

Executive summary of DDP Political Forum

Theme :	The Relationship between Representative and Participatory Democracy in Post-Apartheid South Africa
Presenter:	Mr. Mazibuko K. Jara (member of the editorial collective of Amandla Publishers and Freelance researcher on land reform, cooperatives and poverty)
Venue	Southern Sun - Elangeni
Date	23 July 2008

The purpose of the forum was to explore how a thicker relationship between representative and participatory forms of democracy could create possibilities for constructing alternative power relations between the state and society. Mr. Mazibuko Jara observed that even though the winning of representative democracy in South Africa had certainly been a major popular victory, electoral democracy needed to be strengthened, deepened and defended by the consolidation of many other forms of democratic engagement and of popular power, including popular participatory democracy. To this end, he illuminated the salient limitations of the liberal democratic framework and posited an alternative popular democratic perspective that seeks to go beyond traditional meanings of democracy.

The meaning of democracy goes beyond our liberal democratic framework

He indicated that the Freedom Charter approaches the question of democracy in a more substantial way than the current applied meaning of procedural democracy. It loudly proclaims that *"The People Shall Govern!"* It combines measures of representative democracy such as the right to stand as public representatives in legislative bodies with demands for participatory democracy. Hence, it presents three strands of thinking about democracy – democracy as *representative* democracy; democracy as the enjoyment of *rights* within a constitutional, rights-based dispensation; and democracy as *popular, collective self-empowerment*. Jara contended that a tendency to marginalize democratic self-governance would weaken institutions of representative democracy.

Lack of participation

He indicated that for most ordinary citizens, democracy & politics become, at best, a kind of theatre in which they are reduced to spectators. They have the periodic illusion of being able (once every five years) to choose the show they will watch, and thereafter are expected to applaud, fall asleep or, at worst grumble in protest.

Part of the explanation for that lack of participation of ordinary citizens' lies in the incomplete transition of the democratic order after 1994, turning them from being "subjects" into

“citizens”. Poverty makes that even worse as it circumscribes and limits the forms of agency that are available to them. This political disempowerment of poor communities weakens their capacity to challenge the very social, economic and political processes which marginalise them. And even the celebrated ward- or health committees and other democratic participation structures fail to address the political marginality of the poor. The main problem is the absence of power in these structures i.e. a ward committee does not have powers to decide on a budget. In this way, the liberal democratic framework, as celebrated as it is, is quite apathetic to popular participation and popular power.

The biggest threat facing the deepening of democracy in our country originates from the inordinate inequality, poverty, under-development and the continued ownership and control of our country’s wealth by an unelected elite coterie. The post-apartheid growth and accumulation path has further diminished the meaning of democracy for popular forces as well their capacity to democratically shape and change society in their own democratic interests. In other words, in South Africa we have not succeeded to build thorough-going popular democracy in which there is democratic development of goals at the community level and democratic execution of those goals in productive activity. The main faultline of liberal democracy is that it thinks of citizens as individual voters with rights to pursue their interests without any mediation of class and social power.

The liberal democratic perspective creates an elusive boundary between the state (political society) and civil society. The state is identified as the political realm where power resides. Decision making power is the preserve of the political elite who occupy representative elected bodies (Executive, Parliament, etc). Civil society is designated the role of ‘watchdog’ over the state to prevent it from oppressing the personal freedoms of its citizenry. The liberal perspective advocates for a vibrant civil society to hold the state accountable, however, without explaining how accountability would be achieved. This does create at its core an illusionary dichotomy between the state (or: political society) and civil society. The net effect is the de-politicisation of grassroots discourses and activities. Meanwhile, whilst it recognises the complimentary role of representative and participatory democratic institutions, political power and control are reposed within the elected bodies of the state. But often Liberalism would incorrectly conceive civil society as an uncontested terrain, as a platform of consensus. Thus taking for granted the power relations and class interests embedded in civil society. Liberalism masks vested interests of those who have benefited from colonialism and more than a century of capitalist development which has continued uninterrupted in the post-1994 constitutional dispensation.

Hence, it is Jara’s contention that popular democracy should become the accent of our democratic struggle and that we need to reconceptualise the very basis of state-society relations. He argued that the solution lies in the strengthening of representative democracy, and the condition for that is the strengthening of popular, localised creativity, participation, power and involvement. The solution calls for reinvigorating traditions and practices of popular democratic power in many settings. We need to envision pluralities of democracy: if the presidency or parliament has failed, then our hopes and aspirations do not fall through with

that failure. Therefore we must create the potential for constructing alternative power relations in society as a whole.

Popular democratic alternative

The central thesis of Mazibuko Jara's presentation was that political equality is inconceivable in the face of social and material inequality. He argued that political power needs to be diffused in society. We must envision the utopia of pluralities of democratic power everywhere. We cannot afford to have power in one centre which if degenerates and fails then all our hopes and aspirations drown with it. That would be a tragic anti-climax to the play. We must strengthen popular, localised creativity, participation, power and involvement. Simply challenging the executive through parliament would be inadequate in dispersing democratic power. For stopping the politics of politicians continuing to displace and factionalise the politics of the community, the need for change lies close at hand: *a reform of the electoral system; accountable, transparent and open public funding of democracy; and public funding of social mobilisation. Progressive popular politics is needed that must seek to defend, strengthen and transforming the state: the struggle against privatisation and commercialisation, against fragmentation and corruption, and the struggle to consolidate coherence and a transformational planning capacity.*

Responses from participants

Mazibuko's presentation stimulated a lively debate. Overall, most comments intimated a tenuous relationship between representative and participatory forms of democracy in South Africa. The majority of participants felt that the relationship between civil society and government is poor and often motivated by self interests. Participants felt that civil society is dynamic, but not well coordinated and capacitated, and that it lacks power to influence public policy processes. In this regard, they were of the view that government should share decision making power on public policy issues with civil society. They also casted aspersions on the efficacy of participatory forums such as NEDLAC, ward committees, etc. Participants felt that these forums are being occupied by well resourced and highly organised interests groups. They lack decision making power and were often exploited by politicians.

