

A tale of two nationalisms - Moeletsi Mbeki

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Or, how South Africa has ended up in the state that it's in

South Africa: 1909 - 2009: A tale of two nationalisms

Independence

South Africa became independent a 100 years ago this month. It was in September 1909 when the British king signed the South Africa Act into law thus passing political authority over South Africa from the British parliament to the parliament of the Union of South Africa.

Nationalism in South Africa

During the last 100 years South Africans made their own history. This history can be summed up as the history of nationalist rule since 1909.

The first period of nationalist rule started in 1910 and ended 84 years later in 1994. During this period South Africa was ruled by the two main factions of Afrikaner nationalism, the accommodationists faction of Anglo-Boer War Generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts and by the more anti-British faction spanning the era from General Hertzog to FW de Klerk.

The second period of nationalist rule commenced in 1994. This was the era of rule by Black nationalism. Interestingly Black nationalists did not have the strong factional divisions found among Afrikaner nationalists. Black nationalism was, and is, predominantly accommodationist both to the British who remain major investors in the country and to South Africa's economic oligarchy, the mineral energy complex who, with finance capital, control the commanding heights of the South African economy.

South Africa's two main nationalist movements had one thing in common; they were both movements of elites that sort to be included in the social, economic, cultural and political systems created by British colonialism.

Nationalist elites

The Afrikaner nationalist elite were predominantly private landowners who controlled vast tracts of undeveloped land that they had expropriated during several wars from indigenous populations in the interior of the country. At the Western Cape there was another more settled group of farmers descended from slave owners. Slavery was introduced at the Cape in the mid-17th century by the Dutch East India Company and was abolished by the British in 1834.

Black nationalism was a movement of the small Westernised Black elite that emerged during the era of British colonialism. This elite was prominent in the Eastern Cape and in Natal. Many of them had fought on the side of the British against independent tribes and in the process had converted to Christianity. The British built schools for these groups to introduce them to Western arts, crafts and science. When slavery was abolished some of the descendants from artisans among former slaves became part of this Black elite as independent craftsmen. Towards the end of the 19th century, yet another group descended from among non-indentured Indian professionals and merchants that paid their way to South Africa added to the Black elite.

When the British decided to give up political control of South Africa after over a century of trials and tribulations, they therefore had a choice as to which of the two nationalist elites to hand over power to - the Black elite or the Afrikaner elite. The two elites offered the British different models of how they would rule South Africa and at the same time how they would protect and advance British economic interest.

Black nationalism offered a democratic model of rule along the lines that the British themselves had introduced at the Cape Colony in the middle of the 19th century. Afrikaner nationalism on the other hand offered a model that excluded Blacks from political power but would mobilize the Blacks as cheap labour for British diamond and gold mining companies. The British had no trouble deciding; they chose the Afrikaner nationalist model to whom they handed control of South Africa in 1910.

Industrialisation

The Afrikaner nationalist model was clearly built on a defective foundation. It however, surprised many by

lasting for 84 years before it was obliged to hand power to Black nationalists. What accounted for Afrikaner nationalist's staying power? This can be answered with one word - industrialization.

The main agenda for Afrikaner nationalism was firstly to improve their agricultural expertise and to get their products to markets in the mining towns that sprang up with the discovery of diamonds and gold in the late 19th century. Secondly it was to ensure that Afrikaner people caught up with English speaking South Africans. Thirdly, it was to reduce the influence of the British government over South Africa. These objectives were reinforced by a massive education drive to raise the technical skills of the Afrikaner population.

In order to achieve these objectives, Afrikaner nationalists used the state to develop transportation and communication infrastructure as well as to establish a vast network of state-owned enterprises in broadcasting, armaments, power generation, development finance, iron and steel and chemicals. Some of these parastatals - SABC, Iscor, Sasol, Eskom, Armscor, Denel and IDC became internationally renowned. Afrikaner nationalists also facilitated the growth of Afrikaner entrepreneurs several of whom developed international brands.

While consolidating the cohesion of the Afrikaner population under their leadership, Afrikaner nationalists embarked on a massive drive to disrupt the cohesion of the Black community. Their main instruments being the migrant labour system, single sex hostels, forced removals, stripping Blacks of whatever assets they had and blocking them from acquiring new ones. The purpose of these measures was to atomise the Black population so that it could not resist. All these methods exposed the Black population to being exploited as cheap labour. It therefore, took the Blacks many years before they could recover sufficient cohesion to mount meaningful opposition. This started to happen on a significant scale only in the 1970s and 1980s.

The rule of Afrikaner nationalism however had a built-in contradiction that ultimately led to its undoing. This was political and economic disempowerment of the Blacks which eventually resulted in to endless conflict between the Afrikaner nationalist controlled state and the Black population. These conflicts reinforced by interventions by the international community ultimately led to the birth of South Africa's democracy in 1994.

Black Nationalist rule

As a political system, democracy has certain universal attributes. These are universal adult suffrage, elections at fixed regular intervals, equal chance to win for all contestants, and the winner has right to form the government which must last for a specified period. Notwithstanding these common attributes, no two democracies are the same. Each country's democracy is a product of that country's social and economic structures as well as a result of the balance of power of the various social groups in that particular society.

South Africa's Black nationalists while they were an elite, as we have seen, they were an elite that did not own property. This was to be a crucial factor in determining the characteristics of South Africa's democracy especially the nature of its internal contradictions.

The new Black elite were therefore faced with several questions when it gained control of state power in 1994:

- Should it use the newfound power to enrich itself?
- Should it use the new power to enrich the mass of the Black people who had been exploited for the best part of a hundred years?
- Should it do a bit of both?
- What about the wealth of South Africa's rich whites, should they be allowed to keep it?
- Should it be nationalised?
- Should it be taxed and to what extent?

South Africa's big business had anticipated all these questions and came up with its own solution. It offered to transfer a small part of its assets to individual leaders of the Black resistance movement in return for them leaving the country's business environment essentially as they found it. The leaders found this offer of instant wealth hard to resist. The co-option of Black nationalist elite by big business came to be known as Black Economic Empowerment or BEE.

South Africa's largest companies notwithstanding their deal with the Black nationalists realized that conflict between the Black nationalists and the Black masses was inevitable and would probably be even more fierce than the struggle between the Black masses and Afrikaner nationalism. Thus within five years of Black nationalists taking control of the state in 1994, South Africa's largest companies, that is, Anglo American Corporation, Old Mutual, Billiton, South African Breweries and Dimension Data moved their head offices and their primary listings from Johannesburg to London.

Anglo American which once accounted for more than 50% of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange market capitalization and which had had a major presence in almost every sector of the South African economy - gold mining, banking, insurance, beverages, motor vehicle assembly, agriculture, real estate, media, pulp and paper, food processing, chemicals, engineering - disinvested from all these sectors in South Africa. It was left with only four mining interests - platinum, diamonds, coal and iron-ore.

What were the risks that came with Black nationalist rule that these large corporations identified which led them to migrate from South Africa?

We saw earlier that the Afrikaner nationalist elite in order to advance its interests as land owners had to drive South Africa's industrialization. The Black nationalist elite on the other hand are not property owners. Their primary interests are not so much to drive further industrialization as they have nothing to gain from increasing investment. Their primary interest is to drive the Black elite's private consumption. This poses two major threats to the stability of South Africa. Private consumption will be at the expense of investment especially of investment in South Africa's physical infrastructure. Secondly growing elite private consumption will be in competition with the consumption of the black poor and state employees.

All these contradictions are already manifesting themselves. In 2008 South Africa ran out of electricity because despite many warnings that state owned power company Eskom needed to build more power plants, governments turned a deaf ear. It did not want to make the necessary investment in power generation or to open up power generation to independent power producers: parastatals have become a cash cow for Black nationalist elite.

Also in 2008 for several weeks South Africa was caught up in what came to be known as xenophobic riots which left more than 60 people dead and thousands uprooted from their homes. These were a manifestation of another decision not to invest. This time not to invest in the army. South Africa thus left its borders uncontrolled leading to a flood into South Africa's poor neighborhoods of economic refugees from many parts of Africa. This led to competition for meagre resources between South Africa's urban poor and arriving foreign migrants inevitably leading to violent conflicts between these two groups.

With the wealth of the whites thus protected through BEE, the only source for enrichment of the new Black elite available - besides old fashion hard work that is - were state revenues. This has proven to be the central internal contradiction of the era of Black nationalist rule. This contradiction can be summed up as follows: who gets what share of state revenues between the elite's private consumption, the poor people's welfare consumption, investment in social and physical infrastructure, as well as payments to other claimants such as workers in the public sector.

Competition between these claims on state revenues has become increasingly explosive. South Africa is therefore now entering a new phase of conflict, the conflict between the Black nationalist elite and the Black masses over how to distribute state revenues between them. This struggle is commonly referred to as a struggle over service delivery which in a limited way it is.

ANC president, Jacob Zuma, once predicted that the ANC's rule would last until the second coming of Jesus Christ. At the rate at which conflict is growing Jesus may find South Africa a burnt out shell when he returns.

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