

Perspectives on Liberation and Development in Southern Africa

Lecture in honour of Sven Hamrell

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When I was approached early January by Henning Melber about the idea of organising a lecture of this kind at the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation – in honour of Sven Hamrell, the longest serving Executive Director of the Foundation, and in connection with his 80th birthday – I did not hesitate at all. During the last 25 years or so Sven Hamrell has been a very close friend, a mentor and a source of inspiration for me and my family. We have stayed in close touch over the years; sometimes very intensely and at times more at a distance, given my various postings abroad, mainly in Southern Africa. Our dialogue and interactions have centred on questions relating to international solidarity, international peace and security, the UN and – not least – Africa: from the days of the liberation struggle, when things tended to be easier in many ways, to today's more complicated reality. What always impressed me with Sven is his courage, his integrity and intellectual vigour, his burning and probing interest in central issues about the future and global challenges in this context, and his very genuine and sustainable friendship with so many people that he is constantly in touch with.

My lecture here today – in Sven's honour – deals with some broad perspectives on liberation and development in Southern Africa. I have chosen this topic not only because of the fact that I have been working more or less full time with this region during the last 30 years or so. But it was also a prime area for our discussions from the outset, when I started to engage with Sven during the real hey days of the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.



It is well known to all of you present here today that Sweden has a proud history when it comes to consistent and long-term support for the liberation struggle in Southern Africa; political, moral, material and humanitarian support, which was quite unique in the sense that few other established Western donors at the time did what we managed to do so well during many years. However, one thing that I often think about now – many years after the active liberation struggle in Southern

Africa – is how quickly the strong Swedish legacy in this whole area is fading away. Young people who are now entering the diplomatic service in Sweden do not know much about what we did during this shining period of Swedish foreign policy and assistance. You even sometimes hear young people criticizing some of us for what we used to do at the time in supporting and liaising with the liberation movements. This is a sad development, I think, and more should be done to keep this excellent legacy alive also among younger generations. We should all be very proud of what Sweden managed to do during these decades – in the then bi-polar world, which was so different from what we experience today. Thanks to the Nordic Africa Institute and Tor Sellström this active Swedish role has been quite thoroughly documented. What is urgent now is for the Southern African countries concerned to document their own history of the liberation struggle, so that this knowledge can be passed on to younger generations.

What many people still do not know is the fact that Sven Hamrell played a key role in this development during several decades: as a very influential member of the Consultative Committee on Humanitarian Affairs and as a well-connected informal advisor to many of the key decision-makers in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and in SIDA. What is also not well known is that Sven kept his own detailed hand-written records about what transpired in all these meetings and discussions about Swedish support to the liberation struggle. Not even our meticulous friend Tor Sellström had access to these records when preparing “Sweden and National Liberation in Southern Africa”. In the light of this I would like to make a proposal to researchers and academia, who are here with us today – and to Sven Hamrell himself of course: please arrange for some young researchers to go through and somehow process Sven’s private records from this challenging period of Swedish history in Africa. It is nothing less than a gold mine, I can assure you. And we need to preserve this information also for the future.

One question you sometimes get is why we did not do more to preach the message of democracy and human rights when we interacted with the

then leaders of the liberation movements. My answer has always been: yes, maybe we could have done more; but we must remember the context at the time; it was different from the one following events in the 1990s and the one we are living through now. The main focus was on the fight against evil discriminatory systems and for independence and freedom from colonial oppression. In hindsight, you can always say that we maybe had too much faith in the liberation struggle leaders at the time. Maybe we assumed that they shared the same ideals as us: equal rights and opportunities for all – not accumulation of wealth for a small elite at the top. What we have seen subsequently is that at least some of them have not been so keen – following the transition to independence – on promoting equality and democratic space or to be in the forefront in respecting basic human rights. But then again you come to realize that the fight for democracy and human rights in Africa is a continuous complicated process, which will take both long time and good leadership in order to make progress.

Since the 1990’s African states have committed themselves to the institutionalization of democratic governance, individually and collectively, through regional and continental inter-governmental bodies. At the continental level, the African Union (AU) has been in the driver’s seat for democratization of the continent since its inception some six years ago. Flowing from this have been continental legislative processes designed to promote democracy in Africa. A prime and very important example is the AU Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance in Africa (ACDEG), adopted in January 2007 and aimed at reinforcing the commitments of AU Member States to democratization in order to build institutional and cultural foundations for sustainable democracy and peace. It places a clear obligation on African governments to ensure free and fair elections and to respect democracy as the only way of changing governments. Just some ten days ago at the AU Summit in Addis Ababa we could all see how these general commitments were played out in practice in the political AU context. The incoming AU Chairman, President Jakaya Kikwete from Tanzania, has not yet formally recognized

the Kibaki government in Kenya, and just after his election as new AU Chairman he issued – on behalf of the AU – a stern warning to the advancing rebels in Chad that a new rebel-led government in N’Djamena, installed by force, would never be accepted in the AU family. This is real progress and we should all welcome it. However, the AU has more work to do and needs to place increased and proper emphasis on the importance of having a conducive environment by which conflicts can be solved peacefully and by which elections can be legitimately claimed to have been free and fair.

Recent developments in Kenya have shown how frail democracy is in Africa. The general commitments made at the regional and continental level are not enough. In addition to that you need – in each country – a strong and robust democratic framework and established institutions with a long and proven track record, which over some time have built up trust and confidence among not only the political parties in place, but – more importantly – among ordinary and normal people. Without that you can slide back in the most amazing manner, which the sad Kenyan experiences have shown.

“Losing candidates and parties in a free and fair election do not find it difficult to accept defeat”.

This observation from a new pastoral letter from the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, entitled “Elections in 2008: Only When Power Stands Under God’s Blessing can It Be Trusted” (16 December 2007), puts the finger on the critical point. Too many Africans just do not trust the election process and assume almost as a matter of course that elections are being rigged by those in power, so that they can continue to stay in power. Hence the opposition, seeing victory being snatched out of its hands, does not accept defeat and protests, sometimes violently, against fraud and rigging. And the ruling party in question will do whatever it takes to fight back in order to remain in power.

Some Jesuit friends in Harare recently tried to explain this phenomenon in the following manner:

“Politics in Africa does not seem to be about different political programmes and social visions. People do not argue about different concepts through which to realize the common good. They fight for control and influence. Politics is about laying your hands on national wealth. You support a Big Man hoping to be rewarded for your loyal support like a vassal by his feudal lord with positions, jobs, property and monetary favours. Your very life depends on your man winning, and therefore you fight for him until death. Your political adversary is not just a political alternative, but your deadly enemy who must be crushed, by fair means or by foul. Therefore election rigging is part of the battle, and “accepting defeat in good grace” is just “not our culture”. -- People can only follow the democratic rules and “accept defeat in good grace” if their livelihood does not depend on who is in power. They must be economically secure before they can play the democratic game. But how can you make people economically secure while this type of feudal regime is in power whose corruption is eating up national wealth and not spreading it far and wide to everybody?”

I convey these observations and questions for all of us to reflect on. I for one find them very relevant and important, not least in a Zimbabwean context. Elections in Zimbabwe will take place next month and it remains to be seen how they will be played out, especially in the absence of a level playing field and a broad final agreement resulting from the SADC mediation process. What can be said already now is that it is not an easy thing to conduct democratic elections in a harsh and polarized environment, where the economy is in shambles and where “things are falling apart”. We have not yet seen real alternatives in terms of different political programmes and social visions. What is there already is the fight for control and influence, continued grabbing of the national wealth – not in the interest of the nation but for your own gain, and patronage centring around one Big Man. New developments during the last few days may change this situation in a positive direction, but it is a huge challenge to break away from an entrenched and well-established political pattern.

Most countries in Southern Africa are still governed by ruling parties, which were born or grew out of liberation movements which were involved in a hard and protracted liberation struggle for independence and freedom. This history gives them a strong political base and mandate to carry on the political battle in a leadership position. At the same time these movements have to adapt to the new situation and accept the fact that they will now act as political parties in an open and transparent democracy. Some movements and countries are doing better than others in this adaptation process. In Zimbabwe not much progress has been made up until now. The old liberation struggle credentials still count more than anything else; those who are not part of these credentials or try to break out of the fold are often dealt with ruthlessly by the ruling elite. The control mentality is obvious and the democratic space very limited indeed; this in spite of the still on-going SADC mediation process, which is supposed to pave the way for normalcy and the establishment of a level playing political field. Those of us who try to be consistent in standing up for democratic values and respect for human rights are brushed off as “enemies and detractors” of Zimbabwe. After the EU/Africa Summit in Lisbon in early December last year German Chancellor Angela Merkel was even branded by Zimbabwe’s Information Minister as “a fascist with Nazi inclinations” and those of us in the EU, including Sweden, who dared openly to share the collective criticism expressed, were referred to by President Mugabe as the “Gang of Four”, who are representing British colonial interests. In another development early this year Mugabe’s official spokesperson went as far as making the astonishing allegation that Sweden is now there to “destabilize” the liberation movements in Southern Africa, particularly ZANU-PF, SWAPO in Namibia and ANC in South Africa; the proof being that we maintain contact also with people in the region who are pursuing their own path in fighting for positive change and increased democratic space, such as Hidipo Hamutenya in Namibia and Simba Makoni in Zimbabwe. These allegations – often made by young people with no or inadequate knowledge about the Swedish legacy from the liberation struggle – are of course truly amazing and should be rejected with the

contempt they deserve. We, as Sweden, must be consistent and firm and continue to stand our ground. We are not the ones who changed – it is the other way around. What we have been doing all along is to align ourselves with those who fight for freedom, democracy, respect for human rights, good governance and economic development without poverty. We have also always taken the view that conflicts can only be solved through peaceful means and through dialogue and bridge-building efforts.

The ANC in South Africa has made considerable progress in the adaptation process referred to above. The ANC is no longer a liberation movement caught up in its glorious past, but more and more a modern political force to be reckoned within an open democracy. The party congress in Polokwane two months ago – and the whole process leading up to it – was in many ways an impressive, democratic and transparent display of a political battle between two alternatives in terms of leading personalities and future policies to be pursued. In spite of this there are reasons to be seriously concerned about South Africa’s future. With Zuma strong populist tendencies have crept into the ANC and in the quick and decisive backlash against the other side, represented by President Thabo Mbeki, major changes were pushed through. In the process the rainbow factor – so important in ANC’s history – seems to have disappeared from the new party scene. In a worse case scenario we may soon face a situation where most ANC comrades in leading positions see it as their duty to toe the line of the new Big Man, quickly trying to buy into a new patronage system with major negative consequences when it comes to good governance, corruption etc. With Zuma now in the lead one can also think of political attempts to influence or reduce the independence of the judiciary, thereby undermining the holy division of labour in any true democracy between the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The quick decision after Polokwane to disband the Scorpions – who prepared the pending judicial case against Zuma – and merge it into the Police Force could be the first step on a slippery slope towards a new and potentially disastrous situation. It is too early to take an overly pessimistic view

about future developments in South Africa. Some worrying signs are there but there are also some mitigating forces, both within and outside the ANC, which can still balance things up.

Talking about balance – and just to reassure you that I am not turning cynical or slowly moving into the deplorable camp of Afro pessimists – I would also like to make some brief positive references to Tanzania and Namibia; countries, which are of course also struggling with these kinds of transitions.

Tanzania has had its ups and downs and can maybe not be a perfect example in terms of the issues we are now discussing. But Mwalimu Nyerere, as the first President of Tanzania, stood for good leadership in two vital respects: (1) his modesty and ethics, also in his interactions with people at the grass root level, and (2) his determined efforts early on to lay the foundations for Tanzania as one nation, one people and one language. Thanks to this Nyerere legacy, peace has always prevailed and conflicts due to ethnicity or religion are unknown; or can be handled in a peaceful and proactive manner. What we see in Kenya today would currently be inconceivable in Tanzania, much thanks to the enormous contributions made by Nyerere. Corruption was of course there both under Nyerere and under Hassan Mwinyji, when it really flourished. They still have been unable to come to grips with it, despite some good efforts by Benjamin Mkapa. But the prospects for more active and concrete action are good and the rule of law seems to prevail more and more. The latest examples are the decisive action taken by President Kikwete against the Governor of the Central Bank after a major corruption scandal in the Bank, and his decision – just a few days ago – to accept the resignation of Prime Minister Lowassa, also on corruption-related grounds.

Namibia can also be proud of its political leadership and – by and large – with the transition from the liberation struggle to a modern democracy. Sam Nujoma was wise enough to step down as President of both the nation and of SWAPO. In spite of some negative efforts – e.g. to weed out political opponents in his party a few years ago – he enjoys

wide support and recognition as the true Father of the Nation. And with his successor Hifikepunye Pohamba now at the helms there is no doubt that the core values of rule of law and equal opportunities for all are high on the agenda. Namibia is still young but future prospects are good. The period until the next parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of 2009 will be decisive in terms of either accepting and consolidating plural democracy or eroding the achievements by trying to marginalise, if not eliminate, any serious political challenge – as the new Rally for Democracy and Progress (RDP) may become.

Democracy, good governance and dynamic development in Southern Africa will always depend on two things: the determination of the people and the quality of leadership, as well as of course the interrelationship between the two. Southern Africa has produced some eminent leaders in terms of political vision, modesty, ethics and leadership qualities; leaders who stand out also in a broader global context. Julius Nyerere, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela come to mind and many of us in this room have had the privilege of interacting and meeting with them on various occasions. Greatest of them all, in my own opinion, is Nelson Mandela and – before closing this lecture – I will share with you a favourite quote from him that I have been using every now and then in my on-going difficult work in Zimbabwe. It is about tolerance and Mandela had this to say in an interview made in 2001 – maybe with the situation in both the ANC and Zimbabwe in mind:

“We must welcome differences of opinion. They will always be there. One of the most effective weapons in dealing with different opinions is tolerance – the ability to take criticism and not personalise it, even if a prominent individual is specifically identified and becomes a target for criticism. Tolerance is one of the best ways to solve major national issues”.

We do not know anything about future developments in Southern Africa. But if present and future leaders try harder to follow in the good footsteps of people like Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela the region will stand a better chance to reach a bright and prosperous future.

Let me end up by again commending Sven Hamrell for the visionary and committed role he played during the last few decades in helping to form dynamic Swedish policies in Southern Africa and for his eminent ability to inspire many of us – who are slightly younger – to engage with Africa and with Africans. Let us also hope that the younger generation will continue to take an interest in and build on the Swedish legacy in Southern Africa – in a new time and under different circumstances. The fact that we will close down three Swedish Embassies in the region this current year – Namibia, Botswana and Angola; all countries where I had the great privilege of representing Sweden – is not a good sign. But contacts, communications and interactions can of course take place in other forms than through an Embassy.

I thank you