

The ANC-Alliance and its Discontents: Contesting the ‘National Democratic Revolution’

Devan Pillay

After the ANC was banned in 1961, the ANC in exile absorbed all sections of the Alliance into its ranks in effect making it a nonracial organization – although it was only in 1985 at the Kabwe conference that the ANC formally admitted non-Africans into the ANC. At its 1969 Morogoro conference in Tanzania the ANC formally recognized the ‘leading role’ of the working class. However, this was not as clear-cut a victory for the Left as it seemed – it was left vague as to whether ‘leading role’ implied that the social weight of the working class, due to its location in the sphere of production, gave it this leading role, or its numerical weight. In other words, was the working class ‘leading’ because of its potentially anti-capitalist, pro-socialist orientation, or because it was merely the majority within the black population (and hence formed the bedrock of mobilisation against apartheid, under the banner of nationalism in reality led by the middle class)? This deliberate fudging was deemed essential to the maintenance of a multi-class alliance, which explains the ANC’s broad appeal in later years.

Critics argued that it subordinated working class interests to that of the middle class rather than the other way around. Under the banner of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), the ANC-Alliance fulfills an important legitimization function, whereby it glues together disparate social classes under the hegemony of conservative class interests – since 1994 a coalition of white and emerging comprador black capital, and a professional black middle class that has done rather well out of the democratic transition. In other words, the organized working class is being fooled – by their leadership enmeshed in patronage politics - into supporting the ANC against its own class interests.

Alliance supporters, however, counter that, despite slow progress towards reducing inequality and eradicating poverty, the Alliance is nevertheless essential to holding the centre together - by preserving national coherence through an admittedly tension-ridden but nevertheless persistent non-racial discourse, and preventing South Africa from splitting into a dangerously fractious contestation over resources. The working class, far from being fooled, understand that this is in their interests, and they are influencing their leadership in the unions and SACP, as much as leadership is influencing them.

For the Alliance Left, space has been opened post-Polokwane for further contestation within the ANC, to return it to its ‘working class bias’. Any attempt to pursue a left agenda outside the Alliance would, on the one hand, abandon that space to predatory rightwing forces, and on the other relegate the left to the political fringe, no more than a “debating society”.

In other words, despite its class biases and its acknowledged ‘sins of incumbency’, is the Alliance nevertheless our only hope of putting the country onto a holistic, inclusive developmental path? Or does there need to be greater political uncertainty – that is, credible electoral challenges from the left (or, for liberal pluralists, the right as well) - to prevent the ruling party from taking citizens for granted? Indeed, are the two mutually exclusive?

This paper examines the state of the Alliance post-Polokwane, but within the context of the movement’s powerful discourse on the ‘national democratic revolution’, which first

emerged in the 1920s. It then considers the various events since the 2007 Polokwane that seemingly threaten the stability of the Alliance, a recent survey of Cosatu members' political attitudes, and an attempt by ousted SACP officials and independent socialists to build an alternative pole of attraction outside the Alliance.