

CONTINUITY AT THE EXPENSE OF NEW POLITICS

Mzukisi Qobo

The false imagery of liberation

Almost two decades have passed since South Africa became a democracy. It has been an uneasy journey. In part, it has been filled with a sense of idealism, driven by the promise of change and a better life, but, with time, hope has gradually made way for brutal realism. The honeymoon is long over and impatience with unfulfilled expectations and inept governance is increasingly bubbling to the surface.

The surplus social capital that the African National Congress (ANC) possessed during the early years of the transition is in deficit. The goodwill that excited and propelled the ruling party when it assumed power in 1994 has dissipated. Fragmented and politically compromised institutions are trembling under the weight of growing demands that range from jobs, education and quality healthcare to the provision of minimum basic services. As a result, trust in political leaders, the political custodians of these institutions, is at a nadir. Unlike in the earlier stages of the political transition, it is no longer possible to simply implore people to be patient. A change in leadership and the embracing of progressive values are what would bring healing to the country.

While the plight of the government must be viewed sympathetically against the backdrop of resource constraints, induced by a volatile global economic environment, there can be no excuse for the way in which weak governance compounds the problem. Every year, reports from the offices of the Special Investigating Unit and the Auditor-General paint a grim picture of maladministration and corruption that affect critical spheres of government. Their frequency and the seemingly lukewarm response from the authorities serve to deflate the hopes of citizens, as well as their confidence in the current political leadership to deliver the future that they have been promised.

South Africa's leadership transitions and national priorities

The challenges that confront South Africa today are the product of a volatile present, largely induced by factors related to globalisation; importantly, however, these have been superimposed upon an ugly past that fragmented the country along racial and economic lines. The traces of apartheid's social architecture are still evident in human settlement, educational

attainment, capacity for resilience in the face of economic adversity, access to opportunities for betterment that life has to offer, and the extent of participation in economic activity.

There is no doubt that the ruling party has had some notable achievements in reducing the socio-economic deficits created by the apartheid system, but these have not been consistent or of the required quality. According to data published by the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR 2012), there were improvements in the delivery of key services between 1996 and 2010. The number of South African households living in formal houses increased from 5.8 million to 11 million, with the proportion of all households living in formal housing increasing from 64 to 76 per cent. The SAIRR (2012) study further noted that the number of South African households with access to electricity had increased from 58 to 83 per cent. Equally important gains were made with regard to access to clean tap water.

These absolute gains in service delivery, however, must not be regarded as something out of the ordinary. Given the promises that were made, South Africans expected nothing less than access to the most basic of services. With enhanced political awareness and a better sense of what is rightfully due to them, citizens have gained more confidence to demand better public services. They are also less inclined to tolerate gaps and inconsistencies in public service delivery. They know that they are living in a democracy and that it should deliver more effectively than in the past.

In fact, much of what has been achieved by way of public service delivery since democracy arguably falls short of expectations. Millions have benefitted, but millions also feel aggrieved. When bureaucrats parade their statistical gains in presentations to show progress, most fail to grasp that aggregated data do not soften the real day-to-day experiences of those who have not benefitted yet from healthcare services, access to education, public transport and policing, and still experience the trials of being unemployed and poor. What aggravates their sense of betrayal is the dysfunction of public institutions that interface with them at the local level. In the 2010/11 financial year, only 13 of 343 municipalities received clean audits from the Auditor-General, with capital budget underspending of 30 per cent during the same period. This is



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a sign of poor institutional capabilities and underperformance in meeting the reasonable expectations of citizens. In its recent downgrade of South Africa, Moody's rating agency underlined weak institutional capacity as one of the reasons for the downgrade, with political instability in the future as one of the major risks for the country.

Thus, despite the numerous percentage improvements that are often trumpeted by the ruling party, income levels and the quality of material well-being are perceived to be stagnating. Inequality is exacerbated by an underperforming education system that sustains the stark imbalance between the supply of and demand for better-paid skilled positions. Even with the continued improvement of services, the fact that the ruling party started off on a very low base means that it will become increasingly difficult to meet expectations. The dwindling fiscal resources will certainly add to social strain and fuel the cauldron of social discontent.

To avert implosion under the weight of rising expectations and constrained fiscal room, South Africa will have to develop a different kind of leadership, which can tackle current socio-economic difficulties and is ready to confront the coming economic battles. Such leadership would have to be in tune with the needs of the country's citizens – not only to regain their trust, but also to understand and act upon their expectations.

This raises important questions about the possibilities of change emerging from within a new, younger generation of leaders. Is there hope for a different ethos and approach within a younger generation of leaders that can shift the political discourse to become more inclusive and responsive? If not, where does the hope for change lie?

Generational change and a new kind of politics

Slowly but surely, new faces, which were too young to participate in the politics of the transitional years, are emerging on all sides of our political spectrum. They have lived most of their adult lives in a democratic South Africa, and while the remnants of the apartheid legacy are still there for everybody to see, their realities have been and are being shaped by a country in which the divisions of the past are increasingly blurred and where new social contradictions are constantly emerging.

South African politics, however, have become too static to respond with urgency to the demands that a fluid society imposes. This lack of responsiveness is underpinned by fragmentation and polarisation within and between political parties. The cost of concession seems too high, and factions,

parties and lobby groups have adopted an all-or-nothing approach as their way of conducting politics. This has come at the expense of the interests of citizens. The country desperately needs visionary leadership that is capable of navigating the realities and demands of an emerging society. As such, we need to ask whether and how these new leaders can work towards a more inclusive and just society that is informed, but not defined, by the experiences of generations before it. We need to ask this of the ruling ANC, but also of those that present themselves as an alternative government, the DA.

A major obstacle to more visionary leadership emerging from the ruling party is that its view of the future is deeply premised on an interpretation of the past that emphasises victims and villains, scripted on a black and white canvass. The ANC's definition of the future is limited to a negative discourse that seeks to construct a South Africa that is *anything* but apartheid. As such, the ANC sees itself as the ultimate bulwark against the return of the past, and uses history, memory and symbolism of the struggle as an ultimate mobilising tool. Because traces of our racial past are ever present, and marked in patterns of unemployment, human settlement, differential educational standards and participation in economic activity, the ruling party frames the present as a continuity of the apartheid social legacy. It insists that its character as a liberation movement remains relevant to remove all vestiges of the past.

Left unexamined is the ANC's own role in failing not only to create conditions that reduce the social legacy of apartheid but also to facilitate a continuation of a genuine and healthy dialogue, beyond the rhetoric of non-racialism, to allow for the healing of the scars of the past. Accordingly, it is only a step better than apartheid, and it wallows in such comparisons. So, there are no new minimum standards of what is acceptable to secure good governance and human dignity. For the ANC, the barometer is the apartheid past. In this way, the ruling party can deflect its own culpability for the current state of affairs by portraying it solely as a historical legacy, and by emphasising its historically bestowed task of delivering the economic spoils of freedom alongside political liberation. The reality, though, is that inequalities have deepened under the ruling party.

In rationalising its governance failures of the past 18 years, the ANC has presented a picture of itself as shackled by the post-1994 political compromise expressed in the country's liberal constitutional order. Some in the party, with President Jacob Zuma a vocal advocate, have pushed strongly for the adoption of a 'second transition' – a view suggesting that what has gone wrong in the past 18 years has little to do with the

internally degenerative state of the ANC, but much to do with the deformity of a political order that has imposed strictures on economic transformation (ANC 2012).

This perspective conveniently overlooks the fact that the ANC's political mandate entailed authority to manage economic transformation, which is why it was able in October 1998 to put in place a black economic empowerment (BEE) programme, and this goes through cycles of review by the Department of Trade and Industry. Further, the ANC has presided over government machinery and designed a welter of other economic policy instruments that could have been better shaped and directed towards improving the quality of services and producing better economic outcomes for the majority of citizens. That has not happened.

Ignoring the intricate linkage of the political and economic mandate, the ANC has argued, from its 'second transition' perspective, that an explicitly economic mandate would reposition it better as an economic liberator. This view misrepresents the complexity and causes of the country's socio-economic challenges, of which the youth carry a disproportionate burden with the unemployment rate in this category at 50 per cent. There is keen awareness in the ANC that the swelling of the ranks of the unemployed, the growing inequalities, the rise in crime and the sporadic incidents of public service delivery protest signal a weakening in the legitimacy of the ANC.

Improbabilities of generational shift in the ANC

Against this backdrop, it is inconceivable that generational change within the ANC will translate automatically into a change in the conduct of its politics. The younger generation that is currently coming through the ANC's ranks has been socialised too deeply into its culture and ideology to offer any hope of a clean break that would lead to the emergence of a new kind of politics. At the leadership level, the ANC Youth League is caught up in the web of the party's factional battles and is a product of the malaise rather than its cure. The breeding ground for a new layer of leadership in the ANC includes its youth league, branch structures and, to some extent, the student bodies at both high school (Congress of South African Students) and higher education levels (South African Students Congress). Such structures do not depart from the ANC's philosophy and practices. Not only do they continue its chaotic existence, they exacerbate it.

Given the limited extent to which generational shift within the ANC could bring about organisational renewal and a repositioning of the party and the state, prospects for change are more likely to emerge from two other sources. The first traces its origins from within the ANC, and has a potentially

populist-nationalistic character. It may take the form of a party that splits from the ANC, exploiting existing disaffection with the leadership, and presenting itself as a new hope for the poor. This may gain traction in the current climate of discontent over public service delivery and the wave of industrial strikes.

The second could be driven by a new breed of younger politicians, with the mobilising framework created by the existing opposition parties, and drawing upon active, politically inclined professionals who want to reverse the tidal drift experienced under the ruling party. The advantage of this possibility would lie not only in the youthfulness of its make-up, but in the ability to find a better balance between the interests of the middle classes and the underprivileged.

Possibilities of generational shift in the DA

The DA, the official opposition, faces different, but equally complex, challenges in ensuring that generational succession also brings with it the kind of renewal that will make it appeal to a broader range of voters. One of the things that gives succour to the ANC is the framing of the DA as a party representing the aspirations of those who benefitted from apartheid or whose interests exclude the poor. As such, the ANC constituency strongly associates the DA brand with being anti-poor and anti-black. What has lent credence to this view is the sense that the DA does not seem to consider itself as having a shared responsibility to offer meaningful solutions to the complex challenges of race and socio-economic inequality in a way that transcends ideology. As such, the ANC exploits this weakness of the DA and uses its lack of progress in overcoming racial and socio-economic divides in the Western Cape to frame it as a party of the rich, clamouring for a return to the past.

Perceptions have a greater force than reality, especially when one stacks these up against the fact that 57 per cent of the DA's total budget in Cape Town is spent on underprivileged black communities. Its public administration is run far better than municipalities and provinces under ANC control, which regularly receive qualified audits. Significantly, the DA's membership is also more racially diverse than any other party, including the ruling party. It has made serious inroads in traditional ANC constituencies, such as townships, some rural villages and predominantly black university campuses through its student movement, the DA Students Organisation. Its leadership mix at the top is also diverse, dynamic and youthful.

However, the DA has significant self-imposed limitations. Beyond the nitty-gritty of managing public administration and getting budgetary allocations right, the kind of leadership that is equal to the weight of the country's racial past is absent.

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Social mobility is happening at too slow a pace to make any significant dent in racially configured social inequalities.

There are no meaningful conversations within the DA on issues of race and socio-economic cohesiveness. Instead, it resorts to standard philosophical explanations leaning on liberalism, in particular placing emphasis on the phoney notion of an equal-opportunity society, without so much as an attempt to identify the root causes of inequalities in the first place and to address them vigorously at the core. This is made trickier by the strong association of social inequalities with the politics of race, even in the light of the growing middle class. You will encounter more blacks than whites amongst the poor, and more whites than blacks in the richer segments of our society.

The DA leaves answers to socio-economic inequalities to the trickle-down effects of GDP growth, according to which growing aggregate output leads to a levelling of social inequalities. Essentially, the DA has failed to hone a genuine transformational narrative that connects the aspirations of black communities and expectations of the well-off in the Western Cape. The DA does not need to adopt the ANC's or any populist thesis on race, but should have a deep internal conversation about it. Moreover, it should evolve its own philosophy, which it can present as more fluent and credible, and with more substance than anything we have had in the past. Being transformational does not mean looking more like the ANC; it entails taking the necessary step to connect deeply with social reality from the standpoint of legitimate social purpose, principle and a broadly supported governing programme.

In addition, to establish solid legitimacy, the DA will need to go beyond finesse in public administration and showcase a better picture of the future in the province it currently runs. That it has failed to capture hearts and minds in a sufficiently broad-based manner undermines any claim that it can be an alternative party of the future. It would also need to deal decisively with its own legacy challenges of being identified as a party pandering to a core constituency that has deep financial pockets, and is middle-aged and white, which restrains it from experimenting with fundamental and progressive change.

One of the biggest challenges that the current DA leader, Helen Zille has is to use her political capital with the white core constituency of the DA to challenge and persuade it to embrace an inclusive political and economic future for South Africa. The DA leader could play a role similar to Nelson Mandela's promotion of reconciliation by managing the expectations of the black majority. In this case, it would be challenging the DA's core constituency to buy into a new and well-defined compact that reflects active support by the

white sections of society for policies aimed at redressing the legacy of the past, their involvement in and support of a social dialogue about tackling the challenges of the present and painting an inclusive future, and their contribution as active citizens who participate in efforts or pioneer initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being of the country beyond just politics.

Granted, there is a case to be made that most of these efforts and initiatives are not limited to the white community but are applicable to anyone who has the capacity to make a contribution towards the country's well-being. In the context where there remains a deep resentment around race and inequalities, and a growing sense amongst sections of the black community that Mandela's rainbow vision was an unreciprocated gesture to reassure the white population at the expense of black aspirations, positive gestures inspired by the leadership of the opposition could help promote better race relations and rebuild the platform of nation-building. The DA's core constituencies would have to be challenged to embrace such a vision, and if they cannot buy into it, they must be shown the door.

Elements of change in the DA's internal character would entail a radical shift in leadership at the top to broaden and deepen diversity in leadership across various structures. This would have to be undertaken authentically rather than through superficial means of merely co-opting black leaders as tokens. Secondly, the party would need to reframe its philosophical core with relevance to South Africa's unique social challenges. This would require tempering liberalism with an emphasis on social redress. As such, the party would need to locate its ideological commitments in the political centre – championing the politics of liberalism, while seizing ground on tackling social inequities. Finally, the party would need to rebrand, focusing strongly on presenting itself as an inclusive party, and a party of the present and the future. Skilful and empathetic management of diversity, rather than assimilation of new entrants, would enable the party to transcend its past and reposition it better in a changing social context. It cannot hope to remain culturally and philosophically the same and still have a moral claim to being a party for change.

Conclusion

There is a generational shift within the ANC, but this does not provide much comfort that there will be substantive change in how the party manages its affairs and governs the country. Its youth are deeply socialised in the party's culture from branch to national level. A hallmark of the ANC's succession processes is that it entrenches continuity.

While four of the top six office-bearers of the ANC are aged 60 years or more, there is a generational mix in the rest of the National Executive Committee (NEC) and various regional and provincial executive committees. This will continue to be the case as the Youth League pushes for more generational shift, but also as an adaptation to the demographic realities of a youthful country. There is a clear directional change in the ANC pointing towards a more youthful but radicalised leadership in future.

Leadership succession within the ANC may appear disorderly with respect to the top six NEC positions; however, there is a loosely structured internal succession process from branch to provincial to national that seems to signal a seamless passing of the baton. Most of the youth that the ANC draws its membership from, and who make the transition from its youth league to the mother body, are from tough conditions in the townships. They can draw parallels between their socio-economic circumstances and the relatively privileged existence of their peers across the colour line.

Given the low success rate of matriculants and that there are few who transition to a middle class life via higher education or commercial enterprise amongst black youth, this segment may be more ideologically inclined to the ANC or a radicalised alternative than to a party in the shape of the DA or similar option. Even though the average ANC Youth League member or sympathiser today would have been born a few years before the country became a democracy in 1994, the social legacy of apartheid is reproduced in the patterns of human settlement, educational attainment and participation in economic activity.

Even amongst those who successfully go through higher education, their socio-economic background remains the reference point of their political and ideological orientation,

and they are likely to be drawn towards ideas that promote radical change in society. Conditions of social inequality are reproduced by poor educational outcomes amongst the black population. Social mobility is happening at too slow a pace to make any significant dent in racially configured social inequalities. This lends the ANC greater appeal for those who see it as the ultimate liberator, on the strength of its liberationist rhetoric. Under the current social conditions, the ANC may even locate itself not just as a bulwark against the imaginary resurgence of apartheid, but also as a bulwark against a more radical alternative. Generational shift within the ANC is unlikely to deliver a society that overcomes the divides of the past, reduces social inequalities and improves quality of life.

While the ANC is showing signs of decline, the DA is not yet the party of the future. The future movement for change would be comprised largely of the black middle class, but would seek to reach for the kind of politics that could secure a stable future for generations to come, and that would be sensitive to the systemic political risks posed by deep socio-economic inequalities in society. Persisting inequalities, unemployment and poor standards of education undermine social stability. The effects of instability would be borne by the poor and middle classes alike, so it is in the interests of the middle classes to strive for a socio-political framework that is inclusive.

It must be stressed that it is not just good policies, in the technocratic sense, as important as these are, that would guarantee stability; transformational leadership that has legitimacy across society is also required. The ANC seized the centre-ground in 1994 not on the basis of coherent policies but on the promise of its moral leadership. The betrayal of this promise is symptomatic in governance failures, and it is this that needs to be seized and recast.