



Biko and the 'new' South Africa

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As we commemorate the brutal and barbaric killing of Stephen Bantu Biko this time of the year we are once again forced to reflect on where we are as a country against the ideals that Biko died for. South Africa is also marking 20 years of political independence. It is fitting, indeed, to ask and answer the question: how far is South Africa in the journey to true liberation?

Barney Pityana, at the debate that commemorated Biko at the University of South Africa, appealed to us, as Africans, to confront the question of what is wrong with us. Pityana, among many important points made during his reflections on Biko and South Africa, argued that Biko cherished dialogue and that we must discuss what is going on in South Africa. He reminded us of one of Biko's most powerful and timeless essay, "We Blacks", which was directed to Africans in an appeal that Africans must have a dialogue among themselves as a step towards decolonising the mind and being proud in being African. There have been similar calls and similar commemorative discussions across the country, as we remember Biko.

Pityana's call is, in my view, the most important because it is specific to Africans in South Africa. There are, I think, many discussions that are taking place that are not taking the country forward. Even the National Development Plan (NDP), though a step at the right direction, has not been helpful in ensuring a dialogue that can take our country forward as we appear to find ourselves at the crossroads. The NDP and associated discussions are oblivious to the fundamental point that the ramifications of apartheid colonialism are the main Achilles heel for the African in South Africa.

As we know, apartheid colonialism created racialised categories in order to enslave Africans. I tend to classify human beings into two categories: African and non-African. Africans are those that have endured the historical experience of colonialism and other forms of enslavement. In the case of South Africa, I use the category of "African" to refer to South Africans who have, or their earlier generations, experienced the evils of apartheid colonialism — the people who once lived well, in the most southern tip of the African continent, until the colonialists rudely interrupted their lives. I say this because Kwesi Kwaa Prah emphasises that Africans existed far before slavery — Prah also insists that "if everybody is an African, then nobody is an African".

It might be ideal to examine the state of our country, 20 years on, by looking at the extent to which the goal of a developmental state is being pursued. The plan of creating a (democratic) developmental state in South Africa features in many policy documents of the government and the ruling African National Congress. The notion of a developmental state is, arguably, all-encompassing in a sense that the vision of what post-apartheid South Africa was envisaged to be effectively encapsulated in the developmental state framework.

Thandika Mkandawire defines a developmental state as a “state which is able to set developmental goals and willing to create and sustain a policy climate and an institutional structure that promotes development”. The main attributes of what could be characterised as a developmental state include: determined developmental elite, relative autonomy of the state from outside influences, effective management of non-state economic interests, legitimacy, developmental ideology, meritocratic recruitments, sufficient requisite capacities to determine and implement a long-term developmental plan as well as insulated/“neutral” public servants.

It would seem that South Africa has lost track, or is off-tracking in all these areas. At a more empirical level, poverty and inequality remain very high while the level of human development is stagnant — all this in a context of an economy that has performed below and an economy that is entering a recession, if not already in a recession. South Africa is speedily drifting away from becoming a developmental state.

As South Africa drifts further away from the developmental state ideal, a corporatist state appears to be emerging. A corporatist state, as I use the term, broadly refers to the state that is influenced, if not captured, by business interests. It is a state that is not (sufficiently) concerned with socio-economic transformation. It is almost a given that a corporatist state functions within the neo-liberal principles, but it is not necessarily a neo-liberal regime. The notion of a corporatist state is useful, in my view, because it distinguishes the character of the post-apartheid state and disagrees with the notion of a neo-apartheid state as some have characterised South Africa lately.

South Africa’s democratic state is increasingly an ineffective or weak state, captured by capital. As such, for South Africa to be (ultimately) a democratic developmental state, the government would have to take control of the socio-economic transformation programme at the very least. In the main, or fundamentally, South Africa requires a profound restructuring of state-capital relations, if not the complete restructuring of the society itself. Anything else would simply scratch the surface and the developmental state dream would remain deferred, so long as Africans remain worse off in important socio-economic development aspects.

There is a role for every African in efforts to undo the ramifications of apartheid colonialism. The psychosocial damage that the brutal discriminatory system visited on an African requires robust conversations among Africans, at the very least towards regaining our lost glory and dignity. While government gets its act together, hopefully soon, Africans must answer for themselves what is to be done. Africans, as Biko argued, “set out on a quest for true humanity,

and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible — a more human face ... as we proceed further towards the achievement of our goals let us talk more about ourselves and our struggle and less about whites”.

Biko’s thoughts and struggle remain valid today because vestiges of apartheid colonialism remain rampant in our psychology, economic structure and educational system. As an academic, I suppose, my major concern should be in the area of education and the overall effect that a colonised curricula continue to have on our African students. But the issues are inextricably connected and interlinked. Biko alerted us on the need to decolonise our mind, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Frantz Fanon, Mangaliso Sobukwe, Chinweizu Ibekwe and others. Biko appealed on an African to reject racist ideologies that reinforce inferiorisation of Africans by the whites. Biko, a fighter, as characterised by Andile Mngxitama, would want Africans to reject servitude and subservience to the white establishment as well as to confront fear and feelings of powerlessness. Mngxitama, in his Wits university lecture on Biko, also reminds us again that it was Pityana who coined “black man you are on your own”.

In conclusion, Africans have reason to remain optimistic. Recognising the challenges that they face and that their country, South Africa, faces is a good starting point. As argued elsewhere, the (South African) post-apartheid development experience, 20 years since political independence, is not dissimilar to what can be observed regarding post-colonial Africa’s development experience. The 1960s, in particular, and parts of the 1970s in post-independent Africa showed many signs of hope. The 1980s were, however, declared the “lost decade”. South Africa, 20 years since the end of formal apartheid, could be experiencing, increasingly, its “lost decade”. This can be reversed, as many African countries or a myriad of countries in the developing world were able to change their fortunes.