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Presidential Address
ANC renewal and rebuilding Debacles
(Self-preservation battles of parasitic classes)

Introduction

How parasitic social classes safeguard their domination of society is a central question that confronts emancipatory struggles of all oppressed and exploited people. Ruling classes seize hold of the state and concentrate political power in their own hands to safeguard their interests. In class societies, the dominant classes retain their social power through a combination of brute force and machinations to defeat revolutionary insurgencies. Needless to say, our protracted struggle to overthrow capitalism in South Africa is both a microcosm and integral part of these worldwide class struggles.

Exposing the machinations of the ruling classes to prolong the subjugation of the oppressed and exploited is a central task of a revolutionary anti-capitalist leadership. This entails the defeat of false ideological currents to misguide and deflect our struggles. In the realm of ideas, usually etched in captivating programmes or slogans, this assault is relentless and varies in forms. An idea that has stirred popular debates inside the ANC as well as among the trade union left and social movements turn on the renewal and rebuilding of the ANC.

Why and how is the ANC renewing and rebuilding itself? How should anti-capitalist movements look at these ANC renewal and rebuilding debates? Placing this phenomenon and questions that arise from it in perspective, should help us combat and uproot other populist ideas crafted to derail the anti-capitalist movement off its course towards democratic Eco-socialism. Before examining the contradictions of the ANC's approach to renew and rebuild itself, let me first summarise assessments of the governing party from so-called outsiders.

Different political analysts claim that the defeats that the ANC suffered in the 2021 local government elections represent yet another harbinger of an approaching end of the ANC era. It must be stressed, however, that not all these analysts and self-styled commentariat argue from the same ideological angle. Some of them do the bidding of ANC opponents inside parliament. Among this group, speculation about the ANC's impending demise rages on as they seek to capitalise on the setbacks of their competitors for seats in parliament (and the lavish perks that come with it). The parliamentary opposition aspire to defeat the ANC for reasons that should not be difficult to understand. In the opinions of these parliamentary opponents of the ANC, they can better serve the political interests of the capitalists that dominate our society. Needless to say, this assertion is far more insidious because it is part and parcel of ploys to perpetuate our enslavement rather than emancipate us from capitalist tyranny.

Leftist activists and commentators have aired similar viewpoints that anticipate the 'collapse of ANC popularity' and its ouster as the governing party in national government¹. Variants of such leftist forecasts have gained heightened publicity during nationwide electoral cycles and social protests². It is rare to find statements issued in commemoration of *Human Rights Day* (21 March), *Workers' Day* (1 May) and *Women's Day* (9 August) without clinical analyses of ANC crises and terminal decline³. Similarly, leftist assessments of the July 2021 unrest that erupted in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng reiterated this ANC gloom and doom talk.

¹ Disparate and discordant Leftists: In addition to *Amandla!* Magazine and SAFTU, academic commentaries proliferate that include former (disillusioned) tripartite alliance dissidents. A glimpse at the confusion and contradictions in left circles about the ANC self-preservation battles can be gleaned from *Amandla!* magazine, with one commentator proposing:

"But as last week (mid-July 2021) made all too clear, those forces ('RET faction') are in fact a serious threat to the constitutional order, and the Left should spare nothing in opposing them. Acknowledging that what happened was not just a bread riot but also a serious assault on democracy seems important in that regard." (*Amandla!* Issue No.77, August 2021, pxx).

Another author in this *Amandla!* special issue upholds the neoliberal constitution as sacrosanct:

"Support for the Constitution without siding with the CR faction of the ANC. Defending human rights, and the checks and balances for curbing the abuse of public power." (*Amandla!* Issue No.77, August 2021, pxx).]

² After the 2021 local government elections, one social movement cheerleader speculated about pragmatic manoeuvres to outsmart the ruling class in elections: "The ANC in particular will be desperate to reverse its decline and regain control of the national and the provinces currently under its rule. The ruling class will want to avert protracted instability in the different spheres of government. But the dilemma is how to achieve this when the ANC's authority is unravelling". (Noor Nieftagodien, Local government elections 2021. *Amandla!* No79/80, December 2021, pp40-42)

³ An opinion piece which reads like an obituary of national liberation movements in Africa, emphatically states: "Now that the end of the domination of the SA politics by the ANC is in sight, there is some importance in considering the trajectory and fate of national liberation movements elsewhere on the continent." The scathing critique of romanticising national liberation movements is then reiterated: "It is clear that a few decades into liberation, romanticised constructions of liberation wear thin; factional battles, poor governance and corruption set in and this often leads to the end of liberation movements in power". (Imraan Buccus, What comes after national liberation movements?, *New Frame*, 31 December 2021)

What comes after Ramaphoria?

Cyril Ramaphosa and his slate narrowly won the leadership of the ANC in December 2017, based on a self-promotion campaign that centered on a break from the Zuma years and a new beginning for the party and South Africa⁴. Let us recall that Zuma's ascendancy to the presidency was accompanied by similar hype, with the backing of Julius Malema and tripartite alliance leaders. Ousting Thabo Mbeki as head of party and state, the Zuma-ists promised back then, would herald a radical transformation of the party, state and society. Both the meaning of radical transformation and how to bring it about remained hollow. More importantly, with the class interests of radical transformation gutted, Zuma and his backers tried to exploit this catchphrase to disguise wealth accumulation among black elites. Zuma's desperation to speed up his drive to enrich himself, exposed the skulduggery.

More or less a decade later, between mid-2017 and early 2018, a replay of ANC leadership succession squabbles unfolded, with Ramaphosa standing against Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. Spin doctors who masterminded the CR-17 publicity stunt, elevated Cyril Ramaphosa's personality traits, leadership style, integrity and his ostensible respect for 'the rule of law'. Zuma's desperate attempts to delay his removal as state president merely postponed the inevitable and heaped more embarrassment on his party. With hindsight, it was easier for Ramaphosa to overcome Zuma's 'stalling antics' than to rid himself of predicaments that stubbornly continue to haunt him and the ANC.

Among his multiplying predicaments, it is worth drawing attention to the party's readiness to accept a female leader, Ramaphosa not speaking out against corruption earlier and his 'Marikana albatross'. First, with Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma's nomination, hopes of a woman president for the party and country intensified. With her narrow defeat, these hopes were crushed whilst at the same time calling into question if the ANC is genuinely committed to gender equality. Second, when Ramaphosa served as Zuma's deputy president, his tolerance for the latter's corruption spree was inferred from his intriguing silence. Questions about his silence and inaction against rampant corruption remain despite the rambling excuses fabricated for the Zondo Commission. Third, Ramaphosa has failed to extricate himself from the perpetrators of the 2012 Marikana massacre, contrary to the official verdict. Indirectly, his alleged instigation of the massacre resurfaced at a 2022 May Day rally at the Royal Bafokeng Stadium⁵. Ramaphosa could not deliver his speech because angry mineworkers stormed the stage, forcing the presidential security entourage to immediately whisk him away from the rally.

Finding a leader with the charisma and credibility for the renewal and rebuilding of the ANC continues to plague the organisation. Today, Ramaphosa appears as the public face of this self-preservation battle of the ANC but nobody knows who it will be tomorrow. It invokes the idea of a rebirth that resonates with Thabo Mbeki's infatuation with an African Renaissance. In fact, Mbeki and ideologues from his presidency have been resuscitated, with Mbeki rebranded as an elder statesman; he is no longer *persona non grata* of the Zuma years.

Why and how of ANC renewal – intrinsic contradictions?

According to the latest January 8th statement, issued to celebrate the 110th anniversary of the ANC, the party has declared 2022 as its year of '*unity and renewal*'. The statement is not only framed around this theme, but renewal is central in the 3rd of its 5 priorities for 2022. This priority, it states, is to '*accelerate the fundamental renewal and rebuilding of the ANC*'. A summary of this priority stretches over 3 pages (pp16-18), covering aspects such as why the party needs to rebuild and renew itself coupled with technicalities about setting up a Renewal Commission.

The January 8th statement refers to the 54th national congress resolutions on organisational renewal adopted in December 2017. Reading the relevant resolutions adopted at that congress, reveals more about what ANC leaders mean when they talk about rebuilding and renewing the party.

Almost 20 years ago (at the 2000 National General Council meeting in PE/Qebhera), renewal emerged as a worrying headache for the ANC. At subsequent congresses and gatherings, this has evidently mutated into a cancer that would confront the party with larger and intractable difficulties. Leaders could no longer turn a blind eye to what increasingly looked like a threat to the existence of the party or its ability to 'lead society'.

The December 2017 resolution on organisational renewal betrays more than a longstanding awareness of the troubles that confront the ANC. In fact, it downplays these troubles as either affecting a small group that must yet internalise the values and traditions of the ANC or as the twisted perceptions of detractors outside its ranks. What the authors of these documents reinforce is that improving the image of the ANC is urgent to restore its social standing and dispel all the criticisms and misperceptions of the party. It is all about cosmetic tinkering! This is how a key observational clause defines the problem:

⁴ APDUSA published a series of articles that place Ramaphosa's track record and political ascendancy in historical perspective. One article, entitled '*Ramaphoria - A Bourgeois Deception*' (July 2018), is a must read for anyone interested in understanding of this revolving door politician beyond the superficial portrayals in the bourgeois media. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/world/africa/ramaphosa-anc-south-africa.html>

⁵ "The striking workers have become even angrier in recent days over reports that Sibanye-Stillwater's CEO, Neal Froneman, earned more than 300 million rand (\$19 million) in 2021 in salary payments and company share schemes." "The tumultuous scene Sunday indicates the challenges that Ramaphosa faces later this year in his effort to be reelected head of the ANC as the unions are a key constituency of the party." *Washington Post*, 2 May 2022

“Many organisations and thought leaders have become critics of the ANC and its leadership and we are losing much of *our influence and appeal among students, young intellectuals and the black middle class.*” (ANC 54th Congress Resolutions. Organisational Review, Section 1, px. *emphasis added*)

The arrogance and denialism in this excerpt cuts across the December 2017 resolution. More importantly, this observation exposes the fundamentals of ANC ideology. Except for repeating its condescending notion of ‘*servicing our people*’, statements concerned with its renewal do not discuss where the labouring majority fits into the party’s political orientation. This bold orientation toward “*students, young intellectuals and the black middle class*” should leave no doubts about which social classes the party bases itself upon. Without a doubt, the ANC is profoundly devoted to building a social base among the petit bourgeois.

Endemic corruption is but one factor that is eroding the ANC’s ability to attract voters in elections for seats in local and national government. Factionalism is rife inside the ANC, more frequently exploding in violent feuds in which warring factions use assassination as a common method to settle disputes. Disarray and infighting engulf every province, with scandals around ghost membership and ghost branches dragging on in bourgeois courts. Staff employed at the party’s head office [Luthuli House] went on strike because they did not receive salaries and mandatory benefits for months while elites in charge of the ANC continue to accumulate private wealth.

As ANC tradition dictates, its statements on ‘*rebuilding and renewal*’ are divorced from reality and replete with contradictions. For example, glib references to ‘principled unity in defence of the objectives of our revolution’ are mixed with ‘advancing the implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP)’. Any serious comparison of this rhetoric with how the ANC actually operates in reality, should beg questions about what revolution the ANC is or had been involved in and towards what end? The National Democratic Revolution (NDR) from bygone years was nothing but the old two stage theory of betraying the demands and aspirations of the labouring masses. Socioeconomic misery, state repression and the criminalisation of anti-neoliberal protests stem from the intrinsic logic of the NDR; not some betrayal or diversion from its core tenets. In fact, the aggressive neoliberalism and black elite accumulation safeguarded through the NDP are integral to a brutal onslaught on the working class and landless peasantry. This is the ANC ideology to preserve its rapacious self-enrichment without any camouflage.

Let me conclude my overview of this episode in the ANC’s venture to renew and rebuild itself. Illusions in this ANC renewal project are spreading in the anti-capitalist movement through leftist circles outside the ‘tripartite alliance’. Left promoters of these illusions have stepped up their efforts in rallying the oppressed and exploited behind a faction in this ANC renewal ploy. Such leftist illusions negate the necessity to prosecute anti-capitalist struggle independent of the political machinations of self-serving elites. Moreover, one of our central tasks is to resolutely oppose populist and misguided political influences in our struggle for democratic Eco-socialism.

Thank you.
Peter Jacobs