

SOUTH AFRICA: TOWARD AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM?

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Should supporters of liberal democracy in South Africa fear the Zunami? Daryl Glaser suggests that those hoping for a quieter post-election life should be careful what they wish for.

Two authoritarian sub-traditions of the ruling Congress movement have long loomed large among potential threats to the constitutional democracy founded in the 1990s: radical nationalism and the Leninist variant of Marxism. They are now joined by a third: populism. Like nationalism and like Marxism (but unlike Leninism), populism contains democratic and progressive possibilities. But like them, too, it has a democracy-unfriendly side. With Jacob Zuma in power at the head of a movement that is populist in important ways, it is worth dwelling a little on this phenomenon. In what ways is Zuma a populist, and how bad a thing is it if he is?

The rise to power of Zuma can only be made fully intelligible if we invoke a version of the elite-mass distinction – a distinction at the heart of populist discourse, and which cuts across the Marxist class schema of bourgeoisie versus proletariat. The Tripartite Alliance Left likes to think that the ANC's 2007



Zuma Dawn
Photo: Flickr/Warrenski

Polokwane conference shifted the balance of forces in favour of the working class and against capital. There may be some truth in this depiction: the organized working class is certainly a part of the coalition that triumphed there, and its assertive presence is enough to unsettle big business. But the Zuma coalition is a multiclass one that extends well beyond the unionized proletariat to encompass a range of subalterns – shack dwellers, hostel dwellers, semi-educated urban youth, peasants, farm workers – as well as local and provincial party cadre, Zulus, traditionalists and pro-Zuma businessmen. This coalition was mobilized, not against capitalists, but against a range of ‘insider’ elites, first and foremost the leadership cadre and businessmen around Thabo Mbeki but encompassing, if often only subliminally, liberal judges and journalists, intellectuals, gender activists and urban sophisticates. Against these forces the ‘Zunami’ represented an anti-establishment revolt. The leaders of that revolt won at Polokwane. April 22 2009 was mere ratification.

In some ways this triumph must be a good thing

for South Africa’s liberal democracy. Whether you are a defender of liberal democracy (like this writer) or one of its critics, you are likely to see some of its genius as lying in an ability to rotate elites peacefully through power and provide institutional channels for expressing popular grievances. If long-run democratic stability depends on popular legitimacy, then Polokwane restabilised the democratic order by reconnecting it to a popular base. The ANC may remain entrenched as a ‘dominant party’, but Polokwane served as the vector of a mass desire for change, and it secured a change of government if not of party.

Moreover, liberal democracy has nothing to fear from an economic shift to the left, least of all the sort of moderate shift likely in fact to take place. (It would be surprising if South Africa shifted as far to the left economically as George W. Bush took the US in his final months in office!) Far from being narrowly ‘bourgeois’, liberal democracy is logically capable of accommodating working class power and gains, as many liberal-democratic polities did during European social democracy’s long postwar hegemony. The ideological reaction that shoved governments to the neo-liberal right from the late 1970s swept along dictatorships as well as liberal democracies. Indeed, mass electoral politics made for effective resistance to the wholesale abolition of welfare states. And if one purpose of liberal democracy is to enable a populace to test alternatives to failed ruling ideologies, then South Africa is surely due, democratically speaking, for a shift from economic policies that have been complicit in some of the world’s worst levels of inequality and unemployment. To be sure, a slow shuffle away from in-your-face neoliberalism commenced already under Mbeki in the early

2000s, but those initiating it did not bring the labour movement with them. From now on the Left will be inside the tent, forced to take partial responsibility – and to the extent that it gets to shape policy, will be accountable – for further moves in a leftward direction. Good: give it a go.

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Nor is there a threat to constitutional democracy in the fact that our new leader is under-educated compared to his predecessor-plus-one. Mbeki is a fine example of the damage that intellectuals can do in power. Instead of accepting the limits of his expertise and taking his cue from global medical-scientific consensus on HIV/AIDS, Mbeki experimented on his people with policies inspired by late-night trawling on internet sites. Mbeki's Africanism, which drove his insistence that colonialism rather than HIV caused AIDS, was moreover seriously ideological. The populist Zuma is ideologically shapeless and nurtures few pretensions about his intellectual powers. Happy to be the top guy, he is likely to leave health policy decisions to people who are guided by current scientific wisdom rather than by paranoia about the Western medical-industrial complex. Liberals rightly defend intellectual avant-gardism against popular prejudice and social conformity, but socially progressive liberals should refrain from intellectual snobbery. Indeed they ought to welcome the autodidact who rises from poverty and illiteracy as an exemplar of redemption through upward mobility – or as proof of the capacity of civil associations to generate 'organic intellectuals' fit for civic duty. Still more important, they ought to acknowl-

edge that on some issues 'ordinary people' come bearing a coalface knowledge that policymakers can usefully tap. If they do not acknowledge such things, why would they support democracy?

Still, there is a threat to democracy from populism. Populism, qua movement of revolt, displays an anti-institutional bias that sits uneasily with constitutionalism. The person of its leader floats above the normal politics of party and state, appealing to a popular desire for action in place of bureaucracy and routine. Radical populists are happy to unleash crowds against the pillars of institutional order, at least while it suits them. Thus Zuma, for a while, made the whole political world turn on the issue of his personal vindication. His mobs and allies gathered aggressively outside courtrooms, demonized judges as 'counter-revolutionaries' and successfully turned the tables on his prosecutorial accusers. Zuma and his supporters also threatened the media – another pillar of liberal democracy – with legal suits and tribunals. Since taking office the president has more than once promised to respect judicial and media independence, but oblique threats continue to issue from his camp, mostly veiled as talk of 'transformation'.

We should note, though, that in targeting the judiciary and media, Zuma's populism mimics Mbeki's Machiavellianism, radical nationalism and Leninism. The main difference is that Mbeki unleashed spies and online polemics rather than mobs on his enemies; a true *anti*-populist, he preferred legalistic decorum and ideological debate to anything hinting at uncontrolled popular expression. Nor do the authoritarian impulses in the Zuma camp spring exclusively from its leader's populism. Thanks to the presence of a re-Stalinised SACP and increas-

ingly purge-minded Cosatu leadership, there are plenty of ideologues in Zuma's own camp ready to explain broadsides against the media and judiciary as interventions necessary to counter 'bourgeois' institutions and plots. What lends Zuma-ism its particular lethality may indeed be this conjunction of Marxism-Leninism and post-ideological populism.

Another nasty thing about populism – democratically speaking – is its romanticisation of popular common sense and the corollary of this, an animus towards independent intellectuals, cultural liberals, modern women and variously defined outsiders, from gays to immigrants. Zuma has never in fact been an anti-African xenophobe, but it is telling that many of his fans are and assume him to be. Zuma's ANC is faithful to the party's post-1994 commitment to elite-level gender equality, but its president has signaled an affinity with men who think that women should be both sexually available and punished for getting pregnant in their unmarried teens. Ignoring the provisions and intention of the Bill of Rights, he has suggested that gay boys should be beaten to toughen them up and that the rights of the criminally accused should be curtailed. And some at least of Zuma's followers understood their rebellion as directed against intellectuals, their anti-intellectualism directed in the first instance at the Shakespeare-quoting ex-president but including in its sights the many lawyers, academics and commentators who recoiled at the prospect of Zuma's ascent to power. If intellectual snobbery is bad, so is anti-intellectualism, the currency of many a tyrant determined to impose thought control on society. In many ways, then, the Zuma brand – a potpourri of benevolent patriarchy, virility, folksiness, Zulu authenticity and fealty to customary and religious values – jars with

the spirit of egalitarian and liberal modernity supposedly animating the new constitutional order.

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The Leninist Marxism of Zuma-supporting leftists stands in a curious relationship to this brand, both awkward and supportive. Leninists are all too ready to join in attacks on ‘counter-revolutionary’ intellectuals, yet Marxism is itself historically a movement of intellectual vanguardism. Twentieth-century Marxist-Leninist regimes counterposed a conservative ‘socialist’ morality to bourgeois decadence, yet Marxism’s DNA is modernizing. In its will to school rather than celebrate the raw masses, and to champion modernity against reactionary forces and prejudices, Marxism is more like liberalism than populist traditionalism. It will be interesting to see how the juxtaposition of conservative populism and Marxist progressivism works out within the Zuma coalition.

How worried should liberal democrats be about Zuma’s populism? In the aftermath of Zuma’s swearing in, our new president has been the perfect statesman, dressing in suits rather than leopard skins, speaking in reassuring tones. Several factors could keep the authoritarian side of Zuma-ite populism in check. First, Zuma has in a sense won: if his drive was for personal vindication, he has succeeded. He can call the mobs off: as a creature of post-ideological populism, he has no further agenda of radical disruption that requires their service. As a post-ideological populist, moreover, Zuma is content to leave policymaking to policy wonks. Policy recklessness is

not on the cards. Further, and in contradistinction to many a populist, Zuma is very much a party man, and he is the man of a party that has long and strong traditions of collectivism in leadership. Zuma insists that he has no policy approach distinct from that of the ANC, and he probably means it. The popular cult of Zuma – the belief in Zuma’s almost Jesus-like powers – is not matched by any confidence that the leader has in his own redemptive magic. Whether or not one finds comforting this subordination of president to party, it certainly helps to neutralize one potential hazard of populism, the emergence of a strongman. Finally, Zuma is the benign patriarch sort of populist: he likes everyone in his kraal, not excluding the *Vryheidsfront Plus*. Inclusivity comes more naturally to him than it did to Mbeki.

If, as earlier conceded, populism has a democratic upside, its post-election deflation may not be a wholly good thing. When we look at Polokwane, we can choose to see a vindictive cadre humiliating a democratically elected leader, but we can also choose to see an inspiring pushback against Robert Michels’ iron law or oligarchy. We can choose, that is, to see evidence of a party grassroots determined to hold its leaders to account, whether in party conferences or (as briefly seemed to happen afterwards) via parliamentary portfolio committees. Progressive liberal democrats surely want the bottom-up assertion and accountability, even if they do not want intimidating crowds or riot. It’s a difficult balancing act: but those hoping for a quieter post-election life should be careful what they wish for.

Nor should we think that the threat to democracy-crucial institutions has entirely passed. Zuma’s inclusiveness has a conditional feel, and it is meant to disarm those contemplating adversarial politics.

We still lack a clear sense of what the new leadership intends for the judiciary and media, not to mention the provinces. What are we to make of the ANC’s continuing apparent refusal to accept that any party other than itself should control a province or big city? If the good side of populism can be put back in the box, the bad side of it can be conveniently released when necessary – witness the thugs of the MK Military Veterans’ Association marching on Helen Zille to demand her apology for impugning Zuma’s sexual honour. If maintaining the post-1994 constitutional order matters to you, best keep your guard.