

Zuma not worth our democracy

By Ronald Wesso

Wesson argues that a secret ballot in the vote of no confidence against Zuma will deepen corruption and open space for vote-buying. He called for mass based mobilization to force MPs to vote Zuma out in the open.

Working class and poor people should not support the Constitutional Court application of the United Democratic Movement for a secret ballot when the National Assembly votes on the motion of no confidence in President Zuma. Instead, the focus of activists should be to build a movement to broaden the democratic space for the poor, instead of closing it by handing more powers and opportunities for corruption to members of parliament and big capitalists.

The temptation to support anything that is anti-Zuma can be overwhelming. Zuma is a proven sexist who – as feminists such as the 1 in 9 Campaign pointed out. His regime up to now was one of indifference or open hostility to the plight of Black women who are the majority of the working class and the poor. Policies such as privatization, outsourcing and public-private partnership have enriched the elites massively at the expense of the poor and have created endless opportunities for corruption. This went hand in hand with increasing authoritarianism, surveillance, repression and violence of the Zuma regime against poor people who resisted, especially in the informal settlements and rural areas.

Perhaps more importantly, if Zuma wins his current battles for more control of the ANC and the state, things are likely to be much worse for the poor than it is even now. The nuclear deal alone will have several disastrous effects. It will bind the state elite closer to the most authoritarian, climate-denying and powerful regimes in the world, like that of Vladimir Putin of Russia and Donald Trump of America, which will strengthen the creeping authoritarianism of the South African state that has been going on for years. Running the state through outsourcing and tenders will become entrenched, as will the corruption that goes with it. The price of electricity will shoot up, which will raise the prices of all necessities and worsen hunger and suffering in poor communities, with Black women bearing the brunt of it. Uranium mining will produce illness inducing levels of radiation in the soil and air, with once again women being most at risk of ovarian and breast cancer. And this is only some of the most obvious likely effects of the nuclear deal. A victory for Zuma threatens to institutionalise, at national level, the anti-poor violence and corruption that is already prevalent at local and provincial levels.

However, none of this means that the court application of the UDM is driven by the needs of the poor and working class. Secret ballots for members of parliament create opportunities for vote buying. This may seem like an abstract threat, but it is not. Magda Wierzycka is the CEO of an asset management and stock broking company that claims to manage assets to the value of R158 billion rand. She has emerged as a key thought leader and opinion maker for the anti-Zuma sentiment among the big capitalists called White Monopoly Capital. In a recent article on the Daily Maverick, she calls on big business to guarantee well paid positions in their companies for ANC MPs who get dismissed if they vote against Zuma in the no-confidence motion. This is nothing but a proposal for open vote buying by big capitalists. The fact that it is aimed against Zuma does not make it any better for the poor. If Zuma falls because of these

interventions it will simply reinforce the regime of extreme exploitation of the poor by White Monopoly Capital. A secret ballot will enhance the scope for this kind of vote buying and corruption.

While it is in the interests of the poor that Zuma must go, it is also important to reject political approaches that strengthen the hold of the big capitalists who are much more responsible for poverty, violence and exploitation than Zuma. The politics that is needed is one that builds the capacity of the poor to struggle for their own demands and that expands the democratic space for poor people to mobilise within.

In this case, it could look something like this: Movements of the poor and working class target ANC MPs with constituencies dominated by townships, informal settlements and communal areas. The movements demand that these MPs attend constituency meetings and commit beforehand to vote according to the decisions of these meetings. Should these MPs fail to attend these meetings and vote against its decision, the movements continue to target them with protests and other forms of pressure. The logic here is that the rollback of state capture, corruption and the neoliberal capitalism that drives it depend on the strength of the movements of the working class and the poor. If the terms of Zuma going is set by the big capitalists instead of by these movements, the situation will not improve for the poor as much as it could in the face of rising self-mobilisations of the poor for the poor.

Of course, this no-confidence debate and the UDM court application is just one instance in the political crisis around state capture and corruption. Movements like Save South Africa and the Freedom Movement are general attempts to rally the public, including the poor, behind the concerns and methods of White Monopoly Capital. The need for the poor and the working class to build interventions and movements of their own against state capture and corruption therefore goes beyond this court case and parliamentary vote. If the movements of the poor leave the leadership and definition of the struggle against state capture and corruption to the big capitalists it might lead to a situation like in Brazil, where big capitalists came to power on an anti-corruption ticket and are trying to deepen neoliberal austerity in a way that will destroy the previous gains of the working class and the poor.

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