

Commentary

A tribute to Steve Biko*

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I would like to congratulate you warmly on successfully completing this part of your journey. I know that ceremony should not stand in the way of celebrations. But I promise to be short.

I was invited to give a talk at the American University of Cairo in May, 2011. It was the time of Tahrir Square. Others had seen Tahrir Square as a continuation of colour revolutions said to have begun in Eastern Europe with the fall of the Soviet Union. I said that Tahrir Square evoked for me a period more than a quarter of a century ago, marked by an event we know as the Soweto Uprising of 1976.

Tahrir Square evoked the memory of Soweto in a powerful way – for me, in three different ways. One, like Soweto 1976, Tahrir Square in 2011 too shed a generation’s romance with violence.

What does it mean to move from armed struggle to peaceful protest? More than just dropping lethal weapons, it means dropping fixed ideas about who is a friend and who an enemy. It means not thinking in terms of good and evil – where the enemy is evil and has to be eliminated. The language of evil comes from a long religious tradition, secularised over time: you cannot live with evil, you can not convert it, you must eliminate it. This is why the struggle against evil is necessarily a violent struggle. The lesson of Egypt, unlike that of Libya next door but like that of Soweto over three decades before, is the moral force of non-violence. Unlike violence, non-violence does not just resist and exclude. It also embraces and includes, thereby opening up new possibilities of reform, possibilities that may have seemed unimaginable only yesterday.

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The second resemblance between Soweto and Tahrir Square was on the question of unity. Just as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa had uncritically reproduced official distinctions between races and tribes, so had mainstream politics in Egypt politicised religious difference. Black unity in South Africa became a banner for the unity of all the oppressed, across races. In Egypt, Tahrir Square became a symbol of unity across religions. Who can forget the powerful image of Christians in Tahrir Square forming a protective cordon around Muslims in prayer when threatened with police violence?

Tahrir Square shared a third significance with Soweto. Soweto forced many people internationally to rethink their notions of Africa and the African. Before Soweto, the convention was to assume that violence was second nature with Africans who were incapable of living together peacefully. Before Tahrir Square, and particularly after the 9/11 events in the United States, official discourse and media representations, particularly in the West, were driven by the assumption that Arabs are genetically predisposed not only to violence but also to discrimination against anyone different.

Today, I want to talk about Soweto, and not Tahrir Square. At the heart of the movement that led to Soweto and beyond was one remarkable individual, Steve Biko, an alumnus of this university. Please consider this address a salute to Steve Biko.

Soweto was a youthful uprising. In an era when adult political activists had come to accept as a truism the notion that meaningful change could only come through armed struggle, Soweto pioneered an alternative imagination and an alternative mode of struggle. Not armed struggle but popular struggle. The youth of Soweto stopped thinking of struggle as something waged by professional fighters, armed guerrillas, with the people cheering from the stands, but as a popular movement with ordinary people as key participants. The potential of popular struggle lay not just in sheer numbers, but in a new imagination that laid the basis for a wider unity.

To understand the power of this new imagination, we need to understand the nature of the power to which it was a response. Apartheid rule had split South African society into so many races (Whites, Indians, Coloureds) and so many tribes (Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, Venda and so on), by putting races and tribes, and then each tribe, under a separate set of laws, so that even when they organised to remove or reform the laws in question, those opposed to apartheid organised and acted separately: the Whites as Congress of Democrats, Coloureds as the Coloured People's Congress, Indians as the South African Indian Congress and Africans as the African National

Congress.

In this context came a new person, a visionary leader, Steve Biko, at the helm of a new movement, the Black Consciousness Movement. Biko's message undermined apartheid statecraft. Black, said Biko, is not a colour; Black is an experience. If you are oppressed, you are Black. In the South African context, this was truly revolutionary. Biko's subsidiary message was that the unity of the oppressed could not be achieved through clandestine armed struggle; it had to be achieved in the open, through a peaceful but militant struggle.

Steve Biko created the mass movement of which the ANC took the leadership in the decades that followed. ANC had spoken of non-racialism as early as the Freedom Charter in 1955. But the ANC's non-racialism only touched the political elite. Individuals from the white and Indian and Coloured political elite had joined the ANC. But ordinary people remained confined and trapped by a political perspective hemmed in narrow racial or tribal boundaries. It is Biko who forged a vision with the potential to cut through these boundaries.

Ten years later, in 1987, occurred another event reminiscent of Soweto. This was the Palestinian Intifada. The First *Intifada* had a Soweto-like potential. Like the children of Soweto, the youth of Palestine too shed the romance of armed struggle – daring to face bullets with no more than stones. Faced with feuding liberation movements, each claiming to be a sole representative of the oppressed people, the youth of the Intifada called for a wider unity.

If the contribution of Biko evokes a parallel, it is with that of Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Biko led by example, and fearlessly too. Unlike that of Gandhi, however, the life of Biko was cut short at a young age. But even that short life, like that of Gandhi, was testimony to the power of an idea.

Ideas spread in the open, not in clandestinity. Consider one remarkable fact. No major event in contemporary history has been forecast, either by researchers or consultants, whether based in universities or in think tanks. This was true of Soweto 1976, it was true of the fall of the Soviet Union and it was true of Tahrir Square. What does it say about the state of our knowledge that we can foretell a natural catastrophe – an earthquake, even a tsunami – but not a political shift? The rule would seem to be: the bigger the shift, the less likely is the chance of it being foretold. This is for one reason. Big shifts in social and political life require an act of the imagination – a break from routine, a departure from convention, a shift in consciousness

– which is why social science, which is focused on the study of routine, of institutional and repetitive behaviour, is unable to forecast big events.

The energy released by the Soweto uprising inspired and propelled the revolt of thousands of communities in South Africa. Over time, it combined with the organised strength of the independent labour movement born in Durban in 1973. It took nearly two decades for the Soweto Uprising to deliver a democratic reform in South Africa. The democratic revolution in Egypt has just begun. Tahrir Square has not led to a revolution, but to a reform. And that is not a bad thing. That South Africa did not have a revolution in 1994 is no reason to deny the importance of the reform it did have. It is also no reason to stop at the gate of reform. As Biko predicted, Black Consciousness would take us to the gate, but no further. To go beyond the gate, we have no choice but to think for ourselves.

I would like to close with a story that I remember reading in my college days. It was the story of a settler meeting a lion in the Highlands of Kenya. The settler shows the lion a painting of a lion shot by a settler. The lion is down, and the settler stands triumphant, a rifle in his right hand, his left foot arrogantly placed on the lion's chest. After making sure the lion has had a good look at the painting, the settler asks: 'What do you think of the painting?' The lion responds: 'I wish we lions could paint'.

Well, you are the lions of today's South Africa. No matter what your colour, each of you is a lion. And I hope each of you can paint. I wish you a great journey ahead as you paint your own image of the world – and try to remake South Africa and the world in your image!