

# What is the character of the ANC?

Is its 'broad church' character one that predisposes the organisation to resolve questions by discussion and agreement and give and take, or does the 'broad church' concept also entail decision-making processes that amount to unilateral decrees?

There seems to be an assumption especially since the resolution of the apartheid conflict through negotiations that this method is and has always been the preferred ANC approach for dealing with conflicts within and outside the organisation.

Certainly there have been many phases of ANC history that have reflected a desire to talk, to negotiate to meet and discuss, to call for the holding of national conventions for resolving differences. It may also be true that this was a method preferred over armed struggle and that armed struggle was embarked on reluctantly after all avenues for peaceful action had been closed in the late 1950s. But even this may need to be qualified. Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were already discussing the possibility of armed struggle, around 1953. When Walter Sisulu visited China he agreed to Mandela's request to investigate the possibility of future support in the event of armed struggle. The Chinese response was not what had been hoped. Mandela reports: 'Walter came back with encouragement but no guns.'<sup>1</sup>

It would be a mistake to see the ANC

*Raymond Suttner looks at the inherent cultural features of the African National Congress (ANC) and whether it is in its nature to negotiate within the organisation and with other parties?*

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(or all sections of the ANC) as inevitably committed to negotiations over other ways of resolving problems. Whether or not that route has been chosen over alternative ways of dealing with problems has depended on a range of factors. These have included who at any particular moment have been seen as allies and as antagonists/opponents/enemies and what weaponry (used metaphorically or literally) has been deployed on each side. And the same parties may have been transformed from allies into enemies or antagonists at various times or oscillated between a variety of categories at the same time. This is true of its relationship with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Cosatu and also the New Nationalist Party (NNP) and the Inkhatha Freedom Party (IFP).

That conditionality can be seen from the earliest moments of the organisation's history. In a sense, the ANC was formed after the defeat of the military option - the

early tribal resistance to conquest. The time of the spear was over.

This came to pass – the country perished. But the struggle was not over, it had only shifted from a physical to an intellectual plane. Education was the new weapon, the intellectual the new warrior. A correspondent of the *Isigidimi*, commenting on the African's suffering under the white man's rule, suggested that 'the spear' was not the solution. 'No,' he said, 'we have tried and failed. The only solution is learning and knowledge. I mean that kind of knowledge that will make us realise that each one lives for all...'<sup>12</sup>

It was now the time of the people with learning, for them to provide leadership in the new conditions after Union. And the phase of political activity that opened up in 1912 was one where the ANC faced a consolidating white national entity, which had been handed power by the British. On the other hand, the newly formed organisation also engaged the British. It sent numerous deputations and petitioned the former colonial power to intervene. Some writers have depicted the early ANC's appeals to Britain as rank naiveté. But the Australian historian, Peter Limb, has argued that a closer reading of many of these statements reveals an element of irony in the appeals to Empire and British morality.<sup>3</sup> Tactically, it may also be that the appeal to Britain should be read as an attempt to pit one force – the departing colonial power against those who were perceived as the real enemy, the local settlers, in effect the practice of 'divide and rule' in reverse.

This early experience provides elements towards understanding how the ANC has related or the range of relationships it has tended to have with organisations outside of its immediate ranks. In the conditions immediately after its founding, there was no way that the ANC could take on the Union government

militarily. Admittedly, its leadership was also predisposed towards constitutionalism.<sup>4</sup> It had to assemble forces that were respected and effective in the conditions of the time. This explains the attempt to build an organisation comprising both the newly emerging professional elite, as well as a house of chiefs. The latter was modelled on the House of Lords.

As the struggle unfolded, this form of interaction with the local colonial bloc and Britain proved increasingly unsuccessful. But petitioning and attempts at negotiating were not the only form of engagement over this period. One of the most significant was the women's anti-pass protests in Bloemfontein in 1913.<sup>5</sup>

Although it was not a systematic part of Congress activity, sporadic mass action was a repeated feature over the early years. Also, there were times, as in the presidency of Josiah Gumede in the late 1920s, when the politics of deputations and petitioning came under challenge.

The main strategy of the time, however, was to protest and petition the authorities for redress of African grievances, in some ways akin to modern negotiations, though the relationship reflected a grossly unequal balance of power.

In the 1940s there emerged a substantial critique of this approach, in particular from the ANC Youth League, whose programme of action became the programme of the organisation as a whole.

The ANC leaders, Walter Sisulu then secretary-general and himself a key Youth League figure, and president-general Dr JS Moroka wrote a letter to the prime minister, as a prelude to embarking on the 1952 Defiance campaign. The letter, which was in effect an ultimatum, is, nevertheless, an interesting illustration of the simultaneous continuities and discontinuities in ANC discourse and approaches. While about to embark on the

first significant and direct challenge to the regime, the letter referred to the constant efforts to engage the government. However, unless the government repealed specified laws, before the end of February, the Congress would embark on its Defiance campaign.<sup>6</sup>

## Engaging allies and opponents

All that is part of a long history of escalating resistance. The regime is no more although the legacy of apartheid is still with us. The alliance that was consolidated in the decades after 1950 is still around, but with periodic eruptions of extreme tension or hostility. Is it outrageous to ask whether the components of the tripartite alliance today relate to one another simultaneously as allies and opponents or even enemies?

A short time back this question need not have been asked. It was clear that in the period of illegality the partners, initially Sactu before being supplanted by Cosatu, the ANC and the SACP related to one another as partners and comrades-in-arms. Thus, the late ANC President Oliver Tambo said at the SACP's 60th anniversary: 'We hail the SACP in the name of [the] contingents of our army of liberation which together with the SACP comprise a fighting alliance that represents the power of the South African revolution in the making.

'...We applaud your achievements, for the SACP has not only survived, but is today stronger, and increasingly makes more significant contributions to the liberation struggle of our people.

'The ANC speaks here today not so much as a guest invited to address a foreign organisation. Rather we speak of and to our own. For it is a matter of record that for much of its history, the SACP has been an integral part of the struggle of the African people against oppression and exploitation in South Africa...

'...Your heroes are ours. Your victories, those of all the oppressed.'<sup>7</sup>

If there were differences between the parties these related mainly to the long term. In the immediate context of their focus, overthrowing the regime, there appeared to be few differences. In addition, there was a great deal of overlap at leadership level between the ANC and SACP. All three components of the alliance spoke a similar language, in speeches peppered with Marxist terminology and anti-imperialism, and often anti-capitalism and pro-socialist orientations. The foreign policy inclinations also converged. The ANC, for example, issued a statement supporting the Soviet/Warsaw pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

But all of this changed with the collapse of the former socialist states and the unbanning of organisations in South Africa in 1990. Previously membership of the Communist Party had been an advantage in the liberation movement, comprising what were described as 'the most advanced cadres'. This was no longer the case in a period where the 'government-in-waiting' had to engage with capital. Nearly half of the national leadership of the SACP allowed their membership to lapse.

Those who left made no critique of the Party, nor of Marxism or Communist practices. Paradoxically while the SACP engaged in considerable introspection and in the process dropped certain formulations like 'democratic centralism', many of these remain part of ANC doctrine. That is one reason why one hears the wry statement (from SACP members) 'the SACP abandoned Stalinism but retained Marxism while the ANC abandoned Marxism but retained Stalinism.'

Additionally, one still finds the use of Marxist methodology or terminology in ANC circles or as the predominant mode of expression in ANC pronouncements,

including that of President Thabo Mbeki.

But from 1990 and especially after 1994, there was not only a divergence of opinions on the part of ANC, SACP and Cosatu but a tendency for positions to be developed unilaterally by the ANC or the government, often speaking on behalf of the ANC (without the policy necessarily passing through ANC structures). This was most obviously the case with Gear.

Whereas tripartite alliance meetings had been fairly common in the pre-1994 period, it became more and more difficult after 1994 for Cosatu and the SACP to secure meetings with the ANC. There were many occasions when meetings were cancelled by the ANC at the last minute.

What has emerged in the post-1994 period is that the parties relate to one another with little pretence of equality. This inequality may always have been the case, but now it is no longer a secret understanding, but there for all to see. The ANC relates to its alliance partners more as government than as a partner organisation. It is not clear that the ANC as a party has a relative independence in its relations with Cosatu and the SACP from the ANC as government.

It may be that instead of relating to one another as partners, Cosatu and the SACP relate to the ANC/government as interest groups or petitioners, closer to be sure than organisations like the Treatment Action Campaign, but nevertheless having to appeal for consideration increasingly in a similar way to these other organisations.

Finally, there is an element of opposition in the relationship. Cosatu's macroeconomic positions and to a lesser extent that of the SACP stands increasingly in an oppositional relationship to that of the ANC. This is not to suggest that there is a rejection of the overall vision, but there are substantial areas where constructive interaction no longer takes place and the resultant policy is sufficiently

unacceptable for Cosatu (and to a lesser extent the SACP) to relate to government (and ANC insofar as the organisation follows government) in an oppositional form.

Perhaps all of this is less a revelation of a new reality but a failure, especially on the part of the SACP, to recognise that its much-vaunted influence on the ANC was less substantial than many believed. It may well have been that the price of the SACP's close alliance to the ANC during the exile period, presupposed the dependence and essentially subordinate status of the Party.

In spite of all that has been said, all parties to the alliance claim to want and need the alliance to continue. But what does one mean when one says that each partner needs the alliance or wants it to continue at this stage? In fact, no section of the alliance is monolithic. While the ANC is often described as a 'broad church' both the SACP and Cosatu also bear elements of this character. One of the features of the 'broad church' concept in politics is that there is often a tendency to phrase policy positions in generalised terms, sufficiently wide for distinct tendencies to give divergent interpretations. One finds this within the ANC, though current centralising tendencies aim at minimising its effect.

But within the SACP it is perhaps more publicly evident. While the organisation unites behind a programme for socialism, many of its senior members are government ministers, in the forefront of recent attacks on Cosatu. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, deputy chair of the Party and Minister of Public Services has taken to lecturing the unions and advising them to read Lenin on the dangers of 'infantile leftism'. Although not as confrontationist, Jeff Radebe, Minister of Public Enterprises, also a member of the Party Central Committee was the main target in last

year's anti-privatisation strikes and engaged in public attacks on Cosatu.

Within Cosatu the commitment to the alliance is not universal. Every year sees resolutions, which call (unsuccessfully) for withdrawal from the alliance. Some unions, like the South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) have in their leadership people not very warmly disposed to the ANC or to concepts like 'national democratic struggle'. While the federation is committed to the alliance and many members are active in the ANC, there are nevertheless undercurrents, which have for some time been in favour of breaking the link.

A factor that militates against splits is the continued and considerable overlap in membership between the organisations, especially the ANC and SACP, at every level of their organisations. To speak of a schism in the relationship is thus to speak of a split between components that overlap.

Even this does not mean that each component supports the relationship without qualification. Clearly, a point may be reached where one or more than one component of the alliance believes that what they gain no longer outweighs the disadvantages. Such a decision would very likely lead one component to decide that membership of one organisation precludes membership of the other. Although it is hard to visualise this happening immediately, there is already repeated reference in the ANC to dual loyalties on the part of SACP leaders who are also in the national leadership of the ANC.

Finally, if there have been tensions in the alliance over the last year, and especially between Cosatu and the ANC, the fault cannot be placed exclusively at the door of the ANC. Some of the statements of general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi and president, Willie Madisha suggest an ANC 'shift to the right' as an accomplished fact, instead of

tendencies that are open to contestation. They have also sometimes given the impression of a dogmatic approach to privatisation, precluding negotiations. This is incompatible with working towards agreed positions. There needs to be a willingness to engage and debate differences on all sides, if the alliance is to survive in a meaningful way. All parties need to be prepared to end the mudslinging and labelling and try to build a new framework, owned by all parties to the relationship.

## Endnotes

- 1 See *Long Walk To Freedom. The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (1994) Macdonald Purnell: Randburg.
- 2 'Deculturation - The African Writer's Response,' *Africa Today*, 15 (4) Significantly, but beyond the scope of consideration in this article, the *Istgldlmi* article goes on to advocate the necessity of such education for women as well as men
- 3 Peter Limb (2002) 'The ambiguities of British Empire Loyalty and identities in the politics and journalism of early ANC leaders', Paper to the British World Conference, University of Cape Town, 9-11 January (unpublished).
- 4 See Jack and Ray Simons (1983) 'Class and colour in South Africa, 1850-1950'. *International Defence and Aid Fund: London*.
- 5 See Julia Wells (1991) *We Have Done With Pleading The Women's anti-pass campaign* Ravan Press: Johannesburg; and (1993) *We now demand! The history of women's resistance to pass laws in South Africa*. Witwatersrand University Press: Johannesburg.
- 6 *In From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa. 1882-1964* ed Thomas Katis and Gwendolen M Carter Vol 2 by Thomas Katis at 476-7.
- 7 Address on the occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the SACP, 30 July 1981, in *Preparing for Power. Oliver Tambo Speaks*. Compiled by Adelaide Tambo. Heinemann Educational Books: London 1987 at 201-202

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