

Freedom Day 2018

Why only revolutionary change in South Africa will deliver real freedom

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Freedom Day is an annual public holiday in South Africa to celebrate the anniversary of the country's first democratic election in 1994. The euphoria of that moment is now a distant memory. To many the promise of a truly democratic future marked out in the Freedom Charter of 1955, and even the less radical commitments of the new Constitution adopted in 1996, seem to have been betrayed.

From communities, to the mines and the factories, university campuses, and rural areas there is a deep sense that the promise of what was once called "the new South Africa" has been dashed. This often manifests in popular protest and the emergence of new forms of popular organisation outside the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

The negotiated settlement that brought an end to apartheid at the end of the Cold War was once widely - if not universally - celebrated. But the settlement was a compromise, a fact that quickly became apparent. The negotiated settlement ensured that the transition left many of the colonial features of South African society intact. The interests of the old white elites and the emerging black elites were systematically prioritised over those of the working class and impoverished majority.

Furthermore, the ANC has had an exceptionally poor track record of governance. The party is regularly charged with wholesale corruption, repression (including, most notoriously, the 2012 massacre of striking miners at Marikana), sustaining neo-apartheid forms of rule in the countryside and the cities and the failure to redistribute land and democratise the commanding heights of the economy by removing it from the domination of white capital.

A great disappointment

The broad sense of disappointment in post-apartheid South Africa is not just a matter of sentiment. It's an undeniable fact that millions are unemployed and millions languish in shacks.

The most recent 2018 World Bank Report shows that over 55% of the population live below the poverty line. Those closest to the upper poverty line live on just R992 (USD\$80) per person and over 76% live with the constant threat of poverty.

And, according to last year's figures, 27.7% of the population is unemployed and up to 70% of homes suffer food insecurity with many of these households skipping meals.

The education statistics are just as bleak. A 2016 international literacy report found that eight out of 10 school pupils in Grade 4, that is between the ages of 9-10, cannot read.

Two decades after the end of apartheid the majority of the black population still labours under

conditions of exploitation, oppression and poverty despite South Africa being classified as a upper middle income economy with the second largest economy on the continent.

The stark contrast between rich and poor makes South Africa the most unequal country in the world. This inequality is deeply raced and gendered. African women are consistently at the bottom of all indicators – from poverty to income, education, safety and food insecurity. The key question that arises is how have such conditions been able to continue in a country as rich as South Africa?

Betrayal of a promise

The ANC came to power via the strength of a working-class mass movement based both in communities and workplaces. But once the ANC attained power it demobilised the movements that had defeated apartheid. This allowed the party to become a vehicle for elite interests. Black elites sought to integrate themselves into existing power structures, and to become partners in the management of exploitation and oppression, rather than to build a just society.

The majority of black South Africans were left with liberal rights on paper. In reality, however, they continued to suffer severe impoverishment and exploitation. As the gap between the promises of the “new South Africa” and lived reality widened, protests became more frequent, and repression rapidly worsened.

The ANC lacked the political will to implement even the most basic economic reforms for the majority of South Africans. This is in stark contrast to Lula’s government in Brazil which made modest reforms that, nonetheless, made a real difference to people’s lives.

The rhetoric of the ANC, and its partners in the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions was, and is often, left wing, sometimes even socialist. But in reality, the country has been ruled by a comprador elite unwilling to make even the most limited moves to reform the countryside, the cities or the economy. The crux of the country’s disappointment lies in the fact that the ANC tied itself to the interests of capital rather than to the majority of South Africans.

Ramaphosa no panacea

Under Jacob Zuma’s disgraceful rule the degeneration of the ruling party spiralled into free fall. But as much as the removal of Zuma from the Presidency is to be welcomed, it does not resolve the country’s fundamental problems. Corruption did not begin with Zuma, and the entire negotiated settlement was a deal structured to keep rapacious forms of capitalism in place.

President Cyril Ramaphosa is an oligarch who became a key figure in the forms of accumulation and repression that have left the majority of black South Africans still impoverished and exploited after apartheid.

If freedom is to be realised for the majority of people, South Africa will have to construct a new rural order, a new urban order and a new economic order. But charming the elites in Davos and the City of London won’t change the lives of impoverished and working class South Africans. A return to neoliberalism cannot be the answer to our tremendous problems.

Towards socialism

If the promise of freedom is to be restored to South Africans, the first step is to rebuild the power of the working class and impoverished people. And a clear vision of a better future needs to be developed that goes beyond liberal rights and into substantive entitlements. New formations need to

build their power to the point where a new order can be constructed in the countryside, the cities and in the economy.

South Africa, is fortunate to still have a mass-based working class movement. By building the power of progressive formations of impoverished and working class people across the country the country can begin to build an alternative society in which socialism is not just empty rhetoric. It is in this kind of change, revolutionary change, that the hope for real freedom lies.

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