

The consolidation of democracy in South Africa and the legacy of the United Democratic Front

Draft input for symposium 'The UDF in Context: Legacies and Meaning, 1983-2003', University of Witwatersrand, History Workshop, 23 August 2003.

The year 2003 marks twenty years since the formation of the United Democratic Front, the broad, massed-based alliance which posed such an effective challenge to *apartheid rule* in the 1980s. I have argued elsewhere that the culture of participation and the building of local 'organs of people's power' contributed to the creation of a democratic political culture and 'smoothed' the transition to representative democracy. Indeed, South Africa has, since the first election of 1994, seen relatively high levels of political participation by 'ordinary citizens'. However, the past few years have seen a growing disillusionment with parliamentary democracy; a new generation of youth who did not experience the deprivations of *apartheid* and who are skeptical of the former liberation movements' commitment to real social change; and an increasingly top-heavy and intolerant ruling party with weak and fragmented opposition parties unable to pose any real threat to its hegemony.

Despite the rhetoric of democratic participation, of participatory development, of the need for partnerships between state and civil society, and even a call within the ANC for a culture of volunteerism to be revived, it is a source of grave concern that levels of political and social participation are dropping. In a society where unemployment is unacceptably high, and expectations of government 'delivery' of basic needs are also unreasonably high, most citizens who vote for the ANC adopt the position of 'loyal grumblers': they do not see themselves as having a role to play in the delivery of those benefits of democratic government which they anticipated.

I have argued elsewhere (see Cherry 2001) that levels of political participation were particularly high in the urban African townships of the Eastern Cape during the 1980s, and that something of this culture of participation was 'carried through' with the establishment of representative democracy in the 1990s. It is now perhaps the right time to revisit some of these questions around the nature and extent of political participation, and to see what lessons we can draw from this experience in order to understand the consolidation of democracy in South Africa.

What kind of democracy?

This necessarily involves revisiting the 'democracy debate': what kind of democracy is optimum for the kind of society we are trying to create? If we are democratic socialists, social democrats, humanitarian socialists, socialist feminists, green socialists, radical liberals, left human rights advocates, or any number of variations to the left of these positions, we agree that there has to be some combination of political democracy which allows all citizens equal rights and political participation at some level, with socio-economic

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democratization which ensures basic socio-economic rights are fulfilled and that the extremely divided and unequal society we live in becomes more egalitarian. But what combination of these things will lead to the best outcomes? And what is the relationship between process and outcome – ie does how people participate influence what the outcome is?

Representative democracy

One area that we are compelled to explore as the next election draws closer, is that of participation in representative democracies. Is the casting of a vote every five years the best we can hope for, as the liberals argue? Are the post-apartheid youth really not interested in voting? Have voter turnouts declined dramatically? My research in Kwazakele township shows that while there was a drop in voter turnout in 1999, the level of voter participation and knowledge was still remarkably high – especially when we compare it to 'established democracies' such as the USA where voting has become a meaningless exercise, shunned by a large proportion of the population. Still, I am interested in what will happen in the coming election, in 2004: will voter turnout drop still further? If there were a real left opposition, would voter turnout rise again?

And beyond voter turnout, what about other forms of participation in representative democracies? This relates of course to the electoral system, the PR 'party list' system we have here, and the problems within that system: the primary one being that choice of candidates becomes a matter of party infighting, leaving ordinary people right out of the process.

Again, participation in branches of political parties is another concern. Despite all the ANC's rhetoric, it is increasingly the case that it is only those who have something to gain – re their political careers – who participate in branch activities. Ordinary members and supporters do not see much point or benefit in political involvement at this level for most of the time. When elections come around, every four and a half years, the ANC (and other parties) suddenly become concerned about the quality of party members, how they participate, building the party, drawing in new constituencies, wooing back 'lost' constituencies, etc etc. Supporters and ordinary members are suddenly meant to become energized, to rush around campaigning, yet they have not been included in party activities for the previous four years....well, this is characteristic of representative democracies, and its limitations: politics is run by career politicians, and there is little place for ordinary people outside of election campaigning and voting.

Direct democracy

Well, we had to give up this idea a while ago. Idealistic, only possible on a very small scale, only suited to revolutionary moments....etc.etc. And of course, it is not an alternative to representative democracies when the government of a big country is what is under discussion. Elected representatives is the way to go. But perhaps we need to revisit what we have lost in this regard: a culture of ordinary people speaking their mind at

meetings, making their voices heard. Many of the people in Kwazakele I interviewed said that their experience of participation in street and area committee structures in the 1980s was a positive one, which taught them about democracy many years before representative democracy was 'won'. Some even said things like 'No-one can teach us about democracy....we learnt that well during the struggle'. Without idealizing the extent or democratic nature of participation in such structures in times of extreme conflict, this brings me to

Participatory democracy

Again, not an alternative to representative democracy, but to be used in combination with it. It's dangerous, of course, because it means giving much more say to people 'on the ground', and they may become dissident.....but a strong argument can be put forward for structures of participation in various spheres – not only formal politics (as in party branches, or ward committee elections) but in trade unions, civic organizations, rural development projects, and so on. This argument links not only to policy debates at the macro level, but to 'developmental democracy' and the taking seriously of the participatory ideal in the planning and implementing of development solutions. There are still examples of this happening – the old street committees operating to solve problems at community level – but it has to be faced that we are steadily losing some of this tradition which was built up in the 1980s in the face of adversity. The problem is that this 'civil society politics' has become depoliticised, no longer recognized as 'political', and has become just one of many ways of doing things. Often it is not seen as efficient (although in the long run it is a much more efficient way of doing things) – or if it is recognized, then is seen, in the form of 'public private partnerships' or 'consultations' as a tedious necessity by government officials to gain acceptance of programmes.

Feminist democracy

Lastly, perhaps it is time to revisit the debate about women and democracy. Everyone knows that women are more democratic than men....well, of course, we know that some women are capable of extreme authoritarianism and intolerance. But generally....some fine feminist theorists (Anne Phillips, Iris Young) have given a lot of thought to this question, and particularly to the importance of breaking down the distinction between public and private when it comes to politics. Women's involvement in decision-making and action at the level of the household, and from thence in the neighbourhood and the community, become significant for democratic culture. Of course, women should participate more in formal politics as well, in leadership positions in government and parties, and as public representatives. Additionally, we need to revisit some of the values and attitudes that characterize 'women's politics' and reintroduce them into the mainstream: tolerance, humility, listening to others, patience, organizational thoroughness, engaging in real 'grassroots' work for no reward, and so on.....it can even perhaps be argued that the ways in which women just 'cope' with the demands of living in this society – with AIDS, unemployment, poverty, childcare, violence – are indicative of

enormous resources of strength, capacity, caring and selflessness which could enrich our fledgeling democracy tremendously.

Such local organization is today increasingly 'survival based', and is becoming 'depoliticised' as 'politics' becomes the realm of elected representatives and government officials. Yet women's (and other) organization around localized, social problems can pose a radical challenge to the status quo, can put pressure on government to ensure 'delivery', can 'take control of our lives' while maintaining the independence of civil society. I would even go so far as to argue that the growing divide between civil and political society can potentially be bridged by women's organization, infusing a radical egalitarian politics once more into our democracy.

Strong democracy and civil society

There's no need for the ANC to feel threatened by strong civil society, or to see the party as in conflict with civil society organizations – a strong state and a strong civil society can go very well together, as has been argued before. And to link the above, I argued recently at a Women's Day seminar that participatory 'women's politics' can potentially strengthen and radicalize our democracy to become stronger, more dynamic, hopefully even more egalitarian.

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22 August 2003