

The People Shall Govern

Class struggles and the post-1994 state in South Africa

Jeremy Cronin's paper which is summarised below has been commended for its courage. He explores the stages of the ANC government's 'project' and concludes it has failed to deliver to the poor. Using the taxi industry as an example he demonstrates his contention that power at the community level is the way to go.

At least three conceptions of democracy can be discerned in the 1956 Freedom Charter – representative democracy, constitutional democracy, and grass-roots democracy or popular, collective self-empowerment. Popular power was again placed on the agenda during the township insurrection of the 1980s, in 'democratic organs of self-

government' such as people's courts and street committees. In the 1990s, as state violence escalated, communities set up self-defence units.

The legacy of the 1950s and 1980s still resonates in South Africa in a number of participatory institutions, including community policing forums, ward committees and government izimbizo. However, since 1994, it has been considerably weakened, while the other two paradigms of democracy, as representative government and the exercise of rights, have predominated. This has class implications. Without popular participation, a technocratic, capitalist-orientated agenda tends to infuse the executive, legislatures and the courts. As capitalism cannot meet the challenge of underdevelopment, popular aspirations have erupted in grievance-driven uprisings. Why has this happened?

NEGOTIATED TRANSITION AND BONAPARTISM

The state is the product of a negotiated settlement of the early 1990s, where neither the apartheid regime nor the liberation movement could decisively defeat each other. The Marxist concept of Bonapartism provides a useful perspective here. When class warfare reaches a temporary stalemate, a great personality, like Bonaparte or Cromwell, often emerges, standing above political

parties and arbitrating between them. They can be progressive or reactionary, depending on whose class interests they advance.

In post-1994 South Africa, Nelson Mandela played something of this role. Partly because of his outstanding personal qualities, he came to preside over the stabilisation and consolidation of our national democratic breakthrough. He was a progressive Bonapartist who overwhelmingly aimed to defend and institutionalise the advances of popular forces.

SETBACK FOR THE WORKING CLASS

But the stabilisation of class antagonisms must eventually give way to new and more sustainable conditions for capitalist profit accumulation, or move towards a revolutionary transformation of society favouring the working class and its allies. The central project of Thabo Mbeki, as deputy president under Mandela and since 1999 as president, has been the former.

The project has had three phases: 1996-9, when macro-economic policy was seen as the driver of growth. Then 1999-2002, when privatisation was seen as the key growth catalyst; and 2002 until the present, when state infrastructure investment, to 'lower the cost of doing business', became the key catalyst. Each policy has failed to deliver to the poor.

Relative to apartheid, the project is modernising and progressive. But in terms of what was possible in



1994, it represents a serious setback for the working class and the national democratic revolution.

TECHNOCRATIC VANGUARDISM

Mbeki's aim has been to forge a powerful political-technical-managerial centre in the state, focused on the presidency but with close ties to key departments, notably the Treasury and the trade and industry department. His 'technocratic vanguardist' state has the following features:

- It assumes a de-ideologised post-Cold War world marked by a "growing international consensus on human rights and good governance", in which South Africa's negotiated transition, human rights and governance record, give it unusual influence. Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' forms part of this complex of ideas. This overlooks growing Western imperialism after the Soviet

collapse, and the global reproduction of combined development and underdevelopment.

- A powerful, modernising presidential centre in the state, also comprising state managers and technocratic ministers and black economic empowerment managers and capitalists. This ignores the fact that instead of providing the resources for improved 'delivery', strengthened capitalist accumulation heightens the crisis of underdevelopment. It also underestimates the contradictions between the drive for good governance and the promotion of a parasitic BEE elite.
- The modernisation of the ANC from a mobilising mass movement into a centre-left electoral party, in part replicates the state presidential centre in the ANC and downgrades the

secretary general's office. This has overestimated the ability of a technocratic presidential centre to control a mass-based movement with mobilising and revolutionary traditions.

Each pillar of the Mbeki state project is now crisis-ridden. Capitalist stabilisation has not alleviated poverty and joblessness. The ANC's organisational capacity has been ravaged and the entrenchment of capitalist values has heightened corruption, factionalism and careerism.

There are contradictions between the Mbeki project's 'westernising/modernising' and 'Africanist' aspirations and between the ANC's electoral reliance on its allies and desire to discipline them or even provoke an alliance walkout. The ANC's July 2005 National General Council gave vent to these crises, which also involved support for Jacob Zuma.

A major internal ANC and ANC-

led alliance review of what has gone wrong, and on how to move forward, is imperative.

EMOCRACY AS 'REPRESENTATIVE VANGUARDISM'

Mbeki's vision is informed by both 'representative vanguardism' and 'righteous vanguardism'. These derive in part from the Leninist idea of a vanguard, but South African state vanguardism is economistic and evolutionary, rather than dialectical.

Representative vanguardism sets out to position South Africa at the forefront of the modernising drive in Africa, and as the prime spokesperson for Africa and the South in international forums. In South Africa, it seeks to represent black people, and particularly Africans.

These representational aims often conflict. For example, representing Africa in global forums requires regional compromises and 'quiet diplomacy', which tarnish South Africa's modernising and human rights reputation internationally.

'Righteous vanguardism' conflates what is most 'modern' and technically progressive with what is just. It was most evident in Mbeki's initial arguments for a 'new African century', based on the idea that Africa is morally entitled to a renaissance.

EMERGING BLACK CAPITAL

The argument for a new 'patriotic bourgeoisie', the emerging BEE stratum, is strongly marked by vanguardism. It runs as follows: the 'developmental state' needs leverage over capitalists, who control the resources needed for development and are mainly white or foreign. We must, therefore, deploy our own cadres to key sites

of capital accumulation to represent the interests of blacks and Africans.

However, BEE capital is not a typical 'national/patriotic bourgeoisie'. It is parasitic on an existing domestic capital formation developed as a result of 'colonialism of a special type' in South Africa. It has not accumulated its own capital by unleashing new productive forces, but relies on hand-outs from established business in the form of share deals, affirmative action, BEE quotas, fronting and privatisation. It depends on state power to force concessions from established capital. It has created little new wealth or employment.

One consequence of the BEE elite's ties with mining and finance capital is that the tentacles of big business increasingly reach into the state and the ANC, backing factions and personalities and seeking to influence the presidential succession.

A WAY FORWARD

This does not prove that a multiclass national democracy is flawed, or that the left should launch a separate party or regroup as a front of social movements. It shows that a national democratic strategy must be revolutionary, not reformist. It must actively transform the capitalist accumulation path, building momentum towards popular power and working class hegemony.

Emerging capital may exercise great influence, but the post-1994 state is sharply class-contested. How do we build a different class hegemony? Not by weakening the state, as liberals advise. Indeed, we must strengthen it, but around a different agenda. A new class hegemony requires mobilisation of

workers and the poor to shape their own destiny, rather than being passive recipients of 'delivery'.

The following are priorities:

- Rebuilding an ANC that can lead popular struggles and eliminate gate-keeping, careerism and corruption from the branch up.
- Launching an offensive on the axis between ANC elected representatives and state managers on the one hand and BEE capital (and behind it established capital) on the other. An effective public sector requires good managers, and the left should aim to reconnect with the state managerial/technical strata. The Zuma crisis, recurrent corruption scandals and township rebellions have made an ANC-led campaign against corruption possible and necessary. Popular democracy can be built by campaigning around some of the secretary general's suggestions at the National General Council, which include more public funding for political parties, transparency on party donations, post-tenure restrictions on outgoing public servants, and a ban on ANC representatives having business interests.
- Strengthening and transforming parliament, which has been marginalised by the technocratic vanguard state. This requires a review of the electoral system.

South Africa's crisis of underdevelopment also means advanced sectors of the working class can build alliances with the unemployed, casual and retrenched workers, the land-hungry, the homeless, and small township entrepreneurs. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs because of global capitalist restructuring. If workers

quarantine themselves in 'pure' worker formations and campaigns, they cannot contest this critical terrain.

A SECOND ECONOMY?

The left must also focus on 'the second economy', a weak link in the capitalist chain. The vanguard state has intervened here by trying to convert the sector's activities, from spaza shops to stokvels, into 'SMMEs'. A range of technical, top-down projects have tried to create an infant bourgeoisie.

We should resist such processes of 'pseudo-petit bourgeoisification' and not view the capitalist-dominated first economy as a model. The relative delinking of the second economy from the 'mainstream' capitalist production is potentially a revolutionary asset. Should we not think of the minibus sector or township spaza shops as a pole of the economy where production for social need could become hegemonic over production for private profit?

CASE STUDY: TRANSFORMING MINIBUS SECTOR

In contrast with BEE capital, the minibus sector is self-made, answers a real social need and has created thousands of jobs, albeit insecure and badly paid. However, it depends on the perpetuation of a polarised economy, is violence-prone, and provides for dangerous and uncomfortable commuting. It is this 'backwardness' that the government's taxi recapitalisation programme aimed to address.

The programme shows the failure of the developmental state's efforts at top-down modernisation, involving the close collaboration of a managerial political elite, big capital and emerging national

capital. Transnational companies were to manufacture and maintain a fleet of 90 000 new vehicles, fuel companies would have benefited from the expanded diesel market, and IT and financial consortia would have cashed in a lucrative smart card tender. The plan also 'affirmed' a BEE stratum of taxi owners who could meet the payments on the new vehicles.

The programme's top-down character required a single 'representative' national owner body to interact with government. However, Santaco never won taxi-owners' unreserved support, in part because its leaders used access to information and resources as a personal business opportunity. The planners also failed to foresee resistance from operators who could not afford to move into the recap programme, and for whom the scrapping allowance for old taxis was effectively a retrenchment payout. By enforcing formal maintenance franchises, the programme would have marginalised a network of drivers, cleaners and backyard mechanics.

In 2004, the government abandoned the programme as unworkable. It replaced it with a more realistic regulatory scheme that specifies basic safety and other features required for operating licences.

Taxi industry transformation cannot be a national, top-down technocratic affair. It must be part of a broader process that prioritises the development needs of workers and the poor. This must be driven by local spatial planning, infrastructure development and democratic participation. The transport problems of the poor may be better addressed through communities where jobs, schools

and amenities are nearby than through more vehicles on freeways.

In transforming the taxi industry the government should focus less on formal bodies that interface with vehicle manufacturers and fuel companies, and more on the development of municipal-level public transport companies with a mixed ownership, including community ownership.

Power at the community commuter level is the key requirement. The central weakness of the recap programme was to treat commuters as 'beneficiaries', to whom safer and cheaper public transport would be 'delivered'.

CONCLUSION

In a resolution, the ANC's 2005 National General Council indicated what kind of state we should build: "In many international cases, the developmental state has been characterised by a high degree of integration between business and government. The South African developmental state has different advantages and challenges. While we seek to engage private capital strategically, in South Africa the developmental state needs to be buttressed and guided by a mass-based, democratic liberation movement in a context in which the economy is still dominated by a developed, but largely white, capitalist class."

It is a broad vision for which we have to struggle. But given the crises of the reformist, technocratic national democratic project, the possibility and necessity of an alternative is evident.

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