

The 'Zumafication' of Left Politics in the Alliance: A Critical Review of the ANC Policy Conference & the SACP 12th Congress

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The SACP and COSATU have been fiddling with the same strategic and political choice for over 15 years now. First choice: to be junior partners in an Alliance they will never run/control (but might have key positions in) and thus practice a politics of offering critiques of existing policy implementation and arguing for policies that have a more pro-poor character/more state involvement, engage in occasional campaigns and activities designed to 'show' that the working class is still a force to be reckoned with and simultaneously continuing to be part of an ANC electoral machine and to participate in an ANC-run state through its various institutional mechanisms. Second choice: to go back to the basics of organising and mobilising the poor and working class (which must include real, practical alliances with community organisations and social movements) based on a radical programme of demands for the redistribution of ownership and wealth that will act as an organisational and political base to both shift ANC/government policy - not through insider bargaining/politicking but through mass mobilisation and class struggle - and to rebuild a genuine left political and organisational power-base to contest power relations within SA society (something which is not simply reducible to elections and running as an electoral force separate from the ANC).

The problem is however, that the fiddling has been just that - the second choice has never really been on the agenda. As a result, they have continued to play the Alliance political 'game'. While this have contributed to minor policy shifts and occasional genuflections by the ANC/ government towards mitigation of rising inequalities and poverty, these have not happened in isolation from the myriad of protests and mobilisations that have taken place outside the SACP-COSATU nexus and which have arguably been just as responsible for various policy shifts and the more recent rise in political contestation within the Alliance. Indeed, the ANC is probably more wary of poor community uprisings and disillusionment with ANC delivery and socio-economic progress than they are with the regular sniping and critiques of the SACP/COSATU.

The unfortunate but predictable result has been that the politics and practical work of the SACP and COSATU have become, over the last few years, tied directly to what is going on inside the ANC-Alliance in direct proportionate relation to intensifying personal and positional power struggles. This is the logical outcome of such an approach/politics and it has effectively paralysed the SACP/COSATU's ability to organise and mobilise on a genuinely practical, working class/poor - centred pole, where their programmes, struggles and critiques are actually put to the test in real struggles happening on the ground and in the arena of democratic contestation for societal power.

The recently held ANC Policy Conference and SACP 12th Congress reflect this state of affairs in the form of the dictates of the personal/political battle between the Mbeki and Zuma 'camps' - with preceding mobilisation campaigns and practical work tending to ape this contest (i.e., whether it will, or won't, take forward the personal positions and accompanying politics of this or that 'camp'). The fact that the SACP and COSATU have publicly stated that the outcomes of the ANC Policy Conference represent a victory for 'left forces' is clear indication of this - despite the fact that there was nothing in the outcome of the ANC Policy Conference that would indicate any kind of radical shift from what has previously been the case (i.e., a stated commitment to a 'developmental state' and for better functioning of the Alliance etc.).

Similarly, the SACP 12th Congress was mostly dominated by the politics of personality and positionality - who would/would not be elected to leadership positions based on what 'camp' they belong to as well as the debate over electoral positioning depending on what happens at ANC Congress in December (read: wait and see if Zuma wins the leadership contest and if so, then this will determine the strategy and tactics of the SACP). It is a sad state of affairs - a situation in which the largest and most long-standing 'left' party in South Africa is effectively held hostage to the outcomes of personal/intra-organisational and patronage battles within another party and, in which it's own programme and politics is also effectively moulded by the same battles. From the outcome of the leadership elections at the SACP Congress, it is clear that those who 'won' and those who 'lost' were largely defined by what 'camp' they supposedly inhabit (in this case, a clear 'victory' for those in the Zuma/Nzimande 'camp' and a clear 'loss' for those supposedly allied to the Mbeki/Nqakula 'camp'). Sadly, there was very little evidence of any clear ideological and/or organisational criteria being upheld as the main arbiter of choice for leadership positions. As one Congress delegate succinctly put it, one of the main reasons why Mbeki did not show at the Congress, "could be that he would not want to walk into Zuma's den".

What makes things even worse is the fact that the person on whose shoulders so much of the fortunes, political energies and organisational decisions of the SACP are now being placed, is not even an active member of the party itself and has shown, time and again, that his own political and ideological inclinations are neither communist nor even socialist but are defined by what will take his own position and power forward. In other words, saying what is 'popular' despite there being no indication of any meaningful capacity nor commitment to see through the actual implementation of what is being said/preached. This is also consistent with what came before the Zumafication of SACP/COSATU politics - the Mbekification of the same.

Prior to the dominance of the now raging Zuma-Mbeki battle, the SACP's (and to a lesser extent COSATU's) politics and organisational direction was largely defined by what Mbeki represented/was doing in government. This meant fighting (or at least spoiling to fight) the pro-capitalist policies of his government and his political control of the ANC by positioning itself as a counter-Mbeki force within the Alliance and as the real inheritor and prosecutor of the ANC's National Democratic Revolution (NDR) legacy. The alternative - acting as an independent force of the left with both a comprehensive critique of, and a programmatic path to overcome, capitalist relations of production and the inherent exploitation and oppression it demands, as an active mass force of the poor against the policies and politics of the ANC under Mbeki's leadership and as a political party capable and willing to offer the poor/working class both a organisational home and a political identity defined by what it is and not simply what/who it is against - has never really seen the light of day.

All of this begs the question: Where is the concrete evidence to confirm that the ANC has "shifted to the left" as Nzimande claimed at the SACP Congress? Is it contained in ANC Policy Conference resolutions about a 'developmental state' or in references to expanding certain social services and promises of basic service infrastructural delivery? Is it to be found in the draft Strategy and Tactics document that, as ANC Secretary General, Kgalema Montlanthe, admits, "does not propose a

substantial departure from the vision, character and tasks of the ANC ... but does seek to articulate these in a more precise manner". Methinks not. The real assessment/ judgement should be made in relation to what is actually happening where it most counts – on the ground, in the daily lives of the majority. Two further question then beckon: What was the practical, 'left' way forward provided at either the ANC Policy Conference or the SACP Congress on water cut-offs, pre-paid water meters/the provision of adequate water for the poor, the housing crisis and evictions, the decrepit state of the public health care system, the crisis of public education, the complete lack of any meaningful urban and rural public transport system and the systemic nature of the unemployment crisis? And: Who exactly were the respective delegates talking for and talking to?

Ironically, it is ex-DA politician and now public liberal intellectual Raenette Taljaard who has captured the essence of what emerged from the ANC Policy Conference, aptly calling it, "the shade of the variety of capitalism under a 'developmental state' banner ...". The reality is that all the ANC (and by default, the government it presides over) has done is to more fully recognise that the reality of increasing socio-economic inequality and political (read: electoral) dissatisfaction amongst the poor represents a real threat to both their longer-term hold on political/state power as well to the organisational continuance of the alliance (which the ANC still finds extremely useful as a foil against the actual possibility of an independent left/working class force outside of the alliance – and thus not organisationally controllable and politically manageable).

This recognition has led to genuflective nods in the direction of greater infrastructural spending (although most of this has nothing to do with poor/working class communities but much more to do with the interests and demands of corporate capital and the seemingly insatiable need of the political/economic elite for grandiose projects and affirmation from global elites that they are now real players on the global scene and can 'deliver' things such as the World Cup), slight increases in social grants, relatively small increment increases in public sector salaries and much more rhetoric about the need to control/discipline the 'free market' and listen more attentively to the voices/cries of the poor. This surely does not constitute a meaningful and serious 'shift to the left' but rather an astute politics on the part of the ANC – both in relation to the ANC's own chosen ideological path (i.e., a deracialised capitalism dressed up in the language of the NDR) as well as in relation to the ongoing personal and patronage conflicts within the ANC itself – as a direct means of lessening the appeal of the populist politics of Zuma.

Indeed, it would appear that the SACP (and COSATU) have been ensnared in the political game that the ANC has constructed and which has been playing itself out over these last few years (and more specifically, over the last year). Thus, can their respective leaderships make the incredibly dubious claim that the ANC Policy Conference was a 'victory for the left' and that the politics that they have pursued over the last while has actually been the defining factor in this 'shift', while simultaneously claiming, as Cronin does, that such a politics has been 'sober and intelligent'. This is really just another way of saying that there was really no other option, that it is ludicrous to think about, or worse to actualise, either leaving the ANC/Alliance or forging a fighting programme of the working class/poor separate from the NDR-ANC-Alliance axis and testing its popular and democratic applicability with those they claim to represent. In the absence of another choice being contemplated, what we continue to witness (and have again witnessed at the recent ANC Policy Conference and SACP Congress) is the repetition of the same manta – namely, that the left in the Alliance has to 'manage' the relationship with the ANC and now, given the evident shift to the left, even more closely 'manage' the implementation of the developmental 'agenda'.

COSATU General Secretary, Zwlenzima Vavi, once again confirmed this with his comments at the SACP Congress, in which he complained (for the umpteenth time) that the real problem is that, "the alliance is not driving transformation together, which creates divided loyalties". As a result Vavi said, COSATU "has called for the restructuring of the alliance so that no single component or

individual in the alliance determines strategy and deployments". It is as though if something is repeated often enough, people (in this case those attending the SACP Congress) will actually believe it. Does Vavi, Nzimande or any of the others in their 'camp' actually believe that a 'restructuring' of the alliance (how many times can this be done anyway?) is going to result in the SACP and COSATU becoming equal members/deciders with the ANC? Of course it is not, and it never will, precisely because it is the ANC which places itself in front of the South African people as a governing choice (and also as the historic and never-ending liberator of the people) and constitutes the leading political organisation of the so-called NDR (which is the incredibly weak theoretical and strategic glue that binds the three together anyway). The upshot of this is that the very constituency that the SACP/COSATU claim to represent - the poor/working class - do not have the choice/option of holding the SACP/COSATU to direct democratic and organisational/ideological accountability - they only have the choice of doing so through the proxy of the ANC.

For all the recent talk of the 'victory of the left', one still needs to pose the question as to what indeed constitutes 'left'? The SACP/COSATU cannot really define what this means because any slight change in ANC/government policy that has occurred/might occur - and which could provide some additional succour to the poor/working class - is interpreted as a 'victory' for the Alliance left, precisely because to interpret otherwise would be to undermine the larger claim and position that it is necessary and imperative for the SACP/COSATU to remain in alliance with the ANC. Also, because any deeper and more realistic interpretations would undermine the entire theoretical construct of the NDR upon which the alliance rests, as well as the present and ongoing organisational and ideological positioning of both the SACP and COSATU. Thus does the SACP resolve at its Congress, that the state should lead macro-economic growth instead of the market, without any meaningful discussion of what this concretely means in relation to the ANC's ideological commitment (confirmed over and over again) to a capitalist macro-economy which the ANC-run state has practically lead/implemented. What did the SACP see at the ANC Policy Conference to suggest a deviation (i.e., of the state being used to drive the accepted macro-economic policy framework) from this practice?

Another salient issue to arise from these gatherings, is the degree to which the SACP and COSATU have made much of their opposition to the 'path of accumulation', presently ensconced in the macro-fundamentals of South Africa's political economy. Any serious communist would, of necessity, have to identify this 'path' as one that is intrinsic to capitalist relations of production (with all the attendant exploitative generation of surplus value, expropriation of the social wage and the institutionalised marginalisation of those peripheral to the capitalist market - i.e., the unemployed/destitute etc.). However, what the SACP and COSATU leaders are really referring to is the particular character of this overall accumulation path (in their minds, BEE enrichment for the few, consolidation of the post-1996 'class project' in the ANC through use of inherited state institutions and existing capitalist productive capacities, abandonment of promised redistribution of land and the provision of basic services for all etc.) in the context of post-apartheid South Africa - not the path itself. They thus have no other option but to propagate the idea that the side-lining of the individuals and class forces (within the ANC-Alliance) that are pursuing this 'path', will then evidently result in the possibilities of pursuing a different 'path'.

Vavi confirmed this at the SACP Congress when he boldly stated (and without any hint of irony or contradiction) that the task of the SACP and COSATU is to defeat the "agents of new capital". In other words, the battle of the SACP and COSATU has become a battle to politically and organisationally 'cleanse' the ANC of its historic and more contemporary progeny. Put another way, the political and organisational defeat of those who want their 'fair share' of the capitalist system as was so clearly enunciated by ANC Secretary General, Dr. Xuma, all the way back in 1949. This would mean nothing less than a complete political and ideological revolution within, and through, the ANC - something that is clearly not going to happen simply because certain SACP and COSATU leaders

want it to happen and proclaim its possibility as the fundamental basis for their own organisation's strategy. If ever there was a classic case of embedded 'entryism' then this is it (apologies to those Trotskyists who might still claim this tactic as wholly their own).

At both the ANC Policy Conference and the SACP Congress there was also a much talk about completing the 'tasks of the NDR'. But what are we to understand by the NDR? For Nzimande, "the basic aim of the national democratic revolution is to address poverty, unemployment, disease, restore the dignity of the overwhelming majority of our people through creating a mass driven democratic dispensation, remove all forms of discrimination and build an egalitarian society". Further, "this means provision of minimum basic necessities, services and human dignity to all South Africans". This is such a general 'definition' that it can encompass (and celebrate) virtually any move to "address" the inherited inequalities of apartheid capitalism as well as any improvement (no matter how small or sustainable) in relation to basic services for the poor majority. It is because of this generality that Nzimande can then claim that, "a key challenge therefore is that we must build an ANC (and Alliance) that consciously seek to build and lead a mass movement that is daily engaged with issues and challenges facing the mass of our people ... This should also be seen as part of the very important challenge of building the capacity of the ANC (and the Alliance) to exercise effective oversight on government and all our cadres so deployed (and to) defeat factionalism, patronage and corruption within our ranks."

Not surprisingly, this was the main organisational and political 'challenge' identified (once again) at the SACP Congress, and it is this 'challenge' that fits comfortably with the accepted understanding of the NDR amongst the 'left'. Viz, the NDR demands that those identifying themselves as socialists/communists etc. have no other option but to follow the strategic path set out by the SACP and COSATU (as the two main 'left' forces in the country) - any other strategic path/challenge is simply counter-productive, or at best, naïve. Again, this 'approach' was confirmed by Montlanthe in his address to the SACP Congress when he stated that, "the recommendations we made at the policy conference of the ANC last month confirm once again that there is no fundamental divergence between the Alliance partners on the nature of the National Democratic Revolution and the most immediate tasks we face."

But, completing the aforementioned revolutionary transformation of the ANC (just like the same in relation to the NDR and broader societal forces) is a practical, not to mention a political, impossibility, as long as the SACP and COSATU tie their own programmatic and thus political/ideological 'path' with that of the ANC-Alliance. They have already admitted many times that the ANC is not a socialist organisation (only, somewhat laconically, that it is an organisation of the poor/of the left). And yet, the entire strategic thrust is to try and 'transform' the ANC (through persuasion, use of 'working class power' and position in the Alliance/ANC/ the state and through the occasional pursuit of class struggles on the ground) from within, so as to then embark on a different accumulation path, using the self-same organisation and historic politics whose entire *raison d'être* is to deracialise the accumulation path, not fundamentally change/overthrow it.

Importantly for the whole South African left, the ongoing community protests and struggles around basic service delivery etc. was raised again at the SACP Congress, alongside its intention to mobilise and lead these struggles. This intent goes back sometime though. In 2004, the SACP launched the 'Basic Services for All Campaign' in which it was pledged that, "party branches, working together with our allies (and) community based organisations, will mobilise communities through local campaigns and struggles based on the information and problems received, building local organs of popular working class power, engage municipalities and government departments, and undertake many other local interventions ... This campaign will include a focus on evictions, cut-offs and problems our people face in accessing services." Since then, and other than Khutsong (where struggles have revolved predominately around issues of provincial demarcation and frustration over

ANC arrogance), the campaign has never gotten off the ground.

The several hundred community protests (with accompanying state repression of social movement and community activists) has been largely met with a deafly silence from the SACP (and COSATU) leadership and structures on the ground. Instead, there have been endless statements and media interviews focused on the Mbeki-Zuma battles, attacks on individuals from other 'camps' and pronouncements on all sorts of other issues - including demands around the national sporting teams - coming out of the offices of the SACP and the YCL (and to a lesser extent COSATU). Even during the recent public sector workers' strike there was little effort and/or practical work around linking worker struggles for better wages/working conditions and those of poor communities around basic services and freedom of expression. - as a means to create a united working class front against the capitalist-friendly policies and political power (read: use of the coercive and economic muscle of the state) arrogance of the ANC and the government it runs, and for the possibilities of creating a meaningful coalition of poor/working class forces.

What the SACP Congress unintentionally revealed on this front, is that little has been done to put efforts where mouths are. It is wholly legitimate to ask - Where have the SACP and COSATU 'been' as the hundreds of community protests around basic services, crackdowns by the state on these activists/communities and efforts to influence local government delivery mechanisms and politics to be more inclusive/participatory have taken place? The unfortunate answer is, virtually nowhere. The emphasis at the Congress on linking up with, mobilising and supporting these community/social movement struggles (with SACP National Organiser, Solly Maphaila, stating that the SACP will now "formalise relations with social movements ...") is nothing more than hot air given the hostage politics of the Alliance left (for reasons advanced above). It is such a politics, now defined more than ever by the embrace of individuals and factions, that will always ensure that this does not happen precisely because the consequent positioning of the SACP and COSATU demands that they politically and organisationally control the social movements so that they are not "anti-ANC" and also so that these social forces do not pose any ongoing or future threat to the 'left' dominance of the SACP/COSATU and the self-anointed 'left' forces in the ANC/the state.

This is the main reason why the SACP/COSATU find the social movements to be 'a problem' (instead of seeing allies on the left to build a viable and grounded political movement in direct opposition to the shosholozza capitalism of the ANC/government). It is not a 'problem' for them to throw all sorts of nasty words at certain ANC leaders and 'class forces' (the shrillness and vitriol of which, the social movements have never approached) but it becomes a 'problem' when social movements go straight to the real political, ideological and organisational reasons behind the increasing anger with, and practical opposition to, the ANC and the policies it implements through the state. It is precisely because the SACP and COSATU refuse to cut the umbilical ties to the ANC that they must adopt this wholly contradictory position/politics, so much so that they are more apt to be accepting of closer relations with capitalists and liberals than with most poor communities and their struggles.

Ultimately, what has come out of both the ANC Policy Conference and the SACP Congress for the left, revolves around the SACP (and to a lesser extent COSATU - it being a trade union) defining who/what it is on its own terms and not those determined by the character and content of constructed conflicts between/ amongst individual leaders and 'camps' of the ANC (and by extension, the Alliance). For now, the Alliance left has allowed a 'Zumafication' of its politics to take hold. Rather than a 'victory for the left', the respective gatherings represent a crisis of confidence at its most acute: a crisis of confidence in the 'left's' ability to forge a political and organisational opposition to what it stands for and what it stands against; a crisis of confidence in the ability/willingness of its constituency (i.e., the poor and working class) to embrace a political and organisational alternative to the ANC's deracialised/elitist capitalism and to identify with the class line that now divides South African society so clearly.

P.S.

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