

THE CUBAN FACTOR IN NAMIBIA'S INDEPENDENCE  
1981 - 1990<sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction*

One of the cardinal objectives of the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.), as stated in Article II of its charter, is to "eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa"<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, with the active support of the organisation, most African countries attained nationhood in the 1960s while few others had their independence in 1970s. Namibia was however, liberated from former apartheid South Africa on the 21st of March 1990. Since then the process of her attainment of formal independence has generated a great deal of controversy among scholars. However, two schools of thought have emerged on the issue.

One school of thought which could be called "constructive engagement" holds tenaciously to the view that the U. S. policy in Namibia initiated by the former U. S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Chester Crocker, under the Reagan administration (1981 - 88) was responsible for the attainment of Namibia's independence. This was premised on the idea that the U.S. and Pretoria had a set of common interests including the prevention of "Soviet expansionism", maintaining access to strategic raw materials and protecting the sea route round the cape.<sup>3</sup> In view of this South African was induced by the U. S. to withdraw from Namibia and reform apartheid.

The other school of thought which may be called the Africanist, believed strongly that the Cuban factor reflected in

the defeat of the South African Forces at Angola front in late 1987 hastened the process of decolonisation in Namibia. It was after this defeat this school emphasized that the South Africans, accepted a resolution to withdraw from Southern Angola and implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 which eventually led to Namibia's independence.

Till date not much has been written generally on the role played by the Cubans in the Liberation struggle in Africa. Her involvement in this area dated back to the 1960s when she identified with the aims and aspirations of African Nationalism. Thus she found receptive audience among African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea and Ahmed Ben Bella of Algeria. This paper therefore reassesses the role played by the Cubans in the process of decolonisation in Namibia during the era of former U.S. President Ronald Reagan between 1981 and 1990. We had to focus on the aforementioned date because it was during that time that the policy of constructive engagement, which inadvertently linked Namibia's independence to the extraneous issue of Cuban withdrawal from Angola, was in operation.

#### *U.S. Policy of Constructive Engagement under the Reagan Administration*

As previously mentioned, the policy of Constructive Engagement was originated by Chester Crocker, former U. S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, during the Reagan administration. According to him 'Washington should work closely with former apartheid South Africa rather than ostracising it.<sup>4</sup> By doing so he believed that the former apartheid South African government will be readily induced to reform apartheid and leave Namibia.<sup>5</sup> Indeed with particular reference to Namibia, he stressed that the process of decolonisation could be hastened

through a reapproachment with South Africa which was believed to hold the key to any settlement on the issue. Thus, writing in Foreign Affairs (Winter 1980/81) Crocker laid out his hopes for keeping change under control.

*Without Western engagement in the region as a whole, it will not be possible to insure that South Africans are permitted to build their own future. The American stance must be firmly supportive of a regional climate conducive to compromise and accommodation.<sup>6</sup>*

He also stated that the U.S would insist, on linkage of the Namib. in issue to the Cuban presence in Angola.

*African leaders would have no basis for resisting the Namibian Angola linkage once they are made to realise that they can only get a Namibian settlement through us.<sup>7</sup>*

This was the belief of Chester Crocker and his followers. But this belief that by embracing apartheid the U.S. would make South Africa to reform apartheid and leave Namibia was erroneous. Not only did South Africa refuse to reform apartheid, she also refused to leave Namibia. Indeed in Namibia, the apartheid regime institutionalised its stay by establishing an interim government on the 17th of June, 1985,<sup>8</sup> just four years after the U.S. announcement of its policy of constructive engagement with South Africa in May, 1981. The interim government was of course, condemned by the international community. However, the former racist government established it in order to divert the attention of the international community from criticising it for refusing to withdraw from Namibia. The hopelessness of the policy in attaining Namibia's independence was evident in Robert Manin's statement that the policy should be termed "destructive engagement".<sup>9</sup>

Explaining further this destructive aspect of the policy in Namibia the former Zimbabwe Foreign Minister, Witness Mangwene said in 1985 that:

*Namibia is in fact further from independence today than it was prior to the emergence of the obnoxious 'constructive engagement' and the introduction of the so-called policy in the overall Namibian equation has in reality had the effect of delaying any movement towards achieving the long overdue decolonisation of that territory.*<sup>10</sup>

It was certainly in this respect that Jerry Frank, a former African specialist in U.S., who served in the National Security Council under the Carter administration, stated that 'all that constructive engagement had accomplished was to give South Africans four more years of breathing space in Namibia.<sup>11</sup> More importantly, the policy had the effect of almost destroying the earlier progress made on the Namibian talks by the Contact Group or the Western Five consisting of the United States, Britain, France, Germany and Canada. The contact Group had succeeded in September 1978 in coercing South Africa to accept, although reluctantly, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 435. This provided for a cessation of hostilities, withdrawal of South African troops, and free elections supervised by a military and civilian United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) leading to early independence.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from almost institutionalising South Africa's stay in Namibia the policy equally complicated and delayed Namibia independence through the linkage issue. As earlier noted, Crocker had stated that the U.S. would insist on the linkage of the Namibian independence to the Cuban presence in Angola in order to force African leaders to accept a Namibian settlement through the U.S. Consequently, by mid 1981, he talked ambiguously about an empirical relationships between the

Cubans in Angola and south Africa in Namibia. He emphasized this again in July, 1982 when he stated that "while the Contact Group had no mandate to negotiate anything with Angola", 'what we (the United States) are seeking is parallel movement on the two questions - South African withdrawal from Namibia as provided for under the UN Plan Resolution 435 and Cuban withdrawal from Angola.<sup>13</sup> As a result there were numerous contacts between the U.S. and the MPLA government of Dos Santo to accept the linkage idea. But Angola consistently rejected the linkage idea. She stated that Cuban presence in Angola was necessitated by South Africa's destabilisation policy and support for UNITA.

It should, however, be noted that a fundamental reason for the U.S. insistence on linkage idea, was due to the fact that the foreign policy makers in Reagan's administration were mostly "globalists", those that were interested in reducing regional or local conflicts to cold war strategic competition between the U.S. and former U.S.S.R.<sup>14</sup> Reagan's obsession with Cuban presence in Angola linked Namibian independence to Cuban withdrawal from Angola despite the unrelatedness of the two issues. The linkage issue continued to serve as a log jam to the whole negotiation process. The other four members of the Contact Group rejected the idea of linkage. France in particular, protested and finally suspended her membership of the Contact Group in December, 1982.<sup>15</sup> Earlier in October, 1982 her foreign Minister, Claude Cheysson had stated that "the U.S. should bear the full responsibility for blocking the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 435 on Namibia's independence".<sup>16</sup>

In like manner, the Reagan administration further obstructed Namibia's independence by devising a new system

for writing Namibia's constitution. In collaboration with South Africa, she suggested proportional representation or single membership for choosing delegates that would write the Namibia constitution.<sup>17</sup> Thus prolonging South Africa's stay in Namibia. This suggestion which deviated from the original U.N. plan for Namibia independence was totally unacceptable to SWAPO and Front Line States.

Thus it can be seen that the policy of constructive engagement did not in any way advance the decolonisation process in Namibia. Rather it blocked the independence of Namibia in the areas discussed above.

### **The Cuban Factor**

Having seen the futility of the 'constructive engagement' in attaining Namibia's independence, we now turn to the Cuban factor argument. In our view, the Cuban linkage in Namibia's independence raises fundamentally such relevant issues as the resurgence of cold war rivalry between the U.S. and former U.S.S.R., linkage politics, origin of Cubans in Angola and how this hastened the process of decolonisation in Namibia.

As previously noted, the globalist view of the Reagan administration foreign policy makers which enabled them to view regional or local conflicts within the prism of cold war perspectives made the U.S. to link U.N. Namibian plan to the issue of Cuban withdrawal from Angola. In Southern Africa international communism and Soviet presence rather than apartheid was considered by Ronald Reagan as one major source of instability in the region. It was this reasoning that formed part of the philosophy of "constructive engagement". This is implicit in Reagan's insistence that the issue of Namibia independence be made conditional in the withdrawal of Cuban

troops from Angola. This explains the introduction into the complex Namibian problem-cold war inspired linkage politics.

Furthermore, the U.S. inadvertently designed the policy of constructive engagement and the linkage issue to make it appear as if Angola was preventing the people of Namibia from attaining her independence. She supported her linkage doctrine with the theory of Arthur Stein known in international relations as 'linkage politics'.<sup>18</sup> This means that the policy of a state in a given issue could be felt by another state in a different area. Thus America's policy was that of making its course of action concerning the issue of Namibian independence contingent upon Cuba's withdrawal of its troops from Angola.

Stein also makes clear the fact that while linkage has always existed as a means of national influence, its popularity in the U.S. was due to the declining power of the United States in world Affairs. This decline was particularly noticeable in Southern Africa. For instance, the United States having more or less lost its influence in Mozambique and Angola to then Communist influence was increasingly been challenged by the former Soviet Union every where including Southern Africa. Thus in Southern Africa the U.S. was determined to 'roll back' perceived Soviet interest or punish movements seeking greater independence and opposing imperialists interest.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the adoption of linkage politics was designed to ensure American influence and dominance in the region and thus secure a foreign policy success and prop up South Africa, her ideological ally. Of course, most foreign policy strategies are designed to seek national interest of the nations concerned.

Indeed the Reagan administration made linkage politics notorious as it used it whenever it was in difficult situation in international politics.

Be that as it may, it should be noted that the origin of Cuban presence in Angola had to do with the acceptance of Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) decision in 1975 to call on international assistance to repel the South African invasion initiated on the eve of Angola's independence.<sup>20</sup> The Angolan authorities then had repeatedly stressed that the Cubans were deployed in Angola in defensive capacity to assist in the development and training of the Angolan Armed Forces.<sup>21</sup>

The Angolan government however, emphasised that the Cubans had not taken part in combat action against South Africa's forces who were then violating Angola's territorial integrity and that Cuba's presence was in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and is a joint agreement between Angola and Cuba.<sup>22</sup>

Angola's position was supported by the Frontline States including Nigeria and Kenya. In a communique issued by Frontline Summit Meeting held in Lusaka on the eve of the meeting on 4th September, 1982, it observed with indignation that the U.S. attempt to link negotiation about Namibian independence with the withdrawal of Cuban forces in Angola.<sup>23</sup> The Summit meeting instead emphasized the importance of separating the process of decolonisation of Namibia from the Cuban presence in Angola.<sup>24</sup> It felt that Angola had the right to safe-guard its security for which incidentally she pays financially with the proceeds of her oil revenue sold to American oil corporations in Angola.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, we observed that it was of ironic importance that in Angola, large segment of American business community favoured a peaceful settlement or management of the Angola and Namibian issues. This was necessary in order not to jeopardise their business interests.<sup>26</sup>

It should be noted that after several months of impatience on the Namibian talks, Angola presented, in December, 1984, a compromise five-point proposal in which she accepted a form of linkage championed by the United States and South Africa. Angola agreed to the phased withdrawal of Cuban troops only when South African forces in Namibia had been reduced to 1,500 infantry men in accordance with UN Resolution 435.<sup>27</sup> The phased withdrawal of Cuban troops was to take a three year period which only covered their removal from Southern Angola. It was however, difficult to reach a satisfactory agreement on how to persuade Angola to repatriate the Cubans. Actually, the problem with linkage was that continuous South African incursions into Angola kept the Cuban forces there. It may be argued that but for persistent South African incursions, the Angolan government might have eventually, asked the Cubans to leave some years later.

### *The Defeat of the South Africans*

In order to intensify her attack on Angola, Pretoria in November 1987 sought to establish a new base for UNITA at Cuito Cuanavale in Southern Angola. In response, Cuba increased the strength of its forces in the country. Victoria Britain observed:

*"The South African offensive was the most ambitious operations since 1975. It aimed at capture of Cuito Cuanavale and a completely new strategic base for UNITA to attack Central Angola. At the same time FAPLA was facing myriad attacks from an estimated 20,000 UNITA forces well equipped by South Africa, funded by U.S. and increasingly trained in Morocco and the Israeli aided UNITA facilities in Zaire."*<sup>28</sup>

The Cuban and FAPLA forces committed themselves to the defence of this area and a major battle continued through late 1987 into May, 1988 around Cuito Cuanavale. By then, South Africa realised that she had lost control of the air in Southern Angola and had been defeated by the Soviet backed Cuban and Angolan forces at Cuito Cuanavale. After this defeat she also realised the necessity for negotiating a withdrawal and seek non-military solutions to the crisis.

The negotiation began in May 1988 with the U.S. represented by Dr. Chester Crocker himself. By August, a cease fire had been agreed and South African Defence forces were able to begin their withdrawal from Southern Angola. By December, 1988, South Africa, Angola and Cuba formerly signed on agreement to (i) implement Resolution 435 opening the way for Namibian independence and (ii) a time table for Cuban withdrawal linked to South African withdrawal from Namibia.<sup>29</sup> It was in this way that Cuba contributed greatly to the process of decolonisation in Namibia. The importance of the Cubans in hastening the process of decolonisation in Namibia thus lies in the historic defeat inflicted on the South Africans at Cuito Cuanavale.

The defeat thus brought to an end twenty-three years of bitter warfare between SWAPO and South Africa. What proved difficult to be solved through the U.S. policy of 'Constructive engagement' was solved militarily through the Cubans. More importantly, the South Africans were brought to the negotiating table and made to sign the all important United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 leading to Namibia independence.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have demonstrated that the Reagan administration's policy of 'constructive engagement' pursued with South Africa could not be held responsible for Namibia's attainment of independence. Instead the policy complicated and obstructed Namibia's independence in three significant ways. First by embracing apartheid, Pretoria was given enough encouragement to consolidate her illegal stay in Namibia through the establishment of an illegal interim government.

Secondly and more importantly, by linking Namibia's UN plan to the extraneous issue of Cuban withdrawal from Angola as a precondition for Namibia's independence also prolonged South Africa's stay in Namibia. Lastly by devising a new constitutional plan that was different from the original UN plan for Namibia, the U.S. obstructed Namibia's independence. The complicated method of electing or choosing delegates to write the constitution was, of course, unacceptable to SWAPO and Frontline States.

On the other hand, the Cuban factor tremendously hastened the process of decolonization of Namibia. In view of this significant role played by the Cubans, a mono casual explanation in form of Cuban factor could perhaps be provided for Namibia's attainment of independence.

## Notes and References

1. This article was prompted by the argument expressed in the editorial opinion of West Africa Magazine (2-8 April, 1990) as to whether it was the policy of 'Constructive engagement' of Chester Crocker or the Military defeat of the former South African Defence Forces (SADF) by the Soviet backed Cuban and Angolan forces at

- Cuito Cuanavale that brought independence to Namibia.
2. Zdenek Cervenk, 'The O.A.U. and the Quest for Unit, 1963-1976' *Tarikh*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 47-58.
  3. George V. Wright, U.S. Foreign Policy and Destabilisation in Southern Africa, *Review of African Political Economy*, Militarism, Warlords and problems of democracy. No. 45146, pp. 157-167.
  4. *Ibid*, P. 160.
  5. *Ibid*, P. 160.
  6. *Ibid*, p. 160.
  7. *Ibid*, p. 160.
  8. *Afric Asia*, August 1985, p. 16.
  9. Cited in *South Magazine* February, 1985, p. 30.
  10. Cited in *The Guardian*, July 18, 1985, p. 7.
  11. *Afric Asia*, July 1985, p. 10.
  12. Ruth First, *Namibia, Recent History, South West Africa. Africa South of the Sahara*, England: European Publications, 1983, pp. 603-663.
  13. *International defence and aid fund on South Africa briefing paper*. No. 6, November 1982, pp. 1-4.
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  15. *Africa*, 1983, p. 5.
  16. For more details see Adebayo P. F., *United States Policy of Constructive Engagement and its prospects for Namibian Independence*, Unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, University of Ife (O.A.U) 1986, pp. 36-41.

17. Arthur Steir, 'The Politics of linkage', *World Politics*. Vol. 70, October, 1980, pp. 62-68.
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20. Fola Soremekun, *Angola: The Road to Independence*, (Ile-Ife, University press, 1983) and Ravis S. M. Koroma, "Angola the struggle for birth right" *Lusophone Area Studies, Journal*, No. 2 July, 1983, pp. 22-47.
21. See Article 51 of the UN Charter.
22. Cited in *Concord Weekly* (4th February, 1985) pp. 21-24.
23. *Ibid*, pp. 21-24.
24. *Ibid*, pp. 21-24.
25. Gerald Bender, *Angola: Left, Right and Wrong: Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1981, pp. 53-59.
26. Cited in *Concord Weekly Op.Cit* (4th February, 1985, pp. 21-24).
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