

'Democracy of a Special Type'?

Persistent world-class inequality

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Introduction

In the late 1980s, amid widespread fears of a racial civil war and black majority rule, the ANC played a central role in crafting a new South Africa by inviting whites and blacks to reconcile in order to build a new, caring, single national and non-racial republic. The vision was about “the construction of common nationhood” arising “from the *abolition of disparities* in the quality of life among South Africans ... and geographic inequalities we all inherited from the past” (Mbeki quoted in Seekings, 2008). Democracy has to be more than casting a ballot but is defined by the aspiration to produce a better and more equal, integrated society as well as meaningful, effective and broad participation by the majority of citizens. As Ranciere (quoted in May, 2008) put it, the essential driving force of democracy is active equality. Democracy means social levelling and reduced inequality so that the majority of citizens see and experience each other as political and social equals within a defined political community.

This Special Issue on 30 Years of Democracy in South Africa provides an opportunity to reflect on this vision, where we are now, and how we got here, as well as how to extract ourselves from the deepening and largely *inherited* contradictions as well as the self-imposed choices for failure since 1994. This Special Issue is less focused on the short-term political manoeuvres but rather more on fundamental shaping processes which might add to understanding the current conjuncture centred on the apparent final dethronement of the ANC as the majority party and the celebration of a new “era” of centrist coalition politics.

World-class corporate corruption and the elite’s choice of obscene inequality

As Seeraj Mohamed in this issue argues “over the last 30 years, governments and the large corporations have chosen *inequality*. Moreover, the government and most elite policy think tanks fail to appreciate just how extreme South Africa’s inequality and unemployment are compared to almost anywhere else in the world.” Mohamed warns that changing the parties in Parliament without understanding the structures and paths of the unequal financial economic development since 1990 is bound to lead to failure.

By 1990, the ANC’s key leaders believed it had “won over” capital and that, as Arrighi *et al.* (2010: 432) put it “it could mobilize capital’s support to launch the economy onto a growth track that would enable it to meet its socio-economic pledges.” However, as they go on to argue, “by ‘betting’ on capital to solve the crisis, it forfeited the kind of investments in the welfare of the population (housing, public transport, health and, above all, mass lower and higher education) that ... may well be the most essential, though by no means sufficient, condition of renewed economic expansion” (Arrighi *et al.*, 2010: 435).

Yet voters with lowered expectations still trusted the ANC. The 1999 election saw a voter turnout of 86% of registered voters and the ANC won 10,6 million of the 17,6 million votes.

By 2024, the ANC faced radically different prospects. Its popular base might still be black and working class but it is now deeply and irrevocably fragmented with the rightwing Cope split, the EFF left split, and now the MK split. The moderate ANC under



Ramapahosa did not change the trajectory and has presided over a country that now stands at the apex of global inequality with a very wealthy minority, still largely white. As Mohamed in this issue shows, the democracy that millions fought for and many died for has become liberation for highly mobile financial capital. "Since 1994, the large corporations that have dominated the markets of the economy have increased operations and shifted capital abroad. They have financialised and not allocated capital towards manufacturing." Most new jobs are low-skilled and precarious leaving South Africa ill-prepared for new skills required by the fourth industrial revolution. We have a mass of black people effectively imprisoned in dangerous and collapsing townships and failing education and health services that reinforce inferiority, low skills and racial identities.

Patrick Bond provides a valuable reminder that we should not allow the noise of the mainstream media and political parties to blind us to the facts; he shows that corporate crime of both the traditional South African white monopoly capital and Western multinational corporations – both sometimes termed 'WMC' – needs to be factored into our understanding of the crisis. He reminds us of the limits to black capitalist class formation in the post-apartheid economy, which in turn creates a dependency on accumulation via the state.

Sibusisiwe Sibeko points to the oft-ignored centrality of female labour in households in economics and the role of women in the economy and social reproduction of the labour force. Almost 40% of South African households depend on and are headed by single women. Unpaid women's work which makes up 75% of household labour has been ignored in orthodox economics.

Vivienne Taylor focuses on the gap between policy intentions and implementation and the ongoing administrative hurdles facing the poor who seek access to state services and grants. "The reality for many people who live in situations of intolerable conditions and deprivation is that political democracy post-1994, has not yet resulted in significant changes or improvements in their daily lives." The evidence shows that income for some poor households has declined in real terms since then. A third of households, consisting of 18 million people, are estimated to live in poverty, and 54% of the poorest are children.

A deepening political and ethical crisis of the ANC, the state and hope

Drawing on in-depth interviews with socialist UDF activists, Robert Van Niekerk powerfully explores the political dynamics of disempowerment and demobilisation that enable elite capture. Van Niekerk argues that by 1994 the "[I]nstitutions of the state were already being re-purposed for private accumulation by 'deployed' cadres of the ANC". He goes on to argue that the ANC destroyed the "self-belief in the diverse ranks of the impoverished in their capacity to effect change in their community through civics, youth and worker organisations and action committees was lost with the closure of the UDF in 1991" and instead the ANC replaced civic democracy with "undemocratic centralist parliamentary party politics".

How did the ANC, once rooted in hundreds of mass organisations and the UDF, lose its vision and inner vitality and internal democratic practices among its allies?

Longstanding ANC parliamentarian and SACP member Yunus Carrim shared his high and low moments in a recent frank interview (see Moira Levy in this issue). Echoing

many other authors in this volume he notes that: “The reason Parliament has declined is because the ANC has declined as a whole. The one reinforces the other. You see increasing corruption, distance from the masses, the mismanagement of resources.” He confirms that since 2007 there have been deep divisions that have paralysed the party.

Shepi Mati’s contribution to the Special Issue is a semi-biographical reflection that is deeply personal and political. He supports the dictum that “politics is far too important to be left to the politicians” and we all need to take responsibility for both our partial victories and dismal defeats. In particular, like many socialists in the UDF and ANC, he laments the almost complete capitulation among many in the ANC to the lure of the market. Mati warns: “Today we are told privatisation is the panacea to all our social ills and the market is like God. The elite has moved to the suburbs and left the townships behind ... The ‘now it’s our time to eat’ brigade, driven by the zeal of a market on steroids – *uvulazibhuqe* – have descended like vultures on their prey of SOEs [State Owned Enterprises] and are already gouging the carcass”.

The eating started in 1994 and by 2005 five members of the ANC’s National Executive Committee (NEC) had a combined wealth of R1,5-billion in shareholdings alone.¹ ANC multi-millionaires who “bought in” rather than sold out sit on boards of powerful corporations and foundations and have contributed to the ANC’s fragmentation into competitive mafias and factions. Let us recall that the ANC is the oldest liberation movement in Africa that stood for political freedom and political equality with a non-racial unitary South Africa (see Carrim quoted in Levy in this issue). It refused to be typecast into neat ideological categories although many argue it was social democratic in orientation.

‘Your vote means *fokol*’

Why is the majority refusing to be represented by not voting (“your vote means *fokol*”) and who are these non-voters? Have the contradictions of South Africa become so deep that they can only be resolved on the streets rather than through the ballot box? Is it a choice between the ballot or the bullet or do some people occupy both positions? Does anyone trust representatives who earn massive salaries and do not live like the people they claim to represent? Can the parliamentary system and parties like the ANC and DA or “democracy” contain the explosive social contradictions that threaten to tear the country apart? The ANC and DA, as many have observed, have done little to change the social geography of South Africa (see Roland Ngam in this volume) and the contradictions are expressed in taxi wars, blocked highways, load reduction for black townships while the elite are ensconced in leafy suburbs in their own social reproduction systems (private schools, private security, private hospitals and gated estates (Mahkubu and Ruiters, 2020).

Democracies such as South Africa and the USA fail when captured by the wealthy and when governments reflect the perceived wishes of “investors” or more crudely when a few rich individuals provide core funding for political parties. Democracies also fail or cease to have value when parties and the government cater to the desires of the middle class and impose additional hardship on segments of the population previously excluded spatially and economically, thus exacerbating inequality. While most parties appeal to the notion of “national or public interests”, this is a notion that is notoriously



hard to define especially in highly polarised and divided societies.

As Ngam (in this issue) powerfully documents, key issues like land ownership, wealth gaps and geographical apartheid starkly point to an unsolved national question. The ANC faces a stark choice: solve these contradictions or die!

South African rulers need to change the trajectory and economic model. They embraced a wholehearted integration into the neoliberal global economic system even before this was required by international capital.

None of the challenges (the social question, the land question and the national question) posed in the South Africa transition have been adequately addressed. The majority of the white population refuses to see the need for deeper changes. Paradoxically, this minority has benefitted more economically than blacks have from the demise of apartheid (*The Economist*, 2013). Elites have turned disasters into opportunities to further lessen the dependence of the state and have effectively opted out: they created a private security industry to protect themselves when the police failed; they installed personal power systems in response to Eskom outages and have in fact created a parallel society with new forms of social separateness.

South Africans are building their own private cities to barricade themselves against rampant unemployment and endemic crime. The multi billion Rand developments are complete with their own hospitals, schools, road works, and sanitation services, and they come at a time when Africa's most developed economy faces years of power cuts and stalling growth (*The Star*, 24 April, 2015).

In South Africa, only 18% of black African workers occupied skilled jobs in 2014 while four out of five white people were in the top 20% income bracket (*Business Tech*, 18 September, 2014). Out of a total of 46,800 high net-worth persons in South Africa in 2014, 32,100 were white, representing 69% (while whites only made up 8% of the population) (cited in *Business Tech*, 12 March, 2015). Top management positions remain a white domain, with only 13% held by black African people.²

The system of social grants, fee-free schools (that are mostly dysfunctional) and free basic municipal services (6kl of water – a refugee standard) which draws on constitutional socio-economic rights (defined as only basic needs) do not remotely realise the citizenship ideals of social equality and social solidarity (See Vivienne Taylor in this issue).

Waarna toe nou? The new struggle ...

The election has surfaced the latent which now has become manifest. 2024 confirmed that the "people" are not voting. Despite the IEC and influential commentators' celebration of the 2024 election, it showed the lowest voter turnout since 1994.

Some groups still see value in the electoral process. This shows the elections are still an important moment for movement building (see article and inputs from Abahlali Basejondolo and My Vote Counts in this issue). The EFF is seen as a progressive force that could be conditionally supported in elections.

The fallout of the ANC's electoral dethronement is likely to play out in the next few years in complex ways. One possibility is further decline as Government of National Unity (GNU) partners force the ANC rightward. The MK party, to the extent that it can maintain organisational coherence, might benefit further. Still powerful and well-heeled

ANC leaders and stalwarts who back Ramaphosa, such as Cheryl Carolus, Siphon Pityana, Kgalema Motlanthe, Snuki Zikalala and Trevor Manuel (who left the ANC ten years ago) and is head of Old Mutual have come out strongly in favour of the DA-ANC partnership.

On the other hand, Heribert Adam (2023), who celebrated the coming demise of the ANC and the birth of coalition-era politics in the ANC-DA format, argues that the DA (seen as the party of big business) will have to persuade the super-rich (black and white) to make real compromises and accept inheritance taxes.

Whether the wealthy can ever take a long-term view is debatable. Insulated behind securitised gated estates, the wealthy have created a sense of hyper-Europeanness in Africa and have revolted against publicness: “the ultra-rich property owners in South Africa have turned to ‘whole-life’ homes – places in which they can live, work and play never having to set foot into the ‘real world’” (Fourie, 2021).

Democracy is fundamentally about the kind of society we wish to live in and how the material and social foundations of that society and the resources of the country are shaped and controlled. Democracy as popular rule can be construed as much more than individual liberty, being represented, and voting but as a way of life and community built on class and social solidarity and majoritarian democracy centred on the prioritisation of the impoverished. The coming GNU does not create or encourage mass participatory democracy but bargaining at the summit between elite and class conciliation rather than class struggle and dissensus (see Held, 1987). It is not about elite consensus between competing elites as pluralists and corporatist thinkers maintain but rather about fighting a hegemonic majority working class consensus for a new society. The socialist left also has space to contest for a new liberation struggle, solidarity and hope in a new politics based on grassroots movements, social solidarity and new ethical anti-capitalist ecological foundations (see Ari Sitas in this issue). **NA93**

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See *Sunday Times’s* “Rich List” at <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-08-06-anc-to-rein-in-its-fat-cats/>
- 2 See https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201507/15-cee-annual-report-2015.pdf