

Who's left in the post-1994 conjuncture?

By **Z Pallo Jordan**

The author is a member of parliament and of the ANC National Executive Committee

Although the political revolution that commenced in 1994 is incomplete, it has wrought impressive socio-political changes. It has opened doors of opportunity formerly barred to black South Africans; the statutory abolition of racism has completely transformed the political culture of the country; the political tradition, the democratic principles and values of the movement, once the basis of treason charges, have now become hegemonic.

One of the very visible consequences of democracy has been the rapid growth of the African middle and upper strata. Recent reports suggest that these have more than doubled. This profile however conceals two realities. The first is how democracy has benefitted the white minority: 87 percent of whites are now in the upper income brackets (LSM 5–10). The second is that the disparity between the incomes of all the wealthy and those of the poor, who are overwhelmingly black, has widened, making South Africa one of the most unequal societies today. The broad national coalitions, comprising various class forces that the movement mobilised during the struggle for freedom, might become less and less tenable as class becomes the chief determinant of African political behaviour.

STRUGGLE-ERA STRATEGY

I have in the past written of “a crisis of legitimacy” affecting the African National Congress (ANC). Evidence of a decline in ANC legitimacy emerged during the recent general elections, suggesting that ANC has lost support in the key metros of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Port Elizabeth. Are the tensions the ANC Alliance is experiencing today another expression of such slipping legitimacy?

One must again underscore that the Alliance was not the only force in the field fighting for freedom. The ANC, however, did have a strategy to galvanise social and political forces across class and race, which equipped it to lead the charge and consequently to dominate South African politics under the democratic dispensation. In the Strategy and Tactics document adopted at the ANC'S 1969 Morogoro Conference, we read:

our nationalism must not be confused with

chauvinism or narrow nationalism of a previous epoch. It must not be confused with the classical drive by an elitist group among the oppressed people to gain ascendancy so that they can replace the oppressor in the exploitation of the masses.

Further on, the document says:

our drive towards national emancipation is therefore, in a very real way, bound up with economic emancipation. We have suffered more than just national humiliation. Our people are deprived of their due share in the country's wealth; their skills have been suppressed and poverty and starvation has been their life experience. The correction of these centuries-old economic injustices lies at the very core of our national aspirations.

These themes are reiterated in the Green Book, produced in 1979:

it is necessary (a) for our movement itself to entertain no ambiguities about the aims of people's power and the role of the primary social forces, both inside and outside our movement, which will underwrite these aims, and (b) to gain increasing mass understanding for the idea that, in contrast to many old-style nationalist movements in Africa, we believe that there can be no true national liberation without social emancipation.

The seizure of power by the people must be understood not only by us but also by the masses as the beginning of the process in which the instruments of state will be used to progressively destroy the heritage of *all forms of national and social inequality*. To postpone advocacy of this perspective until the first stage of democratic power has been achieved is to risk dominance within our revolution by purely nationalist forces which may see themselves as replacing the white exploiters at the time of the people's victory.

Both strategy documents contained a powerful plea for social justice. What the Green Book refers to “social emancipation” was spelled out



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in 1969 as “the correction of these centuries-old economic injustices”. Namely: deprivation of wealth, suppression of skills, and the experience of terrible poverty.

Both documents also carry a warning against aspirant exploiter classes, from amongst the oppressed people themselves, who will want to exploit the common victory in their class interest.

TRANSITION: THE TEST OF THEORY

During the transitional years between 1990 and 1994, social justice, once a central concern of the liberation movement, was placed on a backburner. It was argued that there was “no alternative”. Such proponents said it was wiser for South Africa to craft its own structural adjustment programme

than to have one imposed by the IMF. The outcome is a huge social deficit, expressed in the Gini co-efficient, the yawning gap between the rich and poor, and poverty that is racialised and highly gendered.

What is more, we have not replaced the old exploiter classes. The white monopolies and the classes who own and control them are still firmly in power. In our democracy, the only site of power that the black political elite can claim is the state, exercised through the ANC’s control of political office. The principal sites of economic power are still well beyond its reach.

The leveraging of state power for accumulation is a typically South African pattern, pioneered by Rhodes and the randlords in the 19th century, then copied by the Afrikaner nationalists during



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the 20th. The currently emerging black propertied classes hope to employ the same methods, but the environment is far less favourable. Because the capitalist property relations inherited from the apartheid era have not been tampered with, they have been compelled to borrow heavily from the white monopolists and rely on their co-operation in order to advance. Consequently, the black propertied classes are being assimilated into the incumbent white monopoly capitalist classes and they have been unable to change the character of South Africa's economy. The template of the mineral-energy complex, on which South African capitalism was built, still dominates the economy. Many of the features rooted in South Africa's "colonialism of a special type" remain unchanged. That volatile mix of contradictions boiled over at Marikana on 16 August 2012.

I would argue that a new national democratic alliance that will focus on social justice and the eradication of poverty is now required, and that the same coalition of forces from among the oppressed will be essential to construct a new consensus.

Addressing a mining lekgotla, then Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe acknowledged Gavin Hartford's analysis of the migrant labour system:

Sadly, mining has remained a prisoner of its apartheid past in its core element of cheap labour sourced through a migrant's punishing annual work cycle and the social evils associated with that cycle. No amount of employment equity plans and empowerment transactions have ventured to tamper with this.¹

LEFT ANALYSIS

The founders of the liberation movement had thought that the incremental inclusion of the black majority in the political institutions of the country would bring change. The post-war generation recognised that change could only be realised by overthrowing the system of white domination, not its reform. They posed democracy, non-racism, non-sexism and equality before the law as the alternative to white minority rule. Democracy required at least

two basic conditions: adult suffrage and the repeal of all racist laws that institutionalised inequality.

The objectives of the ANC and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, later the SACP) converged during the first decades of their respective histories: a non-racial franchise, together with the abolition of all the laws and ordinances that designated Africans as non-citizens. Shared objectives led to the historic alliance of the ANC, the SACP and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), the most progressive trade union federation. What the left brought to the democratic alliance were analytical tools that enabled that alliance to devise a strategy that mobilised the social and political forces necessary to effect change.

Since the Rand Revolt of 1921–22, reams of paper have been invested in debating the relationship, if any, between racism and capitalism. Which was the determinant and which the dominant factor in South African capitalism? Some theoreticians concluded that race and class must be read together: the national and class dimensions were inseparable, and neither should be stressed at the expense of the other. In the 1950s, after decades of argument back and forth, the SACP concluded that racism was relatively autonomous within capitalist relations of production. That implied the possibility of intervention through broad-based alliances, built around democratic principles, which could include other classes, even fractions of monopoly capital. According to the SACP, a de-racialised South African capitalism was thus conceivable. Is that, realistically, South Africa's immediate future?

CAPITALISM OF A SPECIAL TYPE

The peculiar circumstance of an industrial revolution in a colonial country gave South African capitalism its special features. The capitalist mode of production, kick-started by mining, had not evolved organically from feudalism, as it had in Europe, driven by small entrepreneurs and merchants. It was imposed here by advanced foreign capitalist interests allied to local capital. Within a decade, there were high levels of monopoly concentration, particularly in the mining-finance complex. It relied on pre-capitalist modes of production for the reproduction of the proletariat, which it articulated in South Africa and its hinterland. It harnessed the institutions, laws and mores of a colonial society to discipline the proletariat for capital accumulation. An intricate dialectic of race, colour and class thus evolved, whose impact is felt in every facet of South African capitalism, even after the end of the colonial and the apartheid states.

The great historical irony of modern South Africa is that, having called into being a modern political



economy through colonial conquest and rapid industrialisation, the white capitalist classes and their supporters marshalled every political device to evade its socio-political consequence: the emergence of a common society in which whites and blacks are not merely mutually dependent, but are inextricably intertwined by the centripetal forces generated by capitalist development. They instead put in place policies that constrained, rather than released, the energies of potential entrepreneurs and contented themselves with an economy sufficient to serve only the white minority.

The South African Constitution, with its injunction for measures to redress centuries of racial domination, in fact requires social-democratic interventions.

By the cunning of reason, the national liberation movements and organisations of the black proletariat became the most consistent proponents of modernity and most fervently embraced the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-racial, multi-faith society that is the principal outcome of capitalist development. While successive white governments tried to unscramble that historic omelette, the liberation movements strived to realise the full potential of South African capitalist development.

FORCES FOR CHANGE

Marxism insists that revolutionary theory guides revolutionary practice. But, as Mao Zedong warned, theory is tested in revolutionary practice, and its soundness cannot be pre-determined. Strategy, the overall battle plan of a revolutionary movement, designates the principal agent/s of change, the social and political forces that can be mobilised to support it, the principal enemy, and the most likely opponents of change.

The kernel of a Marxist political strategy should therefore be the nurturing of political alliances on the basis of a realistic and concrete analysis of the existing or the potential balance of political and social forces, with the aim of assembling a political majority that supports socialist transformation.

Historically, the SACP has been the only left political formation in South Africa to evolve a strategy that successfully integrated the national and class struggles, thus enabling it to participate in coalitions of different class and national forces and

make strategic interventions in the mass struggles of the post-1976 period. In most instances, the SACP made its influence felt indirectly, through its alliance partners.

The danger of Marxists isolating themselves on the left margins of society remains very real today. I would argue that a new national democratic alliance that will focus on social justice and the eradication of poverty is now required, and that the same coalition of forces from among the oppressed will be essential to construct a new consensus. Such a coalition must be popular: rooted firmly in the popular classes, the working people of town and country. Its popular character must also be reflected in the causes it espouses.

TOWARDS SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

If the first phase of the democratic transformation established popular sovereignty through political democracy, this phase must pursue social democracy. The South African Constitution, with its injunction for measures to redress centuries of racial domination, in fact requires social-democratic interventions. Among the immediate objectives should be to prise the emergent black bourgeoisie from the corrupting embrace of the old white monopolists and compel them to undertake the re-industrialisation of South Africa by pursuing the development of the country's productive forces in earnest. The black working class and the black bourgeoisie share an interest in the expansion and growth of the South African economy. The upliftment of the rural working poor equally relies on an efficient economy that turns out the durable consumer good that can improve the quality of their lives.

Linking the struggle against racism to the struggle for socialism will thus prove more complicated than many of us expected. The challenge is to evolve a revolutionary practice, rooted in Marxism, which is at once intellectually rigorous and politically engaged.

Regrettably, the liberation movement is reluctant to engage seriously with the outcomes of democracy, which include pronounced stratification of the former oppressed. Its reluctance to address the issue has seriously impaired the ANC's capacity to anticipate and thus manage these contradictions intelligently.

THE CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT

Fragmented working class

The first issue confronting the left in our post-apartheid era is the historical legacy of a highly fragmented working class. It is estimated that



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there are more than 200 trade unions in South Africa today. Of these, 179 are registered. There are also four trade union federations – COSATU, NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions), FEDUSA (Federation of Unions of South Africa) and CONSAWU (Confederation of South African Workers’ Unions) – reflecting both the historic racial- and skill-based divisions within the working class and highly differentiated levels of political consciousness. Compounding matters, most unions are not affiliated to any of the four federations, again indicative of the low levels of consciousness within the working class. COSATU, the largest federation, has correctly argued that its political preferences and the thrust of its political practice have been informed by the intersection of national oppression and class exploitation. COSATU is effectively the federation of the organised black workers, with NACTU playing a secondary role. The other two federations represent the white labour aristocracy, with a handful of predominantly coloured unions in their slipstream.

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ANC Green Book, 1979

The ANC and the SACP both have longstanding organic links with the African working class. Their alliance with COSATU solidified these. Other left formations and emergent groupuscules or splinter groups have sought to build such links, such as AMCU (Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union), at the expense of the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers). How successful they will be remains to be seen.

In white-ruled South Africa, the most visible line of fracture was race, in terms of which power, status, and access to wealth and opportunity were apportioned. No less important, but perhaps less obvious, was class, which intersected and coincided with race in a number of instances. While

nationalists proceeded from an uncomplicated unity of “the people” vs. the system of white domination, Marxists necessarily were more sensitive to the real diversity of “the people”. Actual contradictions among the people had to be addressed, not in order to divide them, but to maximise their striking power. It was Marxist intellectuals who unpacked the salience of class in the struggle, even as it ensued. Their most important contribution was investigating the symbiosis between racial oppression and capitalism.

That legacy impacts directly on both the consciousness and organisational capacity of the working class. While coloured and Indian workers have historically been better organised than African workers, their political consciousness is relatively low. White workers have been tainted by their virulent racism for decades and only a pathological optimist could hold out much hope for progressive politics among them. A left project thus has to kick off with a nuanced appreciation of the political trends and opinions among black workers, the African workers in particular.

Social justice under capitalism

According to the findings of a recent study, South Africa’s GDP has trebled since 1994. The absolute number of those in LSM bracket 5–10 has virtually doubled since 2001, while those living below the poverty line have also been reduced to 9 percent of the population. The de-racialisation of the welfare system has resulted in an increase of those receiving social grants, from 2.4 million in 1994 to 16.1 million in 2012. These statistics indicate an absolute improvement in the condition of all classes since the democratic breakthrough of 1994. Yet social tensions remain very high and expressions of discontent are both loud and highly visible. The high rate of unemployment and the snail’s pace of economic growth mean that, annually, thousands of school-leavers cannot be absorbed into the job market. The question remains: can South African capitalism, as presently structured, deliver rapid economic growth and enhance social justice? Or will social justice trickle down to the less fortunate as a result of faster economic growth and wealth creation for the rich?

Given the high degree of diversity of the South African working class, its differentiation by skill, race, gender, culture and region, what political intervention is required to encourage greater unity and to raise the general level of political consciousness? In addition to the working class, what other class forces and strata objectively have an interest in a left agenda in pursuance of social justice?



Between capitulation and sectarianism

The collapse of Soviet socialism and its satellites in Eastern Europe was probably the worst defeat the left has suffered in over a hundred years. That the four remaining states under communist government have taken recourse to methods associated with capitalism has also planted the notion that capitalist methods are the most efficacious route to wealth creation and poverty alleviation. The debate no longer centres on the relative merits of the two systems, because the merits of capitalism are supposedly self-evident. The question arises: what meaning do we give to socialism in an international environment in which communist states have apparently capitulated to capitalist methods?

As we strive to create a national consensus around an agenda of crosscutting objectives such as economic growth and a concerted struggle against poverty, we should be vigilant in navigating between the reefs of capitulation and those of sectarianism. Socialist forces should not marginalise themselves, and thus reduce themselves to political irrelevance and impotence, by adopting postures that sound radical but that do not in fact advance the cause of the working class and the poor. A strategy that unfolds as a number of tactical engagements that help to amass the social and political forces to effect change is preferable to one of confrontation in principle.

South Africa's democratic forces have to grasp the nettle of the de-industrialisation of the economy and set in place a programme to grow and expand the productive forces of our country. There are no predetermined answers and strategies to help us define the role of state-owned enterprises, the state and the private sector in such an endeavour. We should be prepared to accept that there will be instances when it will be necessary to stimulate strategic partnerships between the state-owned and the private sector; when it might be tactically wiser to permit the private sector to invest in and expand infrastructure where the state is no longer able to assume responsibility; and we should sometimes consciously encourage the private sector to intervene in areas where it can make handsome profits while stimulating the expansion of the economy.

Accepting the need for such ventures should not encourage the illusion that private capital has or will suddenly become altruistic. The business of business is business. And there is no free lunch! But, as has been demonstrated in Vietnam and China, it is precisely in its pursuit of profit that the private sector can be spurred to create or expand badly required infrastructure, industries and services. There will, in fact, be situations with no option other than to harness the resources in the hands of



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the capitalist classes for national purposes, in the full and conscious realisation that their motive is to maximise profits.

A left agenda in today's environment entails a long transition, which will necessarily require recouping the moral high ground that the left lost at the end of the twentieth century. It should be a strategy to consolidate the national democratic agenda. It might also require us to re-visit our concept of socialism itself and to rethink the swiftest route by which to achieve it.

NOTE

1. See Hartford's article in this issue

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