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South Africa

Land at the centre of President Zuma's Radical Economic Transformation

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Farm workers and farm dwellers have generally been excluded “as beneficiaries” of radical land distribution.

“Access to land is a key priority for people in the countryside. We will therefore review the appropriateness of the existing land redistribution programme. We are doing this in order to speed up land reform and redistribution and to promote land ownership by South Africans.” Thabo Mbeki, 13th AU Summit, 2009

Radical land transformation has been used as a jack-in-the-box that has regularly jumped up and taken centre stage of the government's political discourse over the past twenty years. The pattern that has emerged over the two decades indicates more noise than an actual shift in political will.

Movements, farm worker organisations and activists struggling and supporting the rural poor, the landless and farm workers have consistently argued for radical land and agrarian transformation. These forces have repeatedly demanded an end to the skewed land holding patterns, with arable land concentrated in the hands of 37,000 commercial farmers.

Many have argued that the ANC has no vision of the economic, political and ecological significance of implementing meaningful agrarian transformation that puts land in the hands of thousands of small holder farmers (women and men). Such radical agrarian transformation has to be accompanied by adequate infrastructure, finances, training, extension and technical support to radically transform the countryside and provide livelihoods for thousands. These demands have mostly fallen on deaf ears, except during electioneering periods and moments when the ruling party has had to respond to pressures from below and from the left.

We are now in such a moment; hence the ratcheting up by Zuma of talk of radical land redistribution as part of the radical economic transformation. We must recall ANC speak on land transformation over the past two decades, much of which has tended not to go very far.

More noise than action

Over the past twenty years, the ANC has periodically returned to radical land transformation. The slow pace of land reform and the extent to which land holding patterns have not shifted has been a thread that has run through several “State of the Nation” speeches and government conferences.

The National Land Tenure conference in 2001 was one of the first to deal with radical land transformation. This was to be the first in a series of conferences on land reform where we were told that the ruling party was to review the “fundamentals of land policy”. At the 2001 conference, government emphasised its objective of transferring 30% of white agricultural land to those historically dispossessed by 2014. Yet, to date only 9% of arable land has been transferred.

Just four years later in 2005, Thoko Didiza, and the Deputy President, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, hosted a National Land Summit in Johannesburg. This summit was significant in that it brought together many relevant stakeholders and also had buy-in from white commercial agriculture and commercial farmers' unions, trade unions and civil society

organisations. At the National Land Summit, Didiza said publicly that the ANC's market-led policy in the form of willing-buyer-willing-seller (WBWS) was an obstacle to speeding up land reform. In her opening address, Deputy President Mlambo declared in front of 1,500 representatives, "today we bury WBWS".

Shortly afterwards in 2006, President Mbeki in his State of Nation address stated that the state would be playing a key role, as the "lead driver" in land reform. This call for the ANC to play a more radical role was echoed at the ANC's 52nd National Conference in 2007. Here again the ruling party called for the fast-tracking of a small-scale farmer strategy. The 52nd conference again emphasised the need to speed up and increase the pace of land reform. "Willing-buyer-willing seller" was buried for the second time. Since then, there were several more government conferences that spoke about land redistribution and placing land at the centre of economic transformation. It took the government almost 10 years after the 2005 Land Summit to shift policy slightly.

The National Development Plan was probably the most concrete of the ANC's policy proposal in this regard. More recently, in 2014, under the Zuma administration, yet another land conference was organised, where all the noise of the previous summits was repackaged.

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Real Proposals are far from radical

What is clear however is that, throughout these policy shifts, land holding patterns have remained largely unchanged. Farm workers and farm dwellers have generally been excluded "as beneficiaries" of land reform. Where farms have been redistributed, it has been without financial and technical support.

The reality of all these pronouncements and calls for radical economic transformation is that meaningful and far-reaching land redistribution is simply not on the ANC's agenda. The substance of ANC land policy has been the insertion and consolidation of a small coterie of black commercial farmers as part of the existing white commercial agriculture and agro-business sector.

President Zuma started office as president in 2009 by asserting: "During the election campaign, we made it clear that rural development and land reform would be one of our key five priorities." Again, in 2015 in his State of the Nation Address Zuma outlined a nine-point plan that was to create more jobs and boost the economy is indicative of this approach. Agriculture and agro-processing were at the centre of the job creation strategy. Some of the proposals spoke about:

• transforming the agricultural sector through the roll-out of Agri-parks in 44 districts

• fast-tracking the implementation of the Strengthening Relative Rights of People Working the Land (50/50)

• implementing the One Household One Hectare programme

• supporting 90 black commercial farmers through the Commercialisation Support Programme, which targets 450 black smallholder farmers by 2022.

The consistent failure to deliver on these proposals is not unsurprising when we consider that the budget for the

Department of Rural Development and Land Reform is not only underfunded but that land reform receives the least funds in the government's overall budget.

Beyond budgets

Apart from the gap between public announcements and implementation, the ANC government has a narrow vision of land and agrarian transformation. Moreover, it is deeply divided on the question of land and agrarian transformation, especially when it comes to land expropriation. For the ANC, the land and agrarian question is embedded in private property and capitalist relations of production; hence the ruling party's inability to act decisively

Land redistribution requires a political will and a political leadership that will put measures in place that reverse the market -oriented, neo-liberal approach to land reform that essentially still refuses to address historical dispossession and injustices. Some of these measures imply expropriation of land without compensation. This is a position from which Zuma has very recently backtracked after his earlier populist promises. Speaking at the Indaba of Traditional Leaders, he said "the land issue must be resolved within the ambit of the Constitution and the law".

At the heart of the lack of transformation is an ANC with an urban elite with limited interest in agriculture. They lack a perspective on the role that radical land redistribution can play in transforming the economy and giving the rural poor access to livelihoods. It also lacks a vision that restores the relationship between land, people and nature. The ANC does not have the will to challenge white land holding patterns – they have no faith in impoverished rural people and their capacity to produce food and ensure national household food security. All the policies show a focus on maintaining the status quo whilst ensuring that there is a small layer of black commercial farmers.

Of course, without significant progress, there may come a point when these the rural poor will tire of waiting and take matters into their own hands as we see from the recent spate of occupations in Suurbraak and other parts of the country.

Nevertheless, it is possible for the ANC, when faced with the prospect of losing power, to use land reform to regain popular support and maintain a hold over the countryside. This we have seen in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Southern Africa. It will mean considerable political upheaval in the rural areas and possibly open a Pandora's box where they lose control of the forces they have unleashed to drive land reform.

Against ANC policy zig zags and policy failure what is required is a national movement of landless people and the rural poor that demands and mobilises around a comprehensive platform of radical agrarian transformation. Large agricultural land should be sub-divided and land allocated to households and producers. Municipalities must play a leading role in supporting radical land redistribution. We require services and support such as restructuring of the Land Bank so that it serves the needs and interests of smallholder producers and agricultural households. It must act as a facility that enables them, especially women, to access grants and soft loans. Our focus and priority has to be local food production for local markets and local household food security before an export oriented agriculture.

July 2017

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