

Tutu, COSATU and the “powder keg” of South Africa

Our South African correspondent
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A vicious spat between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the African National Congress (ANC) has erupted in the wake of the Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture delivered by Tutu on November 29.

Tutu's speech was entitled “Look to the rock from which you were hewn.” More than half of the address comprised a paean of praise to the “new South Africa,” and in particular to the figure of Nelson Mandela. Employing his characteristically florid language, he recalled South Africa's traumatic transition period, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the post-Apartheid 1994 elections. He also made much of the new patriotism—“Many wear the new flag on their lapels and emblazoned on their luggage. They want everyone to know they come from Madibaland.”

The Archbishop then proceeded to offer a few criticisms directed at the ruling ANC. Pointing to the “culture of sycophancy” within the ANC, he appealed for more open debate, particularly with respect to President Mbeki's views on HIV/AIDS and his handling of the Zimbabwe question.

His most significant statement focused on the massive poverty and growing inequality in South Africa: “At the moment many, too many, of our people live in grueling, demeaning, dehumanising poverty. We are sitting on a powder keg.”

Questioning the government's Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policies, the Archbishop asked, “What is black empowerment when it seems to benefit not the vast majority but a small elite that tends to be recycled? Are we not building up much resentment that we may rue later?”

There is some merit in the Archbishop's concerns. Vast inequality is not politically sustainable, and ultimately, is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. However, he speaks, not as an advocate of the poor, but rather as one of the foremost proponents of the current regime, a staunch defender of South African capitalism and a lifelong opponent of social revolution. In effect, Tutu is warning the ANC that a too hasty implementation of its free market agenda could have a profoundly destabilising effect on South African society.

The ANC responded with predictable vitriol in Mbeki's letter published on its web site, slamming the Archbishop as an ignoramus: “The Archbishop has never been a member of the ANC, and would have very little knowledge of what happens even in an ANC branch. How he comes to the conclusion that there is ‘lack of debate’ is most puzzling.”

The president's letter continues with an attack on Tutu's statements regarding BEE: “There are some in our country who regularly communicate the entirely false message that black economic empowerment...benefits almost exclusively a small elite composed of members of the ANC.”

Mbeki then refers to the recent Telkom deal, in which well-connected politicians and officials are poised to buy a R6.5 billion stake in the service provider. This deal is being facilitated by prominent members of the ANC, including Smuts Ngonyama and former Communications Ministry Director-General Andile Ngcaba. Ngonyama stands to earn between R32 million and R160 million from the deal. The Telkom deal, according to the president's letter, “seems to have provided an opportunity once more to spread this falsehood.”

Even when defending the government's record, Mbeki only confirms that for him black economic empowerment is precisely the self-enrichment of an elite—or more correctly, the consolidation of a class of black capitalists. He states, “In this regard I must confirm, with no apology, that our movement and government are firmly committed to the pursuit of black economic empowerment. We will continue to promote the goal of the deracialisation of our economy as vigorously as possible. In this context, we will continue to pursue the goal of increasing the wealth and income in the hands of the black people of our country, as an inherent part of the continuing struggle to eradicate the legacy of colonialism and apartheid.”

The secretary general of the ANC, Kgalema Motlanthe also came out in defense of BEE: “All the government programmes to transform our society should provide the basic starting point for accumulation of capital by black people.”

Motlanthe continues: “Our government is pursuing a broad based BEE programme

focussed on benefiting ‘the vast majority’ of our people. Nobody can provide a shred of evidence to contest this statement.”

Tutu responded to this verbal barrage by issuing a statement: “Thank you Mr. President, for telling me what you think of me, that I am a liar with scant regard for the truth, and a charlatan posing with his concern for the hungry, the oppressed and the voiceless.”

In a statement that further ratcheted up the tension between the ANC and South Africa's trade union federation, COSATU, Zwelinzima Vavi, its secretary general, came out in support of Tutu's statements about the “culture of sycophancy in the ANC.”

COSATU remains part of a Tripartite government alliance which includes the ANC and the South African Communist Party, and is just as faithful a defender of big business interests as its allies. But it is painfully aware of the scale of discontent amongst South Africa's working class.

The day before Tutu delivered his lecture, Smuts Ngonyama, irked by COSATU's accusation of a conflict of interest in the Telkom deal, launched a vicious verbal attack against Vavi, characterising him as “an impetuous reckless leader” and “a very, very young child in the alliance.” Vavi responded by saying that he was “proud to be attacked

by a businessman.”

Vavi had asked whether Andile Ngcaba, “when director-general of the department of telecommunications [was] working to create the conditions for such a deal, which he is now able to take advantage of” and whether “Smuts Ngonyama’s position as adviser to the president [gave] him access to privileged information that could help him in his business career.”

This follows on a public row between the ANC and COSATU regarding the ANC’s handling of the Zimbabwe crisis, and in particular, the ANC’s perceived support for the embattled Zimbabwean leader, Robert Mugabe. Following the forceful deportation from Zimbabwe of a COSATU fact-finding mission earlier this year, and the ANC’s criticism of COSATU for embarking on such a mission, relations between these two components of the alliance have grown increasingly bitter.

COSATU has also taken a public stance around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the country that differs markedly from the ANC’s apparent lack of concern about the epidemic. There has also been a growing discomfort about the government’s pro-business macro-economic policy and the general attack on workers’ rights.

In the weekend newspapers following Tutu’s speech, speculation was rife about the future of the alliance, and whether COSATU would follow the route of the Zimbabwean opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and form a trade-union-based party. However, in public statements, the ANC and COSATU reaffirmed the tenacity of the alliance.

The fact that the MDC is being offered as a possible model for the future direction of COSATU speaks volumes of the nature of its own differences with the ANC. The MDC is a vehicle for the trade union bureaucracy and other elements including wealthy white farmers that is backed by the imperialist powers and advances more-overtly pro-free-market policies than the Mugabe regime.

COSATU has also made clear that it wants a greater share of the spoils of government in its comments on the issue of “succession” within the ANC.

The ANC’s ruthless implementation of a free market agenda has created difficulties for the COSATU leadership in justifying its support for such anti-working-class policies. But withdrawal from the alliance would mean the withdrawal of COSATU loyalists from the ANC’s electoral lists, and, as Tutu pointed out, “It is lucrative to be on a party list. The rewards are substantial and if calling in question party positions jeopardises one’s chances to get on the list then not too many are foolhardy and opt for silence to become voting cattle for the party.”

Despite the public rows that have come to the fore recently, COSATU has not called into question its role as an essential component of the ANC’s electoral machine. Come the 2005 general elections, it will be mobilising its membership to turn out at the polls to deliver a majority vote for the ANC.

The ANC’s 1994 election manifesto, which eventually secured it a 60.2 percent victory in the first democratic elections in South Africa, held out the promise of “a better life for all.” This would entail freedom from homelessness by providing 1 million houses within five years, freedom from land hunger through the redistribution of 30 percent of agricultural land within five years, and freedom from unemployment through the creation of 100,000 non-agricultural jobs per year. The strategy for the achievement of these objectives was “growth through redistribution.”

Ten years later, we are confronted with the reality of between 5.2

and 8.4 million South Africans unemployed, an average life expectancy that has dropped by approximately 10 years, mainly due to the impact of the AIDS pandemic, and a housing backlog that stands at more than 200,000 units per annum, whilst 70 percent of houses constructed do not meet the minimum requirement of 30 square metres or more. In addition to this, there has been an increase from 3.7 million to 4.7 million people living in “extreme poverty,” defined as subsisting on less than one US dollar per day.

Though inequality has always characterised South African society, the trend over the past 10 years has been a steady increase in wealth for the topmost layers of society, while the income of the bottom layers has decreased in real terms. The most spectacular growth in wealth has been manifested amongst the “liberation aristocracy,” which includes individuals such as Tokyo Sexwale, Cyril Ramaphosa, Saki Macozoma and former trade unionist Marcel Golding. Dumisani Ngcobo of the University of Durban Westville notes that “it took Afrikaner capital ten times longer to achieve the level of listed corporate ownership that the new deal makers have notched up in the past four years.”

While a thin layer of politically connected black South Africans have grown phenomenally wealthy since 1994, the working class majority has seen very meager returns after a decade of parliamentary democracy. Anyone who raises this taboo issue, including pillars of the establishment such as Archbishop Tutu, is subject to ferocious attacks from the ANC leadership.

Tutu has recognised that the process of impoverishing and politically disenfranchising the masses is inherently reckless, and that for capitalism to survive, it is essential that some effort be made to alleviate social hardship and provide for the release of the massive accumulation of political tension. But all sections of the ruling elite, including the trade union bureaucracy, are in thrall to the major transnationals and imperialist governments—who are demanding ever-greater profit margins from the exploitation of South Africa’s working class and its natural resources. Unable to act differently, and concerned only with their own self-enrichment, they denounce Tutu for his friendly warnings and thus help create the conditions in which the “powder keg” he has identified will be set alight.



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