

South Africa: The Rise and Fall of the ANC Youth League

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In conversation with South African author and activist Rebone Tau

Few national liberation movements loom as large in the politics and history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as the African National Congress (ANC). Founded in 1912 as an association to advocate for the rights of African and mixed-race subjects of the Union of South Africa, a so-called “Dominion” of the British Empire, beginning with the implementation of Apartheid in 1948, the ANC grew to become the premier force opposing racial oppression and white supremacy in the country.

The ANC was banned in 1960, the same year that South Africa’s white-only electorate voted to leave the British Empire, driving the organization to found an armed wing and sending most of its leaders into exile. For decades, it represented the vanguard of South Africa’s movement for freedom and equality and inspired powerful solidarity campaigns around the world, until Apartheid finally ended in the early 1990s. The ANC won the first free elections in 1994 and has ruled the Republic of South Africa ever since.

Less well-known outside of South Africa, but pivotal to the ANC’s success and historical legacy, has been its Youth League. Founded in 1944 by young liberation fighters, for decades it served as the main reservoir of activist cadre and an important impetus within the organization, raising up many of its paramount leaders such as the first president of post-Apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela. In recent years the organization has been the subject of numerous controversies and often found itself in open conflict with the ANC leadership. Rebone Tau, a programme manager for political affairs at the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung’s Johannesburg Office and the author of *The Rise and Fall of the ANC Youth League*, spoke with Loren Balhorn about her new book, the legacy of the Youth League, and what role she thinks it has to play in South Africa’s future.

LB: What is your relationship to the ANC Youth League and why did you decide to write a book about it?

RT: Well, the Youth League is open to people ages 14 to 35 and I turned 35 this year, so I’ve graduated. But before that, I was the Youth League branch secretary in my community, then I was a regional executive member. Then Julius Malema, who was the president of the Youth League, was expelled in 2012 and Sindiso Magaqa, to whom my book is dedicated to, was suspended as secretary general.

The ANC conference convened that year ultimately led to the Youth League being disbanded at a national level in early 2013. I was fortunate enough to be appointed to the National Task Team set up by the ANC leadership in April 2013. But we were dissolved on the eve of our conference, which they later termed as a “consultative conference”—no longer an elective conference. Then I went back to being a regular member.

The National Executive Committee appointed another task team including people like former Youth

League president Malusi Gigaba, who was once the Minister of Finance, and Fikile Mbalula, how is now the Minister of Transport and a former president of the ANCYL. This team took the Youth League to conference in September 2015, but only two weeks later the #FeesMustFall movement broke out.

That movement plays a big role in your book and seems to figure in your thinking a lot. Can you say a little bit more about it?

#FeesMustFall consisted of students at higher-learning institutions from all different currents of youth politics. In South Africa we have what's called the South African Students Congress (SASCO), which is aligned to the ANC but is more diverse. We also have the Youth League on certain campuses, along with the Student Commands of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by former ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema, as well as the youth from the Pan-Africanist Congress.

The movement included many middle-class students, who might not be poor but still aren't eligible for a bursary from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). They argued that "Fees Must Fall" because, if you look at the South African economy, it's still controlled by a small minority. The majority are still not liberated. Studying becomes a burden: many can't afford fees, as they can't afford to pay back the bursary. Also, because the youth unemployment rate is so high, many former students can't find a job after university, making the burden even greater.

I took part in the campaign as a member of the Youth League. We marched in solidarity with the students, but there was no leadership coming from the Youth League. Our president claimed he was ill in hospital. That worried me. The Youth League had always been for free education—why wasn't it saying anything? Had it died? This is what sparked my idea for the book. I wanted to look back on different generations of the Youth League in order to better understand what's happening to it now.

In the beginning of the book you write that you "know no life outside the ANC". That's a pretty powerful statement. Could you say a bit more about the role of the ANC and Youth League in South African life?

I come from a very ANC-dominated family—I had family in exile, my mother used to do underground work for the organization—so it's something I grew up with. I identify with the organization based on its policies, that it's pro-working class and pro-poor. The ANC has been a beacon of hope for the people of South Africa since its formation. It's the oldest liberation movement, formed in 1912, and although it faces challenges, it was an organization that fought the system and was loved by the majority of South Africans for decades, which is why it received overwhelming support in the first democratic elections and still does today, although its support is declining now.

You group the history of the ANC Youth League around different generations, beginning with the "1944 Generation", which seems to be a strong point of reference. Could you say a little bit of who those people were and what drove them politically?

Most of the 1944 Generation were products of the University of Fort Hare in the Eastern Cape, like late president Nelson Mandela, who served 27 years in prison, and Walter Sisulu who spent some time in Robben Island with Mandela, or Oliver Tambo. He was part of the group that formed the ANC Youth League and became secretary-general of the ANC at a very young age. This generation said that the ANC needed to change its approach because it was seen as an elitist organization, not a mass organization of the people. That's why the Youth League passed a Programme of Action in 1949, and in 1952 launched the first defiance campaign.

This generation changed the politics of the ANC. Before the 1944 generation, the ANC was more about writing letters to the queen in London, writing letters to the Apartheid government, starting petitions, etc. The youth said "This isn't working any longer", and started to look towards mass campaigns and armed struggle.

What kind of people were leading the ANC? Were they from the black elite? Did such an elite even exist under Apartheid?

Most of the founding members of the Youth League were university graduates, and in general the people who led the ANC were educated, sometimes even chiefs. Soon they were sent into exile in London, where they started to see that only allowing black Africans as members of the ANC was becoming a problem, because there were other racial groups from South Africa whom they wanted to support the struggle, but also to help to mobilize the international community.

Former President Thabo Mbeki and Essop Pahad met with then-president Oliver Tambo to tell him that the ANC needed to start opening up its membership to other racial groups. He agreed, but the decision wasn't formalized until 1969 at a historic ANC Consultative Conference in Tanzania. This episode shows the impact that the Youth League has had on the organization historically.

You mention that there were Youth League chapters founded both in East Germany as well as the Soviet Union.

Yes, there were ANC members who went to study in Germany. There is a man in the book named Voyu Skweyiya who grew up in Germany and was in the Masupatsela, the ANC children's organization. In general, the activists who studied abroad played an important role because they were educated and had been exposed to the world.

Could you maybe say a little bit more about the relationship between the ANC and the Communist Party?

Actually, in the book I talk about how the Youth League was initially anti-Communist because they thought the party would try to change the ANC's ideology into an internationalist organization. Still, the ANC and the South African Communist Party have had relations for a long time. There were figures like Moses Kotane, who was the General Secretary of the Communist Party and later also the Treasurer General of the ANC while in exile. Another example is Chris Hani, who was assassinated in 1993—he was one of the main leaders of the ANC, a military commander, and later was also General Secretary of the Communist Party. There have been disagreements, especially since Apartheid ended, but they remain in alliance.

Many ANC members also went to study in the Soviet Union. In that sense, the relationship has always been there. But the ANC never had a solid relationship with the Communist Party of China.

I ask because in the book you speak positively about the Cuban and Chinese Communist parties. Is the experience of the Communist movement still a point of reference for people in the ANC today?

I refer to them for their discipline, which I think the Youth League lacks as an organization. I was invited by the Communist Party of China when I was in the leadership of the Youth League, and I really appreciated the discipline I saw in that party. Lessons can be learned there, especially given the accusations of corruption currently facing the ANC.

Let's talk about the ANC since 1994, when it came to power. You write that the dreams of the Youth League's 1944 Generation were realized in 1994. But that also seems to be the

point where the problems really start to emerge.

Post-1994, the ANC started to open up its membership. Now everyone could join the party without being arrested—whereas before the ANC just had supporters, only a few people were recruited into the party during the Apartheid regime. Post-1994 there was still hope: Youth League militants were still very prominent, and Peter Mokaba was still the organization's president.

In the 2000s things changed. Businesspeople became more heavily involved in the organization and you started to see very lavish lifestyles among the leadership. This was around the time that Jacob Zuma, deputy president to Thabo Mbeki, was facing corruption charges around the Arms Deal. It all came to a head at the 2007 ANC conference, followed by the 2008 Youth League congress, where factionalism really started to take over the organization. After election results were announced at the convention, some delegates rejected them, saying that the numbers did not add up. But the conference was adjourned and the ANC leadership said that the outcome had to be accepted.

Biggers problem came when Julius Malema fell out with Jacob Zuma and a lot of comrades were purged. In the book I speak about a conference in Limpopo Province and the way comrades who disagreed with the leadership were dealt with.

At the same time, under Malema the Youth League was still visible on the ground in terms of winning the youth vote for the ANC, but they neglected political education. If there is no political education, members cannot understand our mandate and what is expected of us. We need to behave as comrades and serve the people, not our interests.

Your account of the Youth League's decline is quite focused on personalities and the emergence of specific factions, but what underlying political and economic issues do you think played a role?

In 2010 the ANC was preparing to go to its National General Council, the NGC, which meets every two-and-a-half years after the ANC conference to review policies in terms of what has been implemented in government and what has not. That same year the Youth League had its first and last NGC ever—there hasn't been a Youth League NGC since. That Youth League NGC wanted to push the issues of nationalization at the ANC's NGC. If you look at the 2011 ANCYL congress, many of the resolutions passed were quite similar to the 1949 Programme of Action, which has yet to be implemented. The economy, for example, is still in the hands of the few. We still need to transform South Africa.

It seems like a lot of this is also related to the difficulties of going from a party of opposition to a party in government, which affects all national liberation movements after they take power.

One of the ANC's mistakes post-1994 was that it no longer was a liberation movement, but became a political party. Parties talk about numbers, about budgets, whereas liberation movements seek to liberate people—and that's what we have to do. We still need to liberate the people of South Africa, even if we're in government.

What exactly do you mean by "liberation"?

Economic empowerment—that's the main issue in South Africa right now. Whether it's land or who controls the means of production—people still live under very difficult conditions. That's why #FeesMustFall was so big. Twenty-six years into democracy we now have what we call the "middle class", but it's heavily indebted.

We also still have racial issues to deal with: there are a lot of people who say “I’m educated, I’m qualified, but I’m underpaid. And my colleague who’s white doesn’t have the qualifications that I have but they’re getting paid more.”

Is it fair to say the ANC Youth League has failed to live up to people’s expectations?

The Youth League has become too inward over the years. Too many members just think about getting a job in government or becoming a member of parliament. But in terms of championing the interests of young people and rallying them behind the banner of the ANC, we have failed. We are not championing their interests on a daily basis and taking their struggles seriously. That’s why Julius Malema’s new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, has been so successful in organizing young people.

Most people in my generation say about the ANC that yes, we appreciate that they liberated us, but they don’t speak to us and our challenges today. We don’t have a political party in South Africa that can understand the youth of this country and the various classes within it.

South Africa, like you said, is still a deeply unequal country with high youth unemployment and poverty. There is still the need for a national liberation movement and a youth movement. Do you think that the ANC will be able to continue to play that role?

There’s no political party that can play that role besides the ANC, but the factionalism in the party is so deep that it really compromises the party. The ANC talks about renewal, but it can’t just be a slogan. We have to see changes in comrades’ behaviour and an end to patronage within the party—which is also a result of poverty. One of the ways we can do that is with improved and better political education, so that people understand the ANC’s history and its mission, rather than just seeing the party as a way to get a job. That’s why I wrote the book.

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