

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Africa > South Africa > History (Freedom Struggle and first years of ANC government) (South Africa) > **South Africa: The “second phase of the transition”: another dead end?**

South Africa: The “second phase of the transition”: another dead end?

Monday 16 July 2012, by [SATGAR Vishwas](#) (Date first published: 13 July 2012).

The ANC held a policy conference in June, after being South Africa's ruling party for almost two decades. There are many ideas and policy perspectives up for discussion but the [big idea' framing the discussion is captured in a 47-page long document entitled: The Second Transition? Building a National Democratic Society and the Balance of Forces in 2012'](#).

For many militants of the ANC (including its [socialist desk' called the SACP](#)) this [confirms the Polokwane left shift'](#) of the ANC, the big leap beyond the first stage of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). This is both a superficial, self serving and propagandistic reading of a very ambitious document and proposition now watered down.

Almost twenty years into postapartheid democracy, the degeneration of the ANC prompts us to ask deeper questions about what the ANC is really about. Can it still be a vehicle for the emancipation of South Africa, for a [second transition'? To use its own discourse, does the ANC believe that its leadership of the first transition'](#) was such a great success? Does the ANC really believe it inspires confidence amongst a substantial majority such that it has the moral authority and legitimacy to take South Africa forward for another 30-50 years? Or was talk of a second transition a desperate rhetorical move to confront a deepening crisis of internal cohesion and wider political legitimacy? This contribution seeks to situate the ANC's conversation of a [second transition' in the context of what the ANC is today. {{{Does the ANC Have All the Answers for South Africa?}}}](#) The ANC does believe, despite The existence of the SACP and given its own Marxist-Leninist schooling, that it is the [real vanguard of the people and the working class'](#). By implication it has the monopoly on answers for the way forward, and as an extension of this Leninist faith, the state is a crucial instrument for bringing about change. In fact, 18 years of neoliberal rule confirm a poverty in the ANC's understanding of transformation and the failure of the state to be the [magic wand' of change. Ironically, the ANC has engaged in deep globalisation of the South African economy exposing the state to the discipline'](#) of international markets and limiting its autonomy. The only way around this challenge is to bring the people genuinely into the transformation process from below. However, this is not a central dimension of the politics envisaged in the second transition. Moreover, the distance between the ANC and the grassroots has widened such that the ANC branch is not necessarily the expression of grassroots politics.

There is a common sense understanding in South Africa that one of the strengths of the tri-partite alliance is that it assists in enhancing debate, sharpening policy perspectives and supplying answers to challenges facing the country. The ANC is meant to embody the collective wisdom of this creature. Unfortunately, this is a naïve understanding of the tri-partite alliance. Moreover, it tends to suggest the alliance is locked into a division of political roles: the ANC governs, the SACP is the conscience and COSATU holds mass power. The reality today is that the alliance is a battle ground for personal and factional interests that spill over into the state. When the SACP's leaders declare that [the 1996 class project' is alive and well in the ANC, whose interests does this serve? When COSATU calls on its members to swell the ranks of the ANC'](#)

whose interests does this serve? Today, overlapping membership in the Alliance has become the greatest weakness of the ANC given that it creates confusion and instability; political debate in the Alliance is factionalised and it is increasingly a cacophony of self-interested noise. It seems the ANC's second transition will continue this noise and instability because there is no conception of the ANC remaking its political relations over the next 30-50 years in its document and conversation.

While the ANC still talks about resolving the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, South Africa's economy and society are in the grip of a deepening crisis that is exacerbating race, class, gender and ecological contradictions. This is a direct result of the ANC choosing to play the 'globalisation game' by adopting, to an even greater extent than the National Party, neoliberal restructuring that has made South Africa vulnerable to the changing circumstances of the global crisis. What started as financial collapse in the rich countries has now become a conjunctural crisis of neoliberalism (although the world's ruling elites are not willing to surrender market-based policies favouring transnational capital) and a deeper civilizational crisis (interlocking of systemic factors preventing the reproduction of human and non-human life). While the ANC's document eludes 'civilisational crisis' and 'multiple dimensions of the crisis' the most it calls for is 'shared growth' and 'regulated markets'; social democracy redux! {{{The Growing Legitimacy Deficit: Why the NDR is not the Direct Route to Emancipation?}}}

For many South Africans our unfinished political transition was the first dead-end brought about by ANC leadership. Instead of implementing the policies for which it was elected, and for which many South Africans sacrificed, the ANC chose to implement policies that secured the confidence of global capital and Black Economic Empowerment to serve elite formation. Widespread social protests, whether indicative of 'rebellion of the poor' or not, are about profound discontent with state failure, rampant corruption and lack of service delivery. Such protests are widening and becoming increasingly violent in their expression of grassroots anger. The split in the ANC after the Polokwane conference and the formation of COPE further undermined the legitimacy of the ANC. As a newcomer to the political scene and despite serious limitations, COPE secured a dramatic foothold in the political system with 7.4% of the national vote in 2009. In the same election the ANC lauded its near two-thirds majority, but a closer look reveals that its share of the total electorate in fact declined from 53,8% in 1994 to 38,8% in 2009. At the same time, 12,1 million (40,3% of eligible voters) did not vote at all.

In the 2011 local government elections the DA experienced a general increase in support, while the ANC lost voters across the country except in Kwazulu-Natal. The DA's demand for a youth wage subsidy challenges one of the most important pillars of ANC legitimacy amongst the working class: the social grant system that reaches 15 million South Africans. With the ANC failing to create jobs the role of social grants in feeding the material roots of ANC legitimacy cannot be underestimated.

Another crucial factor in the legitimacy crisis facing the ANC is its failure to deepen democracy during the 'first transition' to political freedom. Attacks on the judiciary's independence, staffing the upper echelons of the police and intelligence agencies with Zuma cronies, attacks on the media through the infamous secrecy bill' and the proposed media tribunal and the traditional leaders bill, inter alia, raise profound concerns about the ANC's commitment to democracy. The street politics accompanying this display an authoritarian face of the ANC (as protestors reach for machine guns' against artists etc.) while also exposing a shallow commitment to non-racialism and democracy. A final strand in the legitimacy crisis facing the ANC is the manner in which it seeks to control the union movement. COSATU has an

impeccable national and international record of defending and advancing democratisation. However, the increasing populist authoritarianism of the ANC is also undermining the credibility of COSATU's commitment to democratisation. COSATU is increasingly called upon to defend the indefensible in the eyes of the people. Moreover, the political independence of COSATU is being undermined as union leaders are being drawn into cabinet positions in government, union investment companies are locked into BEE deals, the ANC government responds violently to civil society protest action and unions themselves undermine traditions of worker control. COSATU is at a crucial crossroads and internal union battles, both at the recent NUM Congress and most likely at the next COSATU elective conference, will reveal how the ANC (working in cahoots with the SACP) finds it absolutely necessary to control COSATU to safeguard its influence and legitimacy amongst the organised working class. COSATU would do well not to let ANC vanguardism substitute for independent working class leadership and worker control of unions. {{{Second Transition to What?}}} When squared up with reality of what the ANC is about today, the noble sounding rhetoric of the second transition document comes unstuck. The ANC does not have the answers to confront the challenges of crisis-ridden global capitalism, its legitimacy crisis is deepening and it is showing signs of growing authoritarianism. This prompts a crucial question: 'second transition' to what? If the ANC genuinely believes that the content of the second transition is to address economic transformation then it is rather remarkable how its document is bereft of a serious analysis of the neoliberalisation of South Africa and its implications for the state, the accumulation model, class formation, civil society and international relations. It skirts social realities that the ANC was responsible for constituting and merely reduces 18 years of neoliberalisation to a tactical difference amongst Alliance alliance partners. Without such a critical understanding of South Africa's political economy one can only conclude that the ANC's transition to a national democratic society is one in which the **spectre of capital** looms large. This is further confirmed by formulations on the dimensions of what constitute a national democratic society'. These are shot through with a narrow liberal understanding of freedom and representative democracy, a conception of social capital emptied of an understanding of power relations, a state that hovers above class contradictions to regulate class conflict and a productivist conception of economic change; more growth and industrial jobs. All of this is rather outdated, overtaken by globalising capital and the total crisis of capitalism today and certainly not the **best that human civilisation has to offer**. The ANC today is not the place where new Left thinking, imaginings and propositions are developing. It would seem the much vaunted second transition' is likely to be another dead end.

Vishwas Satgar

P.S.

* AMANDLA ISSUE 25 <http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/>

* Dr.Vishwas Satgar is a senior lecturer in International Relations at WITS University. He is also a member of the national steering committee of the Democratic Left Front.