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# The Dangers of Liberalism: A Short Reflection on the African National Congress in South Africa

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## Essay

# The Dangers of Liberalism: A Short Reflection on the African National Congress in South Africa

Wanelisa Xabat<sup>†</sup>

People of colour all over the world exist and have to rebuild their humanity deep within the ruins of colonial imperialism and white supremacist heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalism. For many of us, our sense of orientation is lost between essentialist longing for “pre-colonial Africa” and the violent colonial interpretation of our histories. Can you imagine? Trying to build your humanity amongst the ruins of an all-encompassing, unrelenting, and continuously re-inventing system? It is a big task. This is what any requests to engage with the oppressor must be measured against. Do we have time to engage the oppressor? When we take into consideration the energy and resilience required for us to survive the system (which seeks to kill us at every turn) and reimagine a decolonial anti-system humanity, the answer is clear. It is unequivocally no.

Moreover, asking freedom defenders to engage the oppressors, especially within the context of human rights, makes dangerous assumptions about our oppressors. It assumes that our oppressors have a conscience. It assumes that our oppressors are capable of or want reform. It assumes that our oppression is an accident of nature. No! Our oppression is a carefully engineered system of denigration, disease, and psycho-social death. Every waking moment it dreams up new ways of drowning Black lives. It salivates over Black death. It celebrates our demise and destruction. How can I speak to such a system? What string of sentences and woolen paragraphs can I offer at the altar of death?

As Assata Shakur asserts, “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who

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were oppressing them.”<sup>1</sup> She is precisely right because the people who oppress us have no moral compass. Our chains and our deaths are evidence of this. The destruction of the world and nature is evidence of this. The bones of our ancestors at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean are evidence of this. The evolution of colonialism and white supremacist heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalism from its inception until now is evidence that the system has no peace with justice and equality.

One of the greatest failures of the African National Congress (ANC) during the resistance against Apartheid was its timid posture towards the oppressor. The organization and its leadership greatly appealed to the consciousness of the oppressor. At the height of colonial terrorism and white supremacy, this ideologically-bankrupt organization advocated for multiculturalism. Amidst Pan-Africanist cries for the reclamation of the land from colonisers, the ANC was creating soul-ties with them. Despite the Pan-Africanist Congress’ cries for “Africa for Africans” the ANC chanted alongside white communists, “South Africa belongs to all who live in it.” How could it be for all who live in it if a settler minority was killing Africans, continuing a centuries-long history of making the continent bleed? How could the ANC remained untroubled by the illegitimate presence of people who came as a result of genocide and maintained their presence through genocide? In fact, despite the liberalism of the Freedom Charter, the “imminent sell-out seeds [were] already pregnant within the ANC, long before ... the 1950’s.”<sup>2</sup> At inception, the ANC was a middle-class boys club that was disconnected from the Black working class.

Taking into consideration its history, it is no surprise that the ANC sold out the freedom of poor Black South Africans in 1994. Instead of decolonizing and obliterating white supremacy, the ANC chose to administer it while white people further consolidated power. Moreover, the ANC chose to rewrite history and legitimize their leadership by positioning themselves as the liberators of Black people, even though it was ordinary Black South Africans who had fought Apartheid. Revolutionary fighters like Winnie Mandela were sidelined from the narrative because they did not fit the sanitised “Rainbow Nation” political project. Winnie and others wanted uncompromising grassroots resistance until South Africa was decolonised. As Biko predicted, any political reform that isolated economic freedom and psycho-social reform from white barbarity would leave the poor dehumanised while holding meaningless ballot papers.<sup>3</sup> It is with this sour taste left behind that I must insist that any engagement with the oppressor must be ideologically unwavering. It must be engagement that itself endangers the oppressor.

Moreover, when we pander to the logic of the oppressor or when we are lukewarm about the urgency of its destruction, we are likely to emulate it.

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1. Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* 139 (ed. 2001).

2. Rithuli Orleyn, *On Nomboniso Gasa’s ‘Multi-Racialism Apologia and Infidelity Of Meaning’*, THE DAILY VOX (Mar. 4, 2016), <https://www.thedailyvox.co.za/fallism-nomboniso-gasa-wanelisa-xaba-anc/>.

3. See generally Steven Biko, *I Write What I Like: Selected Writings* (1969).

Power is seductive. White supremacists heteropatriarchal neoliberal capitalism is seductive. As the “unhuman,” we look up to the ones deemed human and salivate over privilege. When we are unclear about the destruction of the system in its entirety, then we begin to negotiate with the system. We start to locate ourselves within the crevices where we can access privilege and, as a result, we develop coping mechanisms to convince ourselves that we are “free.” It is within these crevices that we start to mirror and emulate the system. It is within this space of deep denial and close proximity to power that we inflict violence on those who dare switch off the main power supply to our Disneyland.

The ANC’s violent response to the student movement Fees Must Fall is evidence that when we fail to decolonise and when we assimilate into the system, we inadvertently reproduce the system. The Fees Must Fall movement was a student movement in South Africa that demanded decolonization of the university, challenged neoliberalism in higher education, demanded free education, and exposed the failed “Rainbow Nation” project.<sup>4</sup> Exposing coloniality, white supremacy, and illuminating the dispossession of Black people is a huge threat to the ruling party. This is because their stay in power is contingent on creating a false consciousness of freedom and equality among South Africans. In response to the student protests, the ANC unleashed violence that mirrored the brutal tactics of the Apartheid government. For months, images of young Black students being violated and bleeding on television became the norm. Young Black students bleeding on television because they could not afford an education which would have offered them a way out of abject poverty. Juxtapose this reaction against the many ways in which the ANC protects white power in South Africa today. This is what happens when a political organization is not clear about its position in relation to the dominant system of oppression. Unfortunately, this is what happens when any political resistance seeks to assimilate into white barbarity. Therefore, how do you engage the oppressor when they have outsourced your so-called liberators to kill you? And perhaps, the critical question to ask freedom defenders in South Africa is: what forms of resistance do you engage in to remove the Black administrators of white supremacy and coloniality, to get them out of the way in order to deal with the system head-on?

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4. Wanelisa Xaba, *Challenging Fanon: A Black radical feminist perspective on violence and the Fees Must Fall movement*, 31 *AGENDA* 3, 10-28 (2017).

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