The state of migrants in current South African electoral politics.

By Tawanda Matema

The hallmark of democracy in South Africa and the world over is citizen participation in government and the selection of political representatives through free and fair election. Political parties play the role of aggregating the interests of the citizenry and translating them into national policies and programs. However, some political parties play on the citizens’ sentiments, particularly anti-African migrant dispositions, to increase their voter base during elections.

In South Africa, migration is one of the central issues in electoral politics and economic debates that affects democracy. First, African migrants in the country are defined as the problem to be solved which shifts the focus of electoral debates away from economic concerns and developmental issues. Second, the fundamental freedoms of African migrants are not respected and the contributions that some of them make to the South African economy are overlooked. Third, migrants and locals alike are misinformed and do not have access to the correct information on migration and migrants’ rights.

Being characterized by a longstanding narrative that widely considers African migrants to be a burden on the economy, South African electoral politics have gravitated towards ‘populism’ – with political parties campaigning to win the support of the citizens by sticking the socio-economic problems (widespread crime, corruption, growing unemployment, the spread of diseases and poverty among others) faced by the country on migrants, particularly undocumented African migrants.

The 2019 pre-election period was charged with anti-African migrant sentiments and xenophobic violence— for instance, political parties like the National People’s Front, the Forum 4 Service Delivery, the People’s Revolutionary Movement and the Democratic Alliance (DA) among others, were calling for South African citizens to be given first priority over migrants, restricting the entry of African migrants through stricter border controls and calling for African foreign nationals to leave South Africa.

Ahead of the 2019 general elections, the DA published its Immigration plan in 2018 which was defined as populist. Playing on popular immigration sentiment, the DA’s Immigration plan purported to support and protect documented migrants but advocated to restrict the formal channels for migrants to access legal documentation.

The ruling ANC government has also had a track record of gravitating towards populism, for instance the 2017 White Paper on International Migration, although taking a pro-African stance, the party indicated that unskilled immigrants and undocumented migrants will not be allowed to neither come into nor stay in the country even if such a move is regarded as anti-African. Additionally, the 2019 ANC election manifesto indicated that the government would endeavour to stop illegal trading predominantly conducted by African migrants in a bid to encourage and protect the control of economic activities and ownership of retail stores by South African locals. The narrative of illegal trading has been used to feed into the long-standing rhetoric that migrants are taking away South African citizens’ jobs especially with the presence of migrants in the informal sector and their willingness to take up precarious work.

The current migration debate has focused on the informal sector and some politicians have continued to make anti-African migrant claims that are not necessarily true. For instance, the African Transformation Movement, claimed that over 70% of the South African informal economy is controlled by non-citizens during the State of the Nation Address (SONA) parliamentary debates of February 2021. However, in an investigation conducted by Keegan Leech has proven that the above
claim is not supported by current data drawing from the Quality of Life Survey V (2017/18) and other documents. Yet, the anti-migrant narrative still continues.

With such an atmosphere two years after the last elections, can we expect any change in the upcoming local government elections in October 2021?

President Cyril Ramaphosa has warned against the populist politics of blaming migrants for the problems being faced by South Africans expressing a political will that rivals anti-migrant sentiments that fuel xenophobia and afrophobia in the country. The Economic Freedom Fighters have also been speaking strongly against xenophobic tendencies to the point of publicly refusing votes from ‘xenophobic people’ in 2019.

After the devastation of the first and second waves of COVID-19, the coronavirus still presents a real danger and possibility of a third wave. The pandemic also has the potential to encourage voters to avoid crowded spaces like voting stations and although South Africa has not reached herd immunity, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) asserts that it is ready host elections in October despite the slow vaccination rollout. However, this is not the only challenge, there are concerns over access to registration, and inclusion of every eligible voter given the implementation of electronic voter registration which will only be conducted over one weekend. Will there be an increase in voter turnout? Will the pandemic discourage voter turnout? Will South Africa experience a third wave of the pandemic? These questions still loom over electoral politics in the country.

Nevertheless, electoral politics is changing in South Africa with the 2020 Constitutional Court ruling that the Electoral Act must be amended by Parliament to allow independent candidate to run for elections. While there is a lot of contention over how this will work out, this presents a possibility for better representation of the marginalized sections of the population and perhaps migrant communities at local level in the future. However, it will most likely be a difficult process to achieve since the reverse is also true (the possibility of individual candidates capitalizing on populist politics and feeding on anti-migrant sentiments), candidates would also have to raise their own funding or have a considerable amount of wealth and social currency in terms of popularity.

Reform is taking place in South African electoral politics but much remains to be seen especially when considering the issue of the looming ‘third wave’ of the coronavirus and the challenges associated with representing migrant communities in South African elections.

Ends.

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