



Chapter 7

The ANC ‘Leadership Crisis’ and the Age of Populism in Post-apartheid South Africa

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Introduction

Recent developments on the South African political landscape have raised questions about the political leadership emerging in the country just over a decade after the end of apartheid. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) has largely defined the leadership fabric in the country, having grounded its political project on a moral appeal derived from the party’s role both as a leader of both the liberation movement and the transformation process in South Africa since 1994. Recent events in South Africa, though, have left the ruling party on the defensive, where the party finds it necessary to reiterate and explain itself in terms of the leadership that it stands for. The need for introspection on the part of the ANC seems to have emerged after the dismissal of its then deputy president, Jacob Zuma,¹ as deputy president of South Africa in June 2005 due to his alleged involvement in corruption. Since his dismissal from cabinet, Zuma has been able to mobilise popular support among different ANC structures and within trade unions. This chapter examines conditions leading to the attractiveness of the populist agenda as an alternative to President Thabo Mbeki’s style of leadership in South Africa.

Populism as a political project does not necessarily divert from the basic assumption of democracy. In fact, in South Africa it seems that it is clearly seen as an alternative and attractive style of politics in response to the perceived shrinkage of democracy under President Mbeki’s pro-capitalist agenda. The leadership succession battle that has engulfed the ruling ANC, as seen towards the end of Mbeki’s second term as president of South Africa, can be seen as an expression of contradictions that have emerged due to the rapid implementation of a pro-capitalist agenda amid increasing inequalities and poverty in South Africa. Further, the

1 Zuma was elected president of the ANC in December 2007.

rapid implementation of market-friendly policies under the Mbeki administration has essentially cast Mbeki's leadership style as centrist, non-responsive, technocratic and illiberal. As a result, as seems to be the case in some Latin American countries, populism has emerged in the hope of a more responsive, more engaging, locally based and more idealistic democratic system (Huntington, 1991: 9). The next section explores this charge against Mbeki's leadership style.

Mbeki, the centrist

The leadership model adopted during Thabo Mbeki's two terms as president of South Africa and also as president of the ruling ANC is not inconspicuous. Following the ANC's victory in the 1999 general elections, Mbeki became the second democratically elected president of South Africa after Nelson Mandela's first and only term in office. Mbeki's presidency inaugurated a new type of leadership compared to what was seen during Mandela's presidency. Mbeki's presidency is characterised by the consolidation of various government administrative departments into a few administrative committees. The latter are centrally co-ordinated and controlled from the President's Office. Centralisation of power during Mbeki's presidency has also been observed by Jacobs, who argues that Mbeki's 'restructuring process'—notably the formation of the Office of the Presidency, from which various departments were to be co-ordinated, had an effect of 'centralizing enormous power in the hands of the President's Office' (Jacobs, 1999: 4). While the broader aims and objectives of Mbeki's restructuring process are well intended, namely to ensure better co-ordination and swift implementation of government policy, the process ultimately renders most government institutions (particularly the ministerial system) redundant.

By centralising power in the Office of the Presidency, and therefore circumventing the mechanism of delegation aimed at by the ministerial system, the general democratic institutional framework risks being impoverished. If government departments do not in effect play a role in policy implementation, such an arrangement undermines the innate value of the democratic system of delegation of power and responsibilities. Under this arrangement (ie centralisation), government accountability on most matters would be co-ordinated from a single office and that would place government in a position to shield itself from a meaningful engagement with the public, as it swiftly provides responses to complaints, criticism, etc from a single office. Weakening channels through which the government can meaningfully engage and interact with the general public, in turn, has nourished the idea that Mbeki's presidency is elitist. Under this type of presidency, the administration's top-level officials, who actually engage in policy implementation, are also insulated from the public.



Suppose a particular department is officially charged with the responsibility to implement a policy on, say, minerals and energy. Implicit in this system is the principle that the department has powers and competence regarding the policy to be implemented. Further, the institutional framework in place would be such that the department should also be accountable with regard to progress, challenges and even the rationale for the policy. These departmental responsibilities are undermined if the policy implementation is in reality usurped from the designated department by the central body (ie the Office of the Presidency). However, when it is time to be accountable regarding the policy, the actual policy implementers (in the Office of the Presidency) would not, as a matter of protocol, be the ones to respond to policy shortfalls, although they are effectively involved in the implementation. This shields the actual implementers from accountability and results in the situation where the officially designated department engages in evasive public relations manoeuvres, as the department lacks knowledge on the implementation of the policy it is officially charged with.

In the end, government ministers, who are supposed to be the connecting points between the executive branch of government and the public, seemingly exert less influence on policies to be implemented. This type of presidency, which Jacobs (1999) termed an 'Imperial Presidency', has deep implications for democracy. The case of South Africa shows that this type of presidency has a direct relationship with economic policies. The populist response to it appears to be a criticism of economic policies that impoverish the people and breed inequalities. It should be noted, however, that the implementation of unpopular market-friendly economic policies in developing nations, including South Africa, necessarily require, or coincide with, a clamp-down on open engagements around policy, as it will be argued in relation to Mbeki's presidency. This perceived shrinkage of democracy usually arouses a populist reaction.

The effects of centralisation on party politics

Populism as a concept defining a political project is essentially reactive (Canovan, 1999). That is to say, populism does not have a stand-alone life and, even more interesting, as the chapter will argue later, while it professes alternative politics, populism is not sustainable as alternative politics. This, however, does not mean that populism is conceptually hollow. If we follow the analogy that populism is a 'spectre' (Arditi, 2004) or a 'shadow' (Canovan, 1999) of democracy, it is still possible to conceptualise the conditions under which populism is invoked. Arditi (2004) argues by way of complementing Canovan's argument that populism is a spectre of democracy; perhaps a permanent spectre that becomes relevant and attractive whenever a democratic deficit seems to appear. In the case of South

Africa, as will be demonstrated, populist reaction emerges with the perceived centralisation or shrinkage of democracy. Let us turn to the question of how Mbeki's style is believed to have led to the shrinkage of democracy by undermining party politics in South Africa.

In order to put this question in context, it is essential to underscore the point that the rolling out of Mbeki's centralisation processes, or 'institutional alignment', is a precursor to the adoption and implementation of policies that may not survive meaningful scrutiny by voters or the ruling party itself. The extent of elitism and centralisation that characterise Mbeki's presidency seems to go against the fundamental principles of the electoral system in use in South Africa, namely the party list proportional representation (PLPR) system. With the PLPR system, citizens vote for the party, which then provides a list of candidates to occupy office. This implies that the president and cabinet would be accountable to the party through which they came into office. That the president has to be accountable to his or her party is not merely a matter of institutional formality. The fundamental principle of this system is that political parties will also serve as instruments of accountability. Hence it is not incorrect to demand, even from a non-partisan standpoint, that political parties should display some level of internal democracy in carrying out their activities. If a party has internal democracy and correctly follows rules and regulations that are stipulated in its constitution, such a party would most likely be in a position to ensure that individuals emerging within its ranks have the integrity and ability to carry out the mandate of the party at government level. In addition, officials who ascend to government on the party ticket are in principle reproachable by the party.

Mbeki's presidency has rather widened the gap between the party (the ANC) and his administration. As Jacobs (1999: 9) observes: 'The institutional losers in [Mbeki's] reorganisation are parliament and the African National Congress.' Jacobs further states, correctly, that: 'As the president builds the capacity of his executive office, so the ANC's capacity dwindles' (Jacobs, 1999: 9). Since the beginning of Mbeki's term of office, the ANC has progressively drifted away from the administration. While structures and protocols that serve to link the party with the president continue to be in place and obeyed (eg the party's National Executive Council), there has been progressive weakening of the linkage between the party (the ANC) and the Mbeki administration. On first impression, one may say that Mbeki has weakened the ANC as a party. At one level, this assertion is correct in the sense that the ANC's influence on policy direction has diminished under Mbeki. For example, individuals serving in Mbeki's executive seem not to be established persons within the ANC rank and file. The explanation could be that, once appointed to serve in cabinet, Mbeki's ministers seem to *naturally* relinquish their contact and influence with the party, leaving behind within the



party a vacuum that is filled by new cadres who become more conversant with party structures. This illustrates the so-called 'two centres of power' (*Business Day*, 2007), with the Mbeki administration on the one hand, and ANC cadres on the other.

The status of the ANC needs to be carefully ascertained in this configuration. The ANC has been weakened *only* in relation to the Mbeki administration. Thus, outside the Mbeki administration, the strength of the ANC has been fermenting despite Mbeki's orchestrated neglect of the party in relation to his administration. As a result of this, the ANC has been left open for any movement that seeks to counter Mbeki on the basis of his perceived centrist elitism, among other reasons. The culmination of events leading to infighting within the ANC about who should succeed Mbeki as president of the ANC, and subsequently of the country, highlighted the need for Mbeki to recapture the ANC.

As president, Mbeki conspicuously kept party structures (the party's branches) at arms length, but he has now come face to face with the reality that his successor as the president of the country will come in the form of the ANC president. And all it takes for someone to be put forward for the ANC president are nominations from the party branches. With discontent building at party level against Mbeki's economic policies and his perceived illiberal attitude towards open engagement on policy, ANC branches became a convenient seedbed to grow a populist campaign against everything Mbeki. The much talked about battle for the 'soul' of the ANC began here.

The economic and international context

The main concern that preoccupies observers is whether the end of Mbeki's second and final presidential term would mean continuity or shift, particularly in relation to economic policy and the approach to governance in post-apartheid South Africa. This concern goes beyond the ANC leadership problems and offers an opportunity for policy reflections after just over a decade of liberal macroeconomic policy in South Africa.

In order to appreciate the depth of the concern regarding policy options in South Africa, it is important to begin by developing a comprehensive understanding of Mbeki's presidency, looking at the centralisation of power in the Office of the Presidency as a starting point. Mbeki could easily be characterised as a hands-on president who co-ordinates all departments under his office. However, Mbeki's consolidation of government administration under a single office does not necessarily explain the president's plummeting popularity, and the mounting criticisms and apparent 'mutiny' from within the ANC. In quasi-socialist regimes—Hugo Chavez's Venezuela being an example at hand—consolidation or

centralisation of power under the president does not normally spark mutiny from within party ranks. In this type of scenario, discontent may arise from outside the party, but usually not from within the party.

One way to explain Mbeki's isolation in the ANC is in terms of his personality. Such an explanation may also explain the centralisation of power in the Office of the Presidency in terms of the leader's personal fascination or obsession with power, as some have attempted to characterise Mbeki. William Gumede's book, *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC* (2005), is largely an account of Mbeki's administration in a way that fuses personality and a leader's pragmatism. While Gumede's analysis is important in outlining Mbeki's 'Machiavellian' leadership style, excessive emphasis on Mbeki's personality does not offer an opportunity to pursue an insightful analysis of his leadership style. The conspiratorial analysis that ensues from this approach is not useful in understanding the Mbeki administration. Personality does affect the way in which individuals carry themselves in office. However, personality may only accentuate some of the institutional imperatives that a leader is confronted with. This is a rather more interesting way of assessing Mbeki's presidency than to pursue a personality analysis of the man.

Centralisation of power is a global trend and not strictly a South African problem. The leadership crisis that the ANC is apparently experiencing under Mbeki's presidency, both at party and government levels, is an expression of a global phenomenon of resentment against the substitute of democracy for technocracy. There is enough evidence pointing to situations where prime ministers or presidents have opted for policies that are perceived to be out of touch with their political parties, let alone their constituencies. In such circumstances, leaders usually find themselves in adverse positions in relation to the broader mandate of their parties. One such instance can be seen with the former British prime minister, Tony Blair, as Gumede correctly points out (Gumede, 2005: 64). Towards the end of his tenure as the British prime minister and the leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair's leadership became illustrative of the creation of a rift between the Labour Party and the prime minister, where the prime minister's policy choices are seen to be bordering on going against the party's mandate. Among some of the defeats that Blair suffered from his own backbenchers was the rejection of 'his' anti-terror bill by the Labour-controlled House of Commons. Subsequent calls by the Labour Party, which were confirmed by voters at the polls, for him to step down signalled that the prime minister had become a liability for his own party (BBC, 2005).

In newly established democracies, the rift between the administration and the party usually coincides with the adoption of market-friendly economic reforms, because the implementation of such policies requires some level of technocracy and centralisation. Socialist regimes, on the other hand, are generally centrally



co-ordinated. Since centralisation of power has always been associated with socialist and communist regimes, the relationship between centralisation and market-based economic policies has not been fully explored. This relationship can be unpacked in the context of Mbeki's administration. The ANC leadership crisis is connected to, and partially arises from, the perception that Mbeki's administration has diverted from the ANC as a ruling party. For Mbeki's administration to be able to implement market-friendly economic policies, the administration has to be insulated from open engagement with the ANC and subsequently from the general public. The complexity of the influence of economic policy on leadership style, and vice versa, is a permanent dilemma of modern society.

The system essentially undermines democratic practices of accountability as the executive branch of government overwhelms the entire government and also the political party. Populism in this scenario, as it seems to be in the case of South Africa towards the end of Mbeki's second term as president, comes as a demand for expansion and reinstatement of democracy. In other words, the populist resurgence becomes a demand for a more responsive form of government. This populist demand is similar in most developing nations: it usually manifests itself as a struggle against growing poverty and rising inequalities, the latter associated with market-based economic policies. Growing poverty and inequalities in South Africa are *conveniently* blamed on Mbeki's out of touch, elitist approach to governance. This explains why democracy as a form of government usually comes under strain in developing countries. The argument for the extension of democracy is ironically invoked to undermine democracy. The next section examines how this plays out in the context of the ANC leadership crisis.

Democracy and institutional stability in developing nations

In developing nations, characterised by ever growing poverty amid experimentation with market reforms, reactions to the leadership's diversion from the party mandate pose a threat to institutional stability, as we see in reactions towards Mbeki. Similar reactions to the very same problem of growing technocratic and market-friendly leadership styles can be seen in some Latin American countries. In Latin America, such reactions have resulted in the emergence of *alternative* leaders, such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and López Obrador in Mexico, among others. The central question emerges: why do developing countries react particularly in this manner; ie by seeking to overturn the institutions of democracy and radically change the administrative style? To reverse the question, why does elitism (or centralisation of power, as was the case under Tony Blair) pose a lesser threat to democratic institutions in Western democracies? The

answer to this question has to do with the impact of centralisation and elitism on poor societies, perceived or real.

What explains the developing countries' radical reactions to a technocratic style of leadership and market-friendly policies is that such policies are seen to exacerbate poverty and inequalities in the developing world. As far as Western countries are concerned, excessive technocracy and centralisation seems to be taken to denote a philosophical position on how governance ought to occur. This is not to imply that Western countries are less concerned about the possible decline of democracy under highly technocratic governments and the excessive implementation of market-friendly economic policies. Democratic institutions in post-industrial Western societies—where the economy is able to distribute income to citizens—are usually under less strain. In this situation, most differences that occur revolve around cultural issues, eg fox hunting in the United Kingdom is higher up on Maslow's hierarchy than basic necessities such as food and shelter. In the United Kingdom, the Iraq war, for example, was not a bread and butter issue, nor even a security issue. It was arguably about national self-image and Britain's special relationship with the United States. Life for most in the United Kingdom goes on whoever wins or loses these debates. Therefore, the kinds of criticisms that governments in Western societies are subjected do not deal with issues that relate to the survival of a country's citizens. Hence, such criticisms do not usually escalate into calls for a radical shift in government or systemic change that could result in the overturning of democratic institutions. Unlike Western societies, developing nations do not enjoy the privilege of resolvable or 'distant' debates that the electorate can 'live' with. Economic despair in developing nations is so rife that almost every quarrel with government can be interpreted as having a bearing on the survival of a country's citizens, and hence can be mobilised to merit radical shifts in terms of the approach to governance.

In developing nations such as South Africa, this problem seems to create a space for the growth of populism that defines itself against globalisation, against continued dependency on the West and against the shrinking of the public sphere. The emergence of Jacob Zuma as a possible successor and, most importantly, an *alternative* to Mbeki attest Mbeki's policy shortfalls such as a non-consultative pattern of policy implementation, the centralisation of administration, the undermining of party politics and the adoption of market-based policies. All this seems to create a space for the populist bid in South Africa. Jacob Zuma as a person has little to do with the space that his political project seems to occupy. If Zuma did not exist, the leftist populist movement in South Africa would have invented him.

In outlining the link between populism and policy shortfall in South Africa, it is imperative to look at Mbeki's rapid modernising package both within the ruling ANC and within state institutions. The chapter will argue that Mbeki's



modernisation package has alienated both the ruling ANC and the general public in South Africa. The aim here is to draw a connection between Mbeki's centralisation of power in government and his botched attempts to do the same within the ANC, as we see with the failure to remove power from party branches in the 2005 ANC National General Council (NGC) meeting held in Pretoria.

The administration versus the party

Given Mbeki's macroeconomic policies, it is perhaps understandable that his administration has increasingly been estranged from the other Tripartite Alliance members, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The cracks in the relationship between Mbeki's administration and the third leg of the Alliance, the ANC itself, needs further exploration. These cracks appeared towards the build-up to the ANC's NGC meeting, held in Pretoria on 29 June–3 July 2005.

The Pretoria NGC was preceded by the dismissal of Jacob Zuma as deputy president of South Africa, following the conviction in the Durban High Court of Zuma's financial advisor, Schabir Shaik. Shaik was found guilty of corruption related to South Africa's controversial strategic defence package (or 'arms deal', as the media referred to it). As a result of Shaik's conviction—and the apparent or implicit involvement of the then deputy president, Zuma, in the matter—Mbeki moved to 'release' Zuma on 14 June 2005. Zuma was subsequently charged with counts of corruption, but the case against him was struck off the roll.² The timing of Mbeki's dismissal of Zuma was significant. It occurred on the eve of the G8 summit, where Mbeki appeared before the international community and global capital as one of the resolute African leaders, eager to address stereotypical views of bad governance and corruption in Africa.

Triggered by the Zuma affair, the ANC NGC held in Pretoria was indicative of the struggle for control of the party. As the Pretoria conference progressed, it became evident that Mbeki was not fully in tune with the ANC, particularly the 'basic unit' of the party, the branches. Instead of refraining from discussing Zuma's dismissal from government, pending the outcome of the corruption trial against him, the Pretoria NGC engaged in heated debate on the matter. Subsequently it reinstated Zuma, allowing him to participate in ANC activities despite corruption charges pending against him. The NGC's decision to reinstate Zuma to participate in ANC activities defied a decision made earlier by the party's National Working Committee (NWC), which accepted Zuma's offer to withdraw from party activities since he was charged with corruption. Whereas

² Zuma was recharged a short time after he was elected ANC president in December 2007.

the NWC is largely constituted by individuals serving in the Mbeki cabinet, the NGC is a forum that comprises delegates from the ANC branches. Here, a widely representative body (the NGC) stood against the ANC's top structure (the NWC).

The Zuma debacle has successfully set the stage for rebellion within the ANC and also opened an opportunity for discussions about deep-seated contradictions that have accumulated over the years within the ANC. A closer reading of the party's 'Organisational report' (ANC, 2005a) presented at the Pretoria meeting of the NGC indicates without doubt that the Pretoria conference commenced against the background of an atmosphere of mistrust between government officials and ANC structures, particularly ANC provincial branches. At the core of the matter is how the ANC ought to relate to its cadres serving in government, and vice versa. Further, the atmosphere also reflects struggling ANC branches thrown into disarray by 'divisions', power struggles and attempts to monopolise the control of party structures.

The 'Organisational report' (ANC, 2005a) notes that: 'this division within the ANC and the parallelism that exists between the ANC and government means that the [Tripartite] Alliance cannot be effectively consulted regarding matters of governance.' Poor co-ordination and diminishing consultation between different levels at which ANC cadres exist—in government, in the NWC, in ANC provincial branches and in provincial government—reflects one of the main challenges the party has been confronted with since it assumed office as the leader of the democratic project in South Africa. This poses a major problem, as the party requires all its structures and all members serving at different levels within the party and within government to be in tune with one another in order to properly elect its leadership. The issue of leadership comes to the fore here since it is traditionally through party provincial branches that the nomination for the party's leadership is supposed to take place.

One need not exaggerate Zuma's role in the contradictions that have surfaced in the ANC. Zuma's tenure as deputy president of South Africa was quite underwhelming. Mbeki charged him with obscure responsibilities such as driving the country's 'moral regeneration'. Before he was dismissed as deputy president, Zuma never sent out signals that he aimed to be considered as the natural successor to Mbeki. As is the case under the Mbeki presidency, even after Zuma's dismissal, the office of the deputy president is usurped by that of the presidency. The charismatic Jacob Zuma never raised any objections regarding his not being given any concrete responsibility in Mbeki's cabinet. The 'Zuma issue', though, set the stage for what has been brewing in the ANC since the party came to power. Although some of the defeats that Mbeki suffered in the Pretoria NGC had remote connections with the Jacob Zuma affair, they arose largely



due to the 'mutiny' environment created in the aftermath of Zuma's dismissal. For instance, there has always been a concern about Mbeki's power to appoint premiers and executive mayors of metropolitan municipalities. This problem has driven a wedge between ANC provincial structures and the provincial governments. Mbeki uses his executive powers to appoint premiers to serve as heads of provincial governments. It is believed that in appointing provincial heads, Mbeki has deliberately overlooked individuals who are well invested in respective ANC provincial structures in favour of his own subordinates.

Unlike being an issue merely raised by observers outside the ANC, the perceived concentration of power in Mbeki's hands has become an issue within the ANC. The 'Organisational report' (ANC, 2005a) notes further, although not explicitly, that officials appointed as government leaders at provincial level need to recognise and work together with ANC structures, particularly party provincial chairpersons. This is an acknowledgement that the relationship between the ANC provincial chairpersons and premiers has deteriorated sharply during Mbeki's presidency.

Perhaps Mbeki's tendency to appoint to his administration individuals who do not enjoy popular support within the party should be seen as a non-partisan commitment to a functional government; a way to circumvent narrow party politics in the interests of nation-building and democracy. If that is the case, it then reveals even more problems within the ANC, namely that the party may not be in a position to offer viable leadership. This conclusion is, however, improbable, given the fact that some of the individuals who have been appointed by the president as provincial premiers have not been remarkable or outstanding in their performance vis-à-vis the integrity and even capacity of ANC provincial chairpersons. Therefore, there is no apparent proof that the ANC structures are indeed incapable of providing a viable leadership. Mbeki's neglect of party preferences in terms of leadership has unnecessarily widened the gap between the party's leaders and government. The 'Organisational report' (2005a) and other 'discussion documents' released by the ANC during and after the Pretoria NGC show desperate attempts to recapture the lost (provincial) structures of the party.

The last-ditch attempt to circumvent the 'unruly' provincial branches came through a proposal to establish a permanent election committee within the ANC. In one of the discussion documents tabled at the Pretoria NGC, attempts were made to 'reform [ANC] election and selection processes' (ANC, 2005b). It was charged that ANC branches 'as presently established are not in a position to reach and mobilise all the motive forces'. As a result of this weakness, the document proposed that the party conference (NGC) should elect a 'permanent Electoral Commission, which takes charge of the election process in the run up to and including election processes'. The success of this proposal would mean the creation



of a structure whose powers involve appointing party leadership both at provincial and national levels. This would change the leadership contest—currently located within branches at provinces—from the traditional popular lobbying model to a technocratic and ‘efficient’ way of electing and selecting party leadership (IDASA, 2005).

Here again, it was apparent that the authors of this ‘renewal’ proposal had lost faith in the ability of the ANC structures to bring about a desirable leadership. While the document proposed to allow branches to continue to provide nomination lists, the proposal noted that the permanent structure to be created (ie election committee) would be ‘accorded the right to correct deviations’ in terms of nominations to the leadership. The proposal was rejected by the NGC in Pretoria, and the leadership election processes were left to the provinces and branches. Mbeki was defeated.

All this demonstrates that Mbeki’s neglect of the ANC is coming back to haunt his presidency. His attempt to ensure that his legacy prevails—by securing the succession of a leader that would not pose an alternative to his leadership style—has recently become a more pressing concern for the president. Of course, some of the issues that have been raised about the integrity of the leadership that South Africa deserves have merits. The relationship between business and ANC officials serving in government is an issue that requires the party to engage in introspection in order to recapture its priorities in steering the democratic project. However, these issues should have been raised within the party long before the emergence of the leadership debacle that the ANC is currently struggling with. Failure to raise these issues proactively has exposed the party to criticisms that its leadership style—as seen in the Mbeki administration—has not been sufficiently in the interests of the poor. It is during the course of the Mbeki administration that the ideological position of the ANC has become problematic as the president focused on the ambiguous notion of driving the ‘developmental state’ while pursuing economic policies that are not perceived to be poor-friendly.

The search for an ideology within the ANC: Policy contradictions

The ANC leadership tussle has also revealed the need for the party to engage in broader debates as to its priorities and who its chief constituencies are. Since the collapse of apartheid, the ANC has generally characterised itself as the leader of the ‘progressive movement’. The party’s election manifestos show the juxtaposition of the need for socioeconomic transformation and the need to drive the country to global competitiveness. In reality, the biggest part of transformation seems to have been achieved in creating the black bourgeoisie. And some of the projects



that have been piloted and sold to the public hardly have any connections with the reality of the Third World sector that the majority of poor South Africans find themselves in. To paraphrase Sampie Terreblanche, the ANC's transformation project—relying heavily on the 'myth of the first world society'—is out of touch with the larger Third World sector in the country (Terreblanche, 2002: 60). This explains why the ANC has been unable to identify itself ideologically; that would reveal policy contradictions. That the party's priorities and its constituency are the poor and the working class is a position that is wearing thin, considering the basic tenets of the economic policies in place. As stated in the ANC document, 'Contextual consideration in addressing challenges of leadership', authored by Ntshitenzhe, Godongwana & Nkomfe (2006: 25):

The ANC should clearly define its ideological relationship with the working class. An amorphous expression of leaning towards workers and reference to pro-poor government policies is not enough: there should be clarity in more positive terms about the kind of society (and indeed the kind of economy or even capitalism) we seek to create.

The debate about the ideological position of the movement led by the ANC can only happen within the party and it would ideally involve the other Tripartite Alliance partners (COSATU and the SACP). That has not happened, at least since the adoption of the liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic policy programme in 1996. The adoption and sustained implementation of GEAR marked the rift between the Mbeki administration, and the ANC and its Tripartite Alliance partners.

The complexity of the shift towards the market-oriented GEAR policy is well-captured by Terreblanche. He argues that the adoption of GEAR, as a substitute for the distribution-based Reconstruction and Development Programme, is an implementation of the elite compromise that was arrived at during negotiations for a democratic regime in the country. Terreblanche (2002: 98) writes: 'This elite compromise should be regarded as one of the most decisive ideological turning points in the ANC's approach to economic issues.'

One may take a step back and temporarily remove the ANC, as a political party, from the 'compromise' picture. Thus, despite its elitist component, the ANC as a party should in theory contest the uncritical adoption of a policy that seems to be a long way from the realisation of the principles of the Freedom Charter, supposedly the guiding framework for what the party is about. In other words, one could conclude that a fully functional and well-consulted ANC would adopt a critical attitude towards the implementation of policies such as GEAR, not on philosophical grounds, but on the grounds of its inability to bridge the prevailing



poverty gap. It is from this point of view that it makes sense for Mbeki to build an administration that is distanced from the party.

On face value, as already stated, it is tempting to celebrate the achievement of building an administration that is totally independent and unaccountable to the party in a proportional representation system. As we have seen in Africa, failure to distinguish the party from the government may lead to corruption and the abuse of state resources. An obvious example of this is Kenya under Daniel Arap Moi's leadership. In this case, when Moi's party (the Kenya African National Union) lost power in 2002, the party realised that it had lost office because it had been using government offices and resources to carry out party activities. This makes a strong case for a complete separation of government from ruling party. However, taking into consideration that it is through the party's manifesto that voters have put the administration in office in the first place, through the party list system, to whom then is the president and his/her executive ministers accountable when they transgress with regard to the fundamental programme and principles tabled in the party manifesto?

Parliament is indeed the rightful institution to ensure the accountability of the executive. However, parliament has no power or mandate to question the ideological orientation of policies. This can only be accomplished within the party, where the election manifesto originates. In an ideal world, the president may be removed from office by the party in case of an outright violation of the basic principles of the manifesto. This is where the democratic practice of oversight and accountability should begin: within the party. In a proportional representation electoral system (where the party provides the list of representatives to assume office) there are no primaries where party members directly elect candidates to contest elections or seats in parliament. Adding to this are the implications of South Africa's closed list system, where officials who are to occupy office are selected through an internal party mechanism. This fundamental principle of the proportional representation system notably does not provide a direct accountability mechanism that links office bearers and voters. In a sense, voters do not have (direct) recourse with regard to officials whose conduct or policies are seen to violate the principles and values of the party.

It is this principle of the proportional representation system that has attracted criticism, sparking calls for a shift towards the presidential/constituency system. The latter is believed to be direct and more democratic. However, it should be noted in relation to the proportional electoral system that, in principle, an internal democratic process has to take place before a leader can make it to the top of the party list. This process, if correctly followed, showcases democracy at work, as leaders have to earn respect and support through their work in and dedication to the party. Those who are concerned about the type of leadership that emerges



through the party may join the party and influence the processes. According to the tradition of the ANC, leaders should receive sufficient support among branches and the various structures of the party in order for them to make it to the top. Again, it is out of the realisation of the importance of this principle that even non-members of the ANC often call for internal democracy within the party to ensure that the system in place works optimally to provide desirable leadership. Of course, the system is not flawless: it may be subjected to opportunism. However, any attempts to circumvent the system either by weakening the party structures or by relocating the power to elect the leadership from the party to a select few would ultimately defeat the purpose of the system.

Mbeki's two terms as president have weakened the party and left it vulnerable to populism. However, neglecting the party and also circumventing the Tripartite Alliance do not pose sufficient grounds to give rise to the type of populism that the country has seen in the wake of the Zuma affair. Rather, the situation was aggravated by the impact of the economic policies that the Mbeki administration has been seen to implement: rapid market reforms taking place alongside high levels of unemployment.

In the end, the very fear of 'macroeconomic populism' that the Mbeki administration has guarded against has gained ground because of the poverty and widened inequality that have continued during the experimentation with market policies. The extent of the poverty and constricted socioeconomic transformation that has been recorded in South Africa offers political leverage for an alternative leadership based on macroeconomic populism. A quick look at the Latin American experience offers a better insight as we attempt to grapple with what is happening in South Africa just over a decade since the inauguration of democracy.

Democracy is difficult to sustain in Third World countries. This, however, has little to do with the conceived cultural variation of Third World countries that is believed to be unsupportive of the openness that sustains democracy. Rather, the concept (of democracy) is often bundled with specific economic packages, namely market-oriented economic policies. South Africa's transition to democracy has followed a similar pattern, being categorised as a successful Third Wave democratisation. By subordinating democracy to market-friendly economic policies, the failure of such policies to provide for the basic needs of huge numbers of people translates into the failure of democracy to bring about social justice. Hence, developing nations have often been seen to forsake (liberal) democracy in the interest of pursuing the system that aims to fulfil the basic needs of societies. It is therefore the shortfalls of market policies that threaten democracy and institutional development in Third World countries. The populist resurgence in developing countries becomes a tangle response to this problem.

While South Africa is new to the populism phenomenon, a closer examina-

tion of Latin American countries shows that what is being experienced in South Africa—the emergence of a populist challenge to authority, as we see with the Zuma resurgence—is by no means a surprise turn of events. As the earlier sections of the chapter attempted to explain, the stage has been set for this to occur.

Labelled primordial, backward and subversive, populism has largely defined Latin American politics. Latin American countries, such as Venezuela (under Hugo Chavez), Argentina (under Nstor Kirchner) and Bolivia (under Evo Morales) have recently experienced the emergence of populist leadership as a move to ‘take back’ the state. Brazil, under Lula da Silva’s leadership, has been able to pursue macroeconomic pragmatism while pursuing worker-friendly and poor-friendly economic packages. What brings all these countries together is their discontent with market reforms inspired by the Washington consensus and the type of centrist leadership emerging from such reforms. Some of the populist leaders have been referred to as ‘skillful and irresponsible’ (Castaneda, 2006: 3); however, they have become influential because of democracy’s own shortfalls.

The leftist populist movement of Latin America is both difficult and simple to explain. It is difficult in the sense that its contents—thus, what it proposes to put forward in terms of substance—is a moving target that is difficult to discern. Populist leaders tend to emphasise their leftist heritage, while—depending on the country—also drawing on their rural connections. Latin American populism has thrived on the notion of ‘direct democracy’ and the need to uproot poverty (Canovan, 1999: 2). Populism centres its political project on the massive distribution of resources. Further, populism focuses much more on regional politics and has less room for internationalism. However, Latin American populism has tried to influence other developing nations not to enter into what is perceived as a subordinate relationship with Western powers. This has been attempted from a non-aligned position when it comes to foreign affairs. Populism is fluid, and to understand it, one has to appreciate its ‘genius of improvisation’ (Athey, 1984: 175).

The simple and most uncomfortable characteristic of populism is that it usually has a clear target. Populism, argues Canovan (1999), finds its expression in the heart of democracy. Its existence is usually preceded by the shrinkage of democracy in the process of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. Populism preys on democracy’s weaknesses, the weaknesses that are endemic to the functioning of democracy. For democracy to function, there needs to be delegation to a form of bureaucracy and technocracy, as we have seen with the Mbeki administration in South Africa. Even liberals in the economic sense, who believe in a ‘free market’ void of government interference, would acknowledge that the free market does not come about by itself. It needs a complex set of bureaucratic and legal artifices backed up by state power, and therefore the promotion of the free market goes



hand in glove with the expansion of government (Gray, 2007: 43). The problem lies with the extent of delegation and its impact on the citizenry. Delegation simply alienates. Through its mass mobilisation, populism resuscitates citizens' involvement. Populism targets the weakness of democracy, namely over-bureaucratisation.

Populism is not simply a dangerous manipulation of the masses, as is often believed. Rather, populism brings democracy to task. The political behaviour that has been recently experienced in South Africa in relation to the Jacob Zuma affair is indicative of a populist resurgence and is not the work of the aimless manipulation of the masses. What is interesting about populism is not the personal figures behind the phenomenon, but the political space within which political behaviour seems to express itself. In that sense, the space in which the Jacob Zuma affair continues to unfold is not inconceivable. The past 10 years have created a space for a populist movement in South Africa in more or less the same way that these movements continue to occur in Latin American countries.

Conclusion

There is no need to jump to the hasty conclusion that South Africa is about to experience an about turn in terms of leadership style. The country may not radically shift from a technocratic approach to a direct form of democracy. Direct democracy is unsustainable, too chaotic and not suitable for policy implementation. The recent events in South Africa, however, have elevated criticism of a centrist approach to public discourse. Even those who are targeted by the populist movement (the perceived centrists) have launched a counter-movement based on populist sentiments as well. Mbeki's crusade about 'family values', 'integrity' and 'modesty' in leadership, as stated in the Presidency's *A Nation in the Making* (Presidency, 2006), and even his appropriation of socialist language like 'the collective' could not be more populist. This shows how populism will continue to play a major role in Third World politics. That Mbeki's economic policies do not say anything about modesty and family values is a contradiction that shows how forceful populism can be.

The last point that needs to be made relates to populism and its perceived threat to institutional stability. In South Africa, the recent resurgence of populism has been seen as a threat to the gains of democracy that have been achieved in the last decade. This is a quintessentially Third World analysis, where attempts to question the extent to which democratic institutions deliver basic goods are automatically seen as a threat to democracy. To put the issue differently, why is the populist bid in Western democracies not seen as a threat to democratic institutions too? In the United States, a rightist type of populism based on issues

such as 'family values', anti-abortion and the denial of civil rights unions is played out by the American Evangelical movement. Arguably, this type of populism shows more deviations from modern (enlightenment) democratic thinking than the leftist populist agenda, which usually calls for social justice. These questions need to be further investigated before judgment can be passed on whether populism is really bad for democratic institutions. In Third World countries, politics is not separable from survival economics; the two reinforce each other. It can therefore be concluded that populism in developing countries is not necessarily a threat to democracy; it is rather a wake-up call, as Canovan (1999) and Laclau (1977) have respectively argued. Experience has taught us that populism is not a pre-democratic state, but an interpellation on democracy.

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