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## SPECIAL ATTENTION

# Reflections on the Rescinded Oliver R. Tambo Award to Guyana's Forbes Burnham

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### BACKGROUND

The Order of the Companion of O. R. Tambo, an award inaugurated in 2002, is granted by the President of South Africa to foreign dignitaries who have “promoted South African interests and aspirations through cooperation, solidarity, and support.” On April 18th, 2013 it was announced publicly by the Burnham family and in the Guyanese press that the award would be conferred on the late and former President Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham for his “integral part in supporting the boycott against South Africa during the apartheid era and support for the liberation movements and freedom fighters in South Africa.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the next few days, details and additional news about the intended award emerged across numerous Caribbean and South African sites, together with a sense of urgency in regard to protest, because the award was to be conferred on the 27th of April, only 9 days after breaking the news to the public.

Two petitions emerged and began to circulate widely: one at Change.org and another at Avaaz.org, both created on April 25th, 2013, and both rapidly reaching a worldwide audience through social media engagement and cross-linking between communities. Among other things, these petitions linked the Burnham government to gross violations of human rights, and the deaths of community leaders, including but not limited to the assassination of Dr. Walter Rodney.

Several published statements emerged, calling for the award to be rescinded. Horace Campbell's pointedly titled essay: “Is the ANC Rewarding Forbes Burnham for the Assassination of Walter Rodney?” circulated within African Studies circles starting April 21st and was published two days later by South Africa's Amandla, among other places. Private individuals sent letters of protest to the South African leadership. Many reporters around the world covered the story of the award and its responses.

The Rodney Family appealed directly to President Jacob Zuma, President of The Republic of South Africa, requesting that he intervene to withdraw or rescind the award. The family stated that it was the people of Guyana who made personal sacrifices to contribute to and stand in solidarity with the struggles of the South African people for their fight against apartheid, not the then President. The letter noted that though Burnham may have portrayed himself as a freedom fighter to the world, the reality and history of Guyana clearly shows that he was a dictator and leader of a brutal and murderous regime at home. The family reiterated that it was concerned and appalled that such a man could even be nominated for such a prestigious award.

On April 27, 2013, the date the award was to be given, and with Burnham's family members on South African soil to receive it, the South African Government announced that it had deferred the award indefinitely. A statement from the Board of Directors of the Walter Rodney Foundation soon followed, expressing “support [for] the action taken by the South African government to

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<sup>1</sup> Stabroek Editor, “Burnham to be Honoured with Oliver Tambo Award,” published at [www.stabroeknews.com](http://www.stabroeknews.com) on April 18, 2013. Click here for full article.

indefinitely defer the award,” and, further, joining “the call for cancellation of the Award to Forbes Burnham.” To date, no further action has been announced by the South African government. However, it is important to remain attentive to this matter, as it has been reported that there have been attempts to reverse this decision and move forward with the award.

### **DICTATORS AND THE CLOAK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

It is not uncommon for dictators to disguise their domestic actions with socialist rhetoric or progressive foreign policy actions on occasion, in the hope of confusing international criticism or garnering international support, or even to muddy the waters within their national territories. History is replete with examples of this kind, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, so it came as a surprise that the family and/or supporters of Burnham were able to get as far in the award conferral process as they did. It has been reported that they lobbied for the Tambo award for Burnham soon after former Guyanese President Cheddi Jagan received the O. R. Tambo Award in 2005.

One of the above referenced petitions states that the government of Burnham was a “corrupt, brutal and murderous regime, replete with election rigging, illegal referendums, and an imposed Constitution in 1980. Internationally, it is also known that Burnham was an agent of imperialism, associated with the foreign policy goals of the US, France and other colonial powers. No amount of superficially progressive foreign policy rhetoric can be allowed to cover up, then or now, the violence of Burnham’s domestic policies and their legacies. This award sets a dangerous precedent, whereby other dictators who cloaked themselves in external Pan-Africanist, anti-apartheid, or anti-colonial rhetoric, while pursuing their despotic practices at home, may now become eligible for such awards and honors.”

One reason the Tambo Award to Burnham was resisted in South Africa and abroad was that it sullied the good names of Oliver Tambo and the ANC. Another was that it set a bad precedent for other dictators who would try to purchase good names for themselves internationally through occasional acts of solidarity or charity abroad, while maintaining power domestically through human rights abuses and violence. As Walter Rodney himself pointed out, as did other Pan-African and anti-colonial scholars, the era of colonial independence was rife with neo-colonial politics and leadership.

Many cases are well known, such as that of Jomo Kenyatta, who was cultivated by the British in prison because, among other things, he was willing to leave appropriated land in the hands of the white settlers of the colonial highlands around Nairobi. It is notable that Kenyatta nevertheless functioned as a ‘liberator’ and ‘anti-colonial hero’ in some African-American and international circles, due to his rhetoric and posturing, even while he functioned as a dictator, repressing dissent, and maintaining the erasure of Dedan Kimathi and other freedom fighters who paid with their lives during the “Mau Mau” struggles for Independence.

Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral and Walter Rodney were instrumental in developing a critique of neo-colonialism even while formal colonialism was still

#### **OLIVER TAMBO BIOGRAPHY**

In order for our readers to better understand the importance and stature of Oliver Tambo in the history of South Africa and the rise of the African National Congress, we provide this brief outline, with the caveat that such a short review cannot possibly do justice to the complexity and longevity of this lifelong comrade of the oppressed.

Oliver Reginald Kaizana Tambo entered the world on October 27th, 1917 in the village of Kantolo in the district of Mbizana, Mpondoland (Now Eastern Cape), South Africa. Born into a family of recent Christian converts, his schooling followed their faith: Ludeke Methodist Church at age seven, finishing primary education at the Holy Cross Mission, and high school at St. Peter’s Secondary School in Rosettenville, Johannesburg. By matriculating at the top of his class, Tambo won a scholarship from the Transkei Bhunga to attend the University College of Fort Hare.

It was at Fort Hare that Tambo became involved in politics. After graduating with a Bachelor of Science in 1941, he led a student boycott demanding a democratically elected Student’s Representative Council which ultimately led to his expulsion and inability to complete an honors degree. It was shortly thereafter that his political action...

--- TAMBO BIO CONT. ---

continued. He joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1943 while it was under Anton Lembede's leadership, and quickly organized with others, including Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Ashby Mda, Anton Lembede, Dr. William Nkomo, Dr. C. M. Majombozi and others, to build the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) as a way to bring the ANC message to the masses. It aimed to do so through the Programme of Action, which later became adopted by the ANC nationally.

The ANCYL was grounded in militant African nationalist discourse that centered on the principle of national self-determination. Its focus was on reaching students and the average working population, and Tambo excelled in connecting with his brothers and sisters. Because of his determination and hard work in the ANCYL, Tambo was elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC in 1948. With the Programme of Action as a national platform, the ANC shifted its social organizing from a casual method of politicking to grassroots activism that involved large-scale nonviolent resistance; Tambo was involved every step of the way. He rose in the ranks to Secretary General in 1955 after Sisulu was banned by the government under the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1955, the ANC collaborated with the South African Communist Party (SACP), South African Congress of Democrats (COD), Coloured People's Congress (CPC), South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), ...

in its final stages of downfall. They could see the beginnings of a neo-colonial period in which racial mystification, false solidarities, and claims of Left solidarity would be used to create confusion, divide the population along historically manipulated lines, and thereby extend their dictatorial rule. The racial confusion of having a dictator who looked like the oppressed mass of the population, was in some ways a new and improved version of colonial rule; since it took away the blatant apartheid manifestation of outside white rule by imperial powers. As Noam Chomsky put it in a recent interview discussing the case of Israel and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, the post-apartheid plan was engineered to: "keep the socioeconomic system and allow - [to] put it metaphorically - allow blacks some black faces in the limousines." But if the extractive and oppressive colonial relations remained the same, or intensified, as they did under Mobutu in Congo after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, replete with CIA and Belgian patronage, no amount of Afro-centric garb should be able to cover up blatant neo-colonial policies. Like Kenyatta, Mobutu nonetheless managed to confuse some with his rhetoric, as was the case during his brilliantly

staged "Rumble in the Jungle" between Muhammad Ali and George Forman in 1974.

All too common in post-colonial African political practice, neo-colonialism can also be seen in the Caribbean context. One example from a recently published book is insightful. The authors note that in 1969, President Houari Boumedienne of Algeria convened the 1st Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, on behalf of his government, and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which he also headed at that time. Leaders and delegations from numerous independent African and Caribbean nations, and representatives of the Black Panther Party, convened at the former headquarters of the Algerian National Liberation Front, to discuss "the class character of the global liberation struggle." The representative from Haiti described a situation that has become all too familiar:

"I would like to say a few words about Duvalier who rules our country, who is Black, who has said that he is in favor of "Negritude" and is one of the worst oppressors that has been known. The experience with Duvalier shows clearly how "Negritude," which at one point of history, de-colonization, was effective and did achieve a certain amount of liberation and repersonalization of peoples, how this same concept of "Negritude" now turns back against people. And in the case of Duvalier proves that we have to wage a class struggle. And that in the context of this class struggle, we Black people - if we begin to depend on the power of money, on the power structure and money - we also then become tyrants, dictators, or tonton Macoutes as in the case of Haiti. And this is why one must destroy all the capitalist structures which create monsters, be they White, Black, or Yellow."<sup>2</sup>

Oliver Tambo was one of the great leaders of the African National Congress, and he always stood

2 *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin Jr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 317.

against superficial cover-ups of underlying oppression and injustices. This is one of the reasons he was such a prominent leader in building the international solidarity movement against South African apartheid. He was a sharp critic of neo-colonialism, racial manipulation, divide and conquer practices, and pervasive class exploitation. South Africa's naming of its highest award in his name makes great sense, and carries great weight in the world of freedom fighters and social justice advocates, but it also bears with it the responsibility of living up to his immense legacy of integrity and commitment, not to mention the historical redress of the whitewashing of history by the colonial and imperial victors of yesteryear.

### WHY RODNEY AND TAMBO'S LEGACY WERE INTEGRAL TO THE RESCINDING OF THE AWARD

Dr. Walter Rodney, a leading political activist and international scholar, was assassinated in Guyana by the Burnham regime on June 13, 1980. Rodney's murder was preceded by killings of members of the Working Peoples Alliance and others who were vocal of government injustices, election rigging, the illegal 1978 referendum and the still problematic 1980 Constitution. Rodney had just returned from the Zimbabwe independence celebrations at the invitation of the President Mugabe when he was killed.

In addition to his academic work at the University, Rodney was a strong supporter of several liberation movements, including the African National Congress (ANC), Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO), The Peoples Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), South West African Peoples' Organization (SWAPO), Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

Walter Rodney lived and worked at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania during the periods 1966-1967 and 1969-1974. Rodney was instrumental in what became known as the Dar-es-Salaam 'school' of social theory and praxis directed toward Tanzanian 'socialism.' He wrote critical pieces on Tanzanian *Ujamaa*, imperialism, underdevelopment, and the problems of state and class formation in Africa. Many of Rodney's articles that were written in Tanzania appeared in *Maji Maji*, the discussion journal of the TANU Youth League at the University. In addition to his work on campus, Rodney was a significant contributor to *Cheche*, the magazine of the University Students African Revolutionary Front (USARF); conducted lectures in the USARF self-education classes; worked in cooperative villages and student-run farms; attended symposia, demonstrations and exhibitions about the war in Vietnam and against Portuguese colonial rule and apartheid South Africa, and participated with West African colleagues on the UNESCO African History Project.

Rodney traveled within the continent and was deeply committed to many African liberation struggles, including those in Angola, Mozambique, South Africa, Zimbabwe and South West Africa. From Tanzania to Uganda to Nairobi, Walter lectured, debated and addressed gatherings on liberation struggles. It was this involvement with liberation struggles that informed

### --- TAMBO BIO CONT. ---

South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and the Federation of South African Women under the moniker "The Congress Alliance." The Freedom Charter was ratified at the Congress of the People, a mass rally held at Kliptown, Soweto in June 1955.

A year later, Tambo, Mandela and 154 others involved in the Congress Alliance were arrested in a raid under the suspicion of treason. Tambo was released shortly thereafter because of a lack of evidence, and then took up residence in exile in Lusaka, Zambia. His comrades, however, were forced into a five-year trial, which came to be known as the 1956 Treason Trial, that ended in March of 1961 with a not guilty verdict.

In 1958, Tambo officially accepted the titled of Deputy President of the ANC. In the two years leading up to the Sharpeville Massacre, Tambo revised the ANC's constitution so extensively that it became known as the Tambo Constitution. Changes included more constitutional recognition of the ANCYL and the ANC's Women's League, endorsement of non-racialism, the Freedom Charter, and more.

Two years into his deputy presidency, Tambo went into exile again, but all the while remained focused on the task at hand: the end of apartheid. He traveled extensively during his exile, fostering relationships with government officials from a multitude of countries, including Denmark, Tanzania, Sweden, the USSR, and China. ...

--- TAMBO BIO CONT. ---

The apartheid government began to fear the power and momentum of the ANC and frequently acted out violently against the congress. To combat increasing government intervention, the ANC established Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), or "Spear of the Nation," in 1961 as a military wing that sought to prevent harassment of the ANC and to sabotage the South African government's racist apartheid-driven regime. Military camps were established throughout neighboring countries after MK was forced out by the government, and the military wing's efforts continued throughout the 1980s.

A number of contributing factors during the 1970s left apartheid in South Africa on shaky ground. Tambo relentlessly travelled to build regional and international support; colonialism was under full attack on the continent; Black Power gained support in the United States; news coverage expanded, and; the Soweto Uprising all penetrated the walls of apartheid. Struggle on the ground in South Africa intensified, while the boycott/divestment/sanctions campaign gained international momentum and force.

The 1980s were a period of continued globetrotting for Tambo. He delivered talks in London, Germany, Lusaka, New York, Harare, and Glasgow and to the United Nations. His ability to build momentum for the cause was unrivaled. Then, after nearly thirty years in exile, Tambo finally returned home to South Africa, newly free from apartheid, in December, 1990. Shortly thereafter, he was installed as Chancellor of the University of Fort Hare and remained in that position until his death in Johannesburg on April 24th, 1993.

much of his work in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*.

In its outcry regarding the planned Tambo award to Burnham, the Rodney family urged that it was critical to examine the historical basis for this national award, the legacy of Oliver Tambo, and whether history would seek to document his name with that of Forbes Burnham. The Rodney family stated that to place the name of Forbes Burnham alongside that of such an illustrious man as Tambo is reprehensible and disturbing in any level of discourse.

Between 1998 and 2002, the Presidential Advisory Council on National Orders revised the orders *to reflect the spirit of a non-racial, non-sexist democracy where a culture of human rights prevails*. It is uncontroverted that the late Oliver Reginald Tambo dedicated his life to overthrowing the Apartheid regime by relentlessly mobilizing fellow citizens and world opinion against the Apartheid ideology and regime. Tambo was known in the liberation movement for his gentle character and compassionate qualities. It is said that his benevolence and personal concern for the plight of freedom fighters and their conditions in the field endeared him to thousands of liberation fighters.

The conduct and character of the Burnham government appear in stark contrast to the reasons the award was established. Burnham and his regime

promoted inherently racist policies and blatantly ignored human and civil rights; racial inequity and dichotomy amongst Indians and Africans were promoted in his own homeland, while superficially spouting anti-apartheid rhetoric overseas. Burnham imposed and exacted compliance through threats of job loss and social exclusion and sanctioned the detention, prosecution and killing of those that opposed his rule. This was a dictatorship and a brutally malevolent regime.

The family and the global community expresses gratitude to the government and the people of South Africa for rescinding and denouncing the planned award that would have sullied and discredited the record of South Africa's National Orders, the ANC legacy and the legacy of Oliver Tambo, but that also would have been a gross insult to all who fought and gave their lives for the freedom of South Africa, for freedom in Guyana and the African Diaspora.

## CONCLUSION

The affront to the work, life and legacy of Walter Rodney has been recognized by the world and addressed with expediency by the South African government. What ensued was a recognition of a flaw in the process that has led the people of South Africa and its leadership to dialogue about its internal policies surrounding protocol and participation in the process for accepting nominees and selecting awardees of their nation's highest awards. Vigilance is necessary on two fronts. First, to ensure that this planned award to Burnham is never awarded. Second, to ensure that nominees of national awards of this type are fully vetted and investigated, such that the whitewashing or rewriting of history does not happen on our watch.