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

Kwandiwe Kondlo

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'.**

I. Introduction and Background

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

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

So, it is perhaps correct to argue that the turning point is marked by the ANC's progressive losses in the arena of 'politics of support' (Gamble 1974; Dobell 2000) – this arena is about the degree of popular support by the mass of the electorate. The failure to cultivate reproachment has favoured a situation of perpetuity of internal conflict and organizational semi-paralysis which confronts both revolutionary and moderate forces within the ANC with serious tactical and strategic challenges. The challenges include how to forge unity and organizational coherence to advance the ideals of the organization's national democratic 'revolution'. The disunity which reached immense proportions from the time of the Polokwane conference continues to haunt the ANC. The 'conflict' has far deep and complex permutations as it includes access to power and money as well as underlying contestations about the direction of change in the country – the competition between a pro Anglo-American development path versus the new versus the emerging path forged out of alliances between new and emerging global powers – especially Russia-China – continues to be an issue. The former is supported within the ANC by moderate and 'enlightened' majority led by the current President Cyril Ramaphosa and the latter, is articulated by the radical transformation faction in ANC and is largely associated with the former President Jacob Zuma who was recalled as President just a year before the end of his term. It is during his term that corruption in

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state procurement took centre stage leading to the establishment of a national Commission on State Capture. Former President was required to appear several times as witness and accused person during the Commission enquiry sessions. He appeared a few times and them defied the Commission and summons which were sent to him. The former President was then charged and arrested. His incarceration on charges of contempt of court triggered uprisings in some parts of KwaZulu-Natal province and Gauteng province and these uprisings were hijacked by criminal elements and community activists, not loyal to Zuma, but using the space to loot and fulfil personal financial interests. This nearly plunged the country's democracy and governance into chaos with early estimates showing a repercussion of approximately R50 billion on the national economy.

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

II. Issues Raised in the Existing Literature

Prominent scholars around the globe have made important reflections on the aetiology of conflict in the ANC and most importantly, the fate of South Africa's democracy. I still find the works of the 'older', generation of South African scholars very useful in providing insights to understand what is happening in the ANC today. One is reminded here of the works of Hugh MacMillan; Colin Bundy, Archie Mafeje; Dani Nabudere, Kwesi Prah; Steven Ellis; Raymond Suttner, Tom Lodge etc. It could be useful to refer to some of the issues raised by these scholars in order to focus the points made in this article. One is also fully aware of the fact that the younger generation of scholars, has reviewed and challenged some of the positions made in the works of the earlier generation of scholars. For instance, some more recent and relevant works on internal issues in the ANC have been produced by scholars like Janet Cherry, Xolela Mangcu, William Gumede, Mcebisi Ndletyana, Lungisile Ntsebeza; Hebert Maserumule; Ivor Chipkin etc but this article will mention where appropriate but will not delve into works produced by this generation.

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

The phase which follows, starts from 1960 to 1990 and is about the ANC's transition from a legal civil rights organization to an exile national liberation movement; the third phase, 1990 to date is about the ANC unbanned and its about the ANC as a governing political party, since 1994 national and provincial elections. The common thread in all the phases is that the governing ANC came into power and continued to be in power without a nuanced concept of the kind of democratic state it can realistically build. Its ideas of democracy and democratic state have always been broadly framed and the detail has always been due to effective opposition within the country's parliament. The character of leadership during the various moments of transition (from one phase to the other) and the impact the transitions had on the character and political culture of ANC need more careful study. Each phase that I have indicated in this paper also has its own 'sub-phases; eg. the second phase which is the exile period had formative years stretching from 1960 to 1965 and thereafter the 1967-1969 period of serious internal tensions following the Wankie debacle, the Hani Memorandum and Morogoro conference. In fact the 1970s had challenging periods for the ANC and these included the 'Africanist' challenge which re-emerged

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within the ANC and was led by Tennyson Makhiwane. The "group of eight", as it was called in the ANC, was expelled from the ANC and Tennyson Makhiwane returned to the Transkei where it is alleged he was gunned down by MK operatives in Umtata. Again in 1986, an ideological storm swept the leadership corridors of the organization but the storm was short-lived. This time the ANC was confronted by the rise of the Marxist Workers Tendency within the organization. The MWT underlined the lack of clear ideological choices in the ANC. The Tendency was also suppressed, some members expelled from the ANC. When the ANC was unbanned, its only strength deriving from years of exile, was dog loyalty to the party. It also brought back into the country structures of the ANC expanded in exile "on a scale which is unprecedented in the history of any other exiled liberation movement". By the time the ANC and its allies returned home in the early 1990s, they had developed a bureaucratic machinery of huge proportions" (Lissoni 2008) This brought with new challenges - institutional robustness and internal disarticulations. These were exploited by a rising subaltern tendency in the ANC – the tendency of 'comrade criminals' always looking for any loophole in the system to support their financial and business schemes. It has taken time for the ANC to see the importance of strengthening 'integrity management systems' even though this is still fragile.

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

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

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

III. Implications for South Africa's Democracy

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

As a result of internal leadership conflicts, the ruling party (ANC) is failing to provide the kind of 'centre which maters' in a fragile democracy; a centre around which things find integration and therefore 'hold

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

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

IV. Conclusion

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

There is a dominant view in public discourses that the radical economic transformation groups within the ANC, following the arrest of Mr Zuma in 31 June 2021, campaigned and influenced 'release Zuma' riots which developed into an 'insurrection' kind of mass looting of businesses. This was intended to subortarge the economy and weaken the state. What appeared like an aborted 'insurrection' on the 2nd and 3rd July 2021 when scores of largely unemployed township and slum dwellers invaded malls and businesses in their vicinity, was huge dent on the integrity of democracy and the state.

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

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