

Fighting marginalisation

can COSATU rely on the alliance?

Seven years after the triumph of the African National Congress (ANC) in the election of 1994, there is growing dissatisfaction about the workings of the 'tripartite alliance'. Increasingly, COSATU feels it is treated by the ANC more as a subordinate than a partner. Nonetheless, there is immense unease about suggestions of breaking up the alliance, despite rumblings from government and business about the need for labour flexibility, and to roll back union gains such as the 1995 LRA. How then should we characterise the state of relations between COSATU and the ANC? What might we expect in the future?

We can clarify the relationship if we look at different views of the nature of South African democracy. In particular, it is useful to contrast the 'dominant party' model with the 'corporatist' model of South African politics and consider their implications for the unions' relationships with government.

The 'dominant' ANC

The idea that the ANC is a 'dominant party' is becoming increasingly widespread among political commentators. A dominant party is one that 'dominates society' by its ability to secure repeated election victories, and which can dictate the government agenda, implement policies and impose a hegemony of ideas.

For instance, the Botswana Democratic

Roger Southall analyses the state of relations in the tripartite alliance and proposes ways for COSATU to fight marginalisation.

Party, which has won repeated elections since independence in 1966, is often referred to as a 'dominant party'. It has never faced a serious challenger or the prospect of losing power. Similarly, although the ANC has only won two elections in a row, no other party could win enough popular support to defeat it.

Although it is widely accepted that the ANC's emergence as a dominant party is a product of democracy, some view its dominance as a danger to democratic rights. Conservatives close to the Democratic Alliance argue that because the ANC is guaranteed the votes of the large majority of Africans, it does not have to pay serious attention to the needs of whites, coloureds and Indians. Race-based affirmative action is empowering and enriching a new black elite, not only at the expense of racial minorities, but also of the black majority, who remain extremely poor.

Meanwhile, the ANC is becoming increasingly arrogant. Not only is it

increasingly attacking the legitimacy of the opposition parties, but it is also eliminating debate in its own ranks and those of the tripartite alliance.

This critical view of the ANC as a dominant party is shared in many ways by certain radicals, who see mounting evidence that 'the revolution is being betrayed'. Dale McKinley, who was recently expelled from the South African Communist Party (SACP) for dissent, argues that this betrayal is rooted in the nature of the alliance sealed by the ANC with international and national capital via the 'pacted' transition agreement in 1994.

This deal, he argues, flew in the face of the widespread view among alliance supporters that the capture of political power by the ANC needed to be linked to a fundamental attack on the economic and political interests of capital. The SACP leadership, which should have protected the interests of the working class and the poor, has abandoned the revolutionary aspects of its programme, endorsing the move from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to Gear.

Although ANC and SACP leaders continue to use a 'radical rhetoric' of transformation, the reality is different. They are increasingly suppressing internal democracy in the alliance in defence of the status quo, and allowing an emergent African bourgeoisie to accumulate wealth and power. Corruption is becoming rife, with the poor as its main victims.

Not surprisingly, there are marked differences between the conservative and radical views on COSATU's relationship with the ANC as a dominant party. For the conservatives, COSATU's membership of the alliance makes it a 'partner in privilege', the organised representative of the employed working class at the expense of the unemployed. Organised labour, from this perspective, has become

the vehicle of a labour aristocracy that is clinging to the coat tails of the new African bourgeoisie. Its power, therefore, needs to be curbed.

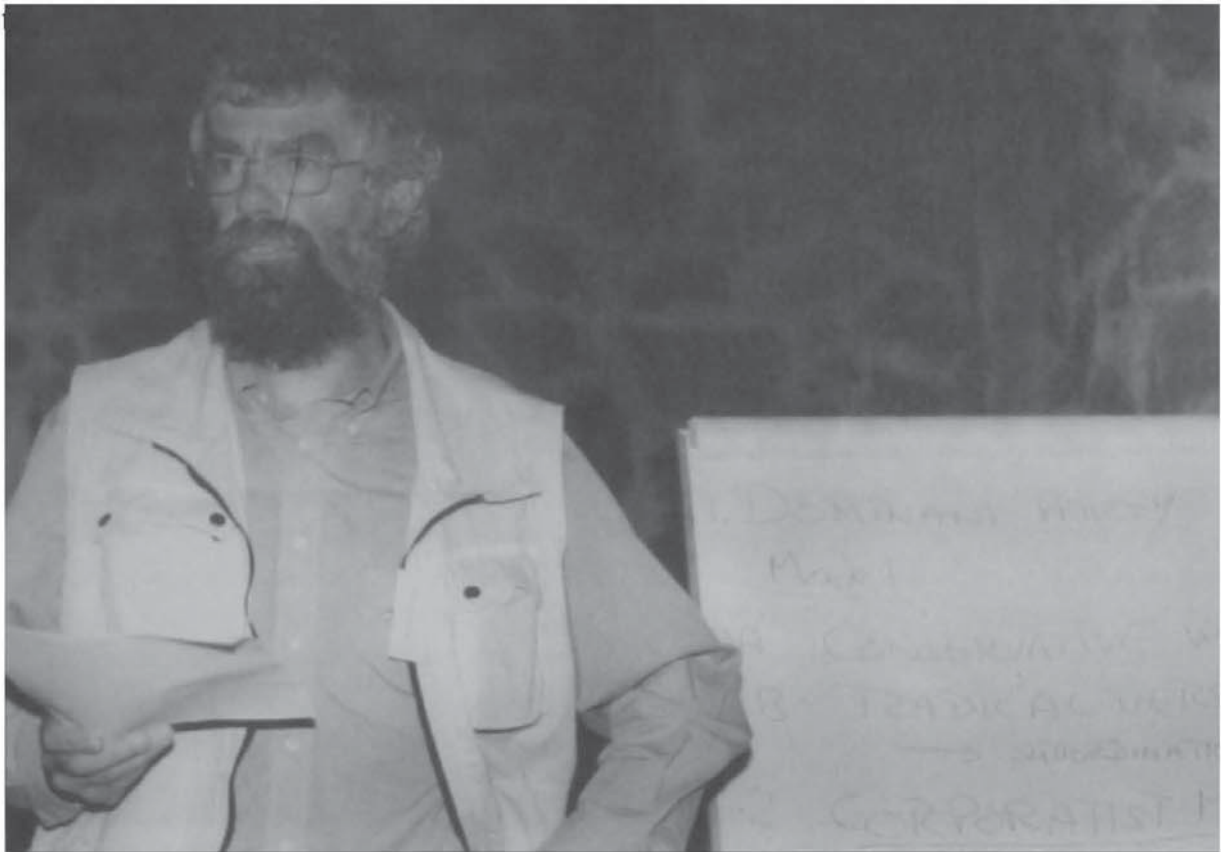
The radicals argue that COSATU has remained the instrument of the workers, and see it as becoming increasingly impatient with both the ANC and the SACP or at least their leaders, who are seen as having 'sold out'. Indeed, some believe that COSATU should consider breaking with the alliance and form a labour-based socialist party in collaboration with those members of the SACP who are still committed to revolutionary ideas.

Conservative and radical critics of the ANC pose challenging questions about COSATU's participation in the tripartite alliance. However, corporatists would argue that both viewpoints oversimplify a complex situation.

Corporatism

Commentators who believe South Africa is following a corporatist path are more optimistic. They argue that despite all the disappointments since 1994, the country is a much better place to live in than under apartheid. Formal racism has been abolished, and the social and economic forces behind racial capitalism have been weakened by ANC rule. Yet these forces have not been wholly defeated. The political deal made in 1994 reflected a political and military stalemate, and the outcome was a democratic one. Yet no such deal remains fixed. The real questions are: How is our democracy responding to constant changes in society? Is democracy leading to progressive social change and economic improvement? Or are things getting worse for the working poor?

The corporatists argue that the relationship between the ANC, SACP and COSATU represents a 'strategic



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compromise' between competing tendencies within the liberation camp. Three, in particular, can be identified. The first is the 'national democratic' tradition of the ANC and SACP, which sees liberation as a two-stage process, with political democracy, involving a multi-class alliance of the oppressed, preceding a transition to socialism. The second is the 'community'-based trade union tradition, which views struggles in the factories as ultimately subordinate to political struggle. The third is the 'workerist' union tradition, which emphasises participatory democracy on the shopfloor and in politics.

The 'strategic compromise' found expression in three principal ways. First, the liberal democratic constitution of 1994, and the final constitution of 1996, represented a bargain between the old order and the liberation movement. Both sides made concessions. Yet the most

significant aspect of the deal was that, while the ANC was able to take control of the state, control of the economy remained very much in white hands. However, although the capitalist basis of the economy was unchallenged, the second aspect of the 'strategic compromise' was the ANC's adoption of the COSATU-designed RDP. This argued that a steady redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor would not only be fair, but would boost economic growth by increasing internal consumer demand for goods produced by the economy.

The last feature of the compromise was that, recognising their interests in promoting growth and moving away from the conflicts that marked industry under apartheid, employers would join a partnership with the government and unions to determine the major direction of the economy. Such corporatist

arrangements were expressed in the establishment of bodies such as Nedlac, where COSATU trades ideas with employers, and in the LRA of 1995, which was conceived as the basis for a consensual labour relations system.

The strength of the corporatist perspective is that it tries to grapple with the realities of the post-socialist world. Following the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe, world capitalism is rampant. For the corporatists, the global experience shows that a working class that is industrially and politically organised can counter the polarising effects of capitalism and provide for a relatively just society. The Scandinavian social democracies of Europe and Germany, where unions work in 'co-determination' with capital, are all capitalist states, yet their capitalist systems are more equal and socially just than the capitalism of the United States. They are far from perfect societies, yet the power of organised labour has forced capital to reach a working compromise.

But the corporatists also recognise that even in the European social democracies, the balance of forces has tipped in favour of capital in recent years. Globalisation has increasingly forced governments to adopt neo-liberal policies that roll back the gains and protections won by workers in order to make their national economies more competitive. As a result, in countries where governments have worked in coalition with trade union movements, these alliances have come under increasing strain.

Where there is a close identification between ruling parties and labour movements, built up over years of struggle, labour-government cooperation may be maintained despite increasing difficulty as, for example, in Sweden.

Where unions have continued to

support the ruling party, perhaps because they have no realistic alternative, but where the party has not invested as heavily in the alliance, the labour movement has been marginalised. This is the case in Mexico, Argentina and Australia. However, where unions have broken with social democratic governments after the introduction of neo-liberal policies, the relationship has ended in divorce. This is what happened in France and Spain during the 1980s.

Corporatist commentators like Eddie Webster argue that following the ANC's abandonment of the RDP in favour of Gear, COSATU has become increasingly marginalised. For complex reasons, which relate to the ANC's history as the movement that liberated South Africa from apartheid, COSATU has remained an alliance partner, despite its extremely strong criticism of Gear. Yet there is mounting anger in its ranks over the disdainful way in which the ANC has treated it. Like similarly placed union movements elsewhere in the world, COSATU now has to ask: Should we accept policy reversals by our allies in government, and hope that we can counter our marginalisation? Or should we oppose 'our government', perhaps by divorcing the alliance and forming an opposition party that could pose a significant challenge to the ANC in an election?

COSATU and the alliance

It should be clear from the above that while radical critics of the ANC have already begun to call for COSATU to represent workers' interests by forming a separate political party, corporatists are inclined to see a break from the alliance as a far more complicated option. This has led to a debate with the following broad outlines:



Only organised labour has sufficient support to provide viable opposition.

Breaking the alliance

This position starts from a recognition of the ANC as a dominant party. Because of South Africa's history of racial and social injustice, no other party can mount an electoral challenge to the ANC. No opposition party offers programmes that can attract the support of the majority of South Africans. As a result, the ANC is becoming more arrogant and less mindful of its alliance partners. This is not only bad for workers. It is bad for democracy, as ruling parties are best kept in line if opposition parties are strong enough to constitute an alternative government. In South Africa, only organised labour has sufficient support in the working class and among the poor to provide the electoral basis for viable opposition. Yet COSATU is for the moment committed to the alliance, and the ANC can rely on the labour movement to mobilise the working class vote every time there is an election.

However, COSATU's influence on the government is waning.

The ANC's pursuit of neo-liberal policies through Gear is leading to greater economic inequality, while the deepening of poverty among the masses is beginning to undermine the democracy established in 1994.

The ANC still uses radical rhetoric. Yet actions speak louder than words, and in practice the party is becoming increasingly anti-working class. Voter surveys indicate that the level of commitment to the ANC among the African working poor is waning. This constituency is increasingly available for capture by any party prepared to advocate their class interests. COSATU and the SACP, therefore, have both the opportunity and the duty to break away from the alliance, and to form a progressive, labour-based party of opposition. This would serve the interests of the poor and of democracy at

the same time. Such a party could put forward radical policies that would favour the working class and the creation of a more equal and just society. In addition, COSATU's creation of a labour party, which might be explicitly socialist, would deepen democracy in South Africa by holding out the possibility of an alternative government.

Maintaining the alliance

The counter-argument is that despite the government's adoption of Gear, COSATU has won major concessions for workers since 1994, including the LRA, the BCEA of 1996, and representation on such bodies as Nedlac. Some of these might be under threat, aggravating tensions within the alliance. But if COSATU left the alliance, the ANC would have even more freedom to pursue a conservative agenda perhaps by combining with the Inkatha Freedom Party or working with the Democratic Alliance to pursue more strongly capital-friendly, neo-liberal policies. Besides, a COSATU breakaway from the alliance would probably be much more complicated and messy than the radicals imply

Although surveys indicate that African working class voters are increasingly concerned with issues, rather than simply identifying with the ANC as the party of liberation, most feel that the alliance should continue. In other words, there is very limited support for the creation of a workers' party. Anyway, if COSATU and the SACP did split from the ANC, could they do so in a coherent fashion? Would the union rank and file follow them? Could they sway those in informal jobs? Would a socialist or labour party be able to appeal to rural voters, or would it find itself confined to urban areas? These and other questions suggest that the launch of a workers' party would be extremely risky

especially considering the difficulties it would face in competing with the ANC for election funding.

Furthermore, if COSATU left the alliance, it would more than likely become poorer than it is today. The decision would, in all likelihood, lead to courtroom wrangles within unions over finances, pension funds and other investments, for it would almost certainly be contested by ANC loyalists. In short, a decision by COSATU and the SACP to divorce the ANC and form a new party would almost certainly leave the working class divided, and with a reduced capacity to protect its interests and those of the poor.

Corporatists admit that circumstances might dictate a radical break at some point in the future. However, they argue that despite the terrible job losses caused by Gear and worsening poverty, the moment of crisis has not arrived. What COSATU and the radicals should do, therefore, is to contest their increasing marginalisation in the existing structures of the alliance and the ANC.

Fighting marginalisation

It will not be easy for COSATU to re-assert its weight in the alliance. After all, it is not just battling a dominant party, but one whose economic policies have the enthusiastic support of national and international capital, not to mention the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Vigorous attempts by the union movement to promote pro-labour policies will prompt the conservative cry that it is selfishly pursuing its own privileged interests at the expense of the national interest and the jobless poor. Nor should it be forgotten that the march of globalised capitalism is undermining the influence of organised labour almost everywhere. As the corporatists point out, it is only in countries with particularly favourable

historical circumstances that unions have been able to maintain an effective working relationship with ruling parties. Elsewhere, as in Tony Blair's Britain, the union movement is mostly in retreat.

But the corporatists also tend to insist that South Africa could be an exception. South African unions can draw on their own workerist tradition of participatory worker democracy, combining this with the community tradition, which stresses that shopfloor and political struggles cannot be separated. These traditions infused the development of democratic trade unions from the 1970s, and helped bring about the labour-friendly 'strategic compromise' of 1994.

To be sure, changing circumstances may have battered the traditions. It was easier to mobilise workers against the apartheid state than against an ANC government, which many still feel embodies popular aspirations. The unions have been drained of many leaders, who through their connections with the ANC and SACP have moved into better-paid jobs in politics, the civil service and even the private sector. And workers are less militant at times of mounting unemployment. Yet corporatists go on to stress the 'politics of the possible'. The balance of forces may have tipped against the working class for the moment. Yet there are more realistic, and less risky, options for the labour movement than rejecting the alliance.

For a start, there are growing signs of mobilisation among poor people, who are contesting government's failure to deliver basic services, the non-payment of pensions and grants and the imposition of higher water charges on the destitute, among other issues. Non-governmental organisations lost many of their best people after 1994, as well as suffering a collapse of funding when donors diverted assistance to the new government. They

are now reviving and overcoming their initial reluctance to criticise the ANC. This suggests that there are new possibilities of drawing on the national democratic tradition, forging multi-class alliances by engaging pro-poor campaigns that emanate from civil society. As when COSATU fought alongside the United Democratic Front against apartheid, awkward questions will have to be answered. What criteria would COSATU use in entering such alliances? Would they be on a multi-class, radical democratic basis, or would they go further by appealing for socialism? And to what extent could domestic coalitions be strengthened by international alliances, for instance with overseas groupings campaigning against the cost of globalisation to workers?

Conclusion

There are no easy answers to the dilemmas facing COSATU. However, the strong arguments advanced by the corporatists suggest radical calls for it to quit the alliance are dangerously simplistic.

There may be growing authoritarianism in the ANC, but it is also the heir to a long tradition of liberation politics. Rather than withdrawing into the political wilderness, COSATU should seek to revitalise participatory democracy in the alliance and restore its influence. Bruising fights may lie ahead, but COSATU still has the potential to shift the balance of power in favour of the working class and the poor. It played a key role in bringing down apartheid. Is it now so toothless that it cannot counter despotic tendencies in the ANC? ★

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