

**Undermining the “Rainbow Nation”? The Economic Freedom Fighters and
Left-wing Populism in South Africa**

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Abstract

Historically, three waves of populism are often identified: agrarian populism in the US and Russia in the 19th century, post-war Latin American populism and new populism, which has been a predominantly European right-wing phenomenon. However, the third wave of populism, even in Europe, now needs to be supplemented with the recent emergence of populist left parties and movements like Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. There are also good reasons for broadening the focus beyond Europe and Latin America. This paper looks at the recently formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by Julius Malema in South Africa. We argue that EFF could be understood as a particularly African articulation of left-wing populism. Unlike the European PRR parties, the EFF has a more open pan-Africanist approach to immigration, rather than a purely nationalist stance on the issue. However, their populist approach aims to side with the black African majority of the population against an elite, understood as both white capitalists and the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC). This is captured both in the performative nature of their politics and their policy proposals. The EFF's 25 representatives in the National Assembly have adopted a confrontational approach to debates in the chamber and also wear distinctive party uniforms in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the political elite. Substantively they emphasize justice over reconciliation, expropriation of land without compensation, and have strategically aligned themselves both with the victims of the Marikana Massacre of August 2012 and the wider service delivery protests across the country. This poses a direct challenge to the negotiated consensus reached at the beginning of the post-apartheid era, which envisaged the ‘new’ South Africa becoming a liberal democracy infused with a strong sense of multiculturalism, as embodied in the idea of a ‘Rainbow nation’.

Keywords: Populism, party politics, South Africa, Economic Freedom Fighters, Julius Malema

1. Introduction

Populism as a political phenomenon seems to be as old as modern representative democracy. Since the 19th century and agrarian populism in the USA and Russia, political movements that claim to represent the people against corrupt elites either at home or outside the borders of the nation-state, have emerged from many corners of the world. The most recent wave, which some have labelled “new populism” has emerged since the 1970s, mostly but not entirely exclusively from the European political right (Pauwels 2013: 16). What has been of

particular interest to comparative politics scholars in this most recent populist phenomenon is that, unlike the parties of the previous waves, these ones have actually been able to create some sense of electoral stability. Indeed, they might be a political phenomenon that is here to stay (Zaslove 2008). For many commentators the rise of Donald Trump might be one reminder of populists not riding on an entirely European wave either. Indeed, while after the Second World War in Latin America state-led and authoritarian populist politics like the one led by Juan Perón in Argentina, gained in popularity, a new form of populist politics has emerged there as well in recent years in the shape of Hugo Chávez, Jose Mujica, Evo Morales and others. Curiously though, Africa has been an understudied continent in terms of populist politics. This paper is an attempt to start filling that gap.

Defining populism is a task that many have attempted but few have succeeded in. Ernesto Laclau (1977) famously argued that studying populism is often an exercise in circular arguments. Many start with the assumption that there is such a thing as populism, they define it, look for examples of it, study them, and then refine their definition to fit the concrete cases studied. The more you zoom into the detail of populist politics, the less clearly you see. In order to avoid such pitfalls, we suggest that what is required is a minimal approach to defining populist politics and advocate an approach based on taking it as a “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004, Stanley 2008). We also argue that in order to transcend the rather unhelpful Left/Right binary, which often obfuscates the definitions of populism, we ought to concentrate on their economics based on a nationalist ontology. Finally, the aspect that separates populists from mainstream political parties is their exploitation of populism as political performance and spectacle, in an attempt to act out the societal divisions into corrupt elites and pure people at the heart of their “thin ideology”.

Our paper uses the recently formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa, led by Julius Malema. They represent a good example of an African populist party that draws inspiration from its sister parties across the world, but perhaps especially from the most recent Latin American wave of broadly left-wing populism. The EFF made a relative breakthrough in the 2014 election in South Africa by securing over a million votes. We discuss the performative nature of the EFF’s politics, most acutely demonstrated by their actions in the National Assembly and their key economic policies: land reform and nationalisation.

2. Populism and democratic party politics

There is an abundance of scholarship on populism in political science in general where especially during the last couple of decades there has been a considerable growth in this area within comparative politics. The existing literature is varied and the debate within it is relatively rich – in fact, it is so rich that populism has been called a “many-headed monster” (Canovan 2004: 241). The debate on populism reflects this analogy, as one key question in the literature is on the very usefulness of the term itself. Laclau’s ideas of the elusiveness of the concept, especially at closer scrutiny, would support a more sceptical approach to populism as a concept. Indeed, some commentators claim that the term has now been overused and abused to such an extent that it has lost its analytical value and become meaningless (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). However, we do claim that while making strong normative claims about populism might be a challenge it is still important to talk about it. Populism is not entirely alien to democracy anyway, since there is always a tension between representative and direct democracy (Drummond, Dalton and Burklin 2001), and populism or elitism are both possible outcomes of this tension. It could be argued that extreme versions of either might be detrimental for democracy’s ability to continue functioning as a mode of governance. As such, it is not surprising then that populism is not always viewed as an exclusively negative aspect of democracy. In some estimates, for instance, populism has been considered as a useful tool of regeneration and revitalisation of democratic politics. So, while some see it as a threat for democracy, some others consider it as a corrective force (for a very useful discussion of this debate, see Kaltwasser 2012).

After the rather rich general debate on populism in earlier years (see for instance Ionescu and Gellner 1969, Laclau 1977, Canovan 1981), the focus in the literature has now shifted towards a particular articulation of populism by the Populist Radical Right (PRR) parties (Mudde 2007), which have gained in popularity in Europe during the last couple of decades. As we discuss below, this is perhaps simply a reflection of how populist politics has developed from its early waves in the 19th century to responses to more typically 21st century grievances and democratic challenges. Nonetheless, as the debate on populism has become more and more concentrated around a recent rise in popularity of right-wing varieties of it, the discussion on the terminology has also become increasingly varied. A whole host of different terms are used in the literature to describe what is essentially more or less the same phenomenon (Kitschelt 2007) include “Populist” (Canovan 1999, Albertazzi and McDonnell

2007, Zaslove 2008); “neo-populist” (Betz 1998); “radical right” (Kitschelt and McGann 1995, Rydgren 2007); “extreme right” (Hainsworth 1992, Hainsworth 2000, Ignazi 2003, Hainsworth 2008); “right wing extremism” (Von Beyme 1988); and combinations of the previous, such as “populist right” (Bornschieer 2010); “populist radical right” (Mudde 2007); “radical right-wing populism” (Betz 1993, Betz 1994); and “extreme right-wing populism” (Rydgren 2004). Characteristic to much of this debate, and many of these labels enforce this further, is to engage with what can be a counterproductive exercise of locating the parties on one extreme of the traditional left-right continuum of politics. Many of these parties explicitly reject horizontal cleavages and claim to represent an attempt of transcending the left-right divide altogether (Mény and Surel 2002: 12)

In attempts to identify a minimal definition of the parties in question, two essential characteristics that unite them could be mentioned, and these are not associated with the Left/Right binary. The first is that populism is used as both an ideology and a political campaign tool. Compared to other political “isms”, populism has “many of the attributes of an ideology, but not all of them” (Taggart 2000: 1). Hence, unlike their mainstream counterparts who often operate on a more coherent ideological platform, populist parties are driven by a “thin ideology” of populism (Stanley 2008) where essentially the core elements are on the one hand, the juxtaposition between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elites”, and on the other, the belief that the leitmotif of political life should be “volonté générale” (the will of the people) (Mudde 2004). Or, as Mudde in his later work argues (2007: 65-69), populist radical right parties are typically marked by an anti-elitist/anti-establishment impulse, by emphasising the direct rather than representative aspects of democracy. One characteristic of this is also the way in which these parties and movements often appeal to common victimisation – small people in front of big corporations or normal people governed by elites who live in a parallel universe (Gerbaudo 2014: 72). The second element that unites these parties is that their politics is based on a nationalist ontology (Kuisma 2013). In other words, based on their particularistic ontology, they reject the cosmopolitanism of both liberalism and socialism (Hont 2005). If defined with these two key characteristics in mind, this relatively modest and minimalist definition of populism would, as we will point out later, allow for relatively wide and inclusive approach.

Therefore, while populism continues to be “quintessentially mercurial” and difficult to define, as we pointed out above, there are a number of things that unify them. The “thin ideology” of

populism is one, as we argue above. Beyond looking at the content of populist politics, we can add a third characteristic and also talk about populism as political style (Jagers and Walgrave 2007, Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The charisma and personality of the leader is more important for a populist party than institutionalised mainstream parties. According to the leader of the populist Finns Party Timo Soini, an openly proud populist, a good populist leader is a good public speaker, able to think on his/her feet. S/he also needs to have the ability to simplify complicated issues and the psychological strength to withhold public pressure and critique (Soini 2008: 170-1). With his charisma, a populist leader fills the gaps that might exist in the party's organisational structure. They have to throw their personalities into the political battlefield. Many commentators, such as Taguieff (1995) and Canovan (1999) have discussed the way in which, especially populist rhetoric, is used as a way of building on the image of the society being divided into corrupt elites and pure people – an us vs. them approach – but in this paper we want to follow Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) lead and look at populism not only as a discursive or rhetorical style but to look at populism as performance. The populist style of leadership is the concrete embodiment of the thin ideology of populism taken to the parliament floor and the TV studio. Being a maverick is a positive attribute for a populist. Below we elaborate on this through the case study of Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters Party in South Africa below.

3. Waves of populism and the emergence of populist parties of the left

In terms of empirical analysis of populist parties, there is a relatively rich literature on populism in Latin America (Roberts 1995, Weyland 1999, Weyland 2001, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) but the current debate is still rather Eurocentric and, if anything, this trend is increasing further. A quick search in Google scholar for publications dealing with populism in different parts of the world shows that overall the debate has been dominated by Europe and the Americas. Almost nothing has been written about populism in Asia while the literature on African populism is also dwarfed by the European and American literature on the topic. Possibly even more telling are the results over the last few years. Since 2012, scholarship on European populism has dominated again with publications on it almost doubling in volume. Despite the possibilities for a growth in work on African populism, this has not really been taken up. Boone's work on Côte d'Ivoire (2009) is one rare exception. This simple keyword search does not tell the whole picture about why there is such a rich debate on European and American populism. There could be many reasons for this. Indeed,

these regions will undoubtedly be higher on the agenda, as many publishers are based in either of these two regions and most of the authors who publish through these outlets might also be either European or American. However, what this undoubtedly demonstrates is that very little has been written about populism in Africa and it is our intention in this paper to begin filling that gap.

Table 1 Published academic work on populism in different continents

	Europe	Americas	Asia	Africa
Overall	317	309	15	56
2012-	151	72	4	21

Source: Google Scholar

While there is considerable variety of understanding about the content of populist politics, many authors do agree that populism has emerged in waves, and that it has been around from the beginning of modern representative democracy (Taggart 2000, Pauwels 2013: 13-17). The first wave dates to the end of the 19th century when Russian Narodniki and the US People's Party gained support, especially among the agrarian populations. The two parties represented the interests of deprived farmers to fight the dominance of economic elites of bankers and industrialists (Pauwels 2013: 13-14). The second wave has been associated with the growth of more authoritarian and even state-led populist movements in Latin America during the twentieth century, a prime example of this being Peronism in Argentina. A third wave is often identified in the breakthrough of European Populist Radical Right and Far Right parties like Front National in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium or The Swiss People's Party.

However, while it is clear from the existing scholarship on populism that it can exist both on the left and right of the political spectrum and, as we argued above, it can in some cases be an attempt to transcend that divide altogether, the literature seems to be overcrowded with studies of the Populist Radical Right parties. A simple keyword search on academic scholarship on populism of right and left via Google Scholar demonstrates this: 87% of the published work searchable on Google Scholar that mentions populism of either left or right in the title is on populist right-wing politics. There also has not (yet) been a significant growth in publications on left-wing populism, with only 36% of the work that has been published

since 2012, while for right-wing populism work published since 2012 represents 48% of the total volume of publications on the topic. This is, obviously, an overly simplistic way of looking at the issue but it would certainly point at a relative gap in the literature on left-wing populism and especially cases from outside of Europe and Latin America.

While analogies can ask at least as many questions as they manage to answer, we argue in this paper that we might be witnessing a fourth wave in the shape of left-wing populist parties now emerging in many corners of the world. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain are European examples that certainly suggest that even the most recent wave of populist politics is not the exclusive property of the radical right. Similarly, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia are examples of this trend in Latin America. To some extent, we might even explain the recent popularity of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US through related phenomena. A way in which the left can be added to the populist party family without much further obfuscation of the term itself is through the nationalist ontology that populist politics is often founded upon (Kuisma 2013). The very critique of global capitalism these parties are often built upon, with policy solutions that call for a re-nationalisation of industries, as will be seen from our case study below, are but one example of how some of them might fit into this picture. Another, which we will demonstrate through the case study of EFF in South Africa, is linked to the performative aspects of populist politics.

4. The Rise of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa

The growth of populist politics in South Africa reflects the fact that the ‘Rainbow nation’, envisaged during Mandela’s time as President, has run into difficulties. The focus on reconciliation in the first few years of ANC rule came at the expense of broader questions about the full extent of the transformation to democracy. As discussed below, the socio-economic crisis that has developed and the ANC’s ineffective efforts to address it have created fertile conditions for the growth of populism. It also reflects the fact that the liberal constitutionalism developed as part of the transition to democracy has yet to become part of the political culture. As Vincent (2011: 5) argues, the populist view that democracy simply reflects the will of ‘the people’ poses a direct challenge to the non-majoritarian mechanisms at the heart of a rights-based model.

As most of the various elements of the self-identified ‘left’ in South Africa accept, the country is faced with an increasingly acute socio-economic crisis centred on the inter-related challenges of high unemployment, rising inequality and poverty (Hurt forthcoming). The most visceral expression of this crisis was the Marikana Massacre in August 2012. However, this was far from an isolated incident. Since the start of the new century South Africa has seen a significant rise in what have been termed “service delivery protests”. Alexander has termed these a rebellion of the poor and has argued that although they often have very local manifestations ‘the protests reflect disappointment with the fruits of democracy’ (2010: 37).

For much of the post-apartheid era, the tripartite alliance between the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), has mitigated against the prospect of a left-wing challenge to the ruling party. However, in recent years there have been significant developments in this regard and for many a potential watershed was reached with the Marikana Massacre in August 2012 when 34 striking miners were shot dead by South African police (see for example Alexander 2013, Bond 2014).

It is this context of increasing social crisis that has created the fertile conditions for the rise of new ‘leftist’ political formations in South Africa. One such development was the so-called ‘NUMSA moment’, which saw the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) lead a split from the ANC-aligned tripartite alliance. They have since developed a movement known as the ‘United Front and Movement for Socialism’ (United Front) (NUMSA 2014) but so far progress has been slow on this front. As one observer notes, this is to be expected ‘given that it requires undoing years of schooling in political practice and thought rooted in a strict division between worker and community struggles’ (McKinley 2015: 465). Nevertheless, in a recent press statement NUMSA reiterated its desire ‘to build a mass-based, democratically controlled, Marxist-Leninist workers’ party’ (NUMSA 2016).

At the same time as we are witnessing the emergence of political formations that appear independent from, and to the left of, the ANC, the historical legacies of the liberation movement still shape the contours of the contemporary debate. In particular the Freedom Charter remains an almost sacred document. As discussed later, this continues to inform much of the EFF’s policy. A key strategy of Julius Malema during his period within the ANCYL and now EFF has been to develop a rhetorical strategy of seeking to reclaim this tradition as his own. As such, Veriava (2015: 432) concludes that for both the EFF and

NUMSA, continued reference to the Congress tradition, limits their ability to break free of long established debates.

Unlike other sections of the left in South Africa, the EFF were quick to organise and despite being formed only a year earlier, they were able to mount an effective campaign for the 2014 general election in South Africa. Mbete (2015: 36) argues that they gained a rather disproportionate level of media coverage as a result of the personality of Malema. Unlike other parties in South Africa they abandoned ‘...any pretence of support for non-racialism, generally a necessary if meaningless genuflection for political parties seeking votes in the ‘Rainbow Nation’’ (Everatt 2016: 10).

The EFF mark an important rupture in the post-apartheid era. While some analysts (e.g. Pithouse 2013) have questioned the validity of the party’s leftist credentials, their emergence is a reflection of the ongoing structural inequalities that have continued since 1994, and the increasing appetite (particularly amongst young South Africans) for an alternative to the established political parties. In the next two sections of the paper we discuss how their approach to politics and the policies they advocate, warrants the label of left-wing populism.

5. Politics as performance

The argument as to why the EFF can be considered as a populist party is supported not only by their policies (discussed below) but also by the performative nature of the way they have engaged in the political arena since their formation (on populism as performance see Moffitt and Tormey 2014). In this section of the paper we consider two central aspects of the EFF’s ‘politics as performance’. First, we discuss the ongoing saga of the clothing worn by EFF representatives in both the National Assembly and the provincial legislatures. Second, we look at the disruptive approach that the party has taken, both in formal political spaces and in its links to recent political protests in South Africa.

Right from their first appearance in parliament in May 2014, EFF MPs have worn bright red overalls and hard hats or maid uniforms in an attempt to physically portray themselves as representatives of the workers. One of their MPs, Floyd Shivambu, suggested that ‘the working class and poor now know they've got representatives in parliament’ (BBC 2014). This has also enabled them to distance themselves from other politicians who are portrayed,

in line with their populist approach, as the corrupt political elite. During his time as President of the ANCYL, Malema built a reputation for expensive suits and watches, which appeared a touch ironic given his claim to speak for the poor (Forde 2011: 10). Nevertheless, one analyst has gone as far as to claim that their choice of clothing reflects ‘a challenge to the ‘Western’ conventions upheld in South Africa’s Parliament and the compromises made during the negotiated settlement that led to democracy’ (Mbeti 2015: 50). This certainly fits in with the thin ideology of populism: building an image of a society divided into a corrupt and out of touch (in this case Westernised) elite and pure people, and building politics firmly on an “us vs. them” setting.

In early July of 2014 EFF representatives were removed from the provincial legislatures in both Gauteng and the Eastern Cape for wearing inappropriate clothing. This enabled the party to make political capital out of the attempts at a ban, as it speaks directly to the party’s anti-establishment rhetoric. On 22 July, Malema then led hundreds of supporters in a protest march, which resulted in them storming the Gauteng legislature building and staging a sit-in protest (Evans 2014). Eventually the EFF successfully challenged the decision in Gauteng through a case in the South Gauteng High Court (Mbeti 2015: 51). Then in early 2015, ANC MPs, who had become increasingly annoyed by the EFF’s attire, claimed that they were going to seek to use their majority to get a change to the rules so that the red workers’ overalls would be banned (Gqirana 2015a). During the various committee meetings held to discuss revisions to the rules on dress code in the National Assembly, members of the EFF have resisted attempts for overly prescriptive guidelines to be set on what is deemed appropriate. At the time of writing EFF representatives continue to wear their distinctive clothing. While this generates publicity to the party, it also serves to emphasize the sense of common victimisation that populist movements often rely on.

This tactic has been reinforced by their adoption of a disruptive approach within the National Assembly, which has also given them significant media coverage. Since their election in 2014 they have repeatedly decided to walkout of the chamber in protest. On one notable occasion, during the President’s State of the Nation address on 12 February 2015, fights broke out in the chamber as EFF MPs were removed by security agents who were later revealed to include at least one armed police officer (Rademeyer 2015). The speaker of the house, Baleka Mbete, was reported to have called Malema a ‘cockroach’ in a speech a few days later for which she then apologised for (Mataboge 2015). This reflects the fact that the

speaker of South Africa's National Assembly is not required to be independent and in the case of Mbete she is also National Chairperson of the ANC. Leading members of the SACP were also publicly critical of the EFF's disruptive behaviour after this particular incident. Jeremy Cronin was reported to have said that the EFF was 'disrupting the procedures of Parliament for their own theatrical purposes' (John 2015).

As a result, a proposal to change the rules on how to address disruptive behaviour in the National Assembly was passed on 30 July 2015, with only EFF MPs voting against it. These new rules allow for the parliamentary protection service to forcibly remove MPs if they have refused a request to leave. Despite the rule changes, the EFF has continued to adopt a disruptive approach in parliament. In October 2015, Malema became a 'beneficiary' of the new rules when he was forcibly removed from the National Assembly. He was also automatically suspended from the chamber for five days for refusing to withdraw a statement that described Deputy President, Cyril Ramaphosa, as a murderer for his alleged role in the Marikana Massacre (Gqirana 2015b). Most recently, EFF MPs orchestrated a sustained period of disruptive behaviour during the President's 2016 State of the Nation address to parliament. Eventually this resulted in the entire group leaving the chamber chanting 'Zupta must fall', which refers to their allegations that President Zuma has unhealthy links to the influential Gupta family (Pillay 2016).¹

There is a tension between a strategy of disruption within the parliament and the EFF's ability to become an effective political player in the longer-term. The National Assembly has played an important role in scrutinising legislation proposed by the executive since 1994. As Mbete (2015: 53) suggests, the EFF is going to have to both develop its research capacity and adhere to the formal processes of parliamentary committees, to be able to contribute effectively in this regard.

Outside of formal politics, the EFF have also aligned themselves with a number of protest movements. The most notable of these was the '#feesmustfall' campaign, which emerged in October 2015 in response to proposed increases to University fees. This revival of student activism and the frequent deployment of riot police in response, led many media reports to evoke memories of the student uprisings of 1976. The protests began at the University of Witwatersrand but, by using the power of social media, they very quickly spread across the country. They culminated in a march on the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 23 October 2015.

After previously deciding on a 6% cap on student fees in an attempt to satisfy the protestors, this final march led to an about turn in government policy. Later that day, President Zuma announced, via a public broadcast on television, that tertiary education fees would not be increased for 2016. However, as many commentators have observed (Munusamy 2015, Calland 2015) these student protests were in fact reflective of more than the single issue of University fees. The campaign itself also argued for an end to the outsourcing of low-paid administrative jobs at Universities. As the protests swept the country it became clear that they were representative of the broader failings of the post-apartheid political system and its 'inability to lift the burden of being black and poor in a country that still favours those who are white and privileged' (Munusamy 2015).

The EFF put out a number of official statements in support of the protests. With the ANCYL not expressing formal support for the students it was evidently in their interests to do so. The party claimed 'student activism in South Africa is gaining prominence and ascendance since the formation of the EFF...in all campuses and areas where the EFF exists, activism is revived and South African politics are changing to reflect the militant, radical, fearless and direct character of the EFF'(EFF 2015). In addition, they did not miss the opportunity to criticise Blade Nzimande who is both Minister for Higher Education and Training and the SACP's General Secretary. In aligning with the student protests, the EFF were notably more effective than the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, whose leader Mmusi Maimane was chased away from an attempt to join a protest march in Cape Town. In fact the EFF combined this engagement with protest politics with their disruptive approach to formal politics within the National Assembly. On 21 October 2015, EFF MPs began chanting 'Fees Must Fall' as then Finance Minister, Nhlanhla Nene, tried to begin the delivery of his medium-term budget speech. As on previous occasions, the speaker ordered security personnel into the chamber and scuffles broke out as EFF MPs were yet again forcibly removed from the chamber.

In sum, one of the central aspects of the EFF's emergence as a political party has been their concerted efforts to distance themselves not just from the ANC-led government but from elite politics in general. This section has highlighted how their representatives have adopted distinctive clothing and a disruptive approach to formal politics to this end. However, the EFF have not been simply engaged in the politics of spectacle. We now turn our attention to their focus on 'economic freedom', which we argue demonstrates the populist underpinnings

of the appeal they make to black South Africans. This is based on a return to the ideals of the ANC's Freedom Charter of 1955.

6. A populist economic strategy

It is important to highlight that Malema and a number of other key figures in the EFF developed their political careers within the ANC and specifically the ANCYL.² It is therefore no surprise that their economic policies are often related explicitly to the Freedom Charter, a totemic document in the history of the ANC's liberation struggle against apartheid. Moreover, Malema, in particular, draws inspiration from the founders of the ANCYL in the 1940s and seeks to situate his politics as part of this longer tradition. As Forde (2011: 81-83), convincingly suggests, however, although Malema has revived long-standing battles between communist and nationalist factions, his neo-nationalist politics and his use of political connections to secure business interests make this a very selective reading of history.

In the period up until the election in 2014, it was clear that there were a mixture of competing ideological tendencies within the EFF. The troubled Pan Africanist Congress of Azania campaigned with the EFF, and the Socialist Party of Azania and Black Consciousness Party agreed to allow their candidates to be formally part of the EFF's list of candidates (Robinson 2014: 76). Andile Mngxitama, the leader of September National Imbizo (SNI), a social movement inspired by the ideas of black consciousness with a particular focus on land redistribution, was an important recruit during the formation of the EFF. He played a key role in the drafting of their manifesto for the 2014 election (Poplak 2015a).

The EFF portray themselves as 'the vanguard of black South Africans rather than the working class as a whole' (Fogel 2014). In his preface to the EFF's 2014 election manifesto, Malema uses the word 'black' on no less than eleven occasions. Yet at the same time, in line with their populist underpinnings, he states that the 'EFF is an organisation and movement for all the people of South Africa. It is an organisation for and of the people' (EFF 2014). As Mbete notes 'the EFF's appeal is to 'the people', defined as black Africans, who are...placed in opposition to historically advantaged white capitalists and the newly advantaged ANC elite' (2015: 41).

The document as a whole contains a combination of Pan-Africanism, Fanonism and Marxism (Robinson 2014: 77). The manifesto's strength lies in the EFF's clear and simple critique of the ANC's performance in government. In doing so they draw on a familiar populist approach that offers simple solutions to the economic grievances of a population (Cheeseman and Larmer 2015: 26). The EFF's vision is organised around what are described in the manifesto as the 'seven cardinal pillars' required to achieve economic freedom (EFF 2014). These are presented as being non-negotiable and together they reflect an overwhelmingly statist model for rectifying the failings of ANC rule. The two most prominent aspects of this strategy are land redistribution without compensation and nationalisation of strategic sectors of the South African economy.

The first of the seven pillars outlined in the 2014 election manifesto is 'expropriation of South Africa's land without compensation for equal redistribution' (EFF 2014). With land there is a clear connection with the legacies of the apartheid era and before. It is an emotive issue which speaks directly to the black African majority. Since 1994, the ANC government's land reform policy has been based on a 'willing seller, willing buyer' approach and as a result there has been very limited progress. During his time in the ANCYL, Malema visited Zimbabwe in 2010 and was reported to have been inspired by Robert Mugabe's controversial approach to land reform (Forde 2011: 180-186). However, in the months leading up to the election, Floyd Shivambu made it clear that Zimbabwe was not now the model that the EFF would seek to implement if in government (Robinson 2014: 80).

In a similar way to nationalisation, discussed below, the position of the EFF on land reform has become less radical as Malema and the party leadership have set out more details recently. EFF proposals envisage the state appropriating land and then individuals having to apply to the state for a licence to then use the land. The consequences of this don't necessarily solve the demands of the dispossessed. As one commentator has noted, 'For the dispossessed majority, the states' whims may replace those of the private landowner. Perhaps it is true that the state will act more favourably towards the dispossessed, but this is in no way guaranteed' (Greenberg 2015). The shifting stance on land reform was central to Andile Mngxitama's decision to rebel against the party leadership and eventually, together with two other EFF MPs, he was expelled from the party in April 2015. Mngxitama has since argued that Malema has moved EFF policy 'from expropriation of all land to "unoccupied" then

“non-productive” land [which] has had the effect of protecting white farmers’ (Mngxitama 2015).

Nationalisation has historically been on the economic agenda of the ANC. During the transition to multi-party democracy in the early 1990s they initially kept this longstanding commitment to nationalisation in their policy plans (Naidoo and Maré 2015: 409). However, it was soon dropped during the negotiated transition to democracy. It has remained, however, a touchstone issue for Malema both during his time in the ANCYL and now as Commander-in-Chief of the EFF. EFF policy takes literally the demand in the Freedom Charter that ‘the national wealth of our country, the heritage of South Africans, shall be restored to the people; the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole’ (ANC 1955).

The emphasis on nationalisation suits the EFF’s populist strategy to blend nationalist and class-based politics to a point where the two are often indivisible. It should not be assumed that the EFF’s call for the nationalisation of strategic sectors of the economy represents a progressive project. The appeal of nationalisation is that it offers something to black Africans as a whole. It is white monopoly capital that is identified as the problem. This has led to a critique from the Workers and Socialist Party in South Africa, who were initially in talks with the EFF about collaborating before the 2014 election. They argue that nationalisation can appeal to both the black working class, who anticipate that it will give them more control within their workplace, and an aspiring black capitalist class, who see nationalisation as a way to ‘dismantle the white capitalists’ control of the economy’ (WASP 2014). Moreover, more recent pronouncements on the issue by Malema have effectively introduced the idea of nationalisation as stakeholder capitalism, which is contrasted with the elite nature of current policies of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) in South Africa. In November 2015 during a speech at Chatham House he argued ‘in South Africa they are happy to give shares to an individual in the name of BEE, but they are not happy to give shares to a group of people called workers’ (Malema 2015).

In sum, this section has discussed the connections between the EFF’s flagship economic policies and the key tenets of a populist approach. In particular, what is revealed is the rather ‘thin’ ideology (discussed earlier) at the heart of their approach. In the concluding section of the paper we now turn to consider how effective such a populist approach could be in the

case of South Africa. We also note some of the broader lessons for other parts of the developing world and in doing so reiterate our claim that what we may be witnessing is the emergence of a fourth wave of populism.

7. Conclusions – undermining the Rainbow Nation?

The first few years of the existence of the EFF suggest that its populist approach, which we have outlined in this paper, has been quite successful. Despite having less than a year to prepare for the 2014 election, they were able to secure third place nationally with over 6% of the vote. As noted above, charismatic leaders are often quite central to the effectiveness of populist parties and therefore the role played by the EFF's Commander-in-Chief, Julius Malema, will remain significant. This is particularly the case in the South African context when other attempts to form breakaway parties from the ANC have ultimately floundered.

The EFF, given Malema's history with the ANCYL, have sought to target young voters in particular. Last year it was reported that one of their key aims was to target elections for student councils across the country (Poplak 2015b). However, this strategy has only been partially successful, because many within this demographic are not in education and/or choose not to engage with the formal political process. One simple demonstration of this lack of engagement in formal politics is the fact that only 58% of potential voters aged between 18 and 29 years old registered to vote in the 2014 South African election (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014: 22).

While there are clear parallels between the populist approach adopted by the EFF described in this paper and similar movements in Europe, those adopted across parts of Latin America in recent years are particularly striking. Chodor (2015: 178-179) describes how Malema in particular has spoken of the inspiration he has drawn from the 'pink tide' and Hugo Chávez in particular. The lessons from the South African case do seem to have broader relevance. In many developing countries, particularly across sub-Saharan Africa, persistent levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality have resulted from a period when the majority of political parties have adopted broadly neoliberal development strategies. This has created both a social crisis and the political void for left populists to potentially flourish.

The future for the EFF in the longer term is also partly dependent on the ability of an alternative leftist political formation to take shape in South Africa. After some initial optimism associated with the formation of the United Front there remain significant challenges in this regard (Hurt forthcoming). There is little empathy between NUMSA's leaders and those at the helm of the EFF. Floyd Shivambu, Deputy President of the EFF, was particularly dismissive of the development of the United Front, which he predicts 'will dwindle into insignificance' (2015: 16). Nevertheless, if the NUMSA-led political formation does emerge then the EFF would be up against a party that already has established methods for mobilising workers (Robinson 2014: 86).

The EFF's political future will also be shaped by the way that the ANC responds to these emerging challenges to its political hegemony. As Beresford argues, the lessons from other liberation movements in the region (such as ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe) suggest that what might happen in South Africa, is that the ANC will move towards 'a form of nationalist populism, in which the dangerous 'others' are factions opposed to the liberation movement... [which may] serve to 'crowd out' the space within which a left-wing opposition force can emerge (2016: 44).

Notes

¹ The Guptas hold a range of business interests in South Africa including the media and mining sectors.

² At the time of writing, all six of the EFF's Central Command team were previously involved with the ANC. They are Julius Malema, Floyd Shivambu, Godrich Gardee, Magdelene Moonsamy and Dali Mpofu.

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