

Democracy

Democracy is one of the most overused and abused words in the political debates taking place in our country. Political groups from the extreme right, bantustan tribalists and the NP all loudly claim to be democrats.

The democracy advocated by the democratic forces led by the ANC is fundamentally different. The ANC fights for a democratic South Africa in which all people without any racial discrimination, tribal or ethnic division can participate equally and freely in decisions that affect their lives and shape our society.

Democracy is a principle of the ANC – along with the principles of non-racialism and non-sexism, it is our most important objective. Yet unlike many other groupings who state their commitment to this principle, the ANC believes that the principle must be expressed in action for it to have meaning. Meaningful democracy is based on the active participation of people in all activities and processes that affect their lives. Through it ordinary people are empowered to take control of their lives in all spheres – political, economic and social.

THE PEOPLE SHALL GOVERN!

In 1955 the liberation movement led by the ANC put forward a vision of a democratic South Africa in the Freedom Charter. This was the culmination of a national campaign of discussion and consultation among our people to decide what type South Africa we were fighting to establish.

This vision began to be built and expressed in practice when organs of people's power like street committees, Parent Teacher Student Associations,

This is the first in a series of articles on the topic of democracy. We begin by looking at what the ANC means when it talks of democracy. In later articles, we will discuss what it means to put democratic principles into practice in our organisation. At the end of the article there are some questions that readers can discuss among themselves or in their branches as part of their political education.

SRCs, civics and worker locals sprung up during the 1980s. On the factory floor, workers formed independent trade unions to struggle for their rights in the workplace and in broader society.

These organisations are based on the daily participation of ordinary people in deciding on matters affecting their lives. Grassroots participation demands that leaders and representatives are subject to regular elections and accountable to and recallable by those who elected them. Leaders must act within the man-

date given to them by their constituencies and regularly report back.

This is far more extensive than parliamentary democracy where people are active only during elections once every five years. They have no direct control over their representatives between elections.

DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION

To build a real and meaningful democracy, conditions and structures must be created to guarantee and protect the right of people to participate freely and without fear. The ANC demands a democratic constitution that guarantees the right of all our people to participate in decision making. This must be underpinned by a Bill of Rights protecting these rights.

CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

For the constitution to truly reflect the aspirations of the majority the people must participate in drafting it. In the present conditions this can only be done by a Constituent Assembly consisting of elected representatives enjoying the confidence and mandate of the people. Elections for a constituent assembly cannot be managed by the present minority government which still seeks to impose its own limited democracy. The ANC demands that an Interim Government of National Unity replace the present government. Under an Interim Government, elections for the Constituent Assembly can take place freely without interference from the apartheid state.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Society is not homogenous but is composed of different social classes, groups and sectors with different interests, problems and competing demands. In a demo-

cratic society all these groups must be able to freely organise around their interests to promote and protect them. It is to the benefit of society as a whole that these interests are expressed through free political activity. People must be free to form and belong to organisations of their choice. Their organisations must be able to operate without restrictions, fear and intimidation.

VIBRANT CIVIL SOCIETY

Today it is widely recognised that organisations representing interest groups and sectors – eg community, education, health, and environmental organisations and trade unions – should be independent from the state and political parties. Strong and independent organisations in civil society serve both to promote different interests and to safeguard democracy itself. They are an important channel through which

ordinary people can participate actively in the shaping of national policies through consultation with the ruling parties, government structures, planning and management bodies.

ECONOMIC RESOURCES

In a situation where access and control of economic resources is limited to a tiny minority the ability of people to participate in shaping their country and their own lives is severely restricted and undermined.

Decisions of how economic resources are utilised and distributed cannot be left to a few individuals and to the blind forces of the market but must also involve the people through the state and their organisations. The state after a process of consultation with all structures representing various interest groups in society should set out a national policy and framework in which economic

activity takes place. Trade unions in the workplace must be in a position to participate actively in the control and planning of work. Local authorities and municipalities in consultation with community structures must plan economic and financing activities on a local level.

The substance of the democracy we are fighting for is the free and active participation of all our people in decisions that shape society. The basis for democracy must be built today through strengthening the structures of the ANC and all mass based democratic organisations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How can we build a real and meaningful democracy in a future South Africa?
- Do you think that the National Party is sincere about its commitment to democracy? Give reasons for your answer. ♦



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