

# The development of nations in South Africa

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“SOUTH AFRICA belongs to all who live in it, black and white,” the Freedom Charter declares. “Our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood, enjoying equal rights and opportunities.”

Only when this has been achieved will it be possible for a South African nation to develop. And before it does, the likelihood is that a number of different nations will come into being in our country, and that they will flower and prosper before they merge into one.

A single *African* nation in South Africa is likely to develop before a single *South African* nation does. And similarly it seems likely that *Zulu*, *Basotho* and other nations will develop before they merge into a single African nation in South Africa.\*

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\* There may, of course, be substantial changes to the present state boundaries, which were drawn arbitrarily by the imperialist powers. The “South Africa” of the future may be a smaller or a larger place. This does not affect the argument. The peoples who today live together in our country are likely one day to merge into a single nation.

The Africans will constitute the main element in the future South African nation and we therefore begin with a study of the origins of African nationalism.

They are comparatively recent. The development of a single *African* political consciousness in South Africa only really begins in the 1880's. Until the nineteenth century the economic basis did not exist for the amalgamation of the numerous African tribes into states. They were cattle-grazers and small-scale farmers, and as they required large areas of pasture and lived at subsistence level the tendency was towards dispersal rather than concentration of population. Even when, with the accumulation of wealth, a ruling class and a state developed, it was capable of exercising its authority only over a limited area, and when conflicts of interest arose it was powerless to prevent dissident tribal groups within the tribe from moving off to pastures new.

As new techniques were acquired, making possible a greater division of labour and the development of a standing army, groups of African tribes

would have developed towards a statehood and unification just as people did in Europe, and this is clearly demonstrated early in the nineteenth century by the Zulus from the time of Tshaka, and the Basotho from that of Moshoeshoe.

Unification in this form, however, was smashed in its infancy by British imperialism.

Nevertheless, it is not impossible that, taking the long view, British imperialism hastened the development of a single African nation rather than retarded it. The huge inflow of capital which came with the discovery of diamonds in 1870, and of gold sixteen years later, transformed South Africa from a collection of primitive pastoral and agricultural communities into a single economic unit, and smashed the tribal system and sped up the process of unification of the Africans.

Long before the industrial revolution wrought by the discovery of diamonds and the imperialist intervention in South Africa, the voluntary amalgamation of all the black people to make a stand against the white advance had been a dream of the most farsighted African leaders and the nightmare of all the Europeans. But it had remained a dream.

Far from there being unity of the African tribes, a handful of Europeans were able to exploit inter-tribal conflicts so skilfully that in every decisive campaign by far the main burden of fighting, on the European side, was borne by Africans.

At the diamond fields men were transformed from Zulu, Xosa or Basotho tribesmen into African workers. Members of a myriad of separate tribes came, for the first time, to see themselves as a single brotherhood united by their common economic interest. There was not a working-class consciousness, but an African working class consciousness, for they were subject to political disabilities on the ground of race, which, by giving the lowliest white worker the status of boss over all black men, almost completely obscured any common interest between white and black workers.

Though handicapped by the absence of a common language—the *lingua franca* was Dutch—the black workers were not slow in evolving the weapon of workers' unity. There was an African strike at Kimberley in 1882, before there is any record of a strike by European workers in South Africa.

At the same time a tiny African petit bourgeoisie, composed of mission assistants, priests, teachers and clerks, was coming into existence in the Eastern Cape, and in the early 1880's the first bodies cutting across tribal barriers, the first African bodies, came into being. Most important

of these were mutual benefit societies at Kimberley (embryo trade unions), the African Educational Association (composed of teachers and priests around the mission stations of the Eastern Cape) and the general political organisation, Imbumba Yama Afrika.

The Imbumba was the counterpart of the Afrikaner Bond (which incidentally coined the phrase "Africa for the Africans", meaning by that Afrikaners) and it may be described as the first non-European national organisation—the direct forerunner of the African National Congress. Like the Afrikaner Bond, it came into being as the result of the heightened national oppression which followed the decision of the British government, in 1874, to establish complete control over Southern Africa.

From the formation of Imbumba onwards, the drive towards the unity of all Africans continued steadily. By the time of Union there were political organisations uniting men not as members of tribes but as Africans (though the word "African" was not yet used) in each of the provinces, and with Union their merger into the South African Native National Congress was a natural development, the description "Congress" probably coming from the Indian Congress, via the Natal Indian Congress.

With Congress came the conscious assertion of a single African nationhood. The tribes had long been described as nations. Now the word nation came into common use both as a description of the individual tribes and for the African people as a whole.

Strictly speaking, the use of the word "nation" is inaccurate in both cases. Socialists define a "nation" in clear terms. If a community does not share a common language, territory, economy and culture, it is not a nation.

The everyday use of the word, however, is at variance with the scientific usage. Progressives use definitions as tools, not as straitjackets, and it would be pedantic to make any issue about the everyday use of the word—specially when we are not always quite sure what the correct word is.

But when it comes to serious theoretical analysis the situation is quite different. As Potekhin says: "It is by no means an argument about words. To give a definition of a 'nation' is of vital importance for the peoples. A nation is not an imaginary or mystical concept—it is a very real phenomenon, and as such needs an exact definition, without which it is impossible to understand the national question which plays such an important part in the life of the peoples of the present time" (Potekhin, *Formation of Nations in Africa—Marxism Today*—October 1958, p. 308).

### Are There any Nations in South Africa?

It has long been recognised that it is possible to have a nation which does not have its own state. South Africa is an example of a state which has no nation.

A glance at the definition is sufficient to show that there is not a *South African* nation. The South African people have a variety of languages and cultures. For the same reason the *Africans* are not a nation.

What of the Zulus, Xosa, Basotho, Tswana, Swazi and Tsonga? What of the Afrikaners, English, Coloureds and Indians? Are they nations in South Africa?

No South Africans can vie with Verwoerd's Nationalists in the fervour with which they express the conviction not only that the Afrikaners are a nation, but that they are *the* nation.

But are they?

They have a common language and culture, certainly, but can it really be said that they have a common territory?

They inhabit the *same* territory, South Africa, in common with all other South Africans, black, white and brown, all inextricably mixed throughout the country. But there is no substantial territorial area where the Afrikaner is in the majority.

"Common territory" *must* mean a territory on one's own, because basic to the national question is that of self-determination and the right of secession. There is no part of South Africa which the Afrikaners could, by mere reason of their numbers, claim for the exercise of the right of secession. In *this* respect their position can be compared with that of the Jews in Russia, who, Stalin remarked in his argument showing that they do not constitute a nation, "are spread all over Russia and do not constitute a majority in a single Gubernia" (Stalin—*Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*).

A further essential to nationhood is a common economy, "in a word, a single national market" (Potekhin, *op. cit.*, p. 309). Just as is the position with regard to territory, so it is with the common economy whose existence is dependent on that of common territory. South Africa has a single national market—the Afrikaners have not. Nor (again like the Russian Jews) have they a normal class structure, which, as Stalin shows (*op. cit.*, p. 36) is a factor to be considered in determining nationhood.

The ruling class has created a completely distorted class structure among the Africans. The great majority of them are peasant-migrant labourers and proletarians with only a tiny petit-bourgeoisie and an infinitesimal bourgeoisie. The complementary effect has been the distortion of

the class structure of the Europeans. The white workers are essentially supervisors of African labour; there is an exceptionally big stratum of professional men and salaried officials. The Afrikaners are employed throughout the Government service, manning the enormous repressive apparatus, and with a working class well bribed and entirely petit-bourgeois in outlook.

For analogous reasons to the Afrikaners, the English, the Coloureds and Indians fail to qualify as nations.

When freedom is won, the Afrikaners and other national groups, if they so desire, will, no doubt, obtain the opportunity to develop into nations, being given the essential territorial basis for such development, as has happened in the U.S.S.R. and China.

### The African "Pre-Nations"

The African communities are in a different position. Let us consider the Zulus.

There is no doubt that they have a common territory in Natal, in a substantial portion of which they are an overwhelming majority of the population. Similarly they have a common language and culture. In one respect only have they not yet attained nationhood, and that is with regard to the development of a single Zulu market. The government has strangled Zulu economic development because it is in the interests of the ruling class that the Zulus be kept at the level of unskilled labourers.

There is no doubt, however, that this stifling of the Zulu nation will not endure, and that the Zulus are on the threshold of true nationhood.

The Russian term for this type of community is "narodnost" (Potekhin, *op. cit.*, p. 30). The closest English translation is "nationality", and as that has a different connotation in ordinary speech I would suggest that we use the word "pre-nation".

Other "pre-nations" in a position similar to the Zulus are the Basotho, the Xosas, the Swazis, the Tswana, etc.

### Self-Determination

The position of the pre-nations is also different from that of the Afrikaners and the English—who have no territory of their own—when it comes to a consideration of the right to self-determination.

Progressives might, in certain circumstances, accord to a pre-nation the right to self-determination. In fact that is already our policy with regard to Basutoland where we recognise the democratic right of the Basutho to decide for themselves how best they can march towards nationhood.

Although in Europe the demand for self-determination in some form was a characteristic feature of the national struggle, this is not the case in South Africa.

What is the reason for this?

In the first place the national oppression has quite a different basis from that of Europe before the First World War.

The national oppression here has not the primary purpose of keeping the bourgeoisie of the oppressed people out of the market place as it did in Europe (see Stalin, *op cit.*, p. 15). The oppressive laws here have the purpose, first and foremost, of driving the African *workers* to the factories and farms. The restrictions on the non-European bourgeoisie, crushing as they are, are quite secondary to the legal enslavement of the African workers, through the Pass Laws, the Master and Servant Acts, the industrial Colour Bar Acts, the complete ban on strikes and the Suppression of Communism Act.

Further the repression is not that of a dominant nation in one territory oppressing another in a different or adjacent territory. It is more that of a small minority, spread throughout a single country oppressing a big majority also spread out.

Whereas in Tsarist Russia, the Finns, Armenians, Georgians and the dozens of other peoples were separated, were oppressed in different ways and to different degrees, the Africans are in close contact and suffer identical oppression.

And thirdly the demand for self-determination is one which comes in the first place from the petit-bourgeoisie and in particular the traders, and this class is still infinitesimally small.

The demand of the people, therefore, is *not* for secession and self-determination in their own areas, but of full equality throughout the whole country. This is only a reflection of what we have already seen—that there are still no nations in South Africa.

The absence of a demand for self-determination does not mean that one should have no policy on the question. A quotation from Stalin (*op cit.*, pp. 202-203) is very apposite:

“When in 1912 we Russian Marxists were drawing up the first draft of our national programme, no serious movement for national independence existed in any of the border regions of the Russian Empire. Nevertheless we deemed it necessary to include in our programme the point on the right of nations to self-determination, i.e. the right of every nationality to secede and exist as an independent state. Why did we do this?

“Because we based ourselves not only on what then existed, but also on what was developing and impending in the general system

of international relations; that is, we took into account not only the present, but also the future.

“We knew that if any nationality were to demand secession we would fight to ensure the right to secede for every such nationality.”

At the same time it is necessary to clear up a common misconception—that because they fight for the right of nations to self-determination, socialists favour the *exercise* of that right.

A large state enjoys obvious advantages over the small one and the world tendency is towards merger rather than to splitting up. Normally, no progressive would support any splitting up. He would oppose it. But the essence of socialism is that it is truly democratic. A nation has the democratic right even to follow a wrong path though socialists point the correct one. By analogy most people will agree that Mr. and Mrs. Smith should be *allowed* to have a divorce if they want one. That does not mean that they think that Mr. and Mrs. Smith *should* be divorced.

We should not ignore the existence of “pre-nations” and the likelihood that there will develop, when democracy is won, a brotherhood of different South African nations before a single South African nation emerges.

On the contrary, we should consider whether we are succeeding adequately today in identifying ourselves with the specific progressive national aspirations and ideas of the “pre-nations”, just as we have completely identified ourselves with the demand that all share in common for the ending of apartheid and the achievement of democracy.

The dearest possessions of the “pre-nations” are their language, their culture and traditions.

It is obvious that to really get to the hearts and minds of the people, particularly the backward rural masses, it is necessary to develop to the full a presentation of our message which has its roots deep in the popular culture.

It is necessary to produce socialist literature in the language of the people—not merely in *translation* but in the original idiom. Because English is the most widely understood language it is natural that it should be so widely used for conferences and country-wide newspapers. But this is no excuse for neglecting the *majority* of the population who have not been fortunate enough to obtain sufficient education to read or to follow an argument in English. In this respect we could learn from Indian socialists who also use English as the international tongue, but at the same time produce extensive literature in the vernacular languages.

If there is any neglect of these people it is still a hang-over from the old days when there was a feeling that the intellectuals were the only im-

portant people in Congress, and when, in turning their backs on tribalism, the intellectuals tended to turn their backs also on their language and culture.

The need to remedy this situation is already widely recognised. The effect of the deeply moving and inspiring African political songs and music

which has been created in recent years is evidence enough of the importance of this type of development. Now what are required are plays and poems and dances of liberation which will inspire and teach people who know no English, and which will give them that added consciousness of dignity which pride in a national culture instils.