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North Korea and the liberation of Southern Africa, 1960-2020

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EPILOGUE

MICROPHONE REVOLUTION

At a meeting of the Organisation of African Unity in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), in 1975, the Zambian politician Vernon Mwaanga underlined Zambia's solidarity with the anticolonial movements in neighbouring countries. He explained that his fellow freedom fighters have written the story of their struggle in blood, and that 'Zambian blood is part of the ink'. As one of the principal Frontline States, Zambia was at the heart of the various revolutions that engulfed Southern Africa. At the end of his speech, Mwaanga turned to Nyerere and said that 'a very strange form of revolution seems to be emerging in our ranks – and that is [a] "Microphone Revolution"'.⁴⁹²

The term 'Microphone Revolution' is a useful metaphor for analysing the diplomatic dimension of the era of decolonisation.⁴⁹³ The metaphor of a microphone is not only effective to determine who speaks, but also to detect who listens. Words mattered during the liberation of Africa because it was diplomacy that permitted African liberation movements to rally support for their cause from individual governments, multilateral fora such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the OAU Liberation Committee, and international solidarity movements. The struggle was often fought through a microphone.

Mwaanga emphasised that non-African socialist countries were 'the backbone' of the struggle. While we tend to think of the Soviet Union and China in this regard, the important role of North Korea must not be overlooked. African liberation movements depended upon North Korean support, but this was also true the other way around. Both sides desired international recognition and acknowledged each other's anti-imperialist credentials. Africans and North Koreans framed their diplomatic relations as a form of solidarity, or, in slightly different phrasing, as South–South cooperation.

A key message in this microphone revolution was the gospel of Juche Thought. A tool specifically designed to boost North Korea's global image, Juche was instrumental in strengthening the ties between North Korea and African liberation movements. Juche was, as Myers argues, part and parcel of the 'export track' of North Korean propaganda.⁴⁹⁴ At the same time, the resulting connections were valuable for the 'inner track' of North Korean propaganda, as domestic audiences in North Korea were constantly reminded that Kim Il Sung was a leading figure in the anti-imperialist movement and envied across Africa.

The freedom fighters of Africa were particularly receptive to the message of Juche as it branded the DPRK as an example of a successful party state based on the mythology of a liberation struggle. Juche made North Korea distinct from mainstream Communist powers and thus an attractive ally for non-aligned countries. The emphasis on self-reliance resonated with anticolonial movements seeking independence.

Moreover, Juche opened the doors to tangible rewards for African movements. The invitations to Pyongyang provided a stage for African leaders to advertise their campaigns for independence and request support. Juche Study Centres presented the opportunity to meet people, read literature, watch films, and travel. They were both physical and ideological spaces that offered ideological scaffolding at a time when African elites were imagining and exercising their newly found power. North Korean development aid was most welcome at a time when postcolonial African governments were rebuilding their states.

⁴⁹² [NAN] CCO, 39/12/1/3/1; [NAI] PC Zambia Foreign Relations: transcript of interview with Mwaanga, 10 April 1975.

⁴⁹³ Mwaanga originally used this metaphor to defend Zambia's contacts with South Africa during the period of détente. [NAI] PC Southern Africa NLM: Shamuyarira and Leonard.

⁴⁹⁴ Myers 2015.

We must not forget that the process of decolonisation was often long and the outcome uncertain. Mwaanga was speaking at a time when the Portuguese colonial empire was not yet dissolved, when the white minority government in Rhodesia had issued a unilateral declaration of independence, and when the South African apartheid regime was still going strong.⁴⁹⁵ ‘The Southern African crisis for us is a matter of life and death’, Mwaanga said. ‘Freedom fighters have needs we must meet’, he continued, ‘the manpower, time energy and material resources demanded of us is incalculable’.⁴⁹⁶

And here Mwaanga brings us to a key point of the struggle: ‘Africa’s success cannot depend on words, however revolutionary. Our success depends on the material contribution to the struggle’.⁴⁹⁷ The Microphone Revolution has its limits. Several – though not all – liberation movements became convinced that diplomacy would take them a long way, but not far enough. In the end, action speaks louder than words. As the second part of this book shows, microphones were not always sufficient – sometimes bullets and guns were deemed necessary.

⁴⁹⁵ Khadiagala 1994, p. 30.

⁴⁹⁶ [NAN] CCO, 39/12/1/3/1.

⁴⁹⁷ [NAN] CCO, 39/12/1/3/1.