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South Africa

The ANC transformed

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV449 - June 2012 -

Publication date: Tuesday 19 June 2012

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The ANC celebrated its hundredth anniversary on the 8 January 2012. This is indeed a major achievement for the oldest liberation movement in Africa. In its history it has had to negotiate many difficult challenges, perhaps none more so than retaining a broad unity while maintaining the ability to act and implement strategy. This is a remarkable part of the history of the ANC and bears testimony to generations of extraordinary leaders who shaped and guided the ANC.

Celebrations, though, often have blind spots. One such blind spot is the tendency to overlook the fact that the struggle for liberation in South Africa had many impulses, different currents, divergent voices and positions which existed both inside and outside the ANC and which ultimately helped define the ANC. Another is to ask why socialist forces, mainly the South African Communist Party – which has devoted much of its existence to building and influencing the ANC – have been unable to ensure an anti-capitalist orientation to the movement. This is a critical question to pose for forces on the left. Joining in the celebration of 100 years of the ANC requires us to reflect on both of these questions.

Plurality of struggle for national liberation

At the beginning of the 20th century, the ANC started out as a moderate organisation of the black middle classes based on African Nationalism. It developed from a respectful lobbying group to a mass campaigning organisation, a revolutionary force and eventually a party of government. While it initially paid little heed to the needs of the rural poor and black working class, the emergence of trade union organisation and specifically the rise of the Industrial Commercial Workers Union helped to reorient the organisation towards the dispossessed masses.

It was predominantly in the 1950s, when, influenced by African independence struggles and the then-banned South African Communist Party which started to play a leading role inside the ANC, that the ANC began to embrace militant mass action requiring the mobilisation of working-class constituencies, other organisations and movements. To broaden its support base amongst other oppressed layers of society, it began to build alliances with like-minded movements such as the Natal Indian Congress, Coloured People's Congress and the (white) Congress of Democrats. Very significantly, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) joined the Congress Alliance and made up its trade union wing.

The adoption of the Freedom Charter brought these and other movements together and enabled the ANC to operate as a broad church in which nationalists, communists, and liberals, etc. united around the goal of overthrowing the apartheid state.

Other voices, influences and contributions

Despite the fact the socialist currents in South Africa were divided along international divisions associated with the split of the Comintern, forces aligned to Soviet socialism, Trotskyism and other independent Marxist currents influenced South African politics greatly. The history of the socialist movement in South Africa was greatly determined by the strategy and tactics of linking the struggle for socialism with the movement for national liberation. In the conditions of South Africa, where capitalism developed through land dispossession of the indigenous people and through the prism of racism and racial division, it was widely understood that socialism and its narrative of working class unity needed to be articulated in ways that took into account the conditions of colonial and national oppression.

It is this struggle to indigenise Marxism that has such a rich and varied history; an indigenised Marxism that both enriched Marxism as well as the actual struggle for national liberation. Here we can highlight the debates on the land and national question, theories of the development of capitalism in the underdeveloped world (articulation of modes

of production), transition to socialism, etc.

It is especially important to recognise the contribution of two movements which in post-1994 SA are increasingly ignored or falsified.

The Non European Unity Movement was formed in 1943. It was a movement which aimed to unite, on a federal basis, members of the three main black population groups – Africans, Coloureds and Indians – irrespective of religion, caste or tribes. The unifying factors would be a programme of democratic demands contained in its Ten Point Programme. The ANC-led Congress of the People and adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 were obviously influenced and inspired by the example of the Unity Movement.

The Unity Movement's legacy was expressed through the politics of non-collaboration and the tactic of the boycott, which became a critical instrument of resistance to the apartheid government's divide and rule and co-optation attempts via its Bantustan strategy of the 1970s and '80s; it was also found in the politics of non-racialism, meaning the rejection of race as a base for organising, and in the construction of a united single nation with perspectives on the language and land questions that influenced all formations of the liberation movement. Yet, because of splits, weak organic links to black working-class communities (with some exceptions) and the dominance of middle-class professionals in its ranks and leadership, it largely failed to make these ideas and tactics a material force in the struggle.

It was left to the Black Consciousness Movement, led by Steve Biko, and the rise of the independent trade union movement to give effect to some of the more important ideas of the Unity Movement and to give them mass impact. The Black Consciousness Movement was centred on an ideological position that espoused the importance of self-reliance, reawakened a sense of pride and self-esteem in black people and challenged the apartheid categories of Non-White or African, Coloured and Indian. The BC movement saw all the oppressed as black and in effect gave expression to the need to overcome apartheid's divide and rule strategy by uniting all the oppressed in a struggle for national liberation. In essence, this was at the heart of the strategy advanced by the early proponents of non-racialism and endorsed by science's rejection of race as a valid biological category.

This was taken forward by the rise of the independent trade union movement in the 1970s and early 1980s that eventually led to the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). FOSATU was a militant trade union federation formed in 1979. It championed workers' control and democracy within the union and at the work place. FOSATU believed that unions should be non-racial and was one of the first trade union federations to effectively organise across the colour line.

The 1976 student uprising, followed in the 1980s by waves of mass strikes and township protests, signalled the beginning of the end of the apartheid system. Anti-capitalist politics were taking root in South Africa and the mass movement was challenging the State from many fronts. A revolutionary situation was maturing and it was clear that the ruling class could not rule in the old way and that the masses refused to be ruled in the old way.

For the first time in the history of the liberation movement, popular mobilisations, mass revolts, self-defence groups and workers' struggles not only co-existed but created political conditions that went beyond the demand for one person, one vote. It was a period of heightened consciousness which transformed and radicalised the ANC. This was captured in the ANC's call to make the country ungovernable. It was also seen in the ANC's analysis of the South African situation at the time as one of dual power, i.e. the mass revolts led by township-based street committees, people's courts and the paralysis of local government structures versus the state and its repressive apparatus. Taking power was being forced on to the national agenda.

In this situation, socialist forces were increasingly becoming hegemonic in the broad mass movement that was being forged in struggle on the ground in South Africa. The strategy of building a broad alliance of popular forces in the

form of the mass democratic movement and more particularly in the United Democratic Front held out the possibility of ensuring a socialist hegemony in the struggle against apartheid.

Yet this never materialised, and in just a few years the radicalisation of the mass movement and the ANC was to be undone by both objective and subjective factors. The collapse of the Soviet Union was devastating for the ANC and the SACP, which had become so dependent on it for material and ideological support. It was not just the ANC that was affected by the changed international balance of forces; national liberation forces from Ireland, Palestine, El Salvador and many others were forced to reinvent themselves, given the changed situation. The collapse of the Soviet Union created an ideological crisis for the left. The crisis of credibility of socialism had a devastating impact on the SACP. Leading members of its Central Committee, including Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, left the Party. The leadership of the SACP retreated.

The ANC seized the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the apartheid government when De Klerk eventually crossed the Rubicon, but in the negotiations and subsequent transition from apartheid it was unable to create the space for on-going struggle that would open a transition to a much more radical transformation of the existing system. Instead, the ANC leadership, with sections of the UDF, demobilised and displaced popular resistance. Like a tap, popular voices and mass organisations were turned on and off according to the requirements of negotiating a settlement with the apartheid regime. The dynamic of mass mobilisation and working-class power that shaped the politics of liberation in the 1980s was consciously side-lined as the political transition and the negotiations took centre-stage.

Initially, in the first years of the negotiations, the ANC retained a radical public posture. In the first public statements of Nelson Mandela after his release, he confirmed that nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy remained ANC policy. This was also echoed by Chris Hani, Harry Gwala and many leaders of the popular movements. However, as the negotiations unfolded, the ANC agreed to revoke armed struggle and denounce violence. In this period the moderate exiled leadership and reformist elements in the internal structures of the ANC converged and became the dominant force which led the ANC in reaching a settlement with the apartheid government.

The iconic status of Mandela, Tambo and Slovo, who were in favour of an accommodation with the ruling class, was sufficient to paper over the deep class differences and class interests within the mass democratic movement. Based on their leadership as well as the ideology of African nationalism – the glue that held the broad church of the ANC together – they were able to sideline radical forces within the ANC and outside that opposed the settlement with the apartheid regime.

The left outside of the ANC boycotted the negotiations, demanding instead a constituent assembly, and made the mistake of staying aloof from the negotiations. Retaining their purity, they lost influence in the broader society and became more and more marginalised. The ANC was given a free hand to make significant compromises without having to pay a political price in terms of their support among the masses. The successful concluding of the negotiations and the fact that they led to a one person, one vote election meant that the ANC was able to appear as the movement of liberation.

Towards new struggle and movement

It is clear that the past twenty years has transformed the ANC from a movement embedded in the struggle for freedom and resistance (the movement that led bus boycotts, the women's anti-pass march on Pretoria, mineworker strikes, campaigns to free political prisoners, convoking the Congress of the People and the adoption of the Freedom Charter) to a political party that is ultimately responsive to the needs of international and local capital. This is true even if aspirant sections of the petty bourgeoisie rooted in the state bureaucracy and state enterprises rest on the ANC's support in the working class.

The ANC transformed

In power, the ANC has failed to break up the monopolies that dominate the South African economy when it was on the agenda, allowed the biggest corporations to de-list from South Africa and re-invent themselves as foreign corporations, corporatised and privatised key state enterprises and functions, and delivered our economy to the WTO and the needs of predatory finance capital.

Under successive GEAR-like policies, the liberalisation of the South African economy has led to the deepening of inequality (South Africa is now regarded as the most unequal country in the world), and unemployment has more than doubled, with real unemployment today being closer to 40% – one of the highest rates in the world. And it is under the ANC's watch that almost 40% of the workforce is now employed through labour brokers. By prioritising Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) and the promotion of a black capitalist class (as its strategy for deracialising the economy) the phenomenon of tenderpreneurial corruption has come to paralyse state capacity, creating deep crises in the education and health systems and eroding local government capacity.

The crisis in delivery of basic services such as housing, sanitation and electricity have given rise to, according to police statistics, more than 6 000 protests last year alone. A new wave of class struggle driven by the precariat on the one hand and organised labour in defence of jobs and wages on the other hand, cries out for political coordination and unity in action – something the ANC-of-struggle provided previously. The SACP, which still sees itself as the 'vanguard of the working class', rather than recognising the significance of these struggles for determining a new working-class agenda in the yet to be transformed South Africa, has liquidated itself into the Zuma project, taking responsibility for governing over South Africa's post-apartheid tragedy.

In the past two decades, the ANC has shifted its base from the masses to a dependence on the state bureaucracy, the party machinery and a new elite in both rural and urban areas. Increasingly the ANC is becoming a party of the new elite.

Change can no longer come from within the ANC. Polokwane was an example of the inability of the left inside the ANC to bring about any meaningful change. Polokwane, as an attempt to re-invigorate a democratic culture and reconnect the organisation with the general membership, so as to replace the '1996 class project' (neoliberalism) with a radical strategy of wealth redistribution, has been blocked by the hold of a bureaucracy within the state and in the ANC itself. The predatory elite (tenderpreneurs) have undermined any progressive change in economic policy. The pace of land reform remains the same. Even the discredited willing-buyer, willing-seller policy remains in place and the promised National Health Insurance is very far from being realised.

Unless social movements, strong unions and radical initiatives such as the recently formed Democratic Left Front exist and mobilise around alternatives for a broad-based anti-capitalist platform, we will not see the fruits of 100 years of struggle.