

# Democracy and Africa's liberation

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**A**FRICA is now in the top headlines of the press and journals of the whole world. It is a constant topic in radio talks and commentaries, and the theme of scores of new books which pour out on both sides of the Atlantic.

This is not surprising. The swift advance of the African liberation movements in recent years has dealt a shattering blow to the old concept of "darkest" Africa. Millions of Africans are engaged in a gigantic struggle for freedom. They have set the aim of breaking down the old artificial boundaries set up by the rival imperialist powers.

Their strategy is the united struggle of all African people, and their objective a community of free and independent African States. In the process of the African struggle new nations are being created, and linguistic communities separated under imperialist rule are being reunited in new conditions.

Asia is rich in the experience of national liberation struggles, anti-imperialist and anti-feudal in character. These are also the basic features in Africa, but with one important distinction. There was no developed feudal system in most parts of Africa, and consequently the agrarian problem takes on a different character from that of Asia. On the other hand, there does exist in some territories a European settler population which constitutes itself as a ruling class.

Taking the African continent as a whole there is a great unevenness in the stages of the national liberation struggle, and it still remains for Marxists to carry through an objective and up-to-date analysis of the distinctive features of the struggles now taking place.

The writings of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Tse-tung serve as a valuable guide for this new study, but do not provide a ready-made solution. It was Stalin himself who emphasised that:

"The solution of the national problem can be arrived at only if due consideration is paid to historic conditions in their development. The economic, political and cultural conditions of a given nation constitute the only key to the question of *how* a particular nation ought to arrange its life and *what forms* its future constitution ought to take. It is possible that a

specific solution of the problem will be required for each nation. If, indeed, a dialectical approach to a question is required anywhere it is required here, in the national question."

(Stalin: *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*. 1935 Edition, Page 21.)

Indeed, the extent to which nations already exist in Africa, or are in the process of formation, is even now a subject of keen discussion among Marxists. But one thing is clear. In the process of the gigantic struggles now being waged in Africa new nations are being created. And though the stage reached varies from one territory to another, all of them form part of the mighty democratic movements which are sweeping forward in all parts of the continent.

## Imperialism and Democracy

Even before the African upsurge of recent years official Labour policy in Britain was vaguely aware that big changes were taking place. In 1943, under the impact of the Second World War, it was recognised that new problems would arise after the war.

In its 1943 declaration "Post-War Policy for African and Pacific Colonies" the official conception was that of "Colonies inhabited by backward peoples of primitive culture, the great majority of which are in Africa". It was claimed their economic and political systems were so backward that "they are not yet able to stand by themselves".

Two main principles were laid down for the African territories: (1) they should be administered by colonial powers "as a trust for the native inhabitants", and (2) the primary object being to train the native inhabitants "in the shortest possible time to govern themselves". The general approach was one of "gradual advance to self-government". Where Africans were "not yet capable of exercising a franchise, the members of the Legislative Council should be officials and nominated members". In the territories where there is a European minority "it is essential that an elected majority in the Legislative Council should *not* be introduced unless and until the

natives can be given the franchise on the same terms as the European”.

In actual practice, it was the Europeans who constituted the “officials and nominated members” of the Legislative Councils in these territories during the term of the post-war Labour Governments. So that instead of “trusteeship” it was European political domination!

In 1954 Labour’s official statement “From Colonies to Commonwealth” laid down the main principles of its present declared policy. The first sentence reads:

“The aim of Labour’s policy for the Colonies is to enable them to achieve democratic self-government under conditions which ensure for their peoples both a fair standard of living and freedom from oppression from any quarter.”

This was in essence identical with policy formulation outlined by the Labour Government in 1947, and to which the British Tories give their full support. It has, in fact, been taken over without question by the present Tory Government, and forms the first paragraph in the most recent Government publication “Britain’s Purpose in Africa”.

Policy declarations are one thing. How they are applied in practice is another. The road traversed from 1945 to 1951 by the two post-war Labour Governments is strewn with broken pledges in relation to the colonies, even with ruthless repressive measures and the use of armed force against colonial peoples who endeavoured to achieve the objectives set out in Labour’s official policy declarations.

There was the despatch of armed forces in 1948 against the Malayan peoples, the shooting down of Nigerian coal miners in 1949, the repression and arrest of national leaders in the Gold Coast in 1950, the banishment of Seretse Khama, and the forcible suppression of strikes and arrest of trade union leaders in Kenya in 1950. The list is far too long to give in detail. And the Tory list of repressive measures is even longer—Malaya, Kenya, British Guiana, Uganda, Singapore, Tanganyika, and now Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia.

Both in theory and in practice the official Labour and Tory policy are in basic agreement. All the important changes in the relations between Britain and its colonies arise from what the colonial people *themselves* have achieved, together with the pressure of progressive opinion in Britain, and not as a result of a free political gift from British imperialism. Where it has been possible to do so, ruthless measures have been used to suppress the rising liberation movement. Where it has not been possible (or where blank

refusal would lead to dangerous consequences) British imperialism has been forced to make reluctant political concessions—as in Ghana, Nigeria, Malaya, Singapore and elsewhere.

It seems clear that the political objective of both Tory and official Labour is to make concessions either to the feudal and reactionary elements (as in Malaya) or to the rising African national bourgeoisie (as in Ghana and Nigeria) who they believe can be won for co-operation with British imperialism. This does not mean they always succeed in achieving their objective—as shown in India’s opposition to British foreign policy and the dilemma facing the British Tories as a result of the recent P.A.P. election victory in Singapore.

Nor does it mean that Labour’s ranks are united behind the official colonial policy. Indeed, in recent years there is a growing healthy opposition arising within the organised Labour movement, and the initiative and pressure of the Movement for Colonial Freedom is making itself felt strongly, even on the Labour benches in the House of Commons. There is also a murmur of uneasiness in the ranks of the Tories—especially after the unsavoury revelations at the Hola camp in Kenya and the serious crisis which has been created for the future of the Federation in Central Africa.

All the same, the basic *aim* of both Tory and official Labour policy is to build up a political alliance with the reactionary feudal elements and those elements among the rising national bourgeoisie in the colonial countries ready and willing to co-operate with British imperialism. It has nothing in common with the extension of real democracy to the colonial peoples, for this would mean the end of colonial rule and exploitation—the beginning of the end of British imperialism.

The ruling class and its henchmen can never afford to declare openly its real aims, so the phrase “democracy” is a useful cover to cloak their real political aims. This is patently evident when we come to examine the nature of the national liberation struggle taking place in all parts of Africa.

### **Is Democracy Something New for Africa?**

The old ideas of Africa as a “dark” continent, “barbaric” and “uncivilised”, are fast breaking down—though one should avoid the illusion they don’t still exist widely among the British people, even among the working class. But new evidence is fast accumulating on the ancient kingdom civilisations which existed in different parts of Africa at a time when our forefathers were “barbarians” and uncivilised.

One needs to be on guard against painting an idyllic picture of these ancient civilisations, for most of the people lived in extremely primitive conditions under a hierarchical ruling caste. At the same time, there is considerable evidence to prove there existed for centuries in many parts of Africa a form of tribal democracy which had no counterpart in this country.

This is now being recognised in surprising quarters. Lord Hailey, a well-known authority, spent many years making a thorough investigation of systems of local rule in tropical Africa. In his five volumes published in 1951 (revised after the 1940 edition) there is a wealth of useful information on this subject. The Preface (published as Part IV) points out that:

"It is rare to find in British Colonial Africa any instance in which the indigenous form of rule previously in force could be described as autocratic."

On the contrary, it makes it clear that the individual tribal chiefs "had no machinery by the use of which they could enforce obedience to their orders". For ". . . in the last resort the real sanction lay in their ability to secure the acquiescence of their traditional advisers and ultimately of the *community* itself". [My emphasis.] What is more, the tribal community had the right to remove (or "de-stool") the chiefs.

Even Labour's official policy documents (though claiming to "extend" democracy to the Africans) have to admit that democratic forms existed in Africa long before imperialist rule:

"It should also be realised that in many tribal systems there is a strong element of democracy, though it may take a different form from that to which we are accustomed in Britain. The tribal meeting, under varying forms and names, is usually an attempt to arrive at a genuine consensus of opinion. The object of such meetings is not to express majority and minority views, nor to achieve a majority government; but to secure the highest common factor of agreement among those taking part and to express this as a generally accepted view or decision which will then be supported by the entire tribe. Because this is different from most European practice, it has often been thought that tribalism is necessarily authoritarian; and this superficial judgment has caused much misunderstanding between Europeans and people living in tribal societies" (Labour's Colonial Policy—*Plural Society*, page 34).

Even the latest official Government publication *Britain's Purpose in Africa* has to recognise this. Speaking of the first British "administrators" sent to Africa it points out:

"They also soon learned that in most cases tribal society was essentially democratic. The

basis of tribal politics was always the village meeting, and all decisions were taken by the tribal council of Elders. The chief was a 'constitutional monarch'. He could seldom decide anything except on the advice of his council, which was itself closely bound by the will of the common people as expressed at village meetings" (pp. 10, 11).

Then after these wise words comes the "booby trap". The author, Kenneth Bradley (well-known exponent of the Colonial Office outlook), then remarks:

"The British nation itself grew out of a tribal society not very different from this and the administrators began at once to lead the Africans along the old, familiar road" (pp. 10-17).

Even a child could answer that one! If the British "nation" grew out of similar conditions, who led them along the "familiar" road? And if they didn't need anyone to lead them, why should the Africans need anyone to lead them?

Of course, what really happened (and is still happening) is that British imperialist rule broke down the old tribal economy and proceeded to *destroy* these forms of tribal democracy. This was, and is still being done, by the method of "indirect rule". The essence of this is to take over the tribal system, *rob it of its democratic kernel*, and recruit the tribal chiefs and rulers as instruments of British imperialism.

It was not always an easy task. It was easier where the tribal authorities were already authoritarian and anti-democratic in character, as in Northern Nigeria. Where there were no natural tribal rulers (as in Eastern Nigeria) a system of warrant chiefs was created. In all cases where this method was successful the chiefs became salaried servants of British imperialism.

This was not achieved without a great deal of opposition. Even now there is a considerable body of chiefs in various African territories who participate with vigour in the struggle against British imperialism. It is certainly evident that the rising national liberation movement was strongly opposed to the whole system of "indirect rule". Lord Hailey himself recognised in his 1951 "Preface" that in Nigeria and the Gold Coast, the "advocates of this programme [national liberation] are in principle opposed to the present system of native administration".

In Kenya at this time, even in the Local Native Councils, Lord Hailey puts on record the growing tendency to regard the chiefs "as the representatives of official not of popular opinion". In East and West Nigeria they had become "the target for attack by the more progressive and politically minded elements in the community".

### African Forms of Democracy

What emerges from all this is the fact that tribal forms of democracy *did* exist in Africa long before the British people were able to win substantial measures of democratic expression; and that it was British imperialist rule which *destroyed* early African forms of democracy in order to fasten its economic and political grip on the African peoples. All this serves to make nonsense of the official Labour and Tory boasts of "extending democratic rights" to the Africans.

At the same time, it doesn't follow that the old forms of tribal democracy would have remained were it not for the intervention of imperialism. It may well be that the transition from tribal economy to higher forms of economic development would also serve to undermine the old tribal forms of democracy. But it would have led to new forms of democratic expression *within the context of specific African conditions*—but none the less democratic for that.

While there is among the rising African national bourgeoisie a slavish acceptance of British forms of "democracy" there is also growing a strong critical opposition. Last March there was an interesting Seminar discussion on "Representative Government and National Progress" at Ibadan in Nigeria, sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the University College of Nigeria. There were speakers present from several African territories—British, French and Belgian.

No attempt was made to reach final conclusions, but "it was clear that nobody wanted merely to take over institutions inherited from the colonising powers; everybody considered that there must be changes and adaptations and that newly independent African countries must not be expected to govern themselves in the images of the European powers" (*West Africa*, April 11th, 1959).

Much more forthright is the oft-repeated consistent viewpoint of President Sukarno of Indonesia, the essence of which is given in these extracts of his statement last April at the University of Istanbul:

"We imitated the practice of Western countries in establishing a pattern of parliamentary liberal democracy which came straight from the textbooks of Western Europe and America. . . . We swallowed it and got violent indigestion. . . . The sickness grew worse, not better, and eventually it began to menace not only the health, but even the very life of the nation" (*World News*, May 23, 1959).

President Sukarno went on to explain that in Indonesia they had "forgotten the history, the culture, the social habits of our people". The idea

of a majority and an opposition was alien to the Indonesian people:

"Our nation, in its lower levels and echelons, in the villages and communities evolved, centuries ago, its own democratic methods. Rather than the idea democratic majority and opposition, our society had evolved for itself the ideas of democratic consultation and unanimity. . . .

"Something had to be done. We had to apply our own system of democracy, which is in harmony with the character of our nation. . . . We had to make it possible for all sections of our society to participate in the function of government" (*World News*).

### Africa's New Fight for Democracy

It is with the advent of imperialist rule and exploitation that the African struggle has taken a new turn. To the extent that tribal society still exists the various tribes have come together in a common fight against imperialism. The shattering of tribal economy and the undermining of the old tribal society has given way to the rapid growth of a *national* outlook and formidable *national* movements. Even where tribal forms remain, they are not in opposition to the national movement, but often serve to strengthen it.

Of course, there is a vast contrast in the situation from one territory to another. In the absence of permanent European settlers in West Africa there were greater opportunities for the growth of an African national bourgeoisie. It's this class which heads the still growing national movement in Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. Their main spokesmen are both in trading or small capitalist enterprises and outstanding leaders of the national intelligentsia. All the same, their *class* position is that of the rising national bourgeoisie who recognise the need to grasp political power for *themselves* to safeguard and to advance their own class interests as against those of British imperialism.

This could not be achieved without an appeal to the masses, the extension of the franchise, and the unleashing of mass opposition to the grip of foreign imperialism—even the use of socialist phrases. But because of their class position—desiring political power for themselves, but scared that the working class would advance to the leading position—they are unable and unwilling to wage an all-out battle to end all forms of imperialist rule and exploitation.

It is noticeable that in these West African territories the form of political independence achieved (due in Nigeria next year), as distinct from economic liberation, is in association and by agreement with the British Government. The economic grip of British imperialism is as strong

as ever in these territories. This doesn't mean it will remain so, for the winning of political independence gives greater opportunities for the national movement to advance towards also winning economic liberation.

*What is a decisive factor in the new stage is the extent to which the working class will advance as the leading class force in the national liberation struggle, winning allies to its side in the common fight.*

In the territories of East Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika) and Central Africa (Nyasa-land, Northern and Southern Rhodesia) there are important factors which are quite distinct from West Africa. In Kenya there is a European settler population of 50,000 which holds all the key positions in Kenya's economy and in the machinery of government. They represent the dominant capitalist class, closely allied with British overseas monopoly firms, and upon whom British imperialism largely depends for maintaining its grip in Kenya.

Though in comparison the European settler population in Uganda and Tanganyika is extremely small (most of the Europeans being colonial civil servants, advisers, technicians, etc.), they fall within the general pattern of British rule in East Africa. For if these two territories reached the position of having an elected African majority in the Legislative Councils the situation facing British imperialism in Kenya would be even more serious.

Very similar is the situation in Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Though the latter has had the constitutional status of a "self-governing colony" since 1923 its economy is still dominated by British, South African and U.S. capital; while the British Government still has the constitutional right to intervene against any legislation which discriminates against Africans—not that it has ever done so in the past thirty-six years! Nyasa-land is in a similar position to Uganda and Tanganyika in that the European settler population is extremely small (370 Africans to one European), but with an African elected majority in the Legislative Council it would seriously endanger European minority domination in both Rhodesias.

This system of European minority rule in East and Central Africa, representing the dominant alien capitalist class, has hampered and limited the growth of an African national bourgeoisie. The result is that the workers and peasants are a stronger leading force in the growing national movements—though most of the prominent leaders come mainly from the professional classes.

Apart from their important military strategic position (Kenya being the most decisive) and the

reliance of British imperialism on European minority domination, the class character of the leadership of the national movements in these territories makes it more difficult for the British ruling class to win them over to collaboration with British imperialism.

Indeed, the whole emphasis of the British ruling class in recent years is on the need to promote an African "middle class" (really an African bourgeoisie) in this region who would become more reliable allies of British imperialism. This was evident in the proposals of the East African Royal Commission Report in 1954—advocating a system of "land consolidation" which would enable land under tribal ownership to become a saleable commodity, and available for purchase by Europeans and more prosperous Africans. This process has since in fact developed considerably since 1954 throughout East Africa.

Similar steps are being taken to increase the salaries of the higher grades of African teachers and civil servants—all for the purpose of encouraging the growth of an African "élite" who would get the idea that co-operation with the Europeans would be more profitable for them. And to set a final seal on this new "recipe" for "partnership", African franchise rights have been deliberately contrived to cater for the better-off Africans and to exclude the great majority of the adult Africans.

These schemes are so complicated and varied in character that even their authors are often puzzled, and Government spokesmen give endless interpretations of the correct application. In a short space it's only possible to explain their essential character.

For all the six territories there are two electoral rolls, "ordinary" and "special". The highest qualifications needed are for the "general" roll, which means that 99 per cent out of every 100 who qualify are Europeans! Conditions for this roll vary from an annual income of £750 or ownership of property valued £1,500, to £480 annual income or £1,000 property plus primary education, and the lowest to £300 annual income or £500 property and four years' secondary education. It is easy to understand why so few Africans can qualify!

Conditions for the "special" roll vary from an annual income of £100 in Uganda to £150 (or £120 plus two years' secondary education) in the three territories of Central Africa. Even these conditions exclude all but the better-paid Africans (who are a small minority) from the roll. The proportion of Africans with the right to vote can be gathered from the latest available list of registered African electors:

|                    |         | <i>African<br/>population</i> |
|--------------------|---------|-------------------------------|
| KENYA:             | 126,508 | 1 in 50                       |
| TANGANYIKA:        | 29,00   | 1 in 280                      |
| UGANDA:            | 626,000 | 1 in 8                        |
| NORTHERN RHODESIA: | 7,617   | 1 in 300                      |
| SOUTHERN RHODESIA: | 960     | 1 in 2,500                    |
| NYASALAND:         |         | No elections                  |

The strength of the African *national* opposition is revealed in the fact that even this small minority of eligible African electors gave their solid vote to those African candidates pledged to resist imperialism and European minority rule. If imperialist strategy cannot win over the better-off Africans there is little chance of swaying the African masses to accept the imperialist plan for "partnership".

### The New Situation in Africa

The events of the past year make it clear that the British ruling class are finding it more difficult than ever to hold back the rapid advance of the African liberation struggle. Formerly, the liberation struggle was being waged in different parts of Africa, separated in distance and in time one from the other.

The outstanding achievement of the All-African People's Conference at Accra last December was the concept of an all-African liberation struggle, leading to the creation of a "community of free, independent African States". That this was not merely a paper declaration is proved in the subsequent organised solidarity for the struggles in Kenya, Belgian Congo, Cameroons, Nyasaland, and the two Rhodesias. "An injury to one is an injury to all" is now the prevailing ideology in all parts of Africa.

This serves also to lead towards breaking down the artificial boundaries set up by the rival imperialist powers. This has begun with the federation of Ghana (formerly British) and Guinea (formerly French) and the prospect of a free and united Cameroons and a free and united Somalia.

At the same time, it would be foolish not to recognise that the existing relation of class forces

in the growing African liberation movements does *not* provide the guarantee that the democratic revolution can be carried through to a successful conclusion. *And the biggest weakness in the whole situation is that the working class has not advanced to the foremost position in the leadership of the national movements.*

This is true even of independent Ghana, and of Nigeria, due to win political independence in 1960. Whether the working class will advance to the leadership of the national movement first in the independent African States or in those territories still fighting for political independence will depend on a number of factors. It is already evident that the workers and peasants are a stronger force in the national movement in those territories under European minority rule in contrast to West Africa.

Faced with the tasks arising in Ghana and Nigeria in the transition from political independence to economic liberation the national bourgeoisie is clearly making serious compromises. This is expressed in the fervent appeals made for increased foreign investment, the scaling down of the development plans, and the reluctance to make a bold challenge to the new forms of imperialist domination.

On the other hand, because of the strategic military position of the territories in East and Central Africa especially, and the dependence of British imperialism on maintaining European minority rule, the liberation struggle there is bound to take a sharper turn. In this process the workers and peasants will undoubtedly advance to a stronger position in the leadership of the national movement.

The influence of Marxist ideas is growing in the ranks of the African workers, but nowhere in the British territories is there as yet an organised Marxist revolutionary party—the only political force which can give all-round leadership and give a clear perspective for the advance of the democratic revolution to the point of ending all forms of imperialist rule and exploitation and proceeding to the socialist revolution. The need to build this Party of a new type is now an essential next step.