



Unit F, Colstine Terrace, 88Belvedere Rd, Claremont
P O Box 44907, Claremont 7735. South Africa
Telephone: +27 21 6740361 Facsimile: 086 670 6772 Email: wdpetrust@mweb.co.za
Web site: www.wolpetrust.org.za

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Topic:

**SOUTH AFRICA PUSHED TO THE
LIMIT**

Speaker:

Prof Hein Marais

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

[2000 words]

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PAPERING THE CRACKS

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In the second edited extract from his new book, *SOUTH AFRICA PUSHED TO THE LIMIT*, author Hein Marais explores how the ANC might seek to retain the consent of citizens in one of the most unequal societies in the world, with an economy that leaves one third of workers jobless.

[text]

Work, we are told, is the ticket out of poverty and toward a better life for all. But waged work, particularly *decent* work, has become a comparative luxury in South Africa. Add people who've given up looking for non-existent jobs, and the unemployment rate hovers well above 30%.

And despite the labour law victories of the mid-1990s, workers with jobs are also embattled. Measured as a share of national income, company profits rose from 26% in 1993 to 31% in 2004, while workers' wages fell from 57% to 52%. Workers' terms of employment have been squeezed determinedly, too.

Like the endless restructuring exercises that preoccupy large, wounded institutions, job-creating initiatives will come and go. But the traditional narrative of economic modernization seems to be running in reverse, generating more informality and fewer decent jobs.

More jobs are vital, but even the most hopeful pledges envisage 15% unemployment in 2020 – and that's if you count beggars, parking attendants and buskers as “employed”.

For a large proportion of society, job creation along the current path does not offer a viable basis for social inclusion and wellbeing; wages and salaries are the main source of income for about 6 million (57%) of the 10.3 million black African households, according to Statistics SA data.

Four million people live below the poverty line survive in households where at least one person works for a wage that is too flimsy to lift them out of poverty. The quest for more jobs is crucial, but it has to occur as part of the wider realization of social rights.

There have been life-changing achievements on that front since 1994. Access to housing, education and healthcare, and provision of water, sanitation and electricity has improved. But the gains are tempered by other factors – not least the steady increase in the scale of need, faltering local government systems, and stringent cost-pruning and -recovery policies.

The pace, scope and quality of change lagged in the 2000s. The share of households connected to the electricity grid, with access to potable water, and receiving refuse removal services changed relatively little in the 2000s, according to Statistics South Africa data. A focus on targets rather than outcomes has also seen quantity eclipse quality, and has led to neglect of the vital matters of maintenance and sustainability of services.

Some functionaries at the local level fail to properly represent citizens and meet their needs; others are self-seeking and opportunistic. They exemplify not a failure to ‘deliver’, but a failure to ‘serve’.

But many others struggle valiantly, despite institutional constraints, to help improve communities. The caricature of indifference and incompetence is only one part of the picture, as all but the angriest and most wronged constituents recognize.

Financially hamstrung, local councils' stock of experience, management capacity and warm bodies is hardly bountiful. Management skills are often lacking, and poor political and managerial leadership are common problems. Infrastructure and services are introduced unevenly and at fitful pace, which magnifies the impression of favouritism and the sense of unfairness.

The protests that have become a staple of community life are symptomatic of the troubled domain of the local state, and of the intense contests for power, resources and entitlements being waged there. But many of them also express a paradox: they seem to stem less from an abject failure to provide services and entitlements, than from the *partial* success of those efforts, and a sense of favouritism and unfairness.

The protests signal more, of course. Very many – though certainly not all – express democratic impulses, which neither the state nor the ANC has been unable to engage fruitfully. Often they serve as a barometer of the extent to which the ANC's authority has atrophied in communities it might regard as 'natural' constituencies.

It is against this background of insecurity and disgruntlement that the expanded social protection and public works schemes of the past few years are best understood. They became crucial *political* imperatives in the 2000s, as unemployment rates worsened and community protests multiplied.

The pension and social grant system in fact turned out to be the single-most effective anti-poverty intervention government has been able to deploy – not its small business promotion schemes, not the job creation gambits, not industrial policy, but an old-fashioned welfare system. Ironically, that system had been designed not to fight poverty, but to support people who, due to age or ill health, could not reasonably be expected to work for a wage.

The grant system is not a source of pride for everyone in the ANC. Officials still talk of grants as 'hand-outs', fret about 'dependency', and prefer to view them as stop-gaps to be dispensed with once economic policies work their magic. But a large proportion of households very likely would be unviable today, were it not for the expanded pension and social grant system.

Other, important efforts are underway to improve the wellbeing of South Africans. Government's AIDS campaign has been overhauled, a national health insurance scheme is being readied, the disastrous outcomes-based education policy has been discontinued, the public works programme is expanding (and, by some accounts, improving), and a fresh industrial strategy has been drafted, for example.

These are potentially of huge importance, and they can be augmented with many other feasible initiatives.

But an underlying crisis – particularly the morbid coupling of economic growth and profit taking with precariousness – remains unsolved. And that's largely because the decisive economic compass points of the transition remain unadjusted, despite the efforts of the ANC's allies on the left. Macroeconomic policy stands unchanged, financial liberalisation continues, and the 'new' industrial policy really does little more than shuffle chairs on the deck. The economic adjustments of the past 15 years have primarily benefitted domestic (and international) corporate giants, particularly those sections that have inserted themselves deeper into the global system. Parastatal entities, not mention the ANC itself, along with many of its top figures, are now also entangled in that circuitry.

Meanwhile, monstrous inequalities continue to be generated, and close to half the population lives in poverty in Africa's richest country. A rampant sense of unfairness and injustice exists, generating rancour and insubordination.

As long as this persists, the biggest challenge for the ANC and the state it presides over is to secure social stability, maintain legitimacy, and to do so on the basis of broad consent. This has to be achieved in an economy that structurally seems incapable of providing jobs on the scale and terms required, and with a state that (particularly at local level) struggles to serve citizens in predictable, efficient and fair ways.

The malaise that led to Zuma's triumph persists. So do the community protests, many dozens of which flare in poor neighbourhoods each month.

South Africans are questioning their loyalties, eyeballing a revered political organization, and reclaiming traditions of insubordination which the ANC (and the broader liberation movement) used to be able to harness and channel – but no longer commands.

Meanwhile, the entanglement of the ANC (via its investment arms) and significant proportions of its office bearers in business ventures favours the logic and imperatives of the market. Powerful sections of the ANC have developed a reflexive sympathy for policies that put the market ahead of society. The ANC cannot credibly claim to be the custodian and manager of a coherent 'liberation project' any longer. It now hosts a more disparate assortment of interests, ideologies and ideals than ever.

This places a huge premium on retaining power — not for any single goal, but in order to facilitate the pursuit of disparate objectives and ambitions.

This formlessness forces the ANC to advertise its 'radical' credentials with bluster and selective deeds. The organisation still commands enough attributes and means to continue patching together its dominance; no other political or social force rivals it on that front. But its political *authority* — and its ability to govern effectively and manage change, any change — hangs in the balance.

With the underlying economic and social crisis unresolved, increasing instability is likely.

What the ANC is struggling to pre-empt is a crisis of authority, a general crisis of the state in which all sorts of fundamental propositions about constitutional, social, moral and economic issues explode into an uproar of polemics. It has to re-assemble a normative framework that can calm such mordant energies. Doing so requires a set of propositions that resonate, that exude an authenticity across society.

A tried and trusted way of doing so is by affirming and valorising bonds that can muffle discord, or channel it in more manageable directions.

Our identities – 'who we are' and who we 'belong with', our cultural, sexual and family lives, our ethnic, linguistic and other allegiances – are deeply politicized and brim with contradictions. A big challenge for ANC is to adjust and connect these kinds of moral maps – templates for belonging and entitlement – with a practical politics.

This heralds greater recourse to rousing affirmations about entitlement, belonging identity – framed in the language of African nationalism. The bonding and disciplinary force of African nationalism remains the cardinal ideological turnkey of SA's transition. It lays the basis for the overwhelming electoral victories of the ANC, can blanket fractures of discontent, and allows it to situate its policies and deeds in an idealized historical narrative.

But there is a serious risk that exclusionary interpretations of belonging, citizenship and rights will prove politically rewarding.

The versions of nationalism deployed until now have been largely embracing, and mostly undemanding. For many South Africans this is appealing. But it is unsatisfactory in a society with a history as traumatizing – a history which in many ways still constitutes the present and decides the future.

More profane and resonant varieties are available – ones inflected with racial and ethnic chauvinism, for example, or with narrow, exacting interpretations of culture and tradition. Nationalism's embrace is always potentially chauvinistic; its selective inclusion presupposes exclusions. The terms of such exclusion are by now means settled; no doubt they will involve intense contests.

At the core of African nationalism is the goal of empowering and reclaiming the dignity of Africans. But it also implies grappling with slippery concepts and assertions – about who belongs, who has entitlements, who is 'truly South African' or 'African', and on what basis and terms they are such, about notions of authenticity and identity. The 2008 pogroms gave explosive grassroots expression to such passions and contests about 'who we are' and who we 'belong with', who has rights and entitlements.

Notions of custom and tradition will also feature more prominently. Already they are being stitched into more literal frameworks of authority and power. The powers invested in traditional authorities in the 2000s are an important aspect of this shift. They mark a conscious attempt by the ANC to extend and strengthen its authority via traditional leaders.

Those sorts of moves indicate a drift away from the constitutionalism that has helped anchor and distinguish SA's transition. There are already ample signs of a reaction against the 'luxuries' of liberal constitutionalism, which typically comes coupled with attempts to muzzle the news media, and 'tough-on-crime' posturing.

Under Zuma, the ANC seems to be dabbling with a normative framework for belonging that is both more conservative and more permissive than those that marked the Mandela and Mbeki eras. Such an approach combines social conservatism (invested with pinched, essentialist notions of identity, culture and tradition) with license for acquisitiveness and immoderation.

The outcomes are unclear: no doubt the shifts will be hotly contested, from both inside and beyond the ANC. But it would be foolish to take for granted a progressive outcome. Too many coarse tendencies and brazen ambitions now rub shoulders with power.

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Hein Marais is a South African writer. His new book *South Africa Pushed to the Limit: The political economy of change* (UCT Press & Zed Books, 2011) is available from bookstores nationwide or online via www.kalahari.net.

