

South Africa: conflict in ANC signals deepening social tensions

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The election of Jacob Zuma as president of the African National Congress (ANC) over current South African President Thabo Mbeki expresses the growing social tensions in South Africa. But neither Mbeki's *nor* Zuma's faction has any answers to the problems that face the mass of the population.

The bitter rivalry between the two factions only serves to underline the fundamental bankruptcy of the nationalist programme of the ANC. The struggle within the ruling elite must be the harbinger of intensified class conflict within South Africa that, because of the country's strategic economic and political role, will have continent-wide significance.

Zuma polled 2,329 votes compared to Mbeki's 1,505, after 36 hours of wrangling over the voting procedures at the deeply divided ANC conference. The other top five positions in the ANC were won by the Zuma camp with similar voting margins.

Zuma is backed by the trade union bureaucracy COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP). He has relied on building up support in working class areas, especially in the townships, where there is deep hostility to the ANC government and its free market policies.

More than half the population now lives in poverty, with nearly 9 percent living on less than one dollar a day. The divide between rich and poor is widening. From the standpoint of the capitalist class, South Africa is a success story. Gross Domestic Product has grown for the last seven years; it is currently rising by 5 percent a year. But while the mining companies and finance houses have seen profits rise, the majority of the population has not benefited. Mbeki's finance minister Trevor Manuel has kept to World Bank targets for interest rates and inflation. Public spending increases have been limited to infrastructure projects like the stadiums being built for the 2010 World Cup.

The Mbeki leadership was clearly taken aback by the Zuma camp's wide margin of victory. Saki Macozoma, a top South African businessman and ally of Mbeki, told the *Financial Times*, "We've been a bit naïve. Politics have been smooth and collegial for such a long time. The chattering classes had seen the Zuma phenomena as something that would fizzle."

This gross miscalculation is an expression of the extent to which the ANC elite have distanced themselves from the mass of the population. They lead lives cocooned by their wealth and are oblivious to the sufferings of the majority.

COSATU and the SACP were able to secure a victory for Zuma by winning the leadership of local ANC branches. Each branch sends one delegate to the conference. Some 70 percent of the SACP's 51,000 membership are under 35. This predominantly youthful membership

has been able to oust established, conservative ANC elements.

At its conference last July, old guard allies of Mbeki were voted out of the leadership. SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande denounced the "1996 class project" of the Mbeki leadership, referring to the pro-market policies introduced at that time, and called for a "socialist" turn in the ANC. It was this leftward shift in the SACP's rhetoric that produced Zuma's victory at the ANC conference.

Mbeki and his team are officially allowed to remain in government office until 2009, when presumably Zuma would be elected president. However, given the increasingly bitter divisions between the two camps, and with growing expectations amongst workers that something will be done to alleviate their conditions, a smooth transfer of power seems unlikely.

Indeed, only one day after the ANC election result, according to the BBC, the acting head of the National Prosecuting Authority, Mokotedi Mpshe, announced that he now had enough evidence to charge Zuma with corruption and that a final decision on when to take action against the latter was "imminent." Zuma has been plagued by such allegations; his supporters counter that the charges against him are being orchestrated by Mbeki. Zuma's former financial adviser Schabir Shaik was jailed after an arms corruption court case in 2005, although the case against Zuma was put on hold. Zuma was sacked from office as deputy president by Mbeki and then faced a further trial on rape charges last year, in which he was acquitted.

In reality, the entire ruling stratum has enriched itself from the ascension to power. Leading former ANC militants are now millionaire businessmen and sit on the boards of global corporations. That the Mbeki faction is even considering another trial reveals their recklessness. They are prepared to run the risk that the ANC as a whole will be further discredited in their desperation to cling to power.

Other leading figures are already positioning themselves for the coming power struggle. If Zuma is tied up in court proceedings, his deputy, Kgalema Motlanthe, may come to the fore. Motlanthe was a political prisoner under apartheid, then general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers. He has support throughout the ANC and backed Zuma during the court cases. He gave up his position as ANC general secretary to become Zuma's deputy.

Motlanthe is playing the role of mediator at present and attempting to smooth over the internal divisions. Answering press questions, he said that the "never-ending agony" of legal threats against Zuma would put the ANC in a very difficult position. The political editor of *Business Day* has suggested that Motlanthe could be the next president, presumably with Zuma in jail.

The Zuma camp is likely in any case to attempt to take advantage of its decisive victory by demanding a role in government. Zuma's

supporters may even try to replace Mbeki ahead of the scheduled presidential elections.

The divisions in the ANC are deep, but they do not reflect fundamental differences of perspective. Ever since the 1950s, the SACP has been a key supporter of the ANC's nationalist and pro-capitalist politics. Now, however they recognise the need to present a "left" face to diffuse opposition and keep the ANC in power.

Zuma has carefully cultivated an image that he is a "man of the people," as opposed to the aloof ex-academic Mbeki. One management consultant told the *Financial Times*, "He is the type of man who can talk to a president one minute and a Zulu peasant the next. He is a modern man yet he has not lost touch with his roots."

Behind this public persona there is no evidence that he will push for more than cosmetic changes in the current pro-market policies. He made no criticism of Mbeki's economic direction when he was deputy president and will not challenge the course that the ANC has pursued since the end of apartheid.

Over the last few months, Zuma has held meetings with sections of South Africa's ruling class to allay their fears. He addressed the dining society at the Rand Club, pinnacle of the white establishment, and held lunches with top business people organised by Citigroup, assuring them there would be no U-turn on important matters. He also travelled to Britain and Austin, Texas, where he held more meetings with businessmen, promising them there would be no change in South Africa's economic life if he became president.

Neither the SACP nor COSATU is calling for a shift in the fundamental economic orientation of the government. Motlanthe told the press there would be no change in economic policies and no "payback" to COSATU for its support. "COSATU as a federation has no voting rights in the national conference—they have speaking rights. So there is no way they can even claim 'we put you there so it's payback time.'"

COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi repeated this, saying, "So much has been said that Zuma has to pay a debt to COSATU. There have been leftist policies in the past few years. JZ [Jacob Zuma] is not an organisation. It is up to the members of the ANC to decide policy questions and the leadership must implement these policies."

This piece of double-speak was repeated by SACP deputy secretary general Jeremy Cronin, who told the press "there is a left shift under way already." In fact, ANC economic policy was fixed at the beginning of this year and supports the current line of Mbeki and Manuel. In so far as the SACP has a different policy, it is the call for national economic development within capitalism. It is not a socialist policy. This is what they call their "Medium Term Vision" in a policy document.

Their "industrial policy" calls for a national debate between the ANC and the "business community" over "development policy." Vavi recently told the *Financial Times* that the government should put "our industries first." He calls for the economy to be shifted towards the labour-intensive sectors to promote jobs. "Unfortunately the mining sector is not labour intensive," he said. This is more than unfortunate. The ANC government, with the support of COSATU and the SACP, has destroyed tens of thousands of mining jobs in recent years. This has played no small part in pushing unemployment up to 40 percent in some areas of the country.

According to Vavi, the government should promote growth by allowing inflation to rise to 9 percent. It is currently running at between 3 and 6 percent. Such a policy would inevitably affect the working class by driving up the price of food and other essentials. To

imagine that a government could engineer just a slight inflation is a delusion, especially when the world economy shows every sign of heading towards stagflation—i.e., prices rising but the economy in recession. The results of runaway inflation can be seen next door in Zimbabwe.

The present level of growth has been achieved by making South Africa a prime site for investment and a centre for finance capital in Africa. A higher level of growth could only be achieved by attracting more investment, which would create even greater social divisions. Growth in itself is not the problem. It is one of ownership. When a tiny minority own the corporations, mines, factories and banks, wealth inevitably accumulates in their hands, while the majority of the population who create that wealth through their labour are driven into ever greater poverty.

In so far as the Zuma faction has revealed different economic priorities than the Mbeki faction, their implications are reactionary and harmful to the interests of the majority of ordinary people. But these differences are of a contingent character. What has to be recognised, however, is that the conflict has a definite political and historical significance.

The ANC has operated for the past 13 years as a government of national unity. Differences existed behind the monolithic façade, but they were contained and smoothed over. The very public and acute nature of the Zuma-Mbeki split indicates that the ANC can no longer present itself, as it could when Mandela came to power, as the natural and historically chosen movement to lead the nation. Its years in office have revealed it as a party of big business that has no claim to represent the interests of the vast majority of working people in the towns or the countryside.

A generation is coming to political maturity that has grown up since the fall of the apartheid regime and whose political experience has been shaped by an ANC government doing everything in its power to benefit the rich and big business. The cracks that are emerging within the ruling regime create an unprecedented opportunity for the working class to intervene. But they must prepare for that politically by making an independent assessment of the situation. Workers have to evaluate the political struggle that is going on inside the ANC in the light of their own class interests, which are opposed to those of every faction of the South African ruling elite.



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