

We must unite to defend democracy

Attacks on the SACP by supporters of former president Thabo Mbeki are not helpful in crafting a better way to the future as South Africa battles the scourge of state capture, argues **Jeremy Cronin**

WE need to forge the broadest possible patriotic front across ideological divides in defence of our constitution, democracy, and national sovereignty.

This includes the call first suggested by the SACP for an independent judicial commission to look specifically at the role of the Guptas and their parasitic political and corporate networks.

Former presidential spokesman Mukoni Ratsitanga entered the discussion last week with a peevish attack in the Sunday Times on the SACP and general secretary Blade Nzimande.

Ratsitanga's irritation appears to be largely with the prominent role the SACP has been playing in the critique of state capture, and seems to have been sparked by the SACP saying the recent Seriti commission into the arms deal was a "whitewash" and that any judicial commission into state capture must not follow similar lines.

Certainly, there are self-critical lessons that the SACP needs to draw, as last weekend's SACP central committee emphasised. Although the SACP never formally endorsed Jacob Zuma for the ANC presidency at the ANC's 2007 Polokwane conference, much of the SACP organisational apparatus was actively involved in supporting him.

A mini-cult of the personality was created. Leading SACP voices were among those involved. Going into the future, the SACP must vigorously avoid any "great-man-as-saviour" temptation.

From at least 1996, the SACP and



PEEVISH: Former presidential spokesman Mukoni Ratsitanga

Cosatu, along with many others, were in open opposition to the neo-liberal turn engineered by a leading group within the ANC in which Mbeki was a key factor.

This project was an implicit pact between established big capital and the new political elite, consummated in highly leveraged black economic empowerment deals for the politically connected in exchange for policies that allowed established monopoly capital to largely evade developmental disciplining by the new democratic state.

Key state-owned enterprises were corporatised with a view to privatisation as a new source for private BEE accumulation.

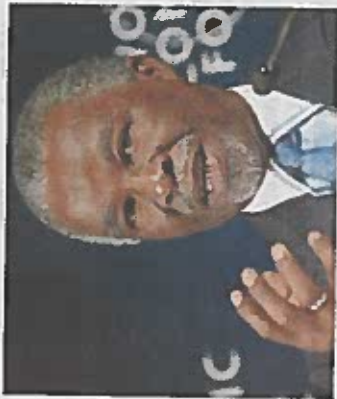
The project had a political dimension, borrowed substantially from the now-discredited "Third Way" currently associated with European politicians such as Tony Blair.

This meant eviscerating the popular-movement character of the ANC and transforming it into a supposedly "modernised", narrow parliamentary electoral formation controlled by a presidential centre in the state and funded by BEE money.

The underlying structural features of apartheid-colonial political economy persisted. The triple crisis of unemployment, racialised inequality and poverty was reproduced, despite growth in the 2000s.

Terrible blunders were also made in this period, notably Aids denialism.

On the eve of Polokwane, the SACP



POLOKWANE: Former president Thabo Mbeki

issued a statement calling for "either a change of direction, or a change of leadership".

SACP-Cosatu-aligned ANC delegates were joined by another grouping — essentially a right-wing, narrow nationalist tendency that expressed the frustration of aspirant BEE players who felt excluded from the inner-BEE circle of the Mbeki years.

The SACP-Cosatu left axis on the one hand and the ANC Youth League and its BEE backers on the other constituted the "Polokwane marriage of convenience".

The two sides were nominally united around the call to re-establish the ANC and its alliance as the "strategic political centre", as opposed to the narrow, state-centred and technicist Mbeki presidential centre.

However, two very different agendas lay behind this.

For the left it meant rebuilding the popular-movement character of the ANC and its alliance, anchoring branch activity in the daily concerns of communities facing crises of poverty, unemployment and endemic violence.

For the narrow nationalist tendency, as it has clearly turned out, the ANC was identified as the soft underbelly in which, through money and patronage-based networks, the Mbeki BEE beneficiaries could be replaced by a new wave of accumulation, grounded less on debt-leveraged share acquisition and privatisation proceeds and more on the parasitic looting of the state.

From the first Zuma administration an uneasy balance of forces has existed between these different and contradictory tendencies in both the government and the alliance.

Important advances were made — the massive rollout of antiretrovirals, but also in key areas like industrial policy, state-led infrastructure build and the recalibration of competition policy to address collusive monopoly capital behaviour.

But progress was always constrained by the suborning of key institutions in the criminal justice system, and by corporate capture of state-owned enterprises.

How does this all relate to Ratsitanga's intervention?

Let's pretend, as Ratsitanga would have it, that the Seriti commission was an exhaustive, no-stone-left-unturned process.

Let's pretend the arms deal was entirely corruption-free, apart from the pesky "secondary contracts" in which Schabir Shaik and Tony Yengeni became collateral damage.

Pretending all of this, a broader set of questions still arises.

Was the massive, multibillion-rand arms deal the right strategic priority for a society facing multiple developmental challenges?

Has the arms deal left our armed forces more appropriately equipped for the strategic challenges of our country?

Did the procurement process advance national sovereign interests, or surrender them to foreign multinationals' interests?

We all need to be thoughtful about lessons to be learnt from the past.

We shouldn't forget the earlier politicisation of institutions such as the National Prosecuting Authority and how in the run-up to Polokwane its head announced there was a prima facie case against then deputy president Zuma, but no charges would be pressed.

This laid the basis for much of the political turmoil that was to follow, of which we pick the fruits today.

● *Cronin is first deputy general secretary of the SACP*