

The strength of the middle ground in BEE, land and race debates – IOL 12 June 2019

With the elections behind us, the ANC is beginning to claim that black South Africans are solidly behind all the statist proposals in its election manifesto. These include expropriation without compensation (EWC), a state monopoly over healthcare under the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, the nationalisation of the South African Reserve Bank, and changes to the Bank's mandate to align it with 'the objectives of the second phase' of the ANC's national democratic revolution (NDR).

None of this is true. The ANC won its 57.5% majority in Parliament with the support of only 26.5% of all eligible voters (both registered and unregistered). Some 10 million people voted for the ANC at the national level, but double that number – more than 20 million – chose to stay away from the polls rather than endorse the ruling party or its policies.

In addition, recent IRR and eNCA opinion polls show that the great majority of South Africans have little enthusiasm for current ANC policies, let alone the further NDR proposals for which the party now (falsely) claims to have strong voter support.

According to an IRR opinion poll conducted in December 2018, most black South Africans have little interest in land reform, for only 2% think that 'speeding up land reform' should be a top priority for the government. In addition, a mere 1% want the government to focus on 'speeding up affirmative action', while 75% want merit-based job appointments and a mere 17% support race quotas in sport. Most have little faith in the capacity of current BEE policies to help them get ahead, with 85% saying that tax-funded vouchers for schooling, housing and health care would be more effective in helping them advance.

Instead, most black South Africans (57%) see 'more jobs and better education' as the best way to improve their lives, while 74% identify this as the key to overcoming inequality. Most (86%) believe the different races need each other to make progress, while 64% think race relations have improved since 1994. By contrast, only 2% say that 'fighting racism' should be the government's top priority.

The eNCA opinion poll (carried out in the run-up to the May 2019 election, and designed and analysed by author RW Johnson) shows a similar picture. Few black South Africans (less than 2%) are interested in land reform, while large majorities of black voters would readily jettison the EWC idea if this would help bring investment and jobs. In addition, many people (50% among ANC voters and 61% among EFF voters) support the idea that the customary land now administered by traditional leaders should be individually owned by the people living on it.

Most black voters see joblessness as by far the most important problem they confront – as a host of opinion polls over decades have repeatedly confirmed. Many (55% among ANC voters) have little faith in the ruling party's capacity to expand employment. A similar proportion (57% of all respondents) believes the ANC cares little about the plight of the unemployed.

Even among EFF voters, large numbers favour privatisation and business-friendly policies if this will help bring jobs. This contrasts sharply with their leaders' demand for widespread nationalisation. There is also little grassroots support for 'radical economic redistribution', ANC voters rejecting this by a majority of 3:1.

Many black voters would also be glad to jettison current BEE and affirmative action policies if this would help boost employment. In addition, most ANC voters remain unconvinced by persistent propaganda blaming white privilege for rising inequality. Instead, many blame the government (55%) or the ANC itself (29%). Only 16% blame 'rich whites', while a tiny percentage (1%) blame 'whites in general, apartheid'.

Moreover, whereas the ANC is determined to avoid the privatisation of Eskom and other state-owned enterprises (SOEs), significant proportions of black voters disagree. Some 30% want the immediate privatisation of Eskom, with EFF supporters particularly keen on this option. In addition, as Johnson writes, 'the largest group in all three major parties favour the privatisation of all SOEs, with EFF voters the most in favour'.

As Johnson notes, these results are 'a resounding vote against the National Democratic Revolution'. They also show that 'the usual ANC/EFF socialist agenda is actually a reflection of the prejudices of a very small political elite of political activists who are wildly unrepresentative of their electorates'.

What these opinion polls also show is the strength of the middle ground. Despite all the propaganda in favour of race-based BEE and radical land and economic redistribution, the great majority of South Africans favour moderate and sensible economic policies. They have little interest in EWC, little belief in BEE, and little confidence in the ANC's capacity to manage the economy or fix the SOEs. Instead, very many want pro-business policies, sound education, and a realistic prospect of the jobs they rightly identify as the key to getting ahead.

ANC and EFF leaders, with their strong ideological commitment to the NDR, refuse to recognise these realities. Social media generally ignore them, while even the mainstream media gives far too little attention to the moderate majority. In this broad group, however, lies the country's hope for a far better future.

As opinion polls show, the foundation for uniting the middle is already there. But the moderate majority must now come together to strengthen its voice, gain the public hearing it deserves, and compel the NDR ideologues to step out of its way.

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