The liberation lens: revolutionary rhetoric in Southern Africa

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The Liberation Lens

Revolutionary Rhetoric in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the revolutionary rhetoric that pervades contemporary Southern African politics. As the majority of governments in Southern African states continue to be dominated by former national liberation movements, contemporary political discourse is profoundly shaped by the experiences of exile and war. Building upon the rich literature on memorial politics, this article develops the concept of the "liberation lens" to analyze how African political elites repurpose the historically infused language of the liberation struggle to address present-day political issues. As the liberation lens is transferred from generation to generation, it is a revealing example of conflict continuity.

KEYWORDS: conflict continuity, decolonization, national liberation movements, political culture, revolution; rhetoric, Southern Africa

In May 2024, the African National Congress (ANC) lost the majority of the popular vote in the General Elections of South Africa for the first time since 1994. It was a momentous occasion for South Africa, as the former national liberation movement had been the leading political party since the introduction of majority rule (Legodi et al. 2024). The once dominant position of the ANC was successfully challenged by two relatively young political movements: the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF, established in 2013) and uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP, established in 2023). Precisely 30 years since the end of apartheid in South Africa, the elections were a fierce battle between a former national liberation movement (ANC), a party that appropriated the common name of its revolutionaries (EFF), and a party that appropriated the name of its armed wing (MKP).

The recent General Elections in South Africa are a revealing example of conflict continuity. With the demise of the ANC and the introduction of the first coalition government, it seemed like a new political era had arrived (Rubin and Von Soest 2024). Nevertheless, the political strategies of parties that oppose the ANC are a fitting illustration of the continued relevance of the liberation struggle in contemporary Southern African politics (Nieftagodien 2015). The leading political actors remain captivated by the struggle, even though the revolution that is central to their discourse was successfully concluded in the previous century. This article coins the concept of the "liberation lens" to explain why this is the case.[1]

The liberation lens describes how modern political elites appropriate the language of historical revolution to advance their contemporary political agendas. The "lens" signifies a certain worldview, which is largely determined by the twentieth-century wars for independence. The anticolonial struggle was a transformational event that continues to cast long shadows over

present-day political issues in Southern Africa. Today, both incumbent ruling parties and oppositional forces advance a narrative that makes explicit references to anticolonial warfare. For this reason, the war is not a dormant memory but takes center stage in political discourse. The liberation lens reveals a continuity over several generations, from actual freedom fighters that took up arms during the twentieth century to present-day politicians that recycle the revolutionary rhetoric from the past. Although there are counter-narratives that push back against the dominant rhetoric of liberation (Kenyon and Madlingozi 2022), this narrative is remarkably persistent.

The majority of people in Southern Africa are governed by former national liberation movements. Specifically, this includes the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) in Mozambique, Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) in Angola, South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in Namibia, and Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in Zimbabwe. Each of these liberation movements has been in power since independence, and their shared historical connections (Alexander et al. 2017) has resulted in a transnational political culture that is to an important degree informed by the experience of the armed struggle (Melber 2002). For this reason, the liberation lens is applied across major parts of Southern Africa.

For the conceptual development of the liberation lens, this article builds upon a systemic literature review that brings together a wide array of studies on memorial cultures in Southern Africa. As Hannah Snyder (2019) has stipulated, a literature review is a valuable tool to "map the development of a particular research field," which in turn can form the basis for new conceptual models. In this article, the sprawling literature on patriotic history is used to highlight the importance of revolutionary rhetoric, which is prevalent across the Southern African region, and infuses the discourses of both incumbent regimes and their opposition. This is illustrated through a select number of examples of recent speeches, songs, and statements, which show how specific references to historical warfare are utilized in contemporary political narratives.

This article investigates the utilization of the liberation lens in contemporary politics in Southern Africa. The first part argues that victorious liberation movements depend on the legacy of decolonial campaigns for their political survival. The second part considers how incumbent governments utilize the legacy of the struggle via the skilled deployment of history and heritage. In this sense, the armed struggle is a "chosen trauma" that benefits incumbent elites. The third part discusses the role of discourse, an important dimension of statecraft in Southern Africa that remains understudied. The fourth part introduces the liberation lens. Three case studies detail how the liberation lens is applied today: by using the struggle to marginalize opponents ("othering"), by using the struggle to mask the inability to deliver progress ("continuation"), and by using the struggle to judge new political issues ("benchmarking"). The conclusion reflects on the question of how political competition in Southern Africa sustains the continued relevance of revolutionary rhetoric that appropriates the violent conflicts of the past.

Conflict Continuity and Decolonization

The conflict that is at the heart of political culture in large parts of Southern Africa is the armed revolution for independence, which occurred between the 1960s and 1990s. The desire for decolonization was driven by African national liberation movements that emerged around the 1960s (Bereketeab 2018; Mlambo and Parsons 2018). Fierce oppression from colonial and white-settler rule meant that independence came relatively late compared to the rest of the con-

tinent and was marked by a significant degree of violence. The most prominent national liberation movements were pushed into exile and fought a protracted armed struggle that oftentimes lasted years, if not decades (Baines and Vale 2008; Khadiagala 1994). Although the various wars for liberation in South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe (Coelho Borges 2013; Ellis 2013; Dale 2014; Guimaraes 2016; White 2015) are often defined in national terms, they have a distinct transnational character. The experience of exile and importance of solidarity had a profound influence on anticolonial warfare as several battlefields became intertwined (Alexander et al. 2017; Sapire 2009).

Today, given that the freedom fighters prevailed and independence has been secured, the majority of states in Southern Africa can be defined as post-conflict societies. Yet, even though the actual fighting has ceased, memories of violence continue to remain relevant in political discourse (Welz and Kromrey 2015). This development is closely related to the ascension to power of former national liberation movements. South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe have been governed since independence by political parties that are rooted in revolutionary organizations (Melber 2002). As such, party and state are at risk of becoming conflated (Southall 2013). It is widely recognized that incumbent governments in Southern Africa deploy the legacy of the struggle to justify their claim to power (Clapham 2012; Dorman 2006), especially as they are increasingly facing demands to make way for a new generation of politicians (Melber 2004).

Contemporary governments in Southern Africa are under pressure from their citizens to deliver upon the promises that accompanied the celebration of independence. To many, the former liberation movements have largely failed in this respect, as unemployment is rife and living standards are often dismal in impoverished areas. As retired revolutionaries strive to maintain power, they gradually betray their democratic values. Claims for legitimacy go hand in hand with disturbing displays of autocratic behavior, which leads to democratic backsliding (Arriola et al. 2022; Blaauw and Zaire 2023). The leaders of former national liberation movements respond to their dissatisfied electorate by making the case that the struggle is not yet over, and that they are the only ones to deliver complete liberation. As such, political discourse in parts of Southern Africa exemplifies conflict continuity.

The idea that "the struggles continues" is best captured in the Zimbabwean concept of the Third Chimurenga (Ndhlovu 2021). The word "chimurenga" became synonymous with the struggle for liberation in Zimbabwean nationalist circles. Early colonial resistance against British imperialism during the 1890s was branded as the "First Chimurenga," while the nationalist uprising against white-settler rule from the 1960s became known as the "Second Chimurenga" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012). In the early 2000s, during the rule of Robert Mugabe in independent Zimbabwe, ZANU-PF employed the "Third Chimurenga" to create a new, contemporary phase of decolonization (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009). ZANU-PF, Mugabe's political party, named its 2002 election manifesto "the Third Chimurenga" and included similar references in its 2013 manifesto (Welz and Kromrey 2015).

Although the Third Chimurenga was primarily linked to the issue of land distribution in Zimbabwe (Sibanda and Maposa 2014), the concept aptly illustrates the utilization of past struggles across the Southern African region. Politicians from neighboring countries have similarly defended their grip on power by arguing that their task is not yet fulfilled. This raises the question of what liberation entails. "Flag independence" was formally secured during the political transition from colonial rule to post-colonial rule, but to many the promises of liberation have not been fulfilled. Scholarship on African decolonization has argued that the structural inequalities of Western colonialism endure in modern times, especially with regard to economic emancipation (Mbembe 1992; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Chambati 2013;

Ntsebeza and Hall 2007; Zeleza 2009). As such, the revolution remains uncomplete, and the struggle continues.

The idea that the goals of independence have not yet been realized can be used to both criticize and defend incumbent regimes. From the perspective of former liberation movements, the struggle is an example of a "chosen trauma," which can be reactivated by politicians "in order to support the group's threatened identity" (Volkan 2001: 79). Werbner (1998) eloquently described Zimbabwean politicians as "agents of nostalgia," a phrase that can be applied to most former national liberation movements in the region. There is a logic to the politicization of the past, as the strategic use of nostalgia glorifies the role of incumbent governments. Today, the overwhelming majority of people in Southern Africa have no personal experience with the liberation struggle. For the consumption of public history, they partly depend on state-owned narratives, which are forged by retired revolutionaries.

History and Heritage in Southern Africa

The role of former national liberation movements in violent warfare has been transformed into a myth that is glorified through patriotic history and public heritage. The scholarly literature on Southern Africa is largely inspired by the work of Terrence Ranger, who coined the term "patriotic history" to describe how the incumbent government of ZANU-PF proclaims "the continuity of the Zimbabwean revolutionary tradition" through a range of activities, including text books for schools, youth camps, and speeches. According to Ranger, patriotic history is "different from and narrower than the old nationalist historiography," as its patriotism is specifically directed to supporting the ruling party against contemporary criticism (Ranger 2004: 215–218). ZANU-PF has been in power since Zimbabwean independence in 1980. The skillful deployment of the revolutionary past has become a central feature of Zimbabwean political life and is an essential tool for ZANU-PF to remain in government (Kriger 2006; Maposa and Wassermann 2014; Muwati et al. 2010; Tendi 2008; Youde 2017).

Ranger's work has inspired a host of studies across Southern Africa that examine the memorial strategies of post-liberation regimes. Namibia is often cited in the literature for its prioritization of the armed struggle in the memorial politics of SWAPO, the ruling party that has been in power since Namibian independence in 1990 (Zuern 2012). According to Becker (2011: 519, see also Becker 2015), this "master narrative" has become a foundational myth, one that heralds SWAPO as "the sole, heroic liberators from apartheid and colonialism." Metsola (2010: 589) contends that interpretations of the past are used "to contest and legitimize current social and political relations" in Namibian politics. History has been a contentious affair in Namibia (Kössler 2007, 2010), where the selective use of violent memory has been instrumental in safeguarding SWAPO's political dominance (Melber 2003). South Africa has, as mentioned before, been governed by the ANC since the introduction of majority rule in 1994 (Baines 2007). While the transition to democracy was reached via a negotiated settlement that was based on compromise, the ANC has downplayed this event and emphasized instead "the armed struggle as the key force" for ending apartheid. In this version of patriotic history, "the primary role of the ANC in the struggle, the heroism of its leaders and the importance of its armed wing" are central (Saunders 2012: 431; see also Baines 2007).

Similar trends also apply to Lusophone Africa, where Angola and Mozambique have been ruled by the MPLA and FRELIMO, respectively, since independence. Schubert (2015) argues that the MPLA has produced a "master narrative" for Angola that ignores the civil war (1975–2002) but revises and politicizes the liberation struggle (1961–1974). Although the MPLA only

has a "tenuous claim" on being the sole liberator of the Angolan people (the nationalist movement was fractured into three distinct parties), it presents itself as the "natural representative" of the Angolan nation. As Martins (2021) argues, the politicization of history is closely intertwined with the MPLA's rise to power. Pearce (2015: 104–117) explains that the ruling party has "revived and reshaped" the past in order "to overcome the uncertainties of the present." This "preoccupation with history in Angolan political discourse" even extends to anti-government activists. In Mozambique, as Souto (2013: 280) has argued, FRELIMO similarly invests heavily in historical projects in order to "guarantee its own legitimacy and hegemony." Borges Coelho (2013) has dubbed this the "liberation script." FRELIMO engages in "fierce political battles where memories of the violent past are used as the principal weapons" (Igreja 2008: 539). Macamo (2016) emphasizes that the symbolic and physical form of violence plays "a central role" in FRELIMO's attempts to legitimize its own version of history while undermining alternative interpretations (see also Sumich and Bertelsen 2021).

Patriotic history is inextricably linked to heritage. In recent years, each ruling party has erected nationalist monuments that convey the "liberation script" or "master narrative" of their role in the struggle. Again, events in Zimbabwe have stimulated a sprawling literature on the relationship between heritage and power (Werbner 1998). In 1982, the ZANU-PF government unveiled the National Heroes' Acre, a cemetery that celebrated the fallen heroes of anticolonial warfare (Duri 2015; Fontein 2009; Marongwe and Magadzike 2015; Mpofu 2017). The selective use of heroism has been an effective strategy for ZANU-PF to claim legitimacy while discrediting the opposition (Kriger 1995). In 2020, the Zimbabwean president Emmerson Mnangagwa launched the construction of the "Liberation City." Located opposite the National Heroes' Acre, this 100-hectare complex will feature a Museum of African Liberation that is continental in scope. According to a representative of the organization, this initiative is primarily meant "to give reverence to our victorious military history" (Marmon, n.d.).

Zimbabwe is not the only country with a National Heroes' Acre. In fact, the Zimbabwean cemetery directly inspired the construction of a National Heroes' Acre in Namibia (Van der Hoog 2019). Inaugurated in 2002, this monument is an important part of SWAPO's attempt to lay claim to the Namibian nation (Becker 2011). A related memorial was inaugurated in 2014, when the SWAPO government opened the Independence Memorial Museum (Baas 2022). Dedicated to the struggle and accompanied by a large statue of SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma, the museum was criticized by historians for its narrow interpretation of history, which glorifies the role of SWAPO (Williams and Mazarire 2019). The MPLA has constructed several monuments that present an "exclusivist nationalism" (Ball 2019), including the Agostinho Neto Memorial. Inaugurated in 2012, the 120-meter-tall monument features a mausoleum and a museum. The memorial complex is presented as a "sacred ground for the birth of the Angolan nation" and centers the MPLA as liberators (Martins and Cardina 2019: 47). Mozambique has followed a similar trend, where FRELIMO has used the "heritagization" of the past to foster a selective reading of the struggle that favors its own party and leaders. The proliferation of statues of Samora Machel, the leader of FRELIMO and first president of Mozambique, is a fitting example of how contemporary leaders seek to claim legitimacy through the appropriation of the past. During the "Year of Samora Machel" in 2011, the then president Armando Guebuza deliberately linked the legacy of the former revolutionary to his own political agenda (Jopela 2017).

It is important to note that the aforementioned monuments are more than passive objects. As heritage sites, they represent spaces for celebration, commemoration, and mourning. The physical buildings are interwoven into a larger approach to memorial politics in which the past is continuously remolded. Rituals are what makes nation states tick. The recurring organization

of national holidays to mark liberation or the struggle is often closely attached to the aesthetics of heritage (Lentz 2013). For instance, the SWAPO government in Namibia celebrates an annual Independence Day, a Heroes Day, and a Cassinga Day (Baines 2009; Kornes 2015),[2] during which the National Heroes' Acre serves as the stage for speeches and performances. While each national celebration emphasizes the unique character of their respective nation state, a regional analysis of commemorative culture shows a striking degree of resemblance across Southern Africa. The common denominator of these examples is the need for the political survival of former national liberation movements (Melber 2010).

Puppets, Patriots, and the Language of Liberation

Militant discourse is an integral part of liberatory politics in postcolonial Africa, as patriotic history and nationalist heritage are accompanied by revolutionary rhetoric. Rhetoric, for the purpose of this article, is not conceptualized as fiction (Jolly 1995; Viriri 2015), nor as written political output such as constitutions (Mathe 2009), governmental plans (Nanyeni 2016), or magazines (Simon 2022). Rather, I aim to focus on political speech. In a landmark study about guerilla veterans from ZANU-PF, Kriger (2003: 5, 185, 192) centered the "war discourse" of post-liberation Zimbabwe. She argued that the participation of guerrillas in political life is relatively understudied, which makes it "important to examine their everyday discourse and practices in the context of political struggles." Not only veterans but also activists, the party, and the media in Zimbabwe have adopted revolutionary rhetoric as a "political weapon" to enhance claims for legitimacy. Kriger focused specifically on Zimbabwe, but similar claims can be made for neighboring countries as well (see Metsola 2019).

The decolonization of Southern Africa was marked by a particular discourse that matured in exile camps in the African Frontline States (Williams 2015), and was heavily influenced by the protracted guerrilla warfare that festered along the borders of Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Distinct militant phrases became commonplace within a variety of national liberation movements. Party members and supporters were described as "comrades," "heroes," and "patriots," while those that opposed them were "traitors," "stooges," and "puppets." During the revolutions of the twentieth century, African nationalists derided the "Yankee imperialists" that delayed independence, the "sell-outs" from rivalling organizations that choose different strategies to obtain liberation, or the "gangsters," "political drop-outs," and "renegades" that were otherwise at fault. It appears that this "war discourse," as Kriger calls it, continues to be regularly used in the present.

Several studies are devoted to critical discourse analysis of speeches by individual prominent contemporary leaders that participated in the struggle, such as Sam Nujoma in Namibia (Nanyeni 2014), Samora Machel in Mozambique (Darch and Hedges 2013; Lázaro 2016), Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe (Chimbarange et al. 2013; Ndhlovu 2021), or Jacob Zuma in South Africa (Mabela et al. 2020; Oostendorp 2015). Zuma is a fitting example of a political operator who has mastered "the language of liberation," which is distinctly militant in nature. Pillay (2021) has described this as a "language of debt," which is used by politicians to argue that societies owe them loyalty for their personal sacrifices in the past. During the South African struggle for independence, Zuma was imprisoned on Robben Island, and was instrumental in setting up the underground structure of uMkhonto weSizwe. He later became the Head of Intelligence of the ANC. In the 2000s, Zuma emerged as a key figure in South African politics and he employed a discourse that was centered around his experience of war (Maritz and van Rooy 2021), eventually inciting large-scale and violent riots by his supporters in 2021. This body of scholarship

is—similar to the literature on patriotic history and nationalist monuments—predominantly organized along national lines.

Virtually absent from the historiography is a regional analysis of political speech. A notable exception is a study by Welz and Kromrey (2015), who analyze the use of revolutionary rhetoric by the ruling parties of South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. They made a distinction between "freedom fighters" and "liberation advocates." The former are individuals that occupied strategic positions in national liberation movements and are sometimes awarded hero status by contemporary ruling parties, while the latter is a broader category that also includes more marginal actors such as students, cab drivers, and soldiers. A quantitative analysis of 250 politicians showed that the participation of "freedom fighters" in cabinet positions in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe was decreasing, while the legacy of the struggle remains strong in political discourse. In their examination of revolutionary rhetoric, Welz and Kromrey focused on election manifestos rather than speeches. While this is understandable considering practical constraints (manifestos are relatively accessible documents, while the transcripts of speeches are often not available), this decision omits a significant part of the art of politics. Not many people read election manifestos, while speeches during rallies are oftentimes attended by tens of thousands of people.

Welz and Kromrey's (2015: 268–270) methodology might have skewed their conclusions to overtly optimistic conclusions. The authors detected a generational change in SWAPO in 2014, with a new intake of political talent into the party that had no practical relation to war for independence. As in neighboring countries, the old guard was passing away due to old age. The authors speculated that this generational change might "mark an end to politics led by former freedom fighters," which was also possible in the case of South Africa. The authors stipulated that revolutionary rhetoric in Namibia and South Africa "has recently declined" and that patriotic history "does not obviously dominate political debates" in these countries. They cited indications that SWAPO and the ANC had "little need to refer to their past roles" and might be able to "transform their agendas beyond their past achievements." Now that a decade has passed since the publication of this study, it is clear that the opposite has happened. Contrary to earlier expectations, new generations of politicians in Southern Africa absorb and transform the liberation struggle paradigm to their own advantage. This is might the case because the distinction between "freedom fighters" and "liberation advocates" is rather artificial—as patriotic history illustrates, the successful appropriation of the struggle is more important than actual participation.

The Application of the Liberation Lens

The liberation lens describes how political players in Southern Africa view the political arena in which they operate. This concept builds upon the rich scholarship of patriotic history and nationalist heritage by emphasizing the importance of revolutionary rhetoric. It contributes to this literature in three ways. First, the liberation lens has a regional application. Where earlier studies on the "liberation script" (Borges 2013), the "liberation narrative" (Metsola 2010), or the "master narrative" (Baines 2007; Becker 2011; Schubert 2015) focused on national case studies, this article underlines the widespread adoption of revolutionary rhetoric across Southern Africa. Second, the liberation lens is applied across the political spectrum. Not only incumbent governments, in the form of victorious national liberation movements, tap into the language of liberation—parts of the opposition do so as well. Third, the liberation lens is intergenerational. Even though most "authentic" revolutionaries with personal experience in the wars for liberation have now passed away, new generations of politicians appropriate a militant discourse that

is built around explicit references to the past (Nantulya 2017). This makes the liberation lens a sustainable feature of Southern African politics.

The prism of the liberation lens is strongly colored by the mythical experience of the wars for independence of the twentieth century. The recycling of revolutionary rhetoric for political gains results in a shared narrative that revolves around a historical conflict. This article describes three distinct strategies: marginalizing political opponents ("othering"); masking the inability to deliver progress ("continuation"); and judging novel political issues ("benchmarking"). The next sections review each of these objectives.

Strategy 1: Othering

It is widely recognized that Southern African politicians use the struggle as a source of legitimacy. Yet, the other side of the coin is equally important—struggle discourse can also be used to delegitimize others. When ZANU-PF was criticized by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for organizing fraudulent elections in 2023, ZANU-PF "trashed the report and hurled insults" at SADC officials (see Nantulya 2023b). Zambian president Hakainde Hichilema, the chair of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation, was called a "puppet" who "did not participate in the liberation struggle." observes that contemporary Zimbabwean leaders believe that "those who did not participate in the armed struggle had no right to govern, much less criticize" them. Through revolutionary rhetoric, political leaders utilize the notion of "struggle credentials" as a "litmus test of political credibility" (Parpart 2015: 312).

Welz and Kromrey (2015: 263) note that ZANU-PF redeployed its revolutionary rhetoric when its rule was challenged by domestic opposition. ZANU-PF has portrayed its main opponent, the Movement for Democratic Change, "as a party that has betrayed the liberation struggle." The distinction between "patriots" and "comrades" is consistently made in Zimbabwean state media, as Mudavanhu (2014) shows. It is a relic from the past, as this language emerged in the 1950s and was an important feature of the Second Chimurenga (Tendi 2010). A binary worldview, divided between "good" and "evil," is an essential part of the "language of liberation" (Pillay 2021). This is a pattern that can be found across the region. In 1999, a SWAPO member described a Namibian opposition party as "traitors and spies" that wanted to break the unity of the Namibian people (Welz and Kromrey 2015). In 2020, a dissident leader of RENAMO, an opposition party in Mozambique (Wiegink 2024), called his competitor a "traitor" and questioned his authority by asking "did he ever fire a weapon?" (Sebastião 2020).

The specifics of this language are significant, as it harks back to a defining moment in the evolution of national liberation movements. In the challenging conditions of exile, most revolutionary movements faced internal discontent and opposition due to challenging physical circumstances, lack of democracy, and uncertainty about strategic decisions. The leadership quickly responded by branding dissidents as "traitors" and "spies," with grave consequences. SWAPO and ANC, for instance, were notorious for jailing and torturing dissidents in exile, many of whom died or disappeared (Leys and Saul 1994; Trewhela 2009). The unity of the movement was sacred. Discipline was seen as an essential condition for success, and scholars have argued that this mentality carried over into postcolonial times (Mazarire 2011). The corresponding dichotomous language was thus designed in the context of "spy fever" (Douek 2020) but finds new uses in the context of postcolonial opposition (see Buur 2010). As Nantulya (2023a) has observed, incumbent elites imply that politicians that have no credible background in the armed struggle are "unfit for office." Politicians use the liberation lens to define who is on "the right side of history" in order to make decisions about the future.

Strategy 2: Continuation

The developmental record of former national liberation movements has been largely disappointing. Despite ambitious promises of economic growth and social equality, the rule of incumbent regimes of former revolutionaries has been marred by financial trouble and anti-democratic behavior (Melber 2004). The deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in several Southern African states has led to societal unrest, international condemnation, and the arrival of new political challengers. Incumbent elites have countered such criticism by arguing that the struggle is not yet over and that they need more time to set the record straight. In this sense, rhetoric is not about the *legacy* of the struggle but the *continuation* of the struggle. This difference has considerable consequences for the analysis of political culture. Politicians use revolutionary rhetoric as a distraction from unemployment, poverty, and debt issues. This approach is reminiscent of the "Third Chimurenga" discourse that is prevalent in Zimbabwe, where the ZANU-PF government engaged in fast-track land reform in order to address electoral dissatisfaction (Rwodzi 2024).

In 2015, the Namibian president Hage Geingob asked the public in a speech on Heroes' Day to continue to trust SWAPO, despite its weak track record in economic transformation. "Only half the battle is won," proclaimed Geingob. "The second phase of the struggle will determine the same sacrifice that the first struggle demanded." The Namibian president thus copied language from SWAPO's revolutionary past and applied it to the contemporary problem of economic governance. In the 1980s, Geingob had asked Namibians to pick up arms and become heroes of the nation. In 2015, with the National Heroes' Acre as the background for his speech, he urged the Namibian people to become "economic heroes" (Geingob 2015). In Mozambique, the FRELIMO leadership deflected criticism of a disastrous economy by investing heavily in heritage that appropriated the legacy of the late Samora Machel. During a speech on Heroes' Day in 2011, the Mozambican president Armando Guebeza connected Machel's legacy in the struggle for independence to "the context of our struggle against poverty." Jopela (2017) argues that Guebeza used revolutionary rhetoric to mobilize Mozambicans for this "new struggle."

The transition from a political struggle to an economic struggle is perhaps best illustrated through the establishment of new political parties in South Africa. Rather than shifting the political dialogue to new territory, far removed from the paradigm of violent decolonization, new parties have adopted and transformed revolutionary rhetoric for their own benefit. In 2008, "disillusioned ANC members" founded a new party, which they named Congress of the People. The name was a direct referral to the Congress of the People in 1955, an event that led to the publication of the Freedom Charter (Welz and Kromrey 2015). In 2013, Julius Malema founded the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa (Fölscher et al. 2021; Mbete 2015; Nieftagodien 2015). A year later, the Namibian Economic Freedom Fighters followed, as well as similarly named parties in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Eswatini (Soldaat 2022).

In 2023, Jacob Zuma established uMkhonto weSizwe Party, a new organization named after the armed wing of the ANC. MKP argues that the victory against apartheid in 1994 "has turned into a strategic defeat," and cites "foundational issues" such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Zuma's party promises a "new era of growth and equality" by "eradicating all remnants of colonialism and apartheid." Thus, MKP constitutes "the renewed hope and determination for South Africans to complete their liberation" (uMkhonto weSizwe Party 2024). Both Malema and Zuma had made their careers in the ANC before they established opposition parties. Although the ANC successfully secured political liberation with the introduction of democratic elections in 1994, Malema and Zuma emphasize the need for full economic liberation—and do so via the appropriation of struggle rhetoric.

While challenging the ANC, the EFF and MKP make eager use of revolutionary songs that were once part and parcel of the fight against apartheid (Jolaosho 2019). Malema, the leader of EFF, famously sings the struggle song *Ayasab' amagwala* during political rallies, including in front of 90,000 supporters at the tenth anniversary of the EFF in 2023. The lyrics are highly controversial, as they include the words "shoot the Boer" (*dubul" ibhunu*), which is seen as heightening racial tensions in South Africa. Malema, who is too young to have actively participated in the struggle, rejects criticism that the song is hate speech by emphasizing the important historical value of this song (Gunner 2015). Zuma, the leader of MKP, has repeatedly used political rallies to perform the struggle song *Umshini Wami*, which includes the lyrics "bring me my machine gun" (Twala 2014). In Southern Africa, revolutionary songs were a key feature of violent opposition against colonialism (Kivnick 1990; Matiza and Mutasa 2020; Mbenzi 2015; Vail and White 1983) and are now resurfacing again in the renewed battle for economic liberation. In Angola, young protesters use the "discursive repertoire of dominant ideology" of the liberation movement to challenge the incumbent regime (Schubert 2017: 158), thereby adapting the language of liberation for their own purposes (Buire 2016).

Strategy 3: Benchmarking

Contemporary politicians use the liberation struggle as a benchmark to judge issues that were not on the agenda during the days of struggle in the twentieth century. The battle for gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights in Southern Africa is regularly viewed through the liberation lens. In 2023, a member of parliament from SWAPO argued that Namibia cannot become "a republic of homosexuals." He defended his opposition against same-sex marriage through his personal experience during the struggle for independence: "I went to Robben Island at the age of 26 not to promote homosexuality here. People died, and disappeared." He then invoked the authority of Sam Nujoma, the former SWAPO leader and first president of Namibia: "the founding father said no." A news report noted that opposition members "loudly agreed" with these comments (The Namibian 2023). The anti-LGBT rhetoric is also persistently pursued by ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe. Youde (2017: 62) contends that this is part of ZANU-PF's patriotic history program, and is used to legitimize the rule of the party. LGBT rights are depicted as "foreign and Western," which makes them "traitorous" to the true Zimbabwean identity.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has also shed light on the continued relevance of past revolutions in shaping responses to new issues. The Western world was shocked when many African countries abstained in several United Nations votes against Russia, as it was expected that the war in Ukraine would be widely condemned. In search for answers, the historical legacy of the Soviet Union as a supplier of weapons, scholarships, and other forms of solidarity to African liberation movements was cited (Götz et al. 2023). African governments defended their stance by arguing that they were non-aligned, just as during the height of the Cold War (Jacobs 1980). But some politicians went a lot further. "I would go beyond the friendship with Russia," Malema said in response to the conflict. "In the war, I would align with Russia and I would even supply the weapons to Russia because Russia is at war with imperialism" (Wanjala 2023). The crisis in Ukraine illustrates that contemporary events can be linked to the African liberation struggle in various ways.

Conclusion

It would not be a strange assumption to expect that the relevance of armed struggle fades over time. Once the battle has ended and the guns have been silenced, a new phase with different pri-

orities is prone to emerge. Welz and Kromrey (2015: 270) speculated that the revolutionary rhetoric in Namibia would diminish once the last generation of war veterans had passed away and that "an entirely new chapter in Namibian party politics" would be opened up. Yet, a decade later, we can see that the opposite has occurred. As SWAPO faces more electoral pressure than ever before, patriotic language has remained a central feature of Namibian politics. The liberation lens is also a recurring feature of politics in neighboring countries, such as Angola, South Africa, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. These states are led by the "agents of nostalgia" (Werbner 1998) of former national liberation movements, for whom the struggle of the past determines the political agenda for the future.

This article has focused on the political afterlife of violent conflict. Through the liberation lens, contemporary politicians approach present-day politics through the prism of an armed struggle that concluded several decades ago. In addition to the design of patriotic history and the construction of nationalist monuments, politicians employ a "war discourse" (Kriger 2003) in which the struggle of the past is recycled for modern use. The appropriation of struggle language is an effective tool for marginalizing opponents that are on the "wrong side of history." For several states in Southern Africa, the denominator of "post-revolutionary societies" would thus be a misleading description, as certain politicians—bothincumbent elites and the opposition—argue that the revolution is not yet complete. Finally, the struggle serves as a benchmark for evaluating new issues that emerge over time.

As such, the liberation lens does not only signify the continuity of conflict. Importantly, it also shows the transformation of conflict memories. Rather than simply repeating phrases that were once uttered during protest marches in capital cities or military training schools in exile, the language of the liberation struggle is being reinterpreted and adapted to suit modern times. This shows both the skill of politicians in Southern Africa and the fact that the difficult events of the recent past have not yet been fully resolved. Discussions about the significance of violence for the making of independent nations in Southern Africa are far from over. Whether former national liberation movements will continue to dominate these debates in the same way that they dominate the ballot box is unclear, but it can be expected that the appropriation of history will remain an important factor in Southern African politics for time to come.

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NOTES

1. The concept of the "liberation lens" is based on the research of my PhD thesis (Van der Hoog 2025).
2. During Cassinga Day, Namibia mourns the victims of the Battle of Cassinga in 1978, when South African forces destroyed a SWAPO camp in Angola.

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