

Cabral: The cancer of betrayal, which we must uproot from Africa



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Some of the men who apparently revered him were amongst those who would eventually betray Cabral to imperialist forces. He was not the first nor the last victim in the long line of treachery, which stretches backward along the road to African decolonization

Treachery is a cancer we must excise by combatting impunity. On May 13, 1972 while making a speech praising Kwame Nkrumah whom he lauded as the Kilimanjaro of African revolutionary consciousness, Amilcar Cabral declared:

'President Nkrumah is the consummate strategist, inventor of African positivism, positive action and an implacable foe of neocolonialism All coins have two faces and all reality has a positive and negative side ... How far and to what extent was treachery able to succeed in Ghana because of class contradictions, the role of the party and other institutions including the army? We absolutely despise those who could stoop to betray Nkrumah to please imperialism.' [1]

Cabral wondered aloud about what could be behind so many betrayals of so many of the martyrs who gave their lives in the struggle for African liberation. This was not a question that occurred to Cabral just because of Nkrumah's death. In fact the question had haunted him for quite a while and it really began to hit home as he was delivering his eulogy. Over the preceding months he had already become conscious of the foul breath of treachery all around him. Although the colonial era was over, a culture of impunity had descended across the continent, creating a climate where traitors thrived. How do we root them out, Cabral wondered?

'Does treachery flourish because of how we define who the people are? Or is there a link to a bigger problem stemming from how we select revolutionary leadership?'

When we take into account his birth in Bafata, named after an illustrious Carthaginian and his childhood and youth under noxious colonialist influences that generated feelings of alienation as well as the constant temptation for the colonized to betray each other, this is someone who knows of what he speaks. To those in the underground struggle, he was Abel Djasi, a name meant to protect him against traitors but one that soon achieved a kind of symbolic status within the ranks of his comrades. Even so, drawing from a bottomless well of human deception, some of the very men who reverently referred to him as O Homem Grande – the Great One – were amongst those who would eventually betray him. Cabral knew the risk he ran, just from being aware of the long line of dead martyrs that he respected stretching backward along the road to African decolonization ... Ben Barka, Mondlane, Moumié, Um Nyobé, Rwagasoré, Lumumba, Olympio ... The list was long and only grew longer after the assassination of Cabral with the addition of Ngouabi, Sankara, Machel , Dulcie September, and Chris Hani ...

In the case of all of those martyrs, it was only the people in their inner circle, their intimates, who knew their secrets and could get prior knowledge of the day they would die. As the saying goes, 'too much trust breeds treason'. Despite it all, Cabral never gave in to paranoia and potential crime. On the contrary, he followed his natural tendency towards tolerance and unity rather than divisiveness [2], and, in the end, that was what did him in. He brought his capacity for unity to an international solidarity conference of peoples in struggle that took place in Havana in 1966. This conference was seen as a 'tricontinental' resistance front. The tough stands taken at the conference faced a stiff fight or became progressively weaker, despite the fact that they were right on target. One by one, its executive secretaries, Mehdi Ben Barka, Ernesto Che Guevara and Amílcar Cabral were all assassinated. Hardly a coincidence!

In a stadium traumatized by Nkrumah's death, Cabral declared:

'As Africans we firmly believe that the dead continue to walk beside us. We are a society of both the living and the dead. At dawn every day Nkrumah will rise again in the hearts of freedom fighters and show up in their determination. Neither our

liberation movements, the people of Ghana, Africa or the progressive world will forgive those who betrayed Nkrumah. Never! [3]

The coup that toppled Nkrumah is a tortuous conspiracy with deep roots. In 1969, the Portuguese freed Aristides Barbosa and Momo Touré, two former PAIGC fighters, and smuggled them out to Conakry. They became part of a grab-bag of fake deserters from the colonial army as well as various other corrupt individuals who would go into liberated zones pretending to repent, to have become reconverted nationalists or to be new recruits. Their task was to sow dissension within the ranks of their former comrades while collaborating with a branch of the PIDE-DGS, International State Defense Police controlled by the Portuguese Security Services, quite likely operating in conjunction with Germans, Italians and the French. These agent provocateurs spread discord, vilifying Cape Verdian officers who were disproportionately represented in the upper echelons of the PAIGC, exacerbating differences and exploiting the superiority and inferiority complexes that pitted the so-called 'Mulattoes' and 'Assimilados' from 'ethnic' Africans such as (Balantes, Foulas, Mandinkas, Mandjacques ... etc.). Despite the popularity of the PAIGC, which reached right down to the tiny Tabancas – those small grassroots cells in the liberated zones, the virus of treachery continued on its insidious journey. Perfidy works by design, functioning as a series of pernicious steps.

The Portuguese had already attacked Guinea Conakry on November 22nd 1970. Operation Mar Verde, Green Sea, was launched on Spinola's orders. Around 400 assailants, one-third Portuguese and the rest a gang of European mercenaries with their African counterparts, including Guineans opposed to Sekou Touré, attacked Conakry. They quickly took up positions around strategic targets so they could free pro-Portuguese prisoners and take down the PAIGC. They also tried to kill Cabral as well as Sekou Touré and to free conspirators against the regime who by that time had already spent more than a year behind bars. Some Guineans were set free, the presidential palace came under attack and Sekou Touré was reported missing. Although the Guineans mounted a spirited defense, the PAIGC camp was destroyed. Cabral, who was visiting Roumania at the time, was unperturbed. Indeed, many of the Portuguese men involved boarded their boats home convinced that the operation had been successful and their African partners had seized the capital. Touré's people rescued him after answering his call to arms, which he issued from a secret hideout.

In March 1972, Cabral denounced the PIDE and DGS for making new attempts to assassinate him. He said, 'If I am ever murdered it will be from within our own ranks. No one from outside can destroy the PAIGC, it will take one of our own to do it.'

In November 1972, another attack aimed at several high-ranking PAIGC officers also failed. Cabral suffered no injuries. On January 8, 1973 after elections in all the liberated zones, Amilcar issued a call to convene a national people's assembly.

He saw it as the institution that would preside over independence. However, to the Portuguese, that became the signal to get rid of him, since his stated intention to declare independence terrified Lisbon. They were already backed into a corner since their troops were becoming increasingly disgusted with conducting its dirty war. Once again, General Spinola and Marcelo Caetano targeted Cabral for elimination. A certain Néné, in charge of PDG communications, conveyed the message to the killer commando, while Amilcar was meeting with members of FRELIMO on a visit to Conakry. Amilcar continued on to a reception at the Polish embassy in Conakry and later on that fateful night, January 20th 1973, he returned home with his wife, Maria Helena Rodriguez. With access to Cabral's personal schedule, given to them by Nabonia, someone close to him, some individuals were able to set up a roadblock on the route he was travelling on his way home. He got out of his car and appeared to recognize the individuals at the roadblock. However, the attackers seemed determined to kidnap him. He reasoned with them for a moment until the blast of machine-gun sounded in the night and tore a hole in his gut. He had had just enough time to start arguing with those who finished him off. At long last treason had met reason face to face.

The most commonly held theory was that Bissau Guineans had made a deal with the Portuguese that left the Cape Verdeans out. There was also a persistent rumor that said the plotters must also have had local co-conspirators, including the complicity of their leader, Sékou Touré. The latter mounted a spirited defense, pointing his finger instead at imperialism and the Portuguese who had corrupted the members of the party implicated in the plot. Touré's secret service rounded up the conspirators Innocent Camil (Inocencio Cani), Momo Mamadou Touré, Coda Nabonia, Carlos Pereira, (Valentino Mangana, Aristides Barboza, Jaoa Tomaz, Soares de Gama and Momo who had been expelled from the party a few months earlier for anti revolutionary activities), Lasana Bangura, Ansoumane Camara, Aleino Egora, Raphael Barbosa – ex-president of the party had become a spy for the PIDE. In his confession Valentino Mangana gave a detailed account of the plot: eliminate the PAIGC and its leader, heir to the party and independence; preserve Cape Verde as a strategic outpost for Portugal and rid Guinea Bissau of its influential Metis leadership. Another of the plotters, Isidor Lima, who was later absolved and then banned following investigation by a different dispensation, returned home from exile in Sierra Leone years later. A huge witch-hunt tore the party apart even as Camil confessed his sins to Guinean authorities. Otelo Saraiva, a PIDE operative, later admitted, at the end of his overseas posting, that the operation had been a total failure since the objective had been to bring back Cabral alive and the PIDE men had overplayed their hand. [4]

During that period there was constant discontent in Sékou Touré's PDG camp with fratricidal conflicts breaking out between Guineans from Bissau and Cape Verdeans who refused to take responsibility for the treachery. Their inter-communal turmoil remained unresolved and, directly or indirectly, continued to poison the atmosphere at the highest levels of the state in Guinea Bissau. The presence of 'Metis' Cape Verdeans who were disproportionately represented

within the higher echelons of Guinea Bissau aroused resentment within the ranks of ‘Aboriginal’ Africans. Very quickly everything fell into place for the state to become the prey of a criminal cabal and a comprador mentality. This was what probably provoked the backlash which eventually culminated in Nino Viera’s coup d’etat against Luis Cabral, Amilcar’s half-brother, and down the line resulted in Nino’s own assassination. [5]

But let’s get back to the business at hand. A Revolutionary Investigative Commission swung into action, composed of Cuban and Algerian diplomats and Guinean Democratic Party leaders. Later on, it was augmented by delegates from Senegal, FREMILO, Egypt, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Tanzania and Nigeria.

Had Sékou Touré taken umbrage with his host and Cabral’s ‘revolutionary aura’ which eclipsed his own? Was there some link with initiatives around staking maritime claims that were open to potential competition by Portugal as early as 1962? What of the areas where Guinea Conakry was already carrying out joint deep-sea explorations with multinational corporations, even to the extent of carrying out seismic experiments the year Cabral died? What of the rumors of dreams of a Greater Guinea to which Conakry’s leader clung? And yet, on the other hand, a magnanimous Sékou had also been open to joint pan-African exploitation of the disputed oil zone in the early eighties.

As Cabral said in relation to identifying real revolutionaries at Nkrumah’s funeral:

‘My views on this question will help us better understand Nkrumah’s outstanding achievement as well as the complexity of the challenges he faced, quite often all alone. Those challenges tell us that as long as imperialism exists, any independent African state must exist as a movement for taking power or it will cease to exist. Please don’t bother to tell me that Nkrumah died of throat cancer or some other illness. No, Nkrumah died from the cancer of betrayal, which we must uproot from Africa if we are serious about eliminating imperialist domination.’

Inspired by Cabral’s achievements, Sankara did not fall prey to misjudging the scope of the task before him or of the fact that the people’s enemies, the retrograde bourgeois cliques, would never stop trying to sabotage what had been accomplished:

‘Parasitic classes that always benefited from colonial and neocolonial Upper Volta are and will forever remain hostile to the revolutionary process which we began on August 4th 1983. That is so because they remain and will forever remain attached to international imperialism by an umbilical cord. They are and will remain passionate defenders of the privileges they acquired by selling out to imperialism. Whatever we might do or say they will remain just as they are, and will never stop plotting and hatching conspiracies for reconquering their ‘lost kingdom’. Don’t expect these nostalgic folks to change their mentality or attitude. They are insensitive and only understand the language of struggle, the struggle of

revolutionary classes against the exploiters and oppressors of the masses. They will no doubt find our revolution absolutely authoritarian in every way; it will in fact be an act through which the people impose their will including a call to arms'.

Sankara was the last African head of state in the 20th century who successfully tried, without going through a stage of war for national liberation, to follow in Cabral's footsteps. However, that stopped abruptly when he was betrayed by his brother Blaise Compaoré in collusion with Françafrique. Compaoré, the sophisticated face of treachery and willing steward of French machinations and sinister designs against the whole region, today reigns, in total impunity, as master of all he surveys. While he was the Minister of Justice, he brazenly and outrageously claimed that Sankara died of natural causes at the exact same time as eleven of his colleagues. To this very day he refuses to allow the truth about his treasonous actions to come out. While there is impunity and imperialist protection for it, treason will never end.

'Impunity, either in life or in the law, is defined by what is missing. That can mean the absence of prosecutorial provisions against violators of human rights or those who neglect their civil, administrative or disciplinary responsibilities. It may also mean the absence of a properly constituted investigatory system that might lead to charges, arrest, trial, and, if parties are found guilty, conviction and appropriate punishment, up to and including compensation for the victims for having suffered prejudicial acts.'

The fight against impunity means taking a holistic approach. Today impunity is enthroned in every facet of African life. That includes civil rights and political rights, as well as human rights, economic, social, cultural, gender or ecological rights. As human beings we also need to understand that we should respect the rights of all other living beings on this earth, including those who have not been given rights. This is a question of critical importance. For example, let's look at what's happening in the Congo. As the world averts its eyes with studied indifference, six million Congolese have lost their lives, sacrificed on the altar of globalization and consumerism, largely because impunity is embedded in the system that governs their lives, and networks of transnational corporations always operate beyond the reach of any law. The laws themselves permit our resources to be pillaged and our sovereignty to be whittled away. For example, in the Maghreb, in spite of an uprising for democracy, the prevalence of impunity prevents accountability and, in the final analysis, facilitates counter-revolution. Obscurantist religious forces that fit right into the globalized security and neoliberal order gut progressive gains and betray whatever hope they bring.

My brother Demba Dembelé, who owes a debt to Cabral, as I do, has said:

'Forty years after his assassination Cabral's ideas remain more relevant than ever. His premature demise robbed Africa's revolutionary season of one of its most prominent and original theoreticians. Cabral was a leader intimately involved in the

life of the masses and imbued with the fundamental values of his people. He was both a visionary and a passionate panAfricanist, a living symbol of the kind of leadership of which Africa has been cruelly deprived at this time, where there are growing threats of recolonization. In fact the events unfolding in Mali as well as Libya and the Ivory Coast in 2011 revealed the impotence of African officialdom in all its nakedness and exposing the lack of vision of the continent's leadership class, some of whom are no more than vulgar puppets of imperialist forces. [6]

I wrote these lines on the very same day we were commemorating the loss of Chris Hani, on the day when he was murdered, twenty years ago. Like all the other charismatic leaders he also understood that there was a price on his head and so took nothing at face value - and rightly so. We've all turned ourselves into targets by struggling against impunity. On the other hand, far too many of our intellectuals are willing to cut demeaning deals for a few filthy perks. How did our elites sink to such depths of consumerist greed that our people have become numbed and can no longer defend those gains carved out of the struggles that our martyrs led? We badly need to re-politicize our youth based on pan-African ethical rules and fundamental human values. But that would demand an extensive mobilization campaign with the objective of erasing the culture of impunity, which both covers up and funds treachery. Today we are facing a bigger threat than the national liberation struggle was tackling, it is a continent wide one.

In my film <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Wu8vC9MLoU> I raise the issue of all foreign military bases out of Africa, particularly AFRICOM. 'AFRICOM, go home', a documentary where Cabral appears, explores how the US AFRICOM came into existence, what it means and provides a way of interpreting imperialist rivalries and ambitions on the continent, including why they spy on each other and exposing the contradictions that have surfaced in the 'fight against terrorism'. It articulates disbelief in claims of humanitarian goals by those who established AFRICOM for Africa after building a whole network of bases stretching as far as Germany. It explores contradictions that also arise between Africans and within African organizations as they try to defend themselves within a context of conflicts tied to the pillage of their resources and the appropriation of their ancestral lands. It examines the urgent need for panAfrican and internationalist resistance as well as the re-politicization of our Youth for future democracy. I know these are, among other issues , those Cabral fought for.

Amilcar's assassination opened up a pernicious Pandora's box of impunity. Fratricide, pogroms, civil war and evening old scores stalk the corridors of power, while corruption, narco trafficking have also disfigured the country historically liberated by Cabral. And yet Cabral continues to rise above it all and his spirit transcends our struggles like a beacon on the panAfrican horizon. His 'anthem' is and will always remain an undying flame:

'Sol, suor e o verde e mar,
Séculos de dor e esperança:
Esta é a terra dos nossos avós

Sun sweat grass and sea
Centuries of suffering and hope
These lands passed down by our Ancestors hands
* Aziz Salmone Fall is Coordinator of The International Campaign Justice for Sankara/GRILA and President of Internationalist Center CIRFA

END NOTES

- [1] Cabral's Obituary to Nkrumah, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLo3Y2IG-iY> and Transcription at <http://mairenasolidaria.webcindario.com/escrituramecanica/amilcarcabral.html>
- [2] Cabral on the liberation struggle, the making of the State and PAIGC' s policy, <http://www.ina.fr/video/I00017312>
- [3] Obituary, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLo3Y2IG-iY>
- [4] Many versions exist on this plot, among them see Lewin Andre, Ahmed Sekou Touré, 1982, Paris, l'Harmattan 2009; Chabal Patrick, Amical Cabral, revolutionary Leadership and People's war, African Studies Series, No37; Castanheira Jose Pedro, Qui a fait tuer Amilcar Cabral, Paris, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2003
- [5] Conchiglia, Augusta, Guinée Bissau, Questions sur l'assassinat d'un Président, Monde Diplomatique, 12 mars, 2009 and also Tobias Engel, Au Cap-vert , la seconde mort d'Amilcar Cabral, Monde Diplomatique, Novembre 2003 ; Lourenco Da Silva, Les héros de la Guinée Bissau, la fin d'une légende, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2012.
- [6] Demba Dembelé. <http://www.frantzfanoninternational.org/spip.php?auteur90>

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