
The ANC and the Transformation of South Africa

SAKI MACOZOMA

Member of the National Executive Committee,
African National Congress

“Through this congress the Natives will have the opportunity and the means with which to influence the public opinion of this country and to greatly assist the South African statesmen who are working for peace, prosperity and the development of this land.” These were the words of Dr. Pixley ka Isaka Seme in an article in *Imvo Zabantsundu*¹ (Native Opinion), October 24, 1911. Seme was responding to the request of “several Natives, Leaders, and chiefs, to write a full and concise statement on the subject of the South African Native Congress, so-called.”

From these humble beginnings, the African National Congress grew to become the major political catalyst that it has become, following the creation of the new South Africa. The ANC was established on January 8, 1912 in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State Province, where it will hold its 49th Congress in December, 1994. Its eighty-two year history is rich with examples of the triumphs of the human spirit over the adversities of racism and repression.

Political Perspective of the ANC

The point of departure of the ANC, from the beginning, was that segregation and racism, and later, apartheid, could not be fought and extirpated by a small group of politicians, however clever. An attempt was made from day one to create a national coalition of interests whose

strength and energy would help to create a new society in the place of the one spawned by racism and colonialism. As the philosophy of the ANC became refined and sophisticated, a conception of the “three pillars of the struggle” developed. These three pillars were the oppressed people of South Africa, the international community, and the liberation movement itself.

The People of South Africa

The ANC put the people of South Africa at the center of the struggle to create a society free of racism and exploitation. This perspective became a central part of the ANC’s strategy from the first campaign the newly established Congress undertook against the Land Act in 1913.

Even during the thirty years of exile, prison, and banning, the ANC committed substantial resources to the effort of organizing the South African people to resist apartheid. This perspective was dominant in the ANC even though vanguardist tendencies were quite tempting at different points in its history. Thus, the greatest strength of the ANC lay in its ability to mobilize groups of diverse interests in support of its political perspectives, strategies, and programs.

From the beginning, the ANC had to mediate the interests of the African elite, peasants, progressive African farmers, clergymen, chiefs, etc. The diversity of groups who found a political home in the ANC increased throughout the years, as did the ANC’s skills in balancing all these interests and in creating a political program that could unite them.

When the possibility of a negotiated settlement came into the political geography of South Africa, the ANC sought to secure the role of the South African people in any settlement that could result. The ANC rejected the notion of a political settlement negotiated by leaders over the heads of the people. Such a notion was promoted by adherents of the so called consociational democracy² model, including the Inkatha Freedom Party. The ANC’s view was that the people of South Africa had to be an integral part of any political settlement that could take place in South Africa. This perspective resulted in the ANC’s insistence that a constitution for the new South Africa had to be drafted by a constituent assembly of elected representatives of the people of South Africa.

The Liberation Movement

The liberation movement—as constituted by all politically active organs of South African society and as led by the ANC—formed the second pillar of the South African struggle. This liberation movement had

to be as diverse as the people, but united in its action against apartheid.

Establishing and maintaining such a movement required considerable political skill on the part of successive ANC leaders. This coalition building on the part of the ANC is often reduced to a cultivation of the relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party. It was actually more significant than simply developing that particular relationship since it involved the rallying of the entire political society behind ANC programs. The ANC entered negotiations with the intention of maintaining maximum unity and inclusivity within the liberation movement, while accommodating the interests of the apartheid state-supporting coalition.

An essential character of the liberation movement was that its strategy and tactics had to change in response to whatever political conditions pertained. The liberation movement had a single, perhaps singular, purpose of delivering democracy to the people of South Africa. All other interests and ideological proclivities were subordinated to this objective. This approach enabled the ANC, as the leader of that movement, to negotiate a settlement without sacrificing the unity of the liberation movement.

The liberation movement had a single, perhaps singular, purpose of delivering democracy to the people of South Africa. All other interests and ideological proclivities were subordinated to this objective.

The International Community

The third pillar of the struggle against apartheid was the international community. The mobilization of international opinion, and later action, against South Africa's racial policies, is as old as African political activity in South Africa. In colonial times, African leaders used the good offices and influence of groups such as the Aborigines Protection Society in Great Britain.³ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, black South African leaders became part of an effort to organize the Pan African Association, which held its first meeting in London in 1900. The ANC inherited the tradition of alliance building in the international community and used it to good effect from the beginning. The ANC was discouraged when delegation after delegation sent to various international forums came back empty-handed.⁴ Over the years of exile, the ANC painstakingly built an international grass-roots solidarity movement that helped to put pressure on governments to take firmer action

against apartheid. This solidarity movement had some minimum demands to propose to various governments for the resolution of the apartheid problem. This meant that the ANC had to carefully consider the role of the international community in its search for a political settlement. The ANC believed that no settlement was possible in South Africa without the pressure of the international community on the apartheid regime. Such pressure was concretized in the complete isolation of apartheid South Africa, and later in the imposition of sanctions. These factors were critical in the build-up of pressure that ultimately made apartheid unattractive to white South Africa.

The experience of decolonization in the southern Africa region, particularly in Namibia and Angola, taught the ANC that it was dangerous to allow the international community to dictate the terms of a political settlement. The ANC and the apartheid regime agreed that the international community should not be allowed to impose a settlement on the South African people. The ANC captured this perspective in the Harare Declaration of July, 1989. The mutual fear of an imposed settlement shared by the ANC and the regime resulted in both parties searching for what would be an uniquely South African settlement. That fear may have been a factor in resolving a number of impasses during the arduous negotiations. A significant turn-around concerning the role of the international community occurred with respect to the IFP. For decades the IFP had sung in the same chorus with the South African government in condemnation of what was dubbed the interference of the international community on South African affairs. Once the dismantling of apartheid began to threaten the IFP's apartheid-derived power and benefits, it sought innovation through contradictory solutions such as "international mediation." The IFP strongly insists on such mediation even though the people of South Africa have clearly expressed their views on the transition during the April 27 elections.

Power to the People

The strategic objective of the ANC was the transfer of political power from the white minority to the people of South Africa as a whole. That objective could be obtained through overthrowing the military of the apartheid regime, through an insurrection of the people, or through a negotiated settlement. The ANC embraced, in varying degrees, all of these perspectives. What is critical, however, is that none was elevated to an immutable principle. The real issue was the result of any of these processes. The result which the ANC sought, was to bring maximum democracy to all the people of South Africa.

As early as the late 1940s, it became clear to the leadership of the ANC that it was not sufficient to profess and mobilize opposition to the evils of apartheid. The ANC had to provide an alternative to what it was opposing. The African Claims, published toward the end of World War II, were the first attempt to publish an alternative view of society. This view was consolidated in the Freedom Charter, which was adopted in 1955. The central thesis of the Freedom Charter was that political power must reside in the hands of all South Africans.

In the mid 1980s, the ANC asked itself what was the constitutional importance of its views, as contained in the Freedom Charter. A Constitutional Committee was set up to explore this question and make proposals. The Constitutional Proposals of the ANC were published in 1987 as a document of discussion. They took the political debate on South Africa to a higher plane, since all political actors in South Africa had to react to the ANC proposals, therefore strengthening the forces that favored a political settlement.

The interim constitution of South Africa reflects, in the main, the principles of the ANC's original constitutional proposals. It is, though, more than a constitution in that it reflects all the compromises that were given a constitutional guise in order to make them secure. All of these were made possible by the ingenuity of the ANC negotiators whose objectives were maximum inclusivity coupled with a speedy settlement. In order to achieve this objective, negotiation constructs such as "sufficient consensus"⁵ were developed and utilized.

The critical fact to remember about the current situation is that it is interim, and is intended to be so. All it sought to do was to create rules through which the transition could be politically managed and to identify constitutional principles which would form the basis of a South African democracy. Its weaknesses are thus as acknowledged as they are inevitable. It is the task of the Constitutional Assembly to draw up a permanent constitution for South Africa, building on the fundamental principles adopted during the negotiations.

During the negotiations, the ANC discovered that there is not much value in anchoring its perspectives on terms such as "unitary" or "federal" systems because of the emotional element they introduce. Instead, the ANC sought to identify the essential principle that the constitution ought to address, and to ensure that it was included. For the ANC, this essential principle was the establishment of a government that was close to the people but that also had the capacity to act as a catalyst in addressing the legacy of apartheid. This principle was opposed by elements who wanted the preservation of the status quo in varying degrees and for varying reasons. In order to make their positions more

The ANC remains confident that South Africans can resolve any problems that currently exist. We are convinced that South Africa has a bright future whose attainment will confound all the prophets of doom.

attractive, these elements, including the National Party and the IFP, embraced the nomenclature of federalism, with a vigor that assassinated reason.

The first hurdle to overcome in the negotiations was the concept of "group rights" that was advocated by the National Party Government and its allies. "Group rights" would give minority groups a veto on certain "critical issues," such as education and culture. The view of the ANC, which ultimately prevailed,

was that "group rights" ossified apartheid-created or exarceated problems and made the birth of a new nation impossible. In any case "group rights" would not be needed because the country's Bill of Rights provided all the protections that any societal group might need. Institutions were created in the new constitution to assist citizens in exercising their constitutional rights. These include the Constitutional Court, the Public Defender, and the Human Rights Commission. This approach effectively dealt with the fears of those that argued that the new government could abuse power in a vindictive way. Some elements of the right wing, ranging from the IFP to the Afrikaanse Weerstand Beweging (Afrikaans Resistance Movement), rejected the guarantees provided by the constitution and opted for the effective vesting of power in the provinces. Their intention was to permanently reduce the capacity of the state to transform society. In effect, the call for federalism and the calls for a separate Afrikaner Volkstaat (homeland) fused the IFP and the Afrikaner Volks Front (Africana Folk Front) in action against the newly negotiated settlement. It was the sheer perseverance of President Mandela that finally provided the breakthrough which enabled the IFP and the Volks Front to participate in the April elections.

The ANC is convinced that the political settlement making the elections possible, while not perfect, provides sufficient constitutional and institutional vehicles with which to manage the political and social transition currently underway. Not a single party, as is the case in all genuine negotiations, can claim to have received everything it wanted. Some parties have recognized this fact and accepted the new order, while others have responded with petulance and war cries.

The ANC has, from the start of negotiations, sought to create an inclusive settlement leading to a state and government able to facilitate

the meeting of the basic needs of the majority of people. The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) was created as a program that could be supported by all South Africans because it takes into account the interests of all people. It has been described as an integrated program, based on the people, providing peace and security for all, and building the nation by linking reconstruction and development by deepening democracy. The key programs of the RDP are meeting the basic needs of the people, developing of human resources, building the economy, and democratizing the state and society. In its Election Manifesto, the ANC argued that: "To build the better life for all requires clear goals and a workable plan. Any solution to the crisis of Apartheid needs an approach which rises above narrow interests and harnesses all our countries resources."

The ANC remains confident that South Africans can resolve any problems that currently exist. We are convinced that South Africa has a bright future whose attainment will confound all the prophets of doom. The words and the desires of Pixley ka Isaka Seme and the founding fathers and mothers of the ANC have finally been realized. (WA)

Notes

¹ *Imvo Zabantsundu* was published by John Tengo Jabavu in King Williams Town as the first independent African newspaper in South Africa, November, 1885.

² This concept was popularized by Dutch Political Scientist Arend Lijphart who argued that it is the best for ethnically divided societies.

³ John Tengo Jabavu wrote to the Aborigines Protection Society in 1877 that the "Government of the Cape Colony is playing political Baal to the entreaties of the Natives."

⁴ For instance, the ANC sent a delegation to the Peace Treaty of Versailles after World War I to put the case of the Africans in South Africa.

⁵ Sufficient consensus was defined in a May, 1993 strategy document of the ANC as "an agreement among forces which are capable of taking the whole process forward."