

The Aetiology of Political Leadership Conflicts in the ANC and Implications for South Africa's Democracy

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Abstract

The internal conflicts within the ANC are to a large extent about leadership contestation for power, given the possibilities that ANC Presidency carries in relation to becoming President of the country. In fact politics within the ruling party and ANC led government has become a 'new economy' in the South Africa. The aetiology of political conflict in the ANC needs more careful analysis since it serves as a magnifying glass of underlying possibilities for the country's young democracy. This paper traces the evolution of conflicts within the ANC. It proceeds to cover the post 1994 period to show how internal conflicts are eroding the power and legitimacy of the democratic state. The paper will reflect on the challenge of political leadership transition, a problem in the entire African continent, and a problem which has become prominent in South Africa, post the Nelson Mandela leadership period. The politics of fracture in the governing party are in fact 'a politics of precarity' and have inaugurated uncertainty, instability, and moral decline in the country's democracy as whole. It's difficult to foresee the end point and return of inclusive democratic 'reason'.

Index terms—

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1 I.

2 Introduction and Background

hat there is conflict and serious internal divisions in the ANC, South Africa's governing party, which Nelson Mandela led to victory during the first democratic elections in 1994, is now a fact which is hard to deny. Turbulences within the ruling party which South Africa's democracy has had to endure tend to intensify during periods of leadership transition, eg. transition from Mbeki period to Zuma and from Zuma period to Ramaphosa. The internal leadership wrangles within the ANC, even though rationalised and explained as a sign of maturation of democracy by commentators and apologists, do pose serious threats to the future and fate of South Africa's

4 ISSUES RAISED IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

43 democracy. Conflict in the ANC, signifies, as is argued in this article, the failure of political leadership to live
44 up to the burden of ethical example in service of a much higher cause, the cause of emancipation and restoration
45 of human dignity. Of course, the story about conflict in the ANC is being analysed and commented upon from
46 a variety of perspectives but is sometimes not carefully related to the country's democracy. The story of ANC
47 internal leadership conflicts is replete with varied strata of meanings, interpretations and contestations. One
48 must also indicate that internal organizational conflicts are not uniquely an ANC thing -many former liberation
49 movements that are now governing parties have had similar experiences at one point or the other. Some have
50 survived albeit the deep reconfigurations of internal power.

51 Perhaps one could argue that the failure of the ANC to use the period of heightened conflict between former
52 Presidents Mbeki and Zuma, (2004) (2005) (2006) (2007) (2008) (2009) to cultivate reproachment
53 between the two important leaders and their supporters, marked a turning point in the history of the organization.
54 The proof of the turning point is in widespread negative perceptions about the ANC hence decline in its electoral
55 support in 2019 national and provincial elections and November local government elections in 2021. The ANC is
56 seen as a huge and old organization which lacks ethical grounding hence the breakaway which occurred in 2009
57 to form Congress of the People (COPE) and later the expulsion of ANC Youth League leader, Julius Malema
58 who then formed a new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, which is giving the ANC a serious challenge in
59 getting youth support.

60 So, it is perhaps correct to argue that the turning point is marked by the ANC's progressive losses in the arena
61 of 'politics of support' (Gamble 1974; Dobell 2000) -this arena is about the degree of popular support by the mass
62 of the electorate. The failure to cultivate reproachment has favoured a situation of perpetuity of internal conflict
63 and organizational semiparalysis which confronts both revolutionary and moderate forces within the ANC with
64 serious tactical and strategic challenges. The challenges include how to forge unity and organizational coherence
65 to advance the ideals of the organization's national democratic 'revolution'. The disunity which reached immense
66 proportions from the time of the Polokwane conference continues to haunt the ANC. The 'conflict' has far deep
67 and complex permutations as it includes access to power and money as well as underlying contestations about
68 the direction of change in the country -the competition between a pro Anglo-American development path versus
69 the new versus the emerging path forged out of alliances between new and emerging global powers -especially
70 Russia-China -continues to be an issue. The former is supported within the ANC by moderate and 'enlightened'
71 majority led by the current President Cyril Ramaphosa and the latter, is articulated by the radical transformation
72 faction in ANC and is largely associated with the former President Jacob Zuma who was recalled as President
73 just a year before the end of his term. It is during his term that corruption in state procurement took centre
74 stage leading to the establishment of a national Commission on State Capture. Former President was required
75 to appear several times as witness and accused person during the Commission enquiry sessions. He appeared a
76 few times and then defied the Commission and summons which were sent to him. The former President was
77 then charged and arrested. His incarceration on charges of contempt of court triggered uprisings in some parts
78 of KwaZulu-Natal province and Gauteng province and these uprisings were hijacked by criminal elements and
79 community activists, not loyal to Zuma, but using the space to loot and fulfil personal financial interests. This
80 nearly plunged the country's democracy and governance into chaos with early estimates showing a repercussion
81 of approximately R50 billion on the national economy.

82 The problem is that on the surface, the ANC always appears to be singing the same song from the same hymn,
83 but deep down, the rhythms and dances to the song are different (Kondlo 2011). This is a simplified analogy
84 of complexity of the ANC's crisis. Another underlying dynamic in the ANC's crisis is the new "political power
85 elite" (Chipkin 2019) which has emerged and continues to grow and its political base is to a large extent in the
86 ANC. The challenge it faces is finding a working strategy of capital formation to create the material base for its
87 reproduction. Dealing with this challenge has led to numerous ethical lapses hence the incidence of state capture
88 and rampant corruption which now erodes confidence in the arena of 'politics of power' (Gamble, 1974; Dobell
89 2000). The state and government, as an arena of 'politics of power' cannot be unaffected by what is happening in
90 the ANC. The "double-speak" (Gumede 20120) you hear among ANC leaders, is basically an attempt to manage
91 numerous internal fractures and this of course creates, even though inadvertently, spaces for the 'unethical' to
92 continue to survive. That is why political leadership conflicts will take long to end in the ANC. It's the severity
93 of losses incurred in the arena of "politics of support" which could probably awaken ANC's moral self.

3 II.

4 Issues Raised in the Existing Literature

96 Prominent scholars around the globe have made important reflections on the aetiology of conflict in the ANC
97 and most importantly, the fate of South Africa's democracy. I still find the works of the 'older', generation of
98 South African scholars very useful in providing insights to understand what is happening in the ANC today.
99 One is reminded here of the works of Hugh MacMillan; Colin Bundy, Archie Mafeje; Dani Nabudere, Kwesi
100 Prah; Steven Ellis; Raymond Suttner, Tom Lodge etc. It could be useful to refer to some of the issues raised
101 by these scholars in order to focus the points made in this article. One is also fully aware of the fact that the
102 younger generation of scholars, has reviewed and challenged some of the positions made in the works of the earlier
103 generation of scholars. For instance, some more recent and relevant works on internal issues in the ANC have

104 been produced by scholars like Janet Cherry, Xolela Mangcu, William Gumede, Mcebisi Ndletyana, Lungisile
105 Ntsebeza; Hebert Maserumule; Ivor Chipkin etc but this article will mention where appropriate but will not delve
106 into works produced by this generation.

107 What emerges from existing scholarship is that there are three broad phases in the history of the ANC within
108 which political leadership conflicts have to be located. The first phase was that of the ANC as a nonviolent
109 civil rights organization. Towards the end of this phase the organization grappled with its ideological identity
110 as was shown during the conflicts which started before and after the ANC's 1930 conference in Bloemfontein.
111 The competition between Josai Gumede, a Communist who wanted to be re-elected President of the ANC and
112 Prixley ka Isaka Seme, an ANC moderate eventually led to a split in the ANC of the now Western Cape. The
113 Independent ANC was formed in November 1930 led by Elliot Thonjeni and Bransby Ndobe (Kono, 1982). But
114 this structure was short-lived. Besides this the ANC grappled with radical ideas from various fronts and also from
115 its youth leading up to the adoption of the 1949 Program of Action which was later abandoned. This and other
116 unresolved ideological issues precipitated a split which led to the formation of the PAC under the leadership of
117 Robert Sobukwe in 1959.

118 The phase which follows, starts from 1960 to 1990 and is about the ANC's transition from a legal civil rights
119 organization to an exile national liberation movement; the third phase, 1990 to date is about the ANC unbanned
120 and its about the ANC as a governing political party, since 1994 national and provincial elections. The common
121 thread in all the phases is that the governing ANC came into power and continued to be in power without a
122 nuanced concept of the kind of democratic state it can realistically build. Its ideas of democracy and democratic
123 state have always been broadly framed and the detail has always been due to effective opposition within the
124 country's parliament. The character of leadership during the various moments of transition (from one phase to
125 the other) and the impact the transitions had on the character and political culture of ANC need more careful
126 study. Each phase that I have indicated in this paper also has its own 'sub-phases; eg. the second phase which is
127 the exile period had formative years stretching from 1960 to 1965 and thereafter the 1967-1969 period of serious
128 internal tensions following the Wankie debacle, the Hani Memorandum and Morogoro conference. In fact the
129 1970s had challenging periods for the ANC and these included the 'Africanist' challenge which re-emerged Volume
130 XXII Issue I Version I 58 () within the ANC and was led by Tennyson Makhiwane. The "group of eight", as it
131 was called in the ANC, was expelled from the ANC and Tennyson Makhiwane returned to the Transkei where
132 it is alleged he was gunned down by MK operatives in Umtata. Again in 1986, an ideological storm swept the
133 leadership corridors of the organization but the storm was shortlived. This time the ANC was confronted by the
134 rise of the Marxist Workers Tendency within the organization. The MWT underlined the lack of clear ideological
135 choices in the ANC. The Tendency was also suppressed, some members expelled from the ANC. When the ANC
136 was unbanned, its only strength deriving from years of exile, was dog loyalty to the party. It also brought back
137 into the country structures of the ANC expanded in exile "on a scale which is unprecedented in the history of any
138 other exiled liberation movement". By the time the ANC and its allies returned home in the early 1990s, they
139 had developed a bureaucratic machinery of huge proportions" (Lissoni 2008) This brought with new challenges
140 -institutional robustness and internal disarticulations. These were exploited by a rising subaltern tendency in
141 the ANC -the tendency of 'comrade criminals' always looking for any loophole in the system to support their
142 financial and business schemes. It has taken time for the ANC to see the importance of strengthening 'integrity
143 management systems' even though this is still fragile.

144 Raymond Suttner (2010) has examined the ANC after it was unbanned in 1990 in his article titled 'Culture(s)
145 of the African National Congress of South Africa: Imprint of Exile Experiences'. He looks into the various
146 ideological, intergenerational and organisational strands that came together to be part of one ANC. As he put
147 it, "these in turn comprised a variety of tendencies and organizational formations" and unsurprisingly there were
148 complexities attached to the post 1994 integration of these various elements since the organizations that now
149 were 'one' had distinct styles of work and historical experiences informing their practice".

150 Post 1994 we see the rise of political leadership conflicts, of a different character and the growing lack of honour
151 and civility is so glaring. The question is why? There is still a lot we have not uncovered about the character
152 of exile and its stamp on the psyche of the ANC as an organization. But there is also still a lot to uncover
153 about primitive accumulation to create the material base of a new political power elite. The character of the
154 period of exile, the exile environment and the impact it has had on the ANC is excellently examined by Colin
155 Bundy (2015) in his article titled 'Cooking the rice outside the pot'. His analysis concurs with that of Tom Lodge
156 ??1986). They both refer to the fact that the exile environment has left an indelible mark on the character of
157 the ANC. As Bundy (2015) puts it, "in exile the ANC leadership was secretive, conspiratorial, and paranoid and
158 decidedly non-democratic" a point which is supported by Xolela Mangcu (2009) in his book, "The democratic
159 moment: South Africa's Prospects under Jacob Zuma'. So the legacy of exile in political leadership culture of the
160 ANC is what you cannot deny. This legacy overpowers the creative role of insile leadership and exile leadership
161 was put ahead of insiles in the 1991 ANC conference inside South Africa. The brief reprieve represented by the
162 choice of Ramaphosa is likely to short-lived as it is literally born undersiege. I believe it was a grave mistake to
163 promote the view that liberation movements were governments in waiting. Once in power what we have seen is
164 that liberation movements do not have a transformed view of power nor do they have a model of 'humanhood'
165 which differs from or surpasses what we have known in our daily experiences of the white dominated world.

166 The perpetuation of leadership conflicts in the ANC is as a result of two things; first, the kind of leadership

7 CONCLUSION

167 culture and values which the organization embraced as it navigated the exile environment. Second, once in power
168 the ANC realised there is a huge white national bourgeoisie capable of buying over members of the emerging
169 political power elite. The ANC leadership has not principled position which is also practically sustainable, on
170 how to respond to the overtures and temptations of both local and international capital. Because they don't
171 have a principled position, they deal with it inconsistently and this generates conflict of positions and conflict of
172 interests.

173 5 III.

174 6 Implications for South Africa's Democracy

175 The implications the ANC conflicts have for South Africa's democracy are deep and dangerous. The country
176 is now a deeply fractured polity characterised by growing spaces of lawlessness. The unhealthy hierarchies of
177 power in the ruling party tend to be replicated in government and society. This has implications for democracy.
178 Democracy needs, as indicate by Anthony Giddens (1994), the creation of public spaces, which he calls 'a public
179 arena', in which controversial issues are at least handled through dialogue rather than through pre-established
180 forms of power. This helps avoid growing the spaces of lawlessness in a country, the challenge South Africa is
181 confronted with. The present form of democracy in South Africa has a challenge of linking the 'shifting character
182 of the South African State' with the creation of 'discursive spaces' which could allow for the 'ordering of relations
183 in political society', through dialogue rather than through embedded power.

184 As a result of internal leadership conflicts, the ruling party (ANC) is failing to provide the kind of 'centre
185 which matters' in a fragile democracy; a centre around which things find integration and therefore 'hold together'
186 the entire nation. Conflicts in the ANC got to prominence from the time of ascendancy of former President
187 Jacob Zuma and the recall of former President Mbeki and has continued to the current period of President Cyril
188 Ramaphosa. The internal political "coups", which saw former President Thabo Mbeki, first and later former
189 President Zuma recalled by the ANC from the position of power (Presidency). With the recall of Mbeki as
190 President, the country was nearly plunged into deep a crisis, as Mbeki was very popular and widely respected by
191 citizens and business people but less by members of his party. Almost the entire cabinet resigned in his support.
192 The recall of former President Zuma was indeed less dramatic and was in fact applauded by many citizens as
193 Zuma was becoming more and more not just an embarrassment to the country but also a liability. For instance, it
194 was hardly a year after Jacob Zuma came to power that 'the Zuma family business empire' made news headlines
195 in 2010 (Mail & Guardian, 19-25 March 2010). The City Press (11March 2010) provided statistics which indicated
196 that "almost half of President Jacob Zuma's Cabinet (42%) own companies. The Auditor-General has found that
197 one in two members of parliament holds directorship in private companies and that between 33% and 50% of all
198 members of provincial legislatures also moonlight". Two years later, Adrian Basson (2012) released a hard-hitting
199 publication titled 'Zuma Exposed'. The book provides a comprehensive list and discussion of instances involving
200 the President's "bad decisions, bad judgment and bad leadership" ??Basson, 2012: ix). The Zuma period was
201 dotted with numerous scandals up to the end; hence his recall heralded the Ramaphosa led 'new dawn' in South
202 Africa.

203 Of course, South Africa's democracy may survive, with or without the ANC. This is because, besides the ANC,
204 there are deeply entrenched powerful international interests in South Africa which could outlive the ANC. The
205 country also has functioning institutions of law and administration. But the impact of ANC influence in many
206 corners of South African society remains a threat to any meaningful change. The influence of ANC networks
207 on the public institutions such as the public service and administration is actually corrupting civil servants,
208 the motivation to excel and operate on strictly ethical grounds. A shallow democracy is most likely the most
209 noticeable impact of political leadership conflicts in the ANC as the conflicts spill over to the 'arena of politics
210 of power'. But a shallow democracy doesn't deal with the most urgent issue of the day -how to correct the
211 injustices perpetrated against the indigenous majority, first, by colonial capitalism and second, by the redrawing
212 of frontiers of power in the form of reconcentration of wealth & power among a few global players.

213 IV.

214 7 Conclusion

215 The future of South Africa's democracy under ANC led government has very limited prospects. The conflict in
216 the ANC continues even to date and it affects the country in a big way given the continued conflation of party
217 and state. At the present moment, internal squabbles within the ANC are affecting the stability of the country's
218 democracy as they affect delivery of services to citizens. The growing theft of state asserts leading to electric
219 power shortages and blackouts continue to haunt the country's democracy. The ruling party is deeply divided
220 and factionalized. There is clearly a pro-Ramaphosa faction now dominant and a receding pro-Jacob Zuma
221 faction. The Ramaphosa faction integrates around the notion of 'the new dawn' which entails clean governance
222 and inclusive economy whereas the Zuma faction coalesces around 'radical economic transformation' and openly
223 defends the maleficence which occurred during the Zuma administration.

224 There is a dominant view in public discourses that the radical economic transformation groups within the
225 ANC, following the arrest of Mr Zuma in 31 June 2021, campaigned and influenced 'release Zuma' riots which
226 developed into an 'insurrection' kind of mass looting of businesses. This was intended to subvert the economy

227 and weaken the state. What appeared like an aborted 'insurrection' on the 2 nd and 3 rd July 2021 when scores
228 of largely unemployed township and slum dwellers invaded malls and businesses in their vicinity, was huge dent
229 on the integrity of democracy and the state.

230 The establishment of a healthy or balanced relationship between the government, the state and ruling party,
231 economy and a united non-racial society is at stake. It requires the deepening of democracy in order to generate
232 meaningful development. The widespread reference to the deficit in our democracy refers to deficiencies in the
233 delivery of material improvements to the majority of citizens. These include, inadequacies in responding to
234 grassroots citizen preferences, the gap that has developed between those who can make their voices heard and
235 those who cannot, except under situations of noticeable mass protests. The improvement of degree of interaction
236 between the government and independent citizens, the improvement of levels of access to decision makers and
237 decision making, by grassroots citizens, especially those outside urban centres, is what could save the country's
238 democracy.

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