

## **STATE OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE MOVEMENT: WHAT ARE THE KEY TASKS FOR THE LEFT TO ADVANCE THE REVOLUTION?**

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This article seeks to identify key tasks for the Left in advancing the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). In doing so, it proceeds from an assessment of the balance of forces over the past two-and-half decades, and where we are today.

The article is based on the SACP Jack Simons Party School lecture of the same title<sup>i</sup>. The content is partly informed by the Strategy and Tactics document of the African National Congress (ANC) adopted at the 2017 National Conference, Discussion Documents for the 2021 National General Council (NGC), as well as the 2020 Mapungubwe Annual Lecture.

A few words on Professor Jack Simons are in order, to acknowledge his role as an eminent academic and revolutionary activist – the consummate teacher who cleared our cobwebs as we, in the June 16 Detachment<sup>ii</sup>, at the time eclectically consumed revolutionary literature attaining so much information but little knowledge.

Jack Simons helped systematise the process of studying Marxism-Leninism and its application to our situation. One anecdote on interactions with Jack Simons is appropriate, in the context of this article. This was when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s introduced *perestroika* and *glasnost* (restructuring and openness). Many of us enthusiastically embraced the new approach, though the ideological basis for it was not very clear.

What do you think of these reforms, Jack had asked! And one's response, having been to party school in the then Soviet Union a few years earlier, was that these were necessary to ensure greater democracy within the socialist system and to manage market dynamics under socialism – as the political system was constricted and economic practice had become a break on the development of productive forces.

Jack Simons did not argue against that. But his next question was: but why didn't you say so earlier, comrade! This illustrates the critical point that we should always be true to a scientific, objective and honest analysis of circumstances in which we find ourselves, and critically interrogate prevailing wisdom even if not to follow the herd is not always a pleasant experience.

Indeed, in the context of the so-called 'ten wasted years', all of us should ask ourselves why we didn't speak out earlier. This is not about an ideological inquisition within the Left; but more a lesson for the future.

All of us are concerned that the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) is in peril, which reminds us of VI Lenin's work, *The impending catastrophe and how to combat it*. But as Lenin taught then, in periods of crisis, the frame of mind should be how to advance to new and higher levels of progressive discourse and action.

**Evolution of domestic balance of forces post-1994**

As we all know, in the early years after the attainment of democracy in 1994, it became necessary to contain various forces which were bent on frustrating and even reversing the democratisation process.

The democratic government then started introducing far-reaching programmes of social transformation. But fundamental to the balance of forces is that we inherited an economy dominated by a few white-owned conglomerates owning virtually all the critical economic sectors.

There were macroeconomic difficulties, which led to the introduction of the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy to manage these systemic challenges. All this slowed down thorough-going transformation.

But beyond the transition, the liberation movement had strengthened its grip on the state machinery; and it could speed up the programme of change.

What is clear, though, is that, in the decade of the 2000s, the democratic state could have used its legitimacy and the massive electoral endorsement (which was at 70% nationally in 2004) to push for speedier implementation of programmes of social transformation. The objective balance of forces allowed for faster change.

However, the liberation movement was gripped by negative subjective factors. Efforts that were initiated in the build-up to the 2005 NGC fell on the wayside because of factional dynamics within the ANC; and the movement avoided introducing radical organisational re-engineering. And so, frailties within the ANC combined with a modest reading of the balance of forces, let opportunities slip through our fingers.

The abiding lesson from this is that, when the movement is gripped by factionalism, when its focus is on side-issues, we miss critical opportunities to take the cause of social transformation to a higher level.

### **Domestic balance of forces during the last decade and post-NASREC<sup>iii</sup>**

What about the domestic balance of forces during the last decade and post-NASREC?

There was a recognition after 2009 that faster social transformation was needed. It is precisely this 'sixth sense' that impelled the ANC in 2012 to call for a second phase of transition to a National Democratic Society.

Regrettably, it is exactly at that moment of opportunity to forge a social compact towards Vision 2030, that the ANC and its Alliance partners, as well as the government it leads, were weakened through systemic corruption and state capture.

The capacity of the state was severely undermined.

By the second half of the decade, the ANC was facing declining fortunes, with internal squabbles, money politics, corruption and poor performance in government all conspiring to undermine its legitimacy in the eyes of the broader public.

The level of working-class organisation had declined; and the progressive trade union movement had been weakened. The sense of hope in broader society was dissipating.

Broader sectors of society, including the SACP, the veterans and other forces mobilised for change, to protect the democratic state and the constitutional dispensation.

It is a combination of these factors that helped inspire the NASREC outcome – both in terms of content and leadership. The balance, in terms of commitment to organisational and societal renewal, may not have been ideal; but it presented an important stepping-stone to save and advance the NDR.

There is broad consensus within the liberation movement that the 2019 election outcome was a clarion call against corruption and for faster transformation. The question is whether we are able to meet the people's expectations: whether we can achieve renewal of the ANC and society and at the same time forge unqualified unity within the ANC! This is a fundamental question dealt with later in this article.

We are fortunate that, while we are facing internal organisational and political challenges as the ANC, the other major parties are also dealing with their own demons.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) is facing its own existential challenge: losing support to a right-wing party, it has decided to hold onto the bird in hand in terms of electoral support, rather than pursue two in the bush!

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has been celebrating its 2019 electoral gains. But it desperately wants to become 'a party of government' in some form; and its failure to achieve coalitions, especially in Gauteng, has generated internal strategic concern. As its hope of massive expansion dwindles, and as the threat of criminal prosecution increases, the EFF is bound to become more desperate and more disruptive. We need to understand this strategy, both in the legislatures and outside, and creatively pre-empt and combat it.

Overall, there has been some progress since 2018 in terms of changes in government personnel, revitalisation of law-enforcement agencies and attempts at social compacting; but the impact has been minimal. Since 2018, economic growth has remained pedestrian. Per capita growth has been declining since 2011 and has been negative since 2016.

Why did the post-NASREC efforts to revive the economy not bear fruit, that is, before Covid-19? Perhaps it is because it takes time to turn around an economy. But one of the biggest factors is that the social compacting initiatives such as the Jobs and Investment Summits have been characterised by focus on detail – with a long list of actions – rather than basic principles: referred to later as coalescence around essence.

### **Some insights from current global dynamics**

How would we characterise the global environment in which we have to defend and advance the NDR?

Like other countries, we have to navigate changing global power balances and ensuing geopolitical tensions. A rising China is seen in Western capitals as a strategic rival; huge tensions are emerging

from NATO<sup>iv</sup> encroachment closer to Russia; and tensions in the Middle East are not assisted by the brazen support for right-wing Israeli policies.

While recent changes in leadership in the United States may moderate the tone of global engagement, most analysts believe that the essence of the US' default position will remain, over the coming period.

Overall, the global market system is in poly-crisis, with multiple challenges of slow economic growth, growing inequality, narrow identity politics, declining legitimacy of the polities and environmental degradation.

One of the major deficits in the global political economy is the allocation of research resources to collective threats facing humanity, as distinct from those that generate the highest returns. And it is in this context that many have challenged the characterisation of Covid-19 as an extremely rare 'black swan' event. Rather, they argue, it is 'a gray rhino' occurrence which, according to Wucker (2016) is *a highly probable, high impact yet neglected threat... [as] gray rhinos are not random surprises, but occur after a series of warnings and visible evidence.*

The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the crisis of the global political economy, reflected, among others, in:

- the global economic contraction of about 4.3% in 2020 (IMF: 2021);
- developing countries experiencing a devastating slump including crippling debt and, in the projected two-speed recovery, they are expected to lag far behind;
- progress in reducing poverty, being reversed by *at least three years* (Financial Times: 2020);
- *32 of the world's largest companies* seeing their profit jump by about US\$100 billion more in 2020 (Oxfam: 2020); and
- the net worth of billionaires skyrocketing, with one billionaire added every 17 hours in 2020 and the ratio of CEO pay to employee pay at Standard & Poor (or S&P) 500 companies shooting up from 182 to 227 (Financial Times: 2021).

The poly-crisis had already started to generate some self-reflection among business leaders such as Lynn Forester de Rothschild (2014), concerned about the near maniacal focus of the markets *on short-term financial results, tolerance of disparities of opportunity, and an apparent disregard for the common good.*

In 2019, more than 180 CEOs of large US corporations jointly called for an approach based not only on shareholder value; but one that includes *delivering value to... customers, investing in... employees, dealing fairly and ethically with... suppliers and supporting communities.* Berg and Ostry (2011) of the IMF argue that sustained growth in any economy is *robustly associated with more equality in income distribution.*

So concerned is the global capitalist establishment that, besides the current large state interventions in the economy (some of which of course benefit the rich in stock markets), there may be a new Washington Consensus (as colloquially used) in the making. The IMF is arguing that, in the current situation, government budget deficits should not be the main focus of macroeconomic policy – as much resources as possible should be injected to encourage economic growth, and the US is leading

in this regard. Further, the IMF in April 2021 called for wealth and windfall taxes, for the rich to pay for the recovery efforts.

This may be a quirk of the current moment – it may not last. But the fundamental question is: where is the Left in this discourse! It seems to be languishing in ‘identity politics’ and ‘cancel culture’ and not giving leadership to the global discourse on the fundamental questions of political economy. Of course, issues of identity are important; but when they become the sole focus, they undermine efforts towards working class unity; and they are the precise platform on which the right-wing excels – as shown for instance in Brexit, Trumpism and current dynamics in France.

### **Impact of Covid-19 on domestic balance of forces**

The devastation caused by the pandemic on our political economy is reflected among others in the 7% contraction of the economy in 2020; an unemployment rate of 32% with many discouraged workers and the number of unemployed having grown to an unprecedented 7.2-million; as well as growth in poverty and hunger.

Government’s interventions to ameliorate the impact of the pandemic include efforts to minimise job losses, support specific sectors and micro-enterprises, as well as the ineffective loan guarantee scheme and monetary policy interventions by the Reserve Bank.

In actual practice, the interventions were smaller than in comparable countries, precisely because the pandemic found us at our weakest in terms of the state of the fiscus. But there is debate about whether we have been too risk averse.

An additional consideration on Covid-19 – which is critical to the defence and advancement of the revolution – is the fundamental lesson of social psychology. This is that success in managing a crisis of this magnitude depends on two critical factors: firstly, the extent to which the state and broader societal leadership enjoy the confidence of the population and, secondly, the capacity of the state to implement its decisions.

In the early days of the pandemic, the President and government enjoyed unprecedented confidence among the population. Most South Africans were confident that the government was effectively addressing the threat posed by the virus.

However, as the socio-economic impact of the pandemic deepened, as communities grew weary of the restrictions, as incidents of brutality by security forces were publicised, and as corruption in the awarding of some of the tenders was exposed, the trust in government started to fray. The sense of cohesion and mutual solidarity was negatively affected.

However, the state – working with social partners – seems to have managed the situation well enough to prevent a social conflagration. Communication, reassurance, acknowledgement of weaknesses and a risk-adjusted strategy have largely contained the most negative social dynamics.

But we still face the threat of a Third Wave, with possibilities of helplessness, irrational beliefs, heightened political opportunism, social unrest and so on.

In brief, South Africa is on a classical burning platform; and in order to defend and advance the NDR, we need decisive strategies and actions to place the economy on a higher growth and development path.

### **Towards reconstruction and recovery**

This then raises the question whether the Reconstruction and Recovery Plan announced by government will have the desired effect. The following observations on some elements of the plan should help us answer this question:

- 1 On the **infrastructure programme**, what requires emphasis is that, besides removing binding constraints and improving social welfare, one great advantage of these programmes is in supplier industries. From locomotives to signalling and braking systems in the railway sector; to bitumen and cement and steel and aluminium in roads and housing, there are major opportunities that need to be exploited. Allocation of spectrum belongs in this category; and the continual missing of deadlines is rather inexplicable.
- 2 On **energy generation**, the recovery plan and the December 2020 ESKOM compact signed by the partners at NEDLAC<sup>v</sup> do outline the measures required to deal with the challenges. The financing mechanisms for ESKOM need to be finetuned for urgent implementation; and COSATU's proposal on the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) acquiring equity in ESKOM and possibly with government guaranteeing a return of say, inflation+1% using the current planned subsidies does make a lot of sense.
- 3 On **jobs for workers we have**, the plan takes a leaf from the scenario methodology in the National Development Plan (NDP), that we need to set a target for the number of jobs that should be created, to reach an unemployment rate of about 6% by 2030. The approach is that, as normal employment and self-employment opportunities are inadequate, we should fill the gap through mass public employment schemes. In addition, to meet the needs of the unemployed workers we have, who are largely unskilled or semi-skilled, South Africa needs to identify subsectors in low-end manufacturing that we can take advantage of and massify these through the Special Economic Zones and Industrial Parks.
- 4 On **industrial policy**, more can be done and, as Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS) argues, this should include competitive upstream prices in relation, to feedstock such as iron and steel, polymers for plastics, maize and soya. This requires a combination of incentives and disincentives. In mining, for instance, upstream supplier industries present a critical opportunity for South Africa to benefit from its endowments. South Africa ranks among the best globally with regard to mining equipment and specialist services; and mining can again serve as a critical platform for a new industrialisation drive.
- 5 On **opportunities in Africa**, we should proceed from the understanding that Africa's growth trend is bound to resume, including massive infrastructure programmes. The African Continental Free Trade Area agreement presents major opportunities. We should be thinking about concrete division of labour at least in sub-Saharan Africa to provide supplies for infrastructure projects,

for instance, on which close to US\$200-billion a year was to be spent by 2025 (Engineering News: 2014).

- 6 On ***new technologies***, the recovery plan correctly refers to Information and Communications Technologies, the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution and modernising manufacturing. This is important. But we have not done enough to pursue technologies on which we have huge comparative advantages, such as the hydrogen economy and fuel cell technology which require Platinum Group Metals (PGM), an endowment we have in abundance. We can speed up the setting up PGM Special Economic Zones and promoting the platinum corridors.
- 7 On ***informal businesses***, we should be allocating more resources to these businesses, taking advantage of the registration processes that took place during higher levels of the Covid-19 lockdowns – and these businesses are owned mostly by women with daring and initiative.
- 8 On ***the labour market***, the plan specifically refers to reviewing labour market policies relating to issues such as retrenchments and wages. In this regard, we need to go back to the issues raised in the NDP about the market's stability and responsiveness, life-long career advancement, compliance by employers, and a developmental pact with public sector unions.

Besides these issues, there is the difficult matter of financing for the plan and the broad fiscal and monetary stances required. Further, there are some who argue that more resources could be deployed, and monetary policy could be even more accommodative.

The plan includes creative ideas about how to partner with the private sector in implementing infrastructure projects. What seems not to feature are the creative ideas in the ANC draft document about such issues as the role of Development Finance Institutions and the Reserve Bank in stabilising the finances of State-owned Enterprises. Further, the World Inequality Lab (2021) argues that a moderate and properly targeted wealth tax in South Africa can raise more than R160-billion in one year. The pros and cons of this require serious debate. Overall, the principle in terms of debt-to-GDP ratio should be to add steroids to the denominator (GDP), and thus reduce the ratio: a different approach can result in self-strangulation.

These are important matters of detail.

What needs to be injected into the debate on reconstruction and recovery are strategic questions on how we promote coalescence around essence. What does this mean?

### **Coalescence around essence**

There are three elements of essence that require emphasis.

The first one is about the ***character of the social system***: We need to agree on a conceptual underpinning to the social compact we seek to build: how we can re-engineer an economic structure inherited from colonialism. A combination of a developmental state that leads all of society in pursuing consistently high rates of growth, and social democracy underpinned by comprehensive redistributive measures seems to be the most appropriate strategic approach.

The second element of essence is about the ***core objective of socio-economic policy***: The NDP refers to a minimum standard of living below which no South African should sink. Elements of a decent standard of living include: *nutrition; basic social services; employment; and a clean environment*. There should be serious dialogue on this concept of a decent standard of living as a national objective.

The third element of the essence is about ***the leadership role of the state***: Besides its overall capacity, and its responsibility to lead in crafting a vision and to mobilise society in its implementation, there will be moments when consensus eludes the social partners, and a democratic state has to make the difficult choices. Pursuit of absolute consensus can only result in the lowest common denominator and minimal progress.

Is the Left adequately engaging these fundamental issues? Not really! Currently, we seem to be dedicating most of our energy to internal organisational dynamics and are not raising the core strategic issues.

### **State of the movement**

Now, do the ANC and the broader Tripartite Alliance, have sufficient capacity and will for a step-change, to defend and advance the revolution?

Correctly, the ANC emerged from 54<sup>th</sup> National Conference calling for unity and renewal; and we saw the results of the 2019 elections as a clarion call against corruption and for faster transformation.

However, we are still beset by a multitude of internal squabbles.

As we implement the NASREC resolution to act firmly against corruption and state capture, some of our members and even leaders face the spectre of swapping three-piece suits or ANC leatherjackets for orange overalls; and they will do everything to muddy the waters and escape from the reach of the law.

Claiming they are being targeted because they stand for radical economic transformation (RET), some of them have now trained their fury on law-enforcement agencies and the judiciary. They use the infrastructure of the movement to set up an organisation within an organisation. Elements have started acts of disruption and possibly even sabotage. Experience from other post-colonial societies is that the RET refrain is a case of a revolutionary slogan being used to defeat the revolution.

One of our challenges is the fact that construction of national democracy also entails the creation of a new cohort of the capitalist class; and capitalist class formation is often a brutal, heartless and sometimes violent process of competition and elimination. A parasitic state-dependent bureaucratic bourgeoisie and comprador capitalists, dependent on the established elite, also emerge in this context. So do middle strata who rely on positions and influence in the movement to pursue and sustain opulent lifestyles.

All this creates a fundamental binding constraint to organisational renewal. As the NGC Discussion document on the balance of forces argues, lumpen or criminal elements infiltrate the movement: so, it's not merely a case of revolutionaries who go bad; but bad people who join and pollute our

organisations. These lumpen elements are found in the economic, political, bureaucratic, civil society and other centres – and they are driven by greed.

Are we steeled enough to deal with these challenges and to face down these reactionary tendencies? As a vanguard of the process of change, have we mobilised society to join us in this difficult campaign to deal with the instability that will come with the fight-back campaign against societal and organisational renewal, with the mobilisation by scoundrels to collapse the whole temple and perish with everyone?

These are the key organisational tasks that the Left should address today.

Along with this, the Left must also consciously avoid actions that, on the surface, appear militant; but that may end up sabotaging the renewal project. A good example of this is the recent debate on the restructuring of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), where the facilitators of state capture cleverly and carelessly extended populist benefits which cannot be sustained. Yet some of us on the Left perpetuate a notion that those benefits should be retained irrespective of the damage they are inflicting. One can extend this to many other areas, including the public sector as a whole.

Of course, there also have to be sacrifices that come from other social partners. A good example in this regard is how we take up the issue of Covid-19 ‘winners’ such as ICT providers and pharmaceutical companies contributing some form of windfall tax and of the rich being levied a form of wealth tax. As indicated earlier, even the IMF says this should be considered.

### **Implementing practical organisational measures**

Some of the practical organisational interventions that are proposed in the NGC discussion document on reviewing *Through the Eye of the Needle* include consideration of a form of ‘organisational state of emergency’, with the following measures, among others:

- As we introduce the new digital membership system, we should ask every ANC member to re-apply for membership.
- Our vetting mechanism should include a police clearance certificate for every member.
- We must strengthen the Integrity Committee and urgently set up the Electoral Commission whose tasks include pre-conference ‘integrity checks’ for all candidates.
- We should conduct lifestyle audits, starting with national and provincial leaders, and later regional and branch leaders.
- And we must not retreat from swift and decisive action against wrongdoers.

These are some of the measures required to ensure a fundamental clean-up of the ANC. In this regard, the SACP’s own systems of recruitment and probation also need to be interrogated. Indeed, if we do not clean out our organisational stables, it will not be possible to defend and advance the NDR.

And so, coming back to Lenin's 'impending catastrophe and how to avert it' the broad framework should be:

Firstly, to take advantage of the green shoots of progressive thinking even in the mainstream of global economic discourse in the context of Covid-19.

Secondly, to use the positive domestic impulses towards social compacting to implement the Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, while at the same time addressing the fundamental issues around the colonial political economy that we have inherited – coalescence around essence – rather than merely focussing on the welter of detail.

Thirdly, to be firm as the Alliance in implementing a thorough organisational clean-up and also as the state in dealing with emergent counter-revolutionary attempts by desperate individuals to try and collapse the temple with all of us inside.

At the centre of all this, should be a frame of mind towards advancing to new and higher levels of progressive discourse and action – rather than adopting a defensive posture.

In that way, shall victory be certain!

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<sup>i</sup> Lecture presented by the author on 25 April 2021

<sup>ii</sup> June 16 Detachment of Umkhonto we Sizwe whose members were given political instruction by Jack Simons in the camps in the People's Republic of Angola

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<sup>iii</sup> NASREC: National Recreation Centre, venue of the 2017 ANC National Conference.

<sup>iv</sup> NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation military alliance

<sup>v</sup> NEDLAC: National Economic Development and Labour Council which is platform for formal interaction between representatives of government, business, labour and the community sector