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POPULISM – A TACTIC FOR VOTES

The call by the Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi that the debt of R4.7 billion owed to Eskom by residents of Soweto should be scrapped should have created excitement to many in the township. The news should receive endless praise even in other Gauteng townships as the Premier wants all the townships in the province to benefit from the proposed debt relief scheme.



Lesufi's argument is that township residents, most of whom are poor and in the working-class category, should benefit from what Finance Minister Enoch Gdongwana announced in his mid-term budget speech when he said the national government will take over a portion of Eskom's debt to ensure that the power utility does not fail.

The logic appears quite straight forward. If the national government is giving Eskom relief by taking over a significant portion of the debt, it should be the poor who benefit from the relief, not just the power utility.

Lesufi's call was made in the same week that the gov-

ernment announced the scrapping of e-Tolls in Gauteng. The Gauteng Premier is increasingly looking like Father Christmas. He had impressive gifts for the residents of Gauteng who, like the rest of the citizens in the country, will be going to the polls in 2024.

Judging from the last local government election results where the ANC lost its outright majority in all the three Metros, it is understandable why the newly appointed Premier would want to endear himself to the hearts and minds of the Gauteng residents. He is on a mission to regain lost votes for his party. That is what clever politicians do. They do that which will give them more votes, not necessarily what is in the long-term interest of the country.

And this is where the danger lies. When ruling parties lose popularity, they start implementing populist policies. We just have to look at our northern neighbour on the other side of the Limpopo River. When it became clear that ZANU PF was losing popularity among the citizens who were beginning to ask about the dividends of their political freedom and independence from British colonial rule, the party under President Robert Mugabe introduced a radical land reform program.

Land occupied by white commercial farmers was taken in a chaotic program that saw police providing escort to landless war-veterans who used force to evict the farmers from the land. Of course, the land stolen under British colonial rule had to be taken back and be given to its rightful owners in the free Zimbabwe. But what the ZANU PF regime failed to do was to embark on a well-

structured program, as they were an overwhelming majority government that had the power to enact legal land transfer laws and regulations.

The results of the populist program ruined the Zimbabwean economy. The Zim dollar collapsed. Inflation was measured in the millions, the highest ever recorded in history. Millions of jobs were lost. Millions of Zimbabweans were forced to leave the country. Even today, the country has not recovered from those populist policies on land reform program.

Populist policies can have unintended consequences. Zimbabweans have given up on any real political solution to their problems. They have lost hope in the power of the vote to change their political and economic fortunes. The opposition parties are at their weakest. The ruling party appears to be more concerned about sharing the spoils than developing any real program to get the country out of its political cesspit.

Back to South Africa. The country is facing its highest rate of unemployment ever at about 45 percent. This means that one in two people is unemployed. Of the employed, more than 60 percent are under-employed. They spend more than 50 percent of their income on the cost of transport going to work. In addition to having to cope with the rising cost of living, as inflation has breached the target of 6 percent by far, with food inflation at about 14 percent, the majority of the employed Black people pay "black tax" as they have to support up to four members of their extended families. It therefore follows that they would be unable to pay their bills of municipal rates and the ever-rising cost of electricity.

In Soweto, largely due to the huge cost of electricity, many residents just stopped paying for electricity. Eskom workers who tried to cut electricity were threatened with violence in many instances and they simply allowed those who were not paying to continue using electricity. At some stage, Soweto residents staged a protest march to force Eskom to stop disconnecting power to non-paying residents. It was a popular march which was led by leaders of the ruling party, including those serving in the Gauteng government.

The message was clear to Soweto residents. You do

not have to pay for electricity, but you will continue to have uninterrupted power. Indeed in 2020, Eskom wrote off R8 billion from Soweto's overdue debt. Two years later, the new debt is standing at R4.7 billion. The Premier wants this written off.



It is obvious that the Premier has his sights set on the 2024 election. He is playing to the public gallery. He wants to increase his party's support base, regardless of the consequences. This is not only reckless but dangerous in the long term.

Some may argue that given the high levels of unemployment, Lesufi's plan is geared at cushioning the suffering of the poor. But this can never be further from the truth. Just like in Zimbabwe, the people who suffered the most from the populist policies of ZANU PF were the poorest of the poor. The elite were able to continue with their lives because they could afford the high cost of food and fuel. On the other hand, the poor who were working on the farms that were repossessed lost their jobs. As cost of living was rising, it was the working class that were forced to flee their country to survive in other countries, mainly South Africa.

If the woes of Eskom are accelerated, it will most likely impose severe outages in areas that are not paying for electricity. On the other hand, the elite would be getting off the Eskom grid as they can afford the expensive alternative sources of power. Instead of populism, the government should rather make electricity more affordable and get more people to pay so that the service can be sustainable in the long term.

If debt cancellation is not the best tool to cushion the plight of poor township residents, what is? The

government should radically reduce unemployment. It has the tools to do so. Firstly, the government can unfreeze the more than 300 000 posts in the public sector and start employing professionals in the various departments.

Currently there is just poor planning in the public sector. The government sends young students to study medicine in Cuba and when these return to the country with their qualifications, they remain unemployed because there is no money. Although virtually all public hospitals have a critical shortage of doctors, the government fails to employ qualified doctors whose training it paid for, because the Finance ministry has opted for austerity measures. Wow!

This is just one example of lack of proper planning that can contribute to the reduction of unemployment. South Africa has a serious backlog of infrastructure. Thousands of learners in the Eastern Cape still have to learn in mud schools. Millions do not have water in Limpopo, North West and other provinces. Why the government cannot roll out the much talked about infrastructure program boggles the mind.

It is obvious that the government has neither plan nor vision for this country. This is why it is increasingly adopting populist policies just to extend its long overdue stay in office. And this is why it has to be voted out of power in the coming 2024 election.

BEE OUT OF THE WINDOW

The Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) charade is no more. The Government and its more than 700 State entities no longer disqualify suppliers because they do not meet requirements of BEE.

Treasury has promulgated regulations stating that government departments and parastatals are no longer required to comply with BEE regulations when granting State contracts, in a move seen by champions of BEE as a serious capitulation to those opposed to the economic transformation of the country.

In an attempt to force companies to accelerate the speed of economic transformation by embracing BEE, the government passed a new set of regulations in 2017 that effectively limited companies that were not

BEE compliant to do business with the State. The regulations were challenged and after a court battle, the State had to work on new regulations. The new regulations come into effect on January 16 next year.



AZAPO Voice is not disappointed by the latest set of regulations for different reasons. The first reason is that the latest development removes the charade that the government is serious about economic transformation. It is not. The current government is happy with the situation as it is happy with the white tribe owning the economy and retaining their privileges obtained via colonialism and apartheid on the back of exploiting Black labour. The current government rules to protect and retain the status-quo. For far too long they have convinced many Black people that they are actually committed to economic transformation. We now have evidence that they did not mean it.

The second reason AZAPO Voice welcomes the latest regulations is that it would force Black people to wake up as there would no longer be an opportunity from big white businesses of getting token Blacks as shareholders and use them as fronts to secure big government contracts.

Fronting has retarded real economic transformation. This is because some of the best Black brains who should be forming their own businesses to compete with white-owned businesses get co-opted and become the faces of these businesses, giving an artificial impression of transformation. These coconuts become spokespersons of white businesses and behave like real house-niggers in forcing the government to relent in radical policies geared at real economic transformation.

The new regulations, as reactionary as they are, remind Black people that “Black man you are on your own.” You can no longer rely on government policies to create space for you to compete with white business. As hard as it sounds, you, Black person, will have to run the marathon without running shoes while your white competitors on the same marathon are on motorbikes.

The good thing is that these unfair rules are no longer hidden. They are explicit. And for that, we should thank the government for sharpening the contradictions.

And how should the problem be resolved? Remove the current government from power and replace it with a pro-black government whose program would be to restore the dignity of Black people through giving them their land back and capacity to own and control the means of production and the economy in general.

NEW ELECTORAL LAWS

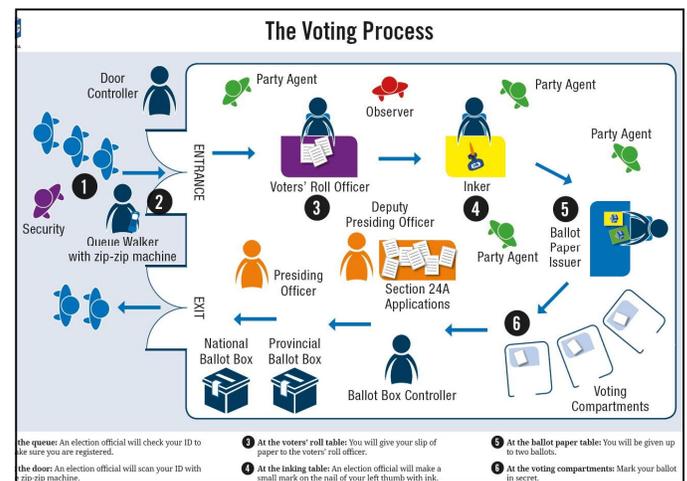
Almost three decades after the dawn of democracy, some amongst us have only now realised that what we have is a flawed system of democracy. The court has made a ruling that essentially forces parliament to change the electoral laws. The court has found the current Electoral Act to be unconstitutional in that it does not allow an individual person to stand for election in the National Assembly or in the Provincial Legislature.

AZAPO, as an organisation led by revolutionaries with foresight, had called for the establishment of a Constituent Assembly as early as 1990 after the unbanning of political organisations by the FW de Klerk regime.

When political parties were beginning the talks-about-talks with the National Party regime, AZAPO was clear. It wanted a two-sided table engagement. On the one side there will be revolutionary forces that were fighting against the system of racism and colonialism, and on the other side of the table there would be the National Party and its surrogate parties that ran the Bantustan administrations. The other key demand that AZAPO made was the formation of a Constituent Assembly which would be the basis of the new politi-

cal system.

In other words, instead of further balkanising our country, which had been divided along racial and ethnic lines, by entrenching the divisions through the promotion of parties as the supreme organ of political activity, we would have the country divided into constituencies to enable members of a particular constituency to vote for their leader directly to represent them in the national Constitutional Assembly. AZAPO lost that battle, and our country was divided into nine provinces that are just a strain to the fiscus without delivering any value as they are a duplication of the law-making process that occurs in parliament.



Had people listened to AZAPO before the first all-race elections, we would not be in this crisis. If voters were allowed to vote for their candidates directly, there would have been no need for the current Electoral Act to be challenged.

The current system limits accountability on the part of the elected representatives as they only have to please their parties and not the voters. The voters essentially give a blank cheque to the parties. Some political parties reveal their candidates only after the election as they keep on rubbing it in that the voters are voting for the party and not the individuals.

The proposed Electoral Act may be cumbersome, but it seeks to allow every citizen equal right to elect and stand for elections. Had AZAPO's counsel on the Constituent Assembly prevailed, the current crisis that threatens the holding of the elections in 2024 would have been averted.