

What is global apartheid, and why do we fight it?

---Yash Tandon

The term apartheid describes a system of governance in South Africa from about 1948 when the Nationalist Party came to power to independence in 1994, but it has acquired a broader usage. “Global apartheid” was first used during the 1980s by scholars, but became famous when Thabo Mbeki in 2001 explained why the 2006 World Cup was given to Germany, not SA, due to a New Zealander’s vote switch.

In 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, he defined global apartheid as the continuing disparity between a small minority of rich (mostly white) nations lording over a great number of impoverished (mostly non-white) nations. The late poet Dennis Brutus, at the UKZN Centre for Civil Society, thought the phrase very evocative, even while criticizing Mbeki’s foreign economic policies as contributing to the problem.

I distinguish between “global apartheid” and “intra-state apartheid”. It is important to draw attention to inequality and injustices within states as well as between states. For example, present-day Israel is almost a replication of the classic model of apartheid in South Africa, where citizens of non-Jewish faith are treated as inferior in almost caste terms, much as black South Africans were treated in the pre-independence period.

In other words, the term “global apartheid” should not distract our awareness of discrimination that people face /within /states.

This said, I do think Mbeki’s “global apartheid” sharpened our awareness about the iniquitous and unfair global system in which we live. The underlying reason comes down a system of production and distribution at the global level that is inherently engineered to further enrich the rich and impoverish the poor.

A good example of this is the record of Africa in the last fifty years. Africa’s integration in the global system of trade liberalization and capital flows (“globalisation”) transferred wealth, in net terms, from Africa to the already industrialised countries of the North. The irony is that policies of independent African states are largely responsible for not only perpetuating “global apartheid” but intensifying it. African governments are themselves co-authors of “global apartheid”.

How do we jump out of this hole?

The first step is to become aware of the phenomenon, and its dual roots, namely the system of global production and distribution, and the domestic policies of the countries of the South to embrace the system. They are two sides of the same coin. It is no use blaming “the North” or “the West” and then engaging in policies that accumulate wealth in the North and deepen poverty in the South.

The second step is to recognise that these policies are not accidental.

It is inherent in the very class character of those who rule and govern us. To be sure, they do have contradictions with the global corporate elite in that they would like a bigger share in the global pie. However, their class character prevents them from undertaking genuine democratic reforms that would put power in the hands of working people.

The third step is to help popular democratic forces to organize themselves in order to struggle on a dual front at the same time. The struggle against the dominance of global finance capital is as salient as the struggle for democratisation. This may sound like a cliché, and indeed it is easy to sloganise anti-imperialist and pro-democracy rhetoric.

But the practice of engaging in transformative politics is harder than chewing rocks.

I say this with some experience. I come from Uganda where we suffered what turned out to be a premature experiment building socialism, called “the Common Man’s Charter”. This led, in 1971, to a military coup engineered by Britain and Israel in collusion with local disaffected forces.

The military regime of Idi Amin was installed, serving the interests of imperialism.

It took eight years of struggle to finally end the brutal regime, with the help of Tanzanian forces.

The period since has brought relative peace and stability, and in its wake some growth. But neoliberal policies created the same effects as in the rest of Africa: deindustrialization, unemployment, increasing debt and aid dependency.

Aid dependency is both deeply ingrained in the psychology of our leaders - who wrongly believe that without aid there can be no development - and in their policies. There are, of course, other problems too. But aid dependency blocks progress in all other matters.

It also blocks progress on further democratisation of society, because our governments tend to be accountable to the donors and the IMF/World Bank rather than to their own people. It has made a mockery of all electoral politics.

In 2008 I wrote a book, “Ending Aid Dependency”, published by the South Centre and a progressive African publisher, Fahamu/Pambazuka. The most crucial first step is the psychological leap that our leaders and our people need to make out of thinking that without aid they cannot survive.

If Africa wants to liberate itself and get rid of both “global apartheid” and “intra-state apartheid”, it has to leap out of this hole beguilingly called “development aid”. There is no such thing as “development aid”.

Let me end by saying that I do not believe in “armchair revolutionaries”. Theory is fine, but it is no substitute for concrete struggle on the ground.

I am pleased and deeply honoured that I can participate in the Dennis Brutus Poetry and Protest Colloquium here in Durban. Dennis was a model fighter, with action and lyric, against all forms of oppression, exploitation, and injustice.

I am also delighted that I am on the hallowed ground where a young twenty - three old lawyer from India touched the soil of Africa, and became the “Mahatma” Gandhi. Few people remember that he stayed in South Africa for 21 years. This is the apartheid soil where for decades further down thousands sacrificed their life, liberty and property to create a free South Africa.

Nelson Mandela left us the same message as Gandhi. Never, he said, blame the person or the individual, forgive him/her if you have in your heart to do so. The problem lies with the system. Fight the system. That too is what I believe.