

# Populism and the National Democratic Revolution in South Africa

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I

KwaZulu-Natal has been and continues to be mutinous. There is a sense in the popular imagination, usually constructed by the media and embellished in everyday conversation, that there is something different, insubordinate and robust about the province.

There is.

But we do need to move away from the platitudes that its 'character' is somehow linked to the fact that there are too many Zulus (there are, of course there are) or Indians (there are) and that even its whites are uncomfortable with broader South Africa (memories of the Torch Commando and the Last Outpost).

What is correct is that it has presented, as a territory scrambled together by colonial forces, challenges to the Union and then to the Republic of Apartheid South Africa. It has also displayed a longstanding ability to present key challenges to African national struggles—harboring differentiating and sometimes secessionist streaks to them.

So prevalent is this popular image that even current KwaZulu-Natal politicians sport a mischievous glint in the eye (a glint that borders on pride) whenever the subject is mentioned. It seems to confirm their robust uniqueness. But correctly they protest that the current troubles in the ANC and Inkatha, with their succession contests embellished with a lot of Zulu-talk have nothing to do with any deep historical character-formation.

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But the evidence is there, my historian friends protest in turn: such behavior spans the formation of all types of national organization in the country— from trade unionism to politics.

After all, the argument goes, any history-conscious person will recall A.W.G Champion's ICU *yase* Natal. All it took is some problems with the national leadership of Clements Kadalie and his cohorts to be mixed with local dynamics before discord and division occurred. Or later, when committed communist and socialist trade unionists tried to revive trade unions, Zulu Phungula gave the dockworkers and other migrants who were to come his way, an independent ethnic base. Even in the late 1970s, the TUACC inner-circle of Durban, arrogantly (for some), confidently (for others) insisted on their way or no way in the formation of FOSATU. And even when their detractors like SAAWU decided to join COSATU, it was the Natal grouping that refused to comply, going on its own way. And it was in this province and no other that an UWUSA was to be possible.

On the political terrain, many would recall Chief Buthelezi's ANC *yase* Natal, better known as Inkatha and the parting of the ways between the two in 1979. For historical reasons, Rowley Arenstein used to argue, the national liberation struggle in Natal immediately translates into a Zulu liberation struggle. Now, there is talk of the 'Zuma-Zulu' factor and/or the 'Zulu anti-Mbeki core', dramatized as a repetition of what had gone before: 'our way' or 'no way'. However fascinating such conceptions are, they are dangerous, at a time of rising greed and need.

If there is 'mutinous energy' it is no longer between the ANC and the IFP but *within* each one. However respectful I am of in-depth regional histories and cultural formation, I submit that the reasons for the turbulence are not embedded in a primordial uniqueness

but they are due to very recent developments. Had it been about Mazisi Kunene's, Prof Maphalala's, Chief Buthelezi's, S'bu Ndebele's, Prof Jeff Guy's or even Jacob Zuma's understanding of historical Zulu-ness it would have been a great debate but it isn't about that at all.

The Zulu-ness that we read and hear so much about is a new construction and is a response by African working-class people to a social crisis unfolding around them.

It is the coincidence of this construction with the political drama unfolding here that calls for serious self-reflection.

## II

The main drama in the province has been political. In crude summary: it is about the ANC emerging as a clear winner through the ballot-box. This was a remarkable success given the organizational density of Inkatha. The latter did not depend for its existence on Homeland institutions and structures alone but also on the exercise of social power through its branches, its supporters and later its militia. No one could predict in 1994 given the first electoral results (although many social scientists did predict an ANC victory) that the ANC would grow. And indeed it did and Inkatha shrunk somewhat.

To avoid platitudes this success story has to be understood in four distinct stages: firstly, key in the 1980s was the growth of democratic trade union organization *beyond* the broader democratic movement's toe-hold. The latter, after the rise of civic movements and later the United Democratic Front was restricted through the Apartheid state's and Inkatha's territorial 'fight-back'. For a while, until the rapid growth of COSATU democratic trade unions included large numbers of Inkatha supporters, spanning not only the main cities but also all the decentralized industrial areas of the province. Although its growth too was brought to a rude halt by the unfolding civil war, most African workers remained members of COSATU's affiliates and were hardened into those ranks through the frontal assault on their organizations and their elected leaders.

The second stage coincided with Jacob Zuma's stewardship of the ANC in the province in the immediate pre-election and post-election period. Jacob Zuma of-

fered a 'third way' between the contending approaches of the insurrectionary Midlands (led by Harry Gwala) and the 'pro-negotiation' and 'peace-settlement' Durban core. Zuma's candidacy had a strong support from the main COSATU and SACP networks in the province. His most important achievement was to enhance the independence of the Royal House and therefore to neutralize the monarchy as the custodian of the cultural integrity of all Zulu people. He also managed through the key economic ministry that he occupied as an MEC, the consolidation of robust regional economic interests.

The next stage under the stewardship of S'bu Ndebele won the electoral breakthrough and his ascendance to the premiership of the province. His vision of an African Renaissance as the vehicle through which the province would move 'beyond conflict' combined identity-linked idealism with a number of hard-nosed on the ground electoral pacts, deals and breakthroughs. For him, Zulu-ness was activated as an exemplar of broader African traditions as an evolving and ever-changing endogenous modernism. Any analysis of the last election results points to important increases in ANC support in areas where the organization had only tiny pockets of support in the past.

The fourth stage begins in earnest with the last national and local government elections. Ndebele argued that the Renaissance was cherished by intellectuals but remained 'intellectual for the masses'. He was right, what was growing instead at local level was a grassroots populism (yes, the same that was later to be expressed as a rallying call against Jacob Zuma's perceived humiliation) and it has been capturing grassroots discontent and resentment at the simultaneous growth of opportunities and inequality. It is a serious and emergent populism because it involves a clear shift in language from the popular-democratic past to populism with serious authoritarian undertones. It is beginning to be 'uploaded' from the grassroots and 'downloaded' from party structures in a mutually-reinforcing cycle.

For historians these stages are too short, the years they refer to can be subsumed under longer sequences and as the jargon has it, 'trajectories'. Unfortunately, our lives are shorter than too short and we do need immediate analyses. For sociologists, at least, they are crucial: the 40 year-olds of the 1980s are now pensioners; the youth of the 80s are mature men and women

and the youth of today were only born in the 80s and gained an understanding of the world around them in the 1990s and 2000s. Under each evocative category of analysis there is 'the changing of the guards', of personnel and of dispositions. I will return to this later in order to try and speak sensibly about 'populism'.

### III

The shift in language is not due to a primordial return to 'traditionalism' however 'traditional' it sounds. Rather it is a direct consequence of rapid democratization. Central here is the new Local Authority legislation and as Gillian Hart and I have argued often, to the turn to local authorities as key-points for development. The crucial issue that has to be understood is that the ANC has experienced (and I will speak of the ANC because my access to Inkatha networks is more limited) a dramatic horizontal spread of its mass-base in the province. There is no inch of this contested province where there is no councilor, or a defeated councilor, or a councilor-in-waiting and by implication a branch and differential branch activity pregnant with its own local dynamics.

Such a rapid process of horizontal decentralization and spread of energies has gone hand-in-hand with an unavoidable provincial (and at a larger scale national) centralization. Without it, the 'centre' could not 'hold'. This is not only due to rank opportunism or anarchic forces (the 'parasitism that the SACP document 'Bua Komanisi!' alludes to, after all 'parasitism' is always in relation to how people ought to have acted according to a theory of how they should have; or 'ill-discipline' in the ANC which according to Thabo Mbeki has bred populism-July,2007) but, because given the broader mix of polarizing greed and need, each locale (involving branches and councilors and large numbers of expectant people) is animated by class contestations, inclusions and exclusions, crises and differential strains. Class struggles and competition are rife *within* branches of the ANC (and Inkatha for that matter) than they are between workers, bosses and the state in broader society.

It is within this 'growth-spurt', unconsciously and consciously, the price that the ANC had to pay for its electoral success involved a shift in language. Whereas in the 1980s and the 1990s the distinguishing language of belonging to one or the other movement could show differentiation between democrats and socialists on

the one side and 'traditionalists' on the other, such distinctions were blurred in the interests of peace and 'development'. By implication the political culture of mandates, accountability, participation was given short shrift so it has begun to be indistinguishable from the other: *uhlonipha*, loyalty and authoritative obedience. *Ubuntu* these days, in a vague way, covers both.

The emerging language of populism is made-up of key 'Zulu characteristics' not defined by what is cherished by intellectuals, but what the 'masses' have found as easily accessible points of unity. This is evident in the public rhetoric of gatherings in the province. Whereas this language might allow grassroots ANC-linked intellectuals to erode Inkatha's ideological building-blocks, and Inkatha leaders to defend their perceived turf, the differences are increasingly difficult to distinguish. My experience and the experience of my peers and senior students in gatherings in the province points to little difference between ANC and Inkatha branch-based language, between cultural forms of expression or hymnody (the same mix of *giya* and *indlamu*, *isicathama* and *maskandi*, Christian and Zionist sounds percolate everything). The most rhetorical form of the *isibongo* alludes to different 'heroes' but the substance of the moral lessons are the same.

Bar one difference: in ANC gatherings if 'outsiders' are involved, it takes one platform orator to mention GEAR and poverty and the chants start against the presidency and move quickly to Umkhonto we Sizwe refrains and to 'umshini wam' incantations among many other incantations from the 1980s. There is a radical populism in the air punctuated by 'veterans' and by now, civil-war hardened ex- youths (remember: now, 40 year-olds) of the 'amaqabane' and 'amad-elakufa' generations. It is a symbolic assertion of exclusion and hope.

This phenomenon involved a cultural and ideological shift- the first, the 'cultural' emerged from below, the latter, the 'ideological' emerged from above. A cultural shift was already in place in the mass democratic movement-linked cultural organizations even before the elections. I know. I was there. No other province had the depth of grassroots cultural mobilization using indigenous forms of expression as a democratic and socialist manifestation in the trade unions and community organizations. It was a profound expression of cultural creativity. The forms were deeply local using

both tradition and innovation, the forms were oral, the language isiZulu. The disillusionment with the insensitivity of 'smarts' and 'intellectuals' from Gauteng and the Western Cape who defined the cultural anti-apartheid terrain led to a withdrawal and re-direction of energies. The handing over of Arts and Culture to Inkatha nationally and provincially reinforced the trend towards an assertive Zulu-ness.

Starting from the 'Jacob Zuma' period of leadership but consolidated through the 'S'bu Ndebele' period a new definition of belonging started gaining force from 'above': that the past was regrettable and tragic. The Shakan modernizing and progressive project had remained unfinished, destroyed by internal division and external forces and much of the historical discord all the way to the 'Natal violence' was animated by it. This was a radical re-reading of Zulu history and a way of bringing forth a symbolic unity among people who killed each other with impunity. 'We are in a province of blood that needs purification', argued Pitika Ntuli (March 17, 2000) as part of the Ndebele-led Renaissance initiative: 'we are in a province in which son kills mother, and father kills daughter-in-law and wife. We are in a province in need of spiritual renewal and revival'. No one disagreed.

These discourses partly cultural and subterranean, partly trumpeted from ideological platforms, have powered the ANC into areas where the 'amaqabane' of the past could not reach. Furthermore, as kinship-based ties were beginning to be re-established, ties that were torn during the violence- a process of reconciliation from 'below' — both the commonness of culture and the thought that the past was regrettable have eased many tensions.

Whereas for S'bu Ndebele a historical consciousness was a necessary search for an African modernity beyond race, for many of the grassroots intellectuals powered by cultural practices from below, it was an affirmation of a codified, static, unchanging, Zulu-ness. It was not long before a new ethnic ontology started defining who the 'we' were which excluded Indians and Whites (let alone other 'foreign' Africans). Nge-ma might have apologized for his song 'AmaNdiya' in 2002 but it is still being sung. The latter, the AmaKhu-la and Abelungu can only belong to a national community through what they do, not through what they are. Their inclusion or exclusion had become a forceful Afro-Zulu judgement: they are at best tolerated stran-

gers.

All this offers a culturally powerful answer to four deep social 'crises' that have affected the grassroots to the core: it is my contention ( a point that I have amplified in the journal *African Identities*) that in every locale we are experiencing the following: the spread of HIV/AIDS has exploded the intimacies of gender and kinship-based powers- what we witness is a response by men to a challenge by women that something has to be done for the sake of the children; we experience the imponderable crisis in livelihoods which has shamed easy correlations between economic growth and prosperity- there has been economic growth, there has been a radical loss of access to livelihoods- what we witness is a new politics of encroachment; what we witness too is the failure of institutions designed to equalize voices and participation to co-determine decisions- instead what we witness is the search for an 'authoritative other' to right the mess; finally we witness, the crisis of protocols and institutions that attempted to proscribe 'otherings', racism and derogation within new value systems.

They are crises because people's cultural formations can neither recoil from them nor refract them into coherent practices and, in the process cultural formations lose their capacity for steering and navigating social action as such. What emerges is not a vibrant civil society, but a spasmodic and turbulent reconfiguration that points to directions away from the designed vectors and institutions of social change designed by our democracy. Only authoritative cultural and political intervention will do.

The de-gendering pressures concentrated on ruptures in man-woman (boy-girl) and therefore in kinship systems brought about by the spread of AIDS; the new forms of alienation from work and livelihoods-procurement, joblessness, vulnerability, casual and sub-casual work, bondage and growing indebtedness amongst the poor; the dis-oralic pressures that fracture the functioning of institutions of equal 'voice' leading to silence, evasion and mistrust; finally, pressures that lead to disvaluation, increasing 'otherings' and racial derogations, are leading to radical reconfigurations 'from below'. They are being expressed at local level.

## IV

To return to the main point- the ANC's mass-base has expanded and whereas in 1994 the ANC needed COSATU and its affiliates to reach the black working-class it now has, as an organization its own direct mass-base. For COSATU and its affiliates this has been experienced as a loss of centrality in the political life of the alliance and it has occurred at a time when its own industrial-base has been weakening especially in what constituted its traditional power-base- the clothing and textile industry where Indian and African women formed its core in Durban and its presence in Hammarsdale/ Mpumalanga, Newcastle, Mooi River and Mandini. And, its loss of jobs in any economic sector we might think of.

But the pressure of basic need and crude survival, of ill-health and resource-exhaustion has magnified pressures and struggles. This intensification of livelihood struggles is cutting into COSATU's prowess in KZN in two critical ways (apart from the shift of all headquarters of trade unions to Gauteng and the Western Cape and the increase of the membership in white-collar unionism): firstly, they have brought with them a crisis of representation: the increase of casual, temporary and informal/survivalist labour cannot be represented in the old ways.

Even though in principle COSATU has adopted a policy of organizing in these new sectors, trade union structures are not conducive to that. Many of these workers and the new poor that are a character of our globalizing streets animate social movement activity *outside* the Alliance's radar. Many manifest spasmodic explosions of anger or protest but do not become sustained upsurges with clear leaderships. Every attempt to bring these energies into some form of organization- SEWU or The Job Creation Forum in the late 1990s came to grief by the 2000s. It is still unclear of how movements like 'Abahlali base Mjondolo' and the newly-created Street-Vendors' movement will pan out in the near future.

But secondly, most mutinous energy and action occurs in areas and wards where neither COSATU, and the SACP nor the new social movements have any sway even though their members might be centrally present in the dynamic. The horizontal expansion of councilors and branches, of ward committees and forums where 'development', IDPs, projects and opportunities are

decided or fought over, creates a new spatial dynamic of note. Any survey through KWANOLOGA will show that the majority of new councilors are black working-class people, many current or past trade union members of COSATU affiliates or UWUSA but this does not translate into a working-class politics.

These sites or spaces generate intensive struggles based on contradictory class projects over 'representation' and 'access'. Groups within the ANC or Inkatha who are claiming representation of community interests find that their efforts in turn, are unsuccessful. That they do fail or how they fail is another story what is vital for this argument is that 'Failure' is swiftly *externalized* (The fault is with the Council, the Metro, the Province, the National). Taking ownership of community interests and development is always a partial and vulnerable project because of the enormous need and the growing, accumulating greed.

What prevails instead and is increasingly the real 'motive force' are two African petty bourgeoisies- a real and an imagined one- on their road to class power. Real: groups who were established through Apartheid's homeland system and groups that established themselves despite it (remember, no 'native', 'bantú' or 'plural' was supposed to own means of production). Imagined: working-class people who know that they can become middle-class through the opportunities of the new post-Apartheid dispensation. Both groups are not 'bourgeois individualists'- they are social enough to have extended patronage networks, yet both are always too small and in order to sustain their accumulation they have to edge out of the terrain broader collective or cooperative projects. Those excluded or 'wronged' become restless and available for mobilization.

They do so in the name of the 'community', the collectivity even where empirically the community is highly fragmented and as mentioned above is deeply enmeshed in crises that affect their capacity to act in non-authoritarian ways. There is no side that is not claiming to be 'doing good' or 'being good'. But their actions are frustrated by another 'level' beyond their reach because they are told so and that it is easy to imagine that it is so. Access to local power is not enough to unlock enough of the wealth, it has to be an access to a higher level and a higher one to unlock resources. In their everyday description what is expressed is a deep need for an 'authoritative other' — 'someone,

somewhere? higher up'.

The tragedy being played out is that there is at once too much and too little: enough to enrich some people but not enough for all. Despite the fact that more resources than ever before are directed to the poorer wards and zones, the need is so high that only a few predominate. And to do so, they have to exclude others. Working-class leaders either join the fray (check how many have formed CCs) or they demand as they are powerless on the ground, a broader working-class politics to become this 'authoritative other' but to achieve that, it has to engage with a broader political terrain at a 'higher' level than the local.

There too, the pressures are enormous and most energy is caught up in *immediate* and *short-term* class contradictions (wage strikes, rate strikes, land invasions, control of streets for vending despite by-laws). The broader effort has been unsuccessful: to impose redistributive policies that affect the *long-term* expanded reproduction of the working-class (e.g welfare system, more state intervention, more collective bias in the rules of spending and redistribution).

The turbulence is further punctuated by the inability of BEE companies to become bourgeoisies 'proper'- owning and controlling means of production or exchange. Despite affirmative state policies their share of wealth remains small and in the overall capitalist picture, insignificant. There is no way that the 'market' can allocate opportunities to them as the economic system in its Darwinian logic makes sure that initial conditions matter! This make BEE company-owners even more desperate for more access and to intensify their struggles of 'encroachment' at the local level and there is a constant need to construct more extended patronage systems and connections: networks controlled by them have to be active and dense and often corrupt or corruptible.

The contradiction is that they are caught in this Darwinian struggle under the collective umbrella of 'the' community. To succeed they have to exclude many and privilege too few. But exclusion has to be defined as 'impermanent', because the excluded remain the disadvantaged community- there is always a promise and a hope that there will be ways of non-exclusion, of spreading the cheer—'Us now, more of us later'. If it was not for the Council, the Metro, the Province 'it' would have been achieved. The reason why it is not

achieved is because there is no 'authoritative other' who can politically intervene to right the mess. And this is not helped by extreme forms of competition and succession struggles that animate provincial leadership.

In this dilemma two new petty-bourgeois strata are vital to complete the picture: both have their distinguished status through their education. Most of the national leadership of the liberation movement in this province, as both Bernard Magubane traced in his early studies of sport in Durban and Leo Kuper observed in his *African Bourgeoisie* even in the 1960s were drawn from this fraction of a class: the lawyers, the teachers, the doctors, the clerks, the nurses, the social workers, the College and University graduates. They constituted the backbone and the idealists of the movement. Together with trade union leaders and some remarkable Amakhosi, they constituted by then the heart of the Charterist and popular-democratic movement. They have disappeared or they have been disappeared into Corporate and State structures.

Joel Netshitenzhe in a recent piece 'Leadership for a New Age' (*Mail and Guardian*, 31 August - 6 September 2007, p.23) reminded the public what this popular-democratic core of the ANC was and what it has to be in trying to find a 'balance and an internal capacity for self-correction', if the national democratic revolution was to succeed. He warned that what the movement needed to achieve, if a popular and people-centred democracy was to become a reality, was 'the existence of a corps of cadres who are able to *withstand the pull of negative energy and stay the course*'. It is precisely the absence of such cadres at a time of rapid expansion of a mass-base that energies have not stayed but strayed the course.

Who are key-players though for these energies are members of the new middle class whose education has made them functionaries of the new state- the state salariat. Their patronage and their interaction and their 'woo-ing' by the old middle-class has been a vital component of access and failure. They too do not have it easy: their importance to accumulation strategies occurs alongside their constant criticism, castigation and trenchant attacks by the new populists. They defend their indifference to local needs by turning their criticism onto other tiers of government or that Whites or Indians in the administration stand in their way (in many cases they are not wrong) — amplifying the pop-

ular perception that there has to be an 'authoritative other'.

The mutinous energies are there, threatening to break the ANC and the Alliance (and Inkatha), and yet at the same time they more than ever need them to be there, their project of accumulation would be unthinkable without them.

## V

The implication of what I am saying is as follows: Zulu-ness is not the problem, yet a version of Zulu-ness is (a Zulu-ness devoid of history or dignity) and so is the rise of a grassroots authoritarian populism. This is new. Had the cadres Netshitenzhe invokes been there, something else could have occurred.

After all, the ANC was never just a generic nationalist movement- its imagined community was horizontal, trans-ethnic, non-racist and since 1955- Charterist. The national democratic revolution was about making this imagined community real. The people who fought for it are now pensioners, the youth of the 80s are 40 year old men and women, 'the new youth' are growing up in the cacophony of the present.

The rise of populism and mutinous energy I have been describing is the result of three processes: rapid democratization; the loss of sway of popular-democratic and socialist leaderships in the spaces created; the absence of the 'corps of cadres' who 'can stay the course' that Netshitenzhe alludes to.

People here are animated by the reconstruction of torn communities through a civil war, which has not been experienced in other provinces and an intense competition for votes and access by the ANC and Inkatha.

Both are punctuated by rising greed and need. Ergo, people 'upload' hope and leadership to an 'authoritative other'. Zuma has stepped into that role as if his entire life was designed for it.

The danger of any analysis is that it 'naturalises' behaviour: given the objective conditions the results and the energies become obvious. Far from it- there were always choices that were chosen and 'choosings' still to come. And it is only hindsight that allows one the comfort to study the consequences (intended or unintended) of prior social action. Peace and its achievement in this province was a pre-condition for any life worth living for. The logic of the four phases of the ANC's consolidation in the province is obvious. That peace has been achieved points to how effective and restrained the leadership of both sides has been. But effective is not enough, if the popular-democratic nature of a movement is conveniently changed.

No one in the ANC has formally asserted that the Freedom Charter is just a piece of paper to be crunched and thrown into the dustbin of history, although many seem to be saying so informally. It is convenient for many to say so. It is also convenient, especially in an African petty bourgeoisie on its road to class power, to always declare the national revolution unfinished into the 'forever'. An analysis can always step in and explicate why this is so. Although I share Netshitenzhe's moral insight about the values NDR-cadres should espouse, I warn that without a moral cadreship coincident with the spread of the ANC's mass-base, it will have to be postponed to the forever. What is gaining strength in the province's grassroots is an ANC *yase* KZN. And I do feel for my Communist Party friends who would then have to rationalize how the second-stage will have to (even if its elements are present now) follow beyond 'the forever'.