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Zuma two, democracy nil

Crooked though he may be, South Africa's problems go way beyond its president

At a three-day meeting in May, the National Executive Committee of the African National Congress (ANC) once again blocked the removal of Jacob Zuma, president both of the party and of South Africa. Committee members had knocked down an earlier vote of no confidence in November 2016. In dictatorial fashion, Zuma warned his party colleagues not to question his leadership again while the ANC Secretary General, Gwede Mantashe, threatened rebellious MPs with expulsion from the party if they voted against the Committee's decision and supported an opposition motion in parliament to impeach the president.

The latest calls for Zuma's resignation come after leaked emails suggesting the powerful Gupta family were allowed to wield undue political influence over the president, members of his cabinet and several state-run companies. Critics say the Guptas – Indian-South African entrepreneurs with interests in mining, energy, air travel, IT and the media – have used their close ties to the State to further their own businesses.

A controversial cabinet reshuffle and decisions by rating agencies to relegate the country's debt to junk status has only increased public indignation. The government alliance of the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and even members of the ANC's own leadership team are calling for Zuma to step down.

President Zuma has undoubtedly abused his office and the Guptas have likewise influenced actions in government, causing considerable damage to the country, his party, and South African democracy in general. So the fact most of his party leadership voted once more for him to stay shows Zuma's network is deeply entrenched within the ANC. The political, economic, and social divisions in the country, far from damaging the regime, actually seem to be helping it.

The current fixation on Zuma, the Guptas and the power struggles

within the ANC are distracting South African society from fundamental problems that mean its hard-won democracy is being sold down the river.

Junking out

International rating agencies have downgraded South Africa's credit rating to junk status, citing unresolved issues including inequality, poverty, unemployment and the social unrest. A struggle for power between different ANC factions has created further instability, as have the persistent demands of party left-wingers and the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters party to nationalise land and key industries.

The main reason behind the downgrade, however, was the dismissal of respected Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan. Investors at home and abroad saw in his leadership the final bastion against kleptocracy, and the last guarantor of the government's previous course of stability and growth. South Africa went into a technical recession in June with unemployment rates rising to a new high of 27 percent.

This political crisis is flanked by complex economic and social crises, too, stemming in part from the unequal and exploitative structures brought in under colonialism and cemented under apartheid. There is still a huge wealth gap, and access to even basic healthcare, education, training and housing differs vastly. Globalisation has just added to the precariousness of many people's lives. It's no wonder students are calling for free education and for a "de-colonisation" of the country's universities, which remain dominated by the white minority. White students still overshadow their black counterparts in terms of success at school and on the jobs market, thanks to their already far greater economic and social advantages.

Protests and vandalism across the country's townships and rural regions reflect the black population's lack of hope or prospects. Demonstrators are sick of petty corruption and mismanagement by local officials. A lack of jobs or steady income means many are dependent on social handouts, which are paid by bureaucrats often on condition of a bribe. Yet civil servants positions – frequently the only jobs going – are not given on merit, but as a reward for party loyalty. The dependency this system of patronage creates has led to a virtual fusion of the ANC and the South African state over the last 23 years, spreading like a virus into every last corner of the system. Endemic corruption and sustained mismanagement, a rising crime rate and violence against women and children are the sorry result.

The question is, why the government led by the ANC, together with the trade unions and the socialists, has not been able to change these structures in a sustainable way and to the benefit of the black majority.

Plundering the chaos

The South African left is caught in a dilemma. By blaming the country's woes on free-market capitalism and searching for a practicable alternative, the left wing has – lacking new economic ideas – fallen back on tired ideology. Many of the country's political and socio-economic problems are by no means unique to South Africa. However, they are aggravated by the country's specific historical circumstances. Questions of racism and identity dominate the discourse because South African society remains segregated – culturally, geographically, economically, and socially. South Africans still haven't got over the trauma of the colonial period and apartheid because the same structures, though technically illegal under South Africa's present day democracy, still prevail.

The neo-liberalism that swept the globe during the 1980s and 1990s affected South Africa too. When apartheid ended, politicians and academics embraced the belief that privatisation, deregulation and a reduced role for the state would unleash the power of the free market. The economy would expand, creating new jobs and increasing incomes. Globalisation was in full swing, and the South African government, looking to reintegrate the country into the world economy, did as it was told by international financial institutions and investors. It reduced state debt, balanced the budget and equalised the trade deficit. It also introduced social welfare programmes to alleviate the worst of the nation's poverty.

Though initially successful, this strategy opened the door to short-term, speculative financial investments and to the legal withdrawal of profits out of the country. The removal of protective tariffs happened too fast and unchecked, leading to a wave of closures in the manufacturing sector. In textiles, steel and mining, thousands of jobs were, and still are being lost. Yet there was no corresponding investment in infrastructure, which would have diversified the domestic economy away from its dependency on raw materials. So while the service sector is flourishing, the share of GDP generated by manufacturing continues to fall. Jobs in industry – especially for low-qualified workers – are disappearing, and there aren't enough new positions to replace them. At the same time, there is a shortage of skilled labour for high-qualified positions and no decent system to retrain workers, stifling innovation. Social welfare transfers are insufficient, and reach only the very poorest. A recent

scandaltypo3/#_msocom_2 surrounding the Social Security Agency has further rocked people's trust in the system.

The 1% live it up

Despite this, until 2008, conventional indicators of economic growth were positive, with moderate gains filtering through to the middle class. But it was the top one percent and the political elite, with their close ties to capital, who really benefitted. Meanwhile, the forgotten black majority had to make do with the crumbs from the table of those who controlled access to the country's resources.

Since 2008, conditions have deteriorated. The global crisis destroyed more jobs, increasing the gap between rich and poor (and thus between black and white). Correspondingly, the battle for influence and resources has intensified. Left-wingers within the government have been blocked by members of the ANC from implementing economic policy, and Zuma, whom the left put into office, reneged on his promise to radically transform the economy.

COSATU, the largest and most influential trade union federation, later split over frustration with political corruption which further weakened and fragmented the workers movement. Business, too, is split between "white monopoly capital" - which thrives on an exploitative employment model coupled with deregulated financial markets – and the "tenderpreneurs" – officials who abuse their political power and influence to secure government tenders. The latter, while benefitting from the government's Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) programme, are often mere frontmen or finance their deals on credit, putting their businesses on a shaky footing. Neither group accepts any social responsibility and both use their political influence to advance their material interests. Zuma is skilled at playing the two off against each another, increasing divisions within the country and enriching himself as he does so.

The political spectrum has also changed significantly in recent years, with two challengers rising up around the ANC: the liberal, market-orientated Democratic Alliance (DA) to the right and the socialist, populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to the left. This threat to the ANC's dominance has led to an increasingly bitter struggle for power within the party and the ruling alliance, distracting from necessary reforms. Unions and left-wing groups have rejected the national development plan, a blueprint for strengthening and developing the country's economy, calling it too neo-liberal.

The social compact reached at the dawn of South African democracy in 1994 and sealed by the passing of the constitution in 1996, is now defunct. There is now deep distrust between business, the government, the unions and civil society.

Getting rid of Zuma and curtailing the Guptas' influence won't be enough to solve the country's fundamental problems – the poverty, inequality, and unemployment affecting the black majority population and the deep-rooted influence of money on politics inherited from the colonial and apartheid years. But it would be a start.



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