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South Africa

It's time for the left to talk

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The 2024 national and provincial elections represent a critical turning point in South African politics. The results are a massive setback for the ANC, which is now forced into a humiliating coalition with the Democratic Alliance. For Cosatu and the SACP, they represent a huge disaster. In effect, they signal the last rites for the Tripartite Alliance, which may continue in name but will have no effect in the political shaping of things. We have to ask: will the dramatic reversal in fortunes of the once dynamic and powerful workers movement be sufficient to bring about a shake-up. sufficient for a new path for the Left to be realised?

In 2007, Amandla published an editorial on the outcome of the 2007 ANC Polokwane Conference, entitled “Zuma victory: a call for the left to vuka”. Once again we make the call for the Left to recalibrate. Failure to do so will usher in a long period where we will be marginal and largely irrelevant to politics. In the face of the real possibility of the extreme rightwing coming to power in France, this is precisely what the Left was able to do. Communists, Greens, Social Democrats and Trotskyists successfully united and defeated the threat of the extreme right— at least for the moment. The situation in South Africa is different, but something similar is required.

What happened in the elections?

The ruling ANC has been implementing harsh austerity and introducing the privatisation of key industries. In those circumstances, the Left might have been celebrating its paltry 40% vote. However, a closer analysis of the elections should put a stop to any false triumphalism.

For a start, the ANC did not lose support to the Left. There was no genuine Left party standing in the elections. The Economic Freedom Fighters is the closest we get to something resembling a Left party, if one is willing to ignore its anti-democratic commandism, history of involvement in corruption, dubious financiers, and parliamentarism. And it also lost support; it received over 350,000 fewer votes than in 2019 and will now have five fewer MPs.

The big winner was Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), only formed a mere six months before the election. It won almost 15% of the vote and will have 58 seats in Parliament. It is now the third largest party in Parliament, after the ANC and the DA. The MKP is a party led by a disgraced former president of the ANC and the country, who is facing corruption charges for his involvement in the arms deal, who is a misogynist and rape accused, centrally involved in facilitating state capture and corruption amounting to hundreds of billions of rands. The fact that such a party is able to garner almost 2.5 million votes (2 344 000) tells us a lot about the state of politics, especially class politics in South Africa.

Rise of a populist politics

It is not possible to characterise MKP's economic policies as reactionary. After all, its manifesto advocates a series of redistribution programmes, nationalisation of key sectors of the economy, greater regulation of big business, and an end to austerity and neoliberalism. But its social policies are regressive and right-wing. Of equal concern is that it is a thuggish party which will not hesitate in mobilising storm troopers against those who stand in its way. It will continue to attack and deligitimise institutions necessary for defending the democratic gains achieved in ending Apartheid.

This thuggish, ultra-nationalist politics is complemented by the rise of the Patriotic Alliance, which wants to drive foreign migrants out of South Africa. No one should be fooled by its jovial, charismatic leadership. It focuses on the resentment of the so-called 'coloured' population, especially those in the rural areas. And it has grown from nothing (6,660 votes in 2019) to now having 330,425 votes, nine members of Parliament and a ministerial position in the new government.

The PA is the closest political formation to fascism in South Africa. It has weaponised the issue of foreign nationals, especially illegal immigrants, to win electoral support. Together with MKP, it signals the potential for the growth of an extreme right-wing type of politics, with particular South African features.

Aiding the growth of these parties is the great disillusionment of South Africans, who have had their hopes of a better life killed off by the destruction of jobs, collapse of services, and failures of local government. The deep alienation in society can be seen in the millions who stayed away from the elections. Part of the ANC's poor performance is that, of the 41 million eligible voters, only 27 million registered, and just 16 million went to vote. Even though this was characterised as the most important election since 1994, the percentage poll dropped from 66 to 58 percent.

It is MKP, and parties like the PA, with their populist and demagogic message, which are better placed to capture the attention of these disgruntled layers. There is nothing progressive that can be read into the millions who have become disillusioned with one person one vote! It is in this sense that we say, once again, the Left must Vuka.

Government of National Unity

The ANC was always going to disguise getting into bed with the Democratic Alliance through the formula of a government of national unity. And in many ways the alliance with the DA, IFP and the rest makes it easier for Ramaphosa to push through the structural reforms demanded by the IMF, and make big business the drivers of South Africa's stalled development.

Opposition in the ANC itself will now be neutralised by Ramaphosa's new partners. Therefore, there should be no doubt that the Government of

National Unity will, at the very least, be a continuation of Ramaphosa's 'neoliberalism light'. The more likely outcome will be neoliberalism on steroids: greater budget cuts, more rapid privatisation, retrenchment of public sector workers, subsidies to incentivise capital investment, and even greater use of precarious forms of labour. Given the weakness of the labour movement on the one hand, and the depth of the economic crisis on the other, tough times lie ahead.

A Left dialogue

This makes it even more urgent for different components of the Left to come together to take stock of these elections, and forge a common approach to the GNU and Ramaphosa's plan to build a consensus amongst all sectors of society for neoliberal reform—his long-desired social contract.

The Left we are referring to are those activists in popular organisations who believe organisation and struggle are the most important means to confront the current situation, and who oppose subordinating these struggles to nationalist agendas. We are referring to Left formations who are expressing the need to build unity and solidarity, such as those in Cosatu and the SACP calling for a left popular front, those in

Saftu involved in building the Working Class Summit, and those in Amcu who are building a Labour Party. We are

also referring to progressive faith leaders who have made calls for a new movement to fill the vacuum left by the United Democratic Front.

We are mindful of the danger of Left sectarianism, and those groups who reduce the problems facing the workers movement to the question of leadership. It will take much more than denouncing the bureaucrats of mass organisations as sell outs to rebuild working class and popular power. In particular, the dangers of the current situation need to be soberly assessed. We need to come to terms with just how bad the current balance of forces is. We need to hold up a mirror to ourselves, not to beat ourselves up, but to be realistic about what basic action programme we can unite on. Adventurism of sustained general strikes or occupations of cities has to be replaced with a programme capable of closing the gap between the few hundred activists that we are as the Left and the millions labouring in impoverishment.

Although we need to look ahead to the 2026 local government elections, our immediate attention must be on struggling together around the most immediate needs of poor and working class people. Hand-in-hand with struggling for a basic income grant, in defence of jobs, resisting budget cuts, privatisation, etc, spaces need to be created to discuss politics, where new and common reference points can be developed. At all costs, polarizing ideological polemics, which shed more heat than light, should be avoided.

The elections, and the coming into existence of the GNU, must do for the Left in South Africa what the first round of the French elections did for Communists, Social Democrats, Greens and Trotskyists—they woke up, came together, and forged a minimum programme based on labour and the social movements. Here too, the Left must Vuka!

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