

Interview with Kristjan Gúdlaugsson

Former Secretary General of the Communist Party of Iceland

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Transcription, Editing and Markup: Paul Saba and Sam Richards

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Proscovia Svärd: I am here to meet with people who were involved in the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Can you kindly present yourself?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I was born in Iceland but I have lived for a long time in other Scandinavian countries, China, Yugoslavia and a lot of other countries. When I was a young man in the 1960s, things were slowly changing partly due to the world situation, the Vietnam war and later, the student revolts in Europe. Earlier than that, we had heard of the struggle in Africa and the struggle for freedom which was rampant at that time, the war in Alger, Nkrumah and Ghana, maybe the first African state that got sovereignty and after that we turned our eyes sort of to Africa. We felt that we had something in common with the people in Africa and there was a lot of sympathy with the struggle and at that time it seemed hopeless with Peter Botha, Ian Smith and the lot but the African people were persistent. They did not give up and they chose a unique way. In Southern Africa and also in several other countries, people thought that they still had this vision that there must be peace among all people. They were not going for revenge but they were going to achieve a truly democratic development on their continent and for us ANC was an exponent of that.

Proscovia Svärd: How were you involved in the liberation struggles?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I early became a communist but things in Iceland are different and therefore, being a communist here does not mean that you demand that people or other countries are communists because of supporting the peoples' struggles and the fight for liberation. Democracy and the right to live was part of our program. So I got engaged by a movement and it meant a lot to us to know that there was a whole continent on fire.

Proscovia Svärd: When you say "us" who do you mean?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Icelanders.

Proscovia Svärd: I understand from the people I have been talking to that the Icelandic government was quite conservative during that time and it did not sympathize with the fact that there was apartheid in Southern Africa. Do you also agree to that conclusion?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Well, they chose to turn a blind eye and they supported the American and British political line during those days but, when the British and the Americans put an embargo on South Africa and obviously things were changing very rapidly, the Icelandic government did the same. So they waited for a green light from Washington and London.

Proscovia Svärd: How were you organized at the grassroots level? Did you have any particular Committee under which you were operating?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Yes, there was a Committee.

Proscovia Svärd: Were you part of the Icelandic South African Committee Against Apartheid that was formed in 1988?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: No, I was not in Iceland at that time but I was a member of a Committee in Norway and we worked to build that Committee in the 1970s.

Proscovia Svärd: Did your Committee collaborate with the one in Iceland?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Oh yes, there was always quite close collaboration between the Nordic committees. I do not know however the exact details.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you collaborate with the Committees in Sweden since they were very active?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Not personally but I was in the Movement and supporting it.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you ever come back during this time as a result of the work that was going in Iceland?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Yes, I came back to Iceland and gave speeches and I was interviewed by newspapers and talked about the necessity of the African people to free themselves.

Proscovia Svärd: What about the Youth Movements? Were you engaged in any of them?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Oh yes, when I was a youth.

Proscovia Svärd: How were these Youth Organizations?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: In the beginning they were rather unstructured.

Proscovia Svärd: Were these the micro groups that existed at the University of Iceland under different ideologies?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Even if these groups were divided among themselves regarding the Icelandic politics, they all agreed and worked together in solidarity with the people of Africa, Asia and South America and so on. So, there was no difference in opinion on these issues. It was only the Icelandic issues that divided them.

Proscovia Svärd: How long were you involved in the liberation struggles?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I am still involved.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you ever engage with any of the international solidarity groups?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I was a member of the Palestine Group, I was a member of the Group supporting the ANC in Norway. I was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Iceland, Marxist Leninist as it is called by these days and I have also been a member of many other solidarity groups.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you ever have contact with the ANC?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Not me personally but through the Group I was working with. There were people that came to Scandinavia and met with activists and members of the solidarity groups and I went there and listened to them. I was not at the closed meetings which were held with the leaders of the Groups because that was not my table but I went and listened to them and followed the developments especially in Zambia, Zimbabwe and also the rest of Southern Africa with keen interest.

Proscovia Svärd: What type of support was mobilized from here? In Sweden for example people collected containers with second-hand clothes and all types of stuff that could be used and money. Did that ever happen here in Iceland?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: That was not the case but they had collections of money and they collaborated with the Nordic Movements and they contributed to their collections because Iceland is a very small country with 300,000 people and it was 250,000 people at that time and that is like the size of Botswana. So at that time we did not have the backbone to mobilize but we tried to be in contact with the Nordic groups.

Proscovia Svärd: What actions were staged in support of the liberation struggles?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I remember that here in Iceland there were solidarity actions that were not only focused on Southern Africa but rather the Third World people and of course the struggle in Southern Africa was a due part of it and that was in the early 70s and 80s. We did not know that Nelson Mandela was in prison until late in the 70s because he was not a known person to us. He was locked away at Robben Island where he was at that time but we knew of the ANC and the struggle. He was the people's front, fighting for the liberation and we supported that and later on when I was in Sweden and Norway, there was direct support for the struggle of the African people not only South Africa and Rhodesia but also the Portuguese colonies. I used to write in the papers supporting the struggle of Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau and the struggle that was part of "Fellesaktionen för Africa".

Proscovia Svärd: Were the actions against apartheid taking place in an open atmosphere or did people have to do certain things underground?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: No, No, we never had to go underground because it was taken very well by the Icelandic people and most of them said, “we support that moneywise and also by writing petitions”.

Proscovia Svärd: So, the government had a different opinion from the people in general.
Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Yes.

Proscovia Svärd: Did the Icelandic government co-operate with the rest of the Nordic countries in support of the liberation movements?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I don't think so because I think they were more pro-American and pro-British in their view.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think your engagement contributed to the liberation struggle?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: As always one thinks one's contribution is worth something and it is hard to know and to measure it but taking part in the struggle and arousing all the people's attention regarding what was going on during the murders in South Africa was positive. It was important I think but I am not going to take credit for that.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think solidarity means today?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: Solidarity today means fighting neo-liberalism because I have seen so many African, Latin American and Asian countries suffer from the IMF and Friedman policies.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think that the degree of solidarity that existed then during those years when you participated in the liberation struggles is the same type of solidarity we are seeing today?

Kristjan Gúdlaugsson: I know there are groups of young people that quite clearly support the African Continent's activity but I think it was more conscience in the 70s and it was also more political.

Proscovia Svärd: Thank you for your valuable time.

The Nordic Africa Institute, Box 1703, SE-752 36 Uppsala, Sweden
Phone: +46184715200, Fax: +4618562290, E-mail: nai@nai.uu.se
Visitors' address: Villavägen 6, Uppsala