The State and Transformation

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It is now familiar that under Thabo Mbeki the democratic project experienced several major reversals. While holding on to the formal constitutional architecture, the time of Mbeki is said to have been associated with the hollowing-out of parliament, the demobilisation of civil-society and even the erosion of the separation of powers.

In 2006 the Congress of South African Trade Unions warned that South Africa and the ANC were drifting towards dictatorship. "Dictatorship never announces its arrival," Zwelinzima Vavi told a media briefing in Cape Town. "It won't, like drum majorettes, beat drums and parade down the street to announce it has arrived. The main concern of the (National Executive) Committee centres on signs that we may be drifting toward dictatorship. This appears in the use of state institutions … in narrow factional fights. We see it in the use of sections of the media to assassinate the character of individuals through off-the-record briefings and the leaking of sensitive information in the hands of those charged to investigate crimes"[i]. As early as 2002, Jeremy Cronin worried about the "zanufication of the ANC". It was a term he used to refer to the "bureaucratisation of the struggle"[ii]. This perspective informed the way that commentators and numerous party members viewed the events at the 52nd National Conference of the ANC.

Several observers welcomed the Polokwane conference as the "day when democracy in the ANC really came of age"[iii]. Steven Friedman argued, for example, that the events in Polokwane represented a break with the "autocratic" culture of the organisation. "It is not hard to see why the ANC old guard did not like what they saw on day one" he suggested. "They are used to conferences where people keep their differences out of the public eye, when they air them at all, and where leaders are treated with great deference, whether they deserve it or not. They are horrified at the possible birth of a new ANC in which members insist on making their leaders serve them, rather than publicly doffing their caps to those in charge"[iv]. Likewise, Eddie Webster hailed the election as a democratic break-through. For the first time in postcolonial Africa, he said, a leader of the dominant political party was forced to stand down after being rejected by his comrades in an internal election[v]. "And, since the ANC may well dominate our politics for a while yet", concluded Friedman, "whatever happens here at Polokwane, it is not impossible that December 16 2007 could be remembered as the day when our democracy became deeper and more real"[vi]. The fact that a public domain emerged, even if only for the duration of the conference in Polokwane, is for both commentators a positive sign of democratisation in the ANC.

The lesson of the last ten years, however, should alert even the most optimistic commentator that the democratic project is not necessarily safe in the hands of those that invoke its terms and symbols. In postcolonial Africa this is especially true

of nationalist movements that came to power on the promise of democracy – but that very quickly eviscerated the democratic space. Nonetheless, there is reason for cautious optimism. Mbeki was successfully brought down for his subversion of democratic procedures both within the ANC and generally. There are signs that South Africans, both within the ANC Alliance and without, are rediscovering their taste for dissidence.

If there is reason to be circumspect about whether 'democratisation' will constitute a key platform of a 'left' government, it is more certain that such a government will rethink the State's relationship to the market. This is to be welcomed. Despite fairly robust levels of economic growth in South Africa over the last several years, growth has been accompanied by increasing levels of unemployment for South Africa's historic working class and for poor, new entrants to the labour market, widening inequality and deepening poverty (moderated only by welfare instruments like pensions and the child-support grant). Given this situation, there is a compelling case to rethink the State's role in the economy and society. What the current situation suggests is that 'deracialising capitalism' (Black Economic Empowerment and Affirmative Action) has not borne the kinds of developmental fruits it was hoped it would. The current interest in the notion of the 'developmental state' is testimony to the search for a new role for the state. Over the past month, Peter Evans, the Berkeley sociologist whose book *Embedded Autonomy* is a key reference text in this debate, has spoken at two separate events on the prospects of a 'developmental state' in South Africa[vii].

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Yet there is something naïve about these debates if they are not accompanied by reflections on the nature of the South African state as it is today. Peter Evans has warned that treating the 'developmental state' as a model that can simply be emulated is to conjure away the unique historical context in East Asia after the second world-war: the dissolution of land-owning classes and weakly organised capitalists that enabled the state to direct investment in key, strategic sectors. This is not the case today, especially in South Africa. Vishwas Satgar, to his credit, has begun such a reflection by considering how, far from being weak and amenable to direction from the State, capitalists in South Africa are both confident (bolstered by the ideological crisis of the left) but also increasingly organised in and through global circuits of capital. As welcome as such a political-economic reading of the current situation is, we must also ask more prosaic questions about the State as an institution, or complex of institutions.

What has been generally ignored in South Africa regarding the relationship of the state to development is the importance of **bureaucracy**. In the distinction between 'predatory' and 'developmental' states, 'bureaucracy' has pride of place. 'Predatory states,' writes Evans, "lack the ability to prevent individual incumbents from pursuing their own goals. Personal ties are the only source of cohesion, and individual maximisation takes precedence over pursuit of collective goals. […] Predatory states are, in short, characterised by a death of bureaucracy as Weber understood it. The internal organisation of developmental states comes much closer to approximating a Weberian bureaucracy. Highly selective meritocratic recruitment and long-term career rewards create commitment and a sense of corporate coherence"[viii].

Focusing simply on questions of macro-economic policy or on the balance of class forces in the current situation detracts attention from the state of the State in South

Africa. Whatever interventions a 'left' government may decide are appropriate, they will necessarily require a well functioning state administration. Such a state is more often than not simply presupposed. Yet the State is precisely what has been compromised over the last ten years or so.

It is simply incorrect to debate the failures of the state as a consequence of affirmative action. Rather, the pursuit of equity in the public sector has coincided with the introduction of a new politics of and on the State. Since, at least, 1999 (the introduction of the Public Finance Management Act) there have been concerted efforts to transform the State away from the model of the bureaucracy (hierarchical, rule-driven, meritocratic) in the direction of the New Public Management (NPM) (manager-driven, high levels of discretion and autonomy, including over financial matters). The NPM was intended both to transform the values of old apartheid-era organisations and to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. In particular it stressed the importance of managers over bureaucrats and valued the application of business principles to the way state agencies operated.

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We should be careful before concluding that the rise of managerialism and the influence of the NPM especially after the introduction of the Gear strategy in 1996, are further evidence of South Africa's slippery slide towards 'neoliberalism'. When NPM was first mooted the model was not Margaret Thatcher's Britain or the United States of America under Reagan. The paradigm example was that of France, and in particular, the thinking behind the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA). There are two aspects of the French experience that were deemed especially important. In the first place, the ENA model, unlike the British one, privileges the state as the dominant agent of development. In the second place, it relies on the role of a powerful class of senior managers who are given high levels of political autonomy and financial discretion.

It is not difficult to understand why in the late 1990's this model must have appealed to those in government and in policy circles sympathetic to the democratic project. Faced with the legacy of apartheid institutions, the new managerialism created opportunities for high level political deployments to fast-track transformation. Furthermore, in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Communism and, more generally, the inauspicious fortunes of postcolonial African states, New Public Management seemed a way to retain a key role for the State without incurring its costs: wastefulness, inefficiency and massive corruption.

Yet in terms of NPM a public sector manager is expected to have uncanny analytical skills to navigate between complex legal, political, administrative, social and economic environments. In short, it is an unenviable position for even the most highly trained and talented recruit. In the face of serious skills shortage in South Africa, the NPM model was severely compromised. Contrary to widespread public perceptions however, the problem is not that, under the pressure of equity legislation, persons without the appropriate skills were appointed to senior positions. The truth, as evidenced by the statistics, is very different. Rather than appoint unsuitable candidates (both in terms of their skills and in terms of their demographic profile), government departments are simply leaving positions empty. The consequences are devastating.

In research for a book edited by Adam Habib and Kristina Bentley, Vinothan Naidoo found that, on average, 25% of senior manager positions are vacant in

the public service. In some departments, including Home Affairs, it is as high as 48%[ix]. Coupled with these extreme staff shortages, government departments are poaching from each other. Together, vacancies and high staff turnover have conspired to destabilise government departments, destroy their institutional memory, demoralise staff and undermine their capacity to perform. Under such conditions it is no surprise that corruption has flourished.

The uneven performance of the public service requires that we begin to ask questions about its institutional character, its systems and processes, its internal culture and its relationship with bodies in society (political parties, social networks, even churches). It is time to stop making affirmative action a scapegoat for all apparent government failure and to start asking questions about the character of transformation as a movement towards new public management. What have been the effects of moving away from the bureaucratic model and from undoing its systems and processes? Has the creation of powerful and autonomous managerial positions not facilitated corruption and made it easier to blur the lines between party and state?

NOTES

[i] cited in Leon Engelbrecht, May 2006

[ii] Cronin, 2002

[iii] Friedman, 17/12/2007

[iv] Ibid, Friedman

[v] Webster, 19/12/2007

[vi] Friedman, 17/12/2007

[vii] The first was organised by Vishwas Satgar and Michelle Williams and the other by the Human Sciences Research Council

[viii] Evans: 1995, p. 12

[ix] cited in Chipkin: 2008

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