

World leaders mourn Archbishop Desmond Tutu in acknowledgement of services rendered to imperialism

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Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the voluble exponent of the peaceful overthrow of apartheid, died on December 26 at the age of 90.

A tidal wave of hypocrisy was unleashed as various imperialist scoundrels proclaimed him an inspiration, South Africa's "moral compass" whose "Christian values" helped to secure the peaceful transition to black majority rule in 1994.

This was because Tutu's religious moralising masked a political perspective and programme that served the interests of imperialism.

African National Congress (ANC) President Cyril Ramaphosa described Tutu as "a global icon" and a man of "great moral stature," according him a state funeral at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town with seven days of official mourning and two days of lying in state.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "deeply saddened" by Tutu's death, describing him as a "critical figure in the fight against apartheid and in the struggle to create a new South Africa." Former US President Barack Obama called Tutu "a mentor, a friend and a moral compass for me and so many others."

President Joe Biden called him a "true servant of God and of the people" whose "courage and moral clarity helped inspire our commitment to change American policy toward the repressive apartheid regime in South Africa."

Behind this sententious blather, what they were really praising was the role this man of the Church played in preserving capitalist relations in South Africa during the 1980s when the vicious apartheid regime of President P. W. Botha came within an inch of losing control of the black, working-class townships in the face of mass protests and strikes and the country teetered on the brink of civil war. It was this possibility of maintaining bourgeois rule, opened up by the African National Congress, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), that in reality convinced US and British imperialism to abandon their defence of the apartheid regime of white minority rule. Tutu became a valuable go-between as these new political relations were established.

US President George H. W. Bush saw Tutu, with his close connections to the ANC and its leader, Nelson Mandela, then imprisoned on Robben Island, as a means of safeguarding US interests from the threat of social revolution in South Africa and throughout the continent.

A key player in the ANC's Popular Front politics

After following in his father's footsteps and becoming a teacher, Tutu was ordained in 1961 and spent six years studying and working in Britain,

where he developed the art of sanctimonious moralizing for which he became renowned. Returning to South Africa, he rose through the church hierarchy, becoming general secretary to the South African Council of Churches in 1978.

Tutu espoused non-violent protests and conciliation as the way to end apartheid, opposing the use of violence amid the growing number of lethal clashes between black youths and the security forces in the 1980s. He mediated between the security forces and the protesters and strikers that were making the townships ungovernable. He also supported boycotts and sanctions of South Africa as a means of exerting external pressure to bring about non-violent, democratic change.

Tutu was close to the ANC, whose political perspective was based on the Stalinist two-stage theory declaring the end of apartheid a democratic revolution and a separate and necessary stage before any struggle for socialism could be mounted. The ANC aimed to develop a black bourgeoisie alongside its white counterparts, one that would be politically dominant even though possessing less economic power.

The ANC's Stalinist line, long dictated by Moscow and the very antithesis of Marxism and international socialism, renounced the objective of proletarian revolution.

Trotsky, in his theory of Permanent Revolution, had explained that in the imperialist epoch the democratic tasks associated in the nineteenth century with the bourgeois revolution could only be realized by the taking of power by the working class as part of the struggle for world socialism.

Against this the ANC, under the tutelage of the SACP, advanced the policy of a national democratic revolution, essentially a programme of political reform of the bourgeois state apparatus. To this end they sought to build alliances with supposedly "progressive" forces within South Africa itself, among all classes including the bourgeoisie, but above all in the imperialist states. This was all dressed up in socialistic rhetoric designed to deceive the black working class.

Tutu, a rising star in the Anglican Church that along with South Africa's other Churches gave more than tacit support to the apartheid regime, came to epitomize this bogus perspective. Over the 1980s, many black South Africans came to view Tutu as the public face of the anti-apartheid movement as most of the ANC leaders such as Mandela and Jacob Zuma were in prison or, like Thabo Mbeki and Oliver Tambo, in exile.

This self-publicist and windbag became one of the most internationally recognized representatives of the anti-apartheid movement, particularly in the US, where he benefitted from official anti-Communism and his priestly robes and was often compared to Martin Luther King.

In 1984, Tutu was rewarded with a Nobel Peace Prize "for his role as a unifying leader-figure in the campaign to resolve the problem of apartheid in South Africa."

Two years later, Tutu became the first black Archbishop of Cape Town, in effect the spiritual leader of southern Africa's Anglican churches, as well as president of the All-Africa Conference of Churches, positions he used to insist that black workers must embrace the brotherhood of man and turn the other cheek in their struggle against President Botha's brutal regime.

The transition to black majority rule

It wasn't long before Washington and London's investment in Tutu paid off. By 1989, then President F. W. De Klerk, along with the international and South African mining corporations, banks and other major corporations, came reluctantly to the conclusion that only Mandela, the ANC and its political nexus of COSATU and the SACP could provide the capitalist class with a political life jacket. Without their assistance, capitalism could not survive in South Africa and its collapse could trigger an eruption of political and social conflict in all the former colonies of the imperialist powers.

In February 1990, de Klerk announced the lifting of the ban on political parties such as the ANC and signaled the end of apartheid and white minority rule.

Tutu was to play a vital role as imperialism's interlocutor in negotiations between the ANC, the ruling National Party and the security services for a transition to majority rule. He was especially useful as a reliable conduit to Mandela after his release from 27 years behind bars.

Within months of his release from prison, Mandela was touring the US, speaking before mass audiences in New York City and Boston, meeting with President George H. W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker and addressing a joint session of Congress, despite officially being on the US's terror watch list!

David Dinkins, New York City's first African American mayor, who welcomed Mandela to the city, made clear the reason for the ruling elite's appreciation of Mandela. He said, "If I had been in prison for 27 years as he was, if I had been mistreated the way he was, I would have carried an anger within me. Yet, the most amazing thing about Nelson Mandela was his total absence of bitterness."

Tutu's metaphor of the "Rainbow Nation" provided the political slogan for the post-apartheid regime to be led by Mandela and the ANC that masked its class collaborationist policies.

After taking power, the ANC ditched its pledges to nationalise the banks, mines and major industries and signed secret agreements with the International Monetary Fund to implement free market policies and open up South Africa to international capital. It did so under conditions where the globalisation of production had prompted all the nationalist regimes that had provided the ANC's political inspiration, including the former Soviet Union, to abandon all measures of economic autarky and implement similar IMF-dictated measures to consolidate the economic dominance of the transnational corporations and banks.

Sanitising the crimes of apartheid

Post-apartheid, Tutu's greatest service by far to South African capitalism and world imperialism was as head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).

Mandela, now president, chose Tutu to chair the commission. Set up in 1996, its purpose was to head off popular demands for the trials of those

responsible for the deaths and torture of tens of thousands of black workers and youth under apartheid.

De Klerk and his National Party had originally demanded a general amnesty for the crimes committed under apartheid, threatening that without it the security forces would mutiny. After years of negotiations, he agreed a compromise whereby "a commission would grant individual amnesties on condition that the perpetrators revealed the truth and could prove that their actions were politically motivated." The TRC would be the arena for this political fraud and would even-handedly investigate "abuses" by all parties, including the ANC, between 1960 and December 1993.

The introduction to the TRC's five-volume report, published in 1998, confirmed that the increasingly brutal imposition of apartheid was motivated primarily by fear of social revolution, dressed up as the "communist threat" in Africa; that the decision to end apartheid and bring the ANC to power was aimed at staving off mass revolution by South Africa's workers and youth; and that the path taken by the ANC was designed to prevent just such a revolution.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time:

The Truth and Reconciliation report, despite its authors' intentions, is more than just an indictment of apartheid. It confirms the role played by the ANC in preventing a reckoning by the South African working class with their oppressors and the type of social and economic transformation necessary to establish genuine equality...

His [Tutu's] introduction to the report makes clear that the course pursued by the ANC was designed to prevent a revolution. He writes, "Had the miracle of the negotiated settlement not occurred, we would have been overwhelmed by the bloodbath that virtually everyone predicted as the inevitable ending for South Africa."

Tutu called for reconciliation with the perpetrators of truly horrendous crimes, with victims and perpetrators describing the cold-blooded details of torture and assassination. The Commission catalogued atrocities including the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the killings in Soweto in 1976 and in Langa in 1985, and the death squads in the notorious Vlakplaas camp. It concluded that the ruling National Party government and its security forces were responsible for the majority of human rights abuses, backed by big business and supported by the judiciary, the media and the Church.

But the Commission was nevertheless a whitewash, with its emphasis on gathering evidence and uncovering information rather than prosecuting those who had committed such terrible crimes.

The top echelons of the military still refused to cooperate with the commission and did so with impunity. The National Intelligence Agency was allowed to continue destroying documents as late as 1996. While some lower-ranking members of the security forces confessed to murders and torture in return for an amnesty, as did one cabinet minister, members of the State Security Council, the inner cabinet that constituted the real government in the 1980s and early 90s, pleaded ignorance, blaming their subordinates for what took place.

P.W. Botha, prime minister from 1978 to 1984, chair of the State Security Council in the 1980s and president from 1984 to 1990, denounced the TRC as a circus and refused to give evidence, while de Klerk threatened legal action to ensure that his role in ordering the bombing of Anti-Apartheid and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) offices was redacted in the final report.

The most high-profile figure to be convicted was Eugene de Kok,

known as Prime Evil, the commander of the Vlakplaas counter-insurgency group that executed dozens of opponents of the apartheid government. He was sentenced to 212 years for crimes against humanity in 1996.

None of those who presided over the murderous regime, including Botha whom the report found accountable for gross violations of human rights, were sanctioned for their crimes. The former Minister of Defence General Magnus Malan, charged with conspiring to order massacres in KwaZulu, was acquitted. The prosecutor who tried him was, together with much of the judiciary, a holdover from the apartheid regime and had previously expressed disbelief that government-run hit squads even existed.

One of the last major trials, in April 2002, ended in a failure to prosecute Dr. Wouter Basson, known as “Dr. Death,” who headed the army’s Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme, developed with assistance from US and British intelligence services. Its projects allegedly targeted only black people and sought to poison Mandela and reduce the fertility of black women.

Few of those who failed to apply for amnesty or who were refused amnesty by the TRC were prosecuted. Several high-ranking officials from the security forces, including former Minister of Law and Order, Adriaan Vlok, were given suspended sentences through a plea-bargain process. The report said that there had been calls for “the disqualification or removal from public office of people who have been implicated in violation of human rights,” but the commission had “decided not to recommend that this step be pursued.”

Finally, no one was prosecuted for the crime of apartheid, despite the TRC concluding that apartheid constituted a crime against humanity. Nevertheless, Mandela called on the South African people to accept Tutu’s report.

South Africa’s “moral compass” viewed the defence of the guilty as the price to be paid for ending apartheid. Speaking about putative trials, he said, “It would also have been counterproductive to devote years to hearings about events that, by their nature, arouse very strong feelings. It would have rocked the boat massively, and for too long.”

At a thanksgiving service marking Tutu’s retirement in 1999, Mandela paid tribute to his role and that of the Church, saying, “Archbishop Tutu, with his celebration of our rainbow nation and his powerfully healing guidance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is an inspiration to us all in this most crucial task of reconciling our nation.”

Tutu’s legacy: The ANC in government

Tutu and the ANC had promised that a negotiated settlement with the former rulers would lead to “national unity through truth and reconciliation ... a new and democratic dispensation characterised by a culture of respect for human rights.”

But as the *World Socialist Web Site* correctly foretold:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) findings on human rights violations do nothing to provide justice for the victims of apartheid rule in South Africa. The truth is that the reconciliation it advocates is impossible because, behind the thin veneer of democracy provided by the ending of apartheid, South Africa is still characterised by appalling poverty and inequality.

Successive ANC governments, staffed by corrupt black billionaires, far from ushering in the promised land, have for nearly 30 years set about

building a society even more socially unequal than the apartheid regime.

Unemployment has hit a new record high of 35 percent, with 46 percent of 15–30-year-olds out of work. Around 10 percent of those unemployed are university graduates. The United Nations Human Development Report (HDR), published in 2020, estimates that about 11 million of South Africa’s 60 million population live on less than 28 Rand a day, enough for just one loaf of bread, and one litre of milk. Four million live in “multidimensional poverty,” suffering from malnutrition and poor health, lacking access to clean water and adequate health care and living in miserable shacks.

There is deepening disillusionment with the ANC’s failure to advance the social interests of the millions of black workers who looked to it for political leadership. Support for the government has dwindled in the face of its disastrous handling of the pandemic that has officially claimed 91,000 lives, the vaccination rollout, power outages, water shortages, rising prices, unemployment, poverty and endemic corruption. Increasingly it rests on a thin layer of black bourgeois who have reaped the benefits of “Black Economic Empowerment” as stooges and front men for the major corporations through the ever-greater exploitation of South African workers.

The ANC, like its counterparts in the national liberation movements elsewhere, could not fulfill its promises because it defends the capitalist system, which condemns billions to poverty and misery.

The South African working class can only liberate itself by building a party entirely independent of the capitalist class and its minions in the ANC, based upon an internationalist revolutionary programme to establish workers’ power, abolish capitalism and organize a world socialist society. The decisive political question is the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in South Africa and throughout the world.



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