The Quality of South African Democracy

Raymond Suttner

There is a tendency amongst sections of the left to romanticise the most recent revolution, only then to replace it with a later one and consign it to the category of those that have failed expectations. This has happened, among others, with Vietnam, Cuba, Guinea-Bissau, and Zimbabwe. Sometimes, this has been deservedly so, as certain countries have drifted into various forms of authoritarianism and other abuses.

But the expectations that are not met are often those of writers-from-a-distance, who have constructed an image of what they believe are the expectations of the people concerned. When the state does not do what these distant observers regard as necessary we are then dealing, in their view, with some form of betrayal.

This is also the case with regard to South Africa in the writings of people like John Pilger and John Saul.[1] In their case, the hopes that were expected to be fulfilled are dashed, though it may well be that the hopes are those of Pilger and Saul and not exactly those cherished by the majority of South Africans.

But there is a counter-tendency where supposed expertise of a more right wing kind is deployed to warn against an impending danger and to advise the emerging South African democracy, indicating certain prescriptions that need to be followed if democracy is not to fail. This is part of a literature on the 'theory' of democratic transition and consolidation.[2]

These criticisms and advice need to be located within the context of the conditions under which South African democracy emerged, what its significance was and the potential trajectories that the new state might have and has taken so far.

Many criticisms directed towards the current South African political order are based on assumptions that are not fully disclosed and it is essential that we know on what basis an assessment is made. Much of the conservative literature assumes there is a word called democracy whose meaning is obvious; yet, in actual fact, it refers to one version of that concept. The concept is deployed in a limited scope, without necessarily stating that this is so. A particular version is simply treated as the only or obvious meaning.

On the other hand, sections of the left may not place great weight on the attainment of democracy. Thus, what we have here is not so much a critique of the democratic order as of the manner in which politics is conducted, eschewing constitutionalism and devaluing its institutions

The dominant African National Congress (ANC) and its allies, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), refer to 1994 as signifying a 'democratic breakthrough' and the strategic defeat of the apartheid regime. The concept of breakthrough is used in order to indicate that a substantial change occurred in political conditions though not the complete defeat of all forces resisting democratisation and transformation. It was recognised that conservative forces have regrouped and capital has reconfigured its modes of operation in order to place itself more favourably in relation to the new order while nevertheless retaining its overall capacity to influence the direction of economic development.

In April 1994, the right to vote changed the entire South African political landscape.

It is too easily forgotten that whatever limitations there may be in representative democracy, to vote for the first time was a great victory for South Africans. That is why millions queued for hours to cast their vote. The South African electorate is more sophisticated than many scholars realise. It understands it will take long to undo the legacy of apartheid. However, for the first time, a government was in place that was responsive to the needs of the majority of South Africans.

The establishment of democratic South Africa occurred when there was not only a fundamental change in the domestic conjuncture that created the possibility of a negotiated settlement, but also an international conjuncture that saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies. In the unipolar world that ensued, choices were narrowed. In any case, the South African left, within and allied to the ANC, had learnt certain lessons from the collapse of socialism and was rethinking its own models for development, including relying less on nationalisation. The possibility of international assistance in choosing a transformative path was now severely limited. An atmosphere of marketspeak was engendered, where the new democracy, as in so many other countries, was warned not to take steps that would scare off investors. Much counsel related to what is described as having the "fundamentals" in place. Those 'fundamentals' were highly ideological, with the main focus on deficit and inflation reduction and with minimal emphasis on welfare and unemployment.

In wishing to stabilise the new democracy, encourage investment and prevent capital flight, the South African government introduced a conservative macroeconomic framework in line with these prescriptions. Indeed, it did impact on these "fundamentals", but without the promised increased investment and making little impact on the 'less fundamental' huge unemployment rate.

Nevertheless, sections of the left—people like John Saul and Patrick Bond in particular—exaggerated the character and extent of this accommodation to the markets, reading it as a 'shift to the right' and characterising the South African social order as neoliberal.[3] Having applied this label, further analysis was found to be unnecessary and the focus tended to shift towards long-distance psychoanalysis of Thabo Mbeki's personality and the spending patterns of the emerging black bourgeoisie. This 'analysis', which has been prevalent in much of post-apartheid scholarship, makes no real attempt to analyse the character of the ANC, its constraints and choices.

There is also no analysis of the black bourgeoisie, which is a fairly diverse phenomenon and some of whose tendencies are quite different from that of established, white capital. The new government has often given unqualified welcome to this class. But instead of the moralising found in much scholarship, what needs to be asked is how this bourgeoisie should be encouraged or discouraged and through what type of leverage it could be directed along a trajectory that most benefits the economy and the people of South Africa?

In reality, the South African social order does not conform to a classic neoliberal order. There has been no withdrawal of the state and its budget is not determined by donors. In fact, albeit unevenly and in a manner that has sometimes been inadequately planned or sustained, the government has pursued a vigorous programme of state spending that has improved the quality of life of very many South Africans. In the rural areas, there are for the first time clinics, electricity and water, often in villages which used to see electricity and telephone wires pass over their villages to provide for neighbouring white areas. Previously, people had to travel long distances to use public telephone booths, now they have private or mobile phones.

These changes have impacted on the quality of life, more specifically on gender relations, with women who previously had to fetch water from rivers, being freed for other activities. Many women are now involved in local government or development schemes.

At the same time, however, some schemes have been inadequately planned and have broken down. In the cities, water and electricity supplies have been cut off when people failed to pay their bills. The record is uneven but statistics on state transfers show that huge amounts of the budget have been ploughed into pensions, healthcare and basic utilities.

Parallel to the attack from sections of the left has been the deployment of 'expertise' claiming to have insights that are needed to ensure the consolidation of South African democracy. The context in which such theories have been deployed has been a variant of the panic that gripped many whites at the time of the first elections, when one could not buy products like long life milk in supermarkets, because of the anticipated crisis that majority rule would provoke. The 2004 panic is based on the supposed danger of the electoral strength of the ANC. That the ANC faces electoral opponents that have no chance of winning elections in the foreseeable future is seen as placing an insuperable barrier to South Africa becoming a 'consolidated democracy'. To pass this test, there should be a potential 'circulation of elites' in the foreseeable future.[4]

This paradigm derives from US political science and has infiltrated South African scholarship and the media. In reality, a dogmatic statement is posed as a scientific test of democratic consolidation. It takes little account of the historical reasons why parliamentary opposition, which has in general been associated with support of apartheid or ambivalence/resistance to democracy, is weak and the ANC remains strong in South Africa. It takes no account of the constitutional mechanisms put in place to defend democracy and to prevent various types of abuse—mechanisms that are not found in the countries from which the 'experts' derive. These are not all working well. But one of the most important, the Constitutional Court, does function very effectively.

At the same time, there is a space for opposition political parties to operate and that is an important safety valve. Instead of being tempted to subvert democracy, access to an electoral system where a certain number of MPs can be elected provides an outlet for forces that could otherwise be engaged in destabilising activities.

An array of other forces have organised themselves into 'new social movements' around a variety of important issues—HIV/Aids and provision of basic services in particular. They also pursue a variety of strategies to achieve their goals. Some, like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), campaign over treatment of HIV/Aids using the constitutional mechanisms. Others use semi-insurrectionary approaches. The difference of approach may not necessarily indicate a tight decision of membership or the character of membership (which may be large or very small). But it indicates a difference in evaluation of the significance of representative democracy. In contrast to the constitutionalism of TAC, certain representatives of the new social movements place little value on the new political order and its institutions. Ashwin Desai expresses this with words that have now become famous: 'we don't want the fucking vote'.[5]

On the other hand, there is a problem on the side of the ANC and government in the way they relate to these movements. Members are discouraged or feel that they are not encouraged to participate in organisations that are outside ANC hegemony; they are often regarded as 'disgruntled' people who have failed to be elected to some ANC position. The reality is that the ANC is a late convert to pluralism and remains within the 'national liberation movement paradigm' and thus sees the organisation as representing the whole nation, without any need for a range of sectoral organisations.[6]

The ANC itself has entered new terrain on becoming the dominant force in government. This has impacted on the power of the ANC as organisation, whose importance may have been displaced by that of the ANC as government. It has affected its relationship with its allies SACP and COSATU, who have often been on a collision course with the ANC as government. The relationship is no longer clearly one between organisations but in many respects that of SACP and COSATU relating as petitioners or interest groups towards the ANC as government. In some situations, it may be that the government will place more weight on other interest groups, whose displeasure may impact more seriously on credit ratings and other factors.

The above is a very broad sketch, which leaves out many factors. One final point that is important is the atmosphere engendered in the country by the array of progressive legislation and the constitution that now govern South Africa. Democracy has created an atmosphere that is infusing itself into the thinking of people who may never previously have thought seriously about gender equality or never envisaged non-racialism and democracy. Even in deep rural areas people carry little copies of the constitution. There is contestation, but also broad consensus.

Notes

1. See John Pilger, *Hidden Agendas*, London, Vintage, 1998, 'Epilogue', pp 597-610; John Saul, "Cry for The Beloved Country", *Monthly Review*, Vol 52 (8), Jan. 2001, pp. 1-52; responses and counter-responses by Jeremy Cronin, John Saul and Raymond Suttner in *Monthly Review*, vol 54 (7), Dec 2002, and vol 55 (2), June 2003. All of these articles/letters are available on www.monthlyreview.org.
2. See discussion in R. Suttner, "Democratic Transition and Consolidation in South Africa: the Advice of "the Experts", *Current Sociology*, Sept. 2004, vol 52 (5), pp 755-73.
3. See Saul, works cited in note 1, and P. Bond's numerous writings, especially, *Elite Transition*, Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2001.
4. See, for example, C. Jung and I. Shapiro, "South Africa's Negotiated Transition: Democracy, Opposition and the New Constitutional Order", *Politics and Society*, 1995:23 (3), 268-308.
5. Quoted by M. Sachs, "'We Don't Want the Fucking Vote': Social Movements and Demagogues in South Africa's Young Democracy", *South African Labour Bulletin,* 2003, 27(6), 23-7.
6. Suttner, "Democratic Transition", pp.763ff.

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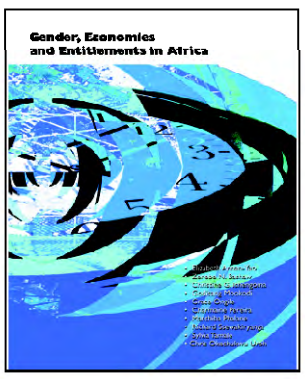
• Filomina Chioma Steady



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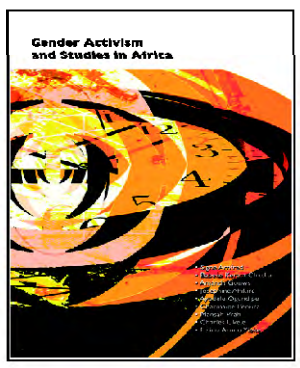
• Manthiba Phalane • Richard Ssewakiryanga • Sylvia Tamale • Chris Okechukwu Uroh



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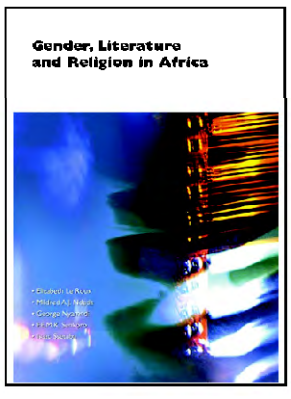
• Charmaine Pereira • Mansah Prah • Charles Ukeje • Felicia Arudo Yieke



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