

# SELF-DETERMINATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

## *A Contribution to Discussion*

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**I**N modern times the right of nations to self-determination has become a rallying call of oppressed peoples all over the world.

What does this demand mean? Essentially it means that a nation has the right to determine its own destiny, and this in turn means that, if it forms part of a multi-racial state or empire, it has the right to secede and lead an independent political existence.

That is self-determination. But what is a nation? People use this word in many ways. Everyone has for example heard talk of a South African nation, a Zulu nation, and an African nation. In each case something different must be meant, for the Zulus form part of the African people and the Africans part of the South African people. They cannot all be nations unless one gives the word nation a very amorphous meaning like community, or people. Social scientists have therefore analysed the specific characteristics which make a community tightly knit and integrated, and capable of leading a separate existence. The definition they have adopted is that a nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up, manifested in a community of culture.

A community possessing all four of these essential features, and lacking none of them, is capable of leading an independent political existence in the world of today; and such a community is therefore entitled, as of right, to receive from all true democrats in the other nations of the multi-national state or empire of which it forms part, the fullest support for its demand for self-determination.

South Africa is not a single nation but a multi-national state. What is the position with regard to the Africans, who constitute the majority of the population of this State?

They too are not a nation. To a very large extent they have become, as the result of their common oppression, and the unifying efforts of the ANC, a single political community — but, like South Africa itself, it is a multi-national political community containing several languages and cultures.

## AN AFRICAN NATION?

Are the Africans developing into a single nation? The answer seems to be 'Yes', and a single African nation is likely to develop before a single South African nation does.

The beginnings of a single South African national consciousness can be traced back to the 1880's.

Until the 19th 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 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 19th century by the Zulus from the time of Tshaka and the Basuto from that of Mosheshoe.

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

Nevertheless, it is not impossible that 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 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 last-named 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, 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.

With Congress came the conscious assertion of a single African nationhood. In fact, however, the Africans do not yet constitute a single nation in the sense in which we are using the word.

Does this mean that the ANC is incorrect to demand self-determination? Of course not, for (quite apart from the fact that there may be circumstances in which even a single "pre-nation" should be supported in the demand for self-determination) the Africans are a political community made up of several national groups on the verge of nationhood, and as we shall see their right to self-determination cannot be disputed.

## ZULUS, AFRIKANERS, COLOURED

This brings us a stage further. What is the position with regard to the different national communities which make up the African people? Let us consider the Zulus.

With their common language, territory and culture, the Zulus have the main requisites of nationhood.

We have only to settle the question of whether there can be said to be a common Zulu economy, or, in the words of Potehkin in his recent Liberation article, "a single national market." The main prerequisites for the development of such a market are "the geographical division of labour and the existence of developed exchanges on a profit basis within a capitalist mode of production."

If we take this view, the only thing separating the Zulus from true nationhood is the stifling of their economy by the colour bar. Abolish the colour bar and the Zulus will become a nation almost overnight. They are a form of the community known in Russia as a "Narodnost", the closest



English translation of which is "nationality," and as that has a different connotation in English, I would suggest that we use the word "pre-nation."

What has been said of the Zulus applies, subject to modification, also to the other African peoples in South Africa.

What of the Afrikaners? 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.

Here again we are at odds about a definition. The pure lily-white Afrikaner volk about which the Verwoerd Nationalists declaim are not a nation but an hallucination. If there is an Afrikaner nation in South Africa it does not consist of the 1½ million Afrikaners who can claim white identity cards, but of about 2½ million people — for once you break through the racialist smokescreen it becomes clear that the one million Afrikaans-speaking Coloureds are a part of the same national community as the 1½ million Afrikaans-speaking whites, common territory, language, economy, culture and all. Except for the political and social discrimination there is nothing at all to distinguish the very substantial proportion of Afrikanerdom which, though technically Coloured, passes for white, from that proportion which is too dark, or too proud, to pass.

And what is so ironical is that the Coloureds are one of Afrikanerdom's greatest national assets. With them Afrikanerdom has a territory where it is in the majority, with a few good-sized towns; and it has a much better balanced class structure.

Although the present leaders of white Afrikanerdom would choke at the idea, it is very possible that under conditions of freedom the single white and Coloured Afrikaner nation will be one of the first to consolidate itself, and that its Afrikaner language and culture will blossom as never before.

At the same time it must be noted that the position is by no means static. The political discrimination against the Coloureds is creating something akin to a Coloured national consciousness, separated from that of the white Afrikaner, and comparable with that of the Negro in the U.S. The South African Coloured People's Organisation is thought of as a national organisation like those of its African and Indian allies in the Congress alliance. But an optimistic estimate of the time required for winning freedom would preclude the development of a separate Coloured nation born of "race" oppression.

There appear, therefore, to be several communities in South Africa which will swiftly become nations when the national oppression which strangles their economic development is ended.

## SELF-DETERMINATION AND SECESSION

This brings us to a discussion of the form which the demand for self-determination is likely to take.



When other oppressed nations, particularly those of Africa, have put forward the demand for self-determination, the form of self-determination contemplated has almost always been that of secession (although informal political links with the former oppressor nation may be maintained, as is the case with the independent nations of the Commonwealth.)

In South Africa, however, as far as the Africans are concerned, self-determination has a different significance. For them it is not a question of calling upon an oppressing majority to permit them independence in their own territory; nor one of calling upon a foreign power to withdraw.

For the Africans are the majority. In a democratic South Africa they can have no fear of being subjected to discriminatory laws by another South African nation, and therefore the demand for Africans to secede from anywhere would not make sense.

The form that the demand of the Africans for self-determination takes, therefore, is simply that for full equality. And as the African pre-nations draw their whole strength and hope from their inter-national African unity, the demands of the individual pre-nations, are identical with and inseparable from those of the Africans as a whole.

The mere winning of the full and free franchise would guarantee the Africans self-determination, constituting, as they would, the majority of the electorate; there would, in effect, come into being an independent African state, with (if the Freedom Charter is the basis) full protection for national minorities.

This leads us to a question which is going to be raised more and more frequently as the realisation grows, that the Freedom Charter is neither treason nor a dream. What does the Charter mean when it says "All national groups shall have equal rights." And what is meant by the term 'national group'?

One answer we may give is that these are things which must be thrashed out at a national convention to plan the new state form, and that if people want to know the answers they must urge the holding of such a convention.

But such a reply, good as it is, is not altogether satisfactory. The new state may not come about as the result of around-table conference! We should begin to think about answers now; not fixed and inflexible answers — for conditions change — but answers nevertheless.

## A FEDERATION

Does the answer lie in some form of multi-national federation comparable say with that of the Soviet Union, India, Switzerland or China?

I would suggest it does. The Freedom Charter guarantees the right of all national groups to develop their own languages and cultures. For the



first time the national cultures will be able to blossom, stimulated by (among other things) free, equal and compulsory education, of the highest standard, available in the national languages.

The example of other countries has proved that only by the fullest development of the national cultures will it be possible to secure the maximum participation of the backward nationalities in the work of constructing a new South Africa.

It may seem strange that the best way to achieve the fusion of national cultures in the future into one common culture, is to favour the blossoming of many cultures first.

As Pandit Chandra put it: "Disunion for the sake of union. Just think! — It even smacks of the paradoxical. And yet this 'self-contradictory' formula reflects the living truth of dialectical reasoning."

The national cultures must be permitted to develop and expand and to reveal all their potential qualities in order to create the conditions for their fusion.

National cultures do not blossom in the air. They have to be rooted in the firm soil. And national cultures, plus territory, plus the unshackled economy which freedom will bring, means nations. The perspective is opened of a South Africa which is an economically integrated brotherhood of equal and autonomous nations, united in a single state, in which racial discrimination will be a crime.

This development and expansion is not merely a matter of the happy future "when freedom comes".

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 — and to do this immediately.

It is necessary to produce democratic 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 democrats 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 important 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.