

Some Reflective Comments from Padkos

This week in South Africa, political parties compete for votes in nation-wide local government elections. The African National Congress (ANC) remains the dominant force and the party's head of campaigns, Nomvula Mokonyane, says they've [spent a billion rand](#) convincing people to vote for them. The build up to the election has even cost a number of people's lives, especially in CLP's home province of kwaZulu-Natal (KZN). And in neighbourhoods and wards across the country, people have been mobilised in their numbers to take actions – sometimes simply to attend an election rally of their party, sometimes to do the slog work of campaigning, and quite often to take to the streets in collective protests against the imposition of ward candidates by the ANC hierarchy apparently over the wishes of local residents and party members. In the latter case it's not really clear whether the cause of these local protests is that straightforward and there is probably no way to prove or disprove the allegation from those under attack in those protests that these are just small groups of people mobilised by individuals who are fighting to be the next ANC councilor instead of the current one. Certainly, by widespread account, ANC branch 'life' has degenerated into naked jostling for a space at the pigs' trough. Membership is either directly trying to line themselves up for personal benefit through deals, contracts, tenders and the like, or is utterly instrumentalised by leadership factions vying for the power to access and distribute those opportunities. The politics of patronage that it reflects and reinforces at local level (especially local African township level) is more or less invariably violent, and not compatible with thoughtful and deliberative popular democratic praxis. It may be that contestation on those terms reflects similarly degenerative characteristics.

Announcing their perspective on the 2016 round of local government elections, the South African shack-dweller movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM, 24 March 2016, “A Special Announcement on the Local Government Election”), points out that

“[t]his is the level at which we are repressed and where we are excluded from development as it is captured by corrupt elements within the leadership of political parties who act like bosses. It is where we face poverty, landlessness and homelessness. It is where we face and experience imprisonment, police brutality, torture, death threats and assassinations. We have successfully occupied and held land and we now want to develop that land. We cannot take that project forward without local government. ... While we continue to draw a clear distinction between living politic and party politic we cannot ignore party politic.”

And indeed, AbM remains one of very few organised and deeply-political spaces outside of the party-political machinery where these issues are collectively and politically thought through. The position that emerged this time around from their deliberations was to continue to strongly assert their autonomy and to reassert their distinction “between living politic and party politic. Living politic is owned by the people. It is a space where people represent themselves and take decisions for themselves. Party politic is owned by those that are meant to represent the people. It is a space where decisions are taken for the people without the people”. This year AbM is urging members to register to vote and “to either vote for their preferred candidates and parties of their individual choice or to spoil their vote”. The overriding logic is to use democratic space to resist repression and the capture of 'development' by a gangster politics – and finally to “to keep in mind that our struggle remains much wider and deeper than party politics and that our power remains in the land occupations and the democratic structures that we build there”.

In a more general way, these kinds of ongoing discussions about the relation between organised, direct and bottom-up democracy on the one hand, and liberal representative democracy of the capitalist state and its political parties on the other, are being engaged in many places around the world. Some of the most vibrant and relevant of those spaces are in Latin America. In some

unpublished notes on a contextual analysis within CLP earlier this year, it was noted that “the recent period in Latin America saw a number of translations from histories of massive and sustained popular organisation in national-scale movements, into successful party-political electoral projects which, in their initial phases at least, delivered real benefits and narrowed inequalities. State-oriented leftists proclaimed a 'pink tide' in the region and many saw the presidencies of Lula (Brazil) and Morales (Bolivia) especially, as the basis for a resurgent hope in the project of state capture by a popular left party - usually with the caveat that a broadly-supportive but independent mass movement had to be sustained as well. Certainly these and other instances deserve careful attention but it is clear that the shine wears off remarkably quickly as the tendencies associated with the (anti)politics of the state terrain kick in. Some key aspects would include:

1. a seemingly unbridgeable contradiction in the relation with social movements as the state invariably instrumentalises that relation, and tends either to coopt or demobilise them – and where those strategies fail, the iron fist of state violence and suppression is never far behind;
2. notwithstanding any reforms and progressive redistributive measures, the fundamental orientation of the state to reproduce and manage social and economic relations that finally reproduce extractable surplus for the benefit of the capital and the state system as such;
3. the tendency of the political classes associated with the parties and the state to dilute any genuinely democratic content in favour of holding onto state power once its seductive logic and material benefits kick in.