

South Africa: Zuma's victory expresses deepening class tensions

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The election victory of the African National Congress and its leader, Jacob Zuma, is a distorted expression of powerful social tensions within South Africa. Zuma, who will be inaugurated as President on May 9, comes to power as the beneficiary of expectations that he cannot and will not fulfill.

Zuma won 65.9 percent of the 18 million votes cast. Turnout was 77 percent, marginally higher than 2004. His vote gives the ANC 264 seats in parliament, 33 less than in 2004, but still a comfortable majority.

The right-wing breakaway from the ANC, the Congress of the People (COPE), gained only 7.42 percent of the vote and won just 30 seats. COPE's poor showing is indicative of the hostility with which the majority of the population regard the pro-business policies with which it is identified.

The Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party also went down from 23 to 18 seats. The Democratic Alliance (DA) won 67 compared to its previous 47 seats, gaining support mainly among white and Asian voters.

The ANC's majority is three less than the two-thirds needed to make constitutional changes. Suggestions that Zuma planned to make constitutional changes were built up during the election campaign by the DA.

Zuma was elected leader of the ANC in 2007 as popular anger mounted against the free market policies of President Thabo Mbeki. He relied on the services of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the trade union federation COSATU to present him as someone who would be more responsive to the needs of the poor majority, after years of declining living conditions and job prospects. Young people in particular, who face mass unemployment, backed Zuma.

His election led to a split in the party. A group of Mbeki supporters, led by Mosiuoa Lekota, broke away to form COPE as an avowedly pro-business alternative to Zuma's radical posturing. But Mbeki himself did not join it, and its poor performance demonstrates why he took the decision to stay within the ANC and fight his corner.

Zuma has pledged to provide jobs, education, sanitation

and healthcare. Fifteen years after the end of apartheid, there is widespread poverty with 34 percent of the population living on less than \$2 dollars a day. At the same time, a tiny elite layer associated with the leadership of the ANC has become obscenely wealthy, receiving shares in major companies and directorships under the Black Economic Empowerment scheme.

This situation has led to widespread disillusionment with the ANC. Protestors built barricades with burning tyres in 2007 over the failure of the ANC to deliver new houses.

"Zuma has promised repeatedly to deliver on those expectations—to create jobs, to build houses, to lay water pipes, to revive crippled clinics, to revamp the education system that has so terribly failed the first post-apartheid generation, to make the streets safer, to ensure that justice is accessible, effective and equitable, and to guarantee the independence of the watchdogs that guard our rights," the *South Africa Sunday Times* explained.

But this is a dangerous situation for South Africa's ruling elite. Many South Africans expect Zuma to change the direction of the party and carry out a major programme of social reforms. But the slump in the world economy is now hitting South Africa and the ANC leaders will have virtually no room to manoeuvre. "The global and domestic economies have not been weaker in their lifetimes. Their job is to do more than their predecessors with fewer resources and a reduced reservoir of public trust and patience," said the *Times*.

No sooner had the election celebrations finished than a fresh wave of strikes erupted amongst bus drivers and doctors, with nurses threatening to join them.

This year up to 300,000 job losses are predicted in the formal sector, where unemployment already officially stands at 3.9 million or 21.9 percent. If the informal sector is included the unemployment rate is more like 40 percent, with predictions that it will rise to 43 percent by the end of this year.

Zuma has promised to cut the official unemployment rate to 14 percent by 2014 by creating 1.4 million jobs, as well as

significant improvements in welfare benefits. Poor families, he has pledged, will receive a subsidy for children up to 18 years old, instead of 15 at present. He has promised free healthcare for all. Currently, specialized and hi-tech services are only available in the private sector for the 18 percent of the population able to afford medical schemes. This is a crucial issue in South Africa where at the end of 2007 there were approximately 5.7 million people living with HIV, with almost 1,000 AIDS-related deaths occurring every day. It is estimated that 70 percent of hospital expenditure now goes on HIV cases. Over the last 15 years, life expectancy has declined by 20 years.

Such pledges from Zuma are worthless. *Business Day* pointed out that the ANC put forward a similar healthcare plan to be implemented in five years in its 2004 manifesto and that the idea has been around for 20 years. In 2007, the government also proposed a social security scheme that would provide retirement, death and disability benefits for all to be implemented next year. "So don't hold your breath," *Business Day* concluded.

Similar issues apply to education. ANC Youth League president Julius Malema spoke to student meetings in the run-up to the election, promising free higher education and that black Africans would become a majority of students. In fact the government has only just begun to extend a no-fee policy from the current 40 percent to 60 percent of schools.

In reality, Zuma's election does not represent a break with the past record of the ANC. With the advice of the SACP and the trade union bureaucracy, he calculated that some attempt to curry support amongst workers was vital given the widespread hostility to the Mbeki leadership clique. But he has no intention of alienating South African businessmen and international investors. The South African rand and government bonds both rose following the election, suggesting that the international markets are generally satisfied that Zuma will continue to pursue pro-business policies.

Zuma has also been careful to ingratiate himself with Western governments by his vocal criticism of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe.

There is particular pressure on Zuma to retain Trevor Manuel as finance minister, a man considered the mainstay of South Africa's commitment to free market economics since he was appointed in 1996. But whatever choices he makes, Zuma will do his utmost to placate the imperialist powers. As one western diplomat commented, he is likely to "campaign from the Left but to govern from the Right."

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Under conditions of global recession, this will mean that Zuma will have to carry out an austerity programme rather

than one of social reform. Falling commodity prices and shrinking foreign investment have hit South Africa. The government is already forecasting a budget deficit of 3.8 percent of gross domestic product over the next year.

In February the government was forced to cut its target for income from taxes by 50 billion rand (\$5.5 billion) because of falling profits in the key mining sector.

Jacob Laubscher, economist at South Africa's biggest life insurer, Sanlam Ltd., told *Bloomberg*: "Revenue projections are already too optimistic, so there isn't room to do any additional spending."

If Zuma is to please his business backers, he must impose the cost of the recession on the very people who turned out in such huge numbers to vote for him. This will inevitably exacerbate social and political tensions.

William Gumede is an opponent of Zuma and the advocate of a split within the ANC to form opposing centre-left and left parties. Writing in the *Guardian*, he predicted that there would be no honeymoon period for Zuma: "If the ANC does not deliver this time," he wrote, "people are likely to plunge back into apathy or protest strongly, even violently."

He expressed his surprise that the South African Communist Party and the trade union federation COSATU had discussed forming a new left party, but then decided to back Zuma. There is nothing surprising about this. Both the SACP and COSATU have been long term backers of the ANC.

The SACP played a major part in drafting the ANC's original programme, which speaks of creating a black capitalist South Africa. It is that programme which the ANC has put into practice since it came to power under Nelson Mandela in 1994.

Gumede predicts further splits in the ANC, which is not out of the question as conflicts mount. But the central issue that class conscious workers must understand is that they need their own party. They can no longer rely on a nationalist movement that will always represent the interests of big business, not workers. No splinter group from the ANC, least of all one led by Stalinists and trade union bureaucrats, can offer a programme that genuinely reflects the interests of the working class and rural poor.



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