

Defenders of democracy?

Unions in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Swaziland

Johann Maree and **Rushil Ranchod** examine trade unions in four southern African countries with varying degrees of democratic engagement. Through this review they assess the importance of union activity as a force to establish and sustain democracy.

The trade union movement in many African countries has often played an important role in the decolonisation of the countries. They are also important actors in defending democracy after independence has been achieved, but have not always been successful in doing so. This article examines the record of the trade union movement in four southern African countries: Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. It starts by briefly examining the role of union movements in each country.

SOUTH AFRICA

The 1973 strikes in Durban gave impetus to unionisation of black workers after state repression of black unions in the early 1960s. The black unions that emerged placed an emphasis on strong and democratic workplace organisation. They were independent of employers, white unions, the state, and political parties. In 1979 the state conceded the same workplace rights to black workers as to white, coloured and Indian workers. As a result black unions experienced explosive growth in the 1980s.

In November 1985 the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) was established. Cosatu was overtly political from the start and supported the congress movement which included the ANC

(African National Congress). After the unbanning of the liberation movements in 1990 Cosatu entered into a Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

In the first consolidating election of 1994 the victorious ANC adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) initially conceptualised by Cosatu. In 1996 the ANC unilaterally replaced RDP with GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) and declared it non-negotiable to its Alliance partners. GEAR was seen as a neo-liberal macro-economic policy and heralded the start of a growing ideological schism between Cosatu and the ruling party.

Cosatu continued to act independently in pursuit of its goals. Cosatu and the SACP criticised the growing centralisation of power in the hands of President Mbeki that had the effect of weakening parliamentary democracy. They also made their intention clear to play a more significant role in the Tripartite Alliance and started mobilising towards that end.

The opportunity came with the ANC's congress in Polokwane during December 2007. The Mbeki faction of the ANC was thoroughly defeated by the Jacob Zuma faction strongly supported by Cosatu and

the SACP. This has placed the largest trade union federation in South Africa at its most powerful position ever in the country's history. Although there are indications that Cosatu is placing less emphasis on workplace organisation it has retained an independent power-base through its ability to mobilise thousands of workers in support of economic and political demands.

On the negative side, Cosatu and its Alliance partners have started to display a disdain for the courts and rule of law when judgements were made against Zuma in his corruption trial. Nonetheless, Cosatu has managed to keep open a democratic space that neither the state nor the ruling party has been able to narrow or close down.

ZIMBABWE

When Zimbabwe achieved independence in 1980, the labour movement was weak and divided. It had played no significant role in the negotiation over transition to majority rule. In 1981 the state played a major role in establishing a central labour federation, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), which it dominated up to the mid-1980s.

In 1987-88 a leadership struggle emerged in the ZCTU. A substantially new leadership emerged and a new secretary general, Morgan Tsvangirai, was

appointed. The ZCTU set its sights on broadening its alliances.

In February 1999 the ZCTU stepped up its political campaign and facilitated a National Working People's Convention. It brought together people from urban, peri-urban and rural areas, representing unions, women's organisations, professional associations, development organisations, churches, human rights groups, the informal sector, communal farmers, industry, the unemployed and student organisations.

The convention gave the ZCTU a mandate to facilitate the formation of a political party. As a result the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was launched on 11 September 1999.

In the campaign for the general election in June 2000, 30 people, mostly MDC members, were killed. Notwithstanding the pre-election violence, the MDC performed remarkably well for a newly-formed party. It won 57 seats against ZANU-PF's 62.

From 2000 to 2003 ruling party violence increased with the aim of crushing the MDC. The violence had a harmful effect on MDC party structures, but did not destroy the movement.

In April 2005, soon after the MDC defeat in the general election, tensions developed within the MDC over whether to participate in elections for senators or to pursue an alternative strategy based on mass action. It split the MDC into two: a pro-senate elections formation led by Arthur Mutambara and a Tsvangirai formation supporting extra-parliamentary arenas of struggle.

By the time the 'harmonised election' in March 2008 took place, the Tsvangirai formation had decided to run in both the presidential and parliamentary

elections. This was because it had become clear to many voters that the collapse of the country's economy was due to the policies of ZANU-PF.

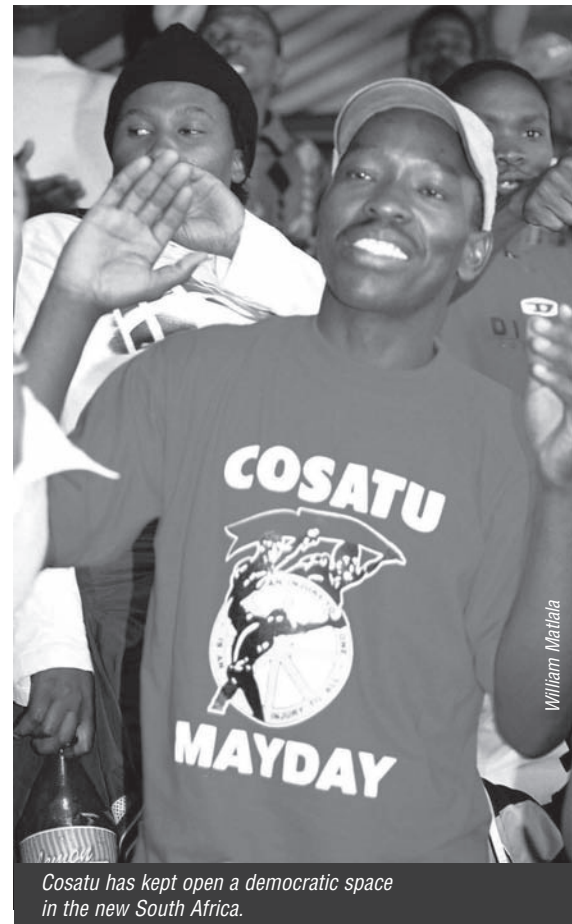
In addition the ZCTU decided shortly before the election that it would mobilise support for the MDC. The outcome was an historic victory for the MDC at the polls. The two MDC formations combined won 109 seats in the 210 seat parliament. In the presidential election the official outcome gave Tsvangirai 47.8% of votes and Mugabe only 43.2%.

A run-off election for the president had to be held, but Mugabe and his military supporters made it clear that he would not give up his presidency through the democratic process. They unleashed a brutal assault on MDC followers and leaders to the point that Tsvangirai had to withdraw from the race in order to try to secure the safety of his followers. Not surprisingly, Mugabe secured 85.5% of the votes cast in the June 2008 run-off.

After the perverted run-off election, a long and difficult period followed in which Mugabe was gently persuaded by leaders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to share power with Tsvangirai and the MDC. In September 2008 a power-sharing agreement was signed between Mugabe and the MDC. In February 2009 Tsvangirai was finally sworn in as prime minister. It thus seems as if a corner has been turned away from the autocratic abuse of power towards the restoration of democratic government.

NAMIBIA

In 1989 the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW) was re-established as a federation of unions with a South West African



Cosatu has kept open a democratic space in the new South Africa.

William Matlala

People's Organisation (Swapo) politburo member as general secretary. It also affiliated to Swapo thereby presenting it with a conflict of interests in years to come. Was its primary role to represent workers or to support Swapo's political objectives?

In 1990 Namibia became independent with Swapo as the ruling party. The NUNW's affiliation to SWAPO remained controversial. In 1995, after a meeting with Swapo, it compromised on workers' rights in Export Processing Zones, agreeing to forbid strikes in these zones for five years.

Since then, Namibia began according to an article by T Tapscott to "display the characteristic patterns of many neo-colonialist states elsewhere in Africa: the arrogation of power by a newly emergent elite, the drift towards a de-facto one-party state, and the slow but progressive erosion of civil liberties." Namibian unions have been ill-equipped to temper the rise of authoritarian tendencies within the ruling party and government.

SWAZILAND

Swaziland became independent from Britain in 1968 as a constitutional monarchy under King Sobhuza II. In April 1973 the king issued a royal decree suspending the Constitution and banning all political parties. He then assumed control over the legislative and executive functions of the state.

The People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo) emerged in 1983 with a central objective to "build and popularise working class consciousness and rally social forces for change behind this revolutionary form of consciousness." The Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) was a major constituency of Pudemo which also included youth groups, student organisations and other civil society groupings.

In 1994 an unprecedented national strike took place in which the SFTU lodged its '27 Demands' with the regime. The '27 Demands' included improvements in minimum wages, the right to strike without intimidation or repression, and the unbanning of political parties.

In 2002 the draconian Internal Security Act was reintroduced. Under the Act, severe penalties were introduced to curtail both union activity and broader political participation. As a result the Swaziland union movement became more docile and timid on the political front. The movement had also been racked by a 'cult of personality' and unaccountability of leaders to members.

Hope for a full democracy was still strongly pinned on the union movement. When interviewed in November 2005, the president of Pudemo said: "I don't see another way of getting democracy without the vehicle of the trade union

movement. The trade union movement is at the means of production, they sustain the economy, they are still organised and make the country tick, and I believe, no matter how few there may be, they are still the vehicle for change."

CONCLUSION

The country case studies show that in order to play a meaningful role in defense of democracy, unions need to be (1) independent of the ruling party; (2) well organised and disciplined; and (3) strong enough to exercise considerable economic power. In South Africa Cosatu fulfills these criteria, but in Namibia the NUNW has failed to do so.

The findings also demonstrate that independent unionism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for trade unions to defend democracy effectively. Other crucial requirements for the consolidation of democracy are:

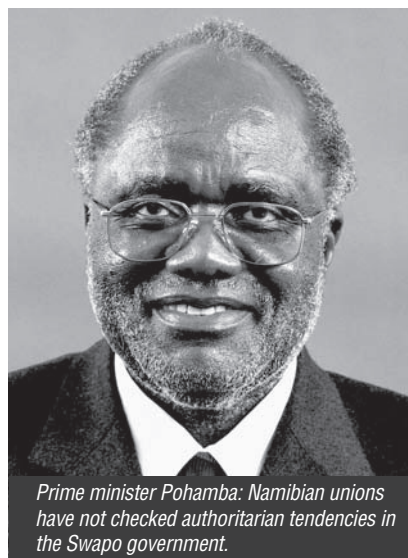
- Freedom of association with the right to protest and strike.
- Rule of law including no detention without trial.
- Freedom of speech with free and independent media.
- An independent judiciary.
- Separation of powers between executive and parliament.
- A multi-party system with the possibility of peaceful regime change through the ballot box.
- Free and fair elections held at regular intervals.

Almost all of these conditions were progressively removed in Zimbabwe and the last three were abolished by the king in Swaziland.

The creation of other organisations of civil society geared to establish democracy can play a key role in its restoration. This was clearly demonstrated in Zimbabwe. Unions however remain the key movement in civil society. When



A 1988 struggle in the ZCTU resulted in a new leadership with Morgan Tsvangirai as general secretary.



Prime minister Pohamba: Namibian unions have not checked authoritarian tendencies in the Swapo government.

Dirk Oberschelp

they are democratic with strong workplace organisation and representative and accountable leadership, they are a force around which the struggle for democracy can be fought and sustained. LB

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