

# **READING CABRAL ON DEMOCRACY**

*by Lars Rudebeck\**

2004/2005

## **Historical significance of Cabral's work**

More than thirty years after Amílcar Cabral was murdered, on 20 January 1973, his name is only rarely mentioned in international media, as opposed to then. His historical significance remains intact, however, not only as an outstanding leader of African decolonization but also as a political thinker and strategist of unusual merits. Although originating and reaching its most immediate concrete aims in Guiné and Cape Verde, in terms of intellectual scope and political impact his work transcended by far the narrow geographical limits of those two countries. Among the leading figures in modern African history, Cabral is in fact quite unique in his capacity to integrate political practice and political theory into a coherent whole; combining as he did elements of classical marxism with neo-marxist dependency theory into an original analysis of social reality, and skillfully applying this to the concrete task of decolonizing his native land.

## **What kind of political liberation?**

Granted that we view Cabral as a theoretically minded freedom fighter and political leader, it is relevant to ask about his views on democracy, in theory as well as in practice. In his case, theory and practice furthermore always go closely together in a truly dialectical sense.

What kind of democracy did Cabral thus have in mind for Guiné and Cape Verde, once they had been freed from colonial rule? How did he deal with the task of combining democratic participation and organizational efficiency?

---

\* The present text draws upon but is still quite different from my previous article of a similar nature "Reading Cabral in 1993", *Review of African Political Economy*, Sheffield, no. 58, 1993, pp. 63-70.

In discussing these questions, while striving to avoid anachronistic criticism and still benefitting from the privilege of hindsight, I will focus upon a few carefully selected quotes to bring out the flavour of Cabral's reasoning and to summarize key points. Let us begin at the end by quoting Cabral's 1973 New Year's message to his Guinean and Cape Verdean compatriots. This was broadcast from Conakry at midnight on 31 January 1972 by PAIGC's *Radio Libertação*, only twenty days before Cabral was killed (Cabral 1980, pp. 288-298). Although not conceived as such, because of the murder it came to be viewed as a kind of political testament.<sup>1</sup>

As Cabral was speaking on the radio in his clear intensive staccato voice,<sup>2</sup> the armed struggle for independence was raging in its tenth year. Victory was within sight. Cabral speaks of it as certain, without demagoguery. Still, at that moment, nobody could know exactly that only a little more than a year later, on 25 April 1974, the fascist regime in Lisbon would be toppled through a coup, swiftly triggering in turn the independence of Guiné in 1974 and in 1975 also that of Cape Verde and the other Portuguese colonies. The fall of fascism in Portugal was brought about by young officers of the colonial army who had learnt the hard way, not least in the swamps and jungles of Guiné, that classical colonialism was coming to its end in Africa. These dramatic events in the history of decolonization can be causally linked, historically, to the very successes of Cabral's political and military strategy until then.

The following extracts from the message (Cabral 1980, pp. 288, 289) demonstrate the importance Cabral attached to popular participation and to certain aspects of democratic procedure. The thorny questions of what kind of democracy and its conditions of implementation in the post-colonial situation are not touched upon, however:

As you all know, in the past year we held general elections in the liberated areas (of Guinea-Bissau /my comment/), with universal suffrage and a secret vote, for the creation of Regional Councils and the first National Assembly in our people's history. In all sectors of all regions, the elections were conducted in an atmosphere of great enthusiasm on the part of the population. The electorate voted massively for the lists that had been drawn up after eight months of public and democratic discussions, in which the representatives of each sector were selected. When the elected Regional Councils met, they elected in their turn

---

<sup>1</sup> José Pedro Castanheira, in his close investigation of the murder and its background, *Quem mandou matar Amílcar Cabral?*, Relógio d'Água, Lisbon, 1995 (third edition 1999), pp. 76-77, points out that an even later document does exist. This is the report on "the situation of the struggle" which Cabral was to have delivered to the Council of Ministers of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in early February. According to Castanheira, Cabral put the final touches to that text only a few hours before he was killed. It was never delivered, however. I have not had access to the document, but judging from Castanheira's summary, it does not add anything with regard to the political system foreseen for post-colonial Guiné and Cape Verde.

<sup>2</sup> I have in my possession a tape recording of the original broadcast against which I have checked Michael Wolfers' translation (Cabral 1980, pp. 288-298). The translation follows the original very closely.

representatives to the People's National Assembly from among their members. This will have 120 members, of whom 80 were elected from among the mass of the people and 40 from among the political cadres, soldiers, technicians and others of the Party. As you know, the representatives for the sectors temporarily occupied by the colonialists have been chosen provisionally.

...

In the course of this coming year and as soon as it is conveniently possible we shall call a meeting of our People's National Assembly in Guiné, so that it can fulfill the first historic mission incumbent on it: the proclamation of the existence of our state, the creation of an executive for this state and the promulgation of a fundamental law -- that of the first constitution in our history -- which will be the basis of the active existence of our African nation. That is to say: legitimate representatives of our people, chosen by the populations and freely elected by conscientious and patriotic citizens of our land, will proceed to the most important act of their life and of the life of our people, that of declaring before the world that our African nation, forged in the struggle, is irrevocably determined to march forward to independence without waiting for the consent of the Portuguese colonialists and that from then on the executive of our state under the leadership of our Party, the PAIGC, will be the sole, true and legitimate representative of our people in all the national and international questions that concern them.

The 1972 elections in the PAIGC-controlled areas were single-party elections. The lists of candidates presented to the voters had been drawn up by local people at meetings called by the party/liberation movement, according to the principle of 'democratic centralism'. This may well have been the most popularly based way possible under the conditions of the armed struggle, but it was clearly not democracy in the sense of including the right to form political parties freely in the future independent state.

As we also know now, it would take until 1990 in Cape Verde and until 1991 in Guinea-Bissau before the single-party system instituted during the armed struggle was constitutionally abolished. The first multi-party elections were held in Cape Verde in 1991 and in Guinea-Bissau in 1994. Let us return below to the question if democratization might have occurred earlier, if Cabral's thinking had been allowed to guide the subsequent events.

## **The weapon of theory**

The 1973 New Year's message is straight and clear. In that sense it does indeed illustrate Amilcar Cabral's intellectual approach. But for a more theoretical grasp, we have to consult other parts of his work. *The Weapon of Theory* is the title of one of Cabral's most famous texts.<sup>3</sup> With its straightforward pragmatic

---

<sup>3</sup> This is the address Cabral delivered to the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in Havana, 3-12 January 1966. It has been published in a number of versions, in several different languages. The most complete English language version is found in Cabral 1980, pp. 119-137. An earlier English language version (Cabral 1969, pp. 73-90) does exist, however, which as far as this particular text is concerned I have found somewhat closer to the PAIGC document in my possession (Cabral 1966). The earlier English version will be used here.

connotation this title could well have been that of his entire written work. But let us turn first to an even earlier document, *Brief Analysis of the Social Structure in Guinea* (Cabral 1969, pp. 46-61), first presented in 1964, to a seminar held at the Frantz Fanon Centre in Treviglio, Milan, on 1-3 May of that year, to illustrate Cabral's way of moving from theoretical analysis to political conclusions.<sup>4</sup> A few key passages follow here (Cabral 1969, pp. 46, 49-50):

I should like to tell you something about the situation in our country, 'Portuguese' Guinea, beginning with an analysis of the social situation, which has served as the basis for our struggle for national liberation. I shall make a distinction between the rural areas and the towns, or rather the urban centres, not that these are to be considered mutually opposed.

In the rural areas we have found it necessary to distinguish between two distinct groups; on the one hand, the group which we consider semi-feudal, represented by the Fulas, and, on the other hand, the group which we consider, so to speak, without any defined form of state organisation, represented by the Balantes.

...

Among the Fulas the first group – the chiefs and their entourages – are tied to colonialism...

Given the general context of our traditions, or rather the superstructure created by the economic conditions in Guinea, the Fula peasants have a strong tendency to follow their chiefs... Among the Balantes and the groups without any defined form of state organisation... these groups... put up much more resistance against the Portuguese than the others and they have maintained intact their tradition of resistance to colonial penetration. This is the group we found most ready to accept the idea of national liberation.

Here I should like to broach one key problem, which is of enormous importance for us, as we are a country of peasants, and that is the problem of whether or not the peasantry represents the main revolutionary force. I shall confine myself to my own country, Guinea, where it must be said at once that the peasantry is not a revolutionary force... A distinction must be drawn between a *physical force* and a *revolutionary force* (my emphases)...

This distinction between the two groups is theoretically founded in sociology and anthropology. Two years later, in his speech in Havana, Cabral would also use for the first time the terms *vertical* versus *horizontal* social structure to denote the key conceptual dichotomy implied (Cabral 1969, p. 78) but without essentially adding anything to his analysis. In Milan in 1964 he still used more common words, although with great precision.

## **Two opposed modes of thinking about the politics of liberation**

It is not possible here to develop the complex theoretical and political issues related to the way Cabral applied the vertical/horizontal distinction. An attempt to sum up my own and others' contributions to this debate, until then,

---

<sup>4</sup> *Brief Analysis...* is not included in the Cabral 1980 selection, for which the texts were selected by the PAIGC. It is however found in Cabral 1969, pp. 46-61, the only English language version available of which I am aware.

is found in Rudebeck 1991, pp. 48-54. Let it just be noted that in 1964 Cabral consciously focused attention on that dimension of the social structure of Guinean society that was most relevant to the task of mobilizing the peasants politically for anti-colonial resistance. He was successful in this, as we know.

It is easy, today, to point out that Cabral's analysis was far from complete, and in fact much more limited to the specific tasks of the anti-colonial struggle than was generally thought at the time. It did not deal in depth with the tasks of post-colonial state construction, but tended to take them for granted. All those, including myself, who speculated then about the experience of the liberated areas as a model for a future popularly based political system have, as we know, become thoroughly deceived by subsequent events. I would like, however, to quote myself from 1974, in my first major study of political development in Guinea-Bissau (Rudebeck 1974), to demonstrate that even then there was awareness of what I still consider to be the key issue, i. e. the issue of democratization (p. 145):

Looking at the structures and the institutions described (i. e. those of PAIGC-controlled Guinea-Bissau in the early 1970s /my comment in 2004/)... and trying to evaluate them from the point of view of political mobilization and democratic centralism, the extent to which they reflect the basic contradiction referred to above (i. e. the contradiction between central control and democracy "in the most elementary and literal sense of that word"/ my comment in 2004/) is striking. On the one hand, we have the undeniable tendencies toward personal leadership and concentration of power at the top developed under Cabral... On the other hand, we have the equally undeniable existence of critical and self-critical discussion within the party, as well as powerful elements of revolutionary democracy at all levels inside the country. It is an open theoretical and empirical question, whether a durable synthesis is possible between such tendencies, or whether they will have to remain in contradiction until one of them absorbs the other.

This contradiction seems to have become quite clear to Cabral himself, as well as the need for deeper analysis, as the struggle went on. The most important source available to me on this are my own notes from a long conversation I had with Cabral in Conakry on 10 May 1972. On that occasion, he described at length the system of government he said he wanted to see at work in Guinea-Bissau after the achievement of independence. This was to be a system with political and economic power firmly anchored in decentralized assemblies of the people. The functions of the state were to be strictly limited. The key was "the institutionalization of structures which tie the people and the leaders together in such ways that the people's participation and control of their leaders are facilitated in all possible ways" (Cabral in Rudebeck, 1974, pp. 146-147). In his discussion with me, Cabral called this "cooperative democracy".

In a democratic perspective, the cooperative system obviously rests on the assumption that the people are a "revolutionary force" and not a mere "physical force", as Cabral had labelled the Guinean peasants in his 1964 seminar lecture in Milan. In some ways such a cooperative system may seem close to classical anarchism, considering the limited functions assigned to the state. There were

other unresolved problems as well in Cabral's theoretical vision. How far, most importantly, can constitutional political power be decentralized to collectivities, be they peasant villages or associations or trade unions, or something else, before coming into conflict with the key democratic notion of individual citizenship? Understandably, Cabral had no ready answers to such difficult questions.

We see thus, how two different modes of thinking were ambivalently posed against each other within Cabral's own analysis of political goals and the social basis of the liberation movement: one marked by pragmatic, leninist party theory combined with conventional modernization thinking on socio-economic progress, the other revolutionary and democratic.

'Democratic centralism' was successfully applied for the task of conquering political power in Guiné and Cape Verde. The problem for the future, however, was that the question of the social basis of the democratic alternative was not confronted, thus opening up in practice for a single-party system cut off from the majority of the people, once independence had been achieved. In reality, there was no other model on the agenda.

Nowhere in Cabral's writings do we find, seriously conceptualized, any realistic way of making the revolutionary-democratic alternative come true in the post-colonial situation, including how to combine it with the basic tenets of constitutional democracy. The only way considered is the unrealistic one of asking the "petty bourgeoisie" to "abandon power to the workers and the peasants", as he put it in Milan 1964 (Cabral 1969, p. 57). In Havana 1966, in an expression that would become famous, he asked for the "class suicide" of the petty bourgeois leaders of the liberation struggle. The passage is subtly ambiguous. Are we listening to a realist, a voluntarist, a prophet or a self-ironist – or all of these together (p. 89)?

To retain the power which national liberation puts in its hands, the petty bourgeoisie has only one path: to give free rein to its natural tendencies to become more bourgeois, to permit the development of a bureaucratic and intermediary bourgeoisie in the commercial cycle, in order to transform itself into a national pseudo-bourgeoisie, that is to say to negate the revolution and necessarily ally itself with imperialist capital. Now all this corresponds to the neo-colonial situation, that is, to the betrayal of the objectives of national liberation. In order not to betray these objectives, the petty bourgeoisie has only one choice: ... the revolutionary petty bourgeoisie must be capable of committing suicide as a class in order to be reborn as revolutionary workers, completely identified with the deepest aspirations of the people to which they belong.

A conceivable third option, which we might call liberal or constitutional democracy 'with a human face', was absent in Cabral's thinking on political liberation as it reaches us in his writings, sayings and actions in the period from 1964 to his death in 1973. It cannot at all be excluded, though, that Cabral, the pragmatist, would have turned to such an option as a middle way between giving free rein to naked 'petty bourgeois' interest and abandoning power

(concretely to whom?), had he had the chance to be faced with post-colonial global realities.<sup>5</sup>

Liberal democracy 'with a human face', however, also requires that a people of citizens, a 'nation', is in visible formation, able to provide the basis of a largely democratically functioning state. This has proved to be the case in Cape Verde, but so far not sustainably in Guinea-Bissau.<sup>6</sup> For longer-term legitimacy and thus sustainability, the third option also requires that at least some basic popular expectations for development are actually met in practice.

## Democracy, development, and ethnicity

As far as Cabral in person was concerned, the discussion of the crucial issues just raised was cut short by the assassin's bullet on 20 January 1973. His theoretical work as we know it mirrors his political task. Taken as a whole, it never reached beyond the point of independence, whether in politics or economics, except for fragmentary pieces. Still some of those pieces carry theoretical significance beyond the context of the anti-colonial struggle, precisely because they are theoretically founded.

One such fragment which I consider particularly significant may initially seem to be quite limited to the concrete context of the anti-colonial struggle in Guiné. In reality it points toward the future, by shedding light in hindsight on aspects of the development failures of independent Guinea-Bissau. The quote is from a transcription into Portuguese of a *crioulo* tape recording from a seminar for party people held in August 1971 (Cabral 1971, p. 14):<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> According to Carlos Veiga, in his contribution on 10 September 2004 to the *Simpósio Internacional Amílcar Cabral* entitled "Cabral e a construção do Estado em Cabo Verde", the option of liberal democracy was in fact present in the pre-revolutionary thinking of the young Cabral, although later abandoned. Veiga also argued that the liberal democratic model of the state which is consensual in Cape Verde today, was in fact the very opposite of what Cabral had had in mind during the period of armed struggle. It is of course true that single- and multiparty systems are each other's opposites. But what about "cooperative democracy"? Carlos Veiga was the first prime minister after the abolition of the single-party system in Cape Verde, elected by the opposition against the former single party PAICV.

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Delfim da Silva, in his recent book *Guiné-Bissau. Páginas de história política, rumos da democracia*, Firquidja Editora, Bissau, 2003, interestingly explains this in terms of the military nature of the Guinean state, accentuated by the coup d'état of 14 November 1980, and opening up for the ethnification of political power as opposed to the development of a nation/people of citizens. Besides writing political analysis, Delfim da Silva has also been politically active in Guinea-Bissau ever since the 1970s. Cf. also Rudebeck 2001.

<sup>7</sup> My translation. The Portuguese text is as follows: "Os camaradas responsáveis de todos os ramos devem ajudar a nossa população a fazer campos colectivos. Isso é uma grande experiência para nós amanhã, camaradas. Quem não compreende isso ainda não entendeu nada da nossa luta, por mais que tenha combatido, por mais héroi que seja."

Regardless of their specific responsibilities, the comrades in charge of all branches of our organization must help our people organize collective fields. This is a great experiment for our future, comrades. Those who do not understand this have not yet understood anything of our struggle, however much they have fought and however heroic they may be.

Cabral used the term "collective fields". In the context of his presentation, though, he was not talking about kolkhozes, but about assuming common (shared) responsibility for the solution of common (shared) problems. What disturbed him was that mobilization in the PAIGC-controlled areas of the country was mainly political and ideological, and not linked to economic transformation. Quite on the contrary, the conditions of the anti-colonial liberation war tended even to reinforce traditional self-reliance in production, in the sense that commercial and administrative links to the colonial system were cut. This paradoxical, forced return to traditional collectivism was not used for the purpose of furthering transformation and modernization on a common basis. Instead the traditional village was used, politically, for the purpose of extracting economic surplus for the armed struggle from the population.

Since independence, on the other hand, any attempts to develop agriculture except by privatization have been undermined by the fact that the leadership has given "free rein to its natural tendencies to become more bourgeois", to use Cabral's prophetic phrase as quoted earlier.

At least in the short run, these developments have in turn contributed to heightening the significance of ethnicity in politics, in Guiné as elsewhere, by favouring partial solutions to problems that in reality cannot be solved except by transcending partial interests. In times of 'ethnic cleansing' world wide, the following definition of 'ethnicity' offered by Cabral thus retains all its validity, theoretically as well as politically (quoted here from *Guinea-Bissau. Alfabeto*, 1984, p. 26).<sup>8</sup>

It is not the existence of a *race*, an ethnic group, or anything of the kind, that defines the behaviour of a human aggregate. No. It is the social environment and the problems arising from the reactions of this environment and the reactions of the human beings in question. All this defines the behaviour of a human aggregate.

In other words: a group of men and women -- human beings -- make up a "race" or an "ethnic group", or whatever, to the extent that they confront common problems and struggle for common aspirations.

Thus by confronting, in 'common', developmental problems 'common' to larger groups while leaving problems 'common' to more limited groups to be resolved by those groups, ethnic division is transcended. This line of thought is linked to the view that democracy and democratization imply the equalization

---

<sup>8</sup> My translation.



of the power to deal with problems of development common to large numbers of ordinary people.

### **What if Cabral had not been killed?**

We noted that Cabral, in his theoretical work, did not go very deeply into the problems of post-colonial development. We shall never know if he would have had the time and force to develop his analyses, had he survived. But if so, this would most likely have been within the realm of political economy. There is an obvious void in his work, as it stands, with regard to linking the transformation of the economy and the democratization of political structure to each other. This is also the area where the failures of independent Guinea-Bissau are most visible. At the same time, passages as the ones just quoted on collectivization and ethnicity do indicate a possible direction of thought which follows logically from Cabral's insights.

His notion of "cooperative democracy" is about a developmental state organized in such a way that the political power to control the use of developmental resources does not fly away from those who need development most. As I see it, this is basically about developing simultaneously both the constitutional dimension of democracy and that of popular sovereignty or citizen autonomy (cf. Rudebeck 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005).

In the case of countries such as Guinea-Bissau, the great majority of those who need development most are rural people – farmers, peasants who cannot live decently off their land and therefore migrate to cities where they also cannot live decently – and who lack the power to inflect state policy, often in spite of the fact that democratic institutions are in place.

What we are faced with in such cases is not only the classical question of how to democratize power over the use of economic resources within a somewhat controllable national space, but furthermore, how to do this under current conditions of globalization, in very weak 'nation' states, with or without nations.<sup>9</sup>

*September 2004*

---

<sup>9</sup> However unrealistic or premature as a political project, Cabral's persisting insistence upon "the political unity of Guiné and Cape Verde" can probably best be understood in the light of his understanding or fear that Guiné would not be able to carry out such a task alone. To that extent, his understanding, or fear, has proved to be highly realistic.

Minor corrections, additions and revisions added in December 2004, May 2005, June 2005, October 2005.

## References

- Cabral, Amílcar. *Fondements et objectifs de la libération nationale. I - Sur la domination impérialiste*, extracts from Cabral's speech at the first Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, held in Havana, 3-14 January 1966, Conakry, PAIGC, 1966 (mimeo).
- *Revolution in Guinea. An African people's struggle*, Stage 1, London, 1969.
- *Sobre alguns problemas práticos da nossa vida e da nossa luta*, transcription from tape recording of speech at meeting of the Superior Council of the Struggle, 9-16 August 1971, Conakry, 1971 (mimeo).
- *Unity and struggle. Speeches and writings*, texts selected by the PAIGC, translated by Michael Wolfers, African Writers Series 1980, Heinemann, London, Nairobi, Ibadan, 1980.
- Guinea-Bissau. Alfabeto*, texts edited by Carlos Lopes, photographs by Giuseppe Lodi and M. Luisa Sabbadini, Terra & Imagini, Gruppo Volontariato Civile, Bologna, 1984.
- Castanheira, José Pedro. *Quem mandou matar Amílcar Cabral?*, Relógio d'Água, Lisbon, 1995 (third edition 1999).
- Delfim da Silva, Fernando. *Guiné-Buissau. Páginas de história política, rumos da democracia*, Firquidja Editora, Bissau, 2003.
- Rudebeck, Lars. *Guinea-Bissau. A Study of Political Mobilization*, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala, 1974.
- "Conditions of people's development in postcolonial Africa," in Galli, Rosemary E. (ed.), *Rethinking the third world. Contributions toward a new conceptualization*, Crane Russak, New York and London, 1991, pp. 29-87.
- *On Democracy's Sustainability, Transition in Guinea-Bissau*, Sida Studies no. 4, Sida, Stockholm, 2001. Revised as *Colapso e Reconstrução Política na Guiné-Bissau 1998-2000. Um Estudo de Democratização Difícil*, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 2001.
- "Beyond Democratic Constitutionalism: on the twofold meaning of democracy and democratization," in *African Sociological Review* (Grahamstown, South Africa), vol. 6, no. 1, 2002, pp. 173-180. Somewhat revised in Tiina Kontinen and Maaria Seppänen (eds.), *Development – concepts, policies and practices. Essays in the memory of Michael Cowen*, Yearbook of the Finnish Society for Development Studies, Helsinki, 2003, pp. 71-80.
- "Democratisation and 'Civil Society' in a West-African Village," in *Decentralisation in Practice. Power, Livelihoods and Cultural Meaning in West Africa*, International Workshop Highlights, Uppsala, Sweden, May 4-6, 2004, IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development), London and Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, Uppsala University, Uppsala (brochure + CD-ROM), 21 pp.
- *The Move out of 'Post-Conflict' Viewed as a Process of 'Development. 'Think-piece' for workshop on Post-Conflict Transition in Africa*, Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), Uppsala, 4 June 2005, 6 pp.
- Veiga, Carlos. "Cabral e a construção do Estado em Cabo Verde", contribution to the *Simpósio Internacional Amílcar Cabral*, Praia, 9-12.9.2004.

