

A Long Walk to Nowhere - Ten Years of Democracy in South Africa

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South Africa,

We would like to begin our review by stating that the near annihilation of apartheid political forces in parliamentary politics - important, necessary and inevitable as this was - does not represent a fundamental social revolution. This stubborn fact has many ramifications. The transition of South Africa to democracy is chronicled as having been miraculous and peaceful. Fact is that parliamentary democracy came about as a negotiated settlement between an elite consisting the ANC-led liberation movement and the apartheid government, after thousands of lives had been taken and many more ruined in political clashes. A liberal-democratic capitalist constitution was ushered in, with a minimalist notion of democracy in the shape of free, regular elections, freedom of the press, freedom of association and basic rights - including the right to private property - was established. This kind of dispensation has, as we will attempt to demonstrate, had an adverse effect on all democratic and redistributive pretenses of the liberation government of the ANC.

The consequence of the unambiguous protection of the right to private property meant that those who owned and controlled land, factories and money under apartheid would continue to do so in 'the New South Africa', as the post-apartheid period is popularly called. 'The real situation is that hardly any change has taken place in the relations of economic power and control...With hardly any exceptions, the sources of economic power remain in the hands that controlled them under apartheid', is an unassailable observation. [1]

The struggle waged by the ANC was a nationalist, not a socialist, one. In essence, the main aim of the decades-long struggle became the 'de-racialisation' [2] of society and economy, to provide equal opportunities for all without regard to 'race' and to provide welfare to an extent acceptable to the major financial stakeholders. Thus an ANC-led coalition of grassroots organisations and trade unions had no intention to abolish state power, but to capture it and expand its more benevolent capacities to encapsulate all of South Africa's inhabitants. [3] While the South African state machinery is internally contested and internally diverse as civil servants from the old apartheid regime work alongside new forces, we nevertheless want to emphasise the striking class character of the post-apartheid state. Despite verbal commitment to popular development by the ANC-in-power, it has become only too obvious that the most basic task of the state emerging out of this settlement is to guarantee the reproduction of the prevailing mode of production. Instead of expanding social welfare and access to basic services like water, electricity and housing for the black the poor and the working class, the state has bought into the globalised concepts and strategies of cost recovery, privatisation and market liberalisation.

Already two years into a democratic South Africa, two trends were becoming discernible writes Ginsburg (1996): first, that the South African democracy 'manifestly stops at the factory gates' that is, government cannot stretch its social interventions further than Big Business allows it. Second, as a consequence of this restriction, or 'shrunk democracy', the government had to rein in or

demobilise social forces that might challenge its policy choices. [4] The reining in and demobilisation of democratic and popular forces has become the single most important reason why the ANC has been able to stay in political power in spite of a mediocre track record of delivering social services in the past ten years, as we shall debate further down.

In 1994, when the ANC took office, an ambitious but short-lived state-led social and economic policy called the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was adopted. Through this programme the state hoped to reconcile economic development (that is, meeting the needs of the people) with economic growth (meeting, essentially, the needs of capital). [5] The best way to understand the RDP is to position it in its political context. The RDP was a kind of wish-list constructed with considerable participation of organised labour and community organisations throughout the country. It is for this reason that parts of the RDP expressed aspirations of ordinary South Africans. It included issues such as state-led job creation, and state-sponsored housing, education, health and welfare. At the same time the policy did not seek to fundamentally or otherwise challenge those sections of society that had unjustly amassed large amounts of wealth in the past, but saw in them natural and key partners of the new state who would provide finance and skills to build a new, unified nation. It is during this time, 1994 to 1996, that the most organised, talented, articulate and critical groups of our society were understandably spellbound by the glib promises of the new government.

Seeing that this programme took private ownership of the means of production to be sacrosanct, it followed that social and economic development would have to be paid for through taxation, government borrowing, privatisation of public enterprises and foreign aid. When the RDP Ministry and offices closed in 1996, progress had been rather indifferent towards meeting human needs, while the new-found political stability of the country ensured solid profits for private enterprises.

But after three years of failing to attract direct foreign investment and fixed domestic investment - alleged necessary pre-conditions for job-creation, reconstruction and development - the ANC decided that a set of unambiguous measures should be put in place to signal both to local and foreign capital that South Africa was ready for full insertion into the neo-liberal global economy on that world's terms. In 1996, South Africa then 'became the first African government to ever voluntarily seek the help of the World Bank to design and impose a structural adjustment programme on its people'. [6]

Thus, the social-democratic pretensions of the ANC were replaced by a determined neo-liberal economic policy dubbed the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (Gear). Like other structural adjustment programmes, Gear abolished foreign exchange controls and virtually banned import restrictions - with immediate and devastating results for the domestic textile and clothing industries and its predominantly female workforce, which was ruthlessly reduced. Anti-inflationary measures, fiscal and monetary constraints, and privatisation or sale of public enterprises became cornerstones of this economic policy. The effects have been to make the lives of the poor and the lower middle-class even more precarious, whilst the rich and big business have seen their wealth multiply.

Due to these economic measures, South Africa continues to have one of the highest interest rates in the world, which makes it near-impossible to sustain the financing of large-scale infrastructure development projects to extend electricity, housing and roads to all. South Africa holds to a sado-masochistic budget deficit of 3 per cent, which prevents extension of basic social services to those who continue to be denied them. Privatisation has resulted in huge hikes in prices of water, electricity and telephone calls. Even education has not escaped malignant neo-liberalism. User-fees (school fees) in education, for instance, have had a predictable but nevertheless dramatic impact. User-fees have ensured that 'white' schools - schools with better infrastructure, facilities and trained

teachers - remain largely 'white'. It does not end there. User fees make it difficult for the poor to go to their own poorly-resourced township and rural schools, as many children in these communities cannot afford to pay school fees. Although there is a relatively high enrolment of learners at primary school, many of these children are forced to leave school because of an inability to pay school fees. For those who manage to stay in school often look forward to schools without water, electricity, toilets or libraries. The vast majority never make it to the last year of school - the government estimates that this concerns as much as 60 per cent of children enrolled. [7]

The question is not whether or not the ANC government is delivering something to the poor. All governments are often forced to deliver something in order to prevent or dissipate popular uprisings by the poor and the working class. A succession of apartheid governments also had to carry out this duty of all modern governments, of building roads, houses, clinics and even universities for the poor and oppressed peoples. The question is not even whether or not the ANC is doing better than apartheid governments. The real question is: has delivery of social services under ANC governments begun to fundamentally and energetically challenge the patterns of poverty and inequality consolidated under apartheid? This we will discuss using delivery of basic services under the ANC as illustration.

Speaking at a housing conference in Norway early this year, the South African Minister of Housing, Brigitte Mabandla, proudly told the assembled dignitaries that 'South Africa has been recently honoured by UN Habitat for providing secure tenure and access to water and sanitation to 1, 5 million households thus substantially improving the lives of seven million people living in poverty'.⁸ It is, indeed, no small matter that the once 12, 5 million people in 1994 who lived without housing, water and sanitation has been more than halved ten years later. But we have to look behind the figures to understand why in post-apartheid South Africa people are taking up struggles over delivery of land, water, electricity, housing and other basic services, and why these areas have become battlegrounds where the class struggle plays itself out in concrete very ways.

The land redistribution programme of the ANC government started under the RDP. In 2004, South Africa still has the most unequal land distribution on the African continent, and as more than half of its 44 million people still live in the countryside, this is not a small matter. As the government has accepted the principle and practice of protecting private property, this means it can only acquire land for redistribution on the behalf of those who were dispossessed of their land as late as in the 1980s by purchasing it on the open market according to the principle of 'willing buyer and willing seller'. Obviously, sellers are only willing to sell land at notoriously high prices, which the government cannot afford to pay, with the result that by 2002 only 3 per cent of agricultural land had been 'redistributed'. [9] Seeing that resources are limited and in a bid to create a 'black' commercial agricultural class, the government has jettisoned the poor in favour of putting 75 000 black farmers on land over 15 years (starting in 2000). The solution to the land question by the ANC is exactly the same as the one employed by the Afrikaners under apartheid: to create a small and subservient class of capitalist agriculturalists to act as a bulwark against a ghettoised rural population.

Since the ANC government adopted Gear in 1996, its approach to municipal provision of services has been on the basis of various kinds of privatisation, or cost-recovery and profit-making measures. 'This municipal drive for profitability has led to a massive social crisis', remarks one commentator [10], and this is no exaggeration. Cost-recovery means that the users themselves must bear all or parts of the costs for the provision of services, but there are many who cannot afford to do so in the face of increasing prices and rising unemployment. The unemployment has skyrocketed and has broken the 40 per cent barrier according to the trade union federation Cosatu. Jobs have become 'flexible', outsourced, part-time, seasonal and much more precarious since the introduction of Gear. Even those within the working class who have jobs find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet,

as can be demonstrated by the many strikes - often triggered by demands for higher wages - which have taken place in the last few years. [11] The inability of many people to pay for basic services has led to massive and widespread water and electricity cut-offs and other punitive measures. According to activist Trevor Ngwane of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), by 2001 more people in South Africa's largest township, Soweto, lost access to electricity every month due to cut-offs for non-payment than got access to it. [12] Between 1999 and the beginning of 2002, over 100 000 households had their water cut off in Cape Town. [13] The Municipal Services Project have, in a survey contested by government officials, estimated that by July 2001, 10 million South Africans had had their water cut off for any period of time, and an additional 10 million had had their electricity cut off, mostly for shorter periods. [14] In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, rural residents had to start paying for piped water that had previously been free in the middle of 2000. The result was that thousands of people began to take water from the streams and other natural sources, and when cholera broke out it claimed the lives of over 250 people while over 100 000 fell ill. [15]

According to the state's own figures, there are still 5, 5 million people without housing in South Africa. And this is not the whole story. Of all the houses built under the auspices of the RDP, only 30 per cent were found to comply with the government's own housing regulations in one survey. Most of the houses are poorly planned and built, with roofs leaks, collapsing roofs and walls, doors and windows not opening or closing. The houses are tiny and are mainly built on the cheapest land available, far away from the city centers, where there is often no social amenities such as schools and clinics nearby. The geographic segregation of the poor - who are still predominantly black - is perpetuated.

This is the background to the formation of community organisations like the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, the Orange Farm Water Crisis Committee, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Landless People's Movement, and similar groups. They are scattered all over the country and originate in the townships and squatter camps and other working class areas. Most of them start out as single-issue groups and are mainly defensive and reactive. [16] The methods used by these groups are often innovative and direct. Groups of residents organise to (illegally) re-connect water and electricity that have been cut off. In Soweto, a march went to the houses of councilors to disconnect their electricity - 'to give them a taste of their own medicine'. Leaders of the march were arrested and 'five hundred Sowetans marched to the Moroka Police Station to present themselves for mass arrest; the police were overwhelmed', reports one activist. [17] In the Western Cape, where waves of house evictions have taken place during a sustained period of time, community members simply carry furniture back into houses repossessed by the banks and re-install whole families. Pickets, occupations, marches and mass meetings are other modes of protest employed by these new social movements. The struggles are new and come from outside the traditional quarters of the liberation movement against apartheid, but the activists use 'the traditions, the fire, the experience of the old days'. [18]

These organisations do present a problem for an ANC government in the hands of capital. They contest the logic of market forces in a hands-on manner, and they organise among the ANCs working class constituencies. Some social movements have taken steps to deepen the struggle for basic and are beginning to realise that long-range political goals are required. The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) was formed four years ago as an umbrella body consisting of community-based grassroots organisations, and its objectives are explicitly to fight capitalism through a class struggle led by the working class and to build socialism. Ten years of liberal democracy in South Africa has served to increase the gulf between rich and poor on the one hand, and has thrown-up a whole host of grassroots organisations that challenge the liberal-democratic consensus on the other.

As Ginsberg (above) predicted eight years ago, a government operating under this kind of democracy must attempt to control - and if this fails undermine - such social movements, and the

ANC government follows this prediction to the letter. Government and party officials from the bottom ranks stretching up to the president of South Africa attack them with an almost religious fervour. They are 'ultra-leftists' whose only goal is to 'undermine the government' and democracy, roll back all gains of the ANC and generally create havoc, is the ANC's gospel of the day. The intolerance towards the new social movements on a discursive level is complete. On the ground, brutal repression all too often follows organised community actions. Activists in the Western Cape testify to how police are deployed to forcibly evict people who have defaulted on house payments. Dogs, teargas, rubber bullets and mass arrests are common features of evictions and the protest against them. In other areas, private security guards and armed security personnel ensure that water and electricity cut-offs can take place despite community protests. [19]

The state power which was captured by the liberation movement in order to entrench equality is ten years down the line used to protect capital from any disturbances caused by the poor it was supposedly meant to protect. While at this point in history repression under the ANC is not comparable to what took place under the apartheid regime - the sheer scale and ferocity of the latter defies such a comparison - we nevertheless want to point out that state repression in the name of profit-making and protection of private property is showing all signs of becoming systematic in 'the New South Africa'.

Thus, we maintain that the class struggle has intensified in a democratic South Africa. While the working class was always divided on the basis of 'race' and - not to forget - gender, the class component is beginning to be the defining feature of the new social movements. 'For the very first time in South African history, these struggles are being fought without the slightest reference to 'race' or colour', is one optimistic analysis of the new struggles. [20]

But the main organisers of the working class still come from the liberation movement: the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), who find themselves in what can be described as a political and 'historical-emotional' alliance with the ANC. While the SACP and Cosatu still control organised labour, their political paralysis and active marginalisation by the ANC has left a political vacuum that the new social movements and non-stalinist left-wing groupings working in and outside of social movements are attempting to fill. Once radical voices in the liberation struggle, the SACP and Cosatu relinquished at an early stage the responsibility and leadership of the country - and its working class - to the ANC. The major inequalities that are plaguing South Africa will be overcome once the National Democratic Revolution takes the leap into socialism, is the SACP's approach. Of course, this democratic revolution has no specified principles, objectives and timelines, but to make it a success, it must be led by a 'revolutionary leadership' and thus 'the ANC must lead its Alliance, and it must lead our society.' [21] The glaring contradictions between the actual neo-liberal policies implemented by the ANC-in-government and the future of socialism are becoming more obvious as time goes by. Ten years after the beginning of 'the National Democratic Revolution', the SACP yet has to explain how a neo-liberal leadership will take the society into socialism.

The union federation Cosatu agrees that the ANC must be the leaders of both society and Alliance. Themselves victims of the ANC government's vicious verbal attacks, as their protests against ANC's economic policies were considered too challenging, Cosatu nevertheless vowed in its 8th Congress in 2003 to ensure an 'overwhelming victory' for the ANC in this year's national elections. The rising unemployment has had adverse effects on Cosatu's own membership, which has dropped in real terms over the last few years, and Cosatu has been in the forefront of organising a few major strikes - supported by the SACP - against privatisation and the Gear policy. But they are not prepared to break with the ANC, despite major political differences, and to prove their allegiance to the ruling party they often join in condemning the left and other voices critical of the state. According to Cosatu, 'vicious' and 'simplistic' organisations, like the Anti-Privatisation Forum and other

movements with an 'extreme left' leadership, are impossible to cooperate with. [22]

However, there are new social movements that Cosatu co-operates with on a regular basis. One of these is the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), a large and influential organisation that lobbies for antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS and education around the epidemic. That Cosatu supports this important movement despite the TAC's vociferous criticism of government for obstructing the development of effective approaches to combat the virus, may be its only saving grace. The spread of HIV/AIDS in South Africa is ripping apart an already torn and very thin social fabric and exacerbates poverty, and the remnants of apartheid's social systems are the breeding grounds for the disease. The migrant labour system, a legacy of apartheid that served to secure a steady flow of cheap, male labour to agriculture, mines and factories, is still firmly in place and continues to keep men away from their families for long periods at a time, and is an important source of the spread of HIV/AIDS in South and southern Africa. Racist collective punishment of a people for decades has bred a sense of constant agitation, which manifests itself in gang violence, crime, and exceptionally widespread violence against women, which compounds the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The continuation of the violent patriarchy constructed under apartheid through state sanctioned gender discrimination, which overlapped with and buttressed the racism of the state, is undermining women's health and jeopardises their newly-won constitutional liberation. It is a serious threat to the fledgling democracy of South Africa, as it stifles development, fuels the further spread of HIV/AIDS and prevents women from reaching their full potential and from participating fully in democracy-building.Â However, the ANC has shown commitment to the eradication of oppression of women. Women's rights have been institutionalised and established in legal and constitutional chapters, and state bodies such as the Commission on Gender Equality have been formed. Within the ANC there is a quota of at least 30 per cent women in the leadership of all structures, and this is seen as a minimum. But this liberal-constitutional protection has done little to improve the quality of life of women in rural ghettos, townships and shanty towns. Women have little power to negotiate the use of condoms or monogamy. With the increasing feminisation of poverty comes increasing dependence on men for resources, and consequently the closure of spaces for equality in sexual relationships. Fewer women than men have access to formal employment and the - though nominal considering the high level of retrenchments - security that provides. The frustrations, alcohol and drugs abuse, hopelessness and the anger of young women and men arising flowing from broken political promises feeds the insatiable appetite of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In the end we wish to re-state the following:

Ten years later, after many hopes dashed and opportunities lost the ANC has learnt that the laws of capitalism will not be suspended even for a country that has lived under centuries of oppression. One of the most serious consequences of the nature of the transition to a liberal democracy in South Africa is that the ANC ironically has to preside over a period that is reproducing inequality along racial lines as effectively as apartheid legislation and institutional apparatus did. Racial capitalism (or, apartheid) is pretty much alive and well in South Africa. The poor and working class is comprised almost exclusively by Black people and the rich are still comprised almost exclusively by 'Whites'.

Even for those who gave the ANC unconditional and often uncritical support for decades, admit that this is not the type and depth of social delivery that they had expected of a ten year old ANC government.Â Those who never gave the ANC such license are looking for a way-forward premised on the understanding that delivery of basic social services is not likely to materialise under an ANC or any other form of bourgeois government.

It is quite clear that the ability of the ANC to implement anti-people policies hinges on the overall inability of the left inside and outside of the new social movements to provide a tangible and credible alternative to the ANC. Important first steps have been taken in order to provide such an alternative. To paraphrase Alexander (1997)²³, the task of the left and social movements in essence remains that of intensifying class contradictions by fighting for and defending reforms that favour the poor and the working class - reforms that will push the capitalist system to its limit - and to take as our final position that the need to overthrow the system will become apparent to all our allies in the course of struggle.

Notes

1 Alexander, N. *An Ordinary Country - Issues in the Transition From Apartheid to Democracy in South Africa*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2002, p. 146

2 Due to the history of South Africa, it is near-impossible to write an analysis without making reference to 'race' - the country was after all divided according to four 'racial groups': 'Africans', 'Whites', 'Indians/Asians', and 'Coloureds'. We will consistently put these categories as well as the references to 'race' within inverted commas, to emphasis that they are social and political categories, as opposed to biological.

3 Greenstein, R. 'State, Civil Society and the Reconfiguration of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa', University of the Witwatersrand (Sociology Department), *Wiser Seminar Paper*, August, 2003, p. 15

4 Ginsburg, D. 'The Democratisation of South Africa: Transition Theory Tested', *Transformation*, 29, 1996, p. 82

5 Lodge, T. *Politics in South Africa: From Mandela To Mbeki*, David Phillip, CA, South Africa, 2002

6 Desai, A. & Pithouse, R. 'But we were thousands'. Dispossession, Resistance, Repossession and Repression in Mandela Park', Centre for Civil Society Research Report 9, November, 2003, p. 2

7 Department of Education: Education Statistics in South Africa At A Glance in 2001, 2003

8 Address by the Minister of Housing: 'How South Africa Improved Housing Conditions for Seven Million People', www.gov.doh.za, 2004

9 Lodge, T. op.cit.

10 Rostron, B. 'South Africa - The New Apartheid?', *Mail and Guardian*, 21 February, 2002

11 Alexander, N. op.cit. pp. 71-72

12 'Trevor Ngwane: Sparks in the Townships', *New Left Review*, 22, July-August, 2003

13 Rostron, B. op.cit.

14 Services For All - Municipal Services Newsletter, 3, April, 2002 www.queensu.ca/msp

15 Shore, K.J. 'Who Pays? Municipal Services in South Africa', Reports, 10 January, 2002

16 Desai, A. & Pithouse, R. op cit.

17 'Trevor Ngwane: Sparks...' op.cit.

18 Ibid.

19 Desai, A. & Pithouse, R. op cit. See also Hjort, L. 'Sydafrika: Kakstadena organiserar sig - mot banker, politiker och poliser', *Internationalen*, 8, 2003

20 Alexander, N. op cit, p. 166

21 'The Alliance - More Necessary Than Ever', SACP Editorial Comment, *African Communist*, 162, 2002

22 See Hjort, L. 'Sydafrikanska LO ger fortsatt stod till ANC', *Internationalen*, 3, 2003

23 Alexander, N. 'Structural Adjustment Series III: There Is An Alternative', *Workers' Voice*, June-July, 1997

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