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Essay

**Ordinary Resistance:
Non-Violent Anti-Colonialism in Africa¹**

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Abstract

This essay looks at non-violent forms of resistance in the process of decolonization in several African countries. It strives to look past what armed fighters can do, and highlight what the seemingly helpless, women, children, and the elderly can accomplish through their own customary everyday lives. The main argument is that non-violence appeals to larger groups in society than violent forms of resistance. Student campaigns, artistic expression, and labor unions are adduced as examples of non-violent forms of resistance, and shown to be effective means of mobilization, and opposition throughout African history. The essay further argues that non-violent contributions to the anti-colonial struggle were not limited to any group by age, profession, skills, or gender.

Sékou Touré famously said, “To take part in the African revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song: you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves” (Mnyele, Kellner, and González 89). This is exactly what the colonized had gradually come to learn, and consequently, this is precisely how freedom was attained. The anti-colonial resistance that shook Africa

¹ An earlier version of this essay was written for the course HIST 2301, Colonial and Post-colonial Africa, under the supervision of Dr. Mark Deets.

was a result of European imperialism and aggression towards the Africans for the greater part of the 20th century. This resistance to colonialism came in various forms, which included violent and non-violent resistance, and it differed from one African nation to the next. Violent forms of resistance, more or less, spoke for themselves and were mostly not as creative, or—arguably—as assertive as the non-violent forms. Civil resistance took the form of student organizations and associations, art and music, indigenous press and media, and negotiated deals. These relatively peaceful tactics represented means and aids towards the process of decolonization. This is not to say, however, that violent strategies were not considered significant, but it seems peculiar that the non-violent approaches, some of which took place prior to the beginning of the violence are often overlooked. These non-violent strategies did not only portray various themes of resistance, but from the socio-cultural perspective, they were influential and often effective.

Frantz Fanon, the author of *The Wretched of the Earth*, believed that resistance could not be achieved using non-violent methods. He was convinced that the only way to overcome the power, strength, and violence of colonialism is to use greater power, strength, and violence in the face of colonialism (Fanon 23). Fanon does not acknowledge the significance of civil resistance or civil disobedience as methods of counteracting the brutality of colonial forces. Fanon fails to notice that nonviolence, in some of its forms, acts as a strong anti-colonial asset. For example, a common act of non-

violent resistance is forming a strike, and this can do more serious damage than what may initially be anticipated. It can leverage a significant amount of economic and political pressure because any regime, including a colonial one, is largely dependent upon the nation's citizens, especially for labor. A nation that is lacking in labor will eventually disintegrate into economic ruin. Moreover, if the protestors behind these strikes resort to violence, and bloodshed takes place, this will discredit the protests, and in turn, it will allow the reigning authority the legal right to fight back in a crueller manner. In other words, it would allow them the right to mass repression. Normally, a state would never be allowed to repress its people, but given that they have already given themselves the right to the people and to their land, mass repression is not a far-fetched option for them. Therefore, nonviolence can be one of the most critical strategies a party can use, and has indeed been used in the past by anti-colonial groups. Non-violent resistance has also been an important bridge towards peaceful settlements, which will become clear.

The South African nation's strategic actions were very much immersed in non-violent approaches, especially when it came to the apartheid regime. They used wide varieties of civil resistance, in an attempt to overthrow the system. One of South Africa's main strategies was the founding of the African National Congress (ANC), which was a very prominent institutional vehicle of resistance that initially advocated for a more peaceful form of resistance, constituting action campaigns (Collins 347). However, there was a transition to a more

violent approach with the founding of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in 1959 (Dovey 49). It is crucial to say, however, that their resort to violence did not undermine their initial use of nonviolence, but given that the process of decolonization is not attributed to a single process, then it must be concluded that different processes at different stages do require shifts. To further comprehend this concept, Griffin quotes Stephen Zunes, a political scientist from Cornell University, “A great leader is one who recognizes where the movement is and leads them accordingly, not one who says, ‘Do it my way!’ ” (Griffin 238-239). Therefore, in this case, a transition from nonviolence to violence was a necessity because the South African movement seemed to favour violence at a particular stage of the decolonization process. However, the focus of this paper is the non-violent realm of the ANC. The ANC had several very important leaders, the most important of these leaders was, arguably, Nelson Mandela. He was a volunteer-in-chief when the ANC made the decision to launch its passive resistance campaign to stand for the anti-apartheid case. He was later elected as the National Executive of the ANC, and he was one of the founders of the ginger-group, the youth league of the ANC (Collins 347). The idea of associating Mandela with the subject of non-violence may seem peculiar to many, but this is not the case. Most articles portray Mandela’s use of non-violence as overshadowed by his views and usage of violence, but this is a considerable fallacy. First, the forming of the youth league of the ANC was a clear portrayal of civil disobedience. It was composed of young members who were mostly students and other

people who were unlikely to become involved in war. Their acts of defiance included boycotts, strikes, and labor unions. One can conclude that the ANC adopted these tactics upon realizing that these methods were the strongest weapons they possessed given the circumstances, and this was proved to be fact (Nepstadt 76). It is true that Mandela was arrested on violent terrorism charges, but after his emergence from prison, his decision to lead a non-violent transition was more than fruitful. Stephen Zunes had great appreciation for the massive non-violent protests carried out by anti-apartheid activists. He writes, “Labor unions, church groups, students, and leftist organizations in solidarity with the resistance movement in South Africa’s townships made business as usual with the apartheid government impossible.”(Zunes 166). This civil resistance resulted in the freeing of South Africa from white minority rule, and following his death, Mandela was portrayed as a hero and a legend (Goodman 7).

Steve Biko, the author of “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” was the founder of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO), which was, as the name denotes, student based, and first and foremost, non-violent. There were two features that made SASO an important and unique organization. First, it played a prominent role in the transformation of race relations. This was probably one of the main reasons why the members of SASO embraced Biko’s, “Black Consciousness Movement,” which meant that the organization restricted non-blacks from joining. Contrary to what people might perceive, according to the SASO,

this was not in any way correlated to discrimination, resentment, or anti-white sentiments, but the members felt that they needed to fight their own battles (Collins 356). In other words, they believed that recruiting white people would diminish their entire cause. The other important feature of SASO was that its political motives were completely independent of any existing political cause, organization, or even the government itself. Because SASO was made up of a group of students, it was expected that their penetration in the apartheid system would be quite limited, but the changes that were incurred because of these students' participation was outstanding. This is depicted clearly by their challenging of the apartheid's educational system, which resulted in apartheid ideas being largely rejected (Welsh 117). Author Robert Fatton believed that due to their deep determination to effect change, and their revolutionary mindset and vision, SASO "was tremendously successful in effecting an intellectual and moral reform" (Badat 163). The relative success of these implemented changes was due to the non-violent tendency of their strategy, and their persistence.

The anti-colonial movement also exploited the media, which represented another form of anti-colonial resistance, to spread their views. It was, in fact, one of the main ways that SASO exposed the inadequacies of the apartheid educational system (Badat 162). One of these was a well-known radio channel, known as "Radio Freedom." It is known as the oldest liberation radio station in Africa and was used to convey SASO's ideology and generally create a form of propaganda

(Drachkovitch 32). Newspapers were also a common medium at the time, especially in South Africa. The well-known New York Times newspaper was particularly concerned with anti-colonial views, and some of its articles included indirect callouts to join the anti-apartheid force. For example, a 1954 article talked about the ANC coming back strong after the defiance campaign that had failed a couple of years earlier. According to the article, the ANC gathered 50,000 volunteers to participate in a non-violent attack on Prime Minister Daniel F. Malan's apartheid policy ("Negroes"). Another article published in 1952 in the same newspaper reported that non-whites began to defy race law through protests. This article also referred to the arrest of 132 people; as much as this may have put a few people in fear, this fear would probably be offset by the promotion of anger and unity ("South Africa's Non-Whites").

Amongst all the strikes, movements, campaigns, and anti-colonial organizations, art and music triggered both internal and external acts of defiance. In this context, the internal symbolizes the colonized subject's psychology. For instance, the South Africans were very fond of soul music, because it had what Biko called "an engulfing rhythm." He went on to say that this soul music, "immediately caught on and set hundreds of millions of black bodies in gyration throughout the world" (Magaziner 46). One may wonder about how the colonized people's psychology may be related to non-violent anti-colonial tactics, but one can argue that both are strongly interconnected. SASO was not successful because of their physical strength or their possession of

weaponry, because this was considered a non-violent campaign. Rather, their success was largely influenced by their ideology, their belief system, and their determination. So, this music is ultimately what they needed, and as Steve Biko describes it, this soul music had an impact on them, and they associated it with anti-colonialism. Therefore, listening to this music was considered an act of defiance. External acts of defiance were also significant in the decolonization movement. This is well-represented by the defiant message, “Say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud.” Some called this approach the “James Brown defiance” in reference to the soul singer (Magaziner 47).

Acts of defiance, however, were not confined to art and music. Poetry and dance were also used (Zavala 183). Some argued that artists living in a repressive society should be no different from journalists or activists (“Artistic Freedom”). It was felt that artists needed to dedicate effort to the anti-colonial movement by, in their case, creating art that represents the circumstances of the oppressive society. Some of the most famous anti-colonial artistic representations were Dumile Feni’s ‘African Guernica’ (Hobbs 169) and Thami Mynele’s art work (Mnyele, Kellner, and González 89). It seems appropriate to conclude the importance of expression using artistic methods with a Sékou Touré quote, “Our painters! They would like them to be more classical; our masks and our statuettes purely aesthetic; without realizing that African art is essentially utilitarian and social.” (Langley 609). This quote demonstrates that art

is not a boxed-in subject; it is a form of expression, it says what words fail to say.

The transition of the British colony known as the ‘Gold Coast’ to present day Ghana was greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi, who was an Indian civil rights advocate and the leader of the Indian independence movement against British rule (Nkrumah 2). Kwame Nkrumah—who led Ghana into independence as Prime Minister—wrote about Gandhi, saying “We too mourned his death, for he had inspired us deeply with his political thought, notably with his adherence to non-violent resistance.” (Nkrumah 3) This non-violent approach to the attainment of independence was indeed what Nkrumah followed, and the method surely succeeded as Ghana was among the first countries in Africa to gain independence from Britain. The Gold Coast’s first political opposition party was the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC), which invited Nkrumah who became the secretary of the convention (Nkrumah 1). In the years that followed, Nkrumah used the press, including his own newspaper, the *Accra Evening News* to convey his message regarding the Ghanaians demand for self-government, and to mobilize his followers. Nkrumah was adamant when it came to Gandhi’s philosophy of “positive action,” which entailed non-violent non-cooperation that continued until the British government conceded the independence of the Gold Coast (Young 249). Nkrumah’s independence movement went through a positive action stage and a civil resistance stage. Neither of these were the sole factor that led to independence, but both provided powerful

leverage for political action to take place. They also influenced the outcome of elections and parliamentary decisions. (MacGinnis 194)

When people think of civil resistance or civil disobedience, strikes and boycotts come to mind. As portrayed, these methods can be very effective, because they can drive a nation to social, political, and economic ruin, or at the very least, they can lead to instability. Whether in a capitalist society or a communist one, the people, or more particularly, the laborers have the upper hand. This does not mean that they have the choice to select their government, the policies enforced by their government, or even their own salaries. Rather, it entails that, because of their work, their choice to uphold peace, or their choice to cause an uprising will be the main variable that affects the entire country. In other words, the people represent the independent variable. Moreover, as many powerful economic thinkers like Adam Smith and David Ricardo have argued, labor is the foundation of any economic system, and the laborers' aggregate choices are what holds the system together (Hunt and Lautzenheiser).

Furthermore, when a campaign requests the renouncing of a specific rule, such as an anti-colonial party, non-violent tactics will allow the campaigners to appeal to a greater, and more diverse audience. For instance, it was mentioned earlier that newspapers were a platform to promote anti-colonial views, and to encourage others to join the cause. People, especially those who have something at stake, such as a family to care for, would

not be prone to join a violent campaign, especially one that involves bloodshed, or even the potentiality of being incarcerated. Their fear is, in a sense, easier to overcome when peaceful means are being adopted in attempts to transition to societal welfare. From a moral perspective, many people, even when they believe that they are being ruled by a cruel regime, still find it inappropriate to participate in a violent uprising or movement that has potential to cause harm to the innocent.

The emergence and spread of non-violent resistance movements has had its fair share of success. It is crucial to note that in many cases, nonviolence is merely a contributing asset to the success of decolonization, but nonetheless, an asset that cannot be overlooked. The approaches to civil resistance that were used in South Africa, Ghana, and many other formerly colonized nations in Africa have not only shown the success that has resulted from nonviolence, but they have also displayed its many forms, and proven that anybody can contribute to the welfare of one's country—in this case, through the overthrow of a colonial regime—whether the contribution is economic, political, cultural, artistic, musical, or poetic.

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