

Presidential succession

where are 'the people'?

Mazibuko Jara reflects on a presidential race that is not revolutionary, but opens up some space for the reinstatement of democratic practice and the reinsertion of a popular voice and progressive values into the debate in the run-up to the ANC's December conference.

“South Africa Elects Rural Woman as President” was the provocative ideal proclaimed on the front page of a April 2004 edition of *Community News* (monthly newsletter of the Cape Town-based Trust for Community Outreach and Education). This was in the run-up to the 2004 general elections. This ideal is a far cry from the tenor and thrust of the current ‘presidential succession debate’. And yet, it is not idealistic to wish that debate about political leadership in a democratic South Africa should be informed by revolutionary principles and driven by popular aspirations and energies. Much of what has passed as the succession debate over the last two years falls short of this.

In broad terms, the succession debate has failed the people because of structural political and economic factors. The post-apartheid political process, essentially a liberal democratic framework, has been apathetic to popular aspirations, which could have been unleashed and mobilised in different political and economic circumstances. The post-apartheid growth and accumulation path, which amounted to the restoration

of capitalist profitability, has diminished the meaning of democracy for people as well as reducing their capacity to democratically shape society in their own interests. In other words, we have not succeeded in building a popular democracy in which there is “democratic development of goals at the community level and democratic execution of those goals in productive activity” as M Lebowitz suggests is the case in Venezuela.

SUCCESSION AND OPEN POLITICAL PROCESS

For all my criticism of the succession debate, I recognise that it has opened up space for a reinsertion of popular democratic values into political and economic processes. The presidential succession creates the possibility that the next president will be the first in the country's history to be chosen in a reasonably open political competition.

The choice of the president of the African National Congress (ANC) – and, since transition, of the country – was for decades an internal matter. Now it could become an openly competitive

process even if the final decision is taken by the December conference rather than by popular vote. In theory, this opens the prospect of more open democratic contest for posts such as provincial premier and executive mayor, which, since 1994, have been chosen by President Thabo Mbeki and at times in an ANC deployment committee in an unaccountable process.

But what is the likely impact on South African democracy? Some see the prospect of open political contest as a democratic breakthrough, establishing the principle that candidates must compete for support and account to voters if they want to hold high office.

Others see it as a premature threat to stability, opening the way to a brand of no-holds-barred politics which will increase political divisions, erode public trust (as politicians discredit their opponents in public meetings and through media ‘leaks’) and threaten peace and democracy.

There is also the danger of money and sensation taking centre stage in a similar manner to unpleasant US presidential campaigns. We have already seen



several financial and mining conglomerates reaching out to the state and upper echelons of the ANC and actively betting on different factions and personalities whilst seeking to influence electoral outcomes. Therefore, we have to ask: what critical conditions are required to put the democratic election of the country's political leadership in a principled, democratic and publicly accountable framework? The two most important conditions in my view are: rolling back a demobilising politics and re-inserting progressive values into the debate.

ROLLING BACK DEMOBILISING POLITICS

Firstly, the question of rolling back demobilising politics.

As already stated the succession debate has not been informed by revolutionary politics in the sense that thinking about political incumbency is a revolutionary task in a wider revolutionary and transformative process of social and economic change.

This is partly an outcome of the excessive presidentialism in the state that the ANC embarked on in order to restore profitability to a capitalist economy that faced a structural crisis for most of the 1980s. A critical feature of this excessive presidentialism was its lack of legitimacy in the ANC. It was

not collective, democratic or mass-based. It was seen as elitist even within the ANC. And despite massive support for the ANC, the ANC's working class base remains hostile to capitalism. This was not counter-balanced by an effective left strategy within the ANC and the alliance.

What we have now is debate shaped by a report released in 1999 by the Centre for Development Enterprise (CDE). The report was released just before President Mbeki ascended to power. At the time, the main concern for capital was what would happen after Mandela, and the only critique put forward of President Mbeki was a concern about Africanisation. Apart from that, the CDE report believed Mbeki must show Cosatu, civil society and the rest of the working class that business had to lead society and that Mbeki must be a president for business and be concerned with international markets. Such thinking is an illustration of how political debate took place without the insertion of a strong popular perspective. The liberal democratic framework, represented by the CDE Report, was indifferent to popular participation. What the CDE was calling for in 1999 was a strong presidential centre, with the capacity to drive an economic programme and to discipline populist forces.

In this climate we saw the emergence of grievance and conspiracy politics within the ANC and the alliance instead of hegemonic politics. Such politics had a debilitating effect on the extent to which the left and working class forces could boldly and confidently struggle for the deepening of democracy. Such politics inevitably leads to scheming, plots and counter-conspiracies. Consequently, for the last two years, the ANC, SACP and Cosatu have been divided by hype, sensation and counter blows. All this had the effect of a systematic political demobilisation of popular working class forces, the undermining of democratic values inside progressive organisations and the discouraging of democratic impulses in our society.

The pro-Jacob Zuma movement has begun to take away some of the excessive presidentialism. But there are other issues brought to the surface by the pro-Zuma group that have a serious bearing on the political direction of the country. How does the executive, and in particular the office of the president, relate to institutions of the state? These are essential questions in any liberal democracy and should not be easily dismissed by the left. They are about entrenching democracy through checks and balances.

INSERTING PROGRESSIVE VALUES INTO DEBATE

Secondly, let's look at re-inserting progressive values into the debate.

A president in society plays a critical role, for example, without a moderating Mandela, working class forces could have pushed for more radical change during the transition. It is also possible to speculate that had Mbeki not been president there would have been more space for the left to engage in economic policy debates. Left to a liberal democratic framework, the position of president becomes unaccountable to popular forces. There is no focus on progressive values that need to shape the debate. It is in this connection that the recently launched Progressive ANC Voters' Network (PAVN) is interesting.

In a letter to founding members, the PAVN stated, "The ANC traditions of non-racialism, anti-tribalism, public service, mass struggle and progressive social policies have again become a contested terrain. After 12 years in power, the ANC faces a crisis in leadership, vision and confidence in its own progressive values, traditions and commitments. The crisis of leadership is based on the absence of sustained engagement by the working class and progressive activists in the ANC. This absence has allowed careerists, nationalists, the emerging black capitalist class and the traditional capitalists to be the dominant voice in the party."

In the letter, the PAVN also put forward values that the new ANC and the president should embody. These included a pro-poor and pro-working class tradition that aims to

eradicate poverty and social inequality; an unwavering commitment to the equality and liberation of women; unequivocal leadership on the science of HIV prevention, treatment and care; a commitment to constitutional democracy through the separation of powers with an accountable executive that recognises the supremacy of the Constitution; a strong, vigilant, accountable and effective legislature, and, an independent judiciary; a commitment to a modern, open, progressive and vibrantly democratic party; action against racism, tribalism, xenophobia, cultural chauvinism, patriarchy, sexism and homophobia; intolerance of, and effective legal action against personal, corporate and political corruption without fear or favour; and commitment to a fair global economic and trading system and African unity, freedom, democracy, development, solidarity and human rights.

Whilst these may not be socialist, they begin to show what is missing in the current succession debate.

In addition to these PAVN values, we do not see political leadership, and even Mandela failed here, being actively in support of progressive values on race, gender equality, homophobia and xenophobia, to mention a few. Besides structural economic contours shaping these, a subjective role is critical in pushing a progressive framework and conscientising our society. Political leadership fails to recognise that despite the Constitution, we have a society that is socially conservative. It fails to educate a socially conservative

society about progressive values.

For example, at the highest political leadership level there is no serious critical understanding of gender relations or the extent to which women are oppressed in South Africa; and how that oppression is fuelled by unemployment and underdevelopment which is reflected in a crisis of violence in households and communities. We do have campaigns against violence. We do have progressive laws. But those laws have produced representative gender equality where an elite few have been able to access positions of power. Yet, the conditions that produce gender oppression have not been addressed. What we need is a political voice right at the centre of the leadership of the country that is able to roll back the socially conservative nature of our society, in particular around gender relations.

We need a radically different political leadership. But this is a dream. We are not going to get it at the ANC's December conference. However, it is useful to go back to these benchmarks, perhaps in the hope of re-igniting debate and mobilising popular forces which have been alienated from the political process, and in the hope of placing them at the centre of future struggles around the political direction of our country.

Mazibuko Jara is a member of the Cape Town Executive Committee of the South African Communist Party, works as co-managing editor of "Amandla!" and as a research associate for the Ikbwezi Institute.