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South Africa

Cyril Ramaphosa Is Not the Answer

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Former trade union leader turned billionaire Cyril Ramaphosa has been elected president of the African National Congress (ANC). In a [historic electoral conference](#), he defeated his rival, Dr. Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma (NDZ) – medical doctor, former African Union president, and current president Jacob Zuma's ex-wife and anointed successor. But, Ramaphosa's victory is Pyrrhic. The top six top positions of the ANC's most powerful body – the National Executive Committee – are split down the middle between Zuma and Ramaphosa's factions, resulting in a stalemate dubbed "unity."

Ramaphosa's supporters have heralded his victory as a triumph over the corruption, criminality, incompetence, and repression that have characterized Zuma's unmitigated disaster of a presidency. Once a darling of the Left, Ramaphosa's reputation will forever be stained by his involvement in the Marikana massacre. In the days preceding the massacre, he petitioned the government on behalf of Lonmin. His actions directly contributed to the murder of thirty-four workers, betraying the movement he cut his political teeth in.

Widely seen as "captured" by the [Guptas](#), an Indian business family, Zuma and his cronies have dismantled large sections of the state, including the national prosecutor and the tax revenue service, in order to keep themselves out of prison.

Zuma's championing of Radical Economic Transformation (RET) has done nothing to help the economy. Under Zuma's tenure, the economy was downgraded to junk status, crime in all its incarnations rose, the once-mighty trade union movement split, manufacturing jobs disappeared, unemployment reached a record official high of 27 percent, and living conditions of the majority of working-class blacks have visibly declined.

The Zuma administration depicted any opposition from the media, the business community, or within the ANC as "White Monopoly Capital." And indeed, big capital in South Africa is as corrupt and venal as Zuma and his cronies. When it has suited their bottom lines, corporations have participated in "state capture" and helped the Guptas milk the country for all it's worth. Big capital in both its domestic and international incarnations, including KPMG, MultiChoice, and McKinsey and Company, have all been implicated in the Guptas' schemes. Last week, in the country's largest corporate fraud scandal, the [Steinhoff furniture company](#) was revealed as a criminal enterprise.

South Africa is [the most unequal](#) country in the world. While the racial demographics of inequality have changed since the end of apartheid – 49 percent as opposed 86 percent of top income owners are white, with blacks making up 30 percent – almost the entirety of the poorest sections of the population are black. But Zuma's rhetoric distracts from the fact that his administration failed to challenge capital. It has [gutted and looted](#) state institutions, hurting South Africa's black working class the most.

For good reason, Zuma and his faction may have lost the party presidency, but the most corrupt and dangerous elements of the ANC are in control of the party. The ANC is now partially controlled by the so-called Premier League, a nickname that refers to a corrupt cabal of premiers (governors) of key South African provinces, more akin to Mafia capos than politicians operating in a constitutional democracy. Two of their members now have positions in the ANC's top six: David Mabuza (premier of Mpumalanga) and Ace Magashule (premier of the Free State).

Two of South Africa's most dangerous gangsters, Mabuza and Magashule have transformed their respective provinces into private fiefdoms. Mabuza has been linked to several political murders and seems more than willing to take out his rivals. Magashule [paid for](#) the Guptas' niece's wedding in cash, and the ANC disqualified his province

from elections twice thanks to his utter disrespect for basic democratic process a remarkable achievement considering the party's already low standards.

Magashule will oversee the party's day-to-day maintenance as secretary-general of the ANC with the help of Jessie Duarte (re-elected as deputy secretary-general), an unprincipled Gupta flunky, and Mabuza is in position to become the next president of South Africa after Ramaphosa.

The result is [most likely](#) a disaster: with Mabuza and Magashule in office, it will be difficult for Ramaphosa to embark on any serious reforms or policy changes, and he might not even be able to recall Zuma. Unity, as Mabuza dubs it, means that the ANC won't split and the SACP and COSATU will remain in the alliance, aborting any hopes for a new left party to emerge out of it. Indeed, there are indications that a deal was cut between Ramaphosa and Mabuza before the conference that saw Mabuza become kingmaker by switching his support from NDZ to Ramaphosa. It could quite possibly mean that Mabuza might have broken with the Premier League and is seeking to carve out a new faction, making him even more dangerous and unpredictable.

Two competing patronage networks now run the ANC: one aligned with big capital promising stability, and the other representing a predatory faction based off transferring state assets to politically connected elites even if it plunges the country into economic crisis.

Zuma Stands Alone

The RET surrounded this campaign. The latest iteration of ANC policy, it promotes an end to neoliberalism, radical redistribution, and the transfer of the South African economy into black hands.

On the first day of the conference, Zuma announced the RET's centerpiece: a plan for free higher education, following several years of [student protests](#) under the #FeesMustFall campaign. Zuma's move was based on a proposal allegedly put together by a state security agent who also happens to be his daughter's boyfriend.

Zuma neglected to consult the party, his finance minister, or the treasury before making the announcement a move that violated all standards of constitutional democracy and should make us very skeptical of the prospects for such measures being implemented.

During the conference, Zuma delivered a monumentally awful speech, speaking as if he had been a mere observer for the last decade instead of party and national president. He blamed the ANC's and South Africa's woes on imperialist plots, the courts, the media, civil society everyone but himself. It is best summed up by Zuma's insistence that that he did his best as president and had no regrets, despite the depth of the current crisis.

Zuma's anti-imperialist rhetoric is so transparently opportunistic and mendacious that it persuades few. The South African working class recognizes the RET as cynical marketing, but also knows that Ramaphosa isn't their man either.

Zuma has thrown all his former allies, including trade union leader Zwelinzima Vavi and SACP leader Blade Nzimande, under the bus. All he has left are the Guptabots, the gangsters, the flunkies, and the utter morons, like the thirty-seven-year-old ANC Youth League president Collen Maine. Publicly derided as "the Oros Man," -- referring to South Africa's mascot for our homegrown koolaid, an orange version of the Michelin man -- Maine hasn't been able to earn the respect of a single South African.

"Oros" made his name for such pathetic stunts as threatening to necklace former finance minister Pravin Gordhan for being an "impimpi" (informer), despite having [no anti-apartheid struggle](#) credentials of which to speak. Indeed, the ANC's younger generation has no political talent; they received their positions thanks to blind loyalty and a willingness to throw their principles by the wayside.

From Ramaphosa's perspective, uniting with the ANC's gangster faction would be a disastrous result, but we shouldn't expect a split, a purge, accountability, or an alternative just stalemate. I genuinely hope I am wrong and that Ramaphosa is able to out maneuver his enemies while stabilizing the economy and purging the state of its parasitic elements, but it's hard to have faith in the ANC.

Zuma is safe for the time being. It suits neither Ramaphosa nor the Gupta-axis to split the party or escalate the factionalism. Both sides recognize that they need control of the state to power their respective patronage machines.

Actual Radical Transformation

At least Ramaphosa's corruption will give South Africans trains that actually work under Zuma, the government made a two billion dollar deal for carriages that didn't fit the tracks. At least Ramaphosa can appoint the next national prosecutor and replace the odious Shaun Abrahams. And at least South Africa's state won't be dismantled, so that a future left government here I am being [quite optimistic](#) will have something to inherit.

What remains of the South African left cannot assume that the heroism of the [anti-apartheid struggle](#) has left behind a mass base crying out for socialism, just waiting for the right leader or rhetoric. It also cannot assume that high levels of social struggle will automatically translate into a counter-hegemonic movement. It must build a majority and win people over. Taking shortcuts gave us Zuma at the very least, we must learn from our mistakes; these mistakes destroyed one of the most powerful labor movements in the world.

While the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and their leader Julius Malema have more than a few flaws, they have shown that left rhetoric and militancy have an audience in South Africa after winning more than a million votes in the 2014 elections. While the EFF were initially dismissed as mere opportunists by the established left, they have kept emancipatory ideas in South Africa's political discourses and probably done more to give Zuma sleepless nights than the center-right Democratic Alliance and their liberal support base's endless whining. A left party won't be birthed by the backroom deals and insiders's club-style endemic to NGOs and the trade union movement; it needs a vision that attracts people and builds cadre instead of sycophants.

Without a movement, we can only discuss defensive struggles to protect post-apartheid gains, such as the social-grant system, the constitution, and the state of a judiciary, which continues to side with the poor and working class more often than not.

The reconstruction of a [trade union movement](#) initiated by the [new](#) South African Federation of Trade Unions will take years as the economic conditions and decimation of manufacturing jobs means the climate for labor organizing is exceptionally difficult.

South Africa needs more than a new leader: it needs a new vision, one that levels economic inequality and dismantles patronage systems, one that both draws from the heroic past and charts a new way forward. That is almost certainly not on the agenda for Ramaphosa, while gangsters like Mabuza threaten to drag the country into a nightmare.

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[Jacobin](#)

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