

South Africa 20 years after Mandela's release

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Twenty years ago, Nelson Mandela walked free from Victor Verster prison. His release on 2 February 1990 heralded the end of the apartheid system, which maintained rigid racial segregation and disenfranchised the black and coloured majority in South Africa. The elections that followed in 1994 brought Mandela to power as president of a country that was hailed as the “Rainbow Nation”.

Two decades later, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, despite the ending of apartheid. The limited political gains that were made have not translated into greater social and economic equality. Rather, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and more South Africans now live in poverty than in 1990.

Some 70 percent of the population live below the official poverty line, according to the latest figures. Unemployment stands at about 40 percent of the workforce according to any realistic estimate. At the same time, the richest members of society have increased their annual earnings by as much as 50 percent.

Social inequality has grown between ethnic groups, as well as within them. The majority of black South Africans are still living in poverty, but a tiny minority of those at the top of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) have become billionaires and joined the wealthy elite that ran South Africa under the apartheid regime.

Cyril Ramaphosa played a prominent role in the anniversary celebrations. He headed the committee that welcomed Mandela as he left prison 20 years ago as a leader of the National Union of Mineworkers. Today he is one of the richest people in South Africa. Not surprisingly, he used the occasion to praise the current government that has given him and people like him such enormous opportunities for self-enrichment.

“Today the baton has been handed over to our president

comrade Jacob Zuma”, Ramaphosa told the crowds gathered outside the prison. “He has taken the baton and continues to lead the nation forward”.

Ramaphosa epitomises the change that has taken place. He is one of those who has benefited from the Black Economic Empowerment programme, which saw shares handed out to leading figures in the ANC. Alongside him was Trevor Manuel, who as finance minister headed the drive to open up the South African economy to the global market. He now continues those same free market policies from his position as a minister in the presidency. The ANC's neo-liberal economic perspective has led to the loss of millions of jobs. It is predicted that the upcoming electricity price rises, in preparation for the privatisation of the industry, will cause the loss of 200,000 jobs over the next months.

Ramaphosa and Manuel reflect the gulf that has opened up between the ANC and the mass of the population that brought them to power. Even as the celebrations were underway, there were protests over the lack of services in the townships such as Siyathemba near Johannesburg. Zuma went to Siyathemba after protests last year and promised to provide services, build houses and alleviate poverty. A year on, the situation remains the same.

Yet it was the struggle in the townships, particularly of black youth, that brought the ANC to power. By 1985, the apartheid government had lost control of these working class districts and declared a state of emergency. The country seemed to be on the brink of civil war. Elements in the regime and leading businessmen opened talks with the ANC, recognising that it was the only organisation that could quell a revolutionary upsurge.

Former President F. W. De Klerk, who released Mandela from prison, told a conference commemorating the anniversary, “It is appropriate for us to celebrate the 20th anniversary of February 2, 1990—not to honour my

role or the role of any other individual or party, but because it prevented a catastrophe”.

Had he not released Mandela when he did, de Klerk said, “The prospects for a satisfactory negotiated settlement would have diminished with each successive cycle of revolution and repression”.

There is a direct continuity between the increasingly unpopular Zuma administration and Mandela himself. Both men have sought to preserve capitalism in South Africa. The 91-year-old Mandela was present at a joint session of parliament to hear Zuma deliver his state of the nation address and give his blessing to his successor’s pro-business agenda.

Mandela always maintained that an ANC government would “open up fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class”. As long ago as 1956, he promised that if the ANC came to power, “For the first time in the history of this country the non-European bourgeoisie will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right mills and factories, and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before”.

During the late 1970s, a fierce ideological debate went on among the prisoners on Robben Island about the character of the ANC’s Freedom Charter. Mandela opposed those prisoners who argued that it was a socialist document. He insisted that its purpose was to establish a bourgeois democracy and to maintain the capitalist system. That is precisely what his government achieved and Zuma has continued.

The anniversary celebrations were an opportunity for now wealthy ANC leaders to reiterate the radical rhetoric of the past and promise their supporters that the government would address social inequality. But the social conditions in South Africa today testify to the complete inability of the bourgeoisie, white or black, to resolve the democratic questions that faced the country in 1990 and still exist today. The franchise is now universal, but this offers little more than a formal show of democracy. Real political power is concentrated in the hands of an elite that now includes leading members of the ANC. That layer acts as the local representative of a global oligarchy and the major banks and corporations, utilising its power to safeguard these interests against the

threat from below.

Every national movement has followed the same trajectory. They have made their peace with world imperialism and its political representatives. Across Africa the picture is the same: nationalist leaders are now acting as the local point men of oil companies, mining conglomerates and banks. The same is true in the Middle East and Latin America.

What this anniversary demonstrates above all is the need for a genuine socialist movement in South Africa that advances an internationalist programme and rejects all appeals to cross-class unity in the national interest. The interests of workers and the rural poor are not compatible with those of the profit system.

The political lesson of the last 20 years is that the working class needs to build its own independent political movement, committed to overthrowing the capitalist system and establishing genuine social equality based on planned production for need not profit.

It must take its starting point from Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution: recognising that in the imperialist epoch, the democratic tasks facing countries like South Africa can only be resolved in the course of a socialist revolution, one that will ultimately be successful only on the world arena and that requires the forging of a unified political movement with the working class in the advanced imperialist centres.

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