

The Idea of the ANC

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Introduction

On 8 January 2012 the African National Congress (ANC) celebrated its centenary in Bloemfontein, the city in which it had been founded. By early morning the streets of the city thronged with ANC supporters. When the gates of Free State Stadium were opened, almost 50,000 citizens quickly filled the stands, ready to enjoy a day of food, speech-making and political theatre. For most of those present, the event was a celebration of a remarkable political movement that had survived a century of repression and exile, and emerged as the natural party of post-apartheid government.

ANC leaders in Bloemfontein indulged in more than a moment of self-satisfaction about the capacity of their movement to scale seemingly insuperable obstacles. Three hundred years of white supremacy and segregation culminated, in the second half of the last century, in institutionalised apartheid and the

forced relocation of Africans to Bantustans. In the eyes of its champions, the ANC has now begun the long process of remaking this troubled society. It has used its electoral mandate to take unpopular but necessary decisions; it has provided housing, water, sanitation and electricity to millions of citizens; it has created a new system of government out of the disorder of late apartheid; and it has ameliorated the racial and ethnic tensions that are an inevitable consequence of such a tumultuous political history.

As the day drew on in Bloemfontein, and the heat intensified, there were reminders that all has not been well in the liberation movement. Youth League members sang boisterous songs about their leader, Julius Malema, who had not been invited to speak and was shortly to be expelled from the ANC. Workers from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) complained that the celebrations had commenced with a 'centenary golf day' in deference to the sporting preferences of the ANC's new business elite. Mother of the nation Winnie Mandela created a storm all of her own when event organisers failed to reserve a suitable table for her family.

The 'tripartite alliance' between the ANC, Cosatu and the South African Communist Party (SACP) had been fraught with conflict in the run-up to the anniversary. Provinces were exhibiting tendencies

towards endemic factionalism and corruption. Such factionalist undercurrents somewhat dissipated the aura of smug satisfaction that might otherwise have persisted during the centenary. The wounds of the 2007 Polokwane conference, at which Thabo Mbeki unsuccessfully stood for a third term as ANC president, had not yet fully healed. Members of a post-Polokwane breakaway party, the Congress of the People (Cope), were conspicuous by their absence from the celebrations; these bitter outcasts were forced to look on as the movement to which they had dedicated their adult lives celebrated its centenary without them.

Looking back on the past century from the vantage point of Bloemfontein, the history of the ANC has been marked by previous episodes of conflict and division. There have been protracted periods in which the very survival of the movement was in doubt. How then has the ANC survived? One secret of its longevity has been its capacity to accommodate changes in its objectives, membership and modes of operation. The chiefs and mission-educated elites who led it during its early years supplemented the movement's ranks later with urban workers, rural activists, organised women and eventually youth. Communist allies brought a 'mass character' to the ANC and changed its modes of protest and organisation. The movement's mostly middle-class leaders ultimately endeavoured to harness

the energies of the peri-urban ‘masses’ that dominated South African politics in the 1980s.

The ANC has also been revitalised fortuitously by powerful socio-economic processes, such as urbanisation and industrialisation, over which it had absolutely no control. And it has been jolted into action by the oppressive political designs of whites. Tactical alliances among European settlers first forced Africans into a struggle for dignity and economic survival; the later social engineering and political repression of segregation and apartheid repeatedly energised black political opposition. Other struggle organisations – notably the Pan Africanist Congress and the offshoots of the black consciousness movement – also created political opportunities that the ANC was able to exploit, belatedly but with often surprising success.

More consistently than its rivals, the ANC has exhibited a capacity for strategic reflection. Its relationship with the SACP helped it intentionally (if sometimes ill-advisedly) to adopt mass and militaristic approaches to political agency, and enabled it to exploit the many advantages of multi-racial organisation. The ANC also waged propaganda war as ruthlessly against fellow struggle movements as against the apartheid regime, and was able to cannibalise or absorb many such rivals.

These factors help to explain the survival of the

liberation movement across decades of anti-apartheid struggle. Since 1994 the ANC has campaigned with great success to replenish its electoral support. Its recruitment drives have taken it to a nominal membership of more than a million. The leadership has dispatched the threat posed by Cope, the first major breakaway the ANC has experienced in half a century, and it has made it difficult for tripartite alliance partners to contemplate a further rupture.

Historians sometimes observe that national-provincial conflicts have been a perennial feature of the ANC and that the movement has been riven with factionalism since at least the 1930s. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that the conflicts within the ANC today merely represent a continuation or resurgence of longstanding and familiar historical divisions. South Africa is undergoing deep processes of class formation that are markedly weakening the internal cohesion of the movement. Much of the ANC leadership is now engaged in the accumulation of wealth on an unprecedented scale; and the interests of the 'empowered' classes are diverging sharply from those of ordinary members. Meanwhile, the black middle class is growing, primarily through access to public sector employment. Such rising classes coexist uneasily with a growing mass membership that remains as poor and economically marginalised as ever.

The ANC possesses three capabilities that allow it to retain a degree of organisational integrity and cohesion. First, it is the party of national government, and it controls eight provincial administrations and the overwhelming majority of municipalities in the country. While the ANC cannot straightforwardly dispense consequent powers of patronage to ensure organisational discipline – patronage has been a force for division almost as much as it has been for unity – the leadership can cement relationships with ordinary people by delivering public services, and it can deliver jobs, tenders and other economic opportunities to its activists.

Second, the ANC continues to possess what its former presidency policy head Joel Netshitenzhe has described as a ‘rational centre’. The factions that compete for position in national and provincial conferences are on most occasions not ‘hard’ or mutually exclusive. There are many activists who are nominated for more than one ‘slate’ of candidates, and there are many more who will step back from factionalist infighting to insist upon a return to dialogue and compromise. Many of the losers at Polokwane – perhaps the most fraught conference the ANC has ever experienced – were ultimately retained in senior positions. Disagreements over policy and ideology continue to be processed through a seemingly endless internal machinery of

dialogue and debate. Although the ANC takes many bad and irrational decisions, it does so through a deliberative process that formally defers to the claims of reason.

Finally, the ANC is united by its ways of telling its own history. When a political movement begins to fragment, it is often consensus about its history that is the first casualty. Competing groups justify their claims for power and advantage on the basis of the alleged injustices or iniquities from the past. The songs that are in evidence at ANC and alliance conferences testify to the presence today of many competing narratives. At the same time, the ANC has been able to sustain and propagate a fairly coherent and consensual grand narrative – albeit one that is increasingly at odds with the interpretations produced by academic historians.

The key dynamics of this quasi-official history can be found frozen in the liberation movement's official logo. Created by the artist and black consciousness activist Thami Mnyele in the early 1980s, this totem continues to possess great appeal for activists and ordinary members. On first observation, it presents a number of unconnected images, drawn at different scales and in diverse colours, crowded together into a rectangular space that can scarcely contain them: a shield, a spear, a wheel, a flag.

The spear and the shield represent the historical

agency of the liberation movement. They summon up a great history stretching from anti-colonial resistance wars to the armed struggle of Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the joint military wing of the SACP and ANC. They also reflect the movement's continuing 'war' against racial oppression. The fist that holds the spear ostensibly represents the power of a united people; but it also recalls the black consciousness ideology that influenced so many ANC activists in the 1970s.

The wheel symbolises the non- or multi-racialism of the ANC, and more broadly celebrates the movement's unifying character. An earlier version of the logo included a wheel with four spokes, each of which stood for one part of the multi-racial campaigns of the Congress Alliance. The current emblem boasts a wheel with eight spokes, out of deference to the contributions of further 'pillars' of the anti-apartheid struggle such as the trade unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

Behind (and sometimes in front of) the wheel there is a horizontal tricolour flag. Its equal bands of black, green and gold represent the oppressed black people of South Africa, the land from which they were displaced, and the mineral wealth that lies under the ground. Together these colours symbolise the elements of historical oppression and dispossession from which the ANC promises liberation.

Official histories

The expected highlight of the ANC's centenary day celebration in Bloemfontein was President Jacob Zuma's late-afternoon delivery of the 'January 8th Statement'. During the decades of ANC exile, this annual communiqué was awaited with excitement by ANC sympathisers and underground activists. By tradition it set out the strategic analysis of the ANC's national executive committee (NEC) and detailed the priorities that would guide ANC activities in the year ahead.

The centenary year's January 8th statement was considered sufficiently important to be printed as a booklet for distribution to branches.¹ When President Zuma delivered a condensed version of the statement to the stadium audience, his delivery was laboured and monotonous. (Zuma, as so often seemingly unfamiliar with the contents of the speech he was reading, had apparently partied late into the night at a gala celebration.) Thousands of disappointed activists fled the heat of the stadium long before the two-hour oration had concluded. Those who remained were treated to a prolonged meditation on the history of the ANC.

Although the ANC's centenary had encouraged an outpouring of reflection on the history of the

movement, no consensus had emerged about how such a history should be written. In truth, historians are not disinterested chroniclers of distant events. The questions they ask are motivated by their preoccupations today and by their fears and hopes for tomorrow. Most historians have characterised the ANC, with more or less sympathy, as an organisation of African elites in the decade of its formation; as a somewhat moribund historical bystander in the 1920s and 1930s; as an increasingly radical actor in the struggle for political rights and justice in the 1940s; as the mobilising force behind a campaign of defiance in the 1950s; as an exiled or imprisoned liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s; as a catalyst for armed struggle from the 1960s to the 1980s; as a mass party in the early 1990s; and, finally, as a troubled party of government after 1994.

The movement that historians describe has changed dramatically across its history. In the second decade of the twentieth century, the ANC was led by missionary-educated professionals and ruling chiefs and it was driven by a thirst for rights – but also for land. The ANC that launched the defiance campaigns of the 1950s, by contrast, was preoccupied with the politics of the urban masses in the burgeoning cities of South Africa. The small band of exiles that languished in Lusaka in the early 1970s shared little with the



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Jacob Zuma at a meeting of the ANC National General Council, Durban, 2010. (Rogan Ward)

dynamic mass movement that propelled political negotiations to their conclusion in the early 1990s.

Less sympathetic writers have sometimes painted a dark portrait of the historical ANC. For some of its critics, it has been a communist puppet, a dinosaur or a political parasite that has betrayed the poor South Africans it once promised to liberate. Sceptics claim that the ANC's recent achievements – bringing political stability, creating a credible programme of government, and neutralising social conflict – have been self-serving or transitory. They insist that the ANC has wasted the opportunities presented by a global economic boom and that its greed and unforgivable policy errors have left millions languishing in poverty.

Over the past decade South Africans have indeed endured deep inequality and unemployment, an AIDS crisis, and deepening corruption. Policy blunders resulted in the humiliation of rolling national power blackouts. Devastating 'xenophobic violence', much of it directed against citizens from the north of the country, exploded in 2008. Community 'service delivery' protests have become commonplace, and in some communities a return to the relentless civil conflict of the late apartheid years now seems conceivable. Inside the ANC there have been episodes of open rebellion against the leadership, and debilitating battles for succession to the movement's presidency and other

senior offices have become routine.

When explaining the current travails of the movement, ANC leaders sometimes turn to history. Their preoccupation with the past is not merely a form of escapism. It is upon claims about the past that assertions of legitimate power today depend. President Jacob Zuma's January 8th statement in Bloemfontein was an expression of a new and increasingly bold narrative that explains the ANC's unique historical character and its consequent entitlement to rule.

This is not the first time that sympathetic writers have presented the ANC's victory in the struggle against apartheid as ordained by history. Even non-partisan professional historians tend to view history from the victors' perspective. Events and actions are all too easily allocated places in a wider narrative that culminates in ANC victory. Partisan historians are, however, now more inclined than ever to treat the ANC's post-apartheid ascendancy as pre-ordained. Their official narrative interprets the movement's periods of passivity, and even its major blunders, as opportunities for political regeneration and strategic learning. While the great liberation movement occasionally trips over its own feet, it quickly rights itself and resumes its inexorable progress towards its meeting with destiny.

The official history presented in Bloemfontein

incorporates a selective recording of events. It catalogues turning points and internal strategic decisions that allegedly brought the cause of national freedom closer. This narrative, as we shall see, tends to erase the movement's political rivals from history. It also presents the ANC as a privileged instrument of historical destiny, as the only legitimate champion of the people's freedom and as the unique custodian of South Africans' hopes for the future. Historically innocent Youth League activists have been taught to believe that history is on their movement's side.

What exactly is this thing called the ANC? The movement's intellectuals discern within the ANC's complex past an historical identity – a set of essential features that make the movement recognisably itself across the hundred years of its existence. The organisation has, moreover, always been constituted in part by how its supporters have conceived of it. ANC activists therefore shoulder an obligation to understand their movement's historical identity and to ensure that it is reproduced into the future. For such intellectuals, the ANC is more than just an organisation: it is also an idea.

The current quasi-official histories of the ANC incorporate three interrelated notions that help to explain the movement's historical endurance and accomplishments: a conception of power or agency;

a notion of unity; and an understanding of human liberation. This book explores how these contested ideas have shaped the ANC in the past, and it speculates about how they may inform its leaders' choices in the future. Along the way, the book will try to explain how and why the ANC has survived, and what, if anything, might be the purposes of its continued existence.

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