

# ANC enters uncharted waters as talk of split becomes louder

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Two realities within the ANC seem to be competing for loyalty. On the one hand is the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) that says everything is under control following the forced resignation of Thabo Mbeki. On the other hand, just under the surface, are orchestrated manoeuvres of destabilisation, struggling to gain coherence to challenge their fall from power. Will the ANC be able to rebuild the unity of the organisation and restore its coherence?

## **Battle for the heart and soul**

The ANC Polokwane conference dramatically shifted power in the ANC. The event was seismic. Besides the fact of the leadership change was also the question of who the old leadership was. Mbeki and his followers were deeply entrenched in state power. They represented a layer of leaders whose length of service in the ANC qualified them to believe they were the ANC's sole and legitimate torchbearers. Their defeat at Polokwane exposed them and Mbeki's recall last month left them naked.

The prospect of the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) contesting Judge Nicholson's judgement propelled the NWC/NEC to act. Yet it was Mbeki's refusal to play ball and recognise the change in power in the ANC that was the basis for his recall. Call it arrogance, a divine sense of the right to rule, or sheer and utter contempt for his opponents - Mbeki carried out a war of attrition after Polokwane

The drama playing itself out from mid-September has its roots in the hostility of two ANC factions. The Zuma faction was Mbeki's own creation. His intolerance of difference and a certain paranoia created enemies were none existed, such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Matthews Phosa. Recall his brutal tone when accusing COSATU and SACP leadership of ultra-leftism in 2001. Mbeki alienated important mass constituencies when he marginalised the Tripartite Alliance structures. The inconsistent and selective way in which Mbeki dealt with those accused of corruption brought accusations of use of state institutions to settle political scores. All this prepared a disparate range of forces to unite in opposition to Mbeki: founding a leader in Jacob Zuma meant Mbeki's time was marked.

Yet Mbeki was still able to garner more than 40 per cent of support at the Polokwane conference. Fierce battles have been subsequently waged at local, regional and provincial level as the Polokwane battle shifted from the centre. Almost every battle has been won by the Zuma leadership, but in each

case a more divided ANC has emerged. It is difficult to see how these divisions will be healed.

Maintaining the loyalty of the defeated usually involves giving up some leadership positions. However, what seems to be unfolding is a struggle to the end in which the minority must either recognise their time is up, or retreat initially into parallel structures, thereafter to be driven out into a marginal competing organisation battling in the political wilderness.

### **Struggles for leadership**

While at a national level the struggle for leadership bears some relation to policy and style of leadership, at a local level it is almost exclusively about resources. Leadership of local branches, districts and regions are the means to municipal councillor or regional position, a better paid job, a government deployment, or a share in a broad-based black empowerment deal. This makes leadership struggles so prevalent and fiercely contested. This was acknowledged recently by ANC general secretary Gwede Mantashe: "The conflict that we see at all levels of our movement is driven by the desire to control the resources and dispense patronage."

Power over the central machinery of the organisation is crucial for the successful outcome of factional fights as membership figures, quorums, registers, AGMs can all be manipulated.

An acrimonious struggle led to the recall of former premier Ebrahim Rasool and paved the way for former provincial secretary, Mcebisi Skwatsha, to become provincial chairperson at the Western Cape provincial conference. Yet 42 per cent of branches boycotted the conference, citing gross irregularities that led the Electoral Commission to question the legitimacy of the Conference. Divisions have led to violent confrontation between members of opposing groups in the Northern Cape, North West, Free State and in the ANC Youth League

It is the *deep hostility* between the factions that contested Polokwane, the competing sense of sole ANC authenticity and the local divisions that run deep in the organisation, which give credence to talk of a split in the ANC. The ANC has not faced such potential threats since the debates on African nationalism and the role of communists in the 1940s

A shot across the bows towards a split was taken by former defence minister Mosieoa Lekota, when he released an open letter addressed to general secretary Gwede Mantashe, voicing concerns over the direction of the ANC under its new leadership. Speaking on behalf of the NEC, Jeff Radebe interpreted the letter as notice of a pending resignation, thereby upping the stakes.

One can expect many provocations and counter provocations as one faction tries to force the other into precipitous action. The opposition to the Zuma camp is far from united and cohesive. A difficult process of finding each other and second-guessing strategy and tactics is playing itself out amongst the 'opposition'. They cannot organise themselves with the legitimacy of pre-conference lobbying, as did Zuma and his supporters before Polokwane. All attempts at organising themselves are factional and give the NEC the right to bring disciplinary action against them. For the moment any 'opposition' is forced to operate underground. There is a tremendous price to pay.

### **Space for a new party?**

The NEC seems satisfied that a split by Mbeki's lieutenants would have no real impact on the ANC; a splinter unable to achieve more than Bantu Holomisa's UDM. But is this the case? One should not forget the way the Kadima party in Israel was formed when Ariel Sharon left the right wing Likud

party that rejected his strategy towards a Palestinian settlement. By attracting other centrist forces with strong credentials earned through their role in government, Kadima won the national election and Sharon remained Prime Minister.

Under Thabo Mbeki's leadership the ANC was moved to the centre of the political spectrum, closing off the space for opposition parties firmly to the right of the ANC. By retaining the Tripartite Alliance and keeping its left wing partners in check, the ANC did not pay a political price for this shift to the political centre.

However, by mobilising popular forces marginalised by Mbeki, the ANC is increasingly regarded as more populist and potentially left wing. Although the election of Motlanthe as the country's president and the attempt to ensure policy continuity with the Mbeki era signals business as usual, the space for a centrist party potentially exists. Should heavyweights from the Mbeki leadership attach their names to such an initiative, mass support, beyond anything the opposition parties have been able to secure, is possible, guaranteeing a healthy showing in the polls. Zuma has clear support in the structures of the ANC, but less so within the general public. Such a party would swallow up a number of smaller opposition parties in the process; they would not be short of campaign funds flowing from big business given its apprehension of a Zuma-led ANC.

But do leaders like Mbeki, Lekota, Shilowa, George, Erwin and others have the stomach for a bruising battle that a split in the ANC would entail? This is far from clear. Years in cabinet and lucrative business opportunities have softened them to the good life and separated them from grassroots structures. However, many local, regional and provincial leaders that have been involved in bitter factional battles with the Zuma camp could serve as the foot soldiers for a new party that claims the traditions of the ANC, especially if this opens up opportunities for material gain.

Deep divisions and factional conflicts create the conditions for a split. Yet a number of factors still have to be played out before this becomes a reality. Not least will be the political steel of those that were defeated at Polokwane

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