Article

Whither nationalism? Are we entering an era of post-nationalist politics in Southern Africa?

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Introduction
More than 40 years ago Frantz Fanon provided a potent critique of bourgeois anticolonial nationalism when he argued that it was an ideology aimed at the (re)attainment of nationhood through means of the capture and subsequent occupation of the colonial state, and which represented only the interests of the elite indigenous classes (Fanon 1963). In recent years, in part as a result of the rise of viable opposition political parties with the capacity not only to influence policy but to challenge incumbent parties for state power, and the blossoming networks of civil society in several Southern African countries, Fanon has been resurrected by some scholars of the region to launch scathing critiques of nationalist ideology and practice, and of the national liberation movements whom they suggest were always more concerned with the consolidation of elite power than with the empowering of the powerless, and with the extension of privilege rather than with its overthrow (Bond 2002, Melber 2002). For these scholars, some of the key features and indeed limitations of post-independence African nationalism have been the abuse of power exercised by the national liberation parties over its citizens, and the partnerships forged with capital and international forces by an African leadership that identifies with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West.

Under the guise of post-independence African nationalism, national liberation movements turned political parties, to varying degrees, have been able to strengthen their political dominance and maintain control over the state by selectively reconstructing narratives of the wars of liberation and inventing new traditions that establish the nationalist parties’ exclusive post-colonial legitimacy to rule. The boundaries between the party,
government/state, and constructions of the nation often have become blurred in the post-independence era of Southern Africa, meaning that those who opposed or dissented from the line of the nationalist party were branded as enemies of the people and of the national interest.

However, in recent years we have witnessed the rise of viable opposition political parties in several Southern African countries, such as the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in Zimbabwe and the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) in Zambia, that have successfully challenged the nationalist parties in some political contests. Perhaps more importantly, we have witnessed a resurgence of grassroots, popular politics and the rise of so-called new social movements such as the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, and the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa that have successfully challenged the ANC government’s policies on crucial issues such as AIDS treatment and the privatisation of basic resources and services. The community struggles, demonstrations and marches waged by these groups have received international attention and signal for some the building of an alternative politics that can successfully challenge the dominant neoliberal policies of many Southern African governments. Commenting on the mass mobilisation and demonstrations organised in opposition to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002, the Canadian anti-apartheid activist John Saul excitedly remarked,

I feel, even more strongly … that we are now entering into novel and complex political terrain in South Africa, terrain that is extremely dangerous but also marked by genuine promise…it was difficult to be on that march and not sense that it served as a significant signpost on the road to a post-neoliberal and post-nationalist politics in South Africa – and as an impressive rallying point for those forces from below that might yet get things back on track in their country. (Saul 2002:13)

The growth of so-called new social movements and grassroots organisations centered on material and basic needs and often aligned with broader anti-globalisation and anti-neoliberalism campaigns may in some respects suggest the revitalisation of grassroots popular politics in South Africa. However, this new alliance of social movements is not without its own contradictions. The leftist scholar and activist Patrick Bond argued as much noting that,

As the final rally opened, a spokesperson from the landless movement intoned ‘Viva Robert Mugabe, Viva! Viva Zanu-PF, Viva!’ , to strong
applause from the large rural delegation … the landless gathering was full of promise but also pitfalls, as witnessed in the movement’s positive reaction to Mugabe’s invitation for a welcome to the Johannesburg airport … in advance of the heads of state meeting … (Bond 2002d:2)

Incidents such as this reveal the heterogeneity of groups that comprise this burgeoning grassroots movement and the disparate interests they represent. What is inspiring about these new forms of struggle and political organisation is that they are fuelled by ordinary people who are protesting at the barbaric affects of imperialism and neoliberal economic policies and practices that prioritise fiscal discipline and the interests of foreign capital over meeting the basic needs of its citizens. But their anti-imperialism manifests itself in various forms – not always anti-capitalist, sometimes socialist, and sometimes nationalist. Indeed the support for President Mugabe among a large portion of South Africa’s rural poor is an indication of the continued resonance of nationalist sentiment. Similarly, many of the sentiments emanating from within the anti-privatisation movement are nationalist in origin, and advocate for increased state intervention and more neo-Keynesian economic policies rather than anti-state slogans and rhetoric.

Such a reality poses serious challenges to the leadership of this new social movement alliance as well as to African intellectuals, particularly those who once shared the liberation movements’ nationalist objectives but may now be critical of many of the policy strategies adopted by nationalist leaders in power. It compels us to pose pointed questions as to what we mean by a post-nationalist politics. Should our criticisms be targeted towards the national liberation movements or towards the nationalist project? Should we label all nationalist demands as reactionary? In what way does a post-nationalist project translate into an anti-state project? And what might be a post-nationalist vision or construction of the nation?

In fact, one of the limitations of these debates has been that post-nationalism has been ill-defined and used to characterise multiple and disparate political projects. Broadly speaking, post-nationalism has been used to connote a critique of post-independence state nationalism. In this regard it has been related to anti-nationalist and anti-state projects. Leftist scholars like John Saul and Patrick Bond have used the term to explain what they hope is a burgeoning socialist and anti-imperialist movement or sentiment. For liberal scholars post-nationalism connotes a liberal democratic political project that places emphasis on individual rights and multiparty
politics. In contrast, African nationalist and pan-Africanist scholars, more wary of so-called post-nationalist political projects, have characterised post-nationalism as a political project detached from the pan-African ideal and free of its moral imperatives, which promotes a more exclusionary and adversarial image of the nation (Mkandawire 2003). In this paper I draw on the arguments of this third group of scholars to provide a critique of both leftist and liberal intellectuals who have rushed to embrace post-nationalism while disparaging nationalism and nationalist leaders.

Deconstructing the nationalist struggles in Southern Africa is a useful exercise but only if it is well-informed and able to interrogate the complexity of the problems that nationalist leaders face, and the structural context for the failure of the nationalist developmental project. This paper attempts to weigh these debates by critically examining some of the recent charges against the ruling national liberation movements made by leftist intellectuals with an extensive and committed involvement in Southern Africa. The new critics, intent on exposing nationalist leaders as the new emperors without clothes, have focused on the material basis and bourgeois and elitist character of post-colonial nationalism. While there is certainly a need to challenge nationalist leaders on their record, this paper argues that we need to take the national project seriously by critically revisiting and deconstructing the nationalist agenda rather than consigning nationalism to the dustbin of history.

**Fanon and nationalism**

Nationalism and the nation-state have returned to prominence in Western social scientific scholarship, especially since 1989. Most of the contemporary studies of nationalism continue to be filtered through a First World or Western lens that perceives nationalism as ‘near-pathological’ (Anderson 1983:129), ‘chauvinistic’ and resulting ‘in the violent intensification of already existing social divisions’ (Lazarus 1999:161). Ironically, such perspectives have been readily accepted in contemporary post-colonial studies where they have taken on their own distinctive features. This is quite opposite from the approaches taken in the context of decolonisation when the liberationist credentials of at least some anti-colonial nationalist movements were not in doubt. Neil Lazarus reminds us,

To speak during those years of Vietnam or Cuba or Algeria or Guinea-Bissau – to evoke the names of such figures as Che, Fidel, Ho, Amilcar Cabral, no matter how fetishistically – was to conjure up the specter of national liberation, that is, of a revolutionary decolonization capable,
Are we entering an era of post-nationalist politics in southern Africa?

in Frantz Fanon’s memorable phrase, of ‘chang[ing] the order of the world’. (Lazarus 1999:161)

In their critique of anti-colonial nationalist movements some contemporary theorists of Southern African ‘postcoloniality’ have drawn on Fanon’s denunciation of bourgeois nationalism (Bond 2002a, 2002b; Bond and Manyanya 2002; Melber 2002). For example, Patrick Bond argues that Fanon’s premonition that the ‘historic mission’ of the bourgeois nationalists was to constitute themselves as functionaries, straddling the international division of labour between metropolitan capitalism and the subaltern classes in the peripheries has been upheld in both post-independence Zimbabwe and post-apartheid South Africa. In Fanon’s Warning: a civil society reader on the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), Bond argues that NEPAD as ‘a new framework of interaction with the rest of the world’ is an example of the partnership between Africa’s leaders and powerful foreign interests that may lead to Africa’s rapid integration into the world economy, but is unlikely to provide equitable and sustainable growth. He contends,

Mbeki and his main allies have already succumbed to the class (not necessarily personalistic) limitations of post-Independence African nationalism, namely acting in close collaboration with hostile transnational corporate and multilateral forces whose interests stand directly opposed to Mbeki’s South African and African constituencies. (Bond 2002a:1)

Bond shares with many of the civil society critiques of NEPAD included in his book a great deal of scepticism over the form of corporate-driven globalisation and development supported within NEPAD (Bond 2002b). He argues that Africa’s marginalisation has occurred not because of a lack of integration into the global economy but because of too much of the wrong sort of integration. Thus for Bond, NEPAD simply represents the complicity of the African national bourgeoisie in the extension of neocolonial globalisation, a condition Fanon foretold when he wrote of the national bourgeoisie as ‘being the transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the mask of neocolonialism’ (Fanon 1963:152).

Bond and Manyanya make a similar condemnation of Zimbabwe and the ruling ZANU-PF party (Bond and Manyanya 2002). They argue that the leadership of the national liberation party, despite its continued radical rhetoric, became the local agents of imperialism by following the structural adjustment plans dictated by the IMF.
After national liberation, the petit-bourgeois leadership can abandon its alliance with workers and peasants and emerge as the new ruling class by gaining certain concessions from both foreign and local capital and, in fact, forming a new alliance with these forces, which they need to stay in power. Of course, lip-service commitment, à la Kenya, to the masses will be made. (Bond and Manyanya 2002:25)

These policies alienated the urban and rural masses from the ruling ZANU-PF and precipitated the explosion of mass action in 1997-8, reflecting what the authors term the ‘exhausted nationalism’ of the ruling nationalist party (Bond and Manyanya 2002). Such exhausted nationalism is characterised by an abuse of power by the nationalist party, in which it becomes increasingly authoritarian over its own citizens, demanding loyalty and obedience instead of welcoming the free flow of ideas and expression of popular discontent.

Henning Melber, in his article on the national liberation movements turned governments in Southern Africa, makes a similar argument, suggesting that, to varying degrees, these revolutionary liberation parties have transformed themselves into a new ruling conservative elite, often becoming the post-colonial enemies of democracy and freedom (Melber 2002). He argues that the nationalist parties ‘have been able to establish exclusive post-colonial legitimacy to rule by constructing selective narratives of the war(s) of liberation and establishing themselves as an integral part of the post-colonial national identity’ (Melber 2002:163).

Given the blurred boundaries between party, government and state under a factual one-party system subordinating the state and the growing equation of the party being the government and the government being the state, any opposition or dissent is considered to be hostile and branded as an enemy to the people and the national interest. (Melber 2002:163)

For Melber the blending of party, government and state among the ruling nationalist parties indicates a very similar development in Southern Africa to the one Fanon prophesised over 40 years ago. Fanon spoke of the abuse of power exercised by the party that controls the masses, not to make sure that they really participate in the business of governing the nation but to remind them constantly that what the government expects from them is obedience and discipline. The political party … instead of welcoming the expression of popular discontentment, instead of taking for its fundamental purpose the free flow of ideas from the people up to the government, forms a screen and forbids such ideas. (Fanon 2001:146,147 – quoted in Melber 2002: 168)
These intellectuals provide important analyses of the detrimental impact of state nationalist ideologies that promote anti-democratic and authoritarian governance practices and mask neoliberal economic policies that keep Southern African countries in relationships of dependence with the developed world. They highlight the material basis of nationalism, which has tended to be bourgeois and elitist in character. However, the debates have tended to become framed in terms of left versus right politics, while dismissing any progressive possibilities of nationalist politics. For example, what do we make of the persistence of nationalist sentiments among the grassroots and poor? Can it be explained as simply ‘false consciousness’ on their part?

A critique of nationalist politics in Southern Africa requires a more nuanced understanding of nationalist pressures emanating from elites as well as from the poor. Ruling nationalist parties confront multiple nationalist pressures from new African elites demanding capital/resource accumulation, and from the poor demanding redistribution. To be sure, the nationalist project in Southern African countries has tended to lean towards elite/bourgeois nationalism, to the detriment of the poor. As Neville Alexander argues, the nationalist project will continue to lean towards bourgeois nationalism if multiple understandings of the nation persist. Yet the goal cannot be to deny the national question nor to replace a racialist approach to the national question with one that is classist (Alexander 2002:41).

To develop a more nuanced understanding of post-independence nationalism, I suggest we revisit the writings of Fanon and consider some of the lessons learnt in other parts of the continent. Fanon has proved to be incredibly prescient in laying out the questions that continue to haunt us in the post-colonial and post-apartheid era. Yet, his denunciation of bourgeois nationalist ideology was not an abstract repudiation of nationalism as such. Indeed his critique was made from an alternative nationalist standpoint, an argument convincingly made by Neil Lazarus in his interrogation of some recent ‘second thoughts’ on anti-colonial nationalist ideology and practice (Lazarus 1999). Fanon distinguishes between bourgeois nationalism and an alternative form of national consciousness – a liberationist, anti-imperialist, nationalist internationalism1 of which he wrote,

\[\text{[it] is not nationalism in the narrow sense; on the contrary it is the only thing that will give us an international dimension … [I]t is national liberation which leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history. It is at the heart of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows. (Fanon 1968:247-8)}\]
For Fanon, in the context of decolonisation, nationhood can be secured under different auspices. The neocolonial option would emerge if the state comes to be dominated by the national middle classes, and capitalist social relations are extended. But for Fanon, the national project also has the capacity to become the vehicle of a social(ist) demand that promotes the fundamental transformation of the prevailing social order. From this perspective it is clear that Fanon privileges the nation-state as a decisive site of anti-imperialist struggle and the fulfilment of a progressive nationalist/nation-building project. This has been seen by some as a limitation of Fanon’s thinking. However, for Fanon the attainment of nationhood was not the end goal in itself but a step in a broader internationalist project. Furthermore, while Fanon recognises the importance of recreating national identity and consciousness, he argues that it is important to go beyond this to create a social consciousness at the moment of liberation. Without this, decolonisation merely becomes the replacement of one form of domination by another.

Mahmood Mamdani makes a similar distinction in his seminal article on the state and civil society in contemporary Africa (Mamdani 1990). He traces the evolution of nationalism from a popularly rooted conception forged during the anti-colonial struggle to one transformed into a state ideology in the post-independence era. The reformulation of nationalism as a state ideology was characterised by two processes:

on the one hand, a delegitimation of all democratic struggles as partial, sectarian or tribal while upholding the state as the only legitimate expression of the interests of the whole (the country, the nation, the people); on the other, the displacement of all internal, popularly derived efforts towards a way forward by an externally imposed, state-centred, technocratic search for a solution. (Mamdani 1990:49)

While Mamdani provides a critique of state nationalism, it is firmly grounded in an alternative nationalist discourse. For him the crucial point to be recognised is that

the crisis of nationalism today is the crisis of one particular anti-democratic variant of it. But the formulation of an alternate perspective on nationalism, based on a popular and democratic orientation, is not possible unless we move away from a state-centred approach to one which puts emphasis on the autonomy of popular organisations, and in the contexts of such a shift, raise the question of social transformation from below. (Mamdani 1990:49)
Thus the state nationalism of the post-independence era cannot be understood as simply the logical evolution of the popular nationalism of the anti-colonial struggles for they are grounded in fundamentally different projects. During the anti-colonial/anti-apartheid struggle, nationalism was a progressive force that emerged as a result of the popular unity forged in struggle. It was part and parcel of the democratic struggle. Yet, as a state ideology, nationalism becomes reactionary when it equates the national project and nation-building solely with the state and is grounded in the project of state-building. Thus, Mamdani suggests that it was when nationalism became divorced from the democratic struggle that the defence of nationalism could easily be presented as the defence of state interests (Mamdani 1990:52).

What we can learn from Mamdani’s analysis is the need to distinguish between different forms of nationalism, and its potential as a progressive as well as a reactionary force, both within and outside of the state. His detailed discussion of the national question and democratic struggle in Uganda highlights the need to break down various social and class bases underpinning different nationalist movements, and the tendencies that may alter current trajectories.

Nationalist movements and leaders in many instances have been easily assimilated to the rationalist social engineering of nation-building, adopting projects of national development very much in accordance with Western models and interests. But nationalist passions have not. Nationalism as a doctrine and sentiment rooted in common history, culture and language still has considerable resonance among large sections of Southern African people. Indeed, while nationalist ideology holds no candle to liberalism or Marxism as an intellectual doctrine, it has elicited a far more intense and widespread commitment.

This is particularly so in Southern Africa where the national question or, in juridical terms, the right to self-determination, remains a central issue and an area of intense debate. The national question plays itself out in different ways, as reflected in recent debates over the land issue in Zimbabwe, as well as debates in South Africa between COSATU, the SACP and the ANC within the ruling tripartite alliance, and the debates over ‘who is an African’. In fact, nationalist ideology prevalent within the liberation movements of Southern Africa viewed colonialism and apartheid as a denial of sovereignty and self-determination as well as a denial of rights. Thus, in the post-independence era that still confronts the legacies of colonialism/apartheid, African
governments face ambiguously the so-called national question – that is, fundamentally the continuous search for equality and sovereignty by various communities that have historically merged into a single nation-state.

This aspect of southern African reality is not fully grasped within the context of the left versus right debates. On this point Jeremy Cronin suggests that

if we are to understand South Africa then this left-right axis needs to be supplemented with another axis, North-South. For it is the persisting crisis of under-development in the South, of a South that is not so much neglected as actively linked into debilitating accumulation patterns centered on the North, that lies at the heart of the South African reality. (Cronin 2003:1)

Indeed it is the persistence of colonial legacies, including semi-colonial accumulation paths and racialised inequalities, that continue to shape Southern Africa’s reality and must be addressed in particular and complex ways. Such a reality is inadequately grasped through an exclusively class analysis that dismisses nationalist sentiments as simply a manifestation of ‘false consciousness’.

African nationalism has been shaped by the historical context in which it developed and the present global context in which it operates. African nationalism emerged in response to colonialism and was heavily influenced by African intellectuals who were educated abroad, as well as Pan-Africanist intellectuals such as Garvey, Padmore and DuBois. This has limited (as well as strengthened) the nationalist project in several ways. For example, Mkandawire explains that the early African nationalists were

cheered on by the ‘modernisation school’ that considered ethnic identities and social pluralism as ‘barriers to development’ … [The] image of the nation was essentially ‘European’ in its mystified forms – one race, one language, one culture. Alternative images of nation states – multiethnic, multicultural or multiracial – were never seriously considered, and if considered had been so tarnished by apartheid’s claims as to be of no lasting or sympathetic interest. (Mkandawire 2003:5)

Indeed, this has been a criticism hurled at Fanon by critics such as Christopher Miller, who argues that Fanon privileges the nation-state as the primary political unit without questioning the appropriateness of that construct in the African context, or the form that it might take (1990).

Far from being ‘natural national entities’ or cohesive nation-states, the modern nations of black Africa must make do with borders created to satisfy European power-brokering in the ‘Scramble for Africa’, borders
that often violate rather than reinforce units of culture ... In Fanon’s essay on national culture there is no analysis of what a nation might be ... (Miller 1990:48)

As a result, African states’ ethnic diversity was often masked over, and pan-African cultural continuities promoted even where none existed. At the same time, within the nationalist agenda the overwhelming focus on imperialism and the hegemony of neo-liberalism meant that class differences within the nationalist project tended to be minimised or even denied. In other instances, the nationalist project, drained of its anti-imperialist and class character, degenerated into ethnic nationalism.

In contrast, more recently the image of the nation offered by the new breed of leaders in Africa, such as Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, is one detached from the pan-African ideal and free of its moral imperatives (1990: 6).

Post-nationalist leaders have tended to define the nation either in more exclusivistic terms or in adversarial terms. In the former case, the insistence is on more precise definitions of who are nationals, as in the case of Cote d’Ivoire’s President Conan Bedia’s insistence on ‘Ivorite’ or Zambia’s Frederick Chiluba’s genealogical definition of a Zambian. The latter shows up in dreams of territorial extension or redefinition of colonial borders that has been broached by some Tutsi intellectuals. (Mkandawire 2003:7)

Indeed, post-nationalism in Africa, as characterised by Mkandawire and represented by ‘new African leaders’ such as Museveni and Kagame, is not without its limitations, having to confront the same structural constraints as nationalist regimes. In many African countries this political project has proved to be divisive and polarising, both nationally and regionally, as witnessed by the increase in border conflicts. Furthermore, such post-nationalist leaders have all too easily succumbed to the imperatives of neo-liberalism and globalisation, and are more often concerned with their reputation outside Africa than with building a positive reputation among their neighbours. It is dubious whether the construction of the nation provided by post-nationalist leaders in Africa will fare much better than its nationalist predecessors.

Outside of the state, the post-nationalist project has taken on a decidedly anti-state character. Fuelled in part by leftist (and non-leftist) intellectuals who have found themselves increasingly marginalised from government policymaking and have turned their research and intellectual inputs towards
advising civil society and non-governmental organisations, there has been an uncritical embrace of civil society as the engine for social change. In South Africa in particular, the trend toward intellectuals becoming NGO consultants or even spokespersons for grassroots movements has taken hold and is not without its problems. To begin with, some of this work has been firmly placed within the neoliberal framework and the discourse on universal human rights which has proved less capable of dealing with the contemporary political environment where harsh local and global inequalities persist, and there remains a strong demand for socio-economic justice. To the left of the political spectrum, the relationship between intellectuals and the masses can often be a contentious one, and NGOs are often used as launching pads for particular political agendas or to hurl attacks at the state. At times, intellectuals have a tendency to articulate a particular leftist or socialist agenda while ignoring the actual demands on the ground, many of which are nationalist.

The knee-jerk reaction has been to promote civil society and new social movements as the only progressive and effective alternative to state nationalism. What is clear is that we need considerable empirical research on these new social movements and post-nationalist opposition groups to determine to what extent these are organic movements or ones defined by an international architecture, Western donors and the neoliberal agenda. In a candid interview, one of the leading figures of the new social movements in South Africa, Trevor Ngwane, confessed,

If we’re honest, some of these social movements consist of nothing more than an office and a big grant from somewhere or other. They can call a workshop, pay people to attend, give them a nice meal and then write up a good report. They build nothing on the ground. (Ngwane 2003:54)

It is hard to see how a diverse, contradiction-ridden civil society will be any more able than the post-colonial state to withstand the hegemony of the neoliberal framework. Clearly what is required is a more balanced analysis of the potential as well as limitations of both the nationalist project and the post-nationalist alternatives. This point will be explored further in the next section on political developments in Zimbabwe.

**Zimbabwe – ceding the nationalist terrain**

The political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe provides an interesting case by which to examine both the limitations of the nationalist project as well as post-nationalist alternatives. Zimbabwe has increasingly been used as
Are we entering an era of post-nationalist politics in southern Africa?

evidence of the effects of an exhausted post-liberation nationalism as well as an indication of its rapid decline in Southern Africa. The opposition party formed in 1999, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), handed the ruling nationalist party, ZANU-PF, its first national electoral defeat in the 2000 parliamentary elections. The MDC has its roots among social movements, labour organisations and human-rights NGOs that first came together on the streets during mass protests (1996-9), and then through the National Working People’s Convention (February 1999) and the National Constitutional Assembly (1999 – the present).

However, soon after its formation the MDC became increasingly influenced by capitalist elements such as the white commercial farmers and big business interests who shared an opposition to Mugabe and the ruling ZANU-PF. In 2000, with the appointment of Eddie Cross, a leading official of the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI), as economic secretary of the MDC, the party began to take on a decidedly neoliberal agenda (Bond and Manyanya 2001: 95).

What had begun as a working-class party resisting Mugabe’s neoliberalism, malgovernance and repressive state control was hijacked by international geopolitical forces, domestic (white) business and farming interests, and the black petit bourgeoisie. (Bond 2002c:1)

This observation is important because it highlights that the dominance and hegemony of the neoliberal framework is such that even the popular-democratic struggles that emerged in response to the ineffective neoliberal policies of government are susceptible to being coopted by these very same neoliberal forces in the course of struggle. Indeed, both Mugabe’s nationalist project and the MDC’s post-nationalist alternative need to be analysed and understood within the context of a neoliberal hegemony.

What is interesting in the context of the land question in Zimbabwe is the resilience of nationalism’s image of the nation, and the resonance of its notion of cultural reaffirmation and the liberation of the race. Mugabe has cunningly abused the memory of the liberation struggle, the land question and the cultural anchors of Zimbabwe’s past to sustain his nationalist project. However, the MDC’s post-nationalist alternative has also displayed a number of limitations.

To be sure, the capitalist policies of the MDC leadership, particularly regarding the land question, facilitated Mugabe’s success in deactivating much of the opposition to ZANU-PF in the countryside in the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections. Mugabe also used state repression and rigged
electoral rules against the MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai to secure his electoral victory. However, the MDC began losing momentum and strength when it effectively ceded the nationalist terrain to ZANU-PF, a point that came out most clearly over the land issue. Land redistribution was at the heart of Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle and fundamentally defines the nationalist project in that country. On this crucial issue the MDC ceded the nationalist terrain almost from the very start with its unholy alliance with the Commercial Farmers’ Union.

The MDC chose to focus on economic management and government reforms in its campaigning before the June 2000 parliamentary elections. On the issue of land acquisition, the MDC called for a transparent but ill-defined market process, in contrast with the ZANU-PF leadership who called for a speedy reclamation of land from the whites and even supported the land occupations (Moyo 2001: 7). While many have alleged that the land issue is merely a campaign strategy for ZANU-PF used in every election since 1980, it is one that has resonance with the majority of Zimbabweans and will not go away until it is adequately resolved.

Mugabe, without a doubt, capitalised on nationalist sentiments for political ends. Reflecting on the MDC’s defeat in the 2002 elections, Brian Raftopolous shows how even radical nationalism can be evoked in demagogic and dangerous ways:

In a more negative sense the nationalist legacy, in response to colonial violence, also brought with it experiences of political mobilisation which we need, as a nation, to unlearn and move away from. In particular, we need to continue our protests against the practices of forced party affiliation through violence, the demonisation of dissent as unpatriotic, a selective use of the history of the liberation struggle to deny other voices the right to be heard, and narrow race-based assertions of who has a legitimate right to be called national. (Raftopolous 2002:1)

ZANU-PF and President Mugabe’s actions must not be condoned. But it is important to recognise that part of the MDC’s failure was to not challenge ZANU-PF on its nationalist record, for this is precisely where it was vulnerable. For example, the ruling party presented its compulsory land acquisition programme ‘Fast Track’ ahead of the 2002 presidential elections, after adhering to an ineffective, market-driven land reform policy for the previous 20 years. Especially with the introduction of the World Bank-initiated structural adjustment programme (ESAP), the ruling party’s land
policies promoted the growth of new export land uses that called for greater privatisation of land, including communal and state-owned lands. These policies diminished the potential for mass-based socio-economic benefits from land, and strengthened the concentration of capital accumulation in selected rural areas (Moyo 2000:13). Reacting to the ruling party’s adherence to a largely market-driven land-reform process, a leading Zimbabwean expert on the land question, Sam Moyo, concludes: ‘The state’s legitimacy as an arbiter and protector of the land rights of the poor is, therefore, increasingly questioned’ (Moyo 2000:13).

Without delving further into the land question in Zimbabwe it should be clear that ZANU-PF was vulnerable on this issue. The very social movements that gave rise to the MDC challenged the ruling party on precisely these neoliberal, market-driven policies. However, as the MDC increasingly came under the influence of powerful international interests they chose to shy away from these issues and focus on government reforms, or they chose to deal with the land issue within a rights-based framework, not in the context of the national question and a concern for socio-economic justice. Having become a broad church, representing multiple and disparate domestic and international interests, the MDC was unable to present a more popular and progressive democratic agenda that could address the demands of the poor majority.

But pressure also came to bear on Mugabe from within his own constituency. The peasant class and the war veterans, two of the present government’s most powerful voting constituencies, were two of the most vocal groups opposing ZANU-PF’s land policies in the 1980s and early 1990s and posed a serious internal political threat to Mugabe. Responding to the failed resettlement exercise, in the mid-1980s landless peasants began to occupy and use land that belonged to politicians and the black elite. Branded ‘squatters’ by the media and forcibly removed in some areas by the police and army, by the 1990s peasants began to occupy white-owned farms (Chitiyo 2000). Thus, as early as 1992, the government was being forced to respond to the nationalist pressures for redistribution from its rural constituency and push through the Land Acquisition Act, which allowed the government to designate commercial farms for resettlement.

Similarly, far from being the band of anarchic thugs that they are portrayed as being in Western and even some Southern African media, the Zimbabwean war veterans have been a potentially powerful political alternative force to the ruling party since independence. The Zimbabwe War Veterans’
Association (ZWVA) was formed in 1989 in response to the government’s failure to assist ex-combatants. Land was one of the war veterans’ primary grievances. The government responded by passing the War Veterans Administration Bill (1991), the War Veterans Act (1992) and the War Victims Compensation Act (1993). In practice, however, the system put in place was ineffective in part as a result of false claims, interventions by the ZANU-PF party hierarchy, and little accountability within government regarding disbursed funds (Chitiyo 2000:19). The disgruntled war veterans became an increasingly vocal political threat to the ruling party.

Under increasing criticism and facing challenge politically, President Mugabe, at the ZANU-PF summit in Mutare in September 1997, succumbed to pressure from the war veterans and announced a package that would pay each genuine ex-combatant a lump sum of Z$50,000 and a gratuity of Z$5,000 per month for life (The Herald, September 17, 1997). The government’s capitulation to the war veterans precipitated a political and financial crisis that persists to this day. But the war veterans, like the peasants, proved to be a malleable political partner for the ruling party. By mid-1999, factional struggles within the war veterans movement as well as mounting criticism of the government were bringing the two sides closer together. The government used coercion, delegitimisation and negotiation to neutralise the war veterans and co-opt them into the ruling party’s agenda. By the time of the constitutional referendum in February 2000, the war veterans had effectively become the ‘military wing’ of ZANU-PF in the war against white commercial farmers (Chitiyo 2000:19), and were spearheading ZANU-PF’s election campaign.

Again, it is important to note that initially the movement of war veterans was potentially positive. In so far as their political activity was organised along nationality lines, it was not necessarily reactionary to the extent that it was anchored in popular organisation and aimed against pro-colonial and anti-democratic interests. That the state was able to seize the initiative reflects its ability to manipulate social cleavages and internal organisational weaknesses within the war veterans movement.

No one condones President Mugabe and ZANU-PF’s use of land invasions, racial scapegoating and violence and intimidation to retain power. But what the actions of the war veterans and peasant class reveal is the organic pressure within the nationalist agenda in Zimbabwe, an agenda that unfortunately is not immune to being co-opted but which, at its core, is redistributive and anti-imperialist but not necessarily socialist.
Unfortunately, the war veterans were reduced from a potentially powerful political alternative, promoting a more radical nationalist agenda, to a recognised but politically co-opted special interest group. Yet the fact remains, President Mugabe and the Zimbabwean state do not have a free hand to act as they please. The actions of the Mugabe administration should be heavily criticised, but it should also be clear that the government is responding to pressures from social forces, indeed from a black elite seeking capital accumulation but also from the poor demanding redistribution. But the tendency among leftist intellectuals has been to critique post-colonial nationalism entirely from a class perspective while minimising, if not denying, race and the national question. The problem with this is that it doesn’t acknowledge pressures from multiple sources, and thus dismisses nationalist sentiments of the poor as simply ‘false consciousness’.

If our focus were on deconstructing the nationalist project in Zimbabwe it would become quite clear that ZANU-PF has not only failed to address the national question but has failed to put forward a viable national project. The Mugabe administration, by and large, has failed to redistribute resources to the poor. Furthermore, it has failed to promote a national agenda, using Zimbabwe’s history of economic inequity, which galvanises all sectors of society around a common vision and social order (Savage 2003). Instead it has sown division and violence that has been very detrimental to the nation-building process. But rather than simply pointing to the failure of the national developmentalist project in Zimbabwe we must ask why it failed. What was the potential for a progressive political alternative to emerge within the nationalist agenda, and why was it so easily co-opted?

**Conclusion**

Nationalism has always been double-sided. Many of the virtues of nationalism – sense of community, patriotism, a sense of shared historical past – are also its dark side … strong communal feeling can easily turn into xenophobia, and the need for unity can generate pressures for conformity that can stifle intellectual work. (Mkandawire 2003:12-13)

The relationship between intellectuals and the post-colonial nationalist project has always been contentious. The new critics are not the first to expose nationalists as the new emperors without clothes. But their critique is not just of the failure of nationalist leaders to deliver in the post-colonial era but of the nationalist project itself, which they claim never really held the progressive goals of fundamental transformation and democratisation. In so
doing, however, instead of deconstructing and demystifying nationalist struggles, much of the criticisms seem to dismiss nationalism and the nationalist struggles altogether, along with any progressive, anti-imperialist agendas that it might encompass. In its place a post-nationalist alternative is being proposed that is at present very undefined and does not take into consideration the actual demands emanating from the grassroots (or various other sectors of society).

However, if we are serious about our task as critical intellectuals we must acknowledge and address the dilemmas within the nationalist project before consigning it to the dustbin of history. Indeed, as Mkandawire reminds us,

In defiance of its death foretold, nationalism in Africa and elsewhere has displayed a remarkably enduring resonance, although in the eyes of some incongruously and regretfully so. (Mkandawire 2003:2)

Such enduring resonance is unlikely to diminish even with the recent flurry of condemnations from intellectual circles.

**Note**

1. I’ve borrowed this phrase from Neil Lazarus who uses the term to indicate Fanon’s dual revolutionary commitments to the national liberation struggle and the wide struggle for socialist internationalism (Lazarus 1999:162).

**References**


