‘We don’t want the fucking vote’

Social movements and demagogues in a South Africa’s young democracy

Representative democracy in South Africa, young as it is, has seen a flowering of ‘social movements’. Michael Sachs argues that movements position themselves in opposition to representative democracy will remain marginal to the process of social transformation.

The diversity of social movements defies an easy definition. In SA the boundaries between a ‘social movement’ and a football club, an independent religion, vigilante group, political party, trade union, choir group or NGO remain fuzzy. All have characteristics usually associated with social movements; all overlap with modes of organisation, solidarity and mobilisation at community level.

Acknowledging this complexity, and welcoming the contribution of social movements to democratic practice, this article takes issue with a particular discourse in some social movements which consciously poses itself as the adversary of representative democracy. This tendency, strongly evident in the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) and the Landless People’s Movement (LPM), has attained much media notoriety in recent years. However, those who remain strategically hostile to the institutions of democracy are unlikely to attract significant popular support in SA. As a result they will confine themselves to the margins of change, and deny themselves the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to social transformation.

Which side are you on?

By the dawn of the 20th century, European social movements had won, through struggle, the extension of universal franchise to the masses of the poor and working class. One hundred years later ‘mature democracies’ in Europe and elsewhere are said to be experiencing a ‘crisis of representation’. Democracy appears at best unresponsive, and at worst hostile to the goals of human liberation. In this context, a European intellectual, Andre Gorz asked an age-old question as follows: ‘There are the oppressors and the oppressed. Which side are you on?’ Assuming that ‘every society is divided in two by a central conflict, and that no one can avoid being part of that conflict’, Gorz proposes the following answer: ‘Increasingly, the real frontier between Left and Right does not run between… (party political) apparatuses but, rather, between the parties which occupy the institutional centre stage, on the one hand, and the movements rising up on their margins and

contesting them, on the other.' (Gorz, 1994:15-16)

These sentiments were echoed at a conference that I recently attended with anti-globalisation and green movement activists in Berlin, entitled 'McPlanet.com: the environment caught in the trap of globalisation'. A highlight of the gathering was a panel discussion convened to unravel the following conundrum:

'Social movements… result from protests against predominant societal structures. This implies a natural opposition to established politics. At the same time they are in need of contacts and alliances within the institutionalised political arena, at least in areas in which they wish to alter state actions. How can the relationship between social movements and institutionalised politics contribute towards a fairer world?… Does politics need social movements? Do social movements need politics?'

Hans Christian Ströbele, a veteran radical and popular Green Party MP was joined by two doyens of the green-left movements in the South: Dr Vandana Shiva, a physicist and campaigner from India, and Ricardo Navarro, chairman of GreenPeace International.

Shiva and Navarro said that supposedly representative institutions had been subverted by the will of corporations and social movements should steer clear of institutionalised politics – avoiding the compromises which participation entails. Their strategy must be to deploy power from outside the system in order to influence the decisions of politicians who, left to their own devices, could be expected to act only in response to the venal incentives of power and greed.

Ströbele, the radical activist turned MP, disagreed. He argued that through electoral participation, the Green Party had influenced important decisions. He

emphasised the importance of both social movements and formal politics, both of which have an important role to play. Conceding that corporate lobbies did indeed hold disproportionate power in the functioning of the state, he believed this was precisely the reason why progressives should participate; in order that the business of government is not left to business alone.

Strobele's views were out of kilter with many on the conference floor. Ricardo Navarro drew much applause for saying 'the only difference between the Republicans and the Democrats (in the US) is that the one is supported by Coca Cola and the other by Pepsi Cola.'

It appeared to me that many European social movement activists believe that this is the truth behind all systems of 'institutionalised politics' and that social movements globally constitute a new Left – the new representatives of the poor – rising up on the margins and contesting establishment politics.

These European debates certainly have relevance for SA, where the liberation movement now occupies the institutions of state. The social movements and workers organisations that form part of the liberation alliance have had to adapt to the new politics of representative democracy. This has entailed their inclusion in decision-making processes, and the departure of their leading cadreship into the democratic state's fledgling institutions. At the same time, new forms of community solidarity and mobilisation are emerging in a variety of unpredictable and evolving forms.

Grappling with the 'natural opposition' between social movements and the state, realising the constraints faced by former social movement activists now in government and concluding that alliances must be formed in order to influence state actions, many activists are asking themselves 'how can the relationship between social movements and institutionalised politics contribute towards a fairer world?'

However, much more media attention is given to the antics of those who are not seriously or genuinely facing up to these important questions. These groups have, most notably, punctuated SA politics with impressive mobilisations at moments of global focus (ie the WSSD and the WCAR). Many subscribe to views similar to those I attributed to Shiva and Navarro above. In similar fashion to their European counterparts, many consider themselves to be rising up on the margins of earlier political forms, primarily the liberation movement. They see their future as that of a mass movement capable of challenging the hegemony of the current order, which they define as neo-liberal. The government is regarded as a slave to corporations and democratic institutions are dangerous mechanisms for the co-option of the poor. Some go further: not only does the state seek to co-opt any form of autonomous mobilisation, but it is engaged in a 'war against the poor' in which radical social movements are the last line of defence.

Notwithstanding their celebrity status in the media, I think that there are two factors, which will undermine their ability to meaningfully contribute to social transformation. The first is the legitimacy of the vote in South Africa since the franchise remains an effective instrument to realise the interests of the poor. The second is the national character of changes underway in South Africa.

Legitimacy of the vote

Some social movement activists in South Africa take a decidedly contemptuous attitude toward representative democracy and the movements that occupy its institutions. Ashwin Desai, who was recently interviewed by a British journalist, cogently expresses this attitude: 'What was the whole struggle about, from the beginning?' he demanded, rhetorically. 'It was about saying, we won't work in your mines – we want our land, we want control. We don't want the fucking vote – the vote is meaningless unless we can run our own economy'. (Kingsnorth, 2003: p121)

But in South Africa the vote can, and is, used consistently by the masses of the poor and excluded to realise some of their interests. What is more, the reasons they do so are clear to anyone with even a cursory knowledge of recent history. The social movements that shook the foundations of the apartheid state did, in fact, pursue the key objective of a non-racial and democratic South Africa, in which the demand 'one person, one vote on a common voter's roll' featured prominently. Even the most cynical reading of the transition would not lead a democrat to conclude that the vote is 'meaningless', but this is exactly how some regard it.

Take for example Trevor Ngwane, who stood in SA's first municipal elections as an independent candidate in his home ward of Pimville, Soweto. As fate would have it, he received less than 30% of the votes in that ward, being easily defeated by a relatively unknown ANC member. Ngwane then decided to engage municipal government around the implementation of the ANC's pledge to extend free basic amounts of water and electricity to all. Ngwane describes his campaign as follows: 'I was on national TV saying that the promises had just been an election ploy. People were beginning to call them liars. So the ANC announced that they would start a programme [to

extend free basic water and electricity] on 1 July, 2001. On 30 June, we all took a kombi… to the mayor's house… and cut off his supply, to remind him that he had to give us the free water and electricity the next day… At the time, Masondo downplayed the meeting [sic] to the press, but the next year, 2002, when we went to his house again after the mayor's office refused to respond to our demands, he was still complaining about it: 'You guys, you're undisciplined! It's very bad when you come to my house'.

Ignoring the mayor's pleas, Ngwane convened a meeting in Soweto where it was resolved to visit Masondo's house again. On the date chosen Masondo was out of the country. Nevertheless, 'as fate would have it, we got there in a mean mood,' says Ngwane. As fate would have it too, Ngwane had ensured the presence of various international media, such as CNN, outside the mayor's house. The small group of Ngwane's followers proceeded to pelt the house with stones, causing much distress to Masondo's wife and child. In the scuffle that ensued the security guard outside Masondo's house opened fire and injured some of the demonstrators. 'After that all hell broke loose... The comrades poured rubbish in his swimming pool, cut his water, cut his lights. In the end, 87 of us got arrested.' (Trevor Ngwane, NLR, 2003)

Now, it is true the implementation of free basic water and electricity to the poor has not been as smooth as envisaged. And it should not be doubted that, given delays in meeting its commitments, civil society must act to ensure that government is held to account. It is also true that, despite his resounding defeat at the polls, Ngwane does represent a section of the community in Soweto. However, the point here is that Masondo has been elected by all the people of Johannesburg, predominantly by the black and the poor, to represent their collective interests, over and above those of a particular section or grouping. Beyond the ethical implications of Ngwane's tactics, the fact is that while certainly sensational, they are unlikely to command popular appeal and will not result in change. The reason is that they like Desai's views fail to realise the centrality of the universal franchise, and its implications for the social movements of the poor.

Social movements that are able to link immediate demands to a deepening of democratic gains must certainly grow into a vibrant SA civil soicety.

Voting for the poor

Voting is definitely not the last act of popular democracy but it is the first. This is because, where the poor constitute the majority, and where they have won universal franchise through struggle, the poor have the possibility to realise some of their material interests by installing their political representatives in government through democratic means, irrespective of the economic system in place. (Przeworski, 1985 chapter 1) In South Africa, the last ten years have seen the rapid extension of housing, education, social security, basic services like water and electricity and other important social and political gains. This explains why earlier generations of social movements were correct to regard the vote as a first step in the further transformation of society. It is also the reason why the poor will, in all likelihood, continue to give overwhelming endorsement to the system of democracy and its representative institutions, which they perceive (correctly) to be the only thing standing between them and the super-exploitation they experienced, within living memory, under the system of white minority rule. Though the vote is meaningless to Desai, it is not meaningless to the people he claims to represent.

Social movements that are able to link immediate demands to a deepening of democratic gains must certainly grow into a vibrant SA civil soicety. But those who are openly contemptuous of representative democracy, who link their immediate demands to the undermining of the franchise, and whose tactic is to delegitimise the newly founded institutions of democracy will confine themselves to a perpetual margin outside the main currents of South African politics.

Perhaps in recognition of this reality, the LPM has attempted to mobilise against the Independent Electoral Commissions' (IEC) 'voter registration weekend' around the slogan: 'No Land, No Vote'. Rather than detracting from the franchise, such tactics serve to remind us that to have a vote is to have a say. The paltry results of the LPM's actions (a few hundred people, at most, participating nationwide) stand in stark contrast to fact that 3.5 million people, the vast majority of whom were young, poor and black, visited polling stations over the same weekend to ensure they could participate in the democratic process. The fact is that the 'landless rural masses' whose demands the LPM claims to voice, are more likely than any other section of the population to

vote in the forthcoming election. Indeed, the IEC noted in its evaluation of the registration weekend that 'apart from the youth the… rural voters registered in larger numbers than before'. (IEC 2003)

Racial structure of power

There is a second reason why those who pose themselves as a 'new Left' outside of and in opposition to the 'institutional centre' are unlikely to develop in South Africa. Here, the universal franchise is not only mechanism for redistributive politics, it is also meaningful in the struggle to defeat the racial structure of power, which continues to dominate many aspects of South African life. Apartheid was only an authoritarian state. White supremacy dominated civil society. Those who pose as the adversaries of liberation politics must confront the problem of locating themselves in the anti-racist struggles underway in universities, schools, labour markets, Sunday newspapers, market structures and rugby teams, to name a few.

It is on the terrain of a protracted contestation over anti-racist transformation at every level of society that to define 'Left' to mean 'outside the institutional centre stage' is inappropriate for South Africa. If 'Left' is against white supremacy and if South Africa's struggle continues to be coloured by three centuries of white supremacy, then democracy means that, for the first time in history, the struggle against racism can be conducted simultaneously from without and from within the institutional centres of society. To speak of a progressive movement, which excludes progressives within the state is patently absurd. These are also the reasons why in SA party politics cannot be regarded as a mundane competition between various flavours of cold drink. The political parties that contest elections are differentiated precisely by the positions on the question of race as well as the politics of redistribution.

Some social movements in South Africa have succeeded in mediating the complexities of race and class, in conducting struggles at varied levels and in building durable alliances that transcend the dichotomy between the 'state' and 'civil society'. These are the movements, that have also been able to win material victories for the constituencies they claim to represent. As a result, these are the movements we can expect to grow and develop into decisive forces in the ongoing struggle to define the content of South African democracy.

Those, on the other hand, which isolate themselves on the moral high-ground of left-wing purity, who abstain from meaningful interaction with the broader progressive movement, who eschew the construction of alliances within the state and the compromise that such alliance entails, will continue, no doubt, to capture headlines in the mainstream media, not least on CNN. Indeed, their very prominence (and subsequent obscurity) at moments of global focus in South Africa's politics serves to underscore the manner in which such political theatre does capture the imagination of distant audiences.

However, their claims to be the voice of the poor will continue to sound hollow against the spectacle of fifteen million working class people standing in the sun to mandate their political representatives in the state. Those who are serious about the process of human liberation in South Africa, in Africa and the world, cannot avoid the power of that statement and its implications that social movements must serve to augement, not undermine democratic power.

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