

# The African National Congress centenary: a long and difficult journey

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The current political pre-eminence of the African National Congress in South Africa was not inevitable. The ANC was often overshadowed by other organizations and there were moments in its history when it nearly collapsed. Sometimes it was ‘more of an onlooker than an active participant in events’.<sup>1</sup> It came into being, as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC),<sup>2</sup> in 1912, at a time of realignment within both the white and the conquered black communities. In the aftermath of their victory over the Boers in the South African War (1899–1902), the British were anxious to set about reconciling their former enemies to British rule. This included allowing former Boer territories to continue denying franchise and other rights to Africans, thus disappointing the hopes raised by British undertakings to the black population during the war years. For Africans, this ‘betrayal’ signified that extension of the Cape franchise, which at that time did not discriminate on racial grounds, to the rest of South Africa was unlikely. Indeed, when the Act of Union of 1910 transferred sovereignty to the white population even the Cape franchise was open to elimination through constitutional change—and in course of time it was indeed abolished.

## The rise of the ANC in context

From the onset of white settlement of Africa in 1652, but with particular intensity in the nineteenth century, land was seized and African chiefdoms crushed one by one as they sought to retain their autonomy. The conquests helped address the demand for African labour both by white farmers and, after the discovery of diamonds and gold in 1867 and 1886 respectively, by the mining industry.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Saul Dubow, *The African National Congress* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2000), p. xiv.

<sup>2</sup> It changed its name to the ANC in 1923.

<sup>3</sup> On ANC history, see Peter Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa* (London: C. Hurst, 1970); Edward Roux, *Time longer than rope*, 2nd edn (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964); Mary Benson, *South Africa: the struggle for a birthright* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1985); Peter Limb, *The ANC's early years* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010); Tom Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983); Andre Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu! The beginnings of black protest politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984); Francis Meli, *South Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC* (London: James Currey, 1988); Lionel Foreman, *A trumpet from the housetop: selected writings*, ed. Sadie Forman

At this point in South Africa's history, many Africans were self-sufficient or even farmed profitably, and were not inclined to work for wages. But the Union government moved quickly to meet the demand of the mining industry for labour and to allay the anxiety of white farmers squeezed between capitalist agricultural companies on the one hand and competitive African peasants on the other. It criminalized breach of contract by Africans in a range of sectors. The 1913 Land Act prohibited Africans from owning rural land or pursuing any occupation outside reserved areas (comprising 7.5 per cent of the country), dispossessing many African landowners and outlawing leasing or tenant-farming relationships between black and white. This and other laws were used to destroy a whole class of peasant producers, forcing them into overcrowded reserves or into new and arduous social relationships—as farm workers or mine labourers, and later in the least-skilled and worst-paid types of urban industrial and domestic employment.<sup>4</sup>

Africans had learned that confronting the colonizer as separate chiefdoms had facilitated military defeat. In the new conditions, it was argued, they should unite and bury the differences and enmities that had long existed between South Africa's ethnic communities. Numerous political organizations had emerged from the 1880s onwards, and broad national meetings expressed opposition to the draft Act of Union and called for the establishment of a permanent national organization.<sup>5</sup> It was against this backdrop that Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a barrister trained at Columbia and Oxford universities, pressed for the formation of the SANNC, condemning inter-ethnic enmities. Such conflict, he proclaimed, 'has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance today.'<sup>6</sup> His exhortations fell on receptive ears. On 8 January 1912 over 60 chiefs, clergymen, lawyers, teachers, clerks, interpreters, small landholders, businesspeople, journalists, estate agents, artisans, small building contractors, labour agents and workers assembled in Bloemfontein to establish the SANNC.

The structure of the new organization was complex. The alliance of chiefs with commoners would be filled with ambiguities, for some chiefs were incorporated into segregationist apparatuses and others were in varying degrees allied with resistance to the regime. This relationship continued to be troubled over the entire century of the ANC's existence, and current legislative attempts to elevate the status of chiefs are arousing controversy. The leadership, comprising the new professional stratum, has been described as an elite; but this was in no sense a 'power elite'. Lacking political power, the new organization included an intelligentsia without access to academies or publishing houses and an African peasantry without land.<sup>7</sup> Workers were not represented in organized form. Unlike the western experience, African political organizations preceded the establishment of

and Andre Odendaal (London: Zed, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Lodge, *Black politics*, p. 2. For a comprehensive study of the destruction of the peasantry, see Colin Bundy, *The rise and fall of the South African peasantry*, 2nd edn (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu!*, pp. 168–80, 258.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, eds, *From protest to challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882–1964*, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1972), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, p. 13.



Pixley ka Isaka Seme.

Source: University of the Witwatersrand, historical papers.

trade unions.<sup>8</sup> African political activity had previously centred on elections in the Cape Colony, where those who met the property and educational qualifications could vote and stand for office. In the main, however, it entailed acting through white liberals as intermediaries to advance African rights.

### **The ANC as a 'loyalist' body**

The establishment of the SANNNC was a step towards Africans asserting their rights on a national basis, becoming an independent political voice. But self-representation or assertion in a significant way was difficult, where neither Crown nor Union government was sympathetic. In this unpromising situation, the Congress articulated its claims through a discourse of loyalty, as subjects who had never rebelled against the Crown, embracing values associated with (or attributed to) the British and their king. Assimilation of British values found expression in

<sup>8</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, p. xii.

the dress code adopted by African leaders: delegations wore top hats and suits, and carried pocket watches and walking sticks. The early ANC chose to take its vision from the promise of universalism found in early Cape liberalism (albeit manifested with various qualifications that rendered it very imperfect in practice), mission Christianity and the Bible itself. In advancing this outlook they treated these values as being embodied in the king, to whom they owed allegiance, pointing also to various proclamations by Queen Victoria, which asserted equality of treatment of all subjects of the Crown. This discourse and attire have often been described as undignified and submissive. But the stance is open to multiple interpretations. While the early ANC leaders may simply have intended adapting to the conventions of the terrain, wearing the rulers' clothes may also be construed as a claim. John Berger writes:

The suit, as we know it today, developed in Europe as a professional ruling class costume in the last third of the 19th century. Almost anonymous as a uniform, it was the first ruling class costume to idealise purely *sedentary* power. The power of the administrator and conference table. Essentially the suit was made for the gestures of talking and calculating abstractly.<sup>9</sup>

One may also read an ironical or subversive element in the expressed loyalty to the Crown, throwing in doubt the organization's allegiance to the Union government. In 1914, the SANNC sent a delegation to petition King George V on the Native Land Act of 1913, referring to themselves as having 'loyally and cheerfully submitted to your Majesty's sway in the full belief that they would be allowed to possess their land as British subjects, and would be given the full benefits of British rule like all other British subjects'. They invoked an 1843 proclamation of Queen Victoria, 'whose most beautiful influence bound us to the British throne and people', which laid down non-discrimination as the basis for colonization. The petitioners 'humbly pray that Your Majesty may see that that contract is implemented', pointing out that 'they have never accepted the Union Government in place of the Crown, but have only accepted the Union Government as advisers of the Governor-General, through their Ministers, for and on behalf of the Crown'.<sup>10</sup>

Subversive and ironical this may have been; but 'loyalism' also set limits on African political activity. Both the SANNC and the militant women of the Free State who had destroyed their pass documents (controlling movement) in 1913 halted their campaigns when the First World War broke out. Along with the news that the Land Act deputation had failed came the news of Britain declaring war on Germany. Immediately the ANC decided 'to hang up Native grievances', and leaders 'set off for Pretoria to offer Congress's services'.<sup>11</sup> But the government did not want African combatants in 'warfare against whites'. Even so, over 80,000 Africans served as non-combatants.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> John Berger, *About looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 38. See also Raymond Suttner, 'Periodisation, cultural construction and representation of ANC masculinities through dress, gesture and Indian nationalist influence', *Historia* 54: 1, 2009, pp. 51–91.

<sup>10</sup> Karis and Carter, *Protest to challenge*, vol. 1, pp. 126, 127.

<sup>11</sup> Benson, *South Africa*, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup> Benson, *South Africa*, p. 33.



SANNNC delegation to UK, 1914. From left: Walter Rubusana, Thomas Mapikela, John Dube, Saul Msane, Sol Plaatje.

*Source:* University of the Witwatersrand, historical papers.

### **The ANC as an organization**

Congress as a national organization normally met once a year in conference in its early period. Links between branches, provinces and the national leadership were loose, leading to distinct characteristics and practices in different areas. Activities at local level have only started to be uncovered and documented, but already it appears that there was substantial activity in many cases.<sup>13</sup> At national level, the degree of involvement appears to have been greater when conferences were held in Johannesburg (as opposed to the founding conference in Bloemfontein), as in March 1913, when the number of delegates reached 106—almost twice the number at the founding conference. Over half of these were from the Transvaal, including mineworkers and some from distant rural areas in the north.<sup>14</sup> Some of the activity at a subnational level departed from constitutional provisions. For example, during the 1920s non-Africans were admitted as members in the Western Cape despite the constitution stipulating that membership was open to African men only.<sup>15</sup> Women were not formally admitted to ANC membership until 1943, but there appears to have been a substantial disjuncture between the rules and practice, with women taking part in ANC campaigns and being included in branch membership lists. In Vredenburg, in the Northern Cape, seven of 37 members were women.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, p. 156 and *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> See Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism*, pp. 225–6, 249–50.

<sup>16</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, p. 241.

## Mass activities

The politics of petitioning led to the ANC being outflanked by more radical organizations and movements, like Garveyism (the 'back to Africa' movement formed as the United Negro Improvement Association in 1914 by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey), which advocated a radical Africanism, and the mass-based Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU), formed in 1919. While this showed that mass activities were possible, these organizations did not endure, fizzling out after a dramatic phase of activity.<sup>17</sup>

At times, despite its professional leadership, Congress found itself caught up in and even leading broad mass and working-class campaigns, as in the anti-pass campaign mounted by the Transvaal Native Congress, Johannesburg branch, in 1919. In the aftermath of the war, ideas of freedom and rejection of humiliation were part of current discourse among Africans who had served.<sup>18</sup> Already harsh living conditions worsened through inflation and higher rents that pressed hard on the wages of African workers and also on the limited resources of the aspirant middle classes. The pass laws not only made it difficult for workers to bargain adequately, but imposed a heavy burden on all classes of Africans. In 1919 the Transvaal Congress led a campaign of defiance. Protesters collected thousands of passes in sacks and dumped them at post offices,<sup>19</sup> while singing 'Nkosi Sikelele i Afrika' ('God save Africa'), 'Rule Britannia' and 'God save the King'.<sup>20</sup> The Transvaal ANC issued a pamphlet supporting their demands, displaying the Union Jack and declaring: 'We are loyal.'

This apparently incongruous mix of symbols was not unique, a similar display of the Union Jack having occurred in the 1913 women's pass defiance in Bloemfontein.<sup>21</sup> The words of 'Rule Britannia' include the lines:

Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves!  
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves.

...

The nations, not so blest as thee,  
Must, in their turns, to tyrants fall,

—and the protesters were asserting their loyalty as British subjects. To sing 'Rule Britannia' was to claim the rights of British citizenship, the rejection of discrimination, and an assurance that, unlike nations 'not so blest', they would not fall to 'tyrants'. This commitment to notions of universalism, as they interpreted their allegiance to the king and what they drew from Christianity and liberalism, had a lasting effect in setting the ANC on a trajectory that remained opposed to exclusivist and chauvinist forms of Africanism or domination by any particular ethnic group. Even though both African exclusivism and ethnic chauvinism repeatedly

<sup>17</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, pp. 263, 265–6, 325–8, 334–6.

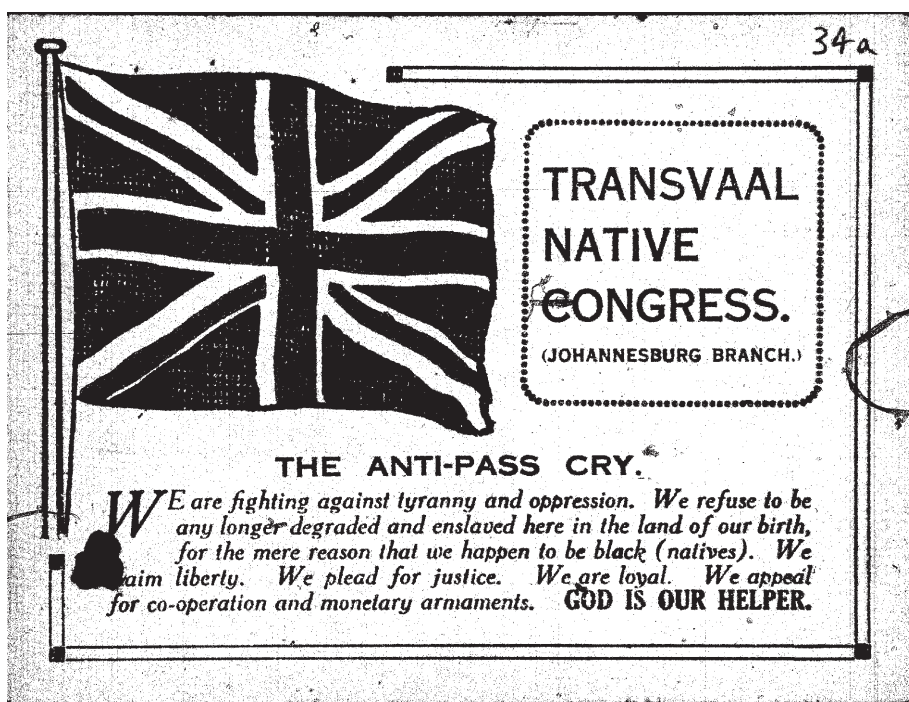
<sup>18</sup> Roux, *Time longer than rope*, pp. 113–14.

<sup>19</sup> See Limb, *ANC's early years*, pp. 174–82; Roux, *Time longer than rope*, pp. 114–21.

<sup>20</sup> Benson, *South Africa*, pp. 38–9.

<sup>21</sup> See Nomboniso Gasa, 'Let them build more gaols', in Nomboniso Gasa, ed., *Women in South African history* (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council Press, 2007), pp. 129–52 at p. 139.





Transvaal Native Congress flyer 1919.

Source: National Archives and Records Service of South Africa.

resurfaced, they were contrary to its overall ideological ethos. In so far as Marxism was to become an influential current within the ANC, it converged with liberal and Christian influences in its espousal of universalism and rejection of racial discrimination. The ANC's universalism is manifested in a range of human rights documents before as well as after the 1940s.<sup>22</sup>

### **Collapse and rebuilding**

By the end of the 1930s petitioning had clearly failed and the organization practically ceased to exist. The presidency of J. T. Gumede (1927–30) saw a turn towards radicalism, with attempts to link up with workers and engage in strikes, pass-burning and other militant activities. His visit to the USSR and links with the communists alarmed some sections of the ANC. Chiefs, as hereditary leaders, raised their own fears, remarking: 'The Tsar was a great man in his country but where is he now?'<sup>23</sup> Gumede was voted out. He was replaced by the organization's founder, Seme, who warned of the dangers of radicalism, condemned strikes and causing 'trouble for the authorities'. The ANC, he said 'must condemn the

<sup>22</sup> See Kader Asmal, David Chidester and Cassius Lubisi, eds, *Legacy of freedom: the ANC's human rights tradition* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Benson, *South Africa*, p. 51.

spirit of sedition in every form'. Such statements discouraged labour radicals from associating with the ANC and the organization, already weak, went into deep decline and became practically moribund.<sup>24</sup>

From the late 1930s and especially in the 1940s efforts were made to rebuild the organization. The election of Dr A. B. Xuma to the presidency in 1942 intensified the process of recovery, with efforts dedicated to ensuring that the organization functioned efficiently.<sup>25</sup> The ANC Youth League (ANCYL), led by Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and others who would become figures of ANC folklore, was formed in 1944. It advanced militant ideas that would transform the ANC and its policies in the 1950s. The ANCYL espoused an Africanism that was exclusivist and hostile to cooperation with other communities and with communists. Xuma pragmatically initiated preliminary cooperation with the Indian Congresses and pursued good relations with ANC members who were communists.

The forging of links between the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA, formed in 1921)<sup>26</sup> and the ANC had been resisted by both sides. Early South African Marxists had been white immigrant workers from Europe. Initially, they did not recognize the full significance of the oppression that black people experienced irrespective of the class to which they belonged. There were also very few Africans who were unionized. White workers were seen as the vanguard of socialist struggle and the ANC leadership was dismissed as 'petit-bourgeois'. By the 1930s, however, the Communist Party accepted the need to address the oppression of black people (in an 'independent Native republic') and secure their liberties, while retaining the long-term objective of socialism.<sup>27</sup> This created a basis for what would later become shared goals and strategies of the two organizations. The links formed in the 1940s did not amount to an alliance. But Xuma and the communists agreed on building organization and this helped create a basis for the campaigns of the 1950s.

## The ANC becomes a mass movement

In the 1950s the ANC became a mass-based organization. The programme of action of the ANCYL was adopted by the organization as a whole and Sisulu was elected to the key position of secretary general in 1949. This took place in the wake of the rise to power of the National Party (NP) in 1948. The NP set about implementing apartheid on a broad scale, tightening pass laws, intensifying forced removals and introducing special educational provisions to 'prepare' Africans to occupy an inferior place in apartheid society.

<sup>24</sup> Limb, *ANC's early years*, pp. 364–5; Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism*, pp. 249, 254.

<sup>25</sup> Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism*, p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> The Party dissolved in 1950 when faced by illegality but reconstituted itself as an underground organization in 1953, changing its name to the South African Communist Party (SACP).

<sup>27</sup> This is a brief summary of a complex period of ANC–Communist interaction, though it is generally regarded as a key moment in the history of both organizations. See further Jack and Ray Simons, *Class and colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1985); Z. Pallo Jordan, 'Socialist transformation and the Freedom Charter', in Bernard Magubane and Ibbo Mandaza (eds), *Whither South Africa?* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), pp. 89–110.



Previous governments had explored the incorporation of sections of the African population in the cities. The NP had little tolerance of an African urban presence and set about removing what rights remained and attacking those of Coloureds and Indians as well. In the case of Africans, the development of the Bantustan policy purported to divert Africans' national political aspirations towards realization within African 'historical homelands', the patchwork of reserved areas. As a buffer against the ANC, the government increasingly relied on government-salaried chiefs and other local authorities appointed from above, together with Bantustan authorities. Uncooperative chiefs were replaced by more compliant individuals, resulting in repeated clashes in rural areas.<sup>28</sup>

Freedom of thought and organization was attacked by the apartheid government: the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act not only declared communism itself illegal but encompassed a range of other doctrines under the widely defined notion of communism. Many ANC leaders were restricted, though they continued operating through clandestine methods.

As the NP introduced an ever-broadening attack on African rights and the rule of law, the ANC launched the defiance campaign of 1952. During this episode, 8,000 people were imprisoned for breaking selected apartheid laws. Thousands were trained as 'freedom volunteers', described in isiXhosa as 'defiers of death': people who were willing to undergo any risk, including the loss of their own lives. The campaign had been influenced by the powerful Indian Congress resistance to limitations on freedom of movement in 1946–8, which saw 2,000 people jailed, and was itself inspired by earlier campaigns of Gandhi.

Defiance captured the popular imagination and ANC paid-up membership rose from around 7,000 to 100,000.<sup>29</sup> Another significant offshoot of this campaign was the emergence of Chief Albert Luthuli, later to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, as ANC leader. Trained as a teacher, he had been an elected chief in the Umvoti mission reserve in 1936.<sup>30</sup> As a result of his defiance, Pretoria demanded that he choose between the chieftaincy and ANC politics.<sup>31</sup> He refused and, on being deposed, issued a statement entitled 'The road to freedom is via the cross',<sup>32</sup> evoking the readiness to sacrifice even unto death and capturing the broader spirit of the volunteers.<sup>33</sup>

Having successfully defied the apartheid state, the organization sought to maintain the initiative and the momentum of struggle by embarking on a fresh campaign proposed by the eminent scholar Professor Z. K. Matthews, who in 1953 called for a Congress of the People to create a Freedom Charter, embracing the aspirations of the people of South Africa.<sup>34</sup> This was a step beyond rejection

<sup>28</sup> Lodge, *Black politics*, pp. 261–94.

<sup>29</sup> Walshe, *The rise of African nationalism*, pp. 402–403.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Luthuli, *Let my people go* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2006), p. 42.

<sup>31</sup> Luthuli, *Let my people go*, ch. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Luthuli, *Let my people go*, pp. 232–6.

<sup>33</sup> See Raymond Suttner, "'The road to freedom is via the cross': 'just means' in Chief Albert Luthuli's life", *South African Historical Journal* 62: 4, 2010, pp. 693–715 at pp. 704–709.

<sup>34</sup> See David Everatt, *The origins of non-racialism: white opposition to apartheid in the 1950s* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009), p. 176.

of the existing regime in apartheid South Africa towards elaborating an alternative vision of society. While this was not the first such articulation of demands, its distinctive feature lay in its popular origins, in that the claims which formed the body of the Charter derived from the people at large.<sup>35</sup> Volunteers gathered demands from people all over the country, written on cigarette boxes or school exercise books or dictated. There is disagreement over the extent and reach of the campaign, but there is little doubt of its mass character.<sup>36</sup>

The popular response to the Charter (adopted at the Congress of the People, held in Kliptown, Johannesburg, in 1955) appears to suggest that it captured the aspirations of black people under apartheid. Indeed, it continued to be a guiding document through the following decades. Its strength lay at once in its being a statement of general freedoms found in most human rights documents and also in its speaking directly to the specific form of rights violation under apartheid.<sup>37</sup>

The Charter, and the popular response to it, 'provoked' the state into charging 156 people with high treason in 1956. The charges, centred on the Charter itself, sought to delegitimize the ANC and its allies by recourse to Cold War discourse, alleging that they sought a dictatorship of the proletariat. But all were ultimately acquitted in 1961.

At an ideological level the 1950s broadened the notion of the national or the nation-to-be, emphasizing that the dominant African nationalism was one that aimed to incorporate all. The Freedom Charter addressed early statements to the effect that South Africa was a white man's country and Africanist claims that it belonged only to Africans by emphasizing that South Africa 'belongs to all who live in it, black and white'.<sup>38</sup> In addition, what became known as the Congress alliance was established in the 1950s, embracing the ANC, the Indian Congresses, the Coloured People's Congress, the (white) Congress of Democrats (many of whom were former communists or members of its reconstituted underground organization) and the South African Congress of Trade Unions. United behind the idea of a South Africa without racism, these other bodies were organized on a different basis, that is, multiracially. It was only much later, starting in 1969 outside the country, that non-Africans would be admitted as ANC members.

The involvement of the ANC's leaders in the treason trial led to neglect of its organizational needs. The swift expansion of the membership after the defiance campaign posed challenges of coordination that were difficult to address. The gains of that period do not appear to have been sustained in terms of membership numbers, branch activity and campaigning.

<sup>35</sup> See Asmal et al., *Legacy of freedom*; and, on the Freedom Charter, Raymond Suttner and Jeremy Cronin, *50 years of the Freedom Charter* (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> See Suttner and Cronin, *50 years*, pp. 63–7.

<sup>37</sup> The text is in Suttner and Cronin, *50 years*, pp. 262–6 and on the ANC website, <http://www.anc.org.za>, accessed 6 June 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Suttner and Cronin, *50 years*, p. 262.

## **Illegality and armed struggle**

In March 1960 police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of Pan Africanist Congress supporters protesting against the pass laws, killing at least 69 people.<sup>39</sup> The ANC declared a day of mourning and leaders publicly burnt their passes. The government experienced a moment of panic as waves of reaction mounted in South Africa and abroad. Gun shops sold out their stocks within days to fearful whites, and embassies were inundated with enquiries about emigration. 'Political uncertainty brought immediate economic repercussions. Massive selling plagued the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, and speculation grew that the crisis would retard or halt the flow of foreign investment.'<sup>40</sup>

The ANC was banned (as was the PAC) but continued underground. It was not well prepared for this eventuality, though it could draw on its previous limited application of the M-Plan (a plan for illegality undertaken in the early 1950s) and the years of underground experience of the small South African Communist Party.<sup>41</sup> The ANC was a mass legal organization and it was well-nigh impossible to successfully transform it into illegal structures overnight. As in much of ANC history, members had difficulty shifting from one mode of organization to another. Habits of legality, such as how to chair a meeting or take minutes, were firmly ingrained in the minds of many members, who were reluctant to abandon these hard-won skills.<sup>42</sup>

After some discussion, around which there remains controversy,<sup>43</sup> the ANC together with the SACP launched Umkhonto we Sizwe (the 'spear of the nation', known as MK) on 16 December 1961, a symbolically important date on which Afrikaner nationalists celebrate victory over Zulu King Dingane in 1838. The early efforts of MK were, of necessity, hastily prepared and they were brought to a swift halt, first with the arrest of national leaders, sentenced in the Rivonia Trial of 1964, and then with the 'mopping up' of smaller units over the following two years.

## **After Rivonia**

Until recently, historians record the period between the Rivonia Trial and the 1976 Soweto uprising as one of almost complete inactivity.<sup>44</sup> Many young men left to join MK, usually through Botswana, making their way to Dar es Salaam, where the ANC was then based. Most expected to return as trained soldiers within six months. That was not to be, and many never returned at all, while others sat

<sup>39</sup> The Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) was an Africanist group established in 1959 as a breakaway from the ANC. See Gail M. Gerhart, *Black power in South Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter, eds, *From protest to challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882–1964*, vol. 3 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1977), pp. 335–6.

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Suttner, *The ANC underground* (Auckland Park, Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008), chs 2, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Suttner, *ANC underground*, ch. 2.

<sup>43</sup> See South African Democratic Education Trust, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2010), ch. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Works cited in Suttner, *ANC underground*, ch. 4.

impatiently in camps. Joint campaigns with the Zimbabwe African People's Union were launched in 1967–8 into what was then Rhodesia. These are known as the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns. Accounts differ as to what was accomplished by the liberation forces, though General Ron-Reid Daly of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts admitted to 'several nasty reverses' at one point that began to assume 'the proportions of a military disaster'.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, MK did not see the campaigns as successes. Many retreated to Botswana, and, like Chris Hani (the MK and later communist leader, assassinated in 1993), spent some time in Botswanan jails. Others were imprisoned in Rhodesia for over a decade. A few made their way to South Africa.

Inside the country, a substantial number of supporters and members remained outside prison. Many of these formed underground units in urban and rural areas, some in very remote locations. Some assisted the departure of men and women who faced arrest or sought military training outside the country. They also inducted people into the history and policies of the ANC.<sup>46</sup> In the meantime, the gap left by the ANC in the public domain was partially filled by liberal organizations and the new vibrant self-assertion of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM).<sup>47</sup> In some cases ANC underground figures engaged with Black Consciousness figures.

A more conservative force, Inkatha, later renamed the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), led by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, was in a complex relationship with the ANC in the 1970s. While the IFP participated in the KwaZulu Bantustan, unlike the Transkei it did not seek 'independence' and the ANC encouraged its opposition to the Bantustan system from 'the inside'. But relations soured and Buthelezi projected Inkatha as the successor to the 'true ANC', which had not supported armed struggle. It may be that at a time when the ANC had a limited visible presence, Inkatha served for many as a substitute. Media surveys in the late 1970s showed Buthelezi enjoying considerable support. Mandela appeared to be forgotten, partly because his image could not be legally displayed.<sup>48</sup>

## The Morogoro crisis and 1976

In the meantime, the ANC in exile was in crisis. After the Wankie and Sipolilo campaigns many cadres were demoralized and angry, accusing the leadership of over-emphasizing diplomatic work and reluctance to secure their return to South Africa to conduct armed struggle. One of those who wrote a critical memorandum was Chris Hani, who was sentenced to death by military commanders, though this was not carried out.<sup>49</sup> This was one of the factors leading to a consultative conference in Morogoro, Tanzania, in 1969. The meeting was a turning point

<sup>45</sup> Thomas G. Karis and Gail M. Gerhart, eds, *From protest to challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882–1990*, vol. 6 (Pretoria: UNISA Press, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Suttner, *ANC underground*, ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> See Gerhart, *Black power*.

<sup>48</sup> Gail M. Gerhart and Clive L. Glaser, eds, *From protest to challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa 1882–1990*, vol. 6 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Hugh Macmillan, 'The "Hani Memorandum", introduced and annotated', *Transformation* 69, 2009, pp. 106–29.

in that, even without the prospect of the revival of popular struggle that began after 1976, its strategy and tactics document defined a course intended to lead to the overthrow of the South African regime. It spoke to members and followers who were on the brink of despair. It analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the two sides to the apartheid conflict, indicating how weaknesses of the 'enemy' could be exploited in order gradually to free the country.<sup>50</sup> Whatever its limitations, it had considerable effect as a guide and inspiration in the two decades that followed. Activity did not immediately pick up dramatically, although there was some infiltration of cadres and distribution of ANC and communist literature in South Africa. Periodic trials indicated activity in both rural and urban areas.

Over this period of illegality, and indeed right up to the 1990s, ties between the SACP and ANC became very close, and the organizations shared an overall analysis of the character of the apartheid state and strategies and tactics to defeat it. Communist Party membership was prestigious and seen as comprising an elite, many of whom became major figures in the ANC. Paradoxically, this does not necessarily indicate that the Party was becoming powerful in its own right. While individual communist leaders, such as Moses Kotane and Joe Slovo, carried considerable weight, the SACP accepted ANC pre-eminence and had to seek permission to conduct some of its activities or to have full-time officials released from ANC duties. In many respects the Party lost its independent existence.<sup>51</sup>

Inspired by ideas of the BCM, the 1976 rising broke out in Soweto and developed from a protest against the imposed use of Afrikaans in one township to spread throughout the country, attacking apartheid as a whole. The conflict was uneven, with students wielding stones against heavy weaponry and suffering many losses.

As repression intensified in the wake of the uprising, thousands left the country. Although many may have intended to join the PAC, the ANC was better equipped to absorb the young people. Many of those who left the country wanted military training but were generally advised to first finish their schooling.<sup>52</sup> It is claimed that those who said they wanted guns were told that the ANC was more concerned with the person behind the gun: that they should understand why they were fighting, that it was not against whites but for a particular type of society.<sup>53</sup> The influx of large numbers of young people brought an air of excitement into the exiled community in Lusaka (Zambia), Mozambique and Angola. Within a year some of the young recruits returned to the country and carried out daring attacks, notably on police stations. Such actions, by people who would in the normal course of events not bear arms, let alone have military training, had considerable symbolic importance. It also punctured the prevailing sense of the invincibility of the apartheid state.

<sup>50</sup> 'Forward to freedom: strategy and tactics of the ANC (1969)', in Ben Turok, ed., *Readings in the ANC tradition* (Auckland Park, Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011) pp. 97–115.

<sup>51</sup> See Suttner, *ANC underground*, pp. 54–8.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Phumla Tshabalala, Johannesburg, 13 July 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Interviews with Phumla Tshabalala and Faith Radebe, Johannesburg, 11 Oct. 2004.

## Popular struggle re-emerges

The Soweto rising also emboldened anti-apartheid forces within the country to engage in public mass activity. This took place through local organizations known as 'civics' and both new and revitalized trade unions and youth and women's organizations. There was also a proliferation of anti-apartheid newspapers, operating on the margins of legality. On the government side, a higher degree of tolerance had emerged from the rethinking within the apartheid regime after P. W. Botha replaced B. J. Vorster as NP leader in 1978. Botha believed it was better to allow space for worker organization through trade unions and political activity, in order to 'normalize' the situation. The idea was not to meet black aspirations in a generalized sense but to provide an outlet that could be contained in scope.

But developments could not be easily contained as popular activities gathered force. In 1983 the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed, an umbrella organization with hundreds of affiliates from a range of sectors, formally representing millions of people. It appealed across class divisions, embracing traders as well as workers, students as well as teachers, nurses, doctors and many other categories of people. Some of these were ANC members or considered themselves to be carrying out the mandate of the ANC. But even where this was the case, they were not directly under ANC command because affiliates operated all over South Africa and had to use their own initiative in deciding what to do, how to act and, if they intended to advance the ANC, how to carry out ANC intentions.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout this period the ANC's Radio Freedom beamed broadcasts, primarily from Lusaka, which appear to have been heard by a fair number of clandestine listeners.<sup>55</sup> The broadcasts provided interpretations of political events and suggested directions for future activities. The growing strength of the Lusaka-based leadership lay partly in its ability, deriving from its increasing contact with actors inside South Africa, to set tasks that were realizable, to understand what was within the capacity of local activists.<sup>56</sup> Thus the late 1970s to late 1980s saw heightened mass struggle within the country, directly challenging government authority, along with strengthening of underground structures, an increase in MK activities—and international isolation of the regime, derived from a growing diplomatic offensive from a wide range of states and anti-apartheid organizations. Beginning in the 1950s with a call for sanctions, the international presence of the ANC within wider anti-apartheid solidarity became a powerful factor, significantly increasing pressure on the regime.

As the level of resistance intensified, South Africa became increasingly 'ungovernable'. The country also witnessed the rise of organs of 'popular power' where local organization displaced that of government. These structures were based on street committees after police and collaborationist councillors had been driven

<sup>54</sup> Michael Neocosmos, 'From people's politics to state politics: aspects of national liberation in South Africa', in Adebayo O. Olukoshi, ed., *The politics of opposition in contemporary Africa* (Uppsala: Nordic Africa Institute, 1998), pp. 195–241; Raymond Suttner, 'The UDF period and its meaning for contemporary South Africa: review article', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30: 3, Sept. 2004, pp. 691–702.

<sup>55</sup> Suttner, *ANC underground*, and interviews cited, pp. 68–9, 75, 78, 117–18.

<sup>56</sup> Gerhart and Glaser, *Protest to challenge*, vol. 6, p. 120, argue, in contrast, that Lusaka's role was 'marginal'.



out of many townships. In one of the most successful ventures, in Port Alfred, a state building was taken over and turned into a crèche. The imposition of a series of states of emergency (from July 1985 to February 1990, with only a short interruption), during which thousands were locked up, only temporarily halted this process. However, the removal of many leadership figures led to a deterioration in the level of discipline of these popular organs: 'kangaroo courts' proliferated, and the difference between activism and gangsterism became blurred.<sup>57</sup>

Even though repression had weakened resistance, it became clear in the late 1980s that apartheid governance was unsustainable. At the same time, the forces of resistance could not inflict a military defeat or secure surrender of the apartheid forces. Such a stalemate was conducive to a negotiated settlement. Unknown to most people on both sides of the conflict, initiatives were in motion to secure such an agreement. On the side of the regime, intelligence services were reconstructed under the Botha regime, and the professional orientation of the intelligence community was altered.<sup>58</sup> The National Intelligence Service believed that the enemy was not in Moscow or anywhere outside the country but lay in the conditions of inequality in South Africa. The imperative was to secure a settlement from a position of strength. Drawing on their observations of the Zimbabwean experience, they reached the conclusion that delay could lead the apartheid regime into a settlement negotiated from a position of weakness.<sup>59</sup>

In this same period of the mid-1980s, the jailed Mandela initiated talks with his captors, while Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma and others met with intelligence officials of the apartheid regime in Europe. These talks created a basis for later negotiations. That this process was carried out in secret, with very few people even in the leadership knowing about it on either side, became a source of some suspicion and acrimony.<sup>60</sup> On the side of the ANC and its allies, these talks were conducted while the organization was calling for insurrection. Indeed, Thabo Mbeki chaired an SACP conference in Havana endorsing insurrection in late 1989.<sup>61</sup> It is clear that negotiations cannot be initiated through public processes and that confidentiality was required, but as people became aware of what had been happening many read these initiatives as cynical deception. That unease was fuelled in 1990 by early unilateral concessions made by ANC negotiators. It may be that all overtures and concessions were subsequently vindicated by the subsequent establishment of democracy. But the process was managed in a way that aroused a sense of bitterness. At that time many people (mistakenly) believed that MK could defeat the South African Defence Force. That they were denied this opportunity and not consulted may be one of the reasons why a residual militarism remains today.

<sup>57</sup> Suttner, 'The UDF period', p. 697.

<sup>58</sup> James Sanders, *Apartheid's friends: the rise and fall of South Africa's secret service* (London: John Murray, 2006), and discussions held by the author with members of the apartheid intelligence services in Pretoria and Johannesburg during 2003 and 2004.

<sup>59</sup> Discussions with members of the apartheid intelligence services in Pretoria and Johannesburg during 2003 and 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Gerhart and Glaser, *Protest to challenge*, vol. 6, pp. 625–6, minutes of ANC National Working Committee, meeting of 22 Feb. 1988, Lusaka, where members of leadership express disquiet over secret meetings.

<sup>61</sup> See Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: the dream deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), p. 527.

## **Unbanning of the ANC and SACP**

The talks led to the unbanning of all previously illegal organizations on 2 February 1990 and the release of Mandela from 27 years of imprisonment shortly thereafter. The ANC sought to establish structures, often in places where there had not previously been any. It could not simply pick up where it had left off in 1960; now it had to bring into one fold a range of categories of established cadres and new members who knew little about the ANC. These included individuals whose varied experience prior to and/or inside the ANC gave them particular expectations from the organization, as well as many others who had only vague ideas of what ANC membership might mean. Indeed, the ANC had to think long and hard about what type of organization it wanted to be, given the new conditions under which it worked, which also coincided with a changed international conjuncture through the collapse of Communist-led states in Eastern Europe.

This reconstruction occurred within an organization with a tradition of mass involvement, where popular activity had created a power base that stood behind the negotiators. That is why the ANC continued to proclaim that it was a popular movement, people-centred and people-driven. But the reality that has been experienced in a range of similar situations has been that, having played a significant role in securing democratization, the popular forces could not be present in the chambers of government to safeguard their gains, given the system of representative democracy. They became the support base 'outside' where decisions were made.<sup>62</sup> The period of negotiations had seen a widening gap open up between leaders and their mass base. Ordinary ANC members were given periodic reports and were sporadically called upon to break deadlocks through mass action. In other respects, however, they were transformed from direct actors into spectators. The ascendancy of the ANC to the leading and ultimately sole force in government after 1994 saw an increasing gap between the ANC as government and the ANC as organization. The latter was increasingly demobilized, while the former delivered a top-down programme of substantial albeit uneven improvement in the lives of the poor. This demobilization and winding down of mass activity is not unique to South Africa. There is no evidence of strong popular organization coexisting with representative democracy on a sustained basis anywhere. This is worth noting because it was a widespread expectation and continues to be part of ANC discourse.

### **The ANC in government**

The period since 1990 has seen the movement from 'popular nationalism' to 'state nationalism', whereby the primary repository for the realization of popular aspirations is no longer the ANC as organization but the ANC as government. That is not to suggest that the ANC as organization no longer exists; however, its importance now lies primarily in securing the election of successive ANC governments, and electing organizational leaders who often also become leaders of

<sup>62</sup> See Neocosmos, 'From people's politics to state politics'.

government. Though there are said to be a million ANC members, it is not clear what branch activity entails outside election periods. Building the organization after its unbanning in 1990 was a very complex operation, involving the integration of individuals with disparate political experiences and many with no previous political involvement at all. There were many languages and many levels of formal education and political understanding in each branch, some requiring basic discussions, others ready to discuss strategy. Once the ANC started to prepare for the first democratic elections in 1994, such broad educative activities were generally displaced by campaigning. While there is evidence of organizational weakness, it is impossible to generalize because media coverage and existing research tend to focus primarily on the big cities.

When the first ANC-led government took office, the president (and whoever he consulted) had authority to choose his cabinet. These individuals (some of whom were not elected as ANC leaders through ANC structures) were also seen as ANC leaders and often sat on the platform at ANC rallies, indistinguishable from those who were 'actual ANC leaders'.<sup>63</sup> This resulted in a shift from leadership deriving from the organization alone towards leadership being conferred (among other resources dispensed from the top) by the president. In the election of over 80 office-bearers for the national executive of the organization at national conferences, the average ANC delegate does not know many of the candidates. The public exposure that the cabinet receives facilitates its members subsequently also becoming elected ANC leaders.

While ANC conferences take policy decisions, what is ultimately implemented by government is often much more specific and in some cases at variance with conference decisions. Nevertheless, government policies are generally depicted as ANC policies. In one case, the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (GEAR) in 1996 occurred without any consultation with the ANC leadership and was declared by Minister Trevor Manuel to be 'non-negotiable'. This observation is not intended as an evaluation of that policy initiative, but as an indication of the shift in the status of the ANC as organization, a shift that may be seen as the 'normalization' of ANC politics.

When the ANC came to lead government it pledged to provide a 'better life for all', and there have indeed been substantial improvements in the quality of life for very many communities. Electricity, water, health care and other necessities have now been supplied to many who had never had these before. Nevertheless, many remain without such basic resources and in some cases what has been provided is inadequate.<sup>64</sup> Despite the claims by some that the government has succumbed to 'neo-liberal agendas', a considerable part of the national budget has been devoted to welfare. Even so, the shortfall in 'service delivery' is fuelling continued protests that have seen buildings destroyed and police shooting protesters since 2004.

<sup>63</sup> The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme of 1993 held, as Mandela publicly admitted, that the ANC national executive would decide on the cabinet. But Mandela said it would be impractical to implement.

<sup>64</sup> In some cases it is acknowledged that areas have been without clean water for six months; televised footage on ETV showed people in Bushbuckridge drinking polluted water.

Assessing the character of these protest actions is a complex task. Many involve ANC members, motivated either by competition for office or by community frustration with the failure to implement declared policies or the manner of their realization. Whatever the impulses driving individuals, there is undeniably a reservoir of dissatisfaction over promises made by the ANC and ANC government that remain unfulfilled. A high level of unemployment was inherited and has risen to approximately 40 per cent. The official figure is lower because those who have become discouraged from seeking work are not counted. High and increasing unemployment relates partly to the growth path that was inherited and remains fundamentally in place, relying on capital-intensive industry to drive future growth. Labour-absorbing enterprises tend to provide only short-term and insecure jobs. GEAR was intended to attract investment, but what investment resulted has been primarily in capital-intensive industry.

Achievements since 1994 in the extension of democratic institutions have been significant, with elections held at all levels, and largely viewed as free and fair. In 1996 a constitution was adopted that is regarded as one of the most advanced democratic instruments in the world. Since 1994, too, the new government has entered or re-entered a range of forums from which the apartheid regime had been excluded or in which it had played only a limited role. South Africa became able to play a credible role on the international stage and was a powerful actor both on the African continent and in the wider South. At the same time, there were conflicting pulls from North and South. While South Africa purported to implement its domestic policies, in particular the human rights aspirations of its constitution, in its foreign policy this was not always possible owing to disagreement within the region and the continent. It may also be that an approach of engagement often amounted to acquiescence in the human rights violations of Zimbabwe.

### **The ANC in crisis and the emerging systemic crisis**

Some of these gains have been thrown into doubt by a developing crisis within the ANC which has spilt over into government institutions, policing, procurement, the judicial system and other areas of governance. While the transition from Mandela to Mbeki was smooth, Mbeki attracted much criticism and indeed profound enmity related to his centralization of powers and the patronage he dispensed. The political hostility his leadership aroused related primarily to who benefited from the largess (as opposed to any more general objection to patronage *per se*). Patronage was not new to the ANC, and in Mbeki's case the beneficiaries derived primarily but not exclusively from relationships formed in exile and at ANC HQ. Over time some of these beneficiaries found themselves, for no apparent reason or for reasons they found unacceptable, outside the network. Thus a group of former insiders came to have a common grievance with those who had wished to be beneficiaries but never had the opportunity.

At the same time, from the onset of Mbeki's presidency the partners in the 'tripartite alliance', the SACP and the Congress of South African Trade Unions

(COSATU), resented their marginalization in policy deliberations. These organizations combined with other dissatisfied groupings to bring about Mbeki's undoing. When Jacob Zuma, Deputy President of the ANC and in government, was found to be implicated in the conviction for corruption of Shabir Shaik, who had made a series of payments to Zuma, Mbeki dismissed Zuma as state deputy president in 2005. This evoked fury and widespread demonstrations. It was depicted as a conspiracy to prevent Zuma from becoming president when Mbeki's term of office as state president expired. (Mbeki was eligible for further terms as ANC president.) Shortly thereafter Zuma faced rape charges that were depicted as part of a conspiracy. Zuma was acquitted, in a case where the prosecution was weak and in which Zuma's defence and the judge relied on stereotypes of how a rape complainant was 'expected to behave' in such situations.<sup>65</sup>

At the ANC conference of December 2007, Zuma defeated Mbeki and became ANC president. At that point Mbeki's term as state president was to run until 2009. In September 2008, however, the ANC leadership 'recalled' Mbeki and appointed ANC Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe as state president because Zuma could not immediately take office. This was because in the aftermath of the Shaik trial, Zuma faced a series of fraud charges, which formed an obstacle to his becoming state president. Before he stood trial, however, charges were withdrawn on the basis of intercepted telephone conversations in which the investigators discussed the timing of prosecution, apparently with the intention of exercising an adverse effect on Zuma's (ANC and state) presidential aspirations. The acting director of public prosecutions withdrew the case, claiming that the intercepted conversations tainted the entire prosecution. However, the intercepted telephonic evidence had been obtained illegally and leading barristers assigned to prosecute argued that the substance of the charges was unaffected. They held that it was for the court, not the director of prosecutions, to decide whether or not the telephone conversations affected the material evidence against Zuma.

After the charges were dropped Zuma was free to lead the ANC into the elections of 2009, and Motlanthe, who had been president from 2 September 2008, handed over the presidency to Zuma on 9 May 2009. At that point it appeared that Zuma would never face the charges. But at the time of writing (early June 2012) a legal process is in motion to set aside that decision and it is possible that Zuma may still stand trial.

Zuma's rise to power was accompanied by widespread political violence, chants of 'Kill for Zuma!' and actual physical attacks on political opponents. The alliance around Zuma consisted not only of the SACP and COSATU, allegedly to secure a 'left project', but also included rising black capitalists and a range of dubious characters with criminal associations. The current ANC leadership includes a significant component previously convicted of crimes such as fraud. Partly as a result of this constellation of elements, political leadership is at present indecisive,

<sup>65</sup> Raymond Suttner, 'The Jacob Zuma rape trial: power and African National Congress (ANC) masculinities', *Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 17: 3, 2009, pp. 222–36.

because Zuma has to negotiate what he does with a range of individuals with diverse goals and in pursuit of a finite resource of positions and other spoils. Though the air is filled with slogans, it is a period of de-ideologization.

There is ANC instability, and there is systemic instability. At the time of writing the former commissioner of police from the Mbeki period is in prison for corruption, the present commissioner has been found to be dishonest and lacking the qualities required for the position by a judicial commission, the director of public prosecutions has been suspended (following a court finding on his fitness for office), and the head of crime intelligence has been suspended on the basis of allegations of murder and corruption, including employing family members as 'undercover agents'. Yet the ANC government, which has presided over a range of irregularities, acts of violence and threats to constitutionalism, is unlikely to be defeated in elections for the foreseeable future. One could conclude that remedying the current crisis can only be a long-term process, requiring a new coalition of forces with broad democratic aims to be formed. But one cannot exclude internal regeneration. In December 2012 the ANC meets in national conference to elect new office-holders. There is an acronym current in ANC circles and the media: ABZ, which means 'anyone but Zuma'. It refers to the need to replace Zuma. While one may argue that all the present leaders are complicit in the decisions of the current government, there are candidates with gravitas who may, under different conditions, be able to lead or be part of a process of recovery. Beyond such generalizations, it is impossible to forecast.