

# The philosophical, political and moral obligations imposed on us by the Rivonia Trial



With hindsight we now know that the Rivonia Trial was a constitutive historical moment that created a climate change that began a gradual process of the withering away of the apartheid ideology.

By Kgalema Motlanthe

Looking at the 50th anniversary of the Rivonia Trial as well as the 20th anniversary of democracy in South Africa, one cannot help noticing the striking manifestation of the notion of causality as it plays itself out in history.

Indeed it appears incontestable that the emergence of the democratic breakthrough of April 1994 was intrinsic to a process that began with the raid of Liliesleaf farm in Rivonia and the subsequent sabotage charges brought against the anti-apartheid fighters in what would be known as the Rivonia Trial. One would be hard put to identify causative conditions that made South Africa's democratic breakthrough possible in our historical narrative outside the defining episode of the Rivonia Trial.

There does not seem to be universal agreement on a clear and univocal definition or description of what causation is or what it means to say something causes something else. (For a comprehensive treatment of this subject see the works of Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* and *Metaphysics*.)

The causal link between the two historical poles may not be self-evident at first sight but a closer examination of all the political emanations of the Rivonia Trial throws the underlying connection in bold relief. Without sounding deterministic, it can also be contended that subjective conditions created by the political actors in the Rivonia Trial largely shaped the resultant historical process into specific directions that would inexorably lead to definite long-term outcomes. At the same time, objective conditions imposed themselves on the path to the future the struggle was carving.

At a philosophical level the spirit behind the Rivonia Trial – the very spirit whose intensity propelled the historical process until the end of apartheid - necessarily brings up the full weight of the seminal thought of Georg Hegel that:

*It is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; the individual who has not staked his or her life may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he or she has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness*

(Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Mind*:23)

In these Hegelian terms, the democratic breakthrough of 27 April 1994 was the culmination of the claims for freedom made by the African National Congress (ANC), whose years of hard slog in the theatre of struggle for liberation had generated a self-consciousness that transcended the extraneously imposed servile status on the oppressed to stake a claim to its innate personhood. In consequence the epochal events of the Rivonia Trial 1963-4 represented, with the advantage of hindsight, the distinct possibility for a day such as April 27 1994 when the highly unequal relationship of lordship and bondage in South Africa would be finally ended.

### Background

While it remains true that the Rivonia Trial became the central event that led to the possibility of April 1994, it should be borne in mind that the Rivonia Trial was itself an outcome of numerous preceding events that need to be

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surfaced for the strategic importance of the Rivonia Trial to be appreciated.

The evolution of a non-racist perspective within the ANC gradually enabled all progressive forces to coalesce around the notion of a free and just post-apartheid society. The Doctors' Pact, signed in 1947 by Doctors





Mama Albertina Sisulu attending the Rivonia Trial.

Xuma-Naicker-Dadoo, provided the stimulus for the subsequent Defiance Campaign of 1952.

The ANC had passed a resolution in its 1951 Congress to mobilise the masses into action in the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign. Interestingly, the resolution was drawn up by the joint Planning Council, which comprised the leadership of the ANC and the South African Indian Congress.

During its span of five months

the Defiance Campaign clearly demonstrated to the regime that South Africans of all descriptions and races were united behind the vision of political equality and democracy.

The ANC, the Congress of Democrats, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, the South African Indian Congress and the South African Coloured Peoples' Organisation came together in what became known as the Congress Alliance and began

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to mobilise the people towards a common vision for a post-apartheid society – The Freedom Charter. The Freedom Charter provided a platform for the espousal of a non-racial society, and its preamble clearly states that:

*We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:*

*that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people.*

By elevating the principle of non-racism, the Freedom Charter broke new ground by offering an alternative worldview that philosophically undercut the prevailing dominant thought system of white supremacy even as it drew many progressive-minded South Africans together.

When the police swept on Liliesleaf on that fateful day on 11 July 1963 and arrested the leaders on charges of sabotage, the die was already cast on a number of imperative fronts. Firstly, non-racism had taken root at the coalface of the struggle, cementing inter-racial solidarity. Secondly, the resort to violent means of overthrowing the regime was established as a strategy that would guide the struggle from this point on; and lastly, the regime's intransigence and determination to defend racial domination was recognised as an accepted fact.

#### **The Historical Significance of the Rivonia Trial**

Once again, with hindsight we now know that the Rivonia Trial was

a constitutive historical moment that created a climate change that began a gradual process of the withering away of the apartheid ideology. From the Rivonia Trial to the dissolution of apartheid in 1994 when for the first time all South Africans cast their vote for the government of their choice, several distinct anti-apartheid permutations emerged, the aggregate effect of which would in time prove too formidable for the apartheid state.

The first permutation to come out of the Rivonia Trial as a long-term cause of the future 1994 breakthrough was the emergence of the iconic figures in the firmament of our history, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg and Andrew Mlangeni. They were able to articulate the innermost yearnings of oppressed South Africans, projecting the future post-apartheid society whose moral underpinnings undermined the grounds of apartheid claims.

Secondly, in a feat of historical irony, the Rivonia Trial afforded the struggle both a national and an international platform it could otherwise not have had. While the apartheid justice system sought to use a semblance of justice to put the anti-apartheid leadership away, it unintentionally created propitious conditions for this leadership to articulate the core vision of the struggle to the whole world. More than at any time in the anti-apartheid struggle the quintessential vision that made up the core of the struggle was expounded with exceptional clarity. For instance Mandela's speech in the dock was to reverberate across the world in ways that were until then never thought possible. The following excerpt from the speech was to internationalise the exalted credentials of the struggle:

*During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I*

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*hope to live for and to achieve. But, my lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.*

These lofty words did not only sum up the spirit and idea of the struggle for liberation but became hymnal, a sort of divine inspiration that breathed life into anti-apartheid activism everywhere in the world. They became a trope for the struggle between good and evil and the refusal of the human spirit to submit to oppression. The trial had the desired effect of igniting international consciousness about the apartheid system and the insufferable experience of black South Africans under conditions of political inequality, social discrimination and economic exploitation.

Mandela's speech was either extracted or reported in various influential international publications. In addition, the international community was jolted into action. During the trial the United Nations even sent messages to the South African government asking it not to impose capital punishment on the trialists. Immediately after the conviction of Mandela and his comrades the United Nations

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condemned the trial and called for sanctions against the apartheid state.

International solidarity went into a high gear, with 106 members of the UN voting in favour of a resolution calling for the end of the political trial, which was a major moral victory over the illegitimate state. Trade unions around the world were refusing to handle SA goods, with US senators and UK MPs staging marches, which was unprecedented. Gradually over time all these measures begin taking their toll on the regime despite its contrived facade of composure and bravado.

The third permutation, closely related to the Mandela impact at the level of symbolism, is the moral and legal dimensions of the Rivonia Trial, which, in the same measure of irony, put the whole apartheid system on trial. In terms of this permutation the trial, as seen by the players then, provided a media platform upon which the ANC could crystallise the ideals of the struggle through an institutional record, placing in a formal court of law its understanding of the National Democratic Struggle. In the final analysis, as Mandela later explained “We went into the court room determined to put apartheid in the dock, even if this were to put our own lives at risk.” (Diane Halpern: *Thought and Knowledge*).

An expansive view of the nature and ultimate goals of the struggle was further given by Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Ahmed Kathrada. Walter Sisulu clarified the nature of the struggle by arguing that “in the face of violence, men struggling for freedom have had to meet violence with violence. How can it be otherwise in South Africa? Changes must come. Changes for the better, but not without sacrifice. Your sacrifice. My sacrifice.” (Karis and Carter, *From Protest to Challenge*:760)

As such the trial, despite the spectacular setback the Rivonia arrests represented for the struggle, evolved to become an avenue to define the values of human dignity, equality, non-racism, non-sexism, the supremacy of the Constitution and universal adult suffrage as the ANC understood it. As the trialists explain in their generic



Winnie Mandela attending the Rivonia Trial

letter about Joel Joffe, their attorney: "He has understood and accepted that, above all else, we would not compromise our belief or consciences for legal advantage and in that understanding he has advised us along a course which we fully believe to have been politically correct, and legally as well." (Joel Joffe: *The State vs. Nelson Mandela: The Trial that Changed South Africa*)

Fourthly, the non-racial composition of the struggle undermined the entire philosophical edifice upon which the apartheid state had sought to justify its social domination, by among others, depicting apartheid as a natural order of things as well as rooting it in a Christian world outlook. Yet, when both national and international media covered the trial a large section of society benefiting from the status quo was shocked to discover that the struggle was made up of people from different racial backgrounds. This insight, following so soon after the Treason Trial of 1956 to 1960, did not only pour cold water on the hare-brained ideological

machinations of the system but would later on inspire countless young South Africans from among the ranks of the national minorities to follow the example set by the Rivonia Trialists. Indeed the activists that swelled the ranks of the United Democratic Front in the 1980s as well as many other resistance formations that emerged from the 1970s, included white, Indian and Coloured South Africans who had grown impervious to the ideological manipulation of apartheid

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partly because of the inspiration drawn from the non-racial composition of the struggle.

Lastly, through the efforts of the ANC President in exile, Oliver Tambo, the isolation of South Africa became a reality. Isolating the apartheid regime was one of the four pillars under which the struggle was waged. These were international isolation, the armed struggle, underground work and mass mobilisation. While the concept of the four pillars of the struggle emerged explicitly in the '80s, it is worth noting that, in practice, all these pillars had underpinned the struggle from as early as the 1960s when President Oliver Tambo went into exile.

#### Conclusion

While the historical value of the Rivonia Trial as the stage in our history that defined the future cannot be gainsaid, it is equally important not to see this event in isolation. A host of political developments in the previous decade resulted in the Rivonia Trial, though as a happenstance.



Crowds awaiting verdict of the Rivonia Trial

From the viewpoint of the ANC and the Congress Alliance at large, the Rivonia Trial was a massive setback, although, as it has been shown, this setback turned out positive permutations, not by chance but because of the political wit and strategic vision that guided the struggle. Ultimately what appeared to be unmitigated failure finally yielded positive outcomes as attested to by the number of permutations which, it is argued, led to the final moral, political, economic and social vitiation of the apartheid behemoth.

It is widely agreed that the Rivonia Trial had short- and long-term consequences on the course of the freedom struggle. While imprisoning key leaders of the struggle did represent a setback, at least in the short-term, it also imbued the imprisoned activists with the mantle of martyrdom, and an epic air of legend, immortalising their names and, ironically, inspiring many more young activists to follow in their footsteps. Besides, the Rivonia Trial also signalled the urgent need to

begin employing alternative means of struggle to strike at the heart of the apartheid state. As a result the underground networks outside and inside South Africa gained strength and more sophistication as more young South Africans from across the racial divide continued to fill the ranks of the ANC.

The raiding of the Liliesleaf farm and the subsequent trial of the key activists and leaders of the struggle became a meta-context in which everything else that happened in South Africa played out. The Rivonia Trial passed into history as the prime matrix event, thereby pre-inclining our historical trajectory in a particular direction for subsequent generations. While it is not always advisable to pose hypothetical questions in history, it is interesting to ask what could have happened had the leaders of the South African revolution decided not to embrace freedom as the essence of what distinctively lies at the heart of the human makeup and instead gave in to

the apartheid system. In other words, what if, in the Hegelian sense, all those individuals had decided against staking their lives, and in that way failed to attain 'the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness'?

Looked at closer, the essence of the Rivonia Trial resides in its trans-historical character. While it constituted the philosophical basis as well as the reference point of the struggle, it was also transcendent in that it envisioned the contours of a post-apartheid society, imposing obligations on us, its modern inheritors, to live within its moral parameters and philosophical paradigm. This is summed up by Mandela's words that:

*We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity" (Nelson Mandela, inauguration address, 10 May 1994). ■*