

## The ANC after Mandela

Saturday 29 April 2006, by [BRECKER Carl T.](#) (Date first published: 1999).

**South Africa's new president Thabo Mbeki has all the credentials to sell the eclectic blend of left rhetoric and right politics that has come to characterise the ANC in government.**

In the wake of the country's second round of elections, the ANC holds sway over the national and provincial assemblies and looks set to consolidate its hold on local government.

The ANC's electoral victory marks the end of an unstable interregnum that began with South Africa's first post-apartheid elections in 1994 and ends now with the consolidation of a new democratic state under a new ruling bloc.

There is no doubt that Mandela himself was central to the success of this transition. But incoming president Thabo Mbeki is the new man of the moment.

The new circumstances call for an astute balancing of class forces. Thabo Mbeki is a bourgeois politician with struggle credentials. As such, he is eminently suited to the task of 'building a nation' and promoting his much-vaunted 'African renaissance'.

Mbeki is much more intellectual than Mandela. More importantly, he has unchallenged control over the structures of the ANC.

Having run the country for the last two years of Mandela's presidency, Mbeki is widely credited with the formulation of GEAR, the ANC's neo-liberal macro-economic policy. If the bourgeoisie need to be wooed, Mbeki has a reliable track record to rely on.

At the same time, Mbeki's impeccable 'struggle' credentials, his intimate knowledge of radical politics gives him the credibility to coax into line any would-be malcontents in the ranks of the organised working class and among the representatives of the rural poor. (Mbeki is a graduate of Moscow's Marxist-Leninist Institute and an former leader of the South African Communist Party).

Mbeki's task is made easier by the fact that this election witnessed a dramatic shift to the political centre. It is a shift that not only shattered the far Right but also put paid to the electoral hopes of ex-liberation organisations like the PAC and AZAPO. Despite their long histories of armed and unarmed anti-apartheid struggle, neither could muster more than 1% of the popular vote. This shift also adds immeasurably to the disorientation of the radical Left, whose tactics in the immediate preelection period displayed little grasp of the pitfalls of electoralism.

However much the Left may deplore this shift to the centre there is no denying the electoral achievement of the ANC. Almost winning a two-thirds majority (66.4%) nationally, the Congress-led alliance swept the board with between 65% and 88% of the vote in seven of the country's nine provinces.

Only in Kwazulu-Natal did the ANC (39.3%) come (a very close) second to Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (41.9%). In the Western Cape, the last bastion of the 'New' National Party,

the ANC emerged as the most popular party with 42% of votes cast but failed to win a majority in the provincial legislature. In these two provinces the ANC faces the prospect of coalition government with parties to the right of centre.

The Democratic Party - the voice of liberal capital and, increasingly, of the conservative white minority - is now the official opposition with 9.55% of the national vote. This represents a significant advance on their performance in 1994 but gives a hollow ring to their claim to be the only real alternative to the ANC.

Any assessment of what has happened to politics in South Africa over the past five years must look beyond the unique combination of 'Mandela magic' and the considerable achievement of the ANC leadership in adapting from 'freedom fighters' to parliamentary rulers.

Among the ANC's immediate goals in 1994 were the consolidation of democracy in South Africa and the construction of national unity. Above all else loomed the huge task of overcoming the heritage of apartheid. The ANC government has accomplished more than a modicum of what they set out to achieve - as a party without any previous parliamentary experience working against the grain of a civil service steeped in apartheid practice.

Their most important achievements include the construction of a viable system of government with a new constitution and a comprehensive bill of rights. A battery of progressive legislation has been passed on a wide range of issues and compromise rather than confrontation has led to a dramatic reduction in the level of right wing-inspired violence that wracked the country during the negotiation period leading up to the 1994 elections.

They have set the country on the path to national unity with a new sense of national identity and common purpose. They have begun to deliver much-needed social services - housing, education, health services, water, electricity - and removed many of the most hated symbols of white minority rule.

But services delivery remains some way below the levels the ANC's core constituency might have expected. And the systems used to provide housing, schooling and basic utilities to the rural and urban poor all too often prove unsustainable in the long term. And little has been done to transform the apartheid city with its sprawling ghettos.

That there has been change is beyond question. What is in doubt is its extent, and the price that has been paid by the ANC in reaching the compromises it has made.

The ANC not only retained the support of the black majority, but increased it, despite their failure to deliver on the promises they made in the heady days of 1994. This is a clear indication that the majority of South Africans still believe that, given the circumstances under which the ANC came to power, no other party could have done better. For the most part the black majority seems to have accepted the ANC's contention that, despite their best intentions, the terrible legacy of apartheid could not be overcome in five short years.

But the question remains: how much more could have been achieved over the last five years if the ANC had not been so willing to appease local capital, foreign investors and those who grew fat on apartheid?

Every critique of the ANC government has centred on the sharp rightward shift in government policy away from the radical policies of the liberation movement and the Reconstruction and Development Programme on which the party won the 1994 election. This shift is encapsulated in the adoption of a new, IMF and World Bank-approved, macro-economic policy. Known by the acronym GEAR, this

strategy endorses a depressingly familiar range of neo-liberal policies including 'sound money', export-oriented growth, the privatisation of public services, government austerity (cutbacks in social expenditure), a refusal to resist the effects of globalisation (on the basis that 'there is no alternative') and an over-reliance on (some say obeisance to) foreign investment as the key to future prosperity.

GEAR has been accompanied by an extremely cautious approach to land redistribution, a labour reform programme that equates strikes with lock-outs, a taxation policy that favours capital and burdens the workers, the lack of a radical industrialisation policy based on internal need, and an unwillingness to attempt any significant redistribution of wealth. Not surprisingly, the Left has been highly critical of the government's economic policies.

But the government shrugs off criticism, claiming that it is helpless in the face of globalisation and the international financial crisis. Mbeki promises to do more when circumstances permit.

The election results show that no other party was able to launch a coherent, generalised, criticism of government policy, or realisable aspects of an alternative strategy. The Democratic Party and New National Party were seen as tainted by the apartheid past. The Inkatha Freedom Party was perceived as an ethnically-based group at war with the ANC. The PAC and AZAPO - despite their 'struggle' credentials - simply lacked credibility as mass parties.

The ANC also had the considerable support of the COSATU trade union federation, and the Communist Party, its partners in the governing tripartite alliance. Both COSATU and the SACP swallowed their preelection misgivings about GEAR and the impact of globalisation, and give uncritical support to the ANC. They provided an army of articulate political canvassers for the electoral campaign.

The overwhelming electoral victory of the ANC poses crucial questions for the Left. Although the South African left is well versed in the politics of anti-imperialism, and has a long experience as radical opponents of capitalism and apartheid, the left has failed to respond to the birth of electoralism. In a historical period when calls for revolutionary change no longer resound; despite the urgent need to put socialism back on the agenda; the country's many small left groups have become increasingly marginalised. They display a persistent inability to present viable alternatives to the pervading pro-capitalist consensus.

The 'big battalions' of the struggles against apartheid; the unions and the mass democratic movement; have all moved into the dominant political camp represented by the Tripartite Alliance (ANC, COSATU and SACP). The left, with strategies and tactics belonging to a bygone political period, has failed to translate its radical anti-capitalist, socialist critiques of the negotiated settlement, of consensus politics, of neoliberalism and of globalisation into viable mass based campaigns on which to build an electoral intervention.

Left groups need to go beyond their critiques of ANC politics. For example, how do they explain the growing, almost total, hegemony which the ANC has achieved? If the two-stage theories of the SACP, and its belief that post-apartheid South Africa has entered the national democratic stage of the struggle for socialism, are bankrupt how can the party's continued influence in the trade unions and other mass structures be explained? Why does COSATU, the most representative and combative of formations representing the working class continue to support the ANC despite their sharp disagreements with many aspect of government policy?

The radical left will only gain ground if it can develop an explanation that goes beyond conspiracy theory, beyond cynical claims about the duping of the masses, beyond the historical role of the ANC

in struggle, and beyond the 'magic of Mandela'.

The left has argued that the revolution has been deflected. But that begs a whole series of questions about how—and in a period of consolidated democratic transformation and electoral politics—the struggle for socialism and the revolutionary transformation of society can be put back on the political agenda.

What difference would a revolution, as against a negotiated settlement based on class compromise, have made? And how shall the left proceed to build a mass presence capable of taking on and defeating the ANC? Through electoral challenge or on the streets? What, in other words, are the politics of a way forward?