

South Africa's democracy at risk

Written by Allison Drew

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ALLISON DREW, APR 21 2009

South Africa's transition to democracy still captures the world's admiration despite its dark side – the sectarian violence of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party and the populist violence that led to the burning alive of supposed traitors to the liberation struggle. Intolerance toward those refusing to support particular organizations lived alongside the tolerance that remains the transition's potent symbol.

The vitality of the democratic movement is still seen in a vibrant print and radio culture and in discussion forums, workshops and educational programmes organized by a range of civil society organizations. This new democracy has been repeatedly tested. But now, at the time of the fourth democratic elections in April 2009, its future is threatened by powerful anti-democratic forces, and it risks succumbing to the populist authoritarianism that has captured so much of post-colonial Africa.

The story of the new South Africa concerns the development of an African economic elite using the machinery of the state – a phenomenon apparent across Africa since the 1960s, but that the Afrikaners introduced well before apartheid's launch in 1948. In post-apartheid South Africa a black economic elite has developed through the Black Economic Empowerment scheme in which politically well-connected black South Africans acquire shares in the commanding heights of the economy. Another means of acquiring wealth is corruption, a phenomenon exposed by a relentless media campaign, by political activists Pregs Govender and Andrew Feinstein and by public intellectuals William Gumede and Xolela Mangcu.

The Afrikaner state had its own share of corruption scandals. But the nameless millions of South Africans whose relentless sacrifice paved the way to democracy have a right to expect integrity and accountability from their representatives. Corruption is now endemic from the top of the dominant political party down to small-town rural councillors. The ANC's current election campaign reminds ordinary South Africans that many have benefited from improved service delivery. This is true. But many more could have benefited had not fifty billion Rands been spent to buy unnecessary armaments from international companies such as BAE Systems and Thint – this 1999 arms deal was accompanied by generous kickbacks to people at the very top of the ANC and government. Many millions live in dire poverty without job prospects, and in rural areas health care does not meet the basic conditions for human decency.

Former President Thabo Mbeki will be remembered for the foot-dragging on effective anti-AIDS treatment that led to countless unnecessary deaths. During his tenure he centralized power within the presidency and surrounded himself with sycophants. Yet he did this step by step with ANC approval. Only late in the game did diverse factions unite around the charismatic and controversial Jacob Zuma, the former deputy-president whom Mbeki sacked in 2005 because he was implicated in the arms deal. At its December 2007 conference the ANC rejected Mbeki's bid to lead the party for a third term; had Mbeki succeeded this would have exacerbated competition between the party and the state. From then on the anti-Mbeki alliance gained ground. Mbeki finally resigned as president in September 2008.

South African politics has been consumed by the rivalry of two leaders with very different styles. But the division concerns factional struggles for power and influence – not ideology or policy. Most leaders of the country's largest trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) believe that the federation's interests are best served by remaining in the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and South African Communist Party. Polls of

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shop stewards indicate that support for this position has declined, but it is still the majority view. COSATU backs Zuma because its leaders feel they have more scope to influence policy with him than with Mbeki, even though there is scant difference between Mbeki and Zuma on economic policy.

In certain respects South Africa's multiparty system is flourishing: there are a number of opposition parties, although most are regionally or ethnically based. The recent split within the ANC that led to the launch of the Congress of the People (COPE) was not a split between the alliance partners or a left breakaway. COPE is an alliance of Mbeki supporters out of favour with the ANC's new leadership and of those opposed to corruption. COPE, the Democratic Alliance, the Independent Democrats and the United Democratic Movement share an anti-corruption agenda and call for electoral reform. In Parliament the party list system means that MPs depend for their positions on pleasing the party; they are not elected by or accountable to their constituencies. Such an electoral system reinforces the dominant party's position; many voices call for its reform, but its beneficiaries outnumber those critics.

Zuma has risen on the crest of a populist wave. His trademark song, *Umshini wami* [Bring me my machine gun], harks back to militant armed struggle, when success did not depend on formal education. Yet armed struggle was only one part of the anti-apartheid movement, which was also marked by a commitment to non-violence and critical discourse. In a democracy differences should be resolved through discussion, debate, voting and the law – not by using guns. This exultation of weapons is extremely dangerous in a country that has seen an explosion of violent crime – not least extraordinary violence against women – and the proliferation of guns. The machine gun is a potent phallic symbol dating from the very gendered era of armed struggle.

Despite their different styles, Mbeki and Zuma share an intolerance for dissent. Mbeki's intolerance is reflected in his own actions and statements, Zuma's in those of his followers. In May 2006 Zuma was acquitted on a rape charge; the woman who brought the charge was subjected to violent intimidation and death threats by some of his supporters. In June 2008 ANC Youth League president Julius Malema's claimed he would 'kill for Zuma'. A chorus of voices swiftly condemned his statement, but that it was uttered at all signals the readiness to consider using violence to stifle dissent.

Political irresponsibility takes various forms. On 17 April 2009 ANC spokesperson Jesse Duarte claimed in a BBC radio interview that 90 % of the people in Alexandra township are from other countries. This claim is false and dangerous, playing into the sentiments that led to last year's pogroms against African immigrants who came seeking a better life. This xenophobic violence, which shocked the country and the world, resembled the populist violence of the 1980s.

Zuma went on trial for corruption in 2006, claiming he was targeted for political reasons. Shortly before the April 2009 elections the National Prosecuting Authority controversially dropped the corruption charges, claiming evidence that the prosecution had indeed been politically motivated. Yet Zuma still has a corruption case to answer. He will be president of the country under this cloud.

The massive challenges facing South Africa depend for their resolution on political leadership willing to respect the democratic institutions won after a bitterly hard struggle, to welcome public debate and to impress upon their supporters the need to tolerate the views of others and respect their right to disagree. A broad-based culture of democracy is sorely needed in today's South Africa, and if the country's leaders do not start building this now, its democratic institutions may well founder.

Allison Drew is professor of politics at the University of York. Her work includes South Africa's Radical Tradition: A documentary history (2 vols), Discordant Comrades: Identities and loyalties on the South African left, Between Empire and Revolution: A Life of Sidney Bunting and numerous articles on African politics.