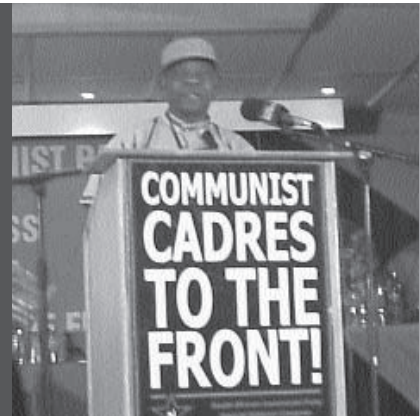


The SACP going it alone?



The decision to adopt a resolution at the recent SACP conference to contest the next elections is something that has been debated for some time.

Vishwas Satgar, a proponent of such a move, presents his views as part of an ongoing attempt to ensure debate about electoral options for the SACP.

Throughout the nineties, debate about the question of electoral options has been suppressed in the SACP, at least at a formal leadership level, for a host of reasons. Despite this, debate and discussion about electoral options has continued informally in the ranks. Many comrades have been keen to find the most appropriate methods of struggle - under new and increasingly complex conditions - to advance the interests of the workers and the poor and to construct a socialist democracy in South Africa. The time has come for a more open and thorough debate.

SACP STRATEGY AND SOCIALIST DEMOCRACY

We are now in a representative democracy

and a capitalist-dominated world both locally and globally. The SACP did not register as a political party but gave absolute support to the ANC's electoral campaigns. While this might have been the correct decision in order to assist the ANC make the transition from liberation movement to ruling party, it has also affected the SACP (and not always positively).

Within this political configuration the SACP's strategic approach to advance our programme for socialism relied on having access to state power indirectly through the ANC. The RDP and the numerous ANC conference resolutions and election manifestos were meant to be the means through which the SACP programme could be transmitted into the state and policy implementation.

Arguments against this 'ANC path to socialism' approach are:

- International experience shows this leads either to social democratic reform in which the capitalist class is accommodated and pleased or 'hegemonic revolutionary reform'. In addition, state power is an end in itself and 'electoralism' dominates the objectives of political parties. While there are gains for the workers and the poor, these are tenuous and normally rolled back by the logic of capital accumulation. Today's South Africa resembles this and over the past ten years the SACP has supported it.

The alternative strategy of 'hegemonic revolutionary reform', which the SACP ascribes to in theory, requires winning a democratic consensus in society for important programmatic reforms that reallocate the surplus of society to the workers and poor, redirects the accumulation process to meet social and domestic need, unleashes individual and collective working class energies from below, and ensures a deepening of

participatory democracy. In this approach state power and the market are subordinated to the aspirations and needs of the working class and the poor; capital is commanded and led through the combined instruments of a developmental state and a mass movement.

But for this approach to work the SACP must be in control in order to ensure a collective political will drives reforms defended and advanced by the working class and poor forces from below. Broadly similar approaches are currently being used in Venezuela, India, and Brazil.

- The approach of the 'ANC path to socialism' is also naive about the realities of state power. Many decisions taken at ANC conferences are contested by the state bureaucracy, capital, and international forces. Thus, if comrades are not firm in their resolve to implement ANC decisions through their positions in government and the masses are not mobilised behind these decisions, then most of the resolutions are not implemented as policy.
- ANC organisational structures have tended to blend positions in government with ANC organisational positions. This has disengaged the ANC from civil society and has made ANC structures the centre of co-ordinating its mass membership rather than co-ordinating mass forces. The 'ANC path to socialism' approach links the SACP to this shortcoming and cuts us off from civil society.
- The intra-alliance battles during the adoption and implementation of Gear created a great deal of confusion in the ranks of the working class.
- Finally, the 'ANC path to socialism' has divided the SACP between those who have a stake in or careers through the ANC's projects versus those who are committed to the SACP programme. In

the former case, accountability is first to the ANC and its decisions, with the SACP's interests secondary or in most instances ignored. The pro-SACP programme comrades want to take the SACP's programme beyond the ANC, into society and to a wider array of progressive forces. This schism has ultimately undermined the effectiveness and cohesion of our party - and thus we march on the same spot not knowing which way to go.

HAS THE ANC FAILED?

For the SACP to contemplate electoral options it has to ask the difficult question: Has the ANC failed? And more precisely, has it failed the National Democratic Revolution?

Many on the left argue that the ANC has abandoned its left credentials with the 1996 adoption of a 'home grown' neo-liberal programme. In other words, it has become a party of monopoly and transnational capital. Within the SACP a trenchant but measured critique of economic policy choices made by the ANC in 1996 did develop.

Since the 2004 elections the ANC has shifted to the left, not because of the SACP, but because of the ANC's own pressures on the delivery front. The SACP has responded excitedly and has re-affirmed the leadership role of the ANC in the NDR, blowing kisses and tightly grabbing on to points of convergence and, of course, delicately dealing with points of difference. In short, the SACP is moving with the ebb and flow of ANC electoralism and governance rather than tactically guided by its own imperatives.

Despite the pretence of a revolutionary alliance on the terrain of electoralism and reformism, there are still deep and latent ambivalences in the SACP. During the past ten years the SACP has had to understand and rudely awaken to the fact that the ANC is a ruling party and the most powerful political organisation in South Africa and Africa today. And despite the ANC's intimate historical association with the SACP, the SACP has had to come to realise that its relationship with the ANC is not necessarily the only or the most important relationship for the ANC.

It is apparent that the SACP has not worked out a clear strategy and set of tactics, in practice, to deal with the ANC on the terrain of governance and electoral politics. Instead we argue that we have been

'contained' and that 'there is a concerted campaign against us' but that 'we have made some gains' and so on. While there might be an element of truth in this, we still have to come to terms with two fundamental political realities

- The ANC has been highly successful as a liberation movement and has managed one of the most difficult and complex political transitions in the world. It has consolidated power as a ruling party, is an astute nation builder and unifier of a very divided country, has managed and stabilised a modern capitalist economy, is busy transforming and building a powerful state and has positioned South Africa strategically in the post Cold War world order, both on the continent and in the world.
- The SACP, on the other hand, has failed in many of its stated objectives. With the exception of the past few years with its new emphasis on grassroots organising, the SACP has not done enough of what is required to achieve its own ambitious plans for socialism in South Africa. In particular, the SACP has not ensured the development of individual and collective capacities for people-driven change, the eradication of poverty, the construction of a developmental state, and the transformation of the forces of production to meet social need. The fundamental reason for this failure is that the SACP has sat back and expected its alliance with the ANC to yield the socialist programme it wants. In practice the SACP has operated as a collective opportunist waiting for concessions from the ANC and a socialist watchdog that makes a lot of noise when upset.

Arguing that the ANC has succeeded and the SACP has failed, does not mean I am arguing that the SACP should not contemplate an electoral option. Instead, it is important for the SACP to abandon the idea of achieving socialism through the ANC. This is not an argument against dual membership and the alliance, but rather is an argument for the SACP, if it is serious about a socialist project, to shrug off its old strategic approach.

The ANC has given the left, including the SACP, important conditions to work with in order to advance a socialist programme

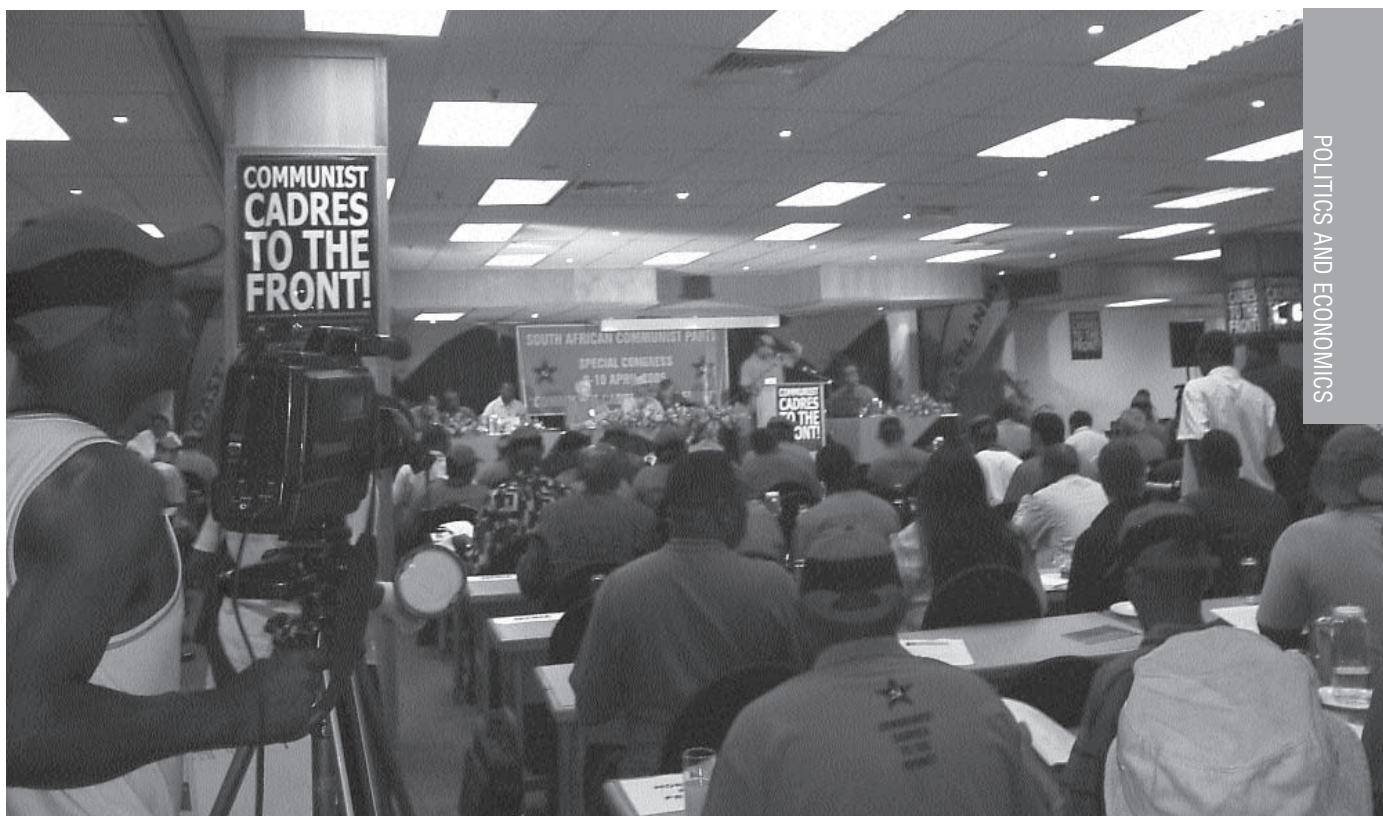
- a democracy free of the threat of counter-revolution and with political pluralism and tolerance

- the ANC as a political party has maintained, albeit with difficulty sometimes, a centre or centre-left orientation that has managed to accommodate multi-class interests although modestly for the working class and the poor.

To this extent the SACP as an organised left force has more to work with to create further conditions for socialist advance than many left formations in the world. What the SACP shares in common with the ANC, like its minimum political programme the Freedom Charter, has to become the centre of focus for the alliance partners as opposed to dual membership and the obsession with keeping the ANC in an old national liberation mould. This common programmatic glue is more fundamental and important and thus has to be the primary basis for ANC-SACP relations on the terrain of governance and electoral politics as well as for their future relationship in post-apartheid South Africa.

Thus, the fundamental political and strategic question for the SACP is how to work with the ANC to implement their common historical minimum programme rather than how to maintain the ANC's third world national liberation movement character. How is the SACP going to do this in such a way that it ends its politics of collective opportunism and prevents itself becoming a reformist Communist Party with radical rhetoric? More sharply, how does the SACP end its left-wing watchdog role over the ANC and get on with the serious tasks of creating capacity, momentum and commitment to elements of socialism while still being in the alliance?

Part of the answer lies in what the SACP has already been developing and doing. Since its 11th Congress the SACP has focused more on developing a programme-centred activism that links with the needs and concerns of local communities and workers. It has also launched important campaigns, like the Financial Sector Campaign, the Campaign for Land and Agrarian Reform and the Co-operative Movement Campaign, which all feed into building a mass-based party movement increasingly capable of harnessing mass pressure and power from below to build elements of socialism. However, while all of this is consistent with the medium-term vision of the SACP to shift the balance of forces in favour of the working class over the next ten years, it is still not sufficient to



achieve its programmatic objectives. Mass power, without being directly married with state power, cannot yield the programmatic outcomes the SACP envisages for socialist democracy in South Africa. A 'vanguard party' moored only on the terrain of civil society and outside the state can only become a lobbyist for reforms or a pressure group. It is in this context that the SACP has to consider contesting state power, but not contesting the ANC.

To further make the case for a tactical electoral arrangement with the ANC, it is important to acknowledge the SACP's history of electoral politics. In the early years the organisation did make use of the electoral tactic to push its cause for a democratic SA and to take up issues of local concern.

STANDING FOR ELECTIONS NOT IN OPPOSITION TO BUT WITH THE ANC

Thus far the argument of this document has been weighted against what has been called the 'ANC path to socialism' position. On the other extreme, and which is an imminent possibility given the trajectory of the SACP, is a position espousing a 'protracted break' from the ANC. This position approaches the alliance relationship in a tumultuous manner that will eventually lead to a fractious break with the ANC when the SACP is supposedly strong enough to contest state power. The

break-away scenario from the ANC will have fundamental ramifications in the ANC and within the ranks of the organised working class. Besides the conflict, hostility and enmity that could result from this kind of approach, the risks for the National Democratic Revolution are very great - the evolution and maturation of democracy in South Africa could be stopped in its tracks.

Hence, there is a strong argument for an electoral option for the SACP based on a negotiated power sharing arrangement with the ANC. Rather than contesting against the ANC, the SACP should contest elections where it is strongest - organisationally and in terms of influence - with ANC support and vice versa. This is not the 'big bang' election contest route in which the SACP raises the stakes on everything for everyone.

In practice, an election contest based on the strength of the SACP could work as follows: if an SACP branch in a particular community is well organised and has the trust and support of the community, then the SACP should lead the joint alliance election's effort in that constituency - that is, the SACP would provide the candidate for the election in that community with the support of all ANC members and structures in that area. In the current situation, such an approach to power sharing with the ANC will merely give the SACP a toehold or

slight inroad into the formal political system and will not threaten the lion's share of the ANC's electoral support. Such a modest positioning and sharing of power in the political system should be sufficient for the SACP to start taking responsibility through the state for its programmatic objectives. Such a formal tactical electoral agreement with the ANC could remain in place for ten years.

ARE WE READY?

The negotiated power sharing arrangement being argued for and its electoral approach can be used both in the upcoming local government elections and the national/provincial elections. However, one of the main objections raised is whether the SACP will be ready. What arguments in favour of a negotiated power sharing arrangement can be made?

- The SACP is not going it alone. Just like the ANC has contested elections with SACP and Cosatu support over the years, the SACP would receive the support of the ANC and Cosatu in the framework argued for.
- If the emphasis is on the more organised and stronger branches of the SACP, then the entire apparatus of the organisation could be deployed to support these focused areas of elections, campaign work.

- With the SACP registering as a political party it can more aggressively fundraise.
- The SACP is organisationally better organised than the PAC, the Independent Democrats and other numerically small political formations in South Africa that have contested elections.
- With all the grassroots organising the SACP has been doing around co-operatives, decentralisation, people's housing, food security and land reform, and the financial sector it is better placed than the ANC in some areas to make the links between mass initiatives and state power.

WILL THE ANC OBJECT TO SHARING POWER?

Many who have been wedded to the 'ANC path to socialism' have gone to war with the ANC leadership and have referred to the 'Zanufication' of the ANC, the 'petite bourgeoisie nationalists at the helm of the ANC' and so on. Contrary to the labelling campaign, the ANC leadership is a seasoned, mature and very advanced political leadership that is not obsessed with having a monopoly over political power for the mere sake of power. Actually, they are the recipients of such a monopoly of political power, not the creators of it. The historically oppressed have given them this power not for an individual or group to do with it as they please, but for the sake of advancing the democratisation and transformation of the country from a racist, exploitative and divided past to a prosperous, equitable and democratic country.

The following arguments are likely to be considered by the ANC:

- In 1994 the SACP did not press its case for electoral space, although it had (and has) a legitimate right. In the ten years since the first democratic election the SACP has not disappeared. In fact the SACP has grown and continues to grow from strength to strength, by all qualitative and quantitative indicators. It has rethought its Marxism in several respects and is purposive about left renewal of the socialist project. In the scheme of South African politics today, the Party is a serious factor and is well

poised to become a political force in its own right. For the maturation of democracy, the most important question we are all faced with is: how do you bring the SACP into the formal institutional political system without creating instability and uncertainty in the country? The time has come to answer this question and the ANC as the most important nation building and democratising force in South African politics should play its role in this regard. The proposal in this document does not upset the dominance of the ANC in government and the country. The proposal is for a managed entry of the SACP into the political system - the ANC as the ruling party, mandated to govern South Africa in the interests of all South Africans, should see the task of managing the entry of the SACP into the formal political system as in the national interest of all South Africans.

- Many argue that it takes a democracy about 25 years or a generation to mature. While we have come a long way the model of democracy we are building will be incomplete without the SACP being included.
- Flowing from the above argument and consistent with the general perspective of this document is that the ANC cannot be and should not strive to be simultaneously nation builder, leader of the country, and 'vanguard Communist party'. The latter task should be left to the SACP. The current centre-left orientation of the ANC should not be about marginalising or usurping the role of the SACP, but about creating space for it to advance its socialist programme. Given the conditions faced by the country, the continent and the South, the ANC should concentrate on the most important task of leading the country, while allowing the SACP to compliment it on the state building and economic front as we build a mixed economy, with a strong state sector, a co-operative sector and private sector.
- A single party or individual cannot succeed in managing the contradictions thrown up by a complex political and

economic transition, particularly in a democracy where the time span of political office is limited. Neither can the SACP or ANC just go it alone in what is a historically unprecedented project on the African continent - pushing democracy to the limits to resolve the national, gender and class question.

- Local government is clearly the weakest link in the governance system. Capacity constraints, incompetence, corruption, a lack of delivery and most importantly discontent amongst the people are extremely rife and widespread. This is reflected in the trend of growing electoral support for the political opposition and sometimes violent outbursts that have been occurring in local communities against local councillors and local government. The forthcoming local government elections are not going to be an easy ride for the ANC. Bringing the SACP into the equation can go a long way in stemming the re-alignment away from the alliance and limiting the space for a new left opposition to emerge. Most importantly, bringing the SACP into the local government system will also assist in solving some of the problems the country is facing.

CONCLUSION

The contribution made in this document is not the first or last word on this question. Its primary intention has been to move the debate beyond a pro- or anti-ANC issue or the normal for or against the tripartite alliance debate. I have written this document with the permission of the Central Committee of the SACP and would not have written it otherwise. The birth of this debate has been painful and is likely to enter stormy waters. Many in the ranks of the SACP will want to undermine or stop this debate because they have a lot to lose at a personal level. We must watch for this and keep the debate on track.

LS

Satgar is the Gauteng secretary of the South African Communist Party. This is an edited version of a discussion paper distributed ahead of the SACP conference.