

South Africa: It's wrong to assume that SA has credible leadership

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President Cyril Ramaphosa and DA leader John Steenhuisen after the swearing-in of the new national executive at the Cape Town International Convention Centre. The writers say the ANC and DA share a common commitment to a neoliberal policy framework that blocks wealth redistribution and the meaningful transformation of society. Picture: Gallo Images/Misha Jordaan

Retired trade unionist Dinga Sikwebu's characterisation of the current political situation as a stalemate — and therefore a basis for the much-vaunted national dialogue and social compact — fatally assumes that we have a political elite and business class with credibility and legitimacy. The political elite is not committed to progressive change, while business is falling far short of the constitutional vision of a good society. If there was a real stalemate, as Sikwebu suggests, the ANC would not have been able to form a coalition government.

A stalemate would have meant a situation where none of the political parties could move in any direction — it would be a catastrophic end of the game. Despite the fact of co-governing, ANC vs DA contestations will continue without resulting in their mutual ruin, as a classical stalemate typically means. Instead of a stalemate, what we have are complex and fluid dynamics that merely compound the politics of governance. The May 29 electoral outcome does not present an unsolvable equilibrium, as it has been resolved through the typical coalition model.

At this point, it is useful to demonstrate how the scope of the fluidity contradicts Sikwebu's stalemate thesis: as Gauteng premier Panyaza Lesufi did with the provincial cabinet, President Cyril Ramaphosa could have chosen partners other than the DA to form a national government. With the EFF, the UDM, the African Transformation Movement and a few other smaller parties, the ANC would have reached the required 50%+1 threshold.

Given the fluid and contradictory nature of coalition politics, such a realignment is not impossible in the near future. Applied to the economy, Sikwebu's stalemate thesis falls flat. In historical terms, a stalemate in the economy would arise when workers and businesses are unable to overcome each other. Typically, this would be an unsolvable socioeconomic quagmire where heightened worker struggles collide with intransigent business.

We do not have such a reality. Since 1994, business has gained so much more than workers, the unemployed and the poor combined. To regard such a situation as a stalemate is a terrible misreading and mischaracterisation of South Africa's socioeconomic reality. The weight of the parties represented in the ANC-DA-led coalition translates to 71.5% of the seats in parliament — but this majoritarian framing hides its unwieldy and ideologically incoherent composition, which all make for shaky governance. The more sobering fact is that the coalition is endorsed only by a mere 27.73% of voters (the parties in government represent only 11.09 million voters out of 40 million eligible voters).

We are governed by discredited and untrustworthy politicians. This is a huge legitimacy crisis, which hollows meaningful, substantive and genuine democracy. And the governance and policy track

record of both the ANC and the DA show them as lacking the political will and strategic capability to overcome the overwhelming social crisis. Instead, they share a common commitment to a neoliberal policy framework that blocks wealth redistribution and the meaningful transformation of society.

The ANC has subordinated itself to the power of the markets, with many in its leadership comfortable in business circles. In addition, the agency of the ANC has enabled the destruction of public and state institutions through corporatisation, corruption, maladministration and mismanagement. The DA has actively resisted constitutional provisions for progressive transformation. These include redistributive land reform, affirmative action, BEE, the regulation of business activities in the public interest, and the decommodification of education and health.

It is these two parties that Sikwebu has implicit faith in and expects to drive a genuine social compact. The depth of the social crisis — characterised by global records of unemployment, poverty, inequality and underdevelopment — is beyond their political will and strategic capacity. It is this very social crisis that led to the ANC's electoral decline, while voters also did not have confidence in the political elite to take over from the ANC. These two parties will be united in confining the scope of the desired social compact to bring about significant change. Instead, we're likely to see emphasis on a social compact that would consolidate a conducive policy environment for short-term gains in profitability and returns on investment.

But these will not secure social and political stability. No amount of social compacting will contain this hard-wired instability. For as long as the social crisis is not arrested, we will regularly experience destructive, dramatic events of social upheaval — as in the July 2021 riots. The political elite is far too unreliable an agent and incoherent a leadership upon which to premise the national dialogue. The public endorsement of the dialogue by yet another set of elites (the nine foundations named after struggle luminaries — from Nelson Mandela to Steve Biko and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka) fails to close the gap between the elites and the people. The same with Sikwebu's scheme.

The two parties and the government they lead can turn a new page if they substantially temper their party political interests with genuine humility, embrace and meaningfully address the social demands of workers and the unemployed who constitute the majority of the population, and are prepared to review and undo the neoliberal policy script and advance a sovereign development project. Business is another major player. In a November 2006 interview with the New York Times, Warren Buffett (one of the richest people in the world) boldly said: "There's class warfare [in the US], all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

Since the early 1990s, South African business has also won handsomely. In his book *Towards a New Deal: A Political Economy of the Times of My Life*, former trade & industry minister Rob Davies writes that "wages-to-GDP ratio fell from 57% in 1993 to just under 53% in 2010, despite labour productivity having risen by 73% between 1994 and 2012".

Overall, this trend continued to 2017, which includes a period of the longest expansion in our business cycles since World War 2. This picture shows that business has benefited much more than workers. So, in light of these objective indicators, what do Sikwebu's compromises involve and mean? Is he suggesting workers should sacrifice their income and well-being more than they already have? If so, what does Sikwebu imagine will happen to social stability if the already squeezed give up more?

Presumably, his logic is that these compromises would be met by increased investments, inclusive economic growth, improved service delivery and the rebuilding of weakened government institutions. Learning from previous processes of social dialogue, even a new and signed social compact will not be enough to bind business and government to any such expectations. Instead of

Sikwebu's unexplained historical compromises, we need an alternative socioeconomic programme that has the real possibility to stabilise South African society.

Such a programme should put at its centre decent jobs on a large scale, a basic income grant, provision of free basic public services and other redistributive measures that can take us closer to the constitutional vision of a good society. Without recognising this deepening and persistent social crisis, the desired social compact will amount to nothing other than futile attempts at stabilising a system that is imploding and crisis-ridden. This alternative progressive programme will not be delivered by the ANC-DA government. Therefore, workers, the unemployed and poor communities have to rebuild their mass movements, wage impactful struggles and recast the historical stage.

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P.S.

- Amandla!. Jul 9, 2024:
<https://www.amandla.org.za/its-wrong-to-assume-that-sa-has-credible-leadership/>
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