

South Africa: Back to the future

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The defeat of Mbeki and the old guard was enthusiastically endorsed by the predominantly black working class electorate and has created the hope that a new era has dawned, where AIDS denialism, the crisis of delivery, the disastrous state of public health and schooling, and pro-business economic policy will be reversed. The mass of South Africans voted for change – change that is meaningful especially for black working class and poor people. They no longer wish to be confined to the third class compartment of the transformation train.

In all the excitement of the announcement of the new cabinet by the New ANC, under new president Jacob Zuma, one can easily forget that we have been here before.

In 1994, Mandela's ANC achieved an overwhelming electoral victory. With a landslide of 62.65% of the vote, the ANC received a mandate to implement the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), as forged by the mass movement and particularly COSATU at that time. In fact, COSATU explained that given the history of betrayal of newly independent African states, it was crucial to tie their support for the ANC to the implementation of the RDP, which subsequently became the ANC's election manifesto.

On his election as the first president of the democratic SA, Nelson Mandela had this to say: 'We have emerged as the majority party on the basis of the programme, which is contained in the Reconstruction and Development book. That is going to be the cornerstone, the foundation, upon which the Government of National Unity is going to be based. I appeal to all leaders who are going to serve in this government to honour this programme.'

It is worth highlighting the ANC members who served in the first postapartheid cabinet: First Deputy President Thabo Mbeki; Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfred Nzo; Defence, Joe Modise; Justice, Dullah Omar; Police, Sydney Mufamadi; Housing and Welfare, Joe Slovo; Trade and Industry, Trevor Manuel; Labour, Tito Mboweni; Minister Without Portfolio, Jay Naidoo; Health, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma; Public Enterprises, Stella Sigcau; Education, Arts and Culture, Sibusiso Bhengu; Transport, Mac Maharaj; Provincial Affairs, Kader Asmal; Public Services, Zola Skweyiya; Public Works, Jeff Radebe; Prisons, Ahmed Kathrada (questionable?).

It is also worth remembering that Jay Naidoo had been the general secretary of COSATU, and Joe Slovo general secretary and chairperson of the South African Communist Party. With Mac Maharaj, Sydney Mufamadi (COSATU assistant general secretary and SACP leader), Jeff Radebe and Dullah Omar, Mandela's cabinet had a strong left orientation to it.

Yet within two years the RDP was dead and there was the non-negotiable GEAR. We at Amandla! are not prophesising that history repeats itself but we must be mindful of the structural limits to change and the struggles still to be fought that will ensure a changed balance of power in favour of the poor and working people. Any trade unionist can verify that what you have not won on the battlefield, you are unlikely to win at the negotiating table.

Significant leaders on the left have been appointed to the new government, SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande, Rob Davies, Ebrahim Patel, Jeremy Cronin and Yunus Carrim. The removal of Manuel from the finance ministry, and the appointments of Patel and Davies to the ministries of economic development and trade and industry, respectively suggests a more fluid situation in formulating economic policy.

Without a doubt, this group of left cabinet ministers is aware of the recent history of cooption of the left in government. They will therefore be hard-pressed to do something different from what other left cabinet members did: such as SACP member Jeff Radebe leading the privatisation drive under the Mbeki presidency. However, the politics of focusing on individuals is to miss the importance of the structural power of capital over the ANC government. These left ministers are not in the cabinet on their own. On a daily basis, they have to face significant pro-business impulses present in the cabinet and the government bureaucracy. They will be doing this in the absence of organised mass struggles directed at capital and pro-capitalist government policies.

Conscious of this reality, some of these left ministers appreciate the need for critical mass and left struggles and engagement. Critical here is their strategy to withstand and overcome pro-business impulses within the cabinet. The first test for this will be the extent to which the much-punted industrial policy takes on the power of capital and asserts the role of the state and indeed transforms the structure of the South African economy. Again, this struggle will not largely be won in the cabinet boardroom. What this points to is the need to build an organized mass base that directs its social power at both capital and the state. But we are very far from this. The challenge therefore is for the broad left to wake up from its slumber and dirty its hands in building and fostering such a mass base.

P.S.

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