

# Why South Africa needs Democratic Socialism

Monday 27 May 2019, by [FOGEL Benjamin](#), [JACOBS Sean](#) (Date first published: 19 May 2019).

**South African politics urgently needs an injection of electoral energy from the left, that speaks in a language that resonates with voters, rejects chauvinism and embraces democracy.**

After 25 years in power, one would expect that the African National Congress—the party that brought South Africans the Marikana massacre, 40% unemployment, 6-hour power cuts, systemic broken local governance, the corruption of Jacob Zuma and the Guptas and more—would be on the ropes, but for some reason the opposition has not been able to capitalize on this. When the results were announced, the ANC still won with a clear majority (57.60% of the national vote) and eight out of nine provinces. The opposition, despite the damage the ANC has inflicted on itself and the country, is still not a serious political threat, but why has a serious alternative to the ANC not emerged?

For 25 years, many on the left believed that building an alternative would require civil society, NGO's and social movements to create a countervailing power outside the state to hold the ANC to account, but this hasn't produced the desired results. The short answer is that South African politics urgently needs an injection of electoral energy from the left, something that speaks in a language that resonates with voters, rejects all forms of chauvinism and embraces democracy.

One of the main stories of this election is low turnout. Given the array of unpalatable options on the table, it is hard to blame anyone who couldn't stomach voting. According to South Africa's national electoral commission, the IEC, there are 36,5 million people who are eligible to vote, yet only 26,7 million registered. That means about 9,8 million South Africans that did not register to vote, as the South African Federations of Trade Unions (SAFTU) pointed out after the election. A further 9,7 million registered but decided not to vote. The IEC reported that more than one quarter of a million people spoiled their ballots.

The support of the second largest party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), managed to garner around 20.77 % of the votes (it got 22.23% in the last election in 2014), but failed to win any provinces outside of its Western Cape stronghold (an interesting statistic is that third of voters didn't bother to vote in the province). The DA is even more moribund than the ANC and in the post-Jacob Zuma era can only offer vague rhetoric, cheap stunts and opportunism, such as its xenophobic "secure our borders" campaign.

The shock of the election was the DA's loss of votes to the right-wing Afrikaner nationalist party, the Freedom Front Plus. The FF Plus opposes affirmative action, denies Apartheid's effects and opposes land reform at all costs. Despite the DA's origins in the liberal opposition to Apartheid (for years it was the only opposition party, sometimes with one MP, in the whites-only parliament), it based much of post-1994 electoral growth strategy on absorbing right wing voters who supported the old National Party. While it has attracted black votes, the party has struggled to transform itself into a

party of governance and its first black leader, the platitudinous and weak Mmusi Maimane, has failed to provide a clear vision.

The Economic Freedom Fighters, the third largest party in parliament, has cause to celebrate after it increased its share of seats in parliament substantially from 25 to 44. While not enough to force coalition provincial governments, the EFF is now the official opposition in three provinces usually dominated by the ANC, namely North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

The ANC might be beset by internal strife, but it remains the only game in town its alliance partners—the trade union federation, COSATU, and the South African Communist Party—which could have served as a check on ANC power—are shadows of their former selves clinging to life through aligning to incumbent President Cyril Ramaphosa. They, or other left-leaning forces close to the ANC, are unlikely to influence policy going forward. At the end of the day, the ANC is as out of ideas as everyone else and has been promising to renew itself for more than a decade. The best we can hope for is some economic growth and ongoing repair to some of our most damaged institutions.

### **Understanding South African politics**

It is common for South African and international pundits to map South African politics onto a traditional left/right axis, with the ANC occupying the ground to the center-left, the DA the center-right, and the EFF and FF Plus occupying the left and right extremes respectively. The DA and the ANC are better understood as broad church parties encompassing an exotic array of different political currents in the same formation. For the ANC these include black nationalists, conservatives, neoliberals, unionists, social democrats and communists, while the DA unites libertarians, Thatcherites, liberals, Afrikaner conservatives, and coloured nationalists, among others. Parties such as the FF Plus and the nonagenarian former Bantustan leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) are essentially ethnic nationalist parties. Their performance in this election is tied to rising sentiments among groups who perceive that their interests are no longer being served by broad church parties.

The EFF is a racial populist party that employs leftist rhetoric; its policy positions and support for struggles over land and economic rights means that a large part of its social base encompasses workers, students and social movement activists. The leadership of the EFF may be corrupt and opportunistic, but writing off the entirety of the party's support would be effectively writing off a large section of a base for a left politics. The EFF mobilizes aggrieved sentiments on racial rather than class-based lines and its authoritarian leadership is best understood as another faction of the ANC—a competing church with a more charismatic and fierier message.

The much smaller players are mainly religious parties with a base in the church or one-person operations set up by veteran politicians, like Patricia de Lille (former DA Cape Town mayor), who leech off the energy required to remain in public office at all costs. Their comparative lack of success of church-based parties contrasts sharply with what's been witnessed elsewhere, most notably Brazil, though it is clear the ANC and DA absorb these churches and their rapacious leaders for now.

The DA faces an uncertain future in the post-Zuma era. It has no cohering politics, its broad church, center-right appeal apparently no longer includes many conservative whites and it doesn't have anything ideologically to distinguish itself from the pro-business, eloquent Cyril Ramaphosa. Shoddy opportunistic stunts and banalities are not enough to convince weary South Africans that the DA is really ready to govern. The infighting, the tantrums and the twitter barbs are annoying.

If the existing political parties are disappointing and politics stale, it is clear that South Africa needs

an injection from the left. For too long the space for a left politics has been dominated by the idea that politics can only be built without contesting state power through social movements and NGOs. The left has to think electorally.

South Africans still believe in democracy, despite the disappointments of the last 25 years. The majority of voters opted for parties that uphold rather than reject the democratic settlement. Fringe parties, such as Black First Land First and its comical leader Andile Mngxitama—which claim that 1994 changed nothing and the South African people have been sold a pipe dream known as “democracy,”—were rejected soundly by the electorate. South Africans have little patience for militant rhetoric and promises of revolution distant from their material realities. Years of these hollow platitudes from the ANC, COSATU and SACP have left many workers weary.

The space for a left party this election was occupied by the newly formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (SRWP). The SRWP is the brainchild of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest trade union in the country. In 2016, NUMSA broke from COSATU to help form the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). The leader of the SRWP is Irvin Jim, also the secretary general of NUMSA. Bizarrely, SRWP only announced its manifesto two days before the elections after committing to elections only a month before the elections. In the end, SAFTU refused to endorse the SRWP and the party received a mere 24,439 votes.

Postelection, the SRWP blamed its poor showing on mass election fraud (though it didn’t provide any evidence) and imperialism. By running on a platform largely sourced from Brezhnev-era Soviet dogma (Irvin Jim is particularly guilty of this) and relying on Lenin quotes rather than speaking to South Africans where they are at, the SWRP managed in to alienate what few voters it could reach, including the majority of its membership. Democracy cannot be taken for granted, tired clichés about the revolution and the state being an instrument of the capitalist class do little to help us understand the state of affairs or figure out a strategy. For instance, the SWRP’s attack on the country’s electoral commission, is not only opportunistic, it is anti-Marxist. Democracy has provided an open space to organize and build movements without facing the jackboot and the gun—even if South African protestors increasingly face police violence. Like it or not the majority of South African believe in democracy. Dismissing their belief as false consciousness and elections—which so many fought and died for—as a mere trick of the bourgeoisie, insults our struggle. Any future left project needs to begin with the premise that 1994 marked a victory for democracy and progressive forces, something that should be built upon rather than rejected or dismissed. (1994 may have been a negotiated settlement, but it was a victory compared to the alternative of civil war.)

It is clear that the space for a new kind of politics exists. Any politics to take on the effects of racial inequality and neoliberalism in South Africa, can only come from the left. It is estimated that counting stay-aways from the polls, spoilt ballots and low turnout, only 27 percent of adult of South Africans voted for the ANC.

Democracy provides a platform for mobilization and movement building and the majority still have some faith in it. We have seen in recent years a Democratic Socialist upsurge in Mexico, the United States and UK as figures such as AMLO, Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn champion a democratic alternative to fading dreams of revolution. In South Africa, we too need a platform to champion policies in favor of the vast majority. We need a politics rooted in struggles that oppose the big-man patronage politics endemic in political parties, social movements and trade unions; one that takes the struggle patriarchy seriously and rejects authoritarian posturing. The left cannot build an alternative through either nostalgia or revolutionary fantasies. We do not have a base, but that does not mean we cannot build one. The task going forward is to create a credible program that speaks to core issues: corruption, crime, jobs, and growth under a Ramaphosa presidency, without surrendering to the dogmas of the failed left or the liberal center. The next local government

elections in 2021 present that opportunity.

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