

Editorial

South Africa: The opposition is dead, Long Live the opposition

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The ANC will win the 2009 election, albeit with a reduced majority. The split from the ANC, the Congress of the People (Cope), while disappointing many that had hoped they would strip the ANC of its mass support and usher in an era of coalition politics, may, nevertheless grow to be the main opposition. But they will struggle to serve as a credible opposition because their roots in the working class are tenuous and will progressively erode as their pro-business orientation becomes clear. The real opposition remains in the ANC and more particularly in the Tripartite Alliance. Until Polokwane 2007, the real opposition was COSATU and the SACP. COSATU virtually turned itself into a political movement in the build-up to the ANC's 52nd Conference as they mobilised to fight the Mbeki faction. With some prompting from the social movements, COSATU became a leading force in opposing the ANC's shift to neoliberalism through GEAR, privatisation and deregulation. With the support of the Treatment Action Campaign COSATU opposed Mbeki's AIDS policies. COSATU led the opposition to South Africa's policy of quiet diplomacy and appeasement to Mugabe. COSATU was vociferously opposed to cronyism, corruption and the manipulations of black economic empowerment. All this is real even though many argue, correctly, that COSATU was not sufficiently consistent in its opposition, hamstrung by its alliance with the ANC.

The role of the SACP should similarly not be taken lightly. Under Mbeki's presidency they had been thoroughly marginalised both inside the ANC and in the Alliance. Many of its leading cadres were co-opted by Mbeki through sweet cabinet or government positions, serving almost as a fifth column inside the Party. A decisive moment came at the 2002 SACP Congress when Mbeki loyalists - Pahad, Mufamadi, Fraser-Moleketi, Radebe, Erwin - were dumped and a more militant leadership, with significant COSATU overlap, was elected. SACP even considered going into political opposition.

A discussion document, 'Should the Party Contest Elections in its own Right?', was prepared for the SACP's Special Congress (8-10 April 2005), in which potential support for an 'independent workers party', alluding to a COSATU- SACP electoral break from the ANC, was gauged at around 15-17%. The SACP extrapolates that 'such an electoral party ... could become the "official opposition" ' That of course was never tested and the rest is history, in the sense that COSATU and the SACP aligned itself with other disgruntled forces in the ANC to support a renewal of the ANC under the leadership of Zuma.

But what happens to opposition politics after this year's election on 22 April 2009? The real opposition will then be in power. It is likely that leading members of the SACP/COSATU will be in government and not just Parliament. And they will be in power at a special time in history, i.e. during the greatest global crisis since the Great Depression of roughly 1928-32.

In which gear will the new ANC govern? The cabinet is likely to be a hotchpotch representing the different currents in the ANC. Expect to see technocratic neoliberals like Trevor Manuel, BEE beneficiaries like Mathews Phosa, Nzimande-like communists, populists in the form of Fikile Mbalula, and even Mbekiites such as Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma under the pragmatic leadership of

Jacob Zuma.

This leadership will be faced not just with the challenges of governing a highly unequal society and the attendant levels of poverty, unemployment and crime, but with an economy deeply integrated into the circuits and institutions of global capitalism under severe crisis. Moreover, South African capitalism is itself in urgent need of transformation as it confronts the contradiction of being built on a mineral energy complex yet having to face climate change and the larger ecological crisis.

One suspects, and hopefully the coming years will prove us wrong, the new ANC will be populist in rhetoric, conservative in its economic policies, and lethargic ecologically. Rather than confronting the power of business, they will ultimately defer to them. Rather than unlocking a radical programme of redistribution, they will rant and rave. Rather than cutting the umbilical cord of coal-fired and fossil-fuelled energy systems, we will see renewables approached as supplementary. Rather than recognising how deep xenophobic sentiments run in our society, government will define citizenship in narrow, exclusivist terms that will spur on new waves of xenophobic attacks. Rather than recognising the autonomy of popular movements and seeing them as vital in building a participatory democracy, government will use these movements where possible as transmission belts for government programmes, and dismiss their criticisms.

For all this we need a popular opposition rooted in the everyday struggles of poor and working people. The opposition is dead long live the opposition.

P.S.

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