

BRITAIN AND THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE

Basil Davidson

(An appreciation of the work of Amilcar Cabral appears elsewhere in this issue of Labour Monthly; the following article was written for our journal by Basil Davidson soon after his return from Guinea-Bissau, and before the tragic news of the assassination of the leader of the liberation movement.—Ed. LM)

COMING back to England in December from a long visit to the liberated regions of Guinea-Bissau (what used to be known, in so far as it was ever known at all, as 'Portuguese West Africa'), I was thinking about the national independence they will shortly proclaim, and the recognition of their new state that they will then ask of Britain, as of every other country. 'But haven't you heard?' said one of my more (or less?) respectable friends: 'In 1973 we are going to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance.' And that, apparently, is just what 'we' are going to do. At this very moment the Foreign Office is drawing up lists of municipal and other public bodies who will be asked to lay aside public money for fanfares and flagwaving, for wining and dining the delegates of Lisbon's regime, and generally for carrying on as though the Anglo-Portuguese alliance were some kind of foundation to our national self-respect. They have even invited the Lisbon regime's top front-man, Marcello Caetano, to be 'our' national guest.

I went and had another look at the last version of this cobwebbed treaty of alliance, signed no longer ago than 1661 and still in vigour. Article 15 is much to the point. 'The King of Great Britain does profess and declare . . . that he will take the interest of Portugal and all its Dominions to heart, defending the same with his utmost power. . . .' That, Lord save us, was during the Dutch wars. But it still goes on, as anyone may see who looks at what the British Government does for the Portuguese dictatorship at the United Nations, in the councils of Nato, or most recently in the commissions of the Common Market. It is a singularly squalid aspect of our national story, but it has also long become a singularly odious one as well. All that is obvious enough, but could there be a better example of the difficulty of our ruling class in getting itself somehow into the twentieth century, let alone the years before the onset of the twenty-first?

These thoughts are bound to be painful for any British person who returns from liberated Guinea-Bissau (or, of course, from the liberated areas of Angola and Mozambique). For one sees there, in the realities of daily life, that everything which is good and hopeful, in any sense progressive or constructive for present or future, stands on the side of the liberation struggle. One needn't even be left-wing to think so; a leading British Liberal, after visiting Guinea-Bissau, has just been saying the same.

After an absence of five years, I found a great deal of development in the structures of life in the liberated regions. The men and women of the PAIGC (the liberation party of Guinea-Bissau) began to clear the Portuguese army out of rural areas in January 1963. In the ten years since then they have enormously widened these areas until today they cover more than two-thirds of the country, and include about three-quarters of the regions of relatively dense population. All this represents a remarkable success in terms of guerrilla warfare: allowing for its scale, perhaps one of the greatest guerrilla successes in history. Yet the political success of these revolutionary nationalists, embracing from the first the conviction that they must transform their revolt into a profound revolution, is something that the visitor finds even more impressive.

Following that conviction, they determined from the very first, and long before they began fighting, that they must base all their policies and actions on the active participation, rather than the mere support, of the mass of people in their country. Only in this way would they be able to guarantee that their revolt became something far more valuable than a military adventure, even a successful one, or a means of merely exchanging élitist Portuguese rule for élitist African rule. Only in this way, they believed, could the suffering and sacrifice of armed resistance find their justification and sufficient reward. So with every military advance they redoubled their effort to build, within the liberated areas thus cleared of their imperialist enemy, a new social structure and a new political system powered by mass participation.

The results are there today. Anyone in reasonable health can walk about these liberated regions, as I have done, in complete safety save from the threat of bombing and strafing from the air, for the Portuguese pattern is very much that of the Americans in Vietnam, and see these results. You can visit schools and clinics, simple in their fabric and still far from adequately staffed, and yet a major improvement in the life that villagers can have and look forward to. You can stay in forest camps or villages, move freely from one adminis-

trative sector to another, and, when you are ready, march back to the frontier and cross it with no difficulty at all. You can inspect in their details the ways in which the full-time workers of the PAIGC consistently promote the active participation of village people in the conduct of their own lives, and in the use of social services opened to them for the first time.

Best of all in this respect, you can meet the members of village committees and listen to what they have to say. They are 'simple folk', not a doubt of that, mostly illiterate, knowing little of the modern world or its machines. But they are men and women with the firmest possible grip on the realities they know; and they are this today, in contrast with the colonial past, precisely because they feel now that they command these realities: whether directly through their own committees, or through the leadership of their sons and brothers, daughters and cousins who are the full-time workers of their liberation movement.

By 1970 the PAIGC had promoted the creation of elected village committees throughout their liberated regions. Then they promoted the creation of elected committees for each of their many administrative sectors. Then, in August 1971, they decided to promote the creation of elected committees for each of the fifteen regions into which they have divided their country, and to do this by a general election which should also create a People's National Assembly. None of this was easy, but all of it was carried through in 1972. Now they can go further.

'We have led the people to elect a representative national assembly,' in the words of Amílcar Cabral, founder and secretary-general of the PAIGC, 'and this, from now onwards, becomes the sovereign organ of our state. Already we have self-government in the liberated regions. Now our National Assembly will meet in the near future, and proclaim the independence of Guinea-Bissau, even though a small part of our territory and our capital are still in enemy hands.' One thinks of a parallel with South Vietnam. 'Our assembly will adopt a constitution and appoint a state council, and this council will ask every country and the United Nations for recognition.'

That's one side of the picture. The other side is also seen by the visitor. He can also watch, as I have done, the incessant aerial bombardment to which the Portuguese have long resorted. Barred from movement on the ground, they move in the air. 'The guerrilla commands the land,' runs a children's song in the schools of the PAIGC, 'and the little Portuguese commands the clouds.' But the little Portuguese, up there in his Nato-made bomber, is a murderous

Portuguese all the same. He can build nothing but only destroy. He can offer only suffering or subjection. He is at worst a thug, at best a menial of masters whom he dares not question, much less defy.

This year, notwithstanding, 'we' shall welcome to these islands the spokesmen of those masters, and celebrate an alliance whose every meaning, today, should make us blush for shame. It is up to anyone who may read this and agree to say so now, and to say it loud and clear. Are you quite sure, for instance, that your borough council isn't involved in this macabre fandango?

UNITY AGAINST THE COMMON MARKET

The Sussex *Labour Monthly* Discussion Group has taken the initiative in organising an all day conference on the subject of 'Unity Against the Common Market'. This is to take place in the No. 1 Conference Room of the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, on Sunday, March 18, and delegates have been invited from progressive organisations throughout Sussex. There will be three sessions.

In the morning there will be a conference of *Labour Monthly* readers. Any *Labour Monthly* reader from any part of the country will be welcome. The main discussion will be on problems of increasing circulation and setting up new discussion groups. Entrance will be by March issue of *Labour Monthly*. Copies will be on sale at the door for casual readers who wish to attend.

The afternoon session will be a delegate conference. Five weeks before the conference, 52 delegates from 19 organisations had already been accredited, representing more than 80,000 people. These include delegates from the Brighton Trades Council (whose President, George Cooper, will preside over the conference), the Hastings Trades Council, and the Brighton (Kemp Town) Constituency Labour Party—the only Constituency Labour Party in Sussex ever to succeed in sending a Labour Member to parliament. Trade union branches and Labour Party ward associations throughout the county are expected to add their weight, and a large delegation is expected from the students' unions. In all, it is hoped there will be more than 200 delegates present.

The evening session will be a public meeting. Further information on the conference may be obtained from the Organising Secretary, Ernest Trory, 57 Tivoli Crescent, Brighton, BN1 5NB.

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