

South Africa' s Youth Face a Grim Future

“Don'tKnow Much About History”

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DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA: I got into South Africa before I got there.

I did so through meeting a young woman whose given name was Pony in the tradition of South Africans who call their daughters, “Beautiful” or “Truth” or some other creative appellation.

She was on her way home to a small country town, after a year spent in Cuba where she is in a course teaching scientific sport. She was one of a number of scholarship students traveling on the plane with me from Madrid. Cuba had adopted the systematic training system or Sports institutes used in East Germany and put it to good advantage in its award winning State backed athletic program. Now they are sharing their knowledge with other Third World countries

Pony, in her late teens, was one of a large number of foreign students attracted to the idea, and was selected by the Cuban Embassy in Pretoria for the five year opportunity beginning with a immersive Spanish language course. She now speaks Spanish pretty well, and knows all the Cuban revolutionary songs and slogans like “Patria O’ Muerte, Veneceremos,” (“Fatherland or Death, We Will Win”) that tens of thousands of Cubans echo at huge rallies. She laughed when I chanted one at her as we unexpectedly sat next to each other on the large Iberia jet.

As it turned out, I knew more about Cuba’s role in supporting South Africa’s liberation struggle, a gesture of solidarity that led to Fidel Castro being cheered the loudest of all foreign heads of State who attended Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as the first President of a Democratic South Africa. I covered the scene in a film, Countdown To Freedom that I made about the historic 1994 election.

Cuba’s foreign policy has put a premium on backing revolutionary movements since 1960 and was the only country in the world to openly help South Africa militarily by sending its own troops—“internationalist volunteers” to Angola where they defeated the apartheid army in a crucial battle that accelerated the process of political change in Southern Africa. Many Cubans died alongside Angolan soldiers and South African liberation fighters in a war that has been largely forgotten.

Cuba has, in the years since, mellowed in its revolutionary ardor and is in the process of reforming its top-down Socialist economy.

After 19 years of “freedom,” post apartheid South Africa has also cooled its commitment to “struggle politics” and has become more of a “normal” African state, albeit an advanced one

economically. It is now battling corruption within the ranks of its government and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) while coping with enormous challenges to create a new society so that youngsters like Pony who are very ambitious and eager to learn will have a future.

She admitted to me she doesn't know as much about politics or her own history as she would like, and says that's true of many in her generation. That's in part because the real history is not taught in any detail at the schools or shown with any regularity on South African TV stations that are more into selling than telling by endlessly pumping out sports and popular culture shows.

Kids know more about Mandela than the movement he led, an expression of the celebrity worship that dominates youth culture. On TV here, Oprah is better known than such lionesses of the freedom fight as Albertina Sisulu, revered by many as the Mother of the Nation, who died a month ago.

When I asked a young white South African girl who the ANC leader and Mandela law partner Oliver Tambo was, she said, "you mean the airport guy?" Johannesburg's principal airport was renamed for Tambo after years of honoring Afrikaner leaders. (This is all more anecdotal evidence for why South Africa needs its own History Channel of the kind being proposed by producer Anant Singh.)

In Durban, where streets are being renamed for other liberation heroes vandals have blacked out the new street names with paint to protest the change. I was told that people are pissed off in part because it screws up the GPS's in their cars. (I was thrilled to see a highway named after my old friend and London School of Economics colleague, the South African journalist and feminist heroine Ruth First.)

As it turns out, Pony was flying home on June 16th, the annual youth day holiday marking the anniversary of the Soweto uprising of 1976 where kids Pony's age and younger revolted against forced instruction in Afrikaans. (South Africans were scandalized when an iconic picture of a young man carrying a victim of that police massacre was mocked on Facebook. In the new one, the child who had been shot in the original was portrayed smiling and carrying a bottle of beer,)

At least Youth Day is commemorated, as it was this year with concerts and hip-hop shows. In Soweto this time, there was riot when local kids felt excluded and fought their way into a stadium while private cops maced and beat them to the horror of many onlookers. The event turned into chaos when all many kids wanted to do was "krump." the latest street dance craze.

South Africa's President Jacob Zuma hardly made the ceremony a priority, showing up three hours late after most of the crowd left in the company of Julius Malema, the controversial head of the ANC's Youth League. Malema claims to be a youth leader but he is more like a demagogic politician who has learned that the more outrageous his statements, the more "militant" his pose, the more publicity he gets. Sadly the media can't get enough of his provocations.

He and his League are certainly not doing much of a practical sort to improve education or create jobs for tens of thousands of unemployed and perhaps unemployable young people who cheer his rhetoric while being stuck in lives of crime and desperation. They are not

visible in the fight against pervasive child abuse, youth homelessness and even starvation in South Africa.

Here in Durban, one newspaper says “the youth today mistake nastiness, name-calling, crass materialism and the sale of political office to the highest bidder for revolutionary thought.” Some of those demanding more youth leadership are being dismissed as “Gucci revolutionaries.”

Their agenda to nationalize the mines without compensation, a demand rejected by the ANC, is seen as radical to some but analysts think it is a ploy to shake down patronage payments out of worried business leaders, some of whom have already made “donations.”

Even if you agree with it ideologically, the government’s track record in poorly running industries—so called parastatals—does not inspire confidence.

A new book, “Zuma’s Own Goal,” (Africa World Press) picturing the president playing soccer on the cover, details the miserable failures of the ANC’s poverty reduction strategies arguing its continuing loyalty to neo-liberal policies are responsible for a still widening gap between rich and Poor.

Another less academic work, Alexander Parker’s “50 People Who Have Stuffed Up South Africa,” is merciless in denouncing the pathetic job done by the electricity monopoly ESKOM.

Does the government have the chops to run the mines? Apparently not!

South Africa was rebranded globally though last year’s World Cup that brought the country so much world attention and its people so much good cheer.

But now, the people are left with enormous debts to pay off for the construction of fancy stadiums that are barely used. The global financial crisis has also now hit home with unemployment and poverty up and foreign investments down.

The “Rainbow Nation, the hope of so many with the fall of apartheid, faces enormous challenges from structural economic issues that are increasingly intractable, even as waves of new protests mount against a lack of government services.

My new friend Pony seems oblivious to this swirl of contradictions but is bound to be affected by them. I did appreciate her gift of a Che Guevara key ring.

News Dissector Danny Schechter produced the South Africa NowTV series and directed several films about Nelson Mandela. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org. “Don’t Know Much About History,” is a line from an R&B hit sung by Sam Cooke.

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