

# **A Perspective on the Alliance Today**

*By ANC KwaZulu Natal Provincial Secretary, Sihle Zikalala.*

## **Introduction**

The abiding strength of the ANC and its Alliance lies in its culture of robust debate, which helps to bring more clarity and wisdom to those participating in such debates. Affirming this culture, the ANC 52nd National Conference asserted that: *"instead of causing divisions, debating matters helps us to listen and learn from one another"*. The post-Polokwane era has created a space for more interaction and improved coordination of the Alliance, and provided significant space for ideological and political debates. This is a positive development in the alliance as a living organism whose survival depends on its ability to harness class contradictions inherent in our revolutionary alliance. However, the recent events of attacking one another, poses a serious threat to this tried and tested culture of the movement and if not properly addressed, can erode robust debate and we may therefore find ourselves back to the pre-Polokwane era of caricaturing and labeling one another, resulting in us being side- tracked from focusing on substantive issues facing our movement and society in general.

The critical issues facing us today is how we manage the Alliance and harness its effectiveness as an instrumental organ for the attainment of the National Democratic Society, which we defined as the ultimate goal of the National Democratic Revolution. Clearly, navigating the treacherous waters of our journey leading to this ideal society will not be plain sailing. Critically, this requires a political force rooted among the masses of our people and embedded in their day-to-day experiences. The Tripartite Alliance is indeed such a formidable force. However, there are critical questions that time and again confront the Alliance. One such question is whether the ANC still remains the strategic political centre or whether the Alliance has become a strategic political centre of power? Has the centre shifted from its historical position and, if so, what are the political factors that might have brought about such a shift? Politically, what are the prevailing circumstances that even give birth to that idea?

## **What is the Alliance and why does it exist?**

As a revolutionary movement, we have always regarded the Alliance as a 'living organism', composed of three streams of the National Liberation Struggle, namely: the revolutionary democrat, socialist and the trade union movement, all of them committed to the National Democratic Revolution. The alliance is not a museum, and therefore not static, but it is a strategic point of convergence of these forces of change. What bring all these classes and strata together are the content and the character of the National Democratic Revolution.

These three streams of the Alliance have come together and joined forces, first and foremost, because they independently adopted the National Democratic Revolution as a minimum revolutionary program of our struggle. The essence of this was properly captured by former President O.R. Tambo at the SACP's 60th Anniversary, when he said:

*"Ours is not merely a paper alliance, as created at conference tables and formalized through the signing of documents and representing only an agreement of leaders. Our alliance is a living organism that has grown out of struggles. We have built it out of our separate and common experiences. It has been nurtured by our endeavours to counter the total offensive mounted by the National Party in particular against all opposition and against the very concept of democracy. It has been strengthened by resistance to the vicious onslaught against both the ANC and the SACP by the Pretoria regime. It has been fertilized by the blood of the countless heroes; many of them are unnamed and unsung. It has been reinforced by a common determination to destroy the enemy and by our shared belief in the certainty of victory".*

None of the partners of the Alliance doubt the relevance and the strategic nature of the Alliance. That it is strategic is primarily because it was born to attain the common strategic objectives of the revolution. This has been for many decades of struggle and continues to be the essence of what this historic alliance is all about. The ANC Strategy and Tactics, adopted at the 52nd National Conference in Polokwane in 2007, explicitly defines the content of the revolution:

*"The main content of the NDR is the liberation of the Africans in particular and Blacks in general from political and socio-economic bondage. It means uplifting the quality of life of all South Africans, especially the poor, the majority of whom are African and female. At the same time it has the effect of liberating the white community from false ideology of racial superiority and insecurity attached to oppressing others. The hierarchy of disadvantage suffered under apartheid will naturally inform the magnitude of impact the programmes of change and the attention paid particularly to those who occupied the lowest rungs on the apartheid social ladder"*

### **Why is the ANC the leader of the Alliance?**

As stated above the main content of the NDR is the national liberation of the previously oppressed - the African majority and blacks in general, democratic whites and in class terms it includes the unemployed and landless masses, unskilled and semi skilled workers, professionals, small business. Therefore the character of the revolution requires a National Liberation Movement to lead, hence the African National Congress, with the working class as the primary motive force in such movement. The ANC as the leader of the revolution places the poor, who occupied the lowest rungs on the apartheid social ladder, at the centre of its programme of change, and therefore, it is a disciplined force of the left.

Secondly, for this revolution to triumph, it requires the mobilization of all social forces that share the vision of a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa. To be precise, "the primary task of the ANC remains the mobilization of all the classes and strata that objectively stand to benefit from the cause of social change". The mass character of the ANC provides such forces with a platform to participate in pursuit of the national democratic revolution. Therefore the ANC throughout its evolution has become an organ of mass mobilization and the glue that keeps all of our people together. Because of its character and the fact that it derives its orientation from people drawn from all social strata, it has become a trusted leader of social change.

## **Is there a need for a reconfigured Alliance in the post-Polokwane era?**

There have been calls for the reconfiguration of the Alliance from, in particular, the South African Communist Party and Congress of South African Trade Unions. This call continues today with a dedicated focus on the question of the centre, whether the ANC or the Alliance is the Strategic Political Centre.

The 12th National Congress of the South African Communist Party, held in 2007 observed that:

*“The alliance requires major reconfiguration if the NDR is to be advanced, deepened and defended, and if we are to achieve the SACP’s medium term vision objectives of building the working class hegemony in all sites of power, including the state. That this reconfiguration of the alliance must include the following elements: (a) the Alliance must establish itself as a strategic political centre; (b) this political centre must develop a common capacity to drive strategy, broad policy, campaigns, deployment and accountability. At the same time, this reconfiguration of the Alliance must respect the independent role and strategic tasks of each of the Alliance partners”.*

In this regard, the SACP proposes that the Alliance should be reconfigured and become the strategic political centre to drive policy, campaigns, deployment and accountability. This means having an Alliance Deployment Committee and the Alliance mechanisms to develop and implement policy instead of the ANC. To put it more directly, the SACP is deeply concerned that the National Democratic Revolution will not be deepened and defended unless the centrality of its leadership lies with the Alliance, rather than with the ANC. This is notwithstanding the fact that the ANC has led this revolution even during difficult moments of our struggle. In the same vein, the 9th National Congress of COSATU held in 2006 resolved that:

*“The alliance must enter into some form of a pact that would enable the alliance to influence government. This should include agreements of deployments and quotas for representation of different partners at every level, with independent caucuses and power of recall to ensure accountability”.*

Critical questions arising from the scenarios (presented by both COSATU and SACP resolutions) are what happens if there are divergent views on specific policy matters and whose mandate will prevail? Secondly, as some of ANC public representatives are members of the ANC, SACP and SANCO, where will they account and who will have a final word on their deployments and mandate?

Clearly, the situation will lead to a state of perpetual contention of views with no Alliance partner having the mandate to decide. It will also lead to a state of paralysis where critical decisions will not be taken where there are conflicting views. But secondly, if some of our public representatives decide not to support a particular view in Parliament primarily because it is not in line with the view of the Alliance partner with which their political allegiance lie, they might decide even abstain or at worse to vote with the opposition and none will have mandate to discipline them or ensure a common approach.

Since the inception of the Alliance the ANC has been the strategic political centre that co-ordinates and leads the NDR, both during the difficult moments prior the unbanning and after the 1994 democratic breakthrough.

None amongst the Alliance partners questions the ANC leadership of the NDR but the contestation is on the ANC being the political centre of power. Arising from this is the question of whether the ANC can be a leader of the Alliance and the National Democratic Revolution without being a strategic political centre of power. If so, what entails that leadership?

As indicated above, the ANC leadership of the NDR is not inherent but was earned based on the content of the revolution and the ANC's character as the liberation movement. Thus, as long as we agree on the content of the revolution and the ANC being a leader, we must accept that the ANC as a political centre will always provide a strategic leadership.

This does not negate the fact that we are in a strategic Alliance and there should therefore be maximum consultation and the commitment to always ensure consensus on issues of policy and deployment in particular.

In advancing the argument of the shifting of the strategic political centre from the ANC to the alliance, there have been articulations suggesting that affirming the ANC as a strategic political centre, constitutes a reversal of gains of the Polokwane ANC 52nd National Conference. Implied in this perspective is that the ANC 52nd National Conference debated and resolved that the Alliance should now be the strategic political centre of the NDR. This is incorrect and misleading.

Notwithstanding the fact that the SACP and COSATU resolutions on the reconfiguration of the Alliance were taken prior to the ANC 52nd National Conference, none of them were presented at the ANC 52nd National Conference, and therefore none of them were adopted as resolutions of the ANC.

The ANC National Conferences, because of its strategic role and political leadership, has come to be recognized as Conferences of the broad mass democratic movement, which defines the content and programme of the revolution. Thus, all components of the MDM strive to influence and shape the direction of the movement. But once the Conference is over all components of the MDM and Alliance partners in particular are expected to rally behind resolutions taken at conferences, without surrendering their independence.

Consistent with its culture of open debate and extensive consultation, the ANC convenes National Policy Conferences to undertake policy review. Such process always ensured that there is maximum participation of the Alliance partners and all components of the mass democratic movement.

Reflecting on the role of the alliance in pursuit of the National Democratic Revolution, the ANC 52nd National Conference resolved:

*"Conference confirms the relevance of the Alliance, united in action for joint programme of social transformation, using its collective strength to continue to search for better ways to respond to the new challenges. To achieve this, we must continue to enhance coordination amongst alliance partners and to strengthen the organisational capacity of each individual component."*

Conference further confirms that the leadership role of the ANC places on it the primary responsibility *"to unite the tripartite Alliance and all democratic forces"*. Leading up to and during the ANC National Policy Conference there was extensive discussions on the question of the political centre of power, with specific reference to

the question of policy development of policy, deployment of cadres and their accountability. This debate arose within the context of affirming the long-standing organisational position on the centrality of the African National Congress as a leader of both government and society in general. Because the ANC is a living organism, from time to time it will always be seized with the question of strategically positioning itself within this changing domestic and global environment. In response to this organisational imperative, the ANC 52nd National Conference resolved that:

*“Conference affirmed that the ANC remains the key political centre of power, which must exercise leadership over the state and society in pursuit of the objectives of the NDR. This means that the structures and collectives of the movement must make the decisions on the direction our country should take collectively.”*

In the same vein, with regard to policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, the ANC 52nd National Conference resolved:

*“Conference affirms the centrality of ANC structures, especially the branches, in policy formulation process of the movement and the ongoing need for the ANC to give leadership to the society and state”.*

However, this does not mean that the ANC should act unilaterally and without engaging the alliance partners. The ANC should always engage the alliance consciously, with a view to influence and be influenced in order to achieve broader clarity and ensuring participation of the alliance on policy and deployment matters. In doing so, the African National Congress is by no ways delegating its responsibility as a centre of power to the Alliance but this happens as part of a consultation processes.

### **So where does the problem lie and what are solutions?**

The period before the ANC 52nd National Conference, which was characterized by lack of proper engagement within the alliance and tendencies of labeling one another, left a negative mark on the history of our struggle. It created mistrust and therefore a tendency for each partner to want to take charge of decision-making. But, as the revolutionary movement we ought to rise to the occasion and seize the space that has been created by the post-Polokwane era. In this regard, we must all strive to enhance the coordination and better implementation of the programme of the Alliance. We must therefore build on key achievements we have already attained, including:

- Sustaining the recently improved coordination of the alliance, through the establishment of the National Political Council composed of all officials of the Alliance partners, the convening of regular National Summits, and the National Alliance Secretariat that meets consistently and ensures the implementation of the Alliance programme. This coordination should cascade down to provinces, regions and branches;
- Keep improving the participation of the alliance partners in policy implementation, through representation of the alliance in all NEC sub-committees, extending this to provinces and regions;
- Maintaining the status quo with regard to the deployment wherein the alliance partners are represented in the ANC deployment committees; and

- Continue working together on joint programs of social and economic transformation and campaigns agreed upon in alliance summits. Much work still needs to be done in building the same commitment in regions and branches in this regard.

Whilst these are not new interventions, if sustained and cascaded down to lower levels of the alliance structures, they will enhance the coordination and functioning of the Alliance. However, and most importantly, this must never be construed to replace the programs of each alliance partners as adopted through their respective conferences. This should also not be misconstrued as the abrogation of the ANC's historic role to lead. Our strength lies on our ability as different components of the alliance to effectively advance our strategic goals and complement one another.

### **Tendencies that contribute to disunity in the Alliance**

Genuine concerns have emerged relating to the manner in which the Alliance partners sometimes conduct themselves. The emergent of this unfortunate conduct, more often than not, finds expression through disruptive tendencies and polarization of debates. Unless the revolutionary movement acts in unison, these tendencies will distract the revolutionary alliance from its strategic task of advancing the National Democratic Revolution. The latest developments of booing ANC leaders and attacking one another in public reflect a level of intolerance and degeneration of political consciousness within the movement.

In dealing with such tendencies, it is first and foremost important to assert the character of the ANC. As a multi-class mass movement, the ANC has a responsibility to mobilize all people and unite them in pursuance of the NDR. This is succinctly illustrated through the ANC membership, which is not based on class orientation, and therefore socialists, communists and revolutionary democrats can all be members of the ANC, sharing equal rights, duties and obligations as determined in the constitution.

Secondly, our vision of a democratic state with bias towards the poor recognizes the leading role of the working class in the programme of social transformation. The character of the ANC, as disciplined force of the left, arises from this ideological position and relationship with the poorest in society.

Therefore the question of whether there is space for socialism within the ANC or even in the NDR does not arise. Socialists and communists as individual members - not as a group within the ANC - have a right to participate in the shaping and execution of the NDR. Like all other members of the ANC, they are confined by the principles, vision and code of conduct of the African National Congress. In the African National Congress, members are valued on the basis of their allegiance and commitment to the values, vision and program of the movement, not on the basis of their ideological orientation.

More often than not, leading cadres within the South African Communist Party and COSATU have missed no occasion in asserting that the ANC must be protected from being hijacked by business. This is actually a reflection of class contestation within the movement, which is inherent given the character of the ANC. However, it remains critical to assert that mere differences on tactical positions must not inspire hatred or labels such anti-communist, etc. Hatred and labelling feed into disunity and

inspires personalized attacks, which distracts the revolutionary alliance from substantive issues of the day.

Precisely because the alliance partners also share membership, the issue of dual leadership became inevitable. Historically, the movement has accepted that a leader of one component may be elected to any position in the other ally. This tradition has been with the movement for decades and was not abused. It was always understood that leaders are elected on the bases of their individual membership and loyalty to that organisation. When one is elected to lead an organisation, s/he leads that organisation and does not lead it on behalf of another ally.

Speaking again on the occasion of the SACP 60th Anniversary, the ANC President, O.R. Tambo captures this:

*"Within our revolutionary alliance each organisation has a distinct and vital role to play. A correct understanding of these roles, and respect for their boundaries has ensured the survival and consolidation of our cooperation and unity".*

If this understanding still prevails today, the debate about the communist takeover or calls for communists to swell the ANC ranks merely for leadership positions than pursuing the revolution loses significance.

Part of the tendencies that seem to be resurfacing is labeling one another, denouncing the loyalty of other cadres to the revolution, whilst proclaiming others as the only revolutionaries loyal and committed to the movement. Prior to the Polokwane ANC 52nd National Conference we experienced the same tendency of calling one another ultra-left and ultra-right.

Recently, such tendency has resurfaced in the form of pronouncements that claim that there is an "elite" within the movement that is committed to taking over the ANC. This claim has yet to be substantiated. If such pronouncements are unpacked and substantiated, they become nothing but divisive labeling where one seeks to project others as less revolutionary and therefore position herself/himself as the only best cadre to advance the revolution. Such tendency can factionalise the organisation into various groupings and has a potential of derailing the programme of building a national democratic society.

We all share a common responsibility of uniting the ANC, the revolutionary alliance and mass democratic movement. None of us should be found wanting in this critical task. Unity is sacrosanct and each and every one of us should strive to maximize her/his effort in building unity of the movement. The success of our revolution is dependent on our clarity of vision and unity of purpose.