What’s left of ‘the left’ in Post-Apartheid South Africa?

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the question of 'the left' in contemporary South Africa in two senses. First, in terms of the health of leftist politics and second, it asks to what extent are the self-identified left, progressive in any meaningful sense. The first half of the paper reflects on the development situation in South Africa and highlights how amongst most sections of the left there is broad agreement on the triple challenge of unemployment, rising inequality and poverty. The second half of the paper identifies three different sections to the contemporary left in South Africa (the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside of the Alliance and the remnants of the revolutionary socialist left). It argues that the Alliance left, despite the introduction of the New Growth Path, are failing to implement the radical policy changes needed to address the challenges identified. The left outside of the Alliance, meanwhile, despite recent attempts at co-ordination, remains largely ineffective and divorced from the mass base.
Introduction

In the immediate post-apartheid period Connell (1995) published an essay which asked ‘what’s left of the South African left?’. In that paper he suggested that there were good reasons to be either optimistic or pessimistic about the future for ‘the left’ in South Africa. His optimistic predictions were based on the influence of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) on the African National Congress (ANC)-led government, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as a policy programme of the left, and the strong commitment of South African citizens to democracy (Connell 1995, p. 19). With hindsight the factors he outlined predicting a ‘downward spiral’ have proved to be more enduring than those suggesting a more positive outlook. In particular Connell noted the shift to the right of the ANC, the limits to the influence of the SACP due to its membership of the Tripartite Alliance, and the disappearance of the popular movement that had been so significant in the fight against apartheid (1995, p. 19).

It therefore seems apposite to revisit the question of ‘the left’ in post-apartheid South Africa for two main reasons. First, given the current socio-economic circumstances and the persistence of the historical legacies of the apartheid era (and before), there is an ‘objective’ need for a revival, or renewal, of progressive forces within South Africa. I suggest in the first part of this paper, that what is needed is a genuine shift away from the broadly neo-liberal trajectory that the ANC government has pursued during the post-apartheid era and in particular since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy in 1996. Second, the election of Jacob Zuma as ANC President at Polokwane in December 2007, and then subsequently as South Africa’s President, together with the split of some of the right-wing within the ANC to form a new political party, the Congress of the People (COPE), led a number of observers to suggest that a leftward shift in the ANC and South African government was on the cards (see for example Johnson 2009, Plaut 2009). These analysts came to such conclusions by highlighting the support that Zuma received from Cosatu and the SACP in his successful bid to oust Thabo Mbeki from office at the ANC’s National Conference in Polokwane in December 2007.

The focus of this paper is on the question of ‘what’s left’ in two different but complementary senses. First, it seeks to ascertain the health of leftist politics within South Africa as we
approach the end of the second decade since the political transition to democracy. Second, it interrogates how leftist many of the self-identified progressive social forces within South Africa actually are. This of course prompts the question – what is ‘the left’ and on what criteria do I base my assessment of the various organisations? On the former question I have adopted the rather inclusive definition that understands ‘the left’ as those who pursue social change informed by the broad notion of egalitarianism in the face of various inequalities within society. Here I would agree with the view of one of the interviewees for this research who suggests that a minimum standard for anyone to claim to be from ‘the left’ ‘is a genuine commitment to social equality and a defence of democratic rights…against neoliberal corporations’.¹ In terms of which actors in South Africa warrant analysis, here I have let the field of study be largely self-defined. This is because whether or not analysts agree as to the ‘leftist’ credentials of an individual or institution, it is significant in itself if they proclaim such a position and self-identify as part of ‘the left’. Within the South African context the most obvious example is the ANC, which President Zuma at a speech marking the centenary of the organisation was keen to reiterate is ‘a disciplined force of the left with a bias towards the poor’ (BBC 2012). By focusing on those who self-identify as ‘the left’ and mapping their intra-ideological debates, the boundaries of who is relevant are largely drawn by the actors themselves. In terms of making an assessment of the leftist credentials of the various groups I clearly make normative judgements based on the available evidence and in particular I seek to disentangle rhetoric from practice.

The overall argument of the paper is that an effective left formation in the country is not present. The reasons for this can be traced back to the dissolution of the popular structures of the anti-apartheid movement, such as the United Democratic Front, and their subsumption into the organisations of the Tripartite Alliance, and the ANC in particular. The second half of the paper categorises the fractured nature of forces in post-apartheid South Africa that self-identify as ‘left’. It argues that the ANC and its Alliance partners are broadly failing to introduce the radical policy changes necessary to address the desperate plight of the majority of South Africa’s population. The reasons for such an approach can be traced back to a longstanding commitment to the ‘two-stage’ theory of the National Democratic Revolution and the compromises that were made with capital during the negotiated transition to democracy. The paper does identify some limited evidence of attempts to forge a renewal of cooperation between leftist forces but at present this is failing to forge any meaningful links to a mass movement, which is instead engaged in localised protest and struggle that lacks co-
ordination and/or leadership. Of the alliance partners, Cosatu could potentially provide that crucial link with the mass base. However, Cosatu, as the main representative of organised workers, has as Marais suggests ‘loyalty to the Alliance [which] tends to discourage links with other left formations and initiatives’ (2011, p. 446). The dangers of a continued absence of an effective and organised leftist mass movement are clear. These are most evident in the populism of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) led by Julius Malema, which skilfully uses leftist rhetoric in speaking to precisely those people in society, the young and underemployed, who remain marginalised from current leftist formations.

The research for this paper included nine semi-structured interviews with eleven individuals that represent a range of institutions that self-identify as ‘left’. The interviews were conducted in Cape Town in October 2011. This constitutes one of the key contributions that this paper makes to the existing literature. Recent scholarship on ‘the left’ in South Africa is either focused on specific actors (Friedman 2012) or tends to focus on Johannesburg and the surrounding region (Bond 2012). Without conducting research on the ground there is a danger of over-emphasising the significance of certain organisations by referring to indicators such as the extent of their online presence. For example, one of the key activists of the Democratic Left Front (DLF), which has a detailed website and facebook group, acknowledges that it needs to ‘invest in cadre-formation…we have done very well in a very short space of time, but it is still very early’. The limited and partial nature of these qualitative interviews is acknowledged and as a result they have been triangulated with speeches, primary documents and the secondary literature. The locational bias given the interviews were exclusively focused in Cape Town is also acknowledged and as one of my respondents noted, the situation might look slightly different, especially with regard to the extent of leftist activity outside of the Alliance, if one looked at Johannesburg.

The rest of the paper proceeds in the following fashion. The first half outlines what I see as the key realities of the political economy of South Africa, focusing in particular on rising levels of inequality and the persistence of poverty and underemployment that pose major challenges to broad-based development in South Africa and how these relate to the neoliberal nature of the strategy pursued since the end of apartheid, and in particular the introduction of the GEAR strategy in 1996. The normative stance underpinning the discussion here is the need for a leftward shift in South African politics given the trajectory of South Africa’s post-apartheid political economy. The second half of the paper then assesses the significance and
influence of self-identified leftist forces within South Africa and the extent to which they can be considered ‘left’ in relation to the definition outlined earlier. The left is understood as being broadly composed of three layers: the left within the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside the Alliance, and the remnants of a revolutionary socialist left.

The realities of post-apartheid South Africa

The left in South Africa appear to broadly agree with what the key development challenges are. This was evident from the research interviews conducted. Three main themes emerged from the interviews as a whole when respondents were asked what they saw as the main concerns in this regard: unemployment, rising inequality and poverty. At the most superficial level these are also the major challenges that are acknowledged by the current government. In his most recent state of the nation address President Zuma suggested that ‘the triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality persists, despite the progress made’ (2012).

However, there is far less of a consensus on what the main obstacles are to overcoming these challenges. Whilst members of the SACP who hold key positions in the government argue that a shift in the growth path engendered by changes in government policy will address these concerns, others in the left outside of the Alliance, see the continued hegemony of the ANC as the main obstacle. Then there are those in the revolutionary socialist left who question ‘the notion that capitalism somehow or other can develop South Africa and that everybody can be a winner’.  

As we approach the end of the second decade of the post-apartheid period whilst there have been many achievements under ANC rule, the development situation demonstrates significant continuities from the apartheid era. South Africa continues to reflect the polarised society that apartheid policy sought to embed. However, as Marais highlights ‘attributing these outrages solely to the apartheid system hides the political-economic contours of inequity that still define South African society’ (2011, p. 7). Absolute poverty, measured by the familiar income-based indicators, has declined to a limited extent during the post-apartheid era, mainly as a result of the introduction of government grants such as the state pension and child support grant. Analysts have concluded that without the introduction of such basic state support the incidence of poverty within South Africa would have worsened during the post-apartheid era (Liebbrandt et. al. 2010, p. 46). The trend of urbanisation has also had an
impact on such absolute measures of poverty. As people have moved from rural areas to shack settlements in urban areas overall poverty has fallen (Desai, Maharaj and Bond 2011, p. 3). Nevertheless, a recently leaked Unicef report highlights that well over half (11.5 million) of South Africa’s 19 million children continue to live in poverty (Hosken 2012). It should also be noted that such absolute measures fail to capture the subjective nature of poverty. As Marais argues poverty ‘has important non-material dimensions (such as pride, self-respect, dignity, independence and physical security) that resist measurement and enumeration’ (2011, p. 206).

South Africa’s official unemployment rate initially increased during the post-apartheid era from 16.9% in 1995 (the first full-year of the ANC-led government) to a peak of 31.2% in 2003, which has since fallen back to a rate of 23.8% for 2009 (International Labour Office 2011). More recent data from the last quarter of 2011 highlights how there is significant variation amongst racial groups as shown in table 1 below:

**Table 1 – Official Unemployment Rate by Population Group (4th Quarter of 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Group</th>
<th>Unemployment Rate (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Africans</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Asian</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6.7</td>
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It should also be noted that the official unemployment rate only includes those members of the labour force who continue to actively seek work. It does not include what in South African statistics are labelled ‘discouraged workers’ and others who are ‘not economically active’. Another more meaningful measure of the true extent of the crisis of unemployment is the ratio of the working age population (ages 15-64) who are employed (either in the formal or informal sectors), which for the last quarter of 2011 was only 41.3% (Statistics South Africa 2012a, p. vi).
The distribution of income in post-apartheid South Africa remains stubbornly skewed in favour of the richest fractions of the population. This is reflected in the Gini Coefficient, which measures the extent of income inequality within a society. (Leibbrandt et al. 2010, p. 32) has estimated that this was 0.66 in 1993, 0.68 in 2000, rising to 0.70 in 2008. Similarly if we look at the distribution of income by population deciles then again there has been an increasing concentration amongst the top 10% of the population at the expense of the rest.

**Table 2 Share of Income in South Africa by Decile of Population**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>0.27%</td>
<td>0.44%</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1.03%</td>
<td>1.07%</td>
<td>1.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>1.66%</td>
<td>1.56%</td>
<td>1.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>2.21%</td>
<td>2.15%</td>
<td>2.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3.15%</td>
<td>2.95%</td>
<td>2.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>4.33%</td>
<td>3.96%</td>
<td>3.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>6.16%</td>
<td>5.61%</td>
<td>5.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>9.61%</td>
<td>8.76%</td>
<td>8.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>17.69%</td>
<td>16.79%</td>
<td>16.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>53.89%</td>
<td>56.71%</td>
<td>58.07%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Overall, the structure of the economy also demonstrates significant continuities from the apartheid era. This can be traced back to the negotiated nature of the transition to democracy. The South African economy continues to be dominated by big monopoly capital (Anglo American, Anglovaal, Old Mutual, Sanlam, Liberty Life, etc.) many of whom have now taken the opportunity of the liberalisation of capital controls to list on the London Stock Exchange. The economy remains wedded to a trajectory based on finance, mining and retail. What we have witnessed since 1994 is a deindustrialisation of the South African economy with the contribution made by the manufacturing sector to nominal GDP declining from over
20% in the early 1990s to only 13.6% in the final quarter of 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2012b, p. 4). Within the manufacturing sector itself we have seen much slower growth in labour-intensive sectors than capital-intensive sectors and Gelb suggests this can be explained by trade liberalisation in the immediate post-apartheid era, which saw import penetration in labour-intensive sectors rise from 55.5% in 1993 to 67.5% in 1997 (2010, p. 52).

The post-apartheid development strategy

The situation in South Africa, described above, has developed during a period where the government has, since its adoption of the GEAR strategy in 1996, adopted a broadly neo-liberal development strategy.

The ANC had adopted the RDP as the equivalent of its manifesto for the 1994 election. Its view of development was empowerment of the people of South Africa. The philosophy, adopted in the RDP, was to seek a balance between growth and development with redistribution. The solution was a neo-Keynesian approach. In the RDP document itself it is stated that, ‘the key area where special measures to create jobs can link to building the economy and meeting basic needs is in redressing apartheid-created infrastructural disparities’ (African National Congress 1994, p. 13). After the election this RDP Base Document was committed to a process of consultation amongst stakeholders. Not all sections of South African society were entirely happy. This led to the RDP White Paper, which took account of the criticisms over the costing of the programme, which came notably from the business community. It spoke of the need for fiscal discipline, private sector expansion and a greater external orientation in trade and industrial policies (Government of the Republic of South Africa 1994).

These ideas then came to prominence in the GEAR strategy that was published in June 1996 (Department of Finance 1996). This policy was drafted by a small number of government-appointed economists and was the result of discussions only within the upper echelons of the ANC. GEAR was little removed from the type of neo-liberal proposals found in numerous Washington Consensus-style loan agreements that have been implemented by the IMF and World Bank throughout much of the developing world. It was concerned with the state providing an enabling environment, with the ambitious targets for jobs and growth to be almost wholly dependent on the performance of the private sector and in particular a reliance
on foreign investment. As a result we have seen the liberalisation of capital controls and extensive privatisation. In its external trade relations due to its membership of the WTO South Africa was party to a number of commitments to tariff reductions. To demonstrate its commitment to the neoliberal model in some areas it moved faster than required in this regard. For example, the government decided that for the clothing and textile industries to survive, a seven-year rather than the stipulated twelve-year period of adjustment should be imposed.

In February 2006 the government launched the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative – South Africa (AsgiSA). This aimed to overcome the problem of ‘ownership’ of policy and was devised through consultation with a range of stakeholders. The main aim of AsgiSA was to halve poverty and unemployment by 2014 (The Presidency 2006, p. 2). It was not a new policy as such, and the basic method for achieving these aims remained the GEAR and its emphasis on growth first and foremost. What AsgiSA highlighted was some of the constraints that had hindered progress in achieving high levels of growth. It focused on economic infrastructure (road, railways, electricity, water, etc.) and social infrastructure (schools, housing, health provision, etc.). It also focused on the lack of skills by targeting both schooling and training programmes.

More recently in November 2010 the government launched a new economic strategy, the ‘New Growth Path’ (NGP) (Economic Development Department 2010). This builds on the shift represented in AsgiSA, and was reflective of the new context of Zuma’s rise to power on the back of significant support from the Alliance left. The NGP is certainly a leftward shift in relation to previous macroeconomic approaches developed by the government in the post-apartheid era (Tregenna 2011, p.634). It puts employment at the heart of the policy, rather than just economic growth, demonstrated by its target of creating 5 million new jobs by 2020 (Economic Development Department 2010, p. 8). It also sees a more active role for the state (industrial policy, a more interventionist competition policy, improved education and skills, and a rolling programme of investment in infrastructure etc.) and proposes wage moderation, including the capping of higher salaries. Nevertheless, it still sees the private sector as being the main driver of employment creation. It also contains a tight fiscal policy that may undermine the ability of a more active state to shift the growth path of the economy. Similarly it steps back from a more radical agenda that would involve progressive taxation
and controls on capital flows to reduce the power of capital to continue to determine the policy agenda.

The NGP, as discussed below, is viewed in contrasting ways by different sections of the South African left. Those in government, maybe unsurprisingly, see the NGP and the associated Industrial Policy Action Plan as ‘seeking some quite bold and fairly ambitious changes’. In contrast, others emphasise the continuities between the NGP and the development strategy that South Africa has followed since the end of apartheid. One interviewee suggested that despite the rhetoric contained in the preamble when we look at the detail ‘the prescription comes out the same...what we need in terms of economic policy is emphasis on education, skills development...government must play an overarching role...to lure private capital to play the developmental role’.

The rest of the paper now turns to an assessment of the left within contemporary South Africa. It identifies three categories (the left within the Tripartite Alliance, the left outside the Alliance and the remnants of a revolutionary socialist left). This categorisation does not imply that each section of the left is internally coherent or mutually exclusive. In the analysis that follows the aim is first to ask what is the significance of each section of the South African left. Then I assess the extent to which they can be considered genuinely committed to the normative conceptualisation of ‘the left’ outlined in the introduction.

The left within the Tripartite Alliance

The Tripartite Alliance has been in ‘unofficial’ existence for decades. Historically, it was certainly the case that in South Africa the dominant leftist formation was the ANC, Cosatu and to a lesser extent, the SACP.

The ANC, despite the trends outlined in the first half of this paper, continues to dominate South African elections. In the 2009 election, they received 65.9% of the votes cast, which translated into 264 of the 400 seats within the National Assembly. One analyst suggests that part of the explanation for this enduring electoral dominance is the legacy of the ANC’s role in the liberation struggle, which ‘extends to the ANC a significant degree of latitude, with the majority of the electorate still being prepared to indulge its failings on account of its heroic historical contribution’ (Hamill 2010, p. 11). Membership levels have increased significantly
in recent years and were noted to have reached 933,672 in September 2011, a rise of almost 50% since the election of Zuma at Polokwane in 2007 (The Times 2011).

The ANC remains by far the more senior partner in the Alliance. Things are complicated somewhat by the overlapping memberships of individuals within the Alliance partners. It is debatable to what extent there is now a leftist grouping within the party. Historically the ANC began life as a fairly conservative organisation and has always operated as a broad-church and was only united by the struggle against racial division and apartheid. The process of the democratic transition described as an ‘elite transition’ (Bond 2000) led to a series of compromises that saw South Africa move fairly smoothly from apartheid to neoliberalism. As negotiations began in earnest in the early 1990s the ANC began to align itself with ‘Third Way’ thinking and as Rethmann observes it used the same advisors as New Labour did in the UK (2009, p. 367).

The SACP does appear on the surface to be becoming more significant in recent years. When the party was unbanned in 1990, its total membership stood at just 2,000 (Connell 1995, p. 19). However, this had risen to 114,600 in 2010 according to an SACP press statement. Similarly with the removal of Mbeki as President, they have more members in influential positions within the government. However, we have to question the ‘leftist’ credentials of the SACP and the extent of its influence in government. Whilst SACP members now hold some key posts – notably Minister of Trade and Industry and the newly created post of Minster of Economic Development - the leadership of the SACP, according to one critic from the revolutionary left, ‘...hasn’t embarked on any programme since 1994 to challenge the domination of private capital within South Africa’.  

Whilst membership of the SACP might be rising and this may indicate a growing appetite for its leftist credentials, we should also ask to what extent is this because given their status in the Tripartite Alliance, being a card-carrying member of the SACP can be seen as part of a career trajectory and is one obvious route to gaining formal political power.

Cosatu does continue to represent a more leftist stance in many of its statements than its partners in the Alliance. It advanced a detailed critique of the NGP, which reached the conclusion that it ‘does not represent a new breakthrough in economic thinking and policy. It
re-states positions that are, in one way or another, found in GEAR, the Employment Strategy Framework, AsgiSA and the series of Budget Statements’ (Cosatu 2011).

However, there are two weaknesses with its current position within the wider left in South Africa. As one interviewee suggested, Cosatu has remained constrained by its membership of the Alliance but it has also ‘distanced itself from ongoing struggles that are happening in working class communities’. During the post-apartheid era Coastu members have enjoyed a relatively privileged position in South African society and their changing social characteristics may help to explain ‘their optimism and support for democracy, the government and institutions such as the tripartite alliance’ (Buhlungu 2008, p. 40). This raises questions over the debate on Cosatu and the familiar call from those outside of the Alliance for the trade union movement to breakaway and become truly independent. Whilst Cosatu leaving the Alliance might help to develop a leftist organisation, Cosatu alone does not represent precarious workers and the underemployed in South Africa. It has failed to make any progress in recruiting beyond its core base (workers in full-time permanent jobs) and as a result Cosatu ‘could find themselves increasingly isolated from the rest of the working class, particularly from the new movements formed to mobilize against the effects of economic liberalization on the working poor and the unemployed’ (Buhlungu 2008, p. 37). There is no guarantee that a leftist political party might develop out of a union movement that is independent from the ANC. Cosatu ultimately represent the interests of its members. Whether Cosatu remains in the Alliance or not, it is not a panacea for the left given the significant changes in membership over recent years, instead the key issue is how ‘...Cosatu...relates to what has become the majority of the working class, which is the casualised, informalised and so on, of which they have no relationship at all’.  

Those who see themselves as within the left and part of the Alliance often distinguish between the Mbeki era and the ANC government post-Polokwane and the election of Zuma as ANC President. In doing so, they clearly share some of the observations made in the first half of this paper with regard to the direction of the development strategy that the South African government has adopted during the post-apartheid era. One leading SACP representative suggested that in addition to the legacies of apartheid South Africa is suffering from ‘...some reverse gears that we took in the last ten years by the previous ANC administration, in its adoption of most conservative policies, the so-called GEAR, where we saw a lot of privatisation taking place’. The question remains whether the contrast they seek
to make between the two administrations outweighs aspects of continuity. There have been some changes such as the NGP, which is a shift to the left from previous economic policies given its focus on job creation, the emphasis on decent work and a more active role for the state (Tregenna 2011, p. 634). However, the core macroeconomic framework remains consistent with the past. The NGP combines a looser monetary policy with a more restrictive fiscal policy (Tregenna 2011, p. 631). Moreover, in his medium-term budget speech in October 2011, Finance Minister, Pravin Gordhan announced a further relaxation of capital controls with a limit of acquiring no more than a 20% stake in a foreign entity (Cape Times Business Report 2011, p.1). In sum when we look at practice, rather than rhetoric, it appears that there are continuities in policymaking, which the self-identified left within the Alliance seem unwilling to acknowledge.

As a result, there has been a growing sense of factionalism within the Alliance as a result of the failures of GEAR. This was temporarily put on hold with the election of Zuma at Polokwane but tensions are now increasingly visible again.

What is also important to acknowledge when discussing Alliance politics, particularly in the post-apartheid era, is that the alliance is effectively an elite pact amongst the respective leaderships. The alliance doesn’t resonate so strongly with the rank-and-file memberships of the three organisations. Moreover, it is important to remember that the SACP and Cosatu are in an alliance with the ANC and not the state itself. One of the reasons for increased tensions within the Alliance is the centralisation within the ANC that developed under Mbeki’s leadership.

**The left outside the Alliance**

To understand the current state of the left we need to go back in particular to the negotiated nature of the transition to democracy in South Africa. This was an elite transition and as a result the popular movement that had developed during the 1980s in particular was weakened and marginalised from decision-making. This has continued since 1994. Marais correctly undermines the popular notion that civil society represents an entity distinct from the state, and highlights how ‘many popular organisations [have] experienced financial and political pressure to partner with the private sector and/or the state and focus their work on ‘delivery’” (2011, p. 448). Such an approach sits logically with a neo-liberal strategy, which seeks to
depoliticise the process of development in favour of a focus on the effective delivery of services.

As the full impacts of the GEAR programme took hold in South Africa – job losses, the commodification of basic services, etc. – during the late 1990s we saw the rise of what have been labelled ‘new social movements’. This marked a clear rupture in the South African left as a whole with the SACP and Cosatu often actively opposing such organisations for reasons which McKinley suggests relate to the challenge they posed to the self-anointed leftist forces in the ANC and the state (McKinley 2008, p. 79). The most significant of these organisations include the Treatment Action Campaign, Anti-Privatisation Forum, Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, Landless People’s Movement, the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and Abahlali baseMjondolo (the South African shackdwellers' movement). These represented a disparate group of organisations. Marais (2011, p. 451) suggests that despite their heterogeneity they tended to share three key features:

1. they targeted alleged failures of the state;
2. they tend to rely on middle-class activists who have a pedigree based in the anti-apartheid struggle;
3. most aimed to organise and mobilise the poor and the marginalised.

Some, such as the Treatment Action Campaign made specific rights-based claims within the current order (i.e. the demand for the roll-out of ARVs in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic), whilst others seek to directly challenge the current order.

Since 2004, South Africa has also witnessed the rapid growth of what have been labelled as ‘service delivery protests’. Police statistics on ‘crowd management incidents’ give us a fair indication of their incidence given that the majority of these are related to some form of protest. Recently released figures suggest that from 2009-2012 such incidents have been on the rise with an average of 2.9 incidents per day, which leads Alexander to conclude that although only an approximation, such data does suggest that South Africa is rather unique in the extent of such ongoing unrest in urban areas (Alexander 2012). These protests tend to be very localised and focused on housing and the delivery of other basic services. What they do represent is the fact that in South Africa there is a level of resistance, however spontaneous and un-coordinated, to the neoliberal policies of the government. This led one interviewee to assert that South Africa ‘is not a country which has a crushed working class’. However,
research into the details of some specific protests highlights that beyond a demonstration effect engendered by media coverage, there are no organic links between them and scant evidence of ‘sharing experiences, let alone coordinating action’ (Alexander 2010, p. 36). One of the reasons for this is the local focus of the protests. For the left outside of the Alliance, however, it is difficult to make strategic use of such protests because although protests have continued since the election of Zuma the politics behind them are complicated. Alexander highlights that in his research he ‘found no evidence that Zuma, or the ANC in general, were held responsible for people’s problems, and some interviewees argued that the timing of the protests was linked to having a government that, at long last, would listen to people and address their complaints’ (2010, p. 34). Hence, the localised nature of such protests is problematic in two senses for the left outside of the Alliance. First, it restricts their ability to seek to connect them into anything more significant. Second, there is a disjuncture between localised struggles and the perceptions of the poor towards national government and the role of the ANC in particular, which Alexander suggests makes it most likely that in the short-term at least, such protests are more likely to ‘feed into the SACP and reform of the system than into the development of a revolutionary movement’ (2010, p. 38).

In recent years there has been an attempt to unite many of the disparate elements of the non-Alliance left. In 2008 the Conference of the Democratic Left was created and this was relaunched in January 2011 with the new name of the Democratic Left Front (DLF). In the words of one of the architects it is hoped the DLF ‘can contribute to consolidating, building an alternative politics beginning to build the linkages, build the bridges and helping us to bring together these popular struggles, these social movements with an intelligentsia, with a continuity in struggle, with an inter-generational dynamic and also with a tradition of left politics which comes from outside of the Communist Party’. The DLF is currently still in an embryonic form and is led by dis-illusioned former SACP-members. The DLF suggest that parts of the South African left are stuck in old revolutionary paradigms and that what is needed is new ideas. In contrast there are those within the revolutionary socialist left (discussed below) who suggest that ‘it’s largely about how we can make this participatory democracy work…within the capitalist frame’.

The problem remains that both electorally and in ideational terms the ANC maintains a position of hegemony amongst the majority of the South African population. What is clear is that despite the renewed attempts at co-ordinating an alternative leftist programme,
encapsulated by the DLF there remains a need to connect this to the masses. Cosatu does have a membership base that would allow organic links to be formed within the rank and file. As one interviewee put it, ‘if you don’t engage with the Cosatu rank and file, you’re really engaging in futile sectarian struggles, that is what the DLF needs to do’. However, even here there are blind spots. Firstly, Cosatu, for reasons outlined earlier in this paper, remains hamstrung whilst ever it remains within the Alliance. Secondly, the nature of Cosatu’s membership has changed in recent years. Since 1994 there has been a decline in unskilled and semi-skilled workers within Cosatu, which reflects both the changing structure of South Africa’s labour force and the significant unionisation of the public sector (Buhlungu 2008, p. 36).

The remnants of a revolutionary socialist left

There are a number of small groups that still follow a revolutionary socialist agenda. They are prone to splits and internal disagreements. Groups such as the Revolutionary Marxist Group and the Workers International Vanguard League remain active although significantly marginalised within the broader South African left. The marginalisation of this fraction of the South African left can be traced back to events prior to the introduction of multi-racial elections in 1994. In the period leading up to the end of apartheid it was notable that the ANC suspended and then expelled a faction knows as the Marxist Worker Tendency from the party. Here the role of the SACP was significant during the 1970s and 1980s in forming ‘what became eventually the dominant view in the mass structures...so you have the beginnings of a squeezing out of the revolutionary left already’. As a result when it came to the negotiated transition to democracy the voice of the revolutionary left was therefore already marginalised. It was difficult to generate any meaningful support against the negotiations although this was a position that was made in 1990 when the League for the Fifth International argued that ‘the only guaranteed weapon against the sell-out being prepared by the ANC leadership is revolutionary mass action by the workers and the rural poor’ (League for the Fifth International 1990).

The political approach of such groups remains based on a complete rejection of reformism of any kind and a belief in the need for a Marxist revolution led by a Leninist vanguard party. As a result, many of these groups eschew working with both groups that fall within the other two categories described above, and often even with each other. Nevertheless, there are some
organisations, such as Keep Left who do acknowledge the need to address the practical realities that face the left in South Africa. Keep Left is affiliated to the DLF and in this regard, they have acknowledged that ‘...the challenge for the left, it is to form organic links with the rank and file within the townships’.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the left within post-apartheid South Africa remains factionalised to a large extent, despite attempts such as the DLF to unite various organisations. The Alliance left remains attached to the idea of the National Democratic Revolution. This entails a process of capturing the soul of the ANC which, despite the election of Zuma at Polokwane remains a problematic enterprise. Here I would concur with McKinley who suggests that, ‘the main task is not to force the ANC to review what it is that they have fully committed themselves towards, although the struggle for practical reforms that impact positively on the daily lives of the majority must always form part of the tactical arsenal of a meaningful left’ (2008, p. 86). Instead efforts should be continued in the task of co-ordinating leftist formations outside of the Alliance.

However this alone, without clear links to the mass base, will not lead to meaningful progress in the daily lives of most South Africans. If Cosatu were to break away from the Alliance then it might help in this regard, however given its changing social composition, it could only partially fulfils such a role at best. Moreover, as Beresford (2009) argues workers who are members of Cosatu continue to support the ANC despite an awareness of its ideological shortcomings, for reasons other than their material interests such as ethnicity, religion and culture. As a result he concludes that we do not appear close to a situation where it would make sense for Cosatu to split from its Alliance partners given that ‘a prerequisite for a formation to break away…with strong support from the organised working class would be that workers ceased to identify the ANC as the party that best represents these aspirations’ (Beresford 2009, p. 411). It therefore remains difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for an effective leftist formation in South Africa despite the deepening socio-economic crisis outlined in the first half of this paper.
Notes

2. Personal interview with Mercia Andrews (Trust for Community Outreach and Education), Cape Town, 31 October 2011.
3. Personal interview with Wilhelmina Trout (Retired Trade Unionist), Cape Town, 28 October 2011.
5. Personal interview with Michael Blake (International Labour Research and Information Group), Cape Town, 27 October 2011.
6. Personal interview with Rob Davies (Minister of Trade and Industry), Cape Town, 24 October 2011.
8. Personal interview with Ashley Fataar (Keep Left), Cape Town, 30 October 2011.
15. Personal interview with Ashley Fataar, Cape Town, 30 October 2011.
16. Personal interview with Michael Blake, Cape Town, 27 October 2011.
17. Personal interview with Ashley Fataar, Cape Town, 30 October 2011.
References


