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Communism in Africa

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## Abstract and Keywords

Communism in Africa can be analyzed along two dimensions: Communist movements that generally developed between the two world wars and were subjected to state repression and communism as a post-colonial state policy. During the colonial era communists built alliances with democratic and anti-colonial movements; any success reflected their ability to forge links with trade unions and nationalist organizations. Following independence, many new states adopted communist ideology and policies to facilitate international alliances and promote development. Those regimes form a subset of African one-party states that span the ideological spectrum. In post-colonial Africa communist and socialist movements have made episodic political gains during turbulent periods, but they have found it difficult to capitalize on such advances when faced with multiparty elections.

communism, socialism, Africa, anti-colonial, nationalist, one-party states, post-colonial movement, trade unions

Twentieth-century Africa's predominantly rural population, mostly subsistence cultivators, did not offer a likely terrain for communism, which saw the urban working class as the driving force for political and socioeconomic change. Moreover, the Communist International (Comintern) was far more concerned with Europe and Asia, although it periodically chastized communists in the imperial countries for their inadequate attention to colonized peoples in Africa. Despite these seemingly inauspicious circumstances, communism gained a foothold along coastal areas where ports ensuring links with Europe allowed the flow of ideas and where railways and roads enabled the dissemination of communist literature.

The century saw a tremendous population surge—from 142 million in 1920, the population rose to over 200 million in 1950 and 600 million in 1990. Urbanization and improved transportation would seemingly have facilitated the spread of communist ideas.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite its foothold, communism remained a weak movement in Africa, although its influence was sometimes

greater than its numbers would suggest. Post-colonial independence saw some thirty-five African states claiming to be communist or socialist, but these were overwhelmingly the result of leadership choices rather than movements from below. This underscores the distinction between communism as a movement subjected to state repression and as a state policy to promote top-down development.

The continent's externally oriented political economy was the underlying reason for communism's weakness as a movement, although the relative neglect of Africa by overseas communists accentuated the problem. Following European conquest, African production became geared to overseas demand. Thus, West Africa's regional economy developed around agricultural exports and manufactured imports. Its smallholder production and capitalist farms did not provide fertile conditions for communism, although travel between West Africa and Europe allowed the diffusion of communist ideas. But in central Africa, where colonial powers allocated land to foreign companies for plantation production, communism made virtually no headway. East Africans dispossessed of their land became farm workers on tea and coffee estates producing for overseas markets, but there was less contact with Europe and correspondingly less communist influence. In Sudan, however, Marxist ideas were introduced by Egyptian communists and by central and Eastern European immigrants working on the railway, and communism became influential. Southern Africans were subjected to widespread dispossession of their land. In South Africa, where almost 90 per cent of the land was expropriated by white settlers, the mineral reserves facilitated industrial development and the emergence of an industrial working class.<sup>3</sup> North Africa—especially Algeria—was also characterized by significant dispossession and proletarianization. On the north and south ends of the continent, both political economy and contact with Europe favoured the spread of communism.

Communism in Africa falls into two categories. First were local communist initiatives to build alliances with democratic and anti-colonial movements. These began in the 1920s and 1930s and continued into the post-war era; any success reflected their ability to forge links with trade-union, anti-colonial, and nationalist organizations. Second were state-led initiatives following independence, when one-party states adopted communism as a developmental model. In both the colonial and post-colonial periods, communism depended on alliances. Where communists were few in numbers or their movements extremely weak, they generally merged into national

liberation movements or left-wing one-party systems. To the degree that they had an independent social base, they maintained their political autonomy.

### Communist Initiatives between the First and Second World Wars

In 1920, with the prospects of revolution in Europe effectively finished and the conquest of Africa virtually complete, the Comintern began considering anti-colonial and national liberation movements as a means to weaken imperialism. The Moscow-based Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) was launched in 1921 and began recruiting Africans and African Americans.<sup>4</sup> The Comintern organized an international campaign against colonialism and imperialism, and a Congress of Oppressed Nations was convened in Brussels in February 1927, attended by 174 delegates from 31 countries, although only a few were African. The Congress saw the founding of the League against Imperialism, which insisted on African freedom and equality. The following year the Comintern's Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern) formed the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) to spread communist influence in colonized areas. This produced the *Negro Worker*, which was edited by the Trinidadian-born communist George Padmore and distributed in Africa. Yet although the 1920s was a decade of road-building, and lorries became common across many regions, the dissemination of communist material remained very limited.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, communism was strongest in the settler societies of Algeria and South Africa, which had a degree of industrial development and where workers from overseas had brought their trade-union and socialist traditions. But in both cases communists faced great difficulties. Three factors are paramount in understanding their differing experiences—class structure, geopolitics, and repression. Although the structural conditions impeding the development of communism were arguably more difficult in Algeria than in South Africa, the two cases highlight the degree to which geopolitics pushed the two communist parties down different paths, thus undermining the Comintern's aim of applying universal policies to diverse local and regional conditions.

Algeria and South Africa were both subjected to brutal military conquest that undermined the indigenous social systems and denigrated the local cultures. As arable land was appropriated by Europeans, the amount of land available to the indigenous people declined, leading to sharecropping and the development of an agricultural proletariat and migrant labour force. This process led to the formation of rigidly divided urban working classes. Muslim

Algerians and black South Africans were subjected to extreme inequalities vis-à-vis their European and white counterparts.

Yet the two countries had distinctive patterns of proletarianization and urbanization. Algeria was less urbanized than South Africa at comparable points in time, and large numbers of Algerian workers migrated to France, creating a displaced proletariat. The first Algerian worker-based national organization—the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* (North African Star)—was launched in Paris in 1926, reflecting this displacement. By comparison, South Africa's migrant workers went to Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, and its first worker-based national organization—the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union—was launched in Cape Town in 1919. These different patterns of working-class formation carried implications for political organization.

Crucially, Algeria's geographic proximity to Europe and its colonial relationship with France meant that it felt the impact of European events very intensely, in marked contrast with South Africa, whose political autonomy and distance from Europe meant that, with brief exceptions, local communists were concerned mainly with national rather than European affairs. The Comintern's relationships with communists in Algeria and South Africa also differed markedly. The Comintern prioritized countries and regions that it believed to be internationally significant. This necessarily included the French Communist Party, whose relationship with the Comintern was frequently tense. As a result, the Comintern intervened in Algeria earlier than it did in South Africa.

Promoting communism in Algeria was daunting, both in comparison with industrialized France, with its influential *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), and with South Africa. From the outset, communism in Algeria was torn between the international and the national. This tension undoubtedly reflected its organizational formation in December 1920 as a region of the PCF, whose local members were overwhelmingly European. As the Comintern placed greater emphasis on national and anti-colonial struggles, it insisted that communist parties in colonized regions build an affinity with the nationally oppressed; after many arguments and expulsions local communists began calling for an independent Algeria.

Communist activity in mid-1920s Algeria took place during a repressive climate. Measured in terms of prison sentences, the onslaught of repression against communists in Algeria was far greater than in South Africa—reflecting both French colonial control and the geopolitics of the Rif War. A key dynamic during the interwar years concerned the possibilities for

communist alliances with other movements. The Comintern's geopolitical priorities meant that its policies were implemented in its national sections at different times, and this differentially impacted the abilities of local communists to forge alliances. This was evident in the new line of 'class against class', which led to worldwide purges of first-generation communists and the breakdown of communist alliances with other groups. The Comintern argued that capitalism was on the brink of imminent collapse. The 'class against class' slogan stressed that communists had to combat reformist and social-democratic policies that diverted the working class from the struggle against capitalism.

In Algeria the new line was implemented in late 1927–1928. Although the PCF's Algerian region was decimated by the new line purges, by 1933 it was able to make alliances with peasant communities and with the Islamic Reform movement. But in South Africa the new line was introduced in late 1930. The following year the party's founding figures were expelled, and over the next two years its membership collapsed. The CPSA was consumed by factionalism until the mid-1930s.<sup>6</sup>

In 1934 the Comintern adopted the Popular Front, stressing the widest possible alliance of working-class and democratic forces to fight fascism and essentially conceding the failure of the 'class against class' policy. The PCF's critical support for the Popular Front government in France led it to moderate its anti-colonial stance, so that anti-fascism and anti-colonialism became posed in dichotomous terms. Although an autonomous *Parti Communiste Algérien* (PCA) was launched in October 1936, it continued to follow the PCF, which backtracked on the demand for independence. Ironically, despite its formal organizational autonomy, the Popular Front period tied the PCA more firmly to the PCF.<sup>7</sup>

In South Africa the CPSA remained factionalized as racism worsened. In March 1936 the Comintern convened a commission in Moscow. This led to the ascendancy of Moses Kotane, whose emphasis on building broad alliances dovetailed with the Popular Front strategy. Communists aligned with the ANC and used the state's racially divided political institutions as propaganda platforms. Unlike the Algerian experience, the CPSA's new line purges had produced a Trotskyist movement, which called for a boycott of racially divided institutions; the boycott principle became a hallmark of local Trotskyism. South African socialism was therefore ideologically as well as racially divided; white labour steadfastly refused to support black rights, and the CPSA could not build a Popular Front across the racial divide.<sup>8</sup> Thus, by

the start of the Second World War, the experiences of the PCA and CPSA had already diverged due to structural and geopolitical factors.

The significance of regional contexts in understanding communism's impact is underlined by the West African experience. Communism penetrated into French West Africa largely through trade unions. Like Algerians, other African workers in France joined trade unions in the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT), which established affiliates in the colonies. Through the CGT they came into contact with the PCF, which brought Africans to France for training in its Communist Party school. Dakar, French West Africa's administrative, commercial, and industrial centre, was also the railway hub; workers and intellectuals in and passing through Dakar could hear and read about communism.<sup>9</sup>

In the British colonies communist ideas filtered in through individuals who studied overseas or worked in transport unions with international links, such as the Sierra Leone Railwaymen's Union and the International of Seamen and Harbour Workers, which affiliated to the ITUCNW. This convened an International Conference of Negro Workers in Hamburg in July 1930, which was attended by several West Africans. While repression impeded communism's diffusion in West Africa, the lack of a significant industrial working class, coupled with the prevalence of smallholder and capitalist farming, were far more important factors in shaping an environment that was generally unreceptive to communist ideas. British East Africa had notably less communist influence: Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta studied at the KUTV, but aside from rare individual contacts, the region proved even less accessible to communism.<sup>10</sup>

## The Second World War

The Second World War reinforced the Comintern's focus on Europe and Asia. From this time on the experiences of Algeria and South Africa diverged sharply. Sociological similarities remained—rural people moved to cities, where they lived in cramped shanty towns, surviving through formal and informal employment. But politically, the two Communist parties operated in very different conditions.

Algeria's close geographic proximity to war-torn Europe meant that wartime conditions debilitated the tiny PCA. In September 1939 both the PCCF and PCA were banned, remaining illegal until July 1943. The fall of France and establishment of the Vichy Regime in June 1940 brought further repression to Algeria; communists were given lengthy prison sentences,



tortured, and condemned to death. Not surprisingly, the PCA's policy on independence changed substantially. From 1939 until 1941, with the Comintern characterizing the war as the product of inter-imperialist rivalry, the PCA called for independence to weaken French imperialism. But from June 1941, when the Soviet Union entered the war and its national sections followed suit, and especially after Algiers became the capital of Free France, the PCF succeeded once more in promoting its own agenda within the diminished PCA. This agenda prioritized the anti-fascist struggle and saw the movement for Algerian independence as a diversion.

The Anglo-American landing in French North Africa in November 1942 led to some political liberalization, but only after February 1943, when the Soviet Union finally won the Battle of Stalingrad, were PCF members released from internment. PCA members had to wait longer, and this allowed the PCF to make political headway in Algeria. The year 1943 brought limited political liberalization across the Maghreb as communist movements in Tunisia and Morocco, banned during the Vichy period, were legalized. The Comintern's dissolution that year signalled Soviet concern with national security but did not lessen Soviet influence over the international communist movement.

In May 1945, as liberation was proclaimed in France, European settlers massacred tens of thousands of Muslims in eastern Algeria. Viewing the events through the lens of the anti-fascist struggle, the PCF and PCA were slow to condemn the Sétif massacre. Thus, while the PCF's role in the resistance gave it a heroic status in the eyes of some sections of French society, Algerians were at best ambivalent towards communists and more often cynical.<sup>11</sup>

The war had a decidedly different impact on South African communists, who, like the Trotskyists, initially opposed the war. But once Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the CPSA joined the war effort. This brought it a new-found legitimacy and enabled it to make appreciable gains among white workers and soldiers. Although the CPSA counselled against strike action, it supported the demands of African workers for better pay and working conditions, and as a result its members gained leading positions in both black and white trade unions.

In the aftermath of the 1946 African mineworkers' strike, fifty-two individuals—communists, ANC members, and trade unionists—were charged with conspiracy; the main charges were dropped and the defendants fined. The common repression to which communists and nationalists were subjected strengthened the relationship that had been forged during their tactical

alliances, laying the basis for their post-war strategic alliance. Thus, while the PCA emerged from the war emaciated and generally scorned by Algerian nationalists, the CPSA had built a solid alliance with African nationalists.<sup>12</sup>

## The Cold War and Wars of Liberation

The Second World War saw a spate of strikes across the African continent. After the war imperial powers increased their resource extraction to finance their own reconstruction, causing further labour unrest. In addition to Johannesburg, strikes erupted in Dakar, Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, Bulawayo, Zanzibar, the Gold Coast, and Nigeria, and across the French West African and Sudanese railway systems.<sup>13</sup> The Cold War that began in 1946 proved an important ideological tool against left-wing activists who sought to make inroads amongst discontented groups. This was particularly so in South Africa, where the apartheid government used anti-communism to rationalize its repression of African nationalist aspirations and retain Western allies.

But the period was also marked by the weakening of imperial power, coupled with the rise of anti-colonial struggles. In Algeria and South Africa the trajectories of the two communist parties diverged even more as they were swept along by national developments. In South Africa the National Party's election on an apartheid platform in May 1948 brought greater repression. The CPSA's national conference in January 1949 claimed 2,482 members, but only 992 were in good financial standing. The leadership could not decide how to respond to the increasing repression and made no attempt to set up an underground. In June 1950 the Suppression of Communism Act—a South African manifestation of the Cold War—banned the CPSA and empowered the state to act against a wide range of critics. The CPSA's Central Committee disbanded the party, leaving members confused and demoralized.

Three years later the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) was formed. While the CPSA had prioritized class struggle, the SACP emphasized closer collaboration with the African nationalist movement, giving primacy to alliance politics over the development of an independent profile. Those who joined the SACP did so because of their desire to fight apartheid, and they were acculturated into an international communist world to which most remained uncritically loyal. Thus, when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) criticized Stalin at its twentieth Congress in 1956, SACP stalwart Michael Harmel applauded the CPSU for condemning the cult of Stalin, while praising him for promoting economic development and fighting Trotskyism. The SACP's commitment to national liberation protected it from pressure to address its relationship with the USSR.



During its first seven years, the SACP issued no public statement. Instead, individual communists worked with the ANC and its allies in the Congress Alliance. The relationship of communists and nationalists was further strengthened by the Treason Trial of 1956–1961, in which almost the entire Congress Alliance leadership was charged with treason and conspiracy to use violence—and eventually found not guilty. Several leading African nationalists joined the SACP at this time; overlapping membership at the leadership level was common. This close relationship had its critics; in 1959 discontented Africanists broke from the ANC citing white and communist domination and formed the Pan Africanist Congress. Yet that did not deter South African communists from claiming that they had merged with the national liberation movement. Following the March 1960 Sharpeville-Langa massacres, the government imposed repeated states of emergency, banning many political organizations and activists. Communists went underground and into exile, and communists and African nationalists jointly launched *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) or MK as it was commonly known, to wage armed struggle.<sup>14</sup>

In Algeria, meanwhile, the PCA had rethought its approach to Algerian nationalism in the wake of the Sétif massacre and began campaigning in earnest against state repression. By the late 1940s young radicalized Algerians were gravitating to the PCA both because of the lack of tolerance within the nationalist movement—an intolerance that ultimately led to its destructive fragmentation—and because nationalist organizations did not offer an answer to the problems of poverty, inequality, and social justice. Reflecting this demographic change, alongside the pressure of a burgeoning national liberation movement, the PCA's policies became—with some exceptions—more autonomous vis-à-vis the PCF.

One consequence of anti-colonial agitation was an increase in the international flow of ideas about emancipation from colonial rule, as liberation movements sought to learn from each other's experiences. Armed struggles in Tunisia and Morocco—and not least the Vietnamese victory over France at Dien Bien Phu in 1954—brought communists and nationalists face to face with the possibilities of guerrilla struggle in Algeria. Despite the PCA's support for the Vietnamese, it was slow to join the armed struggle launched by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) in November 1954. But pushed by its rural activists, it formed its own armed detachments. While the FLN aimed to bring all Algerians into its fold, the PCA insisted on maintaining its organizational autonomy, although in July 1956 its armed detachments integrated into the FLN's *Armée de Libération Nationale*. Yet this failed to

ease FLN scepticism towards communists, many of whom were killed during the war—both by the French and by Algerian nationalists.

As war swept across the Algerian landscape and into the cities, urban political organization became ever more difficult, accentuating the disjuncture between the cities and the countryside. Led by Bachir Hadj-Ali and Sadek Hadjerès inside the country and Larbi Bouhali in exile, the underground PCA contended that, however restricted, there was still public space for urban civil society organization and protest. However, the FLN's never-ending drive for unity and intolerance of organizational pluralism left little political space for the PCA. Pulled into the armed struggle, the PCA maintained its organizational autonomy from the FLN, while its programme showed increasing independence from the PCF.

The euphoria of independence notwithstanding, as the war ended the discord within the FLN erupted into the open. Despite factional violence, the idea of unity promulgated during the war as necessary for victory became a model for the new Algeria. The PCA, with its ranks depleted, could hardly contest this new state. While the FLN pursued state to state negotiations with the Soviet Union, it banned the PCA in November 1962 and proclaimed itself as the sole legal party the next year.<sup>15</sup>

Across Africa leaders of liberation struggles were in contact with each other. In March 1962 two ANC leaders met with FLN representatives. Later, South African communists met with Algerian communists. The lesson that the SACP drew from the PCA's fate was the need to strengthen its strategic alliance with the ANC. The lessons it drew from the FLN's experience were the need to build unity, to link town and countryside, to develop external bases from which to launch armed struggle, and to keep open the possibilities for negotiation.

Once again the West African experience was a significant counterpoint. In the post-war years communist influence in French West Africa was arguably greater than in the British colonies due to the coordinated work of the PCF and CGT and the PCF's provision of training in France. By Walter Kolarz's account, more Africans were schooled in Marxism in Paris than in Moscow, Peking, Prague, or Leipzig combined. French colonialism was far more concerned with culture and ideology than its British counterpart, and the PCF, far larger and better resourced than the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), was correspondingly more concerned with the diffusion of culture and ideas, despite its ambiguity on colonial independence. Thus, the West African *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain* (RDA), an

anti-colonial party formed in 1946 by the Ivory Coast's Félix Houphouët-Boigny, originally had links with the PCF. But in the 1950s, as the Cold War intensified, Houphouët-Boigny steered the RDA in a moderate direction.<sup>16</sup>

In British West Africa, Marxist ideas were more influential in Nigeria than its neighbours, presumably due to the larger labour movement. Nigerian Marxists sought support from the CPGB, which had both Nigerian and West African branches. But they were never strong enough to develop a mass base or form a Nigerian Communist Party, and in the 1950s Nigerian communists were banned from the civil service. Thus, despite scattered Marxist groups and influential individuals, communism remained extremely weak in this region.<sup>17</sup>

British Sudan, at the crossroads of Africa and the Arab world, was distinctive. Alongside nationalism, communist influence grew during the Second World War due to the combined influence of British communist soldiers and Sudanese students returning from Egypt who had links to Egyptian communists. In 1946 the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation was launched; this became the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) in 1949. The SCP rapidly broadened its base to include workers and peasants, was particularly strong amongst workers at the railway hub of Atbara and, as a result, was important in the anti-colonial movement that won independence in 1956.<sup>18</sup>

### Post-Colonial Independence, African Socialism and Non-Alignment

Across Africa independence opened up new possibilities for communist influence. Capitalism was tarnished by its association with colonialism, and the USSR hoped that independent African countries would follow its model. It continued to offer education and training for people from developing countries through bodies such as the communist-aligned World Federation of Trade Unions and International Organization of Journalists, both headquartered in Prague. Stalin's death in 1953 had loosened Soviet dominance over the communist world, which, after the Chinese Revolution, was gradually becoming polycentric. Nonetheless, the six African communist parties represented at the CPSU's Twenty-Second Congress in October 1961 still looked to the USSR for guidance. These were Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, South Africa, Sudan, and Réunion (founded as a region of the PCF in 1946 and an autonomous party in 1959). Communists in Africa faced harsh conditions: only in Tunisia and Réunion were the parties legal, and Egypt's long-standing but fragmented communist movement was heavily repressed.

Kolarz estimates some 50,000 communists in Africa around October 1961, but judging by SACP and PCA membership, this is highly exaggerated.<sup>19</sup>

Superpower competition intensified as both powers sought to pull newly independent countries into their orbit. But if African states were often sceptical of capitalism, they did not rush to adopt communism. To the consternation of African communists, a non-aligned African socialism became the dominant left-wing approach of the 1960s and early 1970s. Its proponents agreed that Africa's pre-colonial communal values and relative absence of classes and class struggle should form the basis for an African path of development.

Although African socialism claimed to reflect pre-colonial values, it was applied to societies that had been markedly transformed by the colonial experience in divergent ways. Ghana, independent in 1957, became a beacon for African socialism. George Padmore, disillusioned with communism, moved there to work with Kwame Nkrumah, who in contrast to the rural orientation of most African socialists, stressed rapid industrialization. But Ghana quickly became heavily indebted. In 1964 Nkrumah declared himself president for life and banned opposition parties, only to be overthrown two years later, bringing Ghana's socialist experiment to a halt.<sup>20</sup>

Tanzania's Julius Nyerere promoted *ujamaa*, or familyhood, with the extended family as the building block of African development, and sought to reconcile social differences within a single party. He began the forced relocation of rural people into collective villages, which proved politically unpopular and economically non-viable.<sup>21</sup> A. M. Babu, an influential Zanzibari intellectual-activist imprisoned by Nyerere, wrote a harsh critique of African socialism, arguing that its architects perpetuated Africa's economic dependency. The doctrine was discredited both by its failed economic projects and by the repressive one-party regimes wielding power in its name.<sup>22</sup>

One-party states and military coups became common across Africa. Yet regional differences remained significant. Although not African socialist, Algeria's FLN styled itself as a left alternative to Soviet-style communism and a socialist beacon for the Third World, despite its hostility to independent socialist initiatives. Following the PCA's banning, the FLN crushed the Kabyle-based *Front des Forces Socialistes* (FFS) launched in September 1963. The military regime that seized power in June 1965 continued this hostility to autonomous socialist groups. The *Organisation de la Résistance Populaire* (ORP), formed after the coup by members of the banned PCA and leftists

close to the deposed president Ahmed Ben Bella, was crushed within a few months. A successor organization, the *Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste* (PAGS), was formed the next year. The PAGS continued the PCA's pro-Soviet orientation, seeing the regime's approach to the USSR as an anti-imperialist step. In 1971 the military regime took a left turn: first nationalizing Algeria's oil and gas reserves, then, over the next two years, collectivizing agriculture. The PAGS saw these as further positive moves. Many PAGS members and supporters worked in the public sector, and in the 1960s and 1970s the party was influential beyond its numbers. Nonetheless, it could hardly dent the military regime.<sup>23</sup>

Sudan suffered a similar fate. In 1969 Gaafar Nimeiri took power in a military coup and announced his decision to form a progressive one-party system. The SCP, which retained its strong labour base, refused to disband despite pressure both from the regime and the CPSU. It drew the lesson of Egyptian communists, who in 1965 had merged into Gamal Abdul Nasser's Arab Socialist Union. Thus, in 1970 it called for a national front of progressive organizations. In April 1971 communist leaders were arrested and in August hundreds of communists were executed. The USSR nonetheless maintained cordial relations with Nimeiri, only reconsidering when he shifted his Cold War allegiances. Virtually decimated, only very gradually did the SCP begin to recover.<sup>24</sup>

### Afrocommunism

The 1970s saw another left-wing wave as the People's Republic of the Congo, Benin, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique all espoused Marxism-Leninism and, in varying degrees, pursued closer ties with the USSR. The political climate was favourable to top-down socialist experiments. Mali made another attempt at socialism in the 1970s and 1980s, as did Ghana in the 1980s. Along with anti-authoritarian upheavals in Asia and Latin America, the events precipitated a rethink of US foreign policy—American policy-makers were concerned that the new regimes would be pro-Soviet—and an increase in US military involvement in the Third World. This intensified the Cold War, producing what Fred Halliday called the second Cold War.<sup>25</sup>

This can be seen in southern Africa, where struggles against settler colonialism and white minority rule became intertwined with Cold War ambitions. Alliance politics have been critical for southern African communists, who integrated themselves into armed liberation movements in Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa. Thus, some of Mozambique's

and Angola's anti-colonial leaders had embraced communism as students in 1950s Portugal, but they were too few in number to form autonomous communist parties. Guinea Bissau's Amílcar Cabral, who studied in Portugal and visited Angola, played a pivotal role in spreading these networks across Lusophone Africa. They proved critical for the struggles against Portuguese colonialism. Both Mozambique's *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique* (FRELIMO) and Angola's *Movimento Popular da Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) gradually became socialist during the course of armed struggle and through contact with the USSR. Portugal's April 1974 military coup transformed the southern African political terrain, and Mozambique and Angola became independent in June and November 1975 respectively.<sup>26</sup>

What David Ottaway and Marina Ottaway have called Afrocommunism made significant headway in 1977, when Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola adopted Marxism-Leninism as their state ideology. Unlike other Soviet-aligned African states, they applied Marxism-Leninism as a state-led developmental paradigm. This entailed strengthening ties with the Soviet bloc, building a vanguard party, putting the economy under state control, and promoting industrialization and modernization—in contrast to African socialism's concern with tradition. In pursuing national interests and promoting socialism at their own pace, their approach was seen as an African counterpart to Eurocommunism. The Soviets did not take the assertions by these states of Marxism-Leninism at face value but nonetheless supported African countries seen as moving towards socialism. By 1980 the three countries had built political parties, organized peasants, and developed state farms.<sup>27</sup>

The Ottaways stress the commonalities of these regimes and seek to explain the subsequent divergences. The regimes had followed the same general approach—strong state-led development with a collectivist agenda. In 1982 they still embraced Marxism-Leninism, despite their striking dependence on foreign investment and aid, and had reorganized civil society through the formation of youth groups, women's associations, peasant associations, communal villages, and trade unions, all of which had the potential to cut across ethnic and cultural differences. Ethiopia, with its stratified class structure, had a skilled cadre to facilitate institutional development. In Mozambique and Angola, by contrast, the Portuguese settlers who had run the civil service left at independence. Not only did the two countries lack the capacity to pursue large-scale agricultural collectivization, they were torn apart by civil wars running from 1975 to 2002 in Angola and 1977 to 1992 in Mozambique. Indeed, by 1987, Marina Ottaway contends, Afrocommunism



remained viable in Ethiopia, but was mired down in Mozambique and Angola, which were both rent by superpower rivalries involving the USSR, the US, and China.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, commonalities should not obscure significant differences: Mozambique's FRELIMO, influenced by Nyerere's model, retained more popular support than Angola's bureaucratic MPLA.

Unlike Mozambique and Angola, Ethiopia's left turn was not the result of an anti-colonial struggle. The country's social structure had barely been touched by its brief colonial experience decades earlier. Emperor Haile Selassie's regime collapsed in 1974 following a popular revolt from below. Only after mass executions of old-regime officials and Mengistu Haile Mariam's ascendancy in late 1974, did the military regime advocate socialism as a modernizing strategy. In 1975 it unleashed sweeping reforms—nationalization and abolition of private property. In contrast to southern Africa's guerrilla struggles, which reflected alliance politics, Ethiopia's military was isolated from the civilian left. In 1976 Mengistu proclaimed 'scientific socialism' and began distancing himself from the US. Late that year he launched the Red Terror—the mass slaughter of Marxist civilians. The USSR finally threw its weight behind Mengistu after his February 1977 coup—although the Red Terror only ended in 1978 with the elimination of all opposition to Mengistu. The Horn of Africa became embroiled in Cold War politics, as Somalia's military regime expelled the Soviets and embraced the Americans. Thus, while Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola all pursued state-led socialism, they took different routes.<sup>29</sup>

### Cold War Rivalries in Southern Africa

The independence of Mozambique and Angola had important inspirational and practical repercussions for the South African liberation struggle. The SACP's early armed actions ended in July 1963 with the arrest of MK's top leaders. By November 1965, with its key activists imprisoned or in exile, the SACP ceased functioning as an organized body within South Africa.

The SACP's external wing assumed leadership, setting up headquarters in London, with Moses Kotane as general secretary. Exile strengthened the party's relationship with the Eastern Bloc countries, undoubtedly due to financial dependence; its response to the 1968 Czechoslovakian crisis was uncritically pro-Soviet. It hoped to infiltrate MK troops trained in African and Eastern European countries back into South Africa. But repeated military failures compelled the ANC to convene a conference at Morogoro, Tanzania, in April–May 1969. The ANC's executive resigned *en bloc*; communists formed the majority of the new executive. MK was put under the supervision

of a 'revolutionary council' that answered to the new executive and that included three non-African Communists.

From the SACP's perspective, the Morogoro conference was a success. Senior communist Joe Slovo had drafted most of the ANC's *Strategies and Tactics* document, and the conference strengthened the political alliance of the SACP, ANC, MK, and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Yet, although communists were well placed in the ANC and MK, the party itself was not functioning as a collective entity. It hoped to launch a 'people's war' combining armed struggle with mass mobilization, but the difficulty of infiltrating troops precluded this.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, popular resistance inside South Africa was growing, signalled by the growth of the black consciousness and black trade-union movements and the 1976 Soweto uprising. Communists figured prominently amongst exiled SACTU leaders, and the SACP was antagonistic toward the new trade-union movement. Moreover, diverse socialist currents were challenging the SACP's position on the left. The party was cautiously critical. In 1977 the SACP moved its headquarters to Luanda, Angola—closer to home.

Yet the armed struggle was stymied. The 1984 Nkomati Accord between Mozambique and South Africa precluded MK access to Mozambique and intensified the pressure on MK troops in Angola. More discontent within MK ranks—culminating in a mutiny in Angola—propelled another ANC conference in June 1985 at Kabwe, Zambia. The Kabwe conference stressed the need to broaden the armed struggle into a 'people's war' and fully opened ANC membership to all South Africans, irrespective of race—another SACP victory.

Within South Africa popular pressure against apartheid escalated dramatically during the 1980s, a decade of intense socialist ideological debate. The 1984–1985 Vaal uprising fed into left-wing debates about community and workplace struggles, while the massive growth of the anti-capitalist labour movement led to the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in December 1985. Pragmatically, the SACP wooed COSATU leaders, and after concerted political battles, COSATU aligned itself with the ANC and the SACP. By the late 1980s the party had absorbed a range of left-wing intellectuals into its ranks, and its banners were seen in the seemingly unstoppable mass demonstrations taking place around the country. The 1987–1988 battle of Cuito Cuanavale in Angola signalled a shift in the regional balance of power, forcing South Africa to withdraw from Angola and rethink its strategy. When the SACP held its seventh congress in Havana, Cuba, in April 1989, it raised the spectre that the South

African ruling class would prematurely push the liberation movement into negotiations. The party continued to stress armed struggle, an organized underground, mass action, and international pressure.<sup>31</sup>

At the continent's northern end, another democratic movement was rapidly evolving. A conjuncture of events from October 1988 produced what has been called the first Arab spring, when popular uprisings in Algeria compelled the one-party state to introduce multi-party democratic elections. Sixty-five percent of the eligible voters turned out for the June 1990 municipal and provincial elections. These proved a major defeat for the FLN, which polled 28 percent of the vote, and a calamity for the PAGS, which obtained only 0.3 per cent; the FFS had called for an electoral boycott. The Islamist *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) obtained 54 per cent of the vote, signalling a profound desire for change. But before the Parliamentary elections had been completed, a military coup in January 1992 aborted the democratic transition. Martial law was followed by a decade of civil war.<sup>32</sup>

### The Soviet Collapse and its Impact on Communism in Africa

The Algerian events overlapped with the tumultuous developments in Eastern Europe. The popular uprisings of August–September 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall that November, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union two years later had dramatic repercussions across Africa. A succession of leftist regimes—Ethiopia, People's Republic of the Congo, Benin, Angola, Mozambique, and Zambia—either lost power or dramatically shifted their policies.

But African responses to the collapse of international communism were varied and complex, reflecting the interactions of national and global dynamics. By the mid-1980s IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs had already undermined socialist ambitions for collectivization and redistribution. Tanzania, Mozambique, and Algeria, for example, all yielded to international pressures for economic liberalization. External economic pressure undermined left-wing regimes, but domestic pressures were critical. Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique all faced significant internal dissent and guerrilla struggle based on rival claims to power. But with Mikhail Gorbachev advocating reconciliation rather than military confrontation to resolve local conflicts, Soviet support declined, and the three countries were compelled to switch gears. In Algeria the PAGS dissolved in late 1992, in part a response to its electoral failure, in part to the collapse of communism. Some of its members formed the left-wing and anti-Islamist *Ettahaddi* (Defiance). Others, trying to retain the communist tradition, formed the *Parti Algérien pour la*

*Démocratie et le Socialisme*. Civil society has revived in the twenty-first century, and there is a fragile and fragmented socialist movement.<sup>33</sup>

The Eastern European events finally propelled the SACP to confront its relationship with the Soviet Union. It did so with astonishing rapidity. Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed?*, published in January 1990, criticized Stalinism for bureaucratic and authoritarian leadership that restricted power to a tiny elite and stripped socialism of democracy. But he nonetheless believed that socialism could function democratically without the 'distortions' that characterized the Soviet Union.

With the Cold War ending, the prospects for a negotiated democratic transition seemed more likely, and in February 1990 the South African government unbanned the ANC, PAC, and SACP. It stepped up pressure on the ANC to suspend armed struggle and to distance itself from the SACP. An uncovered ANC underground initiative was portrayed in the press as a communist plot, and President F. W. de Klerk tried—unsuccessfully—to keep the SACP out of negotiations. In July 1990 the SACP was relaunched as a legal organization; in August the ANC agreed to suspend armed struggle.

The SACP, ANC, and COSATU formalized their relationship through a Tripartite Alliance. By December 1991 the SACP claimed over twenty-one thousand members, with strong concentrations in the country's industrial areas. Its leadership included MK heroes and leading COSATU trade unionists. The USSR's collapse was traumatic for many members; the party's manifesto argued that international conditions made the prospects for socialism unlikely and that the working class had to maintain a 'strategic initiative' during negotiations. Despite enormous strains, not least the assassination of SACP general secretary Chris Hani in 1993, the country's first democratic elections took place in April 1994.

The SACP is amongst the very few communist parties to have survived the Soviet Union's collapse relatively unscathed. It has done so precisely because of its long commitment to the ANC and its role in the armed struggle. Although the party retains its membership in the Tripartite Alliance with the aim of influencing government policy, its close relationship with the ANC has left COSATU as the government's most vocal critic. Despite being Africa's strongest communist party, the SACP does not feel confident to contest elections on its own ticket, and its leaders prefer a comfortably close relationship with the ANC rather than the uncertainty of an independent profile. Its membership in the Tripartite Alliance has come at the cost of a distinct communist political agenda.

However, the SACP is playing a leading role in the African Left Networking Forum, launched in Johannesburg in August 2008 with the aim of building a Marxist-Leninist network in Africa. Its first conference took place in Johannesburg in August 2010 and included Sudanese communists and representatives from left-wing groups in Botswana, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somaliland, Tunisia, Uganda, and Zambia. Africa has a diverse range of independent socialist groups, but communists are striving to retain the communist tradition, while building continent-wide links.<sup>34</sup>

Although communist movements in Africa have generally been weak, they have periodically had an influence far beyond their numbers, especially in southern Africa. Nonetheless, while communists and socialists have made episodic gains during socially turbulent periods, they have usually been unable to capitalize on these gains in multiparty elections. With the exceptions of the anti-colonial guerrilla movements in Angola and Mozambique—which had Soviet support—communist-oriented movements have never gained state power. However, communism was adopted by a significant number of states as an official ideology to promote economic development and facilitate international alliances. While state-led communist and socialist initiatives have been undemocratic and repressive, they form a subset of African one-party states that span the ideological spectrum. For socialist movements to gain ground, they must address democratic demands. Significantly, these movements are now operating in the absence of a global socialist power.

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Notes:

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