South Africa: social change or Plus ça change?

Will Emkes [1] 1 June 2012

The consequences of Black Empowerment policies as implemented by the African National Congress (ANC) now constitute the most severe threat to South Africa’s young democracy to date.

When the ANC was elected to office in 1994 the party identified Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as the key instrument with which to penetrate the inequality and exclusion the apartheid era had built around the South African economy. The result has been widespread confusion over how to implement such policy and the extent to which it can act as an effective agent of social change within the country. To date, South Africa has seen a relative privilege conceded to a minority of blacks whilst preserving the pre-existing structures of social inequality. The policy has bred a powerful, oligarchic and parasitic capitalist class largely to the detriment of its young democracy.

Zwelinzime Vavi, General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, (COSATU), has described Zuma’s administration as ‘heading rapidly in the direction of a full blown predator state’, run by ‘corrupt and demagogic political hyenas.’

Many observers have noted the anti-democratic nature of BEE, the paradoxical re-racialisation of capitalism and the small number of empowered black capitalists. Others rightly highlight the corruption inherent in many of the deals, often fronting for white capital, and the inability of the state to monitor compliance with its BEE programmes as evidence of its failure. These problems, all important, derive from the role that the ANC has assigned this new category in their vision of post-apartheid nation building. BEE deal-makers with strong political connections, capable of persuading the state and other social institutions, have articulated a class political project serving primarily the corporatist agenda of big business. In the end the power of such a connected, predatory elite, intent on using political leverage to secure business opportunities, together with the implicit corruption of government officials has superseded the mechanism of democracy as enshrined in the post-apartheid constitution.

In 1994 the ANC took on an adherence to the notion that South Africa had embarked upon a National Democratic Revolution (NDR). The perspective broadly states that the nation, on account of its extensive natural resources, has been inculcated into world capitalism and the neo-liberal ideologies of institutions like the IMF. Historically these resources have been the preserve of a few, with white settler minorities oppressing the black majority population, facilitating a vast accumulation of wealth for the few at the expense of the many. The objective of the NDR is to overcome this legacy of racial oppression, thereby forging a united nation, achieving democracy and forming the basis of an equal society.

The NDR has led South Africa into a situation in which elements of the project are now threatening the stability of democracy and widening inequality gaps. The ANC’s strategy, orientated towards the emergence of a ‘patriotic bourgeoisie’ has encouraged elitism. The group that the NDR sought to promote was always going to be far too small in size to lead to the consolidation of democracy. Instead a self-serving and corrupt culture has emerged, all the time seeking to secure its own interests at the expense of democratic governance.

African nations fail primarily when corruption ceases to become an aberration and instead becomes institutionalised in the system itself. One only needs to look at the history of failed states throughout the continent to arrive at this conclusion. In such states, politics no longer bears any resemblance to competing ideas and policy, but rather, a battle to gain access to the state in order to exploit it for
personal enrichment. This often starts with the centralisation of power with small ruling elites, deploying allies to entrench personal interests. Once in power they move to secure the mechanisms in which to keep power.

Exploitation of the state by the ANC is the key problem affecting South Africa’s new democracy. If the nation comes to be viewed as being run in a similar fashion to many other of the continent’s countries, foreign investment will be choked off and the economic policies of the ANC will have less and less an effect on the prosperity of the country. Meanwhile, the conflation of party and state under the rule of President Zuma looks set to get worse, as has been highlighted by his attempts to censor the press, undermine the judiciary and his scant regard for the constitution. A credible opposition capable of achieving significant support at the election booths is vital to the evolution of our democracy.

There are many reasons why this may not happen. The success of the BEE elite is entirely dependent on the electoral hegemony of the ANC, needing the necessary political connections to secure their on-going wealth. Such a class would become extremely brittle and fragile should South Africa evolve into a more pluralised democracy. Thus, it is in the interests of the governing elite to discourage such a situation, if only in the hope of preserving their on-going status in society.

President Zuma’s personal history and the allegations that preceded his inauguration mean that he is never going to be well placed to lead the fight against corruption. As soon as he was elected to office in 2009, he quickly set about dismantling all the bodies involved in bringing corruption cases against him. The Scorpions, the only real anti-corruption agency in South Africa, were quickly shut down almost immediately when Zuma entered office. The National Prosecuting Authority was, quite astonishingly, placed under the leadership of the discredited former Director-General of Justice Menzi Simelane, who seems to have done more than any other individual to undermine investigations and allegations of corruption. The ANC under Zuma has served to symbolise the same corruption and confusion that BEE spawned in its early years. Despite his numerous appeals for greater transparency from companies concerning their BEE deals and his relentless demand for a more inclusive empowerment there is an undeniable duplicity between his rhetoric and behaviour.

The nexus between business and politics has undermined the moral integrity of the ANC. Not a month goes by without the announcement of a major new empowerment deal in which senior members of the ANC are the direct or indirect beneficiaries. The political potency of this new black capitalist class that emerged shortly after the fall of apartheid has meant that each successive move in the corporatist agenda of South Africa has been an attempt to consolidate their power.

Compared with other young democracies on the continent, South Africa has seen a relatively stable transition to democracy. This may be attributed to having such a dominant party system, effective at the time, but now the principle danger to a sustainable and prosperous democracy.

Country or region: South Africa
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