



What does it mean to be 'progressive' in South Africa today?

Viewpoints from civil society

- By the New Agenda team

An awful lot has changed during South Africa's 30 years of democracy – but clearly not nearly enough. The state's provision of certain basic services is broadly recognised, and commended, but democracy is not measured only according to the ability of the state to deliver services to its citizens. It is reflected in the ability of every person to exercise their human rights to secure better lives for themselves, their families and their communities. Manifesto's aside, how could the country now move forward, from where we are? We publish three views – from the Cape Town-based Progressive Citizens Initiative, from Abahlali baseMjondolo and from My Vote Counts.

The Cape Town-based Progressive Citizens Initiative (PCI), an informal group of current and former activists, begins its statement of intent by defining “progressive” in broad Left thinking: “‘Progressive’ in our understanding means the striving to make real a just balance between equality and freedom.”

The PCI’s 12-point declaration is published in full below:

1. Whereas much has been gained since 1994 in the area of freedom: free movement, freedom of expression, freedom to associate, freedom to elect and be elected, we are surprised at the constant attack on what guarantees the survival of such freedoms: the Constitution and its Bill of Rights! Being progressive means the defence of such freedoms and their deepening in all aspects of social life. Progressive also means to criticise its social non-observance of such rights in the perpetuation of patriarchy, violence against women, children and people who do not conform to binary classifications.
2. Despite the entrenchment of key freedoms very little has been achieved in terms of a move towards equality in terms of income and livelihoods. South Africa remains a most unequal country, getting more unequal by the day. Why? How? Progressive means to understand what constrains its achievement and a struggle to remove such constraints. Income inequality is just one dimension: unequal education, unequal health-care, unequal access to housing and services, unequal city/metro residential/spatial dispensations inherited from apartheid. The list is long and troublesome. The rhetorical refrain of inequality, poverty and unemployment has to be turned into serious action plans that need to bring both Democratic Socialists and Social Democrats closer together: we cannot keep the poor just above starvation with measly grants. Being progressive means providing alternative strategies, making the basic income grant real and job creation within a growing solidarity economy a vital priority.
3. Key areas of cultural, linguistic and religious freedom should be defended and discrimination or derogation against any must not be tolerated. Such freedoms come with responsibility and the need for ethical conduct and care, and a commitment to human flourishing.
4. Inequality, poverty and limited life-chances have been at the heart of the movement of many people reaching our country. Being progressive means that one understands the reasons for the flight or migration and seeks to work with them so that they experience hospitality and social support. Being progressive means that one tries to build bridges between them and local communities and tries to create a climate of tolerance. It also means that one understands the fears and frustrations of citizens whilst trying to help bring their life-chances within the confines of legality and rule.
5. As South Africans we also understand that we exist within a world system of inter-state relations. We respect sovereignty and respect other people’s right to self-determination. We understand that the world is moving towards a post-imperial multipolar system and we understand the tensions between the G7 and G20 and G77 and how the multilateral system of the United Nations and its institutions are in crisis. South Africa does not have or need enemies and being progressive means that



we reach out to others across borders who share our beliefs and aspirations. Being progressive means holding our governments at all levels accountable and focused on a progressive development agenda that prioritises negotiation over conflict, development goals over reckless accumulation and an environmentally sound dispensation rather than extractive self-interest.

6. Being progressive means to be vigilant over how the state amasses, distributes and animates resource-usage and how the private sector behaves in relation to government procurement; how both relate to their employees and how their actions affect community integrity. Our ethical framework asks of us to understand the levels of criminal and violent activity in society and encourages short-term and long-term solutions.
7. The climate crisis, the Covid pandemic and the intransigence of TB, has shown us the urgency for climate justice, food sovereignty and the need for serious education programmes about the invisible threats to our social fabric.
8. Being progressive also means that our political representatives are kept in check. Election should not mean an abandonment of community bar a frugal service to it; the excessive ornamentations of power and elite benefits should be curbed. Similarly, the differentials between corporate executive and worker earnings should be radically reduced.
9. Being progressive means vigilance about how contemporary media manufacture lies and how they help normalize abnormal self-interest. Vigilance too is necessary about the motives of civil society activity, NGO behaviour, philanthropy, community-based organisations, trade unions and all entities that assert the interest of communities and people. Many don't, even if they say they do! All must pass the normative test of valuing accountability and mandates and a commitment to be building collective organization for a better future.
10. Being progressive means an engagement with everyone that nurtures and facilitates creative talent in cultural or athletic expression in our communities and helps in the development of facilities, venues and programmes.
11. Being progressive recognises the rights of all people to decent shelter that provides protection against the vagaries of the weather and fire close to their places of employment.

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12. Being progressive means undoing the legacy of apartheid spatial planning by both locating new housing developments close to places of work and provision of adequate and affordable transport.

Abahlali baseMjondolo (a Zulu phrase meaning “*people who live in shacks*”) is a nation-wide shack dwellers’ movement that strives to improve the living conditions of poor people primarily by campaigning for land, housing and dignity and against xenophobia. It is a socialist group that aims to democratise society from below. Formed in Durban in 2005 at the last count it has 120,000 members in 87 branches.

On 7 April 2024 Abahlali baseMjondolo released : “Election 2024: The People’s Minimum Demands”. This was initiated at the movement’s General Assembly held in Durban in February 2024, and it developed into an extensive consultative process in all its branches across four provinces. The aim of this mobilisation was to develop a collective strategy for the 29 May election. Some time thereafter the organisation declared its electoral support for the EFF.

The organisation conducted a voter registration drive to encourage all citizens to participate in the 2024 election. It said it would work with “like-minded membership-based organisations to begin a process of considering how to build a political instrument for the people, a political instrument that aims to put the people in power rather than a new set of individuals.”

The membership expressed the desire to be able to vote for a “left party” in the 2029 election, although in their statement they made it clear that Abahlali baseMjondolo believes “electoral politics is just one terrain of struggle and [that] it should never replace or distract from the work of building popular democratic power from below, of building socialism from below.”

These are the three starting points agreed on in the General Assembly in February:

- The ANC has been assassinating our leaders since 2013 and in 2022 we lost three leaders to assassination and a fourth to a police murder. It is therefore imperative that the ANC be given a very strong message that repression will not be tolerated, and [it is] preferable that it be removed from power altogether. The new MK party is an off-shoot of the ANC in which some of its worst people and tendencies are present. It has taken some dangerously right wing positions. It must also be considered as a serious threat to society and to our movement.
- We are a socialist organisation committed to building socialism from below via the construction of popular democratic power. However there is no left party on the ballot and so we cannot vote for the programme of any party or with any confidence in its allegiance to the people and to progressive principles. It is not possible to vote for our key principles such as the full decommodification of land or the right to recall.
- Given the seriousness of the crisis of repression, a crisis that poses an existential threat to our movement, abstentionism is not a viable strategy and it is therefore necessary to make a purely tactical vote against the ANC and MK. No tactical



considerations can enable a vote for the DA as it opposes land occupations, puts the commercial value of land before its social value and refuses to condemn the ongoing genocide in Palestine.

“These demands are not a statement of our full political vision or our political practices. They are a statement of the minimum criteria for us to be able to offer a party our tactical support as we take our struggle against political repression onto the electoral terrain.”

The organisation listed the following 20 minimum demands that emerged from the two months of intensive discussions:

1. Well located urban land must be made available for people to be able to build homes and other community infrastructure, including community gardens. This will require a land audit to make planning effective.
2. Those who wish to receive government housing and meet a reasonable income criteria should be placed on the housing list. Government housing must be built at scale and with urgency and must be decent and fit for human beings. Transit camps must be rejected as an insult to the dignity of the people. The housing list must be transparent and neither renters nor any other particular group of residents should be excluded from the list.
3. There must be a serious commitment to affirming and defending the dignity of the people, of all the people including the poor and all vulnerable groups.
4. There must be a clear and viable plan to provide either decent jobs or a liveable income for all. While youth unemployment is a particularly severe crisis for people over 35 must be included in this plan. Informal forms of work should be respected, supported and, where there is danger and exploitation, regulated to ensure safety and fair labour practices. This must include sex work.
5. There must be an end to the criminalisation of land occupations which need to be understood as a form of grassroots urban planning. When there are genuine social complications around land use these must be resolved with negotiation and not with state violence.
6. Existing shack settlements and new occupations must receive collective tenure and the provision of non-commodified access to basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation and road access, and refuse collection must be undertaken as an urgent priority.
7. There should be extensive state support for community gardens including seeds, tools, irrigation and fencing, as well as participatory workshops in agroecological farming methods. The state should also support a system of community controlled markets for produce to be sold. People receiving grants from the state should be able to use their cards to buy at these markets.
8. There must be a clear and viable plan to end load shedding that includes commitments to provision for access by the poor, to a responsible transition to socially owned and managed renewable energy and to ensure that workers in the current system are not discarded.

9. There must be lifelong, free and decolonised education available to all, irrespective of age. Education must include skills for people to be able to find employment and develop their communities as well as forms of education that are simply there for people to develop themselves. Community run creches and schools (along the lines of the Frantz Fanon School in eKhenana) should receive state support if they meet clearly elaborated criteria for democratic management and a social function.
10. There must be state support for democratically run communes and cooperatives and the tendering system should, wherever possible, transition from supporting private business towards supporting cooperatives.
11. There needs to be a clear plan to address the crisis in the health care system, which must include employing many more doctors, nurses and other health care workers. The overcrowding of clinics and hospitals must be addressed.
12. There needs to be a clear plan to address the crisis of violence in society, including violence against women, as well as other forms of socially damaging behaviour. This must not take the form of escalating the endemic state violence against the poor but should rather take the form of building a more peaceful, safe and just society.
13. There needs to be a program to decentralise access to educational opportunities and possibilities for employment to ensure national access, including in rural areas.
14. Political parties need to have a clear program to develop the intellectual strength and integrity of their leaders, and to do the same for government officials.
15. Corruption needs to be understood as theft from the people and to be dealt with decisively. After due process any politician shown to be guilty of corruption must be suspended from their political party for a period of five years, after which rehabilitation can be considered if there is genuine acknowledgment of wrong doing. Any official seeking to extract bribes, to sell houses or to only allocate houses, services or any other benefits to members of a particular political party must be swiftly investigated and, after due process overseen by an elected jury from the affected community, dismissed from their position.
16. There must be a serious commitment to dealing with the environmental crisis from a people centred perspective. This includes effective action to stop the dumping of rubbish in shack settlements.
17. Participatory democracy – affirmed under the slogan ‘nothing for us without us’ – must be committed to as a clear principle to guide all engagements between the state and the people. This is particularly important at the community level.
18. There must be clear opposition to the genocide being carried out in Gaza, and a clear commitment to freedom and justice for the Palestinian people, and for all oppressed people everywhere.
19. There must be a clear rejection of xenophobia, ethnic politics, sexism, discrimination against LGBTQTI+ people and all other attempts to divide and weaken the people.
20. There must be a clear commitment to oppose all forms of political violence and political repression in South Africa, no matter which person or organisation is suffering political violence or repression. This commitment cannot be limited to empty words and must be backed up with real action including mass mobilisation,



media campaigns, legal action, etc. There must be a commitment to work against political violence and repression with all political forces opposed to political violence and repression.

My Vote Counts (MVC), another grassroots civil society organisation, presented its viewpoint in its March 2024 newsletter entitled “#30YearsOfDemocracy.” This was in response to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s 31st State of the Nation address in February in which the President referred to South Africa’s “30 years of freedom,” which MVC described as “fallacious”.

It was critical of Ramaphosa’s use of the fictional character he called Tintswalo which, the organisation pointed out, is a Xitsonga term loosely translated as “the feeling of grace and mercy you have for receiving a gift”. The authors were scathing about the implication that the ANC government has gifted housing, healthcare, social grants and many other blessings to the mass of poor South Africans.

“The Tintswalo narrative is not an accurate reflection of the material conditions of most people living in South Africa. But more importantly, the President’s reflection lays bare his government’s disdain for democracy.”

Drawing on the experience of the past 30 years, the article denounced the idea that the current government has gifted the people; instead it noted that the “gift of a meaningful anti-retroviral programme” was not a gift at all but the product of mass struggle by the people themselves. “[H]is predecessor Thabo Mbeki denied treatment to millions of people amid the AIDS pandemic. The successful programme was guaranteed by the people’s movement that mobilised more than 16,000 activists under the banner of the Treatment Action Campaign, demanding their constitutional right to healthcare.”

Similarly, MVC pointed out that while the President in his SONA address commended the state for intensifying its commitment to end the scourge of gender-based violence and femicide (GBVF), it had been “mute on the crisis until women led a nationwide protest in August 2018 demanding concrete action to end GBVF”.

Dismissing the President’s assertion that his government has “invested in the future” by “gifting” destitute South Africans social relief and distress grants, the organisation called the government to account for “disregarding the united front of civil society, unemployed people and organised workers who demanded social relief after he announced the shutting down of the economy amidst the Covid-19 pandemic”.

MVC states that achievements that have been gained over the past 30 years are the outcome of popular mobilisation, not government generosity.

“He (the President) marvels at how land reform policies have transformed the economy, but the most successful land reform programmes since 1994 have been through occupations of unused land by landless people and mass movements like Abahlali baseMjondolo.

“Ramaphosa refuses to recognise that socio-economic progress since 1994 has happened because people have a say. Not because of the benevolence of his government.

“... The governing party insists that it is solely responsible for upward shifts in the economic status of former oppressed people, and therefore deserve their gratitude and

mercy. This approach is especially irresponsible when [South Africans have little trust in democratic institutions](#) and [most would prefer a dictator](#) in exchange for food, housing and jobs (live links included in the original).

“Democracy is not the ability of the state to deliver services to its citizens. It is the ability of every person to equally influence all spheres of their lives – political, social, and economic.

“A true reflection on 30 years of democracy understands the extent to which our society meets this objective.

“In moving beyond 30 years, we must better use the tools that democracy provides us to shape a more viable society. We must force a people-centred politics and we must work towards the ability of everyone to equally influence all spheres of social life.” **NA93**

