

ACAS Ten Years On: Reflections on a Decade or so*

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It seems that, at least since 1945, every decade has been “fast moving” in Africa. The period since 1975 has not been less so. We must first appreciate it by reference to the previous decade. 1965-66 was in fact a bad year for Africa: the rash of coups which toppled Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Ben Bella (the stalwarts of the old “Casablanca” powers), the closing-out (at least momentarily) of Congolese social revolution with the coup by Mobutu, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence of the Rhodesian white settlers.

The bloom was off. The rosy optimism of 1960--”Africa's Year of Independence”--was over. The euphoria of the founding of the OAU in 1963 was now a memory. And Africa settled into the realities of enormous economic difficulties, political repression (including massively in South Africa after the Rivonia trial), and neo-colonialism seemingly triumphant. The main “action” was in the Portuguese colonies, where the movements had launched their wars for national liberation.

The Portuguese African struggles paid off, as we know. The Portuguese collapsed internally, and suddenly in 1975, all the former Portuguese colonies were independent states. We know too the further developments: independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, the increased struggle of SWAPO, and the reemergence of a popular political struggle in South Africa coupled with an intensified pressure from ANC: the Durban strike, the founding of COSATU, Soweto, the merger of the UDF, the Dakar meeting, etc. We know also the other side of this coin: “destabilization” everywhere, beginning with the march on Luanda in 1975.

Yet we of course should not miss the difference between 1965-75 and 1975-87. Today South Africa tries to destabilize and forbids TV coverage of African funeral marches. Then they ruled with an iron hand. Today the U.S. Congress votes sanctions. Today they are compelled to release Govan Mbeki. Today they “merely” destabilize. Today they are clearly on the defensive.

The transformation is the result of African political organization, particularly in southern Africa. What role have outside solidarity organizations played in this? An important one. We should neither minimize it nor exaggerate it. The outside solidarity work has affected in important ways the constraints within which the U.S. and west European governments operate. This in turn affects the constraints within which the South African government operates. It is vital to tighten (and sometimes to alter) these constraints. And this has been done.

The campaign for disinvestment began in the late 1950s. It is today at last more or less successful. This is a very positive achievement. On the other hand, it points to the limitations of our possibilities. Disinvestment is more complicated in its consequences than we pretended, which is what our conservative opponents always predicted. As a result, everyone is “thinking” about it--the legal movements inside South Africa, the ANC, the Frontline States, the solidarity organizations. In a sense this shouldn't have been so. We should have anticipated the present ambiguities and have had a strategy ready.

It is of course not too late. And we will solve this one, with a little effort. But are there other such “pitfalls” or dilemmas awaiting us? The struggle in Southern Africa will still be long. We should look ahead.

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