What's Left of the state?

The ANC's Polokwane conference opened up possibilities for the election of a government more responsive to issues of poverty and democracy. **Ivor Chipkin** argues that if this happens a future developmental state will have to seriously engage with the creation of a well functioning state administration.

I f the current alliance between elements of the ANC, especially those organised around Jacob Zuma, Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the SACP (SA Communist Party), survives until the next election it is likely that South Africa will wake-up to a 'left' government – or at least one that positions itself as left. Yet this is by no means a *fait accompli*. The nodal point of this coalition is Jacob Zuma, held together, to paraphrase Julius Malema, by love for the leader and hate for his opponents. Should Jacob Zuma go to trial and be convicted for corruption this coalition is likely to dissolve.

Let us assume, however, that this coalition survives and even succeeds in forming the next government. Let us assume too that a Zuma government is not marked by deep continuities with the Mbeki era. It is likely that a 'left' government will distinguish itself by revitalising the democratic project and rethinking the role of the state and, in particular, its relation to the market.

It is now familiar that under Thabo Mbeki the democratic project has experienced major reversals. While holding on to the formal constitutional architecture, Mbeki's

time has been associated with the hollowing-out of parliament, the demobilisation of civil society and even the erosion of the separation of powers.

In 2006 Cosatu warned that South Africa and the ANC were drifting towards dictatorship. "Dictatorship never announces its arrival," Zwelinzima Vavi told the media. "It won't, like drum majorettes, beat drums and parade down the street to announce it has arrived. The main concern of the (National Executive) Committee centres on signs that we may be drifting toward dictatorship. This appears in the use of state institutions… in narrow factional fights. We see it in the use of sections of the media to assassinate the character of individuals through off-the-record briefings and the leaking of sensitive information in the hands of those charged to investigate crimes."

As early as 2002, Jeremy Cronin worried about the "zanufication of the ANC". It was a term he used to refer to the "bureaucratisation of the struggle". This perspective informed the way that commentators and numerous party members viewed the events at the 52nd National Conference of the ANC.

MEANING OF POLOKWANE

Several observers, such as Steven Friedman, welcomed the Polokwane conference as the "day when democracy in the ANC really came of age." He argued, for example, that the events in Polokwane represented a break with the "autocratic" culture of the organisation. "It is not hard to see why the ANC old guard did not like what they saw on day one," he suggested. "They are used to conferences where people keep their differences out of the public eye, when they air them at all, and where leaders are treated with great deference, whether they deserve it or not. They are horrified at the possible birth of a new ANC in which members insist on making their leaders serve them, rather than publicly doffing their caps to those in charge."

Likewise, Eddie Webster hailed the election as a democratic break-through. For the first time in post-colonial Africa, he said, a leader of the dominant political party was forced to stand down after being rejected by his comrades in an internal election. "And, since the ANC may well dominate our politics for a while yet," concluded

Friedman, "whatever happens here at Polokwane, it is not impossible that 16 December, 2007 could be remembered as the day when our democracy became deeper and more real." The fact that a public domain emerged, even if only at the Polokwane conference, is for both commentators a positive sign of democratisation in the ANC.

The lesson of the last ten years, however, should alert even optimistic commentators that the democratic project is not necessarily safe in the hands of those that invoke its terms and symbols. In post-colonial Africa this is especially true of nationalist movements that came to power on the promise of democracy but that very quickly eroded the democratic space.

Yet there is reason for cautious optimism. Mbeki was successfully brought down for his subversion of democratic procedures both within the ANC and generally. There are signs that South Africans, both within the ANC Alliance and without, are rediscovering their taste for dissidence. Post 2009, it might not be easy for anyone to put the democracy back in the bottle.

SEARCHING FOR STATE'S ROLE
The second likely platform of a 'left' government will be to rethink the state's relationship to the market. This is to be welcomed.

Despite robust levels of economic growth over the last years, growth has been accompanied by increasing unemployment for the working class and poor, widening inequality and deepening poverty (moderated only by welfare instruments like pensions and the child-support grant). Given this situation, there is a compelling case to rethink the state's role in the economy and society.

What the current situation

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William Matlala

suggests is that 'deracialising capitalism' (Black Economic Empowerment and Affirmative Action) has not borne the developmental fruits hoped. The notion of the 'developmental state' is testimony to the search for a new role for the state. Over the past month, Peter Evans, the US sociologist whose book *Embedded Autonomy* is a key reference in this debate, has spoken at events on the prospects of a 'developmental state' in South Africa.

Yet there is something naïve about these debates if they are not accompanied by reflections on the nature of the South African state as it is today. Evans has warned that treating the Asian 'developmental state' as a model that can simply be copied, ignores the unique historical context in East Asia after the Second World War. Here the dissolution of land-owning classes and weakly organised capitalists enabled the state to direct investment into strategic sectors. This is not the case in South Africa.

Vishwas Satgar, to his credit, has begun reflection on how, far from

being weak and open to direction from the state, capitalists in South Africa are confident (bolstered by the ideological crisis of the Left) and increasingly part of global capital. But we must also ask more everyday questions about the state as an institution, or complex of institutions.

IMPORTANCE OF BUREAUCRACY
What has been generally ignored in South Africa in the relationship of the state to development is the importance of *bureaucracy*. In the distinction between 'predatory' and 'developmental' states, bureaucracy has pride of place. "Predatory states," writes Evans, "lack the ability to prevent individual incumbents from pursuing their own goals. Personal ties are the only source of cohesion, and individual maximization takes precedence over pursuit of collective goals." Predatory states are, in short, characterised by a death of bureaucracy. According to Evans the organisation of developmental states comes much closer to a Weberian bureaucracy with

recruitment on merit and long-term career rewards which create a commitment and coherence.

Focusing simply on questions of macro-economic policy or on the balance of class forces detracts attention from the 'state' of the state in South Africa. Whatever interventions a 'left' government decides on, they will require a well functioning state administration. Such a state is often assumed. But a functioning bureaucracy has been missing over the last ten years.

It is incorrect to debate the failures of the state as a consequence of affirmative action. Rather, the pursuit of equity in the public sector has coincided with the introduction of a new politics in and on the state.

Since 1999 with the introduction of the Public Finance Management Act, there have been efforts to transform away from the model of a state bureaucracy which is hierarchical and rule-driven, in the direction of *New Public Management (NPM)* which is driven by managers with high levels of autonomy, including over financial matters. The NPM intended to transform the old apartheid organisation and improve efficiency and effectiveness. In particular it stressed the importance of managers over bureaucrats and valued the application of business principles to the way state departments operated.

We should be careful before concluding that the rise of managerialism, especially after the introduction of GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy) in 1996, are evidence of South Africa's slide towards 'neoliberalism'. When the NPM was first mooted the model was not Margaret Thatcher's Britain or the United States of America under Reagan. The model was that of

France, and in particular, the thinking behind the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (*ENA*).

There are two aspects of the French experience that the state thought important. First, the ENA model, unlike the British one, considers the state as the dominant agent of development. Secondly, it relies on the role of a powerful class of senior managers who have high levels of political autonomy and financial discretion.

It is not difficult to understand why in the late 1990s this model appealed to those in government and policy circles sympathetic to the democratic project. Faced with the legacy of apartheid institutions, the new managerialism created opportunities for high-level political deployments to fast-track transformation.

Furthermore, in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism and the unfavourable fortunes of post-colonial African states, the NPM seemed a way to keep a key role for the state without the costs of wastefulness, inefficiency and corruption.

Yet in terms of the NPM a public sector manager is expected to have sophisticated analytic skills to navigate complex legal, political, administrative, social and economic environments. In short, it is an unenviable position for even the most highly trained and talented recruit.

In the face of a serious skills shortage in South Africa, the NPM model was severely compromised. Contrary to public perceptions, however, the problem is not that under the pressure of equity legislation people were appointed to senior positions without the requisite skills. The truth told by statistics is very different. Rather than appoint unsuitable candidates in terms of skills and population

profile, government departments are simply leaving positions empty. The consequences have been devastating.

Vinothan Naidoo has found that on average 25% of senior manager positions are vacant in the public service. In some departments, including Home Affairs, it is as high as 48%. Faced with these extreme staff shortages, government departments are poaching from each other. Vacancies and high staff turnover destabilise government departments, destroy institutional memory, demoralise staff and undermine their capacity to perform. Under such conditions it is not surprising that corruption has flourished.

These are challenges that any new government will have to confront. They will be especially important for a 'left' government wanting the state to play the lead role in development.

In the absence of a return to a bureaucratic state there are several disturbing possibilities. Ineffective and unaccountable state organisations are breeding grounds for the nepotism that has brought African states to their knees.

For a 'left' government the challenge is even more acute. It will be a devastating blow to the Left project if a more interventionist state is associated with an increase in corruption and a further decline in state performance. This means that if we want to act on the formation of a developmental state in South Africa, it is time to debate in earnest the state of the state itself. This article is an attempt to start such a discussion.

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