

Nelson Mandela Lecture, hosted by the National Council of Provinces:
Each one Teach One:
The Power to Transform the World: Mandela in Conversation with Palestine

Converting South Africa's solidarity with Palestine into tangible political assets, in the struggle against occupation

17 July 2020

Honourable Deputy Chairperson of the NCOP, Comrade Sylvia Lucas, Honourable Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Comrade Lechesa Tsenoli, Honourable members, Comrades.

Before I begin, I want to extend my condolences and the condolences of my colleagues and comrades to the Mandela family on the loss of their daughter, our sister and comrade, Zindzi. Comrade Zindzi's death reminds us of the many struggles we still have to win in our country and the world: against impoverishment, climate change, occupation, colonialism, apartheid, capitalism, and for justice, economic liberation, and freedom. It also reminds us of the very immediate and urgent challenge of Covid-19. May she rest in Peace, and may she and her parents be witnesses to us never dropping the spear.

One other comment before I begin is to note that Comrade Lechesa Tsenoli and I both signed the Global South Call against Israeli annexation of Palestinian territory, along with politicians, academics, artists, sportspeople, judges from various countries of the South, such as Brazil, India, Malaysia, Chile and Venezuela. We were in company of a number of former heads of state, including Kgalema Motlanthe. Such gestures from the leadership of our legislature are important for Palestinians who are being betrayed all over the world.

We have all heard the famous statement of the first president of the democratic Republic of South Africa, Comrade Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela: 'We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.' This statement has been quoted across the length and breadth of our country, and across the world. It is a popular quote in the Palestinian solidarity movement and among Palestinians. One can understand why, of course. It is Madiba! And for Palestinians, it is affirmation of their struggle by the global icon of justice, the freedom fighter, Nelson Mandela.

But beyond the identity of the person being quoted is the very important substance and meaning of the comment, its implications for solidarity, and for South Africa. Indeed, Madiba encapsulates, in this sentence about the Palestinian people, the essence of solidarity itself. Because solidarity is not just about doing for others; it is very much also about doing for ourselves. Solidarity is not about things like humanitarian assistance, pity, or giving; solidarity is a political act; more than that, it is a political process that creates political (and, dare I say, loving – in the Guevaran understanding of revolutionary love) relationships.

I stress this point because, in the era of NGOisation, and Palestine is a wonderful example of the worst meanings of this term, solidarity, for many, has come to mean less a process of struggling together and more one of privileged people being 'human rights' defenders' or providing humanitarian assistance – whether campaigns for political prisoners or food aid. For too many people, solidarity is viewed in an individualistic way, to campaign for injustices perpetrated against this or that person rather than battling the overwhelming structures of oppression that keep entire oppressed populations under their jackboots. It is saddening that many of us, even erstwhile liberation fighters, have succumbed to the allure of neoliberal material benefits, and allowed the attraction of lucre to trump the demands of solidarity.

Chandra Mohanty wrote that solidarity must be based on a 'common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems.' (Mohanty 2003, 49).

Perhaps more familiar to us, is the teaching of Comrade Samora Machel:

International solidarity is not an act of charity: it is an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objectives...

Solidarity is an assertion that no people is alone, no people is isolated in the struggle for progress. Solidarity is the conscious alliance of the progressive and peace-loving revolutionary forces in the common struggle against colonialism, capitalism and imperialism. In short, against exploitation of human by human.

Solidarity has no race and no colour, and its country has no frontiers. There is no solidarity just among Africans, no exclusively Asian solidarity, since the enemy of the people also has no country or race.

We therefore approach the question of solidarity with the Palestinian people not as privileged northerners do, but as people of the Global South, grappling with our own legacy (and current reality) of 'exploitative structures and system', of apartheid, and as a 'conscious alliance of the progressive and peace-loving revolutionary forces in the common struggle against colonialism, capitalism and imperialism'. For us, then, international solidarity should never mean just doing charity for someone else. It is primarily about developing relationships between oppressed peoples – even if, in the case of some oppressed people, they have more privilege. As in our case, compared to the Palestinians. We have a state, a government, a parliament (even if these are also terrains of struggle), a sovereign nation... The Palestinian people have none of these. When Madiba says we will not be free until the Palestinians are free, he is tying our fate, the fate of an oppressed people (or formerly oppressed people if you wish, though I don't agree with that description) with the fate of other oppressed people. In supporting Palestinian resistance and Palestinian struggles for justice, Mandela is telling us, we are charting a course for our own liberation.

But when looking at the Israeli occupation, Madiba didn't just speak about the Palestinians. Long before the regular Israeli onslaughts on Gaza, such as in 2008-2009, and in 2014, long before Israel used the Oslo Accords to undermine the Palestinian struggle and as an excuse

to construct illegal settler towns in the West Bank, long before Israel's thousands of checkpoints made miserable the daily lives of Palestinians, long before the illegal hermetic siege of Gaza, Madiba said of Israel, in 1990: 'If one has to refer to any parties as a terrorist state, one might refer to the Israeli government because they are the people who are slaughtering defenseless and innocent Arabs in the occupied territories.' The PLO, he said, 'we don't regard... as a terrorist organization.' This was a clear understanding of what constitutes terrorism and where our solidarity should lie.

But if our solidarity is founded on a context of shared struggles, and on love of other oppressed people, then surely it is hypocritical for us to pat ourselves on the back, telling ourselves that we are fulfilling our responsibility by statements and speeches on significant days, while continuing our lives as if the world is normal, and without concrete action towards realising the freedom of the Palestinian people, which will also be our freedom. It is not sufficient that we deploy the revolutionary slogans of our own struggle – such as 'Each one, teach one' – when talking about the Palestinian struggle, but do not imbue our deeds with the revolutionary fervour and actions that accompanied those slogans. Let us remember that Madiba's statement – '...our freedom is incomplete...' – was not made in the heady days of struggle; not in the 1960s, not after 1976, not in the 1980s. It was made in 1997. It was a commitment made not by the president of the ANC, but by the head of state of a democratic South Africa, suggesting that that state, supposedly a liberated state, was also 'not free until...' and implicitly committing the state to achieving its own freedom through that of the Palestinian people. Our stated solidarity and commitment must result in practical consequences for us, as a people, as a state, as a parliament. And I want to turn my attention now to a few of these – particularly as they are relevant to parliament and government.

Yesterday, 16 July, was the 57th anniversary of the address of Mama Miriam Makeba to the UN Special Committee on Apartheid. In her speech, which resulted in her passport being withdrawn and her not being able to return to South Africa, Makeba said:

I ask you and all the leaders of the world, would you act differently, would you keep silent and do nothing if you were in our place? Would you not resist if you were allowed no rights in your own country because the colour of your skin is different from that of the rulers, and if you were punished for even asking for equality. I appeal to you, and to all countries of the world to do everything you can to stop the coming tragedy. I appeal to you to save the lives of our leaders, to empty the prisons of all those who should never have been there.

Who of us, especially the Black people among us, cannot see Palestine described in these words of Makeba, and, before her, in the words of Amilcar Cabral and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, both of whom strongly supported the Palestinian struggle. We are not fooled by the apologists of apartheid and colonialism who demand that we should not equate Israeli racism to South African racism of the past. We who have lived as Black people under apartheid know it when we see it, we know what it feels like on our bodies, what it tastes like in our bloodied mouths. And racism, Madiba reminded us,

is a blight on the human conscience. The idea that any people can be inferior to another, to the point where those who consider themselves superior define and treat the rest as sub-human, denies the humanity even of those who elevate themselves to the status of gods.

He could have been talking of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians.

This brings me to an important point. The UN committee that Mama Miriam Makeba addressed no longer exists. It presented its last report in June 1994. While the committee focused on South Africa, let us note that the 1973 'International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid' is not about South Africa. Nor is the apartheid clause in the Rome Statute, adopted in July 1998 – four years after the 'fall' of apartheid in South Africa – about our country. In fact, South Africa is not ever mentioned in either document. The Convention is about apartheid, and it will remain relevant as long as apartheid exists anywhere in the world.

Why then is it, I ask you, Deputy chairpersons, that while we see and recognise and are pained by the apartheid that we witness practised by Israel (and other states), South Africa still has not signed the Convention on Apartheid? Do we feel no shame not to have endorsed a legal instrument developed by the international community that was a weapon in our struggle and can be a weapon in the just struggles of other people? I believe that this is a critical task for this parliament to deal with: signing and ratifying the Convention on Apartheid (especially at this time when we are an elected member of the UNSC), and spearheading a campaign for the reactivation of the Special Committee against Apartheid so that it might be able to address manifestations of apartheid in, for example, Palestine.

There are also numerous considerations for us in terms of South Africa's relations with Israel. Two and half years ago, the African National Congress resolved at its 54th National Conference in Nasrec to call on the government to downgrade South Africa's embassy in Tel Aviv to a liaison office. This was certainly the kind of concrete action that reflects (or will reflect when it is completed) South African seriousness in our solidarity with the Palestinian people. That resolution was referred to and supported on numerous occasions by President Cyril Ramaphosa, Minister Naledi Pandor (even before she became Minister of International Relations and Cooperation) and Minister Lindiwe Sisulu (when she was Minister of International Relations and Cooperation). Minister Sisulu added that the downgrade process had already begun with the recall, in May 2018, of our ambassador to Tel Aviv, and the decision not to appoint a new ambassador in his place. Moving ahead on the process to downgrade the embassy, for which the ANC has called, will be a concrete expression of our solidarity. Parliament needs to hold DIRCO and the presidency accountable to ensuring that the process goes ahead, speedily.

There are also other aspects of our relationship with Israel that are concerning. Why have we not banned, at the very least, the products of the illegal Israeli settlements from being imported into South Africa – no matter how they are labelled? Indeed, why have we not made it difficult for the importation of any Israeli products into South Africa? Our special concern should be for the large amount of Israeli-manufactured security-related equipment

that dominates the South African market – from household security technology to commercial and industrial security technology. How can we claim to express solidarity with the Palestinian people when the security technologies used by most state-owned enterprises comes from Israel? How can we be tolerant of Telkom’s billing systems being outsourced to an Israeli company, which has exclusive control over our metadata? How can we express solidarity with the Palestinians but accept as ‘normal business’ when a South African icon, Clover, is bought out by an Israeli consortium?

Furthermore, what is our solidarity worth if we allow South Africans to join and fight with the Israeli Defense Forces, thus being responsible for the murder of Palestinians and the destruction of Palestinian livelihoods. After the 2008-2009 Israeli onslaught on Gaza (called Operation Cast Lead), a handful of NGOs in South Africa prepared and submitted to the National Prosecuting Authority a dossier, commonly called the ‘Gaza Docket’, which listed 75 South Africans who had been operational in the IDF during Operation Cast Lead. Many of those names were linked to social media accounts where these South Africans boasted of their role in the IDF, with some proudly posting pictures of themselves in the uniforms of the occupation army and displaying their weapons. Nothing has come of this Gaza Docket; no one has been prosecuted; no serious investigation, it seems, has been conducted. And yet you, our Parliament, has passed the Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act in 1998, which makes such activities illegal.

On the global stage, South Africa is currently both an elected member of the United Nations Security Council and the Chair of the African Union. Each of these is a weighty responsibility. Together, they place on our shoulders as a nation, and on your shoulders as legislators, a massive set of responsibilities. They also put us in a unique position to use these weighty responsibilities in order to give concreteness to our solidarity with oppressed peoples. We might have only six months left on the UNSC, but we should not miss the opportunity to use these months to lobby for the world body, which is heavily weighted against the Palestinians, to strengthen international law, pass critical resolutions, and craft new conversations around the Palestinian struggle. Solidarity should not be restricted to the streets, but should forcefully enter the hallowed chambers of the Security Council as well – even if, for now, only virtually. This is especially so when Israel treats the UN with disdain and dismissal.

Our role in the AU is, perhaps, more important substantively. When Israel, the ‘terrorist state’ that Madiba referred to, is poised to turn a sufficient number of African states to support its bid for observer status at the AU, when Israel’s exploitation of blood diamonds from our continent has deadly implications for a large number of Africans, when Israel is supporting undemocratic regimes militarily against their own people, a critical South African voice in the AU is more important than it ever has been. We must ensure that Israel does not put its bum on an observer seat in the AU, a cause to which South Africa has been committed but is facing dissent from many other South African states. We must also cast the spotlight on the broader role of Israel on the continent, especially its military, intelligence and security involvement with states and non-state actors.

Not long after US president Donald Trump unveiled his annexation plan for Palestine in January this year, a plan that the Israeli government has enthusiastically embraced, President Ramaphosa said that it

brought to mind the chronicled history that we as South Africans went through. The apartheid regime once imposed the Bantustan system on the people of South Africa without consulting them and with all the oppressive elements which that plan had... [Trump's plan] sounds like a Bantustan type of construct.

Our president was, of course, correct in his assessment. However, a slightly deeper examination of the issue demonstrates that, in fact, since the 1990s when the Palestinian Authority was created, Israel never had any intention of allowing the creation of a Palestinian state. The most it was ever willing to countenance was the possibility of a Palestinian bantustan, where the so-called government of that entity would have fewer powers and less authority than did the 'government' of Bophutatswana. That is the current situation. What is referred to as a 'Palestinian state' today is, in effect, a glorified bantustan. Despite Israeli leaders occasionally paying tribute to a 'two-state solution', a Palestinian and an Israeli state existing side-by-side, there never was any Israeli intention to allow for a Palestinian state to exist. The Trump plan has made that clear for those who were previously confused – as our president acknowledged in February.

How, then, should South Africa respond in this context? How should this realisation be reflected in concrete political and policy positions?

At some level, it is understandable that South Africa, as a member state of the UN and steadfastly committed to the notion of multilateralism in global diplomacy, continues to maintain its support – even if just rhetorically – for a 'two-state solution'. However, especially in light of the Trump plan, which, as any political scientist will tell you, makes a mockery of the notion of 'state', and which proposes a Palestinian entity that will have no control over its borders, water resources, airspace, electromagnetic spectrum, coastline, nor army and not even an independent police force... In light of this, it is now necessary for us to revisit this 'two-state' idea. Such a re-evaluation, by the way, is no longer a radical idea, if it ever was. When even (liberal) Zionists are busy re-evaluating the idea and when many of them have already concluded that the only way forward for the Palestinian and Israeli people is to live together in one state, then it is certainly not radical for a leading state in the Global South, with revolutionary credentials, to engage in its own reassessment on this issue.

It is not sufficient to continue hiding behind the argument that this is the position of 'the Quartet', especially when one member of that quartet is the architect of this abomination of a 'peace plan' and another satisfies itself by whining and hand-wringing while doing nothing to ensure that Palestinian territory is not annexed in complete violation of international law.

It is also not sufficient to hide behind the argument that we are following 'the Arab states' or 'the Arab League'. Since when has ethnicity granted a people the right of veto over principles and moral questions? These are the same Arab states whose authoritarian regimes oppress their own people, which have normalised relations with Israel, which have

ensured long term civil wars in various parts of the Middle East and North Africa, which undermine democratically-elected governments (including on our continent). Why are they our teachers?

South Africa, it must be said, has not been shy, since 1994, to challenge 'the way things are done' on the global stage. We have been courageous and forthright, for example, in our calls for reform of the United Nations and other multilateral structures. Why then are we afraid of being forthright enough to call for a reassessment of this now-implausible and silly-tragic idea of a two-state solution? Why are we afraid to even begin that conversation publicly at the level of government, parliament and the ruling party? This debate must begin, publicly, in a manner that looks at the best interests of all the people who live in Palestine, Palestinians and Jewish Israelis.

Comrades, as we remember Tata Madiba this month, and as we prepare, especially, for Nelson Mandela Day tomorrow, we must soberly examine his comment about the necessity for seeing justice and peace existing everywhere. We cannot allow ourselves to fall into the trap that has long been set for us of extracting Madiba from his legacy as a freedom fighter and seeing him only as a teddy bear hugging children and White people. Let us not forget that Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was not sentenced to life in prison because he was a cuddly stuffed toy, but because he was a founder of Mkhonto we Sizwe, a leader of our armed struggle against an apartheid state. Let us remember too, that while Madiba committed and devoted his entire life to justice and peace, Apartheid Israel is not interested in justice *or* peace. Unless it is the peace of the graveyard, or pieces of bantustans. It is interested only in war, in the theft of Palestinian land and in the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people. Solidarity, as Madiba demanded of us, requires real and concrete support for Palestinian resistance, not talk of fictitious mediations between Israelis and the Palestinians.

Allow me to end this tribute to our leader Nelson Mandela with a quote from him from 1999, when Madiba, president of the Republic of South Africa, was seated next to PLO Chairperson Yasser Arafat in Gaza. Madiba declared on that occasion:

All men and women with vision choose peace rather than confrontation, except in cases where we cannot proceed, where we cannot move forward. Then if the only alternative is violence, we will use violence.

A few weeks later, Palestinians launched the Second Intifada.

Palestinians today find themselves in a position where they 'cannot proceed', where they 'cannot move forward'. If we fail them, and if we fail the calls for real solidarity from Madiba and from the Palestinian people, we will push them further into a corner where there are no alternatives. Our solidarity must ensure that Palestinians have alternatives that will provide them a just and fair future, free from oppression and exploitation, occupation, colonisation and apartheid.

AMANDLA!