

What Happened to Africa's Left Wing?

This past week, the Nyerere Resource Centre in Tanzania hosted a second encounter between African and other scholars associated with the *Review of African Political Economy* and (some of the) emerging, younger Africans organising around leftist and pan-Africanist ideals.

The first such encounter, held in Ghana last year, had focused on where and how those ideals could be seen today in terms of organising around the nature of African economies. This second encounter focused more on organising around the nature of African politics.

Africa's position in the global political-economy remains dependent. Africa is fully aware of – and trying to take advantage of, manoeuvre within – what was termed a new scramble not only for access to African resources, but also control over the same. While American trade with Africa is on the decline, the American military footprint over the continent has expanded in line with its own security interests. Even if its capacity to act willy nilly on the same is now more constrained.

It was an engaged and thought-provoking conversation. Leaving much to ponder upon.

The first set of questions. What is the state of class struggle and imperialism today? What's persistent? What's changed?

Africa's position in the global political-economy remains dependent. But African agency – or at least our negotiating potential – has nominally increased. Africa is fully aware of – and trying to take advantage of, manoeuvre within – what was

termed a new scramble not only for access to African resources, but also control over the same. While American trade with Africa is on the decline, the American military footprint over the continent has expanded in line with its own security interests. Even if its capacity to act willy nilly on the same is now more constrained. Russian arms-dealing to the continent is up. The Chinese economic presence can be now be felt everywhere – and it too has established its first military footprint on the continent. And diplomatically, Africa's political allegiance is more courted by a larger number of players (think Israel) on the global stage than ever before.

Africa's response to its positioning – through both regional integration efforts and more alert negotiating at the national level – has thus meant that it is no longer as dependent as before. Or at least that its dependency is now uneven – felt more in some places than in others.

The second set of questions. What are African states doing with this increased agency or negotiating potential?

On the one hand, resistance can be seen in what was termed the day-to-day, humdrum, ordinary attempts of people to preserve their dignity and livelihoods.

Here, of course, the news is not good. Some states have learnt the art of 'talking left but leaning right' – how to invoke the language of imperialism and class struggle in effect to defend political incumbency. There is growing concern about what the evident consequences of the new choices available are – across the continent, for example, there is concern about the re-entry of Africa into a new era of debt. And there are contradictions and tensions within African states between the interests of national as opposed to foreign investors, between the interests of national commercial (service) and industrial sectors. Meaning that while the overall African positions on

regional integration are clear, African states pull in different directions – sometimes because of the raw, accumulative and profiteering tendencies of political incumbents (bad) but also sometimes at the behest of different private sector pressures within them (difficult).

The reactions of the people are equally contradictory and fraught with tension. On the one hand, resistance can be seen in what was termed the day-to-day, humdrum, ordinary attempts of people to preserve their dignity and livelihoods. Positive developments here being organising far beyond the small sector of organised workers – mainly public sector workers as well as in states where unions have played a role in natural resource extraction. But also organising in the new social and youth movements, including of small scale farmers against the appropriation of land or of students. Which, in some cases, evolved into more political (and ‘successful’) protest movements – albeit short-lived and soon overtaken as political incumbents and militaries reassert themselves and recover.

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Not so positive developments here, however, include the tendency of many Africans to simply ‘vote with their feet’ – Africans are increasingly on the move across the continent as well as beyond it. Escaping not just the not-so-new forms of political incumbent and state violence but also the sense that dignity and livelihoods are simply beyond the majority in a majority of places. It is in this context that the rising political instrumentalisation of ethnicity, of religion, during times of electoral contestation and transition should

be – but often isn't – placed. The real class grievances of so many Africans are obscured – helped by the growing size of what was termed the 'precarariat' – those of us with some sort of income and livelihood, however tenuous.

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The third set of questions then. What is it that can be done to pass on the experiences of organising from one generation to another on the continent? The anger expressed by youth and social movements towards, for example, what has become known as 'civil society' – even though, in no small number of African countries, the domestic human rights movement arose from the left's decision to move above-ground and engage the democratic process. The anger at the commodification, co-optation and professionalisation of people's resistance. The disappointment that all people's resistance seems so disjointed and scattered – and inevitably peters out – even if some concrete gains are accrued along the way. The sense that African scholars haven't done enough to document and critically analyse the so-called 'second liberation' – not to provide templates for organising but more to provide reflective learning for those organising now. The sense that as 'revolution' became less and less of a viable option, emerging social and youth movements became, if not reactionary then at least only reformist – and in not enough of a structural way, taking both national and global power into account?

'What's left of the left?' The biggest question of all.