

Amilcar Cabral – 40 Years on: Tribute to a Revolutionary Intellectual

“We are nothing on earth if we are not in the first place the slaves of a cause, the cause of the peoples, the cause of justice and liberty”. Frantz Fanon

Like Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral was ‘the slave of a cause’, that of the Liberation of his people and the peoples of Africa from the yoke of oppression and imperialist domination. Like Fanon, he sacrificed his life in the defence of that sacred and immortal cause. January 20, 2013 marks the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Amilcar Cabral, the founder and leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde Islands (PAIGC). In his country and around the world, activities were organized to honour the memory of this visionary charismatic leader, staunch pan-Africanist champion and revolutionary intellectual.

Birth of a revolutionary consciousness

Amilcar Cabral was born and spent his adolescence years in a colonized country where he witnessed racism, daily humiliations and horrendous abuses of all kinds perpetrated against his fellow citizens by the Portuguese colonial government. Such humiliations and miserable living conditions of the majority of the population, especially farmers, were the major factors that shaped his awareness. Between 1941 and 1948, a series of deadly famine caused the death of tens of thousands of farmers. It seems that these tragedies played a decisive role in Cabral’s choice to embrace studies at the University of Agricultural Sciences.

He later on went to Lisbon, the capital-city of the former colonial power, to further his university education. This stay contributed to strengthen his revolutionary consciousness. In the Portuguese city, he met those who were to become the future leaders of the liberation movements in other Portuguese colonies, such as Agostinho Neto from Angola and Eduardo Mondlane from Mozambique, among others.

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During his stay in Lisbon and until his return to his home country, Cabral was influenced by echoes of the emancipation struggles waged by the peoples under domination and by the progressive ideas and revolutionary struggles such as pan-Africanism or Marxism. Since the 1945-Pan-African Congress in Manchester, the pan-Africanist ideology gradually gained ground among the progressive and nationalist African and Diasporic intellectuals. Ghana’s independence in 1957, under the leadership of President Kwame Nkrumah, one of the leading figureheads of pan-Africanism, gave Cabral and other leaders of the national liberation movements in Africa more exposure to the doctrine. In addition, Nkrumah and the main leaders of pan-Africanism were maverick Marxists. Among them, were the outstanding William E. B. Dubois, the greatest African-American intellectual of his time, and the Trinidadian C.L.R. James, the revolutionary thinker and writer. James is best known as the author of the book *The Black Jacobins* (1938), in which, in an eloquent and poetic style, he analyzed the historical significance of the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

The influence of these figures of pan-Africanism and the support of the socialist countries to the liberation movements of colonized peoples led Cabral to naturally adhere to Marxism, as many progressive intellectuals of the colonized countries were Marxists or sympathisers of Marxism.

Amilcar Cabral was also influenced by anticolonialism literature. And as such, there is no doubt that Cabral had heard of

Aimé Césaire, a foremost figure and fiery intellectual of the ‘negritude’ movement and author of the most devastating anticolonialism book entitled *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). Both this book and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) which helped expose the immoral, dehumanizing, barbaric and tyrannical nature of the colonial system, thus dispelling the so-called ‘civilizing mission’ of colonialism, were deeply reflected in the thought and action of anti colonial intellectuals such as Cabral.

The founding of the PAIGC and the outbreak of the armed struggle

After his studies in Lisbon, Cabral returned to Bissau in 1952 where he worked for some time before going to Angola in 1955. Once there, he resumed contact with the Angolan nationalists and participated in the foundation of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). Back in Guinea, he founded the PAIGC which decided to utilise urban settings as hotbeds where to spearhead the fight against colonialism. But in 1959, the Portuguese colonial government quashed a workers’ strike in bloodshed, with nearly 50 dead and over 300 injured.

The bloody repression had two major consequences for Cabral and his comrades. The first was that, in reprisal for the horrendousness of the colonial repression, the freedom fighters became bound to use violence. The second consequence was that Cabral was forced to recraft PAIGC’s strategy by giving priority to broad mobilisation of peasant masses from the countryside.

Cabral was strengthened in his contention that violence was a necessary way for the liberation of his country as demonstrated by the Algerian War of Independence waged against the French colonial power and the latter’s defeat against the Vietnamese people. These two examples

and others definitely bolstered his optimism about the possibility of overthrowing the Portuguese colonial power through armed struggle.

The armed struggle broke out in 1963 and quickly recorded significant military and diplomatic successes. To rally international support for the fight and further isolate the Portuguese colonial power, Cabral multiplied travels worldwide. It was during these trips that he made most of his major speeches which are key theoretical and political inputs to the analysis of issues related to the struggle for national liberation.

Cabral's theoretical legacy

In a series of speeches, Cabral outlined the contours of his political thought and stated its stances on the great ideological debates of his time. He addressed topics including the revolutionary strategy, imperialist domination, the theory of history and the driving force of history, the role of the petty bourgeoisie in the liberation struggle, the importance of culture, both as an instrument of domination and a weapon of resistance. His major addresses include his famous speech in Havana, Cuba, in 1966 at the first tricontinental meeting of the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America and the eulogy to President Kwame Nkrumah and the tribute he paid to Eduardo Mondlane, during a visit to the United States.

These texts and many others were compiled under the supervision of Mario de Andrade and published under the title *The Weapon of Theory* published by Maspéro in Paris in 1975.

Cabral attached great importance to the theoretical component of the struggle for Liberation, because he deemed it to be a mighty weapon in the fight against the enemy. As a faithful disciple of Lenin who said that 'there is no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory,' Cabral declared that: 'although we acknowledge that a revolution with a perfectly-designed theoretical background may fail, so far no one has ever led a successful re-volution without a revolutionary theory.'

Therefore, for him, a true revolutionary movement must necessarily be upheld by a well-entrenched revolutionary theory, or otherwise, it is doomed to fail.

But Cabral was far from being dogmatic. He was a genuine self-reliant theoretician. He believed that, 'revolutions are not exportable', despite the similarity of the situations and the fact that oppressed people were facing a common foe: imperialism. Every revolution is dependent on the historical, political, social and cultural context of the country in which it takes place. Therefore, theories, even if they have the same ideological grounds, must adapt to the context of each country and each society. In addition, for Cabral, it is essential not to lose sight of the necessity to combine theory and practice, in such a way that theory is used to inform practice which must in turn confirm or contradict that very theory.

Like Frantz Fanon, Cabral had understood the importance of culture in the strategy of colonial conquest. In a speech in memory of Eduardo Mondlane, delivered at Syracuse University in New York, entitled 'National Liberation and Culture,' Cabral stressed that history has taught that alien domination of a people cannot survive unless the dominating power systematically quells the culture of the dominated people to impose its own culture and values. In fact, 'History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is easy for outsiders to impose their domination ... But history also teaches us that it can only be maintained through constant and organized monitoring of the cultural life of the dominated people ...', he said.

However, culture can also be used as a weapon of resistance in the struggle to end the domination. This is why Cabral gave a critical importance to culture in the overall strategy for national Liberation movement. It is only by reclaiming their own culture that the colonized people can effectively fight against their alienation and challenge the foreign values imposed on them, and thus to better stand against foreign domination.

Cabral's political legacy

From the political standpoint, Amílcar Cabral made lasting contributions to leadership, the construction of the revolutionary movement, the resolution of contradictions within leadership and to many other issues related to the struggle for national Liberation.

One of Cabral's major political legacies is probably his call on the revolutionary intellectuals to 'suicide'. 'The revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be able to 'commit suicide' as a class in order to resurrect as revolutionary workers fully in line with the deep aspirations of the people to whom they belong'.

This is the way forward: Committing 'suicide' to get rid of bourgeois tendencies that constantly threaten the petty bourgeoisie and which eventually lead them to betray or confiscate the revolution once it becomes successful. This call to 'suicide' launched to the petty bourgeoisie is a crucial aspect of Cabral's political thought. For him, 'suicide' is the precondition for the fusion of the leadership and the masses, its ability to meet the key fundamentals that guide the movement of Liberation.

Cabral did not merely theorize about the 'suicide' of the petty bourgeoisie. Like Eduardo Mondlane he so admired, he was able to 'kill' himself to fully embrace the views and aspirations of the masses. He managed to transform himself to align with the working class and peasant masses and to reach down to the lower classes. This explains, among other things, the immense respect he earned both inside and outside the country and the success achieved by the liberation struggle which in less than a decade, enabled to liberate three quarters of the country, despite the ferocity of the repression perpetrated by the Portuguese colonial power.

Alas! Intellectuals of Cabral's calibre are rare gemstones. This is why the call to the 'suicide' of African intellectuals had little echo, as shown by the experience of over 50 years of 'independence.' The political havoc that has occurred and which is still on in Guinea-Bissau shows that Cabral's call has not been heard by many of his own comrades or heirs. What about the behaviour of many so-called intellectual 'revolutionaries' who, once in power, turn their backs on the people and become obedient executors of policies dictated by international financial institutions and their Western 'partners'? In most cases, once in power, they often maintained the status quo and turn their rule into an all-out battle for privileges and a rat race at the expense of the struggle for the decolonization of mentalities and the transformation of



economic and social structures inherited from colonization.

Conclusion

Forty years after his assassination, Cabral's ideas and example are more relevant than ever. His untimely death has deprived the African revolutionary movement of one of its most prominent and original theorists. Cabral was a leader who was closely related to the masses. He was deeply infused with the core values of his people. He was a visionary and a staunch Pan-Africanist. He symbolized the kind of leadership that is sorely lacking in Africa at a moment

marked by growing neo-colonial threats against the continent. Indeed, the current events in Mali and those in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire in 2011 had officially exposed Africa's impotence and the lack of strategic vision of the leaders of the continent, some of whom are nothing more than cheap lackeys in the service of the imperialist powers.

Thus, in this time of deep disillusionment with the 'independence' and the role of the African political and intellectual 'elite', it is essential to remember that the continent has produced a great thinker and revolutionary leader of the stature of

Amilcar Cabral. This fundamental revolutionary thinker deserves to be celebrated and recognized as such by all true African patriots. African political organizations and social movements fighting for the advent of a new, independent, sovereign, united, democratic, standing and prosperous Africa, must reclaim Cabral's ideas and work, as well as those of other martyrs and heroes of the African Revolution. Their lives and works must be taught in African schools and universities. This is an essential condition that would definitely remove the fetters from the minds and help us reclaim our own history.