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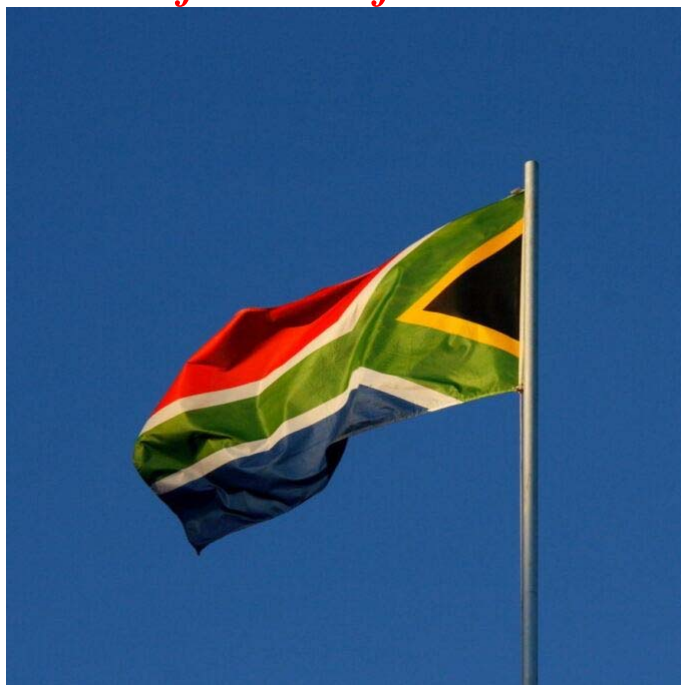
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زبانهای اروپایی

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South Africa's Gift to the World



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Speaking at the International Court of Justice the South African lawyer and writer Thembeke Ngcukaitobi pointed to the statement by Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant that Israel was “fighting human animals”. The denial of the full and equal humanity of Palestinians by Israel and its Western backers is part of a long history of European and then Western monopolization of the claim to be fully human. This was famously expressed by Aimé Césaire, the great Martinican poet, in 1950 when he wrote that the West has never been able to “live a true humanism—a humanism made to the measure of the world.”

In 1973 Steve Biko, the charismatic young leader of the Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, who understood his struggle as a “quest for a true humanity”, wrote that “the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face”. Oppressive regimes are never able to tolerate the intersection of principle and courage and in 1977 Biko met his death, as he had anticipated, at the hands of the police.

In April this year, South Africa will mark thirty years since the formal end of apartheid. In that time it has not realized its most basic commitments to millions of its citizens. One in four people do not have enough food, youth unemployment is over 60%, public education and health care are in deep crisis, there has never been meaningful land reform and corruption and violence are endemic. There is an alarming degree of state-driven xenophobia towards impoverished and working-class African and Asian migrants. Impoverished people are often governed with violence and from the massacre of striking miners in Marikana in 2012 to the many assassinations of grassroots activists popular dissent has often been met with severe repression

So many people gave so much in the struggles against colonialism and apartheid that its almost impossibly painful to measure the commitments and aspirations that animated these struggles against the realities of contemporary South Africa. Struggles for justice, sometimes scattered and ephemeral and sometimes very well organized, continue. It is striking that the declaration “We are human beings, not animals!” has often been present on street protests organized by impoverished people.

Unsurprisingly though political and social cynicism are pervasive, and for many people progress is now only imagined in individual terms. But when South Africa’s lawyers made their case to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague on the 11th January, and when the court made its ruling on 26 January, it seemed, for a sudden and golden moment, that Biko’s aspiration had been realised. It seemed as if the principles forged in the long struggle to free South Africa had endured and were now being presented as a gift to the world.

Since it became clear that former South African president Jacob Zuma was running a repressive kleptocracy the standing of the African National Congress (ANC), which has ruled South Africa since the end of apartheid, has been in steep decline at home and abroad. This has enabled an overweening arrogance on the part of the white lobby in South African public life that insists on the moral superiority of the West and effectively demands that the country be run as a proxy state of the West. This lobby, which has strong political connections in the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel, refuses to

accept that rejection of the domination of the West by the ANC could be motivated by principle. One of its leading figures, Frans Cronje, recently insisted, without providing any evidence, that the ANC was paid to institute proceedings against Israel at the ICJ by Iran. This conspiracy theory functions to make a principled action appear as corruption.

But of course the ANC has a long history of solidarity with the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and struggles for national liberation in countries like Ireland and Western Sahara. After his release from prison in 1990 Nelson Mandela made it clear to the West that his solidarity with Palestine, and Cuba, was not negotiable. Thabo Mbeki, who followed Mandela as president, defied the West by refusing to accept the legitimacy of the 2004 Western-backed coup against Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the elected president of Haiti.

The ANC's failures in terms of meeting the aspirations of its own people, and its turn to repression, cannot be denied. But its long history of solidarity with anti-colonial struggles developed principles that have not been extinguished. Just as Mandela's support for Palestine and Cuba and Mbeki's solidarity with Aristide and the right of the Haitian people to elect their leaders was genuine, so too is the party's current support for Palestine, led by its foreign minister Naledi Pandor.

The shared and at times electric elation in South Africa on 11 and 26 January was animated by both the deep sense of solidarity that most South Africans feel with Palestinians as well as a euphoric recognition that the political principles of the past have not been wholly squandered. There was a sense of hope that something may shift for Palestine, that there may be an opening towards the possibility of a more just global order and that it may become possible to restore some sense of principle in political life at home. Following the ruling at the ICJ South Africa will face a backlash by the West, and it's well-funded and organized academic, NGO, media and political proxies within the country. It requires strong and clear support for the position it has taken in solidarity with the people of Palestine. Progressives in other countries will need to mobilize this support and, where possible, encourage their own governments to stand with South Africa on this matter.

But this solidarity must be with the brave and principled action taken by the South African state in support of Palestine, and not an uncritical solidarity that erases the ongoing struggle to, in Biko's words, "bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift—a more human face".

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