

The War Against Democracy

John Pilger

You can call me a Thatcherite, but for this country, privatisation is the fundamental policy." I replied, that's the opposite of what you said before the first elections. He answered, there is a process and every process incorporates change. In South Africa, the process has been betrayal.

If you think that's too harsh, consider yesterday's Sunday Times newspaper. On page 9, there is the shocking story of Michael Komape. A 6-year-old who drowned in a pool of faeces when the primitive school toilet he was using collapsed.

You probably saw it. Today, the horror of Michael's death was described in detail in the High Court in Polokwane. Michael's parents and the local law centre are pursuing a civil claim against the government which denies that the pit latrine was no less safe than in any other impoverished school.

That's what they say. Unbelievable, but true. And it's taken more than 3 years for that to get to court.

Now if you turn to page 4 in the business section of the same paper. Here it is. It's a report of a party to celebrate the Sunday Times top 100 companies in South Africa.

What fun they're having. Here's the Reserve Bank Governor, Lesetja Kganyago, with Barclays Africa CEO Maria Ramos, who has her arm around his shoulder. How reassuring to see Barclays, the sanctions buster of apartheid, restored to cosy respectability in the new South Africa.

In this picture is Patrice Motsepe, South Africa's first black billionaire, who received the Sunday Times Life Achievement Award. And in a special report, the headline says, making South Africa a better place for all. The Sunday Times report reads as follows.

I say hello to Patrice and his glowing wife, Precious, who has just come back from Harvard, where she's involved in the women and policy program, and is wearing a gorgeous lilac embellished gown. Patrice Motsepe's story is one of firsts. He built the first black-owned mining business and today is in platinum and gold.

And he's launching a new bank. A new bank, just what South Africa needs. Black economic empowerment gave this billionaire his big break.

It didn't give Michael Komape a break, big or little. It didn't prevent little Michael drowning in faeces shit. His arm extended, a haunting symbolism I ask all of you here tonight to reflect on.

Such a new empowered bourgeoisie, wrote Franz Fanon, and I quote him, has an historic mission that has nothing to do with transforming the nation. Their role is intermediary, that of the West's business agent, unquote. Colonialism and imperialism may seem dated terms.

They're often relegated in academic circles, where Western power is regarded as a crisis manager in a turbulent world, instead of the cause of the crisis. In fact, colonialism and imperialism are right up to date. We're beginning to learn, wrote Edward Said, and his great classic, Culture and Imperialism.

We're beginning to learn that decolonization was not the termination of imperial relationships, but merely the extending of a geopolitical web which has been spinning since the Renaissance. The modern media alone has the power to penetrate more deeply into a receiving culture than any previous manifestation of Western power and technology, unquote. We have politics by corporate media.

We have economics by corporate media. Justice by media. Censorship by media.

Apartheid by media. Even our common language is corporate and deceitful. We have free choice that isn't free or a choice.

Reform that is regression. Growth that diminishes. Downsizing that destroys.

And that noble word, democracy, has been emptied of its dictionary meaning. In my view, it's not possible to make sense of the world unless we look at it through the lens and the chameleon history of colonialism and imperialism. Of course, we're urged constantly not to see the world this way.

It's not news that a second imperial conquest of Africa is underway. It's not news that the United States has established a military presence in 53 of Africa's 54 countries. It's not news that the world's greatest war machine has turned its attention to the treasures of Africa and to confronting its new enemy, perceived enemy, China.

It's not news that the United States has abandoned safeguards against the first use of nuclear weapons. It is now committed to spending \$46 million an hour, an hour every day, 24 hours a day. That's \$1.2 trillion.

...when 34 platinum miners striking against a British company can be murdered by the state. There is no democracy when Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa

can morph from miners' leader to millionaire and the seat on the board of London, the company that owns the Marikana mine. There's no democracy.

There's no democracy if Tweedledee, Zuma, is replaced by Tweedledum, Ramaphosa. There's no democracy when 50,000 farm workers can be sacked overnight and up to 40% of South Africans are out of work and a third of those with jobs earn less than \$2 a day. There's no democracy when a six-year-old boy can drown in a school toilet.

The freedom that was fought for by the woman in the photograph, who stood between the hippos, is a freedom that has to be won all over again. But how? Actually, many people don't need to be told how. South Africans are world champions at resistance.

Remember the draconian secrecy bill, the Protection of State Information Bill in 2013, that was approved by Parliament's ANC majority and awaited only Jacob Zuma's signature? It was stopped by massive direct action. As Terry Bell wrote recently, had this bill become law, the revelations about corruption and the capture of state institutions by an effective gangster cabal would not have come to light. Perhaps Marikana was a turning point.

The uprising that followed was not just in mining, but in industries across the country and in agriculture, especially the winelands. People and their history are never still. This month is the centenary of the great uprising of working people in Russia.

The inspiration of ordinary women and men achieving the seeming impossible has acute relevance in South Africa. This country is not Zuma or Gupta. It's not lifetime awards for billionaires.

It's not Tudor castles in Constantia, or streets of white walls empty except for the servants of the rich. That's a facade. This country is a humanism, Ubuntu, which Steve Biko described as an authentic communalism.

Ubuntu is not owned by any political party, neither is it an enduring leg... neither is the enduring legacy of resistance in this country. Of course there are many questions. Not everything that is faced can be changed, wrote the great American poet James Baldwin, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

The independent trade unions, NUMSA, and of course COSATU, together with the great civic and social movements, and the myriad grassroots organizations, the NGOs, are a political force unique, unique to South Africa. They represent a reconstituted and true people power, which has the potential to build a popular unity that could change this country, and even deliver real freedom. How exciting that would be.

Q & A and Open Discussion

Thank you. Thank you, John, for the inspiring input. Comrades and friends, as the program says, we're going to allow for questions and discussion in line with the objectives of the Trust in promoting democracy.

It's your turn to speak. I'd also encourage you not only to ask questions, but make contributions. Let us have a discussion.

As I mentioned earlier, we are in a situation of political crisis. It's unpredictable how things will pan out, and we should use these opportunities to engage with each other, coming from diverse backgrounds as we are here tonight. Okay, so, as I said, we're opening it up for questions.

We're going to take one at a time. Okay, over here, first. And I've noted two more.

Okay, can we have the microphones over there? Thank you very much. Firstly to John. Introduce yourself.

Sorry? Introduce yourself. Professor Brian Williams. Firstly to John.

I think all of us are deeply honoured to have you here. I think almost everyone in this room, in this hall, in one or other way, have directly contributed to the struggle. And at an emotional level, in terms of resources, have contributed.

And all these different impacts, human impacts, as a consequence of being deeply involved in the kinds of struggle based on the analysis that you have presented. One of the important points that you shared with all of us is the importance of information. Research information that can help to expose not only what is happening locally, but to connect what is happening locally to global events and imperialism.

In terms of the battle of ideas, many of us expected the University of the Left, the University of the Western Cape, to in fact play a leading role in providing the beacons of hope and intellectual power to guide us in terms of what we ought to do. Sadly, in February 2012, William Hague, Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom, was at the University of the Western Cape. He's a warmonger.

In March of 2012, the University of the Western Cape leadership tried everything to prevent the Cuban ambassador from speaking there. In August 2012, a global warmonger Hillary Clinton was at the University of the Western Cape. Many people may not even know that while we speak that the doors of

learning should be open, at UWC, undergraduate classes have been shut down starting in the law faculty.

Those of us who tried our best to open up the spaces within the university were demonised. Two high court cases against the leadership for violating the rule of law. And so the University of the Left, we should have provided the platform on which we stimulate our thinking in line with you.

And the things that you have said have sadly failed us. So the challenge for all of us in this room is how do we take forward the kind of messages that you have presented. And my final point to you, John, is how did you manage to emotionally survive all the onslaughts against you? Because given what you have presented, you must have been able, you must have been subjected to some of the worst kinds of threats, the worst kinds of pressures.

So I would like to know how you responded in dealing with all those pressures and threats. Please, thanks. APPLAUSE Thank you.

Well, you know, I said in there the privilege of journalism and the privilege of a position like mine is something I'm constantly aware of. So that privilege, in a sense, allows me to, if you like, answer the pressures or answer the criticisms. It gives me a platform to do it.

And frankly, the pressures are an occupational hazard. That's the job I expected. But they're nothing compared with the pressures felt by people who have no voice, who have no power.

It's easy to come to South Africa as a foreigner, land at Cape Town, drive to a nice hotel, go to nice places and leave again and not have a clue about the majority of this country. That's true of many countries, of course, but particularly so, particularly so in this country. They're the people, the unseen people, who withstand, who have every right to expect, if not a revolution, I don't think people were expecting a revolution.

They were expecting the beginnings, the honest, the well-intentioned, the good faith to build a social democracy. The trappings of a social democracy were built, of course, but the actual social democracy in which there is social justice and economic justice as well as electoral justice for the majority of the people of this country, that was not built. That ought to be built.

That was betrayed. Those are the people. Those are the people who feel the pressure.

And those of us who have the privilege to go into people's lives, to hear their stories and then take their accounts into the offices of the powerful and challenge the powerful, like myself, that's our job. It's a duty. Over there.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The lecture was absolutely marvellous. And I do believe that it should not be limited to the people in this hall.

I believe that Mr. Bobby Wilcox and the people who organized this meeting tonight to obtain the lecture that was given to us here this evening, it is jolly good and it must not remain in this hall. It's got to go out to the people. The people who organized this meeting must have it printed and it must be circulated to schools, to whatever meetings we go to.

It must be there to give to people. That is how we are going to get some form of progress politically within South Africa. Thank you.

I want to thank Mr. Pilger very much for what he has given us here this evening and I'm sure that we have all profited. But please, let not this lecture remain in this room. It must get out to the people.

Thank you. Thank you, that was Ursula Fataar. Just to say, there are several cameras here, so the revolution will be televised.

Over there, the hand over there. On the far left. No, no, there it is.

It's right there. Sorry, I was about to shout at John. John, where do you get your news from? Where do you get your news from? There's very few media sources that we can trust today.

Well, you know, where I get my news from is freely available to you and to all of you. We now have the magic of the internet, which means that you can bypass much of the corporate media and go to sources of news and sources of analysis that we wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to see and to understand. Where do I get my news from? I mean, I could sit here and reel off a whole lot of websites, but really, that's what I do.

First thing in the morning, instead of picking up a newspaper, I log on and look at various websites. They range from websites like consortiumnews.com, counterpunch.com, information clearing house, and many others. I'd be pleased to give you a list if you like, but it's really about just logging on and really following your own instincts and navigating through the net.

It's not all that difficult. There is some really ridiculous stuff on the internet. We know that.

But there's also some wonderful journalism. There are people who are producing journalism for nothing who give us the kind of analysis we're not going to get on television, on television news. We're not going to get in the kind of commercial straitjacket of much of the corporate news.

So that's where I get my news. Yes, I do watch BBC and I watch various other television channels, but I really watch them to monitor them rather than to get information from them, to deconstruct them. I don't sense when I'm sitting in front of them.

I can relax. I usually have a notebook and start writing things down and notes, which probably I do nothing with. So that to me is what the main media, and you must remember that television is still the main source of people's information, free-to-air television.

I have to say in South Africa I'm struck by, in spite of these critical words of the corporate media, there is a sense, even in the Sunday Times I read out to you, they had an excellent report on the family of six-year-old Michael and the time that their parents have had to wait to take this action against the government. But it was hard up against this grotesque party thrown by the Sunday Times, at which the editor of the Sunday Times was introducing all these people like Trevor Manuel, who once said, I'm going to make South Africa a country for winners, or Alec Irwin, who is Minister, I think, for Public Policy, who was responsible for that disastrous policy of inviting foreign investment, which included an arms deal. And there is the utterly corrupt British aerospace deal, which they promised to build a couple of big factories and plants, I can't remember exactly what they were, as long as South Africa bought a lot of Hawk jets.

This is suckering a government, this is international capital taking a country and its movement for a ride. And these people are at this party, all dressed up and having a nice time and telling each other how wonderful they were. So, here we have it in one newspaper, both.

So, it's very interesting that to me. In a way, that is an authentic reflection of South Africa. I mentioned in my address, Sandton and Alexandra, side by side, yet a world apart.

Here we have the story of Michael and his parents, side by side, with a black billionaire and his friends and ministers who are meant to represent the likes of Michael and his parents, but didn't. Side by side. A reflection, in a way, of a kind of apartheid within the newspaper itself.

Thank you. Okay. Let's go to the back and come forward.

We're here as a group of young activists, right? And we really appreciated your input. I think a lot of us young folk miss certain crucial parts of South African history. And you were able to take us through all of those important times really well.

So, thank you very much for that. What I'm curious about, and this is in the spirit of what Martin said in engaging about the input that you gave here today, is we're thirsty for a reimagined political regime or systems or future. So, what are your thoughts on that, in moving forward beyond social democracy? Because as you end your input and you start referencing old, forgive the word, tired, but captured trade unions, I feel like we're ever sort of beginning to think about how we really want to live.

And also just considering the 1912 century that we're celebrating this year as well. Thank you. Because I suggested in the latter part of my address, I do think that there isn't an ideal prescription, but that the ingredients of the prescription are here already.

That's what makes South Africa so interesting and so hopeful and probably unique. Because there are so many grassroots popular movements. The trade union movement does have a history, a history much of it is betrayed, I have to say.

Betrayed through bureaucracy and taking jobs with the state. And its coziness with the state. But there is that tradition here.

And already we've seen, as I mentioned, the declaration of independence of unions like NOMSA and then the formation of SAFTU. But with all, my feeling is that it's a coming together of the unions and the grassroots and the social movements. One thing that has to be addressed, that was never addressed at the time of independence, yes, that's the word, of independence, was the so-called informal economy.

These people who dashed around the world receiving plaudits for their macroeconomic genius, none of them gave a thought to the massive numbers, the millions of people who live, eke out a living in the informal economy. This was a whole group, massive group, almost a nation within the nation of South Africans whose lives and destinies didn't matter and were not worth organizing. And it's almost as if they gave up.

Let's not organize those people because how can we organize homeless people? How can we organize transient people? How can we organize people who have a job one day and don't the next and so on? But it has been done in India. The organization of people who are literally at the bottom has happened

in the most extraordinary way by mass movers, mass organization. But it needs a will.

It needs, dare I say it, a political party, a political force in the townships. In the townships, in the centres of abandoned cities like Johannesburg, organizing the people who have been completely left out, who don't even appear on the radar. That is, they are a resource because the greatest resource in this country are the people.

I know that sounds trite and everything, but it's not. It's true. They are the resource.

And that wasn't even touched in 94. It was immediately straight to this bourgeois sense, this sort of fake idea of a society where power dripped down from above, which was doomed. The whole idea of it was doomed because it didn't include the majority.

But the grassroots movement in this country, the NGOs, the popular movements who have had some spectacular successes. I'm thinking of the Treatment Action Campaign as one, just the dynamism of that campaign and so many others in education and in health and in the townships. There has to be a coming together with the unions of all these organizations.

It's only, and that's a mass movement, that's a popular change. I understand that there's a big wall between that idea and that happening and it's got ANC written on it. And no one suggests that the ANC doesn't have an honourable and proud history.

But for the ANC to be in the position it is in at the moment, disregarding the majority, so demonstrably, is an untenable state for this country. Thank you, John. In the middle, at the back, and then on the right.

Thank you, John. I think you've done a nice overview of... Sorry, my name is Dale. To deal with how the ANC's hegemony in the 1980s over the mass movement was quite critical to the formation of the new South Africa and the form that it took, which was basically a form against the struggle of the 1980s and the aspirations of the people then.

But just as we speak about the decades-long now struggle against the new ANC regime in terms of its lack of delivery, in terms of its lack of producing what its programme and manifestos have said, I think that is the kernel of the difficulty that we are confronted with today, to say that there's all this raw material out there without having a focus, without having a political ideology. And I think one of the previous speakers alluded to this. I think you can't simply say that

there is this inherent resistance without forming a political way in which this resistance can be organised.

Now we know that we are not just sitting still and the other side is also fast asleep. The bourgeoisie in this country is also concerned about the decay of the ANC, that they are not sitting quite quietly. They are mobilising as we speak.

They are packing the Cyril camp in the ANC national elections. They are packing the democratic alliance as a liberal alternative to the ANC. So they have also their plans.

The point is, what is the political orientation of the working class given 23 years of non-delivery, given 23 years of corruption, given 23 years of Michael's falling down the toilets? What are we doing and what is the political motivation and organisation that is needed to make this effective?