



SA BDS Coalition calls to Boycott the World Movement for Democracy Conference: No complicity in genocide-washing!

15 November 2024

The South African BDS Coalition, its member organisations and many other Palestine solidarity activists and civil society organisations are calling for non-participation in the World Movement for Democracy (WMD) Conference scheduled to take place in South Africa from 19-22 November. The WMD is a project of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a bi-partisan legacy project of former President Ronald Reagan, established to promote the interests of US state policy overseas.

In his address [inaugurating the WMD then President Reagan](#) said the following:

We must work hard for democracy and freedom, and that means putting our resources — organizations, sweat, and dollars — behind a long-term program... The National Endowment for Democracy...funded by the Congress, will be the centerpiece of this effort... the forces of democracy will be strengthened wherever they may be. They'll have a caring group of Americans to go to, to get assistance from, advice, and cooperation...Through the National Endowment, the private sector will promote exchanges between the American people and democratic groups abroad... And, of course, it will be consistent with our own national interests.

The seemingly innocuous conference in Johannesburg, purporting to celebrate South Africa's 30 years of freedom and promoting democracy across the world, makes no mention of the genocide being carried out by Apartheid Israel against the people of Palestine, now extended to Lebanon. There is no mention at all of Palestine on the NED website or in any of the promotional materials for the Conference. This is in line with the national interests of the United States. Under either Democrat or Republican governments the US is the largest funder and supplier of weapons that is enabling Apartheid Israel to carry out the genocide in Gaza and expand into Lebanon.

Palestine solidarity activists are acutely aware that our country is facing enormous push-back, from the US in particular, for its admirable step in taking the case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) under the genocide convention. It is very clear that this Conference is yet another attempt to co-opt civil society into a US/Zionist imperialist agenda that erases the genocide and the Palestinian freedom struggle.

Ronnie Kasrils wrote in [an article on 29 October](#):

“The US government funds projects that make it seem that ‘fake news’ only comes from its rivals in BRICS and never from the US or Israel.

In late November, the ‘World Movement for Democracy’, a project of the National Endowment for Democracy and a US state organization associated with many US-backed coups against elected governments, will be hosting a massive ‘civil society’ conference in Johannesburg that will misrepresent the US and the West as the custodians of democracy around the world.

Pressure for South African NGOs to boycott the conference is rapidly mounting, and some have already pulled out.”

We have approached the local coordinating forum organisations and so far two have pulled out. In addition, some board members of The Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation have made public statements against the Conference and many of its supporters, and those of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (AKF), have also expressed their concerns. The Congress of South African Trade Unions ([COSATU](#)) [has issued a statement withdrawing](#) from the Conference. The South African Federation of Trade Unions ([SAFTU](#)) [issued a public letter](#) to AKF calling on them to withdraw from the Conference.

The namesakes of the Foundations - Ahmed Kathrada and Archbishop Desmond Tutu - were both vocal in their support for Palestine. Archbishop Tutu was one of the first eminent South Africans who, on his return from a visit to Palestine, declared that the situation there was worse than apartheid South Africa.

Ahmed Kathrada initiated a campaign for Palestinian political prisoners as he himself was imprisoned on the notorious Robben Island along with Nelson Mandela. It is noteworthy that the NED #SetThemFree political prisoners campaign [does not include political prisoners in Palestine](#).

We remind the AKF that since 7 October 2023 over 11,600 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza have been detained, abducted and imprisoned in Israeli prison camps. Forty three prisoners have died in Israeli prisons. A July 2024 press release from UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OCHR) reported staggering numbers of detained men, women, children, doctors, journalists and human rights defenders, most of them without charge or trial and held in deplorable conditions. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk reported testimonies of ill-treatment, torture including sexual and gender-based violence, waterboarding, tying prisoners hands and stringing them up from ceiling, and setting dogs on them.

What is most disturbing is that the AKF states in a letter addressed to Zwelinzima Vavi, Secretary General of SAFTU, that they “served on a coordinating forum and provided advice on issues relating the programme of the assembly.” Initially there was no mention of Palestine on the programme. The updated programme shows a derisory 30-minute slot for Burma and Palestine together with no mention of speakers.

A press statement issued on 13 November from the Kathrada Foundation, Defend our Democracy, HURISA, the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, In Transformation Initiative (all on the coordinating forum for the Conference) and signed by other organisations, states that “Our solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for peace, freedom and democracy remains stronger than ever before and we will champion their cause at the Global Assembly and beyond”.

If this was the case, why have they not argued to the hilt to ensure Palestine was front and centre on the agenda of the WMD Conference? Why have no Palestine solidarity organisations been consulted or invited to participate in the Conference? It appears that these organisations are now trying to appease civil society and the discontent within their own constituencies.

Their statement notes support for the South African case at the ICJ against Israel under the Genocide Convention but there is no indication that these organisations are doing their utmost to ensure WMD condemns the US veto on UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire; or for civil society actions to pressure third party states to adhere to their legal obligations: end all complicity in the illegal occupation and genocide by instituting arms and trade embargoes and imposing sanctions on the Apartheid Israeli state.

Exactly what “advice on the programme” did the South African representatives on the coordinating forum provide? If they did raise the centrality of Palestine solidarity against the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people and this advice was ignored, why did they not pull out months ago?

Further, we note that that an award will be given to “Palestinian civil society.” The organisations in the coordinating forum have been unable to inform us of who the recipients are. While Palestinian civil society fully deserves recognition for their resistance and the extraordinary work they are doing to support their communities, end the genocide, illegal occupation, apartheid and settler-colonialism, in the absence of any meaningful programming on international action for Palestine this reeks of window-dressing, duplicity and ‘genocide washing’.

It is extremely disappointing that the organisations in the coordinating forum fail to understand the current geo-political moment, the role of ‘soft-power’ institutions like NED in pursuing US global interests and its fundamental support for the Zionist settler-colonial project.

We hope they finally will understand that the WMD is a NED initiative as indicated on the NED website homepage. The NED has not promoted the demand of millions around the world for the US to end its complicity in genocide, the right of the Palestinian people to resist illegal occupation or to adopt the Palestinian civil society call for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS). They have not defended human rights defenders around the world facing repression for expressions of solidarity with Palestine. They have not supported the Palestinian people’s right to resist over 75 years of Zionist ethnic cleansing, illegal occupation, apartheid and settler colonialism from the river to the sea. This is the litmus test.

Mild rhetoric and tokensim in the face of Palestinian genocide is not sufficient.

The WMD will do what the NED does, as stated by Ronald Reagan at its inception: be consistent with US national interests. Legitimising the World Movement for Democracy and the National Endowment Fund is complicity in US/Zionist 'genocide washing'.

We reiterate our call on organisations and invited individuals to withdraw from the WMD.

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Some references giving more information on the NED:

Since 2020, more than 4000 scholarly studies of the NED:

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?as_ylo=2020&q=%22national+endowment+for+democracy%22&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5

John Pilger – War on democracy by the National Endowment for Democracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVn9soMbe8Q>
Long: <http://johnpilger.com/videos/the-war-on-democracy>

CIA Whistleblower Philip Agee Exposes National Endowment for Democracy (including deep roots dating to 1967): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh0EbYXJsWY>

The Grayzone debates National Endowment for Democracy VP on group's CIA ties
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khv7dYG15Fs> <https://popularresistance.org/the-grayzone-caused-biggest-pr-fiasco-in-history-for-us-government/>
<https://thegrayzone.com/2023/05/29/grayzone-national-endowment-democracy-vp-cia/>

Mnar Adley exposes the National Endowment for Democracy:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5QXDM195G4I>