



Old and new challenges for the States, the Nations and the Peoples of Africa

Samir Amin

The 1955 Conference of Bandung declared the will of the Asian and African nations to reconquer their sovereignty and complete their independence through a process of authentic independent and consistent development to the benefit of all labouring classes. In 1955 most of the Asian and Middle East countries had reconquered their sovereignty in the aftermath of World War II, while movements of liberation were in struggle elsewhere, in Africa in particular to achieve that goal.

As recalled by the leaders of Bandung, the conference was the first international meeting of non-European (so-called coloured) nations whose rights had been denied by historical colonialism/imperialism of Europe, the United States (US) and Japan. In spite of the differences in size, cultural and religious backgrounds and historical trajectories, the so-called non-European nations together rejected the pattern of colonial and semi-colonial globalisation that the Western powers had built to their exclusive benefit. But Bandung also declared the will of Asian and African nations to complete the reconquest of their sovereignty by moving into a process of authentic and accelerated inward looking development which is the condition for their participating to the shaping of the world system on equal footing with the States of the historic imperialist centres.

The timeless conference brought together countries which had made different choices with respect to the ways and means to achieve their developmental targets. Some (e.g. China, North Vietnam and North Korea) had chosen what they named the socialist road, inspired by Marxism. Other conceived national and popular specific ways combined with social progressive reforms (what could be named national/popular projects). Soekarno's Indonesia, Nehru's India, Nasser's Egypt and later many other countries are examples. All these countries gave priority to the diversification and industrialisation of their economies, moving out of their confinement to remain producers/exporters of agricultural and mining commodities. All of them considered that the State had to assume a major responsibility in the control of the process. They also considered that their targets (in particular their moving into the industrial era) could eventually conflict with the dominant logics of the global system; but that they were in a position which allowed them to successfully compel the global system to adjust to their demands. Yet a number of countries which joined Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) did not adopt a definitive position with respect to what needed to be done, and considered possibly pursuing development in the frame of the deployment of the global system.

What ought to be recalled is that all the countries of Africa and Asia benefited from the very existence of NAM, whatever had been their choices. Political solidarity initiated by Bandung paid in various ways. A country like Gabon for instance would not have been able to capture a good part of the oil rent if not OPEC and NAM made it possible. The stress was therefore put on that political solidarity and NAM countries supported unanimously the struggles (including armed struggles) of the peoples of remaining colonies (Portuguese colonies and Zimbabwe), and against apartheid in South Africa and occupied Palestine.

The history of NAM until the 1980s has been the history of internal political and social struggles within each country precisely around the axis as defined above: what is an alternative efficient strategy for political, social and economic meaningful development? These struggles combined with the conflicts operating in the international arena, mainly the East/West conflict. Yet, in no way should the initiatives taken in Bandung and their deployment by NAM be considered as a misadventure of the Cold War, as presented by the Western media, yesterday and today. The Soviet Union sided with NAM and to various degrees supported the struggles conducted in Africa and Asia, particularly in response to the Western economic and, sometimes, military aggressions. The reason for that is simply that Soviet Union and China were also excluded from the eventual benefit of participating in a truly balanced pluricentric pattern of global system.

In contrast, the Western powers fought NAM by all means. Therefore, the view expressed by the Western media that NAM has lost its meaning with the end of the cold war, the breakdown of Soviet Union in 1990 and the move of China out of the Maoist road, is meaningless: the challenge that unequal globalisation represents remains. Bandung and NAM were fought by the imperialist countries. Coup d'états' were organised by local reactionary forces, supported by foreign interventions that put an end to a number of Bandung inspired State systems and national popular experiences (in Indonesia, Egypt, Mali, Ghana and many other countries). The growing internal contradictions specific to the concept of historical soviet and maoist socialisms, as well as the contradictions specific to each of the various national popular experiences prepared the ground for the counter offensive of the imperialist triad.

The achievements during the Bandung and NAM era have been tremendous and historically positive, whatever have been their limits and shortcomings. The view that Bandung failed, as expressed in the Western media, is simply non-sense. Yet what ought to be said in this respect is that Bandung and NAM's systems, in spite of their achievements, were not able to move beyond their limits and therefore gradually lost breath, eroded and finally lost their content.

In Algiers in 1974, NAM formulated a consistent and reasonable programme (the New International Economic Order) that invited the countries of the North to adjust to the needs requested for the pursuing of the development in the South. These proposals were entirely rejected by the Western powers. The targets of the counter offensive of the imperialist triad were formulated in 1981 at the Cancun Group of 7 countries (G7) meeting. The G7 was for unilateral structural adjustments, dismantling of the national productive systems, privatisations and opening to financial plunder and pillage of natural resources (i.e. the Washington consensus).

There is no need to recall the tragic consequences associated with the deployment of the new imperialist global order for the societies of Africa, Asia and Latin America. On the one hand the super exploitation of cheap labour in delocalised industries controlled by multinationals

and sub-contracting locally owned industries and services. On the other hand, the plunder of the local natural resources to the exclusive benefit of maintaining affluence and waste in the societies of the North. These resources do not consist only of oil, gas and minerals, but include growingly agricultural land (land grabbing as works of the late Sam Moyo demonstrated), forest, water, atmosphere and sun. In that respect the ecological dimension of the challenge has now come to the forefront. Such a pattern of lumpen development has generated a dramatic social disaster: growing poverty and exclusion transfer of rural dispossessed to shanty towns and miserable informal survival activities, unemployment, particularly of youth, oppression of women etc. National consistent productive systems which had started to be constructed in the Bandung era are systematically dismantled, embryos of reasonable public services (i.e. health, education, housing, transport) destroyed.

Protest against these miseries is not enough. The processes which have created these digressions need to be understood and no efficient response to the challenge can be formulated without a rigorous analysis of the transformations of capitalism in the centres of the system. In such circumstances the conventional means of measuring development have lost meaning: a society stricken by this pattern of lumpen development can still enjoy in some cases high rates of growth, based on plunder of resources, associated with a trickle-down effect restricted to the enrichment of a small minority. Simultaneously, the centralised control of the productive system by financialised monopoly capital has resulted into its control of political life by oligarchies; annihilating the meaning of representative democracy.

Yet, in the frame of that global disaster, some societies of the South have been able to take advantage of the new global order of deepened globalisation, and even seem to be emerging in that frame as successful exporters of manufactured goods. These successes feed, in turn, to the illusion that such a process, respectful of the fundamentals of capitalist accumulation and globalised markets, can be maintained. An analysis of the growing conflicts between these successful emerging economies and the imperialist triad (over the access to natural resources in particular) needs to be considered, as well as an analysis of the internal imbalances associated to these processes.

The social disaster referred to above produces a no less dramatic political disaster. NAM had succeeded in the past to maintain a degree of polycentrism in the management of international politics, which has been destroyed by globalised neo-liberalism. The legitimacy of the international community represented by the United Nations (UN), NAM and the G77 plus China, has been abolished to the benefit of a self-appointed so called “international community” restricted to the G7 and a small number of selected “friends” (in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar, not exactly models of democratic republics!). Financial, economic and eventually military interventions are orchestrated by this so called “international community”, denying again the sovereign rights of all the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The same nations that met at Bandung, as well as those of Latin America and the Caribbean, are again challenged by neo-liberal globalisation, which is no less imbalanced by nature. Therefore, they must unite to face the challenge successfully as they did in the past. They will, in that perspective, feed a new wave of revival and progress of the three continents.