

South Africa: The state of the nation

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In spite of substantial levels of expenditure compared with many semi-industrialised countries, crises dog critical sectors of South African life. Unemployment and crime need no elaboration. The continuing nature of service delivery protests, a number of which turned riotous and violent, point to the crisis of accessing decent services. The housing backlogs that increase annually, the acute skills shortages, crises in the schools and hospitals, and the HIV/Aids infection rates point to a South Africa that is not working. Even the so-called miracle of national unity and reconciliation is exposed by each new racist and xenophobic incident. While it may not be the worst of times, God help us if this is as good as it gets.

In finding an explanation for the state of things one would have to single out the legacy of apartheid, of social division and extreme inequality. The structure of SA is rotten and policy tinkering is not the answer. The electricity crisis could still prove to be a blessing in disguise if it gets more people to realise the structural nature of the crisis facing South Africa and the need for radical change. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority prevents the economic and social restructuring necessary for overcoming the fundamental problems of poverty, mass unemployment, inequality and social division.

A good example is the proposal to deal with the electricity crisis by building an additional six nuclear and four extra climate-changing coal fuelled power stations. By replicating these electricity generation modes, we will reinforce an environmentally destructive accumulation path oriented to the needs of big capital and dependent on cheap labour. The huge infrastructural spend by Eskom and the government will put most of the estimated R1.3 trillion in the hands of a few foreign multinational corporations.

Moreover, such a path will remain based on capital, as opposed to labour-intensive production and import dependence. This will generate balance of payment difficulties, exchange rate volatility and murderous interest rates that encourage the financial over the productive sector. So just as we take one step forward, two in reverse follow. This is likely to be the cycle of post-apartheid development unless there is a radical rupture with the current ways of doing things.

Post Polokwane

Will the Polokwane earthquake be sufficient to bring the structural roots of the problems facing transformation to the fore? Should we depend on the internal developments in the ANC to bring about the necessary shift away from top-down pro-business development? It is necessary to recognise the significance of Polokwane, while understanding its limitations. It is not going to be business as usual, and not because Mbeki says so. The old guard around Mbeki were soundly defeated at Polokwane and as a consequence, the opportunity exists for organisational vibrancy and internal democracy to return to the ANC. However, the class project of Mbeki is still firmly intact. The business-friendly budget tabled by Manuel is evidence of this. Defeating a class project is on a different scale to overturning an out-of-touch leadership.

Already Cosatu has signalled the need for popular movements to remain vigilant and depend on the mass actions of their members to guarantee fundamental change. This was the point Vishwas Satgar made in a recent article in Amandla! (Pilot Issue 2, September 2007) when he highlighted the need for post-national liberation politics to be based on the principle of self-emancipation. The mass movements in SA would be wise to depend on its own independent mobilisations and campaigns to press home the demands of the working class and the poor, rather than wait for Jacob Zuma or anyone else to deliver to them. The very act of staking their claims, whether for decent houses, wages or jobs etc., builds organisation, creates higher levels of consciousness, solidarity, and, most importantly, a counter-power. It is this urgent need to build this counter-power and to anchor it in the politics of self-emancipation that can trump the argument that the new leadership of the ANC must be given time to use their position to make the necessary changes to policy or otherwise. Post '94 history has already shown this to be fatal. Let's not have a repeat of that history.

Amandla Editorial Collective

P.S.

* From Amandla!'s website:

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