

South Africa: factional warfare within ANC coalition

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A serious political crisis has erupted in South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC), culminating in the sacking of the country's deputy president, Jacob Zuma.

The pretext for President Thabo Mbeki's moving against his deputy was a scandal involving Zuma's former financial advisor, Schabir Shaik, who was convicted in May of corruption and fraud and sentenced to 15 years in jail.

In his summing up of the Shaik case, Judge Hillary Squires said, "All of [Shaik's] companies had been used at one time or another to pay Jacob Zuma in contravention of...the Corruption Act." He described the relationship between Shaik and Zuma as "generally corrupt," despite the fact that Zuma was not involved in the trial.

Shortly after Zuma was sacked, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) also charged him with two counts of corruption. He appeared in court on June 29 and will be tried at the High Court in October. One of the allegations is that he tried to solicit a bribe of R500,000 (about US\$77,500), through Shaik, from a company that won contracts in South Africa's arms procurement programme.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has accused the government of carrying out "a concerted politically inspired campaign" aimed at destroying Zuma. On August 17, the organisation's central committee (CC), after a heated struggle between pro-Zuma and pro-Mbeki elements, called on the president to intervene to ensure that all the charges are dropped and Zuma is reinstated as deputy president.

These events have caused what the South African *Mail and Guardian* describes as a "maelstrom" in the ANC, with some leaders claiming that Zuma is the victim of a political conspiracy. In a letter addressed to the ANC alliance, Mbeki called for an end to the "rumour mongering" and proposed the setting up of a Commission of Inquiry to "establish the truth or otherwise" of the allegations that "as president of the ANC and the republic, I occupy the leading position in the political onslaught against [ANC] Deputy President Zuma."

COSATU rejected the call and countered with a demand for the reopening of the entire 2003 investigation into the arms deal.

Before the corruption scandal broke, Zuma was widely expected to be Mbeki's chosen replacement in the 2009 presidential elections. His removal from office expresses an extraordinary and potentially explosive power struggle within the ANC.

Zuma is a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle, which he joined at the age of 17. He served a 10-year prison sentence on Robben Island in the 1960s and, after his release from jail, was in charge of ANC security before being forced to escape abroad.

He has played a key role in the ANC ever since it came to power in 1994. As a Zulu, he was able to counteract the position of the Inkatha

Freedom Party that the ANC did not represent the interests of Zulus. He has retained a certain appeal to the popular masses because of his imprisonment and his professed concern for the poor peasants and workers.

Some commentators have portrayed the conflict in the ANC simply as the clampdown on corruption that Mbeki claims it to be.

There is no doubt that the ANC government as a whole is riddled with corruption. There have long been demands from big business for moves against the extensive system of patronage and bribery, which the major transnational corporations consider to be impermissible because it siphons off a portion of their superprofits to the national bourgeoisie.

For this reason, Mbeki's claim to be "rooting out corruption" has certainly been welcomed by the South African business community and by Western governments. It has been hailed as being "investor-friendly." *The Star* claimed Zuma's sacking "would benefit South Africa both politically and economically."

Mbeki is anxious to prove to the Western powers, global investors and the major transnational corporations that he can reduce corruption in South Africa and guarantee their interests. But this alone doesn't explain why he has chosen to make an example/scapegoat of someone of Zuma's standing. This is bound up with political relations inside South Africa itself.

Other commentators who go beyond the official version of events have portrayed the conflict as a left-right split in the ANC. This is a gross simplification that lends far too much credibility to Zuma's populist rhetoric.

Zuma is no left-winger. He has been Mbeki's second-in-command since 1999 and has never opposed any of the government's pro-market privatisation policies. Nevertheless, by attacking Zuma, Mbeki is making clear to South Africa and the world that the ANC government is not prepared to make the type of concessions to the working class to which the former deputy president at least paid lip service.

Zuma is associated with a definite wing of the tripartite government. His power base is in COSATU, and he also enjoys the support of the South African Communist Party (SACP).

Both these organisations are part of the governing ANC alliance and have been at one with Mbeki in implementing its pro-big business agenda. However, the Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracy play a particular role—that of securing the support of workers for a government that has singularly failed to meet their essential social needs. Zuma, with his connections with the ANC's radical past and his rhetoric about fulfilling the aims of the ANC's Freedom Charter, has provided a useful "left" figurehead to justify supporting the

government and in this way heading off mounting social and political opposition.

Mbeki most directly articulates the demands of international finance capital and the transnational corporations. The Stalinists and the trade union bureaucracy, while defending these same interests, also have to deal directly with the working class and therefore want to proceed with more caution.

This power struggle unfolds against the background of mounting opposition to the government. South Africa, according to the United Nations Development Programme, is among the most unequal countries in the world—third from the bottom, behind only Brazil and Guatemala. Despite the ending of apartheid 11 years ago, the gap between whites and blacks is increasing. None of the aspirations of the working class and rural masses regarding jobs, housing, education and social services have been realised since then.

Official unemployment currently stands at 26 percent, but the real figure is 41 percent—double what it was 10 years ago. Millions of workers earn less than US\$150 a month, and 4 million people are living in conditions of extreme poverty, defined as less than US\$1 a day.

There have been an increasing number of industrial disputes this year, including strikes by textile workers, public service employees, teachers, truck drivers and airport workers, and the first strike by gold miners in 18 years.

There is growing anger in the townships, and there have been demonstrations protesting against appalling housing conditions and lack of promised amenities such as clean water and sanitation.

Mbeki is determined to press ahead with the free-market policies demanded by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund: increased privatisation and attacks on workers' wages and conditions. Three months ago, popular opposition reached the stage where COSATU was obliged to call a general strike in order to let off steam and prevent the emergence of an insurrectionary political movement against the government.

Despite this, opposition has continued to grow. There has been widespread opposition to the appointment of Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka—an enthusiastic advocate of free-market policies—as the new deputy president. When she recently tried to address a rally of 10,000 ANC members, she was shouted down and was forced to leave the platform.

COSATU has responded by launching, on August 22, a “new coalition to fight poverty and unemployment,” the Western Province Coalition for Jobs and Against Poverty.

The coalition was convened in Cape Town by the trade unions, along with various non-governmental organisations and churches. Its first meeting witnessed numerous speeches from workers about the problems they face and their profound sense of betrayal by the ANC. A BBC report described a “heady mix of rebellion and defiance.” COSATU has attempted to channel this movement behind a pro-Zuma campaign and in this way to maintain the grip of the ANC as a whole. But its Western Cape deputy chair, Wende Ntaka, was shouted down and had to abandon her prepared speech when she attempted to give it.

According to *The Witness Group*, “speaker after speaker stated their grievances about housing and land shortages, deepening unemployment and the ever-growing gap between rich and poor.”

The government policy of black economic empowerment was denounced as a means of “enrichment of a small elite, while the majority continue to suffer from poverty and unemployment....”

“The descriptions of the pitiful lot of seasonal workers, of fisher

folk with insecure job prospects and of clothing and textile workers battling to feed their families in the wake of the loss of thousands of job losses...were peppered with references to ministers in ‘big, expensive motor cars’ and former comrades in smart houses.”

Both the Mbeki and Zuma camps fear the development of an independent movement of the working class. So much so that on September 10, the two men came together to put out a joint statement professing their “unity.” It read, “We wish to assert that there is one ANC, and therefore reject the notion that individuals should be required to choose sides, on the basis of the absolutely false assertion that we had two contending factions within the movement.”

In similar fashion, COSATU has denied that the Western Province Coalition for Jobs and Against Poverty poses any threat to its alliance with the ANC and SACP. It has made it clear that if it cannot persuade Mbeki to back down on Zuma, it will not reduce its support for the government by one iota. Tony Ehrenreich, the COSATU secretary for the Western Cape Province, said that despite the tensions, “our alliance [the ANC] will continue as one of the most progressive political parties in the country.”

COSATU even describes Mlambo-Ngcuka as a “wonderful person” and said she should be respected “as a leader of our people.” On August 23, it issued a statement warning COSATU members that they “should not take out their frustrations about the sacking of the deputy president on his successor.”

The working class should by no means be indifferent to the power struggle within the leadership of the ANC. As in so many countries, the so-called fight against corruption will resolve itself into an even more determined effort by the government to impose the dictates of the transnational corporations. Behind the campaign against graft and greed will come ever-deeper attacks on what little remains of welfare provision in South Africa.

But no political support should be extended to Zuma or his cheerleaders in COSATU and the SACP. The ANC is the favoured party of the South African bourgeoisie, both white and black, and of international capital. It has utilised its past struggle against apartheid to defend capitalism in South Africa against its revolutionary overturn by the working class. The SACP and the trade union bureaucracy have been crucial in enabling the ANC to play this role.

Under conditions in which the terrible cost that this has extracted from the working class is becoming clearer every day, COSATU and the SACP now want to reduce opposition to the government to a campaign to defend Jacob Zuma.

It is imperative that the working class reject this attempt to tie it to what passes for the left flank of the ANC. Workers and young people must instead establish their political independence from all factions of the ANC through the construction of their own party, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, to take on the task of fundamentally transforming society on socialist foundations.



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