

The Spirit of Bandung and the struggle for freedom in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

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This paper analyses the work of a conference that took place in April 1955 at Bandung, Central Jawa, Indonesia. The conference was and is still an important event in the lives of the oppressed people. Representatives came from 29 African and Asian underdeveloped countries. They came to promote economic and cultural co-operation and to oppose colonialism. Most of the Afro-Asian and international conflicts were on the agenda. The conference finally agreed on 10 principles as an orientation for the formation of their mutual internal relationships, which includes respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations, equality of all races and all nations, mutual agreement on non-intervention into internal affairs and non-violent conflict solutions. This paper seeks to evaluate the work on Bandung and suggests a way forward to the 50th anniversary of the conference that will take place in 2005.

1 INTRODUCTION

Bandung was a milestone on the road towards the non-aligned Nations Movement, in the changing geopolitical conjunction caused by conflict ideologies represented by the two blocks that emerged after the Second World War. The initiators of “Bandung” had anticipated the impact of such a competition on the newly emerging nations who might have been devastated, because they would have been caught in the middle of conflicts. They dared to counter the military power blocks by moral power of non-alignment, called the “Spirit of Bandung”, and so they have protected autonomy and integrity of the new nation states. The political importance of Bandung is that it indicated and started an independent road for smaller and even for bigger new nations to survive as nations during the forthcoming four decades of the bi-polar global supremacy of the USSR and the USA. The main aim of the Bandung conference was to restore human dignity and the image of God in people being exploited.

2 FIFTY YEARS LATER

Fifty years later the Afro-Asian countries are faced with the same issues of colonialism, oppression, rejection, and isolation by super powerful countries. They are now faced with new global problems. Reading papers from the conference the author was reminded of a quotation from Jubulile in 1977, when the apartheid regime was responsible for the deaths of many women and children. On that day she said:

“History is happening while we live our daily life, when we rise at sunrise and go to sleep at sunset, when we sow, plough and harvest, When we bring up children, get old and die. And when we have passed away we will be part of the story told in the evening. We will return to the land which gave birth to us like a mother”.

(Fröchtling 1998:17).

The above quotation reminds us of history that is in the making daily. Like the Bandung Conference, we are challenged by poverty, oppression and rejection, etc. Hence the leaders of Afro-Asia called a conference to address the evils of those years, faced by poor and oppressed people, who were seeking to live a decent life in the midst of poverty. Anything that undermines human life (human beings) needs to be tackled in such a way that the first and the third world countries would begin to recognize human beings as an important part of life. Through Bandung the Afro-Asian countries began to discuss issues of injustice, rejection, colonialism, and oppression etc head on. Today we are still faced with the same issues in a form of globalisation. This new monster seeks to destroy the souls and spirit of Bandung. The word Bandung in Indonesia means brotherhood. It is now associated with life of the oppressed and poor people. It seeks to better their condition in the midst of poverty. This great spirit of Bandung lives in ordinary people, who are struggling to live their lives in a dignified way. The reader needs to note that in Afro-Asian practice; life is characterized by the motive of wholeness. Life is shared with others in a community. For example, in our religion there is no separate community of religious people, because everyone who participates in the life of the community automatically participates in its religion. The Afro-Asian people seek their lives in a continuous liturgy of worship that comes alive in their eating, drinking, ploughing, working and sleeping. Bishop Desmond Tutu summarises the above concept of life by saying:

“The African (Asian) world view rejects popular dichotomies between the sacred and secular, the material and the spiritual. All life is religious, all life is sacred, all life is peace”.

(Tutu 1995:16)

Tutu reminds us that life and death, joy and sorrow, good and evil, justice and injustices, all these realities are manifested in the drama of life as human beings experience it. I am aware that the whole drama of injustice is developed by greed through first world countries, and it is acted out on developing countries. Multi corporations crushes life of poor people daily; as a result, people are confronted with issues of life and death. Life is important and that is why Afro-Asian concepts of wholeness is inclusive. It highlights the wisdom and philosophy of the two continents. Life is a gift that the poor people have and they can contribute this gift to the first world countries. It is lived in a community with other people, lived with each other, and we share resources that God has given to us together.

3 GLOBALISATION

David Befus raises a point about the poor who are oppressed economically by the first world countries. He says:

“What people and communities want, at some point, is to also confront the issues of economics. One thing they have in common is a lack of money, although this may not be the first issue to address in life...[T]he poor have a gift of life which they share with each other”.

(Befus 2000:53)

I agree with Befus because what is important among the poor is human dignity and not money. What is the use of being rich, and still be treated as a second class citizen in an oppressive country? Addressing the economic issues Befus makes us aware that the western world operates from that viewpoint. Even their presidential election (USA) money determines who is going to be the next president. In other words, the poor will never have the opportunity to participate in presidential elections due to lack of money. In the developing countries, we start with human dignity especially among the poor and the oppressed. In short, we operate from wholeness of life -the very life which was attacked by colonial rulers who had a political agenda. A good example of wholeness of life and human dignity is celebrated by those who were oppressed in South Africa. We are politically free and, we now have to continue struggling with issues of landlessness, poverty, economics,

unemployment etcetera. Hence this struggle of poverty, colonialism and oppression caused Afro-Asian leaders to come together in Colombo (Sri Lanka – Ceylon) in order to address and attack head on this evil that sought to destroy human dignity and life as a whole. They did all the planning in order to protect life, because the issue was and is still an important part of our struggle, especially among the poor who are humiliated everyday by forces of evil. My conclusion in this issue of life is that every philosophy or ideology that seeks to destroy life is evil and needs to be destroyed. De Silva from Sri Lanka when addressing the imbalance of the evil of globalisation says:

“Maldistribution of wealth is intrinsically evil because it destroys the rich through over-consumption, and the poor through malnutrition”.

(De Silva 1991:41)

De Silva challenges us to analyse the imbalances that exists between the developed and under-developed countries. It is important to note that the powerful continues to make the rules that benefit them through the World Bank, the IMF, WTO, etcetera. As a result the world trade system becomes unjust particularly to under developed countries. Statistics have shown that liberalized trade continues to favour the industrial countries and their corporations. 40% of global trade is among the 350 largest corporations in the north, which is part of the managed markets, an indication that the concept of free market is a myth. The above imbalance is expressed well by Laura, a sacred Filipino factory worker:

“I made elegant Reebok, Puma and Nike shoes for eleven years. But look at what I wear on my feet – a cheap pair of plastic sandals. I am like those who build but they are homeless, and those who till the soil but are hungry”.

(Bharagirath 1998:17)

The poor, especially women and children are affected by globalisation – a new monster of colonialism. The Bandung Conference was called upon to be a voice of the voiceless. This was a key issue in the agenda of those who met in 1955.

4 WESTERN WORLD

How does the western world view life? They have an interesting idiom which summarises their concept of life. No man (woman) is an island. What a contradiction, because their world is centered around private, self-centered

life, which eventually destroys human life through loneliness and isolation. Descartes describes a person in the western world in terms of “cogito-ergo sum” which simply means “I think, therefore I am”. In this western world individualism creeps in and introduces a spirit of competition and self-centeredness. The above concept will never work in an Afro-Asian community. These communities will embrace the first idiom because it introduces the concept of belonging to each other. The second one seeks to destroy the working together of people who belong together or to each other. In Africa, when people greet each other they say the following words:

“Siya kubona umfowethu” (I see you my brother or sister).

When the other person responds, he or she will say:

“Ngiya ku bona umfowethu” (I see myself in you my brother or sister).

The two concepts of greeting and responding affirms humanity and further introduces another important concept of living – “UBUNTU” John Mbiti is helpful because he leads us deeper into respecting human dignity that God has given as a gift to humanity. He says:

“I am because you are, you are because I am”. (Mbiti 1969:61)

The above concepts live and flow in our daily lives. When taken seriously, it can assist us in correcting the evils of colonialisation, globalisation, oppression, rejection, etc. Now, the reader will realize that Afro-Asians have a gift that we can give to the world, especially the western world that thrives on individualism. This is a new concept that can be presented to the global village – it is the concept of “UBUNTU” (humanity or human dignity).

Mbiti again shares an interesting idea about the fundamental reason behind the concept of relationship. He is of the opinion that:

“The individual does not exist alone, except being in relation to the Other”

(Mbiti 1969:108-109)

While our Xhosa idiom strengthens the above idea (UBUNTU) by sharing this wisdom:

“Umntu (a person) ngumuntu (is a person) ngabanye abantu (because of other people)”.

The emphasis is on communal life, which then leads to human dignity and finally preservation of life. Afro-Asians are, therefore, challenged to revitalize these concepts or codes of living with each other. They cannot afford to live a private life alone; they need each other in order to survive in the global oppressive world. We are meant to live with each other. The participating countries of the past conference agreed to enforce on the moral and ethnical codes, or values that made every country, and all people to have equal opportunities in order to live a dignified life. The slogan they enforced at that time was:

“Live and let live”. (Abdulgani 1981:47)

5 PEACE

Afro-Asians need to be reminded that freedom cannot be separated from peace; the two work together to produce the concept of justice. Abdulgani is helpful in developing this idea. He says:

“The spirit of Bandung is the spirit of love for peace, anti-violence, anti-discrimination, and development for all without trying to intervene for one another wrongly, but to pay a great respect to one another”.

(Abdulgani 1981:89)

Peace and respect were enforced by the leaders of that conference. In this era of globalisation, the forces of evil are now seeking to destroy that spirit which prevailed in Bandung among Afro-Asians. Bandung played a great role in highlighting problems of colonialism and oppression. To continue their work, we need to strengthen unity among developing countries. They have raw materials which western countries need. In order to destroy this evil monster of globalisation, we need to come back to basics. I am convinced that the concept of Ubuntu, culture, and spirituality is of primary value and will lead us to harmonious human relationships. The spirit of Afro-Asians does not point towards the self but to outsiders, a group, or a community. The words of President Sukarno are important in taking us back to basics:

“Our struggle and our sacrifice for the freedom of our people from the chains of imperialism had been done from generation to generation for centuries. But the struggle had not yet finished. And how can we say

that our struggle is completed, if, in reality, millions of people either in Asia or Africa are still living under severe colonialism, and are unable to breathe the air of freedom”.

(Sukarno 1956:2)

The above quotation challenges us to be a seedbed of harmony and a beacon of peace. Our coming together need to help us to strategise about how to break the cycle of greed, selfishness, self-centeredness, individualism, oppression, rejection, HIV and Aids pandemic, etc.

6 CONCLUSION

The Bandung Conference help us to introduce a new world order, which will not only liberate the oppressed but the oppressor too. The papers help Afro-Asian people to free themselves from the shackles of the oppression of colonialism, imperialism, including globalisation. This kind of freedom can be achieved only when Afro-Asian people focus their mind on the spirit of Bandung - the spirit that seeks to unite the poor, and finally introduce peace. The papers challenge us to work towards an introduction of peace, good relationships and address injustices that are experienced by poor people.

President Sukarno, in closing the conference, concluded with these powerful words:

“Like peace, freedom is indivisible ...[P]eace was necessary for us, because an outbreak of fighting in our part of the world would imperil our precious independence ...[N]o task is more urgent than that of preserving peace. Without peace, our independence means little”.

(Abdulgani 1981:87)

Sukarno knew that colonialism thrives where there is no peace. He also knew that the developed countries will never be free until the under-developed are free. Afro-Asians need to unite in addressing these elements of oppression, colonialism, imperialism and globalisation together with the focus on the concept of justice and peace. Then we shall (together) relate in a way that leads to harmony. In unity we shall overcome the difficulties of humiliation, especially among each other. The papers point at how Afro-Asians oppress each other. This is a weakness that was discovered and need attention. People cannot be loyal to their country, especially when their own fellomen oppress them. How can one expect people to love their country, when they live in a devastating condition, which has been brought about by their own leaders? Faced with a situation of segregation, rejection and

isolation in the country of his birth, and yet forced to be loyal to his country, Burke said:

“To make me love my country is impossible, I can only love my own country when it embraces me as one of its own”.

(Burke 1983:64)

The above statement is important. It is a reality experienced by many people in the developing countries (e.g. Zimbabwe, Angola, Burundi, etc). It is only when our own countries embraced us in such a way that we feel like human beings that we will feel we belong and can therefore be loyal. The process of affirmation works both ways, and that is perhaps the crucial element which will lead us to a better future. Karno said words which are worth quoting:

“Let us not be bitter about the past, but let us keep our eyes firmly on the future. Let us remember that no blessing of God is so sweet as life and liberty, let us remember that the stature of all mankind (sic) is diminished so long as nations or parts of nations are still unfree. Let us remember that the highest purpose of mankind (sic) is the liberation of man(sic). His(sic) bonds of fear, his(sic) bonds of humandegradation, his (sic) bonds of poverty – the liberation of man (sic) from the physical, spiritual and intellectual bonds which have for too long stunted the development of humanity’s development”. (Karno 1981:90)

These are words that sent delegates back home to fight oppression, colonialism and rejection. I discovered the following weaknesses of the conference:

- (a) The conference was male-dominated.
- (b) It was also dominated by the Islamic faith (and leadership).
- (c) Women played a minor role in decisions and outcomes of the conference.
- (d) Latin-American countries were not invited, and yet they are part of the developing countries.

My own conclusion is that the coming conference in 2005 should address issues of sexism, gender, oppression by Afro-Asian leaders of their own people. The inclusion of Latin American countries is crucial, while the

participation of women and youth, and the balance of participating faiths or religious orders cannot be avoided.

I believe that the issue of spirituality should get the main focus. In other words, spirituality of a common future is spirituality that respects peace and justice, a life for all without considering religious and ethnic differences. The 50th anniversary conference needs to recognize that the universe belongs to all humanity. The conference thus needs to address globalisation - the new monster of colonialism and oppression of developing countries. The conference further needs to note that spirituality of the future puts solidarity with the poor, and marginalized people first. This should be top on the agenda. Secondly, respect of environment and ecology for future generations must be discussed. We are now facing the common enemy of greediness, conquest, poverty, discrimination, injustice, oppression, sexism, misuse of power and destruction of life. Peace, justice and freedom are essential to every human being. Basically there is no religion that refuses peace, justice and freedom for all. Religious communities must work together in this coming conference for a better future.

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