
Dr. Dale T. McKinley

In order to contextualise and more fully understand the chosen period history (1964-1994) of the African National Congress (ANC), a very brief overview of its first 50 years of existence is first required.

The ANC is South Africa’s (and Africa’s) oldest national liberation movement. Formed on 8\textsuperscript{th} January 1912 in Bloemfontein, the ANC represented the first serious attempt to establish a national organisation to address the oppressive political and economic situation of the black population. From the time of its formation until well into the 1940s, the majority of ANC members, and most certainly the leadership, was drawn mainly from the newly emergent black petite bourgeoisie as well as traditional chiefs. The result was an eminently moderate ‘politics of deputation’, which was centred around attempts to persuade both the British and South African governments to provide relief by constitutional means. When this politics manifestly failed to deliver any meaningful practical redress, the ANC fell into a moribund state for nearly a quarter of a century.

It was not until the late 1940s/early 1950s that the ANC experienced a political and organisational revival – the combined result of increased political/industrial activity of a burgeoning working class, the ‘arrival’ of a younger generation of black leaders (under the banner of the ANC Youth League) committed to more direct forms of action and mass mobilisation and the formation of a ‘Congress Alliance’ which was made up of all the main oppressed groups (including organised workers and the SACP). During the 1950s, the ANC-led Alliance adopted the Freedom Charter and embarked on its famous Defiance Campaign against the raft of apartheid legislation implemented by the new Nationalist Party government. The cumulative response of the apartheid state was to send most of the leadership of the ANC and its Alliance partners to prison and to close down all legal political and organisational space for opposition to its rule. The counter-response of the ANC was to launch an armed struggle and
move into exile, decisions which in strategic and practical terms, meant that the previous 'people's front' strategy would be transplanted from a purely non-violent terrain to that of an internationalised guerrillerism. By 1963, Oliver Tambo and a small group of other ANC leaders who had been sent outside the country soon after the ANC's banning, had set up an external headquarters/mission in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. For the next twenty-six years, the ANC and its armed wing – M.K. - would operate as an exiled liberation movement/‘people’s army’ whose sole purpose was the removal of the apartheid state and the implementation of democratic majority rule.


The general political, social, military and economic conditions pertaining in South Africa, the Southern African region and internationally in the mid-1960s, were anything but ripe. The apartheid state had succeeded virtually in wiping out the internal remnants of an organised ANC underground as well as showing brutal efficiency in suppressing allied labour and local community struggles. Newly independent regional nations such as Tanzania and Zambia – besides being geographically located far away from South Africa’s borders and broadly sympathetic to the ANC - were politically weak and economically vulnerable, while all other regional nations remained under the yoke of colonial control. Internationally, there was ‘competition’ for resources and attention from other national liberation movements such as the PAC (whom – as documents show - the ANC leadership spent much time denouncing and lobbying against in various regional and international bodies like the U.N. and O.A.U.) and a global geo-politics dominated by Cold War rivalries in which the early ANC was but one small ‘player’.

Added to the ANC’s own limited material/personnel resources as well as internal ideological and strategic ‘battles’ (as confirmed by a sizeable number of documents for this early period), the cumulative result of such conditions meant that for the first few years in exile, the ANC was unable to launch any kind of serious guerrilla activity and had slipped into a generally moribund
organisational state. As identified internal ANC organisational and financial reports reveal, ANC/MK recruits in the few training camps that existed became disenchanted with the lack of military activity and generally poor conditions and ANC leaders spent a great deal of time simply trying to ensure both their own survival and that of the organisation.

Given the state of things during these early exile years, it is not surprising that the ANC turned most of its attention to seeking assistance from (friendly) foreign governments and international organisations for sustenance. Practically, this meant that most time and energy was spent on diplomatic work, particularly in relation to the U.N. and the O.A.U. - something that the vast majority of documents identified for the mid-late 1960s period, consisting predominately of reports and speeches related to the ANC’s international work, bears out clearly.

Despite the difficulties, these efforts were not in vain. With growing material and financial support provided by the USSR and its Eastern European allies (secured, in the main, through the ‘offices’ of its SACP Alliance partner-in-exile), the ANC was able to establish a modest presence in Tanzania, with the bulk of recruits situated in four camps around the country. The ANC also began to have some success at attracting the support of the Scandinavian countries (particularly Sweden). In addition, most of the SACP leadership and structures – often doubling-up as ANC counterparts - were located in London and their contacts with the British Communist Party and other progressive organisations were to lead to the establishment of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) - which in turn, gradually spawned a global network of similar structures.

The adoption of a new ‘strategy and tactics’ document at the ANC’s first major internal conference-in-exile, held in Morogoro (Tanzania) in 1969, identified the ANC’s main task as being the prosecution of an externalised (guerrilla-style) armed struggle, resulting in a decidedly top-down organisational/leadership restructuring that saw the ANC's top bodies take on a distinctly two-tiered appearance and approach to functions. On the one hand, the top political leadership of the new ANC National NEC (which resembled a who's who of early Youth Leaguers) became the highest decision-making body, with its main day-to-day tasks being centred around internal organisational matters, propaganda and diplomatic initiatives. On the
other, the new 'Revolutionary Council' (with a majority of members who were also leading lights in the SACP), took effective control over the prosecution of the armed guerilla struggle.

Despite the organisational changes and 'new' strategic direction, the ANC did not experience a cessation of internal problems. As numerous documents reveal, over the next several years there continued to be internal bickering over the inclusion of non-Africans and the influence of the SACP within the ANC. This eventually resulted in a public feud and the expulsion of eight prominent ANC members for 'destabilising activities'. Although many of the criticisms had the air of personal grievance, the accusations of undemocratic decision-making and a general 'Stalinist' atmosphere hanging over the exiled-ANC, were more serious. That they were mostly dismissed with contempt by ANC leaders was unfortunate, for the same accusations were to surface later with more serious consequences.

On the armed struggle and internal (underground) fronts things were not much better. There were several partially successful attempts to infiltrate MK cadres through the Botswana border, the explosion of leaflet 'bombs' in some major South African cities and at least one ill-fated plan to land guerrillas by boat on the South African coast. Even though the ANC was able to produce and distribute increasing amounts of internal propaganda and to take some credit for politically influencing the growing radicalism of organised workers in South Africa, the documents identified (e.g. press articles, internal organisational/military reports) give little indication of a growing/sustainable internal-ANC organisational presence or that the apartheid state itself was under serious political/military pressure from the ANC.

On the positive side however, the ANC could point to at least two successes: it had managed to hold itself together which was, under the prevailing circumstances, no small achievement; and it was gradually succeeding in winning increased international support for itself and a growing anti-apartheid campaign. Secondarily, the ANC could also point to a growing socio-economic crisis within the apartheid system, which while not directly the result of any particular action and/or campaign of the ANC itself, certainly provided it with added ammunition in its burgeoning propaganda and diplomatic offensive against the apartheid state and its policies.
In the context of this state of affairs, it was not surprising that the predominately externalised political and military struggles of the ANC received a huge fillip from renewed and intensified struggles within the borders of South Africa itself. From the mid-1970s onwards, a combination of labour, student and community (e.g., youth, women’s and civic associations) struggles spurred a new organisational militancy and political willingness to confront the apartheid regime and its policies. For example, the BCM, even with its strategic limitations and lack of a mass base, influenced an entire generation of young black intellectuals and students and came to represent the main focus of internal struggle during this period. It was, in the main, BCM-aligned youth who, in the aftermath of the harsh crackdown from the apartheid state resulting from the 1976 Soweto uprisings, provided the externalised ANC with the means to resurrect the armed struggle and give a much needed injection of youthful militancy into the liberation struggle. As these youth poured across South Africa's borders, it was the ANC who provided the only organisation capable of absorbing such an outflow. Identified documents from various ANC camps/units etc. as well as from leadership structures, clearly indicate the degree to which these developments became the key focus of much ANC activity and resource-allocation, as well as new organisational and political/military problems and challenges.

Most importantly though, and despite the numerous logistical/financial/political difficulties and its generalised lack of an internal presence, it was during the period from the late 1970s – early 1980s that the ANC was able to establish itself as the dominant political force for the national liberation of South Africa. The hard years of grinding organisational and political work during early exile were paying off, as the exiled ANC showed itself to be the only liberation movement with the will and capacity to capitalise on, and take dominant practical and symbolic leadership of, the varied anti-apartheid struggles being waged both inside and outside South Africa. This included the newly formed UDF (1983) whose struggles, emanating mostly as they did from the ANC’s own call for the ‘ungovernability’ of South Africa, provided the ANC with an ally whose strategic approach was consistent with its own, an internal base within which it could now popularise its ‘national democratic liberation’ message, and a mast on which to fly the internal flag of the ANC. Also crucially important was the ANC’s ability to politically win over most of the key trade unions, who had come together with the formation of COSATU (1985) and had almost immediately pledged allegiance to the ‘Freedom Charter’.
By the early-mid 1980s the ANC was confident that it had finally achieved the status it had claimed from the start of its exiled existence - that of 'sole legitimate representative' of the South African oppressed. Although this claim was somewhat arrogant as well as dismissive of the complexities of the South African liberation struggle, the ANC had certainly come to hold centre stage at this juncture – something which numerous documents, especially those relating to international and domestic relations between the ANC and various other organisations/institutions and governments affirm.

Increased sabotage action inside South Africa, backed by the dissemination of ANC iconography (with the jailed Nelson Mandela leading the way), coupled to the organisation’s growing international support, had given the ANC a high profile, both at home and abroad. The ANC’s external presence – with its new administrative/political H.Q. in Lusaka, Zambia - had, by the early 1980s, become a giant exercise. Apart from the thousands of MK cadres in camps around the region (with newly independent Angola having become the main ‘host’), the organisation had a large educational complex in Tanzania (the Solomon Mahlungu Freedom College), several hundred ANC members studying at foreign universities and a diplomatic presence in over 30 countries. The large number of documents included which relate to this ‘government-in-exile’ provide confirmation of both the expanding nature of the ANC’s attendant responsibilities/undertakings as well as the immense challenges/problems that came with them. In this regard, particular mention must be made of the persistent problem of gender relations within the exiled ANC structures (especially within MK). Although identified documents do show that there was a hive of conference/meeting activity led by the ANC Women’s Section, as well as concerted efforts by leading women in the ANC to raise and confront these problems, there can be little doubt that the ANC-in-exile was a difficult place for most women.

Despite the limited military threat to the apartheid regime of the ANC’s armed propaganda efforts, MK did manage to pull off a few spectacular attacks inside the country during the early 1980s that contributed to the apartheid state’s fears of a revolutionary onslaught, the seriousness with which international actors were now taking towards the ANC and to raising the ANC’s symbolic and moral appeal among the South African masses and the progressive international
community. Inside South Africa, the ANC and its UDF internal allies were riding high on the wave of ungovernability. With the added strength of COSATU there reigned an attitude of supreme confidence that liberation, or as the nationwide ANC slogan proclaimed, ‘people's power’, was just around the corner. The political (and symbolic) hegemony of the externalised ANC ensured that the vast majority of those who took up the call to make South Africa ungovernable looked to it for such action and leadership. Despite the inability of the ANC and its internal allies to broaden and sustain a dual ‘people’s power in the face of a brutal counter-onslaught from the apartheid state, ANC strategic and tactical projections provided the background for the activities and expectations of internal resistance. The extent of the externalised ANC’s (and MK’s) almost unquestioned moral authority and symbolic power – as evidenced in several documents included for this period, no more so than in the sheer number of positive press/public statements and internal (underground) propaganda issued by the ANC - revealed itself in both the content/character of internal resistance as well as in an increasingly hegemonic position of international support for ANC-led anti-apartheid campaigns/activities.

However, such real and imagined successes came with serious consequences - for the ANC itself, for South Africa and for those governments and people in Southern Africa who were providing it with physical havens and practical support. The levels of violence and social upheaval unleashed by the internal conflict created deep political and personal divisions amongst the oppressed majority (no more so than in relation to Inkatha and AZAPO but also within the Alliance camp itself as evidenced by the “Mandela Football Club’ saga). The apartheid state unleashed a massively destructive military and economic sabotage campaign, using proxy forces such as RENAMO and UNITA, against the neighbouring countries of Mozambique, Angola and Swaziland where most of the ANC’s military forces/capacity was based. In this regard, documents relating to the signing of the Nkomati Accord between the governments of Mozambique and South Africa, as well as the state of things within MK units and in ANC camps in Angola give ample evidence of the effects on the ANC.

One of the results of the apartheid state’s destabilisation campaign, was that the ANC became increasingly organisationally paralysed and militarily ineffective, with the leadership showing signs of sliding into political authoritarianism. Often too busy with international diplomatic
commitments and at the same time trying to cope with the practical consequences of the apartheid state’s counter-revolutionary campaign, most ANC leaders lost touch with what was going on inside their own organisation. As some identified documents reveal, a sense of paranoia set-in, with the ANC’s intelligence and security department ‘seeing’ an apartheid agent or conversely, a political ‘dissident’, hidden in every corner, resulting in numerous arrests and interrogations of suspected cadres as well as some expulsions. The effects of this were particularly acute within MK. While the leadership continued to make administrative adjustments (a new Political-Military Council was formed to oversee the armed struggle) and issue new plans for a people’s war, large numbers of MK rank-and-file became increasingly demoralised, eventually resulting in a number of mutinies in the Angola camps which were physically suppressed but not without accompanying political, organisational and moral costs.

It was within this context that the first full conference of the ANC since Morogoro was held in Kabwe (Zambia) in 1985). Whatever ‘version' of the conference is cited (and there are many documents which provide different ‘versions’ as well as cover the plethora of strategic papers and tactical positions from various sections of the ANC coming into, and out of, the conference) it would appear as though established ANC and SACP leaders and long-serving ANC officials dominated the proceedings with all elected NEC members coming from ANC President-General Tambo distributed ‘guide’ list of candidates. On strategic matters the conference reaffirmed the Freedom Charter as the 'ideological lodestar' of the ANC, rejected the idea of a negotiated settlement with the apartheid state (even though other documentation included clearly reveals that the ANC leadership was well on its way in moving towards such a scenario) and confirmed the strategic/ military shift to a ‘people's war’ strategy.

Whether or not the armed struggle was seen as merely a pressure tactic for eventual negotiation or as a way of realising an armed seizure of power, the externalised ANC was, more than ever, reliant on favourable international conditions to maintain anything resembling a viable military option. In this regard, events/activities outside of South Africa’s borders during the mid-late 1980s - as revealed through documents containing internal ANC activity assessments and reports on the geo-politics of the region - increasingly narrowed the scope for the externally based activities of MK, and set the scene for decidedly more open/visible moves towards negotiations.
Some of these included: increased reliance on international anti-apartheid and diplomatic campaigns for the political, military and economic isolation of the apartheid state; closer working relationships with key Western nations (e.g. the USA, Japan, Britain) and multi-lateral international institutions (e.g. the I.M.F. and World Bank); and, the promise of dialogue wrought by the numerous open and secret meetings between the exiled ANC and a host of influential South Africa organisations and individuals from all sides of the racial and political spectrum (with identified documents capturing the extent and character of relevant meetings, trips and campaigns). All of this made it clear, regardless of public and intra-ANC pronouncements to the contrary, that the ANC leadership had shifted its strategic locus towards a negotiated settlement with the apartheid state and a general rapprochement with its erstwhile ‘imperialist’ enemies.

As numerous documents reveal, a huge amount of ANC organisational and intellectual activity was given over, from 1986 onwards, to addressing/engaging with, the various political/constitutional, social and economic ideas and policies that would inform and guide a post-apartheid democratic order with an expected ANC government at its head. This most often went hand-in hand with the slew of meetings that various ANC leaders continued to have (up until 1990) with almost every imaginable constituency within South Africa and the region. Two crucial documents to come out of all this ‘pre-negotiation diplomacy’ were the ‘Constitutional Guidelines’ of 1997 and the ‘Harare Declaration’ of 1989, which set the ANC firmly on a negotiations course. By setting out publicly its (maximum) conditions for negotiations the ANC leadership, for the first time since the late 1950s, sent a clear signal that it was prepared to engage in serious compromise. At the same time, in order to strengthen its hand at any future negotiating table, ANC leaders continued to call for the armed struggle and internal mass resistance be intensified. While this could be viewed as tactically astute, the general lack of direct communication with, and meaningful debate amongst, the ANC’s rank-and-file members (both in South Africa and in exile) around the issue of negotiations and the overall strategic direction of the liberation struggle itself, caused a great deal of confusion and legitimate criticism concerning the state of internal democracy within the ANC.

While the externalised ANC leadership was trying to find an acceptable way to the negotiating table, the symbolic (individual) incarnation of the organisation and its struggle, Nelson Mandela,
was busy doing the same from inside his prison cell. Following the lead of his organisation, Mandela had first suggested the route of negotiations to his captors in 1986. Acting as a conduit between the apartheid state and the external leadership, Mandela began to assume the (indirect) mantle of leadership of the ANC once more - a development that was hastened when Oliver Tambo suffered a debilitating stroke in late 1989 and further spurred by the release of fellow ANC leaders/prisoners such as Walter Sisulu and others. As several key letters/ correspondences and internal ANC documents clearly demonstrate, the gradual but nonetheless systematic move towards formal negotiations with the apartheid state was the product of the ANC leadership’s own (subjective) choice of political strategy in the face of objective realities. On the eve of President F.W. de Klerk’s 2nd February 1990 ‘unbanning’ speech to the South African Parliament, the pressures for a negotiated settlement were coming from all angles: from the battered Frontline States; from Western governments; from international and domestic capital; from a rapidly disintegrating USSR; and from liberal ‘supporters’. With any hopes for a seizure of power having progressively diminished along with the ANC’s ability to build and sustain a viable internal underground linked to armed struggle, the organisation’s negotiations strategy was a fait accompli.

Once the ANC had been unbanned the leadership not unexpectedly, began to almost immediately shift the organisation’s time, energy, resources and political/intellectual capital back inside South Africa. While the first engagements took the form of a series of personal meetings between de Klerk and Mandela, formal talks between the ANC leadership and the apartheid state began soon thereafter. The subsequent release of both the Groote Schuur and Pretoria Minutes, while giving firm indication that the ground for formal negotiations was being prepared, also reflected the weakness of the ANC because it was now having to ‘play’ on a completely different field with an entirely different set of ‘rules’ than that it had experienced for the previous 30 years in exile. The most glaring example of this was the fact that at the same time that the ANC leadership took the decision to unilaterally suspend the armed struggle, ostensibly to move the negotiations forward, its own members and supporters were being subject to an orgy of violence/death directed by the apartheid state and its proxy forces such as Inkatha. As various documents show, such contradictions caused serious internal tension and problems for the ANC and its ‘Congress Alliance’ partners and made it extremely difficult for the ANC’s rank-and-file – both inside and
outside South Africa - to openly and democratically influence and shape the strategic direction of the ‘new’ internal liberation struggle, umbilically bound as it was to a negotiations process from which there was now no turning back.

For the next three years (1991-93), the ANC walked a three-legged tightrope. The first leg was given over fully to participation in the now officially formalised CODESA negotiations with the apartheid state and other political forces. In this endeavour, the ANC employed the vast majority of its leading cadres who, alongside academic/intellectual supporters produced a wide range of position papers, draft policy documents and strategic discussion documents. These were designed to provide the ANC (and its SACP partner) with adequate ‘ammunition’ in the negotiations ‘battle’ over the content and character of post-apartheid constitutional and policy-related decisions/agreements whilst simultaneously ensuring that the ANC’s pre-negotiation demands around issues such as the release of political prisoners, the role of MK and the apartheid army/police etc. were met (or at least taken seriously). Additionally, it was these leading cadres who, despite numerous setbacks, successfully pulled together the varying multi-class, multi-ethnic strands of the ANC (through two Congresses, several massacres of ANC supporters and the assassination of Chris Hani) into an ultimately cohesive political force able to ‘deliver the deal’.

The second leg involved, for the most part, middle and lower-ranking ANC officials/leaders, tasked with building new organisational structures and recruiting members that would secure political hegemony for the ANC inside the country and which also required absorbing and melding the myriad allied formations into an efficient, above-ground political party capable of contesting and winning elections. In practical terms, this task was accomplished but also raised serious questions around the ANC’s longer-term commitment to grassroots democracy and acceptance of political dissent within its own ranks. Added to this was the Herculean task of dealing with the logistical and financial implications of ensuring that all ANC exiles/MK cadres were able to return safely to South Africa and to be integrated into the ‘new’ organisational structures and activities. It was a task that at times appeared to be falling under its own weight and which, while mostly accomplished, did leave many dedicated ANC members out in the cold and/or disillusioned.
The third leg relied on the ANC’s rank-and file members and supporters, alongside those in allied organisations such as COSATU, the SACP and the civic movements. Here was where the brunt of the ‘transitional’ violence was borne since it was this leg that was left to physically defend and fight for the liberation movement at the grassroots level, most often with little organisational, resource support or political стратегic direction from the ANC itself. At the same time, these masses were called upon to provide the muscle for the various forms of ‘mass action’ (such as rallies, marches and work stayaways) that acted as pressure points when the negotiations process broke down – as it did on more than one occasion – and the ultimate guarantor for the ANC’s strategic and historic end-goal of the conquest of political power and majority rule through one-person, one-vote democratic elections.

The wide range of documents identified for this period cover various aspects of all three ‘leg’s of the ANC’s difficult journey to April 1994. They provide a partial but nonetheless in-depth view of the often tortuous, but ultimately successful path, that the ANC traversed as it turned itself from a thirty-year long government and ‘people’s army’ in-exile into a political party capable of winning democratic elections and taking the reins of state power. What the documents also show though, is a glimpse into the actual and potential longer-term problems and challenges of a triumphant ANC in meeting the socio-economic expectations of the very people whom the ANC championed and who provided the basis for its political victory over apartheid. As the ANC itself had put it quite clearly in a 1970s statement: “It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. To allow the existing economic forces to retain their interests intact is to feed the root of racial supremacy and does not represent even a shadow of liberation”.

NOTE ON ARCHIVES VISITED
There are three main archives and correspondingly, three main collections, from which the vast majority of identified documents were drawn for this collection. These are:

- Historical Papers & Manuscripts housed at the University of Witwatersrand (Karis-Gerhart Collection)
• The Liberation Movement Archives housed at the University of Fort Hare (Official ANC Archives)
• Historical Papers & Manuscripts housed at the Centre for African Studies – University of Cape Town (Simons Collection)

Dale T. McKinley – April 2007