

Seventy Years after Bandung, the Global South is still waiting for Independence

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This April marked the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference held in Indonesia that brought together high-level representatives from 29 countries, most of which had won independence from colonial rule riding the wave of decolonisation that accompanied the onset and advance of the Second World War.

The 1955 event, a kind of milestone in global history since the mid 20th century, was remarkable in many ways. Although it was a meeting of leaders rather than of people, it did appear to have the enthusiastic support and sanction of the populations that had won political freedom from imperialist domination. The proceedings and the outcome document had a strong anti-colonial flavour, reflected in the declaration that “colonialism in all its manifestations is an evil which should speedily be brought to an end”. The reference to “all manifestations” clearly implied that the challenge was not merely to root out the still-present instances of colonial domination but to stem the onset of neocolonial domination in the then Third World.

The conference reflected the mood in Afro-Asian nations that it was imperative to keep imperialism at bay. Towards this end, these leaders together committed themselves to, and demanded of others, recognition of the equality of nations “large and small”, and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty. Implicit in this case for the establishment of a democratic international order was the idea that the nation state was the entity that mattered and the assertion that national governments were more representative of their peoples than any self-designated international rule-making authority.

These features of the Bandung agenda give the event much relevance today, when international inequality and the push of capital from the North to the South have locked many less developed countries in a debt trap; when the developed nations refuse to recognise their prime responsibility for redressing the effects of past carbon emissions that triggered the current climate crisis; and when developed countries turn inward and seek to resolve their domestic problems by shutting out the less developed countries from their markets. The countries of the global majority are once again recognising that they need to stand on their own feet, shape autonomous development strategies, and cooperate to strengthen each other.

Given this context, it is surprising that although “Bandung” was a landmark that received popular support in Afro-Asian nations, the 70th anniversary passed with scattered celebrations that were little more than a token recognition of the importance of the occasion.

Underlying this absence of the Bandung spirit is the reality that while Bandung’s call for political independence across the colonies has in fact been met, the economic independence and egalitarian development path it advocated are still substantially unrealised. But that makes a case not for dropping the Bandung agenda but for recognising that the Bandung spirit has gained a new relevance and needs to be revived. The changed circumstances also pose new challenges.

The Bandung cohort did realise that they had responsibilities to their peoples who fought for political freedom, installed them as leaders, and gave them the social sanction to advance the project of autonomous and independent development. The issue they faced was not just that of raising productivity and per capita income but also addressing the asset inequality that would deprive the majority of the benefits of post-independence development.

That, in turn, would prevent the emergence of a domestic market needed to support a process of development that would be less dependent on international markets dominated by the developed countries and on the foreign investors whose support would be needed to obtain any foothold in those markets. In sum, the less developed countries would have to pursue more egalitarian strategies with a major or even dominant role for the state, as well as cooperate with each other to create combined markets and realise the scale needed to support the diversification of economic activity.

Seven decades after the Bandung conclave, this vision appears to have been only partially realised and does not seem to have the needed purchase among governments who are seen as central to breaking the shackles of global economic inequality. After a brief honeymoon with the ideals that were espoused at Bandung, governments in most postcolonial nations lost the will to stand up to imperialism and push ahead with strategies that could have helped them pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. They had failed to deliver on the promises based on which the mass upsurge against imperialism was mobilised, having gone too far to accommodate the demands of powerful, asset-owning vested interests and their elite backers.

This not only resulted in the persistence of different degrees of inequality, poverty, and social deprivation, but also subverted the effort to pursue autonomous and successful development. The result was the loss of support from those advocating or aspiring for national development.

The Embrace of Neoliberalism

By the 1970s, governments in most less developed countries were faced with a development impasse. To resolve that, they turned to the surfeit of liquidity that flooded global markets following the rise to dominance of finance starting in the 1980s. Rather than stand up to foreign capital and influence, expand domestic markets, and build domestic capabilities, they embraced neoliberalism in the hope that they could leverage foreign investment and finance to restructure themselves as export engines growing on the basis of markets in countries they had promised to win economic independence from.

What the embrace of neoliberalism did was set off competition among these poorer countries to win larger shares of the limited world market open to them. Wages were kept down, foreign investors were wooed, and developed country governments appeased in order to emerge the winner. Few did, but even when they did the outcome was not adequate to ensure coveted membership of the rich nations club.

The result largely was greater dependence, excessive external debt, subordination, and extreme vulnerability. Meanwhile, whatever growth occurred largely bypassed the poor. And when the US administration under President Donald Trump decided to weaponise tariffs and held out the threat of being shut out of the American markets, governments in even the more “successful” countries had to rush to negotiate and offer concessions that are likely to set

back development and hurt most those who have been marginal beneficiaries of whatever development has occurred.

That weakness explains the muted response to attempts to recall Bandung. It poses a challenge to democratic forces and civil society actors seeking to revive the spirit of Bandung and realise its ambitions. They must struggle to put in place truly representative governments committed to pursuing the goals that inspired national liberation struggles the world over.

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