

The Role of the Decolonization Committee of the United Nations Organization in the Struggle Against Portuguese Colonialism in Africa: 1961-1974

by

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ABSTRACT:

In 1960, the United Nations Organization adopted the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, in which was established the right to self-determination and independence of non-self-governing territories. In order to implement these principles was created in 1961 the Special Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, widely known as Decolonization Committee. Since the beginning of its activities, the Decolonization Committee elected the Portuguese colonialism as one of its main concerns. As the Portuguese government, until 1974, did not recognize its legitimacy, the Committee turned its attention to the national liberation movements. The relationship between the Decolonization Committee and the national liberation movements of Portuguese colonies was touched by several important moments. The Committee became a stage in which the national liberation movements developed a diplomatic struggle against the Portuguese colonial domination.

Background

In the fifteenth century, Portugal began a process of extending the territories under its control, a process through which it achieved dominance over territories geographically spread out, and with which it maintained distinct relationships. Later on, in the nineteenth century, after Brazilian independence in 1822, the Portuguese colonization turned over to African continent to establish a more effective dominion. The pursuit of geographic delimitation and military control over the population shaped what is known as Portuguese Third Empire.

The existence of the Portuguese Third Empire was partially coincident with the *Estado Novo* (New State) regime established from 1926 onwards, when, in the aftermath of a coup d'état, the Portuguese First Republic was overthrown. The *Estado Novo*, stressing a colonial ideology in which the idea of Portuguese historical mission to colonize and civilize had a prominent place, carried out a tenacious resistance to decolonization. Such resistance was expressed in the use of military repression from 1961 onward against the aspirations of the national liberation movements, which, since the end of the fifties, started to emerge in the Portuguese African colonies. It was only after the overthrow of the *Estado Novo* on 25 April 1974 that a political solution was implemented that answered to the demands of national liberation movements for the independence of Portuguese colonies, which took place during 1975.

One of the fields that has recently had a major increase in Portuguese historiography is Decolonization Studies. Some works of reflection devoted to the subject have stressed Portuguese resistance to decolonization, demands of national liberation movements and internal and external pressure against the *Estado Novo* regime. Notwithstanding their unquestionable scientific value, these works disregard the efforts developed by the national liberation movements of Portuguese colonies in supranational institutions such as the United Nations Organization (UN). The limited reflection concerning this issue has been almost restricted to analysis of the main bodies: the Security Council and the General Assembly and their condemnations of Portuguese refusal to recognize the right to self-determination and independence. Neither has the available bibliography approached the circumstances in which the UN became the scenario of a diplomatic campaign developed by the national liberation movements.

Since the subject is an area practically unknown, in this paper, I intend to approach the diplomatic activity of these movements at the UN, particularly, in the Decolonization Committee. Established in 1961, the Decolonization Committee quickly became the main body on issues related to non-self-governing territories. Being a master of non-self-governing territories, Portugal was an inevitable target. By the time it was accepted as UN member in 1955, the General Secretary questioned whether the Portuguese government had territories that could be qualified as "non-self-governing". The Portuguese response was negative, since, according to its revised Constitution of 1951, the non-self-governing territories were overseas provinces.

Given the controversy surrounding the terminology used by both sides, the General Assembly established, in late 1959, a Special Committee charged with settling a definition of the concept of non-self-governing territories. Approved by Resolution 1541 (XV), adopted on 15 December 1960, the Special Committee established that the non-self-governing territories definition should take into account geographic separation in regard to the colonial powers, ethnic and cultural differences between the territories and the rulers and the administrative, juridical and historical subordination (UN, Resolution 1541, p. 29).

One of the outcomes of this definition was Resolution 1542 (XV), adopted also on 15 December 1960, in which all Portuguese colonies were qualified as non-self-governing territories. Under the provisions of this Resolution, Cape Verde, Portuguese Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe and their dependencies, São João Baptista de Ajudá, Angola including the enclave of Cabinda, Mozambique, Goa and the State of India, Macau and dependencies, as well as Timor and dependencies, were within the UN legal capacity of being studied as non-self-governing territories (UN, Resolution 1542, p. 30). As such, the President of the Decolonization Committee invited the Portuguese government to take part in its sessions, but until the middle of 1974, when the decolonization process began, Portugal refused to recognize the Committee's legitimacy. That circumstance, however, did not prevent the examination of the status of Portuguese colonies all the more since the Committee included the national liberation movements in its activities.

The participation of the national liberation movements of Portuguese colonies in the Decolonization Committee raises some questions. For instance, were their expectations in regard to the role that the Committee could play in the decolonization of Portuguese territories realistic? Would the Decolonization Committee be able to meet those expectations? Would the Committee react to the allegation that the national liberation movements represented the peoples of Portuguese colonies and embodied their will of resistance to colonialism? Did the movements use the Committee as a legitimating forum and to create a national identity? These are the questions that I intend to answer in this paper.

The Establishment of the Decolonization Committee

One of the main controversies surrounding the preparation of the UN Charter concerned the dependent territories. In its final version, the Charter had three chapters devoted to the issue: Chapter XI concerning the non-self-governing territories, Chapter XII regarding the Trusteeship System and Chapter XIII about the Trusteeship Council. Until the beginning of the sixties, the UN attention was focused on the trust territories, whose situation was examined by the Trusteeship Council with the intention of promoting independence. Since they practically disappeared in the early sixties, non-self-governing territories became the priority of the UN (Barbier, 1974, p. 16). The analysis of those territories was attached to the Committee on Information from Non-Self-Governing Territories, whose mission was to study the technical and statistic data provided by the colonial powers according to the provisions of Article 73 of the Charter.

This technical approach, however, did not produce prompt alterations in the status of non-self-governing territories, all the more since recent studies point out that «the Charter, far from supporting decolonization, *juridically organized colonialism*» (Lopes, 2003, p. 45). The disruption to this commitment to colonialism was promoted by the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, adopted on 14 December, through the Resolution 1514 (XV). Inscribed in the agenda after a request from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the text was proposed by the African and Asiatic countries, which had the majority in the General Assembly. The Declaration established the self-determination - interpreted as the right to freely determine the political status and pursue economic, social and cultural development - as something inherent to all non-self-governing territories (Martins, 1995. p. 186-187). It was simultaneously seen as a political duty to be fulfilled by the colonial powers and as an inherent right of the colonies, accomplished through independence.

In order to promote its effective application was established by Resolution 1654 (XVI), approved on 27 November 1961, the Special Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. This new organ, known as Decolonization Committee, was a reaction to the transformation that took place in the UN, whose activities concentrated more on the political dimension of decolonization. Initially the mandate of the Committee was set up in indefinite terms, such as to «examine the application of the Declaration, to make suggestions and recommendations on the progress and extent of the implementation of the Declaration, and to report to the General Assembly in its seventeenth session» (UN, Resolution 1654, p. 65). This mandate was, however, progressively circumscribed and completed, allowing the Committee to inform the Security Council about the situations occurring on non-self-governing territories that could threaten the world peace and security. Around 1970, an alteration took place, according to which the General Assembly charged the Committee to promote and strengthen its relationship with the non-self-governing territories and to disseminate, at international level, information regarding decolonization (Santos, 2008. p. 24).

The Decolonization Committee and the National Liberation Movements

Indicative of the UN intention to intervene more decisively in the self-determination of the non-self-governing territories, the establishment of the Decolonization Committee was followed by the adoption of procedures unforeseen in the Charter. Willing to maintain a close relationship with the non-self-governing territories, the Committee insisted on the gathering of information by direct methods, allowing the participation in its sessions of individuals from the colonies. Such participation was accomplished through hearings and petitions¹. In the absence of criteria for the granting of hearings and for the distribution of petitions as official documents, there occurred an extensive participation of national liberation movements, civic organizations and individual personalities from Portuguese colonies in the Decolonization Committee². This extensive participation began, however, to decrease from 1968 onward as a result of an increasing dissatisfaction with regard to the efficiency of the Committee.

In addition the Committee suspended the meetings carried out in Africa, which had facilitated the participation in its sessions of individuals that had no means to travel to the UN headquarter in New York. In these circumstances around 1970, the national liberation movements of Portuguese colonies more actively engaged in the Committee's sessions were: the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), and the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO)³. These movements had in common the commitment to armed struggle and the perception that independence would be achieved through a combination of elements, including diplomatic activity⁴. The significance the movements attached to diplomacy was expressed for example in the establishment of external relations departments inside the organs of MPLA and FRELIMO. Another example was the Ministry of External Affairs of the Revolutionary Government of Angola in Exile (GRAE) set up by the FNLA.

The presence of the movements in the UN was instrumental in their diplomatic strategy. Inspired by the hope entrusted by the UN, in the early years they were enthusiastic in their belief in the efficiency of the Decolonization Committee's political and moral contribution to the independence of Portuguese colonies (UN, A/6000/Rev. 1, p. 182). Nevertheless, the inordinate length of the debates and the absence of viable solutions produced a more realistic conviction that the decisions adopted would not, all by themselves, solve the problem, since they had no practical application. Taking into account the initial enthusiasm and the subsequent adjustment of expectations, one question arises: what benefits did those movements intend to receive with their participation in the Decolonization Committee? Having in mind the inevitable particularities, they wanted above all to: i) acquire legitimacy to their claims; ii) collect material support; iii) isolate the Portuguese government and win international goodwill; and iv) exert pressure upon the countries whose governments allegedly helped Portugal.

The proliferation of movements, which stated that they embodied the true aspirations of Portuguese colonies, forced the FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC and the FRELIMO to request their recognition as peoples representatives. Arguing that they were the only movements committed to armed struggle against the Portuguese government, the major premise on which they based the request for recognition was the argument that they had conquered a portion of the territories, the so-called held areas, in which they were implementing the democratic foundations of the future states (UN, A/8423/Rev.1, p. 206). In the fierce competition for recognition, they took advantage of all opportunities granted by the Decolonization Committee to call attention to the reconstruction programs that, as they stated, were in progress and that proved the inevitability of their recognition as representative of Angola, Guinea and Mozambique (UN, A/8423/Rev.1, p. 206).

The development of such programs and the advance of armed struggle involved large sums of money. As an essential component to the development of the struggle, a considerable diplomatic effort was made by the national liberation movements of Portuguese colonies to raise funds and obtain material support. Initially with 17 members, and from 1962 onward, with 24, the Decolonization Committee was a free platform to reach potential financiers. The national liberation movements that have been referred to above were assiduous in their appeals to the members, asking for their support to the struggle in Portuguese colonies. They did not spare efforts in order to convince the Committee to use its prestige to influence the UN, the specialized agencies and other international organizations to secure them material assistance. In the beginning they asked for support for the general population and for reconstruction programs. In the seventies, the appeals became more audacious, presenting lists of armament needed in the combats (*UN, A/AC.109/PV. 856, p. 8*).

The status of national liberation movement meant that they did not have the same military and diplomatic resources that were available to Portuguese government. As a member of the UN since 1955, Portugal refused to cooperate with the Organization, arguing that the subject of its colonies was related to the country's internal jurisdiction. Absent from the Decolonization Committee, Portugal did not defend itself directly against the attempts to force its international isolation⁵. Inspired by the example of the Argelian National Liberation Front diplomacy against France, the national liberation movements, as has been pointed out, tried to isolate Portugal based on two arguments. Armed with strong criticism against the Portuguese colonial system, on the one hand, they put the responsibility on Portugal for the delays in the political, economic and social development of the colonies (*UN, A/5238, p. 138*). On the other hand, when they exposed the methods used by Portugal in the armed conflicts, they accused the government of perpetrating atrocities against unarmed population (*UN, A/9023/Rev.1, p. 116*).

The accusations of human rights violation were profusely used by the national liberation movements. The FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC and the FRELIMO publicized the most shocking aspects of Portuguese colonial wars, stressing that they were instigated by support received by Portugal from a number of countries. The Committee was a place where they were able to apply pressure upon the countries that, according to their beliefs, were providing armament and funds to the Portuguese war effort. The movements did not restrain themselves from making references to institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), to countries like the Federal Republic of Germany or to companies such as the Gulf Oil Corporation, pointing to them as Portuguese partners. On several occasions they presented to the Committee weapons presumably seized from Portuguese soldiers and presumably obtained through NATO or acquired with the taxes of the foreign companies working in Portuguese colonies (*UN, A/6700/Rev. 1, p. 78-82*).

The Gradual Support to the National Liberation Movements

Having a majority of African and Asiatic countries⁶, the Decolonization Committee became the most outstanding UN organ in regard to the self-determination and independence of non-self-governing territories. Concerning Portuguese colonies, the FNLA's, the MPLA's, the PAIGC's and the FRELIMO's expectations were gradually fulfilled between 1961 and 1974. In that space of time several steps were taken until the moment when the Decolonization Committee gave complete satisfaction to the movement's aspirations. The Committee's precaution can be explained in part by the proliferation of national liberation movements, which made difficult the task of differentiating those that could be entitled as valid representatives of the population. Another explanation can be found in the duality within the Committee⁷, where radical members such as the USSR urged the adoption of a strong support to the national liberation movements (UN, A/6000/Rev. 1, p. 192), while Australia, the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom stressed the virtues of moderation (UN, A/6000/Rev. 1, p. 190).

Such constraints exerted their influence for a while upon the Decolonization Committee's activities. The earliest resolutions adopted constituted a reflex of those constraints. The Committee just reaffirmed the principles established in the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples. Even so, not always was the right of Portuguese colonies to self-determination and independence asserted explicitly. Only for Angola and Mozambique, whose territories were analyzed in 1962, that reaffirmation was explicit. For the remaining territories, the recognition of the right to self-determination and independence was implicit in the condemnation of Portuguese government, in the appeals to help the refugees from Portuguese colonies and in the warnings to the countries to refuse all assistance, especially military, to Portugal (UN, A/5238, p. 151).

More decisive steps to overcome the constraints that affected the Decolonization Committee's performance were taken in 1965, with the recognition of the legitimacy of the armed struggle (UN, A/6000/Rev. 1, p. 204-205). Preserving the previous condemnations, the resolutions adopted from that year onward had new elements, indicative of a major radicalism. Maybe one of the most important of those new elements was the appeals to the states to support the population in Portuguese colonies through the national liberation movements. The references to NATO, whose members were urged to suspend the supply of armament, ammunitions and assistance to Portuguese government, were signs of an escalade against Portugal. Regarding the national liberation movements, the Committee expressed its satisfaction in what concerned the progress achieved in the struggle for independence and in the implementation of reconstruction programs. Willing to give a sign of its commitment with the preparation for independence, appeals were made to the Secretary General to implement programs designed to prepare the Portuguese colonies population to secure the management of the public administration and the economic and social development (UN, A/7200/Rev. 1, p. 146-147).

In the early seventies, the constraints that were restraining the Decolonization Committee's decisions were overcome. The position on the ground, at least in Guinea, gave positive information in regard to which movements could be entitled as valid representatives of the population. Some of those movements had achieved the recognition of several countries and institutions, such as the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The duality within the Committee's members was also overtaken with the withdrawal of Australia in 1969 and of the USA and the United Kingdom in 1971. Those withdrawals, impelled by the strong criticism experienced by those countries, had effects in the adoption of decisions concerning the Portuguese colonies. From 1971 onward the votes against the Portuguese condemnatory resolutions disappeared. The Committee's decisions were adopted unanimously or with a limited number of abstentions (Santos, 2008, p. 76-77).

This new scenario instigated the attribution of observer status to the national liberation movements. Proposed by the Committee's Resolution of 9 September 1971, the new status was approved by the General Assembly later on in that year, on 20 December, through Resolution 2878 (XXVI). According to this new status, the national liberation movements were able to intervene more actively in the Committee's debates. They were granted the opportunity to present motions and to make suggestions in regard to the resolutions proposed by the Committee members. The national liberation movements were no longer – and this was the prime consequence of the new status – acknowledged as common participants to which the Decolonization Committee allowed the privilege of making declarations in its sessions. The practice would, nevertheless, point out that not all the movements were eligible to the status. Only the names of FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC and the FRELIMO representatives were listed in the inventory of observers approved by the General Assembly according to the OAU's recommendation (UN, A/8723/Rev.1, Vol. I, p. 37). The criterion to the eligibility that prevailed was the commitment to armed struggle and the previous recognition by the OAU.

For achieving recognition as the sole and authentic representative of the peoples of Portuguese colonies, the Decolonization Committee also required a third criterion: control over the so-called held areas. According to this criterion, the PAIGC was the first movement to receive this status from the Committee, whose visiting mission sent to Guinea between 2 and 8 April 1972 concluded that the movement was controlling part of the territory and was protecting the people's interests efficaciously (UN, A/8723/Rev.1, Vol. III, p. 116). When the Committee's decision of 13 April 1972 was approved, the General Assembly, through Resolution 2918 (XXVII), adopted on 14 November, enlarged the recognition given to the national liberation movements of Angola and Mozambique (UN, Resolution 2918, p. 76). Nevertheless, the Resolution only stated that they were representative of the people's aspirations, and it did not distinguish which movements received this status.

A similar pattern was followed by the Decolonization Committee the following year, when the Resolution of 22nd July was adopted. It is, however, correct to say that the recognition as representative of the peoples aspirations was assigned to the same movements that had received observer status since the engagement in armed struggle allowed them to claim control over the held areas. On 25 April 1974, when the Portuguese decolonization process began, the Decolonization Committee gave the same recognition to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and to the Movement for the Liberation of Sao Tome and Principe (MLSTP). The belated recognition of these movements was encouraged by suspicions of UNITA's involvement with the Portuguese government (Correia, 1990, p. 150) and by the circumstance that armed struggle was non-existent in Sao Tome and Principe.

Final Remarks

The general conclusion of this paper is that the Decolonization Committee had a positive engagement in the Portuguese colonial issue. Having in mind the questions raised in the beginning, the paper tried to explain that the participation in the Committee was crucial to the movements' strategy. Concerning the question about the expectations of the national liberation movement in regard to the role that the Committee could play in the decolonization of Portuguese territories, the signs indicated that the FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC, and the FRELIMO were not always realistic. Overestimating the Committee's potential in the early years, they quickly became aware that the Committee's activities had some constraints.

The existence of those constraints reminds us the other question concerning the ability of the Decolonization Committee to meet the expectations of the movements. In search for an answer, it is correct to say that the Decolonization Committee's contribution to the independence of Portuguese colonies was far from what the national liberation movements had wished for since it was not able to compel Portugal to implement the principle of self-determination and independence. The essential condition to success was Portuguese cooperation, which did not exist, given the Portuguese government's refusal to recognize the Committee's legitimacy. The lack of Portuguese cooperation, however, did not deprive the Committee of a valid engagement in the issue. We cannot limit ourselves by only pointing out the fact that its decisions were not implemented in practical terms. The political and moral support to the national liberation movements cannot be denied and must, therefore, have a broader interpretation. The FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC, the FRELIMO, and lately the UNITA and the MLSTP, achieved political and moral support, which, combined with engagement in the armed struggle, put these organizations in a favourable position to discuss independence with the Portuguese government after 25 April 1974.

Such conclusion allows us to answer the question whether or not the Committee reacted to the allegation that the national liberation movements represented the peoples of Portuguese colonies and embodied their will of resistance to colonialism. As we saw, until the beginning of the seventies, the Committee did not react to those allegations. It was only with the overcoming of the constraints that restrained its activities that the FNLA, the MPLA, the PAIGC, and the FRELIMO were recognized as peoples representatives.

The circumstances surrounding the recognition as peoples representatives are closely connected to our last question concerning the use of the Committee by the movements as a legitimating forum and to create a national identity. As far as it was possible to disclose, the Decolonization Committee was an arena where they were able to gain legitimacy as representatives of Portuguese colonies, stressing the idea that they were creating a national identity above the ethnical divisions and strengthened by the union around the struggle against Portuguese colonialism.

Notes

¹ Those procedures, according to the UN Charter, should be employed only in the trust territories. They were not foreseen for the non-self-governing territories. Cf. United Nations Organization – *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. New York: Department of Public Information, 2001

² Among the participants from Portuguese colonies in the Decolonization Committee's sessions, we can point out the Mozambique African National Union (MANU), the National African Union of Independent Mozambique (UNAMI), the Mozambique National Democratic Union (UDENAMO), the Front for Angolan Unity (FUA), the Movement for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (MLEC), the Democratic Party of Angola (PDA), the Angolan Women's Democratic Movement (MFDA), the Alliance of Angolan Youth for Freedom (AJEUNAL), the Confederation of Angolan Free Trade Unions (CSLA), the Assembly of Angolan Scouts and Guides, the Front for the National Independence Struggle of Guinea (FLING), and the Movement for the Liberation of the Cape Verde Islands (MLICV).

³ Some international organizations were also present in the Decolonization Committee's activities in regard to Portuguese colonialism. Those organizations were the Project Mozambique, the United Church of Christ, the American Committee on Africa, the Dutch Angola Committee, the Soviet Peace Committee, the World Peace Council, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the International Amnesty, the Chicago Committee for the Liberation of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, the Committee for the Liberation of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea, the World Federation of Scientific Workers, the Women's International Democratic Federation, and the International Defence and Aid Fund.

⁴ On several occasions, some of those movements were represented in the Decolonization Committee by the Conference of Nationalist Organizations of the Portuguese Colonies (CONCP), whose representatives acted on behalf of the PAIGC, the MPLA, the FRELIMO, and the CLSTP.

⁵ Absent from the Decolonization Committee, Portugal used some movements, such as the Ngwizani a Kongo and the Ntobako Angola, in order to reveal the fragmentation within the national liberation movements. Those movements were used by Portugal especially to stress in the Committee that independence should be the result of negotiations and not achieved through armed struggle.

⁶ In the beginning the Committee was composed of Australia, Cambodia, USA, Ethiopia, India, Italy, Yugoslavia, Madagascar, Mali, Poland, United Kingdom, Syria, Tanganyika, Tunisia, USSR, Uruguay and Venezuela. By the end of 1962, the General Assembly appointed Bulgaria, Chile, Cote d'Ivoire, Denmark, Iraq, Iran and Sierra Leone as new members. Several rearrangements were made between 1962 and 1974, but the Committee always tried, although sometimes it did not succeed, to preserve the geographic criterion used in the selection of its first members.

⁷ The Portuguese colonial issue divided the Committee's members. Although all the delegations stressed that the Portuguese colonies had the right to self-determination and independence, they did not agree for example in what concerns the methods that the national liberation movements should use. The USSR and the African and Asiatic countries stressed that the use of the armed struggle was the only solution to convince Portugal to recognize the self-determination and the independence. On the contrary, Australia, the USA, the United Kingdom and others countries expressed their preference for more pacific methods.

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