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Bolsonaro, Zuma, Malema: hegemonic impasse in South Africa in a world drifting right

Fabio Luis Barbosa dos Santos

Introduction

1 Since Jacob Zuma's ascension to the presidency in 2009, the African National Congress (ANC) has been facing a steady electoral decline. At the same time, lower voter turnouts signal a growing discredit of democracy. In 2014, voter turnout was 73%, dropping to 66% in 2019 and to 58% in 2024. When another 15 million eligible voters who did not register to vote are taken into account, the voter turnout further drops to 38% in the most recent election. At the same time, the party's electoral support fell from 69.69% of votes in 2004, to 65.90% in 2009, to 62.10% in 2014 and to 57.50% in 2019. In the 2024 elections the decline changed pace, jumping from margins of 3.79, 3.80 and 4.60 percentage points to a whooping 17 percentage points. It seems that the ANC's discredit has worsened since Zuma resigned in 2018, accused of state capture and mired in corruption scandals. Since then, the ruling party underperformance can no longer be blamed on him. This steep downturn implied a slump from 230 seats to 159 seats in the National Assembly, meaning that for the first time, the ANC could not form a government on its own in 2024[1]. The ANC´s steady electoral decline signals the depletion of the multiracial democratic settlement that followed apartheid: the Rainbow Nation framework is losing legitimacy, and a hegemonic crisis is underway.

2 Arguably, the largest chunk of the ANC vote was taken by Jacob Zuma’s uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP). Usurping the former ANC's armed wing name, this political outfit launched six months before the election and won 14.58% of the national vote, primarily thanks to its leader's charisma. Next came the left-oriented Economic Freedom Fighters

(EFF) with almost 10% of the vote. These offshoots from the ANC ranked after the Democratic Alliance (DA), which can be considered the official opposition to the ANC rule and came second. Descending from the Progressive Party of respected lone apartheid opposition leader, Helen Suzman, this liberal, conservative party openly embraces neoliberalism and does not support transformation policies aiming to do away with the legacy of apartheid. It has found it hard to shake off the image of a party clinging to white privilege[2].

3 For those reasons, the ANC's mass base and the left wing of the ANC's National executive committee, as well as the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), initially rejected an ANC coalition with the DA. Sundry voices called for a coalition of black-led parties – a 'Black Pact' between the ANC, EFF and MKP on a programme capable of 'uniting the Africans'. At the same time, an ANC-DA coalition was portrayed as a 'betrayal' of ANC supporters[3]. Nevertheless, this was the preferred option of the ANC establishment, which eventually imposed it from above. Unlike the DA with whom the ANC partnered for a government of national unity in 2024, the EFF and the MKP embody corrosive trends that strain the Rainbow Nation framework.

4 In Brazil, the demonstrations that rocked the country in June 2013 signaled the beginning of the end of the Worker´s Party (PT) political dominance. The following year, Lula´s successor Dilma Rousseff managed to be reelected by a narrow margin. However, the conjunction of corruption scandals portrayed as spectacles by the corporate media and economic slowdown, which turned into recession as of 2015, explained the depletion of the PT´s way of regulating social conflict. Against this background, there was a shift in the ruling classes approach to the government of social tensions. The times of inclusive neoliberalism gave place to an open assault on people's rights, while class conciliation was superseded by an authoritarian drive. This is the backdrop for Rousseff's 2016 deposition, Lula's arrest, and Bolsonaro's victory in 2018.

5 While the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016 should be seen as a *coup d'état* operated by the Congress in collusion with the judiciary and the mainstream press, this was not comparable to its Cold War predecessors, such as Pinochet´s coup against Allende in Chile in 1973. Rather than a dispute over the future of the country, the Brazilian coup was triggered by the loss of command over the small politics that the PT had successfully handled for 13 years[4], in a context of depletion of its social and political prestige. However, beyond the defenestration of the PT, this elite shift indicated that the institutional framework of the New Republic, which succeeded dictatorship and is underpinned by the so-called « Citizen Constitution », is compromised. The downfall of the PT is a symptom of a departure from the New Republic towards a new political, institutional and cultural framework that is in the making. Bolsonaro´s election was but a provisional response to that challenge.

6 From the standpoint of social emancipation, it can be argued that the New Republic and the Rainbow Nation settlement are not historical pinnacles, and the Worker´s Party (PT) and the ANC's prominence should be superseded. However, the future does not look promising. Even if former president Jair Bolsonaro becomes a spent force, the social trends he embodies remain. What kind of hegemony can the acceleration of social, economic, and ecological dispossession put in place?

7 As a professional politician, Jair Bolsonaro embodies a paradox: an ex-military who made a career going against the institutions and values through which he thrived. Bolsonaro graduated from the Military Academy in 1977 and eventually became a spokesman for junior military who faced loss of prestige as the dictatorship was fading. In 1986, a leading magazine disclosed a plot to explode bombs to draw attention to their grievances. Brought to trial, Bolsonaro was acquitted but forced to retirement in 1988. In the following year, he was elected to the city council of Rio de Janeiro and popular vote took him to the national parliament at the dawn of the New Republic in 1990. Since then, he was reelected six times, transiting through nine different political parties, before winning the presidency in 2018.
While Brazil is in tune with the global rise of far-right hate politics, South Africa doesn't seem to follow that trend. The party identified with white monopoly capital built a reputation of efficient management from its Western Cape stronghold that resonates across the racial divide and counterposes ANC dominance within the Rainbow Nation framework. The far-right remains on the fringe, although the influence of organisations such as AfriForum or Operation Dudula's goes beyond the polls, pushing the public sphere to the right[5]. The two competitive newcomers in the 2024 elections splintered from the ANC. This might be a telling statement on the renovation limits of post-apartheid politics but seems unlikely to be comparable to Bolsonaro's rise. However, on closer inspection, both the MK party and the EFF leadership display features that typify far-right hate politics in Brazil and elsewhere, ranging from macho stands and conservative moral agendas, to tribalism and politics of spectacle.

8 This article discusses these political challenges to ANC dominance, having Bolsonarismo as a point of comparison. It is argued that the tacit rationale behind the government of national unity that brought together the ANC and the DA in 2024 is to defend the post-apartheid « Rainbow Nation » framework from social and political trends embodied by the EFF and the MKP to accelerate its depletion. A comparable rationale underpinned the political front that brought Lula back to the presidency in 2022 backed by most of his former foes in the name of the New Republic. As with Bolsonaro, the prominence of the MKP and the EFF are seen as symptoms of a hegemony crisis, pointing to social and political trends that are likely to outreach their leaders´ political span.

Morbid symptoms : Zuma's MKP

9 Jacob Zuma´s presidential ascent could not be more different from Bolsonaro´s. While the latter emerged amidst a far-right backlash in Brazil, the first embodied widespread discontent with the ANC’s business-friendly politics, which tuned the country with neoliberalism and globalisation since Mandela´s days. Over time, frustrations mounted and Mbeki's approach came under attack from various fronts. At the ANC Polokwane congress in 2007, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) leadership were instrumental in bringing these disgruntled forces together around Zuma, who was then portrayed as part of a socialist project[6]. Sensing the opportunity, the corruption-riven and rape-accused Zuma stepped into the role of a popular leader who, unlike Mbeki, was ready to listen and to attend to the needs of the poor.

10 Once in office Zuma maintained Mbeki's macroeconomic policies, leaving the left at a loss[7]. At the same time, radical economic transformation became a narrative device disguising what eventually became known as « state capture ». Insofar as it implied a drive to transition from acceptance of the constitutional settlement to a repurposing of state institutions that is achieved, in part, by breaking those rules, state capture amounts to a silent coup[8]. Conversely, Bolsonaro never disguised his authoritarian ambitions, and the Trumpist-inspired storming of Brasília that followed Lula's swearing-in as president in January 2023 was hardly silent[9]. In the face of ensuing judicial troubles, the pentecostalised rhetoric to which both former presidents have resorted gained momentum. Before delving into that, other shared features will be briefly discussed.

11 Both Bolsonaro and Zuma made a virtue of their lack of formal education. Unlike the elites they stand against, their straightforwardness is deemed to prove their oneness with ordinary people. The flip side of Bolsonaro´s crudity was that he was never perceived as part of an elite that nevertheless supported him because he had something their own candidates had not, and that was votes. The rationale of the ruling class was explained in the presidential campaign by future Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes, a thoroughbred Chicago Boy, who studied in Milton Friedman´s university in the 1970´s and worked in Pinochet´s Chile in the 1980´s: « a completely coarse, brute person emerged and attracted votes like Lula did, » thus bringing to the Brazilian elite « an opportunity to change Brazilian politics for better, » as long as it can « tame the animal. » When he was asked if this was possible, he said: « I think so, he (Bolsonaro) is already a different animal »[10].

12 Social media played a core role in Bolsonaro's performance while Zuma was a latecomer, taking to social media only after stepping down from the presidency. Zuma's approach is centred on an embrace of what is perceived as Africanness performed. Africanness is exuded by Zuma's singing and dancing of liberation songs as well as his polygamous way of living, showcased as a patriarchal ‘traditional’ Zulu worldview soaked in popular religiosity. In 2006 Zuma faced a rape charge laid by a woman known as Kwezi, who was the daughter of a former Robben Island comrade and had known Zuma since childhood, referring to him as *malume* (uncle). During the rape trial, the ANC leader posed as a respectable Zulu patriarch, offering to pay the bride-price (ilobolo) for the woman who was accusing him[11]. If anything, writes Hart, the rape trial consolidated support for Zuma, especially among poor black women who recognised a righteous patriarch willing and capable of supporting his wives and children[12]. Once acquitted, Zuma emerged from the courtroom to sing a forgotten freedom struggle song that became his trademark: « Umshini Wam », meaning « bring me my machine gun ». According to Suttner[13], Zuma's movements while singing the song could also be taken to mimic a sexual act: « What Zuma was doing was re-enacting the rape he claimed not to have committed ».

13 The implications of Zuma´s patriarchal tribalism are not restrained to the realm of values. MKP's 2024 electoral programme advocated giving more constitutional power to unaccountable traditional leaders and even making elected politicians subordinate to traditional leaders. It has been noted that « custom and tradition are perfect ideologies for curtailing democratic accountability because they make social hierarchies and male power appear natural and beyond question »[14]. Beyond strengthening chieftaincy, the MK proposes implementing a sort of parliamentary

supremacy in which the ‘majority’ would rule unconstrained by the judiciary, thus sidelining constitutional checks and balances. They also talk of bringing back apartheid-era military conscription to instil discipline in the youth[15].

14 MKP's reclaim of traditional authority exudes apartheid. It revives the bantustan framework designed to make communally held property in separate ethnically defined territories the basis of political dependence upon chiefs. To this day, in Zuma's stronghold of Kwazulu-Natal, the Zulu King is the largest landowner through the Ingonyama Trust, which holds just under a third of the land in the province. At the same time, the deference to native identities fuels violent exclusionary idioms against those who are said to be from ‘outside of the province’ in the face of housing or land shortages[16].

15 The specificities of South Africa's multi-layered history add ethnic complexities not found in Brazilian right-wing politics. Likewise, migration influxes from neighbouring countries play no significant political role in the South American country as it does in South Africa, where xenophobia has been entrenched. Bolsonaro's brand of exclusionary identity revolves around the idea of a 'Christian nation' in a country where there are no sizeable religious minorities to be targeted. In the Brazilian case, otherness is built in opposition to 'good Christians' as the embodiment of 'good citizens' in general, as the assault on Brasília in January 2023 explained.

16 One week after Lula was sworn in as president, more than 4,000 self-styled « patriots », « Christians », and « good citizens » stormed the headquarters of the three branches of government in Brasília. A spectacular performance in which the symbols of the republic and democracy were desecrated, the assault on Brasília also had the contours of a religious catharsis. Couched with Old Testament and apocalyptic language, many clamored for authoritarianism as if they were fighting for their liberation: « It's like Moses, he freed the people of Egypt. The people of Brazil are going to liberate the people of corrupt Brazil », said one person filming himself. Another man behind the Senate desk said, looking at the camera held by a woman: « The Senate is now a church until military intervention. Divine intervention has already arrived. Now it's the military »[17]. On January 8, the messianic wait for a prophetic great event gave way to an active attempt to reach out for the millennium Christian homeland.

17 Despite the specificities of each context, Bolsonaro and Zuma share an essential political feature. Both portray themselves as permanent victims of obscure conspirators often framed in idioms of spiritual warfare. Confronted with juridical processes or political criticism, many supporters cast them as martyr-messiah figures, corroborating a public sphere where religion and politics mingle.

Pentecostal shift

18 While Zuma was president, traditional churches such as the Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists and the South African Council of Churches (SACC) were sidelined in favour of pentecostal denominations. This shift became more evident as the latter did not join the public uproar that followed the Nkandla scandal in 2013, exposing the use of R246-million of state funds to upgrade the president's residence. Zuma had a longstanding membership of various neo-pentecostal churches, being ordained as an

honorary pastor in the Full Gospel Church in 2007. But political ordeals were the key drivers behind his pentecostal shift[18].

19 Zuma's public statements on the controversies he was immersed in were frequently informed by pentecostal rhetoric and tropes of spiritual warfare, drawing parallels between himself and the persecuted Jesus. Invoking Jesus was not new to Zuma. Even before becoming president, he and his followers repeatedly depicted the ANC as a party blessed by God, doomed to rule 'until Jesus comes back'[19]. By claiming religious sanction for ever-lasting ANC rule, Zuma invested the party and his personal leadership « with apocalyptic Christian significance »[20].

20 However, the parallel with Jesus was now invoked in a language of spiritual war in which dark forces strived to crucify Zuma as the « blessed one ». More than political alignment, this vocabulary explained elective affinities between neo-pentecostal theology and Zuma's staunch popular support. Van Wyk's research shows that members of these churches recognised in Zuma's reckless spending behaviour, his unrelenting political ordeals, his unflinching fight against dark « enemies » and his political invincibility, the marks of a « blessed » man[21]. A very specific neo-pentecostal religious ethic can be recognised in Zuma's unapologetic conspicuous consumption and how he and his supporters have reacted to his travails. Unlike the puritan (productionist) ethic that often informs critiques of conspicuous consumption, the neo-pentecostal ethic is consumerist in its focus. It's an ethic that demands of its subscribers that they consume conspicuously and without « shame » as « blessed » Christians. At the same time, they have to wage spiritual war on those who undermine their « good fortune »[22].

21 While various civil society groups, ANC veterans and the SACC used the language of shame and honour to press for Zuma's resignation, many of his supporters saw the matter through a different lens. For those who believe in spiritual war, a powerful man like Zuma achieved his blessings through individual spiritual strength, raising reactions from obscure forces[23]. Framing himself as a blessed man, Zuma would boast of God's divine support when matters went his way and blame obscure interests when they did not. His supporters responded to this by acting out in a similar register. Outside the courts, Zuma was likened to Jesus and his 'crucifixion' was decried, while prayer vigils were assembled[24]. All in all, the framing of political and juridical disputes in religious terms led to an increasingly pentecostalised public culture.

22 Comparable trends were at play in Bolsonaro's Brazil. If a neo-pentecostal ethic allows Zuma's shamelessness to be taken for the mark of a blessed man, the elective affinities between neo-pentecostalism and entrepreneurship are at the heart of Bolsonaro's popular support[25]. In broad strokes, prosperity theology cultivates individualism and advocates that God will honour his contract with believers if they are sufficiently submissive to divine purposes. In this sense, the evangelical identity, while disciplining individual action within a community of faith, also values the satisfaction of desires associated with the believer's material progress, reinvigorating the volition for work that is necessary to make a living in the informal sector. Schematically, the expectation is that the more the believer offers to the church, the more God will repay him, in a spiral capable of satisfying both the particular desires of each believer and the collective needs of the people of God represented by the church[26]. The financial responsibility and individual resilience emphasised by prosperity theology take root in a context marked by deep job insecurity, the reversal of social rights, and widespread

commodification of urban spaces and urban community life in Brazil. As the prospect of collective progress via universal rights dwindles, especially for young workers, and competition for informal business opportunities increases due to rising unemployment, faith in a god who rewards individual efforts appears to become a powerful ally in daily life. In that context, Bolsonaro's individualistic, warlike, religious-coated rhetoric offers a credible response to reality, while Lula's conciliatory rights-based approach appears as out of touch[27].

23 At the same time, evangelical groups are generally guided by a politically conservative patriarchal agenda. This characteristic brought them closer to Bolsonaro and his efforts to restore the power of the father of the family as an antidote to the supposed indoctrination of 'gender ideology' that supposedly penetrated Brazilian politics in the PT era. In sum, among subaltern groups in Brazilian society, Bolsonarismo gained support due to the entanglement of neo-charismatic ethics, neoliberal subjectivities, and popular conservatism, just as the convergence between neo-pentecostal ethics and patriarchal shamelessness embodied by Zuma worked in his favour in South Africa. As a result, both countries face an increasingly pentecostalised public culture.

Morbid symptoms : Malema's EFF

24 Malema's EFF can be likened to Bolsonarismo in odd ways. When Bolsonaro bashes the Congress, the judiciary, and corporate media for their self-interested hypocritical operating modes, one has to concede that he has a point. In the past, several of his flagship protestations were voiced by the left, which now finds itself in an awkward position in defence of the order. In like manner, black economic emancipation, land reform, exposing parliamentary elitism, and denouncing Zuma's corruption are all commendable critical stands. As with Bolsonaro, one has to concede that the EFF has a point, or many points. And unlike Bolsonaro, EFF politics are grounded on a 20th century left revolutionary repertoire.

25 Yet, there seems to be more bringing these opposite political poles together than apart. Beyond the moot point of anachronism, the EFF's revolutionary idiom sounds fake in the face of a leadership riven by corruption even before reaching the national political summit. One cannot help to see the EFF as performance politics guided by greed rather than a consistent ideological project, very much in Bolsonaro's way.

26 The EFF was formed one year after the expulsion of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) leader Julius Malema in 2012[28]. Pushing for economic emancipation, the party was officially launched in Marikana where 34 miners on strike had been killed by the police, in an episode that became a source of shame for the ANC. The obvious message was that the EFF was siding with workers against the ruling party.

27 Nevertheless, the party did not invest in building relations with workers' movements. Its discourse is not class-based but rather centred around the notion of the « people » as « the true holder of sovereignty », as opposed to an exploitative corrupt elite. This message had a strong appeal to a young, aspiring black middle class who live closer to whites and experience racism daily. In fact, there was a generational undertone in the EFF's critique: « The ANC is too old and too tired, they can't think of anything new », as Malema once said[29].

28 The youth claim does not go together with renovated politics, though. Economic emancipation was equated with nationalising the commanding heights of the economy, such as mines and banks, and redistributing land without compensation. Furthermore, the party evoked a 20th century militarised political culture of the left. Party members wear red berets, which soon became ubiquitous at political meetings, township funerals and on urban streets. Julius Malema is referred to as 'commander in chief', in what quickly gained contours of a cult of the male personality in a gender-toxic environment. A staunch supporter who would 'kill for Zuma!' in the earlier days of his presidency, Malema had ridiculed Khwezi during the rape trial, saying that she must have enjoyed the encounter[30]. More recently, an EFF MP was fined and made to apologise to the party for missing a parliamentary session because her baby was sick[31].

29 If innovation is to be found in EFF politics, this is closer to the right than to the left. In Bolsonaro's fashion, Malema's discourse is unapologetically coarse, serving as a mark of distinction from the high politics of the elite. The Brazilian leader is a macho, racist, and homophobic character who praises dictatorship, torture, and violence. However, atrocities are said in playful, colorful, and youthful language, unlike what the old, serious, and scowling right-wingers used to do. For much of his audience, Bolsonaro's notorious intellectual limitations, as he is unable to articulate a cohesive reasoning in an interview, are cause for amusement rather than astonishment. His chaotic and fragmented style of communication, based on quick reversals, dry cuts, and slogans, is tailored for the short internet videos where he rules. His followers edit the best moments of his interventions in mainstream media to circulate them on digital networks, from broadcast to multicast[32].

30 In Malema´s case, spectacle is foremost enacted through the production of images. In their first sitting of the National Assembly in 2014, EFF MPs wore bright red miner's overalls for the men and domestic workers' uniforms for the women as a challenge to the Western conventions upheld in South Africa's parliament. Eventually, the EFF members were barred under the pretext that political insignia is not allowed on the legislature premises. It was not their first or their last ban: the party's advertisement on the tolling of Gauteng's highways had been banned by the national broadcaster because it called for the destruction of the e-toll gantries. The party protested with the authorities and in the streets, turning the ban itself into a campaign tool[33].

31 From its onset, the EFF defied the rules and conventions of politics to set themselves apart from ordinary politics and the elite. In the run-up to its first elections, the party challenged the Independent Electoral Commission registration fee requirements, arguing they excluded poor people from the democratic process. Eventually, fees were paid and the party went on to become the third most voted, grabbing 25 seats.

32 Once in parliament, the EFF's dominant approach has been disruption. In response to Zuma's State of the Nation address in June 2014, Malema denounced white supremacy, emphasised the similarities between the ANC and the DA and stated that the ANC had murdered the miners at Marikana. Refusing to retract, Malema was ejected and accompanied out by party mates who whistled and hurled abuse along the way. As the Nkandla scandal came to light months later, the EFF MPs frequently disrupted proceedings by chanting 'Pay back the money' at Zuma[34]. Brawls, walkouts, and catchy expressions such as 'Zupta,' blending the president's surname and that of the corruption-riven Gupta brothers, became a signature of the EFF's parliamentary display in the years to come.

33 Outside Parliament, Malema has repeatedly brought up the incendiary apartheid-era struggle song ‘Shoot the Boer’ at rallies[35]. In fact, footage of Malema's radical rhetoric was displayed as evidence of ‘white genocide’ when US President Donald Trump confronted South African President Cyril Ramaphosa in May 2025. Zuma was featured chanting 'Shoot the Boer' as well[36]. In other words, Trump's performance accusing the ANC was entirely based on the political performances of those who undermine the ANC's political leadership. In Brazil, Bolsonaro spoke of shooting the PT followers during the 2018 election campaign. A neologism was coined to convey his message. The term to allude to PT followers (petista) was blended with the Brazilian translation of the Beagle Boys (irmãos metralha), so that Bolsonaro advocated shooting the ‘petralhada’.

34 In the South African context, the EFF is, to some extent, part of a resurgent black consciousness politics in post-apartheid South Africa, driven by mounting frustrations among the black majority. However, the exclusionary nativism radiated by Malema is directed not only against whites. In Zuma's province of KwaZulu-Natal, he has talked about Africans being treated as subhumans by Indians: « Our people are crying tears, when they speak about how Indian fellows are treating them. How they treat them as subhuman. And the ANC has allowed that nonsense because the ANC is captured here in KwaZulu-Natal. All political parties in KwaZulu-Natal [...] are in the pockets of other Indian families. It has to come to an end »[37].

35 The EFF leader consistently resorts to provocative and racially charged language. In 2016, he said « We are not calling for the slaughter of white people, at least for now »[38]. In 2018, he incited supporters to « go after a white man » and spoke of « cutting the throat of whiteness »[39]. And in 2022, he exhorted a crowd in a rally to « never be scared to kill » in support of the party’s revolution[40]. On that occasion, far-right organisation AfriForum submitted complaints to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) for incitement of violence and hate speech[41]. Fifty years ago, this line would hardly make it to the headlines, let alone feed a court case. Likewise, the idea that racism is violence and should be responded to with violence was commonplace, and had wide purchase in anti-apartheid circles. However, in 21st century South Africa, these utterances cause considerable malaise as they contradict the Rainbow Nation spirit.

36 This later speech was further complicated by its context. Malema was speaking in the Western Cape, where he had recently been involved in a scuffle outside Brackenfell High School. EFF members protested at the school after allegations of racism surfaced around a private party where only white learners were invited, a contention that was later disproved. Malema's allusion to killing in a revolution came after referring to the Brackenfell brawl: « You were beaten by white people and there is a white man who is visible on camera . . . why have you not, as a revolutionary organisation, followed up on that guy, him alone, to take that guy in an isolated space and attend to the guy properly? »[42].

37 The white man in question was Brackenfell resident Dante van Wyk. Allegedly receiving thousands of death threats on social media that forced him into hiding with his pregnant fiancé and unborn baby, 19-year old van Wyk went to court against Malema, asking for 1-million rands in damages[43]. At the time of writing, the case is ongoing, mobilising so-called experts to prove or disprove hate speech and the incitement of

violence. Providing a contentious platform to Malema and to the far-right, the episode nurtures racial polarisation that the Rainbow Nation settlement tried to temper.

38 To clarify, the point is not to disapprove of polarisation per se in a society as unequal as South Africa. The point is to signal that Malema's political appeal does not fit into the Rainbow Nation framework, being symptomatic of a hegemonic crisis. Polarisation may result from political radicalisation grounded on a deeper understanding of social contradictions, as happened with Steven Biko-led Black Consciousness in the 1970's. However, it may also operate to simplify social contradictions in devious, politically manipulated ways. In those cases, polarisation razes reality complexities in favour of simple binary worldviews, laying the ground for straightforward political agendas against clear enemies.

39 The fabrication of enemies and diversion of public attention through controversies were Bolsonaro's trademarks. Bolsonarism's internal logic requires the fabrication of enemies to mobilize its base and divert attention. As a president, an invariable script was followed: he chose enemies to attack, while portraying himself as a victim. Bolsonaro accused people, but also institutions and the press, of being obstacles to his project, contriving a logic of self-fulfilling prophecy. So when the president accused Congress of boycotting him, he shifted responsibility for his failures to those who ‘don't let him rule’, while at the same time mobilizing popular support to face the institution that, in the eyes of citizenship, synthesizes rotten politics[44]. When Congress reacted, the president's narrative was legitimized, and therefore, he raised the tone. When it shut up, the president advanced another square. In this game of inversions, Bolsonaro appeared as subversive, while the left brandished the constitution in defence of order.

40 Perhaps the EFF's aesthetical and discursive reenactment of the liberation struggle fulfils a comparable longing for simplification with a changed political sign[45]. However, unlike the Brazilian case, the call to fight, nationalise, and ‘take back’ what the black majority has been deprived of since colonisation cannot be reduced to spectacle, as the land issue exposes.

Land frustration

41 In South Africa, land is an idiom for the citizenship once denied to the black majority, combining moral and material aspirations. Because it had earlier been central to deny citizenship, it is crucial in restoring it[46]. When the ANC became government in 1994, it committed to transferring 30 percent of the country’s 86 million hectares of arable farmland to black farmers by 1999. This goalpost was shifted and in 2018, official figures indicated that only 8 to 9 percent of commercial farmland had been transferred under the government land redistribution programme[47].

42 From the start, the ANC government eschewed Zimbabwe´s approach to land reform, making clear that land occupation and other forms of organised pressure from below would not be tolerated. Over time, the state sought to channel people's aspiration away from restitution to redistribution. The former involves rights-based claims beyond an economic rationale, summed up in the idea that ‘we cannot buy what already belongs to us’. The latter insists that restitution claims should not interfere with the productivity of existing agricultural enterprises, impling a primarily economic-driven approach.

43 In tune with the Rainbow Nation settlement, the ANC proposed partnerships between restitution claimants and white farm-owners. However, many farmers aspired to leave the country, in contrast to black claimants who envisioned the land as more than a commodity. From the government's point of view, a major challenge was to persuade these white farmers to share their expertise and contacts before leaving. Conversely, many claimants frustrated by their inability to prove historical rights simply bought property, either through the redistribution programme or independently. Government redistribution involved transferring land through purchase by willing black buyers, making for a 'willing seller, willing buyer' approach to land reform supported by the Democratic Alliance. It soon became evident that the 'willing seller' could dictate the selling price of land and the pace of land reform, ultimately determining how much land was transferred within the state's allocated budget at any given time.

44 As such, the ANC land reform had to appeal for white-owners' cooperation. In 2001, government advertised in national and provincial newspapers, asking farmers to sell land to 'kick-start' the redistribution programme. Eventually, KwaZulu-Natal farmer, Robin Fowler facilitated his workers' ownership of their village, while Gauteng landowner Roger Roman had already offered half his land to resident black families, a gesture that came in the course of a notable personal transformation that turned him into a land activist[48]. Praised as true patriots, these individual responses could not put the country on the track of meaningful land reform, fulfilling the 30 percent land transfer goal set by the ruling party.

45 Frustration has been compounded by an awareness that, in the past, the state subvented the life that white farmers enjoyed at the expense of the black majority. As rights-based land-ownership expectations were quelled, the quest for historical redress was likely to take the form of individual aspiration to enter what once was the domain of white privilege, not unlike what was taking place in urban settings. Nonetheless, commercial farming feasibility was undermined by the removal of subsidies under Mbeki. Unlike the apartheid state, the ANC-led state neither ensured access to land nor profit conditions to those it primarily represents[49]. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that resentment over the broken promise of land distribution feeds racial acrimony channelled by the EFF's polarising politics.

Frog kisses frog

46 However, the sincerity of the EFF commitment to land distribution should be questioned in light of the broader political logic it follows. More than a commitment to social transformation, land agitation might be just another political tool to stir up popular support for its power-driven ambitions. Since his early days as the leader of the ANCYL, Malema has been implicated in corruption scandals and murky connections. And so is the EFF: its registration as a political party with the Electoral Commission in 2014 was paid by tobacco smuggler Afriano Mazzotti, as Malema himself acknowledged[50]. EFF transparency is further compromised by not submitting its list of funders to the Electoral Commission as required by the Political Parties Funding Act. Most of its rivals comply, and the IEC could force the EFF, but it has never done so.

47 Funding sources are murky, but what is clear is that the party has money. And so have its leaders. Although not as flamboyantly wealthy as Zuma, Malema has made no secret about his penchant for designer labels, fancy cars, expensive champagne, and lavish

partying since his ANCYL days. As with Zuma, Malema understood that poor black people often interpret the affluence and material sophistication of political leaders as a mark of aspiration. Bling became part of a political style embedded in a rhetoric of racial accomplishment. The obvious contradiction of one so opulent claiming to defend the interests of the poor was twisted into solidarity of the black rich and poor against the economic domination of the white minority[51].

48 The most prominent corruption exposés involving the EFF are the ransacking of the VBS Bank in Malema's home province of Limpopo[52], and tender deals with the city councils of Johannesburg and Tshwane[53]. The latter case was part of an exchange for supporting local DA governments. However, in the aftermath of the 2024 election, Malema denied a possible coalition with that party on the grounds that the EFF is « a radical militant and revolutionary economic emancipation movement and will not compromise principles on the altar of political and opportunistic convenience »[54].

49 However, in the run-up to the elections, a congenial Malema traded the EFF red T-shirt for a tailored black shirt in an attempt to cut a more statesman-like figure. In a conversation at the Wits School of Governance, he hinted that principles could be flexible in view of a strategic objective: « We are going to kiss a lot of frogs along the way ». He then added that « The ANC is not a small organisation. You have to eat it bit by bit »[55]. At the same time, Malema argued that the EFF was a natural coalition partner for the ANC. After the elections, the EFF reasserted its willingness to go into a coalition with the ruling party, but an agreement was reached with the DA instead. Somehow, the ANC didn't feel encouraged to form a coalition with those who are out there to eat them bit by bit.

Comparative remarks

50 South Africa's 2024 elections confirmed the decline of the national liberation party’s hegemony. However, the two most significant new contenders to emerge since the onset of the Rainbow Nation are splinters from the ANC itself. So one might ponder whether, in a broader sense, the ANC hegemony is morphing rather than fading. But this is not so, because the ANC's faith is tied to that of the Rainbow Nation settlement their offshoots undermine. The unspoken rationale behind the ANC teaming up with the DA in a government of national unity is to safeguard this framework, no matter how long it lasts. In fact, the instability surrounding the coalition further exposes a hegemonic crisis. Likewise, Lula´s comeback for a third term in 2023, with his former electoral foe Geraldo Alckmin as a ticket companion, should not be seen as a countermove to the decline of the New Republic, but as a sign of the contradictory tensions involved in this unsettled conjuncture. It should be seen as part of the interregnum and not as a way out.

51 The rise of Zuma's MKP and Malema's EFF sheds light on the aspirations that the Rainbow Nation settlement has fostered and those it has quenched. Schematically speaking, Zuma proceeds from the first while the EFF stems from the last. But reality is more complex. Having been together as one in Polokwane, Zuma and Malema are not far opposed as left-and-right political conventions might suggest. In fact, these political strands intertwine. Signalling a change in the spirit of the times, Zuma's shamelessness points to the prevalence of an individualistic consumerist ethic overcoming the collective rights-based values that guided the Freedom Charter ANC. At the same time,

his MKP party has campaigned for land expropriation as championed by the EFF. Conversely, the EFF's disruptiveness invokes Freedom Charter values that were left behind by the ANC. But its radical stands are soaked in an individualistic consumerist ethic, being instrumental to its ladder-climbing ambitions. That explains a paradox: despite espousing genuine causes, Malema lacks the authenticity that Zuma and Bolsonaro exude.

52 There is no simple explanation for the popular support Zuma and Bolsonaro enjoy but their political performances speak to widespread frustrations in languages of 21st century aspirations. Over time, the collective expectations borne by the New Republic and the Rainbow Nation were turned down. This loss of hope was compounded by the nurturing of individualistic, competitive, commodified and neoliberal subjectivities, which shaped how the way forward is perceived. Bolsonaro and Zuma speak to this reality through different idioms. Instead of policies to restrain social dynamics that pit each one for oneself and all against all, as did the PT, Bolsonaro normalises these dynamics, standing for the right to defend oneself by attacking. Under this logic, social isolation in the pandemic is not perceived as collective protection but as an assault on freedom. Unashamed of leaving others behind, Zuma embodies unbridled black empowerment aspirations shaped by a competitive consumerist culture. After being let down by Mbeki's rule of law, transgressing the law is perceived by many as a rightful thing to do in light of the need to survive and eventually shine.

53 If Zuma's authenticity exhales cynicism, Malema's stand smells farcical. But the farce is revealing of broader left political impasses in the 21st century. Since revolution has dropped from the agenda, left politics has become a broker of class conciliation in times of structural capital crisis, as Lula's PT did in Brazil. In other words, given the impossibility of structural challenge, left politics has championed crisis containment. However, in the South African context, the ANC filled that position from the start. Facing the dawn of revolution, the ANC embraced negotiation. Although the Rainbow Nation settlement has been more than that, it is nonetheless a complex piece of crisis containment with the ANC in the driver's seat.

54 Since the national liberation movement became the establishment, the emerging left had to go against it. Since negotiation was government, it had to go for revolution. However, this was to be done in a context where revolution, as known in the 20th century, was not in the picture. Furthermore, the left had not reinvented itself globally, but the right had. As the legitimacy of post-Cold War democratic arrangements ebbed worldwide, the far right positioned itself against the establishment. What kind of left politics could emerge in South Africa when revolution was out of place and anti-establishment politics was captured by the far right?

55 Revolutionary politics frozen in 20th century moulds could only be performed as spectacle, varnishing an antidemocratic, centralised, and personified party culture. The enactment of a militarised national liberation movement sprung up as a performative device to compensate for real impotence to reinvent and challenge social structures[56]. Detached from any domestic or global revolutionary élan, the tragedy of African national liberation party state politics re-emerged as a farce. In that sense, it converges with idioms of far-right politics, where culture wars smokescreen an impotence to address structural change.

56 In Brazil, Bolsonarismo displaced political confrontation from policy-making to the realm of values, normalising violent dynamics underpinning neoliberalism. It enacts as

a culture war the dynamics of individualism and competition that preside over daily social reproduction, while the policies it implemented reinforce these same trends. Bolsonaro's moral crusade gives ideological colour to what, in fact, is giving up on social solidarity. In ways different from the EFF, it is a politics of impotence insofar as it displaces confrontation to cultural and moral grounds while surrendering to the violent social dynamics it reinforces.

57 War-like performances cloak left and right idioms of social impotence. However, this is not to say that they are inconsequential. Impotence to change does not detain politics performed as a war but fuels it. Zuma's ad hoc party was named after the ANC's armed wing, conveying the message that values freedom fighters once stood for were betrayed, and as in the past, violent means might be justified to achieve change. Furthermore, framing their political ventures as spiritual wars, Bolsonaro's and Zuma's constituencies draw on fighting stamina that is corroborated by a pentecostalised public culture.

58 On the other hand, real consequences do not preclude these performers from being farcical: professional politicians appear as outsiders, shamelessness as authenticity, aggressors as victims, attacking as defence, and so on. These inversions suggest that Bolsonaro's and Zuma's effectiveness as mass leaders lies less in what they deliver than in the image they construct and cultivate. They are dearly concerned with public image and media performance instead of policy delivery. Consequently, the campaign to oust Zuma successfully set an alternative narrative around state capture. Conversely, Bolsonaro's electoral defeat did not correspond to any meaningful reframing of the political debate and of his crimes in the public sphere, while his supporters' prowess in the digital arena remains unmatched.

59 This difference partly explains the limited outreach of Zuma's comeback. In the end, Zuma's and Bolsonaro's political game may come down to saving themselves by blackmailing the establishment in the face of multiple judicial processes. Nevertheless, Zuma's tapping on tribalism, ethnicity and violence is unlikely to go national, while Bolsonarismo as a social phenomenon has gained a life of its own. South Africa's fraught landscape is compounded by the EFF's self-representation as a liberation army. Over and above the current discredit of national liberation party governments on the continent, the party's spectacularised bad manners resemble Bolsonaro's politics in disturbing ways. One wonders whether the EFF's authoritarian, personalised and state-centred politics evokes the worst of the 20th century left, blended with the worst of the 21st century right, performed as anti-systemic hate politics ready to accommodate capital – all mired in corruption. Like Bolsonaro and the MKP, the EFF might not be the way out of the hegemonic interregnum. However, they do point in the direction of things to come.

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ABSTRACTS

Having Bolsonarismo as a point of comparison, this article discusses challenges to African National Congress (ANC) political dominance in South Africa raised by two ANC splinters: former president Jacob Zuma-led uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party and Julius Malema-led Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). It is argued that the rationale behind the government of national unity that brought together the ANC and the white-dominated Democratic Alliance (DA) in the aftermath of 2024´s elections is to defend the post-apartheid 'Rainbow Nation' framework from social and political trends embodied by the EFF and the MKP, which are likely to accelerate its depletion. A comparable rationale underpinned Lula´s return to the Brazilian presidency in 2022. As with Bolsonaro, the prominence of the MKP and the EFF are seen as symptoms of a hegemony crisis, pointing to social and political trends that are likely to outreach their leaders´ political span.

Tomando el Bolsonarismo como punto de comparación, este artículo analiza los desafíos al dominio político del Congreso Nacional Africano (CNA) en Sudáfrica planteados por dos escisiones del CNA : el partido uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) liderado por el expresidente Jacob Zuma y el Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) liderado por Julius Malema. Se argumenta que la razón de ser del gobierno de unidad nacional que reunió al ANC y a la Alianza Democrática (DA) dominada por los blancos tras las elecciones de 2024 es defender el marco de la « Nación Arco Iris » post-apartheid de las tendencias sociales y políticas encarnadas por el EFF y el MKP, que probablemente aceleren su agotamiento. Un razonamiento similar sustentó el regreso de Lula a la presidencia brasileña en 2022. Al igual que en el caso de Bolsonaro, la prominencia del MKP y del FEP se consideran síntomas de una crisis de hegemonía, que apuntan a tendencias sociales y políticas que probablemente prolongarán la vida política de sus líderes.

Prenant le Bolsonarismo comme point de comparaison, cet article examine les défis posés à la domination politique du Congrès national africain (ANC) en Afrique du Sud par deux scissions de l'ANC : le parti uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) dirigé par l'ancien président Jacob Zuma et les Combattants pour la liberté économique (EFF) dirigés par Julius Malema. Il est avancé que la raison d'être du gouvernement d'unité nationale qui a réuni l'ANC et l'Alliance démocratique (DA) dominée par les Blancs au lendemain des élections de 2024 est de défendre le cadre de la « nation arc-en-ciel » post-apartheid contre les tendances sociales et politiques incarnées par l'EFF et le MKP, qui sont susceptibles d'accélérer son affaiblissement. Le retour de Lula à la présidence brésilienne en 2022 reposait sur une logique comparable. Comme pour Bolsonaro, la proéminence du MKP et de l'EFF est considérée comme le symptôme d'une crise d'hégémonie, indiquant des tendances sociales et politiques susceptibles d'étendre la durée de vie politique de leurs dirigeants.

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