



**Universiteit
Leiden**
The Netherlands

The ANC in exile

Ellis, S.

Citation

Ellis, S. (1991). The ANC in exile. *African Affairs: The Journal Of The Royal African Society*, 90(360), 439-447. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9037>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9037>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

THE ANC IN EXILE

STEPHEN ELLIS

THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, founded in 1912 as the voice of black South Africans, was banned by law on 30 March 1960, nine days after the infamous Sharpeville massacre and at a time of unprecedented international pressure directed at the racial policies of the government of South Africa. The ANC remained illegal until 2 February 1990, when President De Klerk unbanned it, together with other illegal organizations such as the Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party, as a bold step in his declared aim of creating a new South Africa through negotiation.

We may therefore define the ANC's period in exile as lasting from 1960 to 1990. For most of that period the ANC leadership was based abroad as were many of its most active rank and file members. It is no exaggeration to say that the ANC was in danger of extinction inside South Africa at one point, say from the arrest of the *Umkhonto we Sizwe* leadership at Rivonia in July 1963 until after the Soweto rising of 1976. For most of that time the ANC was committed to advancing its aims by force of arms through the autonomous organization which later became its military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. It was these conditions which formed the ANC during its exile period.

Before giving a brief account of the main developments which affected the ANC during these years, it is perhaps helpful to sketch the previous history of the organization. At its foundation in 1912, the ANC was a rather genteel organization, established by what were then the pillars of black South African society. These included lawyers and ministers of religion with some Western education as well as traditional chiefs. Its tactics were to lobby and petition on behalf of black people. It was not a mass organization, made no attempt to apply pressure by such tactics as strikes or demonstrations, and appears to have engaged in little formal activity beyond its annual general meetings. It did not represent the views of white, Indian or so-called 'coloured' South Africans, nor was membership open to them. It had no ideology beyond a moderate nationalism.

The ANC first developed a relationship with the Communist Party of South Africa in the 1920s. The CPSA was founded in 1921 by white immigrant socialists, many of them of British origin such as Sidney Bunting, the Communist Party General Secretary, Bill Andrews and David Ivon

Stephen Ellis was Editor of *Africa Confidential* and has recently become Director of the African Studies Centre, Leiden. He gave this talk to The Royal African Society in 1990, and is currently writing a book on the subject.

Jones. At its inception the Communist Party regarded the white proletariat of the Witwatersrand as being the obvious breeding ground for socialist politics. The black urban work force was largely composed of migrant workers who did not appear to be ripe for advanced socialism, although it is fair to say that some of the early Communists, and especially Sidney Bunting, were more than usually sympathetic to the cause of black workers. Nevertheless, in pursuit of its identification of the white proletariat as the key component of the struggle, the Party in 1922 got off to a disastrous start by backing a strike of white workers on the Rand, in which the workers' main grievance was the threat posed to their standard of living by cheap black labour. The strike was a disaster because it was repressed with great savagery by the government, with dozens of lives lost, and because it resulted in legislation formally defining black and white jobs.

It was in the aftermath of this strike that the Communist Party of South Africa, realizing that the mass of white workers could be lost to class politics because of the racial factor, made its first efforts to explore links with black organizations, including the ANC. The relationship was consummated in 1928 when Josiah Gumede (the father of the later United Democratic Front leader Archie Gumede), a fervent admirer of communism who had visited Moscow, became the ANC President and urged the two organizations to work together. On the Communist side, this trend was subject to the direction of the Comintern, which in 1928 gave orders to the Communist Party of South Africa, to the dismay of many white comrades, to work with black organizations such as the ANC for the attainment of an 'independent native republic'.

In other words, we can say that 1928 was a landmark in South African radical history for several reasons. First, it marked the assumption by the Communist Party of a theory of two-stage revolution which it has held ever since. Since 1928, South African Communists have believed that it is their duty to work in the first instance for majority rule in South Africa and only when that has been achieved to aim to achieve the second stage of the revolution, the socialist stage.

This has made the ANC and the Communist Party natural allies, since both have the same aim in the medium term. It was in this period after 1928 that an ANC-Communist Party alliance was born and nurtured through the work of people like Josiah Gumede and Moses Kotane, the fiery Communist who studied in Moscow in the early 1930s, was General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1939 to 1978, and was always a staunch member of the ANC, being eventually its Treasurer-General. Since 1928 and even before the Communist Party has been determinedly non-racial in its membership policy, an important tradition. The relationship was not a smooth one in the early days, especially during the 1930s when Gumede was removed from the presidency of the ANC by a conservative and

anti-communist backlash and when the Party itself was torn apart by internal squabbles fuelled by personality clashes and changes of line emanating from the Comintern in Moscow.

Only in the 1940s, and especially after the Soviet Union's entry into the Second World War in 1941 had created an official climate of tolerance by the South African government towards the Communist Party, did the Party-ANC alliance revive. This was one of the points taken up by the band of young black radicals who constituted the ANC Youth League in 1944 and who were to play such an important part in South African history. Anton Lembede (who died tragically young), Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Robert Sobukwe and others campaigned to transform the ANC from the small and somewhat toothless organization it had previously been into a more militant organization. In their early days all of these young lions were more or less anti-communist, fearing that the highly disciplined and thoroughly Stalinist Communist Party might impose its own agenda on the ANC through people like Kotane, J. B. Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyana, who were members of both organizations. Competition between the Communists and the Youth Leaguers reached a peak in the ANC's 1949 elections when Walter Sisulu was elected to the Secretary-General's position of the ANC by a mere six votes over the Communist Party candidate Dan Tloome. The political climate was governed by the 1948 electoral victory of the National Party, which had made clear its intent to ban the Communist Party. This sent black Communists scurrying for cover inside the ANC. So when the Communist Party of South Africa was duly banned, and voted to disband itself in 1950, it had at least two important side-effects. One was to cause black Communists such as Dan Tloome, Moses Kotane and J. B. Marks to continue their political work in their capacity as ANC members. The other was to disarm the anti-communism of some of the ANC Youth League, including Mandela, Sisulu and Tambo, who were prepared to dilute their earlier anti-communist sentiments in order to accommodate an ally.

Meanwhile, non-black Communists reconstituted themselves into other organizations such as the Indian Congresses and the Congress of Democrats, the latter effectively a front organization for the Communist Party, secretly re-established in 1953 as the South African Communist Party. Already some ANC members feared that the formation of the Congress Alliance between the ANC, the Congress of Democrats, the Indian Congresses and allied organizations was changing the direction of the ANC. This was one of the factors giving rise to the breakaway in 1959 of the Pan Africanist Congress, which rejected the Communist alliance partly on the grounds that the Communist tail was wagging the ANC dog.

It has been necessary to sketch this brief history to illustrate several points crucial for understanding the evolution of the ANC after it was driven

underground and into exile in 1960. I would draw especial attention to the following:

1. The ANC and the Communist Party had a long, if not always harmonious, history of association.
2. The Communist Party, by 1960, already had 10 years' experience of clandestine work which was to prove invaluable in the re-establishment of the ANC in exile.
3. Some members of the ANC, an exclusively black organization, had at times grown wary of the Communist Party, not least because of the number of whites, 'Coloureds' or Indians in its leadership and the fear that these would unduly influence the direction of the premier vehicle for black political expression.
4. The Communist Party had better international contacts than the ANC, largely through its connection with the Comintern and its successors.
5. The Communist Party also had more experience of mass mobilization, which it lent to the ANC when it undertook the defiance campaigns and various mass protests of the 1950s.

In fact the ANC was singularly unprepared for its banning in March 1960. Only two days before the measure, ANC National Executive member and former Secretary-General Oliver Tambo was directed to leave the country to set up an ANC external mission to lobby for outside support. It was this which was to eventually make Tambo the senior ANC leader in exile.

After the ANC's banning, many ANC members and many Communists determined to continue the struggle by the only means left to them, namely through illegality and force of arms. The result was the formation in mid-1961 of *Umkhonto we Sizwe*. It is important to note that MK, as it is known, was not set up by order of the ANC National Executive. Rather, it was considered an autonomous organization established by members of both the ANC and the SACP. The MK leadership, under the overall command of Nelson Mandela, the former President of the ANC's Transvaal branch, was drawn from members of both organizations. This was to prove important in bringing the ANC and the Party closer together.

The flight into clandestinity made the ANC far more dependent than previously on the Party. For one thing, the Communist Party had the best connections with the two major revolutionary powers in the world at that time, the USSR and China. And during the period of the Sino-Soviet split, around 1964, the Party used its influence to shepherd the ANC away from the path of Maoism and heresy to the point that Maoist literature was withdrawn from the training camps which *Umkhonto we Sizwe* was establishing in Tanzania and elsewhere and military trainees were withdrawn from Chinese military academies. It led the ANC to side with the other pro-Moscow liberation movements in southern Africa, such as the

Zimbabwe African People's Union of Joshua Nkomo, and to regard with some hostility the Chinese-influenced movements such as Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union and the government of Tanzania. The effects of this lasted into the 1980s.

On both the political and military fronts the ANC was almost wiped out inside South Africa in the early 1960s. Nelson Mandela was arrested in 1962 and the cream of its leadership, including Walter Sisulu and others, in a police raid on Lilliesleaf farm in Rivonia, in 1963. The ANC underground inside South Africa was smashed, and thousands of ANC members or sympathizers were detained, kept under police surveillance, harassed, banned and otherwise neutralized.

Thus the ANC after 1963 was huddled in exile in Tanzania, its main leaders gone, only Tambo being considered paramount by virtue of having been designated three years earlier as leader of the ANC External Mission. The Communist Party, on the other hand, was better equipped for the life of exile. Although it lost such prominent members as Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada and Bram Fischer, leaders of the calibre of Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo, Moses Mabhida and Moses Kotane were in exile and were able to reconstitute the Central Committee. The Communists were the people with access to guns and money, they had a more coherent organization than the ANC, and they alone had a long-term strategy, formulated in their programme '*The Road to South African Freedom*', adopted by the Party in 1962. The Communists were the people with the international connections, thanks to their standing in Moscow. And, in the person of Joe Slovo, they had MK's most sophisticated military brain.

Already one of the recurring problems of the ANC in exile was making itself manifest. The MK camps in Tanzania were full of young men and women committed to armed struggle but bored and frustrated. There were signs of disaffection as early as 1966. Much of the feeling was directed against Joe Modise, a former street-fighter from Alexandra who had been a security guard for Mandela and Tambo during their public meetings and who had graduated to become the commander of the ANC army. He was allied to several other former township hard men who later became prominent in the ANC leadership some of whom even rose in the ranks of the normally ultra-intellectual Communist Party.

Current mythology has it that disaffected soldiers found a leader in the person of Chris Hani, the son of a humble migrant worker from the Transkei who had managed to receive an education, had come under the influence of Cape Town Communists such as Jack and Ray Simons and Simon Makana, and had gone into exile to join the army. He is said to have signed a memorandum articulating the soldiers' grievances, for which he was sentenced to death by an outraged MK High Command. He was saved only by the intervention of political leaders who decided that the only way to

solve this problem of incipient mutiny was to throw the army into battle. The result was the Wankie campaign of 1967, undertaken in partnership with ZAPU. The joint ZAPU/ANC forces surprised the Rhodesian security forces by their strength and their firepower, the first time these had been fully deployed, but their tactics were hopeless against a vastly more mobile and better equipped enemy and brought heavy casualties on both the ANC and ZAPU.

After the Wankie campaign, a period of demoralization set in which led to the calling of a conference at Morogoro, Tanzania, in 1969. This was a true turning-point in ANC history. The main motives for the conference were: to take stock of military strategy in the aftermath of Wankie, to restore the confidence of ANC members in their National Executive, and to plot a new political strategy.

The Party saw in the Morogoro conference an opportunity to advance its own cause by persuading the ANC to adopt a more explicit socialist line and by opening the ranks of its External Mission to non-black members, thus strengthening the commitment first outlined in the 1955 Freedom Charter to a class, rather than a racial, analysis of South Africa's condition. The result was a triumph for the Party. The conference was packed with Party members, some of whom were not members of the ANC. It voted to adopt the document called '*Strategy and Tactics*', a watered-down version of the Party's own programme. It elected new officers. And it decided to open membership of the ANC in exile to non-blacks. The Party came to dominate the ANC's most important administrative organ, the Revolutionary Council. Headed by Communist stalwart Moses Mabhida, it included a white (Slovo) an Indian (Yusuf Dadoo) and a 'Coloured' (Reg September), all three of them Party members also.

Morogoro inspired a period of dissidence in which a faction, later labelled the Gang of Eight, emerged as critics of what they alleged was SACP manipulation. The eight, all blacks, included the Communists Tennyson Makiwane and Temba Mqotha, both of whom had been prominent in the Party, and also the son-in-law of the former ANC President-General, Chief Albert Lutuli. They eventually left the ANC in 1975 but their efforts to set up a splinter group failed dismally. The dissidents sank without a trace. Tennyson Makiwane was later murdered by an ANC unit in 1980. The Morogoro conference and the fate of the Gang of Eight sealed the Party's supremacy and the principle of democratic centralism within the ANC, and hence destroyed the prospect of real debate on certain fundamental subjects.

Important though these developments were in the life of the ANC, they took place in a vacuum insulated from life inside South Africa. There the local initiative passed to the Black Consciousness Movement and the Soweto generation. This is not the place to describe the June 1976 rising in Soweto, and the momentous effect it had on politics. Suffice it to say that

thousands of young South Africans, very angry and very militant, left South Africa to seek arms abroad. Many had never heard of either the ANC or the PAC, although their Black Consciousness beliefs made them closer to the PAC than to the ANC. By dint of much hard work and the shortcomings of the PAC, the ANC succeeded in recruiting most of the Soweto émigrés to its armed wing and installing them in the military training camps now springing up in newly independent Angola.

The task facing the ANC was to convert these Black Consciousness radicals into loyal ANC cadres, and this it did through a system of political education carried out by Party commissars especially at Nova Katenga Camp in Angola, before it was destroyed by the South African Air Force. The successful early commissars at Katenga were Francis Meli, Mark Shope and Jack Simons. From Katenga, the system of commissars spread throughout the ANC, eventually leading to considerable resentment, especially under the regime of Andrew Masondo as National Commissar.

The Soweto recruits enabled MK to relaunch the armed struggle for the first time since Rivonia. Under the influence of Vietnam's legendary General Giap, whom Slovo and others visited for a period of study, ANC strategy was to build a programme of armed propaganda, especially through the Special Operations Unit which carried out the well-known attacks on the oil from coal plant at Sasolberg and on Military Headquarters at Voortrekkerhoogte.

Pretoria's response was the intensified campaign of destabilization, murder, cross-border raids and abductions which began in earnest after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency in 1981, and which was eventually to succeed in its aim of defeating MK's guerrilla war.

One of the main consequences of destabilization and the disruption of MK's logistics network was to keep the MK soldiers bottled up in their Angolan camps. Here, short of supplies, bored and frustrated, disenchanted by the corruption of some of their commanders and the brutality of the camp regime, the soldiers' mood became dangerous. The High Command, in mid-1983, set them to fighting against UNITA. But this did little more than add to their grievances. In early 1984 a mutiny erupted at the battle front, and hundreds of MK soldiers headed for Luanda to lobby their High Command, calling for the resignation of the entire leadership except for Tambo, Slovo, Moses Mabhida and Chris Hani, and labelling all the rest as spies of Pretoria and imperialist agents. They reserved their special hatred for Army Commander Joe Modise, the target of particular hatred by the soldiers for nearly a quarter of a century.

The mutineers under a Committee of Ten chaired by Zaba Nkondo, were persuaded to surrender. The ringleaders were detained and others sent for re-education at a punishment camp in northern Angola. There they mutinied once more. This time there were pitched battles between loyalist

troops and mutineers. After the loyalists had retaken Pango camp, the ring-leaders were executed in public and others were detained, some until very recently. It was from the period after the mutiny that the worst violations of human rights within the ANC date, recently reported in the press.

The disaster of the Angola mutiny came at the same time as events inside South Africa gave the ANC its greatest hope yet of a military breakthrough which it was ill equipped to exploit. This came in the shape of the Vaal triangle uprising of 1984, which soon spread throughout South Africa and was only snuffed out by the government's imposition of a state of emergency in 1986. The explosion of black South Africa seemed to offer suitable conditions for guerrilla war and takeover.

At the height of this promising period, the ANC convened its first conference since Morogoro in 1969. This was the Kabwe Consultative Conference of 1985, the main event of which was a successful proposal by the Party for the first time to remove all racial barriers to membership of the ANC's governing body, the National Executive Committee. The first white to be elected was Joe Slovo, who became Party General Secretary on Moses Mabhida's death the following year.

In retrospect, the ANC's confidence in its eventual military triumph at the time of Kabwe, around the mid-1980s, was misplaced. It failed to appreciate the full strength of the Pretoria government; it failed to resolve the practical problems and lethal political intrigues which made the ANC's guerrilla struggle so much less effective than it might have been; and, naturally enough, it failed to predict the end of the Cold War with its incalculable consequences.

Nevertheless one powerful ANC and Communist Party leader at least was working steadily to improve the ANC's range of political contacts and to cultivate the political terrain. This was the then information chief and confidant of Oliver Tambo, Thabo Mbeki. In time many others in the ANC and the Party were to be glad of the course he had mapped out virtually single-handed in the early 1980s. It was largely through Mbeki, and with backing from Sweden and support from President Oliver Tambo, that the 1988 proposals for a Post-Apartheid South Africa, together with constitutional and economic policy guidelines, were published as ANC discussion documents.

The late 1980s made plain the developments in the ANC during the exile period. The relationship between the ANC and the Party had changed to the point that there ceased to be an alliance in the normal sense of the term. The Party did not bring its own members to the Alliance. Instead, virtually all Party members were now members of the ANC too. Moreover they dominated the ANC leadership to the extent that, by late 1989, of some 35 members of the NEC only eight were not Party members. The Party

dominated every leading organ of the ANC, and used the organization as a pool from which to recruit the best and brightest for party membership.

Corresponding to this, the ANC's tradition as an umbrella movement, covering all individuals of nationalist persuasion, had been altered. The ANC had been transformed into a socialist organization in which criticism of socialism, or even of its Stalinist variant, was not welcome. Moreover, the practice of democratic centralism had installed in power an elite which switched between major command posts and which did not tolerate criticism of its decisions. The movement was effectively split into a number of bureaucratic fiefdoms, headed by barons who rivalled one another for control over turf. Despite the deadliness of these intrigues, any intervention threatening the interests of any one of the barons inspired all to close ranks. This has made the leadership very unpopular with the MK rank and file, as was made clear when the rank and file expressed themselves freely to Walter Sisulu when he visited Lusaka in January 1990. They now put all their faith in the Rivonia generation to return the movement to its democratic tradition.

The return from exile obliges the leaders of the ANC to show their true credentials to their real constituency, which is the people of South Africa. In the meantime, decision-making is paralyzed and much foot-dragging is going on. Only time will tell what the ANC will become once it has returned home fully and once the people of South Africa have had time to give their considered opinion of it. But in the meantime, we may be able to detect already a number of reactions or trends resulting from the period in exile and the subsequent homecoming.

In the first place, the ANC can rest assured that it is the prime vehicle for black South Africans and the principal opposition party in the country. And, whatever the shortcomings of the armed struggle, it has had a mighty impact on radical youth, who have seen the ANC-Communist Party Alliance as the one force which really dared to fight apartheid in the way that so many aspired to do.

Whether the Communist Party and the ANC will remain in alliance or will go their separate ways must remain an open question. At present, the Party shows every sign of being embarrassed by the very success of its 40-year policy of entryism. But whatever happens, the Party can be credited (if credit is appropriate) with turning the ANC into a multi-racial organization. It is unlikely that it will ever become a solely black outfit again: rather we are seeing whether the ANC can pick up the threads of its pre-exile tradition as a broad democratic party rather than a Marxist-Leninist organization.