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Jenny Schreiner | **Red Alert** 

## Reflections 30 years since unbanning

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### On 2 February 1990

We were sitting in Pollsmoor Prison, holding consultations with our legal team on the court case against the 14 of us for our liberation struggle activism. Those of us who were South African Communist Party (SACP) members, without exposing our Party membership to others, listened to the report on the unbanning, wondering what it would mean for the SACP. Only to hear that, indeed, the Party was included in the list of those organisations unbanned.

### Thirty years later

We reflect back to where we were on that day – some inside Robben Island or Pretoria Central; others in exile; others in State of Emergency detentions; others on the run, ducking and diving the ever-searching security police; others with family members missing; others in mass organisations; others in the underground, some in military uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) units inside the country.

The SACP was the first political organisation to be hit by the use of the law (that is, the apartheid law) to ban, clamp down on ideology, political mobilisation and organisation. The Communist Party of South Africa, now the SACP, the Communists, and communism in general, became the first to be banned by the apartheid regime as one of its first actions just two years after coming to power. The Suppression of Communism Act, adopted by the apartheid regime in 1950, was a key instrument of repression in the apartheid state arsenal. It was used against many South African activists, many of whom were in fact not even Communists!

There were several factors that shaped the anti-Communism of the apartheid National Party and its state.

The decade during which the apartheid regime came to power was especially intense in class struggle. The Communist Party played a great role in working class struggles and building progressive trade unions. It was during this that the first biggest black mineworkers' strike took place, the 1946 African mineworkers strike. The colonial regime that preceded the apartheid regime, and subsequently the apartheid regime, felt the pressure.

The apartheid regime was a racist and fascist regime, while the Communist Party was the first political organisation to organise on a non-racial basis. The Party was the first to advance the principle, and vision, of non-racialism, and of freedom from all kinds of oppression.

In the struggle for liberation, the Communist Party went beyond attacking just the racist character of the apartheid regime. The Party was virtually the only political organisation that attacked the class basis of racist oppression. This exposure of, and attack on the capitalist roots of apartheid, did not sit well with the apartheid regime.

The regime subjected black women to all forms of oppression – merciless class exploitation and marginalisation, racial oppression and patriarchal domination.

As expected, neither did the Communist Party's ability to work with a wide range of organisations against oppression, and the ability of Communists to provide leadership within so many fronts of the liberation struggle – the trade union movement, the women's movement, community mobilisation (for example, around food prices, removals, peace movements) endear it to the apartheid regime.

The reaction was to ban Communism, not just aiming for the Communist Party as an organisation, but the ideology, its values and any person associated with it, rightly or wrongfully. The Suppression of Communism Act was so named accurately and deliberately – it was a key hammer in the apartheid battle of ideas.

The response of the cadres of the Communist Party and Congress Alliance organisations, the African National Congress (ANC), South African Indian Congress, South African Coloured People's Congress, Congress of Democrats and South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), was to intensify the struggle. The 1950s saw mass action by the people, led by the Alliance, with the Communist Party underground but active through its cadres in the Alliance and broadly society. Resistance to oppression (pass laws, forced removals) intensified, as demands around living conditions (bread prices, wage strikes), but also demands for the future (the 'Freedom Charter'), gained increasing support.

Just after the end of the decade of the 1950s, the MK was launched, in December 1961, to pursue the course of liberation also through armed struggle. By this time the SACP, as Nelson Mandela states in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, had already established organised armed struggle units and carried out a number of activities on that terrain. This made it easy to set up the MK, as he says in the book.

As the MK manifesto proclaimed, as blasts exploded in apartheid offices and installations on 16 December 1961:

*The people's patience is not endless. The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defence of our people, our future and our freedom.*

The 1960s and 1970s saw significant developments in the struggle for liberation. The ANC Consultative Conference held in 1962 in Lobatse, Botswana, endorsed the armed struggle. It integrated the MK into the structures of the liberation movement.

In 1969, the ANC Consultative Conference, held in Morogoro, Tanzania, adopted the concept of the national democratic revolution (NDR) in its first *Strategy and Tactics* document. The ANC opened its membership ranks to all South Africans, irrespective of race. In South Africa the concept of the NDR, along with the characterisation of the ruling regime as colonialism of a special type, was first articulated by the SACP in its programme adopted in 1962, the 'Road to South African Freedom'.

The struggle continues in the 1970s. The year 1973 saw waves of strikes by workers frustrated by apartheid oppression and exploitation. The year 1976 saw the massive student uprising and the flood of young South Africans into exile as part of the June 16 Detachment. In 1978 a senior delegation of our movement to Vietnam returned and drafted of 'The 4 Pillars of our Revolution'. This mapped our strategic approach to armed struggle, underground organisation, popular mobilisation, and international solidarity and isolation of the apartheid regime. These pillars of struggle were not competing fronts but critical areas of revolutionary contestation and struggle.

The decade that followed, the 1980s, was characterised by the intense implementation of the approach of 'The 4 Pillars of our Revolution' – not as four silos, but as four mutually reinforcing and related areas of struggle.

#### **Popular struggle of mass mobilisation saw:**

- The growth and consolidation of trade unions and formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in 1985.
- The formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) as a broad democratic front against apartheid, for democracy and social justice.
- The growth and consolidation of women's organisations, including UDF Women's Congress in 1987.
- The growth of civic organisations culminating, in the early 1990s, in the formation of the South African National Civics Organisation (Sanco).
- Activism amongst students, teachers and academics at schools, colleges and universities, and consolidation into the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC);
- Political activism of faith based organisations.
- Mobilisation of the End Conscription Campaign.

#### **On the front of the armed struggle:**

- Consistent attacks on apartheid installations and offices took place throughout the 1980s.

- There was a significant increase in MK armed struggle related trials.
- A change from individual symbolic actions to people's war took place.
- Self-defence units within our communities were set up.
- Political-military structures inside the country that led to Operation *Vula* were established.

### **Underground organisation:**

- Although the least visible part of the liberation struggle, underground organisation improved political co-ordination and strategic direction and made it more evident.
- Political education through underground literature and pamphlets was increased.
- The Party flag was unfurled in Craddock on 22 Feb 1985.

### **International solidarity and isolation of the apartheid regime:**

- Sanctions impacted the economy, for example, the Chase Manhattan Bank refused to roll over the country's loans.
- Sports and cultural boycott, as well as South Africa products boycotts widened.
- Political mobilisation and support, namely, the Release Mandela and Political Prisoners Campaign not just at home, but also strong internationally, intensified.

### **The crisis of apartheid**

By the time the last president of the apartheid regime, FW de Klerk made his speech covering the unbanning of our movement, the apartheid regime was in deep and irreversible crisis. A process of dissolution within the ranks of the apartheid ruling bloc was unfolding and differences were becoming apparent. Their 1980s' strategies of extreme brutal repression were not containing the uprising of the revolutionary movement. In addition, there were indications that the apartheid regime no longer had cohesive support from within all Afrikaner nationalist ranks. The apartheid capitalist ruling class also looked for a way out, while its regime unleashed:

- Intense repression of the people and their resistance – two states of emergency, 1985 and 1986, were declared, followed by waves of state of emergency detentions, an increase in political trials and Stratcom, hit squads and Askari activities, as well as strikes on neighbouring states (the Gaborone Raid, Matola Raid and Maseru Massacre).
- Intense initiatives to turn back the space that Southern African countries provided to the forward areas of the liberation movement (Nkomati Accord; Swaziland clean up; etc.)

And then there were "Talks about Talks" in the late 1980s, covering, among others, the release of political prisoners.

When de Klerk read the speech unbanning political parties on 2 February 1990, he did not do so voluntarily. He had not suddenly seen the light. de Klerk is not a hero.

He is the last president of the apartheid regime, a regime that was declared by the United Nations a crime against humanity.

Moreover, the speech does not only address the issue of the unbanning. The other topics that it covers reflect how the apartheid regime was responding to the pressures that had been brought to bear by the people and the global community. The speech discussed six topics:

- Foreign relations.
- Human rights, with emphasis on individual and minority rights, reflecting that the fear of the future they knew was coming.
- Death penalty, perhaps also a reflection of realising that they had judiciously murdered so many of ours and that in a changed South Africa many of their own would be found on the wrong side of the law.
- Socio-economic aspects of the outcome of their own apartheid policies – poverty and unemployment, amongst others.
- Economic policy changes, which reflect a very significant shift that had taken place from a state capitalism in the interests primarily of the Afrikaner *volk* and the white community. This covered policy instruments that are clearly neo-liberal and ring uncomfortably close to the tune of the global capital facilitated Mont Fleur Scenarios Flight of the Flamingo in 1992 and of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) introduced by the neo-liberal elements in the ANC in 1996.

It is only after that he addressed the issues of negotiation, the release of political prisoners and unbanning. It is highly significant to situate the negotiations and unbanning strategy within the economic strategy that was unpacked in the very self-same speech.

The unbanning was a direct result, primarily, of decades of our liberation struggle against the apartheid regime. The struggle drove the apartheid regime to a point where it could no longer rule in the old way or continue existing. At the secondary level, the unbanning was also a result of a number of years of planning and strategising by the nationalist party or at least elements of it, and the ruling bourgeoisie, as they sought to find a way out of the quagmire that their apartheid policy and repression and in particular our response to it had placed them in.

### **Not de Klerk, the last president of apartheid, but our own liberation efforts**

For the unbanning we are indebted, not to de Klerk, but to our own liberation efforts, and to our people who joined the struggle against apartheid. Others are still unaccounted for, because the apartheid regime – of which de Klerk is the last president – is responsible for their disappearance.

The Neil Agget inquest is currently taking place. Ahmed Timol's family received partial closure only recently when the inquest found that he had been murdered by the apartheid security police. Justice is yet to serve its course.

Justice must still be pursued, to the end.

Also, our people have not yet overcome the legacy of the socio-economic crisis whose roots lie in colonial and apartheid oppression based on racist and patriarchal capitalist exploitation. Our economy has not yet recovered, even in the narrow terms of growth, and structurally from the distortions of colonial and apartheid rule, and from de Klerk's initiatives to privatise state-owned enterprises.

### **No change of heart**

To this day de Klerk does not like our movement, not least the Communist Party. So the unbanning was not a good will or a change of heart by him.

- *Jenny Schreiner is SACP Central Committee and Politburo member*