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RETHINKING REVOLUTION

New Strategies for Democracy & Social Justice

THE EXPERIENCES OF ERITREA, SOUTH AFRICA, PALESTINE & NICARAGUA

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In Eritrea, peasant women organize to partake in a postwar land reform, demanding an equal share in the benefits of the former colony's hard-won independence. Octogenarian railroad workers come out of retirement to reconstruct a rail link from the capital to the sea coast, as thousands of young people volunteer to repair damaged bridges, build new rural roads, reforest barren hillsides and educate impoverished villagers — all this to keep the new country from losing its economic independence. Even the president foregoes a salary for his first four years in office.

In South Africa, where the trade unions and the Communist Party are formally allied with the ruling African National Congress, organized workers champion the basic needs of all citizens in confrontations with capital and the new government, while they struggle to build what they call "islands of socialism." Meanwhile, the Communists publish contentious papers on the state's post-apartheid economic policy and on their own program and practice, sparking fierce and continuing debate over the future of the country.

In Nicaragua, a broad-based coalition of party and nonparty activists responds to the ravages of Hurricane Mitch with a program to eliminate poverty, protect natural resources and increase citizen participation. The plan integrates issues of gender equality, ethnic diversity and age and generation relations with a trenchant class analysis. It also advocates the democratization of power relations in the country, challenging the FSLN as well as the state to think and act differently.

Even in the still-occupied Palestinian territories, democratic forces contest the autocratic rule of Yasir Arafat while seeking new ways to resist colonial rule. Women organize to enhance their participation in the society and the political movements. Worker advocates organize to renovate the trade union movement. At the same time, diaspora Palestinians more and more assert their right to be included in any "settlement" of the national struggle.

While researching this book, I heard all sorts of exchanges over how best to open up and develop impoverished, formerly colonized societies. I learned of innovative strategies to overcome inequalities

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and unify divided citizenries. I saw thousands of people mobilize to make this happen. I heard vigorous debates over how to maintain the momentum — and the values — that got these movements to this point. Almost everywhere I went, I found people experimenting with new forms of organization, popular participation and direct action to radically reshape their societies.

So why is it that we hear so little of this? Are we really to take seriously the notion, pervasive now in mass culture, that greed is all there is? And that rage — or passivity — are the only available responses?

What happened to the vision of a world without injustice, inequality and oppression, a world in which the "exploitation of man by man" is recalled as a quirk of history and not experienced as an unexamined characteristic of daily life, one in which human community is the defining identity and not just a marketing slogan? Has such inspirational yearning — once the bedrock of left belief systems — expired? Or has it just been driven underground by the triumphalism of an ascendant right that today touts its gospel from a position of unprecedented power and global influence?

What I found over the five years of my research is that the vision is still very much with us — tarnished a bit, but no less vibrant and compelling than it ever was. What has been missing are viable and appropriate strategies to make it real. That most of us are unaware of the creative efforts to develop such strategies should not surprise anyone — that's part of what "globalization" is about — homogenizing and sanitizing our world view. Remedying this is a task for those who share the values that drive this vision.

Certainly the issues on which the left has historically thrived are as pressing as ever. Extremes of wealth and poverty are in our faces daily, thanks to a technological revolution that is driving capitalist expansion to new heights, even as whole populations languish on the margins — a reality that reaches us daily through the news media. Systems of gender, ethnic and racial inequality remain deeply entrenched throughout the world, perhaps more subtle (or subterranean) in some places but fueling entire political movements bent on protecting or extending them in others. The culture of selfishness, as embodied in the crass reductionism of the "bottom line," has never been as pervasive as it is today. Alienation is a palpable condition of everyday existence — commentators endlessly bemoan the loss of

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community, of civility, of empathy. And life itself, never mind its diminishing quality, is threatened as never before by the blind rush toward short-term profit.

Given this, where is the left? Where is the vision of social equality and environmental harmony to counter this? Where is the ideological and political leadership to pose a credible alternative powerful enough to rouse millions to action on its behalf? And where are the facts on the ground in this world-historical contest to render the left's outlook and program not only attractive to mass followings but viable?

I will argue here that effective revolutionary strategies are emerging where movements integrate short- and long-term social and political objectives and where they encourage popular participation in setting their expanded agendas. In doing so, they strengthen and diversify their social bases and heighten their capacity to wage (and sustain) protracted political struggles. Both the successes and the failures of these movements remind us that a revolution entails a thorough restructuring of society, not just a rotation of those at the top. And that this starts within the movement itself and in its interactions with the society it purports to lead, where it models what it stands for and learns from its own experience in trying to do so.

But these experiences also demonstrate that good will and model behavior are not enough. Nor are large numbers of individuals or disconnected social formations, however militant or well-motivated. It takes highly organized, disciplined and far-sighted leadership to marshal the forces needed to defeat the foes of equality and justice and to give these popular forces the coherence, the stamina and the direction to defend them afterward. The most vexing questions are: how to do this without recreating the very relations of repression and dominance that brought the people to the barricades in the first place, and how to maintain the momentum and the quality of popular participation in the transformation struggle once a political victory is achieved.

These are among the concerns and challenges that preoccupy the people I interviewed for this book. The answers they are finding speak not only to their urgent need for practical solutions to real problems, but to all of us who share their dream. Yet, most insist that this is an ongoing process whose end is not in sight. Perhaps the recognition and acceptance of this is the most important lesson here.

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Rethinking Revolution is a voyage into the thick of unfinished debates and dialogues among frontline activists over how to transform their societies. Most seek higher levels of material security, social equality and political participation in addition to the goal of national self-determination that brought many of them into politics in the first place. However, their circumstances differ quite a bit, as do their responses to the challenges they face today. One by one I have dived into these situations, recorded what I saw and heard, placed the results in a historical framework and then organized the material so that commonalities and contrasts might better be perceived.

* * *

This book is the account of four third-world revolutionary movements, all deriving from left traditions, to reposition themselves in the post-cold war global economic and political environment on behalf of a transformative vision — movements where new thinking about equality, democracy and social justice is put to the test of daily practice and not simply idle speculation. What these concepts mean in this changing world, how they relate to one another, and how the evolving nature of the struggles to achieve them help redefine potential outcomes are at the heart of this exploration.

While the political movements in the four states or states-in-the-making targeted for this project — Eritrea, South Africa, Palestine and Nicaragua — showed considerable promise of renewal and growth at the outset of my research in the early 1990s, their trajectories have varied widely in the years since. On the downside, the Palestinian national movement has been defeated and its left wing marginalized, though a renewed popular revolt is underway at the time I am wrapping up this project. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas remain strong but stalemated as a legal opposition unable, as yet, to rally the support needed to return to power by electoral means. In South Africa, the outcome of the left's uphill battle to restructure the country from within the apartheid-era state is far from clear. Even in Eritrea, where the liberation movement won the independence war outright and took unchallenged control of the state, the future is clouded by renewed conflict in the region.

Yet there are new trends in these countries that say much about what change is possible and how to bring it about in this pervasively cynical era. Certainly there are lessons to be drawn from the set-

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backs and defeats, as well as from the victories. In fact, the experiences and exchanges I will recount are all the more compelling for revealing the consequences of catastrophic misjudgments and missed opportunities. And it is the process of rethinking based upon the accumulation of fresh experiences, good and ill, rather than the elaboration of a particular model, that is the subject of this book.

* * *

The end of the cold war triggered a deep and pervasive crisis throughout the international left, which is only now beginning to recover, as a wide range of rightist forces — from neoliberal free-marketeers to religious revivalists, ethnic demagogues and hard-core neo-fascists — contend with each other to fill the vacuum. Fickle electorates are beginning to vote for left parties in a number of countries after a brief period when they were nearly pushed off the political map, especially in Latin America where left parties were not as beholden to Soviet inspiration (or control) during the cold war as those elsewhere and were therefore not as rattled by the USSR's demise. But the rise in popular support for them often stems more from disenchantment with disintegrating corrupt centrist parties than from a ground swell of organized, committed backing for the left and its program. As a consequence, this support is unstable and may shift erratically from one election to the next.

In many cases, the left's apparent electoral strength coincides with a rightward shift (usually characterized as a move toward a "center" that has itself been yanked to the right) that emasculates its status as the representative of a structural alternative. Such born-again social democrats as have appeared in Western Europe over the past decade may be more honest and more humane than their rightist rivals, but they are rarely the bearers of a fundamentally different political project. Certainly they are not revolutionaries in any recognizable sense of the term. Often they seem to be precisely the opposite — compassionate apologists for capital. For their part, the surviving left parties in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union appear to be engaged in an exercise in nostalgia. They campaign for the retrieval of the social and personal security that was lost in the collapse of their stagnant, state-centric political projects, but they offer little that is fundamentally new. At times, they ally themselves with the worst of the very old.

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In this volatile transitional era, the vision of a broadly-inclusive, dynamic, global community based upon principles of cultural diversity and social and economic equality that animated left revolutionaries throughout much of the past century has lost its mobilizing force. Yet this vision — and with it the commitment to break down barriers across class, race, gender, ethnic and other lines that privilege the few at the expense of the many — lies at the heart of what it means to be "left" in one's outlook. If the organized left is to play a leadership role in the struggles over how we construct and manage our social, economic, cultural and political lives in the twenty-first century, fresh strategies are needed to demonstrate the vitality of this vision. Unfortunately, the impotence of much of the left's strategic thinking defines the political space in which the right, in its many incarnations, thrives.

While many who identify with left values, activist or not, are disoriented by the drastic turn of post-cold war events, especially those who doggedly insisted that history was a one-way street running in their direction, some are taking the opportunity to re-examine and reconceive basic strategies. Among the most creative are those whom I am calling "frontline activists" — those leaders and organizers who operate in the midst of major social and political upheavals where the possibility to effect transformational change is greatest. It was to four such situations that I turned for this project.

Because of the kinds of transitions underway in Eritrea, South Africa, Palestine and Nicaragua, the debates the left is having on strategy and tactics are not (or at least not only) theoretical — they are directly tied to planning processes for national socio-economic and political development. This gives them an urgency lacking in other circumstances. It also provides an opportunity to test new ideas in the laboratories of entire societies, and it endows them with a level of credibility sorely lacking in more abstract or limited forums elsewhere.

These are not the only places where such engagement with transformational projects is underway — Brazil is one, El Salvador is another, Cuba remains an important if stalled social experiment, EZLN-controlled areas of Chiapas in southern Mexico may contain the seeds of one, several Indian states count in this category, Uganda and Rwanda are others, and there are more. But the four at the center of this study captured the imagination of left activists and fellow travelers throughout the world over the past four decades, each now

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offers rich insights into the complexity of the post-liberation transition, and they are countries with which I have the experience and the contacts to make such a project feasible. In any event, as the artist said, you have to draw the line somewhere.

* * *

The main political movements I focus my attention on are: Eritrea's People's Front for Democracy and Justice (formerly the Eritrean People's Liberation Front), the South African Communist Party, the Palestine People's Party (formerly the Palestine Communist Party) and the Sandinista National Liberation Front. While there is an explosion in the growth of what is fashionably termed "civil society" in these countries, I concentrate on two key social movements: women and workers. Other movements and sectors play important roles in these countries — the South African "civics" and other community-based organizations, farmers' associations in several countries, youth movements, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), churches and church-affiliated groups, among others.

The list is long, but I limited my research in order to avoid an open-ended inquiry that would lose focus. I chose the sectors I did because of their strategic importance within their societies, because they are at the cutting edge of new thinking on social change, and because they are pushing political movements in their societies toward increased democratization. This is not meant to diminish the importance of others I have not treated, only to make the project manageable. I have also looked to a limited extent at NGOs, largely because of the attention they generate despite their mixed character and performance, and I have integrated some of this material into the section on parties.

Though there are significant variations in the strategy and tactics of the political formations in these countries, they all once shared a commitment to strongly centralist notions of how to organize themselves and their populations during and after the effort to gain state power. They also viewed the state as the principal, if not the sole, vehicle to implement social change once political objectives were met (for example, national independence or the ouster of neo-colonial regimes), though each to varying degrees sought to engage the general population in this process. The outlooks of these movements on the role of the state and on democracy have either evolved or are

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changing now as a result of direct experience and the changing international context.

All four national movements exercise considerable, if also limited, influence in their societies. Each is either in power, sharing power or contending for power. Each now functions in a relatively open context (though that of the Palestinians has substantially contracted since the onset of this project, as has the strength of the left there). As a result, each is concerned with the question of how to operate as an unarmed political force competing with other political forces in a legal arena, under conditions that require it — for now, at least — to seek, maintain, or share power through the ballot rather than the bullet.

For their part, several of the social movements within these countries are asserting themselves not only as sectoral interest groups but as forces for broad social and political change. Women's organizations in Nicaragua are challenging the left not just on issues relating to the position of women but on its overall failure to develop a coherent social agenda, and they are contesting the way politics has been conducted for decades within the Sandinista party. The trade unions in South Africa are asserting themselves as independent institutional players and are articulating broad positions on national development strategy that challenge both the African National Congress and the Communist Party at key junctures. With certain qualifications which I will get into later, I take the heightened political role of these social movements and the impact they are having on political parties and states to be among the most promising aspects of the transition now underway within the third world left. As such, they are a central focus of this inquiry.

In Section One I explore the complex forms of transition which these left movements must navigate in the aftermath of the cold war, and I describe the specific challenges that each now faces. (Readers unfamiliar with the history of these movements might bookmark the political chronologies that follow the Author's Note.) In Section Two I compare and contrast the development of women's movements in these societies. In Section Three I do the same with workers' organizations and trade unions. Section Four focuses on the political sphere to examine how political parties have changed (or not) in this new period. In a brief Conclusion I summarize the new strategic thinking in these social and political movements and raise questions about the future development and direction of the left.

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I have varied the order of the countries and movements in these sections in order to highlight features in one that bear on subsequent analysis, but readers should feel free to take them up in whatever order suits their needs, following the thread of a single country from section-to-section, for example, if that proves more useful. Note also that the party chapters are longer than the others, in part because I bring in other issues — the role of NGOs, for one — and because political parties have been more central and long-standing than the other organizations and movements in the institutional history of these countries.

Within this broadly delimited framework, I argue that the struggle for democracy, both in terms of the character of the society itself and within the political movement that proposes to transform it, is as central to the success of a left project as the struggle for justice — not as alternatives to one another but as aspects of a single, organic transformation strategy. This is all the more critical in the context of the fragmentary state of the international left, where the strength of a national political movement depends heavily on the extent and quality of popular engagement.

But what do we mean by democracy? Is it reducible to a new set of recipes? Is it an identifiable rite of passage through which a nation passes — a gateway to a "higher" stage of development? Or is it, like nation-building, a process that ebbs and flows unevenly and at times erratically, dependent upon often unpredictable internal and external factors? What are its economic and social components, as well as its political forms? To what degree is it shaped by socio-economic, historic and cultural context? How much is popular participation essential to the practice of democracy, and how can it be fostered in a non-manipulative manner while yet retaining its substance? By the same token, what do we mean by the achievement of social justice? Is it reducible to a road map with milestones to be checked off as the political movement whizzes by them, or is it the product of an organic set of relationships that must be transformed from within to have both meaning and durability? Is justice possible without democracy, and is there such a thing as democracy without justice?

* * *

My research for this book formally got underway in August 1994 with a grant from the MacArthur Foundation that funded field trips

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of approximately six weeks to each country. However, for years I had been asking these sorts of questions of activists there and recounting what I had seen and heard elsewhere. The idea for the book emerged out of these dialogues. I went to all four countries at least once to set up my investigation prior to the extended field trips. After sifting through the material gathered in the first round of travel in 1994-95, I also returned to each country, not only to collect further information but to deepen my understanding of what I had already learned and to test hypotheses that arose from it. I have been back frequently to Eritrea in the years after this for other assignments, and I have kept in close touch with key informants elsewhere. However, I have not sought to update each profile in depth, apart from referring the reader to critical changes that either extend our understanding of issues already discussed or raise new questions for future inquiry.

The danger in trying to maintain contemporaneity in four fast-moving political arenas is obvious. They never reach a neat end point where one can say: this, then, is what it all led to. *Rethinking Revolution* is by necessity a series of vignettes drawn from a continuing process, rather than a definitive analysis of any or all these movements and countries. As they say in the trenches, the struggle continues. My intent here is not to give the reader a current portrait of any one of these. For that, you will have to turn elsewhere. (I have listed several websites in an appendix that are useful in tracking developments in these countries.) Rather, it is my aim to draw lessons from these experiences and reflections in order to heighten our understanding of what works and what does not in making radical social and political change.

Nor do I pretend to present a detached critique of the process of individual and institutional self-examination out of which these queries arise. On the contrary, I take my role to be similar to that which Nicaraguan journalist, philosopher and political activist Sofia Montenegro identifies for herself at the end of Chapter Eight — that of an "organic intellectual" whose task is to collect, synthesize, organize and then give back ideas and experiences on liberation and social justice to those on the frontlines of the struggles to achieve them. *Rethinking Revolution* is written to nurture fresh discourse in these and other political and social movements — focusing as much on questions as on answers — to encourage new trends and emerging possibilities.

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AALC	African American Labor Center [U.S.]
AMNLAE	Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women
AMPRONAC	Organization of Women Confronting the National Problem [Nicaragua]
ANC	African National Congress [South Africa]
ANC/WL	ANC Women's League
ANDEN	Nicaraguan Teachers Association
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
ATC	Asociación Trabajadores del Campo (Association of Agricultural Workers) [Nicaragua]
APT	Area de Propriedad del Trabajadores (Area of Workers' Property) [Nicaragua]
AWC	Arab Workers' Congress [Palestine]
AZACTU	Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions [South Africa]
BC	Black Consciousness movement [South Africa]
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [United Nations]
CENIDH	Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights
CONAPRO	Nicaraguan Confederation of Professional Associations
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
COSEP	Superior Council of Private Enterprise [Nicaragua]
CST	Central Sandiniste de Trabajadores (Sandinista Workers' Central) [Nicaragua]
CUSA	Council of Unions of South Africa
CWIL	Chemical Workers Industrial Union [South Africa]
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DWRC	Democracy and Workers Rights Center [Palestine]
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement

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EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRP	Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party
Fatah	Palestine Liberation Movement
FETSALUD	Federation of Health Workers [Nicaragua]
FEDUSA	Federation of South African Unions
FIDA	Palestine Democratic Union
FOSATU	Federation of South African Trade Unions
FNT	National Workers' Front [Nicaragua]
FSLN	Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua
GTUF	Gaza Trade Union Federation
GFPTU	General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions [Palestine]
GUPW	General Union of Palestinian Workers
GUPWmn	General Union of Palestinian Women
Hamas	Islamic Resistance Movement [West Bank & Gaza]
al-Haq	Law in the Service of Man [West Bank & Gaza]
ICFTU	International Congress of Free Trade Unions
ILO	International Labor Organization [United Nations]
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JCOPS	Juntas Comunitarias de Obras y Progreso [Nicaragua]
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe [South Africa]
MRS	Movement for Sandinista Renovation [Nicaragua]
NACTU	National Council of Trade Unions [South Africa]
NALEDI	National Labour & Economic Development Institute [South Africa]
NCEW	National Confederation of Eritrean Workers
NEDLAC	National Economic Development and Labour Council [South Africa]
NEHAWU	National Education, Health & Allied Workers Union [South Africa]
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NOW	Natal Organization of Women [South Africa]
NP	Afrikaner-based National Party [South Africa]
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth & Students

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NUM	National Union of Miners [South Africa]
NUMSA	National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
OATUU	Organization of African Trade Union Unity
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PA	Palestine Authority
PAC	Pan Africanist Congress [South Africa]
PARC	Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees
PAWS	Palestinian Arab Workers' Society
PCP	Palestine Communist Party
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy & Justice [Eritrea, successor to the EPLF]
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNC	Palestine National Council
PNF	Palestinian National Front
PNGO	Palestine NGO network
PPP	Palestine People's Party [successor to the Palestine Communist Party]
RWM	Rural Women's Movement [South Africa]
SACCAWU	South African Commercial, Catering & Allied Workers Union
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTWU	South African Clothing & Textile Workers Unions
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SANCO	South African National Civics Organization
UDF	United Democratic Front [South Africa]
UNAG	Nicaraguan Union of Farmers & Ranchers
UNLU	United National Leadership of the Uprising [West Bank & Gaza]
UNO	United Nicaraguan Opposition
UPMRC	Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees
UPWWC	Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees
US/AID	United States Agency for International Development
WNC	Women's National Coalition [South Africa]
WAC	Women's Action Committee [West Bank & Gaza]

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WATC	Women's Affairs Technical Committee [West Bank & Gaza]
WWS	Working Women's Society [West Bank & Gaza]

POLITICAL CHRONOLOGIES

ERITREA

1890 — Italians establish the colony of Eritrea during European "Scramble for Africa."

1895-1900 — Italians invade Abyssinia and are defeated; Emperor Menelik II signs treaty with Italians, acquires modern arms and drives south and east to quadruple the size of the landlocked Ethiopian empire.

1936-41 — Italians occupy Ethiopia, joining it to Eritrea and Somalia in what it terms Italian East Africa.

1941 — British-led forces defeat the Italians; Ethiopia regains independence, Eritrea falls under British administration, the U.S. establishes strategic communications facilities in the Eritrean capital.

1952 — Over protests by independence parties, Eritrea is federated to Ethiopia under a UN plan that gives each country a separate flag, constitution and parliament; Italy's other colonies — Libya & Somalia — prepare for independence.

1953-58 — The U.S. arms Ethiopia in exchange for military bases in Eritrea; Ethiopia's Emperor Haile Selassie I drives Eritrean nationalists into exile, imposes Amharic language, takes down Eritrean flag; Ethiopian troops fire on protesting students and workers, killing or wounding over 500 in Asmara and Massawa.

1960-61 — Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) founded in Cairo, fires first shots of independence war on police post in western Eritrea.

1962 — Selassie forces Eritrean parliament to dissolve itself and annexes Eritrea as Ethiopia's 14th province.

1970 — ELF splits, Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) is established, civil war breaks out between ELF and EPLF.

1974 — Selassie is overthrown by a military *junta* (*derg*); ELF and EPLF agree to a truce and turn their guns on Ethiopia.

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1977 — ELF and EPLF capture all but a handful of Eritrean towns, prepare to declare independence; the *derg* breaks relations with the U.S., realigns Ethiopia with the USSR.
1978-79 — Ethiopia mounts a series of massive, Soviet-backed offensives; ELF suffers defeats; EPLF withdraws to remote mountain base.
1980 — Renewed civil war breaks out, EPLF drives ELF out of Eritrea, ELF splinters and scatters.
1981-85 — EPLF defeats repeated Ethiopian attacks on base; famine sweeps the region.
1988 — EPLF breaks ten-year stalemate, encircles Ethiopian forces in cities.
1991 — EPLF defeats *derg* forces in Eritrea, establishes provisional government, helps Ethiopian opposition topple the regime; new governments make peace, ending thirty-year war.
1993 — Independence declared in May, after UN-monitored referendum on Eritrea's political status.
1994 — EPLF dissolved, relaunched as People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).
1995 — Government announces sweeping agrarian reform, compulsory national service.
1997 — New Constitution ratified.
1998 — Renewed war breaks out with Ethiopia over contested borders; Constitution, party congress, national elections postponed.

SOUTH AFRICA

1652 — Dutch settlers found a colony at the Cape of Good Hope.
1795 — British take over the Cape colony and drive Dutch Afrikaners inland.
1899-1910 — British defeat Afrikaners in the Anglo-Boer War and unite four colonies into Union of South Africa, which they grant independence.
1912 — African National Congress (ANC) founded.
1913 — Native Land Act restricts Africans to 13.7% of land.

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1921 — Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) founded.
1948 — Afrikaner-based National Party (NP) wins elections, formalizes apartheid system.
1950 — Population Registration Act categorizes people by race, mandates racial identity cards; Group Areas Act imposes strict urban residential segregation; Suppression of Communism Act criminalizes protest, curtails speech, press and rights of association, outlaws CPSA; party disbands and re-forms underground as SACP.
1952 — ANC Deputy President Nelson Mandela arrested in nonviolent Defiance Campaign.
1955 — South African Confederation of Trade Unions (SACTU) founded.
1959 — Promotion of Self-Government Act establishes ten "bantustans" for Africans, strips them of South African citizenship; Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) splits from ANC, attacks its policy of non-racialism.
1960 — Over sixty protesters massacred in Sharpeville; ANC, and PAC are outlawed; SACTU joins them underground.
1961 — ANC founds Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK or "Spear of the Nation"), launches armed struggle; NP government declares country a republic, leaves British Commonwealth.
1962 — Mandela arrested, given life sentence for "treason" in 1964.
1973 — Strike wave in Durban signals revival of black trade unionism.
1976 — Soweto student uprising sparks renewal of mass opposition.
1977 — Black Consciousness leader Steven Biko killed in police custody.
1979 — Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) founded with 20,000 members; South Africa loses credentials at UN.
1983 — The anti-apartheid United Democratic Front (UDF) is launched with over 400 unions, churches, civic and student organizations.
1985 — Sharp increase in mass protest, government declares State

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of Emergency; merger of FOSATU and mineworkers union lays basis for launch of pro-ANC Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) with 1/2 million members in thirty-three unions.
1986 — Government declares second State of Emergency, detains thousands; COSATU leadership goes underground, protests escalate.
1990 — ANC, SACP, and other organizations unbanned; Mandela released.
1992 — Transition talks begin among wide range of political parties; ANC, SACP, COSATU establish "Strategic Alliance."
1993 — SACP leader Chris Hani assassinated.
1994 — ANC wins elections, Mandela elected president.
1996 — New Constitution adopted.
1999 — ANC wins second nonracial elections, Thabo Mbeki assumes presidency, Mandela retires.

PALESTINE

1517 — Ottoman Turks conquer Palestine.
1916 — Arabs launch revolt, with British support, against Turkish rule.
1917 — Britain's Balfour Declaration promises Jews a "national homeland" in Palestine.
1920 — British rule begins under League of Nations mandate.
1922-1927 — Large-scale influx of Jewish immigrants.
1935-39 — British crush Arab uprising.
1948 — Palestine partitioned by UN; Israel declares independence; Arab states attack and are defeated; 800,000 Palestinians are driven out or flee as Israel seizes new territory.
1951 — Jordan annexes the West Bank including East Jerusalem, and the Arab League places the Gaza Strip in the custody of Egypt.
1956 — Egypt's President Nasser nationalizes Suez Canal; Britain, France and Israel invade Egypt, Israel occupies Sinai; U.S. forces withdrawal.
1957 — Fatah founded by Palestinian nationalists under leadership

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of Yasir Arafat.

1964 — PLO founded in Cairo under control of Arab states; Palestine National Council meets in East Jerusalem, adopts Palestine National Charter.

1967 — 2nd Arab-Israeli war; Israel seizes East Jerusalem, West Bank and Gaza Strip, Syria's Golan Heights, Egypt's Sinai peninsula.

1969 — Fatah takes over PLO; leftist PFLP founded, splits into three factions (PFLP, DFLP and PFLP-GC), joins PLO.

1970 — In an event dubbed "Black September," King Hussein drives PLO out of Jordan; PLO moves its headquarters to Lebanon.

1973 — 3rd Arab-Israeli war breaks out, Israel suffers setbacks, U.S. strengthens "strategic alliance" with Israel, increases aid.

1974 — Arab summit in Rabat, Morocco, recognizes PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people"; PLO granted UN Observer status, Arafat addresses General Assembly.

1978 — Camp David peace accords signed between Israel and Egypt.

1982 — Israel invades Lebanon, drives out PLO; PLO forces scatter, headquarters shifts to Tunis; Palestine Communist Party (PCP) separates from Jordan Communist Party, merges with Gaza party.

1987 — West Bank & Gaza Palestinians launch *intifada,* which comes under co-equal underground leadership of Fatah, PFLP, DFLP, PCP.

1988 — PLO's National Council recognizes Israel, calls for two-state solution; Islamist opponents launch Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas).

1991 — Arafat's support for Iraq in Gulf war estranges Egypt, costs $120m in annual donations from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq; thousands of Palestinian workers are evicted from Gulf states; Madrid peace talks start; PCP holds congress, renamed Palestine People's Party (PPP).

1993 — Israel and PLO sign Oslo accords; PFLP and DFLP reject them, PPP offers critical support.

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1994 — Arafat returns to Jericho and Gaza to set up Palestine Authority.
1995 — Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin assassinated.
1996 — Israelis assassinate Palestinian known as "the Engineer"; Hamas bombs Israeli buses; Israel closes Palestinian borders; Likud coalition ousts Labor government in Israeli elections; "peace process" unravels.
1997 — Arafat elected president of PA, 88-member Legislative Council elected in first balloting in Occupied Territories since 1970s.
1999 — Labor-led coalition ousts Likud in Israeli elections, initiates "Final Status" talks with PA.
2000 — Second *intifada* erupts in the West Bank and Gaza and within Palestinian communities inside Israel.

NICARAGUA

1823 — Independence from Spain.
1855 — North American adventurer William Walker seizes power in Managua with support of shipping magnate Cornelius Vanderbilt, legalizes slavery, gains U.S. recognition; driven out two years later.
1912-25 — U.S. troops occupy country to quell political instability; negotiate exclusive canal rights with puppet government.
1926-33 — U.S. Marines reoccupy Nicaragua; Augusto César Sandino launches uprising; U.S. launches counter-insurgency, sets up National Guard under Anastasio Somoza García to take over.
1934 — Sandino assassinated on Somoza's orders after entering peace talks.
1936 — Somoza seizes power in fraudulent elections.
1956 — Somoza assassinated, son Luís assumes presidency.
1961 — Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) founded, launches armed opposition.
1967 — Luís's brother Anastasio Somoza Debayle takes over.
1969 — FSLN issues its "Historic Program," calling for nationalizations, agrarian reform, free medical services, subsidized

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credit and other measures to benefit the working classes.

1972 — Earthquake devastates Managua, Somoza's profiteering outrages local elite.

1977 — Flagrant human rights abuses and corruption lead to withdrawal of U.S. aid under Carter administration.

1978 — Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of opposition newspaper *La Prensa*, is assassinated, alienating middle class from regime; FSLN, then split in three factions, forms coalition and steps up pace of insurrection.

1979 — FSLN launches six-week military campaign to coincide with popular uprising and general strike, Somoza flees; FSLN forms broad-based Council of State, seizes Somoza estates, nationalizes mining companies, slashes rents, declares university education free.

1980 — FSLN introduces price controls, launches literacy crusade with 95,000 volunteers; in five months illiteracy is cut from fifty to thirteen percent.

1981-82 — FSLN launches rural health campaign, agrarian reform; Reagan administration suspends U.S. aid to Nicaragua, initiates support to contras, begins military exercises in Honduras.

1984 — Daniel Ortega wins presidential election with sixty-seven percent of votes.

1985 — U.S. steps up aid to contras, imposes trade embargo; FSLN initiates conscription.

1986 — FSLN imposes strict austerity measures, slashes size of government.

1987 — New Constitution is adopted.

1988-89 — Start of eighteen-month ceasefire, regional peace negotiations; inflation tops an astounding 33,000%; FSLN devalues currency, negotiates IMF Structural Adjustment Program; country ravaged by Hurricane Joan.

1990 — FSLN loses February elections to United National Opposition (UNO), led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of slain editor; FSLN transfers power in April; UNO ends conscription, U.S. ends embargo.

1991 — FSLN holds first national congress, postpones changes in party, re-elects leadership slate.

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1994 — FSLN holds special congress, party splits.
1995 — Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) founded under leadership of former vice president Sergio Ramirez.
1996 — Right-wing candidate Arnaldo Alemán wins presidential elections against Daniel Ortega.
1998 — FSLN holds second national congress; country devastated by Hurricane Mitch.

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RETHINKING REVOLUTION

New Strategies for Democracy & Social Justice

THE EXPERIENCES OF ERITREA, SOUTH AFRICA, PALESTINE & NICARAGUA

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We are all in agreement that the current moment has no historical antecedents to help us situate ourselves. The debates are no longer classical ones about method, but go deeper. We ask ourselves what our organization is, what our proposal is and how can we materialize it. Added to the general questions that are never fully answered — what is the left and what is revolution — there is now an even tougher one: what is the left and revolution in this new stage.

— Alejandro Bendaña, FSLN (1993)[1]

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INTRODUCTION

NO MORE SOCIALIST BLUEPRINTS

For most of the twentieth century, left thinking about how to make a revolution was clear and straightforward: capture the state, reconstruct it to serve working class interests, then use it to transform the society. All else should be subordinated to these tasks.

Today, this formula is in question. Several of the movements covered here have begun to characterize the state as contested terrain, rather than as a fixed entity that can be won (or lost) in a single exhilarating upheaval and then smashed and reconstructed on some entirely different class and political basis. Furthermore, say some, capitalist society is not only class-defined but also essentially patriarchal. This demands coincident attention and action to bring about effective social transformation. And there are other features that cannot be treated tangentially.

In this expanded view of social and political change, making a revolution is a more protracted and complex undertaking than the left once supposed — one that needs to be waged on many fronts, often simultaneously, over a very long period of time. It requires tiered strategies, as well as new relations among allied political and social movements, whether or not the revolutionary party holds power. It demands new ways of involving the population in the process without reifying this participation into the sort of bureaucratic miasma produced by what we used to call "already existing socialism." Above all, it means that the left needs to loosen up a bit and come to terms with ambiguity. But before we dive into these issues, let's look at the left legacy a bit more closely.

In the conventional formulation, revolutionary social transformation was to proceed according to a set of "scientific" procedures once the movement had state power — land reform, collectivization, nationalization, rapid industrialization, the institution of central planning and so on. Oppressive social relations — gender, ethnicity and

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other "secondary" factors — would resolve themselves as class distinctions were eradicated. That they did not seem to do so was not cause for concern, only patience. In any case, there was little or no space in which to discuss it or any other flaws in the project. The defense of this state trumped any proclivity toward "bourgeois democracy," which was viewed as a reactionary delusion whose practice only undermined more important economic and social transformation. Though much oratory was expended on the virtues of "proletarian democracy," precious little of it was evident within the working class or in its political vanguard, the party.

This strategic outlook and the practices that went with it were extended to left-led (or left-influenced) anti-colonial struggles of the cold war era, where the seizure of the existing state — constructed by the conquering powers as an authoritarian mechanism for repressing the indigenous population while extracting all available wealth — was the central objective of the struggle and the fundamental requisite for post-liberation development. All other tasks and objectives were subordinated to this. But there was a twist. No substantive working class existed upon which to base a proletarian revolutionary party. Modifications had therefore to be made to theories developed in and for more advanced and more socially differentiated industrial societies. With a few exceptions, Marxists insisted that, because history evolves in linear stages, each of which builds directly on the previous one, societies in transition from pre-capitalist modes of production toward socialism had to pass through something roughly equivalent to capitalism while avoiding its more venal aspects — capitalism without capitalists (or at least without capitalists-in-power) and without the gross inequities and injustices associated with early, unregulated capitalism.

Most Marxists interpreted this to mean that the transition to socialism in post-colonial societies would be reached in two distinct stages: a "national democratic" stage in which a society's mode of production was modernized — its forces of production developed and its workforce proletarianized — and a second one in which socialism itself was reached. (All of the movements considered here to one degree or another subscribed to this notion.) During the phase when there was not yet a critical mass of workers to lead the revolution, most Marxists also agreed that the economy (and the entire political superstructure) was to be under the stewardship of a transitional

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regime acting in workers' long-term interests. On the question of precisely how this worked, however, they divided into opposing camps generally associated with the feuding socialist powers, the Soviet Union and China. Soviet theorists characterized this stage as "noncapitalist development."[2] The Chinese called it "new democracy."[3]

The Soviet argument went something like this: as socialist countries were by definition workers' states, and as there were few industrial workers in most third world societies, an intermediate stage was needed to accomplish the economic and social changes historically associated with capitalism. These centered on the development of modern agriculture and industry and the socialization of the work force (from which a proletarian party would be constructed). In the absence of a developed proletariat, a third force was required to midwife the new society into existence. Any organized, progressive sector of the new middle class in these societies would do. This could — and increasingly did — include the option of an enlightened faction of the army, so long as it introduced a specific series of reforms to set in motion basic socio-economic changes and so long as the country in question was closely allied with the Soviet Union, whose experience substituted for the missing working class until it developed and was ready to take power. Among the changes the noncapitalist regime had to implement were land reform, the nationalization of large-scale agriculture, industry, banking, commerce and trade and the organization of the oppressed sectors of the population — workers, peasants, women and youth.

Soviet development theorists put a fresh spin on this in the 1970s, after watching many of their prototypical noncapitalist states — Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Guinea, Congo (Brazzaville) and Burma, among others — stall in the first stage. A sub-category was identified: noncapitalist states under Marxist leadership. Henceforth, these were to be known as "socialist-oriented" states. Among them were Mozambique, Angola and Somalia (until the Soviets demoted Somalia to "noncapitalist" status and replaced it with Ethiopia, after a dazzling geopolitical realignment in which Moscow and Washington traded places in the two warring states). Burma and Iraq also made it into this category, as did a dozen other Soviet allies and clients.[4]

During the Mao era, the Chinese formula for third world states advancing toward socialism also called for land reform, nationalizations and popular mobilization, but it differed in the emphasis placed

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on the need for a popular revolutionary front — workers, peasants, progressive sectors of the petty bourgeoisie and individual members of the bourgeoisie who placed national goals ahead of class interests. The core of this front was to be a worker-peasant alliance operating under communist party leadership. Chinese Marxists, no doubt reflecting the largely feudal character of social relations in much of their country, also stressed that the democratic stage would be prolonged, during which there had to be a thorough-going cultural transformation as well as an economic restructuring. By the late 1970s, however, the Chinese, too, were forwarding a global strategy — the Three Worlds Theory — that, like its Soviet counterpart, subordinated socio-economic transformation in other third world countries to the effort to build an international alliance, led by China but in this case aimed at both superpowers.

Apart from the self-serving aspect of these "theories" in promoting the national interests of the Soviet Union and China, there were philosophical differences that translated into substantial variations in developmental strategy. The Soviet approach, following that country's own experience, was an essentially economistic one that stressed major investment in the forces of production and the rapid (coerced, if necessary) restructuring of the workforce. Soviet advisors urged client-states to immediately take charge of banks, insurance companies, industries and agriculture, collectivizing them and placing them under strict centralized planning and direction, regardless of the class character of the state or the level of consolidation of a workers' party. People were organized into sectoral associations led from the center, which were used to transmit directives from the pinnacle of the state to the periphery of the society. Literacy campaigns and public health programs were encouraged and often carried out to good effect, but their implementation tended to reflect a heavy-handed, top-down approach to governance that rested on the conviction that once the economy was restructured, social and cultural change (progress toward gender and ethnic equality, for example) would automatically follow. The process by which these changes were achieved was not important — only the results mattered.

The Chinese, for their part, tended toward a more voluntaristic approach, stressing the centrality of politics over economics and the capacity of a communist party to reshape people's class outlook. Their strategy was built around the notion that proletarianized peasants

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and re-molded members of other classes would pull (or push) the economy and the rest of the society into socialism. Hence, political education — and re-education — were as crucial for development as material investment. One might say that the march toward socialism was a matter of both capital and ideological accumulation, with the latter being the key link. Far from being automatic, this was socio-economic and political change by sheer force of will, which helps to explain the strength of Maoism's appeal to petty bourgeois students and intellectuals the world over in the 1960s. Nonetheless, the state remained the vehicle through which this process was instituted and sustained, and popular organizations were, in practice if not in theory, entirely subordinated to it, as its instrumentalities within particular social sectors. One difference, however, and an important one, was that the role of the party in driving the entire process was more central than in the case of the noncapitalist model, where the party was often a project of the state itself, once a progressive force (like Plato's philosopher king) was in power. Yet what flowed from this was a similarly ritualistic politics — a sort of paint-by-the-numbers approach to the art of social transformation, simply using a different numerology.

It is not my intent to parse these ideological and political edifices in any depth here, though it has to be done far more thoroughly and systematically than it has been so far to liberate the left, particularly but not only the Marxist-oriented left, from the debilitating baggage it still carries. My point is that these quasi-religious prescriptions no longer command the unquestioning adherence they once did. As a result, left movements coming to or contending for power in the post-cold war era lack ready formulas for their project. There are no more socialist blueprints, no fixed models, no hard-and-fast rules. It is not just that the way through the transition is less clear — the nature of it, as well as its outcome, are also now up for discussion, debate and, in the four countries under study here, experiment and innovation.

* * *

In addition to the complex transition from opposition to participation in the state, left movements today act in a political world shaped by radical shifts in the global balance of class and political forces. These are reflected in new — or at least newly ascendant — forms of domination, control, intervention and resistance. Such changes rede-

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fine the political arenas themselves in most third world countries, as international capital, operating through a handful of rich states and multilateral institutions, limits the power of weaker states to intervene in their own economies or in their economic relations with the leading capitalist powers. As one consequence, there are new constraints on what is possible for a revolutionary movement to achieve in a relatively impoverished society. This, in turn, necessitates changes in the political and organizational strategies that guide them. There is, as Régis Debray might put it, transition in the transition.

At the heart of this contextual shift is the transition from an era defined by the contention between two geopolitical (and global economic) alliances — the U.S.-led capitalist countries and the Soviet-led socialist states — to one broadly under U.S. dominance. Today, the major capitalist powers compete with each other in some areas while cooperating to manage the contest throughout most of the world — in effect, regulating the deregulation of the global economy while systematically restructuring other players to suit their interests and needs. A key aspect of this is the curtailing of the economic and social functions of states (though not their repressive apparatus) and the opening of new realms for capital penetration. This takes place under a "neoliberal" framework that gained ascendance in the U.S. and Britain during the Reagan-Thatcher years and that now represents the dominant strain of post-cold war capitalist ideology. This may not result in an actual downsizing of the state, but it usually entails a drastic reallocation of its resources and priorities.

What we commonly term "globalization" is a reflection of both this ideological hegemony and the re-organization of production and distribution of goods and services made possible both by the momentous changes in information technology and by the effective dismantling of cold war era political structures. It is not that the globe is now knit together in some transcendental political form. In fact, the opposite appears more and more true. Nor is it that commerce and trade are newly global, though they have certainly expanded in some areas (largely within and between the main capitalist powers) and reached into new ones. The most important change is the vastly increased and accelerated mobility of finance capital. Coupled with the ability to manipulate ideas and public perceptions through powerful global media, this gives capital — and capitalism as a set of beliefs, as well as social relations — an edge over its strategic opponents that it did

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not have at any time in the twentieth century. Nowhere is this more true than in the third world, where increases in foreign direct investment and the importation of foreign goods at low tariffs are quickly harnessing local economies to the needs of faraway stockholders. One result is that social goals are subordinated to the interests of private capital. Another is that, for capital, the primacy of political structures and political/military relationships to defend and promote its interests has been supplanted by a reliance on economic relations and global economic institutions whose ability to bring offending states into line rarely relies on military force.

In this new world order, the titans of finance and industry no longer describe third world states euphemistically as "developing countries." Instead they dub them "emerging markets." Where once these states jockeyed for position in regional alliances or geopolitical blocs, they now contend for individual position with the hydra-like power of transnational capital, which is more apt to simply pack up and run to another, more profitable site at any sign of confrontation than to stand and fight. This leaves the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank the task of reorganizing an abandoned country's economy — and, increasingly, its political structures — to suit current creditors and future investors. It is this shift from the centrality of political and military superpower to that of economic hydrapower (with military power nonetheless evident in the wings) that defines our era.[5]

In this new order, controlled by a much energized transnational capitalist class operating from bases in a few rich countries, multilateral financial institutions are better able to dictate structure, let alone policy, to most third world states than any individual states could since the end of direct colonial rule. The stage was set in the early 1980s when many third-world states borrowed heavily (and first-world banks freely dispensed loans) only to face a massive debt crisis by the end of the decade. This gave the IMF and the countries that control it the leverage to force debtor nations to contract social services, privatize state-owned enterprises, reduce tariffs and dismantle other barriers to global market forces. In fact, the manipulation of debt and credit and the control of access to markets turn out to be much more potent, more effective and far less costly instruments of control than invading armies, though military force is occasionally called upon (the Gulf War, the Kosovo campaign, among others)

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to demonstrate the power that capital has available to it. Still, it is the imposition of economic sanctions rather than the invasion and occupation of territory that most often characterizes post-cold war interventions.

Though there were major contradictions in the way the Soviet Union dealt with the third world — ask the Eritreans! — the existence of competing global political blocs provided weaker states wiggle room to play one off against the other for short-term advantage, both political and economic. It also created a space for horizontal alliances and cartels among third world states. These ranged from the largely symbolic Non-Aligned Conference to the sporadically effective Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC. And individual states were able, depending on their strategic value to one or the other superpower, to dictate some of the terms of their relationship, to leverage economic and military aid, and, in some cases, to nurture and protect their own fragile internal markets as they invested in import-substitution development strategies. At various points, there were even initiatives to establish alliances of debtor nations to renegotiate more favorable repayment terms with the increasingly vulnerable commercial banks, if not with first world governments and multilateral lending agencies. With the end of the cold war, however, these initiatives collapsed, leaving the poorer states to stand alone, without allies of any sort for the time being, to face the new capitalist Goliath.

One project for the third world left in this era — and for leftists elsewhere to support — is the construction of new regional and other interest-based economic alliances that give these states some form of collective bargaining power. The reappearance of OPEC as a cohesive bloc at the end of the 1990s signals the possibilities inherent in this approach, though opportunities for such producer cartels are limited. This challenge comes at a time when the onslaught against third world countries is focused precisely on restricting the economic and social functions of the state, not only in relation to their own populations but in their interface with global capital. In much of Africa, this arises when the very definition of these states is contested, making regional blocs more difficult than ever to sustain. Under these circumstances, and taking account of the debacle of the narrowly state-centered socialism of the cold war era, a critical question to be asked is: what is the appropriate role of the state in this conjuncture,

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and how much and in what ways should the left focus on the state as the sole mechanism for defending a society's interests in the face of a rampaging international capital? To put it another way, can a mobilized population, acting not only through the state but through other popular institutions and regional and international linkages, create effective new weapons for this struggle and, in doing so, transform the struggle itself?

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Section One

TRANSITIONS

The transition from armed opposition to governing party was not an easy one for any political movement that fought its way to power in the post-World War II wave of national liberation. From the outset, they had an array of new tasks and responsibilities without possessing either the requisite skills and experience or the material resources. This was made more difficult when those who did have them picked up and left, as happened, for example, in Mozambique and Angola, where former colonial administrators and settlers destroyed files and records and sabotaged equipment and machinery on their way out. During the cold war, this encouraged revolutionary nationalists to look elsewhere for help, often introducing a new set of problems in the process.

If a post-liberation regime turned to nationals outside the former underground who possessed the needed skills and capital but who had not been politically active, it opened the door to the intrusion of hostile ideology, often accompanied by pressure to abandon its revolutionary goals. Or it opened itself to corruption. If it turned instead to the socialist bloc for assistance — as many did — it laid itself open to the imposition of an imported model that came as a package with little or no relation to local conditions. Nationalist revolutions with a socialist orientation were invariably subjected to sustained Western-backed counter-revolutionary attacks, which only intensified as alliances with socialist countries were constructed. These attacks, in turn, triggered a tightening of already tenuous political and civil liberties and accelerated a reversion to military-style administration.

Once in power, the former liberation movement became urban-centered where members were subject to a new set of influences. Its leaders no longer lived and worked among the rural folk who made up the bulk of the population and to which the movement had been

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linked during the struggle. The new managers no longer shared the hardships, let alone the dangers, borne by the most down-trodden — a sharing that had not only fed their understanding of the society but that had won them its trust. In some cases, this translated into a tendency to work on behalf of rather than through the masses, assessing their needs and aspirations from afar rather than knowing them from the inside out. In the worst instances, it turned into self-serving indifference. Coupled with the tendency toward repression in the face of external and internal opposition, this led to ever clearer distinctions between leadership and base and, in most cases, to heightened dependence on outside support and guidance.

In the post-cold war era, the abrupt shift from armed confrontation to "peaceful" contention — negotiations leading to elections — in many long-running conflicts threw the left a curve, even while narrowing its options. The threat of armed counter-revolution eased, but the problems of both governing and reconstructing impoverished and war-damaged societies remained formidable. Popular expectations did not lessen, but the space in which to act and the support on which a left movement could call, contracted dramatically. And efforts to subvert radical, structural change did not abate, they only changed form. This produced striking political and economic anomalies.

The Palestinian left was caught entirely off guard by the 1993 Oslo accords between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel and the sudden prospect of a Palestinian-run administration within the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. The rejectionist left's decision not to participate in this project took it off the hook in one sense, even while consigning it to political oblivion. The fraction of the left that gave critical support to the new Palestine Authority did not do much better. Both tendencies cast figurative stones at the agreement and the authority it created without proposing clear alternatives. As a consequence, they ceded the field to the Islamist opposition, which was not only more militant in its rejection of the Oslo Accords but also more effective in the economic and social arenas, running a host of social services and education projects that reached thousands of poor Palestinians in their neighborhoods and villages. In the end, the Palestinian left did not deal at all well with its limited experience of transition, and, as a result, it is unlikely to survive it with any substantive following or influence.

The Sandinistas, already reeling from the effects of the prolonged U.S.-backed *contra* war, suffered major economic setbacks in the late 1980s with the trimming of subsidies from the USSR. It was the FSLN,

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not the right-wing opposition, that first implemented an IMF-style austerity program — albeit one without an infusion of dollars — that set in motion the neoliberal project now well entrenched there. The Nicaraguan revolutionaries slid into this situation while under enormous pressure from the war, with inflation rising to an annual rate of more than 30,000 percent. They were, of course, convinced that they would win the 1990 elections and be able to maneuver the agreement more to their liking. But to this day they have failed to articulate an alternative to the restructuring that was imposed on them then, even while expressing unrelenting outrage over its effects.

In South Africa, a related set of problems arose when the negotiated transition from apartheid to majority rule produced the first nonracial national elections in the country's history in April 1994. Once they were over, the African National Congress found itself holding political power, but without the freedom of movement or the tools to radically transform the society — particularly its grossly unequal economy. The South African revolutionaries were absorbed into an existing power structure over which they had little definitional control, even as they were positioning themselves to try to run it. Co-optation became a threat, though the political leadership and its constituents and allies in the social movements had far greater depth and breadth of action within which to struggle than did either the Sandinistas or the Palestinians. And the liberation movement at least held a considerable share of state power, even if it didn't fully control it, until the second democratic national elections in 1999.

Only in Eritrea did the revolutionaries actually seize power in the classic sense and find themselves in a position to restructure the state from the bottom to the top. Nevertheless, the Eritreans, too, despite years of planning for this moment, faced major, often unanticipated, challenges in an economic arena far different from that in which they fought for independence. Commitments to allocate resources to enhance equity came under pressure from the U.S. Agency for International Development (US/AID), the European Union and prospective private investors, among others. The new government was forced to redraft its investment policy twice, each time "liberalizing" it, until nearly all state controls disappeared. Some muffled criticism, if not outright opposition, also arose from returning exiles, needed for their skills and capital, but bringing with them far different political agendas. Meanwhile, the potential for conflict existed in the society's religious and ethnic divisions. The neighboring Islamist regime in Sudan moved to exploit them by giving support to a splin-

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ter group, Eritrean Islamic Jihad, though the EIJ found little resonance within Eritrea. Then, in 1998, simmering border disputes erupted into full-scale war with Ethiopia, severely disrupting the new country's development and re-militarizing the society. As Eritrea had no tradition of political pluralism after a brief experience in the 1940s and as the institutions of the country's emerging civil society had no history of independent action, it remained to be seen how this experiment in popular democracy would function under such pressures.

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Chapter 1

ERITREA

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

As with all African colonies, Eritrea's borders were arbitrarily drawn by the conquering European power. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Italians forcibly brought people from nine distinct ethnic and linguistic groups and different modes of economic and social life — settled agriculture in the colony's temperate highlands and seminomadic pastoralism in the sun-baked lowlands — under one political roof. About half were Christians and half Muslims. Some were related to peoples in what became the neighboring independent state of Ethiopia. Others were linked to peoples in Sudan, and still others to peoples in French Somaliland. Though there were informal ties among many of the groups that stretched back centuries, this was the first time they were subject to a single formal political administration.[1] The Italians called this mosaic Eritrea and set about displacing or killing local leaders in an effort to undermine the coherence of the societies they were subjugating. Next, they expropriated large tracts of land. In 1889 alone, over one million acres, fully one-fifth of the cultivable land, were taken.[2] Together with the imposition of new taxes, these land seizures forced impoverished farmers and pastoralists into the towns in search of work in the cash economy. As happened elsewhere in colonial Africa, however, the coerced social melding that took place there helped create the basis for an emerging anti-colonial nationalism. At the same time, inherited ethnic and religious differences, together with widening class distinctions, constituted fault lines for future ruptures within Eritrean society and in the movement that arose to liberate it.[3]

The Italians invested heavily in Eritrea, viewing it as a staging area for further East African conquest. By the early 1930s, the colony was crisscrossed with new roads and communications networks. A nar-

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row-gauge railway linked the port of Massawa with Asmara and inland areas as far west as Agordat. More than 300 small workshops and industries arose around the capital and the colony's two ports, and large labor-intensive farms and plantations were established in the countryside.[4] In 1935, the Italians expanded an Eritrean military force that had already fought in Libya and Somalia to a multi-ethnic army of 65,000 men, a significant share of the national work force.[5] Meanwhile, the authorities imposed strict color bars that sharply limited the access of all Eritreans, including those of mixed racial backgrounds, to schools, jobs and social services — apartheid by another name. But in doing so, they encouraged a growing anti-colonial sentiment among the restive urban dwellers, by then almost one-fifth of a total population of about one million. After Italy declared war on Britain in 1940, London exploited this budding nationalism by air-dropping leaflets on the country that said: "Eritreans! You deserve to have a flag!... This is the honourable life for the Eritrean: to have the guts to call his people a nation."[6] In the long run these inducements proved as hollow as other such British ploys, but at the time they resonated with the aspirations rising on the ground.

Italian East Africa collapsed quickly in the face of an assault by British-led forces in early 1941. That April (after Haile Selassie was returned to the Ethiopian throne), the British established a Military Administration in Eritrea, and the colony's human and material resources were redirected into the Allied war effort. The new rulers did little to alter Italian administrative structures, though racial laws were repealed, several new hospitals and schools were built, and Eritreans were hired into the local police force.[7] After the war, however, the British allowed new forms of organization that provided an institutional framework for political action — trade unions, publications and political parties.[8] At this point, the disposition of Eritrea fell to the newly formed United Nations, which triggered a political scramble for the colony that occasioned the first major missed opportunity for Eritrean nationalists.

As anti-Italian unity dissipated, ethnic and religious identities reasserted themselves, as did competing class interests. Eritrean nationalists organized separate Muslim and Christian-led parties, while the displaced aristocracy — joined by the Orthodox clergy — set up a party to promote union with Ethiopia, under which they hoped to regain lost prerogatives. Amidst this disarray, Selassie armed paramilitary forces that wreaked havoc across Eritrea while he negotiated with the U.S. — which had already cut a deal with the British

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for communications facilities in Asmara — to win its support for his claims at the UN. The ensuing chaos played to those who argued that Eritrea was ungovernable on its own. Though the nationalist parties established an Independence Bloc in 1949 to present their case in New York, they did not develop an effective strategy to promote the cause at home or to cope with attacks on their followers. Meanwhile, Orthodox priests threatened pro-independence Eritreans with excommunication.[9]

When the UN committee charged with recommending a position to the General Assembly failed to reach a common position, the U.S. began to push for a federation under the Ethiopian crown. In the debate that followed, the Eastern Bloc supported Eritrean independence, but, given the dominant role Washington played in the UN, the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Said U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles during a Security Council debate:

> From the point of view of justice the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the U.S. in the Red Sea basin, and considerations of security and world peace make it necessary that this country has to be linked to our ally, Ethiopia.[10]

Soon after the new arrangement went into effect, Washington signed a treaty with Addis Ababa that gave the U.S. access to bases in Asmara and the Eritrean port of Massawa in exchange for equipping and training Ethiopia's armed forces. (Ethiopian troops served under the UN flag — and U.S. leadership — in Korea and, later, the Congo). The UN plan granted Eritrea nominal autonomy, including authority over the police, control of other domestic affairs and the right to levy taxes and adopt its own budget, but Ethiopia controlled defense, foreign affairs, currency and finance and international commerce and communications. Eritrea had a Constitution complete with a U.S.-style bill of rights, a separate parliament, a national flag and two official languages, Tigrinya and Arabic — the trappings of sovereignty but not the power to defend it.[11]

Over the next ten years, Selassie dismantled the entire edifice. First, he decreed a preventive detention law. Then his representatives arrested newspaper editors, shut down independent publications, drove prominent nationalists into exile, banned trade unions and political parties, forbid the use of indigenous languages in all official transactions and in the schools, and seized Eritrea's share of the lucrative customs duties. Whole industries were relocated from Asmara to

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Addis Ababa to cut the former colony's economy down to size. Finally, the emperor ordered the Eritrean flag replaced with that of Ethiopia, and, in a last humiliating act, forced the parliament at gunpoint to dissolve.

* * *

Throughout the 1950s, the Eritreans protested with no noticeable impact on the international community. In 1957 students mounted mass demonstrations, and in 1958 the trade unions launched a general strike. The response of the Ethiopian government was swift and brutal — troops opened fire on the protestors, killing several and wounding hundreds. Like the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa two years later, this incident sent a powerful message to Eritrean nationalists that peaceful protest was no longer viable. But the launch of rival liberation organizations occasioned Eritrea's second missed opportunity, as ethnic, religious and class divisions again sapped the strength of the nationalist movement.

After the crackdown, a handful of exiles, supported by the Sudan Communist Party, launched the Eritrean Liberation Movement to challenge Ethiopian rule. The ELM, whose main following came from urban centers and sought a multiethnic base, carried out highly visible acts of agitation and propaganda. Then in July 1960, a mostly Muslim exile group met in Cairo to establish a rival organization — the Eritrean Liberation Front — declaring that the armed struggle was to be the sole means to achieve independence. A little over a year later, a small band of ELF guerrillas, armed with antiquated Italian rifles, fired the first shots of the revolt on a remote police post in western Eritrea.[12] Soon afterward, the ELM also declared its intent to take up arms, but it took the organization four years to do so, by which time the moment had passed.[13]

At the outset of the independence war, there was little discussion within the new ELF of transforming Eritrean society — only of freeing it from Ethiopian control. Expatriate ELF leaders — including members of the displaced Muslim elite who had been shouldered aside by Christian aristocrats allied with Selassie — believed that a symbolic armed uprising would provoke the UN to intervene. Few gave any thought to the exigencies of building a popular movement. In any event, with the U.S. standing behind Ethiopia, Eritrea's annexation garnered little international notice. The revolt sputtered along in relative obscurity until a *coup d'etat* in Syria in 1963 brought the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party to power and provided the ELF with a patron.

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Soon, arms and military training flowed its way. By the end of that year, the ELF had 150-250 fighters under arms.[14] The next year this number doubled.[15]

Early in 1965, an armed unit from the ELM attempted to set up parallel operations in rural Eritrea, but it was quickly crushed by the ELF, which insisted on a monopoly over the armed opposition. As the ELF grew, however, factionalism and internal rivalries steadily increased. Near the end of that year, ELF leaders reorganized the front into four autonomous zones, all Muslim led. In 1966, a fifth was added in the mainly Christian highlands. These divisions effectively established a system of allied warlords who prospered by collecting taxes, levying fines and looting livestock and property within their respective areas.[16] However, as the revolt spread, it generated an escalating response from Ethiopia's global backers, particularly the U.S., whose strategic interests in the former colony had multiplied substantially. A U.S. spy base in Asmara — set up to intercept communications across Africa, the Middle East and even the southern Soviet Union — at its peak housed some 6,000 American personnel and dependents. Naval facilities in the port of Massawa serviced U.S. war ships. During this period, over two-thirds of U.S. aid to Africa went to Ethiopia, including the first jet fighters on the continent. In the late 1960s, as the U.S. became more deeply embroiled in Vietnam, Special Forces units were sent to train Ethiopians in the latest counterinsurgency techniques. Israel also sent advisors and arms, as early as the 1950s.[17]

Up against this, the ELF succeeded in disrupting civil order in much of rural Eritrea, but they failed to consolidate any gains. When the government, with U.S. and Israeli help, launched a counterinsurgency drive in 1967, the liberation front was thrown into chaos. The Ethiopians attacked the zones one at a time, making them easy targets for the heavily-concentrated, well-armed government troops. For the first time, they used aerial bombing to support infantry operations. Scores of small villages were destroyed, and thousands of Eritreans fled to refugee camps in neighboring Sudan. Coincidentally, Israel's victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war caused a break in outside supply to the ELF, leaving the battered guerrilla forces in a precarious state.[18] These setbacks nurtured a rising tide of discontent within the rank-in-file over the leadership's lack of either a coherent military strategy or a forward-looking political program. Instead of dealing with these issues, however, ELF leaders looked abroad for more help. This decision, ironically, hastened their downfall, for the

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aid they found — largely from socialist or radical nationalist third-world regimes — fed the internal revolt.[19]

In mid-1968, the ELF began to implode as dissidents from a number of tendencies moved to restructure the movement and displace its leaders. Successive unity conferences within Eritrea in 1968 and 1969 nearly succeeded in reorienting the liberation movement — three of the five divisions achieved battlefield unity and began coordinating their military operations — but the old leadership quickly struck back in an attempt to derail the reform effort. Over the next eighteen months, many fighters were imprisoned, killed or driven out of the field, as the organization fractured and broke up. Some opposition members stayed in the ELF to contest for power. Others regrouped in new organizations. Still others disappeared into the growing diaspora that spread across the Middle East and Europe. Of those who remained, three factions split off with a few hundred fighters between them and began a dialogue that eventually produced the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. The embryo of the new movement's program was contained in a document drafted in October 1971 and circulated under the title "Our Struggle and Its Goals."[20]It placed strong emphasis on overcoming ethnic and religious differences and on launching a struggle within the independence war against gender, class and other structural inequalities, committing the new movement to simultaneous social and political transformation along with national self-determination.[21]

In 1972 the EPLF established a rear base in the Sahel Mountains, where it carried out intensive political education, along with literacy and military training. In response, the ELF launched a brutal three-year civil war aimed at eradicating its rival. As a consequence, the liberation movement was entirely unprepared to capitalize on the collapse of Ethiopia's feudal order in September 1974, when a military cabal, known as the *derg* (Amharic for committee), overthrew the eighty-two-year-old Emperor Haile Selassie.[22] In fact, the fighting between the Eritrean factions only ended two months after the coup, when some 30,000 Eritrean civilians converged on the highland villages of Wauki-Zagher — where the two fronts were holding peace talks — to demand that they immediately agree to a truce.[23]

The Ethiopian junta took two years to consolidate itself and a further two years to rebuild the country's armed forces. This period constituted the window the Eritreans had in which to take control of their territory, set up a provisional government and seek international recognition before they faced a major counteroffensive. They very

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nearly succeeded. But disunity in the liberation movement during this transition helped put victory out of reach again and added another decade and a half to the fight, as the Ethiopians found substantial new sources of external support in the Eastern bloc.

* * *

I came into the picture there as a freelance journalist early in 1976, traveling first to southern and central Ethiopia to observe the revolution there and then going to Eritrea, first with the government and afterward with the two liberation fronts. I returned to Eritrea in 1977 to spend six months in EPLF-held areas, as the two loosely allied fronts captured all of the country save the capital, the two ports and a handful of minor garrisons, and I was there again for much of 1978 during the Ethiopian campaign to re-take these towns. What I found on these early encounters was at first terribly confusing, however. Ethiopia was in the throes of a profound upheaval in which a centuries-old feudal order was being dismantled by a self-described "socialist" junta. Up to the end of 1976, this government retained the support of the U.S., then anxious to demonstrate it could work with state-centered regimes. Meanwhile, the *derg* continued to prosecute the war in Eritrea with unrestrained fury (though its armed forces were badly demoralized and largely ineffective) and to ruthlessly suppress internal opposition. On the Eritrean side, the two liberation fronts both claimed to be the only genuine "progressive" force there, and each denounced the other as counter-revolutionaries.

Here was my dilemma: On paper, all three political forces called for the establishment of a "people's democratic state." Each favored the nationalization of large farms and plantations, big industries, mines, banks and insurance companies, public transport and most other large-scale economic institutions and infrastructure. They also made nearly identical commitments to universal adult literacy and equality for women and all ethnic and religious groups, and they were all in the process of setting up mass organizations of the basic population sectors (peasants, workers, women, and youth). Reading their programs at that time, it was difficult to tell them apart. It was only when I went into the field to assess their practice that the differences became starkly clear.[24]

The Ethiopian revolution was driven by an idiosyncratic nationalism shrouded in Marxist rhetoric that went through a series of mutations linked to power struggles within the junta and to shifting alliances with civilian parties. Its motto was *Ethiopia Tikdem*

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(Ethiopia First). When the military first seized power, its model was the classless "African socialism" of Tanzania — an approach with which the U.S., continuing to arm and aid the regime, was quite comfortable. Within months of the takeover, the conflict in Eritrea escalated dramatically. At the same time, the regime decreed sweeping urban and rural land reforms and the nationalization of industry, commercial agriculture and banking and finance across Ethiopia. This radically altered the empire's economic and social character, but the main beneficiary was the state (and those who controlled it), which utilized these assets largely to wage more war.

In the spring of 1976, the *derg* issued a National Democratic Program, drafted for it by a Marxist-oriented civilian party known as *Me'ison* (the All-Ethiopia Socialist Party), which created the mass organizations and a system of village and neighborhood administration built around local committees known as *kebeles*. At the same time, the junta launched a brutal campaign — dubbed the "Red Terror" — to eradicate its internal adversaries. Tens of thousands were arrested, killed or driven out of the country, many of them leftist adversaries and critics, before the blood-letting wound down. Once Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged on top of the *derg* at the start of 1977 — after killing one of his rivals in a shoot-out in the presidential palace and having another executed — *Me'ison* and other civilian parties were crushed, and a new party was formed under tight military command. The mass organizations and *kebeles* were then harnessed to the regime as instruments to control the civilian population, not as engines of social change. Traveling in Ethiopia at that time, one could not help but be struck by the pervasive fear on the part of students and urban intellectuals, workers, peasant farmers, and many lower level government officials — nearly everyone outside the ruling junta. "Even the stones have ears," one young Ethiopian told me as he insisted we walk in the center of a busy Addis Ababa thoroughfare to have a whispered conversation.

Once fully in control, Mengistu ousted the U.S. and realigned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union. Moscow quickly adopted the regime as its pre-eminent ally in the region, sending in hundreds of military and political advisors and billions of dollars in new arms to shore it up. At the end of the four-year transition — and after repelling a Somali invasion of the contested southeastern Ogaden region — the junta turned its attention to Eritrea. Meanwhile, the Soviets performed a political makeover on Ethiopia to reflect the trappings of "non-capitalist development," described earlier. They also pressured anti-impe-

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rialist states and movements throughout the world to withdraw support for Eritrean self-determination on the grounds that the context had changed now that Ethiopia was a Soviet ally. Many did so — among them the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party and most of the Palestinian left.

But this was not all. China, which, with Cuba and others, had trained Eritrean guerrillas in the 1960s, now offered aid if the Eritreans would condemn the "Gang of Four" and publicly denounce the Soviet Union as "social-imperialist" — conditions the Eritreans spurned. The Israelis, fearing the rise of a pro-Arab regime along the strategic southern coast of the Red Sea, quietly continued to back the new Ethiopian junta, led by Lt. Col. Mengistu Haile Mariam. Even Saudi Arabia undercut the Eritreans by funding an Islamic splinter group opposed to the EPLF's left secularism. Ironically, this Saudi intervention then became a rationale for pro-Soviet elements to claim that the Eritreans, including the EPLF, were fronting for imperialism.

The Soviet shift posed particular political problems for the ELF, which also subscribed to the *derg's* Soviet-derived theoretical framework. Some in the early ELF were influenced by the radical nationalism associated with Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, though the organization as a whole never had a well-defined political orientation. After the split in the late 1960s, the organization adopted the "non-capitalist development" line as its ideological nomenclature, though the politics of its members remained amorphous.[25] The practical effect of this within the ELF and the areas of Eritrea it controlled was difficult to gauge, as a key aspect was that structural social changes were largely reserved for implementation once a political movement had captured state power, or in this case liberated the nation. On my 1976 tour of ELF-held areas I found a phenomenon similar to that I describe below in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon — a political movement whose populist rhetoric far outstripped its practice and whose ambiguity accommodated many otherwise contradictory political trends. There was a sort of "modernization" underway as the system of local administration by traditional chiefs was being replaced with one based upon elected village committees. However, interviews with members of these committees revealed that most of the new chairs were former chiefs. The front also managed a steadily expanding system of services, but in this area, as in civil administration, the transformation of existing power relations was put on hold until after independence. Instead, services were developed on a patronage basis to win over and main-

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tain the loyalty of ELF supporters. There were women fighters in the ELF but no program to alter gender relations in the wider society.[26]

I was told that to tamper with such things as traditional authority, land tenure or women's rights would divide the conservative society and invite a backlash that could undermine the national struggle. The front was setting up mass organizations of women, workers and peasant farmers, but they served almost exclusively as resources for the war effort, not as agents of social or economic change. There was also little emphasis on education and training in these associations or in the front itself, though there was occasional political education carried out by itinerant cadres who went from village to village to lecture on topical subjects.

What distinguished the EPLF from the ELF was its commitment to simultaneous social and political struggle and the incorporation of this approach into its political culture as well as its practice. Though it was not acknowledged until much later, there was a clandestine Marxist-Leninist party guiding the front, the Eritrean People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP, known in Eritrea simply as the People's Party). Despite the secrecy surrounding the party, its impact was readily apparent.[27]

The EPLF functioned as a disciplined political organization whose members shared a common outlook and acted as political emissaries in their interaction with civilians and rival factions.[28] The notion that each fighter had to model the EPLF's politics was embedded in the structure of the organization, which set out to re-mold its members in order to transform the society at large. This started in training camp, which lasted six full months for most new recruits, and it continued within the front as members met three times weekly for political education led by cadres within their units. The content of these sessions varied according to issues of the day, but in the mid-1970s, as the EPLF went through a major growth spurt, the main thread followed a curriculum produced in the field that started with a reprise of Eritrean history and proceeded to a highly sophisticated analysis of the revolution's goals and objectives. Marxism was the methodology.[29]

In the society at large, the EPLF's most decisive interventions came in the areas of land reform, village democratization and gender equality. Cadres surveyed land tenure in rural Eritrea — which varied widely from one region to another — and set about reorganizing it on a more egalitarian basis through newly elected village administrations. Unlike the ELF, the EPLF mid-wifed these committees into existence

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through a system of sectoral representation based on new mass organizations of peasants, women, workers and youth, themselves segmented by class position. Each sub-set selected its own representative, producing a People's Assembly of mostly poor women and men of all ages. Though this formulaic approach was modified as the years wore on, it signaled a commitment to empower the disenfranchised majority through new mechanisms.

Elections were held as often as every three-to-four months as villagers learned to evaluate the performance of the new officials and to oust those who didn't measure up. Quotas were set for women's representation in the new assemblies, and marriage laws were reformed to free women from arrangements that in many cases kept them in life-long bondage. These and other such measures antagonized some conservatives, but they were accompanied by the provision of social and economic services — health care, early childhood education, adult literacy, agricultural extension, veterinary assistance and so on — that were often channeled through the new associations and committees rather than directly administered by the front. This helped to squelch the grumbling by those whose prerogatives were curtailed. By arguing that women's full participation in the independence struggle was essential for the country's liberation, the front also tried to make it unpatriotic to contest women's increased prominence in social and political affairs.

Much of this was party-driven.

* * *

The seeds for the People's Party had been planted in the contentious political environment of the 1960s. At that time, to voice support for a secular nationalist outlook within the ELF, let alone a more developed left agenda, could put a member at serious risk. But this was also a period when left ideas were swirling around the movement, and activists from a variety of left trends were flocking to join it.[30] They brought with them an eclectic agenda for sweeping social and political change drawn from Marxist "classics" and popular accounts of other liberation struggles then circulating on the campuses — an agenda at odds with the disheartening reality they found in the field. Among them were Isaias Afwerki, a former engineering student from the Christian highlands, and Romedan Mohammed Nur, a Muslim from the coastal lowlands. Both men entertained radical egalitarian visions of national liberation. Both were shocked at what they found in the ELF.

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"In those days it was something like an obligation to join the movement for national liberation. Emotionally and sentimentally, everyone was with the ELF," Isaias told me later.

> But when I joined the armed struggle in 1966 with many of my friends, we began to know the real ELF. The first day I arrived in Kassala [Sudan], I was frustrated, people telling me about the ugly nature of the ELF. It was a nightmare. For some reason that no one explained, we were ostracized. There was an atmosphere of terror where you had to go out in groups, especially at dusk. There were no instructions, there was no organization, but if you asked questions, you were labeled as an agent of the Ethiopians. Not only highlanders — everyone who joined the ELF found himself in this situation.
>
> The shocking thing was that during high school, you never knew who was from what tribe, from what region, because there was not a hint of that kind of thing. But in the ELF everything was based on your clan or tribe. This created the ground for a new outlook, a reformist trend. Anyone who got there with high nationalistic feeling would be in the camp against the ELF leadership. It was not a battle of ideas or ideals — it was a question of whether there was nationalism or not. You would never talk about 'Eritrea' inside the ELF — always it was tribes or clans or religious affiliations that mattered. Revolutionary ideals had to be injected into the ELF to make it a real nationalist movement.[31]

Early in 1967, Romedan and Isaias, by then participants in clandestine cells inside the ELF and linked to left circles outside the front, were sent to China with three other fighters for political and military training. When they returned nearly a year later to serve as the political commissioners for two of the regional ELF commands, they brought with them fresh ideas on how to wage an effective guerrilla war and a new appreciation for the importance of a political party in that process, among other things.[32] They also cemented ties with one another and with a circle of close comrades that would last through the next two decades. Among them was Haile Wold'ensai, who would play a key role in shaping the political direction of the liberation movement and the clandestine party within it. Haile, Isaias and a third comrade who did not survive the war had already taken a blood oath in Kassala in 1966 committing themselves to rectify the national movement. To this day, each carries a scar in the shape of a capital E

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on their upper arm from that compact.[33]

After three breakaway ELF factions came together in the early 1970s to form an alliance they called the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces, a group of left activists, led by Isaias, formed the nucleus of the new party. In 1972, they quietly launched it. A year later, just as the new front was beginning to extend its reach into the highlands, a struggle within the core group erupted into an open contest for control of the party and, with it, the EPLF. The initial putsch was led by an ultra-left faction of mostly urban intellectuals. This triggered a wider political upheaval that brought in rightist and regionalist elements and nearly wrecked the new front. The outcome was ugly — several of the group's leaders were executed — but this was the single worst instance of sectarianism within the EPLF, and it was never repeated. The following year, after an extended period of political debate, the party was revitalized, and the front stabilized. People's Party activists set up a school under Haile's direction to train cadres to work among the fighters and within the civilian population. At this point, EPLF forces again moved out of their mountain redoubt into the densely populated highlands. By 1976, the People's Party was firmly in control of the EPLF, which was rapidly expanding the territory under its control just as I made my first visit to the liberated areas. During that year, the party held its founding congress, electing a leadership and drafting a socialist program. Early in 1977, the EPLF held its first organizational congress, adopting a National Democratic Program, drafted by the party but widely circulated among all the fighters before its acceptance. At that moment, the Ethiopian army was collapsing and the liberation of the country appeared in sight.

However, the national movement got stuck on the question of political unity. This was a hot topic in the EPLF and the ELF and in the wider society, but the two fronts made little progress toward it. Several attempts to cooperate on the frontlines, including joint assaults on government positions, failed badly and led to sharp recriminations, mostly aimed at the ELF, whose command structures were weak and whose fighters lacked the discipline under fire of their EPLF counterparts. Unity negotiations never got beyond the formal stage as both fronts — and the parties operating within them — held out for approaches that played to their respective strengths. The EPLF favored a gradual process of coordination and dialogue at all levels in order to build a united front from below. The ELF called instead for an agreement to combine the two forces through a one-time, movement-wide congress in which each front would be represented according to

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the size of its membership. These positions reflected obvious organizational self-interest, as the EPLF, with its highly politicized membership, would have an advantage over the ELF in an extended political encounter, while the ELF, with its larger numbers, would have an edge in an abbreviated contest where size alone determined power. This reflected a consistent divergence in each organization's way of dealing with political matters that harkened back to the original split, and it was never resolved.

The moment of truth for the Eritreans came in 1978 when Ethiopia launched a massive, Soviet-backed military campaign to retake the territory. More than 100,000 heavily armed troops attacked insurgent positions from a dozen points, driving north across the Ethiopian border from bases in the neighboring province of Tigray, exploding out from the encircled urban enclaves inside Eritrea and landing expeditionary forces along the Red Sea coast. They were supported by mechanized brigades of new Soviet tanks and armored personnel carriers and by waves of Soviet-supplied jet fighters, against which the Eritreans had little more than rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns. Soviet advisers played a key role in planning and executing the campaign, which unfolded in a series of four large offensives over six months.

The ELF suffered heavy losses in battles along the border before pulling back. The EPLF chose instead to fight and retreat, fight and retreat, until its forces were backed up to the northern mountains. Once there, however, the lightly armed fighters were able to make use of the terrain to offset the imbalance in firepower, and the war ground to a stalemate. The loss of liberated areas was a major setback for both fronts, but the manner in which the EPLF withdrew, conserving its strength and assisting civilians to escape ahead of the fighting, positioned it to resume the war almost at once, infiltrating guerrilla units far behind the lines while maintaining an entrenched defense of its rear base. The ELF, on the other hand, never fully recovered.

Apart from the battlefield losses, there was also political damage. The ELF's stubborn adherence to a pro-Soviet political line — arguing at times that the Soviet intervention was a simply a "mistake," and involving itself in back-channel mediation efforts with, among others, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Italian Communist Party — did little to reassure disgruntled members and supporters, many of whom bailed out. On the EPLF side, there were also defections in the field, though mostly minor ones.[34] That front's main loss came when its U.S-based student and women's

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organizations broke off *en masse* in an orgy of ultra-left polemics. The youthful renegades, working with a pro-Albania political sect active in the U.S. and Canada and fancying themselves the party-building vanguard that would put the movement back on course, denounced the EPLF as "capitulationist" for failing to characterize the Soviet Union as "social-imperialist," and they predicted the front's imminent collapse. (The EPLF had earlier described the Soviet Union as a "strategic ally." It now argued that Soviet foreign policy, like that of the US, was driven by national self-interest and left it at that.)[35] This defection was a major blow, as the U.S.-based organizations were a critical source of financial support as well as skilled volunteers. However, within a year the 'leftist' splinter group imploded — its leader leapt to his death off a ten-story building — and the support network was reconstructed.[36]

Outside these circles, most non-Eritrean commentators — left or right — declared the war over but for the mopping-up, based upon the premise that a tiny territory like Eritrea without a global patron had no chance against a neighbor twenty times its size that enjoyed the full support of a superpower. As a result, the movement entered a phase of extreme isolation, as the Soviet-led political embargo took effect, and the West simply walked away.

A maverick, left-wing guerrilla movement fighting a Soviet-backed "socialist" military regime was indeed a political anomaly, but it did not take long to see that predictions of the EPLF's imminent demise were premature. In 1979 I traveled far behind the lines to assess the front's post-retreat recovery. I skirted the government-held enclave of Afabet in absolute silence one night, passing within two miles of the town with a battalion of 600 heavily armed men and women for an escort. In the mountains along the coast, we spent a night at an EPLF radio relay station, stocked with supplies for guerrilla bands operating in the area. The next day, in the remote hamlet of Geleb, virtually destroyed by government troops in 1970 and again in 1974, I found EPLF cadres working with a local People's Assembly to implement an advanced land reform program. At the base of the escarpment northeast of Asmara a few days later, I saw EPLF agricultural specialists operating a fruit and vegetable plantation. Nearby, doctors and field-trained paramedics ran a sophisticated field hospital. On the slopes, we encountered a silent file of 400 fighters carrying automatic rifles and grenade launchers, returning from an overnight raid on an Ethiopian-controlled village.

I saw no sign of a government presence during most of the three-

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week journey, apart from the frequent over-flights of MiG jets. EPLF fighters had moved back into position throughout much of Ethiopia's thinly defended rear. Their main task was rebuilding and strengthening ties with the local population. They also linked with supporters in the occupied towns, keeping the Ethiopians off-balance with a stream of commando raids and propaganda operations. In addition to regular military clashes, EPLF partisans attacked prisons to release political detainees, kidnapped collaborators in the villages, pasted inflammatory posters on the walls of government buildings and distributed pamphlets to their supporters under the nose of the occupation forces. "Our main strength is flexibility," Isaias Afwerki, the EPLF's top field commander (and Eritrea's future president), told me then. "We have exploited this strong point to the maximum in maintaining our military initiative and our manpower and morale."[37]

* * *

Meanwhile, the strategic retreat triggered a gradual rethinking of the EPLF's general strategy and tactics. There were no sudden ruptures, but there was an acceleration of the trend toward the "Eritreanization" of the movement on the organizational, political and ideological levels. Not only the direct involvement of the Soviet Union but also the behavior of the rest of the world, socialist or otherwise, encouraged the movement to believe that when the chips were down, there was no one to trust but the Eritreans themselves.

In the following years, the armed forces were re-organized into three levels to reflect the new situation. At the core was the EPLA, a national army with modern weapons, a highly centralized administration, extensive combat experience and tight military discipline that operated at brigade (and later division) strength. At the outer edge were the village militias, organized in squads as small as five people, charged with defending and policing their communities and with playing an exemplary role in mutual aid and cooperative work. Between the EPLA and the militias were zonal armies, made up of people who lived at home but who were well-trained members of mobile military units that joined EPLA units for specific operations and played a key role in regional defense. (There were also clandestine cells in occupied areas, whose main tasks were intelligence gathering, sabotage and occasional assassinations.) In addition to its military responsibilities, each regular army unit managed its own small vegetable garden and raised goats and chickens to supplement its rations and to set an example to the civilian population. Both the EPLA and the

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zonal armies engaged in large-scale productive work, operating irrigated farms for the front and helping individual farmers in their fields, building and repairing roads, and so on; and they proselytized among the civilian population on behalf of the EPLF and its program whenever the opportunity arose.

Political education was a constant feature of life in EPLF areas. It took place in small meetings, through intensive courses of study, and in large public seminars. It could involve military units, sectoral groups or whole villages. Its aims were to discredit the enemy, to build commitment to the EPLF, to transmit specific lessons on the meaning and method of political struggle, or simply to increase morale and self-confidence. After the retreat, this process opened up to include more dialogue and more exploration of topical issues. Organizers were advised that meetings should be short and "untiring" and that they should be scheduled in consultation with the participants to ensure active involvement. Sessions ranged from the difference between Ethiopian-sponsored *kebeles* and EPLF-supported peoples' assemblies to interpretations of Middle East politics, discussions of the meaning of democracy and disquisitions on women's right to sexual satisfaction in marriage.

To support the intensified political work, the EPLF reopened its cadre school — run by the party — and trained over 400 new organizers from 1979-82 (compared to 266 in 1975). Meanwhile, basic education continued in civilian society and within the military. Adult literacy was a major focus of the mass organizations, and frontline combat units routinely met behind their trenches to study language, mathematics, geography and other primary subjects, as I witnessed during my trek to the highlands. Each unit also had its own cultural troupe which regularly performed the songs and dances of all Eritrea's ethnic groups for the fighters and for villages where they were stationed.

Although an extraordinary range of organizing and mobilizing was going on, the pace of this work slowed from it's tempo prior to the retreat. It became more thorough, more patient, more modest in its expectations, and less ideologically rigid or politically derivative. There was also an attempt to create new types of membership that would draw people in over a wider political spectrum and hold onto their loyalty. The EPLF's strategy in this phase had three main components: strengthening the front's popular base in order to maximize the human and material resources available to it, building alliances inside Ethiopia in order to challenge the regime from within, and

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resolving the contradiction with the ELF to enable it to concentrate these resources on the fight with Ethiopia.

The mass associations of peasants, women, youth and workers remained the basic building blocks for people's power, whether they were organized clandestinely in contested areas or openly in more secure villages and towns.[38] Shortly before the retreat, members of the peasants' and the students' associations, until then managed directly by EPLF cadres, held founding congresses to consolidate their own structures and leaderships. The military situation prevented women and workers from holding congresses that year, but in November 1979 they both did so, launching "national unions" with chapters around the country and abroad. One effect of this was to heighten participation by Eritreans in the diaspora, who, over the next decade or so, would send tens of millions of dollars to Eritrea to underwrite the independence war. The front also encouraged those diaspora Eritreans who hesitated to join the political and social movements to support their humanitarian arm, the Eritrean Relief Association, which set up chapters in North America, Europe and the Middle East.

But disunity in the field continued to plague the movement. EPLF attempts to revive the unity talks with ELF were unsuccessful. By the end of 1980, tensions were at a peak, and the number of armed clashes between them steadily increased, as the EPLF prepared for another round of fighting with Ethiopia. (ELF forces were no longer on the frontlines.) That spring renewed civil war broke out, and the EPLF drove the ELF out of the country altogether. Remnants of the defeated front took refuge in Sudan, some to eventually reconcile with EPLF and rejoin the war with Ethiopia, others to remain in opposition and to attack the postwar EPLF government in the 1990s. Many ELF members simply scattered into the diaspora, as had happened in 1970 during its first big split.

Though the ELF's collapse allowed the EPLF to turn its full might against Ethiopia for the first time, it also put enormous pressure on the front's political resources, as it tripled the size of its operations. In 1982 alone, the EPLF organized over 550 new village committees. At about this time, it stopped sub-dividing the mass organizations on the basis of class, in part due to the pressures of their expanded area of operation, in part to the leveling effects of the drought that was ravaging Eritrea and also because they began to see it as too mechanical an application of Chinese-derived political formulas.[39] However, there was a renewed emphasis on socio-economic development in the liberated and semi-liberated areas. Land reform remained at the core

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of this work in the densely populated highlands where it was seen by the EPLF as a springboard to social revolution.[40] Despite problems with resources and logistics, the EPLF also renewed its efforts to improve rural productivity through agricultural extension work, assistance with animal husbandry, and projects such as poultry-raising and vegetable gardening run by the mass organizations. Consumer cooperatives were established, and loan cooperatives were set up to finance village infrastructure projects. After 1981, mutual aid teams were organized among poor peasants to increase the scale and cost-effectiveness of their farming activities. Perhaps the most effective project in the early 1980s, though, was the public health program under which scores of traditional village health workers and mid-wives were given special training and linked into a national network of preventive and curative medicine. Throughout, the watchword was self-reliance — doing more with less.

Then, in the mid-1980s, war and famine combined to create a human crisis of near biblical proportions. Persistent drought seared the brittle land until the population of northern Ethiopia and much of Eritrea teetered on the brink of starvation. But politics played a key role in the size and scope of the disaster that ensued, as the regime used food relief as bait to lure hungry farmers out of opposition-controlled areas and prevented aid from reaching them in their villages. In Ethiopia's Tigray province, starving families fled their homes to seek help in camps set up near government-held towns — those that were televised to devastating effect in October 1984. Once there, many were loaded onto Soviet transport planes and forcibly relocated to southern Ethiopia. Seeing this, the TPLF organized a massive exodus to Sudan where those who survived the harrowing journey finally received international aid. The situation was not so desperate in Eritrea, as the EPLF was better positioned than its Tigrayan counterpart to deal with the emergency, so there was nowhere near the outflow of people. But the famine had a considerable impact on the liberation struggle there, too.

By this time, some 360,000 Eritrean refugees had already fled to Sudan, most due to the war, some as early as 1967. Several hundred thousand more were internally displaced, either subsisting with help from relatives or under the care of the EPLF, whose humanitarian arm, the Eritrean Relief Association, mounted a cross-border relief operation from logistical bases in northeastern Sudan. However, though millions of dollars in aid poured into Sudan once news of the famine broke, relatively little of it made its way into Eritrea at first,

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since most international donors — with the exception of the European Protestant churches and a handful of solidarity groups — declined to support work in guerrilla zones.[41] In December 1984, when I toured the area, ERA was feeding more than 100,000 people in thirty camps inside Eritrea, and the numbers were growing by the day. Much of the money for this came from the Eritrean diaspora, though by early 1985 Western NGOs finally became significant contributors. Meanwhile, this situation had a dampening effect on the EPLF's political mobilization. Organizers found it increasingly difficult to produce convincing results from social experiments in an economy where there was no surplus, and where people were almost entirely preoccupied with basic survival. As one frustrated cadre put it to me, "The people can't eat ideology."

Other factors also fostered a moderation of the politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The end of the civil war with the ELF encouraged the EPLF to be more inclusive, as the front reached out to Eritreans of all political stripes on the basis of their nationalism. The need to assign scarce cadres around vast new areas of the country to reach people in former ELF areas also limited the ability of the EPLF to carry out its social reforms and its political mobilizing at the level of complexity it had brought to its early experiments. Also, seeing nearly every socialist-oriented movement and government in the world troupe in and out of Addis Ababa had the effect of undermining faith in the litanies of the Left that had informed the front's early ideological development. Within Eritrea, too, the experience of administering the liberated zones fostered a growing sense of the limitations of state-centered development models. These factors did not provoke a political about-face, as one might have expected, but they did foster a more pragmatic approach to economic policy and more openness to experimentation.

Throughout these years, the EPLF was engaged in a process of political reflection, which found formal expression in March 1987 at its second congress. A (party-led) preparatory committee circulated a draft of a revised National Democratic Program to every member of the EPLF, including the fighters and those in the mass organizations, soliciting comments that were incorporated into the document during a year of intense debate. Among the changes from 1977 were the deletion of references to "imperialists" and "Zionists" in favor of allusions to "foreigners hostile to Eritrean independence." The "masses of workers, peasants and other democratic forces" became "the people." "Anti-feudal and anti-imperialist" popular organizations

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became "nationalist" associations. More significantly, the rights of all "nationalist political parties" were for the first time explicitly guaranteed; pledges to confiscate all land in the hands of the Ethiopian government and all foreigners and Eritrean collaborators were scaled back to include only lands held by the former regime; plans to establish large-scale, state-run farming cooperatives were dropped; Eritrean capitalists were encouraged to set up factories and enterprises without reference to size; trade was to be "regulated" by the state rather than "handled" by it; and more emphasis was given to public education, treatment of prisoners of war and attention to the rights of Eritreans living abroad. While the rhetorical level dropped a notch, the most important pattern in these changes was a diminished view of the role of the state in Eritrean development.[42]

Toward the end of the war, the structure and substance of the front's political education for the mass organizations — and for the fighters — also lightened up in frequency and depth. Study groups that used to meet three times weekly for political education now met once each week or less. The content of the political education curriculum came from a new manual, published in 1989 to replace the text of the 1970s.[43] The main focus was on Eritrea — the place and the nation — with less theory and more emphasis on practical issues. The formulas were absent, but the values remained. "Our political education is based on our philosophy: nationalism, social justice and the development of the Eritrean personality (Morality)," Haile Wold'ensai, who supervised the redrafting of the manual, wrote across the top of an annotated outline that he gave me in Orota.[44] "We were carried off by the revolutionary and leftist upheavals that were the order of the day in the 1960s," he reflected during a late-night interview conducted by candle light in the underground guest house. "From the beginning, our objective was to create social justice, but we tried to find models in other people's experience. The strategic retreat gave us a good time — a hard and a good time — to reassess this. We came to understand that we had to cool down, first of all to stand on our two feet on our own soil."

Haile characterized the EPLF's first years as a time of cult-like revolutionary purism. The reaction to the conservatism of the ELF combined with the revolutionary zeal that university-based political groups brought into the field fostered a lurch to the far left. In the 1970s, EPLF members shared all their material possessions, took an absolute vow of chastity and broke all ties with their personal pasts. Fighters often passed through their home villages without acknowl-

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edging their families. "In the early EPLF, we had an ideal image or dream, and sometimes we failed to connect it to reality," Haile said. "When you don't care about your family, you can't care about the society at large." Nevertheless, he insisted, the commitment to egalitarian values remained intact. "The struggle itself was a school. We have learned to base our struggle on the objective reality, but we have not detached ourselves from our aims. The fighters who formed the EPLF were purely committed to national unity and to justice, and this has worked."[45]

* * *

Huge but largely unreported battles took place in Eritrea during this decade, some involving hundreds of thousands of troops in campaigns that went on for months at a time. The EPLF fighters, dug into a network of heavily fortified bunkers and trenches, inflicted massive casualties on the attacking government forces while minimizing their own. They also captured enormous quantities of Soviet arms and equipment. Gradually, they gained parity on the battlefield until they were positioned to strike back. The turning point came in 1988 when they launched a surprise counter-offensive.

Breaking with the conventions of protracted people's war (mass your forces at the enemy's weakest point and then withdraw to fight another day), the EPLF hit the Ethiopians at their strongest point, shattering the ten-year stalemate and encircling Ethiopian forces in the country's main towns and cities. In one forty-eight hour battle, Eritrean forces wiped out three Ethiopian divisions and overran the largest ammunition and supply depot in Eritrea, taking enough heavy weapons, ammunition and equipment to supply (and substantially expand) their army over the next year.[46] British historian Basil Davidson, who was in Eritrea at the time of the battle, described it in a live interview on the BBC as "one of the biggest [victories] ever scored by any liberation movement anywhere since Dien Bien Phu in 1954."[47]

Over the next year-and-a-half the EPLF closed in on Asmara and other highland garrisons, while stepping up support to — and direct involvement with — anti-government forces fighting inside Ethiopia. In February 1990, the noose tightened further when the EPLF took the port of Massawa, using a flotilla of small speed boats to mount a surprise attack on off-shore positions. The final battle took place outside Asmara in mid-May 1991, during which Ethiopia's mercurial dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, fled Addis Ababa to take refuge in Zimbabwe. On May 24, after the Ethiopian army in Eritrea disin-

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tegrated, the EPLF marched into Asmara and began the process of constructing the new state. Three days later, the government in Ethiopia collapsed, and a TPLF-led coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front — operating with EPLF military support — took power there. That July, the new regime announced an agreement with the EPLF to allow an internationally-supervised referendum on Eritrea's political status after a two-year transition period, based on a peace proposal the EPLF had put forward eleven years earlier.

* * *

During the six weeks in late 1991 that I traveled about newly liberated Eritrea, several months after the end of the fighting, I witnessed the barely controlled chaos of a country's birth. There was the quiet drama of a refugee just returned to Nacfa from Port Sudan, now camping with his five small children in the ruins of their war-damaged house. There was the euphoria of the family in a village outside Segeneiti discovering that their daughter, who disappeared twenty years earlier to join the EPLF, was still alive — and had made them grandparents. But there was also the pathos of the three young men in the Keren hospital, wounded the day before I arrived by a leftover land mine. Everywhere, there was a creative frenzy, as people struggled to put things back together — homes, families, farms, enterprises, communities, human lives. EPLF agronomists were planting tens of thousands of seedlings on badly eroded hillsides in Akele Guzai. A military brigade was chopping rocks and hauling them into the battered front-line town of Nacfa to help returnees rebuild houses and shops. A school had already been put up there, and a new hospital was on its way. Roads were being repaired, water pipes patched, telephone lines strung, fields harvested, small gardens planted.

Two impressions from the beginning of the postwar transition are etched in my memory. No one, anywhere, was idle. All the people appeared to be occupied with the tasks of reconstruction. And nowhere did I see young people carrying guns, a truly remarkable feature for a country just emerging from more than a quarter century of war. Nor did I hear expressions of bitterness toward the vanquished foe, only talk of the challenges that lay ahead. But there was a downside to this rupture with the past, apart from the risks entailed in precipitous denial of unprocessed pain and anger, which would come back to haunt them by the end of the decade. Even then, it was impossible not to feel the loss of community — of the EPLF as one large,

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extended family — that had so profoundly defined life during the liberation struggle, as the former fighters moved into private living quarters, shed the ragtag wardrobes they had in common, donned the accouterments of urban life, and began to trundle back and forth to their new positions in officialdom.

The intensive organizing of the civilian population, long a hallmark of the Eritrean movement, seemed to stop altogether in those first post-liberation years, as EPLF fighters for the most part busied themselves with tasks set by their leaders in Asmara. Two years into the transition, I found some fighters in outlying towns and remote military outposts with nothing to do, who turned for the first time to excessive drinking in their off-hours. The Department of Public Administration, responsible for civilian mobilization during the war years, had been converted into the Ministry of Local Government. Except for the National Union of Eritrean Women, all the EPLF civilian associations were dormant or formally dismantled. Nor was there any of the intensive political education that long characterized the liberation movement. There was, said one former cadre, no time for it.

These changes were accompanied by an apparent sea-change in outlook, as many of the fighters-turned-administrators described the new postwar phase they were entering as one marked by the end of ideology and the dawn of a new, thoroughly pragmatic era. The isolation of the war years was to be a thing of the past. Aid and investment would flow into the new country. Market forces would revive — and drive — the economy. More than once, I heard that the collectivist politics of the independence war was history. However, the more I encountered it, the more it seemed that this represented less a decisive ideological shift than a weariness with political life and a deeply felt, if naive, wish that the world would finally accept the justice of the Eritrean cause and step in with enough material aid that everyone could just relax and get on with their lives. Of course, this was not to be the case, and the hiatus in political life did not last long.

For those two years, however, the leadership and the liberation movement's mid-level cadres were preoccupied with the immediate demands of putting the new state together. As a result, the front's uncommonly close ties with the base of the society, within which the fighters swam like the proverbial political fish, steadily atrophied. Much was done *for* the people in this period, but little was done *with* or *through* them. As so often happens when a revolutionary movement seizes power, the people became the objects of programs rather than the agents of their own development. In effect, the political sit-

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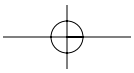
uation seemed to mirror that of the economy, which was dominated by the distribution of donated food relief.

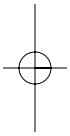
This phase came to a close in April 1993, when Eritreans at home and abroad voted overwhelmingly for independence, which was declared on May 24, the anniversary of the end of the war. The political erosion halted eighteen months later, in February 1994, when the EPLF dissolved itself, after months of internal debate, and relaunched the movement as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice. The PFDJ was to be organizationally and financially distinct from the state and open to any Eritrean who subscribed to its founding charter, whether or not they fought in the independence war. This is when the existence of the now-disbanded People's Party was announced, much to the surprise of many EPLF members, but there was no sustained public discussion of it, a signal of how much secrecy had become part of the country's political culture.

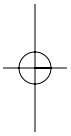
PFDJ leaders said that they sought to start the new movement on a fresh, more transparent basis and left it at that. This was to be a mass movement, not a vanguard. Their goal was to organize the majority of the adult population, at home and abroad, and to involve them in the political process, creating an environment in which pluralism in the political sphere could thrive, but not until national unity had reached a higher level and the threat of ethnic and religious fragmentation had receded. Geography, not the workplace nor the army nor any other institution, would be the basis for new party structures, with the initial effort focused at the local level.

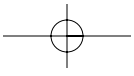
The National Charter, adopted at the PFDJ congress, defined a further transition period for the country lasting through 1997. During this time, a constitution was to be drafted and ratified, laws were to be promulgated for the establishment of competing political parties, and national elections were to be prepared. The state would be limited to a minor role in the production and distribution of goods, but it would set national priorities, regulate commerce and investment, and control banking and finance. The space was opened for trade unions, semi-autonomous sectoral organizations and other non-state organizations, as the new political movement took shape under rules that effectively blocked other parties from forming until after the transition. Most of these objectives were met, though on a slower timetable, when war broke out with Ethiopia in mid-1998 and brought the process to a jarring halt.

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CHAPTER 2

SOUTH AFRICA

POSITION, NOT POWER

Similar challenges confronted South African revolutionaries in early 1995, when I arrived in Johannesburg nine months after the elections that brought the African National Congress into power with Nelson Mandela at the head of a Government of National Unity. The situation was complicated by the fact that the liberation movement was the dominant member of a coalition of nearly all South African political parties that together managed the first phase of the transition within the state apparatus of the apartheid regime. The ANC was constrained at first by compromises agreed to during the negotiations for the formation of the governing coalition. More importantly, though, it lacked control over the country's economic resources, which remained in the hands of the white minority under agreements that effectively precluded their redistribution. Even when the ANC took full control of the government, it lacked the leverage to transform it. Instead of restructuring the state, a hard enough proposition for a victorious revolutionary movement, the South African revolutionaries were absorbed into the very institution they had for decades opposed. Once there, they set about trying to reform it from the inside out.

Almost immediately the liberation movement came under siege from the state apparatus itself, as the deeply entrenched, almost exclusively white, conservative bureaucracy — guaranteed extended tenure by a pre-election agreement known as the "sunset clause" — worked to put the brakes on economic or social change. At the same time a nervous capitalist class sought to blunt the direction and character of the movement by limiting its field of action from the outside. This was the backdrop for the next phase of the struggle for a people's democracy, with its complex overlays of race, class, gender and ethnicity.

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The South Africans arrived at this point out of one of the richest traditions of revolutionary nationalism in Africa. Founded on January 8, 1912, the ANC (originally called the South African Native National Congress) is the first such movement on the continent. For its part, the South African Communist Party (originally the Communist Party of South Africa, or CPSA) was established in 1921, drawing on a left tradition in South Africa that reached into the nineteenth century. Separately and together, the two political organizations exerted a powerful sway over the destiny of this strategic, resource-rich country through most of the twentieth century. With the elections of 1999, they positioned themselves to steer its course — and to influence much of the rest of the sub-continent — well into the next one.

With upwards of thirty-five million people, South Africa is the third most populous nation in Africa, after Nigeria and Ethiopia, and one of its richest. Its vast mineral reserves — not only gold and diamonds, but also chromium, platinum, manganese and other strategic metals — and its relatively developed agricultural and industrial base, its skilled workforce, its strategic location, and the size and quality of its internal market, give South Africa a global economic importance. They have also long made the country a target for outside interference. That will certainly not lessen in the years to come.

The Dutch first established an outpost at Cape Town in 1652, after failing to take Mozambique from the Portuguese, with the object of servicing their merchant fleet. Settlers trickled in, later importing slaves and establishing themselves along the coast. With the increased strategic value of the nearby sea lanes, the British seized the colony in 1806. Three years later, they introduced the first "pass laws" to regulate the movement of Africans, who resisted their dispossession fiercely throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in the Eastern Cape region. Meanwhile, the Dutch settlers, known as Boers (and later as Afrikaners, after the dialect that evolved among them), responded to British intrusions along the coast by moving inland where they formed new colonies. The settlers' discovery of diamonds in the 1860s and then rich gold reefs (long worked by local tribespeople) triggered new influxes and whetted British greed for further conquest. The upshot was a brutal white tribal fight in 1899-1902, known as the Anglo-Boer war, which the British won after laying waste to Afrikaner communities and placing thousands of captured women and children and their black farm tenants in concentration camps.

In 1910, Britain joined the four colonies together, calling them the Union of South Africa, and gave them independence under a con-

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stitution that entrenched racial subordination and left the English-speaking whites in control of the new country and its fast-growing economy. The new parliament quickly passed a Native Land Act — amending it in the Thirties — that dispossessed hundreds of thousands of Africans by setting aside eighty-seven percent of the land for people of European descent. The rest was designated as "native reserves," the precursors of what were later termed "bantustans" and then nominally independent "homelands." These moves, coupled with the imposition of "job reservation" by racial categories, formally institutionalized the already stark racial divisions in the country. They also catalyzed a small group of black intellectuals to form the ANC. Their mission was to unite Africans across ethnic and tribal lines, improving their economic condition and defending their rapidly diminishing political rights. It was to be a long, uphill battle.

The English controlled the state until the Afrikaner-based National Party scored an upset electoral victory in 1948. The NP, many of whose members had been Nazi sympathizers during the war, moved immediately to intensify the already draconian legal system of racial domination, terming its elaborate embellishments *apartheid*. New laws categorized everyone by race, mandated racial identity cards, prohibited sex between people of different races, imposed strict urban residential segregation, outlawed opposition to the apartheid system under the banner of fighting communism (and specifically banned the CPSA), segregated services and facilities throughout the country, reduced schooling for Africans so that it would "equip the Bantu to meet the demands which the economic life ... will impose on him," and established ten tribal "bantustans" to which all Africans were assigned while stripping them of South African citizenship. The NP also gave its Afrikaner constituents, many of whom lived in poverty, a leg up in the English-dominated economy. From 1948 to 1975, Afrikaner control of private industry increased from ten to twenty-one percent (a figure that rises to forty-five percent when state-owned enterprises, dominated by Afrikaner civil servants, are factored in).

Apartheid reached into every aspect of the country's economic, political, social and cultural life, reducing people of African descent to aliens in their own land and virtual slaves in the burgeoning post-war economy. The problem for the whites was that they needed blacks to do much of the work, not only on the farms, in the mines and in the new factories, but also in their homes and communities. The result was the creation of a sybaritic society built around bizarre, paired communities — posh, white, European-style suburbs linked always

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to grim poverty-stricken African townships (at one stage dubbed "locations," as if they had no particular identity). The ramshackle hamlets, resembling wartime refugee camps, were frequently sited behind hillsides or at such a distance as to be invisible from the white communities. African communities that fell outside this framework were labeled "black spots" and targeted for "removal." Between 1962 and 1980, over 18 million arrests were made for pass law violations and some 3.5 million people were forcibly relocated into the barren rural "homelands."

South Africa's economy had expanded rapidly during the war, and it continued to do so afterward, propelled by its considerable mineral wealth — it was the largest gold producer in the world — and by its cheap black labor. From 1948 to 1970, the country had the second highest growth rate in the world, after Japan. It also had one of the most narrow bases of economic ownership in the capitalist world. The private sector was heavily monopolized, with one corporate conglomerate — the Anglo-American Corporation — controlling over half the companies on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. Two others each controlled ten percent. The state sector also mushroomed in this period, with the South African Transport Services becoming the country's largest employer, and ISCOR producing three-quarters of its iron and steel. Other state-owned enterprises included SASOL, the chemical giant, and ARMSCOR, the dominant force in South Africa's strategic arms industry. What came with this industrial growth, of course, was a rapidly expanding African work force.

* * *

In its early years, the European-dominated Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) concentrated on organizing white workers, insisting that class, not race, was the primary contradiction in South Africa. However, struggles within the party led to a shift in focus toward black South Africans. By the mid-1920s 1,600 of its 1,750 members were Africans. In 1924, under strong pressure from the Moscow-based Comintern, the CPSA adopted a program of internal "Africanization." Four years later, also at the behest of the Comintern, they committed themselves to build a "Black republic" as a first step toward the construction of a socialist state. With the ANC at a low ebb and not a willing ally, CPSA members then threw themselves into the task of building black trade unions to strengthen the class content of the national struggle. There were major strikes in the 1930s,

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with which the anti-communist ANC was not involved. The climax came in 1946 with a bitter gold-miners' strike in the Transvaal that struck terror into the white power structure shortly before the first postwar elections. After the Afrikaner-led National Party won in 1948, the CPSA was the first opposition organization to be proscribed by the new regime. In 1953, it was relaunched underground as the South African Communist Party, or SACP.[1]

In the meantime, militants from the recently formed ANC Youth League took over the leadership of the parent body and began to reposition it to more aggressively defend African rights. Among the movement's new leaders were Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Throughout the 1950s, as the regime intensified its policies of social division and political repression under the rubric of apartheid, the reinvigorated ANC edged steadily closer to the SACP. In the mid-fifties, the two parties worked together to mobilize a highly successful, nonviolent Defiance Campaign that brought tens of thousands of people into the streets to protest the new apartheid legislation. SACP members were also instrumental in launching the South African Confederation of Trade Unions (SACTU) in 1955, the strongest expression of black working class political power the country had yet seen. And party members participated clandestinely in a Congress of the People on June 26, 1955, that brought together the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the Colored People's Congress and the (white) Congress of Democrats. This meeting ratified the Freedom Charter, which functioned as the ANC's programmatic centerpiece throughout the liberation struggle. It was later adopted by the SACP at an underground party conference in Johannesburg in 1962, where party leaders forwarded a comprehensive analysis of what they termed "colonialism of a special type." The thesis (hotly debated even today) identified the nature of the South African state as essentially colonial, though colonizer and colonized shared territory. This placed the national liberation struggle at the center of the SACP's strategic perspective and provided a theoretical foundation for the alliance with the ANC.

The anti-apartheid movement reached a key turning point in March 1960 when a protest march in the township of Sharpeville (outside Johannesburg) led by the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) — a new group that split off from the ANC in 1959 over the latter's policy of nonracialism and its close ties with the SACP — ended in a massacre by the police. Sixty-nine people were killed and 186

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wounded, most of them shot in the back as they fled the police attack. Ten days later, the ANC and the PAC were both banned, and their leaders went underground to launch an armed resistance, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK, or "Spear of the Nation"). Mandela was arrested on a minor charge in 1962 and then sentenced to life in prison at the second of two high-profile trials that decimated the ANC's top leadership. In the years immediately following this, the ANC sought unsuccessfully to build an effective armed threat. By the 1970s, however, it mounted sporadic commando raids that threw white society off balance and inspired a new generation of militant black youth involved in the country's growing Black Consciousness (BC) movement.

According to the late Joe Slovo, the party's general secretary at the time and an early MK chief of staff, the decision to take up arms was taken by the SACP central committee and the ANC's Working Group.[2] Wider consultations with the various groups and individuals associated with the congress movement, including the ANC's official head Chief Albert Luthuli, were not feasible because they would be compromised by such an exchange, he said. Security for the fledgling army was also a consideration.[3] But few in the movement today question the assessment that the armed struggle was an instrument of inconsistent pressure on the regime, one whose impact declined dramatically — much as happened to the Palestinians at about the same time — as MK's external bases were closed down in the 1980s and its access to South Africa became more and more difficult.[4] Nevertheless, it had a powerful mobilizing effect on those forced to live under apartheid, according to party veteran Raymond Suttner:

> At times MK hit police stations and military bases. They blew up SASOL — the regime's oil-from-coal project. These acts empowered people. They gave them a sense that the regime was not invincible, that a people who had not been armed since the end of the earlier resistance at the turn of the century were able to take on the regime under modern conditions. MK was a powerful propaganda force, and its actions were often described as 'armed propaganda.' Measured purely in military terms, MK was no match for the regime, but it was very powerful in people's imaginations.[5]

Inside the country, the liberation movement gained renewed momentum with a wave of strikes in the Durban area in 1973 and an explo-

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sion of student protest that erupted in the sprawling Soweto township near Johannesburg in 1976. The subsequent clamp-down by the regime drove thousands of young black activists into the underground. Many joined the ANC and its armed wing, MK. Then, in the 1980s, two powerful social movements emerged — one in the workplace and one in the community — to drive the anti-apartheid struggle in new directions. These were, respectively, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the United Democratic Front.

By the start of that decade, two rival black trade union federations had appeared, the Black Consciousness-oriented Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) and the independent Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). With the National Union of Mineworkers among its affiliates, CUSA was the larger of the two but far less tightly organized and much less militant in its dealings with management. After a series of summits among union leaders, FOSATU, NUM and several smaller ANC-oriented unions came together in 1985 to launch the explicitly pro-ANC Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the most powerful opposition force the country had ever seen, not simply for its numbers but because of the leverage it had over white South African prosperity. Immediately, COSATU leaders moved to dismantle rival locals and overlapping "general unions" and to reorganize the membership into large industry-based unions that would have greater economic and political clout. What also distinguished COSATU were strong commitments to worker leadership and shopfloor democracy, though practice varied from one union to the next.

The government sought to deflate the rising anti-apartheid movement by dividing it and co-opting Indians and so-called coloreds through the establishment of a tricameral parliament that excluded Africans while giving the other ethnic communities a limited voice. The result, however, was to bring together hundreds of community-based civics, women's organizations, youth and student groups, church-based associations — and, later, prominent individuals like Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu — into a pro-ANC civil society coalition known as the United Democratic Front. More populist in its politics than the socialist-oriented COSATU and more prone to single-issue actions targeted by their leaders, the UDF was nonetheless a potent force at the community level. UDF groups — which came to number more than 600 organizations with a million members — carried out rent strikes, consumer boycotts and other nonviolent campaigns (some patterned after those taken by the U.S. civil rights move-

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ment in the 1950s and 1960s). Under constant fire from the government, UDF groups also pioneered forms of decentralized organization that gave many people important leadership experience and kept the movement from being crushed when repression intensified at the end of the decade during the brutal States of Emergency initiated in apartheid's dying days.

In the end, the combined pressure of the underground challenge from the ANC, the above-ground opposition from the UDF and COSATU (then joined together in an alliance known as the Mass Democratic Movement), and the impact of international sanctions and capital flight pushed the regime into negotiations to bring the racist experiment called apartheid to a sputtering end. These began in secret with Nelson Mandela in the late 1980s and came to a head at the close of the decade. On February 2, 1990, with almost no public warning, the ANC, the PAC, and the SACP were unbanned. Nine days later, Mandela was released from prison.

Over the next eighteen months hundreds of racist laws were repealed, and negotiations got underway for a transition to one-person, one-vote political democracy. However, this period was also marked by unprecedented violence, as forces opposed to the transition sought to derail it. From the unbanning to the elections in 1994, 14,000 people were killed, most in attacks by vigilantes armed and trained by government security forces — twice the total of the previous forty years.[6] It was also a period of profound and often disorienting transition for the anti-apartheid movement, which was caught unprepared by the sudden alteration of its status.

The SACP had only 2,000 members when it was legalized in 1990 (only a few hundred of whom had served in the underground inside South Africa), but an estimated 50,000 people attended its formal launch in July 1990, and within a few years its signed-up membership topped 40,000. At the same time, half the central committee resigned, including the country's future president, Thabo Mbeki, when the party voted to go public — choosing the 'Yeltsin option,' as party strategist Jeremy Cronin put it.[7] "Some weren't sure socialism was viable, some were worried about their careers," he told me in 1995. "I was on the CC [central committee] then, and I watched the other half go."

While this extraordinary growth spurt demonstrated the party's latent popularity, the loss of veteran leaders coupled with the sudden expansion created a crisis of sorts — certainly a major challenge — as the party scrambled to adjust to its new legal status and to the wholly different issues it now faced. The impact of these changes was

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apparent at the SACP's first legal congress in 1991. Party veterans came in with proposals to alter several of their long-held concepts to take account of post-cold war realities and the lessons they were taking from the fast-changing global scene. But the new members rejected these imprecations, seeing them as tarnishing the party's rich heritage — precisely what drew most of them to join.

Members traded charges that the party was succumbing to "Eurocommunism" with accusations of "unreformed Stalinism." A suggestion to insert the word "democratic" before "socialism" in the party's mission statement was rejected as redundant and demeaning. Still, profound shifts in political orientation did get underway. "We retained our symbols and our name, but they were invested with new content by the experience of the social movements," Cronin said. These included a commitment to a new openness in party debates and a re-examination of the view of the state and the party's relationship to it. Nevertheless, the radicalism on the floor produced what Cronin termed "paradoxical moments." There was a sharp debate over the party's long-standing commitment to a strategy of insurrection, for example, with party veterans the ones who wanted to drop it. Delegates reaffirmed the strategic role of the working class in the national democratic project and the fight for socialism, but at the same time, they opened a debate, not yet fully resolved, over precisely what socialism is. This followed the publication of SACP chairperson Joe Slovo's stinging critique of the ideological and political shortcomings of Soviet-style socialism in his pamphlet *Has Socialism Failed?*

Slovo, whose first wife, writer Ruth First, was killed by South African police agents with a letter bomb in 1982, was, according to one party official, the SACP's leading strategic thinker for thirty-five years before his death from stomach cancer in January 1995. His strategic interventions ranged from the party's initial commitment to armed struggle to its oft-debated position on the relationship between the national liberation and socialist struggles. Though an architect of the decision to take up the gun and for years the chief of staff of the movement's military wing, MK, he was critical of those who facilely equated militancy with revolutionary authenticity: "In any phase of the struggle, whether non-violent or armed, tendencies are germinated against which movements must guard. The non-violent phase fosters constitutional illusions; in the violent armed phase there are dangers of adventurism and the devaluing of the political factor."[8]

In December 1992, Slovo crafted the controversial compromise that broke the impasse in the negotiations between the ANC and the

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ruling National Party and set the stage for the country's first nonracial elections. Many on the left, inside and outside the party, characterized this as a capitulation. Slovo's answer — with which I agree, despite the heavy cost of the concession — was: "We cannot conduct ourselves at the negotiations as if we had defeated our opponents outside the negotiations."[9] The movement simply did not have the leverage to get a better deal.

His insistence on the primacy of the political, coupled with an astute grasp of both the conditions in which he and the party operated and the balance of forces they faced was part of what made Slovo an effective leader. It also enabled him to respond quickly to the collapse of the "socialist" world at the end of the 1980s, and with it many of the assumptions that had long guided parties like the SACP.

"For our part, we firmly believe in the future of socialism," he wrote in 1989. "But it is more vital than ever to subject the past of existing socialism to an unsparing critique in order to draw the necessary lessons. To do so openly is an assertion of justified confidence in the future of socialism and its inherent moral superiority." Despite these strong words, it is quite clear that the party was disoriented by these changes, and it struggled to regain its strategic footing as it was thrust into the post-apartheid transition.

"The weakness of the liberation movement as a whole is that we haven't developed an adequate strategic perspective for the current period," said Raymond Suttner, a top party and ANC official, in a 1993 interview. "Many of the concepts that we've used are inadequate and flawed; I would go further and say there are a lot of concepts that we've worked with, mind sets that we've inherited, that we haven't come to terms with or properly re-evaluated."[10]

* * *

But once the liberation movement assumed the reins of government, it found itself pressured to compromise further — and it did. Longstanding commitments to nationalize more of the economy rapidly gave way to plans to privatize much of what the state already held. Growth rather than redistribution became the foundation of the regime's new economic policy. As the SACP, submerged in the ANC in a unique and complicated arrangement dating from the 1950s, preoccupied itself with shoring up the base of the movement, and as a number of its underground leaders and middle cadre (including future president Thabo Mbeki) made swift conversions to "moderation" in economic and social policy, often dropping out of the party, it was

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left to COSATU to criticize the apparent retreat from goals of economic and social transformation. Many people on the left — particularly outside South Africa — fiercely criticized the ANC for this, calling it a fatal drift rightward and, in some cases, dismissing it as a progressive force.

But the ANC had always functioned as a big tent liberation front for a wide range of contending political tendencies and ambitious individuals, and its behavior, once in power, should have surprised no one. For its part, the SACP was simply too small to steer the liberation movement in a decisively left direction, though it was able to influence many of the ANC's early policy decisions. More troubling was the fact that apart from COSATU the popular movement, once the driving force in the liberation struggle, was in tatters — worn down by the transition process, emasculated by a totalizing liberation movement, abandoned by foreign patrons whose funding now flowed mainly to the government, and stripped of many of its best leaders, who either moved into government jobs or, like ANC general secretary Cyril Ramaposa, opted to enter the private sector. Under these conditions, the prospects for the South African left appeared rather dim to some observers.

Yet the liberation movement held the presidency, the overwhelming majority of seats in Parliament, the majority of cabinet positions and all but two regional governments, and the SACP, together with COSATU, remained in a position to influence the ANC's direction from within their Strategic Alliance. For that matter, the ANC, though of a contested political character, could still be described as left-oriented, and in the spring of 1996, after the new Constitution was approved and the National Party dropped out of the governing coalition, it increased its control over the state. Throughout this period, the SACP was engaged in redefining its strategy and tactics in an internal debate that was both transparent and unabashedly self-critical, even as its membership skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the commitment to democratization was so widely acknowledged in the culture-at-large that it could only be attacked obliquely by the right, leaving a broad political space for public debate over the country's future. And a comprehensive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was on the table, both as a program of action for the left and as a benchmark against which to measure the ANC-led government's performance.

Outside the state, COSATU remained relatively strong, particularly at the shop steward level, if also confronted with new challenges

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and problems. Among other inputs to the transition process, the trade unions were instrumental in drafting and pushing through the RDP as the ANC's official postwar program, though by 1996 the government had abandoned any pretense of following it as originally conceived. Nevertheless, the RDP remained a formal articulation of what the left proposed for South African society at an historical moment when few left parties anywhere in the world had done as much. Despite the left's limitations in being able to implement this vision, it functioned within a culture of mass engagement that was deep-rooted and widely-shared, and it and its ideas enjoyed considerable popularity. This remained true even though many popular organizations and institutions that developed during the anti-apartheid struggle were in crisis, and though the ANC-led government seemed at times ill-disposed toward independent, popular initiatives.

One of the most important challenges facing the South African left in these drastically altered circumstances was to shift the terrain on which they were struggling beyond the government and the multiplying, expert-driven forums and to take it back into the factories, the communities, the schools and other such venues, where it had latent strength and considerably more experience. For this, highly developed cadre were needed at the local level. This was complicated further by strong opposition to extra-parliamentary popular protest from within the liberation movement itself. Mandela at one point characterized this as "social anarchy."[11] But protest was only a piece of the challenge — mass organizing that produced tangible changes in people's lives was the central task, whether or not it took protest to achieve it.

If one wanted measuring sticks by which to judge the strength of the South African left and its prospects for the future, the ability to reconstruct and lead the popular movement over the coming years would be one of its best tests. Could the left find other forms of organization and other issues to generate the kind of creative, multi-tiered activism that sprouted in South Africa in the 1980s, amidst the most fierce and sustained repression the previous regime could muster? Could it do this without the unifying animus of *apartheid*? And could it manage this, while also facing the simultaneous need to transform the state, the armed forces, the security and intelligence branches, the civil service, and the legal and judicial systems?

Here, as elsewhere, if the left failed in any of these challenges, there was no shortage of demagogues ready to step in to whip up popular dissatisfaction for quite different ends.

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Chapter 3

PALESTINE

SYMBOLS OVER SUBSTANCE

In 1993 the Oslo accords between Israel and the PLO seemed at first blush to offer a similar opportunity for Palestinian revolutionaries to put down their arms and refocus themselves on shaping the state that would emerge through an extended negotiating process something like that underway in South Africa. The resemblance soon proved to be ephemeral, however, for the deeply divided Palestinian left had far less power within the nationalist movement than did its South African counterpart, and the PLO was in such a weak negotiating position that the agreement the Palestinians reached with Israel was stacked against them — and against the prospect of genuine statehood — from the outset. This position only worsened as the accords were renegotiated again and again (with U.S. help) in Israel's favor.

Despite a parade of highly publicized events and signings designed to portray the two sides as being on a parallel footing, the vast gap in the balance of forces was telling. If it didn't show in the ceremonies, it was clear in the substance of the pacts. The PLO lacked anything like the leverage the ANC had in South Africa, let alone the opportunity to set the pace of change held by the EPLF in Eritrea, and the left turned out to exist only on the margins of the PLO. Nor did the Israelis take the leap of faith into the transition process that white South Africans did — accepting that the present dispensation was untenable without having a hard and fast guarantee of what the future might hold. Instead, the Israelis seemed to want it both ways — separation but not divorce — neither absorbing them into a democratic state that included Jews and Arabs as equals, nor allowing for distinct truly sovereign states to emerge for each people. Perhaps given Jewish history it should not be surprising that the Israelis would take so few chances, but in refusing to do so, they offered none to the Palestinians.

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From the beginning, the preferred outcome of the negotiations was not spelled out. This enabled the Israelis to use the extended transition, which they kept lengthening by one or another subterfuge, to strengthen their position and to further limit Palestinian options until only the illusion of sovereignty was left on the table. Throughout the post-Oslo period, the Israelis hedged their bets, loosening the chokehold they had on the people in the Occupied Territories without ever promising them full freedom and at the same time encouraging further settlement in the very areas they were ostensibly to evacuate. In doing so, they left a gaping hole for opponents on both sides to sabotage the undertaking — which they did quite effectively.

Throughout the transition, the crucial questions of what would happen to Israeli settlements, the right of return for displaced Palestinians living outside the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the future status of Jerusalem were not discussed at all. Meanwhile, Israeli settlement activity in and around Jerusalem foreclosed the possibility of any form of future Palestinian role in most of the city and nibbled away at the rest of the territories occupied in 1967 (themselves only twenty-two percent of historic Palestine).

Yet despite its flaws, the Oslo process put the shape and structure of Palestinian society squarely in front of those Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza (if not for the millions left outside). This raised a host of questions, not for the first time, about what the PLO and, in particular, the left proposed for them. Unfortunately, what became devastatingly obvious was that the only organized forces in the society that had a concrete economic and social project were the Islamists, who had been quietly organizing at the grassroots level for years, while the secular nationalists were either bickering among themselves or posturing toward Israel in acts of often violent but largely symbolic defiance. Now it was the Islamists who seemed best positioned to contend for popular support in the new political arena, and they emerged in the 1990s with a fury. But how did the Palestinians get to this point?

* * *

To begin with, however justified by events elsewhere and mythologized by ancestral links, the creation of Israel was a colonial enterprise, and the Palestinians are a colonized people. The resulting conflict is complicated by many issues, some real, some manufactured, that obscure this basic truth. But without recognizing it and working from there, no lasting resolution is possible. Secondly, the crucial fea-

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ture in the development of this national liberation movement — one that distinguishes it from the others under consideration here — is the scattering of the Palestinian people, starting in 1948 and continuing in waves with every new war in the region.

The classic Zionist slogan was: "A land without people for a people without land." But this was not an empty land — the Palestinians were already there. Yet hundreds of thousands of them were driven from their homes by colonizers who insisted they were not taking anything from anyone, only reclaiming what was historically theirs. For many observers, the suffering the Jews had undergone in Europe eclipsed the injustice visited upon those to be colonized in the Middle East. The victims became victimizers, as most of the world simply looked the other way. It is important to understand that this conflict is not only about land, it is also about people — who they are, where they have a right to live (and with whom) and how much definitional control they have over their lives, however the territory they inhabit it is demarcated.

For Palestinians committed to resist the loss of their homeland — and their very identity — their dispersal was only the beginning of their troubles. The outflow of refugees and exiles created a situation where large groups of them lived under quite different circumstances, with different possibilities for organizing themselves, different immediate issues around which to mobilize, and different outcomes needed to resolve their particular predicaments. Identity itself was a central issue, as it was not only the Israelis who denied their existence. None of the host countries but Jordan offered citizenship to more than a few of the refugees, and Jordan only did so in an attempt to permanently annex the West Bank for itself. (The term "Palestinian" was banned from official documents throughout Jordan after 1950, as if the people of that name had disappeared.[1]) It was in this fractured context that the national movement was born. Its most urgent task then — as it remains today — was to unify this dispersed nation through the struggle to liberate it. Its inability to do so has been its biggest failure — one for which the left bears a considerable share of responsibility.

The 1967 Arab-Israeli war had nearly as great an impact on the Palestinians as had the 1948 *naqbah* (catastrophe), as it brought large swathes of as-yet-uncolonized Palestinian territory under Israeli control and set the terms of struggle for the next quarter century. Ever since this war, the main dividing line within the Palestinian nation — and within the political movement — has been that between the peo-

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ple living under Israeli occupation and those living in the surrounding Arab states. This only sharpened as the nationalist discourse focused ever more narrowly on "solutions" geared to those residing within the West Bank and Gaza and not the others, except as a bargaining point. But the divisions between those in Lebanon, say, or those in Syria, Jordan or Egypt (let alone those in Israel) were also significant, not least because of the constraints that host regimes placed on Palestinian political activity and the ways in which they sought to manipulate the movement through proxy forces and other means.[2] Each war also had a significant effect on the politics and strategy of the PLO and its member organizations, particularly their regional and international alliances but also in terms of the form and substance of potential "solutions."

Fatah's domination of the PLO and Yasir Arafat's autocratic control of both organizations were critical features of the liberation movement almost from the beginning. The left, such as it was, continually scrambled to react to Arafat's twists and turns rather than proposing its own programs and strategies. This was due in part to the fact that it at no time led the liberation movement, but it also reflects the role the organized left chose for itself as an essentially reactive force that rarely forwarded alternatives to what it criticized or rejected. But what "left" are we talking about?

Though I set out to focus on the Palestine Communist Party (now the Palestine People's Party) as a case study on its own account, I realized early on that it was impossible to make sense of it apart from the broader Palestinian left and the nationalist movement as a whole. So, at the risk of overburdening you with the twists and turns of this tortuous history, I will review the seminal events in the Palestinian national struggle in terms, mainly, of how the principal left parties navigated their way through them. I will then look more closely at how the PCP/PPP evolved (or failed to evolve) in the changed circumstances of the 1990s.[3]

* * *

The Palestinian left started out divided. It never bridged its differences. This is the key to its repeated failures in the national struggle and its near irrelevance in the post-Oslo period. How and why this happened is a convoluted tale, but it bears extended scrutiny.

The PCP/PPP is the oldest of all the parties in the Occupied Territories — or at least the oldest formal political tendency. As an

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organization, it evolved in stages, but its roots lay in already established communist parties — mainly Jordan and Egypt but also Palestine — that go back to the pre-World War II era. A badly riven Arab and Jewish Palestine Communist Party was dissolved by the Comintern in 1943 after two tortuous decades, but new incarnations emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s, divided by geography rather than ethnicity. From its launch in 1951 onward, the Jordanian Communist Party organized West Bank Palestinians, while a newly formed Palestinian Communist Organization mobilized members in Gaza.[4] In 1975, a Palestinian Communist Organization appeared in the West Bank as a branch of the Jordanian CP, and in 1982, it severed its ties with its political parent and merged with the Gaza organization to form the Palestine Communist Party.[5]

Despite this institutional diffusion, however, communists in this period, whatever their geographical base, had much in common at an ideological level, and all were heavily influenced by their ties to the Soviet Union. The USSR was the first country to recognize the state of Israel in 1948, and it was an early supporter of the UN partition plan. Under its influence, the PCP and its antecedents were the first organized Palestinian advocates of a "two-state solution" to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It is also significant that the Communist Party remained for the most part a non-military organization — unlike the left forces based outside the Territories — despite consideration at several stages of taking up arms, and it readily embraced strategies of mass organizing to build its ranks well in advance of its rivals in the national movement, starting with trade union work. However, it did not take its place as a full-fledged member of the PLO until 1987.[6]

Though there were a welter of nationalist parties that identified themselves with a left outlook and (or) high levels of militancy, and though Fatah itself has left and right wings within it, the main organized left strand within the PLO framework has long been that associated with the Popular and Democratic Fronts. These parties had their origins in the Arab Nationalist Movement, an eclectic gathering of left and liberal intellectuals from throughout the region that came together in the early 1950s. From the outset, the ANM embraced a tension between pan-Arab nationalists and socialists, but, as an organization, it had no specific program on the future of Palestine, apart from its liberation from Israeli colonization. When the ANM fell apart in the late 1960s, the Popular Front emerged out of its militant nationalist wing. A younger generation of ANM Marxists initially went with

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them but broke away in 1969 to form the Democratic Front. The appearance of the Democratic Front on its left flank seemed to pull the Popular Front in that direction, too, and it was soon appropriating Marxist-Leninist formulations into its discourse as well. Both, like Fatah, privileged military action over mass mobilization, at least in their early years, while describing themselves as party-building formations. Thus, there were three main left organizations contending for support, and membership, through much of the struggle — the PCP, the PFLP and the DFLP. Two were armed and based outside the Occupied Territories, one — the PCP — was for the most part unarmed and based inside.[7]

To focus on these organizations is not to imply that the roles of Israel, the U.S. and the Arab states were not critical in defining the possibilities and setting the limits of the Palestine national struggle, but you can read about this in depth elsewhere.[8] For the purposes of this study, I want to examine how the left responded to what it was dealt and to consider what can be learned from this about the construction of a revolutionary movement in adverse circumstances. Yes, the balance of forces was heavily tipped against the Palestinian national movement and its left wing from the beginning. The question I am asking throughout this book is: what did the left do (or fail to do) to alter the balance and to improve its position?

* * *

Because personalities figure so prominently in this movement — especially that of Yasir Arafat — I want to start with a look at him and his particular role. Born Mohammed Abdel-Rahman Abdel-Raouf Arafat al-Qudua al-Husseini in Cairo in 1929 to a religious family of modest means from Gaza, he spent part of his childhood with relatives in Jerusalem — his mother died when he was only five — but he grew up mainly in Gaza and Egypt. There, he came under the influence of the Islamist *Ikhwan* (the Muslim Brotherhood), one of several Arab forces to mount an armed challenge to British colonial rule. While at university, he ran guns to partisans in mandate Palestine. He also participated directly in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. He adopted the name Yasir, after Yasir bin Ammar, a renowned Muslim warrior and companion to the prophet Mohammed. Later, he took on the *nom de guerre* Abu Ammar.

Arafat's war experience convinced him that the Arabs lost because of incompetent leadership. He concluded that Palestinians needed to rely on themselves to win liberation. After the defeat, he returned to

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school in Cairo, where he met many of the men who would remain by his side as advisors and confidants for decades to come. Meanwhile, his fervent nationalism and his continuing relations with the Muslim Brotherhood, which attempted to assassinate Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser in 1954, put him at odds with Egyptian authorities. When the 1956 Suez crisis brought about a demilitarization of the Egypt-Israel border and forced a curtailment of *Ikhwan*-sponsored guerrilla activities, he and several of his comrades left for Kuwait where they formed a new organization — *Harakat al-Tahrir al-Filastiniyya*, the Palestine Liberation Movement, popularly known by its reverse Arabic acronym, Fatah.[9]

At this point, there were three broad trends in Palestinian politics: (1) the secular pan-Arabism of the Arab National Movement (ANM), founded in 1951 by intellectuals at the American University of Beirut; (2) the pan-Islamism of the Islamic Liberation Front, built around the Muslim Brotherhood; and, (3) the elite nationalism of the Arab Higher Committee, formed by Palestinian notables in 1936 in an effort to co-opt an anti-British revolt then underway. The appearance of Fatah altered the balance within this mix but never overcame its contradictions. Under Arafat's peripatetic leadership, Fatah rejected the notion that the Palestinian issue should be subsumed under more grandiose social categories or political objectives. His central tenet was that Palestine needed to be liberated by Palestinians waging an armed national liberation struggle. The role for Palestinian notables was to bankroll the fight.

Early on, Arafat established himself as an effective fundraiser from this elite. This gave Fatah a consistent edge over its competition, even allowing it to pay recruits. However, the heavy dependence on powerful families also gave the notables considerable influence over the organization in its formative years.[10] Not surprisingly, nothing in Fatah's early publications suggested any sort of social or political agenda apart from national independence, and the organization declined to take any positions on intra-Arab conflicts.

This contrasted sharply with the Arab National Movement, which viewed Arab unity as a precondition for Palestinian liberation.[11] The ANM, led by George Habash, aligned itself with Nasser's greater Arab nationalism and advocated the ouster of reactionary Arab leaders.[12] It also took a generally anti-imperialist stance toward the U.S. and the former colonial powers and publicly threatened Western business interests for collaborating with Israel. ANM cadres were involved in several armed operations in the early 1950s, mostly aimed at pro-

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Western Arab regimes, not Israel. Members fought in the 1957-58 Lebanese civil war, the 1958 revolution in Iraq and other regional flash-points. But the ANM's naïve promotion of the ill-fated United Arab Republic that brought Egypt and Syria together in 1958 cost it credibility when the merger collapsed three years later, even as it revealed a tendency toward idealist politics that plagued the ANM's later incarnation, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).[13]

In the early 1960s, Fatah secured support from Syria, Iraq and Algeria. By 1964, Fatah operatives were infiltrating both the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip and the Jordanian-controlled West Bank. Meanwhile, Nasser used the first Arab summit meeting, convened in Cairo earlier that year, to launch the Palestine Liberation Organization under the leadership of Ahmad al-Shuqayri, a pliant proxy who had served as the Palestinian representative to the Arab League. That May, Shuqayri and his self-selected executive committee met in Jordanian-controlled East Jerusalem to proclaim the PLO as the official representative of the Palestinian people and the umbrella for the armed struggle. They also announced the formation of the Palestine National Council (PNC), a parliament-in-exile whose members they appointed, and a new military wing, the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA), whose leadership they chose.

Arafat kept himself at arm's length from the new PLO, though Fatah had a handful of delegates at the Jerusalem conference. Instead, he parlayed Syrian and Saudi hostility toward Nasser into support for Fatah, which launched its first armed raid into Israel on January 1, 1965. The ANM also carried out commando attacks, starting in 1966, but the organization appeared to hold a view of Israel's military capacity that was totally at odds with reality, if a lead article in the January issue of its magazine *al-Hurriyya*, is to be taken at face value. Responding to suggestions that Israel might answer these raids with an all-out war on its Arab neighbors, the authors insisted that "experience shows that Israel is not only afraid of such a war, but also thinks of defensive means."[14] Less than six months later, the Israelis burst out of their so-called "defensive" perimeter to smash the Arab armies and capture East Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai peninsula.

The stunning Arab loss had the effect of discrediting the PLO leadership along with its mentors. It also signaled the broader decline of pan-Arabism as a political force. The vacuum was partially filled by increased superpower rivalry in the region and by new Islamist chal-

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lenges to Nasser's militant secularism. It also created space for emergent nationalisms to flourish, amongst them that of the Palestinians. Arafat moved quickly to take advantage of this, bringing Fatah into the PLO, while stepping up armed attacks on Israel.

The next two years marked the most intense period of military struggle inside Israel or Israeli-controlled territory in the history of the Palestinian movement, with hundreds of cross-border raids, most by Fatah, some by the ANM and other groups.[15] Israel retaliated swiftly against its neighbors and the people in the Occupied Territories. Rebuffing moves by the U.S., the USSR and the UN to promote a Palestinian state in the territories — Prime Minister Golda Meir denied there was such a thing as a Palestinian people — Israel arrested hundreds of suspected opponents, deported dozens of opposition leaders and blew up scores of houses of alleged guerrilla sympathizers. The Israelis also bombed guerrilla bases and civilian encampments along their borders, occasionally sending troops to attack them.

Thousands of young Palestinian men fled the clampdown to join Fatah, swelling its ranks to many times its former size and elevating Arafat's personal status in the national movement. He used this to gain a dominant position for Fatah on the PLO's executive committee in 1967, to amend its charter in 1968, and then to take over as chairman the following year. At the same time, Saudi Arabia imposed a seven-percent tax on Palestinians working there and began remitting the funds to the PLO, setting a precedent that was soon followed by other Gulf states. This provided the organization with a strong financial base, which Arafat controlled.

Fatah leaders anticipated that their escalating attacks would stir people to action, the more so in response to intensifying Israeli repression — making the armed struggle itself the central organizing vehicle for the movement (much like the *foco* theory espoused by "Che" Guevara in Latin America). They paid little attention to mass mobilization, apart from that done for specific military tasks, and they made no preparations for a lengthy conflict in which underground political structures might play a central part. The armed struggle would unite the people, rather than the other way around, and the fight for Palestinian liberation would unite the Arab states, rather than Arab unity liberating Palestine.

The badly demoralized ANM, which held the opposite perspective on the Arab states but shared Fatah's view of the centrality of the armed struggle, fell into disarray after the 1967 defeat. In the debate that followed, the organization's left-wing characterized this a victo-

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ry not for Israel but for the U.S., putting an anti-imperialist gloss on the struggle in an effort to explain the lop-sided balance of forces. Within a month of the conflict, the Palestinian branch, then known as the National Front for the Liberation of Palestine, broke off and started negotiations for a united front with other small fractions. On December 11, 1967, they formed the PFLP. The new force then joined the PLO.

Two years later, two PFLP factions split to form their own parties — the PFLP-General Command[16] and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (shortened to the DFLP in 1974 and often referred to here as simply the Democratic Front.[17] Both joined the PLO in 1969 and were given seats on the executive committee, though the three new members continued to have differences among themselves.[18] Despite these defections, the Popular Front remained the second largest PLO member organization. As such, it functioned as the main pole around which opposition to Arafat tended to rally.

With Fatah dominating the military confrontation along Israel's borders and beginning to speak of the "final stage" of the liberation war, the Popular Front burst onto the international scene with a series of spectacular airline hijackings. These actions incurred the wrath of Israel and the displeasure of much of the West, but they put the Palestinian question on the world stage as no amount of lobbying or protest had done. This boosted the PFLP's status among many Palestinians, frustrated at their marginalization in the international media, and it strengthened the front's position inside the PLO. Behind the scenes, however, a bitter debate raged, not only over these tactics — which some thought damaged Palestinian standing in the wider world while undermining efforts to promote sustained, collective action — but over long-term strategy.

The critical dividing line within the PLO was that between Fatah's commitment to non-interference in the affairs of Arab states, and the Democratic and Popular Front's insistence that changes in the Arab world, particularly in Jordan, were necessary for Palestinian success. Arafat saw the frontline Arab states in terms of the sanctuary they offered. The left parties saw them as targets. This was captured by the popular PFLP slogan "The road to Jerusalem goes through Amman, Damascus and Cairo."[19] But all the Palestinian organizations, including Fatah and the Communist Party, were involved in Jordanian politics by 1970, and the king's ability to govern was in question. In February, Hussein imposed controls on PLO activities,

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but he was soon forced to rescind them. This demonstrated that the country was operating under a system of dual power. Over the next several months there were frequent skirmishes between Jordanian and Palestinian forces, public calls for Hussein's overthrow and an abortive attempt on the king's life. In August, the Palestine National Council openly discussed his ouster.

What pushed Hussein over the edge was a triple hijacking by the PFLP in early September during which the front declared the little-used Jordanian military airport which they commandeered "liberated territory."[20] (A fourth plane was hijacked to Cairo and blown up on international television.) After the Popular Front defied the king and destroyed the planes in Jordan a week later, Hussein declared martial law and launched an attack on the PLO, announcing his intent to drive it out of the country. Fighting reached the heart of Amman and yielded heavy casualties on both sides. The Palestinians brought in reinforcements from bases in Syria. Jordan unleashed its air force. By the summer of 1971, PLO forces were cornered in northern Jordan, from where they made a hasty escape to Lebanon. In hindsight, it is clear that it was not only the left that vastly underestimated Hussein (and overestimated its own strength, too) but also Arafat, apparently convinced that other Arab states, particularly Syria, would ride in to the rescue. This didn't happen. Instead, the PLO was very nearly annihilated.

This marked a critical turning point for the Palestinian movement. Though PLO factions continued to launch attacks on Israel from Lebanon, they never again reached the level of combat that they had had while in Jordan.[21] Instead, the armed struggle was reduced to one of several bargaining chips in a conflict that could only be resolved by other means (much like that of the ANC in South Africa at this time). Not all the factions agreed, however. This led to steadily widening rifts, at the root of which were deep differences over perceptions of what the national liberation struggle could achieve.

Up to 1971, Fatah's goal was a loosely-defined democratic (not necessarily "secular") Palestinian state for both Arabs and Jews. Arafat frequently rejected the idea of what he derided as a "rump state" in part of Palestine — the sort that was first proposed in the 1947 UN Partition Plan and that came up later in terms of a return to pre-1967 borders. Ironically, the Popular Front — which later became identified with this "one-state" position — strongly opposed it then, insisting, as had the ANM, that the liberation of Palestine must be part of a larger movement toward the establishment of "a unified revolu-

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tionary Arab entity."[22] In this regard, the PFLP's political line was intellectually attractive but a very large step behind what was possible — a phenomenon we will see with this front again and again.

The newly-formed Democratic Front, under the leadership of the thirty-two year-old Jordanian-born Nayef Hawatmeh, positioned itself between these poles.[23] It supported the call for a unitary Palestinian state but forcefully insisted that this entity be one in which all Arabs and Jews enjoyed equal rights — one where there would be no tolerance for efforts to "drive the Jews into the sea."[24] However, the DFLP, like the PFLP, saw this as part of a regional socialist revolution that would minimize the ethnic and cultural identities of all the peoples there, while uniting them along class lines — another intellectually attractive proposition, but wholly at odds with the regional reality. In July 1970, Hawatmeh told an interviewer that "the Palestinian revolution is an inseparable part of the Arab revolution and any attempt to 'Palestinianize' the Palestinian question is in the last analysis a rightist attempt and nationally suspect."[25]

* * *

After the PLO's ejection from Jordan foreclosed the possibility that it could win control of historic Palestine by military means, there was for the first time a public discussion of alternatives. As in any conflict, the available options depended on the balance of forces. If the Palestinians could not win a shooting war, they had to develop other leverage. If they could not change the balance in their favor, they would have to compromise on their goals. Under these circumstances, the left had a critical opportunity to assert its leadership. But to do so, it had to come up with a new movement-building strategy capable of rallying large numbers of people to sustained political action. Instead, it fragmented, weakening the national movement further.

Consider the Popular Front's response. Following a lengthy internal debate, PFLP leaders convened a congress in March 1972 to define the revolution's new tasks. At the meeting, they reaffirmed the strategy of fighting on two fronts — to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy and to defeat Israel. They castigated the "liberalism" of the liberation movement's leadership and exhorted their members to turn the Popular Front into a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary party. The transformed PFLP would construct a new "united national front" to lead the revolution to victory. The key to increasing the movement's strength was the mobilization of the masses. But how? According to the congress's political report: "This means providing the masses with

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the facts about the new situation, explaining to them our analysis of it, the reasons that led to it, and finally how we see the way out of the crisis…. We should also ask their opinion about the programme of action. This should make it clear that this battle is the battle of the masses and that the cause is their own."[26]

The Popular Front conceptualized the relationship between party and people in purely political terms and even then only in a limited political sphere — that of the national struggle. This was a dialectic of ideas and positions, not actions or experiences — "idealist" politics — with no organic relationship to or impact on material life, upon which the program is excruciatingly silent. Though the proletariat is repeatedly invoked, there is not a single word in over 100 pages on how the front would address the needs and interests of the Palestinian working class — or women, or youth, or farmers or any other social category.

Not surprisingly, neither the party nor the united national front was constructed as described. Nor was the Jordanian monarchy overthrown or Israel defeated. Instead, the Popular Front expended much of its energy on trashing its rivals for their willingness to compromise, while the prospects for liberation slipped away.

* * *

In October 1973, the third Arab-Israeli war broke out with far-reaching consequences for the Palestinians. This time the Arab states — with modest participation from the PLO — scored dramatic early successes before they were forced to accept a truce.[27] But they didn't lose this one, which gave Israel and its Western backers pause. Shortly afterward, the Arab states imposed an oil embargo on the U.S in retaliation for a multi-billion dollar American commitment to rearm Israel. This gave the Palestinians the most leverage they had had in years, though the advantage proved short-lived.

As pressure built for an international conference in Geneva that would include the PLO, the debate within the movement over what sort of compromise to consider caused the first public split in its ranks. This occurred as U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was shuttling about the Middle East in an effort to break up the emerging Arab consensus.[28] Due in part to the crisis in the PLO, he succeeded. The much-touted, all-party Geneva conference met only once — without the PLO — after which the initiative collapsed, setting the stage for Egypt to break ranks and negotiate a separate peace. Since this was perhaps the closest the Palestinians ever came to achieving a viable

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version of a "two-state solution," let's examine the political debate and the split it produced.

The Communists had accepted the idea of a Palestinian state alongside an Israeli one — the partition of historic Palestine —since 1947. But the DFLP was the first PLO member to come out in favor of a Palestinian state in the territories seized by Israel in 1967 (albeit, framing this as a step toward ultimate liberation). It did so in 1973.[29] DFLP leaders argued that the territories taken by Israel in 1948 were fully colonized, while those taken in 1967 remained under military occupation and had a Palestinian majority that could serve as the social base of a military and political struggle. Furthermore, Israeli attitudes toward the two areas were different, offering the prospect of exploitable divisions within the enemy. But this analysis and the position that flowed from it put the DFLP and the Communists at odds with the rest of the national movement.

It was only in July 1974, after an Arab summit tabled a similar proposition, that the PLO's top leadership signaled somewhat circumspectly that it was prepared to consider the creation of a state on a fraction of historic Palestine — "a Palestinian national authority in any Palestinian areas liberated from Israeli control."[30] But even this was anathema to the PFLP, as it implied recognition of Israel. In response, the Popular Front went into open revolt, freezing its membership in the PLO, resigning from the organization's executive committee and mobilizing other dissenting groups into a Rejection Front.[31] The "rejectionists" quickly secured support from Libya, Iraq and Algeria, polarizing the Arab states as well.

Meanwhile, even within the communist movement, which was formally outside the PLO, there were differences over the issue of Palestinian statehood. The Israeli Communist Party, with its large Arab membership, went on record in 1969 as supporting "mutual recognition of the just national rights of the two peoples of Palestine, the people of Israel and the Arab people of Palestine." But the Jordanian Communist Party initially denied the specifically Palestinian character of the struggle in the West Bank (which Jordan continued to claim).[32] It was only later in the 1970s, as it gained more autonomy, that the Palestinian branch of the Jordan party clearly asserted its support for two states — one Israeli, one Palestinian — hearkening back to the communist position in the 1940s.

This confusion over line was to some extent a product of the structure of the international communist movement itself. The pro-Soviet left, which included most Palestinian Marxists, was hampered in its

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formative years by a Moscow line that denigrated the national liberation struggle as petty bourgeois and that dogmatically insisted on the primacy of class over nationality in organizational matters. This translated into a policy that obliged a would-be communist to join the party in whatever country he or she was in at the time, rather than to affiliate with a party based upon national origin or nationalist objectives. A Palestinian communist living in Beirut had to join the Lebanese Communist Party. A Palestinian communist in Amman joined the Jordanian Communist Party. A Palestinian in Nazareth joined the Israeli Communist Party. Palestinian exiles in Paris joined the French Communist Party (whether or not they spoke French). This diminished the impact of nationalism within the communist movement, even as it weakened the influence of communist ideology in the Palestinian national movement.

Many Palestinians also had difficulty with the issue of two states in the 1970s because Israeli and Jordanian versions, unacceptable to almost everyone, had already poisoned the atmosphere. Shortly after the 1967 war, several Israelis floated proposals for an autonomous Palestinian entity that was mainly designed to avoid the demographic consequences of absorbing over a million Palestinians into the state of Israel. The best known was the "Allon Plan," named for its author, Yigal Allon. This was a blueprint for Israel to divest itself of responsibility for the Palestinians while maintaining final control over them and their resources — providing for self-rule without sovereignty.[34] Although this was not taken up as official Israeli policy, it tainted the concept of a territorial compromise with the image of a vassal state. For many Palestinians, the notion that this was Israel's secret intent was reinforced by repeated — and singularly unsuccessful — Israeli efforts to create a puppet administration in the Territories, which I will come back to in a moment. For his part, King Hussein formally issued a "peace proposal" in 1971 that called for the hand-over of both the West Bank and Gaza to Jordan. The expanded state would be renamed the United Arab Kingdom and divided into two regions (called Palestine and Jordan), with Jerusalem and Amman as their respective capitals. The plan generated little enthusiasm in the Occupied Territories or in the U.S. or Israel. It did, however, remind the Palestinians that it was not only Israel that had designs on them and on their land.

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The PLO's exodus to Lebanon in 1971 gave the national movement latitude to develop its economic, social and political structures as never before, even as it shrank the regional theater of military operations. Once again, however, the left played only a minor role in this process. The PLO built a quasi-state apparatus with separate departments responsible for such things as military matters, information, politics, planning, social affairs and mass organizations. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society ran a system of hospitals, clinics and training centers. *Samed* (the Palestinian Martyrs Works Society) managed a sprawling collection of industries and businesses. A PLO police force kept order in the camps.

The Arab states funded these operations with a mix of grants and remitted taxes on Palestinian workers. After the Camp David accords, these states (minus Egypt) expanded their commitment to an annual subsidy of $250 million, controlled by Arafat. They earmarked another $150 million for the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, channeling the money through a joint Jordanian-Palestinian committee. This gave the left parties an opportunity to articulate — and fight for — a plan for how these funds would be spent. Instead, they boycotted the joint committee and squabbled over what share of the subsidy they would get for themselves, while focusing their main efforts on building party-affiliated associations and organizations. This left Fatah to design and operate all the "national" institutions. In my view, it also revealed the political bankruptcy of the other parties. But I am getting ahead of myself.

When civil war erupted in 1975, the PLO was quickly drawn into the fight on the side of the Lebanese National Movement, a coalition of left and Muslim forces whose aim was to dismantle Lebanon's system of confessional rule and to build a secular democracy. However, when the Joint Forces, as they were called, began to advance against the Israeli-backed Christian militias, the Syrians, unwilling to risk a change in the balance of ethnic and political forces there and still claiming a historic right to dominate the Levant, intervened on the Christian side. Then, as the Syrians stood by, Lebanese rightists carried out one of the worst massacres of the war at the besieged Tel al-Za'atar refugee camp on the northern outskirts of Beirut. Thousands of Palestinians died, many of them children who perished from dehydration and starvation, before the carnage stopped. Afterward, Lebanon divided into hostile confessional camps, neither of which had the strength to defeat the other. Thus stymied, and once again sold out by their Arab "allies," the Palestinians marked time as Israel

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took the initiative.

From Tel Aviv's standpoint, the years 1977 and 1978 were momentous ones. Though the Labor Party had proven to be no friend to the Palestinians, the accession of the right-wing Likud coalition further intensified the conflict. The new Israeli regime accelerated settlement activity in the Occupied Territories, while stepping up military incursions into southern Lebanon. With Egypt's prospects for a separate land-for-peace deal suddenly in jeopardy — after months of secret contacts with the outgoing Labor Party — Anwar Sadat made his now-famous journey to Jerusalem to initiate the negotiations that culminated in the 1978 Camp David accords.[35]

For the Palestinians, this spelled disaster. It not only fenced them off from another battlefront, it freed the Israelis to concentrate their fire to the north, which they promptly did, invading Lebanon in March 1978. Though this was a relatively brief occupation, the Israelis used it to carve out a "security zone" along the border, which they placed under the administration of a right-wing Christian Lebanese militia — the South Lebanon Army — they created for this purpose. Thus, the Palestinians found themselves sandwiched between hostile Israeli-backed forces in a shrinking patch of Lebanon with no place else in the region to go. Their defeat — in military terms — was now just a matter of time and opportunity. For them, the only positive aspect of Camp David was that Egypt's defection drove the feuding Palestinian parties back together. In 1978, the Rejection Front dissolved and the Popular Front and its allies returned to the PLO fold.

* * *

It was against this backdrop, in the spring of 1979, that I first visited Lebanon. Entering Beirut in April during a tenuous but relatively stable truce, I was struck immediately by the proliferation of Palestinian micro-parties and military organizations that did little more than strut and posture. The Fakhani neighborhood was dotted with the symbols of rival factions. It seemed that all one needed was a name, a building, a flag and a regional sponsor to create a "liberation army." Yet, on a PFLP tour of the Beirut refugee camps — the closest thing the Palestinians had to liberated territory — the only evidence I saw of a program to benefit the people, despite repeated requests to be shown something tangible, was a clinic run by European volunteers. The one-room dispensary was little more than a distribution point for donated medicines, as there was no public health program of any sort attached to it.

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When I returned three years later, little had changed. During the height of the Israeli siege of Beirut in July 1982, I visited the PLO's prestigious Akka Hospital. There, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (run by Arafat's brother, Fathi) was able to perform open-heart surgery. But I found no aspirin when I visited outlying refugee camp clinics — no outreach programs of any kind, no links between these institutions and the people they were said to serve. I also visited an impressive PFLP-associated kindergarten in Sidon, but it was run by the European widow of a Popular Front martyr and had no apparent link to the party beyond servicing the children of its members and friends — no tie-in, for example, to a Popular Front program for the education of Palestinian children in general. In this respect, the main difference in the approaches to public health or education or any other service between Fatah (acting through the PLO) and the PFLP was the former's superior access to resources. The PFLP and most of the self-described "left" simply had no programs in this field. In fact, the DFLP was the only one that incorporated popular organizing into the provision of social services or economic development, but it did so largely through the initiative of a semi-autonomous women's organization, the Association *Najdeh*. Apart from this, there were few attempts to involve the people in party programs — any party, any program — except as objects of charity. Nor was there an effort by the left to construct a popular political authority within Palestinian society — in the camps or otherwise — to contest that of Arafat appointees.[36]

For all their wealth, the left parties were not engaged in social or political work that could bring their constituencies together as a progressive force within the national movement.[37] Public health, education, reconstruction and development, rights issues and so on were sidelines, left to a growing number of NGOs, many of them satellites of the parties but with little influence over them. Administration was a PLO (Fatah) function. Military preparations for the coming confrontation with Israel took precedence over such things, squeezing them out of the field of vision of party leaders. But in military matters, too, the orientation toward top-heavy, symbol-laden forms of organization and action, rather than collective popular mobilization contributed to their undoing.

* * *

When the invasion came on June 6, 1982, PLO forces in south Lebanon fell like dominos. The Israelis roared in with overwhelming

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force and surprised everyone by leapfrogging from one skirmish to the next until they reached the outskirts of Beirut. Once there, they linked up with the right-wing Lebanese militias and quickly besieged the city. Additional Israeli units mopped up behind the assault force, so the rapidly advancing forces made no effort to consolidate positions before they moved on. For their part, individual Palestinian fighters exhibited courage under fire, but some of their top leaders turned and ran at the first sign of combat. But courage and cowardice were not the decisive factors. What quickly became clear was that the Palestinian armed forces were unprepared for such a fight. Organized as a conventional force and armed with vintage World War II hardware, they were no match for the superior firepower or the tactical sophistication of the Israelis, but they had not prepared for other forms of combat (stashing arms ahead of the conflict, melting into the population once it started, attacking Israeli communications and logistics rather than large military units, and so on). And they had squandered the good will of the people of south Lebanon upon whom such a strategy would have to rely, rendering it unviable. Some Palestinian fighters took to the hills spontaneously and managed to disrupt the Israelis for a while, but it did not last long. Meanwhile, the invaders wreaked havoc in the refugee camps in an obvious effort to make them unlivable so the Palestinians would flee again. The point was not merely to set up a buffer in the south but to drive the Palestinians out of Lebanon so they would no longer serve as a base for the PLO. Refugees were not permitted to rebuild their bomb-damaged houses or repair damaged water sources, for example, while thousands of young men were rounded up and carted off to prisons in Lebanon and in Israel.

I arrived in West Beirut in early July and remained there close to a month, taking several tours of the Syrian-controlled Beka'a Valley and the Israeli-occupied southern half of the country to assess the humanitarian situations there, but spending most of my time in West Beirut.[38] If ever there were a hell on earth, this was surely it. Water and electricity were shut off, garbage piled up everywhere, food and medicines were in short supply, and the only safe spots were parking garages three stories underground. Every other day — between brief cease-fires in which both sides repositioned themselves — the city was pounded by land-based artillery from Israeli and Lebanese militia positions on three sides. Israeli patrol boats shelled us from the fourth, as American-made F-15s loosed rockets and bombs of every possible description from above. Hand-launched,

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heat-seeking SAM missiles flew harmlessly through their jet trails, drawn to the flares the aircraft towed behind them, while Palestinian and Lebanese fighters reeled off thousands of rounds of ammunition from AK-47s and 50-caliber machine guns. The noise was deafening, but I never saw a plane take a hit. What I did see were hundreds of brightly-colored explosive devices shaped like toys that came from seven-foot long cluster anti-personnel bombs. I saw one old man with smoke pouring out of his nose and mouth from a phosphorous fragment of an artillery shell that burned through his chest and set his insides on fire. I saw hospitals hit, ten-story apartment buildings flattened, whole neighborhoods razed, refugee camps devastated — in short, I witnessed a no-holds-barred effort to break the PLO once and for all, coupled with a systematic attempt to drive the Palestinians who made up its social base further away from the Israeli border.[39]

In the end, the Israelis dislodged the PLO from Beirut and scattered it throughout the Arab world. Still, the organization survived, much to Israel's (and the U.S.'s) chagrin, and the refugees stayed on in Lebanon, despite a horrific massacre in Beirut's Sabra and Shatila camps carried out by rightist Lebanese militias with the connivance of Israeli Gen. Ariel Sharon.[40] Nevertheless, the invasion and PLO retreat altered the political landscape. To start with, the Palestinian armed struggle was over. Commando raids and the odd "terrorist" attack might still be possible, but this was all. At the same time, Israel's incomplete victory demonstrated that it could not remove the PLO from the political scene. The two foes had achieved a stalemate in which military force might be a factor but would no longer be decisive. Under these conditions, the left again faced the challenge of showing that its politics provided an edge over the Israelis in another arena. With Fatah divided after the debacle and Arafat coming under vocal criticism for his handling of the war, there was an opening for alternative leadership. Once again, it was a road not taken — at least not effectively.

The next several years saw the PLO very nearly self-destruct. Two competing centers quickly developed. The Fatah-dominated mainstream based itself in Tunis. The left opposition (PFLP and DFLP), together with other factions hostile to Arafat (including Fatah dissidents), set up shop in Damascus. Arafat focused on diplomacy, but his tilt toward Jordan and the U.S. only polarized the movement further while yielding no discernible results.[41] The others retained their commitment to the primacy of the armed struggle, though they were

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also stymied. Then, in 1983, civil war broke out between feuding Fatah factions in Lebanon (which the Popular and Democratic Fronts refused to be drawn into, despite Syrian prodding). Fatah fighters also came under attack, along with Palestinian refugees, when the Syrian-backed Lebanese Shi'ite militia Amal launched what came to be known as the War of the Camps, which spread from Beirut across much of southern Lebanon. This time the left factions came to Fatah's aid in defense of the people, much to the dismay of the Syrians. In 1985, the Popular Front assembled another "rejectionist" coalition, the Palestine National Salvation Front, to challenge Arafat's leadership, but continuing Syrian interference finally convinced the oppositionists to change course. Talks among the PFLP, the DFLP and the PCP laid the basis for a rare unity of the left. Calling themselves the Democratic Alliance, this group met with Fatah officials in Algiers and Aden to work out their differences, reaching agreement in April 1987. The reconciliation was timely.

At this point, the Palestinian movement had hit a wall and was going nowhere. As it turned out, it was the people in the Occupied Territories who offered a way forward when they rose in revolt at the end of 1987, initiating what was quickly dubbed the *intifada*. Years of organizing — clandestine party networks, the social movements, the NGOs —paved the way for the uprising, which many activists were forecasting, but the speed with which it engulfed the territories and transformed the national struggle surprised many, even as it empowered the masses in new ways within the movement. But before we get to that, let us step back a bit to see how the situation there got to the point where the people took matters into their own hands.

* * *

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Israelis strove to create a system of indirect rule in the territories captured in 1967 that would render the PLO extraneous. The first attempt came with municipal elections in 1972, which were boycotted by all the nationalist organizations and most West Bank and Gaza voters. As a result, they carried little legitimacy. The next try came in 1976 with a second round of elections. By then, West Bank Palestinians were not only chafing under the occupation, they were tired of remaining passive in the face of it. When residents refused to accept PLO calls for another electoral boycott, the fragile consensus within the organization disintegrated. Fatah backed off and agreed to field candidates (unofficially, as the Israelis would not tolerate anyone openly identifying with the under-

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ground parties). For their part, the Democratic and Popular Fronts refused to yield, arguing that participation legitimized the occupation. Yet, by foregoing participation in the elections — much as they did two decades later in the legislative balloting mandated by the Oslo Accords — they ceded the field to Fatah, whose supporters swept the contest. Pro-Communist candidates could not win on their own without broader left support, so the winners were mostly center-right nationalists, offering nothing in the way of a transformational program to their constituencies. Even so, the outcome came as a shock to the Israelis, who proceeded to deport many of the elected mayors over the next few years. This put the fiction of self-rule to rest for the time being, but the ousted officials, most of whom publicly signed on to Fatah once they reached Jordan, remained important figures in exile, and Fatah reaped the benefits of their political martyrdom. Meanwhile, Fatah also set out to consolidate control of the emerging underground resistance.

In the early 1970s, PLO organizations began to pay more attention to the population in the West Bank and Gaza because of the emerging possibility of forming a state there. By the middle of the decade, each of the major parties engaged in organizing drives. This process picked up speed after the Camp David accords. In 1973, the Communists, who had long been the best organized political force on the ground, pulled together a coalition with several PLO factions called the Palestinian National Front.[42] This was also the year that West Bankers first publicly raised the Palestinian flag during a demonstration against the Israeli assassination of PLO leaders in Beirut — a symbolic turning point that reflected a rising nationalist consciousness, as well as the growing importance of the Territories to the national movement.

The next year, Fatah activists moved to reconstruct the PNF, using the power of their numbers to reduce the Communists to a minority position.[43] At the same time, the Israelis began to deport key PNF leaders, whom they were able to identify through highly effective intelligence operations. Under the pressure of both repression and infighting, the front soon collapsed, and efforts by the left parties to revive it were unsuccessful. Pro-Fatah municipal leaders created a new coalition, the National Guidance Committee, to coordinate their affairs, which survived to 1982 when Israel banned it, too. The occupation authorities replaced the mayors with an administrative structure they called the Village Leagues, the third attempt to manufacture a PLO alternative, this time not bothering with elections. But the Leagues

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collapsed within two years, as the mostly rural thugs appointed to lead them had no standing in the community and were dismissed as quislings and collaborators. Meanwhile, another process of social development was quietly underway that would eventually shake up the entire political scene.

Early in the 1970s, a university system arose in the West Bank and Gaza to sow the seeds of a home-grown intelligentsia.[44] Its graduates would challenge the domination of the old families within Palestinian society, the landed and commercial bourgeoisie. They would prove critical to the launch of popular organizations and NGOs that, in their turn, would establish new relationships with the Palestinian grassroots, bringing them into the political arena for the first time. And they would help to drive and sustain the *intifada* when it broke out at the end of 1987. In the process, they would challenge both the parochialism and the factionalism of the parties and open up the discourse on liberation to include a range of concerns heretofore absent — gender equality, human rights, the nature of citizenship and the practice of democracy, among others.

Up to the late 1970s, nearly all the organizing of the PLO parties in the Territories had been geared to facilitate military activity. The Democratic Front was the first of the PLO organizations to stress mass action in public pronouncements in the early 1970s and the first, in 1977, to organize an autonomous party branch in the Territories, assigning it the task of building mass organizations there (sectoral organizations, charities, and so on). It was also the first to organize a women's branch. This brought it into direct competition with the Communists, who had been organizing for years, though mainly among workers.[45] Despite its head-start in this area, organizational contradictions hobbled the Communists, as they were still formally under Jordanian party control and not yet linked to their comrades in Gaza. By the time the PCP was launched as an independent party in 1982 and in a position to set its own organizing agenda, the other parties were also active.

Student and youth organizations were far easier to organize than trade unions, given the demographics, the state of the economy and the expansion of the education system. This was also a constituency that readily responded to militancy, rather than class interest, a feature that the Popular Front, and to a lesser extent Fatah, quickly capitalized on to build organizations in this sector. However, Arafat's easy access to money — funds for scholarships, housing loans, social services, individual stipends and more, channeled through the Arab-

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sponsored Jordanian-Palestinian committee — enabled Fatah to create an organization almost overnight that, in numbers at least, rapidly outdistanced the competition. Its youth group — the Youth Movement — served as the core of its emerging political structure in the territories.[46]

The formation of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees (UPMRC) in 1979 under the leadership of the Communist Party's youngest political bureau member, Moustapha Barghouthi, marked a new departure. Rejecting urban-based curative models of medicine widely used as instruments of political patronage, UPMRC set out to create a broad-based public health service with both a rural and an urban focus and with a high degree of popular participation. They mobilized health professionals — doctors, nurses, diagnosticians, nutritionists, physical therapists and others, most of them political independents —to give a day or more of volunteer time to the project each month. They outfitted Volkswagen busses to reach remote villages on a monthly basis, using donated space in private houses to serve as temporary out-patient clinics. They set up small clinics on a more permanent basis in poor urban neighborhoods and refugee camps. They built in an education component, with public seminars on sanitation, hygiene and other forms of disease and injury prevention. They organized and trained local volunteers, mostly women, to carry this forward from within communities — especially to reach the large numbers of poor women who never saw the territory's mostly male doctors for both economic and cultural reasons. The project was conceived as part of a state-building process — not only to construct the infrastructure for a national healthcare system, but to challenge traditional approaches to it. It was also a way for a party to build, consolidate and service its own expanding base.

In 1984, PCP organizers set up a similar program for the agricultural sector. The Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees organized agronomists and others with relevant skills both from within the party and from without (at first including members of rival organizations, though most bolted when party-based competitors formed). PARC provided services to poor farmers — testing and distribution of new seed varieties, education and technical training and so on — as well as promotion of credit unions and cooperative forms of organization for production and distribution. In 1985 and 1986, other factions followed suit, and health and agricultural committees proliferated, each competing for constituencies and for outside funding, and each tending more and more to aim its work at sustaining and

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building its own political following. This undercut their effectiveness as service providers and as a mobilizing force for their respective sectors, and it tended to recreate the patronage dimension of such work. Nevertheless, the form of the work — drawing on high levels of voluntarism, mobilizing large numbers of women and involving them in the new organizations, utilizing popular education to increase effectiveness and relying heavily on information and training to achieve results — tended to favor the left groups over Fatah for the first time, as it played to their political strengths.[47] These programs and projects also created a social and political infrastructure that was critical to the uprising when it erupted.

Meanwhile, Gaza was on a somewhat different trajectory. To start with, nearly three-fourths of the people living there are refugees, living in squalid and horribly over-crowded camps. This has nurtured a level of frustration — and militance — far stronger than that in the West Bank. Gaza Palestinians fought the Israelis during the 1967 war under the PLO banner, and armed resistance continued there long after it trailed off in the West Bank. As a result, the Israeli occupation started off far more brutally, and it intensified under the military command of Ariel Sharon (the mastermind of the 1982 Lebanon invasion), who sought to press Israel's advantage against the Palestinians after the PLO's ouster from Jordan. Frustrated by his inability to capture the commandos, who often disappeared into the labyrinthine refugee camps, Sharon ordered his tanks to flatten thousands of houses to widen the streets to make pursuit easier. Palestinians suspected of sympathy for or links to the underground were repeatedly arrested and interrogated, and hundreds were coerced into acting as informers (many of whom were then executed by the resistance). By 1972, the territory was "pacified," though it remained extremely tense. Unlike the situation in the West Bank, few indigenous institutions were permitted to function. This badly disrupted a community that was reeling from deepening poverty and severe overcrowding, as it was cut off entirely from Egypt where many of its residents had worked. But the weakening of Gaza's traditional institutions played to the growth of the underground — not only that of the secular nationalists but also the Islamists.

Fatah quickly developed a large following there, as many of its top leaders either grew up in Gaza or arrived there as refugees in 1948, and the organization evolved out of armed resistance there in the late 1940s and 1950s. This occurred despite the fact that Fatah was banned by the Egyptians in 1965, due to inter-Arab rivalries and its

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ties with the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. The Communists had a strong residual presence in Gaza from a long history of mass organizing, especially among Gaza workers, though they, too, were banned by the Nasser regime. And the PFLP had a legacy of support there, dating back to the ANM, which Nasser had favored in the 1960s. All three groups — Fatah, the PFLP and the Palestinian Communist Organization — engaged in armed resistance during the first three years of Israeli occupation and played a major role in the territory's political life afterward. The Muslim Brotherhood was also strong in Gaza, though it went into political hibernation for the first two decades of the Israeli occupation. Throughout these years, however, the Islamists were quietly building their base and extending their influence through an intricate web of social, economic and cultural programs, often operating through neighborhood mosques, the only indigenous institutions the Israelis did not touch. This positioned them to re-emerge in the early 1990s, as the PLO went into decline, but in the mid-1980s, the other factions dominated the political scene.

On the eve of the uprising, the prospects for Palestinians under Israeli occupation had never been so bleak. Their economies were in deep decline, and it was clear to all that they could not be revived under Israeli rule, as Palestinians had no control over them — a fact of which they were frequently and publicly reminded. In 1985 future Nobel Peace Prize winner Defense Minister Yitzak Rabin underlined their dependent status when he declared that "there will be no development in the Occupied Territories initiated by the Israeli Government, and no permits will be given for expanding agriculture or industry [there], which may compete with the State of Israel."[48] Later that year, Rabin instituted what he called an "Iron Fist" policy of massive arrests and detentions, more deportations, and the closure of the offices of many of the new Palestinian service and information organizations in another, largely futile effort to crush continuing resistance to the occupation. The effect was mainly to anger the population and drive the leadership further underground.

As Palestinians surveyed the external political landscape, they could see no solution to their plight. The PLO was in disarray, and the Arab regimes were preoccupied with other matters, chief among them the Iran-Iraq war. When Arab leaders held a summit in Amman in November 1987, the Palestinian issue hardly came up at all, except when Syrian president Hafez al-Assad suggested the PLO be denied representation at any future international peace conference. This and other snubs were covered on Jordanian television and seen through-

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out the Occupied Territories. For those in the West Bank and Gaza, it was apparent that no one — least of all their Arab brethren — was going to solve their problems for them.

* * *

On December 8, 1987, an Israeli truck smashed into two cars full of Palestinian migrant workers at the entrance to Gaza. Four were killed. As word of the incident traveled, angry Gazans gathered at Israeli army posts to protest what they took to be a deliberate act of murder. The next day rioting broke out. Israeli soldiers fired live ammunition at fleeing children in the Jabaliya refugee camp, killing Hatem Sissi. This lit the powder keg. Protests quickly spread to the West Bank. Over the next several days, they showed no sign of a let-up — instead they kept growing. Palestinians of all ages and backgrounds took to the streets to vent their pent-up rage. The *intifada* (literally a "shaking off") was underway. It remained for a political leadership to channel the spontaneous protests into a sustained revolt.

The first to respond were the Islamists, who issued a leaflet supporting the uprising on December 10. The Communists put out a statement on December 14. Both had internal leaderships and the flexibility to act quickly. It took Fatah until early January to put out an appeal, and it was not until January 16 that the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising issued a directive in its own name.[49] But the formation of the UNLU was a milestone in itself — a multi-party coordinating body dominated (numerically, at least) by the left. In its first two years the UNLU provided a dynamic local leadership to the resistance, which functioned as a coherent revolutionary national movement for perhaps the first and only time in Palestinian history.

The UNLU had one representative from each of the four major parties — Fatah, the Popular Front, the Democratic Front and the Communist Party. Membership rotated frequently to minimize the impact of Israeli penetration and included seventeen individuals — none from the traditional elite — between the end of 1987 and early 1990, the height of the uprising. They issued leaflets as often as twice a month that provided both a political overview to the protests and specific instructions for action. They dictated the hours that shops and stores could be open (8 am to 11 am in most areas). They called strikes on specific days, promoted boycotts of Israeli products, organized tax resistance and urged other forms of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. They also mediated conflicts within the society — urging landlords and merchants to hold down rents and prices, for

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example, or exempting certain factories from the strikes in order to keep people employed in shaky domestic industries.[50]

At the local level, popular committees sprang up to organize community responses to the uprising and to address local needs that arose from it. The first ones were spontaneous — set up to organize the storage and distribution of food in communities under Israeli curfew. Soon they took on other tasks, such as organizing guard duty, health care, and small-scale self-help projects, cleaning the streets and arranging visits to hospitalized or incarcerated residents, and a variety of other such duties. Many collected funds to support projects and to care for the families whose members were wounded or arrested. Community-based mediation and judicial committees appeared to settle disputes and enforce punishments on local lawbreakers. Together, these institutions became alternative administrations, even taking on the organization of clandestine education when the Israelis closed all the schools in February 1988 and threatened to jail anyone who tried to teach the children. Israel banned the popular committees in August, as it became apparent that they constituted a growing political infrastructure over which the authorities had no control. In proscribing them, Rabin claimed the committees encouraged "violent activity." He also said they were "undermining the Israeli government apparatus and establishing an alternative apparatus in its place."[51]

The NGOs played a crucial support role in the uprising. By 1987, the UPMRC had over 500 volunteers. The organization sent mobile teams into villages and neighborhoods under Israeli attack. They broke curfews and closures by sneaking into communities at night and going house-to-house to treat the wounded. They assembled and distributed first-aid kits (often put together with materials purchased in Israel by support groups there and smuggled into the territories), and they held clandestine sessions in besieged communities to teach people how to use them in emergencies.[52] PARC set up a "home economics" program to help communities produce and distribute basic foodstuffs in an effort to solidify support for the boycott of Israeli goods and to promote Palestinian self-reliance. Other party-affiliated service organizations did much the same on a smaller scale, while human rights organizations — prominent among them the internationally recognized nonparty group *El Haq* (Law in the Service of Man) — recorded Israeli abuses and communicated them in detail to the outside world.

The Israeli response was more brutal than ever, as if the largely

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nonviolent character of the uprising were itself an affront. (Certainly the amount and quality of international media attention were taken to be one.) This was, after all, a revolt that began with kids taking to the streets to confront the Israeli army with nothing but stones and the singular audacity of youth. They were joined by women in ever larger numbers. And then the men, who were arrested by the thousands in massive sweeps. But no matter whom the Israelis took away or how many they took, the protests continued. Certain that the entire enterprise was a PLO plot, the Israelis sent commandos to Tunis on April 16, 1988 to assassinate Khalil Wazir (Abu Jihad), Arafat's number two man and the one responsible for coordinating PLO forces inside the territories up to and during the uprising. The incident triggered massive outpourings of sympathy everywhere Palestinians lived, even inside Israel, and it dealt another blow to the left wing of Fatah, though it had no discernible dampening effect on the revolt.[53]

Most of the Palestinian protestors who were taken into custody — almost all men — endured ferocious beatings and torture, often in the vehicles used to cart them away, until their scars became badges of honor. There seemed to be a sort of hysteria among the Israelis, as they found themselves unable to control the revolt. At one stage, Rabin called for "force, might, beatings." As a result, with the country crawling with journalists, the international community was treated to the grotesque sight of heavily armed Israeli combat troops wielding wooden 2x4s to break the arms and legs of Palestinian youths whose "crime" was often merely to taunt their adversaries. One eighteen-year-old boy I met in Gaza — Yasir — was walking home when he was accused of breaking curfew and beaten senseless. Mohammed Hussein Abu Karch, thirty-eight, married and the father of a small child, was sitting down to dinner when a soldier in a passing Israeli jeep tossed a gas grenade through his window. Hamed, twelve, told me of having his head held under an Israeli vehicle as soldiers chided him about how he would look when they drove over him. Others claimed they saw Israeli soldiers heaving plastic bags of urine off rooftops onto passersby.

The Israelis seemed to go out of their way to humiliate the Palestinians, apparently convinced this would cow them into passivity — or perhaps they were simply out of control themselves. Of course, exactly the opposite happened, for the Palestinians had their backs to the wall. There was no place else to go, no other tactic to take up, and everyone knew it. But this chronic and continuing abuse at a personal level had a shaping influence on the way Palestinians

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viewed the prospect of co-existence with the Israelis — and with it the possibility of real peace.

* * *

The rolling revolt in the West Bank and Gaza had many similarities to the popular uprising underway at the same time in South Africa, of which Palestinian activists were acutely aware. The crucial difference was that Palestine did not have the highly developed mass organizations South Africa did, or the internal cadre with the authority to improvise strategies and tactics on the fly. There was no Palestinian counterpart to COSATU or the UDF, which drove much of the anti-apartheid movement during the height of the confrontation in South Africa. Just as crucially, the Palestinian movement remained divided against itself, regardless of the short-term cooperation the parties managed in the early years of the uprising, and there were divisions within the divisions. Almost from the beginning, the outside leaderships of Fatah, the PFLP and the DFLP struggled to regain control of their organizations in order to head off the development of alternative power centers within the territories. The activists on the ground were not strong enough, nor were their tenuous structures developed enough, to allow them to withstand the pressure. And this, I think, was the greatest failure of the left.

As it turned out, it was the PLO's very success outside territories that finally made it, rather than the Israelis, the most serious threat to the popular character of the revolt. At the end of July 1988, Jordan announced it would sever its long-standing administrative responsibility for the West Bank, apart from religious shrines.[54] This placed the PLO on center-stage, as it became the only political force with which Israel could negotiate. Arafat quickly convened another session of the PNC in Algiers that November at which the organization took the dramatic step of declaring Palestinian independence and proclaiming Arafat president of the new state. The PLO assembly voted to accept all United Nations resolutions on the conflict, implicitly recognizing Israel, and then renounced all forms of terrorism (a formula required by the U.S. for opening a dialogue with the PLO, which came about after some awkward additional tinkering).[55] The organization was now officially on record for a "two-state solution" for the first time. The PFLP predictably voted against this, but it declined to oppose it despite deep misgivings. Thus riding high, Arafat was free to pursue his drive to gain international recognition for the state he planned to lead — and to harness the uprising to his diplomatic

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agenda in what amounted to a "coup from above."

The ground for this had been prepared long ago, as PLO member organizations had allowed themselves to become chronically dependent on outside sources of money for nearly everything they did — often from sources that held precisely the opposite politics to theirs. All the parties relied to some extent on monthly subsidies channeled through the PLO, giving Arafat considerable leverage over them. At the same time, the party-driven NGOs relied for support on Western funders. This left these institutions particularly vulnerable to manipulation — or simply to the consequences of changing donor priorities. Contrast this with the South African trade unions, whose strength came from their success as unions on the shopfloor and whose primary source of support was their members. Or with Eritrea where highly-politicized mass organizations of peasant farmers, youth and women markedly improved their members' lives operating for the most part with funds from the diaspora. The payback was that the people contributed actively and creatively to the liberation struggle, no matter how bad things got, and they did so in an organized, disciplined way that could not be undercut by outside forces. This was decidedly not the case in Palestine. By the time the Gulf war broke out and the Palestinian economy collapsed, the resources of all but Fatah were dried up, helping it to consolidate its dominance over the others.

Meanwhile, the Islamists were becoming a social and political force in their own right, operating for the most part with the tacit approval of the Israelis, who viewed them as competition for the PLO, their main enemy. In a far-sighted but low-key approach typical of Islamist movements throughout the region, the Muslim Brotherhood had begun offering scholarships and other support for students to study at Islamic institutions outside the Territories as early as 1967. The formation of an Islamic University in Gaza in 1978 was a milestone. By the end of that decade, organized Islamist students were beginning to contest student union elections at schools and universities across Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, the Brotherhood established a comprehensive set of social programs and Koran schools at the grassroots level — which the Israelis permitted without challenge — all the while refraining from involvement in explicit political activity until the end of the 1980s, by which time the base was built.

Islamic Jihad was the first of the underground Islamist opposition organizations to announce itself in 1987. The following year, as the

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intifada went into high gear, Hamas — the Islamic Resistance Movement — issued its founding charter, calling for an Islamic state in all of historic Palestine. But it was the PLO's acceptance of Israel in its November 1988 declaration of independence that provoked Hamas into direct competition and confrontation. Soon afterward, the group began issuing its own calls for general strikes, which were widely supported. This sent a clear signal to both the Israelis and the PLO that a new political force was on the scene.[56]

The *intifada* reached a crucial turning point in mid-1989, eighteen months or so into the revolt. Calls for civil disobedience began to trail off, as the main activity became stone-throwing. Protests became more and more routinized under organized factional direction. The community-based popular committees, which the outside leaderships had never been comfortable with, began to crumble — unsupported and unable to withstand the unremitting pressure from the Israelis, whose repression took its toll in weakened command structures and sheer moral exhaustion. Over the course of the uprising, more than 2,000 Palestinians were killed and between 120,000 and 140,000 people were arrested (many more than once), according to official Israeli statistics.[57] Sixty-nine prominent leaders were also deported.[58]

The resulting breakdown of local authority created a vacuum in which organized political gangs appeared in several large towns, and the incidence of "collaborator killings" sky-rocketed, often involving personal vendettas as well as the public execution of suspected drug dealers or other undesirables. The collective character of the revolt began to wane. At the same time, the economic toll on the population climbed steadily from the frequent strikes, closures and disruptions to production and trade. And the Israelis began squeezing residents for unpaid taxes and a raft of new fees and fines in order to make them pay the cost of policing the revolt — even storming into homes to seize furniture and other household goods in lieu of cash when residents would not or could not pay. To worsen matters, Jordan devalued its currency by fifty percent, halving the real incomes of many West Bank residents just as it curtailed subsidies to Palestinian institutions there.

If the people were caught in a squeeze, so was the left. In addition to the repression from Israel and the rising threat from Islamist forces, it was now challenged by Fatah, which moved to take over the revolt. Fatah not only bankrolled competing social services, it underwrote the protests themselves in a move to take them over. In 1989, Fatah estab-

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lished a paid Popular Palestinian Army — its *shabab* — to take over the street confrontations. In "professionalizing" these actions, the front demobilized much of the rest of the population. After the arrest of the last four truly underground UNLU leaders in March 1990, this committee, too, was taken over by prominent political figures from each faction who operated under close PLO control and tacit Israeli approval. Like the armed struggle before it, the *intifada* had reached a stalemate. The Israelis could not break it, the national movement could not take it to a higher level. It was time for a "solution."

Israeli prime minister Yitzak Shamir's first impulse was to propose another round of new elections — still with no PLO participation — in exchange for an unconditional halt to the *intifada*. He reserved the right to disqualify any candidates who were politically objectionable, and he offered only limited political autonomy under this carefully screened administration, while insisting that Israel retain control over land, water and security. The proposal was still-born, but it triggered a wave of diplomatic maneuvering to find a way out of the crisis. From this point forward, however, the uprising steadily wound down in intensity, as first the Gulf war and then the Madrid peace process took center stage.

* * *

Arafat lost stature in the West and outraged many Israelis by his embrace of Saddam Hussein early in the Gulf crisis. That he did so in spite of the political and economic cost is partly explained by Hussein's support for the *intifada* to the tune of $40 million, despite the high price of Iraq's war with Iran, and for Hussein's vocal criticism of the other Arab states at a May 1990 summit for their inconsistent support for the Palestinians. Another factor was Kuwait's support for Islamist projects in the West Bank and Gaza, though the main impetus probably came from Arafat with his perennial drive to stay tuned into the Palestinian street where Iraq's saber-rattling toward the U.S. and Israel was extremely popular.[59] But Arafat misread the military situation when the Gulf war broke out, as did many Palestinians, believing that Iraq had a chance to succeed in the military confrontation.[60] This calculation hurt the PLO dearly, as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the other oil-producing sheikdoms cut off their subsidies (as did Libya for different reasons), which were down from their peak anyway but which still sustained the PLO.[61] The Gulf states also ended the practice of remitting taxes on Palestinian salaries, though this was somewhat redundant as they had just evicted most of the

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workers. As a result of all this, the PLO was forced in 1991 to slash its budget by half and to get by from then on through deficit spending.[62]

When the Eastern Bloc began to collapse, left parties suffered another setback in terms not only of money and other perks — subsidies, scholarships, training, overseas offices, contacts with other movements and more — but also of political identity. The PCP and the Democratic Front were particularly disoriented by these events, though they also affected the PFLP. (Palestinians would be further affected when the USSR collapsed, as close to 400,000 Russian Jews emigrated to Israel, most supporting Israel's right wing and many settling in the West Bank in heavily subsidized new housing.) The DFLP was further damaged by a split that came about over a mix of national politics and internal power issues. In 1990, the front's second-in-command, Yasir Abd Rabbo, led a breakaway faction called the Palestine Democratic Union, or FIDA, that included many of the organization's leading cadres inside the territories. This was the backdrop for the start of the negotiating process.

Immediately after the Gulf war, U.S. president George Bush signaled that the Israel/Palestine crisis was next on America's agenda and that it should be dealt with on the basis of "territory for peace." His administration proposed an international peace conference, jointly sponsored by the Soviet Union. The target date was October. Over the next few months, the PLO, anxious to participate, was forced to make repeated concessions on who would actually come to the table and under whose auspices. For its part, Israel balked at sitting down with any pro-PLO people from the territories (Hanan Ashrawi, Faisal Husseini and others), even under the Jordanian flag, and its representatives bickered over technicalities without let-up in a transparent attempt to derail the conference altogether.

Then the Bush administration took the unprecedented step of announcing it would delay (not cancel) $10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel in a move to pressure the Shamir government to go forward with the meeting. Israel quickly assented in a dramatic display of just how much leverage Washington had — if it were prepared to exercise it. However, Israel continued to accelerate its settlement activity in what Shamir later admitted was a concerted effort to drag out the talks for "ten years," while filling the territories with Jewish settlers.[63] In the event, ten rounds of negotiations, interspersed with negotiations about negotiations and an endless series of third-party interventions, dragged on for more than a year with no results. The

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Israelis were unwilling to budge on the main issues, while Arafat was constrained by his opposition whenever he appeared ready to cave in. To break the impasse, Arafat cronies went behind closed doors to meet separately with their Israeli counterparts in Oslo, Norway.

Consider the situation: the PLO was nearly bankrupt, the uprising had become a low-key ritualized exercise, the national movement had lost most of its allies in the Arab world, there was no superpower to support it, and it was in danger, again, of imploding due to renewed internal divisions. Oslo was Arafat's final gambit, and everyone involved knew it. (It came out later that the Israelis had bugged the rooms of the Palestinian negotiators throughout the talks and knew precisely the pressure they were under.) From the Israeli standpoint, the timing was opportune. As one close observer of the uprising put it, "the PLO in Tunis successfully captured power in the West Bank and Gaza not because it led the revolution but because it promised to end it."[64] Some six months into the secret talks, the two sides cut a deal to do just that. Despite the fanfare, though, the Oslo accords were essentially an interim pact on how to proceed that was widely (mis)characterized as an agreement in itself.[65]

The accords were termed a "Declaration of Principles." They laid out a schedule for constructing an agreement over a five-year period. Their central achievement appeared to be mutual recognition, though the Israelis were careful to hedge this by identifying the PLO as *a* representative, not *the* representative of the Palestinian people. Still, they were a step toward the acceptance of each people's identity, if for little more. The Israelis pledged to turn over control of most of Gaza and the small Jordan Valley town of Jericho to a Palestinian police force that would be responsible for "internal security and public order." Israel would retain control of external relations and foreign affairs. Once this transfer was completed, the Israelis would turn over responsibility for civil services — health, education, social welfare, direct taxation, tourism — to the newly constituted Palestinian Authority in a wider area. Nine months later, Palestinians would elect a legislative council to manage these services. More withdrawals would follow from unspecified areas. And two years on, they would start talking about the big questions — what were characterized as "final status issues" (Jerusalem, the right of Palestinian return, the fate of the settlements and so on). This was the "Allon plan" a quarter century later.

With Oslo, Arafat won the right to serve as a glorified municipal administrator, with the promise of more land to come but no assur-

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ances that the central issues of the national struggle would ever be addressed, and no guarantee that a viable state would emerge from the process. These terms would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier. Now, with the organization's — and Arafat's — survival on the line, they were accepted. "I know many of you here think Oslo is a bad agreement," Arafat later told a skeptical audience in Gaza. "It is a bad agreement. But it's the best we can get in the worst situation."[66]

Then, as happened before, the negotiations themselves turned into an issue. Deadlines were repeatedly unmet, new Israeli conditions were laid down, and agreements were made on the agreements that were themselves renegotiated with great fanfare, often in Washington or its environs.[67] And they were almost always amended in Israel's favor, in effect shifting the fulcrum between the two sides ever closer to Israel's starting position until Arafat began to dig in his heels, only to be chastised by the Clinton administration and others for his supposed refusal to be "creative" and make further compromises. But this also put pressure on the fragile consensus within the national movement.

Soon after the original accords were announced, they split the PLO more deeply than ever before. The agreement was approved by a truncated session of the PLO executive committee in early September 1993 that had an unusually high number of abstentions and absences.[68] Next came the ceremony on the White House lawn. And before the ink was dry, cracks appeared. Israel demonstrated its ambivalent commitment to the process with an announcement that it would "thicken" settlements by increasing the Jewish populations in them, despite a ban within the accords on expanding them. Soon afterward, Israel demolished seventeen houses in Gaza when residents there protested the agreement.[69]

The Popular and Democratic Fronts repudiated the agreement almost immediately. They were joined by several small factions from across the political spectrum. The new "rejectionists" came together in a Damascus-based coalition called the Union of Palestinian Forces that grouped the PFLP and the DFLP with Hamas, Islamic Jihad and a half dozen smaller forces. Such an alliance precluded common work on most other issues, as the political and social differences among them ran deep, particularly on gender issues but also others. They twice had to postpone issuing a founding statement because they couldn't agree on what to call themselves, how to characterize UN resolutions, or on how to position themselves on the issue of phasing

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in a Palestinian state.[70] It was an unholy pact among absolutist forces, with the seeming exception of the Democratic Front. (One of the factors driving the DFLP into the alliance was anger at Arafat's personal promotion of the split that took place within the organization in 1990-91. Afterward, the DFLP splinter, FIDA, was immediately given a seat on the PLO executive committee, and it joined Fatah to form the political base of the Palestine Authority in 1994.)

* * *

As the years ticked by, popular support for the "peace process" began to erode, with most Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank finding themselves worse off than ever before. Tens of thousands were put out of work, many permanently, as a result of punitive Israeli border closures. These reached a peak in 1996 after the Israeli assassination of a Hamas guerrilla, known as the "engineer," and the devastating Islamist bombing attacks that followed in retaliation, but they continued on a more or less permanent basis and often included "internal" closures of areas of the West Bank and Gaza under joint (but ultimately Israeli) control. By the middle of the third year of Palestinian "autonomy," per capita income in Gaza fell by half, with that in the West Bank not far behind. Social services contracted sharply as Palestinian nongovernmental organizations ran out of funds and as Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza lost access to services in Israeli-controlled zones.

Throughout this period, the new Palestinian Authority (PA), under Arafat's autocratic leadership and under increasing pressure from Israel and the U.S., remained preoccupied with security issues. Unlike the ANC or the EPLF, which came into government at almost the same time, the Authority did not forward any sort of program for national reconstruction and development. Meanwhile, as if to further remind Palestinians how tenuous their "autonomous" status was, Israel seized thousands of hectares of Palestinian land in the years after the Declaration of Principles was signed with such fanfare on September 13, 1993. And Palestinians watched even more land disappear as an enhanced grid of settler roads was constructed to link Israeli settlers with metropolitan Israel. This process continued regardless of which Israeli party was in power.

As the conditions of daily life for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories deteriorated, levels of frustration and mistrust — and incidents of violence — rose steadily, not only between Israelis and Palestinians but among Palestinians themselves. In Gaza, the many

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new overlapping "state" security services, incorporating mainly cadre from Fatah, had violent confrontations with militant opposition elements led by Hamas (an Arabic acronym for the Islamic Resistance Movement) and the smaller Islamic Jihad. In the West Bank, only a high degree of social cohesion in villages and urban neighborhoods offset the almost complete absence of public authority. Coupled with repressive measures the new Authority took against internal dissent, ranging from punishing the press for criticizing Arafat to torturing detainees. This led some Palestinians to describe the peace process as the "privatization of the occupation."

What made this situation worse for that segment of the Palestinian population that felt the impact of the deteriorating economic and social conditions most acutely — workers, subsistence-level farmers, the urban poor — was that leaders of the secular left opposition, who purported to represent their class interests, failed utterly to forward a coherent alternative. This created a vacuum increasingly filled by the militant Islamist groups, which had for years been operating grassroots social services and organizing in the neighborhoods — welfare programs, Koran schools, neighborhood security and so on — with considerably greater effectiveness than the left. The upshot was a deepening crisis in the national movement, which appeared to have lost its way.

"We are at a stage where the old Palestinian movement is dying, and a new movement is not created yet," said Moustafa Barghouthi, a member of the political bureau of the Palestine People's Party (formerly the Palestine Communist Party). Barghouthi was also the head of the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, the largest and most effective of the popular nongovernmental organizations that developed in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1980s during the uprising. "Many leaders haven't faced this crisis," he told me before the 1996 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, for which he ran unsuccessfully on a PPP slate. "They are stuck in the past with unrealistic solutions to the current situation, and many people are just tired."[71]

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Chapter 4

NICARAGUA

A PARTY OUT OF POWER

In early 1990, the Palestinian intifada had passed its peak, the Eritreans were preparing to enter Asmara, and the ANC and SACP were regaining legal status in South Africa. In Nicaragua, however, the organized left — embodied in the Sandinista National Liberation Front — was moving in the opposite direction. It had just been thrust out of the very state it had struggled to transform over the previous decade. In February of that year, the FSLN was soundly defeated in elections that brought to power a motley coalition of U.S.-backed opposition groups, ranging from moribund socialist and social democratic parties to supporters of the deposed dictatorship. The victorious United National Opposition was led by presidential candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, a centrist with little to recommend her as a national leader except her lack of ties to any of the main competing blocs within the UNO and her marriage to prominent newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who was murdered by agents of the Somoza regime in 1978.

The Sandinista-led revolution had been on the defensive almost from the moment of the triumphal ouster of the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979. The FSLN seized power at the head of a massive insurrection that drew tens of thousands of people into the political process, though relatively few were formally members of the FSLN. The victory unleashed a wave of activism within Nicaragua that attracted support from solidarity groups and sympathizers around the world. It also sparked a vicious U.S.-backed counterrevolution. In the revolution's early years, modest amounts of financial aid poured in from a wide variety of sources in Europe and North America, some governmental, some not. This was accompanied by an influx of international volunteers — "brigadistas" — who came to help spruce up

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drab urban landscapes with brilliantly-colored murals, to work on national literacy and public health campaigns and to participate in community development projects. Harnessing and sustaining this energy was another matter, however, as was the defense of these gains once the *contra* war got underway from bases in neighboring Honduras.

When the FSLN marched into Managua, it was little more than a politicized military organization, whose three rival factions had united only five months earlier. There had been no "liberated" territory for the front to experiment with social or economic programs or with political administration, as was the case in Eritrea, and there were no significant mass organizations or social movements to speak of associated with the front, such as those in South Africa. There were several small trade unions in and around Managua, whose members were militant supporters of the uprising and which were a starting point for building a national workers' confederation, but only ten or eleven percent of the workforce was unionized. There were also cadre based in the *barrios* (urban neighborhoods), who provided the seeds for community-based Sandinista Defense Committees after the Sandinista victory. In 1977 a women's organization — AMPRONAC — was established that would be transformed into a national women's association, AMNLAE. A rural workers' union was launched in 1978. But apart from these halting beginnings, the FSLN started from square one to mobilize its popular base once the insurrection succeeded.

* * *

The FSLN was launched in 1961 by Carlos Fonseca and three others who broke with the pro-Moscow Socialist Party over its opposition to armed struggle. At the outset, many in the new front subscribed to the *foco* theory of spontaneous popular revolt identified with Ernesto "Che" Guevara, but severe setbacks in the armed struggle in the late Sixties fostered a shift toward a strategy of protracted war. Late in the decade, Fonseca drafted what was known as the FSLN's "Historic Program." It called for extensive nationalizations, land for the landless, free medical care and other reforms usually associated with the "national democratic" stage of a socialist-oriented revolution. This served as the cornerstone of the FSLN's political identity from then on. But, in 1975, the movement split into three tendencies, whose differences over strategy and line were never fully resolved, and in 1977 Fonseca was killed in battle, leaving no single figure with the charisma or the credentials to unite the competing party wings.

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When the three factions finally merged in February 1979, five months before the Sandinistas marched into Managua, they finessed their disunity by creating a National Directorate, with three members appointed from each group, to run the organization. Tomás Borge, the only surviving FSLN founder, joined Bayardo Arce and Henry Ruiz to represent what was known as the protracted people's war tendency. Luis Carrión, Jaime Wheelock and Carlos Núñez represented the "proletarian" tendency. The two Ortega brothers — Daniel and Humberto — and Víctor Tirado led the third faction, which was known as the "*terceristas*" and was identified with a strategy of popular insurrection and cross-class alliances. Once in power, this coalition-type structure became embedded in the state itself as differences over strategy evolved into personal rivalries, and there was never any systematic effort to unify the factions at lower levels of the organization. They simply faded away, though their shadows (and the loyalties associated with them) lingered for years.

Within the Directorate, each member was assigned responsibility for an area of policy and for the management of one or more of the mass organizations. Jaime Wheelock had agrarian reform, for example. Henry Ruiz had foreign aid. Humberto Ortega had the army. Victor Tirado had the main trade unions. Carlos Nuñez was the liaison with the Council of State, and so on. "Daniel Ortega was the coordinator of the junta and the center of gravity of the whole Directorate, but Tomás Borge was the most charismatic," Carrión told me in 1995. "I was put in the Ministry of the Interior to counterbalance him in a distribution of power meant to keep everyone satisfied. There was an unwritten rule — don't meddle in your brother's matters." Victor Tinoco, the Managua party chief elected to the National Directorate in 1994, has characterized the system of leadership as one that combined the idea of a vanguard party with the system of authoritarian rule known in Latin America as *caudillismo*, or bossism. In their case, he said, the FSLN produced a variation in which the "*caudillismo* of one person was replaced by the *caudillismo* of nine people. But in the end it was still *caudillismo*, if a collective one."[1]

Though much was made in the 1980s of the FSLN's commitment to pluralism, many of the front's early attempts to incorporate, or at least neutralize, its economic and political opponents were tactical moves rather than breaks with the state-centered, "verticalist" tradition out of which the front grew and which this leadership structure fostered. Their continuing commitment to democratic centralism was

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reiterated at a conference of party cadres in September 1979 in a paper known as "The 72 Hours Document." Participants were warned against either "excessive democracy or excessive centralism." They were also told that the role of the popular organizations was "to see to it that the government policy set forth by the FSLN is carried out in every aspect."[2] A year later, at the closing ceremony for the FSLN's remarkably successful literacy crusade, Humberto Ortega — acting on behalf of the front, not the government — announced that the country's first postwar national elections would be held in 1985. He cautioned, however, that "they are elections to improve the power of the revolution, but they are not a raffle to see who has power."[3] In the event, the Sandinistas got sixty-seven percent of the ballots cast in voting deemed by international observers to have been free of fraud, though one wing of opposition boycotted them, and though there was little serious debate during the campaign, waged against the backdrop of the steadily escalating *contra* war.

The FSLN also touted a commitment to a "mixed economy," though many in the leadership saw Cuba as the model of choice. In any event, no one seemed to quite know what this term meant, apart from a series of *ad hoc* compromises with potential class antagonists. Where this contradiction became problematic was less in how the front dealt with large landowners and investors — most of whom never believed the FSLN's promises anyway — than in how they actually viewed private property and, based on this, how in the early years they carelessly mistreated small holders and petty producers, many of whom crossed over to the Nicaraguan Resistance in the mid-1980s to oppose the revolution. "These inconsistencies were a dead weight on the workings of the Sandinista government because while speaking about a mixed economy, in practice, we were thinking and acting against it," wrote Alejandro Martínez Cuenca later.[4]

By the end of the decade there was considerable movement on these issues within the FSLN. On the political front, this was forcefully reflected in the highly democratic, if also strongly presidential, 1987 Constitution and in a regional autonomy plan for the Atlantic coast, adopted the same year.[5] It was confirmed in the front's approach to the 1990 elections and in its tolerance for an opposition openly committed to reversing the revolution at a time when the *contra* war had not yet ended. On the economic side, it could be read in the FSLN's shift from a narrow concentration on building cooperatives and large state farms to one of titling small producers, as well as in

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the new fiscal policies adopted in the late 1980s. Ironically, perhaps, the Sandinista cabinet had in 1989 accepted a post-election development plan to concentrate on increasing production (rather than focusing mainly on distribution, as they had been doing for political reasons), while holding down inflation, decentralizing the banking system and reforming the tax structure. But nowhere was the sincerity of the FSLN's commitment to the democratic institutions it had created tested more than in its response to the 1990 election results — an event that marked the first time such a peaceful transfer of power had ever occurred in Nicaragua.

When the eleven-year period of Sandinista rule came to an end, there was much for which the party could claim credit. The literacy crusade in 1980-81 had reached over 400,000 people, reducing the rate of illiteracy from fifty to under thirteen percent. Admittance to schools, from elementary to university levels, was extended to thousands of poor Nicaraguans for the first time, as was access to health facilities, agricultural extension, credit and other vital inputs. But their signal achievement in this sphere was an agrarian reform that gave the country one of the most egalitarian land ownership profiles in Latin America. In this respect, they presided over a thorough-going process of economic and social democratization. And this was accompanied by a process of consciousness-raising that left the population, especially the poor, with a far different sense of itself and awareness of its rights than ever before.

Despite the unbroken drumbeat of criticism leveled at them by the Reagan administration and its allies and by right-wing opponents within Nicaragua, the Sandinistas also made giant strides in political democratization. They not only established and consolidated new democratic institutions, they created the foundation of a democratic culture that now serves to protect them in opposition and that leaves Nicaragua one of the most politically open countries in Central America. But while the FSLN quite dramatically changed its views on democracy in the wider society and contributed substantially to its democratic transformation, the party itself remained a closed shop, stubbornly resisting change in its own make-up and methodology.

* * *

In the months after the victory, the party empowered a broad-based Council of State (actually set up shortly before Somoza's fall) that presided over the country during the transition. At its head was a five-

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member provisional junta that included Violeta Chamorro, along with two Sandinistas and two others considered "independents."[6] Initially, the council was comprised of well-established constituent organizations (professional associations, unions, business groups and so on), which chose their own representatives. In 1980, the FSLN added the new mass organizations it was helping to build — organizations that for the most part could not have existed under the repressive Somoza regime. This tipped the balance of the council decisively in their favor and triggered an exodus of anti-Sandinista members. Chamorro resigned from the junta, and the lines were drawn that would define the contending sides for the next decade. It remained only for the internal opposition to ally itself with the externally-based *contra* movement that was in the process of initiating an armed resistance.

Despite the hostility developing within the higher reaches of Nicaraguan society and being fanned by right-wing forces in the U.S., the years from 1979 to 1982 were marked by a high level of pluralism within and among social and political organizations under the FSLN umbrella, and the country held national elections in 1984, which the Sandinistas won handily. This was a period of unparalleled political animation, in which large numbers of people were drawn into the process of reshaping their society. Not coincidentally, it was the time of some of the revolution's most sweeping structural reforms, starting with the nationalization of the sprawling agricultural estates owned by members of the Somoza family and their cronies in 1979. Rather than turn the land over to landless peasants, however, the estates were converted into state farms. One argument for this approach was that if the land were divided up, poor farmers would simply cut down the valuable coffee bushes and use the plots to raise subsistence food crops. Better to protect one of Nicaragua's few sources of export revenue, while giving the farmers secure jobs and organizing them into FSLN trade unions. In the event, access to the best jobs varied widely, often depending upon how well one was connected with the FSLN, and public understanding of the policy was not consistent. This was true in part because the FSLN lacked strong, organic links with the peasantry through which they could be won over to the new policies (and to the fact that the peasants themselves had no input into these policies).

Sandinista leaders decided not to organize peasant farmers as a separate sector, fearing their potential as political mavericks. At first the FSLN limited itself to building the union of rural workers (the ATC in its Spanish acronym). After 1982 the Sandinistas also estab-

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lished an association of medium and large-scale farmers and ranchers (UNAG), but they never did organize an independent peasants' association, even while they were alienating many small producers with highly unpopular marketing restrictions and price controls designed to protect urban workers, the front's primary constituency. The FSLN carried out a second round of land reform in 1982 that centered on the establishment of state-assisted cooperatives, mostly aimed at peasants. A year later the government began individual land-titling, and in the latter half of the decade several state farms were converted into cooperatives. This was done in part to undercut peasant support for the *contras*, who were capitalizing on FSLN mistakes in the rural economy to mobilize recruits, but it was too little, too late.[7] The Sandinistas did a more thorough job of recasting their policy toward the alienated ethnic minorities on the Atlantic Coast, who provided another source of *contra* support, though the highly participatory process that transformed it also came far too late to affect the political situation. Elections to new autonomous regional councils called for by the new plan were not held until 1990, just as the Sandinistas were swept from office.

But the economy proved to be the Achilles' heel for the Sandinistas. They took over a government that carried a $1.6 billion debt. The protracted *contra* war cost the country billions more.[8] By 1988, as Nicaragua reeled from the effects of the conflict and from the U.S. trade embargo, inflation spiraled out of control at a whopping 33,000 percent. To make matters worse, one of the worst hurricanes ever to strike the country ravaged the Atlantic Coast in 1989. Then the Soviet Union slashed its foreign aid.

Needless to say, the impact of all this was felt most strongly at the base of the society. In 1981, Nicaragua's per capita GDP was $766, close to the average for all of Latin America. By 1991, it dropped to $340, among the lowest on the continent. Such achievements as the stunning increase in access to primary health care in the early Sandinista years — from twenty-eight percent of the population in 1978 to eighty percent in 1983 — were undercut not only by sharp cutbacks in government funding but also by frequent *contra* attacks on remote clinics and by the forced migration of people out of the rural war zones.[9] Vaccination programs were severely disrupted, as were literacy campaigns and other projects aimed at the poorest members of the society. The imposition of conscription in the mid-1980s further undermined public support for the government — the co-optation of the *barrio*-based Sandinista Defense Committees to implement it almost single-

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handedly destroyed them. But it was the unremitting impoverishment of the country and the desperate hope that peace would bring an end to the fighting and the onset of large-scale U.S. aid for reconstruction (which, in the event, was not forthcoming) that worked most strongly to favor the UNO coalition in the 1990 elections.

For all that, the UNO, whose members agreed upon little more than their aversion to the FSLN, splintered almost immediately after ascending to power. Several wanted Chamorro to immediately jettison the new Constitution, under which they had just campaigned, and to throw out the entire agrarian reform under which thousands of impoverished Nicaraguan farmers had received land. Fearing social chaos, she declined to do either, and for much of her subsequent tenure, she had to cut deals with the Sandinistas in the National Assembly to get any legislation passed. However, as Jack Spence, a close observer of Nicaraguan politics, notes:

> Basic disagreements over the Constitution and over the legality of the agrarian reform mixed with the conflicting demands of many social groups to produce major conflicts in every arena. Some ranches, for example, experienced violent conflict between beneficiaries of the agrarian reform, groups hired by the former owner to take the land back, peasants who had never benefited from agrarian reform, and contra fighters claiming that they had won the war (when Chamorro won) and deserved the land. Thus Nicaragua and the Sandinista party confronted conflicts between 1990-1995 over the most basic political and economic issues: the legality of the Constitution, control over the most important economic assets; control of the army and the police, and the division of power between the executive and a fractured legislature.[10]

Nonetheless, control over the powerful executive branch enabled the Chamorro government to dismantle or compromise many of the previous regime's programs that were not safeguarded by the 1987 Constitution. Among those that were protected were land reform and the neutrality of the army and police. However, even these were weakened under unrelenting pressure from right-wing forces in the U.S., spearheaded by Republican Senator Jesse Helms. Using his power as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Helms eventually pushed Chamorro into forcing out the Sandinistas who headed the army and the police. (Humberto Ortega, brother of former president

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Daniel Ortega and a long-standing member of the FSLN leadership in his own right, quit as head of the army in February 1995.)[11] Meanwhile, the government so thoroughly undermined the land reform by abolishing its support systems that many peasant farmers had to sell their land to survive. The effect was a market-driven reversal of the Sandinista redistribution.

Nicaragua provided a sort of reverse-image reflection of what was happening at the same time in South Africa, as one set of class representatives moved into a state constructed by its strategic opponents. Only it proved easier for the right than for the left — given external factors — to enter a government created by its opposite number and then to use it to further its class interests and ideological predilections. In many cases, the trappings of the Sandinista revolution lived on, while the substance changed. For example, public health programs and public schools remained nominally intact but they were stripped of resources. All the while, larger-than-life portraits of slain Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto Sandino and FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca graced the entry to one of the largest downtown government buildings. A hilltop statue of Sandino on horseback looked out over the city as his legacy was dismantled.

What the FSLN did salvage from the electoral debacle was the political space to continue the struggle. The movement had put a strong Constitution in place that guaranteed a wide range of political rights. It had the freedom of action that came with having a depoliticized army and national police, major milestones for Central America. It held a strong position in the legislature with thirty-nine of ninety-two seats. It had a strong presence in the national media (with a daily newspaper and popular radio and TV stations). And it maintained an extensive network of social organizations and NGOs. This network included powerful trade unions and an uneven but resurgent, urban-based community movement. Through an agreement negotiated between the FSLN and the new government, the Sandinista unions also gained control of almost a quarter of the state farms and industries that were privatized after the elections. Many people saw this as a mixed blessing, however. While it provided the opportunity for novel experiments with worker-controlled enterprises, it also tended — especially in the case of the industrial unions — to turn union leaders into business managers, for which they were ill-prepared, at the expense of their role as labor organizers.

From the standpoint of its position to wage a sustained popular struggle, however, what the FSLN lacked most — in addition to a

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strong grassroots women's organization — was a party apparatus with effective lines of communication to and from the general population. The FSLN had been so thoroughly intertwined with the state while in power that it almost ceased to exist as an organic entity after the electoral defeat, an eventuality that no one in the leadership had seriously considered or prepared for. Like many left parties, it also lacked a programmatic alternative to the neoliberal economic project being foisted on the country by international capital, working with and through the rebounding local elite.

* * *

The failure of the FSLN to establish the independence of the party in the heady days of the revolution would haunt the movement throughout the 1990s. While in power, the party functioned almost exclusively as a division of the state, with 3,400 paid organizers working directly under the ministry of mass mobilization. Overnight, in February 1990, this number was slashed to 200, severing the party's direct links to its quite considerable popular base. Nearly all the sectoral organizations and social movements — the industrial unions, the union of rural workers, the organization of farmers and ranchers, the national women's association and others — also depended heavily on state subsidies for their administrative costs and for many of their programs. These organizations were immediately thrown into crisis when the pipeline was cut, though most worked through it. The Communal Movement, the successor to the community-based Sandinista Defense Committees, was least affected, as it had established its political and financial autonomy in 1988 and was more or less self-supporting by the time of the elections.

The abrupt and unanticipated cut-off of resources was only part of the story, however. This was a political movement that had never convened an organizational congress, never held elections for its leadership, and never articulated a party program, apart from that forwarded by the state. The first FSLN congress was held in 1991, a year after it lost power, but a nervous leadership was unwilling to loosen the control it had habitually exercised. Nor did the nine men who comprised the leadership bend to a push from below to include a woman in the National Directorate that had run the state and now ran the party. Instead, the leaders argued that it was a time to consolidate and regroup, postponing programmatic and organizational changes to an unspecified later date.

Long-time Sandinista activist and former General Secretary of the

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Foreign Ministry Alejandro Bendaña points out that the FSLN made the transition from leading an armed front to managing the state without ever becoming a full-fledged political party. In effect, the National Directorate told both the party and the state what to do, acting as what Bendaña calls a "junta government" that was caught entirely off-balance when forced to assume the role of an opposition party. Coming at the moment of the collapse of the USSR and the socialist bloc, this abrupt transition triggered a crisis of identity and direction throughout the Sandinista movement — what was it once out of power, and what lessons were to be drawn from this for the future? How should it be organized? What should be the relations between party and mass organization? What would be its program, and how would it arrive at this? On what basis should the party be built — geographical, sectoral, some combination of the two or another approach altogether?

Despite this confusion, the Sandinista movement — those who publicly identified with the values and objectives of the Sandinista revolution, whether party members or not — remained a large and vibrant force within Nicaraguan society. By the mid-to-late 1990s, there were also signs of political renewal among cadre in the middle levels of the party and in the proliferating popular organizations, party-affiliated and otherwise, though little of this was reflected in the top party leadership. However, the generation that made the revolution in 1979 was by then in its forties and fifties, while half the population was born after the Triumph and was shaped not by the political culture of the insurrection but by the experience of civil war and austerity that followed. Where this generation put its political loyalties would determine Nicaragua's future.

* * *

As the FSLN struggled to reposition itself as a party out of power, most of Nicaragua's four million people sought to cope with economic and social disaster. Falling commodity prices, a flood of cheap imports, the abrupt end of government subsidies, severe shortages of agricultural credit and conflicting claims for land combined to put enormous pressure on peasant farmers, while making it extremely difficult for demobilized combatants to reintegrate into the society. In the early 1990s, Nicaragua achieved the dubious distinction of becoming the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, after Haiti. Government statistics pegged the unemployment rate at over sixty percent in most of the country, with the figure rising to almost nine-

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ty percent on the Atlantic coast. Meanwhile, social services were sharply curtailed. The upshot was a continuing series of public protests, including armed actions by former *contras* and Sandinistas (known, respectively, as *recontras* and *recompas*), at times acting in concert (when they were dubbed *revueltos*). There were also general strikes that paralyzed the country in 1990 and 1991, a massive student-led protest in 1992 over attempts to raise university fees, and other wildcat strikes and slowdowns in virtually every sector of the economy.

Most of these protests arose out of the broadly-defined Sandinista "movement," but few were party-driven. Instead, they reflected new forms of activism among popular organizations, splinter groups and even rogue individuals (in the case of new outlaw gangs operating in the rural areas) forcefully asserting their particular interests, often with little reference to the larger society. In moments of violent confrontation, FSLN leaders (mainly Daniel Ortega) moved in to negotiate with the UNO government, usually achieving paper compromises on behalf of the protesters. These interventions succeeded in ending the crises in the streets, but the agreements were rarely implemented by the regime.

Throughout this period, all the FSLN mass organizations struggled over issues of party-control and organizational direction. Many activists remained deeply concerned that the FSLN become more reflective of and accountable to the perspectives of these popular organizations and the people who participated in them. For their part, some party leaders worried that the pendulum had swung so far toward spontaneous activism that coherent, long-range national strategy was lacking. This tension reflected the state of flux of a movement seeking to redefine itself under enormous day-to-day pressures that permitted little opportunity for extended reflection. It also began to seem that the core leadership was so habituated to top-down methods of command — termed "verticalism" in Nicaragua — that it was congenitally unable to open itself to the ideas and initiatives percolating up from its own followers.

Though the Sandinistas experimented with a mixed economy and a more open political arena than most socialist-oriented governments during their years in power, the party nevertheless favored a strong state acting largely on behalf of, rather than through, the impoverished majority. Once out of power, its internal structure continued to reflect a distinctly top-down form of leadership, thoroughly dominated by men, though women were eventually brought into the

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National Directorate. By this time, the FSLN's paternalism had for so long disempowered people at economic and political levels within the party and in the society at large that it was difficult to re-engage people once the party was in opposition. The question the Sandinistas continued to face was how to rebuild the movement on a more participatory basis to work for long-term social and economic change, while still defending the population in the national political arena despite a second, discouraging loss in the 1996 elections.

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Section Two

WOMEN

One of the first post-liberation attempts to reverse Eritrea's wartime social reforms shouldn't have surprised anyone, though it did not succeed. Shortly after the shooting stopped in May 1991, men in several villages and towns around the capital organized themselves to block women from participating in future land distributions. But they were soon unmasked.

"The men were rushing to divide the good land for housing and for agriculture before we established our rights," Askalu Menkarios told me one afternoon three years later over a hurried lunch in Asmara.[1] At that time, Askalu[2] headed the 200,000-member National Union of Eritrean Women. The union was then shifting its priorities from mobilizing women in support of the liberation struggle to educating and training them for participation in the postwar economy, when it suddenly confronted the need to mount a rearguard defense of the gains women won for themselves during their thirty-year fight for independence.

Women played a central role in the war, making up almost a third of the 95,000-strong Eritrean People's Liberation Front and some thirteen percent of its frontline fighters.[3] Although they trained separately from men, once they went on active duty they were fully integrated into combat units and non-military departments. Women served as teachers, paramedics, truck drivers, mechanics, machinists and political cadre, as well as soldiers. Some commanded mixed gender units and led men into battle. But they were hardly unique in finding life different in peacetime. By now the post-liberation back-slidingon women's rights that takes place in all societies has been widely recognized. Nonetheless, it seemed to take the Eritreans off guard. And the increased demands of private, domestic life — the "double shift"

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— added yet another burden to the former women guerrilla fighters, accustomed as they were to the casual, communitarian democracy of life in the trenches, even as peace brought with it new tasks and challenges.

After the independence war, women activists were drawn into a steadily growing number of important but time-consuming political projects. These included writing a new constitution, revising the civil code, developing new legislation, restructuring the civil service, demobilizing former guerrilla fighters, forwarding recommendations for economic development and drafting a host of other policy initiatives. However urgent these tasks were, they represented a sharp break with the grassroots-level work to change gender relations with which they were engaged throughout the war years, alongside (and often as a part of) an effort to draw women into activities that directly supported the fight for independence.

In South Africa, women veterans of the long anti-apartheid struggle faced a similar problem at the onset of the transition to democracy. One aspect of this — unintended and also unforeseen — was that the country's first non-racial elections, in April 1994, siphoned off the most skilled and experienced women leaders to work in the sprawling state apparatus. Inevitably, this happened at the expense of the dynamic popular organizations that helped bring the ANC to power in the first place. Some of these organizations began to atrophy, others collapsed overnight. Thus, in both Eritrea and South Africa, women battled for their social, economic and political rights on new and decidedly unfamiliar organizational and political terrain. But because their political parties took gender issues seriously — or at least seriously enough — women concerned with these issues in Eritrea and South Africa remained active within them.

This was decidedly not the case in either Palestine or Nicaragua. After the Oslo Accords unbanned the underground political parties in the West Bank and Gaza in 1993, many politically active women began to distance themselves from the highly factionalized Palestinian left in the face of its chronic weakness on gender issues. New women's institutions came into being, and women's organizations sponsored by the parties began to drift away from them. Nevertheless, many women activists remained in dialogue with these parties with a view to changing them, not least because the movement's basic political goals had not yet been met. In Nicaragua, where the crisis-ridden left long resisted placing gender issues at the center of its political agenda, women abandoned the party in droves almost as soon as the FSLN

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lost the 1990 elections. Many set up new organizations with little or no reference to party politics, even though the Sandinistas belatedly tried to catch up by reforming party structures. This made for a far stronger women's movement in Nicaragua, but it helped doom the left as a political force. Despite the party's efforts at reform, or because it did not go far enough, fast enough, the FSLN's chronic weakness on gender — and the residual anger that many former Sandinista women felt for past betrayals — contributed significantly to the party's failure in the 1996 national elections, just as in 1990.

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Chapter 5

ERITREA

AN ORGANIZATION, NOT A MOVEMENT

In prewar Eritrea, most women were treated as chattel with few economic or political rights. In an overwhelmingly agrarian society, they were denied the right to own or inherit land, and they were excluded as a matter of course from clan-based councils of elders and other indigenous forms of village administration. Though they were responsible for scrupulously defined areas of productive (and reproductive) work, inside and outside the house, they rarely controlled any resources of their own. Customs varied from one ethnic group to another; gender power relations rarely did so. The daily behavior of women in the mostly Christian highland farming villages was tightly regulated. A trip to the local market might need permission from one's husband or other male elder. For Muslim women in lowland pastoral communities, it was not uncommon for them to encounter no males outside their extended families for their entire adult lives.

Girls were routinely married at puberty under contracts arranged by their families in both Christian and Muslim communities. A bride might be as young as nine or ten, though she continued to live at home until menstruation commenced. Genital cutting, known euphemistically as "female circumcision," was widely carried out — as cliteridectomies in the highlands and often in more radical forms in the lowland cultures, where the clitoris was removed, the inner and outer labia sliced away, and the remaining skin sewn together in a practice known as infibulation. Girls frequently contracted vaginal infections during and after these crude operations. Death in childbirth was extremely common. Wife-beating was also the norm, as was chronic malnutrition and anemia since, by tradition, women were the last in

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the household to eat. By the time the country achieved independence, most Eritrean women had a life expectancy of barely forty years. However, early in the postwar transition, programs targeting their second-class economic, social and political status — originally developed and tested in the liberated zones — were codified and extended to the rest of the country.

Throughout the war years, the EPLF pioneered far-reaching changes in village life that had a profound impact on the status of women. First, the front mobilized women to join underground mass organizations to support the war effort. When an area became militarily secure, women were called to public meetings — most for the first time in their lives — to participate in political discussions and join literacy classes. Some were selected to attend EPLF cadre schools, others to train as midwives and "barefoot doctors." A small number were armed and assigned duty with local militias. When traditional chiefs were replaced with elected People's Assemblies, twenty percent of the seats were reserved for women. An EPLF land reform included women for the first time in distributions. New laws banned child marriage and made betrothals consensual. Seminars were convened where EPLF cadre talked to the assembled villagers, men and women, about gender equality. Traveling cultural shows reinforced the message that there would be no liberation of the country without women's full participation. In effect, it became unpatriotic to resist women's involvement in economic and political life. These programs formed the starting point for postwar gender reform — and for the anti-feminist backlash.

* * *

After the postwar effort by men to block women from gaining land in the villages around Asmara was discovered in 1992, women protested. Several of the men were jailed, but the incident was one of several that highlighted the need to reform Eritrea's complex land tenure system. This added urgency to a lengthy and at times contentious internal EPLF debate over whether to reinvigorate communal tenure along the lines of what was done in the liberated zones during the war or to opt for privatization. In August 1994 a government-sponsored Land Commission recommended an experiment with a form of nationalization that would incorporate elements of both approaches, perhaps as a transition toward privatization later. A new law declared land the property of the state and allocated use-rights to all Eritreans, women and men alike. Long-term leases were

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made available for commercial purposes, and individual land-users were to be able to recoup or leave to their heirs improvements made to the land.

Apart from this, the most important new economic and social initiative affecting women — announced in 1991 but not fully implemented until later — was a national service campaign. This required all women and men over eighteen to undergo six months of military training before spending a year on reconstruction projects. It was intended in part to compensate for Eritrea's lack of capital and to reduce dependence on foreign aid, while welding together the ethnically diverse society. It would also have a profound effect on the status of women, placing them in a condition of relative gender equality for eighteen months, much as service in the liberation front did for tens of thousands of young women and men during the war years. The importance of this social-engineering project was underlined when it was written into the new Constitution, adopted in May 1997, as a fundamental obligation of citizenship.

While the national service program was up and running by 1994, it would be some time before the land reform — also incorporated into the Constitution — was widely implemented, as the government sought to test public reaction to it and carry out pilot projects in different settings first. Nevertheless, the measure signaled the new government's intent to demolish the remnants of feudal land relations and to attack the material basis for male domination in agrarian society, even as the resistance of some men to women's participation in it put all women on notice that the advances they made during the liberation struggle were far from safe. This warning was reinforced by rises in child marriage and other formerly banned practices, such as humiliating "virginity testing" for prospective brides, and by a rise in the divorce rate among former fighters. Some men, under pressure from their families, jettisoned their wartime wives in favor of traditional brides from their home villages.

This relapse was not the response to anything the government did or didn't do. On the contrary, the land reform, the enforcement of laws against sex discrimination by a women attorney general, the appointment of a near majority of women to the fifty-member Constitution Commission, the reservation of thirty percent of the seats for women in newly elected People's Assemblies (raised from twenty percent in 1996), and other measures favorable to women argued that this was a government sympathetic to women's rights, though relatively few women sat in its highest echelons (party or state). But such

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measures were not enough to counter the efforts to rollback women's gains that arose from within the deeply conservative society, where custom was more important than law and where the most powerful institution was not the government, but the patriarchal family. Slippage was inevitable. The question was: what would the political leadership, acting through the state, the party and the various mass organizations, do to stem it?

"From what we saw, it is clear that we have to campaign again to maintain the changes we've achieved," Askalu told me. This effort would require strong organization of women at the village level, as well as continuing advocacy at the national level, and a sustained campaign of public education that reached into all of Eritrea's patriarchal institutions, old ones and new ones, including (and especially) the family, she said. Yet organizational rivalry on the part of the NUEW, which tried to maintain hegemony over all work on women's issues, coupled with the inherited centralist habits of the liberation movement, undercut efforts to expand and diversify this effort. As a consequence, many women who could play important roles in such work quietly walked away from the NUEW, diminishing its effectiveness but not publicly challenging it — choosing in effect not to sow disharmony in the political movement.

* * *

The NUEW, with a stable membership of 200,000 throughout the second half of the 1990s, was the largest of the three popular sectoral associations that spun off from the liberation movement after the war. It was also the main institutional vehicle for representing women's interests in the wider society. Known in Eritrea by its Tigrinya acronym, *hamaday*, the women's union was founded under the auspices of the EPLF in 1979, drawing on years of previous underground mass organizing. In September 1992, at its fourth congress, it was relaunched as a self-financing, autonomous social movement.[4] In February 1998, after many delays, it convened its fifth congress at which it was reorganized and a new leadership elected. Throughout these years the union retained strong links with the EPLF's postwar incarnation, the PFDJ, which continued to exert strong behind-the-scenes influence, if not day-to-day control, over both the NUEW's program and the composition of its leadership.[5]

With its emphasis on service-provision and project management, the women's union was the least adversarial of the three former mass organizations, rarely challenging the state or the front in public. For

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example, after the first instance where men were discovered to be interfering with land distributions to women, NUEW leaders made it a practice to quietly approach district officials to reverse the situation rather than encourage local women to protest. "They got results each time, but there was no empowering of women in the process," observed one disaffected NUEW member. In another instance of this predilection for private diplomacy over public protest, the recommendations on women's rights that the union sent to the Constitution Commission in 1995 were not published in NUEW's newsletter in order to avoid the appearance of conflict if the proposals were rejected (which they were), despite the fact that none went beyond positions the EPLF held during the war. In the case of fighting what were termed "harmful traditions" (female "circumcision" and infibulation, among them), NUEW leaders argued that the time was not right to take this up — though they retained their official opposition to the practice — echoing a position I heard from some (male) leaders of the PFDJ in private conversations.

At the same time, the union managed a wide range of skills training, literacy and other self-improvement programs, as well as rural credit schemes and other development projects, that reached thousands of women. Each project was accompanied by consciousness-raising seminars on gender issues. The NUEW also routinely monitored and advised other bodies on legislation, trade union contracts and policies that affected women. Whatever its failings, the union had a positive, practical effect on the lives of many poor and formerly powerless women, helping to give them access to areas of the country's economic, social and political life hitherto denied them and giving them vastly increased self-confidence in the process.

However, critics of the union, especially among former members, argued that it was spread far too thin and that its mandate was too diffuse — that it tried to do too much for too many constituencies, which it treated as one undifferentiated mass.[6] As a result, certain key groups, like former fighters, who could bring a dynamism to the union otherwise lacking, fell through the cracks. Most simply didn't join; those who did were largely inactive. Part of the problem was that the government seemed to expect the NUEW to take operational responsibility for nearly everything that had to do with women, from childcare and adult literacy to job training, income generation and health care provision. Severe capacity problems, not helped by the steady attrition of skilled women who left in frustration over union policies, hampered its effectiveness in these undertakings. But this breadth of

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activity, coupled with the union's intolerance for rival organizations, also stifled efforts at advocacy and discouraged program innovations.

Some women argued that there was a theoretical flaw in the approach itself, one that seemed to fly in the face of that taken during the war years. "The analysis of gender issues is that the source is a patriarchal system rooted in economic structures," said one NUEW critic. "Their position is that women's oppression will be overturned by national reconstruction." Hence, education and training, not independent political action, are the appropriate modes of struggle for women in this period. Tackling "harmful traditional practices" or engaging in confrontations over other social issues is at best peripheral, at worst counterproductive.

When I raised this issue with male party members, I was referred to the PFDJ's 1994 National Charter, where the movement commits itself to struggle for gender equality in unambiguous terms. However, though patriarchy is mentioned and inequality is condemned, women are called upon to continue the struggle they started during the liberation war under the slogan: "Equality through equal participation in work."[7] In an email exchange I had on this issue during the final preparation of the book, one male comrade suggested that this economistic approach (which he acknowledged) had encouraged the EPLF to exaggerate its progress on overcoming gender inequality during the liberation struggle, and, in doing so, may have weakened efforts to combat it:

> One thought that has always been lurking in my mind, but that I never said aloud is whether the type of 'equality' attained by women during the struggle had the required elements of durability in it. Remember, the EPLF's strong position here was that gender equality could only be attained with universal equality within the society. True, there was a lot of talk about the 'double oppression' that women were subjected to — colonial and sexual. But tangible steps towards addressing gender problems within the Front itself was not encouraged. That is why, for example, women combatants were not allowed to join the ranks of NUEW. The leadership of that union was mainly drawn from combatants, but the bulk of the EPLF women fighters did not join the Union until after independence.
>
> At the time, this did appear to elevate the combatants above the rest of their gender — that is, it gave the impression that combatants had no need of the Union to assert their rights, as it had already been deemed grasped or attained. In

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> view of the 'slide' they have been suffering after independence, can we still say that the 'equality' achieved earlier had as much substance as it appeared to at the time? I don't like this thought. But, it is there![8]

Despite these constraints, the NUEW was successful in spearheading a number of important reforms after the war. Among the changes pushed by the union that were made in the inherited Ethiopia civil code were:

- marriage contracts could only be made with the full consent of both parties.
- the eligible age for marriage was raised from fifteen to eighteen for women (matching that of men).
- both mothers and fathers were recognized as heads of the family.
- there was to be no discrimination between men and women in divorce cases (grounds for which were adultery, desertion for two years, venereal disease and impotency).
- paid maternity leave was extended from forty-five to sixty days.
- abortion was made legal in cases where the mother's mental or physical health was threatened and in instances of rape or incest.
- the mandatory sentence for rape was extended to fifteen years.[9]

The NUEW's main focus was on poor rural and urban women, who made up the bulk of the organization's members and among whom land ownership had long been the central issue. During a series of workshops convened throughout the country in 1994, however, some NUEW members called for such things as the formal banning of pre-marital virginity testing, "circumcision" and infibulation; the inclusion of domestic violence as grounds for divorce; and the extension of the civil code to cover all citizens, including Muslims, who in many rural communities fell under the jurisdiction of Islamic *shari'a* law. Professional women and ex-woman guerrilla fighters expressed a growing impatience over the lack of a forum to press their grievances at a time when many men, including former liberation fighters, were reasserting traditional male prerogatives. The most urgent situation was that faced by the demobilized women fighters, who found it difficult to return to home villages where they were considered unmarriagable due to their self-assertiveness. Many stayed out of the union because it lacked a focus on their particular needs and because it was not a campaign-oriented organization. As one former fighter put it to me, the NUEW was "an organization of women, not a women's movement."

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"Women's concerns are so diverse that we need a wide variety of organizational forms — issue-oriented organizations, perhaps affiliated to the national union but autonomous," said one long-time EPLF member, critical of what she saw as too much centralism in the women's union. "We need to have lots of democracy," she added. One model she and others talked about was that of a confederation, in which separate self-managing organizations, each with its own program and identity arising from the particularity of its membership, came under one umbrella to act on behalf of their shared interests. This model was discussed within the NUEW in the mid-1990s, but the leadership opposed it, opting instead to streamline management structures to make the organization more efficient.[10]

* * *

As this was being debated and discussed, the trade unions — re-established after the war as the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers with five federations of about 20,000 members (7,000 of whom were women) — were also (slowly) carving out a program to deal with gender inequality. In late 1994, following the formal launch of the NCEW, union leaders set up a committee to research the position of women in the work force and to design a program of education and advocacy to remedy inequities. However, six years later, the research was not completed and no comprehensive program had yet been produced. This halting beginning was in part due to the fact that until 1999 most committee members doubled as office secretaries and because overburdened (male) union leaders gave priority to other tasks. (Two key committee members left in frustration in 1997.) A complicating factor was that women workers were not initially receptive to their efforts.

Women's committee members started by identifying one woman to serve as a liaison in each "base union" (what the Eritreans call the locals in individual workplaces). Next, they convened workshops of twenty to twenty-five women to give them an orientation and to solicit their views. From the outset, however, organizers found resistance from the women workers, who had been forced to join government-run unions during the Ethiopian occupation. "It was difficult to get women to come to meetings," said Mebrat Haile, a founding member of the women's committee. "After the [Ethiopian] *derg*, they don't trust any organizations. They are impatient and suspicious. They want immediate, urgent changes."[11] Nevertheless, what emerged as their central concern was the need for childcare in the workplace, both dur-

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ing work-time and to facilitate their participation in union meetings. The NCEW established a pilot project in the Sembel neighborhood of Asmara, asking both the factory managers and the workers to contribute to the project. However, they found little support at the state level, where government — and party — officials described childcare as a "luxury."

Such cavalier responses did not in themselves discourage women organizers, who viewed this as a consequence of a deeper problem — the absence of women from decision-making sessions in the state and the PFDJ, which between them controlled over eighty percent of the country's industrial base. This meant that women's concrete experience was often not a part of the deliberations. It was on this that they felt they needed to see progress, and quickly. "We are in a honeymoon with the government now," said Mebrat, one of those who later left the committee (and the union). "We were fighting together, so we understand each other. We were together in the field, always discussing the women's issue. They had so many slogans — now they have to put them into practice. At least we have this opportunity as women, but we have to use it. We have to push, we have to fight, we have to speak, we have to represent, we have to be in these meetings. But if we are not there, how can we discuss about these things?"

What disturbed women organizers in the trade unions more than differences they had with government officials, however, was the lack of solidarity they received from the women's union. Independent initiatives like the formation of this committee were met with resistance by the NUEW, which, according to another trade union organizer, insisted that this should be its prerogative. An NCEW proposal to set up a joint committee with the NUEW in 1996 to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 — a national holiday in Eritrea — was soundly rejected. Instead, trade union women held a celebration of their own the day before, complete with skits, speeches and dancing. Late in 1996, NCEW leaders floated a proposal to the women's union to jointly convene a gender forum that would bring together women from the three popular associations, as well as from key government departments and nongovernmental organizations. The NUEW vetoed the idea, and the NCEW dropped it.

* * *

One postwar institution that took an activist approach on gender issues and was less cowed by the NUEW was the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students. With more than over 100,000 members

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by 1999 (including 15,000 members from outside Eritrea), a third of whom were women, NUEYS was the fastest growing, the feistiest and the most campaign-oriented of these sectoral associations. This, despite the fact that it only resumed its activities in 1992 after a two year hiatus, when fifteen of its core organizers came together to relaunch the union with a new membership, new priorities and new activities. By 1999, it was running education and training programs, as well as a wide range of cultural and recreational activities, many of which involved and affected women. It was also active at the training camp for the national service program, where it attracted many new members.

Unlike the women's union, the youth movement made the issue of combating female genital cutting, among other destructive cultural practices, a centerpiece of its advocacy work. NUEYS members went into schools to talk with students about FGM, graphically demonstrating its effects with a plastic model. They also convened seminars for young women and men in villages and poor urban neighborhoods around the country. The campaigners carried films, slides, photographs, models and even video-taped messages from national religious leaders and government officials, who castigated the practice and insisted that it had no basis in religious teaching. "Most of the people think it is a religious practice, so they think we are asking them to change their beliefs," said NUEYS leader Moheidin Shengeb. "Our people are prepared for this, and they quote from the Bible or the Koran in their presentations."[12] Nevertheless, due to the deep-seated resistance to change that they encountered at the village level, the campaigners often had to go house-to-house to convey their message. There, they sought out other young people, while avoiding their socially conservative elders, using an organizing approach that mirrored the way the EPLF worked during the war years.

But apart from the former mass organizations and departments within a few ministries (an ineptly titled "home economics" section within the Agriculture Ministry, for example, and a gender desk in *Mitias*, the office responsible for demobilization), there was little or no institutional framework for women that could be characterized as specifically gender-oriented. Several attempts to launch new women's NGOs failed, in significant part due to resistance by the NUEW, though the Eritrean government was not disposed toward the growth of NGOs in general, distrusting them as vehicles for foreign intervention. Though this lack of institutional pluralism disturbed many outside observers, Eritreans, women as well as men, continued to be

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remarkably united in the front they presented to the rest of the world, for the most part opting to hash out their differences on this and other issues within the national "family." As a result, there was little public discourse on such concerns. Still, there were animated private exchanges.

"There is so much potential for the women's movement here," said one former woman fighter. "Women who have come out of the liberation struggle, women who have lived under occupation, women who have come back from abroad — women with a lot of experience. This potential can either be provided with the ground to develop into something, or it can be stifled. If it is stifled, it will be a great loss to the country."

* * *

Throughout the decade after the independence war, most Eritreans seemed to agree, with reservations but little overt rancor, that the most serious challenge they faced — and the most protracted — remained nation-building. Many women activists I spoke with, on or off the record, said that efforts to transform gender relations in the country could not be separated from that process, any more than they could be from the liberation struggle, though many also voiced concerns that this not be an excuse to defer independent women's activity indefinitely. Meanwhile, the changes in gender relations that were steadily taking place within Eritrea under the aegis of the liberation movement were handy targets for the new government's class and political opponents. The most serious but not the only instance of this was a Sudan-based Islamist movement — Eritrean Islamic Jihad — that began sporadically raiding western Eritrea shortly after liberation. Not surprisingly, Jihad made opposition to changes in the status of women a central organizing focus, though it failed to generate much of a response. Still, its effort to do so, ineffective though it was, raised the question of whether the presence of such a threat might impede Eritrea's progress toward political and social democracy, especially with regard to women, as has so often been the case with other revolutions.

By the end of 1999, when I attended a conference to mark the NUEW's twentieth anniversary, Jihad did not seem to be having any appreciable impact on the gender-related policies and programs of the new government or its commitments to democratization. In fact the Islamists had lost ground since the renewal of conflict with Ethiopia the previous year, a turn of events that rallied Eritreans around the

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flag as never before. Nevertheless, it came as something of a surprise to many, including myself, that it was under these difficult conditions that the NUEW organized a public, no-holds-barred debate that November over just the issues I have been relating here. (At their request, I presented a version of this chapter.) A continuing refrain in the floor debates was the call for a more campaign-oriented organization to act as a vanguard for social change rather than just a service-provider. In the small groups, there was considerable reflection on the need to recapture the capacity to change the society at the grassroots, as it had done during the liberation struggle. Men and women stood up to say how important this was to the future of the country.

Several months later, when I revisited Eritrea for the last time before completing this project, I spoke with the NUEW's new chair, Leul Gebreab, about the impact this forum had on her and the organization's thinking. Leul was a long-time veteran of the liberation movement. I had known her as a fighter in the 1980s, as the mayor of Adi Caieh in the early 1990s (the first woman to serve in such a role) and then as a cabinet minister in Asmara, where she managed the modernization of Eritrea's archaic postal system. She was not wasting any time in her new role. She said that the union's priorities were to draft a National Gender Action Plan to guide its work on policy issues, to institutionalize its relations with the state, which had long operated on an informal basis, and to develop mechanisms to promote the development of other women's associations to work under a common umbrella. "We need to see what is the reality on the ground," she said. "We need to find out where is the need, where is the base for such organizations. And we need to determine how to integrate this at the national level. We need experience and information from other places where this has been done. Then I think we can move forward on this next year."[13]

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Chapter 6

SOUTH AFRICA

'PSSST! YOU LEFT OUT WOMEN.'

Nowhere in Africa do women have more clearly spelled out legal rights than in South Africa, where the post-apartheid Constitution prohibited discrimination on the basis not only of gender but also of sexual orientation; where the ANC and its other Alliance partners had a gender desk or department at the top of each organization, as well as at intermediate and lower levels, to monitor policies and programs on gender equity, as did most government bodies; where the country's Reconstruction and Development Program — drafted by COSATU, adopted by the ANC and then made government policy (though substantially watered down in the process of moving from one institutional level to the next) — asserted the centrality of women's participation on nearly every page; and where the first post-apartheid Parliament — presided over by a woman Speaker, Frene Ginwala — boasted the seventh highest percentage of women in the world (up from 141st before the 1994 elections).

Yet, when I toured the country a year after the transfer of power and again fourteen months later, I found thousands of unemployed women, many of them single mothers, picking over rancid garbage for their single daily meal in crowded urban townships and burgeoning squatter camps. Little had changed from when I saw them in the 1980s on my first visit to South Africa — except that the camps were bigger. Howling dust whipped through endless rows of makeshift tin-and-cardboard shanties. Open sewage spilled across the rutted dirt roads. The ramshackle settlements had the look of hastily constructed refugee camps, as hundreds of families poured into them each day from the economically depressed countryside. Worst of all, the vibrant grassroots women's organizations that sprang up in these communities during the fight against apartheid were defunct, and there was lit-

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tle likelihood of their renewal. The very success of the liberation movement in gaining political power had the effect of weakening it as a social movement. Across the country, women waited for the new state to solve their problems.

* * *

The apartheid system had a particularly brutalizing effect on African women and their families through its policies of enforced separation and "relocation," though women's oppression did not start with white rule. Under both South African law up to the 1990s and according to the Zulu code (still in force in KwaZulu/Natal after the democratic breakthrough), married women had the legal status of minors and were under the authority of their husbands. By the time apartheid collapsed, women comprised thirty-six percent of the national workforce, but most were stuck on the bottom rungs of the economy. Women made up ninety-six percent of the domestic workers who were paid an average of less than $150 per month, for example, and many more functioned in the country's informal sector, falling outside most statistical analyses.

Rural women were the worst off historically and were among the least represented social group in the New South Africa. As a direct result of apartheid, among whose most devastating effects was the systematic destruction of African families, seventy percent of South African women lived in the countryside where they headed half the households (which is to say, men were absent). The year of the first multiracial elections only fifty-three percent of rural people had access to a safe water supply in a country economically ranked in the middle range of nations, just behind Europe and ahead of all of sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to this, every eighty-three seconds a woman was raped, domestic violence was chronic, and women in most areas could not own or inherit property.[1] Meanwhile, traditional practices such as *lobola* (bride price) and polygamy were still common. Unlike their counterparts in Eritrea, however, rural South African women had long experience in self-organization prior to and separate from the liberation struggle, through such community institutions as burial societies and savings clubs, and they built on this during the anti-apartheid struggle.

In the 1980s, several strong and highly politicized organizations arose to address women's socio-economic needs, while at the same time mobilizing them to support the liberation struggle. Among them were the Durban-based Natal Organization of Women and the

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Federation of Transvaal Women in the center of the country. Two rival women's groups developed in the Western Cape, an area long marked by sectarian political struggles, and there were others in smaller towns and cities. The leaders of most of these legal women's organizations linked up with underground members of the ANC and the SACP, but the organizations had a considerable degree of autonomy in their day-to-day activities, and they developed highly participatory methods of work. Their diverse undertakings ranged from literacy training, community choirs and theater groups to backyard vegetable gardens, candle-making and other income-generating projects. They also ran workshops on domestic and communal violence, developed rape crisis networks and did educational seminars on racism. These activities were planned and developed at rambunctious community meetings where women discussed their needs and problems and were encouraged to decide among themselves what to do. As a result, there was little uniformity in program from one village or neighborhood to another. This complicated the work of the facilitating organization, but it gave the projects a dynamism that powered a steady growth in the numbers of women members, many of whom were not affiliated with the underground.[2]

One of the tragedies of the post-apartheid era was that these extraordinary achievements so quickly dissipated with the ascension of the ANC to power. How this happened — and what to do about it — remains a subject of considerable debate among South African women. By most accounts, the independent women's organizations voluntarily folded themselves into the ANC-sponsored Women's League when the liberation movement was unbanned in 1990, perceiving themselves as stand-ins for what one political commentator has called the "A Team."[3] NOW, the strongest and most highly developed of the women's organizations, dissolved itself in September shortly before the official launch of the long-exiled Women's League within South Africa. "We thought we were the internal wing of the ANC and would just collapse into it," one former NOW leader told me later. "This was naive, but we thought we would be betraying the ANC if we stayed independent."[4] Soon after this, the League dropped many of the innovative self-help programs developed by NOW and the other women's organizations in favor of narrowly drawn political tasks, starting with support for ANC negotiations with the white regime, then mobilization for the 1994 national elections, and later preparations for local elections.

"With hindsight, this was a mistake because those organizations

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had built up a particular tradition of organizing, a very strong working class perspective, and a real community involvement, and this wasn't transferred to the Women's League," said Jenny Schreiner, an SACP organizer who remained inside South Africa throughout the anti-apartheid struggle and who was active in the United Women's Organization in the Western Cape. Schreiner was one of four women and twenty-six men elected to the party central committee in 1991, after her release from prison. She won a seat in Parliament in the 1994 elections on the ANC ticket and was re-elected in 1999. "The demands of the negotiating period focused the leadership on the negotiating process and the lobbying and the policy formation. We weren't sharp enough to realize that you need to divide your forces and have a contingent of people to concentrate on that work, which was fundamentally important, and another contingent of people focusing on organizing," she said.[5]

At the party's eighth congress in December 1991 — the first open congress in three decades — there was a vigorous debate over whether to establish a women's section. The decision was taken instead to set up a gender department within the party that would monitor its political education and its policies and programs to ensure that gender issues were integrated into all the party's work. This left the ANC Women's League to function as the sole Alliance vehicle to mobilize women as women. "Our commitment was to build the Women's League," said Schreiner. This debate was repeated, with the same outcome, at the party's second post-apartheid congress in April 1995. "The issue was one of not wanting to confront the League," said Nozizwe Mdlala, a veteran of NOW, an influential woman in the SACP and an ANC member of Parliament.[6]

Thenjiwe Mthintso, also an SACP leader and an MP, as well as a member of the ANC's National Executive Council, spent much of the apartheid era outside the country. She accepted the decision to fold the apartheid-era women's organizations into the League as the correct one at the time, but thinks that the transition could have been better managed:

> When we came into the country, in one way we demobilized these women who had been active in their own right because we had this focus, a serious focus, on rebuilding the ANC, a proud ANC, a strong ANC. But some women were not prepared to go into the ANC. They were prepared to fight on issue-oriented matters, like rape, but they were not about

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> building the ANC. The second thing was that during the days of mass activism, there was always something to do in the streets, so that even your less intellectual women had a role to play. Once you had the ANC Women's League, there was a lot of theorizing, and women found that they could not find a role to play, except mobilizing for the ANC. When the negotiations started, there was a focus on them, and women got lost because they were not part of the process. The ANC Women's League had to find itself a role, and it identified it as mobilizing for the ANC, but it lost out on organizing women around issues that were affecting women. It lost those women who were doing that part of the work, the women who were keen on issues affecting women — violence against women, family violence, rape, and so on. It was pre-occupied with the 'political' issues, failing to recognize that rape is a political issue, violence is a political issue, family violence is a political issue.[7]

"Some people were feeling that the ANC Women's League was an organization from outside the country that was trying to undermine what was going on before, and many women leaders backed off," said Thandi Sigodi, a party activist who remained inside South Africa during the struggle.

> The perception among women from exile was that those structures didn't have any particular direction, which was true. We didn't have a clear line that we were towing. For instance, if we had police harassing a particular community, we'd all mobilize ourselves around that issue, and you'd find women across political lines. It was just violence against the community, so everybody worked around that issue — women from churches, women from business, women from trade unions. This movement was more unifying than what emerged when the ANC came into the picture and party divisions became more strong.[8]

The sidelining of all women in the negotiating process was a key factor in motivating women to organize the Women's National Coalition in 1992. Their aim was to draft a charter of women's rights that would be incorporated into the documents and legal structures being crafted to define post-apartheid South Africa.[9] At its height the WNC brought together dozens of women's organizations from nearly all the

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country's political parties, as well as from the trade unions and a wide range of NGOs and voluntary associations, in a dynamic and highly participatory process. It produced a document, adopted at a conference in February 1994, that had a far-reaching impact not only on the Constitution but on party programs and, in the case of the ANC, the composition and structure of the slate of candidates for the national elections in April. But once the charter was completed, turf battles nearly destroyed the coalition, according to Sigodi, who was elected its president in July 1995: "The ANC Women's League wanted to shut it down after the charter because they were suspicious that other parties would use it to gain access to rural constituencies in the elections." When it could not control the coalition, the League dropped out. Without it and without a clear mandate — or the financing to maintain its national network, provided earlier by foreign donors — the WNC floundered. With the Women's League subordinated to the political imperatives of the ANC, its leadership decimated by political infighting — eleven of the twenty-five members of the League's National Executive Committee resigned in 1995 to protest Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's alleged misuse of resources and her despotic leadership style — the grassroots wing of the South African women's movement lay in tatters.

This decline was all the more ironic as it coincided with a decision by the SACP to elevate the fight against gender oppression to a strategic objective, side-by-side with class struggle, for the first time in its history. A strategy paper adopted at the April 1995 congress asserted that "there can be no consolidation of democracy, still less an effective advance to socialism, unless we also, simultaneously, overcome patriarchy and actively transform gender relations."[10] It remained to be seen how this would be implemented, but an account of the effort to give it this importance provides a unique insight into the challenges that women face in convincing a national political movement to grasp gender as more than an add-on to its other programs.

Jenny Schreiner described this to me in Cape Town, where she served in Parliament:

> I go in there terrified, out of my wits. I'm now with all the heavies, and I go in there thinking: well, I can sit quietly for three years and learn. It's about all I think I can achieve on the Central Committee.
>
> What surprises me is the extent to which we produce discussion documents which are gender-silent. And these are

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being produced by the party boffins! Yet they are silent on gender. And these are people who are extremely well-advanced theoretically — very developed intellectually. So we start saying, 'Pssst! You left out women.'

Gradually, as your hand goes up, people know that you're going to say, 'Women!' So then you say to yourself: I'm not going to say it. But if you don't say it, it doesn't get said, so you start trying to ensure that you've spoken about the State first, and you tag on gender at the end of a sentence.

One goes through those difficulties of becoming branded as: 'Hey, women! Hey, women!' And then saying: No, I'm not going to speak about women. I'm going to try to speak about other things. You develop the concept that people are going to listen to you, and then they may listen to what you have to say about women, as well.

We got to a stage where the people who were doing the paper-presenting — who, needless to say, were men — would include something about women, but it would be a sub-heading for women, a paragraph for women. It was not gender being integrated into the analysis. We then got to the stage, from working in the Gender Department [of the party] and feeling a bit more secure in C.C. meetings, of producing a gender critique of any paper that was being presented.

In the discussion, we tried to start from page one and say: 'In your opening analysis of the South African situation you've spoken about capital, and you've spoken about racism — class and race are there, capitalism and racism are there — gender relations aren't there, patriarchy is not there. Anybody would think that, A, women didn't exist, and, B, there was no patriarchy in this country. And the interconnection between the three — the extent to which the classes you're talking about have gender tensions within them, the racial groups you're talking about have gender tensions within them — don't feature.'

We'd go systematically through the paper, draw out the implications of excluding gender, and get to the end, saying: 'Therefore, the concluding things you're saying about the party are flawed because....' And then we'd try to unpack a strategy that is gender-sensitive, that includes gender transformation and women as part of party leadership.

When we got to that stage, we got responses from the male

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> comrades who had been writing the papers, saying: 'Shit! I now begin to understand what you're talking about! I now begin to understand why you're saying we should include gender.' Prior to that, they just included 'race, class and gender' in whatever they wrote. So long as you say that somewhere, put it in somewhere, that's it, it's all right.
>
> And then you sit back and look at Jeremy Cronin, Blade Nzimande, Raymond Suttner, Charles Nqakula [who made up the party's top leadership], and you think, how come they didn't understand the importance of what we've been saying for 2 1/2 years? And you realize that there's a whole Marxist-feminist, socialist-feminist debate that takes place in gender journals. It gets circulated among gender activists, but the material that we use for our training and political education within party ranks is gender-silent. We haven't managed to take the Marxist-feminist, socialist-feminist debates out of the Gender Department and put them squarely on the [party] agenda.
>
> It's taken us a very long time, but we're now at a point where we can actually say to the drafting committee for the [Ninth Party] congress coming up in April: 'Ensure that those papers are gender-sensitive.' Then a paper gets sent to you, and you say: 'Please critique this on a gender basis.' And you send it back again, and the person actually sits down and does that work. You end up with a paper that's discussing the role of the party that from the beginning of the analysis of the present situation right through to what we should be doing is raising the issues of gender, patriarchy, women's emancipation.[11]

The opposite was true within the ANC, where gender issues tended to be ghettoized in the Women's League, which lacked either an analysis of patriarchy and its relationship to national and class issues or a clear program for tackling gender inequality in the society as a whole. In lieu of this, it occupied itself with small-scale service provision and what appeared to be self-serving affirmative action. "Part of the problem of the ANC Women's League is the lack of understanding of gender as a social construct," said Mthintso, who accused some League leaders of using the organization to advance their own careers. "If you looked at the people who were crying for so many women for certain positions, they knew that if you've got to increase the number of women, they would not be left out. It was an affirmative action that did not empower women on the ground, but selected

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the ones who were already up there."

While women activists in COSATU had a more developed analysis of gender as a social relationship, they, too, tended to be ghettoized — whether within women's departments or in mixed-sex "gender departments" — by male leaders who paid little consistent attention to the issue outside of supporting contract reforms with employers. "One of the critical issues is having women in particular positions in the unions if you're going to make progress," said Chris Bonner, the National Education Coordinator for the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, where women made up less than fifteen percent of the membership and were effectively shut out of the leadership. "You have to have somebody to drive it, someone with authority. To work on gender, you need a core of women committed to it. Then you need men to support you, and you have to be persistent."[12] Since women were a minority in each CWIU workplace, they were rarely elected shop stewards, who formed the pool from which top leaders were elected. Even in SACCAWU (the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union), where women made up some seventy percent of the 120,000 members, few made it into positions of leadership. "All our structures are male-dominated," said Patricia Apollis, SACCAWU's Gender and Women's Coordinator since 1993. "There's something wrong, something that prevents women from coming into the leadership. There's a wall."[13]

The National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) was the second-largest union in COSATU and among the most militant on other issues, but here, too, the number of women in leadership was extremely small. At its 1987 launch, NUMSA passed a ground-breaking "Resolution on Women" that called for equal pay, equal opportunities and full parental rights; condemned sexual harassment; and pledged "to fight against all unequal and discriminatory treatment of women at work, in the society and in the union."[14] Yet in a survey of the membership on gender issues the next year, many women said they lacked the self-confidence to run for union office. Others acknowledged that they hesitated to vote for women. What came through most often, however, was that women workers had too many obligations at home to afford the time for union activism.

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Reconstructing a grassroots women's movement in South Africa would be difficult under any circumstances, but it was made more so by the fact that any attempt to start a new organization — or to restart old ones — was seen as a provocation by the ANC Women's League. A plan to convene a reunion of NOW activists in June 1995 — billed as a "NOW Get Together" and open to the public — had to be canceled after the Women's League accused organizers of trying to reorganize and take over the "post-Beijing process," a short-lived national campaign on women's issues that followed the UN-sponsored conference in China in 1995 to which South African women sent an entire planeload of delegates.[15] However, without a grassroots movement, it will be impossible to translate the impressive gains for women at the legal level into a living reality in the communities, especially in rural areas where a major struggle with the socially conservative "traditional" leaders is under way. This is made all the more complicated by that fact that chiefs who were formally allied with the ANC during the anti-apartheid struggle could not easily be dismissed afterward. Among those who opposed the ANC (or were anxious about the ANC's postwar position on their role), some were drawn to emerging opposition parties. Thus, tampering with the power of the chiefs threatened to open a hornet's nest of political problems, just as social and political reforms in Eritrea had the potential to feed the Islamist opposition.

Meanwhile, on a more mundane note, a problem the whole liberation movement had was far too many meetings. This arose in part from the overlap in focus and function among the various ANC-allied social and political organizations, but it also came out of a political culture of mass involvement developed during the anti-apartheid struggle that was difficult to sustain. As one activist put it, "We equate meetings with democracy." It was not uncommon in the years after the breakthrough to find the most engaged organizers attending two and three meetings each day, including plant-based shop steward meetings, COSATU meetings, ANC branch meetings, SACP branch meetings, civic meetings, executive committee meetings for each of these bodies and others too various to name, often discussing the same issues hour after hour, simply switching figurative hats to do so. This held dangerous potential for fostering exclusivity in the political leadership, especially as it affected women, who remained saddled with the main responsibility for home and family as well. As with the former women fighters in Eritrea, they were now working a "double

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shift," often without the benefit of a supportive male partner.

If the formal commitment to women's emancipation, so impressive in all the documents this movement produced, was to be sustained and expanded, this would have to give, as few women, unless single with independent sources of support, could devote this kind of time to politics. By way of example, one woman on the SACP central committee was discouraged from running for re-election in 1995 because she was forced to miss several committee meetings due to competing commitments, even though in each instance her reasons were deemed acceptable.[16] Her experience was not untypical. An entire branch of the ANC Women's League in Johannesburg folded up because its members were being pulled in too many directions by competing organizational demands.[17] Meetings weren't the only problem, however.

"Almost all of us live double standards," Mthintso told me. "When it comes to relations in the house, you'll find that there's no equality. My last partner was a very good theoretician and a communist to the core — he lived and breathed his Marxism — but when we got home from a central committee meeting, he rushed for the TV and the paper, and I rushed for the kitchen. I led this double standard for a long time. It's a small thing, but it perpetuates the problem. My current partner, John Gomomo, says to me, 'Don't cook if you don't want to, but I can't learn to cook at 49. I'm the president of COSATU and there's so much on my shoulders — please don't ask me to cook.' He doesn't see a contradiction between standing up at a meeting and saying 'Equality!' and then coming home and saying, 'I'm not going to cook, let's go and buy food from outside,' when he knows we can't afford that."

Despite these post-apartheid problems, there were exceptions to the trend away from grassroots mobilizing that held promise. One, the Self-Employed Women's Union, was started in the Durban area by long-time ANC activist Pat Horn but was not sponsored by the liberation organization. Another, the Rural Women's Movement, emerged from a loose network of village-based women's groups doing income-generating and other projects in the late 1980s. The RWM was launched as an organization only in 1990, just as other regional women's organizations were folding into the Women's League. Led by Lydia Kompe, a charismatic rural woman and former trade unionist, the RWM was first sponsored by the Transvaal Rural Action Committee, an NGO backed by the South African Council of Churches. Unlike its urban counterparts, the RWM lacked direct ANC

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guidance during the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, though many of its members were ANC sympathizers. However, according to its post-apartheid leaders (Kompe was elected to Parliament in 1994, taking her to Cape Town), the organization experienced considerable hostility from the Women's League, which treated it like unwanted competition, even as the women's section of the white-dominated Nationalist Party sought to woo it in their direction.[18] Clinging to its independence, the RWM began in the late 1990s to detach itself from TRAC to go national on its own. Its strength lay in its internal diversity, with more than fifty local women's groups active in the north-central region of the country. This was offset, though, by a lack of theoretical analysis or a strategic plan of action.

For a politically effective women's movement to re-emerge, the most likely scenario would be for organizations like these to develop around specific community needs, such as housing, employment, health care, education, fresh water or sanitation, or issues like domestic violence and rape. These might intersect at specific points with feminist initiatives aimed at structural change, in much the same way that the grassroots women's movement developed in Brazil in the 1980s around what Maxine Molyneux and Caroline Moser characterize as "practical gender interests."[19] The issue-based groups could launch campaigns and alliances around common objectives, building coalitions made up of groups with a grassroots constituency and leaving out the political parties and the women's groups they sponsor — as in the case of the National Land Commission that formed to influence government policy on land reform — though including party women as individuals. For this to work to the benefit of the political movement, however, the ANC Women's League would have to loosen the reins on its chapters and open itself to cooperation and collaboration with groups not under its thrall.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of foreign-funded, single-issue NGOs exerts pressure in the opposite direction, toward the compartmentalization of particular needs and problems and away from a movement-building approach to social change. With the state moving slower than anticipated on reconstruction and development projects at the community level, and with impatience developing over the pace of change, the future of the political movement rests in part over how it adapts to these challenges. If the ANC Women's League continues to fail to respond effectively, it will leave a vacuum which other organizations will surely fill and in the process, for good or ill, define the character and direction of a re-emergent women's movement.

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Chapter 7

PALESTINE

WOMEN ONLY DECORATE THE PLO

In 1989 and 1990, at the peak of the Palestinian intifada, women activists in Gaza — more involved in economic and political activities outside the home than ever before — suddenly came under attack. Islamist groups launched a campaign of intimidation and occasional violence aimed at forcing them to wear a hijab (head scarf) in public. Bare-headed women were roughed up on their way to work. Some had stones thrown at them. Much to their dismay, the secular left parties proved largely indifferent to their pleas for support, despite the fact that the campaign was an escalation of the Islamist bid for power within Palestinian society, using the restoration of women's traditional roles as a vehicle. For many women, this was the proverbial straw that pushed them toward mobilizing an independent social movement.

Another factor was the growth of cross-cultural links with other women. During the uprising, for example, many visitors had urged them to explain what they were doing for women when they came to Gaza and the West Bank. Italians were particularly insistent on this, according to several Palestinians with whom I spoke. But though much is often made of the "importation" of feminist ideas by those who resist them — just as conservative class forces claim that Marxist ideology is a "foreign" imposition when they are challenged by it — the reality is that such encounters reinforce rather than create challenges to gender inequality. In this case, it simply prodded Palestinian women to ask themselves difficult questions they had tended to put off. The more important influence, according to most activists I interviewed, was the impact of meeting with other third world women at global women's conferences to share experience and discuss strategy. "This is a different era, when women are in touch with each other worldwide to exchange views and experiences, and we have built a network of women's organizations here that can't be dismantled,"

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community health activist Rita Giacaman told me, echoing a view I heard expressed in all four countries.[1]

The start of peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians in Madrid in 1992 accelerated the momentum toward gender-based organizing, as women were left out of the process and as they saw the future shape of Palestinian society coming under scrutiny for the first time. So, too, did the decline of the political parties as the *intifada* wore down — all but the Islamist parties — and the general disarray of the left after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Palestinian leftists were more affected by this than those in South Africa or Eritrea, due in part to the degree to which they depended on the liturgies of their politics rather than their practice. In the absence of much of a social or economic program, all the parties tended to engage in service provision to build patronage, but none saw this as "political" work. Despite setting up women's committees and holding official positions on women's equality, the secular Palestinian parties had failed utterly to develop a credible agenda for women at the moment they were confronted with the possibility of limited autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza. Hence, women were on their own when it came to issues directly affecting them, a circumstance that was all the more unsettling in light of the Islamist assault on their participation in public life.

* * *

It is an irony of the situation, perhaps, that Palestinian women have a far longer history of public activism than do their African sisters, despite the iron grip of a rigid, patriarchal family system on their daily lives. Palestine was characterized by highly developed urban centers under Ottoman rule, and Palestinian women, at least from the upper classes, participated in political demonstrations against British policy there as early as 1917. In 1921, a group of educated women, most of whom were wives of highly-placed men active in the nationalist movement, formed the Palestine Women's Union (PWU). The organization's primary concern was charity, but members also traveled throughout the mandate territory without the company of men to make speeches and hold demonstrations for Palestinian rights. Much later, in 1964, PWU members participated in the founding meeting of the Palestinian National Council in East Jerusalem, approximately coincident with the formation of the PLO, and set up branches across the West Bank, then under Jordanian rule. Though their primary focus

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was on such things as literacy, sewing, first aid, care of orphans and so on, there was some crossover into nationalist political activity.

The subsequent establishment of the General Union of Palestinian Women in 1965 had the potential to give women throughout the diaspora a gendered platform within the emerging nationalist movement, but a decision by its leaders to identify the union as the official representative of Palestinian women set it up for subordination to the male-controlled political movement.[2] In the late 1960s, Fatah members took it over, just as they had done with the PLO, and put all the union's operations under their umbrella. Lacking any position on women's rights, Fatah did nothing to promote them through the union, using it solely to build support for the national struggle among women.[3] Thus, there was no women's organization — or any organization, for that matter — that specifically worked on or educated the public about the unequal status of women and men in Palestinian society through this period.

There was no shortage of issues, however. Women faced systematic discrimination in education, often being pulled from school at an early age to help at home or to marry. Child marriage remained common, usually in arranged matches with no input from the prospective bride, and polygamy was practiced in Muslim communities. There were no laws protecting women from poverty or explicitly recognizing any economic or social rights for women. Under civil law, marriage or pregnancy was grounds for job dismissal. Strict controls on the behavior and movement of young women were the rule, and women suspected of breaking this code could be executed by male relatives in what were termed "honor killings." Genital cutting was practiced in some rural areas, particularly among Bedouins, though it was not nearly so widespread as in East Africa. An adulterous wife could be killed, however, while an adulterous husband could not even be prosecuted if the wife declined to bring charges. Despite nominal support for women's right to partial inheritance under Islamic law, Palestinian women were routinely passed over in favor of brothers and uncles, leaving them with no means of support apart from male relatives.[4]

Over the past several decades, some of this eased, as young, urban women gained access to higher education in the West Bank and Gaza and abroad and then moved into the workplace, and as young men were forced by economic factors to migrate elsewhere for work. This also aggravated the growing gap between the urban and rural popu-

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lations, as village life for many women changed little in social terms from what it was under Ottoman rule, though such things as electrification and the provision of running water freed them from some burdensome traditional duties. However, if we are comparing the situation of Palestinian women in general to that of women in Eritrea and South Africa, what makes it substantially different today is not the level or kind of inherited oppression or the differences in technology, but rather the fact that they lack the active, sustained commitment of the male-dominated political parties to an emancipatory project.

* * *

Things begin to change in the late 1970s for women in the West Bank when the parties of the left, headquartered in Beirut, decided to initiate mass organizing there, but it was the barest of beginnings. This tack was in part a reflection of organizational strategies developed in the camps in Lebanon, where the PLO functioned as a shadow government (within the considerable constraints placed upon them by their Lebanese allies after civil war broke out in 1975). It also flowed from a specific decision to mobilize support among Palestinians under Israeli occupation. The first women's committee was set up in 1978 as a joint venture of the underground left. However, it soon split into three separate groups — the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees affiliated to the Communist Party, the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees linked to the Popular Front and the Federation of Women's Action Committees under the auspices of the Democratic Front. In 1983, a fourth was set up under Fatah — the Association of Women's Committees for Social Work. This reflected the factionalism that has long plagued the national movement and that still manifests itself in nearly all efforts to organize women, workers, students and other social groups.

These committees had as their main purpose recruiting women into the political parties, though their distance from the exiled political leadership, as in South Africa during the anti-apartheid struggle, allowed a degree of independence in day-to-day affairs. Many who joined the committees, especially among the younger, urban-educated activists, found the space to reflect on their shared concerns as women. There were also small variations in the constituencies each committee targeted — the Communists, initially at least, sought to organize women in the workplace, while Fatah, at the other end of

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the ideological spectrum, focused on housewives — but in the main each committee ran more or less the same programs and competed in the same venues for adherents. All of them set up "kindergartens" for pre-school children, training programs for girls, and sewing centers and other small-scale, self-help projects for women. "We did the same work," said Nahla Hanania Qourah, one of the leaders of Fatah's women's committee, in a round-table discussion I had with her and members of two other committees. "What divided us was ideology."[5]

For the most part, the committees shied away from gender issues. Ideological differences were reflected in arcane political debates but not in their work. However, when the *intifada* broke out at the end of 1987, these committees were strategically placed to mobilize women in the besieged communities. Services broke down, commerce collapsed, security was suddenly precarious (largely because of the rampaging occupation troops), and daily life presented a host of new challenges, not least of which was waging the revolt. In many cases it was committee organizers, most of whom were in their twenties and thirties, who drove the uprising in its first months and took the lead in involving women in its spontaneous manifestations.

During the first two years, women joined the uprising in large numbers. Many took to the streets to defy Israeli troops, the more so after thousands of Palestinian men were rounded up and jailed in an effort to squelch the protests. Outside, many observers noted women's participation in these highly visible confrontations and touted this as evidence that the Palestinian national movement had made great strides in the liberation of women. The formation of a Higher Women's Council that brought together all four party-driven women's committees seemed to underscore this. But the truth was, as usual, more complicated. The joint council was mainly a tactical response to funders' insistence that they not have to look at four identical proposals for every project.[6] Meanwhile, so little consciousness-raising on gender issues was done by the parties and their women's sections that when the Women's Action Committee took a survey of women's political views in 1988, they discovered that the majority favored the establishment of an Islamic state. Nevertheless, circumstances propelled women into more active roles in the revolt, a phenomenon that increasingly disturbed the Islamists.

The Israelis were far more careless with their security measures when it came to women, and many became couriers and organizers for the underground political leadership. Accounts of women step-

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ping directly between Israeli troops and Palestinian boys and men to protect the protesters at moments of intense confrontation were common. Meanwhile, the women's committees organized what they termed "household economy" projects — backyard poultry raising, vegetable gardening, food processing and other community-based economic ventures — whose aim was both to support a boycott of Israeli products and to draw more women into the sphere of influence of the various political parties. Women participated in clandestine popular committees — formed in March and April 1988 and banned by the Israelis that July — that acted as underground municipal administrations, and they organized secret classes for the children when schools were boycotted and the Israelis banned alternative education.

But spontaneous mass involvement peaked by the end of 1989 and began to recede soon after, as the parties, especially Fatah, moved to take direct control of the uprising, systematizing the protests through tightly controlled all-male units that took charge of the streets. Many of the hastily organized women's cooperatives generated in the early days of the uprising also began to falter around this time for lack of skilled management and effective marketing. This revealed them to be unsustainable without a continuous flow of outside funds (a fact that angered many participants when they discovered this, leaving them feeling badly used by the parties).

The year 1990 found the Palestinian women's movement at a crossroads. More women were participating in public life and in explicitly political activity than ever before, and social issues specific to women were being raised with increasing force by party and nonparty women alike, often across sectarian lines that long divided them from each other. This, coupled with the generally diminishing authority of the father within the family due to other factors associated with "modernization," sparked a backlash from the socially conservative Islamists. Like religious revivalists elsewhere, Hamas seized on the issue of preserving women's "traditional" role to portray itself as the defender of cultural authenticity. What was surprising to women, though, was the utter failure of the secular parties to stand up to this. Their silence disillusioned many women activists, especially those in the left parties. It also left the Islamists to fill the vacuum with their nostalgic conception of the passive Palestinian woman.

"If anything created a women's identity here, it was the Islamists," said Rema Hamami, an independent activist who directed a training

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center for women in Gaza in the early 1990s and went on to teach in the Women's Studies program at Birzeit University. "The nationalist factions did different sorts of activities for women, but you could not find a statement from any of them on the particular ways that women were oppressed. Their whole approach was that we have an incredibly conservative society, so what we have to do is find a way of mobilizing women politically without splitting them by raising these issues. By taking this approach, they left this whole terrain to Hamas, which had a very clearly spelled out social agenda — about the family, about women, about how to raise your children, about male-female relations. That was always what they worked on. They were able to be much more powerful when they wedded that to a nationalist agenda [in 1989-90] at a time when people really needed answers to these things."[7]

Yet, far from slowing the momentum toward independent action on women's issues, this gave it new impetus, albeit without party support. Women in the Democratic Front set up the first ever drop-in center for women in East Jerusalem, and they opened talks with Communist Party women about collaborative work on gender issues. In December 1990, the Palestine Research and Development Group (Bisan), a West Bank NGO associated with the Popular Front but operating with a high degree of autonomy, convened a conference on social issues in the *intifada* called "Together Toward Enlightenment and Equality." For the first time, this brought women activists from all the parties together with the growing number of nonparty women activists, dubbed "independents," to talk about a common program for a broad-based women's movement and to take up in public such touchy issues as early marriage.

Then came the Gulf war.

* * *

The effects of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were felt almost immediately. The expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia toward the end of 1990 had dire economic consequences for Gaza and West Bank Palestinians, already reeling from the prolonged impact of the *intifada*. The evident sympathy of many Palestinians for Iraq hardened Israeli attitudes and further polarized the situation on the ground. Though much was made in the press of Israeli fears of attack, many Palestinians also worried that the war might engulf them at any moment — a war that could involve not only chemical

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weapons but nukes — without their having any means of defense. When the U.S.-led assault began in early 1991, it pre-empted all talk of new social initiatives, and women's organizing came to an abrupt halt.

The resounding defeat Iraq suffered, coming on the heels of the Soviet Union's implosion, further demoralized the left parties. Both they and their affiliated women's committees experienced sharp declines in membership. As the *intifada* steadily wound down in intensity and as global moves got underway to bring the Israelis and the PLO to the negotiating table, community organizing of all kinds slowed. This further eroded the popular base of the women's committees, as well as of the parties themselves. To add to this, a bitter split within the DFLP wrecked the party's Federation of Women's Action Committees, which was at the forefront of moves toward a more explicitly feminist agenda. It never recovered.

Despite these organizational setbacks, tensions over gender issues burst into the open again in 1992 with the onset of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Madrid. The PLO established a network of high-profile "technical" committees to advise Palestinian negotiators that almost completely excluded women and women's issues.[8] Some of the nascent movement's lost momentum was recaptured when a mixed group of party women and independents — excluding DFLP and PFLP women who were under party directives to boycott anything that appeared to legitimize the "peace process" — set up a Women's Affairs Technical Committee, staffed entirely by unpaid volunteers. Under pressure, Arafat appointed Hanan Ashrawi, an independent professional, to a prominent position on the negotiating team, but many women still felt marginalized in the peace process. "Almost all the appointments made since then were men. All the hard work of women to get to that point was not acknowledged or remunerated," said Giacaman.[9]

During this period, some Palestinian women formed new organizations, while continuing to challenge the nationalist parties to define a new social agenda. In the early 1990s, more than half a dozen independent research and training centers sprang up in the West Bank and Gaza. Some aimed to empower individual women working in other organizations, others to focus public attention on such issues as women's legal rights and the problem of domestic violence. The first was a research project, the Women's Studies Center, set up by women from the Democratic Front. Independent women founded

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training centers in Nablus and Gaza that set out to increase the basic skills of women working in all the social movements and parties and in the fast-growing network of service-oriented NGOs. The human rights organization al-Haq (Law in the Service of Man) established a women's section, as did many Palestinian NGOs, and a new center was established to focus specifically on women's legal status, the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counseling. "These could never exist before the uprising," said scholar-activist Islah Jad. "They came as the culmination of a long social movement to meet special needs — training, exposure to new ideas, skills — to provide services for the movement, not to be ends in themselves where professional women are only talking to each other all the time. The target group was the women's committees, the women activists."[10] Well-attended women's festivals were also held in 1992 and 1993, and a women's studies program that opened in 1995 at Birzeit University, only the second of its kind in the Arab world, almost immediately drew overflow enrollments.

"What explains the flowering of feminist consciousness and activity really has to do with what happened within the national movement itself and what happened to the Palestinian struggle as a whole," said Lisa Taraki, one of the organizers of the Birzeit women's studies program.

> It's not coincidental that as hope on the national level diminished — as prospects for liberation diminished — and as the *intifada* lost momentum, women began to organize themselves. A lot of women activists began to see that they had to disentangle themselves from the parties to develop a program which deals with women's issues on the one hand and also to deal with the question of power within the political organization, between men and women.[11]

This growth process was enhanced by the growing availability of outside funding for women's organizations and other NGOs, while the political parties were scrambling for financial resources.

In the midst of this ferment, the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees, a creature of the Palestine Communist Party since its inception (reestablished in 1991 as the Palestine People's Party or PPP), declared its independence from party control and renamed itself the Working Women's Society. (This also gave it legal protection as a "charitable society.") The WWS began mobilizing women

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around a gender-specific, rather than a party program, and pushed to expand its membership among nonparty women. Though it continued to run early childhood centers, it also began to run counseling programs for individual women and to host workshops on gender oppression. "All the parties treat women as objects to be used when they need them, but none of them until now has any social program to address women's issues," said Amal Kreishe, who then headed the WWS. Kreishe was also the only women on the PPP central committee, but she was adamant about the need for the committee to put women's issues first. "What is important now is for women to come together as women, no matter what party we belong to."[12]

This mobilization took on new urgency as the Palestinian Authority began to expand its limited powers in Gaza and the West Bank after 1994, while much of the left diddled, declining to engage in debate or dialogue with any institution or organization affiliated with the PA. Though the new Authority repeatedly demonstrated that it was unsympathetic to women's interests, the rejectionist left parties fiercely debated strategic differences on the national struggle (issuing repeated calls for a renewal of the *intifada*) and all but ignored the impact this new situation had on women. While the Popular and Democratic Fronts joined Islamist groups in boycotting the Authority — participating with them in a Rejectionist Front based in Damascus, for example, as well as running joint campaigns with Hamas for student leaders at Birzeit University — many women who shared a distaste for the Oslo agreement nonetheless saw this as a critical moment to challenge the autocratic Authority on its programs and policies. They were also outraged at the left parties' tactical alliance with the Islamists. "These people are preparing legislation for education, for health, for housing, for everything, and we want to be part of that process," said Islah Jad. "If we don't do something to change this now, we will pay the heaviest price later."[13]

The risk of remaining on the sidelines was hammered home when Arafat asked a small group of lawyers, all men, to come up with a "Basic Law" to serve as a temporary Palestinian constitution. An early draft issued in December 1993 made no mention at all of women's rights. Later drafts, issued after strong protests, guaranteed women equal rights in "public life," implicitly ceding the sphere of "private life" to the strictures of Islamic *shari'a* law. None of these drafts committed the Authority to respect the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

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(usually known by the acronym CEDAW), though they explicitly cited other conventions on human and civil rights. This catalyzed a group of women to draw up a manifesto on women's rights.

The rights project took off in the West Bank when former Democratic Front women, then members of a small pro-PA splinter party, FIDA (the Palestine Democratic Union), took up a paper drafted outside the Territories in Tunis by the GUPWMN. This tract typically rehearsed the national issues and slotted women's concerns into them as asides. The FIDA women were joined by feminists from a cross-section of party and nonparty organizations, several of whom had been in South Africa and were inspired by the preparation and launch of the Women's Charter there.[14] In order to draw women from the rejectionist parties into the drafting process, conveners set up an *ad hoc* committee with no formal association to the PA. As a result, the project had perhaps the widest level of political participation of any women's initiative. Together, they wrote a ringing declaration of women's rights, which they proposed for inclusion in a future constitution. They titled it the "Principles of Women's Legal Status."

The document, which they announced with great fanfare in East Jerusalem on August 3, 1994, demanded the abolition of gender discrimination in public and private life, an affirmation of women's right to vote and hold public office, and a commitment to equal pay for equal work. In an attempt to mainstream the project, organizers arranged their press conference at a meeting of the GUPWmn, after convincing its leaders to sponsor it.[15] However, the event was marred when the highest ranking woman in the PA, Social Affairs Minister Intisar Wazir (Um Jihad, the widow of slain PLO leader Abu Jihad), spoke to the assembly. Her appearance triggered a vitriolic intervention by a Popular Front woman who perceived it as legitimizing the Authority. The ensuing exchange threw the meeting into chaos.

Nonetheless, a certain impulse was building that kept drawing women together across party lines. A September 1994 conference on women and law — organized by an *ad hoc* committee of party and nonparty women and convened under the auspices of the Ramallah-based human rights group Al-Haq — drew as many as 200 women to regional preparatory meetings and over 400 women to the main session. The four-day conference produced Action Plans on health, vocational training and education, politics and civil life, work and social welfare, family law and protection against violence. The final statement called for a ban on child marriages, protection for battered

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women, and free public education for women up to the age of eighteen, among a long list of other things.[16] "For the entire four days, there was no factionalism," said one conference organizer afterward. "The center of the dialogue was over *shari'a* and civil law. The main concept we tried to get across was that laws change."

When a delegation of women met with Arafat that November to urge the creation of an official body to represent women's rights, however, he cautioned that he could not take on the Islamic conservatives, and he urged them to be patient. "This showed us that women are only decoration in the PLO," said Kreishe, who led the delegation. "We have a big challenge now, and we will have to strengthen ourselves to deal with it."[17]

* * *

The elections for a Palestinian Legislative Council in January 1996 offered women another chance to challenge the political parties on their commitment to gender equity. Ironically, it was the Israelis who extended the right to vote to women in the first place, in 1976, in the only elections they permitted in the Occupied Territories. After that experience, though, Israeli authorities decided that democracy thrust up too hostile a crop of indigenous municipal leaders — most of whom were later deported to Jordan — and could not be tried again.

Just before the 1996 elections, the PA announced a new policy on foreign travel that signaled how regressive its policies were toward women (or how much it was quietly compromising with the Islamist parties in order to pre-empt disruptions to the elections). From this point forward, the Authority decreed, women were not to be issued passports without men present. Almost immediately, the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC) organized a protest in Ramallah, the first of its kind against Arafat, that attracted considerable publicity. Though some men joined the march, many in the left parties questioned the relevance of the issue, much as they had done on the issue of the head scarves. A commonly-held position was that this only affected the elite and was therefore not important, missing the point that it was another concession to patriarchal control of women's behavior (and that their judgment to ignore it signaled that they, not women activists, would set the agenda for common action). In any case, women activists placed a priority on opposing it and succeeded on their own in forcing the withdrawal of the policy. But the experience left another bad taste in their political mouths.

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In the event, the results of the first Palestinian-run elections were, like everything else in Palestinian politics, contradictory. Nevertheless, they did provide women from many political perspectives — all but the rejectionist left — a chance to work together to articulate a vision, to develop a common program, to learn lessons in strategy and to build structures and relationships for the future. The institution that emerged most strengthened was the WATC. By this time it was run by a staff of fourteen and a board of twenty-one women. They included women from the committees of the PPP, FIDA and Fatah, plus women from the Women's Studies Center, the Jerusalem Link, al-Haq's women's section, the Women's Centre for Legal Rights and Counseling, and other unaffiliated activists. WATC representatives met with leaders of the contending parties to press them to include women on their lists and to articulate positions on women's rights in the campaign. They also pushed to get more women appointed to positions within the Authority, and they provided training to women who agreed to run in the elections. Much of their work focused on civic education for women, drawing on contacts established during the *intifada* by the three party-affiliated women's committees, and they organized forums for candidates of all the parties (men and women) deemed to be strong on women's issues. I attended one of these sessions.

* * *

It was mid-morning when I rolled into Bilin, a dusty hamlet north of Ramallah, with PPP hopeful Moustafa Barghouthi. The other candidate, Dr. Ghazi Hananea, was, like Barghouthi, a medical doctor, but he represented Fatah in the contest for this district. Both men had the endorsement of the WATC. As we walked down a rutted dirt road to the white-washed, one-room schoolhouse where 25 women waited, we were surrounded by a gaggle of children who clustered around the doorway to watch the presentation, giggling incessantly among themselves. The room quieted as we entered. There were no men present, apart from us. We sat in a row of metal chairs whose torn plastic seats teetered over shaky legs on the cracked cement floor as a member of a local women's council introduced the candidates and explained the function and mechanics of elections. The ensuing presentations focused on the nature of the elections themselves, as much as on the issues. Why vote? What is a Legislative Council, and what will it do? How will this be different from the PA as constituted? The essence of

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Barghouthi's pitch was that this new body would set the parameters for education, health and social policy. It would also be important as a forum for debate when the final status negotiations took place with Israel on borders, settlements, refugees, release of prisoners and so on. Hence, it was critical to elect a group that would stand up to Arafat and not allow him to compromise too readily, as he had done in the Oslo accords. Barghouthi also called for women to receive equal salaries for equal work in the new Authority. For most women, the animated discussion that followed was the first time for them to debate the future of their country in an open assembly.

Though there were few women candidates (twenty-eight out of the 628 who ran) and fewer still elected (five of the eighty-eight) — women did play a prominent role in the political process. They voted in large numbers, and they heard their rights interjected into a national discourse.[18] Though none of its twenty-six candidates won, the PPP raised important policy issues. It came out in favor of social insurance for all women (counting housewives as workers) and for changing social status laws to be consistent with the UN convention on women's rights. It was also the only party to support the WATC's call for a women's quota for seats in the legislature, a demand that Arafat rejected out of hand. Many women activists were dissatisfied with the outcome, but few disputed that a turning point was passed. "I think it will be a long way before Palestinian men become believers in human rights and women's rights in particular," said WATC director Suheir Azzouni afterward. "It will take years of long struggle, and it will not be very easy, but we're starting now. It is very clear to women that if they don't stick together, they will lose together."[19]

One of the continuing points of contention is over whether and to what extent the political parties could be a vehicle for this. The PPP and FIDA took the lead on developing a social agenda for the elections, but there was also a vigorous debate over social issues within the Popular Front and the remnants of the Democratic Front. Despite this, both rejectionist parties stayed out of the public debates that accompanied the elections, even though individual members broke party discipline to run as "independents." Within these parties, the proponents of change were hampered by the fact that key decisions were taken outside the territories (in Damascus), by leaders who had not been exposed to the same experience or discourse. Most remained locked into political formulas that had guided their work for decades. This left party women in the West Bank and Gaza facing a dilemma.

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"Gender is becoming a hot issue in these parties because it has been more and more clear that women who have been active and part of the leadership are still not part of the decision-making," said one woman in the Popular Front. "The problem is that these are political women who are against Oslo and feel that this is the priority issue. These women still feel that they are more political than feminist. On a grassroots level, you see that women are more concerned with gender issues. They see that there is no separation between the political and the social. The women who are up high are more closed, they view the national struggle in a very narrow way. Because of problems with internal democracy, many activist women have left the women's committee. Those who are left are less critical of party leadership, while those who have left have less influence."[20]

Many Popular Front members who disagreed with the party line on these issues hesitated to take the debate public out of fear of a split, based on what they saw happen to the Democratic Front at the start of the decade. Instead, large numbers simply drifted out of the party, not only weakening the women's committee but depleting party ranks of their most socially conscious members. In effect, what remained of the Marxist left was committing slow suicide rather than confront the weaknesses of its unyielding position. As one woman activist remarked in another context, "If you don't open your ear to listen to the daily needs of your people, at the end you become an empty balloon."

Even in the two parties that articulated positions on women's rights in the elections — the PPP and FIDA — and among women close to these parties, there were differences on how seriously to take them. Siham Bargouthi of FIDA argued that women should remain engaged: "We can't change the social situation without the parties. Now we must work more in the parties, push the parties, and through them push the authorities."

Amal Kreishe of the PPP was more skeptical, suggesting that her main commitment, despite her position on the party central committee, was to strengthen the Working Women's Society as an independent social force, leaving the party to join in or fall by the wayside. "All the time the party uses us," she said. "Now we want to use the party to empower women."

For her part, Islah Jad, a leading independent, remained a strong advocate of efforts to reorient the parties toward a feminist perspective rather than abandoning them. "Women should never think about leaving the political organizations. This is the most crucial point,"

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she told me. "It is easy for women to talk to women about these things, but they need to be taken up within the political parties, too. This is where the power is in our society. Without political organizations, women will be lost. The continuation of the struggle within these parties is very important."

* * *

In the aftermath of the elections, the women's movement, tenuous as it was, remained the social trend with the best chance of reconnecting with a grassroots constituency on a new, nonsectarian basis, and perhaps the best chance the parties had for revitalizing themselves. This movement or trend or whatever one chooses to call it consisted of a growing number of independent women's NGOs, the declining but still extant party women's committees, women's branches of other organizations (party or nonparty) and quite a few dynamic individuals. Together, they were moving in the same direction but not formally linked, apart from the WATC, and not controlled by any one party or group of parties. Though they lacked an organized grassroots constituency, apart from that of the women's committees, they were the only social sector in which party activists and intellectuals came together for joint activity, and where the intellectuals saw their role as supporting the activists, rather than as leaders. "Our main task is to develop a discourse that is an alternative to the fundamentalists," said Giacaman. "With all due respect to Western feminists — their work is very helpful, but it suffers from serious problems as far as we're concerned, for example, the lack of the notion of nationhood as instrumental to any analysis. Here, this is crucial. We need to develop our own theoretical conceptions of what gender is in the Palestinian context." If this informal network continued to generate a high level of public participation, they might force the parties to take them more seriously — and in doing so, become a resource for them.

Jad was one of those who remained upbeat on this emerging social movement:

> If we measure the power of the women's movement by the quantity of people they used to work with, of course there is a big difference, but this does not only affect women. The constituency of the political parties is not the same. A lot of people have left, a lot of people feel the goals have been achieved, others feel disappointed, a lot think the national role will now be taken by the Authority. These factors explain why the pop-

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ular constituency of the parties has diminished. The women's committees were branches of these parties, so any situation affecting them will affect the committees. But they are not dead, they are not paralyzed, they are changing.

If you compare women's committees to any other social strata, like students, like workers, like professionals, like any other social group, you will see immediately the difference. First of all, they did not let their structures be diluted — to be vanished — they tried to revive them. Their ideology is no longer purely national and very timidly social, as it used to be before. Now we are talking about a real attempt to set up a social agenda. Women have passed through the *intifada* with a very traumatic and strong experience with the political parties. Through this they got aware of the deceptions by their parties and also the pressure coming from the fundamentalist movement. Most of the leadership of these women's committees is still existing and is still active. The strength of the WATC rests on the continuing strength of these committees. We are not talking about the same structure as before, we are not talking about the same programs. But we are talking about the same people with a different vision.[21]

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Chapter 8

NICARAGUA

DIVERSE, DIFFERENT, BUT UNITED

At the end of the 1990s, Nicaragua had the most institutionally diverse grassroots women's movement of the four countries under study. There was the Sandinista-sponsored national women's organization, the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women, that arose during the revolution and was a rough counterpart of the National Union of Eritrean Women, the ANC Women's League and the various Palestinian women's committees. There were women's secretariats within the two major Sandinista trade union confederations, the Association of Agricultural Workers (ATC, in Spanish) and the industrial Sandinista Workers Central (CST). There were also women's secretariats in other Sandinista unions and mass organizations, like those of the teachers (ANDEN), health workers' (FETSALUD) and small farmers and ranchers (UNAG). Outside the FSLN, there were over a hundred women's training centers, policy groups, think tanks, village-level collectives, development agencies and mass membership organizations. There were innovative pilot projects on violence against women involving community groups and the police. There were two national networks — one on domestic violence, one on health — and there were strong links to regional associations that brought women together from Central and South America on a regular basis.

At the same time, with Nicaragua the second poorest state in the Western hemisphere and under a socially and politically conservative government, most women faced a daily battle for survival in an environment increasingly hostile to the exercise of their rights. In the aftermath of the civil war and the imposition of an IMF-mandated economic adjustment program, some seventy percent of the population lived below the poverty line, with women hit the hardest. Under the first post-Sandinista regime, unemployment exceeded fifty per-

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cent by the government's own admission. This did not improve significantly under the second one.[1]

Sweeping lay-offs by newly privatized industries and agricultural plantations, took women first, quickly undermining their position in the economy, as sharp cut-backs in social services — particularly education and health — reversed many of the gains they experienced in their living conditions under the Sandinistas. Of 15,355 women agricultural workers with "permanent" positions in 1989, only 1,285 held these jobs two years later. A 1992 survey found that working women in Managua earned thirty-one percent lower wages than men, as the number of women-headed households soared.[2] Meanwhile, reports of violence against women increased sharply, new laws forced women rape victims to carry their pregnancy to term, and childcare centers were suddenly closed, just as new textbooks funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development appeared with images of women as happy homemakers.

Hence, there was an apparent paradox: the women's movement in Nicaragua was stronger than ever, more varied in form and more active on the ground than any of those we have looked at so far; yet women were worse off in their daily lives than at any time since this movement came into being, and the political movement that spawned it, the FSLN, was in a deep and perhaps insoluble internal crisis. (The Sandinistas lost the 1996 national elections by approximately the same percentage as in 1990.) On closer scrutiny, however, there was no contradiction here. Though the roots of the independent feminist sector lay within the Sandinista movement, a significant section of it was almost entirely divorced from the party, and the party-sponsored organizations, secretariats and so on were themselves in varying degrees of crisis. Thus, while the women's movement had a continuing impact on the party, it did so in contention, not in dialogue. As a result, the FSLN's attempts to reform itself were widely perceived to be efforts at appeasement and co-optation rather than reflections of deep-going change. As a consequence, the party, both as an avenue for women to affect the state and as a political force contending for control of the state, was severely compromised. What Nicaragua had was a left party without the support of many activist women and a women's movement without a direct political expression.

It seems fair to conclude that the rupture between the emergent women's movement and the party after the 1990 elections was in large part responsible for the FSLN's failure to mobilize enough popular support to win the next one. (It may well be the case that it was the

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tepid support the party received from women in 1990 that cost it that one, too.) Even if the many activists in what was termed the "autonomous women's movement" actually voted for party candidates in 1996, which many may have, if grudgingly, few worked for the party in the campaign. This stripped the FSLN of a direct channel to the communities whose support they sought, as no other group, including the party itself, had the links the women's groups had developed. This assuredly contributed to their loss at the polls.

Coming to terms with gender issues within the party and in its program for the society is only one of the front's problems, but it is a central one that reflects the FSLN's overarching difficulty with articulating a compelling social and economic agenda as a party out of power. It also reflects its apparent inability to democratize itself from within to generate this and other new agendas. How this failure occurred provides an object lesson for the left in the consequences of failing to take women's issues — and women — seriously.

The irony here — one of them anyway — is that the Sandinistas seemed at first to be so advanced on these issues, compared to other national liberation movements of the post-World War II era. The many solidarity groups that flowered across Europe and North America in the late 1970s and early 1980s to celebrate and support the Nicaraguan revolution — and later to defend it — made much out of this, as well they should have. But, as with the situation of Palestinian women during the *intifada*, more was going on than met the uncritical eye, and things changed rapidly with the rise of the U.S.-supported counter-revolution (though we now know that flaws in Sandinista policy on land and minority rights harrowed the ground for the *contra* revolt, too, opening the spaces for opponents to operate.)[3]

With regard to gender, I would reiterate two points that should by now be obvious to all political activists: first, the transformation of gender relations in any society where oppressive roles are deeply ingrained is not something that can be folded into other revolutionary objectives as an afterthought. It needs direct, sustained attention and action on its own. Second, slippage after a national liberation struggle is almost automatic, for patriarchal values reassert themselves at the first sign of faltering in other transformation projects. The seriousness of a political movement can be judged on the basis of how it copes with this phenomenon. In the Nicaraguan case, however, more than slippage is going on. The Sandinistas helped start a process of emancipation that they later tried unsuccessfully to put the lid on in the name of national unity. Finally, they lost control over it, as they

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became objects of attack for standing in its way.

* * *

The FSLN first organized women as a social force for the revolution in 1977, when they sponsored the formation of the Organization of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC). Members organized around such issues as human rights abuses, release of political prisoners, and price hikes of basic commodities. They also provided clandestine support for the insurrection. AMPRONAC's critique of women's oppression, to the extent that it articulated one, was that its sources lay in Nicaragua's dependent capitalist economic system and in the authoritarian Somoza regime. Thus, emancipation would come with the revolution — a fairly standard position of Marxist-oriented national liberation fronts in those years in which gender issues were subordinated to other political imperatives.[4] Whatever the shortcomings of this position, this organization and the one that grew out of it after the fall of Somoza in 1979, AMNLAE, provided an entry into political activity for many women for the first time.

Women reaped substantial benefits after the young Sandinista revolutionaries — most were in their late twenties and early thirties — seized power. What they term the "Triumph" triggered an explosion of social reform whose hallmarks were a highly participatory planning process and mass volunteer campaigns that included thousands of Nicaraguan women, as well as foreign supporters, many of whom were also women. Prior to this, women served with distinction and courage in the armed underground, and several women were prominent in the transitional government, though never in the Sandinista Directorate. At the grassroots level, the revolution enabled women to increase their participation in the labor force, participate in a sweeping land reform (albeit not consistently and not with the same results as men, either individually or in organized cooperatives), and to sit in limited numbers on local and regional governing bodies. New Sandinista initiatives in public health and education had immediate and far-reaching impact on women, as did the establishment of day-care services, the passage of legislation on maternity leave and divorce, and the introduction of sex education in the schools. A remarkable adult literacy campaign in 1980 brought the rudiments of education to over 400,000 rural women and men for the first time ever. The new government even tackled the chokehold of *machismo* on popular cul-

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ture by banning advertising that exploited women. Meanwhile, teams of local and international artists covered the walls of schools, government buildings and other public surfaces with a welter of colorful murals that, among other things, celebrated women's role in the revolution.

In 1982, at the peak of this emancipatory push from within the Sandinista movement, AMNLAE drafted legislation that gave women equal rights with men and for the first time spelled out the rights of children in the society — abolishing property rights that men held over their children, recognizing the rights of children without regard for their "legitimacy" (a major issue in this strongly Catholic culture), and mandating that anyone over the age of fourteen directly receive any wages for work, instead of having the money go to the head-of-household, as had been the practice. At one point, AMNLAE even proposed legalizing abortion, a measure that failed to pass and that never came up again though the Sandinistas did not prosecute doctors for performing them. Veterans of that era also point to the less easily measurable gains that women made in self-esteem through the struggles and campaigns in which they participated.

By everyone's account, women were more involved in the public sphere than at any time in Nicaragua's history. However, with the intensification of the *contra* war, the Sandinistas retreated from this social activism and shifted instead to an emphasis on women's supportive roles. From 1983 onward, women were portrayed in party and government campaigns as the defenders of hearth and home — an approach that romanticized women even as it diminished them. After a brief, unsuccessful fight to include women in the draft, AMNLAE was co-opted into this effort, and it turned its main attention to offering support to the mothers of the men sent to the battle front. The association forwarded no more legislative proposals during the FSLN's tenure in office, and its importance to women on issues related to gender equality waned rapidly.

"Looking back on this, we should have gotten some things then that we let go. We should have made a deeper struggle for legal changes, changes in the Constitution," AMNLAE head Dora Zeladón told me. Zeladón took over leadership of the organization after the 1990 elections and was highly critical of the decisions taken in the 1980s when I spoke with her five years into her tenure.

> We were told that we would gain our rights through participating in the defense of the Revolution. Many of us did this

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> very responsibly, feeling that if we worked for the Revolution, we were working for our own rights as women. But this is not always true. What we see now is that at the same time that you participate in a revolutionary project, you must demand that the rights of women for equality in all spheres of life are guaranteed.[5]

With the drafting of large numbers of men into the armed forces in the mid-1980s, there was a sudden rise in the participation of women in the workforce — what one writer has termed "the feminization of the factories" — that brought with it new problems and new issues, just as AMNLAE was pulling back from agitation and activism. A number of seemingly innocuous initiatives aimed at solving these problems got underway at this time, most with AMNLAE encouragement but not under its direction. A Women's Legal Office offered free legal advice, several research teams looked at women's participation in the labor force, and there were others.

A turning point was reached when an ATC study of rural women found that the gender division of labor was the primary obstacle to women's participation in work and in the union. This led to a series of ATC women's assemblies that issued calls for a structured program of action. In 1986, after a protracted debate within the union leadership, the ATC set up a women's secretariat with a mandate to develop women leaders at every level of the union. The new secretariat also ran seminars on gender issues, trained women in labor relations, established gynecological clinics in the countryside (the first in the country) and produced path-breaking pamphlets on gender and sexuality, among other things. This breathed new life into the floundering women's movement, even as it propelled it in new directions. In 1987 the industrial workers' federation, the CST, also established a women's secretariat, as did other Sandinista organizations and unions, marking a shift that implicitly challenged AMNLAE's hegemonic role as the Sandinista representative of all women.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the men at the top, a group of eight-to-ten left feminists began meeting in 1986 in Managua to share experiences and to coordinate strategies and tactics for the gender struggles going on within the front. With tongue in cheek, they dubbed themselves the Party of the Erotic left (PIE, in its Spanish acronym) and continued meeting through the 1990 elections, after which many went on to play key roles in the women's movement. Among them were Alba Palacios who came to head the women's secretariat of the ATC in the 1990s, Milú Vargas who helped found AMPRONAC in 1977

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and founded the Center for Constitutional Rights after the 1990 electoral defeat, Ana Criquillón and Olga Maria Espinosa who left the ATC and the FSLN to form independent women's NGOs, Maria Theresa Blandón who left the FSLN to coordinate a Central American feminist network, poet Gioconda Belli and journalist Sofía Montenegro, an activist in the autonomous women's movement who remained in the FSLN until 1994, when she finally quit after being fired from the Sandinista paper *Barricada* for her irreverent and often controversial columns. This group had a powerful behind-the-scenes influence on nearly everything to do with women during the FSLN's last years in power, including the front's strong declaration of women's rights in 1987 and the inclusion of women's rights in the Constitution the same year, as well as much of the work of the new women's secretariats in the mass organizations.

"We called ourselves the PIE as a joke because we were a sort of underground," Montenegro told me when I interviewed her at her Managua apartment. "We met every Monday night at the house of one of us and had a pot luck supper. We decided we would take this, this, and this action, and then we operated within the space each of us was working in for the Revolution. We were working from within — writing and discussing what the hell the males were doing in the party. It was a tiny group, but I think it was quite influential because nobody else was doing it. Everyone was in AMNLAE then, too. We were also trying to persuade AMNLAE to change its position. At that moment, the Revolution had enormous consensus, and we didn't want to get aside from that. We wanted to work within it."[6] It was this consensus within the Sandinista movement that splintered after the elections.

* * *

There are differences among women activists over when the Nicaraguan women's movement got its start. Most Sandinista veterans, even those who walked away from the party to join the new women's organizations, describe a continuum as I have done, starting with the launch of AMPRONAC in 1977. Women became increasingly involved in the political movement, developed a heightened consciousness of gender issues there, and then either chose to carry on the struggle within the FSLN or became frustrated and left. Alba Palacios, expressing the party perspective, argues that there were three lines within the FSLN by the end of the 1980s: that the concerns of women should be subordinated to other political issues and activities

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that took precedence; that women's issues should lead at times, but that class or political issues should be at the forefront at others; or that women's issues should take precedence in all cases.[7] This effectively polarized the issue between old-line *machistas* at one end and radical feminists at the other, with a small number of feminists still loyal to the FSLN in the middle. According to Palacios, the first position lost so much influence by the mid-1990s that the main contradiction shifted to that between a reformed FSLN and the autonomous feminists.

Those who opted to leave the party, particularly those who joined the FSLN in the 1980s, after the Triumph, and left it later disagree with this assessment. They insist that the FSLN remained under the control of the *machistas*. Younger activists outside the FSLN go further, dating the rise of a women's movement itself from the late 1980s when gender-specific issues began to dominate its agenda and when the first stirrings toward institutional autonomy arose, dismissing all that had come before as pre-feminist.

The existence of a generation gap in this debate is not in itself surprising. What gives it added import, though, is that by the end of the 1990s, close to two-thirds of the population was under twenty-five and had no memories of life before the Sandinistas came to power. Hence, the quite remarkable advances for women that accompanied the revolution no longer carried weight for many in this movement. To them, what mattered was what the front had done in later years. On this, the record was decidedly mixed. The pre-eminent Sandinista women's organization, AMNLAE, had focused on mothers through the war in the late 1980s, a policy that had the effect of offering younger, unmarried women no place within it. As a consequence, many turned to other organizations as they became involved in gender politics and never developed any loyalty to AMNLAE (or, through it, to the FSLN). But there was also a bitterness among many former Sandinista women, born of a sense of betrayal by the revolution itself, that went far beyond the consequences of mere tactical mistakes or historical discontinuities and that would haunt the political scene for years to come.

The FSLN always assumed it would win the 1990 elections. In the lead-up to the balloting, party leaders described their aim as increasing their share of the popular vote from sixty to seventy percent, never suggesting to the public (or considering internally) that the revolution was on the line. The campaign itself was long on *macho* images and short on substance, it failed to capture the public — par-

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ticularly women's — imagination, and there was never an attempt to mobilize women as women to vote for the party. There was a great deal of speculation afterward, supported by polls and interviews, that many women voted against the FSLN in order to bring an end to the war, which the opposition (supported on occasion by statements from U.S. diplomats and local church leaders) brazenly implied would continue unless it was elected. Some commentators also suggested that a number of ballots for the opposition were protest votes, cast in the expectation that the FSLN would win anyway. Whatever the extent of this latter phenomenon, the party lost badly and did not regain its balance for some time. Meanwhile, the long-simmering tensions over gender issues within the movement finally came to the surface.

* * *

Women felt the impact of the change in government most immediately in the economic sphere. Not only were there sudden privatizations that led to wholesale lay-offs, there was also a redivision of the heavily nationalized economy in the negotiated political transition that gave the Sandinista unions title to a number of ailing plantations and industries. This created new tensions within the unions, as their leaders were turned into entrepreneurs who by virtue of their new position entered into a class contradiction with their own members. One aspect of this was a clash over whether to focus the unions' limited human and material resources on making these enterprises successful or on alleviating the fast-declining living conditions of their membership. This divided the unions along gender lines, as the women's secretariats took up the latter mandate and began to run independently-funded social programs. In the case of the CST, this set the stage for a confrontation that split the union, but I will return to that below.

In an unequal society, the first to lose are always those who are already on the short end of the stick — women (and girls). In the aftermath of the Sandinista defeat, cotton plantations were turned over to cattle ranchers, idling large contingents of women workers. Several privatized textile factories where women were the overwhelming majority of the workforce simply shut down and sold off their equipment. Other businesses slashed the size of the labor force, starting with women workers. The upshot was an exodus of women out of the factories and off the agricultural plantations, similar to that experienced by women in the U.S. after World War II. The main difference was that the society into which they

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returned was not prosperous. On the contrary, it was in a state of generalized crisis, marked by sky-rocketing unemployment, rising prices, and fast-disappearing state subsidies and social services. Public health facilities remained open, for example, but they were stripped of supplies and equipment. Patients needing injections had to send relatives to outside pharmacies to buy the serum for the doctors to administer. Those in state-run hospitals even had to bring their own sutures, as well as clean bedding and food. Much the same was true in what passed for "public education" where students had to bring their own notebooks and writing utensils, while teachers charged fees to correct tests, give grades or matriculate students. Many girls dropped out, as poor families opted to keep only their sons in school.

Against this backdrop, two incidents helped to propel many Sandinista women out of the party to form new organizations. The first was the FSLN's refusal to elect a woman to the nine-member National Directorate in the post-election FSLN congress in 1991, despite a massive lobbying campaign by women militants to include the popular Dora Maria Télez among top party leaders. The second came in January 1992 when AMNLAE boycotted a national women's conference — the first of a series of women's gatherings which Nicaraguans term "encuentros" — after losing control of it in the planning process. The more than 800 women who came to the meeting, most of whom were pro-FSLN in their politics up to that point, ended up launching an autonomous women's movement that flourished outside the party from then on. This movement for the most part focused its attention on social issues, frequently at the local level, rather than on party politics, and it carried within it a strong aversion to what many saw as the inherent "*verticalismo*" of party politics as experienced in the FSLN. An attempt to organize a politically-oriented women's coalition, the National Feminist Committee, collapsed in 1994 under the strain of internal differences, though informal networks on health and on violence held together at a national level. But through this period, many women activists became convinced that the party offered them no space to work on the issues that most concerned them, so they left. Or, in some cases, they were pushed out.

Typical of the smaller, independent women's collectives that sprouted in villages and towns around the country in the early 1990s was the Grupo Venancia (named for a peasant woman who died in the 1979 insurrection) in Matagalpa. Started in 1991 by a former

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nun, Yeta Ramirez, and a Canadian cooperant, Helen Dixon, both of whom were active in the Sandinista organization UNAG, the collective of ten women moved into the space left by the dissolution of the revolutionary state. Supported at first by a stipend that Dixon received from CUSO, a Canadian NGO, the group began to receive its own funding (also from foreign NGOs) in 1993. Two years later, it was teaching literacy to peasant women, helping women to start small self-help development projects, and doing trainings in health and sexuality, all incorporating "gender training" on the sources of women's oppression. The collective also participated in several loosely linked women's alliances — the Women's Network of Matagalpa, the Women's Network of the North Ana Lucila, the Women's Network Against Violence and others. "Autonomy is a central strategic issue for us," Dixon told me. "Our emphasis is on bottom-up organizing, collective decision-making, empowering new subjects and networking, not coalition-building. We need to step back from politics for a while to explore methodologies and organizational forms, to build a new base and develop new theory."[8]

The oldest independent women's group in Matagalpa was the Collectivo des Mujeres de Matagalpa — the Matagalpa Women's Collective — founded in 1989 but with origins in a theater group started by CONAPRO, the Sandinista-led Nicaraguan Confederation of Professional Associations, three years earlier. After the elections, the collective, which by then included several health professionals, registered as an NGO and developed programs with a strong focus on women and health, as well as awareness-building on domestic violence, sexuality and the problems women face in the society-at-large. At first, said spokesperson Eva Molina, the FSLN viewed collective members as "troublemakers" and declined to support them. In the face of this, they turned to outside sources, like the Dutch agency NOVIB, which funds some of their projects. They also asked for modest fees and contributions from women who participated in their programs. The collective maintained a library and invited women to drop in to the center for informal gatherings and workshops, often with their children, but Molina told me that organizers sometimes had difficulty getting women to come, due to problems at home. "Men often stop women from leaving the house to go to meetings. If they don't succeed, their next level of resistance is to make fun of the women and denigrate their work," she said. "We try to help women take up issues in their households, or we intervene directly by talking with the men. Whenever we can, we try to get individual men sympathetic to

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us to help win over others in the community."

The variety of issues with which they were dealing, coupled with the tensions carried over from the gender battles within the FSLN, worked against efforts to tie this activity into a national political movement at this point, according to Molina. "The movement is diverse, very wide and open, with different needs throughout. Each organization has to be directed toward its own particular constituency — rural women, urban women in barrios, reproductive health, sexual workers, teachers," she said. "Our goal is to bring all these issues together into a common fight, but at this time there are many different ideas on how to get there and how to get the results we need, and the women's movement is permeated with a political culture that is polarized." Under these circumstances, members of her collective preferred to build alliances with other social movements in order to influence the state directly on policy or legislation without becoming entangled with the FSLN or other political parties in the lead-up to the next electoral contest. "People have lost faith," she told me. "Now we are all trying to build something new out of the social movements, but we are very cynical about the elections."[9]

* * *

The Managua-based Puntos de Encuentro, a mixed (men and women) feminist organization, was started in 1991 by two former leaders of the ATC women's secretariat. One of the better-endowed new NGOs, with support from NOVIB and other mostly European donor agencies and with thirty people on staff, Puntos was, according to Ana Criquillón, "a feminist education, research and communications center dedicated to the empowerment and autonomy of women and young people." Among their programs were what she called a "women's university" which offered courses in such things as gender and development, gender planning and the roots of sexism and adultism and which hosted seminars and open houses for women and men on related topics. They published a bimonthly bulletin on women's issues and activities with a print-run of 15,000 aimed at a post-primary school audience that was distributed by hand to over 1,000 groups around the country. They provided capacity-building support for organizations and networks within the women's movement. They helped a youth group produce a radio program. They were producing a socially-conscious soap opera for national TV. And they ran a "masculinity program" in which men looked at the development of *machismo* in Nicaraguan society. "We are concerned with the transformation of power relations in the daily life of men and women,

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adults and young people, and the way these relations are expressed through domination and violence," Criquillón told me. As such, Puntos saw itself as a part of the women's movement, not as a service agency. "We are not intermediaries standing on the sidelines — we are inside this movement," she said.[10]

Puntos co-founder Olga Maria Espinosa moved on to León in 1992 where she joined three other women to set up the Rural Women's Committee to promote economic development in the impoverished countryside "from an independent feminist point of view." The committee organized unemployed women, most of whom had worked on cotton plantations before they were privatized. Most were illiterate, many were malnourished, few owned property, and nearly all had families with, on average, seven children — often without men present. "We discovered that these women didn't know how to farm," Espinosa said. "We had thought they would, having lived and worked on the farms all their lives, but they had always been 'helpers,' and they didn't know things like when to plant, when to fertilize, when to harvest." The committee provided the women with loans, training and extension assistance. Organizers also taught basic literacy and ran workshops on gender issues (family planning, domestic violence and women's legal rights, among other issues), but, as in Matagalpa, participants sometimes ran into trouble at home over this. One husband actually burned his wife's notebook.

Often it was difficult to get women to talk openly about their problems. "Women in this country live in a great deal of silence," said Espinosa. There had not been more serious resistance, though, no doubt because the projects were economically successful. "Till now, eighty percent of the women can sell something beyond what they produce for themselves," she told me. With such a role in the community — working side-by-side with these women but not being *of* them — the committee struggled a bit to define its identity. Espinosa termed it a "facilitator" rather than a service agency. Meanwhile, she said, the committee was concerned not with its place in the national political scene but with whether to transform itself into a membership organization or to remain a tightly-knit collective.[11]

* * *

Despite the disconnection from party politics evident in the work of these former Sandinista activists, more connected the threads of this fractious women's movement than many of its participants tended to admit, or perhaps to realize. In effect, autonomous feminists set the

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tone and content of the discourse on gender within the party-affiliated unions and mass organizations, if not within the party leadership. However, the legacy of mistrust remained a strong barrier to cooperation.

Even AMNLAE, which for years had insisted, with the FSLN, that the roots of Nicaraguan women's oppression lay in the inherited economic system (and would be transformed with it), began to identify patriarchy as the problem in its training process. They also placed a heavy emphasis on developing women's self-esteem in terms that echoed those used in the nonparty collectives and NGOs. "We have to conceptualize the meaning of patriarchy and how it is expressed in the behavior of men and women," Dora Zeladón told twenty-five regional AMNLAE organizers at a Managua seminar before they broke up into small groups to compare experiences. "We also need to reflect on how we undervalue ourselves — how we internalize *machismo* — and how this limits us from reaching a better position in the family and in the society."[12]

Zeladón spent much of the 1980s abroad as a Sandinista diplomat. She returned after the elections, went to work for AMNLAE in 1991 as the director of international relations and was elected to head it at a special congress in August 1993, when the organization's prestige in the society and its clout within the FSLN were at all-time lows. When I met her two years later, she criticized the party for its failures on gender politics in the 1980s and faulted it for resisting autonomy for AMNLAE and the other social movements after the 1990s defeat. "We need power to change unequal power relations. We feel that in order to negotiate on an equal basis with political parties, with the government, with all the organizations in the society, we need to be ourselves, we need to be united and strong as an organization," she told me.

> The children have grown up, and an intelligent position for the party at this time is to understand that the autonomy of the organizations will promote the party — will strengthen it — because many people who are members are not in the party. Some in our organization are from the *contras*! They came because they think this is a good space to demand their rights. They like what we say. For the first time, somebody is doing something for them.[13]

AMNLAE was running women's clinics, managing a legal aid program, promoting a revolving credit scheme, urging increased representation of women in the FSLN and doing gender education at its

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various centers around the country. Zeladón herself frequently placed articles in the Sandinista paper *Barricada* before its closure in 1998. Her essays urged the elimination of the sexual division of labor in the workplace, decried the setbacks women suffered in the economy, and called attention to the alarming rise of domestic violence throughout the society. She also argued for fifty percent representation of women in all political institutions (parties, unions and the state), and she demanded such rights for women as equal access to credit and increases for widows' pensions to the decriminalization of abortion, access to family planning and recognition of common law marriages. Zeladón participated in coalitions with nonparty women's organizations, such as the one that coordinated Nicaragua's participation in the international women's conference in Beijing in 1995. She told me she was interested in other forms of collaboration, but she said that this was difficult to pull off because of the anger that many women activists carried toward the FSLN and her organization. "We need to mature in terms of how we're going to reach consensus with each other," she said.

Sorting out the details of why this or that joint initiative didn't work would be a daunting, and ultimately impossible, task. (Several women in the autonomous sector, interviewed separately, accused Zeladón of trying to stack the Beijing delegation with AMNLAE members and claimed she dropped out of the National Feminist Committee in 1993 under party orders.) But there was a common refrain among party-affiliated organizations that denigrated the nonparty organizations as run by and representative of professional women, rather than the grassroots, and as being too much foreign-influenced. The latter charge was ironic in view of the FSLN's heavy reliance on foreign volunteers and funding in the 1980s (not to mention the class origin of many of its leaders), but it was an issue that could not be ignored. At a time when the right was politically ascendant, small things could undermine reform efforts in the socially-conservative countryside. In Matagalpa, for example, several Sandinista women criticized the Grupo Venancia for having Canadian, Spanish and Italian collective members. One cited a tendency by the foreigners to hug men and women in the villages, a gesture that was sometimes misinterpreted as having a sexual connotation. This critic claimed that this played into the hands of villagers who sought to discredit gender training of any sort. Whether or not this interpretation was accurate — or whether the account itself was even true — the story was indicative of a hostile attitude to the autonomous women's organizations that

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was widely shared by Sandinista organizers, none of whom, needless to say, spoke to the Grupo women about their culturally-insensitive behavior in order to help them correct it. This was because it was an expression of a generalized critique, which no one wanted to let go of. "All they do is fight on the small things," insisted one AMNLAE cadre in Matagalpa. "Their idea is to put women against men. Ours is emancipation."

ATC women's secretariat head Alba Palacios — whom some of her former PIE *companeras* characterized as a "traitor" to the women's movement for staying with the FSLN — argued that the autonomous sector ghettoized the gender struggle by working in women-only groups. "We think the struggle should take place within the society, not apart from it," she told me. In the ATC, where women attained close to thirty-five percent of the leadership positions, the secretariat was trying to defend women's jobs as well as to provide services — union clinics, credit schemes, childcare and so on — while increasing women's role in union leadership and reaching out to educate the men.[14] However, she acknowledged that some men in the agricultural workers' union continued to obstruct change. "If these men do not learn to appreciate the gender struggle, women will get fed up and leave," she said. "The result will weaken the union."[15] Which is precisely what happened in the Sandinista industrial union in 1994.

* * *

Unlike the ATC, whose leader, Edgardo Garcia, was an advocate of autonomy for the social movements and a supporter of women's rights within the FSLN, the CST was a rigidly hierarchical organization whose leadership opposed the trend toward autonomy, resisted moves to democratize the federation itself, and did little to respond to pressures for gender reform apart from including modest benefits for women in contract negotiations.

Despite the extensive layoffs in 1991-92, women managed in that period to increase their power in a number of the industrial unions, notably among textile workers and sugar workers where they made up majorities. At the same time, the women's secretariat of the federation was gaining financial autonomy for an array of projects and services by securing funds from external sources. In effect, a quiet polarization was underway inside the union. The secretariat's programs — childcare centers, legal aid services, health clinics, technical training and small business development, as well as sex education and leadership training — targeted unemployed women as well as those

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who retained jobs, giving it a constituency beyond the union's traditional membership. This following, like the secretariat's material resources, was outside the control or influence of the core (male) leadership, otherwise pre-occupied with the management of its new enterprises. But it was not only women who were slipping away from old-line leaders. More and more men, particularly those from rural areas, were also concerned over the decline in living conditions and were becoming disenchanted with the new union-owned businesses, which did not seem to benefit the general membership in any observable fashion. As a consequence of this, several long-time CST leaders found their positions threatened by women candidates and their male allies as they prepared for an April 1994 congress.

The crisis came to an ugly head after the women's secretariat held a pre-congress assembly of their own in March at which 800 women unionists demanded a recomposition of the CST leadership. Embattled CST leaders responded with a campaign to isolate and discredit the rebels in order to ensure their own re-election. They vetted women's speeches for the congress and even changed its venue from Matagalpa to Estelí (a Sandinista stronghold with no industrial base) to ensure stricter party control. In the event, none of the seven candidates proposed by the women's assembly were elected, and a woman loyal to the leadership and known to be hostile to the feminist trend was appointed to head the women's secretariat.

Shortly after the tense congress, to which six of the twenty-two affiliates failed to attend, CST leaders launched a highly personal attack against the former secretariat head, Sandra Ramos, taking her to court for allegedly stealing money and pillaging union equipment. Ramos had actually resigned several months ahead of the congress, but she remained the target of the leadership's wrath, and she was the subject of a series of inflammatory articles in *Barricada* the following June. Despite this — or perhaps helped by it — many of those grouped around Ramos opted to form a new organization, the Movement of Employed and Unemployed Women (known by its members simply as the *Movimiento*). Though some of its 450 founding members — and even a handful of its leaders — retained their affiliation to the CST, most ceased to be active. This stripped the federation of many of its best women cadres and severed, or at least severely weakened, its links with many women workers. A year after the congress, the women's secretariat lacked an office of its own or even a telephone, and nearly all its programs had ceased to exist. At the same time, the formation of the new movement marked the launch

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of a women's organization outside the FSLN which was neither led by, nor in any way comprised of, middle class women. This was a mass, working class women's association.

"Our challenge is to create new organizational alternatives that allow us to have our own space in which we feel accompanied in our struggle against the profound discrimination that we women experience now in Nicaragua," Ramos told me. "Above all, we are trying hard to be non-authoritarian — to create a democratic organizational form — in the aftermath of our hard experience with the CST."[16] At their first planning conference in May 1995 — which they billed as their sixth congress in an attempt to claim ownership of their CST history — 800 women gathered to discuss such issues as the effect of the economic crisis, the new free-trade zones, constitutional reforms, gender discrimination in the unions, self-esteem, domestic violence and other topics in all-day workshops designed to produce a program of action for the new organization.

When I visited them again a year later at their sparsely furnished one-room office in Managua, membership had grown to more than 7,000. They were offering modest "scholarship" programs to unemployed women for training in non-traditional trades, such as carpentry, electrical repair and auto-mechanics, as well as running educational programs to promote women's self-employment and conducting workshops on health, housing issues, women's legal rights and other subjects. They were also mobilizing women for issue-specific campaigns, but they were doing nothing related to the national elections underway then. "Anyone who will work with us can be a member, regardless of their party membership," said Ramos. "We're here because we want to transform our society. We want a society that is more just and more equal between men and women, but we have no trust for the parties — they want us for our vote, and then they forget about us."[17]

* * *

I was in Managua for the October 1996 balloting as a guest of an international women's delegation — WOMEN (Women Organized to Monitor the Elections in Nicaragua). Participants came from Eritrea, Palestine, South Africa and fifteen other countries to explore issues related to women and politics and then to monitor the elections. We met with government officials, political candidates, election commissioners, journalists and representatives of women's organizations, many of whom I had already interviewed for this project.

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In the week before the elections — which had 6,931 candidates, twenty percent of whom were women, running for local, district and national office — there was a flurry of last-minute campaigning by all the parties, as one might expect, some of it specifically aimed at attracting women voters. The FSLN had evolved on gender issues since the last elections, diversifying both its slate of candidates and its program, but most of these changes were the result of pressure from women, rather than a change of outlook in the leadership. (At least this was the widely held perception among party and nonparty women.) As a consequence, the FSLN was not credited with growth. Rather, it was seen by many women activists as merely making grudging concessions. The fact that the Sandinista campaign was being waged largely through the media, using a high-powered Costa Rican consulting firm, rather than face-to-face (and woman-to-woman) at the grassroots level did little to overcome this attitude.

The stage for what gains women did make in the elections was set earlier — and not by party heavy weights. Women militants won a major victory at the FSLN's 1994 congress, ahead of the national elections, when party leaders agreed to a thirty percent quota for women in both leadership positions and electoral slates for local and national office. Women succeeded not only in securing a commitment to raw numbers but to what they termed a "braid" on the list of nominees, weaving women candidates into it in such a way that they would win seats proportional to their numbers once the votes were counted.[18] The source of this initiative was not AMNLAE — though its leaders later claimed it — or any other specifically Sandinista organization or caucus. Rather, it emerged from a series of informal meetings among party and nonparty women acting on their own and calling themselves the *Auto Convocal* (literally "self-convoking," but also a pun that can mean "party-crashing").

Some 300 women, including representatives from AMNLAE and other Sandinista organizations, attended the session that adopted the call for the representation of women at all levels of party leadership and for a gendered perspective in the party program. Later, at the FSLN congress, Sandinista women actually asked for fifty percent representation. Party leaders (all men) countered with twenty percent. The congress compromised on thirty. In order to accommodate women into the FSLN's National Directorate, its size was increased from nine to fifteen. Critics derided this move as an attempt to protect the turf of those long in power, while simply adding new faces. They also pointed to the fact that of the women chosen, few were

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sympathetic to the women's movement, and that sexism — what Nicaraguans identify as *machismo* — was not being addressed in the rest of the leadership. "One of the problems for the FSLN is that gender consciousness is not a criteria for selection to the leadership," said Ana Criquillón. "You couldn't have a racist in the leadership, but there is no problem having these convinced *machistas* there."

This congress was marked by other political conflicts, too, as tensions within the party, building since the fall from power in 1990, finally came to a head. Representatives were sharply divided into competing "tendencies" that bitterly contested the structure and program of the FSLN. Afterward, there was a split, yielding a new party that identified itself with what organizers termed "*sandinismo,*" but who rejected the FSLN as its sole representative. They called themselves the Movement for Sandinista Renovation (MRS in its Spanish acronym). Two of the five women elected to the FSLN National Directorate, Myrna Cunningham and Dora María Télez, resigned to join the MRS, which at its founding congress in May 1995 adopted a forty percent rule for the representation of women. (Interestingly, the ballot count for the seventeen-member MRS leadership showed that all seven women elected to it had sufficient votes without the rule.)

At about this time, the FSLN embarked on a study of the two most dynamic social movements in the society — the community movement grouped within the *Movimiento Communal* and the broad women's movement. The research was conducted under the direction of newly elected National Directorate member Monica Boltadano and former FSLN General Secretariat head Ricardo Periera. Ironically, perhaps, Boltadano was identified with the party traditionalists, while Periera was closer to those who favored more autonomy for the social movements and with efforts to win disaffected feminists back into the party. "Accepting the diversity of civil society is the smartest thing the front can do," he told me. "They're going to lose control if they don't, but they don't need control. Either the front has to change or it will disappear."[19] Unfortunately, nothing concrete came out of the more than two months of interviews. As the 1996 elections approached, the FSLN seemed to be starting all over. This time, however, when party leaders tried to convene a meeting of women activists to ask yet again what they wanted, few showed up, choosing instead to meet independently to define an agenda of their own.

Early in 1996 a group of seventy-to-eighty women from several parties, NGOs, collectives and other groups began meeting to discuss the coming elections. In the course of three workshops, they drafted a

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"minimum agenda." On the basis of this, they gathered 3,500 signatures from women voters and launched a National Women's Coalition on March 8th, International Women's Day. Declining to endorse specific candidates for fear of splitting the alliance, they outlined a handful of basic positions on women's representation in the parties and on women's rights in the society. Then they set out to organize public "encounters" to promote all women candidates under the slogan "Diverse, Different, but United."[20] They also convinced all but one of the presidential candidates to sign onto the minimum program. Unfortunately, Arnaldo Alemán, the one who declined, won.

* * *

Within the Nicaraguan women's movement, even among those outside the FSLN, there is a continuing debate about the extent to which they should concern themselves with politics, and if so, how. Sofia Montenegro, one of the prime movers behind the National Women's Coalition, depicts this debate as one between "cultural feminists" and "political feminists," but she insists that she is not disturbed over it:

> The women's movement is going through a transition. This transition is a very difficult one — a transition within the transition, which the whole country is going through. This accounts for the so-called fragmentation, which I think is inevitable. It is also necessary, because women are elaborating a sense of autonomy, and they are in a defensive state over this. They have to create first the conviction and then do the exercise — the aerobics of autonomy. This accounts for the sprouting of lots of little groups and for some of the difficulties they have. They're all conscious that we need to form broad coalitions of women's groups or a new sort of organization that links all these groups together as a political force. In order to do that, some stages have to be achieved, and we are working in that direction, but first we have to provoke an epistemological rupture in the thinking of women so they can synthesize their experience and move ahead.
>
> This means trying to think in a more integral manner — not dividing the economy here, reproduction there, the private and the public — but trying to see the interconnectedness. We also have to build individual empowerment in order to move away from an identity as a victim. We have to work in the objective and the subjective planes of the women's movement. That means to recognize what sort of currents and

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feelings are operating within women's experience and their organizations in order to open the door to create a new type of organization.

To take issues, for example — health, sexuality and so on — it's fine. It opens the door for women to participate in a tiny place in the struggle, on a theme. But if you want to make changes really, you have to have a broad vision of the country, a broad vision of politics, and your own discourse, and then make a gendered lecture on reality, all reality, not just a piece of it. Therefore, I do believe that the intellectuals of the women's movement, the feminists, are the organic intellectuals of the Movement. I do not see myself becoming a political leader, but I am helping to create this broad discourse and giving it back to the rest.

From my point of view, the role for those women in a third world country who have the privilege of having academic knowledge and political experience and the access to information is to synthesize it, organize it and give it back for the others to fight with it. That's the role for the feminists within the women's movement, because otherwise the tendency is to fight in the short-term for the little tiny things, and it will take trillions of years before you change the world. It's not putting one thing or the other first. It's a parallel job — to create spaces to fight for issues and at the same time to construct an integral vision of reality and then to try to influence the rest of the society to buy it, to see things the way you do. For that, you need a strategy, not only tactics.[21]

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Section Three

WORKERS

Gaining entry to the Mercedes Benz assembly plant in East London, South Africa, in February 1995 was a challenge in itself. Security was tight as the morning shift streamed into the yard, passing through a narrow gate in the razor wire fence where identity cards were checked by armed guards. My wife, photographer Debbie Hird, was forced to leave her cameras with the guard. I had to part with my tape recorder, after my ID was checked against the list of authorized visitors. We were both frisked before we were permitted to proceed, on foot, with our hosts from the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa. Three of them led us through a complex of posh, closed-door offices — plant management — to a wood-paneled corporate conference room. They had secured it for a round-table session with a dozen shop stewards, guaranteed the right to such meetings by a hard-fought bargaining agreement.

These elected worker-leaders — all men, all Africans — represented the vanguard of the liberation movement in the Eastern Cape, known as the "border region" because it was sandwiched between the former tribal "homelands" of Transkei and Ciskei along the country's southern coast. Among the most highly industrialized areas of South Africa, it has long been celebrated for its militancy. One of the shop stewards, a former head of the ANC Youth League, was the branch chair of the South African National Civics Organization — an association of community organizations sometimes characterized as the fourth leg of the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance. He was also the publicity secretary for the ANC in East London. Another was on the national executive committee of the ANC Youth League. He was also the branch secretary general of the ANC. A third was the chair of a local civic. A fourth was the chair of the NUMSA local and the

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ANC education officer. Another, who described himself as the "political commissioner," was a former member of MK, the ANC's armed wing. And one, Mtutuzeli Tom, was the national president of NUMSA. Like the others, he was a daily shift-worker at this plant, laboring alongside the 4,500 men and women employed there and collecting the same wages. Nearly all were members of the Communist Party, in addition to the ANC, and most were active in East London community organizations. These were busy folks.

A casual recitation of their political origins quickly turned into a debate over the direction of the recently elected Government of National Unity and COSATU's relationship to it. "We're now in a transition from a politics of confrontation to a politics of cooperation," said one shop steward, a former local secretary of COSATU and a branch secretary of the SACP. "People are still adjusting to this new situation. Their loyalty is still with the ANC, but they're impatient."

The strong shop steward structure that developed within COSATU has long been one of the federation's main strengths, and it contributed significantly to the collapse of the apartheid regime. During the struggle, it gave COSATU enormous leverage over the economy at the factory level, positioning the trade unions to shut down entire industries over national issues or to close all the factories within a particular region when an issue arose locally. It schooled worker-leaders in such depth and breadth — creating layers upon layers of experienced leaders capable of moving up when needed — that unrelenting state repression aimed at the top ranks failed to crush the union's resistance in apartheid's final days. Nor, for the same reason, did the sudden move of many top COSATU leaders into government (and business) in 1994 have the debilitating effect that this "brain drain" had on community organizations and NGOs, though it did cause problems. But, perhaps more importantly, the shop steward movement incubated a militant, democratic approach to popular mobilization, which worker-leaders carried, together with a highly developed working class outlook, to the rest of the liberation movement during the height of the anti-apartheid fight. A key question afterward was: could they keep up this level of militancy and popular participation with this class perspective — or anything approaching it — in the post-apartheid period.

In Eritrea, the workers' movement was at a far different stage of development — due in significant part to the vastly different level of industrialization there — but the long-range objectives of the organizers were similar. Eritrea's much less developed postwar economy,

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most of it in state hands, was a shambles, and the wage-earning work force was relatively small. The trade unions inherited from the war era were constructed by the occupying power and, throughout the 1980s, run by political cadre from Ethiopia's governing political party. The main effect of their efforts was to sow distrust of any form of organization among the workers, most of whom were rendered passive and uncommunicative by the rigid control of all union activity. During the war, the EPLF had organized workers inside the country and abroad in chapters of a single mass association designed to support the independence movement, not to function as workplace trade unions. Hence, the postwar labor movement was, for all practical purposes, starting from zero. Organizers insisted, though, that their aim was to establish an independent trade union federation with a strong commitment to workplace democracy, organized on an industry-based model. Leaders of the newly launched National Confederation of Eritrean Workers said they looked to COSATU for inspiration and example, particularly the role of shop stewards, but, as with most else, they were experimenting with their own forms and structures as well.

Strong trade unions developed in Nicaragua after the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 and were harnessed to the state in a pattern typical of socialist-oriented national liberation movements of the era. The unions, like the other popular organizations, were heavily subsidized by the government and subordinated to the FSLN. The agricultural workers' union was more autonomous than that of the industrial workers — financially and organizationally — and was therefore better able to weather the storm that followed the Sandinista fall from power in February 1990. But the new regime's slash-and-burn approach to the economy, and to state-run social services, threw all the unions into crisis from the moment it took over. The first year of the transition was marked by a series of major strikes and street actions, many of which turned violent, that were intended to slow the dismantling of programs upon which thousands of people depended. But the unions, with the party, were caught entirely unprepared for this and had no alternatives to propose — only: do less damage. Their ability to maneuver was complicated by transition arrangements, negotiated between the FSLN and the UNO, for the unions to take control of entire factories and plantations that were being privatized. The industrial unions were also badly hurt by gender divisions that cost them some of their best organizers. In the years since, the unions have struggled, with varying degrees of success, to reposition them-

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selves for the new challenges they face.

The weakest trade unions among the four countries under study were those in the occupied Palestinian territories. Having both a stunted internal economy under strict, unstintingly repressive military occupation and a large migratory labor force that operated inside Israel where Palestinian unions were prohibited from organizing would make the construction of a viable labor movement extremely difficult under any circumstances. However, the chronic political sectarianism in the national movement made it impossible. It also prevented workers from playing a class-conscious role in the liberation movement itself, despite the Marxist orientation of three out of four of the squabbling parties. This, in turn, further weakened the nationalist struggle.

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Chapter 9

SOUTH AFRICA

AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL

COSATU was unique among the social movements in these four countries — and in most of the world — in establishing itself as a partner in the political alliance that provided the foundation for the government in its initial phases. This positioned the workers to directly influence the course of the political transition there like no other social sector or nonparty organization. COSATU's overlapping membership in both the SACP and the ANC also enabled it to influence its alliance partners from within, just as the political organizations sought to do in reverse. COSATU placed a number of its leaders on the ANC list for the 1994 national elections and again for those in 1999, giving it a voice within the government — one that often sounded like an alarm, as the new government moved rightward. At the same time, COSATU members within the Communist Party were often credited with pushing that organization leftward.1 Thus the trade unions played a major role in defining the parameters of the political arena as well as acting within it. What gave COSATU this political strength was its effectiveness as a trade union — as an organized, worker-led expression of workers' interests on the factory floor and in working class communities. This fact is central to understanding its key role in liberating and democratizing South Africa and to its importance in charting new directions for the post-cold war left elsewhere.

COSATU was launched in November 1985 out of a lengthy and at times contentious series of unity talks among the leading black trade unions in the country. In the event, thirty-three unions with over 450,000 members took the plunge. What bound them together was

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a commitment to five basic principles: non-racialism, one-industry one-union, worker control, representation based upon paid-up membership, and strong national coordination.[2] They also passed a number of specific resolutions calling for, among other things: an active program to counter discrimination against women, support for the right to strike and picket, and support for the international disinvestment movement, despite its potential impact on South African workers. This signaled its intent to play a central role in the anti-apartheid struggle.

By the elections in 1994, the new federation had grown to 1.3 million members — half the organized workforce in the country. Its largest affiliate was the mineworkers with 311,000 members. The metalworkers' union had 170,000 members, and clothing and textile workers had 157,000. By 1998, despite lay-offs in key manufacturing industries, COSATU had expanded further to reach a total paid-up membership of 1.8 million, and it was vigorously defending workers' rights in a wide range of venues and forums. As Martin Murray points out, the rise of militant trade unionism under the singularly repressive apartheid system led to a situation in which organized workers gained collective rights before the overwhelming majority of South Africans won their individual civil rights. This historical anomaly continues to shape the perception of (and the strategy for attaining) rights within the liberation movement and the post-apartheid state.[3]

* * *

Labor analyst Jeremy Baskin argues that the main points to be taken from South Africa's checkered union history are: the fragility of trade unions that are built around single charismatic leaders, the importance of communist organizers in building the base of these unions, the persistent inability to unite black and white workers despite the predominance of non-racialism as a political principle, the importance of plant-based unionism as a vehicle for winning concrete gains for workers, and the inevitability of political unionism in South Africa. He also makes a compelling case for the fact that each new organizing initiative in this century drew on the lessons — and often the cadre — of the previous one, despite some colossal failures, and that COSATU's strength is very much a product of this rich experience of collective class confrontation.[4]

South Africa's first black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) was founded in 1919 in Cape

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Town with a few thousand dock workers. By 1927, under the autocratic leadership of Clements Kadalie (and with strong on-the-ground organizing by members of the Communist Party), it grew to some 100,000 members, drawn from a wide range of vocations and workplaces — factory workers, petty traders, farm laborers, teachers and others — and resembling more a mass organization than a trade union. After Kadalie expelled the communists in 1926, a power-struggle erupted among regional rivals and the union split, sending the movement into a precipitous decline from which it never recovered. Still, it served as a training ground for many activists who resurfaced during the Depression to try again.

The outbreak of World War II had an effect in South Africa similar to that in the U.S. As thousands of young white men went off to fight, black men migrated into the cities and took their places as well as new jobs generated by the war effort itself. In 1939, eleven unions with 20,000 members came together to launch the Joint Committee of African Trade Unions under the leadership of another idiosyncratic leader, a white Trotskyite fiercely opposed to the Communist Party named Max Gordon. When he was arrested for anti-war activities in 1940, this initiative, too, collapsed. Meanwhile, however, communists had been active in organizing black railway workers, food and canning workers (a founding affiliate of COSATU three decades later) and other sectors. These unions grouped themselves at about this time into the African Federation of Trade Unions. In 1941, unity talks among the AFTU, a newly launched mineworkers union and other independent locals produced the Council of Non-European Trade Unions, which led a wave of strikes the next year. By 1945, with South Africa's economy booming, CNETU claimed 158,000 members in 119 affiliates, but they were poorly organized and unprepared for serious confrontation with either management or a hostile state.

When 76,000 mineworkers staged a week-long walk-out the following year, CNETU leaders stood by while security forces brutally crushed the strikers, driving thousands into the mine shafts where at least twelve died and 1,200 were injured. Afterward, the government arrested fifty CNETU and Communist Party leaders, effectively breaking the federation. Yet despite the further disruption caused by the banning of the CPSA in 1950, the removal of many communists from leadership positions in the surviving unions, and the imposition of new apartheid legislation that racialized both the workplace and the trade unions, organizing continued.

In 1955, another federation was launched — the South African

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Congress of Trade Unions, with 20,000 members in nineteen affiliates — that was explicitly tied to the ANC-led Congress Alliance and that immediately joined into the popular political campaigns underway against apartheid.[5] By the end of the decade, SACTU had 46,000 members in thirty-five affiliates, but it placed more emphasis on its campaigning than on its workplace organizing. When most of its leaders went underground in 1960 after the ANC was banned, the federation quickly declined, as had the others before it when stripped of their top leaders. The wisdom of the decision to abandon the trade unions for the newly formed ANC armed wing, Spear of the Nation (MK), remains hotly debated, but the flip side of the unions' loss of cadre was the transformative effect the influx of these highly politicized worker-leaders had on the liberation movement, then dominated by middle-class militants.

Contemporary trade unionists and other political activists describe the 1960s in South Africa as the "dark decade." Organizing activity within the country very nearly disappeared. Thousands suspected of anti-apartheid activity were imprisoned, and many were executed, as the Nationalist Party imposed a draconian system of racial and political controls that stripped black South Africans of all rights and that sharply restricted black labor. At the same time — and by no small coincidence — the country's GNP increased at an annual rate of six percent, giving it one of the highest growth rates in the world. This expansion, especially in the industrial sector, inevitably generated a response from workers — call this Newton's Law of Politics — who found themselves barely subsisting at third world levels within a booming first world economy. The first stirrings came in the early 1970s and erupted in a wave of strikes in Durban in 1973. This time, however, the strikes were led by informal workers' networks that were difficult for the state or management to penetrate. The arrest of suspected leaders did little to slow the momentum of a surge that saw more than 60,000 workers walk off their jobs in the first three months of the year. Behind this renewed worker militancy lay a unique confluence of actors, including former SACTU, ANC and SACP activists, newly active workers and Marxist-influenced independent white intellectuals. Volunteers established "advice offices" — precursors of the NGOs that multiplied like rabbits in South Africa, as elsewhere, in the 1980s — which supported workers around specific violations of their rights in the workplace. Because they concentrated on workplace issues and abstained from involvement in political confrontations elsewhere (even steering clear of the 1976 student-led Soweto

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uprising), they were generally ignored by the authorities, while they quietly helped rebuild the trade unions, brick by brick.

A key turning point was reached in 1979, when the Wiehahn Commission, appointed by the government to investigate labor strife, issued a report that recommended the acceptance of black workers' right to organize trade unions. This conclusion arose from a growing conviction by business leaders that legal unions of black workers were important to bring discipline to the labor force — that control would be less costly than repression. It was perhaps no coincidence that the report came out a month after the launch of yet another labor federation — the Federation of South African Trade Unions, with 20,000 members in twelve affiliates. At this point the momentum shifted decisively in favor of the unions, and organizing accelerated in earnest. By 1981, FOSATU, concentrating on shopfloor organizing and staying out of community politics, had grown to 95,000 members in 387 factories. The next year the Council of Unions of South Africa, a smaller, black-consciousness-oriented labor center, launched the National Union of Mineworkers, which in two years reached a membership of 110,000, making it the largest single union in the country at that time.[6]

By the early 1980s, there were three main trends (excluding white unions) in the labor movement: (1) those grouped around FOSATU, which had a strong focus on shop-floor unionism and workplace democracy (pioneering the development of highly-skilled shop stewards) but an avoidance of political involvement outside the workplace, and which had some whites in its administrative structure; (2) the nineteen unions, many of them very small, that were affiliated with or strongly sympathetic to the newly formed, pro-ANC alliance known as the United Democratic Front (including several general unions not based in specific workplaces and secretly linked with SACTU and the ANC) and which prioritized the anti-apartheid struggle over workplace issues; and (3) the black consciousness-oriented CUSA, including NUM, and the PAC-oriented Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions, which generally had centrist positions on the question of prioritizing either community struggles or factory floor organizing and had strong reservations on how close to associate with ANC politics, particularly over the issue of white participation in union leadership.

Unity talks were launched at a conference in Cape Town in August 1981, but the effort very nearly collapsed a year later at a second meeting convened at Port Elizabeth. The issues that divided them were

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the ANC-oriented unions' adherence to "non-racialism" (versus what BC-oriented unions called "anti-racialism," reserving all leadership positions for black workers) and the question of whether or not to register the unions with the state. A press statement afterward declared: "It was decided that there is no basis for the formation of a federation of all unions represented at this stage. No further meeting is planned."[7]

The talks resumed, however, and despite other deadlocks, the process went forward. A two-day stayaway in the Transvaal region in November 1984 brought out 800,000 workers from all three union trends. This drove home the potential power of a unified federation. That year CUSA's largest affiliate, NUM, bolted the BC camp and committed itself to COSATU, sealing the success of the venture. Most of the other unions in the BC camp declined to do so, however, banding together with the PAC-oriented unions instead in 1986 to form the National Council of Trade Unions, which survived into the post-apartheid period. Meanwhile, the tension among COSATU unions themselves between what came to be identified as the "workerists" and the "populists" — roughly, those who put class first versus those who prioritized the liberation struggle — continued into that federation's early years, nearly dividing it in 1987 when it officially endorsed the ANC's Freedom Charter at its second congress.

These were extremely difficult years for COSATU and for the entire anti-apartheid movement, as the growing challenge to white rule generated ever harsher repression. COSATU had been born in a wave of strikes that saw the highest number of stayaways in ten years and that continued into 1986. The government responded in July 1985 with a partial State of Emergency, with which it sought to dampen union and community resistance. This was lifted the following March, a month after my first visit to the country, but it was reimposed on a far more comprehensive scale in June 1986. Overnight, thousands of activists were arrested and many thousands more went to ground, popping up here and there to make speeches, attend meetings and take other highly publicized actions that drove government officials mad, while COSATU continued to grow.

At its launch COSATU had committed itself to a national drive for a "living wage." This campaign got off the ground in 1987 with demands for a forty-hour work week, job security, six months maternity leave, the right to education and training and several other points. But with the intensification of state repression that year — among the most vicious crackdowns in the long anti-apartheid struggle[8] — the

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campaign never really took hold. Nevertheless, that year saw the longest strike wave the country had ever seen, with retail workers, railway and postal workers, mineworkers and others too numerous to name walking out on their jobs, supported by widespread consumer boycotts and other community-based actions. This time, the government moved to limit strikes by amending the Labor Relations Act, an action that ironically did what union leaders had not managed to do on their own — cause COSATU and NACTU to join forces in a campaign against the amendments. In February 1988 the government went on to ban the UDF altogether and to sharply restrict COSATU's political activities. Despite this, that year and much of the next marked a period of consolidation and growing internal unity for the unions.

One of COSATU's most difficult but ultimately crucial internal struggles was over mergers among its constituent unions. At the launch, members committed themselves to fold all the affiliates with overlapping jurisdictions into ten large industry-based unions. In the event, it took almost four years to get the thirty-three founders, plus several late-comers, down to fifteen — a few hold-outs continued squabbling into the early 1990s — but this reorganization vastly increased COSATU's strength in the workplace and on the national political stage. Not surprisingly, the main difficulties in completing the mergers tended to revolve around questions of turf, fear of loss of hard-won union identity and fear of loss of jobs, power and resources by some officials. The general unions disappeared entirely, as did many smaller factory-based unions. As a result, though, COSATU met the objective of concentrating worker-power to confront capital from a position of maximum strength. By way of example of how thoroughly this was implemented, Sasol coal miners were folded into the chemical workers union instead of the mineworkers union because Sasol was primarily a chemicals conglomerate.

At a special congress in 1989, with organizational issues under control, COSATU leaders turned their attention back to the political arena. In a heated exchange at the meeting, members divided over the issue of united front versus popular front tactics — continuing in somewhat new form the workerist/populist battle — but they ended the dispute by joining with remnants of the UDF to form a multiclass front, the Mass Democratic Movement, to launch a final push against apartheid. This COSATU-led coalition, in its turn, laid the groundwork for the union's alliance with the ANC in the 1990s. And a side effect of this endless debating and strategizing was that worker

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activists got a rich experience of mobilizing around and voting on political issues long before they got the franchise in 1994. They were thus, in many respects, better prepared for the transition than other sectors of the society.

After the ANC and SACP were unbanned in February 1990, some ANC leaders floated the idea that COSATU should now fold itself into SACTU — the ANC's worker organization in exile — as the women's organizations had done with the ANC Women's League. COSATU leaders demurred. Instead, at a summit meeting in Zambia on March 19, they convinced SACTU leaders to dissolve their organization and recognize COSATU as the country's pre-eminent labor federation. This marked an unprecedented break with the party- and state-centered traditions of left and national liberation movements, and it gave the unions unparalleled leverage in the political arena from then on.

Two months later, leaders of the ANC, SACP and COSATU announced the formation of the Tripartite Alliance. Just how closely COSATU had been intertwined with the SACP became clear at the party's first open congress inside South Africa that June, when it was revealed that key union leaders — NUMSA general secretary Moses Mayekiso, COSATU vice presidents John Gomomo and Chris Dlamini, COSATU assistant general secretary Sydney Mafumadi, among others — held high-ranking positions in the party hierarchy.[9]

* * *

The transition from the unbanning in 1990 to the elections in 1994 was a period of radical repositioning for the unions, as for all the institutions shaped both by apartheid and by the struggle against it. The shift from resistance to negotiation and then to cooperation with former foes demanded different skills and took place in new venues. Most of the encounters were in board rooms and conferences. For the first time, they involved the union's top leadership without the rank and file. COSATU's participation in the Tripartite Alliance also placed added burdens on the leadership, who participated in lengthy strategy sessions to draft elaborate position papers. This became further complicated in 1994 when a number of union leaders resigned to go into government and business. Nevertheless, COSATU managed to lead a series of effective public campaigns.

COSATU and NACTU won a substantial victory in 1990 when the already restrictive Labour Relations Act, which the government had tried unsuccessfully to amend, was annulled in three-way nego-

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tiations between the two federations, an employers' committee and the state. The joint campaign set the stage for further cooperation between the leading black labor federations in the transition period, and they sat side-by-side in the National Economic Forum and the National Manpower Commission. These were later folded into a single forum after the elections to bring labor, business and government together on a sustained basis to negotiate national economic and labor policy. But this was as far as the cooperation between the rival federations got, as NACTU continued to maintain an "Africanist" outlook and objected to COSATU's alliance with the ANC and the SACP.

In 1991, COSATU led a broad coalition of union and community organizations in an anti-VAT (value added tax) campaign, positioning itself as a defender not only of organized workers but of the working class as a whole. In November of that year, COSATU called a two-day general strike that was over sixty percent effective across the country.[10] Later, the federation led protests against high interest rates that rendered access to credit nearly impossible for most of the population, and union officials played a strong role in the constitution-building process that went on before and after the elections.

COSATU's main contribution to the popular movement in this period, though, was the drafting of a plan for post-apartheid development — The Reconstruction and Development Program — that became the electoral platform for the ANC and, afterward, the programmatic base for the Alliance. Communist Party cadre within COSATU were deeply involved in the preparatory work and in efforts to mobilize support for it once it was tabled, but the paper germinated within COSATU and was presented to the Alliance from that position. According to party theoretician Jeremy Cronin, the impetus for it came from NUMSA members who distrusted the ANC and wanted to make a formal pact with the liberation movement so that it would not sell out the workers once in power. What began as a social accord offered to the ANC in exchange for electoral support evolved into an effort to articulate the left's vision of a national democratic program, and it drew in such luminaries as SACP general secretary Joe Slovo, among many, many others in the party and in the trade unions.[11] By the time COSATU formally adopted the RDP in September 1993, it was already in its fourth draft. When the ANC adopted it at its January 1994 conference, it was in its sixth draft.

This document, distributed throughout the country with an illustrated instruction manual for organizers, laid out a visionary, "people-driven" plan to democratize the state, transform the society and

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develop the economy. It called for a state that was "efficient, lean, accountable, accessible and responsive to the public," and it demanded an economic strategy that promoted growth while redistributing wealth and economic power. It detailed the need for programs to alleviate poverty through the provision of housing, affordable public services, transport, primary health care and neighborhood security. It called for ten years of compulsory education for all children and access to learning for all adults, singling out women for special attention. It demanded the extension of full civil rights under the law to all citizens, citing the special needs of women (against domestic abuse, for example) and outlining specific needs for workers (free association, the right to strike and picket and so on — points previously outlined in COSATU's Platform of Workers Rights). In effect, COSATU proposed a new social compact.[12]

Nevertheless, some critics on the left dismissed its economic proposals as "Keynsian social-democracy."[13] One Mercedez-Benz shopsteward in East London argued that "the militancy of the community is usurped by the RDP."[14] Most supporters acknowledged that the measure of its success from a political standpoint would not be quantitative — how many houses built, sewer pipes laid, townships electrified and so on — but rather in the degree to which whatever came out of it was truly people-driven. Though far less was accomplished than expected during the ANC's first term in power, COSATU remained behind the program, calling on the Alliance to take it up more vigorously: "The RDP should remain the programme of the Alliance. What confronts us now is the need for a strategy for its implementation."[15]

As COSATU's role in policy-formation got more and more specialized, and more time-consuming, many union activists worried that the accompanying shift from rank and file mobilization to seemingly endless negotiations with business and government would foster a bureaucratization at the top and a separation of leadership from the base. Union leaders faced a difficult choice: if they continued to participate in all the talks and forums, as they had always done to this point, they would have little time left for membership-related work, while the members themselves would be recast as spectators rather than the actors they had hitherto been. While business and the state had trained specialists for this work — heads of companies or ministers never attended these sessions — militant, mass-based organizations like COSATU found it difficult to delegate the responsibility for it, fearing that if they hired outside professionals to do the nego-

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tiating, they would sacrifice the strength and the perspective that worker-leaders brought to such encounters. On the other hand, too much hob-nobbing with the enemy in connection with this protracted dialogue — socializing at upscale restaurants, country clubs and other ruling class haunts in a practice South Africans described as "taking tea with the bosses" — could breed a subtle shift in identity and class loyalty.

A partial solution to this dilemma was to make use of sympathetic NGOs or paid consultants. An advantage of NGOs was that they raised their own funds, and they were often set up by people who were in solidarity with the unions. The potential political cost, however, came from the fact that this financial autonomy for the most part derived from a reliance on outside, distinctly non-union sources of money. This opened the door to the introduction of agendas and perspectives, if not at odds with, then perhaps tangential to those of the unions. Another alternative was to hire professionals to work in-house. In this case, the concern was how to bring them in without ceding control. In either instance — the use of support organizations or the addition of administrative staff without a working class background — there came the question of who was accountable to whom at what particular moment and whether the "professionalization" of the unions would change not only the content of their work but their culture. The fear was that this would ultimately blunt the unions' militancy and ever so slowly re-orient them toward the short-term, tactical objectives with which the new personnel would be preoccupied. During the anti-apartheid years, a number of highly skilled people with professional training — black and white — had put themselves in service to the unions in clearly subordinate positions at subsistence wages. What to do now, when such people were being drafted into government or pulled into business or NGOs that paid well-above union rates?

The National Economic Development and Labour Council, set up in February 1995, was the most important of the proliferating post-election forums that brought former antagonists together to work through differences. NEDLAC was a sort of meta-forum comprised of the country's main labor federations (COSATU, NACTU and FEDUSA), the two main employer associations (Business South Africa and the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce, representing white and black business leaders) and various state officials under the direction of the Labor Minister. In response to pressure from community groups that argued that they, too, had a stake in

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economic policy-making, a fourth leg was added — representatives of women, youth, rural, disabled and civic sectors. NEDLAC's mandate was to consider all economic policy and labor legislation before it reached parliament. Most of its business was conducted in committee sessions, but it convened an annual summit with 300 delegates from all sectors of the society to review its output. The council's creation was a victory for COSATU, but it brought with it a host of new tasks and obligations, and it placed further demands for more trained professionals, rather than worker-leaders schooled in a politics of confrontation. Critics warned that such forums would lead to the "corporatization" of the unions, turning them into mechanisms not for representing workers but for controlling them. As labor analyst Dot Keet pointed out, COSATU actually controlled only a piece of a piece of NEDLAC, sharing its corner with NACTU and the mostly white Federation of South African Unions, both of which were more conservative and more compliant than it was.[16] Nevertheless, most COSATU leaders saw NEDLAC as a valuable new site of struggle.[17]

Business leaders used NEDLAC to argue that they needed to streamline production and increase productivity to be competitive on global market, in a refrain heard round much of the world in the 1990s. This was all the more urgent, they insisted, as the country dismantled the protectionist policies of the apartheid regime and were freed from the effects of an international anti-apartheid blockade. Gavin Hartford, who sat on the NUMSA bargaining unit, told me that ninety percent of negotiations in the post-election period involved discussions of global competitiveness.[18] In the three years after the elections, South Africa experienced steady growth — the GDP grew at an annual rate of three percent — without any significant increase in jobs. The trade unions characterized this as "jobless growth." COSATU leaders also pointed out that business was selective in its payment policies, offering managers first world salaries while seeking to pay workers third world wages. The trade unionists acknowledged the need to increase productivity, but they insisted on bringing to the table efforts to democratize the workplace, to get management to accept this as a *quid pro quo*.

Through NEDLAC, COSATU and the other unions helped write a new Labor Relations Act and a Basic Conditions of Employment Act that were passed by the new parliament. Among other things, these laws set up labor courts where workers could represent themselves without lawyers, and they mandated compulsory arbitration of grievances over dismissals, effectively depoliticizing what had often

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been a strike issue. This released the unions from a burdensome task that had drained considerable time and resources. The legislation brought improvements in working hours, maternity leave, restrictions on child labor and other measures long sought by workers, many taken directly from the 1987 living wage campaign. The unions also used NEDLAC to contest the state's privatization plans and to challenge the government's pro-business macro-economic development plan, GEAR, introduced in June 1996.

The debate over NEDLAC, like others that came up each time the unions became involved in reform projects, reflected in new forms the line-struggle that had run through COSATU since its formation. At the heart of this was the issue of the relation between class and other forms of political struggle. This, in turn, led to a number of strategic and tactical questions over when and under what circumstances to work toward reforms within an entrenched capitalist system and how to link this with long-term revolutionary aims. Defining the historical moment that South Africa was passing through was a critical feature of this debate, but so was the analysis of South Africa's class and political character.

The Communist Party had long subscribed to a two-stage theory of socialist revolution — a national democratic stage involving a broad class alliance, followed by a worker-led socialist revolution.[19] The party characterized South Africa as an embodiment of a national question of a colonial type — what it termed "internal colonialism." Based on this assessment, the main project for the left was national liberation, a task not yet completed, and the main vehicle for this continued to be a multi-class liberation front, the ANC. But, if South Africa were still in the democratic stage after the 1994 elections, at what point would it move to the next phase? How would this be determined, what methods of struggle were appropriate in the interim, what forms of organization were called for, and what alliances should the party make — and maintain — with other class and political forces? Throughout the 1990s the party was rethinking its earlier mechanical separation of the two stages (in part under pressure from the left in COSATU). Increasingly, party theorists argued that the line between them was blurred, that the two stages overlapped and that work for socialism could — had to — take place while still completing the democratic tasks. One of the main slogans of the party's 1995 conference was: "Build Socialism Now!"

The definition and depth of the "democratic" tasks were also coming under new scrutiny, as the party, and with it COSATU, began to

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think about democracy in new ways, in the society and in their organizations. Here, COSATU's experience and the democratic political culture that arose within it were immensely influential. But on the question of stages, COSATU was divided over whether it was time for a working-class party to take up workers' issues outside of and apart from the liberation front, and if so, should it be the SACP? These issues surfaced regularly within the unions, especially in NUMSA, where support for going it alone was perhaps the strongest. NUMSA actually passed a resolution to that effect — one union leader characterized the SACP to me as merely a "dormant workers party" — but the decision to stay in the Alliance continued to command a solid majority in the federation, and the three organizations remained thoroughly intertwined through the end of the decade.

* * *

When the ANC entered the government in May 1994, there were three million workers in unions, comprising a whopping thirty-seven percent of the workforce (forty-seven percent if one excluded domestics and farm workers from the count). This made South Africa one of the most highly unionized countries in the world with more than twice the rate of the U.S. and trailing only Sweden, Norway and a handful of other industrial states. Certainly it was the most unionized third world nation.[20] Meanwhile, five percent of the population owned eighty-eight percent of the country's wealth. This gave South Africa one of the most extreme gaps between rich and poor of any country in the world, and it underlined, again, South Africa's peculiar character as both a first and a third world nation within one border. While a (mostly) white minority lived an upper-middle class or better European lifestyle, an estimated eighty-four percent of rural South African families survived on less than US$250/month, the minimum deemed necessary for a family of five.[21] Little wonder that the country's organized workers were not satisfied with a transition process aimed at political apartheid, while leaving many critical economic issues to the vagaries of the market.

When the ANC-led Government of National Unity came to power, the union movement was divided into five federations or national centers. COSATU was far the largest with almost half the organized workers. NACTU was the second largest with 327,000 members, mainly in chemicals, construction and transport. The only other grouping of consequence in 1994 was the Federation of South African Labor, with 257,000 members, most of them salaried white-collar

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workers, which regrouped with several smaller unions after the elections into the Federation of South African Unions (FOSATU). This labor center took a generally apolitical approach to trade unionism — apart from narrowly drawn positions on legislation and policy that immediately benefited its members — much like the AFL-CIO in the U.S. It concentrated on labor and consumer issues within an overarching commitment to free-market economics, which it did not question. There were another 127 unaffiliated unions with 411 members, none playing a role on the national stage and all being pursued by the other federations.[22]

By 1995, COSATU's numbers reached 1.6 million, with eight affiliates in excess of 100,000, even as membership in several key affiliates was declining or stagnant due to the streamlining of the workforce.[23] Two years later, as I have already indicated, the total was 1.8 million, despite the fact that 116,000 formal sector jobs were lost between September 1996 and September 1997 alone,[24] and unemployment was close to 30 percent.[25] While unions in mining and manufacturing dominated COSATU in the 1980s, the steady downsizing of the workforce in the early 1990s (termed "right-sizing" by business), coupled with the growth of public sector unions (municipal workers, education and health workers, post and telecommunications workers, teachers) began to change the membership balance among the leading affiliates. In general, though, the greatest potential for COSATU's growth lay in three areas: mergers with the many small independent unions or unions affiliated with other labor centers, organizing the fast-growing service industries, and organizing the low-wage workplaces in the former "homelands" (with mostly women workers) where restrictions on union activities had limited organizing until then. Some of the independents were all or predominantly white, others, with nearly 100 percent black memberships, were associated with the declining black consciousness movement. Workers in both tendencies were beginning to see their interests served by joining COSATU, not for its pro-ANC politics but for its power in the post-apartheid workplace. In the other two growth areas — service industries and the former homelands — COSATU was confronted with the need to pay far more attention to gender, not only in its outreach but in its internal structure.

In 1995, COSATU officials estimated that thirty-six percent of the federation's over-all membership was women, but there were no hard numbers from many of the affiliates. What was known then was that women were severely underrepresented in leadership, even in

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those unions with majority women memberships. Only in SADWU (domestic workers), where the entire membership was women, were women the majority — in this case 100 percent — of regional and national leaders. Almost three-quarters of SACCAWU's members (commercial, catering and allied workers) were women, but only seven percent of its regional leaders and thirty-three percent of its national leaders were women. SACTWU (clothing & textiles) had sixty-five percent women members, but only twenty-one percent of its regional leaders and thirty-three percent of its national leaders were women. NEHAWU (education, health and allied), one of COSATU's fastest growing affiliates, had sixty-two percent women members and forty-one percent women regional leaders but no women leaders at the national level. Apart from SADWU, there were no woman general secretaries or union presidents.[26]

COSATU and its affiliates, by then merged into industrial unions, employed over 1,400 full-time workers (not counting some 25,000 shop stewards, most of whom collected wages on the job). COSATU offices alone had a staff of sixty-one. The federation was hurt by the migration of many worker-leaders into government, however. In 1994 alone, with the formation of the new national government, it lost eighty experienced leaders. More followed as appointments were made to various ministries, and more still after the local elections two years later. Among those who became ministers in the new national government were COSATU general secretary Jay Naidoo and assistant general secretary Sydney Mufamadi. Naidoo was put in charge of the RDP and became the target of considerable criticism as the government steadily watered down the program's provisions. Critics argued that the new regime was turning it into little more than a state welfare program rather than a vehicle for popular empowerment. Former NUMSA radical Alec Irwin came in for the most heat when he was appointed Deputy Finance Minister and began defending government privatization programs, a rather dramatic turnabout from an insistence on nationalization-without-compensation when he was in opposition. Other top union leaders were lost to business. Among the most prominent was Cyril Ramaphosa, the former NUM leader and ANC general secretary, who was mentioned as a candidate to succeed Nelson Mandela at the head of the ANC (and after 1999, the state). Though he was the top vote-getter for the National Executive Committee, he was passed over for Thabo Mbeki at the ANC's December 1997 conference (its fiftieth). Afterward, he resigned to head a new black business consortium.

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Not all union militants saw the loss of former leaders as a serious problem, however. "I believe this thinking is very short-sighted in terms of the emerging new layer of leadership growing within these movements," NUMSA president Mtutuzeli Tom told me. "NUMSA lost fourteen to the parliament, but it didn't take us a month or a week to replace them because the struggle has created leadership."[27] Gavin Hartford suggested that NUMSA was better positioned than most unions because of its multi-layered leadership, but he acknowledged that the changes were disruptive. At the least, they brought new people into highly complicated negotiations with which they were entirely unfamiliar and in many cases for which their prior organizing experience had not prepared them, so it took time to get up to speed.[28] Bobby Marie, an organizer and trainer in NUMSA's education department, observed that though the number of those lost was relatively small, they held key positions and embodied critically important experience. They included NUMSA's top four leaders — one was the national secretary for organizing — who had been with the union from the beginning and who were among the union's best strategic thinkers and long-range planners.[29]

Less dramatic, perhaps, but in some respects more consequential, was the fact that more and more factory-level organizers were being offered new jobs in burgeoning human resource departments as part of crash "affirmative action" programs. Once in place, the new hires were asked to advise management on how to deal with their former comrades. In effect, what used to be called spying was now taken to be life in the market economy. Part of the problem for the unions was that only four of them paid full-time staff salary and benefits, so the lure of highly paid work on the management side of the class fence was considerable. Union pay scales for staff — if not for shopstewards whose wages were set by employers — needed to change without engendering new caste differences within the organization. Yet the communitarian culture within the unions made this just as difficult as hiring professionals without blue-collar experience for key tasks — a dilemma inherent in the transformation of COSATU from an amorphous mass movement to a stable institution operating in the new setting. In the first stage, it had been able to draw upon substantial reservoirs of volunteer — or at least poorly compensated — people-power from its members and its supporters. Now, it was competing with what South Africans termed the "gravy train." NUMSA lost fifteen of 250 shopstewards within a year of the elections either to management, the government or better-paying NGOs. And whatever the

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unions did to hold onto experienced cadre, they had also to find ways to maintain the loyalty of departing comrades — either to restrict their ability to take jobs that immediately put them in direct opposition or to prepare them for it. As one NUMSA shopsteward put it, "When you cross the floor, you should take an agenda."

* * *

"A change is coming," said a shopsteward at the Mercedes assembly plant in East London, when I asked about the union's relations with the ANC now that it was in government.

> We in NUMSA are already debating what role we should play and how we're going to relate to this new government which we created. COSATU resolved — in 1985 — not to affiliate with any political party, to remain an independent trade union movement. We've seen what happened in Eastern Europe, and we don't want to become a conveyor belt for the party. 'Alliance' means a working relationship on areas of common concern, but not always. We need to guard against being derailed as a trade union movement. We have to deliver to the needs of our members. When liberation movements take power, they become brutal to those who toe a line different from them.

There were nods around the polished wooden table as the discussion shifted to a description of routine union activities at the plant. Each shop steward had a defined constituency, with which he met during daily breaks to make reports and to solicit the views of the workers. Management had begun to pursue a policy of open disclosure on such issues as new investment, market penetration, changes in work patterns, overtime, and the introduction of shift systems — information they presented to the shop stewards to take to the workers for discussion. After caucusing among themselves, the worker-leaders took the responses back to management. The eighteen Mercedes plant shopstewards met every Tuesday. All sixty or sixty-five COSATU shopstewards in East London also met in town every Thursday (taking up community issues — school facilities, availability of community health services, adult literacy programs — as well as factory concerns). Workers in each plant met as a group four times a year. And all the COSATU workers in the region got together twice a year in general meetings. In a pinch, Mercedes workers could hold meetings after working hours at the factory as late as they wanted, as long

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as they organized their own transportation home. Decisions on major issues were taken to the workers for a vote at such sessions before going to management in a self-consciously bottom-up democratic process that differentiated the unions from other social and political organizations. The week before, workers at this plant met to discuss bargaining levels and shift patterns in view of management's drive to increase annual production from 27,000 units to as many as 41,000.

"In the past we never bothered about production issues," observed one worker-leader. "We never thought about how to make this economy grow. We only wanted to damage it."

* * *

The main challenges facing COSATU as the transition wore on were more organizational than political: reaching the many unorganized workers (particularly domestic workers and farm laborers), absorbing smaller unions and consolidating affiliates, developing new leaders at middle and upper levels, giving women workers more access to all levels of leadership, expanding and deepening leadership at the shopfloor level, and, above all, rebuilding strong ties between leadership and base. But with no direct conflicts between workers and management — or the state — on a day-to-day basis, how could the unions maintain their activist identity and keep the membership engaged with political issues?

The dismantling of political apartheid freed the unions of one set of tasks only to substitute new ones, but it was the alteration of the method of struggle more than the content of the objectives that was most perplexing. To the extent that COSATU was a stand-in for the ANC in the 1980s, it was released from this role and could more readily focus on that of class representation within the movement. "The trade union movement is no longer having to struggle on two fronts, against capital and against the government," noted NUMSA leader Mtutuzeli Tom.[30] But the demands on COSATU leaders and trade union intellectuals were growing exponentially with the creation of each new forum and committee, and with the preoccupation of its Alliance partners with affairs of government. The question was not only how to do it all, but how to do it without diluting the political vision behind it.

Throughout this period, there were multiplying pressures on COSATU to narrow the role of the unions toward a more strictly administrative function at the expense of their empowering one. NUMSA organizer Bobby Marie argued that new ways had to be

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found to reinforce the line between management and workers. In his view, the central task was to rebuild the locals. "We need to take an approach that builds union power," he said. "We need to rebuild the local as a center of political action."[31] In 1995, NUMSA sought to mobilize a "Close the Apartheid Wage Gap" campaign to regain the initiative and to stem the demobilizing effects of this new situation. The campaign aimed at a fifteen percent across-the-board wage increase for inflation and a further five percent increase for lower paid workers. It also called for the collapsing of the present fifteen grades of pay into five. Pamphlets were printed, signs painted, tee-shirts produced and training sessions held at the district and local level. However, the campaign was pre-empted in its beginning stages when business acceded to the main wage demands. "While you're gaining, you're losing," observed one NUMSA shopsteward afterward. Interestingly, where one might expect that COSATU's participation in local and national politics might sap the energy and resources of the unions at the local level, the opposite appeared to be true. During the campaign prior to the national elections in 1994 and again before the local elections two years later, membership attendance at meetings and participation in union activities went up. This suggested that members hungered for activism in the country's political life and that they saw the unions as an effective vehicle for this.

Enoch Godangswana, acting NUMSA general secretary in 1995, called COSATU "the key to transformation in South Africa" because it lay outside the state and could not therefore be absorbed into it, as threatened to happen with the ANC. The central challenges he saw facing COSATU were developing leadership and mid-level cadre and articulating a labor agenda, positions which commanded widespread support within the federation.[32] In this vein, COSATU forwarded calls for action that went far beyond the workplace to address working class concerns in the wider political arena. Among them were calls for a large-scale public works plan to deal with the high structural unemployment; a far-reaching land reform (partly to stem migration into cities and partly to redistribute wealth and income between urban and rural areas, as well as between white and black South Africans); support for small businesses and micro-enterprises; limits on immigration from elsewhere in Africa; and education and training to increase productivity. COSATU was also unrelenting toward its partners when they appeared to slack off on such issues. In 1996, union leaders charged that other Alliance members — particularly the ANC — were doing little outside government to implement election promis-

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es, even as the economy was returning large gains for business, while remaining stagnant for workers. "The economy in the new South Africa continues to largely represent what it was in 1993, except that there is some growth (jobless) and a few black faces and companies that participate in it. Otherwise it is business as usual," COSATU leaders wrote.[33]

At its sixth congress in December 1997, COSATU stepped further into the political arena with a call to "translate its commitment to socialism into a practical and understandable programme." One resolution listed twenty-one actions and programs that could be considered "building blocks" toward this end. Among them were: rolling back the market in the meeting of basic needs, strengthening the public sector and the role of the state in the economy, experimenting with "social capital" (communally-owned companies), working to end all forms of oppression and discrimination (particularly those affecting women), introducing participatory forms of democracy, deepening COSATU's relationship with the SACP (and helping to transform it into a party capable of leading the struggle for socialism), developing mass media to contend in the cultural realm, and educating and mobilizing workers around the need for socialism. The congress roundly rejected the government's macro-economic framework, criticized the ANC for abandoning its responsibilities outside of government, and committed COSATU to take up the Close the Apartheid Wage Gap campaign as a federation-wide project. It also reaffirmed the commitment to worker control of the unions by, again, limiting to only two the full-time paid people in the national COSATU leadership, reserving the other four positions for full-time shopstewards, and it called on all affiliates to invest heavily in education and training programs for shopstewards to expand and strengthen this critical layer of worker-leadership.[34]

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Chapter 10

ERITREA

POST-"SOCIALIST" ORGANIZING IN A NON-INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY

Like South African workers, those in postwar Eritrea faced a situation where a liberation movement ideologically and programmatically committed to advance their interests held political power. Not only that, it did so without serious domestic challenge, and, unlike the South African liberation movement, it controlled the economy, much of which had been nationalized by the previous regime. Apart from threats emanating from hostile neighbors, the Eritrean movement had no serious political opposition and was therefore free, within the constraints of available resources, to do pretty much whatever it chose for the working class. But these resource constraints were enormous, the working class itself was tiny and, for all practical purposes unorganized, and the legacy of an occupation by a self-described "socialist" regime created novel obstacles to mobilization — workers didn't even want to attend meetings to talk about trade unions.

The most important factor that differentiated Eritrea from South Africa was the state of the economy and the social differentiation that flowed from that. This not only shaped what the EPLF could or would do for workers after independence (or what workers might seek to do for themselves), it underlay the front's characterization of the stage the country was in — a "national democratic" one, far earlier into it than South Africa — and the appropriate developmental strategy for this within the global constraints of the era.

Nation-building topped the EPLF's agenda. For the front's leaders, democratizing the society entailed bringing the majority of its citizens into the political process (and into a national economy) for the first time, while eradicating the remnants of feudalism and the heritage of successive colonialisms that lingered in the countryside. Socialism was

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hardly a blip on the horizon, and the working class was neither conscious-of-itself nor organized in a form to even raise the issue of its class and political interests — the more so for having just come out from under a regime where the concept was equated with unrelenting repression and exploitation by a self-described "workers' state."

Eritrea remained a fundamentally agrarian society in the 1990s in which over sixty percent of the population still made its living from the land — either as farmers or herders. Nearly all of them were small, independent producers, not wage laborers. The new country was just emerging from three decades of war that had wrecked what little infrastructure was left from a succession of colonizers. Persistent drought had pushed the already precarious economy into a horrific famine in the mid-1980s, from which the country had not recovered by the time of independence. International relief had helped stave off further disaster, but in doing so it threatened to turn more than three-quarters of the population into chronic dependents.

For workers, the immediate postwar situation was particularly grim. Factories and agricultural schemes — not retooled in decades — had fallen into wholesale disrepair, many ceasing to function altogether in the last three years of the war as government-held areas fell under a steadily tightening siege. Nor was there wealth available to redistribute, as what had been creamed off the economy had already been secreted abroad or seized by the former occupation forces. Not only was there no working class party — or any fully articulated political party, for that matter — there was no functioning labor organization to make demands on anyone. Under these conditions, most individual workers who had jobs were more concerned about the potential collapse of their factory or shop than about wages, working conditions or other traditional trade union issues. Though Eritrea had a history of militant trade unionism linked to the nationalist movement toward the close of the European colonial period, there was little direct connection between this and what they had when Ethiopia was driven out in 1991. Like the economy, this movement had first to be reconstructed.

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A multiethnic Eritrean workforce first emerged in the towns and on a handful of commercial plantations during the Italian colonial period (1890-1941), but it remained small and unorganized through most of these years. There was a relatively high percentage of women and children in it, especially in the 1930s, as the Italians used Eritrea as a

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base for expansion in World War II and mustered large numbers of Eritrean men into the army to fight under the Italian flag in Libya and Ethiopia. Italy's conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 accelerated Eritrea's "development" as a staging area, and the workforce grew further as commerce picked up. However, rigid color bars imposed under Fascist rule reserved all but menial jobs for European settlers, placed severe limits on "native education" and proscribed all Eritrean attempts at self-organization. As a result, the workforce was largely unskilled, super-exploited and generally powerless.

When British-led forces defeated the Italians in 1941 and Britain took over Eritrea (placing Haile Selassie back on the Ethiopian throne), the plight of workers in the Red Sea colony began to improve, but the trajectory was erratic. With the Suez Canal closed, Eritrea experienced a second boom when it became a base for the British to supply their forces in the region. But once the war ended and the fate of Eritrea fell to the new United Nations, Britain began to dismantle whole industries and ship them out, triggering a deep recession that crippled the economy by 1948.

This was a period of intense political ferment among Eritreans, as newly formed political parties sought to advance people's aspirations for independence in the UN debate, and it marked the first stirrings of a labor movement, as the British loosened controls on organizing. Workers in several industries took this opportunity to establish factory-based self-help associations, which became increasingly militant in support of their rights. At that time, Britain operated a two-tiered wage structure under which Europeans received six times the pay of Eritreans, a policy that infuriated Eritrean nationalists. The first strike came in 1949 when dockworkers walked off their jobs over demands for higher wages and benefits. They were followed a few months later by railroad workers who shut down the country's rail system for six weeks, forcing colonial authorities to institute a policy of equal pay for equal work. The British then began a process of "Eritreanizing" state-controlled enterprises and offices (mainly in the transport and government sectors) in anticipation of the hand-over of the colony to Ethiopia under the UN decision to federate the two states, starting in 1952. During Britain's last two years as the "mandate" power, labor organizing accelerated, with the authorities recognizing several unions, including one of government workers, in 1951.[1]

With the loss at the UN, the political parties lost credibility at home, and the initiative shifted to more militant nationalists in the labor movement. One of them, Wolde-ab Woldemariam, a former

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teacher and newspaper editor, argued that trade unions offered a potentially powerful vehicle for defending Eritrea's interests within the wholly unbalanced linkage with Ethiopia. In November 1951, he gathered ten worker representatives to form a committee to organize a Confederation of Free Eritrean Labor Unions. British authorities recognized it two months later. Soon afterward, they issued a decree that legalized unions, collective bargaining and the arbitration of industrial grievances. That year and the next saw a series of strikes for better pay, many of which were resolved in three-way talks among the employers, the unions and the state. In November 1952, workers formally launched the CFELU with Wolde-ab at its head. The next month a newly elected Eritrean National Assembly approved a Constitution for Eritrea that enshrined the right to form trade unions — one not shared by Ethiopians under Selassie's feudal despotism. But almost as soon as Ethiopia took over from Britain at the end of the year, this and other rights came under attack.

The 1950s saw the union movement flower into a nationalist force, and then get crushed. The turning point came early, on January 13, 1954, when Wolde-ab was shot by pro-Ethiopian paramilitary forces as he stepped out of his union office. The government then shut the office for what it termed "security reasons," kicking off a five-year period of intensifying repression during which authorities smashed several major strikes and forced many nationalists, including Wolde-ab, into exile.[2] The Ethiopians also relocated much of Eritrea's industrial base to Addis Ababa, slashing the workforce by two-thirds. The climax of worker resistance came with a four-day general strike in March 1958 over the passage of a new labor code that threatened to further curtail workers' rights. Nine workers were killed and many more were wounded in Asmara when police opened fire on 80,000 people gathered in a city square for a rally to support the strikers. This was the point where any faith in nonviolent resistance evaporated. Afterward, the CFELU was suppressed and its leaders jailed, ending this phase of the country's labor movement.

As happened in South Africa in 1960, most union organizers who escaped prison went underground. Many joined the newly formed Eritrean Liberation Movement, which was then organizing cells in Eritrea's highland urban centers, as I described in Chapter 1. But the annihilation of the ELM's first and only guerrilla unit four years later by the rival Eritrean Liberation Front sent the organization into a decline from which it did not recover, scattering its members across

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the Middle East and Europe. Some worker activists returned to the field to join the EPLF after it was launched in the 1970s, but there was little worker-specific activity of any substance on either side for much of this time.

The remnants of the Eritrean trade union confederation, with some 10,000 workers (most not even registered), were absorbed into the government-sponsored Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions in 1966. This syndicate served a largely decorative function, though workers at individual enterprises did manage to mount effective but localized strikes over wages and benefits. Under the military junta known as the *derg* that took power in Addis Ababa in September 1974, the CELU itself was reorganized and renamed, first as the All-Ethiopia Trade Unions and later as the Ethiopian Trade Unions. This time, however, its role, both in Ethiopia and in Eritrea, was mainly to control the working class and extract support from it for the government. Each local was run by appointees selected by the Workers Party of Ethiopia, which was set up by the junta in the early 1980s with barely three percent of its members drawn from the working class. The locals were not clustered in federations or other workplace-related configurations, and they had little organic relation with one another, according to workers with whom I spoke after liberation. Their leaders' main functions were to convene seminars where workers were lectured by party cadre for up to five hours at a time; to collect "voluntary" contributions for state campaigns, including the war effort; and to conscript workers into free workdays on weekends. "We were only gathered together to clap our hands," Fessahaie Ghidey, a twenty-nine-year veteran of the state-owned telecommunications company, told me.[3]

During the *derg's* first two chaotic years in power, hundreds of workers streamed out of the towns to join the EPLF, as the Ethiopians stepped up repression and as the war heated up around them. Pitched battles even took place inside Asmara in early 1975, a year before my first visit to the besieged city.[4] During this period, the EPLF organized a network of supporters in the urban workforce into secret cells to gather intelligence, distribute propaganda and carry out industrial sabotage. Most of these cells were crushed in a reign of terror — the Red Terror — that peaked in Eritrea in 1977-78 and that drove another wave of workers out of the towns to join the liberation movement. The government's subsequent recapture of many guerrilla-held towns and cities during a bloody six-month military offensive in 1978 that

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saw the introduction to the battlefield of over 100,000 Soviet-trained and -equipped Ethiopian troops, triggered yet another exodus. Ethiopia's abrupt re-entry into these urban centers — administered until then by revolutionary committees involving many worker-activists — sent most of the remaining young men fleeing not only persecution for their politics but conscription into the army.

The growing number of workers in the field and their presence in the fast-expanding exile community in the Middle East, Europe and North America led the EPLF to launch the National Union of Eritrean Workers at a congress in the liberated areas in 1979, not long after its Strategic Retreat. The new association's main mission was to organize workers to support the liberation struggle. It made no pretense of being a trade union. By the late 1980s, it claimed 20,000 members within Eritrea and among the diaspora who tithed themselves ten-to-twenty percent to help fund the liberation struggle. Overseas chapters also organized support from trade unions where they lived and worked, and members filled specific requests for specialized materials that came to them from the EPLF's many sections and departments. By then the EPLF was running a network of underground factories, repair shops and other production facilities, as well as sophisticated transportation and construction operations.[5]

At the beginning of 1990, as the EPLF mounted its final push to win the war, it abruptly suspended the work of its associations of peasant farmers, youth and students and workers — all but the women's union — and put their organizers to work administering newly captured areas. Many people later saw this as a mistake, but at the time it was influenced by a sense that the liberation of the country would complete the mission for which the EPLF was formed and that independence would mark a decisive break with the past. New institutions would have to emerge to develop the country. There was even talk of dissolving the EPLF and allowing time to elapse before a new political organization arose. Within a relatively short time, however, this notion of rupture began to give way to a rising concern for continuity with the front's revolutionary heritage, particularly the strong links it had built at the base of the society. Out of this came a decision to revive the mass organizations, albeit on a more autonomous basis than before.

The workers' association was reestablished in June 1992 under its wartime leadership. While their immediate priority was to mobilize employed workers into trade unions, their over-arching goal, they

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said, was to mobilize the working class for the development of the country. The mission statement of the organization, as distilled by an outside consultant after its launch, was to give Eritrean workers an opportunity to "be the proud actors of progress and development in the building of Eritrea as a nation full of human rights, human dignity, and socio-economic well-being."[6] This was a nationalist vision with little class content. In one sense, it was merely an extension of the impetus behind the original NUEW — to mobilize workers to support national liberation. This time around, however, the institution created for this purpose was to be workplace-based rather than community-based, and it was to take on the responsibility for articulating workers' specific needs and rights within a postwar society of competing interests. What remained to be seen was the extent to which one or the other aspect of this mission would predominate, as well as how (and by whom) the balance would be determined. One test would come when workers perceived a conflict of interest with the state, which acted in the name of the whole people but which of course reflected class contention within itself as well.

Union organizers at the middle and upper levels were drawn mainly from the old NUEW — returnees from abroad and veterans from the field — though some former members of the Ethiopian-controlled unions were recruited for the effort, in part as a gesture of reconciliation and as a bridge to the existing workforce. In a pattern reminiscent of the wartime organizing strategy, they started at the bottom, building separate locals (termed "base unions") in each enterprise with 20 or more workers and combining smaller workplaces into area locals. Workers were grouped by the company or industry for whom they worked, as in South Africa, not the trade they individually practiced. Among the unique difficulties they encountered, though, none was more dogged than the distrust workers held for organizations purporting to represent them.

* * *

Hamed Ibrahim joined the EPLF in 1979 and immediately became an organizer with the NCEW. Until 1987, he organized Eritrean construction workers in Sudan. When the NCEW was revived he took on the task of organizing workers in Eritrea in chemicals, mining, metals, auto and related industries. Through the last half of 1992 and into 1993, he and a handful of others convened meetings with workers, factory by factory, mainly in Asmara and the two ports, Massawa and Assab. On January 4, 1994, they brought together thirty-three

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locals to launch the Federation of Mining, Chemical and General Workers. The largest was that at the Assab Oil Refinery, with 1,000 workers. The smallest was the Kokebe Tzeba Printing Press with seventeen.

"The main problem was that most of them had been organized by the *derg*," he told me.

> To change their mentality was the hardest thing. Not that they accepted the *derg's* style of organizing, but they assumed that every organization was the same. At that time, every worker had to come to meetings, whether they wanted to or not. All the leaders were hand-picked, and all the directives came from the top. Before I called a meeting I did some mobilizing work with individuals and formed a committee that elected its own leaders. It was an advantage that I was an Eritrean and a former fighter, so it was not difficult for them to accept me. We discussed about the unions, and I explained that it was a matter of principle that we did not give instructions and that membership was voluntary.[7]

NCEW organizers started with a moral edge as the liberators of the country, but, apart from the skepticism with which they were met by workers, they also confronted hostile employers in an arena heavily weighted against them. The fact that the labor law under which they operated had been carried over virtually intact from the Ethiopians and had many flaws did not make this easier. Meanwhile, though many in the government were sympathetic to their efforts — most officials of the new Ministry of Labor, which arbitrated disagreements and approved contracts, had shared trenches with NCEW organizers — their main priority was resuscitating the economy, and they were not anxious to institutionalize arrangements that would make it more difficult to attract new capital. Further complicating NCEW efforts were the high illiteracy rates of the workforce — rendering the circulation of written materials ineffective in many instances — and the lack of trained organizers and administrators.

Nevertheless, by the end of 1993, they pulled together over 100 union locals, representing more than three-quarters of the industrial workforce (a share already higher than South Africa's, though far smaller in absolute terms). Next, they grouped these locals into five categories and set out to link them into industrial federations, discarding their original plan to create nine after deciding the numbers were too low to justify the administrative burden. The classifications

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broke down into transport and communication; mining, chemicals, metalwork and related manufacturing or assembly; food, drink, hotels, tourism and agriculture; textile, leather and shoes; and a grab-bag of service industries. By June 1994 all five had held founding conferences. In September representatives of these federations launched the NCEW with nearly 18,000 workers in 111 locals.

The top priority they set at the founding congress was to expand the five federations to include all workers in their industries. Most of these enterprises were state-owned, but there was a growing number of new PFDJ industries, for which NCEW leaders said they needed a go-ahead from the party to unionize, as organizers had already encountered problems at the local level with recalcitrant managers. Next on the list was a drive to organize civil servants into a sixth federation, but this, too, came up against a bureaucratic obstacle, as the unionization of government workers ran counter to the inherited labor law. Thus, drafting a new code became a high NCEW priority. The confederation also set its sights on bringing several white-collar associations into its orbit, starting with the teachers, who already had an organization — the Eritrean Teachers Association — as well as artists, health workers and other paraprofessionals. In two other major decisions, the NCEW voted to dissolve the old National Union of Eritrean Workers, with all its overseas chapters, and to absorb the former National Union of Eritrean Peasants. The former released it from one set of duties, but the latter gave it the daunting responsibility of organizing tens of thousands of peasant farmers into as-yet-undefined cooperatives.

It was difficult to ascertain where this last decision originated — among NCEW organizers, from NUEP veterans, within the PFDJ or elsewhere — but it appeared motivated by a strategic decision to use the NCEW to facilitate the transformation of peasant producers into members of the working class, a very large stretch for an already overextended and under-resourced organization. Perhaps fortunately for the NCEW, there was yet no cooperative law on the books, so organizers had little to do but look into the issue at that point. The NCEW constitution also called for the establishment of worker-owned cooperatives — what South Africans might call "islands of socialism" — but the main stress throughout the document was on workers' rights within a recovering economy. The main mission of the NCEW at its founding remained that of a traditional trade union: organizing the unorganized.

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The new confederation's shortage of resources — human and material — coupled with its expansive mission inevitably led it to search for outside funds to underwrite its development. While some support came from progressive quarters, like the UN's International Labor Office and the Italian federation CGIL-CILS-UIL, much of it came from international sources not disposed to political trade unionism, such as the International Congress of Free Trade Unions and the U.S.-based African American Labor Center (a mostly government-funded project of the AFL-CIO). The latter were oriented toward keeping unions narrowly focused on economic issues, and nearly all, with the notable exception of the ILO, drew on first world experience for their inspiration. Funder-driven projects that came out of these relations produced peculiar distortions, not all of them intended. For example, one donor offered workers EB50 (US$7) as a per diem for attending meetings. This was more than many workers earned in a day on their regular jobs. "Going to seminars became a business," said NCEW vice general secretary Tsegai Mogos. "Soon we saw that the same people were coming back again and again."[8]

Even as NCEW leaders struggled to carry out basic research and design programs for their existing membership, they faced a potential flood of new jobseekers into the workforce from several sources. "We have a huge number of unemployed already, and we have about 50,000 or 60,000 ex-fighters who will soon be demobilized and go into the job market," Tsegai told me shortly after the NCEW was launched. "We are also waiting for about 750,000 refugees who are supposed to come from Sudan, and of these 250,000 are potential workers. And we have the problem of the war-disabled — they should be involved in productive work. If you take all these figures and you compare them with the 20,000 members we have in NCEW, the situation is not encouraging."[9]

The biggest problem remained the perilously weak state of the economy into which these workers would be inserted. The ratio of foreign aid to GNP was estimated at almost forty-five percent in late 1994,[10] yet there were signs of a turnaround, led by the EPLF/PFDJ, which was both the country's largest non-state employer and its biggest source of venture capital. The front was then breaking apart its holdings into autonomous enterprises under separate boards, making additional capital available for joint ventures with both Eritreans and foreign investors in an effort to jump-start the economy. "I don't know how to talk about the private sector in this country now," Hagos Gebrehewit, the head of the PFDJ's economic section told me.

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"Part of our charge is to create it."[11] He estimated that by the end of the decade the PFDJ could employ as many as 18,000 people — almost doubling the number of workers in the formal sector. The PFDJ owned and controlled more than two dozen enterprises in banking, trade, construction, shipping, metalworks, auto repair, road surfacing and well drilling, among others, and it was negotiating joint ventures with foreign investors for other large-scale undertakings.

In the midst of this growth, the paramount concern of many workers was the impact of the state's moves to privatize its own considerable holdings, carried over from the Ethiopian regime. This process unfolded slowly, as the government sought to recapitalize and revive businesses before selling them and to do so under fairly strict conditions. Under the law new owners were required to carry over former employees, but there were no guarantees workers would be retained once newly acquired businesses were restructured, and there were no programs in place to deal with the consequences of large-scale layoffs in an economy where one income-earner frequently supported a dozen or more people.

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Twenty-six-year-old Tsehainesh Amanuel, an organizer for the textile union, had worked at the Mereb Textile Factory in Asmara as an accounting machine operator for eight years when I was introduced to her as my guide for the day at the gates of the factory. Under the *derg*, her union met monthly for three hours to hear treatises on articles that had appeared in Amharic-language newspapers, she told me, but they rarely discussed workplace issues. When I asked what the subjects were, she said she did not recall: "We weren't listening. We were present physically, but not mentally." Party cadre also demanded that each worker donate nine Sundays of free labor each year to support the state. "Today," she said, "the main difference is that it is our union. We can say whatever we like."

But getting the workers to be active in the reconstituted unions was another thing, Tsehainesh said, despite clearly evident gains in other areas. A new contract — hammered out with support from the women's union — gave all workers six days marriage leave (up from one) and women sixty days maternity leave (up from forty-five). Local organizers negotiated an arrangement with management to give workers an hour off each week to attend two-hour long literacy classes, but they had trouble getting women to show up. Most women workers said they preferred to use the free hour to go home to care for their

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children. Of the issues they had articulated so far, childcare was high on the list, but their main concern was that the factory could fail. This plant had been established in 1965 by Israeli investors and nationalized by the *derg* in 1976. The machinery with which it opened was never upgraded. Finally under Eritrean control, the factory suffered from shortages of materials and uneven electric power, and it was recording poor sales. Without help, it would go under.

Upon entering the main building, I had to cover my ears to fend off the noise that assaulted me on all sides. There were 654 workers at this enterprise, two-thirds of them women. Raw cotton was spun into thread that was wound around foot-long cylinders. Some was dyed, most went to mechanized looms where it was woven into long rolls of white cloth. Some of this went through a dying process, the rest was packaged for transport and sale. Safety devices to protect workers from getting their hands or clothing caught in their own machines were generally absent. Clouds of fine dust hung in the still air, but few workers wore masks. All the while, there was a constant, repetitive pounding of metal on metal. Workers and union leaders were aware of the hazards, they told me, but they said they were hamstrung by the costs of remedying them in a business whose very existence was at risk from competition with low cost imports from India and China and goods smuggled in without duties from Saudi Arabia and Sudan.[12]

"We can't compete with the advanced technology of the Far East," said Yemane Gebremichael, the Spinning Master at the factory, where he had worked for twenty-two years. "The government must put big taxes on these imported clothes in order to establish a market for us and to support the development of an export market in neighboring countries while we reorganize."[13] At this time, one meter of imported cloth sold for EB7 in the local market, while a meter of Mereb cotton fetched EB9, according to union officials. Fitzum Kifle, the chair of the Mereb local, also pointed out that prosperous merchants, many of whom supported the EPLF during the war years, were firmly opposed to tariffs. Free trade was their mantra. Thus, ordinary economic policy decisions carried within them the seeds of elemental class conflict — the PFDJ and the state would have soon to decide where they came out on such issues, and the NCEW would have to decide how hard and under what circumstances to push them.[14]

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When I returned to Eritrea in 1996, the NCEW was at about the same size it had been shortly after its launch — close to 20,000 members — but there were significant shifts within this total. Some 3,000 workers had lost their jobs — and their union membership — due to layoffs linked to the "streamlining" of both newly privatized and state-owned enterprises, but thousands of workers in PFDJ-owned businesses, many of them new ones, had been unionized. Nearly all workers in enterprises with more than 100 employees were in unions, according to NCEW officials, who said they were also making progress in negotiations with the teachers' association about affiliation and were close to a breakthrough in talks with the government about organizing civil servants.

There was no decision on this yet — and no overhaul of the labor law — in part because the government itself was involved in a reorganization likely to result in cuts of up to a third of the state workforce. There was no cooperative law either, and the NCEW had done little yet to immerse itself in the business of organizing independent producers (artisanal fishers as well as peasant farmers). First, they would convene workshops around the country to look at local experience and experiment with a handful of pilot projects, union leaders said. Once these got off the ground, they could midwife another organization into being to take the overall project on. In any event, it would be a long process. "The most important thing I've learned," said Tsegai Mogos, "is that cooperatives cannot be imposed." Meanwhile, the union had hosted an international seminar on workers rights (to which two COSATU members had come) and sent recommendations to the constitution commission. They had begun planning a department of education and training. And they had joined both the ICFTU and the Ghana-based Organization of African Trade Union Unity.[15]

At that point, foreign capital was beginning to appear in Eritrea for large projects, but it did not come docily. The unions had already collided with a South Korean contractor managing the construction of a sprawling five-story housing complex near the airport for the PFDJ. "He opposed us," Tsegai told me. "He argued that Korea had industrialized without unions for twenty years, but we did not accept this. The PFDJ is running its own enterprises, and they should respect the rules like any private company. They should not have any special privileges." With several new businesses and four-star hotels springing up in Asmara, many with PFDJ capital, and with a Texas firm

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exploring for oil off the coast and seven transnational mining firms exploring for gold (as ten more waited for government approval), the day was almost upon the unions where their mettle would be tested.

"We're supporting what the government is doing in reconstruction and development in this period, but we will decide our position in the future as we see how it is for the workers," said Tewelde Gebremedhin, a shift leader for the Food and Allied Workers at an Asmara cigarette factory.[16]

At about that time, the NCEW began talks with employers in an attempt to establish firmer ground rules for industrial relations. At one large seminar in the city of Keren, they brought together a group of managers and state officials to discuss the new labor law and to explore the prospects for setting up a tripartite mechanism, similar to that in South Africa. One of the problems they faced, however, was that the employers had not organized themselves — and they resisted doing so. "Nowhere else in the world are the unions the main force to form an employers' association," noted Tsegai, when I spoke to him again in early 1997.

Over the next three years the union submitted proposals to the state for a new labor law and a new cooperative law, but neither was codified. Nor was the confederation given the go-ahead to unionize municipal workers, though the government signed an international covenant in 1999 that committed it to allow such a drive, so it was only a matter of timing before one was launched, according to NCEW officials. It was not so much that elements in the state opposed such moves as that other priorities asserted themselves, and the unions were loathe to force issues. Instead they waited for permission to act. Such was the political culture of post-liberation Eritrea — and the continuing domination of the mass organizations by the party and the state (even when it was not explicit). But circumstances aggravated this tendency. The outbreak of renewed war with Ethiopia slowed action on all such policy issues, and the physical damage to the economy, especially in the last round of fighting in May-June 2000, sharply set back Eritrea's efforts at national recovery, and with them the prospects for a revitalized workers' movement.

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Chapter 11

NICARAGUA

NOT *WHAT* TO CHANGE, BUT *HOW*

Nicaraguan trade unions, reflecting their differing political and economic contexts, were on a quite different trajectory than those in either South Africa or Eritrea. The contra war had wrecked Nicaragua's economy — inflation in 1989 reached 33,000 percent as the currency collapsed — but the liberation movement was in no position to oversee its reconstruction. On the contrary, as the surprise loser in the postwar balloting, it was suddenly stripped of the resources to do so, and thoroughly disoriented by the turnabout. This left the trade unions to fend for themselves, at least in the first years of the political transition.

Up to that point the social programs instituted by the revolutionary government had cushioned the impact of the economic crisis on the working class and the poor. Subsidies from the Soviet bloc and support from European countries and North American NGOs and solidarity groups helped keep them going through the war years. Near the end of the 1980s, these programs were all that stood between much of the population and utter destitution. With Soviet aid contracting, human needs skyrocketing, and no relief on the horizon, the economic collapse proved to be a key factor in driving the Sandinistas out of power. However, much to the surprise of many who voted for the opposition in the hope that a political change would end the downward slide, the neoliberal onslaught that followed the UNO victory plunged working families into the worst straits they had been in yet. The popular response in the months after the election was a wave of strikes, showing that the trade unions were alive and well — perhaps more so than the defeated party that nominally led them — but neither the unions nor the FSLN were able to translate this militancy into a sustained drive to alter the political landscape.

What soon became clear was that the downward spiral of the Nicaraguan economy — and the political pressure this put on the

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Sandinistas — was not only a function of the havoc wreaked by the U.S.-backed opposition. Even without the war, many of the party's development programs — the state enterprises, the peasant cooperatives, the extensive social services — might not have been viable in the post-cold war, global economy without the subsidies that had come from the Soviet bloc. These, of course, came to an abrupt end with the demise of the USSR. Afterward, the party appeared to have no idea of how else to organize the economy in the new domestic and international environments. Once ousted from its command position atop the machinery of the state, it darted from one crisis to the next with no obvious objective apart from maintaining its own position at the front of the broad Sandinista movement, now cast in the role of nonviolent opposition for the first time in its history.

The battles the unions fought after the FSLN's fall from power were largely defensive. The absence of a clear, party-defined, programmatic alternative for the economy left them without a vehicle to which to hitch their militancy, and they were reduced instead to skirmishes over particular government actions or policies — privatizations, state lay-offs, taxes, fuel-price hikes and so on. Each time there was an extra-parliamentary confrontation with the new regime, the FSLN stepped between the demonstrators and the government to negotiate a compromise.

Over time, the effect of these interventions was to disempower the protesters as a political force and to discourage militancy. Meanwhile, the working class was ravaged by the IMF-designed structural adjustment program adopted by the Chamorro regime, which put tens of thousands out of work through privatizations and steep cut-backs in public sector employment. Deep cuts in social programs that came with the scaling back of state itself — the signature of the neoliberal program — presented many people with such urgent personal challenges that their willingness to turn out for political demonstrations and strikes that led nowhere steadily waned. By May 1995, when I began my field research for this project in Nicaragua, an FSLN call for a general strike fizzled so badly it was embarrassing. People simply didn't show up.

Nicaraguan trade unions faced unique challenges in this period as mass organizations of a party that had thoroughly dominated them from its position within the state apparatus. Although the Sandinistas were more politically experimental than most socialist-oriented movements of the cold war era, they nevertheless followed a classic top-down model of party control over trade unions and other sectoral

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organizations affiliated with them. The mass organizations were, in effect, extensions of the party within their assigned constituencies — "transmission belts" in the jargon of the old left. Hence, they were not experienced in setting their own course once the FSLN lost power. Still, there were important differences on this score between the two main Sandinista labor centers — the agricultural workers' union and the industrial workers' union — that stemmed both from the constituencies they organized and from their internal dynamics and leaderships. This showed up in the degree of autonomy they had from the party just prior to the elections and in their ability to ride out the storm afterward. It was also reflected in the ways they dealt with social issues — particularly gender — as they set their post-election agendas. Whether or not they will rebound to play a role in renovating their ailing party remains to be seen, but if they do not, it is difficult to see where else such an impetus will come from, given the centrifugal forces in the Sandinista movement.

* * *

Nicaragua did not have a tradition of politically active trade unions in earlier eras. The strongest nationalist upheaval prior to the Sandinista rising — that of the front's namesake, Augustino César Sandino, whose steel silhouette still towers over Managua — was a peasant revolt waged in the countryside. What labor movement did develop after World War I was stripped by the heavily repressive state of any left leadership and subordinated to the ruling party in a corporatist arrangement that precluded action on basic workplace demands as well as on potentially contentious political issues. This began to change in the mid-1970s, as workers became increasingly involved in protests against the corruption of the Somoza dictatorship, but by the time Somoza was overthrown in 1979 barely eleven percent of the workforce was organized.[1] What trade unions there were prior to the FSLN "Triumph" either disappeared or were absorbed into those formed by the party once it took power. Those that emerged in the Sandinista period took their character from the revolution itself and from the formulas and traditions of the left that came with it.

The seeds of the postwar unions appeared in the last months of the conflict, which accelerated rapidly as it neared the end. Sandinista supporters, led by Edgardo Garcia, formed a Rural Workers Association in 1977 to mobilize farmworkers to support the national struggle. In March 1978, they relaunched it as the Association of

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Workers in the Countryside (the ATC, in its Spanish acronym), which functioned as the agricultural workers' union once the Sandinistas came to power. That same year urban organizers formed Revolutionary Workers' Committees — not trade unions — to participate in the uprising.[2] After years of indecisive skirmishing, everything came to a head in mid-1979 when the Somoza regime — under intense pressure from a fast-breaking urban insurrection — imploded. Ten days after Somoza fled Nicaragua, the Sandinista Workers Central, the CST, was formed to represent urban workers. As routine trade union activity had been thoroughly emasculated under the dictatorship and as the Sandinistas reorganized the unions after they came to power, we can speak of the contemporary workers' movement as emerging then.

The two largest Sandinista unions — and far the most important from the standpoint of their representation of workers as a class — were the ATC and the CST. The Sandinistas also sponsored unions of teachers (ANDEN), health workers (FETSALUD) and municipal workers (UNE) and associations of farmers and ranchers (UNAG) and professionals (CONAPRO).[3] All told, there were eleven major Sandinista mass organizations in the 1980s, including the national women's association, AMNLAE, associations of youth and students, and the community-based Sandinista Defense Committees that evolved at the end of the decade into the *Movimiento Communal*. Each organization had a national executive committee nominally accountable to a congress, but participants now concede that the leadership was internally selected and all direction came from the party. "The party had total power over them," according to Ricardo Periera, who headed the FSLN's General Secretariat up to March 1995.[4]

These unions were run by the party as sectoral branches — their leaders were selected by party cadre, their salaries were paid by the state, and every major decision was cleared at the top, if not actually initiated there. There was substantial numerical growth under the tutelage of the party — by 1986, over half the workforce was organized in one or another of the trade unions[5] — but relations with capital were mediated by the state in a highly paternalistic arrangement that carried over into the 1990s to shape the unions' post-election role as both a social and a political force. Daniel Ortega intervened directly in an early dispute between sugar refinery workers and management, for example, and by 1981 the government was reneging on pledges to support worker representation on company boards.

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According to one Sandinista labor historian, it was at this point, as the *contra* war began to heat up, that the party began to view militant trade unionism as a "destabilizing factor."[6] A series of subsequent presidential decrees prohibited strikes, sit-ins and other forms of worker protest. Sandinista security forces also moved to break up small non-Sandinista unions, jailing many of their leaders.

One way the party manipulated union programs from the inside was by controlling their purse-strings, not only paying salaries and allocating program funds but acting as the go-between for donations from such institutions as the World Federation of Trade Unions. Behind this paternalism lay the assumption, typical of socialist-oriented parties of the era, that the revolutionary government itself — as a "workers' state" — embodied workers' interests, so there was no need for independent, let alone hostile, representation outside it. For their part, workers initially ceded authority and direction to the party out of a sense of patriotic duty and a perception of common interest. The result was weak trade unions with little role in influencing policy or even setting the terms of the members' employment.

With the collapse of the economy in the years before the UNO came to power, workers were the first to feel the impact of the new economic policies and the first to react. But when they protested to the FSLN government, the top-down union/party relations asserted themselves with a vengeance. After auto and construction workers went on strike, party leaders accused them of advancing the aims of the U.S., in effect branding them traitors for rejecting party directives.[7] However, after the elections, when the transfer of political power took place and the leash came off, the urban industrial unions took to the streets almost immediately.

During the lame-duck period from February 26 through April 25, 1990, after the balloting but before the UNO took over, many unions carried out wildcat strikes against their employers — often the state — in a last-ditch attempt to push up wages. This put the FSLN in an awkward position, as the party was then negotiating the terms of the transfer with the incoming regime, but it made a number of concessions to avoid confrontations with its own unions. When the UNO took the reins of government and announced drastic economic cutbacks, workers stepped up their protests, mounting three widely-supported strike actions within the first three months. The new government reacted by declaring the strikes illegal — an edict it was unable to enforce through the Sandinista-controlled army and police

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but one which signaled its attitude toward these challenges.

In October 1990, under strong FSLN pressure, the unions agreed to a no-strike pledge in exchange for a government commitment to a minimum wage, maintenance of the education and health budgets and respect for land reform. However, this turned out to be the first of a series of pacts that was honored more in the breech than in practice. Soon after, with the UNO moving toward a wholesale divestment of state enterprises, restless workers began to call for a policy of "privatization to the workers." This led the FSLN to negotiate an agreement with the UNO to turn over twenty-five percent of the soon-to-be privatized industries and large farms to the unions in a program termed the Area of Workers Property (the APT, in Spanish). This presented the trade unions with a very different sort of challenge, as enterprise managers; it also temporarily defused their militancy as unenforceable edicts had failed to do, but more on this below.

This was not a repressive government in the typical sense. For one thing, in the post-election dispensation, it lacked the power and the coercive instruments to directly suppress the left, as authoritarian right-wing regimes had done for decades in Latin America. Under these circumstances, the Sandinista party could do or say whatever it wished, as could the mass organizations. There was a freewheeling press outside UNO control — including a Sandinista daily newspaper and radio station, as well as other media beholding to neither political pole — in which both the government and the FSLN came in for barbed criticism. Even under the more extreme rightist regime that replaced the UNO in the 1996 elections, Nicaragua remained a remarkably open political arena. This reflected both the balance of power within the society and the legacy of the Sandinista years — particularly the protections written into the Constitution and the depoliticization of the police and army — that made overt repression difficult. Even during the war years, under the FSLN, there had been an exceptionally open environment, despite much propaganda in the U.S. over actions aimed at a domestic press that brazenly supported an opposition at war with the government, something few Western regimes, including the U.S., would easily permit. This set a tone for what followed, and it accustomed people to freewheeling debate. But beneath the surface of this apparent tolerance, the UNO regime was engaged in a systematic effort to dismantle the Sandinista project by other means. The core of its strategy was a drive to undercut the political and social institutions the Sandinistas had created, especially the trade unions.

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One of the first things the UNO coalition did when it came to power in April 1990 was to privatize 600 firms by decree. Not only were there massive lay-offs over the next few years — added to those in the public sector — but the new owners hired large numbers of what they termed "temporary workers" who were by law ineligible for union membership. The industrial unions responded with a series of rolling strikes, as indicated above. The first came on May 16. Another was launched on June 12, and a third — a general strike that paralyzed the entire country — broke out on July 12. The first two strikes were largely spontaneous responses to the new government's economic measures, but the third one was a planned and well-organized campaign, led by the newly-formed National Workers' Front (an umbrella for all the Sandinista unions set up in May, known by its Spanish acronym, FNT). During the third one, a revolutionary situation developed in which the regime, then rent by internal divisions, was itself placed in jeopardy. For days, it teetered on the brink of collapse.

However, even with the potential to bring down the government, the FSLN chose to broker a truce that demobilized the strikers in order to avoid a serious confrontation. Critics within the movement later claimed that the party cut a deal to make the country governable in exchange for its own survival (maintaining its leaders, for the time being, in key positions in the army and police; protecting party-owned companies and other property; and having the new government turn a blind eye to the controversial transfer of resources during the FSLN's last days in power, a phenomenon dubbed the "piñata"). Whatever the truth of this, it had a pronounced effect on the workers' movement. Some union members said that the prominent role played by the popular former field commander Dora Maria Télez in sending the strikers home so soured them on her leadership that they opposed her bid for election to the Sandinista National Directorate at the party's first congress in 1991.[8]

With the FSLN failing to exert decisive leadership as an opposition party until near the end of 1993, there was a space for the trade unions to insert themselves into the political sphere. However, the unions were both unaccustomed to and entirely unprepared for this role, and they were still too much under the thumb of the FSLN to buck the party's organizational hegemony. "This was a great opportunity lost," FNT activist Rolando Membreño told me later. Some workers actually considered launching an independent workers' party at this stage, he said, but they dropped the idea without ever convening a formal meeting to take up the question.[9]

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In fact, neither the unions nor the party were ready to take advantage of the chaotic situation. The FSLN had committed itself to parliamentary opposition, and it was pursuing a policy of co-government, building an informal alliance with the moderate wing of the UNO coalition against its far right members. Under these circumstances, the Sandinistas were in no frame of mind to even contemplate a reprise of the 1979 insurrection. All that was left to do when the workers took to the streets was to cut a deal on their behalf, despite a widespread expectation that the regime would fail to honor its pledges. This happened repeatedly: workers protested one or another new policy, the government stonewalled, the FSLN went behind the scenes to hammer out a compromise, the workers went home, the government reneged on the agreement, and everyone was back where they started, like a game of Monopoly that was fixed so that the workers kept going to Jail without ever passing Go.

Not surprisingly, the strikes came less and less often. They finally petered out after a particularly violent incident in Managua in late 1993 in which a high-ranking police official — the popular Sandinista police chief — was killed. By chance I was in the city in January 1994 as this, the last of the great strike waves, was winding down. The action had started on September 20 the previous year when transport workers managed to clear Managua streets and block all intercity transport in a heated protest over new taxes on vehicles, gas price hikes and increased license fees. When I arrived at the airport four months later, I had to run a gauntlet of hundreds of busses and trucks that still lined the road into the city. But the death of the police chief shocked Managua residents and isolated the strikers, weakening support for the protest to the point where it trailed off with no decisive resolution.

I was in Managua again in May 1995 when transport workers, ranchers and others put up barricades to protest a government decision, under pressure from the IMF, to jack up fuel prices. For the umpteenth time, the interlocking concrete bricks that are used to pave the city's labyrinthine streets were wrenched out of the ground and used to blockade key intersections. Truck and bus drivers lined their vehicles up along the main entrances to put the capital under siege, halting nearly all traffic in and out of the city. Striving to leap ahead of the protest yet fearing a low level of popular support, the FSLN called for fifty-percent public support for a general strike — how people were expected to know which half they were in was beyond me, but never mind — and party cadres began to prepare for a prolonged

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shut-down. By the end of the first day, the demands were broadened to include an end to utility rate rises, a reduction in interest rates for scarce credit, the restructuring of bank debts to small and medium businesses, the resolution of the property crisis (ensuring title to those promised land) and jobs for those laid off since the change in regime. Shortly before dawn on May 9, a comrade and I managed to get around the barriers in a beat-up Russian Lada to drive the seventy-five miles north to Matagalpa for a series of interviews I had scheduled before the strike was announced.

Upon arrival, we met with regional party leader Alfonso Espinoza, who declared: "We are prepared for whatever happens. If the government refuses our demands, the strike will go on. If the government falls, so be it."[10] That evening we showed up at the local party office for a public assembly called to plan tactics for the coming days, as trucks with loud speakers plied the streets announcing the meeting. Only a handful of party regulars were there, so we hung about the well-lit intersection, waiting for the masses to arrive. But, much to everyone's chagrin, no one came. After an hour or so, we gave up and went home. The next day all the shops and restaurants in town were open, even the fuel stations; there was no sign of a strike. By the following day the protest had evaporated in Managua as well. The FNT tried to mount a one-day protest two weeks later, but it too fizzled. And this marked the end of this sort of mass protest. Later, party activists and critics alike told me that people had just lost their appetite for militant mass action that produced so little. Some also described this failed mobilization as a party ploy to position itself for the 1996 elections rather than a serious attempt to change economic conditions — an indication of the cynicism then setting in.

Worker militancy was not only undercut by the negotiating strategy of the FSLN but also by the unions' internal preoccupations. Gender was a particularly divisive issue. The impact of the privatizations under the new Area of Workers' Property was another. In each instance, though, the agricultural workers' union fared better than its industrial counterpart. Although the ATC — with forty percent of its membership comprised of women in the mid-1980s, when the feminist current arose within it — went through a protracted struggle on gender, by the 1990s, it had made substantial changes in its leadership and program. At the moment the Sandinistas lost power, the union had built over 100 daycare centers, incorporated demands for maternity leave into contract negotiations and increased the participation of women in union leadership from one percent in 1983 to

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almost thirty-five percent seven years later.[11] The struggle over these issues had exacted a heavy price, and the ATC lost some of its best leaders to the emerging autonomous women's movement, but the union was itself transformed by the contention.

The ATC always had a higher percentage of women members than the CST, due in part to the higher level of participation of women in the rural economy (at least in the formal sphere), but the agricultural workers' union also responded to the economic crisis differently from its urban counterpart, maintaining ties with and developing new programs for unemployed women and rural communities as well as their core constituency — employed workers. In this respect, it transformed itself into a rural workers' movement and not simply a membership organization for those lucky enough to hold jobs. Rural women faced widespread discrimination in the post-election economic sphere — in terms of access to land and credit, as well as jobs — and the contraction in the economy threatened to further weaken their position within the union, according to ATC women's secretariat head Alba Palacios. Women needed training in organizing and systematic education in management and administration, but the union also had to broaden its gender-training if it was to maintain the support and participation of women, she said. "Consciousness-raising needs to happen with men," she told me. "If men don't appreciate the gender struggle, women will get fed up and leave. The result will weaken the union."[12] Some independent feminists questioned the sincerity — if not also the veracity — of this commitment, but at least it was being actively discussed throughout the union, at regional and local levels as well as at the top, as I found traveling about the country.

But nothing like this was taking place within the CST, which went through a very different sort of upheaval over gender issues that sapped its energy and resources and cost it many of its best organizers without significantly altering the union or its approach to gender. In this case, the struggle was waged almost exclusively along gender lines — and women lost. CST leaders (all men) handled gender issues badly from the outset — never seeming to grasp their importance and farming them out to a handful of activists in the Women's Secretariat, led by Sandra Ramos — but their obtuseness was mirrored back at them by a closed circle of feminist challengers. Unlike the women in the ATC, who set out to restructure and re-educate the union as a whole on gender, winning male allies along the way, the CST women built an autonomous unit to mobilize women only, both within the union and outside it, as I described in Chapter 8. As this group attract-

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ed more and more funding for its projects from donor agencies committed to women's empowerment but not to trade union development, jealousies and resentments began to fester in the CST leadership.

There might have been ways to deal with this from the inside — principally if the CST leadership had itself taken on gender equality as a priority and, to a lesser extent, if Ramos and her compañeras had reached out to male sympathizers to make common cause to transform the CST before the crunch came. But in the absence of any such action, sharp, gendered lines were drawn through the union, with the (male) old guard lining up its supporters against the (female) upstarts. The men at the top became especially nervous in early 1994 when they perceived that women close to Ramos stood a chance of ousting several of them in upcoming union elections. When the Ramos forces allied themselves with the small but feisty transport workers' union — the same militants who had earlier alienated fellow unionists with their violent tactics — in a bid to unseat the CST leadership, they were swept up in a bitter battle whose fall-out included the effective ouster of Ramos herself and the collapse of the entire women's secretariat.

While some critics of the CST paint this as a simple case of misogyny, the break also reflected the complexity of intersecting — and at times competing — social agendas and political cultures. Ramos herself had only come to the CST in 1989, with no union experience, and she had no established support base outside her immediate circle. Ironically, perhaps, her previous work had been with state security. Once at the head of the women's secretariat — placed there by the party — she went outside the union to foreign NGOs to find the resources with which to mobilize other women. Much was done to meet women's needs — in the fields of childcare, legal aid, health, skills development, gender training and so on — but the secretariat never proposed a gender program for the union as a whole. Instead, it remained project-oriented, increasingly influenced by the method of operation and the funding priorities of Western NGOs, few of which had any connection to unions elsewhere or grasped unions' particular needs and problems. In this respect the donors were a divisive force, pitting a feminist agenda against a workerist program, when the union clearly needed both in the context of an overall democratization.

Meanwhile, the Area of Workers' Property — in effect since January 1993 — also divided the unions, this time on a class basis. The program was a product of union struggle, but it was a decidedly mixed blessing, and it, too, generated vastly different responses

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within the unions. By placing inexperienced union leaders in a position of responsibility for managing ailing enterprises, the new program provided a major distraction from traditional union preoccupations. It also set up a powerful potential conflict-of-interest between union leaders and their members, particularly in the case of the CST, due both to the size and structure of the businesses it received and to the character of the union itself.

Under a pact negotiated between the FSLN and the UNO, twenty-five percent of the state-owned enterprises — the formerly nationalized industries and plantations targeted for privatization by the new regime — was to be allocated to the workers in the form of stocks. The rest would be sold off (most of it at bargain prices to friends of the UNO, as it turned out). Faced with this prospect, the unions opted to take as close to 100 percent as possible of as many enterprises as they could, rather than a twenty-five percent share of a larger number of them. They then asked the workers to endorse the shares over to the unions. From this point on, however, there were significant differences between the approaches of the two labor centers. In the agricultural sector, control was decentralized to management councils of elected worker representatives and union leaders, which were networked with other, similar enterprises. These councils had mechanisms for community participation and operated in the open. In contrast to this, the CST established a single, highly-centralized Chamber of Worker Industrialists to run the companies under its control.

Not all the privatized enterprises went to the unions. In the event, the ATC got about thirty-five percent of those set aside for rural producers, while the CST took control of some eighty companies, many of them badly undercapitalized and in danger of imminent collapse. A number of smaller ones fell to groups of workers who operated them as cooperatives or as partnerships. Some ended up as owner-operated businesses or farms. To deal with this new sector, the ATC set up an organization of small business owners, UNAPA. Starting in 1994 business owners from other sectors joined UNAPA, expanding its membership to include service cooperatives and companies that had not sprung from the privatizations. The ATC sought to link them together to enhance their access to credit, improve distribution and so on — to build what union leader Alfonso Espinosa termed "associative enterprises."[13]

The ATC set up training programs in management and administration for UNAPA members and for enterprises under the APT, but

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union leaders insisted that they did not try to take control of the businesses themselves. "One issue for us was how to define their management role and the union's role — when one stops and the other starts," said Alba Palacios. "We decided to separate them completely, so the roles would not be confused."

Unlike the industrial unions, which tried to maintain a toehold on the traditional, highly-bureaucratized economic model of the FSLN period, the agricultural workers' union appeared to see the advent of the APT as an opportunity to experiment with new forms of social property. "We can't go back to the way things were, even if the FSLN is in power again," Espinosa told me. "The people would never permit it, now that they're accustomed to being owners. This is an alternative to statism and capitalism — a new model of economic democratization in which workers are the legitimate owners of what they've produced. No matter what government comes to power, it will be our task to defend them."

The paramount challenge they faced in this undertaking was getting these businesses to run efficiently, at a profit, in the new, highly competitive environment of the largely unregulated market. This entailed learning new work habits, as well as developing new skills. The main difference between these enterprises and traditional capitalist businesses, according to Espinosa, was not how the operation was run but how the benefits were allocated. The union was establishing childcare facilities at each enterprise and encouraging the worker-managers to use their profits to invest in schools, community recreation, social security and other services no longer provided by the state. "Our goal is to produce like capitalists and distribute like socialists," he said.

The operative concept was similar to the "islands of socialism" COSATU talked about in South Africa and to the workers' co-ops cited as a goal in the NCEW constitution in Eritrea. The critical questions in such an undertaking were, first, how to approach them, and, second, whether there was a more or less appropriate moment to do so. In the Sandinista case, at least for the CST, the union inherited mostly bankrupt businesses in one of the worst economic periods in Nicaraguan history at a time when it was reeling from the impact of other problems, external and internal, and when it was totally unprepared for the challenge. Whatever the merits of the program in the abstract, this may not have been the moment to experiment with it.

By the mid-1990s, the ATC had established six distinct sections under its umbrella: trade unions organized on large farms and plan-

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tations in the traditional private sector; unions organized on the newly privatized farms under the APT; peasant cooperatives; district committees; a mass organization of peasant women; and a mass organization of rural youth. The first two reflected the classic mission of a trade union. The third — the co-ops — grew out of the early Sandinista land reform and took the union into new territory. The fourth, a post-elections project, involved the ATC in community-organizing and service-provision typically carried out by a political party or a social movement. The last two — the rural women's and youth associations — were distinctly movement-building undertakings. "The ATC is an organization in a much broader way than a union which is limited to those on a payroll," UNAPA head José Adán Rivera told me. "This is a new form of workers' organization where the backbone is the union, but which is also a class expression of worker interest. Our intent is not to mediate the capitalist system but to defend the interests of the working class."[14]

In the 1980s, the CST gathered urban workers under its wing in several organizational forms: unions set up by workplace, some under private ownership, some nationalized and run by the state; unions organized by trade, such as construction workers and transport workers; and general unions of workers who did not fit any category, sometimes set up on a geographic basis in outlying towns. Little of this structure changed after the Sandinista defeat in 1990, except that the union lost many members in the post-election lay-offs and gained the responsibility for newly privatized industries under the APT. What did change for the better, according to CST organizers, was that the party stopped choosing the union's leaders and setting its program. "Before the defeat, the party made all the decisions," said Matagalpa regional CST leader Francisco Pérez. "Now union leaders are democratically elected without interference, and we don't all think the same."[15] But the limited focus on employed workers in an economy where barely half those seeking work had jobs (and many of those, especially among women workers, were disenchanted with the union), left the CST in a poor position not only to influence the state but to provide new direction to the floundering party to which it gave unflinching (and largely uncritical) adherence. And while the leadership of the CST was slowly changing at a regional level, it remained static at the center, where the power still lay to set the union's main program and policy.

"To say the unions have been democratized would be an abuse of language and reality," said labor researcher Rolando Membreño, him-

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self a party member. Membreño argued that the FSLN tradition of using elections — and debates — to ratify rather than to contest leaders and established positions had not changed, despite the recent introduction of secret ballots. The problem, he said, was an ingrained political culture, aggravated by the absence of clear alternatives arising within the unions. "There is a concentration of power and capacity at the top, and there is no intermediary level prepared to take over. Between top and bottom is a big gap, which the base knows very well. This deforms the leadership, creating an incredible concentration of power. The ATC is better than the CST, but the issue facing all the unions is not only what to change but how to make change. On this we have a long way to go."[16]

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Chapter 12

PALESTINE

A CLASS DIVIDED

If Nicaraguan trade unions faced an uphill battle to assert their independent political identity, those in the Palestinian territories had yet to emerge as an organized class force of any consequence on the political stage. One factor holding back their development was the disastrous state of the Palestinian economy. Another was the peculiar distortions the Israeli occupation had on the workforce. But the extremely weak state of Palestinian unions also reflected a profound failure of leadership by the Palestinian left that extended through the uprising in the 1980s to the post-Oslo transition.

While the *intifada* generated an outpouring of worker participation in its early stages and a welter of alternative services and self-help projects targeted at workers and their families as the revolt wore on — funded and run mainly by NGOs — it also contributed to a deep economic recession that exacted a particularly heavy price from the working class. Commerce and trade within the Occupied Territories were sharply curtailed, while frequent strikes kept people from going to work, both within the Territories and in Israel. Other factors combined to intensify the uprising's impact on workers (and others, of course), making the construction of a viable trade union movement extremely difficult, even without the political problems in the national movement, which rendered it all but impossible.

During the revolt's second year, Jordan, under pressure from the IMF, devalued its currency (the *dinar*) by nearly half, sharply reducing the value of subsidies to many West Bank institutions and to the people who depended on them. At the same time, Israel imposed exorbitant new taxes and fees on Palestinians — sometimes confiscating a family's entire household goods in lieu of cash payments — in a transparent move to make them bear the cost of the *intifada*. Merchants and traders were already reeling from the effects of a

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protest campaign that routinely shut them down for part of each day and that kept them closed altogether on designated strike days that were declared as often as eighteen times a month. The effects of this on what small-scale industrial and agricultural production there was — compounded by other punitive Israeli actions (blocking access to markets at harvest time, for example) and the drop in income of striking workers — crippled the domestic economy. When the political crisis in the Gulf broke out in 1990 and Palestinian workers were expelled by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates in reprisal for the PLO's tilt toward Iraq, the primary source of remittances to families in the Territories disappeared overnight, and the economy plummeted to new depths.

Some saw the "peace process" that got underway between Israel and the PLO after the Gulf war as a way out of this crisis, but the opposite turned out to be the case. As the secret Oslo talks neared completion, the Israelis instituted a system of "closures" of the Territories in which individual communities and, at times, the entire West Bank and Gaza Strip were sealed off, with no one permitted to enter or leave. Travel restrictions on Palestinians were not new — the first were imposed in 1967 shortly after Israel took control of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Nor were municipal closings new — curfews of up to twenty-two hours in which people were forbidden from leaving their homes were often imposed during the *intifada* for days at a time. But the imposition of such restrictions on a systematic and sustained basis was a distinct intensification of control over daily life. It also added new complications to the already dire economic picture.

The first such "security" closure, on March 31, 1993, was imposed after a series of stabbings of Israelis in Jerusalem. When the Oslo accords were signed six months later, the Israelis for the first time set up strict checkpoints at entrances to Israel, including all of Jerusalem, which had long functioned as the hub for much of Palestinian commerce and transportation. Only those with permits were allowed to enter. Cross-border travel by Palestinians — including that between the West Bank and Gaza — became more restricted and controlled than ever before, with many denied permission. The effect was to make what was known as the Green Line — the division between Israel and the Occupied Territories — much sharper, seeming to underline the notion that the process was headed toward a political divorce in which each people would go their separate way.

But as the West Bank and Gaza were sub-divided into zones of

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both separate and shared Israeli and Palestinian authority, it became increasingly clear that the Palestinians were headed into a political cul-de-sac far short of the sovereignty for which they had been aiming. When the Netanyahu government fell to the Labor Party in 1999, the Palestinians had control of less than fifty-two percent of Gaza and only three percent of the West Bank in the largest towns and cities, sharing authority over another twenty-four percent. By Balkanizing what was left of Palestine, the arrangements provided a mechanism to ghettoize almost ninety-eight percent of the Palestinian population in urban islands — many Palestinians dubbed them *bantustans*, after the South African "homelands" of the apartheid era — which were disconnected from each other whenever PLO-administered communities were sealed off. This phenomenon — the closing off of all or part of PA-administered territory within the West Bank and Gaza, known as "internal closure" — was first initiated in the spring of 1996 after a suicide bombing inside Israel. And it, too, had economic and social ramifications, as well as political ones.

Israeli politicians billed these closures as security measures, but Palestinians — experiencing them as lock-outs (or lock-ins) — viewed them as acts of collective punishment. The harshest were imposed after an armed incident (or the threat of one) within Israel, despite the fact that there was never any evidence that Palestinian workers — or guerrillas posing as workers — had anything to do with any of them. From 1996 onward, under the Likud government, the frequency and duration of these closures increased, with the worst of them — internal closure — in effect for 40 days in 1997, a rise of almost 50 percent over the previous year, and some form of general closure in effect for much longer. The United Nations estimated that the 1997 closures cost Palestinians almost $230 million in lost trade and income.[1] Whenever they took place, workers were cut off from their places of employment, teachers from schools, farmers from markets, shopkeepers from sources of supply and so on, rippling through the economy. Internal closures also kept the ill and injured from reaching health facilities, as well as disconnecting family members from one another and causing a wide range of similar social disruptions. After one such closure, a worker remarked to me: "This is not a peace. This is a jail."[2]

After a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv in January 1995 — carried out by Hamas guerrillas in retaliation for an Israeli assassination of one of their operatives in Gaza — the Israeli government sharply reduced the number of Palestinian workers allowed in, and it began

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to recruit laborers from elsewhere to do the jobs Israelis would not accept. As many as 230,000 Palestinians worked in Israel in 1992, according to the Democracy and Workers Rights Center, with between 110,000 and 120,000 legally registered with Israel. In 1994, the Israelis only issued permits for 10,000. By 1996 the number had climbed to 33,200, but it plateaued there. The rest of the migrant Palestinian labor force was replaced with workers imported from as far away as Romania, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, giving Israel a non-Jewish labor pool whose desperately poor members made fewer demands on them than the Palestinians and who were easily deported with any sign of trouble. Needless to say, this dealt yet another body blow to the Palestinian economy, whose combined unemployment and underemployment rates topped fifty percent.[3]

The entry of the PLO to Gaza and Jericho in 1994 and later to urban outposts elsewhere in the West Bank brought with it an influx of cash and some new jobs. The end of the uprising occasioned the reopening of shops, restaurants, and retail outlets, which induced a modest upturn in the economy, and there was a brief burst of new investment by Palestinians from outside. However, most new capital went into construction or commerce, rather than production, yielding few steady jobs, and none of this was enough to offset the sharp drop in income from the much reduced migrant labor force.

The main source of new employment was the quasi-state produced by the Oslo accords — the Palestine Authority. With a large and continuing flow of money from foreign donors invested in the accords, the Authority mushroomed into an ever larger bureaucracy, employing 68,000 people by 1998, almost half of them in burgeoning security forces whose members were often drawn not from among residents but from returnees from abroad. The PA also swallowed up much of the funding that had been previously going to non-state sources, particularly the NGOs, threatening jobs and whole projects in that sector, even as it sought to establish itself as a gatekeeper for the funds it could not get directly. When it became apparent that the unions would also be a source of outside revenue — in the form of taxes on workers remitted by Israel — they, too, became fair game for the Authority, which moved to bring them under its wing.

Unlike their counterparts in South Africa, Eritrea or Nicaragua, Palestinian trade unions did not emerge as a force for either national liberation or development at any time in this process. Instead they floundered on the sidelines in chronic factionalism. When they came under the thumb of the Palestine Authority in the mid-1990s, their

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main function appeared to be the regulation of the working class on behalf of Arafat and his cronies. And where was the left? Busy trying to skim off working class support for their parties, largely ignoring the basic issues — wages and benefits, working conditions, health and safety and so on — that traditionally preoccupy trade unions.

* * *

Modern Palestinian labor history — at least that of the West Bank and Gaza — traces back mainly to the period between 1948 and 1967 when the Territories were occupied by Jordan and Egypt, respectively, and when workers were tied into Jordanian and Egyptian trade unions and the political parties behind them. This experience and the organizations that arose out of it put workers in each area on quite different trajectories that continue to obstruct efforts to unify the labor movement. But these unions had antecedents in an earlier colonial period that set a tone and established a tradition that frames contemporary labor struggles.

The early stirrings of worker activism appeared under British rule during the Mandate period between the two world wars. The first union organizing in historic Palestine, in the early 1920s, was driven by the newly-formed, overwhelmingly Jewish, Palestine Communist Party, which at the outset made little attempt to include Arabs. (In this regard, it was similar to the early Communist Party of South Africa.) The first Arab workers' association, the Palestinian Arab Workers' Society, was launched in 1929 against a backdrop of rising Arab concern over the pace of Jewish immigration, and it quickly attracted support within the small, urban working class. However, it tended to be more nationalist than unionist in its focus, and the anti-communist outlook of its leaders weakened its impact as a trade union during its first decade. Arab communists became active inside PAWS and in the labor movement in general in the 1940s, as Palestine experienced a surge in war-related economic activity. In the midst of this growth, one faction split off from PAWS to form an alternative labor center, the Federation of Arab Trade Unions and Labor Societies (later known as the Arab Workers' Congress). This grouping adopted a "workerist" line and concentrated on shopfloor issues, all the while insisting that only a socialist revolution would meet workers needs, but it failed to establish itself as a major force. After Jordan annexed the West Bank in 1950, the AWC came under increasing repression. It was eventually outlawed and disappeared.

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Yet despite the repressive atmosphere under Jordanian rule, Palestinian communists, operating through the Jordanian Communist Party, were the main force that kept the trade union movement alive on both sides of the Jordan River. In 1954 they formed the General Federation of Trade Unions in Jordan. A year on, the GFTU claimed to have twenty-five affiliates (out of some thirty-six in the country, most but not all in the West Bank). In 1957, in a fit of political pique, King Hussein banned all political parties and clamped down on the unions, several of which were banned outright. Union membership declined for several years, until a thaw in the political situation allowed a resumption of organizing. By the mid-1960s, the number of unions reached forty with a membership estimated at 20,000.

Throughout these years, the trade union movement in Gaza stagnated, along with the economy, but it did not disappear. The Egyptians had prevented effective organizing up to 1967, but this was not the decisive factor. Gaza's economy simply did not lend itself to unionism, as it was dominated by small-scale agriculture and trade. An organizing committee for the General Union of Palestinian Workers was formed there in July 1964, shortly after the launch of the PLO, with which the GUPW was affiliated, and a Gaza Trade Union Federation was launched the following year, with seven nominal affiliates.[4]

When Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem in 1967, all Palestinian trade union activity in the newly Occupied Territories was halted. In the West Bank, the ban was temporary, but in Gaza, where a guerrilla war continued into the early 1970s, union activity was outlawed for more than a decade. The Gaza-based GTUF was only allowed to function again legally in 1979, after Israel came under heavy pressure from the UN-affiliated International Labor Organization, but the anemic, Fatah-controlled federation never really got off the ground. In a 1985 report, the ILO estimated its membership to be only 500 workers, one percent of the Gaza workforce.

For their part, West Bank communists revived the GFTU in early 1969, drawing on the substantial organizational infrastructure they had created under Jordanian rule. One of its first acts was to declare a "freeze" on the class struggle in the face of Israel's policies of economic strangulation and incremental annexation. A year later, after Jordan drove the PLO out of that country in a campaign known as Black September, the Palestinian GFTU broke with its parent organization and established itself as an independent West Bank entity. Despite continuing Israeli harassment and repression, the GFTU and

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its constituent unions grew steadily through the 1970s, from only 1,000 members in 1967 to more than 12,000 in 1979, the year the Israeli ban on Gaza unions was lifted. Still, they were fairly small and concentrated in only a handful of urban centers when the "outside" PLO leadership took the decision in 1974 to step up mass organizing in the Occupied Territories. At this point, they became a battleground for internecine political competition, but before we get into this, a word or two about the environment in which they operated.

* * *

Under Israeli control, the Palestinian economy changed considerably. At the outset of the occupation, it was dominated by a handful of landed families, who traced their wealth and power back to the period of Ottoman rule, and by a rising class of urban merchants and traders. The size and political impact of the working class were negligible, which helps explain why the communist-led trade unions called for a freeze on class struggle to facilitate multi-class organizing against the occupation. After 1967, some Palestinian capital found its way into the Occupied Territories, but Israeli restrictions on investment and production severely constrained development, and there was little jobs growth. Meanwhile, Israel began to attract considerable capital from the U.S. and elsewhere, particularly in the arms industry. Coupled with the dramatic increases in direct and indirect U.S. aid that flowed in, this produced an Israeli boom.

This growth spurt generated a surge in demand for unskilled and semi-skilled labor, as Israeli workers migrated upward into higher-skilled jobs. A concurrent fall-off in Jewish migration left a gaping hole at the lower end of the labor market, soon filled by migrants from the severely depressed Palestinian Territories. When the rightwing Likud coalition came to power in 1977, trumpeting its commitment to annex the West Bank, it stepped up the process of land alienation started by the Labor Party, and it intensified the already Draconian restrictions on Palestinian agriculture. (These ranged from strict limits on water access to controls on marketing and distribution that together rendered commercial farming a precarious undertaking.) As a result, more and more farmers and farm workers were thrown into the urban wage labor pool. With less than eighteen percent of the West Bank and Gaza workforces employed in domestic industry, there was only one place for potential wage laborers to seek work, unless they wanted to leave their homeland altogether (which a number of them did) — and that was Israel. In 1968, 5,000 West

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Bank and Gaza Palestinians worked there. In 1974, the number climbed to 69,000. By 1986, it was officially 94,700, but the actual number — including unregistered workers — was probably double that.[5] In this way, the occupation produced both a source of cheap labor and a captive market, making it a lucrative proposition for Israel that increasingly resembled — in economic and social, as well as political, aspects — South African apartheid. Throughout the period from 1967 to the outbreak of the *intifada* in late 1986, any Palestinian "development" that might undermine this arrangement was swiftly curtailed.[6]

Organizing these migrant workers into functional trade unions was impossible. They were for the most part excluded from the Israeli Histadrut, and Israeli Jews rarely supported them when they had grievances. Palestinian unions were prohibited from organizing inside Israel, and Palestinian workers did not generally participate in Israeli strikes. The ethnic divide within the labor force was as sharp as the border between the two lands. But the migrants were further divided among themselves by organizing efforts of the Palestinian political parties, which formed rival workers' blocs.

Tracking the growth of Palestinian trade unions during this period is difficult, because many were not registered, and not all were real. In 1967, there were twenty-six registered unions. In the 1970s, only five more were added, as the Israelis limited registration in an attempt to undercut organizing drives. As a consequence, these numbers do not provide an accurate reflection of union activity. In the 1980s, when popular organizing in all social sectors was at its peak, some eighty new unlicensed unions announced themselves. Thirty-one applied for registration and were turned down. One, a union of teachers in the Israeli-controlled public schools, led a successful strike for higher wages, though it, too, failed to win legal recognition, as the Israelis kept up a steady pressure to stifle their growth. Organizers were harassed, workers attending meetings were photographed, particular halls were singled out for spot "closure" orders, and union leaders were frequently arrested and interrogated. Nevertheless, a rising nationalist tide fed the organizing drives, even as the sectarianism of the parties blunted their impact.

In the late 1970s, when PLO-affiliated parties began to mobilize supporters in the Occupied Territories, they found another party already there — the communists, who were not then part of the PLO structure. In fact, at that point, West Bank communists were still members of the Jordanian Communist Party. But it was they who had kept

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the union movement going in the West Bank, under the umbrella of the GFTU, and it was their position in the working class that immediately came under challenge by the other parties in what one writer has termed "the war of the institutions."[7] In this bitterly fought contest, some unions were taken over, others were split and still others were suddenly faced with newly created parallel organizations competing for the same constituency. Large infusions of Arab funding that went mainly to Fatah-affiliated groups played a particularly divisive role in this process.

Each of the four main factions — Fatah, the PFLP, the DFLP and what would soon be reorganized as the PCP — set up their own workers' movements to represent their interests in the existing trade unions and to launch new ones. These were formalized in 1978 and 1979 as the Workers' Youth Movement (Fatah), the Workers' Unity Bloc (DFLP), the Progressive Unionist Action Front (PFLP) and the Progressive Workers' Bloc (PCP). The Democratic Front's bloc was the only one of these to make one of its tasks the organization of migrants — a labor force that the Popular Front initially characterized as traitors and which the communists dismissed as unorganizable — but all four eventually vied for the loyalty of these workers, too.

Inside the West Bank, competition among the blocs was intense. In August 1981, the GFTU went through the first of a series of debilitating splits, as the Fatah bloc broke off to form a rival federation, leaving the three left parties in an uneasy alliance with each other. The ostensible cause of the rift was a fight over the right of new unions to representation in the GFTU leadership as federation elections approached, but contention that broke the organization was in essence a struggle for control of the workers' movement, and it would have come to the same point over another issue, if not this one. In the final showdown, the PCP defended its long-standing control of the movement with all the force and chicanery at its command, while Fatah used its standing as the leading nationalist party in the PLO — and its access to outside funding — to muscle its way in. In 1985, GFTU head Adel Ghanem, a leading communist at the time of the split, echoed women's committee activists I spoke with much later when he told an interviewer that "the differences between the unions in the West Bank are not unionist but political in nature. In terms of unionist programs there is no difference between the various blocs."[8]

By 1983 the GFTU-Ghanem (the combined left) said it had twenty-nine affiliates, while the GFTU-WYM (Fatah) claimed forty-two. But many of these, particularly in the latter federation, were shams,

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known locally as "cardboard" unions. In fact, none of these unions was of the large industrial type found in South Africa or Nicaragua in the 1980s or emerging later in Eritrea. Most were either trades-based or geographically-constituted. Among them were many small general unions, of the type that COSATU absorbed in its early years, comprised of people who were often part-time or temporary workers in one or another shop, including day laborers working in Israel. Unions of any size organized around a specific workplace were rare. Hence, it was very difficult to sort out the genuine unions from the shadows. At one point, the city of Nablus had two construction workers' unions, two general institutions workers' unions and three textile workers' unions, among quite a few others. An angry PCP unionist accused Fatah of organizing stereo cassette hawkers, bread sellers and other street vendors into separate unions to present an image of rapid growth. One incentive for this proliferation was representation on federation councils. Another was the ability to attract outside funding. The effect of this marauding, however, was to dissipate what little political impact the workers might have had, as workers, on the national struggle, while feeding a growing cynicism in the general populace toward the parties.

In 1985, the GFTU split a second time, with the DFLP-affiliated unions peeling off to form a third federation, just as Israeli Defense Minister Yitzak Rabin instituted the fiercest campaign of repression yet seen in the Territories, known as the "Iron Fist." This policy is most widely remembered for its much-publicized brutality toward protesters, but it was also characterized by a sharp intensification of efforts to stamp out the new popular organizations, among them the trade unions. One ironic side-effect of this was that hundreds of angry young workers were cycled in and out of Israeli prisons where, like their South African counterparts, they were schooled in the fine art of resistance by older veterans. Though the heavily factionalized unions were in no position to play an institutional role in the *intifada* when it erupted, many of their members, acting as individuals, would play leading roles in the underground committees that guided it.

As Palestinian trade unions had functioned more as service providers to their members than representatives to employers, they faded rapidly in importance once the uprising got underway and other institutions stepped in to play this role. Many workers were active on the popular committees that formed in practically every village and town to function as alternative administrations, and their experience with both organizing and repression served them well. But the unions

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did not seek to mobilize their members for particular actions or strikes. It was the parties that quickly stepped in to call the shots for protest action through the four-party Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (Fatah, DFLP, PFLP and PCP, which in 1987 formally joined the PLO). It was the parties, for example, that declared strike days and boycotts, while an army of foreign-funded, party-affiliated NGOs took over the role of servicing the needs of the population, from health and education to agricultural extension, food processing and distribution and more.

In early 1989 the workers' blocs in Ramallah formed a Higher Workers Council with a representative from each major political faction (mirroring the structure of both the women's committees and the underground leadership) to discuss unification. This process was extended to a national basis that July, and the General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions, or GFPTU, was formally constituted in the West Bank the following March to act as an umbrella for all the unions. This new federation was tightly controlled by the Fatah bloc, however, and workers affiliated with the Democratic Front did not even participate. In any event, the entire undertaking was negotiated at the top, among the factions, with no input from workers and without regard for the size or strength of union membership of any of the groups. This apparent unity-at-the-top masked the continuing political divisions at the base, and there was no real progress in generating active unions, though nonparty, shop-based workers' committees began to form to negotiate with employers on an *ad hoc* basis.

Throughout these years, the PLO maintained offices for the General Union of Palestinian Workers at its headquarters in Tunis, much as the ANC had done for SACTU while in exile. Though the GUPW had little connection with the organizations in the West Bank or Gaza, its officers attended ILO and other international meetings and represented themselves as the overseas voice of Palestinian workers. When, after the Oslo accords were signed, the Tunis and West Bank and Gaza offices finally began to communicate with each other, their leaders set up a meeting in Egypt to draft a new labor law. In the event, they spent all of two days putting together a document that left out definitions, ignored workers' rights and was riddled with careless misstatements — such as references to "Jordanian workers" — demonstrating that the law had been patched together from other sources without serious research or debate. A second draft was prepared with the PA's office in Jericho in 1994 with input from the Arab Labor Office (the regional branch of the ILO), but it, too, lacked substance.

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Efforts to merge the West Bank and the Gaza federations got underway in August 1994, pushed in significant part by a clause in the "peace accords" calling on Israel, starting from September 1993, to remit millions of shekels in withholding taxes to Palestinian unions for money taken out of workers' checks for labor in Israel. This money — one percent of all wages — had been deducted and given over to the Israeli labor federation, the Histadrut, since 1970. But the decision to remit three-quarters of this sum to the Palestinian unions (with Israel keeping one-fourth for administering the program) was a windfall that made them — and those who controlled them — suddenly quite important. Based upon this, the PA decreed that henceforth the GFPTU would be the sole representative of Palestinian workers in Israel, who would be automatically enrolled as union members. At that point, union officials estimated that there were 25,000 eligible workers in Gaza and 40,000 in the West Bank.

The general secretary of the federation, Rusem Bayeri, estimated the potential workforce in Gaza at 180,000, with an unemployment rate of fifty-four percent. In the West Bank, the rate was thirty-five percent, he told me. At that stage, the labor law was in its fourth draft and not yet finalized. Women workers numbered only 10,000 in Gaza, he said, indicating that issues specific to their needs could wait. "Now it is time to struggle for all workers' rights," he said, citing the need to place a limit on hours worked, to institute collective bargaining agreements and to set a minimum wage. "Democracy is the way of the future. Our main challenge now is trying to find opportunities for workers to work."[9]

The director of the Ramallah-based Democracy and Workers Rights Center, Hasan Barghouthi, had another view: "The mission for Palestinian trade unions should be to organize these people, to protect them, and to make this government more democratic, but when I look at these trade unions, I become very pessimistic."[10] The DWRC was an NGO established in 1993 to increase workers' awareness of their legal rights, to provide direct legal assistance in pursuing grievances and, according to its director, to promote democracy within the trade unions. It took cases against Palestinian and Israeli employers, including the PA, and it carried out a range of education campaigns — running seminars and workshops, producing a radio program, printing pamphlets, and setting up a workers' hot line, among other projects. It was similar in some respects to the advice offices set up in South Africa in the early 1970s to provide skills and information to union organizers, though it took the rising tide of orga-

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nizing from within the workforce to power the drive that developed there, and there was no such upsurge taking place in the West Bank and Gaza in the mid-1990s. According to Barghouthi, there were some 250 cadre from the four main political factions working within 170 small unions with a total of only 6,000 members. These organizers were working mainly to win people to their parties, rather than to draw in the unorganized to functioning unions. "These aren't even trade unions. They're political offices," he said. "I think the different political factions realize the importance of the workers, so they try to keep them under their control."

* * *

When I returned to the Territories in 1996, the situation of workers remained unsettled and for the most part without direction. There was no new labor law, but worse, there was little executive authority operating in any fashion, despite the steady proliferation of security forces, to administer existing law or to regulate industrial relations in any systematic way. Employers cut deals with political factions to control the workforce, much like sweetheart unions in the heyday of the Mafia-run unions in the U.S. According to Hasan Barghouthi, these sorts of arrangements had evolved in the latter stages of the *intifada* after workers spontaneously demanded that employers pay them during strike days or cover costs of workers arrested by the Israelis. Now, however, they had become routinized, with union positions turning into political sinecures supported by elaborate bribery networks. Fatah itself had a financial stake in several companies, as did several of the other parties, including Hamas, he said. The profits from these enterprises subsidized the parties, which had a vested interest in seeing that the workers did not become self-organized.[11]

"The trade unions face a big challenge," said Barghouthi. "First, they need to put together a program, a social program, for workers rights, and they need to make a pressure for a good labor law — to change the draft law which came from the PA and is not any good. At the same time, they need to change their institutions and to run elections." However, democratizing the unions was becoming ever more difficult with the inflow of money from Israel. In 1995 this was over IS 8m [close to $3m], and it fostered a symbiotic relationship between the federation and the Authority. "The leadership is an exact copy of the Authority, and they think they are part of the Authority," said Barghouthi.

From the standpoint of those who wished to see class-conscious,

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worker-led trade unions, a considerable amount of organizing had to be done at the base to mount a drive for elections in which progressives stood a chance to succeed. The spontaneous appearance of workplace committees since 1991 was a positive sign, according to Barghouthi, who said that several were showing substantial strength — workers at the electric company and at the Mokassed Hospital, for example. But in local elections, it was often Hamas candidates who came out on top. This was due in part to the fact that they were often the only ones stressing workplace issues, but it also indicated a larger political shift taking place at the grassroots level. In other cases without elections, union heads were simply appointed by Fatah and paid by the Authority, he said.

One of the next major challenges Palestinian workers — and their unions — were likely to face was the establishment of new "industrial zones" along the border between Israel and the West Bank and Gaza. This offered a novel way for Israelis to make use of cheap Palestinian labor without having the workers in Israel or their capital at risk in Palestine. For Palestinians, however, it raised a number of issues: How would this affect Palestinian-owned businesses inside the Territories? What labor law would be in effect, Israeli or Palestinian? Who would represent the workers — the Histadrut or the GFPTU? And how would this affect the political situation, especially the settlements, which could be further entrenched when, as expected, the zones were sited near them? Unfortunately, it appeared that the trade unions would have little impact on the answers.

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Section Four

PARTIES

The Sandinista National Liberation Front's electoral defeat in February 1990 had devastating consequences for the party from which it has not recovered. A last minute scramble the month before they ceded power to hang onto property (real estate, vehicles, cash and other resources) that had never been legally deeded — the piñata — also hurt the FSLN badly, sowing widespread cynicism even among its closest followers. And for all the vitality of the surviving popular organizations, few had the loyalty or participation of women at leadership levels. Those that came the closest — the trade unions, for example, which had strong women's secretariats — had for so long postponed dealing with the rising crescendo of women's demands that they lost many of their strongest and most developed women leaders. Lacking programmatic clarity and clinging desperately to the remnants of its political and organizational past, the FSLN seemed paralyzed after its exit from the state as whole sections of the movement peeled away.

First, the party lost most of its salaried political organizers, who were until then paid by the government. This cut off vital communications between leadership and base. As many of the Sandinista mass organizations either distanced themselves from the party or underwent internal crises and splits, another link was lost. UNAG, the farmers and ranchers organization, was one of the first to join the Communal Movement in asserting its autonomy. Others followed. The party's continuing lack of programmatic clarity fostered further attrition — a phenomenon that owed as much to the changing class and political character of the party's leadership, which became increasingly invested in economic and political options that hurt the grassroots, as it did to the absence of democratic mechanisms within the party. In 1994, the CST, one of the sectoral organizations most close-

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ly associated with the FSLN, lost its entire women's secretariat; two years later it went through a major split in its leadership. In 1995 the FSLN itself split, losing the bulk of its representation in the National Assembly. Under these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the Sandinistas lost the 1996 national elections, and it is likely they will lose again in 2001, if presidential elections are held as planned.

What their experience demonstrates in stark, if also disheartening, terms is that the strategies that got the FSLN to power in 1979 and that sustained them through the 1980s no longer work. A party that radically transformed the lives of its three million citizens in the direction of a more egalitarian, more just, and more democratic society, and that presided over a life-and-death defense of that transformation, no longer appears to know how to build on its own legacy — or perhaps simply refuses to do so. Growing conflicts of interest between the party leadership and its base were fundamental to this, though they were often obscured by militant, if ineffective, populism in the streets. But the unwillingness of party leaders to accede to internal democracy also undercut their ability to grow the democratic movement in the society at large or to give these movements the opportunity to reform and revive the party.

Other social movements have taken up the challenge and are flourishing, however, and the country is awash in new ideas and novel social and economic experiments. Nowhere has this been better illustrated than in the 320-member coalition set up to respond to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 — an undertaking that included several Sandinista-oriented popular organizations but which appeared to have little relationship to (or influence on) the party itself. Though the FSLN grudgingly reformed itself at earlier congresses — in terms of both program and structure — most party and nonparty activists saw such moves as a case of making concessions to pressure and not as a reflection of change in the leadership's thinking. The experience at the 1998 party conference only seemed to confirm this assessment. As a consequence, the party failed to win back those it has lost or to re-energize those who remained in party ranks.

The Palestinian left was caught in a similar cul de sac, made that much worse by the chronic sectarianism within its ranks and by the far less favorable space in which it operated. Several factions — notably the Popular Front and the rapidly expiring Democratic Front — were also plagued by divisions between their "inside" and "outside" leaderships. The Damascus-based headquarters clung to their old ways of doing politics, as well as to their hard-line positions —

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rattling their swords and raging at the "sell-outs" — while their cadre in the Territories struggled to maintain declining followings and besieged institutions. Even the Palestinian People's Party, which showed considerable promise at the start of the decade, seemed to get stuck in the mid-1990s, as a battle for control of the heart and soul of the party raged and a party conference to settle the discord was repeatedly postponed. In all three organizations, the lack of internal democracy prevented the parties from carrying out the sort of reassessment of the new conditions and experience that were needed to make political renewal possible. The result, like that in Nicaragua, was steady attrition, as many of the best cadre simply quit. In the case of the PPP, the party finally did convene its long-delayed conference in 1998, where the democratic forces were able to redefine the program but not to capture control of the leadership. At that tempestuous gathering, newly elected party leaders agreed to experiment with a different role for the party in Palestinian politics predicated on a dynamic relationship with other social and political movements whose intended outcome was not, for a change, fixed in advance. But by this time the left parties had lost so much credibility — and had such little impact on unfolding events — that such reinventions seemed almost a sideshow.

In South Africa, the SACP set out to open itself to new thinking and to new methods of work almost from the moment it was legalized in 1990. It had to. Many exile leaders had resigned, and there was a massive influx of new members, many of whom came from the grassroots democratic movements within the country. There was also an immediate acknowledgement by party chiefs, led by General Secretary Joe Slovo, that the party's slavish adherence to a Soviet model had been a mistake. Yet thorough-going change was no easy task, as habits of work, as well as a heritage of quasi-religious political tenets, were deeply-ingrained, not only from a Moscow-line, Marxist-Leninist tradition but from the experience of operating underground for decades. However, with a clear commitment at the top, the framework was there for democrats within the party to take up the challenge. The problem for the SACP came from its peculiar role within the liberation movement and then the state — not leading either, but implicated by what each did or didn't do. This was complicated by its overlapping relationship with the trade unions, which kept pushing the party to take strong public positions on working class issues when the ANC-led government wavered. What all this added up to was an extremely fluid situation containing both the risk

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of irrelevancy and the possibility of emerging as a fresh force for revolutionary transformation.

The situation in Eritrea's PFDJ at the end of the 1990s was more difficult to gauge, as much of what went within the party remained opaque to an outsider, even one who had been as close to it as I for more than two decades. But this murkiness could be misleading, for the questions of whether and to what extent the party was open to its members was not the same as whether it was transparent to others. Certain trends could be extrapolated from structural changes in the political movement — notably, the dissolution of the clandestine Marxist-Leninist party within the EPLF in 1989 and the transformation of the EPLF into a mass political movement as the PFDJ in 1994. Others could be inferred from public response to critical policy decisions — land reform, national service, support for the Sudan opposition, renewed war with Ethiopia. And still others could be deduced from the way the party adapted to new situations and challenges when old formulas no longer worked. But so, too, could conclusions be drawn from the gradual, quiet attrition in this party (in terms of participation, not membership), especially among veteran activists and long-time supporters, as people stepped back to pursue their personal agendas or to focus on their jobs. As a result of this and the impact of renewed war with Ethiopia, the party had a far less decisive role in the country than the state by the end of the 1990s.

So what lessons could be drawn from this? The critical issue in all four countries was not whether the political movement — or the revolutionary state — met a checklist of Western-derived criteria for "democracy," but whether and to what extent it was an organic expression of the popular will and whether the relationship between leadership and base inside the party, as between party and population, was a dynamic, interactive one. The central questions to be answered by political activists are how can such relationships be constructed and sustained, and what particular mechanisms for doing this are appropriate and available at what points in a nation's development. But so, too, are the issues of how (and how well) a movement comes to know the popular will, how it is accountable to it, and how it helps to shape it, acting as leaders, not simply as poll-takers in the political marketplace.

Woven through this is another, more fundamental question: how can a movement gain the trust of the people and then nurture that trust under trying circumstances — renewed war in the case of Eritrea, the slow pace of economic change in South Africa, setbacks in the

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national struggle in Palestine, rollbacks in economic and social reforms in Nicaragua? It is in moments like these when the quality of democracy is tested, and with it the authenticity of a political movement's commitment to it.

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Chapter 13

NICARAGUA

A COLLECTIVE *CAUDILLISMO*

Though Nicaragua's revolutionary war went on for nearly eighteen years, it was the last two — 1978-79 — that proved decisive, as the harried Somoza regime flailed desperately at its opposition, enlarging it with every act of barbarous repression. FSLN attacks on National Guard posts were answered with frenzied assaults on suspected civilian sympathizers, which politicized whole communities. The January 10, 1978 assassination of prominent newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, after he called for a united effort to overthrow the Somoza regime, pushed many professionals into the anti-Somoza camp. It also provoked popular uprisings in several cities, which were then bombed by the Nicaraguan air force. As 1979 unfolded, support for Somoza fell away on all sides. Even the Carter administration cut off military aid, though the IMF inexplicably granted Somoza one last line of credit for $65 million in May. Early the next month, however, the FSLN launched a final offensive and called for a general strike. In the insurrection that ensued, the country came to a standstill. On July 19, the government collapsed. By the end of the bloody conflict more than 50,000 people had died, but the Sandinistas triumphed.

In their final days, Somoza and his entourage looted Nicaragua, taking everything they could carry — or wire — out of the country. Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, the Minister of Foreign and Domestic Trade in the first FSLN government, found only $3 million in the Central Bank when the Sandinistas entered Managua — and he only managed to hang onto that by a fluke, when an international banker phoned to ask whether he should cash a Somoza check for that amount. With no more resources than this to call upon, the guerrillas served their first four months in government without salaries, subsisting on bags of food they were given as compensation.[1]

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Despite such difficulties, the FSLN acted immediately to set up a new revolutionary government and to decree sweeping changes in the economy. The day after the Sandinistas took control of the capital, they installed a five-member ruling junta that included Violeta Chamorro, the political independent Sergio Ramírez and FSLN *comandante* Daniel Ortega, along with two people from other parties. They established a broad-based Council of State to function as a transitional legislature with thirty-three representatives from political parties, trade unions and other popular organizations. And they announced the formation of a new cabinet, together with the names of those who would serve as government ministers. Over the next six weeks, they abolished the National Guard and confiscated all the property belonging to Somoza, his family, and his departed cronies, and they nationalized the financial system and took control of foreign trade, all natural resources and foreign mining companies. They also made university education free, and they announced a national literacy crusade, among a host of other measures that radically altered the face of Nicaraguan society. Nevertheless, this decisiveness masked the fact that the movement was operating as a political federation, rather than as a unified party with a single ideological perspective. The program was, in effect, a grab-bag of reforms that reflected trade-offs among rival political tendencies.

Over the next several months, the party merged itself into the state, as the National Directorate called the shots behind the scenes. Party cadres were paid by the government, and the mass organizations were controlled by the cadres. Organizing the population, however, was a monumental task, as there were only a hundred or so union locals and little in the way of popular institutions in other sectors, apart from support committees and formerly clandestine cells. The day after the Sandinistas entered Managua they announced the formation of the CST. Next, they initiated organizing drives among health workers, teachers, students, youth, state employees and others, while stepping up efforts among rural workers and women, who already had small associations, as I described in Chapters 8 and 11. By 1981, there were eleven mass organizations, all of them under strict management by the FSLN. Among them were more than over 15,000 Sandinista Defense Committees in villages and urban neighborhoods throughout the country.

"The party had total power over this structure," said Ricardo Pereira, who for six years headed the party's General Affairs Office.

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> The leadership was named by the party, and there were no elections. The party paid these officials and decided the line. Our thought then was that elections were a trap, though we had many arguments over this. For example, in the U.S. and other countries, someone can come to power with less then thirty percent of the [electorate]. In our view, our main task was to defend the revolution, which was the source of democracy. This wasn't based on elections but on the sectoral interests of these organizations. We were using Lenin's concept of party-mass relations.[2]

The party was exceptionally close to the grassroots at the start of its rule, more by default than design, and it enjoyed a high degree of popular support by any measure available. The early economic and social reforms won them more favor at a popular level, even as they further alienated the elite. But the mass organizations set up to institutionalize this relationship were used mainly to convey party directives to the population, and they offered little, if any, opportunity for the people to exert influence in the other direction, especially when questions started to come up around gender, which FSLN leaders viewed as a "weird influence from Europe," according to Pereira. "This was all the fruit of a classic Marxist concept in which the chief contradiction was class," he told me. "All the secondary contradictions would be resolved automatically as this one was resolved. This is why the concerns and rights of women and minorities were not taken into account."

The escalation of the *contra* war and the militarization of the society weakened these links through the 1980s, even as the party worked to correct some of its most egregious policy failings. In the early part of the decade, the mass organizations were represented directly to the leadership through a Department of Organization that sat, with other departments, parallel to the Sandinista Assembly on the organizational chart, just below the National Directorate. (The Directorate appointed the Assembly members as well as department heads.) This structure was reorganized in 1983 as the FSLN shifted to one based on geographical divisions. Under the new arrangement, each of the nine regions had a delegate minister, who also functioned as the regional party secretary and who reported to the Minister of the Presidency, René Nuñez. (Nuñez was close to the National Directorate and was often described as its "tenth member.") The major sectoral organizations, along with representatives of the army, participated in regional committees, where their views and interests were communi-

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cated to the delegate minister. This placed them at a greater distance from the seat of decision-making — government and party — and reflected a policy of harnessing them to the war effort.

I have already discussed the effects of this in weakening the women's organization, AMNLAE, but it also wrecked one of the movement's largest and most effective mass organizations — the Sandinista Defense Committees. As the community-based groups were turned into vehicles for conscripting young men into the army and rewarding or punishing people for paying their taxes and performing other government-mandated services, they rapidly lost popular support. In 1988, they collapsed altogether. At that point, they were replaced by a new, far more autonomous organization, the *Movimiento Communal*, or Communal Movement, initiated not by party higher-ups but by members of the failed committees. The new organization, which quickly established independent sources of financial support, elected its own leadership and defined its own program objectives at an open membership conference, went on to become one of the strongest mass institutions in the post-revolutionary era.

The FSLN and its mass expressions were certainly hurt by external factors (other than the war). Plunging commodity prices added enormous strains to the already precarious economy. Starting in 1981, coffee, cotton, and sugar took a steep dive on the international market, substantially cutting into export revenues and undercutting the FSLN's ability to maintain its generous subsidies to the disadvantaged sectors of the society. Many blame this, coupled with the effects of the war, for Nicaragua's economic collapse later in the decade — and for the FSLN's electoral loss in 1990 — but Sandinista economic policies were also part of the problem. The main failing here was the party's tendency to make political and military decisions on economic issues that only postponed the day of reckoning with steadily declining production. This produced short-term gains in popular support, but it ultimately played into the hands of the U.S., whose strategy was one of fostering political attrition by steadily ratcheting up the pressure on the economy.

During the first two years after the Sandinistas seized power, worker productivity plummeted and debt rose, while prices were fixed and food and other essential commodities were distributed, in many cases, free. Peoples' lives improved, while the economy slid downhill. In 1985, the Honduras-based *contras* escalated the war, and the U.S. imposed an embargo in an attempt to tighten the noose around Managua. The FSLN responded by forgiving debts owed the state and doling out gen-

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erous subsidies to state-owned businesses (many of them run by top party commanders) in an effort to shore up the economy and avoid lay-offs, even as agricultural and industrial production continued to decline. It was able to do this only because it received massive subsidies from the Soviet bloc. As a bridging mechanism to permit effective economic reform this might have been helpful. Instead it masked the steady deterioration of the domestic economy.

Over the next two years, the government lost its capacity to keep up with rising costs, and inflation spun out of control, reaching 1,300 percent by the end of 1987. This took place within the context of a Byzantine system of price and foreign exchange controls that created all sorts of anomalies. At one point, according to Martínez, a gallon of gasoline, whose price was set by the government, cost less than a dozen fresh mangos picked in Managua. Martínez, who served as the Minister of Planning and Budget during the final three years of Sandinista rule, argues convincingly that the FSLN's fundamental commitment to distributive justice and its inattention to production, starting from its first years in power, sapped the revolution of the ability to withstand the (inevitable) counterrevolutionary assault mounted by the U.S. and the displaced Nicaraguan elite.[3]

In 1988 the FSLN implemented its first IMF-style structural adjustment program in a desperate effort to stabilize the economy. Following a standard neoliberal formula, they devalued the currency, cut government expenditures, loosened administrative controls on the economy and opened the market, though they lost several months in the execution of this as the National Directorate itself went through a restructuring. Then they were side-swiped by Hurricane Joan, which ravaged the Atlantic coast in October, causing $840 million in damages and triggering a sharp rise in government spending. Soon afterward, inflation shot up to a mind-boggling 33,000 percent, and the FLSN was forced into another round of "adjustments." In 1989 the economy began to recover — inflation dropped to 1,700 percent, exports grew by nearly thirty percent and the debt dropped from twenty-five percent of GDP to only five percent — but this occurred against a backdrop of sharply declining financial support from the Soviet Union and elsewhere.[4] As a consequence, the populist project steadily contracted. Though the future began to look more promising, ordinary people felt the effects of these cutbacks immediately, even as they were tiring of the long war and growing ever more alienated from the institutions of the revolution, now associated mainly with the war effort.

But behind the scenes, political stagnation within the top leader-

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ship was sapping the movement's capacity to respond creatively to these challenges. Even during the heady years of the revolution, there had been little collective process in the small circle of the FSLN leadership, according to Luis Carrión, who resigned his seat on the National Directorate in 1995 to join the breakaway Sandinista Renovation Movement. "At first things weren't structured," he told me. After the FSLN seized power the group met as peers to discuss in depth every issue that came before it. Gradually, however, there was a subtle change — "an internal alignment," as he put it — that left each *commandante* in charge of a specific area of domestic policy. This was done with care to balance the competing political groups that had come together in early 1979, after a four-year split, to form the backbone of the FSLN prior to the victorious insurrection later that year.

In the 1980s, the National Directorate became more and more like a "corporation," according to Carrión, with each member exercising his share of power, unchallenged by the others. One consequence was that issues as crucial to the revolution as agrarian reform — the purview of Jaime Wheelock — were never debated at length within the group. Through most of the decade, the topics taken up by the Directorate as a whole were those involving international politics, general political matters related to other parties, minor economic issues and the *contra* war. One exception was the explosion of popular protest that greeted the Sandinista austerity measures imposed in the late 1980s. In 1989 there was a wave of wildcat strikes which FSLN union leaders were unable to contain. That December a truce was reached, with leaders of the mass organizations agreeing to postpone their protests until the February elections, after which they could do whatever they wanted. Thus a lid was placed over a caldron of popular dissatisfaction that would erupt again, out of party and government control, within a month of the UNO coalition taking office.[5]

* * *

Two of the FSLN's most glaring errors in social policy while in power — both with dire political consequences — occurred in their handling of the peasantry, if one can characterize small-scale producers this way, and in their approach to the rights of ethnic minorities. The party downplayed the importance of each in a dogmatic insistence on the primacy of the working class to the effective exclusion of other social categories. In doing so, they alienated large segments of the population and fed the growth of the Nicaraguan Resistance, as the *contras* were formally called. (The FSLN did not help its standing with the

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conservative, heavily-Catholic farmers on the Pacific side of the country by publicly insulting the Pope during his visit to Nicaragua in 1983, though they did so in response to the pontiff's provocative polemics against them.)[6] Though the Sandinistas went to great lengths to change their policies toward these sectors in the late 1980s, by then the damage was done, and the lessons came too late to alter the political landscape.

At the outset of the revolution, small farming remained a significant part of Nicaragua's economic base, in contrast to neighboring Honduras, for example, which depended much more on large-scale, export-oriented plantations and had a far higher percentage of agricultural workers. Yet the FSLN never directly targeted these farmers for organizing, except to be folded into the agricultural workers' union or the farmers' and ranchers' association as a sub-set. The Sandinistas tended to view these small-scale producers as an obstacle to social progress and as an *object* of transformation, rather than as economic and political *subjects* in their own right. Early economic and social programs were targeted either at large-scale producers, in a mostly futile effort to co-opt them, or at rural workers. The main approach to those in between under Agriculture Minister Jaime Wheelock was to pressure them to join cooperatives while offering them little support as individual producers in such areas as credit, pricing, and marketing. Many small farmers also feared — with *contra* encouragement — that land confiscations could affect them, as they were not sufficiently reassured otherwise by the party.[7]

In a path-breaking — and controversial — study of the *contras*, Alejandro Bendaña and Zoilamerica (Narváez) Ortega, both prominent Sandinistas, interviewed thirty former combatants about why they joined the Resistance. Respondents recounted tales of bogus land reform in their communities, harassment by local officials, attacks by local military units, disillusionment with the revolution, anger at specific encounters with individual Sandinistas and forced relocation, in addition to nebulous references to religious commitments and anti-communism. But the common thread was a sense that they had nothing to gain from the Sandinistas and much to lose. What also comes clear in this study is that the war thoroughly polarized the society, forcing everyone — especially young men of military age — to take sides. Sometimes they chose a side out of political conviction, but it could just as readily be a matter of kinship loyalties or other circumstances — even whim. What wasn't possible was neutrality.[8]

When the front did send cadres into outlying communities, as it

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began to in 1982-83 as the war escalated, it often dispatched people with no grasp of the complexities of village life. This led, among other things, to situations where the Sandinistas became pawns in family feuds and personal vendettas. "The people the front was sending in … simply knew nothing of the peasant idiosyncrasies," said Jose Boanerges, a former Sandinista himself before he defected to the *contras* in 1982. Once the war heated up, the Sandinistas also began confiscating the property of suspected collaborators and recalcitrant supporters, a policy that opened them to widespread and often cynical manipulation by their enemies. At this point, wrote Bendaña and Ortega, "The crux of the argument used by the counterrevolution to win over the peasantry became a reality: the state became an agent expropriating their lands." The FSLN's approach to this sector changed substantially in the mid-1980s, when the front stopped pushing people into cooperatives and state farms and began land titling for individuals. By 1989, sixty-two percent of peasant families had received land of their own. But this policy change came too late to heal the social divisions the early ones had fostered.

This is not to say that the sustained U.S. campaign to subvert the revolution was not a critical factor in building the *contras* into an effective military force. The election of Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980 was as significant an event for Nicaraguan politics as any decisions taken in Managua. Where Jimmy Carter had earlier authorized the CIA to provide aid to the civilian opposition, including support to Violeta Chamorro's newspaper, *La Prensa*, President Reagan, within two months of taking office, gave CIA director William Casey the go-ahead to support a military option. Over the next several years, tens of millions of dollars flowed into the covert program, which eventually turned Honduras into a major staging area for the counterrevolution.[9] However, without the FSLN's missteps, it is unlikely that this army would have reached the size and strength that it did. As Bendaña and Ortega concluded, "[T]he contra army grew beyond the expectations of the Americans themselves, not due to any sophisticated recruitment campaign in the countryside, but principally as a result of the impact that the Sandinistas' own policies, limitations and errors had on small peasant farmers."[10]

The party's early policy on the rights of minorities also cost the FSLN dearly — and fed the Resistance. The Spanish-speaking Nicaragua in which the Sandinistas arose and thrived ends, more or less, at the mountains that separate the Pacific and Atlantic coasts. On the Atlantic side is a potpourri of peoples descended from indige-

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nous, African and European lines. At the top of the hierarchy are *mestizos* of mixed Spanish and Indian descent, who comprise over half the population and have controlled most of the region's resources (and political power) since taking over from the British at the end of the nineteenth century. Next on the power ladder, though only thirteen percent of the population, are the Creoles, a mix of European and African ancestry. The second largest group, though less powerful, is that of the Miskitos, an admixture of Indian and other peoples manufactured as a single tribe by the British, who crowned one of their leaders a king before pulling out of the region. At the outer edge of power (and size) are the Sumu and Roma Indians and the Garífuna, a people of mixed Indian and African lineage whose settlements stretch north into Honduras and Belize.

Into this social amalgam, roiling with its own internal contradictions, rode the Sandinistas in 1979 with a blueprint for social change. Not surprisingly, their program immediately encountered resistance, not only for its often inappropriate content but for the crude manner of its imposition. FSLN cadres had little appreciation for the local cultures and almost no grasp of their peculiar histories. Instead of taking the time to study them, they plowed ahead with their reform program. Party organizers had problems early on with the powerful Protestant Moravian church, and they clashed with entrenched local leaders over issues of power and program. Plans for establishing cooperatives ran headfirst into powerful objections from small land holders and others not interested in working in what they perceived to be Sandinista projects, not theirs. This was (and remains) a far poorer area than the Pacific side of Nicaragua, with many of the inhabitants improvising a living from fishing, wage labor in the mines, and seasonal cropping more akin to family gardening than the sort of production the FSLN was proposing. It is also a region with a welter of indigenous forms of social organization, of which the Sandinistas appeared to be entirely ignorant, and a number of languages other than Spanish to which the Sandinistas seemed insensitive. When large numbers of Miskitos were forcibly relocated away from the Honduran border in January 1982 to cut off contact with the nascent *contra* movement, many went immediately over to the Resistance. As tensions heated up and the Sandinistas carried out clumsy counterinsurgency operations in this area, more defected to the *contras*, leaving the FSLN confined to the larger towns and settlements, with little access to or communication from the countryside.

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In late 1984, the party initiated a comprehensive study to ascertain the needs and interests of the diverse peoples of the coast, sending researchers into all corners of the region. A concerted effort was made to incorporate the views of the grassroots, turning the project into an exercise in communication and relationship-building, as well. Out of this, the FSLN crafted a proposal for regional autonomy that guaranteed equal rights to all the peoples in the region, recognized all the coastal languages as "official," pledged school curricula in the local languages, granted limited control over area resources, set up a special development fund and mandated two popularly elected regional councils — one in the north, one in the south. This marked a dramatic turn in Sandinista policy, bringing with it a public acknowledgement of the front's initial mistakes. The results were evident in the winding down of the *contra* war along the Atlantic coast and the return from Honduras of tens of thousands of refugees, but, as with the FSLN's shift on the peasant question, it came too late to stem the political tide running against them in the country as a whole.

The autonomy proposal was adopted by the National Assembly in September 1987, and elections for regional councils were slated for early 1989. Had they been held then, the campaigns would probably have focused on issues pertinent to the regions. But the destruction wrought by Hurricane Joan at the end of 1988 convinced the Sandinistas to postpone the voting to 1990, when they could be wrapped into the national elections. This proved to be a fateful mistake, as local concerns were eclipsed and an anti-Sandinista tide led to a near sweep by their opponents in both regions. Ironically, this produced councils staffed by people who were not committed to the very autonomy that gave them a voice on the national stage and that guaranteed them access to resources and services for their constituents.

Looking back at this experience, one cannot help but be struck by the highly participatory process the front adopted to correct its errors. This was also the approach the FSLN took to drafting a new constitution in the mid-1980s. Much like the constitution-building processes in Eritrea and South Africa — and distinctly unlike the backroom process in Palestine — it was a cooperative exercise that incorporated research into lived experience, solicitation of advice and experience from outside, frequent public forums, input from popular organizations and opposition parties and extensive debate. Both the Constitution, which for the first time in Nicaragua's history institutionalized democratic rights and procedures, and the regional autonomy plan turned out to be important building blocks in the

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construction of a democratic culture as well as effective means of producing valuable documents that, one hopes, will guide the country for years to come. They also seemed to mark significant growth in the party's understanding of social and political rights. Yet the lessons learned and the methodology adopted for solving these problems in the society were not extended to other sectors or back into the party itself, leaving us to ask whether, in the end, these were actually changes in strategic thinking or just tactical moves to blunt opposition.

As the FSLN was accepting the legitimacy of peasant demands for land and minority insistence on cultural and economic self-determination, it was going in precisely the opposite direction on gender. The Sandinistas started strong on women's rights in 1979 and carried this into the early 1980s, as I described in Chapter 8, but they slid backward under the pressure of the Resistance and — apparently — under the weight of their own patriarchal baggage. It is worth pondering why the FSLN leadership grasped the need to strengthen its positions on peasants and minorities while at the same time weakening those on women. Was the opening on class and ethnicity part of a deeper rethinking, or not? Did the withdrawal of women's active support for the party in favor of projects outside the political sphere seem so much less problematic than the prospect of their joining the political opposition, as happened with the other sectors? Was this a matter of taking women's support for granted, not seeing gender issues as equally serious, or not perceiving the cost of failure? Does this, in the end, demonstrate that gender differences are more fundamental, less tractable, than other power relations prioritized by the left? Or is it simply, as some would have it, that these guys just didn't want to let go of their own power and privilege? Maybe there is something to be learned from the fact that the National Directorate also favored worker participation in management in the early years of the revolution but later shifted to seeing it as a threat to party control. Autonomy is always easier to accept in theory than in practice, especially when it strikes as close to home as gender. But the Sandinistas would pay for this obtuseness as they stumbled through the rocky transition into political opposition.

* * *

There were ten political formations officially on the February 1990 ballot, but the elections came down to a contest between the FSLN and the United Nicaraguan Opposition, which had fourteen separate parties under its umbrella. The UNO was nominally led by presi-

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dential candidate Violeta Chamorro. In reality little held it together beyond a common obsession with displacing the Sandinistas. Its members ranged from the rightist Liberal and Conservative Parties of the Somoza era to the Nicaraguan Socialist and Communist Parties. Once in power, the coalition quickly unraveled. Chamorro won the presidency with fifty-six percent of the vote to Ortega's forty-one, but the outcome in the rest of the balloting was less decisive. In Nicaragua, parliamentary elections are for slates, not individuals. There are ninety seats in the National Assembly for which parties compete, plus an additional one that goes to any presidential candidate who wins at least one percent of the vote. In 1990, two losing candidates — including Daniel Ortega — qualified for extra seats, mandating a legislature of ninety-two people. Of these, fifty-one places went to the UNO, thirty-nine to the FSLN, and two to smaller parties. Thus, when the UNO disintegrated into squabbling factions, the FSLN was left the largest single bloc in the legislature. Those individuals remaining close to Chamorro constituted the political center, with the FSLN on its left and the other parties and individuals, with little more in common than their hatred for the FSLN, sitting to its right and supported by the U.S.[11] Many people have debated the issue of why the Sandinistas lost, but the question that leaps out at me is why didn't they see it coming? How could they have been so out of touch with the base of the society, and the party, that they were not aware of the groundswell against them? One answer may have been that they weren't listening. "Defeat was not considered because we were highly ideologized," wrote Martínez afterward. "[W]e were convinced that the people couldn't vote against their own class interests."[12]

Government for the next six years was a continuing process of negotiation and compromise, with much of it based on understandings between the centrist grouping, whose main strength was its hold on the executive branch, and the Sandinistas. When agreements were not forthcoming, the government was paralyzed. Months went by when the legislature could not conduct business for lack of a quorum, as quarreling parties boycotted the proceedings. For nearly half a year, bickering government branches followed different versions of the Constitution and feuded over the size and composition of the Supreme Court. As one observer put it to me, everyone seemed to lose power in this situation, but no one knew where it went.

The new government's mission was to roll back the clock, but its ability to do so was limited. Among Chamorro's first acts as president were bans on the use of the term "compañero" in government

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ministries and on the wearing of mini-skirts in state offices. She went on, more substantively, to dismantle many of the FSLN's generous social programs and to further open the economy to the global market, as demanded by the U.S. and the IMF, with disastrous consequences for large segments of the population. But she was unable to reverse the most basic Sandinista achievements — the agrarian reform, the political neutrality of the army and police, the Constitution — and she soon found herself dependent on Sandinista support to get anything else done when her own coalition fell apart. She also faced Sandinista pressure from outside the halls of government in the form of popular protest — especially from the trade unions — over economic and social policy. Unfortunately for the Sandinistas, this duality began to divide the party into contending wings, each of which argued that its strategic option was the correct one.

Meanwhile, the FSLN's wholly unexpected electoral loss threw the party itself into a tailspin, as it struggled with the transition to the unaccustomed (and for Nicaragua, entirely unprecedented) role of a major party out of power but not underground — a legal opposition. The formal changeover lasted two months, until April 26. During this time, the Sandinistas negotiated a transition protocol with the UNO that pledged the front to abide by the electoral outcome and committed the incoming regime to demobilize the *contras*, respect the basic institutions the Sandinistas had created, and sustain the land reform. There was also considerable speculation that a side agreement obligated the FSLN to limit its extra-parliamentary challenges in exchange for a promise by the new regime not to look into the excesses of the *piñata* — a chaotic transfer of resources that benefited some Sandinistas more than others and stirred up much popular resentment.[13] Despite this understanding, the first year of UNO rule was chaotic, as I have described earlier, with massive strikes and public demonstrations, as well as outbreaks of scattered armed resistance by former Sandinistas and former *contras*. This was the turbulent setting in which the FSLN prepared for its first formal party congress.

The Sandinistas came to this historic gathering in July 1991 in a state of internal crisis, as well. The identity and structure of the party had been so thoroughly intertwined with the state that it was unclear where one started and the other left off. Ricardo Pereira, who managed much of the preparation for the party congress, characterized the front as the "third ministry" during the years the FSLN was in power, after those of Defense and Interior — the only other ones with a greater level of staffing. Party officials had been assigned houses

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and cars, paid salaries and provided with health care by the state. They organized vaccination campaigns, set price controls, distributed ration cards, recruited for the army and carried out a number of other duties on behalf of the state. In practice, party members and state officials were interchangeable (and often were the same people with different hats).[14]

The party was in deep financial trouble, too, lacking the resources to pay its core leadership. Thousands of experienced organizers had been laid off, as the FSLN disentangled itself from the state and found little that was its own. A number of businesses — no one still knows how many, or even which ones — were instantly privatized in the names of individuals to provide a flow of money back into the party. However, state subsidies and foreign donations evaporated, and there was nowhere near enough money to sustain the levels of organizational activity as before. Meanwhile, long delayed issues were roiling the party — notably from women, but also from trade unionists and others who had born the burdens and sacrifices of the war years with growing impatience. Sandinista women were among the first to demand changes in the way the party and its mass organizations dealt with them and their issues, but many had already left the party by the time the congress met. In the event, their concerns were postponed again. At the two-day congress, the leadership kept the lid on all contentious issues, arguing that this was a moment to consolidate, not change. Though this leadership was for the first time to be voted on by the assembly, the Directorate proposed an uncontested slate of nine for the top positions, pointedly rejecting the call to include a woman, and promised another conference in the future where program and structure might come up again. This prevented divisive exchanges, but it satisfied few of the dissidents. Though most commentators point to the aftermath of the 1994 special congress as marking the first formal party split, I would suggest that the more important one took place in the space between the elections and this first congress, as women activists bailed out in large numbers to organize an autonomous social movement. That most Sandinistas see it otherwise may be part of the problem.

"During the war, the life women were living was subsumed by the needs of the party," veteran organizer, journalist and theoretician Sofia Montenegro told me in 1992, not long after the congress.

> What we've been trying to do is gain space for an autonomous women's movement within the party — to respond to the new situation and to grow, to try to make our own proposals based

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> on stages we've gone through in these years. Our first reaction [to the electoral loss] was how to reorganize to deal with the new policies. Then, how can we stimulate other women to organize with us, to create space for new issues, to develop new forms of organization that are more democratic, more horizontal, more participatory. Within this diversity of interests, how can we construct unity so we can act as a political force. After the defeat, it was a necessity to finally have this discussion, a national discussion from the base upward, but it did not happen. A proposal for democratization came to AMNLAE at the end of 1990, but it was rejected by the leadership. AMNLAE and the party had a classist conception that did not allow them to accept this. They had a homogenous view of women and organized them territorially, not by sector. As a result, the 'critical wing' broke off to organize independently. Now we are in the process of differentiating what is the state, what is the party, and what is the broad popular movement. The revolution opened the space for women, but it was not enough.[15]

Three years later Pereira put this in the context of an overall party failure to respond to the rising demands for autonomy from many of the social movements:

> The party had a crisis around the concept of autonomy. The object of these organizations was not to depoliticize themselves but to separate according to their interests. But the front had no policy toward civil society, it did not understand it. The fractionalizing arises from this, and we are still confused. There is still no policy.[16]

Montengro agreed: "Instead of being the submissive wife of the Sandinista Front, we wanted to make the women's movement its lover, on an equal basis," she told me in an impassioned interview, made the more so by her frustration at the leadership's refusal to grasp at what she took to be an offer to breathe new life into the movement, not to threaten it.

> We want equality not as individuals but as a group, taking power from power, deciding our own strategy, defining our own program, and articulating our own program for society. The only thing that will change the party is the social movements. We need to make an epistemological break with the

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past. We need a new synthesis. But to get to this, the self-affirmation of each sector is essential.

As volatile as conditions were inside the party, that first post-revolution congress offered a chance to regroup, reassess, and come out swinging. It did not happen. Instead, differences were papered over, vigorous debates squelched and set aside, burning issues left to smolder until they resurfaced three years later in rival "tendencies" whose differences had by then become unbridgeable. The 1991 congress provided a moment when the FSLN might have repositioned itself as a broad, dynamic mass opposition movement that could build a winning majority by the next balloting. No doubt this would have been difficult, perhaps it is a pipe-dream to even imagine it. But without a thorough-going renewal, or at least without making a clear and convincing commitment to undergo one in the near-term, the party could only erode further — as it did.

* * *

The next moment of truth, so to speak, came in May of 1994 at an "Extraordinary Congress." Daniel Ortega announced it the previous July, after a caucus of prominent Sandinistas, calling themselves the Group of 29, criticized the party from the left for failing to oppose the IMF-mandated structural adjustment program. Contending lines gained definition in debates over the party's relations with the Chamorro government, loosely pitting those in the legislature against those in the streets — those favoring negotiation and those promoting confrontation. This debate intensified in September 1993, after militants put up barricades during a transport workers' strike and several people were killed in the ensuing violence — one a Sandinista police officer, another an innocent bystander. The incident triggered a public debate over the efficacy of violence, with former vice president Sergio Ramírez rejecting it under any circumstances and Ortega declining to make a blanket renunciation. By the end of the year, these trends solidified into formal "tendencies" — the Sandinistas for a Great Majority led by Ramírez, and the Forum of the Democratic Sandinista Left (or just the Democratic Left), under Ortega. The following February, each current published its views in the Sandinista daily *Barricada*. By the time they reached the May congress, they had developed competing slates and partially-articulated programs.

As usual in Nicaraguan politics, the debate polarized quickly, as each side attributed absolutist positions to the other. The reality was more nuanced, but there were differences in emphasis that reflected

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substantive disagreements and that, taken together, added up to more. The sharpest clashes were over strategy. Both tendencies rejected armed struggle as a means to capture state power, but the centrist Majority current was more inclined to seek legislative solutions to problems, while the Democratic Left was more comfortable with mass protest. The Majority was more prone to cooperate with capital, the Democratic Left more apt to confront it — and the only one to refer to "socialism" as an objective. Both identified themselves as "anti-imperialist," but the Majority played this down, arguing that the public associated this stance with the *contra* war. The Majority current also called for greater democratization of the party and a heightened role for the social movements, though, apart from the Communal Movement, it enjoyed little direct support from these sectors.[17] The Democratic Left defended party structures and traditions, while accepting minor modifications.[18] In the end, the Majority was sidling toward a social democratic politics that abandoned the goal of structural change in favor of incremental reforms, while the Democratic Left clung to a revolutionary identity without specifying clearly what this meant or where it might lead in the post-cold war world in which they now operated.[19]

At the three-day conclave, the Majority suffered a humiliating defeat, and Ramírez himself was dumped from the National Directorate. However, delegates to the assembly loosened up the two-tiered membership of voting militants and non-voting affiliates, which some criticized as fostering a "vanguard-within-a-vanguard" mentality, and expanded the National Directorate to fifteen members to allow wider representation. (This time former war hero Dora Maria Télez was nominated and won easily.) They agreed to limit the terms of the top leadership from five to three years, though they rejected the idea of specific sectoral slots. They put into place thirty-percent quotas for women in party leadership positions at all levels and ten-percent quotas for youth. And they decided to "braid" the slate offered in the 1996 national elections so that every other candidate would be a woman. In doing so, they took important decisions to democratize the party, but their approach was decidedly incremental, despite their dismissal of incrementalism with regard to changes in the society at large. But the way in which these differences were dealt with proved just as decisive, if not more so, than actual decisions taken, as the Majority forces were treated then and later like traitors and not loyal dissidents.[20] This polarization deepened afterward through a series of personal attacks that reached a nadir in January 1995 when Sandinista radio talk show

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host and station director Carlos Guadamúz accused Dora Maria Télez on air of having a lesbian relationship with Ramírez's daughter. This provoked the resignation from the party of Ramírez and three members of the National Directorate, including Telez.[21] Not long afterward, Ramírez announced the formation of the Movement for Sandinista Renovation, the MRS, to challenge the FSLN for control of Sandino's legacy.

At its founding convention in May 1995, the MRS defined its ideology as social democratic and made a point of institutionalizing a range of organizational reforms for which it had stood within the FSLN. Among them were rules prohibiting re-election to top party posts, whose terms were limited to two years. They also committed themselves to a forty-percent quota for women in leadership positions. In essence, they proposed themselves as a more moderate, more democratic version of the FSLN, but none of the Sandinista mass organizations joined them, in whole or in part, and they failed to attract a new base outside the dissident intellectuals who had earlier bolted the parent party. This left them on the margins going into the elections, though it remains to be seen how they would do if the FSLN continued to stumble.

* * *

Some twenty-three parties fielded candidates for the 1996 elections, but the contest came down to a race between the two strongest political parties — the FSLN on the left and the Liberal Alliance on the right — both of which sought to polarize the electorate between them. In doing so, they rendered irrelevant the "center," which most of the other parties claimed to represent. Among those vying for this middle position in addition to the MRS were the party of the Chamorro government, PRONAL (the National Project); a center-right mutation of the defunct Chamorro coalition that called itself UNO-96; and, representing the displaced oligarchy, the Conservative Party, which had last won a national election in the 1920s.

The Liberal Alliance grouped several pro-Somoza political fragments, but, under Managua mayor Arnoldo Alemán, it put on a new face. Though Alemán allies included Somoza cronies and members of the Somoza family, he also drew support from the business association COSEP, from Miami-based exiles (including Cuban-Americans as well as Nicaraguans) who helped fund his campaign, and from former members of the Resistance. He even managed to attract anti-Sandinista politicians on the Atlantic coast, giving him a national,

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multiclass, multi-thnic base. His Alliance campaigned on the theme of a stream-lined state, with the private sector driving the economy. Alemán took a populist position against monopolies in the domestic economy, and he promised enhanced access to credit and a restructuring of the National Development Bank to help small producers, but he also indicated back-pedaling on the Sandinista land reform. Early polls showed him far ahead, and he never fell behind, though he slipped during the last month of the campaign, triggering frantic moves by the U.S. and the conservative Catholic Archbishop to shore up his support.[22]

On the FSLN side, the campaign — and the preparations for it — revealed the yawning gap between the rhetoric of change and the resiliency of *verticalismo* . Some party loyalists argued that Ortega should step aside to make room for a younger leadership, but it is unclear if any one personality could have held the fractious front together then — a commentary in its own way on the state of the organization. But it was never a serious option. Former Supreme Court justice and human rights activist Vilma Núñez ran for the nomination in a non-binding party primary in February 1996 but garnered only a tiny fraction of the vote and did not succeed in opening a serious intra-party dialogue. Proposals for pre-campaign community outreach were shelved in favor of a media-centered push in the final months, orchestrated by a Costa Rican PR firm. A commission set up by the Sandinista Assembly labored over economic policy only to find itself preempted by a pro-IMF proposal prepared by a coterie of conservative businessmen and launched by the Directorate with great fanfare three weeks before the election. (Commission members learned about this when they read about it in the newspaper.)

The FSLN campaigned for a "government of national unity." Ortega's running mate, wealthy cattle rancher Juan Manuel Caldera, was not even a member of the party. Three ministries were promised to former members of the Resistance. The party platform stressed increased help for small producers and modest government spending within a framework of monetary stability, but it also called for another "*concertación*" around national economic policy, leaving the door open for dialogue with other parties. This conciliatory approach did not, however, succeed in widening the party's base, which remained more or less what (and where) it had been for the previous six years. Some argued that the watering down of the party's outlook and program ended up alienating more voters than it won over. As I have argued earlier, the loss of a potential cadre of activist women, thou-

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sands of whom were engaged in projects at the community level but few of whom campaigned for the FSLN, could have made the difference. But the party's chronic and continuing failures on gender made this impossible — and would only worsen when allegations of Daniel Ortega's abuse of his stepdaughter came out two years later.

The 1996 elections, like those in 1990, took place against a backdrop of continuing economic stagnation.[23] The war was over, and inflation had been curbed, but per capita economic growth was negative for every year the UNO was in power except 1995.[24] New investment was not forthcoming due in part to the continuing instability. Unemployment and underemployment rates remained disturbingly high, as did the country's debt burden. And corruption was endemic. This, on the heels of a decade-long war that had left 50,000 dead and produced as much as $17.8 billion in damages.[25] Ironically, perhaps, it was again inflows of international aid that were keeping the regime afloat — $2.7 billion to 1994, including nearly one billion from the U.S., the World Bank and the InterAmerican Development Bank — just as had been the case for the Sandinistas during the heyday of Soviet support.[26]

The Chamorro government had careened from one crisis to the next, only able to govern at all because it had the support of the FSLN representatives on key issues. Despite this, the FSLN was not able to convince a majority of the people in 1996 that it could do better. Instead, it was implicated in the Chamorro regime against which Alemán campaigned, lumping the two together and holding them jointly responsible for the suffering of the postwar years. He won with fifty-one percent of the vote to Ortega's thirty-eight percent. These numbers were both down a bit from those the UNO and the FSLN racked up in 1990, largely because the smaller centrist parties pulled votes from them, but the gap between the two was almost exactly the same. In the parliamentary balloting, they garnered about the same share of the votes as in the earlier round, forty percent, taking thirty-six of the ninety-three seats in the National Assembly. This was a loss of three places, but the FSLN still had one of the largest parliamentary blocs of any left party in the Western Hemisphere. On the other hand, they were stalled. Then came the scandal.

* * *

Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamerica Narváez Murilo, was thirty in March 1998 when she went public with charges of sexual and psychological abuse going back to her childhood. The accusations

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were leveled in a personal letter, which was later published in the daily news summary *Bolsa de Noticias*. They were reiterated in a press conference that same day, where Zoilamerica appeared with her estranged husband, Alejandro Bendaña, and her aunt. Hours later, her mother held a press conference with Daniel Ortega and two members of the National Directorate in which she vehemently denied all the charges, as her husband for the most part stood mute. In the days that followed, though, party stalwarts were anything but silent, as Narváez was vilified.

Two hostile camps emerged. One argued that this was a family affair and should not be aired in public. Sandinistas who took this position found support from Liberal Alliance leaders and other social conservatives. The other one blasted her for undermining their party leader, whom many viewed as untouchable, whatever the truth of the charges. National Directorate member Monica Boltadano criticized the independent women's movement for rallying to Narváez' side. Others accused her of fronting for everything from the MRS to the CIA. The few prominent party members who publicly supported her, or who called for further investigation, were attacked.

While the details of what transpired might have been in dispute, at least for the first days, the knee-jerk response of party hard-liners was as callous as it was cynical, and it revealed just how much women were expected to swallow for the party and for male prerogatives as the issue of whether or not the abuse had taken place largely disappeared from the debate. In the face of this, Narváez filed criminal charges for sexual abuse, rape and sexual harassment, though it was unlikely that Ortega would ever come to trial as he enjoyed immunity from prosecution under the rules of the National Assembly where, for once, he could count on support across party lines.

* * *

When the Sandinistas convened their third official party congress in May 1998, the organization and the country seemed ripe for change. The 1996 electoral defeat had shaken the confidence of rank-and-file members who had managed to weather the FSLN's fall from power in 1990. Attrition was growing, rejuvenation was needed — the more so as the party faced another round of national balloting in 2001. Yet, midway through his term, public support for Arnoldo Alemán's presidency was also waning, under a cloud of corruption charges and in the midst of continuing economic stagnation and stringent, IMF-mandated austerity. Unlike the situation at the special congress the

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FSLN called in 1994, there were no organized political currents that traded charges and countercharges over past failures, so calls for changes in the program did not have the bitter personal character or the potential for rupture as those in the last such meeting. As the congress neared, mid-level party cadres freely discussed such issues as how should the FSLN define its long-range goals, how closely should it work with the government, what should be its position on foreign investment and private property, and how should the rank-and-file be represented in the party's top leadership. The fact that no one in the National Directorate issued any comments on these issues should have been a tip-off. In the event, the gathering did little more than reaffirm existing structure and policy and elect a new leadership, with Daniel Ortega again at its head, as loyalists closed ranks around him. An unexpected crisis had arisen, and there was only so much room for the public airing of differences. As usual, the line where it ended was drawn from the top.

Six months earlier, the party had set up a commission (with Narváez a member) to draft recommendations. They produced "A Proposal for the Transformation of the FSLN." Among the issues up for discussion were to be the party's concept of socialism, its position on property, greater representation for the popular sectors and the construction of new party secretariats. In the event, the Narváez controversy overshadowed the entire session, though it was never openly discussed, and the congress for the most part limited itself to voting in a new Directorate and reforming the bylaws. Proposals to increase the leadership quotas for women and youth were narrowly defeated, though the Sandinista Assembly and mid-level leadership bodies were expanded to increase popular participation. Delegates also reaffirmed the party's commitment to socialism, defining it in modest (or moderate) terms as "an attempt to provide all Nicaraguans with a dignified life, access to employment, health care, housing, culture, sports and in general terms, to establish a just distribution of wealth by taking advantage of the country's natural resources." By the end of the conference, nearly all the original *comandantes* of the National Directorate were gone — either resigned, retired or voted out — except FSLN founder Tomás Borge and Daniel Ortega, who had become a cult figure in the party.[27]

By this point, Nicaragua was both polarized and at the same time atomized, as many former activists, especially but not only women, pulled back from politics to work on what they took to be fixable problems. Once engaged at the local level, people more readily crossed

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party lines to get things done, as illustrated by the response to Hurricane Mitch that October. At least 3,000 people died in the torrential rains that came with that storm, most in a mud slide on the badly deforested slopes of the Casita volcano, and there were an estimated $1.5 billion in losses with more than over 800,000 people affected. As the two leading parties bickered over which communities should get what relief, some 320 civil society organizations came together, calling themselves the Nongovernmental Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Coalition, to pool their resources and design a long-term plan for reconstruction. Among them were organizations participating in preventive and curative health care, formal and nonformal education, environmental protection, the economy, children, adolescents and youth, community development, women's empowerment and sexuality, local power, housing, credit, urban and rural development, nutrition, agricultural production, forestry production, micro businesses, human rights, research, communications, foreign debt, trade, cultural promotion, cooperatives, and churches and pastoral work.

The list was a Who's Who of professional agencies, community-based organizations and even party-affiliated social movements (AMNLAE and UNAG were among them). In one way or another they were present in virtually all the communities most damaged by Mitch. By the time a donor conference was set for December in Washington, the coalition had prepared a laundry list of specific projects. They framed this with a call to support programs that eliminated poverty, protected natural resources and increased citizen participation, with small and medium rural producers the "main subjects" of all reconstruction and development efforts. What else distinguished the proposal was that issues of gender equality, ethnic diversity, and relations among the generations were integrated with a trenchant class analysis into all aspects of the program, rather than tacked on as dangling statements of principle. The coalition advocated the democratization of power relations with a level of specificity wholly uncharacteristic of Nicaraguan politics. However, it was also plagued by the back-biting and competition for funding common to such groups and could best be considered part of the cure for Nicaragua's bankrupt party politics, not an alternative to them.[28]

Alemán's response to Mitch, which was at first to deny its severity and then to channel aid to Liberal Alliance constituencies while withholding it from Sandinista communities, added to the aura of corruption that was beginning to suffuse the administration — and

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generating public outrage. The president himself was accused of large land grabs, while charges flew of construction contracts awarded to his cronies and rampant political favoritism in the assignment of lucrative government posts. In March 1999, 10,000 people marched to protest the spreading corruption. The demonstration was led by an unlikely mix of Sandinistas, MRS leaders and members of a formerly pro-Alemán community organization, JCOPS. Nevertheless, Ortega's popularity was plummeting in the polls just as fast as that of Alemán, as people appeared to be turning against politics as well as politicians and parties. News that the two were negotiating a secret pact to protect their personal and party positions fed this disillusionment.[29]

Back-door agreements to carve up the spoils of office were common between the two conservative parties that controlled Nicaraguan politics for much of the twentieth century. For them to reappear signaled a further deterioration of the post-revolutionary political arena. The argument for this one was constructed around the need for "stability," which was needed to attract foreign investment. Among other measures, the agreement privileged the two leading parties by eliminating run-offs in presidential contests, while setting up formidable barriers against third party participation in the electoral process. It also guaranteed the outgoing president and the second-place finisher in new presidential elections two consecutive terms in the national assembly, a move that assured Alemán and Ortega immunity from prosecution for criminal charges (notably corruption or sexual abuse) for the next twelve years. And the pact provided the Sandinistas cover for voting in further structural-adjustment measures and privatizations demanded by the country's international creditors. The announcement of this pact provoked an outcry within the FSLN, as well as from its external critics. Sandinista Deputy Carlos Fonseca Terán, whose father launched the party in the early 1960s, was moved to say:

> The founders of the FSLN fought and died for a profound transformation of Nicaraguan society. To achieve this it is not necessary to do what the FSLN is doing now. We are not opposed to the FSLN obtaining positions of power. What we are against is the price they are paying for this power.[30]

For the FSLN to recover and lead the country again, they have not only to tinker with organizational mechanisms and craft fresh policies and programs, they have also to combat the cynicism that is set-

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tling in. The need for a renovated revolutionary movement is certainly clear. The new ideas for one are out there. The organizations are for the most part in place to link much of the population in a new struggle for social and economic justice. The main obstacles are within the party itself — in the habits and styles of work, in the remnants of verticalism that reassert themselves at every moment of crisis, in the powerful hold that patriarchal values and constraints still have on party culture as well as its leaders. New faces are necessary at the top. New relationships have to be established among the various social and political movements. A hard, honest, public look at the party's history is the place to start a serious process of renewal — one that engages everyone and does not simply point fingers or seek to allocate blame. It is not only organizational openness that is needed — or answers to the country's most pressing economic and social problems — but also trust.

"We need a national therapy," says Sofia Montenegro.

> We have to address the subjectivity of a deeply hurt people. Not only because they had relatives killed, but because they have lost their dreams, their faith, their hopes. If we want to be taken seriously, we have to face this and work as seriously on this as we work on the economy."[31]

However, in a sign that *sandinismo* was still a potent mobilizing force, despite the stagnation at the top of the party, a Sandinista candidate, Herty Lewites, won the race for Mayor of Managua in the November 2000 municipal elections, positioning the party (and perhaps Lewites himself) for a run at the presidency the next year. Lewites was a businessman and former municipal official who had dropped out of the FSLN to join the MRS, but later came back to the fold. Many others who had left the FLSN but voted for the Lewites ticket said that they would not have done so if Daniel Ortega's name had headed the list.[32]

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Chapter 14

PALESTINE

SQUANDERED OPPORTUNITIES

Yasir Arafat arrived in Gaza on July 1, 1994 for the first time in twenty-seven years. He was greeted by thousands of cheering Palestinians. It was the high point of his revolutionary career and the pinnacle of his personal power. He was acting president and prime minister of the Palestine Authority, commander of the Palestinian armed forces and controller of the purse for all disbursements, hirings, and other expenditures down to the Authority's last dollar. This was one-man, one-party rule.

The Authority itself was largely an implant from outside — a transfer of venue for the Tunis-based PLO bureaucracy, leavened with additions from the leading families in the Occupied Territories. With this latter move, Arafat began to formally shift his power base to the class of Palestinian notables. In doing so, he undermined all the parties (including his own) and the political class that controlled them, while bypassing altogether the revolutionaries that led and serviced the uprising. This would come back to haunt him in late 2000 when Fatah militants rose up to join a second *intifada* that challenged Israel's terms for a peace settlement — and Arafat's autocratic control of the national movement.

When Arafat returned to Gaza in 1994, however, he did so triumphantly, and he brought his closest cronies with him. A handful of leaders from other parties were folded in — notably FIDA's titular head, Yasir Abd Rabbo — but the PA was a new institutional structure that superceded the others, the PLO included, though it continued to exist as a separate organization with its own mandate.[1] From the standpoint of the social content to the national struggle, this was a giant step backward. With much of the left boycotting it, however, there was no significant challenge to it or to Arafat himself, and, as usual, no serious

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effort to articulate an alternative. Meanwhile, donors ranging from US/AID and the EU to the World Bank stepped in to bankroll the new Authority and to use it to stabilize the battered society.

This was the backdrop for my arrival in the Territories in November 1994 to interview leading members of the Palestine People's Party (PPP) for this project. But what I have to say about the party now is relatively modest. It had lost much of its strength and spirit at the end of the 1980s, when the Soviet bloc fell apart and the *intifada* began to wear down. By the mid-1990s, it was ideologically disoriented and politically exhausted, along with much of the rest of the left. It had been of no great influence on the PLO as the Oslo accords were negotiated and as the PA was set up. Afterward, it vacillated in its position on the accords — or perhaps hedged is more accurate — which confused many of its followers, and it appeared unable to come up with a clear, credible strategy to both accommodate the new situation and to criticize it at the same time. I found many of its members unable to articulate precisely what it was they now represented. A party conference scheduled to revise the organization's program had been repeatedly postponed, but there appeared to be a searching, if as-yet-incomplete, self-examination underway.

The name change from the Palestine Communist Party to the Palestine People's Party — taken shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union at an October 1991 party conference — was not just an attempt to distance the organization from a defeated political experiment. According to party leaders, it also reflected an effort to reposition the organization as the representative of all the people, rather than only (or principally) the working class. The party also jettisoned its "vanguard" structure, launched an internal debate on strategy and tactics and committed itself to support an autonomous women's movement, independent trade unions and other nonparty organizations, though members involved in these formations told me that the decision met resistance and was implemented unevenly. Elections were held under new provisions that limited the secretary general to two consecutive five-year terms and required the Political Bureau to change one-third of its membership every five years. The PPP lost some members in this reorganization, with a small breakaway group joining the Damascus-based "rejectionist" coalition after the signing of the Oslo accords, but it remained one of the largest of the left factions in the territories.[2]

"We need to retain the dialectical method and a historical analysis without Marxism-Leninism," People's Party General Secretary

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Beshir Barghouthi told me when I asked him what these changes meant in terms of the party's future direction. Methodology without dogma might sound refreshing — but communist politics without class content? What was the party for, I asked, and whose interests did it specifically represent? The answers were less than clear, reflecting a degree of ideological and programmatic uncertainty evident since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Near the end of the 1980s, as a newly inducted member of the PLO's inner circle (and as the Soviet bloc began to disintegrate), the communists had begun to de-emphasize class issues in favor of a more diffuse nationalist outlook. "We came to see that before you can have social justice, you have to have national justice," Barghouthi said. "To push for a communist program is like trying to build the fifth floor of a building when you don't have a foundation." In fact, most of what we discussed over the course of an hour and a half in his austere Jerusalem office was the People's Party critique of the recently negotiated "Cairo agreement," often called Oslo II. This was an extension of the Oslo process that spelled out how much land the Palestinians would get to administer at which points and under what conditions on the way toward the undefined final settlement. Barghouthi opposed this phase and favored a direct leap into the final status negotiations while the Palestinians still had some leverage over the outcome. But on the character of the Palestine at the end of the process, he was far less specific.

With the growing despotism of the Palestine Authority, a multiclass formation was needed to fight for basic democratic rights, according to Barghouthi. "There is no separation of powers between the [proposed] legislature and the executive in the Authority," he said, "To whom is the executive accountable? If you lose accountability, you have dictatorship." There was at that time no political party that represented this sort of social democratic agenda, but it was an unfamiliar one for the PPP, and many of its members had difficulty distinguishing it from textbook Western civics. Nor did the party have an original platform for economic development — having dropped all references to socialism — other than to rail against the spreading corruption within the new Authority.[3]

Party veteran Abdel Magid Hamdeen was a writer for the PPP newspaper *Al Taliah* when I met him in Jerusalem. "Democracy is talked about here, but not practiced," he told me after I asked what they meant when they spoke of fighting for democracy.

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> Israel has prevented us from having democracy, so there has been no opportunity to develop our ideas. Now the issue is starting to rise again. Our problem is that we always spoke of a unique democracy for Palestinians, but we never had a place to test it. All the factions always talked about democracy, but they did the opposite of what they preached. Always the practice was the opposite of the slogans. Now there is a debate over what kind of democracy we want. What we have is closer to Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Sudan, but there's no democracy there. We are looking at Western-style democracy for our general framework — an independent judiciary, a state with law, accountability of all structures, freedom of the press, preservation of human rights and equality for women protected by the law. Nothing new has been formulated, but we are learning. The main problem we have is how to liberate the economy from the Israeli economy, but even if we do, our economy is very weak. We don't have the infrastructure or the base for our own development. The whole thing has to be rebuilt, but we cannot trust this Authority, so we are demanding that they stick to the recommendations of the World Bank. Imagine — I am a communist and I want free markets![4]

I found Fuad Rizik at a café in Bethlehem's Manger Square. "Think about this," said the party's aging international relations specialist.

> The communist parties are the oldest parties in the Arab world, but none has ever come to power. We were obviously missing something. We took our ideology and our program from developed countries, and they did not fit our circumstances or our culture. What we see now is that you can't build socialism in an underdeveloped setting. You must put social and economic development as your first priority — you must go through a capitalist phase. Non-capitalist development, as we used to call it, was a myth. There were no non-capitalist countries.[5]

Mohamed Zayn Adeen is another member of the party's old guard. I had met him in 1988 at the UPMRC blood bank in Gaza, which he founded. When I saw him in Gaza in 1994, he ruminated over the point his party had reached:

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> The last two years of the *intifada* were very hard on the people — the economic situation, the collaborator killings, Israel's behavior, the collective punishments. They were ready for a change, and the Israelis took advantage of this. The first need of the people is to feel secure. After you feel secure, you want to eat. We know the Authority is not the answer, but what can we do, how do we begin again? Should we ask the occupation to come back? Should we send our relatives away again?
>
> All the parties have become history. Now we need to build a movement on a social basis. Unless the building starts with a very good basement, it will not go up. What we achieved during the occupation should be our starting point. We need to put boundaries between the Authority and the social, medical and other activities, which depend on the community. The NGOs are important to this — they have moral authority as well as practical strengths. We can begin there, with the establishment of social services, and build on it. The other thing is to keep away from factionalism. This is a one-party Authority. We need one movement for democracy.[6]

At this point, the party was still semi-underground and not altogether unified itself. In 1956 Communists had participated in elections under Jordanian rule only to have ninety percent of their leadership arrested afterward. They were still wary of exposure, as Israel was refusing travel permits to some party members and detaining others without charge in apparent retaliation for the party's public criticism of the Cairo agreement. To cope with this, party members were still grouped in cells of five-to-twelve people, each with an elected secretary.[7] The lines of communication (and command) went up or down through a network of local and district committees. Gaza and the West Bank were linked through the party's fifty-seven-person central committee, whose members were elected in a national congress. But there was growing alienation at the base. One PPP organizer in a village outside Nablus signaled this when he remarked to me, "We have changed our ideology, our program, our class base and even our name, but we still see the same people at the top as before."[8]

As for the other left parties, the Popular Front's leadership for the most part remained outside, though several cadre had surfaced and a few had returned. This physical separation widened the disparity in viewpoints within the party, as those in the Territories struggled to keep up with the changes there, sounding much like their counter-

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parts in the Peoples Party, while the external leadership remained intransigent in its rejection of the Oslo process and the institutions it produced. I spoke with one high-level party activist in Gaza, who argued that the two main challenges to the left were to "fight to make the Authority democratic and to organize the people to gain some profit from Oslo." Like other PFLP organizers I interviewed, he asked to remain anonymous, for fear of retribution both from Israel and, to the extent he voiced dissident views, from his party. Pursuing these objectives was difficult, he said, because the Damascus-based party leadership forbade dealing with the Authority lest this be construed as legitimizing the Oslo accords. "We need to accept that the armed struggle is over," he said, adding, "Oslo marks a new stage of struggle whether we like it or not."[9] These concerns were shared among nearly all the Popular Front activists with whom I spoke. Said another: "Ever since [the 1991 peace talks in] Madrid, all the factions have been arguing with each other. All the while Hamas is building, building, while the left is very far from the people. You can't be popular if you're pure."

Independent human rights activist Raji Sourani, whose views were often identified with the Popular Front, characterized the Authority as a "one-man show" and called for a popular struggle to democratize it. In an interview in his Gaza office, he laid out a five-point program of action that he said members of all the left parties could subscribe to: the independence of the judicial system, elections with real substance, economic stability and development, freedom of expression, and the general rule of law. In contrast with the external PFLP leadership, which deferred commitments to social equality to accommodate the alliance with Hamas, Sourani also urged support for women's right to vote in municipal elections and for equal participation in the workforce, a key to advancing women's rights in the larger society. Now, he said, the political scene was dividing into a struggle between the Authority and Hamas. "We are talking about clinical death for the rest. Generating a third power is vitally important."[10]

A Popular Front organizer in the Gaza camps echoed these views. "The main danger we face now is dictatorship — dictatorship or civil war," he said. "I believe there is common ground among many here to save our society and to build a democratic Palestine. We need to work together on education and health and other areas that benefit the people. And we need to challenge the Authority to get from Israel what is promised. If they do not succeed, a catastrophe is waiting for all of us. The Islamists will become stronger and stronger, and the role

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of the nationalist organizations will go down."[11]

A vigorous debate over these issues was underway throughout the party then, at least in its West Bank and Gaza branches. Two seminars on the party's "development" strategy had been conducted earlier that year, the first time the issue had come up for group discussion. But the inability of party organizers to influence the outside leadership fed a steady process of attrition. Dissidents chose to leave rather than risk splitting the party, as had occurred with the DFLP. Party leaders also found it more and more difficult to generate grassroots enthusiasm around any issue. "The parties have lost the capacity to mobilize people on a mass scale," said one West Bank party activist. "They are no more the vanguard. We have leaders without masses."

Though the Democratic Front was also aligned with the PFLP-led opposition coalition in Damascus, it quietly moved a number of people into the Territories. DFLP leaders also used intermediaries within the breakaway FIDA faction and direct contacts with PLO officials in Cairo to try to influence the Authority up to 1998 when Israel permitted several of the front's top leaders to enter Gaza for a PNC session to alter the movement's national charter. In 1999, Hawatmeh finally settled accounts with Arafat and formally brought the front into the Territories and into a dialogue with the Authority to continue the struggle from the inside. But the Democratic Front also experienced attrition throughout this protracted process. Many party activists grew weary of the infighting and began to worry about their personal situations under the new self-rule Authority, as party subsidies dried up and virtually the only sources of income were in the new "public" sector.

Throughout these years, donor countries pumped large sums of money directly into the PA, often at the expense of the NGOs and their social services, to shore it up — and to try to influence it. The total aid package to Palestine rose from about $174 million in 1992, all of which had been channeled through NGOs, to $511 million in 1995, of which less than $100 million went to the NGO sector.[12] By its second year, the Authority provided salaries or subsidies to nearly one quarter of Gaza's population, making it a formidable patronage operation and creating abundant opportunities for both large-scale corruption and small-time embezzlement. The PA's model was drawn mainly from Fatah's experience in the Arab world, taking little if anything from the movement's experience inside, especially the *intifada*. The result was, predictably, an autocracy in nationalist guise. Yet, once again, the left offered no programmatic alternative,

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leaving Arafat to consolidate his highly personal style of rule virtually unchallenged.

The new Authority rested on the twin pillars of the "Tunis mafia" — the loyalist core of the Fatah leadership that Arafat brought into Gaza with him — and the traditional elite with which he cemented private pacts. Both groups benefited handsomely from being on the inside. Instances of personal corruption were as frequent as they were egregious. Tax collectors sought bribes to scale back assessments, while money Israel turned over to the Authority for rebates on the value-added-tax did not show up in financial statements at all. Backroom deals accounted for lucrative public works contracts, many of which went to Arafat cronies who constructed garish multi-million-dollar mansions for themselves in Gaza, not far from the grossly overcrowded refugee camps where more than half the Gaza population lived in disheartening poverty. Every request turned into an opportunity for graft. The acquisition of a permit to travel from Gaza to the West Bank, for example, needed behind-the-scenes intervention of an official to whom an unspecified obligation was then encumbered. "[E]very revolution has its fighters, thinkers and profiteers," a Fatah veteran told a reporter. "Our fighters have been killed, our thinkers assassinated, and all we have left are the profiteers."[13]

For the first eighteen months, until a Legislative Council was elected, Arafat ruled by personal decree. To maintain order and to protect his position, he relied on Fatah's pre-existing cadre structure and on a Byzantine system of newly established security forces. By 1995 there were more than over 22,000 members of these units out of approximately 40,000 people employed by the Authority. The next year the numbers climbed to 30,000 out of 56,000, maintaining the proportion of more than half of all jobs for security-related work — this in a territory of less than three million citizens (if one counts all of the West Bank and Gaza, over much of which the Authority lacked jurisdiction at that stage) and a remarkably low crime rate. Among the new forces in addition to the police were the General Intelligence Service, the Preventive Security Force, the Presidential Guard and the Special Security Force (whose job it was to police the others). Security courts were set up to hold overnight trials with no defense attorney present. Not surprisingly, they invariably produced convictions.

Criticism of Arafat's regime was met with escalating repression, despite international outcries. When Raji Sourani, the out-spoken director of the Gaza Centre for Rights and Law, refused to muzzle his criticisms of the Authority's method of operation, for example, he was

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twice interrogated by Palestinian authorities, once formally arrested, and finally fired by the center's board of directors on April 1, 1995, under pressure from Arafat himself. (Sourani quickly regrouped and launched a new center under independent oversight.) The arrest and beating in 1996 of the prominent independent critic Eyad Saraj — the co-chair of an independent human rights commission and the director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Centre — on trumped up charges of drug possession generated a torrent of protest in Palestine and around the world. It was not long afterward, however, that reports of Palestinian detainees dying under torture in PA prisons began to surface and that another prominent critic of Arafat — the expatriate author Edward Said — had his books banned. Meanwhile, despite the absence of formal censorship laws, the domestic media was cowed into silence by targeted actions against offending publications. In July 1994, the distribution of the daily *al-Nahar* was halted after articles appeared that were objectionable to Arafat. It only resumed publication when its editorial direction was changed. At the end of 1995 the editor of the Jerusalem-based *al-Quds* was actually detained because he placed an article flattering the chairman deep inside the paper instead of on the front page. Yet the various opposition parties, separately and together, appeared impotent in the face of this.

"All the parties are in crisis," said Salim Tamari, a highly respected independent left intellectual in the West Bank.

> The underground political parties — now becoming overground — lack vision and program. FIDA was the first left party to face a crisis of Marxism, but they didn't translate this into a programmatic alternative. They have become a social democratic party of peace without a social democratic program. [In November 1994] a party conference took the decision to be an opposition party. Party cadres are to stay in the government but to oppose authoritarian tendencies. That is all. The Democratic Front and the Popular Front are merging at the lower levels, but their cadres are leaving. This is also happening with the PPP. The independents are the fastest-growing political tendency. And it is the NGOs that are the backbone of our fragile civil society.[14]

This interpretation was supported by the polls. Although Arafat's personal popularity remained surprisingly high, Fatah had the support of only forty percent of the people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip a year after Arafat set up the Palestine Authority, according to a sur-

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vey conducted by the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center. The Popular and Democratic Fronts together garnered seven-to-eight percent, while the PPP had the backing of about five percent and FIDA barely registered. Those who identified with the Islamist opposition — Hamas and Islamic Jihad — accounted for fifteen-to-twenty percent. The fastest growing group, at nearly thirty percent, was the independents, who appeared to be disenchanted with all the parties. From then on, the numbers associated with the left steadily declined, while those favoring the Islamists remained steady.

* * *

"There has been no strategic vision since the [Oslo] accords," said health sector activist Rita Giacaman, another West Bank independent on the left.

> No one likes the accords, but there is no clarity from the parties in telling us where to go, so the discourse is taking place outside them, within fragments of groupings that may gel into something new, maybe not. We are in transition, politically, and no one knows whether this will produce something new, substantial, organized — or not. But the seeds are certainly there.
>
> Who are the democratic forces? They are the diehards within the parties who still believe in social justice. They are the men and women within the NGO movement, which began to flourish in the 1980s and proceeded to make superb links with the grassroots. They are the women's movement, which will be a major contributing force to the democratizing trend because they are highly organized and active these days. You will find proponents for democratic reform from among Fatah, the PFLP, the Democratic Front, the Communist Party — I don't know about the fundamentalists, that's a different story — but you will find them among all the other groups. There is a grumbling from below against the rising autocratic dictatorship. The grassroots is grumbling. The main obstacle to what is happening here is the continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the continued Israeli domination over the legal structure. Imagine — the Authority can't change the law without the permission of Israel! The occupation continues. But we have two challenges — the occupation and democratization — and we need to work on both.[15]

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This discussion was taking place across the Territories, especially within the NGOs, where many political activists were finding an institutional home, as these organizations offered one of the few alternatives to the Authority for salaried work. This had the effect of "professionalizing" the exchange and at times patterning it to the agendas of outside funders, as talk about democracy became a growth industry. Some of this was self-serving (and risky), as new organizations sprang up to tap into the money flowing into the Territories from sources interested not just in promoting such a discourse, but in shaping it. These ranged from European NGOs with long histories of community-based work there, like the Dutch agency Novib and the British Oxfam, to funders like US/AID, the European Union, and the World Bank, which had clearly vested interests in the new Authority. One of the more active promoters of civic education, for example, was the National Democratic Institute, an arm of the Democratic Party funded by the U.S. Congress. But so, too, were the Danish trade unions and solidarity groups across Europe and North America. Despite these contradictions, conferences and consultations sponsored by Palestinian NGOs catalyzed some of the most original thinking on the new situation, often bringing together members of otherwise feuding political parties. Some — especially those within the women's movement — also managed significant grassroots participation.

What gave the NGOs special prominence in this situation was not only the crisis in the parties but also the substantial weakening of the social movements that arose during the *intifada* only to decline afterward. Early in the post-Oslo period, the NGOs began to assert themselves as a sectoral force for the democratization of Palestinian society. In 1994 a group of seventy of them formed a coalition called the Palestinian NGO Network. PNGO (pronounced "pingo") brought together the largest and most effective private organizations in the Territories, crossing political lines and including a number of non-party institutions — service agencies, policy centers, human rights monitoring groups and others. This ability to overcome the chronic factionalism of the political parties and the social movements was one of the NGO sector's main strengths.

Among the founders and most ardent PNGO promoters was PPP leader and UPMRC director Moustafa Barghouthi. In a paper the UPMRC put out then he cited the NGOs' "flexibility, dynamism and exceptional ability to be creative in the face of the oppression and harassment suffered under the occupation" as among their values. The NGOs had a role in assisting disadvantaged social groups to organize

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to defend their interests in fostering the growth of community-based self-help and development initiatives, and in promoting democracy at the base of the society, he argued. They were also critical to the delivery of basic services, which the new Authority was unlikely to take on effectively. At that point, NGOs were responsible for sixty percent of primary health care, 100 percent of disability care, 100 percent of preschool programs and almost ninety-five percent of the agricultural extension work, for example.[16] Between the lines, Barghouthi was expressing a concern that the Authority would not only fail to develop but would act to reverse the popular and experimental character of the NGO programs and services in favor of the sort of top-down patronage machine they had constructed in Beirut and Tunis.[17]

In a paper presented two years later at a conference attended by many NGO representatives, who were by then coming under attack by the Authority for their institutional independence, Barghouthi warned that Palestine was at a crossroads: "Either we can make the transition to a more solid and stable form of national unity on the basis of democracy, or we can make it to a stage of national disintegration." The NGOs had a critical role to play in promoting a democratic outcome, he insisted, articulating a theme I heard repeatedly from members of the younger generation of activists within all the left parties and among the growing network of left independents.

> Democracy is not a luxury, it is an irreversible necessity, a precondition for the very survival of the Palestinian nation. Genuine democratization means toleration, pluralism, transparency, accountability for both governmental and non-governmental structures.... It means freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom for community organizations and NGOs to function without control or repression.... There are only two ways ahead of us. Either community structures, and therefore society itself, will become marginalized, leading to frustration, weakness and depression. Or we will follow the path of democracy, the path that will allow us to develop a new vision to control our own future and not be a mere instrument in the hands of external forces.[18]

The Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy, known locally as *Muwaten*, was one of the NGOs that arose in the 1990s to foster new thinking on these issues. Its core program was a series of four publications on problems of democracy. It also convened seminars and workshops on political issues, some internal, some open to the

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public. The Ramallah-based NGO provided a neutral venue for intellectuals from the leading left parties (and, at times, from the left-wing of Fatah) to sit with nonparty activists to assess the lessons of the national struggle. "We start with a critical approach to the concept of democracy," director George Giacaman told me. "Political equality with huge economic inequality is a joke. The challenge for us is how to combine political democracy and social justice." Giacaman saw this as a necessary gestation process for renewing a progressive political movement. "The individual is not a political actor without being organized," he said, noting at the same time that the new NGOs were not the solution.

> It is a mistake to think of NGOs as the main agent of change. They have no mass base, and they are vulnerable to disruption — the arrest of leaders, the pressures of funding, restrictions by the Authority. The NGOs have a supportive role, sometimes a leading role as developers of ideas, but you have to have organized social forces. Right now the parties are in a state of paralysis. They have an important role to play, but they are not playing it.[19]

The 1996 elections for a new legislative council presented another challenge to the left — not taken up except by the People's Party. Many on the left forecast that the elections would not happen, and they were taken by surprise when Arafat announced them at the end of 1995 on an accelerated timetable. A major battle was lost when he rejected calls to base the council seats on a system of proportional representation and instead allocated them by district, reserving a handful for confessional minorities. This favored the traditional clans, whose strength lay in territorial pockets, at the expense of the nationalist parties, whose support was dispersed, and it made it extremely difficult for political minorities to win any representation. When, under pressure from below, Fatah held primaries for its slate, Arafat overruled the results and substituted candidates from the traditional elite for some of the top vote-getters, though several were not even Fatah members.

Two weeks before the balloting, I accompanied Moustafa Barghouthi on a campaign swing through several villages near Ramallah. As we jounced along the rutted dirt roads, he reflected on the lessons he had taken so far. "The elections could provide the left with an opportunity to re-find their way, to get back in touch with the people," he said. "I've learned a lot in these days. From the beginning, I noticed a gap between the intellectual left and the public. We

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pay much more attention to the external world than our people. A balance is lost. It is not only the parties — many in the NGOs are far from the people. Even with the restrictions on the electoral process, this has been very useful — an opportunity to talk to people, to understand their needs."

At 6:30 in the evening, we arrived at a clubroom attached to a small mosque in the village of Kopar where sixty men were seated in front of a rickety fold-up table set up for three candidates — two from the People's Party, one from Fatah. (Women would meet the candidates separately.) Coffee was passed around in small plastic cups before a moment of silence for a fallen fighter — Hamas bomb specialist Yahya Ayyash, known as "the Engineer" — who was assassinated in Gaza that morning in a hi-tech Israeli hit involving a remote-control explosive device in a cell phone detonated by helicopter-borne commandos. Though few in the audience supported Hamas, most took the Israeli action as another sign of how illusory their "sovereignty" was. The operation set a dour tone for the evening — and for much of the remaining campaign — as people speculated endlessly on what lay behind Israel's timing.

There was much shuffling and stirring during the lengthy opening presentation on PCP/PPP history offered up by a party pedant from a neighboring village. Barghouthi livened the session with a voluble talk on the flaws in the "peace process," Fatah's failure to win concessions, and the importance of the new council for the next round of talks. He also called for expanded social programs, and he spoke to issues of land-use and taxation. But when he opened the floor for questions, the first speaker roundly damned the Communists for supporting partition in 1947. "How can you criticize Oslo now?" he demanded. "And what makes you think you could do any better?" The tiresome litany of facts and figures the local party comrade trotted out in response did little but irritate the audience, several of whose members cat-called during the recitation. This was a party that had a lot to learn about conducting a popular campaign.

Throughout the period leading up to the elections, the PPP was internally divided over how to approach them. Party leaders debated for months about over whether to participate. A party think tank organized a seminar on constituting a left alternative for members of all the left parties at its Jerusalem office, but the exchange led nowhere. (*Muwaten* ran a similar workshop with the same results.)[20] Proposals from within the party for the PPP to take a coalition approach to the campaign were vetoed by top officials. Several candidates picked to

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run were members of the party hierarchy with virtually no popular appeal or public recognition, chosen instead for their past prominence within the organization. Once the PPP decided to go it alone, however, nominees were left to build their own campaign committees with little structured party support, setting the organization up for an embarrassing rout. "We need to try new approaches, but the old guard is still holding tight control," remarked one mid-level cadre. "We need a revolution in our own house."

In the event, some eighty-seven percent of the registered voters participated, rendering the "rejectionist" boycott an exercise in futility. Fatah swept, taking two-thirds of the eighty-eight positions. None of the People's Party candidates won a seat. However, the top vote-getter was Dr. Haidar Abdul Shafi, an independent critic of both the Oslo agreement and the authoritarian character of the PA. Others who would not be easily controlled by Arafat also won, such as Hanan Ashrawi, and a handful of current and former members of the Popular Front and Hamas (who ran without their parties' sanction) captured seats.[21] Nevertheless, this was an overwhelmingly pro-Arafat body that lacked enough of an opposition to form a minority caucus. On the positive side, the elections marked a milestone for women who participated actively in the campaign and who voted in large numbers, though the number of women candidates was small and there were few women winners. But, helped by the PPP's decision to go it alone and the refusal of the other left parties to participate at all, Arafat was able to use these elections — which also included a vote for him as the PA's "president" — to consolidate his control over the self-rule administration while legitimizing his position on the global stage. In almost every way the elections proved to be a victory for political and social reaction.

"Arafat is now enjoying the support of the whole world — Israel, all the Arab countries, the Japanese, Europe, the Canadians, the U.S., most third world countries," said Ghassan Khatib, one of the PPP's younger leaders and the head of the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center.[22] "His international legitimacy is illustrated by the heads of state who visited — John Major, Al Gore and others. And he is getting a lot of financial support, maybe not enough, but almost the only money we are getting goes to him."

"The left made big mistakes," he said. "The Popular Front and the Democratic Front are isolated from the public, staying outside while everyone is moving to join Palestinian society. It is a nihilistic position — boycotting elections when ninety-seven percent of the pop-

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ulation is registered to vote. Because of this, the left couldn't unify."

Many mid-level cadres from the PFLP and the DFLP also disagreed with the boycott. One Popular Front veteran with whom I spoke was losing patience:

> These parties are always in opposition, and I think they are stuck there. Even if they are not participating with candidates, they should at least be campaigning, but they are doing nothing. They're just sitting there opposing. There is a culture of opposition — nothing, a vacuum. If they don't promote an alternative, it's going to be their end. They need to function as political organizations now, calling party conferences, debating issues.
>
> The left needs to open a dialogue with the Authority, to become a reference group, but we can't do that without a program and without restructuring ourselves in a more democratic way. The internal debates need to go public. We should be brave enough to do that. Is the armed struggle still relevant, or do we need new structures, a new program? How can we challenge the World Bank? What is our position on gender? We can't develop a wider trend unless points are debated and consensus is achieved. We could campaign for the right of return, for example. Next, perhaps, compensation. You have to be relevant. And the left needs to take on social issues in an active way. The main problem is the population — how to reach them. The key struggle, though, is to democratize the parties. The majority supports change, the central committee doesn't. The majority needs to convince the minority to be more realistic. If it doesn't, the left has committed suicide.

Jamil Hilal left the Democratic Front to join FIDA in the 1990 split. By 1996 he had become a political independent attached to *Muwaten*.

> The left made a mistake of strategic dimensions by boycotting these elections. They could have used them to renew their ties with the society. Whether they advised their supporters to go out and vote is a different issue, the least important issue. The people want something new, but the left has put itself outside the political process. They are hiding behind slogans because they don't have programs to address people's needs here. The left is completely absent from political events. You didn't even see a protest banner at the big demonstrations when the

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Israelis redeployed saying, 'This is a sham.' Nothing.

At one stage people become blind to their own experience. These fronts faced the Israeli occupation during the *intifada* through their mass organizations, but they continue to set up a false contradiction between the national and the social, as if the social is not also political. One influence on the leaders is being in Damascus where it is impossible to organize on social issues — for example, for higher wages or for women's rights. But it is interesting to note that in Lebanon when the political structures collapsed, the social structures of Najdeh [a popular women's organization] continued, showing their resilience. This experience should suggest a different position, but the left is undemocratic. There is a gap between leadership and base. The leadership is insulated from the experience of daily life, so these lessons do not get through. Future movements have to rest on women and workers, but both have been weakened in recent years. The women's leadership is strong but with little base, and the unions are very weak. Even so, both sectors have a strong interest in a democratic society. There is an objective need for a left, a strong political party of the left with strong social movements. The people want leadership. But if the left doesn't renew itself to take this role, something else will emerge.[23]

"The Popular and Democratic Fronts may not survive," said the PPP's Ghassan Khatib in a separate discussion.

To talk of the left today is to seek new categories, to include the many independents and the left trend within Fatah. The whole political and ideological map is changing, some groups are disappearing, some emerging. There are major debates going on inside Fatah, too. The old national slogans that attracted people to them from all political sides are no longer valid. This is no longer a military situation with military tasks. There is now going to be a polarization within Fatah on a social basis. Fatah will have to take positions on social issues, to act like a party and not a front. Arafat was able to postpone these issues before, but he can't now.

The PPP planned to hold a conference in 1994 to define a new program, but we're not making progress in theoretical work to fill the vacuum. One debate is over the attitude toward the PA — to be close or far away. Another is over what

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> exactly we are. Previously we could answer this easily, now it is difficult. We are a leftist party in the political and ideological sense, but we are an opposition party within the structure — participating in elections, for example. There is great potential here. We should have run a presidential candidate to demonstrate that we are an alternative. In economics, we are more supportive of a free market model, but we lack clarity. In the social field, we are clear on equality of opportunity for everyone. There is no debate on women's rights or workers' rights — we are clear on this, too.[24]

"A left program in Palestine starts with a commitment to secularism," said political independent Salim Tamari.

> The single most important issue is democracy — freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom to organize. The agenda must include social legislation for women's rights and workers' rights and build from there. There will be new forces coming out on these issues that don't reflect traditional left forces — tendencies coming out of Fatah, for example. Independent issue-oriented coalitions will form. The PPP will be at the core of this. They have the cadres, the tradition, the fighting spirit, the youth, the resonance with the public. What they're lacking is a clear agenda.[25]

The odd thing about this discontinuous debate, as a reader will be quick to perceive, was that as I sped about East Jerusalem and the West Bank to interview party members and left independents — deeply divided as they were — I was hearing much the same thing from all of them, though they remained unable (or unwilling) to work together to achieve these objectives.

Walid Salem, a 1984 sociology graduate from Birzeit University who spent five years in Israeli prisons, heads Panorama, a research center long associated with the Popular Front. In his view:

> There are three main opinions now on the new situation. First, there is that of the PA and its supporters — the national struggle is finished and we are now in the stage of building a Palestinian state. Second, there are the extreme nationalists of the left and the right — there is no building going on, we must continue with the national struggle. They have only slogans and do nothing. Third, are those in the PF, the DF and the PPP who say we have to continue the nation-

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al struggle, we have many unresolved issues, redeployment is not liberation, it just changes the shape of the occupation — but we also recognize we are in a new situation, and we need a new program for women, trade unions, parties, for political and social democracy.

The problem for the Popular Front and the Democratic Front is in implementation. They have the program, but they tilt the balance toward the national struggle, making a mechanical separation with the social. But some argue that we have to take the social programs as parallel with the national. For example, when we improve the conditions of workers, they struggle better. This is my position. I also favored participating in the elections. But the center of decision-making is outside the territories. This creates a big contradiction. I think the people outside cannot understand the situation here. I think the people inside should make the tactical decisions on issues like whether or not to participate in elections.

The left is not developing a line that understands the new situation. Many members left the Popular Front because the leadership uses undemocratic methods to impose the old line. Consider the elections, for example. At a meeting in Gaza, sixty percent decided to go into the elections. In the West Bank, it was fifty percent. A Central Committee meeting was scheduled for mid-November to decide whether the Popular Front would participate, but the Political Bureau postponed the meeting to the end of the month and then made the decision to boycott, announcing it to the public. They issued a mutual statement with the Democratic Front. As you see, the decisions of the Central Committee were made for it before it met. The post-election situation will oblige a new left to be established, regardless of the position of the outside leadership.[26]

One of the issues the new legislative council faced almost immediately was the Authority's relationship with "civil society." Funding cuts to the NGOs — and the shift of monies into "soft" projects, like trainings and civic education programs — produced drastic cut-backs in social services. In the five years after the Oslo accords were signed, for example, over sixty percent of the privately run clinics were closed, along with more than 120 pre-school programs. During this time, however, the Authority moved to gain control of those that were left and the funds flowing into them. A critical struggle took place over

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the promulgation of a new NGO law. Arafat's office produced one (and had it rejected by the new council) that was patterned after one in effect in Egypt, where the state oversees all aspects of NGO activities and can summarily replace an organization's entire board of directors if it determines they acted contrary to government interests. In 1998, the PNGO network, with more than 100 members of its own and allied with the 420-member Union of Charitable Societies, submitted its version to the council, which was approved and passed on to the executive. There, it stalled. Nevertheless, Moustafa Barghouthi, one of the driving forces behind the draft law and the NGO alliance that promoted it, was undaunted:

> This is part of a process of enlightening the society on the importance of participation. It is the making and developing of these laws that makes the difference, because we are building a movement. The fact that these things are in debate creates a new political culture and a new hope. To me, at this point, the process is the most important thing. Coalition-building is a critical feature that prepares us for the creation of an alternative democratic movement.
>
> Many people thought the civil society work, the NGO work, was a deviation from political work, but that wasn't right. This was a stage that required this kind of emphasis, a strong emphasis, on this type of work. It was necessary and important, but it was no alternative to political work. It could not be. Those who had illusions that civil society work could substitute for political parties are discovering how mistaken they were. NGOs are not political groups. They can be organizations with political missions, but you still need parties to develop political programs, to contest elections and to stand up to the other political forces. When you encounter very strong political blocs, like Hamas and Fatah, you need to have a political frame to be able to resist them. But a good political party without a civil society movement is also a terrible thing. At least in the Palestinian context, it becomes very factional and very limited in its approach. I think the most important thing is mixing the national with the social, and it is in the party's relations with the civil society movement where this happens.
>
> Palestinian society is now at a deadlock. There is a very serious polarization between a corrupt Authority that is failing and causing very serious damage to the society, and there are the Hamas fundamentalists. The country is dying for an

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> alternative, and this alternative cannot be a single party, however good it is.[27]

The PPP convened its long-delayed party conference on October 2, 1998. It was, said Moustafa Barghouthi afterward, "the first democratic party congress ever." It was also the site of a power struggle between the old guard and the young Turks associated with the NGOs and the social movements. The outcome was a shift in party structure, program and policy and something of a compromise in the makeup of the top leadership.

A decision during the preparatory phase to allow women to vote for their own delegates — and to set the number of such delegates on the basis of half the members required for delegates chosen by the men — substantially increased women's participation. The conference itself abolished the powerful post of general secretary, rather than replace the outgoing party chief, Beshir Barghouthi, who was extremely ill after three strokes. Delegates voted to supplant the position with a troika, whose coordination would rotate among the three leaders. All of them were banned from sitting on the PLO executive committee or on the cabinet of the Palestinian Authority in an effort to limit overlapping power centers and conflicts of political interest. Barghouthi was one of those chosen.[28] "Maybe in the future the position could come back," he told me, "but there was too much authority in the hands of one person. For now the institution needs to be destroyed."

As it turned out, three-fourths of those elected to the party's forty-one member central committee were new and, by a decision of the conference, one-fifth were women.[29] The conference also voted to designate itself a "continuous body," meaning that it could come back into session at any time there were major issues to be decided for which substantial membership input was deemed necessary, said Barghouthi.

> The most important issues we debated were the identity of the party and our relationship with the Authority. Some wanted us to go back to being a 'communist' party. Some wanted us to become more 'liberal.' We voted that the PPP is a 'socialist' party.
>
> The main question was what would be our relationship to the Authority. That is the issue where you can be revolutionary or anti-revolutionary. You can't be classified as more revolutionary just by saying, 'I am a communist.' What makes you more revolutionary is whether you take a strong stand

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against the wrong social policies of your own government. That was the most important dividing line in this congress. We discussed the need to differentiate between the Authority as the state, or the nucleus of a state, and the government that runs it. This is a new notion that was accepted. And the relationship with the government depends on three issues: their commitment to our national rights and not giving concessions on these rights in negotiations; their social policies, especially in relation to the poor and underprivileged groups in our society; and their relation to human rights and democracy.

We are committed to building a new form of opposition, in many respects more radical than the 'rejectionists,' but from a different base. It will be a coalition of some parties and political groupings — the PPP, Haidar [Abdel Shafi]'s group and others, but no 'rejectionists' — independent members of the legislative council, civil society movements, NGOs, the women's movement, the rising trade unions and others. And that is the biggest achievement of the last congress of the People's Party. For the first time, a political movement said, 'I am not the alternative. I am not the *avant garde* of an alternative. I am only part of the alternative that should be built.'

The other very important point that was passed was regarding the negotiations. We said that we would not accept any solution less than an independent Palestinian state in the full area of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including East Jerusalem — the areas occupied in 1967.

Such a position put the PPP on a collision course with both the Authority and Israel, as the likelihood of such an outcome was nil. The intent was to set the party up to critique the Authority for shortchanging Palestinian national aspirations without breaking off relations with it, as the "rejectionists" had done. This would position those with an egalitarian democratic vision of Palestine who were also opposed to the Oslo process to build a third force in Palestinian politics, according to Barghouthi.

What the Israelis are doing is repackaging the occupation in a new form. They are using this autonomy to transform the Authority into a security sub-agent. This is the creation of a *bantustan*, it is another South Africa, an apartheid system in the making. The Israelis will work with this leadership and

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> with the USA to establish a state. They will call it a state, but it won't be a state. It will be a *bantustan*. That is why it is very important now to clarify what is the content of a Palestinian state.
>
> To fight this, we will need a new political movement, an alternative democratic movement, a coalition of people and groups who share these views. It will have to build a constituency by its work on social issues and social rights and by its support for political and civil rights. The most important thing is to guard it from factionalism and to guard it from looking 'rejectionist' to the international community. It needs to have realistic, honest people in its leadership. Then I think the challenge it will face will be in elections — local elections and legislative elections — with a united list of candidates. Our major enemy now in the Palestinian community is not Fatah or Hamas — it is the people's frustration and disappointment. It is hard to get people to become politically active.[30]

But it was precisely this frustration and disappointment that propelled the Palestinians back into a confrontation with Israel at the end of September 2000 and finally appeared to scuttle the Oslo process. What triggered the return to the streets was a provocative visit by Ariel Sharon — among Palestinians, the most reviled man in Israel[31] — to Haram al-Sharif, a Muslim holy site in East Jerusalem's Old City on which sits the Al-Aqsa mosque.[32] The seventy-two-year-old former general arrived with a body guard of 1,500 heavily armed Israeli troops, touching off a wave of raucous protests. For many Palestinians, though, it was the killing of seven young stone-throwers at Al-Aqsa the next day by Israelis using live ammunition and, subsequently, the televised shooting of 12-year-old Mohammed el-Dura as he lay huddled behind a stone wall in Gaza that turned the civil disorder into a shooting war. But these events do not in themselves explain the fury of the Palestinian response.

What drove many to put their lives on the line was the failure of the "peace process" to offer them anything resembling an acceptable payback for the suffering and humiliation they had endured so far. And the fear that Arafat — whose corrupt, repressive and incompetent rule had proven profoundly disillusioning — would cave in to it anyway.[33] They were also inspired by watching Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon after two decades of occupation — not as the result of negotiations but as a response to *Hizb'allah*'s unrelent-

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ing guerrilla war. To many, the lesson was obvious.

When Barak and Arafat had met the previous July under the auspices of outgoing U.S. president Bill Clinton to hammer out a "final status" agreement at the symbol-laden Camp David retreat, the moment for peace had already passed. Israel had used the ruse of endless talks to steadily improve its position for the last round, while enlarging Jerusalem, doubling the number of Jewish settlers in the Occupied Territories, vastly expanding its network of settler bypass roads and slashing water quotas for Palestinians there. What Barak offered to Arafat was ninety percent of what was left.[34] The additional eight-to-ten percent of the West Bank that Israel planned to annex included large settlement blocs around Jerusalem, fertile lands along the Jordan River and more land around other settlements and bypass roads. What the Palestinians were to get was a carefully circumscribed patchwork of noncontiguous territories on the least productive land. The "state" that would result was to be a landlocked archipelago — resembling the "tribal homelands" white South Africans tried to foist on the blacks there — that Israel could close off from the outside world and even from its own constituent parts at will. This was pacification, not decolonization.

There were other problems with the proposed settlement, too, chief among them Israel's refusal to accept a Palestinian right-of-return in more than token numbers and its insistence on one-sided control of water resources. But the deal-breaker was Jerusalem. Arafat was told that Palestinians could administer religious sites, as they had since 1967, but that sovereignty and security would remain with Israel. Even Arafat, desperate for a package he could take home, balked at these terms, knowing as he did (and as he told his hosts) that he could not sell them to his people or to his Arab allies. And that if he tried, he would be killed. This, then, was the tinder for renewed revolt. Sharon's calculated provocation was the spark that set it off.

Though it bore similarities to the *intifada* of 1987-93, this uprising was different in many respects from the last. In one sense, it picked up where the earlier one had left off in the early 1990s — as a street fight waged by angry and for the most part unpoliticized young men. Much of this was spontaneous. To the extent any of it was organized, the stone-throwers took their lead from Fatah's "inside" leadership, the *tanzim* (organization), not the former Tunis-based bureaucrats who peopled the Authority and certainly not a coordinating body in which the left played a prominent role. Some Popular and Democratic Front supporters were active in the street encounters, but the main organized

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force apart from Fatah was Hamas. The calendar of the protests was set by an umbrella group called the National and Islamic Forces.[35]

Though the "rejectionist" left parties had long called for such an uprising, they had not prepared the ground for it by, for example, building networks to link far-flung rural villages with each other and with the Palestinian-controlled urban enclaves. Nor had they prepared the logistical structures or services to sustain the people through a protracted confrontation. Worse, perhaps, they had not established the cooperation among themselves to manage such operations effectively, and they had not constructed the mechanisms or the unity of message needed to influence international public opinion on their behalf. In failing to do this in advance, they once again ceded the terrain to Fatah and to the Islamists.

The big NGOs like UPMRC and PARC rallied to meet the mushrooming social and economic needs that resulted not only from the conflict but from Israeli closures that placed most Palestinian communities under siege, but each party's affiliates acted independently of one another. Noticeably absent were the grassroots social movements — the women's committees, the popular committees, and others — that had played key roles in mobilizing and supporting the captive population in the 1980s. The revolt was certainly "popular," in that it had the overwhelming support of the Palestinian public, but it was not so in the sense of engaging broad sectors of the population in organized resistance under collective leadership.

Unlike the earlier uprising, most confrontations did not take place in the towns and cities where people lived — and where a cross-section of the society was likely to take part — but rather at police barricades and check points on the outskirts of what was known under the 1995 Oslo II agreement as Area A. Shooting incidents were largely directed at Israeli command posts and settlements. For their part, the Israelis retaliated against mostly civilian targets throughout PA-administered areas, using tanks, artillery, helicopter gunships and snipers. In the first month alone, 143 Palestinians were killed and more than 5,000 wounded — a number equivalent to fifteen percent of the losses over the full six years of the earlier uprising.[36] Another casualty was the idea of a bi-national outcome to the conflict in which Israelis and Palestinians might share a single border in a secular democratic state. Neither people appeared likely to accept the prospect of living with the other for a very long time.

Against this backdrop, a growing conviction emerged among Palestinians that the peace process as then constituted was moribund

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and should be abandoned for a different approach — one based upon United Nations resolutions, not the Oslo accords — and that broader international participation in the process was needed, as the U.S. had disgraced itself as an "honest broker." In this view — much as Moustapha Barghouthi had laid out two years earlier — the basis for peace had to be Israel's return to its 1967 borders, the dismantling of all settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian sovereignty over East Jerusalem, and the full right of return of the refugees and displaced. Three days after the uprising broke out, Barghouthi and others issued a petition demanding that the Authority take this position. It quickly garnered 10,000 signatures. Given that neither the Barak government nor any regime that follows it is likely to accept this alternative unless pressured heavily from the outside (or from within Israel), the struggle ahead will almost certainly be a long and difficult one.

Several scenarios are possible. I will not try to predict which one will unfold from this, but whatever gambit the Israelis opt for — a return to the *status quo ante*, an interim agreement to mask substantive differences while permitting a symbolic declaration of Palestinian statehood, a forced "separation" on its own even narrower terms, or even a return to full military occupation — the Palestinian national struggle has been profoundly altered by the downward spiral of the Oslo process and the renewal of resistance to its proposed outcomes. Once again, the left has an opportunity to play a leadership role in unifying the people and articulating a viable strategy for their liberation. Whether it will do so depends upon whether the left — and the many unaffiliated leftists who have given up on the parties — digest the lessons of their tortured past and come together in new and creative ways to put their stamp on the future.

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Chapter 15

SOUTH AFRICA

RECONSTRUCTING THE POPULAR MOVEMENT

When the African National Congress was elected to lead the South African government in 1994, it had no significant rivals in the anti-apartheid movement, though it had problems with specific constituencies. Chief among them were the mostly rural followers of former bantustan head Gatsha Buthelezi in KwaZulu/Natal and the so-called "coloreds" (people of mixed race) in the Western Cape who feared they would lose privileges to an African-led government. The ANC lost the regional elections in these two constituencies, while carrying the country as a whole with just over sixty-two percent of the vote. By the second round of democratic elections in 1999, the ANC improved its position, garnering sixty-six percent of the votes and doing much better in KwaZulu/Natal and the Western Cape.1 But despite this popularity, the liberation movement was hobbled in its ability to produce results by the fact that it was inserted directly into the apartheid state it had long opposed with little clarity on how to proceed.

The hard reality for the ANC and its allies, the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, was that they had secured a compromise that brought them into governance, but they lacked the power to restructure the state or the society. The central problem was that economic resources were still in the hands of the same class forces that had ruled for centuries, and the terms of the transition agreement limited the movement's capacity to do anything radical about inherited social inequalities. At the same time, much of the state apparatus, below the upper levels, remained in the hands of the apartheid-era bureaucracy, positioning defenders

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of the old order to sabotage or delay reforms that were undertaken. Though capital opened its ranks to black participation, its representatives fought hard to block fundamental change outside the political sphere — affirmative action was for individuals, not social groups. This allowed some of those who had been excluded to enter at the top, but it left millions more out in the cold. Not surprisingly, as the color of inequality began to change, so too did the politics of the liberation movement. In this evolving context, the state itself became a site of intense struggle among contending class and political forces.

The SACP had played a critical role in bringing the liberation movement this far, as had COSATU, but there were tensions in the tripartite alliance and within the ANC itself that inevitably arose from the conflicting interests and outlooks in the new stage. This, in turn, had a direct impact on the strategies they developed for dealing with the new threats and opportunities and the sorts of struggles they engaged in among themselves over these strategies, particularly in the economic sphere. The ANC, the central player in the alliance, was a loosely-knit, multi-class formation without a clearly articulated ideology apart from the vague principles of the Freedom Charter, and its goals fell far short of a socialist revolution. This set the stage for a struggle-within-a-struggle that had now to be waged on unfamiliar terrain in a period still defined by the SACP as one primarily of democratic consolidation rather than socialist transformation.

The political shift that brought the SACP and the ANC into the open was just that — a way back into South Africa's legal political arena for the formerly banned parties. However, it was not decisive for the national liberation movement in terms of its oft-stated goal of transforming the society along more egalitarian lines, even though it marked a dramatic step toward de-racializing the divisions within it.

It is crucial to grasp this: the dismantling of political apartheid did not mark outright victory or defeat for either side, though it profoundly altered the terrain for a continuing struggle between essentially the same class antagonists as before. It was an advance — a "breakthrough," as the movement characterizes it — but it left many issues unresolved, not least of which was how to address the enormous economic disparities created under and protected by political apartheid. South Africa was still a deeply divided society, largely but not only along racial lines. The question facing revolutionaries was how to maintain momentum and focus on the struggle toward greater social equality in this new framework.

To go forward, the left needed new leadership, new cadres, new

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ideas, and increased strength in the popular movement. For this, it needed to mobilize the people in new forms around new issues, policies, and objectives. It had also to operate on several levels at once against an opponent much better-suited to this kind of struggle and far better financed. Yet, even more than the Eritrean revolutionaries, who had at least foreseen the end of their war and spent several years trying to plan for it, the South African left was caught entirely unprepared for the new situation. At a party conference in Havana in April 1989, SACP delegates adopted a strategy of urban insurrection that was keyed to an imminent effort to seize power in a dramatic, popular upsurge. They did so on the basis of reports from cadre inside the country and in the MK camps as well as activists in exile elsewhere. However, they were entirely unaware of the secret negotiations then underway between the ANC and the government, even though the chair of the party conference, Thabo Mbeki, was directly involved in them. The next thing they knew, they were incorporated into that very state, which immediately generated new organizational, as well as political, challenges.[2]

* * *

The devastating loss of two of the most dynamic leaders in the party's history — the charismatic Chris Hani, elected the SACP's general secretary in 1991 and gunned down in April 1993 at the age of fifty-one by a rightwing assassin, and the aging Joe Slovo, who passed away a year and a half later — compounded the difficulty of strategic renewal. When I arrived in South Africa in February 1995, a month after Slovo's death, the SACP was in a state of organizational transition that made such renovation all the more problematic. With most of its top leaders in government, it was simultaneously challenged to consolidate its rapidly expanding new membership at the middle and lower levels and to define a new role for itself in the mass movement.

"The old paradigms were all state-centered," said Jeremy Cronin, the party's deputy secretary general, when I met him at the SACP headquarters in the COSATU building in downtown Johannesburg. Cronin was one of the few top party leaders who did not go into government after the first round of democratic elections the previous April (though he did so in 1999), and he was freely critical of both the party's and the ANC's past mistakes and present weaknesses, particularly those associated with centralist concepts of social and political development.

"The party is trying to lead a process of rethinking, but the ANC

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is not taking this up in the same way," he told me.

> The African liberation paradigm was also statist, and the crisis of third-world-liberation-movement assumptions is just as real as that of the left, though it may be less apparent. The national liberation model was also based on a two-bloc world system. The national democratic project was made possible by the capture of state power in the breathing space created by these blocs. That is gone now, but the ANC has not taken this on board. At the same time, there is a naïveté about the IMF/World Bank and other dangers we face in this new dispensation.

In these shifting ideological sands, the party's post-apartheid role, apart from that of strengthening the ANC, was not altogether clear. "We have not found a program of action that is specifically an SACP program," said Cronin.

> As a result, there is a crisis of identity. For many people, the party is a sort of insurance policy to keep the ANC honest. But we are developing a critique of two-stagism out of our experience with this relationship — a seventy-year alliance with a national liberation movement. For much of this, we had a mechanistic approach that separated the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism. Now we're looking at the relevance of socialist morality to the present situation and to the role of structural reforms in preparing the ground for socialism.
>
> No strategy is waterproof. The danger is boundless reformism. But there are many issues for the party to concentrate on: rolling back the market in some sectors, de-commodifying health and education, empowering communities to act within the market, for example. The party, with the churches and others, has been strongly critical of the 'gravy train,' and we played an important role in developing the RDP, after it arose in NUMSA. This came from the idea that many national liberation movements sell out the workers after victory, so the workers need a pact with the movement, a broad social contract — the national democratic program. The party pushed the ANC to sign onto this.
>
> The ANC barely exists as a movement now — most of its cadres were sucked into government. The social movements

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> are what insures the continuation of the transformation process by holding the state accountable for its actions, but there has been a terrible stagnation and weakening of the movements. They were a key factor in the breakthrough in 1990. The main force of our struggle was never MK, nor any aspect of the external forces — it was the mass movements. But the return of the ANC in 1990 tended to undermine them. The women's movement slid into the ANC Women's League and was shredded by elitists competing for careers. This also happened with the youth movement. The key one that hasn't fallen apart is the unions. If you're going to have a people-driven development process, you need a strong structure at the base of the society. This is where the party has a central role.

Others with whom I spoke were not so sanguine about the party's prospects. One leading trade unionist and long-time party member who asked not to be named characterized the SACP as a "dormant workers' party" and said it had lost its revolutionary potential. Not surprisingly, those to the left of the party were even more disparaging. One NUMSA activist — a member of the Workers' Organization for Socialist Action (which he termed "another failed left project") — dismissed the SACP as irrelevant for burying itself in the national liberation movement. "Who is it now?" he asked. "There is a left leadership vacuum here in South Africa."

WOSA was one of a handful of small left formations — often dubbed the "far left" by both its supporters and its critics — that castigated the SACP as a sell-out for its uncritical immersion in the liberation movement and for its stagist view of revolution. Among the others were Comrades for a Workers Government, the Marxist Workers Tendency and the International Socialist Movement. None commanded a large following, but their views gained a small audience in a few of the COSATU unions, where their case for a worker-centered movement that placed socialist revolution on the immediate agenda found some sympathetic ears.

Outside the country's largest cities, at party branches, in trade union meeting halls and in off-the-record sessions in the homes and workplaces of party and nonparty activists, I heard more restrained but nonetheless pointed criticisms of the party from people who had concerns about the rightward drift of the ANC and the party's ability to affect it. "This is not the national democratic revolution we've been fighting for," said Robon 'Toes' Persod, COSATU's economic

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and development negotiations coordinator in KwaZulu/Natal.

> We're in an intermediate stage that's been presented to the world as a miracle, but problems remain unresolved — for example, here in Natal with the IFP [Inkatha Freedom Party]. The RDP is mainly a program for this transition — to create a government of reconstruction and development beyond the next five-year period. What happens now will be critical, but the politics of this government are the politics of the ANC-in-exile, not the popular movements, which the ANC displaced when they returned. The starkest instance of this came in the constitution talks when they excluded COSATU. There would've been a different outcome with COSATU there.
>
> Once the ANC was unbanned, it knocked the content out of many of the popular organizations, which haven't really begun to redefine their own objectives in this new period. The ANC followed a must-win strategy in the elections, and lots of resources went into rebuilding it instead of these organizations. The SACP is continually caucusing to influence the ANC, but it is not working to build the mass base. The party could be giving leadership to this, but it is not. Left ideas thrive on the self-organization of people. Without a mass struggle, there is no fermentation at the base, and there are no new ideas coming up.[3]

"The negotiations sapped the mass movement," said a party cadre I met a few days later in East London. His views typified those expressed by the dozen or so worker activists I interviewed in the Eastern Cape:

> Mass action was subordinated to the electoral process. People were called on and then cooled out by the center to serve this process. The elections involved people in big ways, but they didn't build anything that continues. The tactic of the enemy was to prolong the negotiating process while making use of violence to call for order. The length of this process demystified the movement, as people saw it in action — for example, the ANC's treatment of people in the camps [in Angola], the accommodation with traditions, and the clashes within the movement between in-country leaders and exiles. The message we got was to prioritize the professionals, while the activists were pushed to the sidelines. All these

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factors combined to point to new directions in the movement. The message was: liberation is here, we are free at last, it's time to demobilize the movement. Now students should go back to school and learn, workers should go back to the factories and produce, and the movement becomes an electoral machine.

But the strength of the South African revolution is that you have communities rooted in mass struggles. The mass struggle has always been the cutting edge of the revolution. Coupled with that is that people know exactly what they want. This offers a good base for consolidating organizations, and we need to build on this, not abandon it. Historically, the two pillars of the liberation movement were the ANC and the party, and the party did a lot to shape the politics of the ANC. The Freedom Charter was an early instance of this. The party broadened the nationalism of the ANC to have class content, and we continued in that tradition. That has been the role of the SACP in the ANC. But it hasn't been accompanied by an effort to build an independent working class vehicle. You ask a worker to join the party, and he will say: 'No, I don't want to join the ANC two times.' We have got to develop an independent profile for the party, coupled with the development of an independent program. The ANC consists of a range of class interests — we have to assert the interests of the working class.[4]

"The party's role is key now — we have to get out and organize," said Cape Town party leader Garth Strachan, when I recounted these interviews to him.

The loss of people to the government has been both a victory and a sacrifice. It is vitally important that we occupy the trenches of the state. And we also have to be in the communities and in the factories. But we are weak politically, not least because of the collapse of the Soviet project. Many of our members have no idea what socialism is about! What we need most now is political education.

We need to play a facilitation role in providing forms for the mass movement. We need to strengthen sectoral organizations. We need to work in the communities to rebuild organizations there. But this means massive, hard work, for which we need to develop new leadership.[5]

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Strachan — who was elected to the SACP central committee in 1991 — was then a staff member of the Foundation for Contemporary Research (FCR), a small left-oriented think tank. We also discussed the role of NGOs in the transition, a hotly debated topic at that moment. During the anti-apartheid struggle, they had serviced the trade unions, sustained besieged communities and their new civic organizations, channeled funds and technical expertise to various sectoral organizations (women, youth and others) and provided a bridge to the underground movement, as well as a vehicle for sending information about the movement and its needs to the outside world. But in the process they had sometimes acted as gateways that controlled funding for the townships and the popular organizations and as vehicles for the personal advancement of their leaders. (One activist suggested that since the elections, NGO stood for "next government official.") Furthermore, the input they got from the communities and the movements they served diminished steadily after the democratic breakthrough. "Saints and scoundrels" was the way an East London activist characterized them.

The ANC's return to South Africa in 1990 created an immediate funding crisis for movement-oriented NGOs, as donor money began to flow directly to the ANC, just as had happened with Palestinian NGOs and the PLO after the Oslo accords. The end of apartheid also stripped many NGOs of their most experienced administrators, as they were co-opted into the newly democratized state to fill the numerous vacancies that appeared for skilled professionals. But perhaps more importantly, the transition triggered an identity crisis — what was their role to be, now that all the political players had legal standing and could negotiate their own relations with the outside world? Should the NGOs be folded into these organizations as service departments, or should they look to each other for support? To what degree should they, like the trade unions, protect their independence as autonomous actors in the new dispensation? And if they were to do so, what were their interests, what constituency did they represent, how were they to be accountable to it, and how were they to relate to the state, the liberation movement, the party, the trade unions and other social movements? Where, in other words, did they fit into the post-apartheid institutional mix?

The ANC always saw itself as a contender for political power. Nothing about this basic aim changed — only the questions of how and to what end. The trade unions were always defined by their commitment to defend workers' interests. They had new challenges in the

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post-apartheid era, but their mission was unaltered. For its part, the party remained committed to a working class politics and to the socialist project, even their content were somewhat fuzzy in the post-cold war era. But the NGOs had been organized almost exclusively to challenge apartheid — once it was gone, who were they, and what was their reason for being? As FCR director Kam Chetty put it to me, "Once the anti-apartheid struggle was removed, there was a crisis of purpose [for the NGOs]. What was their new political role, their social role? This was not conceptualized." In his view, the main role for groups like FCR was to help rebuild the community organizations and then to dissolve themselves.

Though many of the NGOs came out of the pro-ANC United Democratic Front in the 1980s, they were now competing for scarce funds — and for power and influence — with the very movements and popular organizations with which they had once been allied. As National Literacy Campaign director Kumi Naidoo pointed out, NGOs find it easier than social movements to identify and attract funds, in part because they more readily speak the language of and share conceptual orientations with the donors. NGOs also attract a higher level of skill in administration, fundraising, program reporting and other key areas than their popular counterparts because they pay higher salaries to their staff. But if a disproportionate share of resources goes to or through the NGOs, tensions arise among other organizations sharing the same aims and goals. This divides and weakens the movement. One challenge to the NGOs under these circumstances is to increase the overall pool of resources, while streamlining their own operations and coordinating with other organizations.

"NGOs are highly fragmented," said Naidoo, who later left South Africa to head the Washington, DC-based CIVICUS, an NGO promoting global civil society links.

> We have a bloated NGO sector contesting among themselves. There is a need for more sectoral coordination to rationalize output, to eradicate duplication, and to improve quality standards. But the real tragedy of South African society at the moment is that since 1990 the unique factor that we had of mass participation in the political process has effectively disappeared. NGOs have the advocacy and the lobbying capacity to increase the resources available to the popular organizations and to increase the competencies that the masses need to act on their own behalf. The issue is: can we do it in partnership with them? The keys words now are: partici-

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> pation, partnership, and creativity. Organizational survival has preoccupied people in the NGOs for too long. We need to move beyond this.[6]

Nearly everyone I spoke with in the SACP said that the reconstruction of the popular movement was the central issue facing the party — not only the mass sectoral organizations but also community groups, sports associations, cultural organizations, and others. This also entailed reconstructing the ANC as a popular organization and renovating the party itself as a popularly-based mass organization. But there was a running debate over how the party had deployed its forces. Many concerned that the balance was weighted too heavily in favor of the state, where former activists were so swamped with work that they found it increasingly difficult to maintain links with their constituencies. One party official estimated that seventy percent of its top leaders had gone into government at one level or another.

The dilemma facing the SACP was one that comes up in all such post-revolutionary situations: what is the appropriate balance between those in government and those in the mass movement, when the struggle for social transformation takes place simultaneously within and without the state? This was not only a question of how to deploy leadership, but also one of how to mediate between popular forces and a people-friendly government when differences arose. This issue came up with increasing frequency toward the end of the decade, as the trade unions asserted both their political independence and their militancy — COSATU mounted a general strike over government policy in May 2000 — but in the mid-1990s it was still an open question.

"The state is contested terrain," said ANC MP Robert Davies, the party's leading economic policy expert, echoing a position I heard often in interviews with party leaders. At the time he and I spoke in his Cape Town office in early 1995, the ANC was still part of a Government of National Unity, but Davies discounted this as a factor. More significant, he said, were the apartheid-era civil service's continuing control over much of the state bureaucracy, under an eleventh-hour compromise known as the "sunset clause" that guaranteed them their jobs until retirement, and the class and political differences within the democratic alliance itself. On top of this, the forces which had dominated the country before the political breakthrough remained far more effective in bending the state to their interests than the people's movements, steeped as they were in the politics of resistance but amateurs at the politics of influence. "The Parliament is now far more accessible and open to these kinds of organizations,"

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said Davies, "but they're not the ones who are constantly lobbying us. The old interest groups have the resources for it and the experience, and they are much more effective at it."

The result was the conservation and protection of the grossly unequal structure of South African society, despite limited upward mobility for a few individuals positioned at the top of the liberation movement:

> There are many openings for people who were formerly oppressed. But some of those rising up are developing new interests that are not dissimilar to those they're replacing. What we are seeing is a narrowing of income differentiation on the basis of race, but not within the overall society, where there has been an exacerbation of divisions on a class basis. The ANC is committed to the leading role of the working class. This is its major constituency. But there are new interests beginning to develop, and we need to see what the impact of that is going to be. So far, affirmative action has been concerned with the top levels of management and not with working people.

In 1992, the World Bank characterized South Africa as having one of the most unequal economies in the world, with over half the country's annual income going to a tenth of the population and less than four percent going to the bottom forty percent. Gini Coefficient measures place South Africa second only to Brazil in household income disparities. This inequality had long matched South Africa's racial categories, but researchers began to note significant changes inside African society in the late 1970s as a black middle class emerged. This differentiation accelerated in the 1980s and early 1990s. According to the International Labor Organization, interracial inequality accounted for sixty-five percent of earnings inequality in 1980. By 1993, the figure had dropped to forty-two percent. The sudden elevation of individual Africans to upper-level positions in government and business after 1994 — boarding the "gravy train" — stretched the gap within African society, as continuing poverty in the rural areas fed a flood of black migration into urban slums and squatter camps.[7] The ANC was under increasing pressure to produce results in the economic sphere, but there were no quick remedies at hand, according to Davies.

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White agriculture, much of it carried out on marginal land, had been exceptionally profitable due to the use of virtual slave labor and to massive state subsidies, neither of which were there for black farmers, he said. Land reform was needed, but due to compromises embedded in the Constitution it had to be undertaken through market mechanisms, with the state purchasing all land to be redistributed rather than seizing it. Yet how to change ownership patterns was only one issue; changing power relationships raised others. Land reform would not be feasible without a full restructuring of the rural economy, an undertaking that would be resisted not only by white farmers but also by traditional chiefs whose position rested in part on their control over land within black communities. As to the state take-over of major industrial, financial and commercial institutions — the historic cornerstone of both communist and national liberation programs — Davies said the party had altered its thinking on how (and when) to take this up, regardless of the limitations imposed on the movement by the political situation.

"The Freedom Charter had called for the nationalization of the monopolies," said Davies.

> Most people thought that at least meant the Anglo-American Corporation. The balance of forces did not allow this, but the party has also been rethinking this issue on its own in debates over the difference between 'nationalization' and 'socialization.' If I ever believed that socialism was simply nationalization plus central planning, that notion was knocked on its head quite some years ago. Increasingly, the Communist Party has recognized that we're in a phase called national democratic reconstruction or national democratic revolution. What distinguishes us from the far left in this country is that we actually think there are changes which can be fought for and struggled for in the here and now that are of critical importance — which are not in themselves socialist goals or objectives, but which can lay the basis for a socialist project. In this context, nationalization is not on the immediate agenda, probably not on the medium-term agenda either.
>
> We have to go back to formulations like: socialization is the increasing control by working people over their means of production. This means making a distinction between the powers of possession, as they've been seen in Marxist theory, and the powers to control immediate labor processes, the powers of economic ownership, the powers concerned with the

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> allocation of the social surplus. There are some very important things that can happen in both these areas that are not going to require immediate changes in property relations, which is what nationalization is about — things like workplace democracy, control over workplace decisions, a voice for labor in national policy-making. There is always the danger of co-optation or domestication, but these things are still important and feasible now. What the party has to do is push for the furthest possible transformation within the confines of the period we're now in.
>
> We see the struggles of the present as having the potential to create a series of changes that will be relevant to a future socialist project. Democracy is key. But for us, democracy means empowering people to participate in decisions about their own conditions of life and work on an ongoing basis. It means creating a context where decisions by ordinary people can matter.[8]

"The democratic struggle is not necessarily a socialist struggle, but it can be," said Raymond Suttner, another ANC MP from the Communist Party, underscoring Davies' view of democracy as an empowering process and not simply a set of individual rights or fixed mechanisms.

> Insofar as we're building democracy, I believe we're creating the conditions for socialism in this country. One of the greatest failures of Eastern European attempts at socialism was that they tried to separate democracy from socialism. Democracy may not lead to socialism, but it is a necessary condition for it. How do we take the traditions of popular struggle and wed them to a legislative process? The RDP is not doing it. It's a government-driven process, with all the stress on delivery. The challenge is for ordinary people and organizations to see a relationship between what they do and what's delivered. They need to know how they can affect the character and the pace of what's delivered.

Two issues underlay this discussion. One was the nature and role of democracy in the revolutionary process. The other — closely related to the first — was the party's approach to structural reforms, what many there took to be a defining issue for the post-cold war left, said Suttner. [9]

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> We were one of the first communist parties to give a critique of East European socialism and one of the first to re-evaluate our view of reforms, which gives us a radically different attitude toward the present. If you say that everything must wait for the seizure or the smashing of the state, it means that everything that is happening now is irrelevant. If this is so, how do you relate to what's happening now?

Marx gave considerable attention to working class struggles over the length of the work day precisely because they challenged the role and power of the employer class, he added.

> These were structural reforms, and they were part of the process of building socialism. Structural reforms not only ameliorate the conditions of workers, they change the structural relationship between capital and the working class. What we're trying to do is distinguish those reforms that have the character of a structural kind.

Suttner also sought to clarify the party's changing view of democracy and the need for strong active popular movements to drive the process:

> Our commitment to pluralism is not just a commitment to tolerance, "he said." It's a commitment to the proliferation of mobilizations that have a distinct objective basis. All interests are not reducible to class or national interests, as many of us used to argue. [Institutional] pluralism has its basis in the existence of objective qualities in the population that require organizational form. Unfortunately, the entire period since 1990 has seen the weakening of organizations other than the ANC and in recent times of the ANC itself.[10]

I have already recounted my conversations with ANC MP Jenny Schreiner on the importance of independent organizing for women. Here is what the first-term party central committee member, who spent the last years of the anti-apartheid struggle in prison, had to say in the mid-1990s on the traditional left strategy of mobilizing the masses simply to capture the state (and afterward to harness peoples' organizations to the state):

> This flies in the face of our tradition of organizing. The emphasis on mass organizations went far beyond simply building them to seize power. This was a highly participatory process, and those organizations played an active role in determining

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> events within their communities. The strategizing that took place in the ranks of the ANC and the party in the '80s was a synthesis of the momentum and the perspective that was developed on the ground. But somehow we lost the direction we had mapped out then, and the unbanning and the shift of terrain sidetracked us from it very rapidly — horrifyingly fast. When we were arrested in late 1987, I sat in Section 27 thinking, well, here I am for the next twenty-five years. And yet I was released in 1991! It was just not on the agenda. And all of a sudden it was, and you've got to cope with it. So, there was a remarkable lack of preparation on our side.

But work had to get done and people had to be assigned responsibility for it, as the party raced to keep up with the transition and the new demands it threw at them, she said.

> The issue of building an independent party while at the same time strengthening the alliance has been on the agenda of the CC for every meeting in the past three years. There is a very difficult tension there. And it gets worse when you've got an election. That one [in 1994] had to be fought as a unified ANC ticket, and I believe that was the correct decision. But that had basic implications for party-building work because party structures got absorbed into the ANC election campaign.

Nevertheless, she added, this did not preclude challenging the ANC on specific policy issues once they were in government.[11]

"The relationship among the alliance organizations is rather unique," said ANC MP Philip Dexter, when I met him at party headquarters in Cape Town.

> It's like a popular front that has played out in a different way — not by any advanced theoretical thinking on our part, but because of the way the struggle developed here. This is fortunate for us, and I think it gives us a lot of options that other people don't have.
>
> The underlying principle has been to unite people around the most immediate objectives without giving up other objectives we might have for the long-term. Now, we can begin to establish a framework for developing the popular movement — keeping the trade union movement as it is, keeping the ANC as a liberation movement in one form or another, and work-

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> ing with the civic movement, the women's movement and other coalitions that are beginning to develop. It might be possible to add onto the alliance without making organizations give up their identity, possibly a broad front of all the popular organizations. If we could do that, we could begin to do away with the false division between the state and civil society.
> We've always seen civil society as a terrain of struggle — between business and labor, between right and left, between many different relations — but the idea that the state has a tendency to act differently from just an instrument of the ruling class is relatively new for us. Yes, there's a major distinction between the state and civil society, but it's not that they are two clear, separate areas. The left's fetishizing of the state has been very destructive. The state is not just an instrument, it's people, like civil society, and it's got its own contradictions and differences. The fact that one class dominates another within the state, as in society at large, is obvious, but then what?

Marxists had long seen the seizure of state power as the magic bullet that made all else possible, said Dexter, but how to transform it was a lot less clear. For him, this was a practical issue:

> It demands policies that, A, make the people who represent the state more representative in racial, gender and class terms, and, B, make them more responsible. They need to understand that they have a developmental responsibility, not just an administrative one. It means an affirmative action program. It means re-training. It means constant education. Certainly we have political objectives we want to achieve, but the transformation of the state, like that of the society, is a process, a never-ending process, because nobody ever gets to a place where they have all the answers. The important thing about the state is that it's a locality of resources.

The most important task for the left was the revitalization of the popular movement, so the people could go after those resources on their own behalf. And this was where the party was better suited to act effectively than the ANC:

> A lot of the answers to the problems of the mass movement lie with the trade unions and the Communist Party, not the liberation movement. The ANC is constrained by the position it occupies. As the party in power, it is extremely difficult to

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> motivate youth, for example. The challenge is how you bring young people into the national liberation movement in a constructive way. This doesn't necessarily mean recruiting them to the ANC, it could mean building a youth movement. We have youth organizations, they exist already, because that was the way we organized during our struggle because of the legality issue. We have COSAS, we have others, and the possibilities are exciting. These organizations could generate an incredible amount of political activity within themselves and at the same time harness a lot of energy. The same is true of other sectors. I think the party could do things here that the ANC in its current form would find difficult, and we could still have a constructive relationship with the ANC. In one sense, it would be a compulsion on them to deliver.

When I got back to Johannesburg, I resumed my dialogue with Jeremy Cronin on the flaws in narrowly state-centered development strategies. "A lot of rethinking is needed," he said.

> We inherited paradigms — the African nationalist and the Marxist-Leninist. They were crystallized when the party articulated an insurrectionist strategy in its 1989 program: the liberation movement would capture the state and implement the National Democratic Revolution. This element has not yet been properly opened up. We are still in a quasi-insurrectionist process. An overly state-centered approach was carried into the negotiating process and then into the elections at the expense of the social movements.
>
> We need also to ask, where are we in the world? There is a prevailing illusion that South Africa has rejoined the community of nations, that we are the returning prodigals — that our nation is now a happy family picnic — but this is a naïve elation. The scandal of apartheid united a broad range of forces, but the global reality in the 1990s is not any more favorable to socialism. We are still confronted with the harsh realities of global power and wealth, of imperialism, and we face struggles with our domestic opponents whose strategy is to co-opt our leaders through the rapid creation of a new black elite. This is positive at one level, but dangerous at another. We need to reassess our vision, to guard against illusions. We have some markers down — the RDP, for example — but there is a lot more to do.

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> There are discontinuities between the generations and their different experiences. The Mandela generation doesn't understand the social movements. They are operating from an old paradigm. The generation that grew up in prison or in exile thinks it can technically manage the process. They fail to appreciate the contested nature of the state and the need for the social movements. Mandela balances constituencies, he doesn't view this period as one of struggle. And since the unbanning of the ANC, we are also discovering that we have different ideas of what it [the ANC] was before.
>
> Apartheid presided over a massive mobilization of blacks. The growth of industry — auto, metals, chemicals — created a black working class. This led to the growth of a mass movement, an organic re-emergence, not something done by the party or the ANC. It was initially BC [Black Consciousness] and syndicalist, with some influence by the party and the ANC, but it was not until the late '70s that the ANC re-asserted its leadership of the social movements, and only at a distance. Then the unbanning [in 1990] led to a transformation of these pluralistic structures into unitary structures, especially the Youth League and the Women's League, which the leadership used as platforms to advance their careers. They became national lobbies for this or that candidate. Suddenly, we had an elite, cabal-type politics. And now this is happening at the local level, where there is a competition between the ANC branches and the civics. It will get worse when there is local government. There's turf at stake.

It seemed a rather bleak assessment, though it resonated with what I had seen and heard up to this point. Yet when I asked whether it was time for the party to disengage from the ANC and tackle these problems directly and independently, Cronin was adamant that acknowledging flaws in the ANC did not mean abandoning it.

> To retreat out of the ANC now would be to hand victory to our strategic opponents, whose objective is also to capture the heart and soul of the ANC. The masses are behind the ANC. Left forces need to be where the people are. Our alliance is rooted in social reality — and in tradition, history, and principle. The wobbles in the ANC are at the top, at the elite level. We are committed to keeping the ANC true to its vocation.

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"A lot of people see in the party the moral core of the ANC — not selling out to the gravy train," he argued, ticking off major party successes since the unbanning.

> We played an important role in the negotiating process — it was Slovo's 'sunset clause' that moved us off the stalemate and gave an example of how [compromise] could be done. The party also played a role in the RDP, though it came out of COSATU as a social accord — a contract with the ANC in exchange for electoral support, a typical trade union bargaining approach. The party worked with COSATU and the ANC to broaden it from an accord to a program of transformation. Now it's the programmatic basis for the Alliance. Next, we have to mobilize campaigns around it, with mass-based organizations at the core. The critical issue we face today is the establishment of an ANC outside of government. The party is key in this, as a strategizing collective in the movement and in the government.

"We need to link basic issues to the RDP — making battles over land, water, electricity, education the focus of people's struggles," he said, when I asked him about how the party's heightened attention to gender figured into this.

> We've got to continuously look at the intersection between class and gender, gender and national liberation. What will liberate women in South Africa is a massive increase in social spending — and also the transformation of the tribal system, which was re-invented by apartheid. Where is the energy now? It is with organizations like the Rural Women's Movement and the National Land Commission. The women's movement will be rebuilt as part of broader struggles. We have to be there.[12]

"The big issue for the party is to what extent can it risk fracturing the alliance by challenging the ANC and the government," said journalist Hein Marais, when I spoke with him about these issues.

> There is a great need for the Left to revive itself intellectually, strategically, and the party is the most likely place for this to happen, but it has to come out of popular mobilizing within the community. This will take some years, and there will be strong conflicts with the authorities. The re-emergence of the popular movement will be a tough and traumatic process,

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> and there is no guarantee it will be a progressive process. The attempt to rebuild the movement is not an uncontested phenomenon. There are other forces also organizing — reactionary populists, like Winnie [Madikizela-Mandela] and Sowejoca [the Southwest Civics Association of Johannesburg] — but the party has no resources at the local level. It lost many of its best people to government, and funding has dried up. The vaunted civil society has been drained. The party doesn't even have its own constituency offices in the communities.[13]

* * *

Capacity-building was high on the party's priority list for obvious reasons. The organization had increased in size by a factor of nearly twenty, lost half its leadership, suffered devastating losses of key leaders since then, one at the hands of an assassin, another from disease, and it now operated in a radically reconfigured domestic arena within a starkly altered post-cold war context. It had work to do in its own ranks before it could function effectively in the anemic mass movement. Langa Zita was one of the young leaders trying to move the party in this direction. In the mid-1990s, he was responsible for designing and managing the party's internal political education. I met him at a noisy café in Johannesburg's bohemian Yeoville district. He acknowledged that there was a pressing need for internal education at all levels and for expanded cadre schools to drive it, but, he asked, where would the resources for this come from, how would they be organized and by whom, who would be selected to attend training sessions, and what would their obligations be to the party in this newly transparent and less rigorously disciplined political atmosphere? Finally, assuming these issues could be dealt with, what would they teach and where would they look for inspiration and experience, now that the Soviet model was in such disrepute?

"There is still a profound respect for socialism and socialists here," Zita told me, warming to the discussion.

> Mass movement activists are yearning for new ideas, for new ways of doing things, for radical ideas. There is a great need for the Communist Party in particular to begin to talk to this vacuum. The issue is how do you develop cadres who can be active in this context without being co-opted. We need to defend the democratic space that we have won. All of us must appreciate

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> that. But more than that, we have to consolidate and defend the legitimacy of mass struggle as a form of engagement.

Zita was voicing a widely held but not often voiced view within party ranks that the ANC in government should not be insulated from mass protest, despite the fact that many ANC leaders, including Mandela, had strongly criticized it as inappropriate in the new stage.

> There is a tendency for this form of struggle to be de-legitimized, to be seen differently now. But once everyone knows that if you provoke the popular masses, they will respond, you have the environment where you can think strategically. Without this, you are toothless. The issue then is to transform this oppositional energy into creative energy.

But protest is only one form of mass struggle, he added. Organizing projects with widespread popular participation is another, as are other sorts of mass activity that either bring about change or create pressure for others to act on the people's behalf.

> We will not be able to sustain consistent mass-mobilized participation, so what can we do? We need to elaborate new forms of engagement, to look at pressure groups that raise specific issues, like the National Land Commission. The NLC sustains itself by engaging rural people on land issues, and it is forced to mobilize those people. [Organizations like this] are functioning between the mass movement and the state and mediating this relationship in some ways. We must encourage the mushrooming of them, and do this in a way that the mass movement does not see them as competitors, as the civics sometimes do.
>
> Everything was cohesive in the past. Now there are elements of fragmentation as various interests become fully articulated within the mass movement. The challenge is to give these new forces a cover to evolve, not seeing them as oppositional. As the leading force of working people, as an attempt to be the leading force of the poor, the party must talk to these emerging forces, must ensure that their struggles are not ghettoized, must put its weight behind them. But that's quite a new thing for us, because in this transition the party has not distinguished itself as a force that fully nourishes the struggles of working people. It has not been systematic in this.

Zita echoed a perspective I heard frequently from South African com-

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munists — that the state itself is a battlefield, not simply the preserve of one or another dominant class force, and that the struggle for social transformation takes place both within and without it, continuously, often with the driving force outside. "The state has a role to play," he said, "but I am beginning to question whether that is where the locus of power should be." Citing Gramsci's description of socialism as a "regulated society," he argued that communists should use the ideological hegemony enjoyed by democracy to bring key areas of the economy under popular — not necessarily state — control.[14] Among his examples was that of winning trade unions a role in determining how insurance companies manage huge pension funds fed by worker contributions:

> The party, with the workers, should fight to win democratic control over the uses to which this is put. Money from workers should be used to promote worker interests. The state can protect this process, but the active forces should be those in civil society — the conscious popular movement.

When I asked how the SACP's strengthened position on gender oppression would translate into mass action, he emphasized the need to nurture new forms of women's organization:

> People use the women's movement as a bargaining chip in the ranks of political movements, but there is not a systematic commitment to organize women in particular, as women. Women are oppressed in this relationship and, in my understanding, oppressed people must fight for their own liberation. I'm not saying that men should not assist with that — most comrades see themselves as supporting forces for women — but at the end of the day, women's liberation has to be driven by women. Otherwise, it is a misunderstanding of reality.
>
> In our work, there has been an attempt to consciously integrate gender issues into the overall strategic framework of the party. It comes back to the cadre-ship question. A communist ought to be a full embodiment of our values. He must do many things. He must be able to talk and respond to every issue: workers issues, environmental issues, women's issues. If Marxism is to be employed as a method, it has to creatively relate to all areas of human experience. It's not a question of prioritizing gender issues, it's a question of what one does in the practice of being a communist in a multidimensional struggle for transformation.

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But how does the party do this if it is submerged within the ANC, and the ANC does not support — perhaps discourages — independent women's initiatives? "The ANC remains a movement for all people, for all democrats — it is a popular movement — but it has limits," he said.

> What we have done in the past, perhaps it was a strategic error — I would argue that it was — was to subordinate our identity to the ANC. Even though we were there, we never prioritized our own identity. That's a problem now, and we're not deeply part of the public consciousness. People respect us, but to turn that into an effective contest for power is another matter. What we need to do is to fight for the Communist Party's identity, to fight for its base, to stand up and criticize — whether Mandela or whoever — but for the party to fight for communists and not to be seen only as stepchildren of the ANC. I, for one, am not apologetic about who we are.
>
> The ANC is a movement for all black people, whether they are communists or capitalists. This is fine. It is for everyone. For me, the issue is how to continue this twin identity, this Janus-face, but to do it as an organized expression of working-class interests. There's no reason we should leave, but we should still have our distinctive identity and be willing to come out and criticize the ANC.

Zita argued that the party should fight for more independence of action on the part of alliance members — to turn the tightly-centralized (and ANC-controlled) bloc into a more loosely-knit "patriotic front." But, he said, this could not be taken up yet because the question of the independent role of the party had not been settled inside the SACP. "In exile, we were almost the same as the ANC. To evolve from that is a process, and it needs new thinking. As you know, it is not easy to teach an old dog new tricks. Comrades are at home in the ANC. They're happy."

As in most post-liberation societies, there was an inherited political culture that discouraged the public expression of differences or the taking of independent actions that implied them, he conceded:

> Liberation movements have a latent tendency to be hegemonic, over and beyond the revolutionary stage. Unfortunately, ours was a movement for national liberation, and our party evolved in that framework. But if we were to divorce ourselves from the ANC now, we would be ignoring the reality in which

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> we find ourselves. For me, it is important to maintain the alliance, but we must work to transform it.[15]

There was also a continuing struggle to democratize the party itself. For decades it had functioned underground on the basis of strict democratic-centralism, with more centralism than democracy. Now, party leaders were trying to foster critical thinking among the members, but old habits are hard to break. At a regional party conference in Guateng, a few days before I left the country, I sat with SACP members who heard Tokyo Sexwale — a guest speaker from the ANC — recount his experiences in the Soviet Union, where he was sent for training in the 1970s. He described witnessing what he called "the imprisonment of ideas," and he characterized the Soviet regime as "a dictatorship of a few comrades" acting through the Politburo and the Central Committee. "How are you avoiding their mistakes?" he asked the crowd of factory workers and community activists.

After Cronin gave a short talk on the relationship between socialism and democracy, participants broke up into small groups to discuss a list of topics, such as how the global situation affected South Africa, what should be done to defend the "democratic breakthrough," what the party meant by "socialism," and how to maintain a working-class bias in the RDP. The report-back produced little more than regurgitations of the party line, but the most interesting part came next, as party leaders critiqued the exercise, noting that too many big questions had been posed with too little advance discussion and that not enough difference was expressed. "Where is the passion?" asked Cronin. "Unless we really debate these issues, we won't understand where we agree or disagree." Then participants went outside for a coffee break, where they spontaneously divided into small groups on the lawn for spirited discussions. The party had succeeded in sparking informal debate but had not figured out how to institutionalize the process. Still, it was progress.

Later, I was invited to address the conference on the history and politics of the Eritrean liberation struggle, and I was encouraged to critique the party's past pro-Ethiopian position, adopted only after the military junta that seized power in Addis Ababa in 1974 broke with the U.S. and re-aligned Ethiopia with the Soviet Union. The discussion that ensued was lively. As one outcome, I was asked to submit an article for the party's quarterly journal, *The African Communist*. It was published that spring with a preface that I reproduce in full, not only for what it says about the party's evolving politics but for what it indicates about the airing of differences:

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> The Eritrean liberation struggle was one of the notable victims of Cold War thinking. From the middle 1970s through the 1980s the Eritrean liberation movement was more or less ignored, if not actively cold-shouldered, by progressive forces on our continent (including the ANC and the SACP) on the grounds that it was fighting against a 'socialist' and Soviet-aligned Ethiopia. After one of the longest armed struggles in Africa, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front finally defeated the Ethiopian army occupation in May 1991. Eritrea is now an internationally recognised state, embarking on a process of reconstruction and development. In the spirit of acknowledging our own past errors, we publish this account as a tribute to the heroic Eritrean struggle.[16]

When I returned to South Africa a year on, the Government of National Unity was on the verge of dissolution, and the ANC was clearly the dominant force within the state. At the same time, and in part due to this, the role of nonstate organizations in the political process was being hotly debated — and contested. Tensions were rising between the government and COSATU, mainly over economic policy, and there were tensions with NGOs over their role in development, even as the issue of the proper role for the party in this mix remained fuzzy.

The NGOs had created an alliance of their own — the South African NGO Coalition — built not on the basis of politics, as the Palestinians had done with PNGO, but upon their shared interests as institutional intermediaries. In this respect, their organization was more like a trade association than a social movement. "The NGO Coalition is very broad," said FCR director Kam Chetty. "Within it, the left perspective has been thoroughly diluted. The main reason for it is to represent the interests of NGOs: to provide an enabling policy environment and to access funding."

Within this sector, Chetty said, a few "giants" set the agenda for the rest, notably the conservative, business-oriented Kagiso Trust and the Independent Development Trust. Both were frequent recipients of grants from the European Union, large U.S. foundations and other big-money donors. In the middle tier were dozens of smaller professional organizations spread across the political spectrum, including many former affiliates of the pro-ANC United Democratic Front. These NGOs had little direct impact on policy, but they often had significant responsibilities for project management and evaluation in the field — they were the implementers. At the bottom of the hierarchy

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were the community-based organizations and the popular movements, which established the social compacts, got people together for projects and ensured accountability. They generally had to win favor from the larger NGOs to secure funding for themselves, usually as junior partners in projects over which they had little or no definitional control. As outside money dried up for base-level work, the government began to step in with resources for those NGOs and CBOs willing to take on specific pieces of the RDP. In this way, they were being harnessed to the ANC's development plan — but what was this plan?

"The RDP started out as a broad strategy for change, a philosophy of how to do development," said Chetty. "But it has shifted from a people-driven process to one concerned only with implementation while ignoring the process. The people-driven aspect of the RDP is coming up against the efficiency argument, and it is losing."[17]

In a separate interview, Philip Dexter argued that it was the character of the RDP, not the effort to corner a piece of it, that ought to occupy the attention of the NGOs — and the party. Since the elections, the RDP had been absorbed into the state under a department with quasi-ministerial status (later dismantled and parceled out to other ministries), and its form and content increasingly reflected a top-down, service-delivery orientation, rather than the grassroots empowerment approach embedded in the original design. This threatened to further undermine the mass movement. Many RDP projects were actually being contracted out to profit-driven entrepreneurs in an effort to produce quick results, regardless of the low level (or even the absence) of popular participation in them. "There is a huge effort by big business to change the basic meaning of the RDP," Dexter told me.

* * *

Several people had cited the National Land Committee as an example of new forms of organization for the post-apartheid era. So I went by their Johannesburg office one afternoon to see their operation. The NLC was itself a network of nine regional organizations, with a tenth group about to join. It was set up in the 1980s with church backing to resist the forced relocation of black communities. Its main objective now was to link up with and defend the interests of the landless, of whom there were said to be more than a million. Over ninety-five percent of the NLC's constituents were rural, most of them women who were sole heads-of-household. Many had been driven off their land under a policy the government had termed "black spot removal."

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"We are fighting the legacy of the forced removals under apartheid," said NLC director Brendan Pierce. "At a national level, we occupy a position between the beneficiaries and the policymakers. We try to be an intermediary. But this puts us in a sort of schizophrenic position with the new government. We fundamentally support it, but we're independent, and we have to criticize it when we see problems."

The previous year the ANC government had announced its new land policy with great fanfare. But it was, said Pierce, inadequate on its face and inadequately funded besides. To start with, an estimated 55,000 white farmers held 102 million hectares of the best land, while 1.2 million black farmers shared only 17 million hectares in the former "homelands," most of it barely arable. The ANC proposed buybacks of the white-owned land at inflated market prices and offered modest subsidies to potential new black owners. So far very little land had changed hands. "We want to see the government playing a much more interventionist role," he said. "To start with, we propose taking into account the means of land acquisition and the extent of past government subsidies [to the white farmers]. As it stands, this process will exclude the most marginalized, the people we work with."

"The problem in the rural areas is a lack of organization," he went on, pointing out that the main thrust of the anti-apartheid movement and virtually all its popular organizing, had been in urban areas. This left the landless rural population ill-equipped to confront the challenges of the post-apartheid era.

> There is a great need for capacity-building to enable any kind of development. The white farmers are highly organized and well-resourced. The NP [National Party] and the DP [Democratic Party] represent them and push hard for their interests, but there is no-one representing the rural poor — not the trade unions, not the [alliance] parties, which are weak in the countryside. There are no structures for these people. We've been organizing, but slowly. We have a political history with the MDM [Mass Democratic Movement], and we have ten years of experience building relations with rural communities, but it is barely a start.
>
> We're trying to work with the government to go into these communities to form consortiums to bring people together with skills. This year we held a Community Land Conference with the aim of putting these issues on the national agenda. At the local level, we are organizing around specific issues,

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> for example, the problems facing tenant farmers and farm worker evictions. But the problem with organizing social movements here is that the tenants are not homogenous. The question for us is: what is the glue that will pull them together? The ANC approach was organizational uniformity, but that has been a big mistake. Africans, Indians and 'coloreds' have their own histories, and they need to be organized differently. Most of the landless are women, and they have their own issues, especially at the local level where the power of the chiefs is still strong. There has to be room for diversity in the popular movement.[18]

The party's ability to intervene in this arena was complicated by its continuing success in attracting new members. Its overall numbers were up to a staggering 93,000 by 1996, though only about 15,000 were fully paid up and active in branches on a week-to-week basis, Garth Strachan told me when I met him that week in Cape Town, along with Philip Dexter.

> This transition from a small to a large party puts enormous strains on our financial and fund-raising capacity and on our national organizational and administrative machinery. We're having to come to terms with the fact that within the alliance our immediate strategic objectives are no different from the others, and most party members think they can achieve the same thing in their ANC branch. Under these circumstances, how do we keep people in our branches? Some argue — I think mechanically — that this is one of the reasons the party has to have an independent profile, but I don't agree. The real issue for us is to hold the alliance in place, to win political battles within the alliance and to keep a critical mass of membership in it, to remain self-sufficient, and to initiate campaigns that are taken up by the popular movement. We don't have to own and run campaigns ourselves.

Delegates had debated this question at the recent party congress, according to Dexter: "We emerged from the congress with a very firm and clear position about what the party has to do. We didn't produce any great manifestos for the way forward for the next twenty years. Instead, we concentrated on the next steps." Among the key decisions were the elevation of patriarchy to the status of a strategic target, the reaffirmation of the RDP as a vehicle for transformation, and the commitment to "build socialism now" — the main party slogan for

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the next period. This marked an attempt to make reforms meaningful, to enter the terrain of evolutionary change with a view to making it contribute to revolutionary change, including rupture, down the line.

The party also took a strong stand against the massive privatizations then underway, a position that put it on a collision course with the ANC, whose leaders in government were then drawing up a neoliberal economic recovery program that would supplant the RDP as its definitive policy expression. Among other things, this was sparking renewed debate around the role of the state in the post-apartheid economy. In Dexter's view:

> I don't think there is any choice here. The ANC doesn't have control of the economy or of economic resources. It sits atop the state, the machine that we inherited, and the only option it has is to use it. I know this is unpopular. It goes against the neoliberal model, and capitalists will cry and shout about it. But any other path is to capitulate. There's no other way to deliver. If you want the revenues, you have to push up taxes. The government argues that we can't do this because then capital will flee, we can't do this because then the IMF will hold us to ransom. And in the end you do nothing. I think it would be better to venture down that road, make the mistakes, scare the capitalists. I don't think they would flee if we told them we're going to increase taxes by five percent for the next five years, that it's a levy to deal with the legacy of apartheid. But we had a big debate on this in the Finance Committee [of the national parliament], and the ANC leadership refused to consider it. They said, we can't do this because the investors won't accept it. I'm sorry, but at the end of the day you have to choose between the investors and your constituency, and we're choosing in favor of the investors. I think the political consequences of that are more serious than losing the investors.

Dexter was also critical of the party for not contesting such issues more vigorously inside the alliance. "The party is not trying to pose an alternative, even in a non-confrontational way," he said. "I think part of that is our commitment to keeping the alliance intact, but it also comes from a fear of being jettisoned by the ANC."[19]

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"This is a new period for all of us, a new epoch," said Thenjiwe Mthintso, a member of Parliament who sat on both the SACP central committee and the ANC national executive committee.

> We're now on to electoral politics and we don't know these electoral politics, especially within the party. And we're on to Parliament and parliamentarianism — very difficult for us, especially when you're a party that's within an alliance with an organization that's the majority party. To what extent can we as a party voice an independent view without shaking the boat, so to speak? You've got communists in Parliament as the ANC, and you've got an SACP outside as an organization. Suddenly, your friends are your opposition, and that tension keeps coming up. There are certain things you may feel very strongly against, but the ANC, as the leader of this stage, feels that they have to happen because you've got to give and take, to make compromises. To what extent does that affect you as a communist?
>
> I see the Parliament as another terrain of struggle — of class struggle in particular — because that class struggle exists among ANC members. We don't have the same outlook. We come from different backgrounds. The ANC is an omnibus, and these contradictions come up very seriously now in Parliament. The party is committed to playing a distinctive role while remaining part of the Alliance, and that is a very, very tricky balance to strike because most of the things we would want to do are the things that would shake the ANC boat. Then other people would move in fast and say: See the divisions!

Mthintso ticked off a string of instances where she disagreed with ANC policy — state restructuring, the RDP, foreign policy (the party wanted to de-recognize Taiwan and it opposed the cozy relations to Indonesia's military government, for example) — but she indicated that these were her opinions, not formal party positions. "We don't have clear proposals as a party on each issue," she said, adding that it was time to articulate at least some distinct party positions on key issues.

> I think we need to focus on a few specific areas with specific targets and push the government to act — housing is one — and that way we can be the voice of the people, we can be their advocate, and the people will see us amongst them. This will make a healthy tension, a creative one. Each ally should come

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> into the alliance and say, 'We've got a program. These are the areas we want to focus on. Here are the things we want to be doing. And we think that this program will help strengthen the hand of the government.' We have to do this or we lose our identity. We've got to show our independence. We can't just be building the ANC, we have to be building the party, too.[20]

When I met Jeremy Cronin in his Johannesburg office, he acknowledged that the party's plan to focus its mass organizing efforts on building RDP Councils through the ANC branches at the local level had not borne fruit. And how could they, he asked, unless they were driven by the liberation movement, which was itself disorganized?

> Starting about July onwards, we noticed that before each meeting of the cabinet, the NP and the IFP would caucus, but the ANC didn't. It was not coordinated. We also began to see differences between the national and provincial levels. Fragmentation was setting in. But coherence can only be provided by a political organization. The government cannot be a substitute for an effective ANC at the center of a broader developmental movement. We realized that the alliance needed to be strengthened first.

Cronin rejected the view that the ANC had decisively turned to the right and was now on a consolidated trajectory different from that of the party (or the trade unions), as many left critics argued. Rather, he insisted, the ANC remained politically unstable and therefore susceptible to unthought out impulses from within and pressures from without. The party's task under these circumstances was to do what it could to shape policy and programs that benefited the working class, while promoting debate and reflection over the consequences of government action.

"It's not as if there's an ANC with a long-term vision that's different from the party," he said.

> They don't have one, which is partly why it's possible to keep the alliance between these entities open-ended. It would be more complicated if they had a coherent social democratic or progressive liberal agenda. I would dispute the suggestion that the ANC has moved rightwards, given my experience with it over the years.
>
> It continues to lurch in a variety of directions, and there are differences within it in various policy areas, but there is

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> no consistency or coherence to this. On restructuring state assets, for example, the package that was announced in early December [1995] by Thabo Mbeki showed substantial progress. Until that time, the strategic framework was very much in dispute in the ANC, with three views all jumbled up. One was to sell off as much as possible to generate funds for the RDP. The second was black empowerment, *i.e.*, sell off what you can to black entrepreneurs. This was a choice between Thatcherism and what we call the Malaysian route. (In Malaysia over the past ten years of privatization, they increased the control of the economy by Malays from five to ten percent, but it's only ten Malays who control that ten percent!) But the package that Thabo produced, the strategic framework, had come a long way from these very problematic positions. It proposed that the two key public utilities under discussion — TransNet and TelCom — should remain in public hands and that their principal mission was not profitability but the provision of service.

The issue produced some tensions between the party and COSATU, whose primary focus was on the preservation of jobs, he said. This was understandable, but the party had to take a wider view of the impact these policies would have on the structure of the post-apartheid economy:

> As a party, you can't just look at this as jobs. We've got an enormously bloated public sector with real problems that we need to deal with. Our approach cannot be a Thatcherite or a black empowerment approach. Nor can it be a welfarist approach because that's not sustainable either. We must have a developmental approach based on a developmental state. We have a substantial public sector, which we can use as leverage to drive a process of transformation, to leverage the private sector as well. It's critical for us not to get cornered, and that's been part of the strategic plan of the private sector — to make the ANC-in-government responsible for health, education, housing and so on and to confine it in that welfarist ghetto while escaping any responsibility. For them, it's business as usual. Whereas with a developmental approach we would say we'll use TelCom, we'll use whatever assets we've got — things like prescribed assets, pension funds, regulation, all of those things — to lock them in as much as we can to our strategic agenda.

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In other areas, though, his prognosis was less resolute. "When it comes to trade and industry, I think the direction is a rightward one and a naïve one," he said, describing current negotiations with the European Union over a NAFTA-like free trade agreement as a recipe for disaster despite an asymmetry in South Africa's favor built into the pact's initial phase. He characterized this as akin to getting a first-class ticket for an ocean voyage only to find out it was on the Titanic. He said that ANC Minister of Trade and Industry Trevor Manuel favored such neoliberal economic measures as a way to break the chokehold that a handful of white-male boards of directors had over much of South Africa's industrial economy. But, Cronin argued, this would simply facilitate the turnover of the heights of the economy to international capital, which would place a few black faces in prominent positions and move on. "This is not genuine black empowerment, except for a very few," he added.

> What we've tried to do as a party is to make guerrilla raids on areas of concern. Over the past year, the restructuring of state assets was our principal focus, but we've not got the capacity to do it everywhere. Still, my inclinations are to try to make it happen within the ANC, which lacks capacity as well. Policy development is a big issue. Friendly NGOs can play a role in this. They have the advantage of limited focus and strengths in fundraising, though many have lost their organic links to the movement. COSATU remains strong and pretty effective. There's been some brain drain, but I think this is overplayed. They continue to generate impressive worker-leadership from the shop floor, they are growing massively, and they're overcoming the racial divides within the working class. Their biggest problem is adjusting from resistance to economic transformation.

For its part, the SACP had passed a milestone in its post-apartheid, post-cold war development with the production of the 1995 Strategy Document and with its emergence from a period of fractious internal debate, according to Cronin. There had been sharp divisions over the issue of insurrection versus power-sharing and over the interpretation of international events, but these questions were finally settled. "All the insurrectionists are now government ministers or MPs, and insurrectionism has disappeared," he said.

> The ultra-left still purports to be insurrectionist. It says, governments can either be bourgeois or proletarian. This one is

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> clearly not a dictatorship of the proletariat; therefore the principal task remains overthrowing it. But you won't find that temptation within our party, apart from the odd individual knocking around. The April [1995] congress and the strategic perspective document that emerged from that consolidates a developmental perspective within the party and tries to connect that with the socialist project. It's not a very detailed or profound document, but it's a unifying strategic perspective. I think that was the big breakthrough for us. We're much more unified now. We have debates, but the heat and the intensity have gone out of them.[21]

The issue for independent left journalist Hein Marais when I spoke with him that week was whether such measures were truly part of an over-arching development strategy. He argued that they did not appear to be, except at an abstract level, and that this was leading the left into a dead end. He termed the ANC's neoliberal trade policy a "structural adjustment program" of fiscal and monetary austerity that was all-the-more unsettling because it was being implemented enthusiastically with no pressure from multilateral financial institutions. The RDP, he said, no longer amounted to the sum of its parts. "It makes for some dramatic changes in particular areas — water provision, for example — but it is not a strategy for transforming society, as it was first conceived. It has become instead a pastiche of projects, a disaggregate of the strategy it once represented."[22] As if to underline this assessment, the government dissolved the cabinet-level RDP office in March 1996 and parceled out its various responsibilities to line ministries to implement and manage separately.

Apart from the trade unions, the popular movements were "hemorrhaging," according to Marais. And many of those managing to survive were getting co-opted into the conservative, delivery-oriented economic program the ANC government was pursuing. Few were breaking new ground. "What buoys them now is the ideological advances that have been made, the expressions of principle and commitment and idealism that the ANC and the party have made and that are entrenched in the Constitution," he said. "What drags them back is their own organizational weaknesses and their inability to adapt to the new context." A number of key NGOs, such as the aforementioned PlanAct, had become far too reliant on large-scale funding from donors such as US/AID, and could not rebound when that funding migrated to government-run programs, Marais said. SANCO and many individual civics were in the same position, as donors sought

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to stabilize the new local government structures and abandoned their former charges. The result was some change in material conditions but little in social relations — and little independent mobilization or advocacy for such change.

But it was not up to NGOs or social movements to craft a full-blown transformation strategy, he argued. This was the task of a political party, and the one positioned to do it, the SACP, was falling short. What concerned Marais was the apparent unwillingness of the Communist Party to take up this challenge at more than a rhetorical level, as indicated to him by the absence of any reference, positive or negative, to the party's relationship with the ANC or to the performance of the alliance in the strategy paper prepared for the 1996 party conference. "These guys have to come up with a vision of where they want this country to go and how to get there," he said. "This means seriously debating their role with the ANC and with the ANC-in-government. It doesn't mean breaking up the alliance, but it means openly debating this stuff. The alternative, for me, is to destroy the central political axis of the left."

In his book on the transition, published two years later, Marais elaborated on this approach:

> The most attractive route out of this impasse would be to recast the terms of the tripartite alliance, in general, and the SACP-ANC alliance in particular by allowing the creation of platforms within the ANC (along the lines of Brazil's Workers Party). This would render the class and other biases in the ANC less opaque and enable the clear expression and pursuit of divergent interests, enabling a more vigorous pursuit of distinct strategic directions. At the most fundamental level, this could allow the disaggregation of interests and agendas which are being forcibly corralled under the canopy of coerced unity — a prerequisite for the gradual reconstruction of a popular hegemonic project.[23]

Despite his criticisms, Marais echoes Cronin in dismissing the notion that the ANC "sold out."[24] It was never socialist in the first place, he argues, despite desultory gestures in that direction in documents like the Freedom Charter. In 1996, after vacillating between a Keynesian redistributive approach and a more orthodox free-trade model, the ANC government published its macro-economic framework — the Growth, Employment and Redistribution plan, or GEAR. The RDP all but disappeared in this document, as did any semblance of a com-

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mitment to transformative, people-driven development. "GEAR's prescriptions lit the faces of business leaders but shocked many within the ANC alliance," says Marais in his book. But the party at first made little noise about it. It was COSATU that first protested its investor-friendly premises and its narrowly growth-oriented aims, though the party joined in later. Among the many neoliberal tenets GEAR reflected were that of state spending (and financial controls) as an impediment to growth and regulated "flexibility" in the labor market as a key to job creation. For the trade unions, this signaled more "jobless growth" at their expense.

The key factor in this protracted slippage, as Marais points out, was the steady tilt in the balance of social forces away from the flagging popular movement and back toward national (and increasingly international) capital. The ANC was less the author of this shift than its field of battle. "The Left mistakenly assumed it had achieved sufficient hegemonic weight within the ANC and the tripartite alliance (the same applies within each of the alliance partners)," wrote Marais.[25] Left victories were won in the preparation of documents but lost in the execution of policies and programs. The problem was one of power. The right consolidated what it began with and drew further strength from the country's reintegration into the world market, while the Left saw its power, derived from a declining popular movement, steadily ebb, much as happened with more devastating effect in Palestine in the post-*intifada* negotiations. The trend was sadly predictable. Marais quotes Boris Kagarlitsky: "To speak of alternatives is pointless, so long as there is no force on the political scene that is capable of putting them into practice."[26]

I will not try to update these developments further in any detail — this book is an exploration of strategic issues and the discussions and experiences that inform them, not current-events coverage — but I want to highlight some additional milestones, whose proceedings are readily available on the internet, that extend this debate.

At COSATU's sixth congress in 1997, delegates reaffirmed their basic commitment to the alliance, even as their president, John Gomomo, called the ANC-led government's economic program, GEAR, a "monster" and as the congress as a whole resolved to "support the government when it adopts progressive policies and oppose it when it advances policies that are against the interests of workers." COSATU also voted to strengthen its relations with the SACP "as a political party with a socialist vision."[27]

For its part, the SACP at its tenth national congress in 1998, put

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far more attention into the issue of its distinct place in the transformation process than it had three years earlier, and it discussed in depth its role in the alliance. This was unwittingly augmented by provocative guest speeches from both President Nelson Mandela and President-in-waiting Thabo Mbeki, who each took the party to task for its vocal expression of differences with the ANC and the government. Mandela termed the SACP's criticism of GEAR "not acceptable." Mbeki blasted the party for "spreading falsifications," "telling lies," and "claiming easy victories." Party delegates responded by voting in a younger, more militant top leadership, some forty percent of whom were women, and by confirming a much more aggressive strategy for building the party as an autonomous political force, even as they affirmed their commitment to support the ANC in the upcoming national elections.[28]

At an August 1999 COSATU special congress, the SACP's newly elected General Secretary Blade Nzimande saluted the joint political education efforts of the party and the trade unions then underway and called for closer coordination between the two allies to build a "people-driven developmental state."[29] At a strategy conference convened in September 1999, the party declared that its focus should be "on building people's power so that it is the working class, the landless rural masses and the urban poor that should be mobilised to be the main motive force of our revolution." In May 2000, at another strategy conference, the party set its sights on practical efforts to eradicate poverty, with an increased focus on local government. At the national level, it reaffirmed a commitment to the strategic role of the public sector and to a public-private partnership led by the state, stances that echoed those of COSATU, which was at that moment mobilizing its first post-apartheid general strike over job losses and calls for expanded public works programs, and in implicit opposition to the ANC-led government. The party also reiterated the need "to be vigilant that change is not reduced to the transfer of some power, privilege and wealth to an emergent black elite, while the underlying class, race and gender inequalities of our society remain largely intact."[30]

Class and political lines were growing ever sharper throughout South African society and within the alliance, even as racial distinctions were to some extent blurred. However, poverty remained an overwhelmingly black phenomenon, despite limited changes in the economy's upper reaches. In this respect, the notion of abandoning race as a central category of oppression and inequality in favor of a

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strictly class-based analysis, as some on the left urged, was way premature, if not off-base altogether. South Africa continued to be defined by a complex web of interlocking social relations that needed to be grasped and worked with by any movement proposing transformational change. Race, gender and class headed the list but they were not alone. The urban/rural divide was as stark as any cleavage in the country, tribal and ethnic issues remained close to the surface, and there were others.

The SACP had made enormous strides toward understanding these and other distinctive features of their society and in articulating an economic and political agenda to deal with them since the party's — and the liberation movement's — unbanning. During this period, the tripartite alliance had loosened in some respects, but it was holding together as an institutional vehicle to guide the nation through its post-apartheid transition, and the party continued to have some, if not enough, influence over its direction. How much longer this arrangement would last, however, was an open question. Meanwhile, the problem of a severely weakened mass movement to drive the change process remained acute, apart from the trade unions which seemed to gather renewed strength from the government's rightward drift at the end of the 1990s. How to deal with this was the central challenge for the party at the dawn of the new millennium. But this is a party of many voices — and a seemingly endless flow of publications — that are tied to the daily struggles of working people. If this is where creative new thinking comes from on these issues, as I am convinced it is, this is a party better positioned to give leadership to the process than most.

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Chapter 16

ERITREA

AGAINST MORE ODDS

The Eritrean People's Liberation Front is the only political movement of these four that won an outright victory in the 1990s and was therefore positioned to restructure both the state and the economy. Yet, like the Palestinians, the Eritreans had experienced serious problems with political and confessional divisions on their way to this point that nearly tore the movement apart. They had also faced exceptionally unbalanced odds in their confrontation with Ethiopia, whose population dwarfed that of Eritrea and whose successive regimes over the course of the independence war had the backing of each superpower, one after the other, while the Eritreans had no one but themselves upon whom to rely. The insinuation that their struggle was a "secessionist" one, threatening the unity of historic Ethiopia (much as Israel relied on its mythologies for its claims on the West Bank and East Jerusalem), added to their isolation abroad, as there was a widely-held consensus, enshrined in a founding principle of the Organization of African Unity in 1963, that the borders of African states should not be tampered with. Once the Soviet Union took Ethiopia's side in the late 1970s, the Eritreans also lost the support of many anti-imperialist forces around the world, including both the South African and the Palestinian Lefts, leaving them virtually alone in their struggle. And they were still alone when they won in May 1991.

When the fighting stopped, Eritrea lay in ruins. Water and sewage systems in the towns barely functioned. The few asphalt roads were torn up by heavy military vehicles. Port facilities in Massawa, the country's main outlet to the sea, were badly damaged by heavy bombing. The rail system was entirely dismantled, its iron rails used to make bunkers. What remained of the country's light industry had not been maintained or modernized in a quarter century, and urban unem-

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ployment exceeded thirty percent of the economically-active population. Meanwhile, a drought that persisted through the 1980s — aided by the deforestation wrought by the war — kept the rural population on the brink of famine.

At the end of the war, fully eighty-five percent of the people were dependent on donated food aid, while a million refugees languished in exile abroad, many in squalid camps in neighboring Sudan. As many as half of these exiles were expected to return home in the coming four-to-five years, raising the country's population of some three million by nearly one-sixth. At the same time, the World Bank estimated the country's per capita income at less than $150, compared to $330 for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, marking it as one of the world's poorest states.

Overnight, the new government had to design everything from passports, drivers' licenses, and postage stamps to telecommunication systems, school curricula, and an investment policy, while also addressing massive housing and food shortages and reviving the battered economy. In effect, they had to create a country from scratch. Water and sewer systems in Asmara and other cities and towns barely worked, the few paved roads were mostly torn up, the rail system was unusable, electricity was available in most towns only four-to-five hours a day, fields and orchards were overgrown with weeds, the hillsides around the towns were laced with land mines, and most of the country's forest cover was gone.[1] To conserve resources and to avoid debilitating debt, the former guerrillas serving in the government — including Isaias Afwerki, the acting president — collected only a basic living allowance instead of salaries until June 1995.

When I spoke with Isaias in his modest presidential office a year into the transition, I asked him how his political views had changed over the course of the struggle. "I am not shy about the ideals I entertained twenty years ago, ten years ago, but now I don't think they work," he said.

> There are simply things one cannot do because of human nature. You cannot have a society of angels except in heaven. My ideals now are more concrete. Now I can say from very long experience that I have something in mind that is more real than a floating ideal.
>
> Because of the isolation of the Eritrean national movement and because of the conditions here, it was very natural for extreme ideas to appeal to everyone, but I don't think it's proper now to relate everything to those 'isms.' They are a

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liability, not just because people are disappointed by them, but because trying to live up to them is to live an obsession. Once you are obsessed, you never come up with anything new.

I still believe that the main problem that has to be solved is the economic and social status of everyone in the society, but I think it has to be worked out within the context of a realistic policy. Egalitarianism within our armed struggle was one of the main strengths of our organization. I doubt we could have succeeded without it. But it is impossible to be as egalitarian now as we were then.

My belief now is that the state has to be limited in its role and should not be expected to do everything for everybody. We have to abolish this kind of thinking. People talk about classes and class struggle, but my impression is that what is damaging third world societies above everything else is corruption. The institutions of government and of the state have been the main cause of these problems. Before we tackle other problems, we have to tackle this — the state has to be out of all areas that are not best served by its interference.

I remain committed to better the living standards of everyone in this country, but my attitude has changed about how to accomplish it. It is impossible to make a poor man a rich one by simply wishing it. What can be done is to give him an opportunity to do it himself. This does not mean imposing something or halting development in one area so someone from somewhere else can catch up. But the opportunities have to be there.[2]

On the political front, the first two postwar years were largely taken up with the task of laying the institutional basis for statehood and preparing for the referendum. During this time, the mass organizations were almost completely dormant except for the women's union, and there was little if any political work with the general population apart from that associated with the coming vote. The EPLF's Department of Public Administration, until then responsible for civilian mobilization, became the Ministry of Local Government — a management instrument not a politicizing one — and the departments responsible for political guidance were folded into a new Ministry of Information and Culture. What noone outside the EPLF's inner circle knew then was that the clandestine party within the front had been disbanded in 1989, too, and there was no distinct political leadership to take its place as the front dissolved into the emerging state, which

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was nearly overwhelmed by the challenge of addressing the postwar needs of the population.

Almost from the moment the fighting ended, there was an intense debate underway within the EPLF over the future of the liberation front — whether to turn it into a disciplined vanguard party or to dissolve it and start over again or to transform it into a mass movement of a new type. As is the EPLF's practice, they convened seminars around the country over several months to discuss it, but little of this exchange was carried out in public and nothing was ever published. "There are some who say we should turn the EPLF into a party right away and others who say this would squeeze out other political possibilities," Yemane Gebreab told me at the time. Yemane was one of the front's second-generation leaders — those who joined the movement in the 1970s — and the head of the Department of Information in the first years after the war. He said that for his part he wanted the most effective mechanism for developing the country at this stage, but he was not satisfied with the stock alternatives. "The commitment to social justice remains the anchor of the movement," he said. "The question is how to achieve it."[3]

The EPLF's last major political act as a liberation front was to preside over the April 1993 referendum that formalized Eritrea's sovereignty. By October 1992, the referendum commission had signed up 1.8 million people, a third of whom lived outside the country. For the first time in Eritrean history, women and naturalized citizens were included in the registration process. Over the next six months, seminars were convened across Eritrea, in the refugee camps in neighboring Sudan, in major Ethiopian cities, in community centers in Europe, North America, the Middle East and Australia — wherever organized Eritrean nationals lived. People discussed what the vote meant, and they practiced casting color-coded, secret ballots. In the course of this, they were introduced to the electoral process as a means of effecting change. The reasoning behind the front's considerable investment in this exercise — whose outcome was a foregone conclusion — was both that massive popular participation would give the people ownership of the country's independence and that an internationally-monitored ballot would provide it with some security against the possibility of future Ethiopian changes of heart. But the referendum was also viewed as integral to the process of developing a democratic political culture.

It took place on April 23-25, 1993 inside Eritrea and abroad, with monitors from the United Nations, the OAU, the Arab League,

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the European Community, the U.S., Italy, Russia, Ethiopia and numerous other states, agencies and individuals. Most of the balloting was completed in the first hours of the first day, after people lined up in the middle of the night to vote. The results showed 99.8 percent favoring sovereignty. Eritrea's independence was formally declared a month later.[4]

In February 1994, the EPLF held its third congress. Delegates chosen from the liberation army, the non-military departments, the mass organizations and the diaspora voted to dissolve the front after transferring control of the army to the new state. Then they voted to launch a new political movement, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (the PFDJ, dubbed the People's Front by most of its members) under a National Charter which they approved there. Its main principles were commitments to national unity, active popular participation, the decisive role of the human factor in development, self-reliance, and strong bonds between the leadership and the population at large. Anyone agreeing with the charter was free to join the PFDJ, but affiliation was not automatic for former EPLF members — one had to make a conscious decision to register in the new organization. The difference between this and simply changing the name of the EPLF was slight. The point was to mark a break with the structure as well as the mission of the liberation front. However, there were substantive changes in the leadership. Only five members of the EPLF's Political Bureau were carried over to the PFDJ's nineteen-person Executive Committee. Isaias, who dominated the movement to an extent that has no counterpart in the other countries we've looked at (except perhaps Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua during the early 1980s), was chosen to be the PFDJ's general secretary. The front's operational management fell to a five-person secretariat whose members resigned from government positions to take up full-time organizational work. All but one was new to the top leadership.[5]

* * *

For the emerging state, the central political project during the transition was the crafting of a constitution. This got underway two months after the PFDJ's founding congress. Like the referendum, this was important as much for the process as for the product — for civic education, for self-empowerment, for the consolidation of national identity. The entire enterprise took nearly three years — from 1994 to 1997 — and involved seventy-three committees and sub-committees. Before it was over, it reached over a half-million Eritreans at home

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and abroad. The project was managed by a fifty-member commission under an expert in international law, Bereket Habte Selassie, who had briefly served as Ethiopia's Attorney General in the Haile Selassie era and later represented the EPLF to the U.N. Though commission members were selected by the PFDJ and the president's office, they were representative of all the countries' ethnic and religious communities and its various political threads. Nearly half were women. There was also a fifteen-member advisory board of foreign legal experts and a forty-five-member advisory board of Eritrean elders to apprise the commission on the strengths and weaknesses of existing customary law.

The commission had a high degree of autonomy, according to Bereket, who insisted afterward that he was never instructed by anyone in the front or the government to alter anything in the draft document. In the first phase, the commissioners raised funds to underwrite their operations and ensure their financial independence. Six months into it, they sent 400 trained organizers out to lead workshops and seminars on fifteen issues they considered central to the decisions in front of them. Among the topics were: the differences between a presidential and a parliamentary system; the concept of the separation of powers among executive, legislative and judicial branches; the duties and responsibilities of each branch; the place of the military and security organs; the relationship between religion and the state; the rights and responsibilities of individual citizens; and the relationship between national and international law. Various international covenants were also discussed, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the African Charter on People's and Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and various ILO conventions. It was common during this period to see whole communities gathered under shade trees outside their villages debating the issues. Among the most contentious were the rights of women (conservatives objected) and the question of whether there should be official languages (which was rejected). Traveling theater troupes presented skits on these and other questions, contests were held for school children to capture them in art and poetry, and frequent radio programs debated the merits of various approaches, all in an effort to draw the largely non-literate population into the process and to give them a sense of ownership over the outcome, said Bereket.[6]

Once this program of public consultation was completed, the commission put together a first draft, which was circulated at home and

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abroad and debated in another round of public meetings. The commission also convened an international conference in Asmara to bring together a wide range of people — including several South Africans — with experience in constitution-making. Finally, in March 1997, they submitted their final draft to the National Assembly, which added several changes — including a strengthened commitment to equality for women — and then passed it on to a constituent assembly of more than 500 members for ratification.[7]

In the end, it was a relatively spare document. Unlike South Africa's with 600 articles, the Eritrean Constitution laid out basic principles and left most of the details to be developed in law. The framers sought to produce an organic document that would straddle the country's recent history and the stages of development it would shortly undergo. "As always, there was a contradiction between the two, and the Constitution is in between," said Bereket. "[It] is the framework by which you break out of the past, or change the past and go forward into the future." Or, as another commission member said to me, "We chose to follow the EPLF tradition — say little, do much." Though the final document included guarantees of the rights of citizens, it also articulated their duties and obligations, and it affirmed each citizen's duty to his or her family and community.

* * *

At this stage, the movement faced other daunting political tasks: the reform of the existing body of civil law, the promulgation of new policies on the press and civil society organizations, the reform and reconstruction of the state itself, and the development of a democratic culture in which these instruments and institutions could take root and mature. All this came up in the midst of efforts to jump-start national reconstruction and development. The PFDJ's main charge at the outset was to bring the people back into the process.

First, however, it had to distinguish itself from the state, a relationship usually blurred under left parties and national liberation movements once in power. Step one was to make the front financially and administratively independent. They decided that assets nationalized by Ethiopia — factories, agricultural plantations, banks and so on — would remain the property of the state, though most enterprises were slated for privatization. Those undertakings set up and run by the liberation movement during the war — transport, construction, domestic and international trade and other businesses and commercial ventures — devolved to the PFDJ, which would support itself

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from the income earned from them and from membership dues and contributions, but not from state subsidies. This was the setting as I began the field research for this book in September 1994.

"The EPLF's job is only half finished," said Yemane Gebreab when I met him in his PFDJ office. As a member of the front's core secretariat, he oversaw an organizing drive that in seven months had drawn in several hundred thousand members. The question was what to do with them.

> Independence didn't bring the changes in people's lives that they expected from it — freedom, social justice, economic well-being. We tell them that this is going to take time and that the only way it can be achieved is if everyone works for it. Being a member of the front will not bring privileges — only a chance to serve the country. We want self-reliance to become part of the thinking of every Eritrean. The challenge for us is to make these organizations relevant, not talk-shops or indoctrination sessions.

The PFDJ was set up in six regional sections, including one for those living outside Eritrea. There would be an intermediate tier — branches — within the sections and there would be groups of fifty-to-a-hundred members in each village and urban neighborhood (ten-to-twenty to the branch). "The focus for the work should be at the grassroots level," said Yemane.

> We want to include everyone, regardless of sex, age or social position, in the same party organizations. Some think we should organize by social position, grouping people by age, gender, etcetera. We'll see once it's started. This is a very experimental stage we're in. The most vocal sections of the society are the traders and the elite intellectuals, and that's whose voices are most often heard. First, we want to make sure that the vast majority of the population on the periphery has an input, that their voices are heard, too.

Party organizers convened public forums to explain the aims and goals of the movement and to solicit feedback. Their intent was to quickly turn the smaller groups into social and economic agents in their communities. "In the liberation phase, the critical link was the war," said Yemane.

> Unless we won the war, we risked losing everything. At this stage, it's the economy. Unless we develop the economy in a

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> way that does not create social dislocations, we risk losing everything again. So we don't want the party branches to just be places where people come and talk and talk and talk. I don't doubt that Eritrea will succeed economically. The challenge is whether we can do this and really have social justice, whether we can maintain our own identity and our core values.

But what did social justice mean in postwar Eritrea? Most of those I asked described it as diminishing social inequality and increasing opportunity and access across categorical barriers. What was different from the 1970s and early 1980s was that the reduction of almost all issues to class had given way to perceptions of a broader spectrum of social differences that demanded remedial action. "The question of class is not that important in Eritrea today," said Zemhret Yohannes, a former ELF fighter who also sat on the PFDJ's five-person secretariat.[8] His brief was information and documentation, and he was charged with assembling written and oral histories of the liberation struggle. "There are other interests that are more important — ethnicity, religion, uneven development from one region to another. Our priority now is to create a viable political order in which we can address the economic interests of all the people. Safeguarding peace and stability are the most important things. Keeping in touch with the grassroots will be the hardest."

During a visit to a PFDJ branch in the town of Mendefera, a throng of subsistence farmers from surrounding villages lined up to enroll. A local cadre said that close to eighty percent of the adult population had joined since the organizing drive was announced. But they came with questions: "Why are we being asked to register now after being members in the EPLF for so long?" "Why are there no other parties — are you trying to monopolize the people?" "What's the use if the only front is the EPLF and everyone supports it?"

The front's answer to these sorts of questions was to help people at the community level to take advantage of these changes. The objective, organizers said, was to ensure that the state was responsive to people's needs without rendering them passive by showering them with benefits. Soon after the front was launched, the government restructured Eritrea's internal political boundaries, cutting the number of provinces in half — to six, including the capital — and devolving authority and resources onto the new regions (called *zobas*). From the outset, the front set out to educate its cadres on the work of each ministry, acquainting them with the new regional offices and urging

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them to help communities identify their development needs and then go to appropriate representatives for support — to situate the initiative for "development" at the community level. This also coincided with the end of postwar relief distributions and a shift to public works programs to replace hand-outs with jobs, except in the case of severe disability. Ending dependence — as both an economic and a cultural phenomenon — was a central priority.

The most important post-independence social policies were a land reform and a national service. The former, announced in August 1994, nationalized rural and urban land and allocated use-rights for agriculture and residence to all citizens over the age of eighteen (allowing for the inheritance of value added through investment and improvement and for long-term leases of large plots for commercial use). This gave women legal rights to own land for the first time. The latter program, launched the same year, required all women and men over eighteen to undergo six months of military training before spending a year on reconstruction projects. This was intended to compensate for Eritrea's lack of capital and to reduce dependence on foreign aid, while welding together the diverse society. It would also have a profound effect on the status of women, placing them in a condition of relative gender equality for eighteen months, much as service in the liberation front had done for tens of thousands of young women and men during the war years. Almost 40,000 young people were called upon annually to join brigades of the former liberation army — which by 1996 was cut to half its former size — in a campaign to build new infrastructure. The importance of this was underlined when it was written into the Constitution as a fundamental obligation of citizenship. Its value for the defense of the country was confirmed when Ethiopia declared war on Eritrea in 1998, and more than 100,000 reserve troops were mobilized in less than forty-eight hours.

"We are challenged with a shattered economy, and that has compounded our dependence," Isaias told me.

> The last fifty years have decimated everything that could have enabled us to be self-reliant. When it comes to international relationships, we have nothing to offer, and that doesn't bring about an equal standing. This is one of our problems. The national service is aimed to deal with this. We would like to reach a stage where we can talk as equals to anyone without asking for assistance — relief or otherwise. The time when everyone here will feel relieved will be when we are not asking anyone to give us any help.[9]

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Isaias told an international conference in Washington that the country's development was predicated on the rational management of Eritrea's domestic resources, the promotion of regional peace and economic cooperation and the effective use of foreign aid. Relations with potential donor states should be ones of "true partnership," he said.

> Symmetry should be the linchpin of this relationship. Donor-recipient relationships based on prescription and dictation of unsuitable antidotes will not do. Our independence of decision should not be encroached upon by conditionalities of aid. This is a fundamental question of dignity which cannot be compromised by temporary necessity.[10]

Avoiding the chronic dependence that has afflicted most of post-colonial Africa was the issue — along with the related problems of corruption and nepotism — that most preoccupied PFDJ leaders in the first years of the country's formal independence. "The basic lesson from the Eritrean struggle was that we were able to win the war on a very self-reliant basis," Yemane told a BBC interviewer in September 1994.

> It's a lesson that's very important for the future as well. African peoples, African societies, have to find solutions to the problems that they face. That means coming up with their own economic policies. They must first encourage and release the initiative of the Africans themselves — whether it's farmers, traders, workers, business people. If we just rely on outside assistance — no matter how long it's given, no matter how much it is — it cannot solve our problems.[11]

Among other things, these concerns shaped the front's views toward NGOs — international and local — which were perceived as the thin wedge for new forms of outside intervention. Shortly after Yemane's interview, the head of the parastatal Eritrean Relief and Refugee Association, Dr. Nerayo Teklemichael, took public a debate over NGOs that had gone on within the front for some time when he announced restrictions on all of them. Henceforth, religious activity and humanitarian aid work would have to be institutionally distinct — churches, mosques or other religious institutions would be barred from carrying out relief and development programs, though religiously-affiliated aid agencies that did not proselytize would be permitted. All international aid agencies, religious or otherwise, would be required to report on their financial operations. Any foreign organization whose operations could not be sustained on less than ten per-

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cent of overall spending would be asked to close its office and carry on by remote management, visiting Eritrea to monitor projects but not maintaining an office and residence in the country. There would also be curbs on foreign funding to domestic groups — requirements that Eritrean NGOs raise a significant portion of their funding from local sources to demonstrate that they were in fact "indigenous" organizations and not simply representatives of foreign bodies.

"There is too much dependence on international funders, just as there is too much dependence on food relief," Nerayo told me after the press conference.

> Emergency aid is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it saves lives. On the other, it makes people dependent, and eventually they may be worse off than they would have been without it. We are at a very crucial moment in our history to say: 'No more aid'. I think it will not be too long when we say: 'Thank you very much, we are now on our own'.[12]

In 1996, international aid agencies were told to limit their programming to the fields of education and health. In 1997, restrictions were tightened. Foreign staff who lived in the country for more than 183 days were required to pay the highest income tax rate, thirty-eight percent of their salaries and allowances (as, of course, were all Eritreans who earned this kind of money). At this point, most agencies not only left — they left angry. Eritrean officials later insisted they had not ousted the agencies, but the new rules and the heavy-handed manner in which they were promulgated had the same effect because they, like the rhetoric that accompanied them, were put forward in abolutist terms. This cost Eritrea dearly when renewed conflict with Ethiopia broke out in 1998 as these representatives of this influential sector were neither present to witness Ethiopian abuses against Eritrean civilians, of which there were many, nor of a mind to represent Eritrea's complaints on the international stage. But were Eritrea's political leaders really hostile to NGOs — and by extension to institutional pluralism — or were they just insisting on too much control over (and a contrary understanding of) the development process in their country for the donors to accept?

Fear of ethnic and religious fragmentation was — and remains — close to the surface of most discussions of development in Eritrea. Monopolization of political and economic power by small ethnic- or clan-based parties to the exclusion of their rivals has been a recurrent pattern of African rule since decolonization. Widespread popular par-

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ticipation in the political process was the antidote, according to most of Eritrea's political leaders. In their view, the country's new organizations had to be — and be perceived as — broad-based and inclusive in order to build credibility for the institutional structure of the new nation and to promote the development of an open, accountable democratic culture in a country that had had nothing of the sort until now. Powerful NGOs, accountable mainly to their donors, did not reinforce this inclusive vision, even though they might claim its promotion as their mission. The issue, especially regarding international NGOs, was whether they fostered or obstructed, wittingly or not, self-reliance. Even their physical presence — manifested in their elaborate entourages, their fleets of huge, air-conditioned Land Cruisers and their posh, well-tended villas — gave the neat and orderly but resource-poor capital the look and feel of a charity case.

"We have to work, develop our skills and stand side by side with the rest of the world," Isaias told a home audience in 1998 during one of his periodic public question-and-answer sessions. "If we cannot do this, then we will remain paupers waiting for alms and despairing of the eventual development of our country." As to the NGOs, if program and project work could be done by Eritreans, there was no reason to hire foreigners. "NGOs or aid organizations should not be the cause for the weakening of the institutional and human capacity of this country."

NGOs, foreign as well as domestic, attracted such critical attention within Eritrea partly due to the prominent position they occupied in the immediate postwar years. When the fighting stopped in May 1991, there were few other private institutions of any kind there. Haile Selassie had sharply curtailed most indigenous institutions in the 1950s, except for religious institutions and charities, which were kept under close scrutiny, and the *derg* had tightened restrictions further, as it created its own highly-centralized sectoral associations and village and neighborhood committees. The EPLF also launched mass organizations in its liberated zones, as I have described earlier. Thus, at war's end, practically the only institutions in Eritrea not under the control of the state or the liberation movement were a few religious bodies and a handful of weak charitable societies.

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In 1992, Eritrea's first postwar NGO — the Regional Center for Human Rights and Development — stepped into this void. The ambitiously titled but relatively modest operation lasted just under a year

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before the government shut it down. Officials argued that the RCHRD was an anomaly out of synch with the country's institutional development. Their main complaint was that its appearance at that point in Eritrea's postwar recovery gave a tiny segment of the urban middle class — and the international funders that rushed in behind it — inordinate influence over the new country's direction. In this view, the center was a transplant without Eritrean roots — a creature of foreign money and alien imagination in a country whose core identity rested upon a tenacious commitment to self-reliance. The closure provoked an international uproar, but behind this and other new NGOs that followed were only a handful of self-selected individuals, who were skilled at connecting with foreign donors — and who were attractive to these donors precisely because they were not formally linked to the movement that had liberated the country.

The RCHRD was launched in April 1992 by a former EPLF fighter who had headed the war-time Eritrean Relief Association and by his sister, a long-time EPLF supporter. The new NGO had one other staffperson at first — an American who had worked with ERA's U.S. affiliate during the war. Several prominent Asmara-based professionals, all Eritreans, served on the organization's board of directors, alongside a ten-person international advisory board. They started by proposing projects in five areas: referendum monitoring, environmental planning, promotion of freedom of expression (setting up their own newspaper), constitutional development, and NGO networking. This was a big agenda for a small group, but the center's director had access to a strong pool of would-be consultants and staffers.

From the outset, the center's ability to attract international funding was dazzling, as donor agencies leapt at the chance to fund an entity tied neither to the EPLF nor to the emerging state.[13] Its projects also reflected the issues at the top of many donors' priority lists, and the response was immediate and enthusiastic. In short order, the RCHRD raised more than $1 million. A month after the founders opened their doors, they hosted an NGO "consultation" that brought together the few aid agencies and religious organizations that existed at that time in Asmara to discuss cooperation. The occasion served mainly as a brain-storming session for Eritreans from government departments, the center's staff and their international guests, but it catapulted the organization into the limelight, even as it signaled the powerful attraction NGOs held for international funders. A year later, the center was abruptly and clumsily closed down by the government. The director was later appointed to a prominent position on the com-

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mission charged with developing the national constitution, but he was not permitted to reopen the organization.

While institutional and personal rivalries played a role in the RCHRD's demise, the main concerns voiced by officials were about undue external influence. These were repeatedly cited, though never formally codified, in decisions taken to control NGOs and other civil institutions. The central argument was that these organizations should have both a popular constituency and local sources of funding to cover most, if not all, of their operational and administrative expenses in order to demonstrate that they were genuine manifestations of popular sentiment and not "trojan horses" for foreign interests.

Despite the particularity of postwar Eritrea, this experience highlights a broader set of questions about NGOs in any third world society, especially one engaged in such a dramatic transition. Do they promote or retard a people's capacity for truly self-generated socioeconomic and institutional development? Are they a bridge to the grassroots — or a toll booth? Does the NGO sector evince an identifiable class and political character distinguishing it as an agent of change in a given society? If so, do NGOs complement other forms of popular organization, or do they constitute alternatives — even rivals — to such organizations? Can the role and character of NGOs be assessed apart from the organizational and political context in which they operate, or should we view them in relation to broader-based membership organizations and social interests — community-based organizations, social movements, and political parties, for example — and how they enhance or detract from them? Do we evaluate NGOs according to the success or failure of specific projects, or in terms of their contribution to the attainment of strategic development objectives, such as the promotion of national unity and the consolidation of greater social justice in otherwise fragmented and structurally inequitable postcolonial societies?

As these issues were coming up in Eritrea, the unions of women, workers, and youth and students born during the liberation struggle were undergoing a slow but steady rebirth. It was these popular associations that political leaders lauded as the seeds of Eritrea's emerging civil society. Their leaderships overlapped with the EPLF/PFDJ, but they were left to finance themselves and to organize their own operations and programs. They struggled at first, but by the mid-1990s they had carved out new missions and were deeply involved in the development process. An organizational culture inherited from the liberation struggle fostered over-centralization in their internal

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structures while encouraging hegemonic tendencies toward potential rivals, as I have discussed in earlier sections, but these institutions involved large numbers of people in activities and projects often associated with NGOs, and they did so, for the most part, effectively. All three began to solicit and accept grants from foreign donors in the early 1990s, but they relied on membership dues and income-generating projects for their core funding. And, with time and pressure from below, they began to open up to free-ranging debates over program, structure, and direction.

New self-help associations also arose in the 1990s. Among them were an Asmara-based business women's association (started with help from the NUEW), the Eritrean War Disabled Fighters Association and the Eritrean Women with Disabilities. Long-standing associations of teachers and nurses prospered and grew, and relatively new associations of doctors and other professionals appeared. Nearly all of the funding for these groups came from local sources, mainly their members.

In the midst of this experimentation with membership-based organizations, there were signs that NGOs could play a supportive role as long as they acted as bridges to needed resources, skills, and experiences rather than as pace-setters. Certain international NGOs — Norwegian Church Aid and the Boston-based Grassroots International (with which I have long been affiliated), for example — have had little difficulty in this regard. NCA is one of the few aid agencies to have maintained an office in Asmara through this contentious period and the only one to have a long-term agreement with the government. It supports agricultural and infrastructure projects as well as emerging civil society institutions. Grassroots International has always funded projects from afar, mostly through the popular unions, while periodically visiting Eritrea to discuss new projects and to monitor old ones. Meanwhile, at the end of the 1990s, eighteen independent (and self-financing) newspapers and magazines appeared in Asmara, along with a number of new, locally-funded NGOs, mostly operating in the spheres of health and education, suggesting that the space for such organizations was widening, though formal policy on this phenomenon remained to be articulated.

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All in all, Eritrea presents a conundrum for Western critics. The country exhibits a far higher level of popular participation in its economic, social and political affairs than nearly anywhere else in Africa, but

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this is not mediated through or managed by institutions the West favors — small, professionally-run NGOs and other non-party, as well as nongovernmental, organizations. Eritrea's political leaders propose a development process that proceeds through stages of popular mobilization and inclusion, but they insist on doing it their own way. Their central objective is to reinforce the concept of the citizen over that of narrower (and often competing) social identities — to unify the people as they construct and shape the nation itself. They argue that spontaneous organization, artificially enhanced by injections of outside resources, will entrench inherited divisions and inequalities — not only ethnic and religious cleavages but also those of gender and class, as well as simple geography.

NGOs may have roles to play on this stage, but as minor characters, not as the stars of the show, according to party and government officials. They say they are practicing a sort of organizational "protectionism" to nurture the growth and development of indigenous institutions before subjecting them to competition from far more powerful — and more well-endowed — outside forces, much as many developing countries did in the economic sphere before the onset of globalization. However, a number of people, including prominent PFDJ activists, are more pessimistic. "The problem is that our institutions have not really developed," said one when I raised this with him. "Although we may term this 'organizational protectionism', the institutions to be so protected are not that visible."'[14] Whether such strict controls over the institutional forms of "development-related" activity will work or not — and whether this turns out to be a cover for the continuing control of "civil society" by a new political elite — remains to be seen, but there are ways to observe and measure the trend without prejudging it.

We are left with a question of process, not form: as time passes, do we see more or less popular participation, organization-building, transparency, accountability, and, ultimately, impact-from-below in the emerging institutional life of Eritrea? The best evidence that participation is increasing — and having a direct impact on the institutions that promote it — is the experience of the unions of women, workers, and youth. The National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students is, in fact, one of the most dynamic and innovative organizations in the country, and it provides the entry point for thousands of people into social and political activism. In doing so, it also helps to shape the country's evolving political culture and, in some cases, its most important new programs.

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Take the example of one of the union's earliest initiatives and the impact it had on the state. NUEYS piloted the concept of national service with summer camps just after the war at which volunteers helped with reconstruction projects in rural areas. "Young people had a lot of spare time then," said Saad Ramadan, the head of the NUEYS planning and human resources department. "They didn't know what to do with themselves, so we took the opportunity to organize these camps." When they issued a call for applicants in the spring of 1993, they were overwhelmed by the response. Thousands of young men and women signed up, but they could only take 400-500 for each of the three sites they had readied. Soon afterward, the government began studying the prospects for a permanent national service. "Sometimes you think you are doing small things, but then people follow and it has more significance," said NUEYS chair Moheidin Shengeb.[15]

Or consider a more recent — and far more controversial — initiative. In 1999, after a number of setbacks and re-assessments, NUEYS activists launched a grassroots campaign to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation, or FGM — a so-called "harmful tradition" that many of their elders had roundly criticized but appeared powerless to stop. As I indicated in an earlier chapter, FGM is practiced among both Christians and Muslims. It takes three forms. The least violent are cliteridectomies, usually performed within weeks of a girl-child's birth. The most extreme form, infibulation, is commonly carried out when an infant is only a few months old. The intermediate form is one in which severe cutting takes place and the girl's legs are tied together until the wound heals on its own. These latter forms tend to be found in Muslim communities, while the first is common in Christian villages and towns. All three have the aim of controlling women's sexuality. Girls frequently contract vaginal infections during and after these crude operations and throughout their lives. Death in childbirth is extremely common.

Both Eritrea's Ministry of Health and the women's union condemn FGM, but it remained to the youth and students to go into the communities to persuade people to halt it. Shortly after independence, NUEYS members raised the issue and called for it to become an organizational priority. By 1995 they had a project coordinator and were ready to start campaigning. In the first attempt, they trained twenty young people — girls and boys — from each of the country's six *zobas* and sent them out to organize their peers and the local communities.

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They went armed with statements from Christian and Muslim leaders insisting that there was no basis in religion for FGM and with clear denunciations of the practice by leaders of the new government, whose popularity was extremely high after winning the country's independence. But it was not enough.

The campaigners quickly ran into strong resistance that convinced them to step back and reflect on their approach. The outcome was a research project to ascertain what was behind the practice, how people thought about it, and where the levers for change might be found. They chose three sites — Hagaz (a Muslim community in Eritrea's western lowlands where pastoralism and seasonal farming are common), Mendefera (a highland Christian agrarian community), and Ghinda (an ethnically mixed market center on the slopes leading from Asmara to the Red Sea coast). They wanted to find out how best to approach communities where the practice was deeply entrenched and often associated — wrongly — with religion.

I met Awate Shakan, twenty-nine, in Hagaz several months after he completed a twenty-seven-day investigation there. He said his team met with ten groups: fathers, mothers, grandparents, nurses, traditional birth attendants, sheikhs, priests, and other elders. Several of the sheikhs argued that the basic practice was supported by the Koran, despite calls to end it from Muslim leaders in Asmara, yet they accepted the need to end the most extreme form, which many termed the "Egyptian" version (also known as pharaonic circumcision) but not cliteridectomies. This reflected a tendency to medicalize the practice — treating it as a health hazard, but resisting the human rights aspect of it. Many of those interviewed insisted on the need to curb female sexuality. "An uncircumcised girl is like an open door" was a local proverb, according to Saad.

"One question we had was: is it a crime for them, or is it a normal traditional belief?" said Saliem Keviet, the project coordinator in 1998. "If a woman 'circumcises' her daughter, you can't tell her she has committed a crime because she didn't know it was a crime." The NUEYS researchers had at first found resistance to even talking about it in 1995 and 1996. "When we went to Ghinda, we were told 'circumcision' was stopped there. But when the second team went, we found it was the opposite," she said.

There were surprises once the research got underway. "We thought it was the men who were the ones who wanted the continuation of the practice," she said, "but when we got there, it was the opposite. The men were insisting, 'Please tell our wives to stop it. We

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don't want it.'" They also learned they had to approach the issue with sensitivity. "You can't take a man with you even to take notes when you raise these questions with women," said Saliem. "Sometimes the women were proud of it. One told us her daughter bled for a year after she was married. 'I had to open her and stitch her up again so her husband could penetrate her,' she said. She was bragging. The pain was part of her life."

In the second round, campaigners went into elementary and secondary schools. They took a plastic model to demonstrate what a woman's genitalia look like if she is not 'circumcised' — something few had ever seen — and showed what happens to a 'circumcised' woman in childbirth. There are many myths about this, according to Saliem. One is the conviction that women are more badly hurt in childbirth if they have not been previously cut and stitched.

The campaigners also went into communities to meet discretely with small groups. Often they went door-to-door to speak with families one member at a time. Organizers reported that villagers sought them out to say they were not cutting their new-born daughters — but most were afraid to let their neighbors know, lest they and their children be ostracized. "At least many people are talking about FGM now," said Saliem, who was optimistic that the practice could be reduced in the next generation, though she thought it would be many years before it is halted altogether.[16]

During a visit to a youth center at Haycota in the western lowlands, one of the campaigners underlined how difficult it was to alter such deeply-ingrained traditions. "We go into the schools and to villages out from the towns, and we show videos to young people in their teens and twenties," she told me. "Often, they're caught between what they learn from us and what they hear at home. They agree with us, then they go home and practice the tradition."

NUEYS also ran a literacy program for rural youth and a public education campaign on sexually transmitted diseases, with a focus on AIDS identification and prevention, and it sponsored sporting events, cultural clubs (arts and literature), aerobics classes, first aid instruction, vocational training, scouting programs, and a wide range of other youth activities. The organization had offices and drop-in centers in most towns. In many of them, union members operated video programs at local cinemas to raise funds for their programs. They also published biweekly newspapers in three languages, and they had a one-hour weekly radio program on the state-run *dimtsi hafash* (voice of the masses) network. In addition to all this, they ran training ses-

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sions for youth involved in the parliament and in regional governments, where nearly a fourth of the representatives were under thirty-five, and they lobbied the government for greater budget allocations for youth-related programs.

Part of what made NUEYS so effective as an activist organization was its attention to cadre development. Of its 130,000 members, some 20,000 were identified as the "core group" — those who indicated a higher level of commitment to the organization and volunteered to help build it. These members were tapped to participate in special workshops in politics, leadership, and communication skills and then called upon to help mobilize their peers.

But there were bumps in the organizational road. There was some resistance from parents to allowing daughters to participate in NUEYS. (In Eritrea, it was common among both Muslims and Christians to keep unmarried girls and boys completely separate after puberty.) The experience of the liberation struggle and, after it, the national service were changing this, but the practice's hold on the community lingered as many people rationalized these phenomena as exceptions needed for the defense of the country. NUEYS got help here from the PFDJ, which took up the issue of girls' participation in village and neighborhood meetings where their parents were present, placing it in the wider context of the need to educate youth and develop the country — appealing to people's nationalism in a call to set aside parochial traditions for the common good.

There were tensions within NUEYS as well. "People used to identify each other as part of a special group — those who were inside under the *derg*, those who were in the field, those who were outside — and it was a challenge for us to unify them," said Saad. "We did it by bringing these people together and allowing the organization itself to change, so it became theirs." These and other divisions came into the open at the union's 1997 congress, he said. Regional representatives charged that the Asmara headquarters was out of touch with the membership and that it was the regional offices that were doing all the work. Women complained that the creation of gender desks in each office meant little, since the women who staffed them often had multiple assignments and were left with too little time to focus on gender-specific issues. And while women made up nearly half the organization's membership, they were severely underrepresented in the top leadership.

This led to a number of changes in the organization's mission and the structure, including the institutionalization of annual conferences

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to evaluate this and other issues. Among other reforms, the congress set a requirement that twenty percent of all positions be immediately reserved for women and that this number should increase to thirty percent at the next congress (which it did). It also mandated the regional and national offices to refrain from doubling up responsibilities on the gender representative. "1997 was our 'take-off' year," said Saad. "It changed the way we worked together."

What is important about this is not so much the outcome but the way they handled these issues — bringing them into open discussion, encouraging outspoken criticism and self-criticism, and responding positively to it when it came up. This marked new departures for Eritrea's political culture, and it bode well for the movement as a whole, for, as NUEYS members aged, they would matriculate upward into positions of leadership in the other unions, the party and the state. Representatives of the other associations and the front were routinely invited to attend NUEYS conferences where these debates took place, and Shengeb sat on the PFDJ's executive committee where he was positioned to share the NUEYS experience with party leaders as it unfolded.

* * *

The PFDJ's initial registration drive stretched into 1995, with 600,000 people signing up before it was over. That August, the front held an interim conference to review its progress. The main problem remained how to activate the membership. Some were initiating community development projects — road repair, reforestation, dam building — and helping the families of disabled and martyred fighters, but for the most part the groups functioned as monthly forums to air local grievances and to hear presentations on new government policies. "We are trying to make the groups as practical as possible," said Zemhret a year later. "We want to transform them into meaningful, living organizations. We need to develop new books for political education, and we need to train new cadres. The role of the front must be comparable to what it was in the liberation struggle. Its basic character must be its grassroots nature, and it must be a means of popular participation in nation-building."[17]

When I visited the new cadre school at Beleza, north of Asmara, I felt a sense of *déjà vu*. Fifty people, nearly all men clad in the patched shorts, cotton blankets and rubber sandals of peasant society, sat in a dimly lit adobe room engaged in animated political discussion during a two-week session, the fifth such leadership-training

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seminar the front had run that year. But though the scene resembled ones I had witnessed many times during the liberation struggle, the content had changed and the participants were more passive.

The language in the presentation was earthy, the issues practical. There was little theorizing. The values articulated were those of national unity and social justice. The frames of reference were people's own villages and neighborhoods. The focus was on mass mobilization to repair the damaged and dilapidated infrastructure and to develop their communities. "We are learning how Eritrea can be a great country with equal chances for all," said one gnarled elderly farmer named Nega. "It is our task to teach the people, to make them conscious, and to do whatever it takes to build the nation." Yet I saw few questions raised from the floor, and there was almost no response when the presenter tried to get an exchange going.

Despite this sluggishness, party leaders were optimistic about their prospects for development, even as they were becoming more and more wary toward offers of help from outsiders. The running theme in a series of interviews was back-to-basics. "We've gone through an experience, a few years of feeling our way, trying to re-orient ourselves, and I think we've passed through that stage," Yemane told me in 1996.

> There's a sense now in the country as a whole and in the Front that our orientation during the war was best, and that the only way we can move forward is by building on that base. There was a certain period after liberation — two, maybe three years — that we went after fashionable ideas from outside, and people thought these were the solutions. But in the past few years, we've come back to our basic principles. The idea, for example, that foreign assistance can solve our problems. Now we've come full circle.
>
> Yes, we need assistance, but we shouldn't compromise to get it. We should try to get it on our terms, and we should reject whatever assistance is not going to help us. We have to negotiate not just the amount of assistance but the modalities as well. It's not just how much is given but how it's given, what it's used for, and whether we can determine how it's spent. It's the quality of aid rather than the quantity that is important to us. We need to improve people's lives, do away with poverty, but do it with social justice — bring the society closer — close the gaps.
>
> At one stage, we thought ideology was 'old-fashioned' and

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> that the kind of commitment we demanded of ourselves during the liberation struggle was a thing of the past. But at our last conference, we agreed that a well-thought-out philosophy is needed to guide us in whatever problems we face — not dogmatic, not rigid in the details, but clear in its underlying principles. For example, the market is not the solution to all problems, multi-party-ism is not necessarily the political answer now, individualism and consumerism are not answers for us. At the same time, we are again thinking that commitment is decisive and that political education is important.[18]

By this time, some 3,000 PFDJ cadres had been through basic orientation courses at the regional level, and 200 had gone through a ten-day workshop in leadership training. Six days were given over to lectures and discussions, many of them by local officials who explained what they did and how to approach them with project proposals. The other four were taken up with tours of the surrounding area to identify resources and to observe successes in other communities. Once done, participants went home to convene monthly membership meetings — to lead discussions on topical political issues and to act as agents of community development. "The main challenge is to change the popular attitude that the government will do everything for them," Yemane said. "Now this is being reversed, and the front is becoming the decisive force in the society from within these communities."

When I saw him in 1997, strengthening the local leadership was the front's main priority. "The most important aspect of our work is the reengagement of our activists," he said. "There was a certain break after 1991, a disengagement by some activists — trying to address personal problems, trying to make a living, — but now there is a reengagement, along with a reaffirmation of the core values of the movement. I think we've developed a consensus on this, not only in the leadership but among the general population. The central principle is self-reliance." Each local group was to elect a three-person committee to head it. Leadership training courses were organized in Asmara and in outlying regions. "This will be a long process, maybe three-to-five years. But at the end we will have a movement that is very strong and very unified."[19]

Meanwhile, the PFDJ was, by default, the decisive force in the anemic postwar economy. The private sector barely existed, as nearly all major enterprises had been nationalized under Ethiopian rule, and what little domestic capital was left untouched mostly fled. Thus,

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the state held the largest number of factories, hotels, and other businesses and employed far the largest share of the workforce, though many of these businesses needed subsidies just to remain open. Most were slated for privatization but, due to their weakened condition, they were slow to attract investors. What dynamism there was came almost entirely from the front.

PFDJ enterprises included several construction companies, a well-drilling business, transport companies and transport-related businesses, a shipping line, metal works, export-import concerns, foreign exchange operations and a housing bank, among others. By 1996, the front had 15,000-18,000 people working for its various enterprises, which were being organized into self-managing entities with autonomous boards. It was also the primary investment partner in new projects that ranged from housing developments in Asmara and Massawa to joint ventures in mining and oil exploration.

According to Hagos Gebrehewit, the head of the PFDJ's economic section, profits from these investments that were not re-invested would go into a trust fund to capitalize small businesses for ex-fighters and underwrite charitable projects. PFDJ companies would also take on projects that private contractors declined, such as the construction of hospitals and schools in remote areas, in order to promote geographically balanced development. With capital investment — Eritrean and otherwise — lagging far behind what had been hoped, the PFDJ was, in effect, the engine of the country's emerging private sector. "I don't know how to talk about a private sector in this country now," said Hagos.

> We had thought the economy was held back by nationalization and if we just let [enterprises] go, they would grow, but the economy was literally crushed. All we had was traders used to taking enormous war-time profits with no thought of investment. Now we have to create a new climate, just as we do with the political culture, to guide the country toward a dynamic economy, to create new ventures, new jobs. This is a stage where we're creating everything.[20]

"We're still confronted with the basic issues with which we started, reconstructing the country, drawing in new investment, reviving the economy" said Yemane two years further on, just as the renewed confrontation with Ethiopia began to occupy center stage. "Our main focus has been on creating the ground for reviving productivity on all levels. At a higher level, the front seeks to articulate a vision for the country."[21]

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* * *

Throughout most of the 1990s, regional development was seen as key to Eritrea's future. Its leaders invested heavily in a core alliance with Ethiopia that they expanded to include Uganda and Rwanda. They helped revive a dormant regional grouping, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (originally constituted to deal with drought-related issues), to plan infrastructure projects that would promote regional commerce and trade. IGAD also set up committees to help resolve conflicts within and between member states. Much of this was carried out on a party-to-party basis and then formalized at the state level.

"There is a new trend to transform postcolonial Africa," said Zemhret when I saw him in March 1998.

> We are witnessing a new period, the beginning of a new stage. It is premature to call it an alliance, but call it a trend. In it you see Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Congo, the Sudan opposition, and Uganda. South Africa is part of this but somewhat cut off from us. Zimbabwe and Angola are on the edge, also Mozambique, but they are under beleaguered leaders from the 1970s and 1980s, and they need change. South Africa's internal situation is unresolved — there is still the question of the marginalized majority, there has not been a complete transformation of power relations, and there is a serious trend toward co-optation. But in all this, there is a regeneration of the old national liberation agenda — the agenda that was aborted in the 1960s when the new leaders failed to establish truly national states, or to create institutions to respond to the interests and the needs of their populations. Now we are returning to our roots to create confident African states with genuinely national cultures, regaining national pride. The basis for this is in self-reliance — breaking the vicious cycle of dependence that Africa has experienced over the past three decades.
>
> Colonialism was not subtle. It was crude, clear, not camouflaged. People could mobilize against an external enemy. But neocolonialism was more subtle and more exploitative. It eroded the confidence and the pride of African peoples, disempowering them, making them feel they were not capable of becoming a self-governing state. This had a terrible psychological effect on African people. One of the basic principles we have now is to create confidence and hope in these societies, and this cannot be imported from the outside, it must

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> arise from within these societies by transforming them through collective action. I agree with [the late Nigerian economist] Claude Ake that development was never tried in Africa. If you lack the political will and the cultural capacity to implement this yourself, it is not development. Development is essentially the transformation of people, of societies, not a measure of economic output or GDP. This is what needs to happen now. If we succeed, this trend will change the face of Africa. It will be the second African liberation.[22]

In terms of Eritrea's internal development, the need for continuity with the experience of the liberation war was usually the first thing I heard when I raised the issue — that and the importance of ideological and programmatic flexibility. "The experience of the last four years has shown us the importance of a party to lead the process of nation-building," said Zemhret when I saw him several months later.

> The role of the EPLF is still fundamental to that process. The bond between the front and the people has been strengthened through seminars, training programs and the enhanced participation of the people in the political process. The content of our political education now draws on the [PFDJ] charter and the policies of the front and the history of our liberation, but there is no text, as there was during the struggle.
>
> The two-stage approach to revolution was mechanistic — the pretension of making Marxism a science with fixed rules is foolish. It strait-jackets intellectual activity and also practical activity, and it inhibits the prospect of change, of new thinking. I don't see any difference between the democratic and the socialist stages — it is one process of change. In social reality, all the issues come together. They may have different importance at different times, but they are always there.
>
> The harshness of the Eritrean experience didn't allow us the strait-jacket of ideological purity. There was some theoretical dogmatism in the beginning, but it did not have the same hold on us as on others. This was our strength. We were not under the spell of any ideology. We were practical, and this aspect became dominant. We became more aware of our own experience without forgetting that of other countries. There was always among us a sense of creating history, not just living it. We could win, we could lose, nothing was fixed. Our strengths were in our leadership and how the leadership

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digested the experience we gained.[23]

Then came renewed war with Ethiopia — and the effective end of the trend Zemhret had touted.[24] Tensions had been quietly building for years over a mix of economic and political issues, and there had been a series of unpublicized border incidents that had both countries on edge when fighting broke out in May 1998 in the disputed village of Badme. After Ethiopian militia fired on an Eritrean patrol, killing several of them, the Eritreans responded by taking control of the area with a large mechanized force. The next day, Ethiopia formally declared war. A hasty U.S. and Rwandan mediation effort helped broker a truce in June, but foundered on defusing the confrontation. Eight months later, after a mobilization that brought a half million troops to the frontlines, the war resumed in earnest, marked by one of the largest (and least reported) armed confrontations ever seen in Africa. This unraveled all the progress the former allies had made toward regional economic and political integration.[25] A year after that, in May-June 2000, an even larger series of battles took place, with Ethiopia driving deep inside Eritrea and finally forcing terms for a ceasefire that were decidedly in its favor while leaving a trail of bitterness and destruction across a wide swathe of the new country.

The consequences of what Foreign Minister Haile Wold'ensae and many others in the leadership repeatedly termed a "senseless war" were considerable. At the outset of the crisis, the government called up all available personnel, bringing many development projects to a halt, stripping many new enterprises of skilled personnel and severely strapping the cash-poor government — which was precisely what many observers thought was Ethiopia's strategic intent, hoping to trigger a political crisis that would play to their advantage. No such crisis occurred. If anything, the war rallied the population to the defense of the nation as never before, and it put most political disagreements in abeyance (though not out of mind). But the economy was badly hurt, the more so when Ethiopian forces looted whole towns and wrecked schools, clinics, factories, and agricultural projects. The PFDJ's mobilizing work at the village level was also set back severely, as many of the best cadre were called to the trenches. Meanwhile, throughout the crisis, the political transition went on hold. The recently approved Constitution was not implemented, new laws and policies were held up, the PFDJ's next congress was postponed, and plans to hold national elections were temporarily shelved. At the same time, the conflict not only reconfigured the balance of power between the two warring states, it had a ripple effect throughout the region, destroying the alliance that supported

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Sudanese opposition groups and contributing to the dissolution of the loose grouping of states that helped bring Laurent Kabila to power in Congo (formerly Zaire). It also severely weakened IGAD as a force for regional development and peace.

Two years into the crisis, a number of people began to voice concerns that the country needed more focused, tighter political leadership — a party or parties, not a broad front. What this might look like was not at all clear, but many drew for inspiration on the experience of the defunct People's Party, which former members described as a highly participatory forum in its time and place, despite its secrecy. "The People's Party was a very democratic and egalitarian party, a platform where EPLF cadres could openly discuss any issue — military, political, social — any issue that surfaced in that period," Estifanos 'Bruno' Afeworki, a veteran of the party from the early 1970s, told me one evening a decade after the party was closed down.

> We drew up short- and long-term programs — the NDP for the EPLF, socialist transformation for the EPRP. The party tried to transform the EPLF society itself, while the front was liberating Eritrea and its people, step by step. That was the key that enabled the EPLF to succeed. The party was very strict about the role of the army and its relations with the population, for example. You were demoted immediately if you did anything wrong to the people.
>
> The party also had its own structures — a cadre school, a politburo, a central committee, even regional administrations — just they were smaller than those of EPLF. We had members in Asmara — in the factories and among the intellectuals — among the peasants in the villages outside Asmara, in the refugee camps in Sudan, in Europe and the USA. No one had a special office for the party, everyone was immersed in the EPLF structure, not like today when we have professional politicians — people who are only doing politics. In fact, a politburo member might also be a brigade leader.
>
> There was no major shift in our orientation. We were always a socialist-oriented movement, but slowly we started to be more nationalistic, more concerned about our national interests. And we lost a large number of our leading cadres during the war. This had a big effect. Finally, it matured into a nationalist party, and we dissolved it because there was no longer a need for it. A debate came up after the war over the

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> need for the continuity of the front and its work — should it be the old leadership, or should there be new elements? We decided new ones were needed, so we chose a leadership from the generation that was mobilized in the '70s, not the '60s.
>
> The PFDJ is not a party in the way we were then. It is more amorphous, more diffuse. But it is a transitional organization, a nationalist umbrella, out of which parties could develop when the time is ripe. The basic belief of the People's Party was that that there should be a multiparty system in Eritrea. I hope this is still alive.[26]

Part of the problem with the PFDJ was that its sheer size and uneven political character worked against its potential to lead, while fostering informal and less-than-transparent decision-making at the top. Its mandate called for it to bring large numbers of formerly excluded people into the political process and to develop grassroots leaders from within this pool, as it nurtured a non-sectarian national political culture. It had done this effectively. But it could not be both a transitional mechanism for these objectives and also a disciplined formation of activists to lead the country in times of crisis.

In fact, the crisis with Ethiopia was turning the front into a creature of the state — much like what happened in Nicaragua during the *contra* war — as many of its leading members, together with the mass organizations over which it had commanding influence, were assigned tasks set by the government. Throughout the confrontation, key decisions on strategy and policy were made by a small core of EPLF veterans, some based mainly in the front, others mainly in the state, who operated for the most part on an *ad hoc* basis, not as accountable strata of specific party or state political structures (the PFDJ executive committee or the cabinet, for example). This undermined the front's authority as an independent institution, even as it highlighted its weakness as a distinct leadership organ. Perhaps, said some, it was time to move on to the next stage. Many of those who voiced these concerns preferred not to be quoted, so I took the question to several political leaders and activists with whom I had been discussing such issues already.

I began with Zemhret, who told me:

> In my opinion, there is still a need for a broad-based movement, but we also need a democratic party that can be the center of gravity for the political development of the country. The People's Front is too amorphous for effective political work.

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> Politics is specialized work, and you need political activists to do it. You can't expect the whole society to act politically. We need to institutionalize political life and to give people options for the level of participation they want — to create a hierarchy of participation, with power linked to one's level of commitment.[27]

"In spite of its good intentions and the major successes it has scored especially in the development of the infrastructure, the PFDJ has been unable to outgrow the political and economic strategies it inherited from the EPLF," said author and historian Alemseged Tesfai.

> Its Charter is broad and all encompassing enough to lay the necessary path to, among other things, move towards the building of democracy in its diversified and voluntarily participatory sense. But, this is not what the PFDJ has been concentrating on most.
>
> Instead, the Front has been taking rather for granted the notion that the vast and coherent base of the EPLF has remained intact and that it is, as the latter's heir, the unquestioned beneficiary to the EPLF's loyal following and high moral authority. There was a lot of truth in this at the initial stages. With the advancement of time though, the old EPLF base has been expanding to include people with entirely different objectives and plans to get there. Even many old and seasoned EPLF fighters may have already chosen the latter path. Besides, a very large section of the population that is not part of the PFDJ membership must be heard and taken very seriously. Thus the idea of 'going back to the base' seems out of touch with the realities of our time.[28]

"Either the Front should assume the responsibility of a party, taking on the political agitation work a party should be doing, or it should create a new one," said youth union leader Moheidin Shengeb.

> The transition is finished. Now we have to think about the long term. What we need is a smaller group that can be much more active in the political and cultural life of the people, doing the work that was done by the party before. At NUEYS, it is the core group that gives direction to the organization. Our membership is very big — 120,000 — and you can't drive this many people in the same direction. You have to have a smaller group that is more conscious of the direction we have to take, because if you try to work with that big a group, you

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> will just be stretched, you will not be working on the ground, and there will be no clear vision. This is the problem with the People's Front. The membership is now more than a half million, and it is very difficult to address a half million people at the same level.[29]

Women's union leader Leul Gebreab was less anxious to take such steps right away, viewing the ethnically diverse society as still too fragile to risk fragmentation through the proliferation of competing parties and the EPLF's political heritage so firmly embedded as not to be at risk if the movement waited longer to move in this direction:

> We have been politicized as a people for years, and this generation cannot take this out of their minds, whether or not there is a party. Nothing can erase it. The most important thing for us now is to have Eritrean unity. If we are to create such parties now, it could create disunity. For the coming two-to-three years we need to continue in the same direction. We need peace and development. The war has created very strong unity among the people, more than in the *derg* time, and we don't want to weaken this, to create unnecessary divisions.[30]

This defined the essential tension within the liberation movement as it approached the end of the postcolonial political transition and as the armed confrontation with Ethiopia appeared to be winding down after a final devastating round of fighting. The question was: when would it be the right time for the EPLF/PFDJ to loosen its grip on the society and allow competing visions of its future to take institutional form without opening the door to the sort of centrifugal forces that have wrecked so many nation-building projects in Africa? Two views were emerging.

Ibrahim Totil, a veteran of the liberation movement's most traumatic and divisive experiences, was one of many who expressed the concerns behind the Front's official policy. In the 1970s, Totil headed the ELF's Political Department and was a key figure in a clandestine party within that Front, the Eritrean Labor Party. After the civil war in the early 1980s, he led a breakaway ELF faction into merger talks with the EPLF. When I spoke with him at the close of the 1990s, he was the governor of the Northern Red Sea *zoba*, one of the country's largest and least developed regions and the occasional target for raids by Sudan-based Islamist guerrillas:

> Yes, we are centralized, but we are providing our people with

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> education, health care, the capacity for economic development — these are preconditions for democracy. At this time our main task is to unify our people. As we do this, we have to improve democracy within our movement. This is the first step, before we get into institutional pluralism. We need to create the institutions of a stable state, unify our people, then open up.[31]

EPLF co-founder Haile Wold'ensai expressed a different view when I saw him in Asmara shortly before the last round of war with Ethiopia:

> The PFDJ was set up to ensure a healthy transition, and it has its merits. There are many petty things that could divide the society. Unnecessary polarization could hamper the process of reconstruction and the development of a national political culture. But there must be the seeds of difference in this broad-based movement. It will be constructive as long as it allows the free discussion of different political opinions, as long as it creates a political culture of tolerance. Otherwise, if there is a suffocation of this process, there will be a reaction outside it and the appearance of destructive options. The transition was to be a phase for us to lay the institutional basis for democracy and to have the elements in place for a healthy institutional pluralism in the future. I am not sure this is happening.
>
> [The war with Ethiopia] should not be a pretext to hide our weaknesses. This should give us a shock — to force us to look in the mirror and assess where we are.

The veteran guerrilla fighter said that the PFDJ had served a useful purpose, but perhaps it was time for it to yield to a new party or parties that could incorporate the EPLF's legacy without stifling new ideas — parties where a highly conscious, collective leadership could develop and grow on an open, transparent basis. "There is always the need for a core group not to lose its bearings and to be exemplary," he added.[32]

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Conclusion

TOWARD NEW STRATEGIES

The left enters the twenty-first century with the odds stacked against it. The dominance of global capital and the hegemony of neoliberal orthodoxy are unparalleled. Many long-standing left parties and movements are in tatters, more fragmented and disoriented than at any time in the past century. And within this camp, if one may still call it that, most Third World revolutionary movements remain isolated not only from their counterparts in the industrial countries, but from one another. What they do have as resources, however, is their own populations, and it is to them that they can turn to balance the daunting forces arrayed against them. In doing so, they stand not only to strengthen their immediate position, but to deepen the revolutionary character of their struggle and its goals, as I witnessed throughout this project.

The experiences I have recounted demonstrate again and again that where effective strategies to reach political objectives are emerging on the left, it is due in significant part to the dynamism that organized social forces bring to them — certainly to the incorporation of social issues into otherwise narrowly-focused political organizations — and to the quality, depth and breadth of popular participation this generates for a political movement. This is particularly so with women and workers, who are re-invigorating parties that propose to lead them, even as they challenge these parties to more open, accountable and interactive forms of leadership. On the other hand, where political parties are not responsive to these forces — to their energy and their highly participatory forms of organization and leadership, as well as to their issues — there is stagnation and loss.

But the romance of social movements as substitutes for failed parties is misplaced (and that of the new NGOs is even more so). Social

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movements or semi-professional organizations proposing to stand in for them chase their own shadows in a circle of exhilarating short-term successes and devastating long-term failures without a coherent political expression — a party — to contest for power on their behalf (and at times alongside them) in the political sphere. Social movements may — and often do — promote change. They may be instrumental in mobilizing people to struggle for it. They may be extremely innovative in testing different forms of it. But they are highly unlikely, alone, to achieve it on a lasting structural basis without parties to give them strategic coherence, analytic depth, effective leadership and the necessary discipline when such struggles come up against entrenched power relations.

The left's most fundamental challenge, if it is to be more than the accidental — and often fleeting — recipient of public disgust with the alternatives, is to integrate compelling social and political agendas within a democratic framework that nurtures creative, sustainable engagement throughout a society. And to demonstrate that the interaction among the organizational expressions of such agendas is organic — that it reflects new thinking about the identity, structure and aims of a movement as well as how decisions are made and priorities set, and is not simply a cosmetic adjustment to pressure from within (or without) its ranks. Central to this is the affirmation in practice, as well as theory, that democracy and social justice are not separable concepts with neat boundaries, though the struggles to achieve them may proceed at different rates, depending on particular obstacles and opportunities.

Democracy without justice is ritual without substance. Justice without democracy is charity, not change.

* * *

I started with women's movements because they are among the most dynamic social movements I encountered in my research and the most undervalued by the left historically. Though their experience in these four countries is dramatically different, there are common threads. This is true not only of the problems they confront, but of the resistance they meet in trying to deal with them and of the sorts of obstacles and constraints they manifest within their own organizations. For example, those with their genesis in political parties or liberation movements — the National Union of Eritrean Women, the ANC Women's League, AMNLAE in Nicaragua and each of the faction-based women's committees in Palestine — tend to cling to their hege-

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monic roles and to resist the proliferation of other women's organizations, treating them as rivals even when they arise within their own political circles. At the same time, the intensity of the drive for autonomy of these groups in relation to their parent bodies is directly related to the extent to which the parties themselves prioritize action on gender issues and to the space they leave for these and other groups to set their own agendas, elect their own leaders and run their own programs.

In Eritrea and South Africa, women made major gains inside their liberation movements, which retain strong positions on gender relations. Since the transition from resistance to governance, both states have implemented far-reaching reforms, though grassroots struggles have been largely left to women's organizations that are not disposed toward public advocacy outside party frameworks. There are tensions over this but no ruptures, and women in each country remain active in efforts to develop, to transform and, when necessary, to defend their respective societies. By way of contrast, women in Nicaragua and Palestine have either lost ground within their political movements or not gained much in the first place. Many have abandoned political parties in favor of projects with practical goals that make a real and immediate difference in the lives of women. Others have remained in place but have become functionally inactive. In each instance, this has stripped the political organizations of some of their best cadres at a time when they desperately need all the grassroots mobilizing capacity they can get.

The Eritrean experience is instructive in this regard. The Eritrean women's union functions as a quiet but effective lobby with government and the PFDJ on specific issues and policies. Its education and training programs enable thousands of women to be economically and politically active within their communities, and they strengthen women's position within families, where gender oppression is anchored. While over-centralized, over-extended and still to some extent under the thumb of the party, it also provides a powerful base for the difficult confrontations women are waging at the local level with "traditional" power. But the union's lack of internal democracy, its hostility to rival organizations and its timidity toward the state and the party have dissuaded many women with valuable (and scarce) skills and experience from participating in it. Whether they can be won back to the organization — or freed up to start their own — remains to be seen, but the union's new leaders have at least indicated support for moves in this direction and for a more activist approach

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to gender issues, despite the pressures on the revolution from the country's hostile neighbors. Meanwhile, the youth union has nurtured a new generation of activists with strong commitments to gender equity, and the right of women to participate fully in the country's economic and political life has become a centerpiece of the country's post-independence culture.

In South Africa, the impetus for gender equality comes not from a mass movement, but from women and their male allies inside the government and in the two interlocking political parties — the ANC and the SACP — that control the state. The ANC Women's League, which discourages other forms of women's self-organization, functions as a low-key lobby within the ANC and as a service organization of uneven effectiveness, but its impact is waning. Action on law and policy related to gender usually originates among women in the SACP or the ANC women's caucus and bypasses the League. Meanwhile, there are signs of trouble ahead in such things as cutbacks in social spending whose main impact is on rural women and in insensitive remarks by government leaders about rape and violence.

For its part, the SACP has made the struggle to transform gender relations a strategic priority and is educating its cadres, men as well as women, to take this up in their daily practice. To what extent individual party members actually do so is difficult to judge at this point, but this approach will eventually create a large core of gender activists whose impact will ripple through the liberation movement and the society. A key test will lie with the movement's effectiveness in challenging the power of the chiefs and tackling the oppressive "traditions" that continue to hold many women in virtual bondage at the community level.

While nothing in either Eritrea or South Africa suggests significant wavering on gender issues, the weakened state of independent women's organizations limits the potential to mobilize distinct constituencies around specific issues and needs. There are also no public arenas where gender strategies and programmatic priorities can be contested by organized women among themselves, apart from academic forums on these issues (of which there are many in South Africa, none in Eritrea), and there is no vehicle to push the state or the party(s) from the outside. Moreover, in the case of South Africa, there is only limited capacity to implement the sweeping policy decisions in the society-at-large, once they are taken by the state. Ultimately, there is no security for women in this.

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There is no institutional guarantee that a sudden political or economic crisis will not result in the ongoing and far-from-complete struggle for gender equity being put on hold, if not actually set back, in the name of competing national priorities. Only when changes in policy are reflected in a new balance of power throughout a society, with women holding half or close to half of the leadership positions in all a country's major institutions and a similar position in the economy, can this be truly secure. Meanwhile, the capacity for pressure from below is necessary, whether exercised or not.

In Palestine and Nicaragua, where the left is out of power, the parties lag far behind nonparty activists on gender issues. It is certainly no coincidence that autonomous women's institutions there are more developed and more independent of political parties than in the other two countries. But where Palestinian women are building alliances with each other and with the NGO sector with a view to intervening in the political arena, many Nicaraguan women's organizations are focused on local problems and projects and are intentionally not engaged in national politics. This reflects the different trajectories of the two movements, as well as the differing social and political contexts, but the weaknesses of the left parties in each case provide women's organizations with problems and challenges with which the two African movements do not have to deal.

Of the four, Palestinian women are in the least favorable position to effect change in gender relations in their society. The popular base of the party-driven committees has been severely eroded since the 1980s *intifada*. Their respective political parties are as badly divided against each other as ever, making it difficult for party-related women's organizations, however autonomous, to collaborate. At the same time, these parties, in practice at least, demonstrate something between ambivalence and indifference over gender issues, while the quasi-state, under Arafat, shows itself to be entirely unsympathetic to women's issues and demands. A vigorous discourse on gender is kept alive through the network of independent feminist research and training centers and other nonparty institutions, but the women's movement lacks internal cohesion and strength at the grassroots. As a result, it lacks power.

Nicaraguan women, though sharing some characteristics with Palestinian women, are in a nearly polar opposite position to their sisters in Eritrea and South Africa. Though several women's organizations and networks have influenced national policy on specific

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issues, there are dozens of institutions servicing women from nearly every corner of the society that lack organizational clout in the political arena. This limits their capacity for sustained advocacy, especially that which requires alliance-building with other sectors. But many former Sandinista women, now leaders of the autonomous women's movement, have a visceral distrust of hierarchy and resist any form of what they take to be "centralization." The tendency of Sandinista militants to hegemonize coalitions with which they become involved is one factor that encourages this — many are skilled at taking charge of debates and then calling on organizational resources to gain position within newly formed coordinating bodies — but these apprehensions arise just as often in response to efforts to coordinate nonparty women's organizations. Such fears are stoked by the tendency of international funders to single out for support promising organizations and potential leaders. This practice enhances inequality within the movement and sows further mistrust of structure, even as it fosters institutional and individual rivalries. For their part, Sandinista women — much like their party counterparts in Eritrea — resent the easy access that the autonomous women's organizations have to foreign funding from donors who obviously prefer to support nongovernmental and nonparty institutions out of their own ideological predilections.

What all four countries have in common, though their movements differ on tactics and forms of organization, are dynamic, if diverse, drives to mobilize women as forces for economic, social and — by extension if not by explicit design — political change in their societies. With these mobilizations come new demands on the parties — not only for programmatic change, but for organizational reform. Not only for more women in positions of leadership, but for a different way of training and selecting leaders and for making decisions. In this respect, these women's movements are emerging as forces for increased democracy within the left as well as in the society at large, even when, as in Nicaragua, many feminists choose to forego formal membership in the parties. Whether these organized women are outside, inside or working alongside political parties, they are having a growing impact on the political arena itself — propelling the discourse and the party agendas in a feminist direction.

Predictably, this emergent influence meets resistance. The most common refrain from those within left parties who oppose gender transformation used to be: "We can't do it now because this would weaken the national movement." This can still be heard in the "rejec-

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tionist" wing of the Palestinian left, which entered an alliance with the Islamist group Hamas and other parties of widely varying political and social orientation to oppose the Israeli-PLO accords, but it is becoming less frequent. What one hears instead is that the particular culture in question — *machismo*, Islam, tribal tradition, whatever — is uniquely resistant to changes in gender relations and, for that reason, the political movement has to go slow on women's issues. There is some truth to this, insofar as it testifies to how deeply entrenched male domination is in the fabric of every society and how much it shapes the roles, routines, relationships and identities of women and men in daily life, but it is hardly unique to any one culture, as women are finding out quickly through increased international networking.

It is precisely these ubiquitous cultural hurdles that help make independent political organizing both vital and viable for women across the Third World. As even the Eritreans and South Africans are seeing, a government or a party that is still overwhelmingly male at the top levels cannot exercise sustained leadership on gender transformation without organized women interpreting the reality in which they live, articulating strategies for change, and, at key junctures, pushing for action. Without strong organizations of women on the front lines, too, at the community and neighborhood level and extending into the household, all the principled positions and official policies in the world, however well-conceived, will not be enough to guarantee effective, lasting follow-through.

* * *

The organization of the working class is central to any left project — certainly any that purports to draw its inspiration from the legacy of Marxism, as all the political movements under study here do, whether or not they acknowledge it. But can such a mobilization contribute in a decisive way to the liberation — let alone the transformation — of a society if it renders workers passive or, worse, turns them against each other? The answer to this is obvious on its face, yet one or the other inclination has been the proclivity of most socialist-oriented movements (and states) in the last century, and to some degree it characterizes the situations in all the countries under study here.

Typically, left parties or liberation fronts rally workers to participate in national struggles, only to swiftly demobilize them afterward, as a class, much as they do with women — sending them back to their workplaces and homes with admonitions to produce (or reproduce) for the revolution. During the liberation phase, workers are asked to

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channel their militancy into actions designed to weaken their opponents through the leverage they have over the economy, or they are drawn into other forms of struggle where their social discipline and leadership skills are prized assets. Afterward, they are asked by their political leaders to act as a stabilizing force in the society, while generating the surplus upon which the development of the revolutionary state depends. This exhortation only intensifies when the revolution comes under counterattack — as it inevitably does — and workers are required, again, to subordinate their particular needs and demands to the defense of the revolution.

One thing that differentiates workers from women or other dominated social groups is that socialist-oriented political parties and states explicitly rule in their name, even as they tend to strip them of the right to define and advocate their own interests. I found ample evidence of this tendency while researching this project — in Eritrea where workers are hard to get to meetings after their disempowering experience under Ethiopia's self-described "socialist" military regime and where the initiative for rebuilding the unions still comes mainly from party cadre; in Nicaragua where the unions appear rudderless now that the FSLN is out of power and where the leaders (particularly in the industrial unions) are badly out of touch with their members; in Palestine where the unions play no institutional role in the national struggle and command precious little respect in the community at large; and even, though to a far lesser extent, in South Africa where the ANC asks COSATU to sacrifice the needs of its members in a capitalist restructuring that shows few indications of benefiting workers themselves.

In these four countries, South African workers are the most organized and the most autonomous, both within the workplace and in the political arena. And there is a direct correlation between their strength and degree of autonomy and the depth and breadth of the political movement. This is true not only in terms of numbers, which are a function of the character of the economy, but in terms of the movement's internal cohesion and in the unique relationship that COSATU has carved out with the ANC and the Communist Party. At the other end of the spectrum is Palestine, which has an almost nonexistent workers' movement and a correspondingly impotent left. If Eritrea appears to be an exception to this schematic representation — as a strong, highly-unified political movement with institutionally weak participation of workers-as-workers — this is in part because it has the least proletarianized population, and because other con-

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siderations are, for the time being, more central. Yet, Eritrea, too, will face challenges in terms of how free its workers will be in coming years to act on behalf of their self-defined interests, once the economy begins to grow and the class composition of the society begins to change, and in terms of what role they will play in shaping the peacetime political movement.

COSATU's main source of strength is its shop stewards. It is an effective political organization in large part because its leadership remains close to its members and because the unions effectively represent workers to management on basic issues of compensation, working conditions, job security and so on. It is an effective trade union whose political leaders are shaped by their experience as unionists. All else flows from this — and will ebb quickly if this effectiveness diminishes, as some critics warn is already happening. But the practice of participatory democracy that developed within the trade unions during the anti-apartheid struggle has worked its way upward into the political movement, transforming it as it opens it up to a level of greater transparency and accountability. And the continuing flow of leaders into the ANC and the Communist Party from COSATU, as much as it taxes the unions, is having a powerful impact not only on the latter's organizational outlook but also on its politics, helping to make the SACP a workers' party in more than name.

In Eritrea, the working class is at best embryonic as a social actor on the political stage. The trade unions are off to a positive start, but that is almost all one can say. They are small, they are dominated by the party, as are all the new institutions arising there, and they confront an economy so weak and undeveloped that it will be all the unions can do to maintain jobs for their members for the foreseeable future, the more so in the aftermath of the latest war with Ethiopia. However, this is the moment when patterns of organization, identity and outlook are set — where programs of internal education are designed, leadership structures set up and roles defined (as, for example, for shop stewards) and relations developed with other social movements, the party and the state. A key question for the NCEW is whether the unions will define themselves in strictly economic terms, or whether they will emerge as a self-conscious political force. Circumstances — and many of the outside institutions now offering aid — incline them toward the former role, though union leaders say they favor the latter, in the long term. Only time and the members themselves will decide which it is to be, but this will go a long way toward determining the influence of the working class in Eritrea's

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post-liberation development.

The Nicaraguan experience is certainly shaped by its particularly troubled circumstances — the revolution was in direct confrontation with the U.S. from the outset — but it offers interesting insights into the challenge facing political movements that move in and out of power, one that other left movements are likely to face in the future. This is particularly true with regard to the question of what role the unions and other social movements can play in renewing the political party in times of crisis and in providing a bridge between the party and its popular base. The Sandinistas so far have a disappointing record. The FSLN, more than any of the other movements treated here, reflects the left heritage of centralized mass organizations, including those of workers, under tight party/state control. The trade unions there are still recovering from this legacy, even as they confront gender and other issues of substance and structure from within. The agricultural workers are the more responsive to these new challenges and the more creative in repositioning themselves, in terms both of establishing their autonomy from the party and extending their reach beyond the traditional union constituency of employed workers, and to the degree they have reorganized themselves as a more open, democratic social movement.

In Palestine the left parties display a consistent lack of good faith behind their voluminous rhetoric on behalf of the working class (though the former Communist Party no longer even claims to represent it). Their factionalism renders this dysfunctional, their practice makes it a fiction. The post-Oslo situation in the Occupied Territories offered a fresh chance to grapple with this — and virtually the last opportunity for the main left parties to reinvigorate themselves. They did not take it. With the shift inside Israel away from relying on Palestinian labor, one of the main obstacles to effective trade union organizing — the fact that much of the labor force works outside the areas where the unions can operate — is gone. But so too is the limited leverage Palestinian workers might have had over Israel. Meanwhile, they face new problems, as Palestinian administrators are in some respects more antagonistic to genuine trade union activity than were the Israelis. The main task facing the left now in this arena is to make common cause in supporting the democratization of the unions that already exist, which is to say allowing the workers to run their own organizations as workers first and party members second. Given their history, this is a very long shot. The more likely prospect, if there is to be success at all on this front, is for the workers them-

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selves — supported by sympathetic individuals and nonparty organizations (like the DWRC) — to build or rebuild a viable trade union movement from the ground up in a fresh start.

It is in such circumstances that workers gain a direct grasp of democracy as an organizational form, as well as a fighting tool, and where the political movement comes to appreciate democracy as an essential aspect of its strategic orientation. When the interests and the experiences of workers mesh with the national struggle, the organized working class becomes a powerful force for social change. Without this, workers are just so many bodies on the front lines, foot soldiers in someone else's war — good ones, perhaps, but not more than this. How a left party approaches the organization of the working class and how and in what ways that class has an impact on the political movement to which it owes allegiance are key indicators of that movement's vitality and potential for success. If we are honest with ourselves, the answers are too often discouraging. If we are serious about popular democracy and social justice, this has to change.

Classical left assumptions on the role of workers need substantial rethinking. There has long been an insistence among socialist-oriented movements — rooted in the ideological liturgy of the day — that the revolutionary state is, by definition, a workers' state. As such, the state acts automatically — by virtue of its "nature" (its political outlook, not its composition) — in the interests of the working class, even though, in practice, it neither reflects nor represents workers directly. But we are beginning to understand that the state is a creature of many classes, which contend with each other so long as those classes still exist within the society at large. In this respect, as the South Africans insist, the state is not only an *object* of class struggle but an *arena* of class struggle. Under these circumstances, the capacity of the working class to act as the agent of its own interests and not just the beneficiary of a party acting on its behalf is crucial.

Leftists need to re-examine questions relating to workers in much the same terms they bring to bear on women: to what extent are they organized around their particular sectoral issues? What kind and degree of autonomy do they have in determining their needs and interests and in developing strategies to pursue them? What forms of organization are particular to their identity and experience? And how can their unique strengths be drawn upon to build (and transform) political movements into more representative, effective instruments of social and political change? And this methodology has to be extended to other social sectors and groups, particularly where the working

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class is relatively undeveloped, as in Palestine or in Eritrea.

The point is to analyze the social contradictions as they exist, to assess the leverage particular groups have within a given society, and then to act decisively to strengthen them in their capacity to deal with both their immediate practical and their long-range structural needs without setting up an artificial tension between the two. This leads directly to a re-evaluation of the role of reforms not only in building a revolutionary movement but in advancing the revolution itself. If this involves women, support their efforts to better their living conditions as well as to end gender-based oppression, while insisting on their right to participate fully and equally in the national political movement. If it is workers, support their efforts to organize themselves in the workplace, while also enhancing their role in the political sphere. If it involves ethnic or racially oppressed groups, support their efforts to combat this in direct, practical ways, while also mobilizing them for the transformation of the society as a whole. So too with youth, small businesspeople, farmers, craftspeople and others.

The left has long been plagued by a tendency to polarize strategic options, pitting the political against the social, class against ethnicity and gender, the national against the sectoral and so on, and endlessly debating which has the main priority. Designating something the "fundamental" or "primary" contradiction usually meant in practice that everything else went in the political closet. "Secondary" was another way of saying "inconsequential" — not to be dealt with now (if ever). As a consequence, social and sectoral interests other than class were subordinated and postponed. (In a national liberation framework, the "national" squeezed everything else out.) But this is narrow-minded nonsense. Societies are far more complex than this, and efforts to change them need to take this into account. Political formations that propose to lead mass movements have to recognize this, and to do so in ways that energize *all* the forces available to them.

The relationship between trade unions and political movements, like that of women's organizations and parties and that of other sectoral groups, has to be a dynamic, interactive one in which priorities change with needs, opportunities and circumstances. At one time, a party may need to support the priorities of a social movement. At another, the social movement may have to yield to the party or to the needs of another sectoral movement. Only if these options are available, and if all bodies (and their members) are involved in these strategic decisions, can the overall relationship remain dynamic and

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constructive.

Certainly this can be burdensome, but I am not suggesting a collectivist politics where everyone is involved endlessly in every decision. I have been there and hope never to endure it again. Yet democratic forms of decision-making are possible in which the views and experiences of others are incorporated in a transparent process whose outcomes remain open to assessment and alteration as experience demands. Leaders can be held accountable for such decisions through an interactive process of evaluation and dialogue. I will not attempt to spell out formulas for this, as they will vary from one situation and one political culture to the next. Mechanisms are not the issue. My point is that the creative tensions that arise in such situations can profoundly augment the ingenuity, strength, and endurance of a movement, while their suppression can sap it of the same qualities.

* * *

There is a tendency for faltering political movements to explain their setbacks as a consequence of the peculiar ferocity or the unique strength of their opponents. Many Sandinistas blame the U.S. for their loss of power in 1990, just as many Palestinians attribute their dismal situation to the fact that they face such a formidable foe in Israel (and behind it, the U.S.). Certainly there is truth in their calculus, but such explanations do not suffice. The victors exploit the weaknesses and divisions of the vanquished. The losers bear the responsibility for the openings they provide.

The harsh reality is that none of the revolutionary movements we've looked at here — nor any others that I know of — had a free ride in winning their liberation or in developing their postwar societies. South African revolutionaries today face their class opponents within the same state apparatus they once battled, while the full might of international capital is arrayed against any serious effort to restructure the country's economy. (And they made mistakes, too, as in their dealings with migrant workers from Kwazulu/Natal who formed a social base for the Inkatha Freedom Party.) The Eritreans, after fighting successive U.S.- and Soviet-backed Ethiopian regimes to liberate the country, confronted a devastated economy, came under pressure from international capital to abandon commitments to self-reliance, then came under attack by Islamists in Sudan, and after that confronted renewed combat with neighboring Ethiopia, all the while lacking reliable allies.

The debate is an idle one.

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Success for any revolutionary movement is necessarily a function of environment and agency. To start with, it requires making a correct assessment of the balance of forces, however awful they may be, and then finding ways to alter them in one's favor. Part of this involves grasping the character and strength of the enemy and anticipating how it will act, what resources it will have at its disposal, how its actions will affect others, what points of leverage can be developed against it and so on. And part involves correctly analyzing one's own strengths and weaknesses and then mobilizing the people across the broadest possible basis, both to unleash their latent strength and to prevent the other side from making use of divisions to undermine the struggle.

Organizing workers can be a key part of this, more so in societies like those of South Africa or Nicaragua where the working class is large enough and positioned so as to have a major impact on the economy, less so in Eritrea or Palestine where this class is smaller and has far less leverage. Different social forces may be more appropriate or better placed to play such roles in other circumstances. In each case, though, it is up to the national movement to grasp this and to mobilize whoever they may be on the basis of both their short-term practical interests and their long-term strategic ones. The challenge, then, is to engage as much of the society as possible in the process of shaping its own destiny — not only its political one, but also its social, economic and cultural future, which is where "democracy" takes on a wider meaning — and to sustain it once political objectives are met.

A problem too little understood by the left is why its victories are so often followed by the deflation and disempowerment of the popular movement. It seems to me that the left's narrow (and obsessive) focus on capturing state power has laid the groundwork for this by conceptualizing mass mobilization in purely tactical terms — rallying the troops, so to speak — rather than seeing it as a strategic revolutionary objective in its own right. If instead we understand popular mobilization as central to the revolutionary character of the political movement and essential for an ongoing struggle within a contested state, a contested society and perhaps even the liberation movement itself, the problem of how to go about it is not difficult to resolve. It mostly takes a willingness to experiment and to relax the reins enough to allow new initiatives percolate up from below.

The Eritreans tested strategies of mass organizing and social transformation extensively during their long independence war. In doing so, they gave the national liberation struggle democratic content. Though there were lapses in this mobilization in the first postwar

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years, that experience grounded their approach to reconstruction and development, as they sought to re-engage the people in a wide range of economic, cultural and political activities. As we have seen, the experience of the South Africans with forms of self-rule and self-defense in the townships and self-organization in the unions and elsewhere provided invaluable preparation for governance while it significantly strengthened the movement's bid for state power. There may be struggles within that movement today over how (and even whether) to build on that legacy, but it remains a touchstone for efforts by the left to carry forward the democratic struggle in the post-apartheid era. The Palestinian parties, by way of contrast, made very little out of their fleeting experience with self-administration or sectoral mobilization during the *intifada* — if anything most sought to diminish it in order to protect their turf — but neither did they develop and sustain effective mass organizations or new forms of self-rule in Lebanon or elsewhere. The Sandinistas did so in the heyday of their revolution, unleashing an explosion of creative grassroots activism, but they stifled such initiatives in the name of national unity during the *contra* war, and they were never able to relate constructively to them afterward, as many such organizations began to flourish outside the party.

What makes the situation in Nicaragua so disheartening is that the revolutionary movement there seemed to have mastered this art only to lose it once confronted with an external threat. Yet a closer look at the experience of the FSLN reveals that the seeds of this apparent turnaround were there from the beginning. This was never a truly democratic party, though it presided over the democratization of key sectors of Nicaraguan society and though it instituted important reforms that protect the space for political and social organizing even today. But the FSLN's failure to renew itself once out of power seems to have doomed it to indefinite second-place status in Nicaraguan politics. Its errors and omissions on women's issues cost it dearly, but they are indicative of a deeper malaise. It cannot be repeated enough: the loss of social activists (women, workers, farmers, youth, neighborhood volunteers and more) is not just a problem of raw numbers for the Sandinistas at elections but of their reach into the society the rest of the time — their capacity to glean and understand information on people's needs, their reservoir of creative thinking, their motivational foundation, their eyes and ears and perhaps their heart and soul as well. The front has not only lost members, it has lost organizers and thinkers and leaders, and it has forfeited the quite exten-

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sive network of links they developed and nourished throughout the country.

Such failures do not just raise questions about what it requires for a political movement to win control of the state. They speak to whether or not it retains its revolutionary character, whether the potential capture of power really offers enough to the people that they should expose themselves to the economic, political and perhaps even the military risks that could go with it. This, in the end, is the question many Nicaraguans are asking, and their answer has been evident in the FSLN's losing election campaigns. To turn this around, the party has to reestablish its connections to its base, develop a compelling social agenda, articulate an economic alternative to neoliberalism and carry through a genuine transition to internal democracy. It is a tall order, and it demands a major overhaul, almost certainly a turnover in leadership, along with a change in the way it does politics.

The next major test comes in the national elections scheduled for 2001. If the FSLN does not improve its position significantly, it will suffer another round of attrition and be marginalized further. This could leave space for another left party to emerge, or it could trigger an upheaval within the FSLN that opens the party to change from within. But for the FSLN to disappear altogether would be a tragedy for all the social movements to which it has given birth. Without the party acting as a buffer at the national level, a resurgent right could pick them off one by one, perceiving them as vestiges of the Sandinista movement, whether or not they see themselves in those terms. Such a prospect makes it all the more important for the many disaffected activists that litter the Nicaraguan political landscape to come together to contest the right's growing strength — and, if necessary, to displace those remnants of the Sandinista old guard that stand in the way of genuine renewal.

* * *

For its part, the Palestinian left is, if anything, in worse shape, as its defeat appears terminal, while its legacy leaves little on which to rebuild. Its biggest failing has been its inability to unify and lead the dispersed nation in its fight for self-determination. But how could it if the parties of the left were not even able to build a common front among themselves? This was a movement sharply divided along factional lines, but the parties themselves were torn between inside and outside leaderships once the struggle narrowed to that in the West Bank and Gaza, and their lack of internal democracy left no avenue

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for correcting mistakes. The left's political history is rife with errors and misjudgments based on fanciful analyses and wishful thinking. It was rarely in touch with its own reality, or that of its enemy, and it did precious little to alter its methodology or its strategy in the face of its colossal failures. How else to characterize it except as a failed movement?

With few exceptions, the left parties consistently made an artificial separation between the political and the social spheres of action that relieved them of having to articulate their vision of a future Palestinian society, even when they had the opportunity in Lebanon in the 1970s and early 1980s or after the Oslo accords placed this question on the table, however circumscribed, in the West Bank and Gaza in the 1990s. In doing so, they foreswore a key arena in which they might have struggled out their differences and brought the people together to wage an effective national struggle for tangible goals, one that might have been more easily sustained than the battle for the undefined (and for the most part unrealizable) liberation they proposed.

The Palestinian left parties also shared a flabbiness in their political culture derived from their reliance on externally-derived resources. As one consequence, they consistently looked elsewhere to improve their position — to Arab donors, to superpower allies, to European intermediaries, even to international aid agencies, but rarely to their own people. To do so would demand that they demonstrate what they had to offer the people — to convince them in deed as well as word that following them would lead to a better life. This they did not even seriously attempt, except to distribute largess through their competing NGOs, mimicking Arafat and his patronage machine but never having the resources to upstage it.

Of course, there were differences among them. On balance, it is hard to even characterize the Popular Front as genuinely left. Militant, yes, revolutionary, no. They are not the same. In fact, the former often masks the absence of the latter, as it has here. For their part, the Democratic Front and the Communist Party offered the closest things to a left presence in the movement, with their class and political analyses of Palestinian society and their commitments to grassroots mobilization and collective action. This was also true of their ability to grasp the reality in which they operated, in all its debilitating complexity, and to come up with potentially viable strategies for liberation. Yet their inability (or unwillingness) to join forces despite the considerable overlap in their outlooks rendered these strategies utterly unproductive. Had they managed to build a united democratic

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front, not a fleeting tactical alliance, and to have brought other forces into their orbit, including the Popular Front, the left wing of Fatah and the many nonparty leftists, while challenging Arafat and his cronies on their social, economic and political positions, they might have changed the direction of the movement and altered the outcome of the struggle.

If the Palestinian left is to revive itself, it will have to adopt some version of this strategy. A starting point in the West Bank and Gaza would be the construction of a coalition that builds a steadily expanding popular base through its work on social and political issues that directly touch people's lives. This would almost certainly have to be both a rights-based movement and a force for social and economic development. Such a loosely defined front could provide an environment for a new political movement to emerge out of both the remnants of the old parties and the memberships of the various fragmented social movements and organizations that are active today in refugee camps and communities across the region.

This movement would have to establish its credentials and build its following through demonstrations of its practice. Among its most pressing tasks would be the development of a more self-reliant political culture — weaning key individuals, if not whole organizations, away from the current high levels of dependence on international donors and helping Palestinians to take charge of their own lives to whatever extent they could under the circumstances. But similar initiatives are needed among Palestinians inside Israel, in Lebanon and elsewhere if this is to be a truly national movement and not simply another geographical or political fraction.

An emerging progressive leadership will have to find new ways to affirm Palestinian national identity across the region and to build popular confidence that it can defend and advance it. Short-term issues it addresses could include Palestinians' treatment by Israel, the corruption and repression visited on them by the Palestinian Authority, and the deplorable conditions of Palestinian life in neighboring Arab states, while raising demands for genuine Palestinian sovereignty on the global stage. Such a renewed movement will have to win support for its vision within key sectors of Israeli society (perhaps even allying with them) and in the court of world opinion much more effectively than the PLO or any of its left fractions has managed until now. Its central challenge is to unite its dispersed population in a common cause for a democratic Palestine, not just an independent one. It will, in short, have to reconstruct itself as a national revolutionary move-

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ment that is both genuinely and effectively national and at the same time truly revolutionary.

The great strength of the Eritreans and the South Africans throughout their anti-colonial struggles and into their postwar transitions has been their grasp of this challenge and their ability to effectively meet it. They are first and foremost effective nationalists, uniting their populations across ethnic and religious lines around the shared objectives of national liberation and democratic development. That their nationalism has social content now — and had it throughout protracted liberation struggles — is not incidental to their success. On the contrary, it explains much of it. And not just class content, but that affecting other social groups, particularly but not only women.

In Eritrea, it was experiments with land and marriage reform and the provision of services like agricultural extension, primary education, adult literacy and village-level public health in the liberated areas, implemented in a highly participatory manner, that motivated such large numbers of peasant farmers, workers, women and youth to join the struggle. In South Africa it was the effectiveness of the trade unions in representing workers' interests with management that provided the basis for COSATU's considerable strength in its confrontations with apartheid, as did the work of the civics, the women's associations and other community-based organizations on behalf of their constituents in the embattled townships.

Though Eritrea exhibits the least formal organizational pluralism of these four, it is led by a nationalist movement that has invested more heavily in social transformation over a longer period than any of the others. This brought vast numbers into the liberation movement as fighters, as members of support organizations, as donors and more. Since liberation, the movement has steadily widened the circles of people involved in the country's embryonic civic institutions, while achieving unprecedented levels of social equality by extending access to health care, education, economic development and so on to formerly excluded social groups (ethnic and religious minorities, women, people in geographically remote areas and many others). Throughout the postwar years, the EPLF/PFDJ has built a remarkable level of social consensus through a consultative process that reaches tens of thousands of people on major issues — drafting the Constitution is one of the best examples, but there are many less dramatic ones.

No one who has been there can doubt that this movement has the strong, active support of the overwhelming majority of Eritreans. Yet this is still a step away from a functioning participatory democracy, in

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which higher echelons of the movement are held directly and openly accountable for their decisions and actions by the people as a whole and where key decisions not only evoke input from below but on occasion are launched from there. The question is whether this movement is headed in that direction. I continue to think it is, but it could falter.

First, let's place this in context. This movement's victory in the independence war was an extraordinary achievement, given the odds they faced and the meager resources they had to draw upon. So, too, was the defense of the country in 1998-2000 when the entire enterprise was at risk. The strides the movement made between the wars were even more astonishing. This was true not just of economic growth, which at nearly eight percent was impressive, but in terms of the unification of Eritrea's ethnically and religiously diverse population, the development of a political culture that shows zero tolerance for corruption or self-aggrandizement, the growing respect for the rule of law throughout the population, the palpable sense of entitlement most people feel to openly express personal opinions (even though the press does not reflect this), the national pride that comes from ending dependence on international handouts and much more. Some of this is hard to measure, but taken together with the institutional development in the new country, it generated an enormous level of popular support for the movement, it deepened the roots of an Eritrean nationalism that superceded other social identities, and it established the foundation for a sustainable popular democracy. Then fighting broke out with Ethiopia in 1998.

The war inevitably disrupted the democratic transition, but it also raised a host of troubling new issues. How had Eritrea's leaders stumbled into this conflict, which by their own admission took them by surprise? Could it have been avoided? What weaknesses in intelligence and what errors of judgment contributed to this? Were there any concessions or tactics that might have averted the catastrophe in May-June 2000 (which left the Eritreans with far less on the negotiating table than they were offered in 1998 and with terrible war-time losses)? In the end, though, the issue for many people was whether the leadership's insistence on suppressing information prior to the crisis and squelching debate once it exploded helped or hindered the slide toward disaster. And this touched on deeper issues, for control over virtually every aspect of Eritrea's development, not just information, remained highly centralized, no longer under the direction of a party, but increasingly under that of the executive branch of the state. This, of course, is a familiar pattern for left and national liber-

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ation movements.

The exigencies of the war demanded that many of the country's emerging popular institutions — the trade unions, the women's union, the youth union, even the PFDJ itself — be harnessed to the war effort, much as had been the case with popular organizations in Nicaragua in the 1980s when the revolution there was under siege. Thousands of cadres went to the trenches, many organizations were stripped of skilled staff, resources were diverted to the war effort, development programs were put on hold, union and party leaders were co-opted for missions or full-time jobs for the state and so on. With the nation threatened and all available personnel thrown into its defense, it is difficult to imagine an alternative, but the danger was the weakening of the nonstate institutions just as they were establishing independent identities. On the plus side, the unions of women and of youth took the opportunity to reassess their own roles and chart new directions. However, the PFDJ suffered significant erosion in its autonomy during the two-year war, leading a number of veterans to suggest that it had accomplished what it set out to in the post-liberation war transition and should now either give way to or allow the space for other political parties to emerge.

I, too, am convinced that this is a necessary step for the movement if it is to provide effective, continuing leadership not only for the consolidation of democracy in the former colony but for its transformative development from here on out. The essence of political democracy is public discussion and popular participation in governance. The groundwork has been adequately laid to open up the country's political life. It is time to trust the people to pick up the challenge. And a party, not a diffuse peoples' front, is necessary to lead it. This time around, however, the party needs to be fully open in its membership and in its operations. It needs to set a new democratic tone for the country as a whole, even as it — along with other political entities — acts to influence but not monopolize the state, the mass political movement and the various popular organizations in a more open political environment.

* * *

The role the SACP is carving out for itself in South Africa is one example of how this can work. The SACP operates on one level as an independent political party, on another as a progressive force — though not a formal caucus — within both the ANC and COSATU, and on yet another as a partner with these organizations in an alliance that

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leads the country. It has no youth or women's formations or any other mass organizations of its own, but its members and cadres exert considerable influence on the outlook and practice of many other non-state institutions, from community organizations and self-help groups to research institutes and advocacy centers. It conducts all of this in the open, as it does with its periodic strategy conferences, and it publishes a raft of materials on its positions and programs. Many of these carry vigorous debates among leading members and nonmembers over contentious points of analysis and strategy. The party also engages in public discussion with and, increasingly, criticism of its alliance partners and the state itself.

Whatever ideas they had about their role in the tripartite alliance when they helped form it in the early 1990s, the reality today is that one of the partners — the ANC — is in government, while the other two are not. This skews the pact in the ANC's favor and tends to reduce the other two to lobbyists or pressure groups as far as the government is concerned (though each has members in its higher echelons as well), but it does not negate the impact they have on the formation and implementation of state policy. That said, it is also true that the more the junior partners act to exert pressure on the ANC, the more they strain the alliance, and it is only a matter of time before it dissolves. When it does, it will probably not be because the party decides to pull out — there is no reason for it to do so — but because the ANC decides to go it alone without the other two or because COSATU becomes too frustrated with its inability to influence economic policy from within the state and opts for a more activist role outside it. In the meantime, though, there is quite a bit for all three to do to complete their common mission.

Consider the balance sheet at the start of the twenty-first century. On the political level, the liberation movement has won the main battles. The country has gone through two rounds of open, democratic elections at a national level, which the alliance carried by wide majorities, and regional and local government has been completely restructured. South Africa also has one of the most democratic constitutions in the world, along with strong labor laws, powerful legislation banning discrimination on the basis of race, gender and other factors, and an array of other laws that guarantee the rights of all its citizens as never before. In the course of winning these victories, the movement has assembled a broad multi-racial front that unites tens of thousands of people from different classes, ethnic backgrounds and political perspectives in a common drive to democratize the country.

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The culture of liberation they incubated, with its insistence on high levels of popular participation and consultation, remains dominant throughout the country. Progress on meeting basic needs has been uneven but steady, and the expectations of greater, more profound changes in social relations as well as wealth distribution are widely shared. Though the popular movement has suffered greatly since the democratic breakthrough in 1994, the trade unions remain strong and other forms of popular organization are beginning to reassert themselves. Taken together, this positions the liberation movement, particularly the left, to struggle for further advances in the coming years.

The SACP and COSATU are now focused on winning structural reforms that will markedly improve people's lives, while they work to strengthen the popular movement for these and other struggles. Their objectives include a stronger public sector, expanded social services, improved social security, large-scale job creation, public support for skills development, and improved and expanded public education and public health. They also call for the government to become more accountable to its political and social base — to become a participatory democracy and not just a representative one — and they are stepping up their critiques of its fiscal and monetary strategy, as well as its foreign policy. This may or may not put these organizations at odds with the ANC — one of their strongest concerns is that the state is driving the ANC and turning it into an arm of government, rather than the reverse — but it certainly lines them up with the people. According to COSATU, the strategy to achieve such reforms prepares for socialism in several ways:

> •Democratisation of the state reduces the power of capital and gives working people more strength to bring about a socialist transformation.
>
> •The provision of basic amenities such as health, education, water and social security irrespective of the ability to pay rolls back the market and limits the commodification of production that is typical of capitalism.
>
> •Democratising the economy weakens the stranglehold of the mining-finance complex and strengthens socialised capital, including through the state and co-operative sectors.
>
> •Taking progressive positions in international forums helps shape the world climate needed to build socialism over time.[1]

The relationship between the party and the trade unions in for-

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mulating such strategic conceptions is an interactive one. COSATU provides a venue for such ideas to gestate, while the party plays an important role in focusing the discussions that produce such formulations. Many top union leaders are also party members and study political economy and organizational strategy there. At the same time, a large number of party leaders and thinkers come out of COSATU and reflect their union experience in their party work. The two organizations may not be formally linked, apart from the Tripartite Alliance, but they have a powerful influence on one another. (They recently ran a joint political education school for their leading cadres and produced a booklet out of it for wider distribution among their members.) Still, the party plays a distinctive role that the unions simply cannot, by virtue of their obligation to defend the short-term interests of their members and because they lack the organic relations with other sectors of the society — women, farmers, youth and so on — that they have with the working class. The SACP has the potential for this, however. To the extent it is successful, it could eventually challenge the ANC for leadership of the struggle to further transform South African society.

* * *

The role of any political party is to make analyses of key issues, to draft programs and to mobilize support for them. On this basis it contends with other political formations for leadership of a country — for political power. All parties do this, whatever their orientation. A national democratic party does so from the perspective of working people and their social allies, which is one way it distinguishes itself from other parties. But a revolutionary party also molds the character and behavior of its members to enable them to embody its values and its vision. It is precisely in this way that the SACP makes the ANC a better ANC, as Jeremy Cronin puts it, or that the People's Party made the EPLF what it was during the independence war. There is a danger of voluntarism, but the importance of linking the ways we think with how we act toward one another and of reflecting this in what we propose for the society as a whole should not be underestimated. Whether or not a political movement holds "liberated" territory or exercises uncontested political power, it is itself a laboratory for social change, and its members are emissaries for it in every encounter they have with others. After all, if a revolutionary movement cannot transform its own members to embody its aims, why should anyone believe it will do better with the wider society?

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And if individual revolutionaries have to model the revolution in their behavior as they proselytize for it, revolutionary parties have to do the same at a programmatic level, defending the people when they're under attack, assisting them to survive when they're in need, and working with them to alter their lives for the better when the opportunity arises. This is where the fusion of the social and the political becomes an essential strategic principle. But it cannot just be a matter of doing occasional good works for real or prospective constituents. A revolutionary movement needs to demonstrate both its deep commitment to the people's welfare and its capacity to do something constructive about it at every available opportunity. It has also to use such opportunities to draw the people into the revolutionary process, empowering them through it while advancing the transformational struggle it claims to represent, and to do so within a well-thought-out plan of action. This is part of what differentiates a party from a social movement.

Political leadership is necessary to give coherence to the menu of issues that arises from a disjointed collection of social movements, which are naturally prone to prioritizing their own immediate issues over all others. But for any one movement or social group to subordinate its needs and issues to those of others, or to the nation as a whole, it must trust that the leadership that asks this is genuinely committed to it and not just making tactical use of its resources. Only practice can build such trust, as has been the case in Eritrea and South Africa, where people express a willingness to wait for certain pressing needs to be met out of confidence that their turn will come. This has pointedly not been so in Nicaragua and Palestine, where the profound loss of trust in political leaders makes the reconstruction of a broad-based and unified political movement extremely difficult, despite the appalling conditions under which people live.

Those who defend the separation or sequencing of action on social relations from that on political issues, particularly those affecting women, argue that taking up such questions during a national struggle (before or after liberation) divides a political movement or the society upon which it rests. In fact the reverse is more likely to be the case. Strong social movements crosscut the narrow ethnic, regional, clan or other dividing lines within societies and unite people into broad sectors that give shape and substance to the nation. Social reforms may antagonize a minority which stands to lose position through them, but to capitulate to this and postpone action in the social sphere is to forego the prospect of tapping into the enormous

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creativity and intensity of the much larger numbers who are on the other side of the divide.

These issues have to be approached with sensitivity and care in such a way that as broad a range of social interests as possible are harnessed together for the national struggle — not only for "liberation" but for sustained autonomy and development once foreign occupation or intervention ends. The left has tended to see this as an all-or-nothing proposition. Either wage a national struggle and put off the reform of the society, if that is the main issue, or plunge full speed ahead into the class struggle and postpone other social reforms. No wonder that some feminists insist on prioritizing women's issues over class and national issues, or that some ethnic minorities focus only on their rights within highly-stratified, heterogeneous societies, or that interest groups concerned with environmental or other specific concerns do the same. But these are false dichotomies.

The central challenge facing the left is how to integrate these concerns and commitments into a single struggle for a truly revolutionary democracy — transforming the nation even as it consolidates and defends it. In this regard, its performance on the issue of gender equality provides a basic measure of both its authenticity and its effectiveness, but it is only one of several. The question is: does a political movement have a global social vision and is that vision reflected in its makeup, its methodology and its practice?

The failure of socialism marked one of the great setbacks of the twentieth century for revolutionaries, not so much for the loss of what passed for "socialist" states, but for the damage this did to people's faith in the potential for radical social change. In doing so, it fed the cynicism and despair that are the fodder for virulent micro-nationalisms and other reactionary despotisms that seek to fill the vacuum this failure created. The left now faces the task of reestablishing the legitimacy of universal values of equality and justice and of knitting back together an internationalist outlook that people can identify with and organize themselves around. It needs to adapt to new conditions, learn new methods of struggle, experiment with new models, and revise its objectives. It must do so based upon new experiences as they unfold, all-the-while remaining true to its core values. Those holding these values need to learn from their own and each other's successes and failures in concrete, practical ways, sharing more than rhetorical flourishes at periodic international conferences. Out of this could come the re-articulation of a universal vision — so long as it is not turned into another quasi-religious exercise.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Alejandro Bendaña, "The New Transitions: Where Are They Headed?" *Envío*, vol. 12, no. 147, Managua (October 1993).
2. For an elaboration of this theory, see I. Andreyev, *The Noncapitalist Way: Soviet Experience and the Liberated Countries* (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1974).
3. See Mao Tse-Tung's essay "On New Democracy" (January 1940) for the classic delineation of this concept.
4. See V. Y. Chirkin and Y. A. Yudin, *A Socialist-Oriented State: Instrument of Revolutionary Change* (Moscow, USSR: Progress Publishers, 1978).
5. See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

CHAPTER ONE

1. For an analysis of inter-ethnic ties among Eritrean nationalities, see Alemseged Tesfai, "Diversity, Identity and Unity in Eritrea: A View From Inside," a paper presented at a conference on "Identity and Conflict in Africa," University of Leeds, U.K., September 15-17, 1997.
2. Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones Are Burning* (Trenton, N.J: Red Sea Press, 1990), pp. 49-50.
3. Much of the background material for this chapter is drawn from my book, *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1997).
4. See Richard Sherman, *Eritrea: The Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 13-16.
5. Pateman, p. 55.
6. Pateman, p. 59.
7. G.K.N. Trevaskis, *Eritrea: A Colony in Transition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 35.
8. See Sherman, pp. 17-20.
9. James Firebrace & Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down*, Trenton (N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1985), p. 20. See also Trevaskis, pp. 95-98 and 103-13.
10. As quoted in Association of Eritrean Students in North America and Association of Eritrean Women in North America, *In Defence of the Eritrean Revolution*, New York: AESNA, 1976, p.54.
11. Trevaskis, pp. 113-21.
12. Araya Tsegai, "The History of the Eritrean Struggle" in Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson, eds., *The Long Struggle of Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1989), p. 76.
13. For an analysis of the ELM's and the ELF's origins, see Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence: Domination, Resistance, Nationalism, 1941-1993* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 98-114.

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14. Sherman, p. 73.
15. Pateman, p. 98.
16. Sherman, p. 74.
17. The federation between Eritrea and Ethiopia went into effect on September 15, 1952. On May 22, the following year, the U.S. and Ethiopia signed a pair of agreements. The first gave Washington a twenty-five-year lease on military and intelligence bases in Eritrea. The second pledged the U.S. to provide military aid and training to Ethiopia. In 1954, Israel also signed a secret security pact with Ethiopia, though full diplomatic relations were not established until 1961.

    Between 1953 and 1960, U.S. military advisors built black Africa's first modern army, with three divisions of 6,000 men each, equipped largely with surplus weapons and equipment from World War II and the Korean war (to which Ethiopia had sent an army battalion). After an attempted coup against the emperor in 1960 and as the Eritrean revolt began to gain momentum, this aid escalated rapidly. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson quietly sent fifty-five counter-insurgency specialists to Ethiopia. That year, he also approved the transfer of twelve F-5As to Addis Ababa, the first supersonic jet fighters in black Africa. The next year, 164 U.S. anti-guerrilla experts arrived under Plan Delta to teach the new hamleting and other civic action techniques being introduced then in South Vietnam.

    U.S. military aid to Ethiopia from 1946 to 1975 totaled $286.1 million in grants and loans. The U.S. also provided Ethiopia with over $350 million in economic assistance and was Ethiopia's largest trading partner, taking about forty percent of its exports (mainly coffee).
18. Sherman, p. 76.
19. Coups in several African and Middle Eastern countries in the late 1960s brought left-leaning military leaders to power, and the ELF picked up increasing support from them. Sporadic arms, money and training trickled in from Sudan, Somalia, Algeria, Libya, Iraq, the PLO and others, in addition to that coming from Syria.
20. Reprinted in Eritreans for Liberation in North America (the forerunner of the Association of Eritrean Students in North America), *Liberation*, Vol. II, No. 3, March 1973.
21. A summary appeared in the first issue of the front's official organ, *Vanguard*, in January 1973:

    We fight:
    * So that the people may own the land and be the beneficiaries of its fruits.
    * In order to transfer ownership of factories and commerce into the hands of a people's government so that the democratic rights of workers may be fully safeguarded.
    * So that women may regain their full rights and participate in work and politics with equality.
    * In order to work for the development of industry and agriculture, for our country cannot move forward without such development.
    * In order to eradicate diseases and ignorance so that our people can be

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enlightened and healthy.
* In order to protect the rights of all nationalities in Eritrea so that they may develop with equality. To abolish war and aggression and bring about peace and prosperity for all our people.
* In order to bring about conditions of progress for every Eritrean and to guarantee him/her adequate nutrition, clothing, health care and education, which are now exclusively enjoyed by the feudalists and imperialists who control the fertile land, industries and trade.
* For complete independence from colonialism and imperialism and feudalist exploitation. We are waging a national democratic revolution and are fighting with all our might against Ethiopian feudalism and U.S. imperialism.

22. For a critical analysis of the Ethiopian Revolution, see John Markakis and Nega Ayele, *Class and Revolution in Ethiopia* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1986). For further details of events during the coup and an analysis sympathetic to the incoming regime, see Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981).
23. *The Washington Post*. Oct. 18, 1974.
24. I have gone into this in much more detail in *Against All Odds*. See Chapter Five, "'Marx' vs. 'Marx' (vs. 'Marx')".
25. In the ELF's own words:

> The non-capitalist way of development is one type of social revolution. This system's unique characteristic is that it peacefully transforms the feudal tendencies of the various socio-political groups and the backward subjective factors to an advanced level. Moreover, the small and still weak working class is molded into a strong proletariat and the backward economic system geared to the socialist socio-economic structure. The main task here is to develop capital without capitalists, bring about quantitative and qualitative changes in the working class, and reorganize the land-holding system and the national economy as a whole through radical reforms. This new phenomenon indicates the transition to socialism without the vanguardship of the working class.
>
> Countries marching towards socialism by bypassing the capitalist stage are obliged by their ideological outlook and their objective problems to have a strong relationship with socialist countries and the Socialist Camp. This is because the said countries must have the Socialist Camp's backing: (1) to confront imperialism and internal as well as external reaction; (2) to get guidance and advice on how to solve their problems in the process of their economic and social transformation; and (3) [to] receive technical assistance to fight economic backwardness and foreign capitalist domination, establish their free national economy and make best use of their natural resources by themselves. [Quoted from a lengthy summary of the concept of non-capitalist development the ELF published in its official bulletin *Ghedli Hizbi Eritrea* in November 1976.]

26. I have gone into this in more detail in *Against All Odds*, mainly from a

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descriptive standpoint. However, a comprehensive critique of the theory and practice of "non-capitalist development" begs to be done by someone within one of the states or movements which touted it as a path toward socialism.

27. The ELF also had a party operating within it, the Eritrean Labor Party, but its impact on the front as a whole was much less visible. The two parties had direct negotiations with each other in the 1970s over issues of unity between the fronts, but they led nowhere.
28. The front was separated into military and non-military wings. The Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) was organized, U.S-style, in tiers of three units each, starting at the squad level and up to 500-person battalions. For example, three squads comprised one platoon, three platoons one company, and so on. The command structure drew on socialist models, with a three-person leadership composed of a military commander, a political commissar and a vice commander, and no other forms of rank within frontline units.

    Decisions were made collectively by the three leaders, but once in battle the military commander had undisputed authority. The EPLF as a whole was led by an thirteen-member political bureau elected by a thirty-seven-member central committee, itself elected by a congress convened in January 1977 in which the army, the non-military departments and the mass organizations were all represented. (Up to this point, the leadership was a single body comprised of representatives from each of the three factions that broke off from the ELF in 1970.) Romedan Mohamed Nur was confirmed as the EPLF's general secretary; Isaias Afwerki was the vice general secretary.

    The departments — health, education, information, agriculture, transportation and so on — lacked the tiered structure of the army, but they shared the concept of collective authority and were staffed by trained fighters who could at any moment put down their tools and take up arms. The EPLF, like most national liberation movements of that era, ran on Leninist principles of "democratic centralism," which meant that, in theory at least, new issues were discussed broadly but once a decision was taken, every member of the front obeyed it and publicly supported it. As a result, it was at first difficult for outsiders to get more than a rote response to political questions from EPLF members, though this evolved in my case with time and exposure.
29. The political education for fighters and civilians alike followed a formal curriculum contained in a book produced in Eritrea in 1975 titled *General Political Education for Fighters*. Each chapter provided a focus for discussions. Organizers ran through the contents once at a relatively superficial level and then repeated the course in more depth. Roughly translated and summarized for me by members of the EPLF Office of Public Administration in October 1977, the contents of the manual ran as follows:

    Part I

    1. Introduction to Eritrea — location, nationalities, main towns and villages.
    2. Origins of the Eritrean people — early cultural history through annexation, including the origin and traditions of the various nationalities.

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3. Political history — how a country and a nation are defined, Eritrea's development from the 19th century onward, foreign interventions and their effects.
4. Eritrea's economy — distribution of land and resources, modes of production.
5. Eritrean society — class analysis of Eritrean society, with an emphasis on the make-up and role of the working class and on forms of exploitation.
6. History of the Eritrean Revolution — from resistance to Turkish rule in 1875 through the launching of the armed struggle in 1961; the formation of EPLF in 1970; civil war with the ELF in 1971-74; EPLF experience on the political front, the military front and the organizational front up to 1975.

Part II

1. Why political education? — its uses inside the revolution and outside with both friends and enemies.
2. The Eritrean people's revolution and its goals — why we are fighting, the difference between freedom and liberation (political independence and social emancipation), what is democracy, what kind of organization do we have (a national democratic front), after freedom what kind of government will we have (political democracy, economic democracy, cultural democracy).
3. Who are our friends and who are our enemies? — friends include the workers and oppressed peoples of Eritrea and of the world, all progressive forces, and the socialist countries; enemies are Ethiopian colonialism, imperialism, zionism and internal reaction.
4. Our armed struggle — why we fight with arms, why our victory is inevitable (the strength of the mass movement, the progressive forces of the world on our side, the use of revolutionary discipline, the nature of just and unjust war, the difference between a revolutionary army and a reactionary army).
5. The tactics of our revolution — national united front, problems of "leftism" and rightism.
6. Our cultural revolution — against bad customs, ideas and beliefs arising from feudalism, imperialism, opportunism and liberalism.
7. On the handling of contradictions — the nature and origin of contradiction, types of social and political contradictions (external and internal, antagonistic and non-antagonistic, primary and secondary), resolving contradictions, the role of criticism-self-criticism.

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8. Ethiopia — the governments of Ethiopia from the 19th century to Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian people, progressive Ethiopians, relations between the Eritrean and Ethiopian peoples (common oppression — the people are not the enemy).
9. Political economy and the historical development of society — primitive communal society, slave society, feudal society, capitalism before the monopoly stage, monopoly capitalism (imperialism), problems of capitalist culture (prostitution, drug addiction, antagonism between workers and peasants on religious and ethnic grounds, liberalism), the fall of capitalism, colonialism, the fall of colonialism, neo-colonialism, people's struggles in the era of imperialism, socialism.

The last chapter concluded: "If you fight against imperialism as a united people, organized and led by the workers, you step toward socialism." On the back cover was inscribed the slogan: "An army without a revolutionary ideology is like a man without a brain. An army without a brain can never defeat the enemy."

30. In May 1965, secondary school students in Asmara went on a three-day strike to demand a UN-sponsored referendum on Eritrea's political status, the expulsion of U.S. and Israeli military advisors, the closure of foreign military bases and the release of political prisoners. Hundreds of protestors were arrested; many others fled to the countryside to join the guerrillas (Iyob, pp. 105-06).
31. Interview with the author, Asmara, April 8, 1992.
32. According to Isaias, the most useful lessons were those regarding military strategy and tactics.
33. Interview with Haile Wold'ensai, Asmara, March 13, 2000.
34. The EPLF's official line was also that the Soviet Union was making a "mistake" in supporting the *derg* against them, but this did not inhibit the front from waging the war in earnest, nor did it lead to similar back-channel negotiations.
35. Simultaneously, the EPLF published one of the only comprehensive expressions of its political philosophy for the general public outside Eritrea. The fourty-one-page memorandum was targeted mainly at UN member states, in keeping with EPLF insistence then and later that the United Nations was the appropriate forum for the international community to deal with the Eritrea issue. The booklet presented the front's views on the national question, its analysis of the present political situation (from a regional and a geopolitical perspective), the case for the Eritrean people's right to self-determination and a call for a peaceful solution to the conflict based upon the exercise of that right. Quotations from Eastern Bloc countries vigorously defending this right at the United Nations in 1950 were appended. "For peoples to live in peace and prosperity and to progress, they must be free; the exploitation of man by man must come to an end and a communist world created. The progressive forces are struggling to transform the present world so as to achieve this noble

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and human objective," declared the unsigned manifesto. On the next page, the writers added: "In the era of national struggles, only the colonized nation has the right to determine its own destiny." See Eritrean People's Liberation Front, *Memorandum* (EPLF: New York, August 1978), pp. 18, 19.

36. The organization behind this was a tiny political sect with the rather inflated title of the Central Organization of U.S. Marxist-Leninists. It was linked to a larger but no less zealous organization to the north called the Communist Party of Canada (M-L). For more details on this incident and the EPLF's strategic withdrawal, see *Against All Odds*, Chapter 10, "Retreat."
37. Interview with the author, Nakfa, Eritrea, July 1979.
38. The EPLF listed the "basic principles of people's political power" as:

    (a) a democracy without pressure from higher institutions, democracy without bureaucracy, a democracy without officers and political notables;
    (b) a democracy which ascertains full popular participation in every field, democracy which transfers all administrative and economic control to the masses of workers and peasants, democracy built from below on the initiative of the masses;
    (c) a democracy which does not allow the existence of an armed force divorced from the people, democracy which arms the masses as a whole and is guarded by the masses thus armed;
    (d) a democracy which allows the masses to elect their own administrators and to recall and remove them at any time without bureaucratic complications. [EPLF, "Creating a ... base," p. 95.]

39. Interview with Sebhat Ephrem, November 17, 1991.
40. The EPLF's land reform policy called for all farm land to be distributed equally to all eligible families. Unmarried men and women over twenty-five were eligible for a half share; widows or divorcees with children were eligible for a full share. Former feudal lords had the right to a share equal to that of other villagers. People living outside Eritrea or serving the enemy had no right to land at the time but could receive an allotment if they returned home. Village land could not be either bought or sold. See EPLF, "Creating a popular, economic, political and military base," an unpublished paper prepared for a strategy conference in EPLF-held Eritrea in 1982, pp. 42-43. This paper can be found at the PFDJ archives in Asmara.
41. The New York-based Catholic Relief Services, one of the largest semi-private aid agencies in the world and far the largest sub-contractor for U.S. government relief programs, opened operations in Sudan in 1976, but until 1980 it steadfastly declined to involve itself with the refugees along the country's northeastern border. When CRS workers in Khartoum pressed a 1978 request to their head office to take up work with the Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, they were refused on the grounds that State Department policy was then "hands off" these refugees and no funds were available. It was not until 1980 that the International Rescue Committee and CARE, two other major conduits for U.S. government relief funds, made their appearance. Most U.S. agencies waited until 1984 and 1985 to set up programs in Sudan during the much-publicized regional famine, and even then, few funded ERA's cross-bor-

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der operations. One of them was Grassroots International, an NGO I founded in Boston in 1983 to channel aid to Eritrea and other arenas of conflict and struggle. For more details, see *Against All Odds*, Chapter 12 and 13, "The Dispossessed" and "Famine."

42. There were 1,359 delegates at the congress, with civilians outnumbering military personnel three-to-one. A quarter of the participants were women. Every nationality in Eritrea was represented. One of the major events was the merger with a former ELF fraction, known as *Saghem*, after almost three years of dialogue with the EPLF. A new seventy-one-member Central Committee was elected by secret ballot, after 120 nominations were taken from the floor. The former members of the EPLF Political Bureau were the top vote-getters, with Isaias and Romedan coming within one vote of each other. The newly elected Central Committee then chose Isaias to be General Secretary.
43. According to EPLF/PFDJ veteran Alemseged Tesfai, "Political education within the EPLF had already been on a decline in the last years of the struggle. This was because Marxism had lost its attractiveness to many of the new breed of fighters who were joining the front in order to run away from the *derg's* similar rhetoric. More serious than that, even veterans were getting disenchanted with the old ideology — Soviet intervention, Cuban and South Yemeni direct military engagement on the other side and Chinese abandonment of Eritrea's cause were some of the reasons. But then, the EPLF itself was, by the mid-eighties, distancing itself from hard-line Marxism. In 1989, it assigned quite a few of its university-level cadres to re-draft a new program of political education, one that was to be in tune with the 'realities of the day'. Ahmed al-Keisi and Haile Menkerios led that effort and several cadres were part of it. It was decided in one of the meetings there (in Himbol) that the new political education, to be given to the EPLF rank and file and to members of the mass organizations simultaneously, should be free from Marxist content and dogma." Email to the author, October 16, 2000.
44. The topics covered by the new political education text as summarized for me by Haile Woldetensai were:

    I. Eritrea

    1. The country & its people
    2. The history of the Eritrean people from pre-colonial times to the Ethiopian colonial period
    3. The history of the armed struggle
    4. Eritrean national identity
    5. The national call and national obligation
    6. EPLF — the organization & its workings
    7. Important policies and experiences of the EPLF
    8. The Revolutionary Army and its qualities
    9. The Eritrean Woman
    10. Immigration & the question of Eritrean refugees
    11. The legitimacy & justness of the Eritrean cause
    12. The People & the Revolution
    13. Popular associations (mass organizations)

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14. People's Power (popular administrative organs)
15. People's Militias
16. Cooperatives

II. Organizational & Theoretical Issues

1. The Program & Constitution of the EPLF
2. The importance of political education
3. Our victory is certain
4. Revolutionary & counter-revolutionary morality
5. Revolutionary discipline
6. Theory & practice
7. Education, work and development
8. Revolutionary consciousness, vigilance, & initiative
9. Helping & taking care of the members
10. Cadre
11. Institutional methods of work
12. Armed struggle — why & what kind
13. The handling of the P.O.W.
14. Contradictions & their resolutions
15. The history of social development
16. Colonialism & neo-colonialism
17. Colonialism & liberation struggle
18. Social Revolution
19. Cultural Revolution
20. National Democratic Revolution
21. The national question & the right for self-determination
22. The experience of liberation movements
23. Protracted war
24. Classes and class struggle
25. The state and government
26. The government and political parties
27. Democracy

There were also short sections on Ethiopia, Africa and the Horn of Africa; the Middle East; and the International Situation. The syllabus was prepared for discussions at three successive levels, starting with a basic introduction to the concepts, then going into more descriptive and explanatory detail, and finally, in advanced sessions, approaching the material from a more in-depth, analytic perspective.

45. Much of this section is drawn from *Against All Odds*, Chapter 14, "The Challenge of Peace."
46. The EPLF claimed to have captured fifty new tanks, over one hundred military vehicles, sixty large rocket launchers and artillery pieces and twenty anti-aircraft guns, plus enormous quantities of medium and light weapons in the Afabet assault. The EPLF also seized three high-ranking Soviet advisors and put out of action some 18,000 Ethiopian soldiers there. See EPLF, *Adulis*, vol. V, no. 3, April 1988, p. 2.

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47. BBC news broadcast, Monday, March 21, 13:10 hours GMT, as transcribed and reprinted in EPLF, *Adulis*, vol. V, no. 3, April 1988, p. 3.

CHAPTER TWO

1. See A. Lerumo, *Fifty Fighting Years: The South African Communist Party, 1921-1971*, (London: Inkululeko Publications, 1971).
2. Glenn Frankel in his profile of several leading Communist Party members, *Rivonia's Children: Three Families and the Cost of Conscience in White South Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), attributes the initiative to a strategy paper by SACP member Michael Harmel in 1960. Other communist leaders quickly adopted the call for what was at first strictly limited to attacks on property and not people — a campaign of sabotage, not guerrilla warfare. The ANC took a while longer to come on board, but once it did so, Mandela, a strong supporter of the initiative, joined Slovo in the MK high command. See Frankel, pp. 81-86 for more details.
3. Joe Slovo, *Slovo: An Unfinished Autobiography* (Johannesburg, SA: Raven Press, 1995), p. 151.
4. South African pressure on Mozambique, largely through its support for the brutal Renamo-led civil war, resulted in the Nkomati Accords of 1984, shutting down ANC bases there. A 1988 U.S-brokered pact with Angola to end that country's long-running civil war brought about the closure of ANC bases in that country shortly afterward. This effectively ended the threat of an armed revolt.
5. Email to the author, July 3, 2000.
6. David Goodman, *Fault Lines: Journeys into the New South Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p.14.
7. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, February 10, 1995.
8. Joe Slovo, "Southern Africa: Problems of Armed Struggle," in R. Milband and J. Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1973* (London: Merlin Books, 1973).
9. This and other quotes in this paragraph are drawn from Jeremy Cronin's obituary for Slovo, "Joe Slovo — Revolutionary Activist," which he gave me a copy of in Johannesburg in February 1995.
10. "South African Communists Discuss Their Role," *Green Left Weekly*, Sidney, Australia, August 11, 1993. Raymond Suttner was elected to the SACP central committee in 1991. At the time of this interview he was also a member of the ANC's National Working Committee. In April 1994 he was elected to parliament on the ANC slate.
11. "This argument about mass activity was already emerging in the pre-1994 period," says SACP central committee member Raymond Suttner. "In a sense the signs were there, but the ANC was not yet the government. I used to write speeches for Mandela and say a lot about the masses needing to drive the process, and he would read this as prepared. But later at press conferences, he would disown what he said in the speeches!" [Email to the author, September 16, 2000.]

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CHAPTER THREE

1. Jordan shared a common interest with Israel in dissolving the Palestinian identity in order to claim sovereignty over large shares of Palestinian land.
2. See in particular Rosemary Sayigh's excellent study *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon* (London: Zed Books, 1994). Her bibliography is exhaustive.
3. For fuller treatments of the PLO, see Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Alain Gresh, *The PLO: The Struggle Within* (London: Zed Books, 1988); Saïd K. Aburish, *Arafat: From Defender to Dictator* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1998); and Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State, The Palestine National Movement, 1949-1993* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997).
4. At their peak in the 1950s and early 1960s, according to Yezid Sayigh, the Communists in the West Bank numbered about 2,300. The Muslim Brotherhood counted some 700-1,000 members and the ANM several hundred. In Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood outnumbered the PCO by about 1,000 to 220, with the ANM coming in a close third. See Y. Sayigh, p. 51.
5. The Gaza party was originally formed in 1948.
6. In 1984, Fatah agreed to accept the party into the PLO and give it a seat on the executive committee at the next session of the Palestine National Council, but disputes over the PLO's relations with Jordan, among other issues, kept the full PNC from meeting until 1987. (The Left boycotted a truncated 1984 session.) During this time, the PCP joined the PFLP and the DFLP in a short-lived left coalition called the Democratic Alliance.
7. The Communists flirted with armed struggle in the late 1960s as Ansar partisans, and they fought in Jordan during the "Black September" debacle, taking heavy losses.
8. See for example, William B. Quandt, Fuad Jabber & Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Politics of Palestinian Nationalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973); Helena Coban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969-1994* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1994); or Naseer H. Aruri, *The Obstruction of Peace: The U.S., Israel and the Palestinians* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1995).
9. See Aburish, pp. 7-32; also Cobban, pp. 6-8.
10. This was also the constituency to which he turned much later when he came back to Gaza under the Oslo accords as head of the newly constituted Palestine Authority.
11. The ANM did not even refer to "Palestinians" in its early literature but rather to the "Arabs of Palestine," and it did not have a separate committee on the Palestine issue until 1959 or an organized Palestinian branch until 1964.
12. George Habash, the son of a wealthy Christian trader and a medical student at the American University of Beirut, was one of the ANM's founders. He, too, fought in the 1948 war and witnessed his own family's forced eviction from Palestine, but he drew a different lesson from this than Arafat had. For Habash, the point was not to reject reliance on the Arab regimes but to

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change them.

13. I use the term "idealist" to connote a politics drawn from ideas about politics, rather than from material reality.
14. Quoted in Y. Sayigh, p. 140.
15. The number of "incidents" along the Israeli-Jordanian border rose from ninety-seven in the second half of 1967 to 916 in 1968 and peaked at 2,432 in 1969. They dropped to less than fifty in 1971 after the PLO was ousted from Jordan, though they continued sporadically in Gaza and along the Lebanese border (Gresh, p. 14).
16. The PFLP-GC functioned as a Syrian proxy and had little influence over the rest of the national movement, though it remained a force in the refugee communities in Syria and Lebanon and set up its own network of civilian committees in the Occupied Territories during the *intifada*.
17. The Democratic Front took with it a group of young Marxists who were uncomfortable with Habash's eclecticism — a potpourri of militant nationalism mixed with fragments of theory drawn from sources ranging from Lenin and Mao Tse-tung to Kim Il Sung. The DFLP was also influenced by Maoist views in its early years, but it carved out a role for itself by the late 1970s as a left force roughly in synch with the Moscow-oriented international communist movement. Many left intellectuals who participated in it remain influential in party and nonparty organizations today.
18. The Popular Front had difficulties with the Soviet Union over its recognition of Israel and its criticism of PFLP hijackings, and it dismissed the DFLP (and the Palestine Communist Party) as Soviet patsies for their willingness to consider political compromise. For its part, the Democratic Front became increasingly involved in the global network of Moscow-oriented parties and movements. At one point in the late 1970s, the front joined the Italian Communist Party in unsuccessful efforts to mediate the Eritrea-Ethiopia war.
19. Gresh, p. 16.
20. The PFLP apparently intended the hijackings to pull Fatah into the escalating clashes with Jordan (anticipating, wrongly as it turned out, a split in the Jordanian army), while drawing the Arab states back into an active confrontation with Israel. Wadi Haddad, the mastermind of the operation, later said that the hijackings were designed "to disseminate a revolutionary atmosphere" (Y. Sayigh, p. 257).
21. PLO military operations dropped from 2,390 in 1969 to 326 in 1972, 637 in 1973 and 396 in 1974. But as conventional attacks diminished, "terrorist" operations aimed at civilian targets increased, the more so as groups opposed to political compromise sought to torpedo negotiations then underway. These attacks did little to alter the balance of forces in the Palestinians' favor. Instead, they strengthened Israeli resolve and increased U.S. support. But they had the desired effect of rendering negotiations more difficult.
22. From a May 22, 1970 interview with George Habash, as quoted in Gresh, p. 36.
23. The DFLP's second in command was an Iraqi Marxist, Qais Samerai (Abu Liela), who was the front's main theoretician and the author of its two-state position.
24. The notion of two states, one for Jews and one for Palestinians, posed a theo-

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retical problem for Marxist-oriented movements in that most saw the Jews in religious, not ethnic terms and therefore had difficulty extending to them the right of self-determination due a "nation."

25. As quoted in Gresh, p. 41.
26. PFLP, *Tasks of the New Stage* (Beirut: PFLP, 1973), p. 60.
27. Israel was in the midst of a successful counteroffensive when the shooting stopped, but it had already lost 2,800 dead.
28. Cold war politics began to play an increasing role in the conflict, with the Soviet Union starting to arm the PLO directly after its ouster from Egypt in 1972.
29. After the PLO rejected an American peace initiative at a PNC session in early 1971, the Democratic Front issued a memorandum raising questions about the tactical value of a Palestinian state in the event the Jordanian regime remained in power, which of course it did. But the consequences of this issue were not elaborated.
30. This was clarified further in 1977 to mean the formation of a Palestinian state in any land freed from Israeli rule. Two years later Arafat told a visiting delegation of journalists that he would even create a state on only a tiny patch of Palestinian land if need be — "Even just in Jericho, if that is all they would give me." [This incident and the quote are recounted in Cobban, p. 18.]
31. The core of the Rejection Front was comprised of the PFLP, the PFLP-GC, the Iraqi-backed Arab Liberation Front and the small Front for Palestinian Popular Struggle.
32. Resolution at the sixteenth party congress in January 1969, quoted in Gresh, p. 74.
33. In early 1976, the West Bank-based Palestine Communist Organization called on the PLO to formally abandon its goal of a single state in all of historic Palestine and accept a two-state solution that would carry with it the right of "return" for all Palestinians. Several months later, the Israeli party repeated this call.
34. The Allon Plan called for Israel to hold onto parts of the Sinai peninsula, as well as all of Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank.
35. Sadat addressed the Israeli Knesset on November 19, 1977. The Camp David accords were signed on September 17, 1978. The peace treaty formally ending the state of war between Egypt and Israel was concluded on March 26, 1979.
36. The Democratic Front was a partial exception to this tendency. The Association Najdeh, a women-run NGO affiliated with the DFLP, was one of the most effective organizations working in the Lebanon camps. It ran many successful embroidery and sewing workshops and other income-generating projects, and it drew camp women, whether or not they were party members, into the planning and management of the organization itself through elected local, regional and national committees. But Najdeh was only an NGO, and, as such, it had little impact on the political direction or program of the party, which, for example, did not draw on Najeh's experience to forward a critique of PLO-run social services.
37. Starting in 1979, PLO member organizations were given a $400,000 per month subsidy drawn from the Palestine National Fund and channeled through the PLO.

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38. I was working as a consultant for Oxfam America at the time, on an assignment to assess civilian needs for an emergency relief program run through OA's sister agency Oxfam UK. I returned three more times over the next eight months before OA cancelled its program, and I left to start another aid agency in Boston, Grassroots International, to continue the work. (I made my first visit to Israel and the West Bank in the fall of 1982, meeting Israeli anti-war groups and Palestinian NGOs.)
39. One of the more disconcerting experiences I had that year was attending a showing of the award-winning film *Ghandi* in Christian East Beirut where the audience cheered and stomped as Muslims in India were massacred. It was a sign of the ethnic and confessional hysteria that combined with Israeli political interests to doom the Palestinians and their Muslim Lebanese allies.
40. Estimates of the number of Palestinians killed range from 1,500 to 2,750. A subsequent Israeli commission assigned "indirect" responsibility for the massacre to IDF commander Ariel Sharon, who at the time of writing heads the Likud Party and stands to take over as Israel's Prime Minister if the party wins the next elections.
41. The U.S. was, if anything, less open to negotiations that included the PLO than ever before. President Ronald Reagan had come to power in 1981 characterizing the organization as part of a Soviet-sponsored terror network. The PFLP's hijacking of a French airliner to Uganda's Entebbe airport in 1983 — and Israel's dramatic rescue — did little to alter this perception. After another PLO organization hijacked an Italian passenger ship, the Achille Lauro, in 1985, during which an American Jew was thrown overboard and killed, the tentative contacts that had developed were cut off.
42. Members included the Jordanian Communist Party, as it was still known, Fatah, the PFLP, the DFLP and the Palestinian Ba'ath Party (which later faded from the political scene). It was the first four that formed the underground leadership of the *intifada* a decade and a half later.
43. The PNF had had the temerity to draft letters to the PLO leadership (and publish them) calling for, among other things, broader representation in the organization of "the Palestinian popular masses and political forces" (presumably meaning the PNF itself) and strongly endorsing the construction of a Palestinian state. This latter position was supported by polls taken in the West Bank that showed well over twice as many respondents in favor of such a state than those wishing a return to Jordanian rule, the only alternative tested (Gresh, pp. 134-36).
44. The Communists were the dominant political force in the emerging student movement well into the 1970s, much as they were with West Bank workers, largely because the other parties ignored this sector. This began to change in the latter half of the decade as the university population swelled and the other factions began to compete on the campuses, particularly in student elections. See Glenn E. Robinson, *Building a Palestinian State: The Incomplete Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 19-37.
45. In 1978 the Democratic Front also began a determined effort to transform itself into a Marxist-Leninist party and to gain Soviet recognition as the main communist force in the Palestinian national movement.
46. The Popular Front's social and political organizations were grouped in the

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Action Front, those of the Democratic Front in the Unity Bloc and those of the PCP in the Progressive Bloc.

47. By this time I was also making frequent visits to the territories as the director Grassroots International, which was providing small grants to many of these new organizations, including all the women's committees, driven by the conviction that they were integral to the expansion of the base for the national movement.
48. Quoted in the *Jerusalem Post*, Feb, 15, 1985, as cited in Y. Sayigh, p. 608.
49. The first underground communiqué came out on January 8, calling for a general strike until January 13. The January 18 communiqué — the third to appear — was the first to bear the name of the United National Leadership, indicating the formation of the multi-party coalition. This and future communiqués were signed by the "Palestinian Liberation Organization — Unified National Leadership of the Palestinian Uprising in the Occupied Territories." For reproductions of more than a dozen of them, see Zachary Lockman & Joel Benin, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (Boston, MA: MERIP/South End Press, 1989), pp. 327-94.
50. Among the UNLU leaders were professionals and unionists, journalists and students. Almost half had attended Birzeit University, and most came from villages and refugee camps in the Ramallah/El Bira area. The exempted factory was in Tulkarim. This decision was taken over the objections of the PFLP, which opposed any exceptions. (Robinson, pp. 97-99) In a pattern typical of its ultra-militancy, the PFLP also routinely called for fifteen-day strikes within the territories and for a total labor boycott of Israel — unsustainable positions that threatened to impoverish thousands of West Bank and Gazan families.
51. Cited in Robinson, p. 103.
52. By 1987 the UPMRC had seventeen permanent clinics in the territories. During the first two years of the *intifada*, the organization set up five new first aid centers, ran over 1,000 education sessions, taught 22,000 people the basics of first aid and gave out 19,000 first aid kits (Robinson, p. 41).
53. The Israelis assassinated a number of prominent Fatah leaders, many of them from the front's left wing. Among those killed earlier were Kamal Edwan and Kamal Nasser. Majid Abu Sharar was murdered in his bed in Rome in 1980. Nor was Fatah the only target. Popular Front leader (and well-known artist) Ghassan Kanafani was slain by Israeli agents in Beirut in 1972.
54. The announcement came on July 3, 1988.
55. The U.S. dickered with Arafat over the wording of his statements on Israel and terrorism, finally accepting them a month later and opening a dialogue. This was broken off in June 1990 after a PLO group carried out a terrorist attack on Israel that Arafat was unable to disown to Washington's satisfaction. This helped push Arafat toward Saddam Hussein two months later when that crisis broke out.
56. Israel did not ban Hamas until September 28, 1989, by which time the organization had become the second largest faction in the territories, after Fatah and ahead of the PFLP.
57. Yitzak Rabin in a 1994 speech to the Israeli Knesset, as cited in Aburish, p. 271.

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58. Aburish, p. 210.
59. The degree of Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein in this confrontation is often overblown. A week after the invasion, he urged the Iraqis to withdraw from Kuwait and submit the dispute to arbitration, but the U.S. and Egypt refused to endorse such a compromise, insisting instead that Iraq withdraw unconditionally or face war. Within the Palestinian national movement, it was George Habash and Nayif Hawatmeh who uncritically supported Hussein.
60. Arafat was by no means alone in the PLO on this. PFLP deputy secretary-general Moustafa al-Zabri declared that "Iraq is the strategic depth of our cause and the *intifada*" (Y. Sayigh, p. 642).
61. The PLO's annual subsidy at that time was $120 million. The organization lost billions in 1991-93 when its assets in Kuwaiti banks were seized and other revenues were cut off (Usher, pp. 1-2).
62. PLO salaries were cut, stipends trimmed and funds to many West Bank individuals and institutions stopped altogether. By early 1993, many PLO officials were working without pay, while Fatah was selling off assets to cover its bills. Sayigh, p. 656.
63. Robinson, p. 167.
64. Robinson, p. 177.
65. The agreement was finalized in Sweden on August 19, 1993 and signed in Washington on September 13. The details of its implementation were the subject of another negotiation in Cairo in May 1994.
66. Quoted from a speech in the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza on July 2, 1994 in Graham Usher, *Palestine in Crisis: The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo* (London: MERIP/TNI/Pluto Press, 1995), p. 1.
67. This was amended at Taba, Egypt in September 1995 in what many termed "Oslo2" to divide the West Bank into three zones: A, B and C. The PA was to have full control of civil affairs in Zone A, which was initially less than seven percent of the territory, joint control of administration and security in Zone B, which at the outset was twenty-four percent, and no control of C, which remained entirely in Israeli hands. The adjustment of these percentages was the subject of successive negotiations, including the so-called Wye agreement signed in 1998 and promptly trashed by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A modification of the Wye agreement was negotiated between newly elected Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and PA president Arafat in 1999.
68. Only thirteen of eighteen members attended the September 3, 1993 executive committee meeting, and several of these abstained on the final vote, which only showed nine in favor (Usher, p. 14).
69. Usher, p. 15. The operation was carried out under the orders of IDF chief of staff Ehud Barak.
70. Robinson, p. 171.
71. Interview with the author, Ramallah, Israeli-Occupied West Bank, January 9, 1996.

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CHAPTER FOUR

1. Katherine Hoyt, *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 158.
2. Hoyt, p. 46.
3. Hoyt, p. 23.
4. Martínez, p. 89.
5. The Constitution defined Nicaragua as a multiethnic, multilingual country. This gave the peoples of the Atlantic coast an official identity for the first time and laid the basis for autonomy. It also institutionalized the basis for democratic elections as never before.
6. One of them was Sergio Ramirez who went on to become the country's vice president on the FSLN ticket in the 1984 elections. Ramirez was a Sandinista supporter in 1979, but he was not openly a party member, nor was he part of the FSLN's top leadership.
7. For a fascinating series of interviews with former contras who explain in detail why they joined the resistance, see *A Peasant Tragedy*, edited by Alejandro Bendaña. This is an unpublished translation of interviews originally issued in Spanish by the Managua-based Centro de Estudios Internacionales as *Una Tragedia Campesina* (1992).
8. A team appointed by the FSLN government to calculate damages for a suit brought against the U.S. before the World Court in the Hague put the total at $17.8 billion.
9. See *The War In Nicaragua: The Effects of Low-Intensity Conflict on an Underdeveloped Country*, a report issued in 1993 by the Managua-based Nicaraguan Society of Doctors for Peace and the Defense of Life (MEDIPAZ) and distributed by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), Cambridge, MA, USA.
10. Email to the author, October 17, 2000.
11. Part of the deal to keep Sandinista leader Humberto Ortega at the army's head for this long was to greatly reduce its size and power. This had the ironic effect of limiting its capacity to respond to the widespread land invasions and other violence by former contras and demobilized former Sandinista soldiers that plagued the countryside during much of Chamorro's term in office.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 11, 1994.
2. By custom, most Eritreans use their first name as a formal self-designation, as no surname is inherited. Their second name is their father's first name, the third name their grandfather's first name, and so on.
3. These statistics were provided by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice in August 1996.
4. The government gave the NUEW several buildings, but from this point on, it supported itself from the dues of its members (within Eritrea and abroad), income generated from various small enterprises, and grants and donations from foreign agencies.
5. Askalu Menkarios's replacement by Leul Gebreab as NUEW head in 1998

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was dictated by the party, not decided by the NUEW membership, for example. Askalu was then appointed head of the new Electoral Commission tasked with organizing national elections and, when the elections were postponed, as Minister of Labor.

6. Many women freely criticized the NUEW in interviews and casual conversations, but none would go on the record for fear of ostracism by their peers or "punishment" (blocked job assignments, demotions, and so on) by the PFDJ or the government. This was quite common in Eritrea — a willingness to speak candidly and openly on many issues but not to be quoted. As a consequence, there will be few citations of Eritreans by name throughout this book apart from party and state officials, but the material will reflect as thoroughgoing a critique of Eritrean institutions as any of the other subject countries and movements.
7. See *A National Charter for Eritrea: For a Democratic, Just and Prosperous Future*, approved by the Third Congress of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, Nacfa, Eritrea, February 1994 and available from the PFDJ, Asmara, Eritrea.
8. Email to the author, October 16, 2000.
9. These points, together with the report on controversial issues raised at the 1994 NUEW workshops referred to below, appeared in *Eritrea Profile*, August 20, 1994. Note that the outspoken editor of *Profile*, Abinet Issayas, was later fired by the Ministry of Information for running a story on alleged sexual abuse that government officials found offensive.
10. Interview with the author, Asmara, September 29, 1994.
11. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 6, 1996.
12. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 9, 1996.
13. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 29, 2000.

CHAPTER SIX

1. The information in this section is drawn mainly from a statistical summary compiled by the Women's National Coalition in 1994 and from an unpublished paper by Lydia Kompe and Janet Small, "Demanding a Place Under the Kgotla Tree: Rural Women's Access to Land and Power," provided to the author in January 1996 by the Transvaal Rural Action Committee.
2. Interview with former NOW leaders in Durban on February 21, 1995.
3. The decision to fold the women's organizations into the Women's League was taken by leaders of these organizations at a conference with ANC representatives convened in Amsterdam in 1989 and dubbed "Malibongo," shortly before the official unbanning.
4. Interview with the author, Durban, February 21, 1995.
5. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 10, 1995.
6. Interview with the author, Cape Town, January 21, 1996. After the 1999 elections, Madlala served as chairperson of the ANC parliamentary Women's Caucus and Deputy Minister of Defense. She was also chairperson of the all-party Women's Parliamentary Group and served on a number of women's organizations, including a network of local women leaders.
7. Interview with the author, Cape Town, January 17, 1996.

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8. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 15, 1996.
9. The drafting of manifestos, called charters in South Africa, has long been a feature of the ANC-led liberation movement, whose best-known effort was the Freedom Charter, ratified by a Congress of the People on June 26, 1955 that brought together the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Congress and the (white) Congress of Democrats. ANC women had earlier (in 1954) drafted a Women's Charter. See Cherryl Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991).
10. See "Socialism is the Future, Build it Now! SACP Strategic Perspectives," adopted by the SACP at the party's 9th National Congress and available at its website (www.sacp.org.za).
11. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 18, 1995.
12. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 17, 1996.
13. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 16, 1996.
14. This quote and the citations from the NUMSA survey are taken from *NUMSA Women Organize!,* a pamphlet published by the union in Johannesburg in 1989 and distributed to members for use as an organizing tool.
15. Author's interview with a former NOW organizer, February 1996.
16. Three other committee members, all men, were also urged not to run again for the same reason. In an email exchange over this, Jennie Schreiner pointed out that the missed meetings had been scheduled at the beginning of the year and should have been taken into account by the errant members. However, she also expressed concern that only three women were elected to the committee in the first place, out of seven who were nominated. This, she said, is the problem the party needs to address (email to the author, July 11, 1995).
17. This account was provided to me that year by Shamim Meer, one of the branch's organizers and a founder and former editor of *Speak* magazine, which also shut down then.
18. Author's interview with RWM leaders in Johannesburg, January 17, 1996.
19. See Caroline O.N. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice & Training* (New York: Routledge, 1993). On the women's movement in Brazil, see Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transitional Politics* 9Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 24, 1994.
2. See Sherna Berger Gluck, "Palestinian Women: Gender Politics and Nationalism" in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXIV, no. 3 (Spring 1995).
3. See Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).
4. Palestinians are subject to a confusing web of overlapping and at times contradictory legal systems inherited from their colonial history. These include Ottoman law, British mandate law, Jordanian law in the West Bank, Egyptian law in Gaza and Israeli military orders issued after 1967 in both. A key aspect

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of this, with respect to women, is the Ottoman practice of recognizing religious courts' jurisdiction in matters of "personal status" or family law. Under this system, the Muslim community uses *shari'a* law, while the Christian community has three distinct courts: Roman law for Roman Catholics, Anglican law for Protestants and Byzantine law for Greek Orthodox. The British affirmed this system in 1922; the Jordanians did the same in their 1952 Constitution.

5. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 24, 1994. The other women participating in the discussion were Amal Kreishe of the Working Women's Society and Siham Bargouthi of the FIDA women's committee, an off-shoot of the Democratic Front.
6. In 1990, one of the council's leading figures, WAC's Zahira Kamal, wrote that "the establishment of a Unified Feminist Council is, in and of itself, a step in the right direction. However, this council has proved to be ineffective and has not fulfilled its intended purpose." For a fuller analysis, see Zahira Kamal, "The Development of the Palestinian Women's Movement in the Occupied Territories: Twenty Years after the Israeli Occupation" in Suha Sabbagh (editor), *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).
7. Interview with the author, December 3, East Jerusalem, 1994.
8. At this point, the Palestine National Council, which had long served as a parliament-in-exile, had only thirty-seven women among its 301 members and none on its fifteen-person Executive Committee. Fatah, which dominated the PLO, had only two women on its Revolutionary Council.
9. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 24, 1994.
10. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 19, 1994.
11. Interview with the author, Birzeit, December 6, 1994.
12. Interview with the author, Ramallah November 28, 1994.
13. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 19, 1994.
14. Palestinians translated the South African manual for elections, read party programs and followed the internal debates on women's rights. "Through the help of this literature and the different experience in South Africa, we discovered that we are not unique," said Islah Jad in a January 9, 1996 interview in Ramallah. "Maybe the ingredients of the problem are different, but the situation is almost the same."
15. At that time the GUPW had seventeen women on its Executive Committee representing nearly all the important committees and charitable societies in the West Bank and Gaza.
16. For a summary of the conference, see *Towards Equality: An Examination of the Status of Palestinian Women in Existing Law* (Women's Centre for Legal Action & Counseling: Jerusalem, 1995).
17. This meeting took place on November 24, 1994 with women from three of the party committees and several independents, roughly the constituency for the Women's Affairs Technical Committee.
18. See Amal Kawar, "Palestinian Women's Activism After Oslo" in Suha Sabbagh (editor), *Palestinian Women of Gaza and the West Bank*.
19. Interview with the author, East Jerusalem, January 10, 1996.
20. Interview with the author, Ramallah, January 8, 1996.
21. Interview with the author, Ramallah, January 9, 1996.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

1. Author's interview with presidential aide Danilo Lacayo, August 1992.
2. See *A High Price to Pay: Structural Adjustment and Women in Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Witness for Peace, 1995)
3. See Alejandro Bendaña, *A Peasant Tragedy* on peasant issues. Regarding FSLN weaknesses on the Atlantic Coast, see Marcos Membreño, "Ethnic Communities of the Pacific and North-Central Nicaragua: Denied Existence; Obstinate Persistence," *Envío*, vol. 11, no. 136 (November 1992) and Judy Butler, "Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast: New Government, Old Problems," *Envío*, vol. 13, no. 155 (June 1994).
4. For this and other information on the origins of the Nicaraguan women's movement, I am indebted to an unpublished paper — Millie Thayer, "After the Fall: The Nicaraguan Women's Movement in the 1990s (University of California at Berkeley, May 17, 1993) — made available to me, along with a series of briefings, at the library of Puntos de Encuentro in Managua.
5. Interview with the author, Managua, May 3, 1995.
6. Interview with the author, Managua, May 23, 1995.
7. Interview with the author, Managua, May 8, 1995.
8. Interview with the author, Matagalpa, May 9, 1995.
9. Interview with the author, Matagalpa, May 11, 1995.
10. Interview with the author, Managua, May 22, 1995.
11. Recorded by the author in a group interview in León, October 17, 1996.
12. Recorded by the author at an AMNLAE seminar in Managua, May 4, 1995.
13. Interview with the author, Managua, May 3, 1995.
14. In 1995, the ATC women's secretariat nominated five women for national leadership. All were elected.
15. Interview with the author, Managua, May 8, 1995.
16. Interview with the author, Managua, May 9, 1995.
17. Interview with the author, Managua, October 17, 1996.
18. People voted for party slates, not individuals. When the ballots were tallied, each party received a proportion of the seats according to its share of votes cast. Candidates were ranked within the lists, and winners were selected from the top of the slate. On the FSLN lists, women candidates alternated with men to ensure their receiving seats — hence the term "braid." Some of the right-wing parties also nominated women candidates, but they often appeared on the bottom of the party lists and did not get into power unless the party swept — which none did.
19. Interview with the author, Managua, May 3, 1995.
20. This information was presented to members of the WOMEN delegation by members of the National Women's Coalition at a panel discussion in Managua, October 17, 1996.
21. Interview with the author, Managua, May 23, 1995.

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CHAPTER NINE

1. Jeremy Baskin, who headed the National Labour & Economic Development Institute, an NGO housed within COSATU, argues in his landmark history of the union movement, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU*, that leftists in the federation convinced the party to let go of the notion that socialism had to be postponed until after the "democratic" stage of the revolution.
2. By the 1990s, with the federation's national role fully consolidated, the fifth principle began to be articulated as "international solidarity" in COSATU documents.
3. Martin J. Murray, *The Revolution Deferred: The Painful Birth of Post-Apartheid South Africa* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 141-42.
4. Jeremy Baskin, *Striking Back: A History of COSATU*, p. 6. Much of the history of the South African labor movement draws on this and other work of Baskin, including articles in the 10th Anniversary edition of *The Shopsteward*, a bimonthly magazine published by COSATU and now available on COSATU's website.
5. At this stage, the ANC was an all-African organization, though it touted non-racialism as a fundamental principle, and it was allied with the Coloured People's Congress, the Natal Indian Congress and the (white) Congress of Democrats. SACTU affiliated itself with this multiracial Congress Alliance and participated in the conference that drafted the Freedom Charter.
6. NUM was led by Cyril Ramaphosa, who was plucked out of CUSA's legal department to head the new union. Ramaphosa would later be elected general secretary of the ANC.
7. *Shopsteward*, Johannesburg, SA, December 1995, p. 9. For a more detailed account of the unity talks, see Baskin, *Striking Back*, pp. 34-51
8. In addition to restrictions placed on union activity and stepped up harassment and arrests of officials and organizers, the homes of many COSATU office-holders and numerous union offices were broken into, burned or bombed, including union headquarters at COSATU house in downtown Johannesburg.
9. Murray, *Revolution Deferred*, pp. 146-47.
10. *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 16, no. 3 (January 1992).
11. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 15, 1995.
12. See African National Congress, *The Reconstruction and Development Programme: A Policy Framework* (Johannesburg, SA: Umanyano Publications, 1994).
13. Author's interview with Dot Keet, Cape Town, March 8, 1995.
14. Interview with the author, East London, February 23, 1995.
15. For an elaboration of this position, see "A Draft Programme for the Alliance," a COSATU Discussion Paper presented to the Executive Committee of the Alliance, November 22, 1996 (available on COSATU's website).
16. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 8, 1995.
17. Another controversial reform was the introduction of workplace forums under the 1995 Labour Relations Act. This step toward factory-level co-determination needs to be examined by anyone interested in the new directions in South African labor relations, but it goes beyond the scope of this study.
18. Interview with the author, Port Elizabeth, February 25, 1995.

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19. Whether this was interpreted to mean the working class in the lead role or a party of middle class intellectuals that represented the working class, as was often the case in third world "socialist" movements, was another question. One consequence of COSATU's powerful role in the South African Left was an emphasis in party politics, as well as in union affairs, on worker-leaders.
20. Jeremy Baskin, ed., *Unions in Transition: COSATU at the Dawn of Democracy* (Johannesburg, SA: NALEDI, 1994), pp. 2, 25.
21. Murray, *Revolution Deferred*, p. 28.
22. Baskin, *Transition*, p. 54.
23. Baskin, *Transition*, p. 12.
24. For details, see *Shopsteward*, vol. 7, no. 1 (February 1998).
25. For a breakdown of historical trends in job losses in the 1990s and COSATU's proposals to remedy this, see "Creating Jobs in South Africa: Key Issues and Strategies," prepared by COSATU for a Presidential Jobs Summit in April 1998 and available on its website.
26. Baskin, *Transition*, p. 42.
27. Interview with the author, East London, February 24, 1995.
28. Interview with the author, Port Elizabeth, February 25, 1995.
29. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 13, 1995.
30. Interview with the author, East London, February 23, 1995.
31. Presentation at a conference on labor and transformation, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, February 9, 1995.
32. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 13, 1995.
33. See "A Draft Programme for the Alliance," a COSATU discussion paper presented to the Executive Committee of the Alliance, November 22, 1996 (available on COSATU's website).
34. The resolutions passed at the Sixth Congress are reproduced in *Shopsteward*, vol. 7, no. 1 (February 1998).

CHAPTER TEN

1. Much of the historical information for this section is drawn from Tom Killion, "The Eritrean Labor Movement: A Brief History," an unpublished paper drafted for the NCEW for its founding congress September 9-11, 1994. See also Tom Killion's series "Labor and Liberty" in *Eritrea Profile*, Asmara, Eritrea, September 1994.
2. The industrial workforce dropped from a high of 32,400 in 1947 to 10,350 by the time Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea in 1962 (see Killion).
3. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 4, 1995.
4. See Connell, *Against All Odds*.
5. These figures are taken from an unpublished profile of the organizations and departments of the EPLF that was assembled under the auspices of the PFDJ in 1995 for an as-yet-unpublished book.
6. This statement is taken from a report produced after a series of workshops with NCEW leaders in October 1995.
7. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 3, 1994.
8. Interview with the author, Asmara, September 26, 1994.
9. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 20, 1994.
10. See "National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW)," a profile of the

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NCEW and the economy put out by the union in 1994.
11. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 9, 1996.
12. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 13, 1994.
13. Interview with the author at the Mereb Textile Factory, Asmara, October 18, 1994.
14. These interviews were conducted in Asmara on October 20, 1994.
15. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 4, 1996.
16. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 11, 1994.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. Lisa Haugaard, "In and Out of Power: Dilemmas for Grassroots Organizing in Nicaragua" in *Socialism and Democracy*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 1991), p. 162.
2. The Sandinistas never had a strong presence among urban workers during the insurgency, tending to seek their support as individuals in their communities rather than at their workplaces. See James Dunkerly, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America* (New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 240-41.
3. FETSALUD was actually the one functioning trade union that carried over from the Somoza period, though it gained considerably in size and strength under the FSLN in what was, in effect, an organizational monopoly in the health sector. UNAG was formed in 1981 as a split-off from the ATC, when organizers determined that the small- and medium-sized rural producers had distinct interests that called for a separate organization.
4. Interview with the author, Managua, April 28, 1995.
5. Haugaard, p. 162, p. 67.
6. Interview with FNT researcher Rolando Membreño, Managua, May 23, 1995.
7. See Carlos Vilas, *NACLA*, June 1990, p. 13.
8. Telez and another party leader who played a public role in ending this confrontation — Luis Carrión — later left the FSLN to join the new Sandinista Renovation Movement, the MRS, after the party split in 1994. Neither had been tainted by the rumors surrounding the "piñata," however. A key issue in the break-off was the efficacy of parliamentary opposition over militant confrontation.
9. Interview with the author, Managua, May 23, 1995.
10. Interview with the author, Matagalpa, May 9, 1995.
11. Haugaard, p. 171.
12. Interview with the author, Managua, May 8, 1995.
13. Interview with the author, Managua, May 8, 1995.
14. Interview with the author, Managua, May 15, 1998.
15. Interview with the author, Matagalpa, May 11, 1995.
16. Interview with the author, Managua, May 23, 1995.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

1. "Economic & Social Conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip," quarterly report, Summer 1997, UN Office of the Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories.
2. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 17, 1994.
3. In 1997 there was a slight increase to 38,0000, according to UNSCO (Spring 1998 Report, Jerusalem).
4. This section and the paragraphs that follow draw on the work of Joost Hiltermann in *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
5. Legally, registered Palestinian workers were paid the same wages as Israelis. However, slightly more than half these wages were deducted by the state and the Israeli trade union federation, the Histadrut, for insurance and social security. Little, if any, of this reverted to the Palestinian workers. Thus, Israeli workers were protected from "unfair" competition in the labor market, while they benefited from the increased pot of funds for programs serving them at Palestinian expense. Unregistered workers hired for unskilled tasks in construction, agriculture and various service capacities — jobs shunned by Israeli workers — had nothing deducted but received far lower wages.
6. Hiltermann, citing *The Jerusalem Post* for February 15, 1985, quotes then Defense Minister Yitzak Rabin as saying "there will be no development in the Occupied Territories initiated by the Israeli government, and no permits given for expanding agriculture or industry, which may compete with the State of Israel."
7. Hiltermann, p. 65.
8. Hiltermann, p. 74.
9. Interview with the author, Gaza City, November 30, 1994.
10. Interview with the author, Ramallah, November 17, 1994.
11. Interview with the author, Ramallah, January 11, 1996.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. Alejandro Martínez Cuenca, *Sandinista Economics in Practice: An Insider's Critical Reflections* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 29-30.
2. Interview with the author, April 28, 1995.
3. Martínez argues that "the origins of the February 1990 electoral defeat of *Sandinismo* are found many years before that election. We failed to give sufficient importance to the wearing down of the economy — not only a product of the war" (p. 11). He amplifies this later, after noting that the party began with "an exceptionally distributionist thesis" and gave little or no importance to the need to increase productivity or overall production: "The fundamental problems at the beginning of the revolution were false optimism, a great deal of inexperience, and very little appreciation of the limits imposed by an economic process which, when faced with international reality, was going to have to demand efficiency and productivity" (p. 49).
4. Martínez, p. 76.
5. Interview with the author, May 22, 1995.

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6. On his visit to Managua, Pope John Paul heaped ridicule on liberation theology, called on Nicaraguan Catholics to give their loyalty and obedience to the Archbishop (a vocal critic of the Sandinistas) and repeatedly indicated support for the *contras* fighting the FSLN government.
7. The agrarian situation was admittedly quite complex and did not lend itself to simple solutions from any ideological corner. In an email exchange on this issue, Jack Spence argued that "the central problem was that the agrarian reforms could not benefit all peasants (whether in state farms or coops); that purchasing by the government of large portions of the food crops and government set prices bothered many peasants (but the government had also an urban constituency that wanted lower food prices), and that the war reduced the reach of other programs that would help peasant families. The *contras* got recruits because of alienation from the Sandinistas, and because of rural *caudillismo* (if the leader of the valley goes with the *contras*, for whatever reason, other peasants from the valley follow) and because it was very difficult in some zones to be neutral. Where the *contras* posed the larger threat, peasants would join them out of self-preservation. I don't see it so much as a problem of political theory or party failings, as inherent policy dilemmas and the strength and U.S. backing of the *contras*, for which there was no perfect solution." Email to the author, October 19, 2000.
8. "The FSLN's working assumption was that there existed a consolidated social class in the countryside," wrote Bendaña and Ortega in *A Peasant Tragedy*. "This assumption was founded on a deficient understanding of the complexity of social relations in the rural areas. A vastly simplified and ideologized understanding of reality, of the structure and dynamic of any social class, led to the presumption that things would naturally fall into place in the countryside. According to the conception, just as in the rest of the nation, two antagonistic social classes would square off against one another in the rural areas: the peasantry and the bourgeoisie. The agricultural sector was ripe for the great confrontation between proletariat and bourgeoisie, a road down which the peasants were ready and waiting to be led…or so went the thinking. The problem was that the land-owning peasant was both proprietor and peasant farmer, and therefore had one foot in each category."
9. On March 9, 1981, President Reagan approved an initial commitment of $19 million for a CIA program to organize Nicaraguan exiles. This was augmented in December by another $20 million to underwrite a military training project already underway by Argentine intelligence services. The Argentine connection, fueled by anger at Sandinista support for Argentinian guerrillas, ended in 1982 with the outbreak of war with Britain over the Falklands/Malvinas islands, at which point the U.S. took over the project. For more details, see Alejandro Bendaña and Zoilamerica [Narváez] Ortega, "The Casey Plan" in Bendaña, *A Peasant Tragedy*.
10. Bendaña and Ortega, "Forward," *A Peasant Tragedy*.
11. Hemisphere Initiatives director Jack Spence, who monitored the elections, describes the line-up this way: "The coalition had conservative, centrist and even supposedly leftist parties in it. The parties themselves had virtually no name recognition and very little organized base. Some, such as Vice President Godoy's party, were an exception to this, with some 'cadre' scattered around

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the country, at least some eyes and ears. But they were really 'sofa' parties, as the FSLN said. The only thing they had in common was being anti-FSLN and having the hope that if they won each little party would get its share of the spoils. However, there were fault lines between the extent of anti FSLN feelings each had. You could argue that the various branches of the Liberal party led the charge, but the UNO also operated as a collection of individuals. Aleman, who was not well known until he started doing public works projects in Managua, was outspoken, as were several former *contras* (though not all) and as was Godoy. It was visceral with Godoy, but he had a similar dislike for [presidential advisor] Lacayo. In short, it is hard to define this as a party issue, particularly because Chamorro herself did not have a party to speak of. This is why when Lacayo tried to run in 1996 he formed a whole new organization." [Email, July 30, 2000]

12. Martínez, p. 14.
13. The FSLN distributed homes, cars and other property to party members and government officials to whom such perks had never been deeded. The Ministry of Agriculture also churned out hundreds of titles for property given in land reform but never legalized. However, some party officials and friends made out better than others, leading many people to assume widespread corruption. Certainly there was some, but the main impetus for this seems to have been a frantic push to protect revolutionary gains. The fact that it happened in this way was more a result of earlier carelessness and a lack consideration that the front might lose power than a function of greed or personal ambition, though some people clearly took advantage of the confusion to benefit themselves.
14. Interview with the author, Managua, May 19, 1995.
15. Interview with the author, Managua, Aug. 12, 1992.
16. Interview with the author, Managua, April 28, 1995.
17. Communal Movement head Enrique Picado co-authored the Majority tendency's February 1994 policy paper published in *Barricada* with Luis Carrión and Sergio Ramírez.
18. There was a spectrum of opinion on these issues within the Directorate, according to Ricardo Pereira, that ran from the structuralist end, represented by Tomás Borge and Monica Boltadano, to those more disposed to autonomy, grouped around Lumberto Campbell and Victor Tirado. Bayardo Arce was the interlocutor, while Ortega moved back and forth between the two poles — conceptually closer to the autonomy group but habitually drawn to power and, in practice, more often aligned with the authoritarian side. Arce was charged with producing a proposal for party democratization at the congress, which adopted many of the recommendations.
19. For a fuller elaboration of these tendencies and the 1994 congress, see Midge Quandt, *The FSLN in Nicaragua: Conflict and Consensus* (Washington, DC: Nicaragua Network Education Fund, 1994).
20. In October 1994, the pro-Majority editor of the Sandinista daily *Barricada*, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, was replaced by William Grigsby, who wrote an editorial that characterized Sergio Ramírez as a "traitor" to the FSLN, likening him to a comrade of Augostíno Sandino who went over to the U.S. in 1927. After Chamorro's removal, *Barricada* columnist Sofia Montenegro also

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resigned from both the paper and the party.
21. Dora Maria Télez, Luis Carrión and Myrna Cunningham resigned. Benigna Mendiola and Victor Tirado, who had identified themselves with this current, remained in the party.
22. See Judy Butler *et al*., *Democracy and Its Discontents: Nicaraguans Face the Election* (Cambridge, MA: Hemisphere Initiatives, Oct. 1, 1996), pp. 28-35.
23. The World Bank Atlas estimated per capita income in Nicaragua in 1994 at $360, compared to $250 for Haiti.
24. Judy Butler *et al*., *Democracy and Its Discontents: Nicaraguans Face the Election* , p. 7.
25. Lisa Haugaard, "Interesting Times: Nicaragua in Revolution," in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (December 1992).
26. Ironically, the U.S. suspended a $100 million aid package in 1992 under pressure from right-wing U.S. Senator Jesse Helms, who criticized what he saw as the slow pace of "reforms" and the too cozy relationship between the Chamorro government and the FSLN.
27. See Liza Zimmerman, "Few Surprises at Sandinista Congress," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 32, no. 1 (July/August 1998), pp. 16-19.
28. "The Non-governmental Emergency Relief and Reconstruction Coalition's Proposal for the Reconstruction and Development of Nicaragua," received by email on December 2, 1998. See also the Non-governmental Emergency and Reconstruction Coalition's proposal for the international donor meeting in Stockholm, May 1999.
29. In late 1998, polls showed support dropping for both men as news of the bilateral pact broke (*Envío*, December 1998).
30. See Alejandro Bendaña, "Strange Bedfellows: The Alemán-Ortega Pact, *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 33, no. 2 (September/October 1999), pp. 20-21.
31. Interview with the author, Managua, April 23, 1995.
32. "FSLN Candidate Herty Lewites Wins in Managua," Nicaragua Network Hotline, November 6, 2000.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. In 1996, PPP chairman Beshir Barghouthi was also offered a cabinet post as minister of industry, which he accepted over vigorous protests from within his own party.
2. The party had also healed a minor rift in 1989 when it re-absorbed a Leninist splinter that had broken off from the Jordanian CP in 1977.
3. Interview with the author, Jerusalem, November 19, 1994.
4. Interview with the author, Jerusalem, November 22, 1994.
5. Interview with the author, Bethlehem, November 23, 1994.
6. Interview with the author, Gaza City, November 29, 1994.
7. This number had been three-to-six during the *intifada* for security purposes.
8. Interview with the author, Burqa, December 5, 1994.
9. Interview with the author, Gaza City, November 30, 1994.
10. Interview with the author, Gaza City, November 29, 1994.
11. Interview with the author, Gaza City, November 30, 1994.

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12. Sophie Claudet, "The Changing Role of Palestinian NGOs Since the Establishment of the Palestinian Authority (1994-1996)," a study prepared for the West Bank/Gaza Unit of the World Bank, July 1996, p. 6.
13. Quoted by David Hirst in his article "Shameless in Gaza," *The Guardian Weekly*, April 27, 1997.
14. Interview with the author, Birzeit University, December 7, 1994.
15. Interview with the author, El Bireh, November 24, 1994.
16. Claudet, p. 1.
17. Information drawn from Moustafa Barghouthi, "Palestinian NGOs and their Role in Building a Civil Society" (East Jerusalem: UPMRC, undated).
18. Moustafa Barghonti, "Palestinians at the Crossroads," a paper presented at the Gaza Mental Health Program Conference, Palestine in Transition: Rehabilitation and Community Development, September 1995.
19. Interview with the author, Ramallah, December 7, 1994.
20. Popular and Democratic Front cadres were hamstrung by the external leadership's insistence on re-igniting the *intifada* while insisting its members ignore the elections.
21. The head of Gaza's Red Crescent Society, Dr. Haidar Abdul Shafi was a highly respected political veteran, who was close to the PCP during much of the Israeli occupation but who remained formally unaffiliated. He headed the Palestinian delegation to the Madrid talks in 1992 and was offered, but refused, a cabinet position in the PA. Throughout this period, he headed a loosely organized nonparty opposition organization called the Democracy-Building Movement. He later resigned from the Palestinian Legislative Council in protest over Arafat's high-handed treatment of the toothless parliament-in-waiting.
22. The JMCC was set up during the early stages of the *intifada* to disseminate alternative information to local and international media and is now the publisher of the weekly *Palestine Report* and a range of specialized surveys and policy analyses. I interviewed Khatib at his East Jerusalem office on January 7, 1996.
23. Interview with the author, Ramallah, January 10, 1996.
24. Interview with the author, East Jerusalem, January 9, 1996.
25. Interview with the author, Ramallah, January 11, 1996.
26. Interview with the author, East Jerusalem, January 10, 1996.
27. Interview with the author, Boston, MA, November 12, 1998.
28. Another was veteran *Al Taliah* journalist Abdel Magid Hamdeen, whom I had interviewed earlier.
29. Of the forty-one CC members, twenty-five were elected at the congress for four-year terms. The other sixteen were chosen at the district level and could be replaced any time their constituents wished to do so.
30. Interview with the author, Boston, MA, November 12, 1998.
31. Apart from Sharon's brutality in Gaza in the early 1970s and his implication in the massacres of Palestinian refuges in Lebanon in 1982, he served as the housing minister in Netanyahu's Likud government in the early 1990s where he presided over a massive increase in Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Gaza after the Olso process got underway. Sharon had already provoked similar protests by establishing residence in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem's

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Old City and draping an Israeli flag across the narrow walkway below his apartment. He was the acting Likud party head at the time of his foray to Haram al-Sharif. Many thought his intrusion had a dual purpose — to sandbag the Oslo negotiations and to upstage Netanyahu, who was preparing to challenge Sharon for party leadership in the next Israeli elections (likely to come soon precisely because Barak's fragile coalition was disintegrating over the "peace process"). It was an eminently cynical move — and it succeeded.

32. Haram al-Sharif, where the prophet Mohammed is reputed to have risen to heaven, is the third holiest site in Islam (after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia). Israel left it under Muslim administration after capturing it in the 1967 war. Since then, it has become a potent symbol for Palestinian insistence on the need for genuine sovereignty over East Jerusalem in any peace agreement. The fact that such sovereignty was not offered by the Israelis (or supported by the Clinton administration) at the Camp David "final status" talks was a key reason that the negotiations there collapsed. The power of this symbolism and the role it played in the disintegrating Oslo process was undoubtedly what drove Sharon to choose this moment to make his high-profile visit to the site, which Jews call Temple Mount and also invest with religious significance.
33. In the seven years since Oslo, per capita GNP had declined by twenty percent, despite the PA's receipt of over $3 billion in foreign aid. Meanwhile, Israel was prospering due to increased foreign investment and trade and the end of the Arab economic boycott [Atif Kubursi, "Economic Decline and Dependency in the West Bank and Gaza Strip," an information brief from the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, Washington, DC, July 5, 2000].
34. To the U.S. media and policymakers, this was a generous "concesssion." That it appeared so was in part a function of an Israeli ploy: successive regimes had reneged on the 1995 Oslo II pact that obligated them to withdraw from most of the West Bank and Gaza in three stages before they got to final status talks. Instead, they held back on the last withdrawals within this preparatory framework and then tendered them as their final offer. From the Palestinian standpoint, the compromise had already been made when they accepted the concept of two co-equal states, one Israeli, one Palestinian, and agreed to yield seventy-eight percent of historic Palestine to Israel within its 1967 borders.
35. Islamic Jihad, which carried out a November bombing inside Israel, remained outside this consensus.
36. Graham Usher, "The Unifying Impact of the Al-Aqsa Intifada," an information brief from the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine, Washington, DC, November 3, 2000.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1. The ANC won thirty-two seats to the Inkatha Freedom Party's thirty-four in KwaZulu/Natal (while the newly formed Democratic Party took seven), and it won eighteen seats in the Western Cape to the National Party's seventeen (with the Democratic Party taking five), according to the Johannesburg-based *Mail & Guardian*, June 6, 1999.
2. Mbeki, a member of the SACP politburo, did not inform other party members

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of the clandestine negotiations. When the unbanning was announced, he quietly resigned from the party rather than go public with his membership. Mbeki had joined the party in 1962 and served in its top leadership since 1977 (with a brief lapse when he was dropped and then reappointed). Many party members felt angry and betrayed over his behavior during and after this congress. For details, see Mark Gevisser's six-part series on Thabo Mbkei (excerpts from an unpublished book) in the *Sunday Times* of South Africa in May-June 1999, available on the paper's website (www.suntimes.co.za).

3. Interview with the author, Durban, February 15, 1995.
4. Interview with the author, East London, February 23, 1995.
5. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 10, 1995.
6. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 15, 1995.
7. For more details and further sources, see Hein Marais's analysis of the post-apartheid economy in *South Africa: Limits to Change* (London: Zed Books, 1998), pp. 105-08. The ANC-led government tried unsuccessfully to raise salaries for cabinet ministers to $132,000 and MPs to $54,000 in 1994 at a time when the average annual household income for black families was $4,600. After a public hearing they retreated. For more on this, see David Goodman, *Fault Lines: Journeys into the New South Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
8. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 7, 1995.
9. Suttner and others in the SACP acknowledge a debt to the Russian activist Boris Kagarlitsky for his writings on the role of radical or structural reforms in the revolutionary process. For an early elaboration of his views, see Boris Kagarlitsky, *The Dialectic of Change* (London: Verso, 1989). See also Boris Kagarlitsky, "Letter to South Africa," *Links*, no. 4 (Jan.-March 1995), in which he writes: "The democratisation of power and the participation of the masses in decision-making cannot in themselves guarantee that the reforms will be successful. But if these steps are not taken, failure is inevitable."
10. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 7, 1995. I had also discussed these issues with Suttner upon first meeting him in January 1993, and we have corresponded on these and other questions since then.
11. Interview with the author, Cape Town, March 9, 1995.
12. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 13, 1995.
13. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 17, 1995.
14. For a further elaboration of Gramsci's views on socialism and civil society, see Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Letters* (London: Pluto Press, 1988) and *Selections from Political Writings (1921-26)* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).
15. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, March 16, 1995.
16. *The African Communist*, No. 137 (Second Quarter 1994), Johannesburg, SA, p. 47.
17. Interview with the author, Cape Town, January 18, 1996.
18. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 16, 1996.
19. Interview with the author, Cape Town, January 19, 1996.
20. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 17, 1996.
21. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 15, 1996.
22. Interview with the author, Johannesburg, January 14, 1996.
23. Marais, p. 251.

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24. See Marais, pp. 146-76.
25. Marais, p. 192.
26. Marais, p. 194.
27. The full text of COSATU's 6th Congress report is available at COSATU's website (www.cosatu.org.za).
28. "The full text of the program discussion documents prepared for the SACP's 10th congress appeared in the quarterly journal *The African Communist* (No. 149, Second Quarter 1998). A party analysis of the congress together with a lively debate over the implications of Mbeki's interventions appeared in the next issue of the journal. These are available on the SACP's website (www.sacp.org.za)
29. "Address to the COSATU Special Congress" available on the party's website (www.sacp.org.za).
30. "Towards An Economic Strategic Perspective," a discussion paper prepared for the May 2000 SACP strategy conference, available at the party's website (www.sacp.org.za). The paper cites a Wharton Economics Forecasting Associates survey carried out in February 2000 that showed that the poorest forty percent of black households saw a drop of twenty percent in income between 1991 to 1996. In the same period, according to the study, the proportion of black households among the richest ten percent of households in South Africa more than doubled. It also noted that the white middle class (defined as those earning more than R72, 000 a year) shrank by three percent between 1991 and 1996, while the black middle class grew by seventy-eight percent.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1. For a detailed analysis of Eritrea's infrastructure at this stage, see the report prepared for US/AID in March 1994 by John Miller *et al.*, "An Assessment of Municipal Management in Eritrea, March 1994, Abt Associates (Cambridge, MA).
2. Interview with the author, Asmara, November 8, 1992. A version of this interview appeared in *Against All Odds*.
3. Interviews with the author, Asmara, November 4 and 10, 1992.
4. I monitored the voting in Addis Ababa on April 23 and in Asmara and outlying villages on April 24-25. For further details on the referendum and the principle steps in the next phase of the transition, see Iyob, pp. 138-43.
5. Isaias was the front's chair, but he was not involved in its day-to-day activities. The general secretary was Al-Amin Mohammed Sayid. The secretariat's other leading members were Yemane Gebreab (political affairs), Zemhret Yohannes (research and documentation), Hagos Gebrehiwet (economic affairs), and Abdella Jaber (organizational affairs).
6. See Bereket Habte Selassie and Richard A. Rosen, "The Eritrean Constitutional Process: An Interview with Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie" in *Eritrean Studies Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1999), pp. 139-79.
7. The constituent assembly was comprised of members of the national parliament, all the elected members of the countries' six regional assemblies and seventy-five representatives of the diaspora.

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8. Zemhret was in the field with the ELF from 1975 to 1981, when it came under attack by the EPLF and disintegrated into factions that took refuge in Sudan. He returned to Eritrea in 1983 with an ELF group known as *Sagem* ("return") to begin a process of dialogue with EPLF that culminated in a merger at that front's 1987 congress. During the last years of the war, he served with the EPLF's political education section (interview with the author, Asmara, October 1, 1994).
9. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 28, 1994.
10. "Achieving Global Human Security: Eritrea's View," presented at the biennial International Development Conference in Washington, DC on January 16, 1995 and reprinted in *Eritrea Profile*, January 31, 1995.
11. BBC Focus on Africa, September 9, 1994.
12. Interview with the author, Asmara, October 20, 1994.
13. For example, I helped secure a modest grant for the RCHRD from the Boston-based agency Grassroots International.
14. Email exchange with the author, October 2000.
15. Interview with the author, Asmara, July 24, 1998.
16. Interview with the author, Asmara, August 8, 1998.
17. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 2, 1996.
18. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 5, 1996.
19. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 7, 1997.
20. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 9, 1996.
21. Interview with the author, Asmara, August 10, 1998.
22. Interview with the author, Asmara, June 30, 1997.
23. Interview with the author, Asmara, July 27, 1998.
24. As did I in an essay co-authored with Frank Smyth. See "Africa's New Bloc," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 2 (March-April), New York, NY.
25. For a more detailed analysis of this crisis, see my articles "Shootout in the Horn of Africa: A View from Eritrea," *Middle East Report*, no. 210 (spring 1999) and "Against More Odds: The Second Siege of Eritrea," *Eritrean Studies Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1999).
26. Interview with the author, Asmara, December 12, 1999.
27. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 18, 2000.
28. Email to the author, October 17, 2000.
29. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 9, 2000.
30. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 29, 2000.
31. Interview with the author, Massawa, February 22, 1999.
32. Interview with the author, Asmara, March 13, 2000.

CONCLUSION

1. "Advancing Social Transformation in the Era of Globalisation," a Political Discussion Paper circulated by the COSATU leadership in May 2000 for its 7th National Congress, convened 18 - 21 September 2000.

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My deepest thanks go to my wife, Debbie Hird, without whose encouragement — and occasional prodding — this unfolding tale might never have come to a close between these covers. And to my publisher Kassahun Checole, who believed in the project throughout and without whom it might never have seen print.

There is, of course, no neat ending for these narratives, only points at which one can halt for a moment, catch one's breath, reflect a bit, and then plunge in again. That is the challenge — and the exhilaration — of social and political transformation. I salute those who live these stories still and, in doing so, carry them forward to new and as yet uncharted realms.

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RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

ERITREA

There are websites for the **PFDJ** and the unions of women, youth and workers (**NUEW, NUEYS, NCEW**) that are reachable either by searching for their acronyms or by going through the following sites.

Dehai is an Eritrean community information network based in the U.S. that carries news reports, government press releases, historical material, documents and debates on issues involving Eritrea.

Website: http://www.dehai.org

Visafric is the best site for current news on Eritrea.

Website: http://www.visafric.com

Asmarino is the best site for cultural material and the easiest one to use for links to other sites:

Website: http://www.asmarino.com

SOUTH AFRICA

The **ANC, SACP** and **COSATU** websites are linked to each other and to many political sites in South Africa. The SACP's site carries the party's quarterly journal *The African Communist*. COSATU's carries the unions' monthly magazine *Shopsteward*. All three sites carry extensive historical material, as well as current strategy papers, discussion documents, profiles of leaders and email addresses.

Websites: http://www.anc.org.za
http://www.sacp.org.za
http://www.cosatu.org.za

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The *Weekly Mail & Guardian* is a Johannesburg-based newspaper and online news service, whose website has reporting on South Africa and the rest of the continent and news links to other sites.

Website: http://www.mg.co.za

Southern Africa Report is a monthly magazine of left political analysis and commentary on South Africa and the southern Africa region published by the Toronto Committee for Links between Southern Africa and Canada.

Southern Africa Report
427 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ontario M4S 1X7, Canada
Voice: (1-416) 967-5562
Email: tclsac@web.net
Website: http://www.web.net/~tclsac

PALESTINE

The **PPP** website carries news, current affairs, and an introduction to the party. The main site is in Arabic, but there is an English version with press releases and other links coming soon.

Website: http://www.palpeople.org

There is some **PFLP** news and historical material on the Democratic Palestine website, which has links to related sites in English.

Website: http://members.tripod.com/~freepalestine/

The **Women's Affairs Technical Committee** website carries news and analysis on women's issues and activities and extensive links to women's organizations, human rights groups, media and other Palestinian institutions in the West Bank and Gaza.

Website: http://www.pal-watc.org
Palestine Report is a weekly print and electronic publication of the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center that covers political and economic issues in the West Bank and Gaza.

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JMCC
P.O. Box 25047
East Jerusalem 97300, via Israel
Email: jmcc@baraka.org
Website: http://mail.jmcc.org/media/reportonline

Middle East International is a biweekly magazine with current news and analysis of trends and events throughout the region, with a frequent focus on Palestine-related issues.

MEI
21 Collingham Road
London SW5 0NU
Voice: (44-171) 373-5228
Fax: (44-171) 370-5956
Email: steve@meiuk.u-net.com

Middle East Report is a quarterly journal published by the Middle East Research and Information Project with in-depth analysis of the region and U.S. foreign policy. MERIP also runs an active website and distributes topical news briefs on email.

MERIP
1500 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20005
Voice: (1-202) 223-3677
Fax: (1-202) 223-3604
Email: admin@merip.org
Website: http://www.merip.org

NICARAGUA

The **FSLN** website carries historical material and party documents in Spanish.

Website: http://www.netra/tmx.com.ni/~fsln/

The **Puntos de Encuentro** website carries the bimonthly feminist magazine *La Boletina*, along with reports on women's and youth rights issues and links to other organizations. It is mainly in Spanish, with some English (more to be added in the future).

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Website: http://www.puntos.org.ni/

The **Nicaragua News Service** is a weekly report from Managua published by the Nicaragua Network. Topics include: Nicaraguan politics, economic news, labor organizing news, environmental news, social movements.

Nicaragua Network
1247 E Street SE
Washington, DC 20003
Voice: (1-202) 544-9355
Fax: (1-202) 544-9359
Email: nicanet@afgj.org
Website: http://www.infoshop.org/nicanet/

Envío is a monthly magazine published by the Jesuit Central American University in Managua with commentary and analysis on economic, political, and social issues in Nicaragua.

Envío
Apartado A-194
Managua, Nicaragua
Voice: (50-5) 278-2557
Fax: (50-5) 277-2583
Email: envio@ns.uca.edu.ni

NACLA Report on the Americas is a bimonthly magazine of left reporting, commentary, and analysis on issues and events throughout Latin America.

NACLA
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 454
New York, NY 10115
Voice: (1-212) 870-3146
Fax: (1-212) 870-3305
Email: nacla@nacla.org
Website: http://www.nacla.org

Nicaragua-LANIC is a University of Texas-based website that carries dozens of links to other sites on Nicaragua on a wide range of topics and themes.

Website: http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/nicaragua

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