

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

Proceedings of the 39th African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP) Annual Conference, 5-7 December 2016, The University of Western Australia.

(June 2017) ISBN: 978-0- 9942689-2-1

The ANC and Capital: Aspirations to Hegemony

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a worldwide crisis of confidence in economic systems, elected leaders and state structures. This is especially acute in South Africa where confidence in the African National Congress (ANC) has been fatally undercut by corruption scandals, economic stagnation, and state failure. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (NUMSA) departure from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and ongoing attempt to create a United Front opposed to the government presents a new challenge to the ANC by an independent union. A Gramscian view of this situation understands these organisations as counter-hegemonic movements emerging organically from the articulation of subaltern class-consciousness. This paper contends that the ANC is operating an unstable hegemonic project through the vehicle of the South African state. However, bias toward key blocs of capital in economic policy, incompatible with the needs of the population at large, has made it increasingly untenable. Despite this "organic crisis" the ideology of neoliberalism underwriting this hegemonic project has deeply penetrated common sense understandings. This paper is a work-in-progress; research is still being undertaken and interviews are undergoing further analysis.

Introduction

South Africa exists on the periphery of the capitalist world system, as a supplier of minerals, precious metals and cheap labour. The extraction of surplus value from regional to urban centres, and onwards to industrialised countries, has been a feature of the South African economy since colonialism. This system of cheap labour was intensified under Apartheid and has been deepened by neoliberal policy prescriptions in the post-independence period (Koelble 2004). The African National Congress (ANC) proactively supports this through labour laws that promote greater labour flexibility, segmentation and informalisation, and the externalisation of labour contracts (Barchiesi 2003). This has resulted in a cheap, informalised, mostly black labour force, and a white dominated professional white-collar and managerial strata (Statistics South Africa 2014, p. 3). Further, despite the stated intentions of equality and integration, the inequities of urban development have been reinforced by the overwhelmingly black working class still living in Apartheid ghettos spatially excluded from predominantly white suburbs (Bond 2010).

ANC economic policies have generated sluggish, uneven economic growth punctuated by currency devaluations. This has resulted in increased income inequalities, falling wages, growing unemployment, increased utilities costs and much higher non-payment rates and disconnection levels (UNDP 2003; Bond 2010). Although the official unemployment rate hovers at around 25 percent, the real unemployment rate is closer to 35 percent (Statistics South Africa 2014, p. 10). The corresponding increase in inequality has bolstered public dissatisfaction with the ANC, evident in the ANC's loss of Pretoria and Johannesburg in the 2016 municipal elections. Public disaffection was further exacerbated by the failure of the

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South African state to provide reliable basic services such as water, electricity, and waste disposal. This has resulted in a sharp upsurge of popular protest since the mid-2000s, especially acute in the most affected areas: The Eastern Cape and Gauteng province. Strikes also escalated throughout this period, growing from 57 recorded incidents in 2008 to 99 in 2012 (Murwirapachena & Sibanda 2014, p. 553). Police responses have become increasingly heavy handed; the use of live rounds, dogs, high pressure hoses, and pepper spray is common. Between 1999 and 2012, 200 striking South Africans were killed, 313 injured, and over 3,058 arrested (ibid.).

These events culminated in the 2012 Marikana massacre during which the South African Police Force killed 34 striking mineworkers and injured 112 others at the Lonmin Platinum Mine (Lonmin) in Marikana (Alexander 2013, p. 605). As the first massacre of workers since Apartheid, it marked an all-time low in relations between workers and unions, and unions and the ANC. In the wake of this tragedy, South Africa's labour force began to look askance at their own pay and pressed for higher wages. A worker revolt continued well into 2013, inspiring a number of wildcat strikes demanding much higher wages than their unions had negotiated months earlier (Bond 2014, p. 13). The clear conflict of interest between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and Lonmin led to the formation of the apolitical mineworkers' union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). In the wake of this workers' revolt the ANC became increasingly hostile, proposing bills that, if enacted, would clamp down on media freedom and access to justice. Meanwhile, the South African Police Force continued to employ excessive violence, killing four people in Mothutlung during a peaceful protest over the lack of water (Bond 2014, p. 5).

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)

One of the most significant developments during this period was the rejection by COSATU affiliate NUMSA of the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance, and its commitment to establishing a United Front. The Alliance is comprised of COSATU, the ANC, and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Formed in 1987, the Marxist-Leninist union, NUMSA, has long been seen as the most radical affiliate of COSATU. It is a hard-line workerist union committed to the 'independent political interests of the working class' (Ruiters 2014, p. 430). With over 365,000 members, NUMSA is notable for its vocal opposition to neoliberal economic policies such as privatisation and liberalisation. As such, NUMSA has long been critical of union involvement in the ANC-led Alliance, sponsoring a resolution in 1993 that COSATU should not have a formal alliance with the ANC. Instead, NUMSA espoused forging alliances with 'progressive community and political organisations', and looking at 'new forms of organisation that will unify the working class' (Ruiters 2014, p. 430). Although this idea was attacked by the SACP and ultimately rejected at the 1994 COSATU conference, it continued to circulate within the union (Gall 1997).

The suspension of left-leaning COSATU general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, on the 14th of August, 2013, provoked the ire of NUMSA and sympathetic leftist groups already discontent with the ANC. The subsequent massacre of mineworkers led NUMSA to adopt unprecedented positions which harkened back to its 1993 resolution. Citing the ANC's failure to address the needs of the working-class poor, NUMSA committed itself

to the establishment of a political organisation committed to the interests of the working class (NUMSA, 2014). Together with nine other unions, NUMSA resolved to create a United Front

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bringing together social movements and community organisations in a similar vein to the United Democratic Front (UDF) of the 1980s. Additionally, it demanded COSATU break away from the ruling Tripartite Alliance and withdrew support for the ANC in the run up to the 2014 general elections (Ruiters 2014). This resulted in a gain of 38,000 members in 2013 whilst other unions, notably NUM, faced precipitous decline (Ruiters 2014, p. 430).

The response from the ANC-led Alliance was swift and brutal. The SACP branded NUMSA a class traitor, whilst COSATU suspended and attempted to expel NUMSA and Vavi. In late 2014, NUMSA was summarily expelled from COSATU in violation of its own charter constitution. The new Liberated Metalworkers' Union of South Africa (LIMUSA) was ushered in as a replacement in early 2015 (Mail & Guardian 2014). Meanwhile, NUMSA expanded the scope of its operations beyond metalworkers and aligned itself with nine other unions and numerous civil society organisations. These unions have been playing a strident role in helping lead and coordinate protests by various groups, committees and civics surfacing throughout SA, including the ongoing student fees protests (Ruiters 2014, p. 431).

Theoretical Framework

This paper situates NUMSA's actions in the broader context of counter-hegemonic struggle. As such, it employs the Gramscian concepts of "hegemony", "organic crisis", "organic intellectuals" and "common sense" to understand social and political struggle in South Africa. In Gramscian terms, the faltering ability of the ANC to co-opt or contain counter-hegemonic struggles suggests that the ANC's attempted hegemonic project is in crisis. Hegemony refers to the power inflation that accrues to a leading group as a result of its ability to convince subaltern groups that the former are bearers of a general interest (Arrighi 2005, p. 32) This is deeply interconnected with the Gramscian conception of 'common sense', for only through penetrating and reorienting common sense can a leading group establish hegemony (Dufour 2008). The collapse of Apartheid required the reconfiguration of the ruling bloc and the creation of a new racially inclusive national consensus. Although racially excluded subaltern classes were integrated into the leading group, white South African capital and wealthy Afrikaners forged a new national consensus in which they still played a leading role. As a result, the new dispensation was overwhelmingly biased towards the interests of 'financial capital and conglomerates anchored in the minerals-energy complex' (Marais 2011, p. 395). This bias took the form of active state support for international expansion, fiscally conservative monetary policies, and policies of economic liberalisation and privatisation.

The capture of the ANC by key blocs of capital was ideological and material, with the ANC profiting from its new economic trajectory, and creating a system of patronage and corruption. This new consensus took for granted key neoliberal precepts including the assumptions that market liberalisation, positive monetary policy and privatisation were key drivers of economic growth (Ngwane 2007). However, the building blocks of hegemony in South Africa remain eclectic and contradictory. They include elements such as: profound criticism of the Apartheid system; recognition that the ANC 'channels and embodies the values and aspirations of liberation'; a liberal political system; consensus that economic growth is in everybody's best interests and that the pursuit of

growth is best facilitated by a relatively free market; the need for a (temporary) welfare system, and; belief that dependency on the state ought to be avoided (Marais 2011, p. 395). These contradictions constitute the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), whose principal

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aim is the political and economic emancipation of black South Africans.

This hegemonic project is highly elastic, tempering its neoliberal policies with state interventions such as the provision of state housing, public-works programs, and social grants. Furthermore, race and ethnicity are employed to project internal deficiencies onto external blame groups, resulting in sporadic outbreaks of xenophobic violence. The ANC invests itself with great moral weight by evoking the symbols and concepts surrounding the national liberation struggle to undermine counter-hegemonic projects (Darracq 2008, p. 602). However, the contradictions between the requirements of capital and the needs of the population have increasingly undermined the ANC's ability to foster consent. The ANC attempted to bridge the gap between the governed and the governing by replacing Mbeki with Zuma, framing the 'reconfiguration of elite dominance' within the discourse of the 'National Democratic Revolution' (Marais 2011, p. 405). While initially successful, this attempt has proved short-lived, with the latter's presidency plagued by a series of corruption scandals.

Methodological Framework

Just as hegemony is embedded within the norms, social practices and ideology developed within a specific regional and national context, so too is meaning. This study is interested in this historical and cultural bedrock. It employs an interpretative methodological paradigm using qualitative methods to examine the hegemony of, and resistance to, the ANC hegemonic project. Fifteen interviews of "organic" intellectuals and a comprehensive analysis of texts such as newspapers, government communiqués, journal articles, books, and interview transcripts, were conducted. This combination is useful in determining the validity of information and illuminating alternative interpretations of events.

Analysis of academic texts is supported by a historically informed textual analysis of official ANC communiqués available to the general public, newspaper clippings, and other texts pertaining to ANC economic theory, and domestic and foreign policy. These texts are treated as both important sources of information about the ANC and South Africa and are analysed to determine the extent of embedded neoliberal logics. Newspapers chosen for this study include: The Citizen; The Sowetan; the New Age; The Star; The Times; Sunday Times; Mail & Guardian; Cape Times; The Independent, and; Business Day.

Interviewees were contacted based on the researcher's familiarity with their body of work in criticising the ANC and neoliberalism, and/or their relationship with NUMSA and affiliated unions. This constituted their credentials as "organic" intellectuals. Interviews were conducted in an appropriate professional space, recorded and transcribed, and a copy will be sent to the subjects for vetting. Interview subjects were audio recorded, asked four questions followed by a series of prompts, and asked whether or not they wish to be de-identified. These interviews were conducted in English for clarity of expression and ease of transcription, and were thirty to sixty minutes in duration.

I have adopted a five-stage approach for the analysis of interview transcripts, including: (1) 'careful read-through and note-taking'; (2) extracting 'notable quotes'; (3) 'coding/finding the themes'; (4) 'selecting the themes you are going to focus on', and; (5) 'interpreting and writing up the interview data' (Morris 2015, p. 126-133). This approach is rooted in what Glaser and Strauss (1967) labelled the 'constant comparison method'. This involves 'searching for similarities and differences by making systemic comparisons across units of

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data'. Latent meanings of the interview transcripts are emphasised in an attempt to get at the 'common sense' understandings of interviewees.

Research Findings

"Organic" intellectuals occupy a pivotal role in Gramscian thought as the 'thinking and organisational' component of a fundamental social class essential in contesting hegemony (Gramsci 2014, p. 6). "Organic" intellectuals perform the function of organising subaltern classes through the formation of a coherent counter-hegemonic ideology. Analysing how South African intellectuals understand NUMSA and the ANC alliance is crucial to understanding the extent to which the ANC neoliberal project is hegemonic. Of the fourteen analysed interviews of organic intellectuals, two rejected the notion that the ANC is hegemonic, three claimed that the ANC was hegemonic at a certain level, and four claimed that it is hegemonic. However, interviewees generally agreed that ANC economic policy is to some extent neoliberal, with several maintaining that neoliberal doctrine was hegemonic and others noting ANC involvement in a 'class project'. Generally, interviewees were critical of the ANC state with numerous seeing its policies as intended to enrich a small minority at the expense of the majority. Although it is clear that the ANC sees itself as hegemonic and is seen as aspiring to hegemony, the literature on the ANC characterises the hegemonic project as unstable and faltering. This is borne out of its spasmodic capacity to foster consent and social cohesion among subaltern classes through state activities (Marais 2011, p. 397).

Gramsci placed emphasis on the 'counting of votes' as a measure of the 'expansive and persuasive capacity' of the ideas and opinions of the leading group (Gramsci 2014, p. 192-193). As such, I conducted a review of the 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 national and provincial elections and the 1996, 2000, 2006, 2011 and 2016 municipal elections, to discern any noticeable trends. The review revealed that the ANC successfully forged a new national consensus in the post-apartheid period, but entered a period of organic crisis from 2006 onwards, manifest in declining voter turnout and falling popular support. According to the Electoral Commission of South Africa, the ANC enjoyed widespread electoral support in the 1994, 1999 and 2004 national elections garnering 62.65, 66.35 and 69.69 percent of the popular vote, respectively. Similarly, the ANC received growing levels of support in the 1996, 2000 and 2006 municipal elections: 58, 59 and 66, respectively. Although the National Party won the Western Cape in 1994 and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) won KwaZulu-Natal in 1994 and 1999, by 2004 the ANC was in control of every province (<http://www.elections.org.za>). However, stagnant economic growth, devaluations of the rand, and growing unemployment translated into declining electoral support from 2006 onwards. Between 2004 and 2014 national electoral support fell by 7.54 percent, while municipal support fell by 12.39 percent from 66.3 percent in 2006 to 53.91 percent by 2016. Additionally, the ANC lost its outright majority in 4 of the 8 metropolitan municipalities, with the DA gaining control of Nelson Mandela Bay, and forming minority governments in Johannesburg and Tshwane (ibid.). Closer inspection of the national elections reveals declining levels of voter turnout with

only 58.6 percent of people of voting age casting a valid vote in 2014. Thus, although the ANC won with 62.15 percent of the popular vote, only 36.42 percent of the population actually elected to vote for them (ibid.). No alternative political party is likely to defeat the ANC in the short term; however, these trends suggest a crisis in the 'expansive and persuasive capacity' of the ideas and opinions of the leading group (Suttner, 2014, p. 25;

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Gramsci 2014, p. 192-193).

The instability of the ANC hegemonic project is further illustrated by its faltering capability to coerce or contain counter-hegemonic movements. The resurgence of labour strikes and service delivery protests from the late 1990s onwards can be seen as a response to the 'local manifestation[s] of neoliberalism expressed in GEAR', the ANC's economic policy of Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Dwyer & Zeilig 2012, p. 120). In the early 2000s various social movements emerged including the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), the Landless People's Movement and Abahlali baseMjondolo (Saul, 2003, p. 9). While the ANC was initially successful in marginalising social movements through non-violent means, it has proven incapable of quelling the rise of so-called 'service delivery' protests and union marches after 2007. The upsurge of 'spontaneous' uprisings are also problematic for the ANC at a structural level as they signal the rearticulation of the working class experience (Ngwane 2007). In response, the ANC has increasingly resorted to barefaced coercion, employing violence to crush protests and periodically assassinating activists (Bond 2014, p. 2).

The ANC hegemonic project has a fluctuating capacity to foster consent; however, neoliberalism has become embedded in 'common sense' understandings. ANC economic policy is based on the neoliberal concept of 'enhanced competitiveness' emphasising fiscal austerity, export-oriented production, and privatisation (Narsiah 2002, p. 3). The internalisation of neoliberal rationalities is evident in repeated ANC calls for wage restraint; a growing preoccupation with labour productivity by business commentators; the stigmatisation of social protections as handouts; privatisation of basic commodities such as water and electricity, and; the expansion of a public works system (Marais 1998, p. 127). The latter has been criticised for the use of 'points of leverage for instilling in its recipients the 'correct' attitudes and aspirations' (Hart 2007, p. 26). Neoliberal discourse is also evident in the growth of micro-finance and micro-enterprise schemes, which have become integral to government understandings of the economy, notably in the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA). The growth of advertisements in newspapers for micro-credit and sections on saving money and 'managing your finances responsibly' are also highly indicative of neoliberal understandings of wealth-making.

Although NUMSA's decision to withdraw support from the ANC was ostensibly based on its opposition to neoliberal policies, the way it is understood widely differs. There is a dissensus among South African newspapers on the significance and the role of NUMSA as an opposition movement, with many pro-Democratic Alliance (DA) papers viewing it as a sign of the ANC's crumbling alliance, whilst others see it as personality-based. Interviewees were also divided on NUMSA's United Front approach, with some critical of the relevance of Marxism to the current dispensation, while others emphasised the potential of the United Front to revitalise civil society. Several interviewees also saw the NUMSA-COSATU split as another ideologically or personality motivated split, with most respondents unsure of the long term significance, but broadly supportive of its

departure from COSATU. The failure of the NUMSA nine to decisively launch its United Front initiative, job shedding in the steel and manufacturing industries, and ongoing internal consternation over whether it should enter national politics has created an impression of inertia among commentators. However, its decision not to campaign for the ANC has had

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flow on effects, notably coinciding with an 11 percent drop in the party's support in Gauteng in 2014 (<http://www.elections.org.za>).

Conclusion

This paper argues that the African National Congress (ANC) is operating a hegemonic project centred on the state and underpinned by a neoliberal economic discourse. The eclectic and contradictory nature of this project has resulted in a movement which cynically projects itself as liberal, Marxist and neoliberal all at once. This project is unstable and has become increasingly dysfunctional as the ANC has lost legitimacy as the bearer of a general interest. The ANC's electoral decline underscores a period of "organic crisis" whereby it has increasingly been unable to coerce or contain counter-hegemonic groups from the mid-2000s onwards. Although it is unclear whether the ANC was or is hegemonic, it is suggested that the ANC enjoyed its greatest legitimacy between 1994 and 2004. Additionally, neoliberalism has penetrated subaltern 'common sense' understandings, and is reproduced in the media despite opposition within civil society.

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has emerged from this period of organic crisis as a detractor of the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). NUMSA is involved in initiatives which challenge the neoliberal policies of the ANC. NUMSA's organisational capabilities have been significant in the mobilisation of subaltern classes within civil society, such as the #FeesMustFall campaign, and reinvigorating debate over the linking of unions and social movements. However, it has failed to connect with numerous sectors of civil society. Its approach is interpreted by organic intellectuals as muddled, with sectors of the media situating the NUMSA-COSATU split within the context of the ANC-led alliance's infighting. However, the extent to which NUMSA's united front poses a challenge to the ANC as an organic, rather than conjunctural phenomenon, remains unclear.

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