

## POLITICAL OVERVIEW

# Whither democracy?

It will take longer than the term of President Jacob Zuma to heal the fracture in the polity that has resulted from the ruling party's internal battles

KWANDIWE KONDLO

**T**he diverse social and political facts of SA's democracy and the contrary emotions they evoke make it difficult to keep to a neat and coherent story line.

What adds to the complexity is the question: how does one explain the fact that democracy in SA has survived and endured up to this point, when there is no basis from the past indicating it would work in a country deeply divided by poverty, political ideologies, illiteracy and deeply entrenched racial and ethnic cleavages?

The fact that democracy has endured up to this point is an achievement.

The question, however, is whether we are on the path to democratic consolidation or democratic reversal — first, at the level of systems of institutions and practices of governance, and second, regarding the development of socially embedded democratic norms and values.

If not, are we likely to stagnate in the grey area between reversal and consolidation of democracy?

I refer here to either the consolidation of liberal democracy, on which the present social formation is founded, or reversal to nonliberal forms of democracy, including the orientation towards a national democracy led by the working class — a key project of the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu).

The project fell through the cracks after the Mbeki/Zuma stand-off that has divided the ANC.

It is a project that is likely to divide the alliance in more substantive ways than the largely emotional and symbolic split that led to the birth of the Congress of the People.

The SACP project resurrects old questions and debates of the 1940s, about the strategic wisdom of a nationalist movement like the ANC to have within itself — and at the centre of its organisation — a close-knit, independent party of communists whose influence in the ANC's political project is both pervasive and edifying. The question was never resolved. It has come to haunt the alliance and will most likely unsettle the Jacob Zuma administration.

It will be decided the day the communists find they have sufficient strategic significance to go it alone, or if they completely win the soul of the ANC.

The question about democratic consolidation or a possible reversal or even stagnation is foregrounded by the flux, or what could be called the tumult of transformation that surfaced just before and after the Polokwane ANC conference in December 2007 and worsened after the resignation of former president Thabo Mbeki in September 2008.

The tumult of that event continues to cast a shadow over the Zuma administration.

The optimistic view is that the dust is settling and there are new directions to improve the governance of the country. But if the lofty intentions in

the plans of the new administration are not matched with the same level of action it will be a recipe for disaster.

To paraphrase WEB du Bois, the millions of downtrodden people are growing more assertive, and if they cannot be uplifted, they may pull us all down.

This is the message from the spate of protests about poor service delivery at local government level that have dominated the second half of 2009.



The year 2009 on the whole, while it was a year of recovery, also bore the features of an unsettling democratic moment.

From the outset, Zuma's team missed burning strategic issues of governance. For instance, the reconfiguration of cabinet makes sense on the one hand, but evokes numerous concerns on the other.

The concern is how best to design responsive and accountable institutions of government rather than adding new structures or building new layers of superintendence to existing state institutions.

Second, the design of these institutions should provide spaces and opportunities to hold policy makers and implementers accountable to ordinary citizens.

In this way governance ceases to be experienced by ordinary citizens as distant and top-down.

The issue was never the size of cabinet but its orientation and capabilities.

The recovery in the political and governance spheres is tentative as the leadership still needs to provide refinement and coherence at

the level of strategy.

The required level of broad and abstract collaborative trust needed among public institutions is weak and needs to be strengthened.

But how does that happen given the level of internal contestations within the ruling party itself?

In the socioeconomic sphere, the situation is still difficult.

The post-1994 republic was not premised on intentions to fundamentally reorder socioeconomic relations in new ways. It was premised on a political accommodation intended to save capitalism and deracialise its social base.

As a result, old socioeconomic inequalities were preserved under new conditions of political freedom. A situation where the majority of black people continue to drown in the misery of their suffering remains unchanged.

Until government finds a new paradigm of partnering the private sector, until white SA business embraces the sacrifices required to transform the economy in order to uplift black communities, and until political elites abandon the politics of the belly to serve ordinary citizens with devotion and sincerity, the socio-economic inequalities are likely to continue as they are for another generation.

The determination with which Zuma's administration has declared its intention to eradicate corruption, reduce crime, deliver more houses and basic services at local levels, jack up land redistribution and improve health and education gives us hope.

These are informed by popular aspirations. But it is still not clear how these aspirations will be translated into effective social outcomes given the inherent institutional difficulties of the state.

The monitoring & evaluation ministry in the presidency is still finalising the development of performance indicators.

In addition, the planning ministry is in its infancy and is likely to be

constrained by the turf wars emanating from the politics of the ruling alliance.

The country's recovery from the recession, perhaps from about the third quarter of 2010, is likely to be a slow but confident process.

The extent to which it will spur improvements in political governance can only be guessed at.

It is going to take roughly until May 2010 to have firmness of direction and an improved public service geared to deliver on the mandate of government.

But it will take longer than Zuma's term to heal the fracture in the polity which resulted from the ruling party's internal battles.

A particular kind of politics of transformation has emerged. It is characterised, on the one hand, by a triumphant certitude, which translates into a political culture of disrespect.

This confounds the development of bonds of solidarity among citizens and sprouts a strong revolutionary rhetoric (when in reality, as Julius Lewin wrote, there is "no revolution round the corner"), and a clumsy contestation of the direction of public policy.

This particular kind of politics of transformation also reflects the straddling of positions of power and material accumulation.

It professes, on the other hand, solidarity with the poor, especially those who are members of the ANC.

It's a politics of transformation that consolidates the insider/outsider dichotomy and has implications for the distribution of opportunities in SA.

While this may be important for "electoral clientelism" in the ANC alliance, it constrains, at the same time, the ANC's strategies of self-renewal and the reproduction of the conditions of its hegemony.

Neville Alexander described it best when he wrote: "SA will develop or stagnate, as a 'normal' bourgeois democratic social formation for the next generation at least."

There is no revolution round the corner. ■

□ *Kondlo is chairman of the HSRC's democracy & governance programme*



**Recall** The watershed ANC conference at Polokwane