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ANC: National Liberation Movement or Political Party?

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Introduction

In recent months, people from a variety of different groups and positions have assumed that the ANC will convert itself into a political party, or have advocated that it should. This has been expressed by several quarters - the regime, liberal politicians and academics, and the press. Yet at the National Conference of the ANC in July, it was resolved that the 'ANC is a national liberation movement providing leadership to its members and the oppressed and democratic forces of South Africa generally, over a wide range of issues. The ANC is not a political party.' (Resolution on Strategy and Tactics)

In this paper, we look at the reasons behind the conference decision and at the arguments around the form of the ANC - as a political party or liberation movement - and their implications. We argue that the liberation movement form is a more effective strategic weapon at this point in our struggle for two main reasons.

Firstly, for the ANC to succeed in its goal of dismantling apartheid and building a democratic state in its place it needs to retain its broadness and unity throughout the process of transition and beyond it. To do this a central component of the ANC's character must remain an identity with 'the people', to represent their aspirations and to involve them in active struggle for the creation of a new nation.

The second main reason in favour of the national liberation movement form is closely related to this. The ANC's link to the masses is not only vital to its character but it is also essential to its strength both in the current period and under a democratic government where transformation will require the mobilisation of the energies of all South Africans.

These two main arguments will be explored further in the paper. However, it is important to recognise that the debate concerning the form of the ANC is not an either/or question. While those who advocate that the ANC be converted into a political party do so because they envisage a particular type of political party - one

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that 'delivers' its constituency without really being accountable to it - it is not inevitable that a political party cuts itself off from the masses. The second part of this paper deals with the nature of political parties and the contesting of elections and discusses this point in more detail.

Part I: The need for unity, broadness and a mass base

The principal advocate of the argument that the ANC should become a political party is the NP regime. They imply that it is necessary for the ANC - under conditions of negotiations - to abandon mass protest politics and enter the realm of 'normal' politics. They argue that there is no longer a need for mass struggle when leaders can get together at the negotiations table. To engage in 'normal' politics successfully and efficiently, it is argued that the ANC should convert itself into a political party. Through their arguments they imply that the masses of South Africa compete freely on an equal footing with other political actors.

This idea fits neatly into the kind of ANC the government would like to create as a negotiating partner. In the current period leading to a negotiated transition, and during the transition period itself, it is clear that the central objective of the regime is to minimise the influence and power of the ANC and to tone down its negotiating demands.

The regime is attempting to assert its influence over a broad range of social forces through building alliances with groupings among the oppressed and presenting itself as a new non-racial party responsible for the transition to a new South Africa. Their ability to do this depends on the relative strength or weakness of the ANC. As a result, while the NP has presented a new face to the world, it has simultaneously involved itself through the complicity of its security forces and collusion with Inkatha in a campaign of violence and terror against the people. This has been aimed at destabilising communities and undermining the ability of the ANC to organise.

The power of the ANC lies in its mass base and the organised mass base of its allies. Demobilising this mass base from active struggle will severely weaken the ANC and reduce its power. This is what the regime intends when they argue that the ANC must 'heed the rules of politics' (Kobie Coetzee, the Citizen 10 May 1991) and become a political party.

As a national liberation movement, the ANC stands at the head of a whole range of organisations and social groupings that have been struggling against apartheid. Through appealing to the oppressed people as a whole, and by carrying forward their aspirations as expressed in decades of struggle, the ANC is more than a single organisation made up of branches. It stands at the head of a social movement for change. Most significant among these forces are those that represent organised bases of support - the trade union movement, the SACP, the

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civic movement - as well as the youth, students, rural masses, women and religious groupings. In addition to these there are also a range of groupings amongst whom the ANC has influence. Although not an uncontested terrain, the influence of the ANC extends over large section of the unorganised among the oppressed who identify with the ANC and regard it as their organisation.

Under the banner of national liberation, the ANC harnesses a range of class interests and a variety of political tendencies including communists, liberals, social democrats and many others subscribing to the broad goal of national liberation. The ANC and the mass democratic movement brought together in struggle different groups among the oppressed as well as democratic whites. These groupings are united in their common objective to destroy apartheid and replace it with a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist state, where sovereignty will reside in the people as a whole. As a non-racial and democratic social movement for change, the liberation movement represents the new nation in the making.

The broadness and unity of the ANC poses a threat to the objectives of the Nationalist Party. The pressure from the regime for the ANC to become a political party must be seen in this context. It is hoped by the regime that if the ANC changes from an organisation uniting a broad range of forces and representing a broad range of interests, to a political party, it will be more likely to take more specific and defined positions on policy questions. In turn, this would give rise to tension among the component parts and different class interests and political tendencies currently embodied in the ANC. In particular, it is hoped that this will split the tripartite alliance.

The state and other anti-ANC forces - the commercial press, liberal politicians, and the imperialists - have gone to great lengths to discredit the SACP and sow division between the ANC and SACP. A concrete example of this is the Bill presently under discussion in the United States which prohibits government aid to any organisation linked to a communist party. The South African press have paid enormous attention to 'exposing' the number of communists present in the ANC leadership, implying that these individuals have their own agenda and refusing to recognise them as ANC leaders in their own right. In splitting the SACP and the ANC, the regime hopes that the ANC will be more amenable to compromise and a less militant partner to negotiations. It also hopes that as a future participant in government, the ANC will not attempt far reaching economic and social reforms.

Thus pressuring the ANC to convert to a political party is closely related to the future political scenario the regime would like to see in a democratic South Africa.

The regime is aiming towards creating a situation where power is shared - in

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other words, in a majority rule situation, they aim to remain a key political player with substantial political influence. This they hope to achieve both through constitutional mechanisms and political alliances.

Since 2 February 1990, the Nationalist Party have begun genuine attempts to extend their hegemony beyond their traditional support base. They are laying the basis for alliances among conservative sectors of the oppressed, particularly Inkatha and other 'cultural' organisations which have recently converted into political parties, as well as the coloured and Indian communities. Since the unbanning of the ANC, PAC and SACP there has been a proliferation of new political parties, many of them initiated and led by bantustan puppets. There are also indications that the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) intends forming a political party, which could present another potential ally to the Nats, possibly of significant influence.

The constitutional proposals of the Nationalist Party are an explicit attempt to guarantee it a major role in politics even if elections show it to represent a small minority of the population. According to these proposals, the Nationalist Party will enjoy veto powers over government and in sharing power will be President once in every three years.

The state's long term project is to create a society where although governmental power is contested by different contending forces, a change of government does not bring fundamental social change. This can be compared to the situation in many western democracies eg Britain (Conservative and Labour parties) and the United States (Republican and Democrat). Similarly, in South Africa, those wishing to avoid social reconstruction would like to create a situation where two broad blocs - Christian Democrat and Social Democrat - contest power but where it is difficult and highly unlikely that the status quo will be dramatically affected.

Along with this perspective is a characterisation of SA as a 'divided' or 'plural' society. Ethnic divisions are treated as a permanent barrier to unity. To prevent the divisions turning into hostility, it is said that power needs to be 'shared' between leaders of groups and each group should enjoy a veto power over legislation. The masses are 'outside' of this politics which involves deals and leaders delivering their constituencies. Politics is confined to the realm of the state and government and civil society is depoliticised and as a result disempowered.

By civil society we mean the whole arena of social life that is located outside of state institutions. It is the whole network of voluntary associations that people form in the course of their lives. One way of describing civil society is through the social institutions that comprise it - the family, churches, sporting and cultural organisations and groups, trade unions, residents organisations, etc.

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Pressure for the ANC to become a political party is also pressure for the ANC to float free from the institutions of civil society - particularly the trade union and civic movements - isolating itself from its mass base.

While it is an important ingredient of democracy that the institutions and organisations of civil society are autonomous from the state, it is critical that these institutions and organisations are actively involved in the political process in their own right as sector based mass organisations. To build the democratic and active participation of the masses of people, the state needs to take a responsive and inclusive approach to these formations - involving them in the formulation of policy and consulting over its implementation. In a democratic government, the ANC would need to build a dynamic relationship with mass based organisations.

In summing up the first part of this paper, we have argued that it is important both now and in a future democratic South Africa that the ANC maintain its unity and broadness and its link to the masses. This is essential to winning our demands in the transition as well as to reconstruction and ongoing participation in a future South Africa. In concrete terms this means building and extending the organised support of the ANC, building the tripartite alliance and building a broad patriotic front of democratic forces. It means broadening the social base of the ANC and liberation movement as a whole, rather than narrowing it.

The mass based character of the ANC is expressed in the liberation movement form. This does not mean however, that the ANC is not interested in contesting elections or that it may not choose at some point to become a mass-based political party. We need to look at these points in some detail: What will elections involve? Is it possible to be a political party with a dynamic link to the masses?

Part II: Contesting elections

Elections will involve the formulation of policy, nomination of candidates and canvassing support. This includes educating voters around the voting procedure itself and making sure that voters arrive at the polls on election day.

The existing political parties in South Africa are modelled on Western democratic lines, where the party apparatus is geared almost exclusively to contesting elections. The party keeps lists of voters in each constituency and while it does recruit members, more attention is paid to recruiting voters. At the time of elections, voters are sent literature and visited by party workers and volunteers, more as a public relations exercise than a political one where real issues are debated. Public meetings are held in each constituency and the mass media is used to popularise party positions. This process takes place every five years and is generally the only opportunity for voters to hear from or possibly influence their member of parliament. Elected representatives then disappear and are involved

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in the formulation of policy and decision making, without the active participation of the people. It is even accepted practice for MPs to cross the floor and change parties while representing the same constituency.

Does contesting elections, mean that the ANC must operate in a similar way? Certainly in the view of the NP government, this is exactly what they would prefer. But fighting elections does not necessarily entail this style of operation. While this has been the tendency of most political parties to date, it is not an essential feature of political parties. It is possible that political parties can be mass based, democratic and accountable structures that interact dynamically with the organisations of civil society.

The Brazilian Workers Party is one such example. This is a mass party with a dynamic relationship with mass social movements from civics to trade unions. The social movements are fiercely independent although most party members are active in the workplace and/or their neighbourhoods. A precondition of party membership is active participation in party structures either in the workplace or the neighbourhood. These locally based structures are the basis of policy making and discussion which is fed into municipal conventions and then the state convention.

In any event, remaining a liberation movement in name in preference to becoming a political party will also not save the ANC from shortcomings in its democratic practice. In fact, in many instances since its unbanning (although this is gradually being remedied) the ANC has tended to act in the style of a conventional party - where leaders make important decisions behind closed doors without the involvement of members.

It is therefore difficult to draw an abstract line between the nature of a political party, understood in this broad sense, and that of a liberation movement. However, one distinction that we did note at the outset is that a political party - standing apart from its allies - will tend to take a more ideologically defined line than a broad movement. Yet when it comes to political practice, it is the content of the organisation (its practice, approach, style of leadership, structures etc) that decides whether it is democratic and participatory or not.

Thus the manner and style in which the ANC engages in elections should be different to the conventional way described above, since our overall objective is quite different. Very importantly - and this process is already underway within the ANC - policy formulation must involve the active participation of grassroots membership and the people as a whole. The mobilisation of people for elections must extend beyond the elections themselves to mobilising people for the process of national liberation in general. The securing of a democratic constitution and democratic elections is the starting point of this process and opens the way for the social transformation and the continual deepening of democracy entailed in

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national liberation.

If we are to achieve the social and economic goals of national liberation, then the people must remain mobilised to this end. The process of reconstruction will be a long and difficult one and will require a broad unity of forces to participate in this task and strengthen the new democratic state. Active mass involvement will need to be an ongoing feature of social transformation. The basis for this, must be established in the way we organise ourselves now. It depends on the people having an understanding and realistic expectations of what the process involves. To this end the ANC needs to develop and elaborate a programme that goes beyond the implementation of a democratic constitution.

It has been stated a number of times that the strength of our organisation, depends on the broadness of its character. This remains true when we examine the question of elections. While it is essential that the ANC engages the Nationalist Party and other parties on their own terrain - through the mass media etc - the ANC must also harness the strengths of the liberation movement form, when it comes to elections. Contesting elections will mean that the ANC will have to be more efficient as a political organisation but most importantly contesting elections successfully entails that the ANC root itself more firmly among the people in every part of the country.

The liberation movement form does not pose problems for the efficient contesting of elections. To successfully contest elections the ANC must overcome organisational problems, which are not inherent in the liberation movement form. It is in the interests of achieving the goals of national liberation that the base of the ANC is not narrowed. Resolving to remain a liberation movement is one way of doing this, but it does not guarantee it.

What we hope this paper has said about preparing for and contesting elections is that there is a necessity to think creatively about the possibilities open to us. We should not assume that we must adapt our organisational form and style to the norms and conventions that have been established in white parliamentary politics - simply because these are the established way electoral politics in this country has been conducted. In contesting elections we need to look for ways that draw on our strengths - our mass and participatory approach.