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## **FRAGMENTATION AND COHESION IN THE ANC, THE FIRST 70 YEARS**

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Recently Gwede Mantashe, Secretary General of the ANC chided the Media's preoccupation with splits in the ANC and asked the question, is the ANC no more than its fragments. That is a question which deserves serious attention, and I believe lies at the core of South African politics today. Are the ANC's fragments –which I believe definitely exist, destined to split apart or is there some deeper source of cohesion, which whatever the slices that shear away will hold the wider body together. Considering cohesion first there seems to me to be currently two broad sources for the ANC. The first are the immense sources of patronage which lie at the ANC's disposal. There is, however, an element of ambiguity in this as we have seen over the past decade, where competition for control over such sources of patronage repeatedly threaten to break the ANC apart. The second which one might contend, is the real glue which holds the ANC together, is a history of struggle. This history of struggle has been mobilized repeatedly since 2004 to energize its base, and to hold competing factions together—and nowhere more so than in the centenary year of the ANC—2012. What this means—and this is counter-intuitive in an age where the youth has manifestly never been more disinterested in the past is that history matters. Changes in policy direction, new factional groupings always have to dress up their claims in some or other aspect/element of the past history of the ANC/ of struggle. Obviously apparent in the Youth Leagues nationalization programme—but also in the lionization of Pixley ka Izaka Seme as a prototype for African businessmen under the Mbeki administration and again most recently in the ANC Youth League's Defence of itself at the current disciplinary tribunal where it has attempted to justify its actions by reference to Youth League behavior in the past. Conversely, historical forces or events often serve as codes for particular sectional interests or claims, especially where a direct head on challenge is deemed injudicious. This is a lesson which leaders of the more traditional rural sectors of our society have always comprehended—history is a key political resource. You can't do without it and you

need to control it. But it is something which political commentators are much slower even to apprehend or concede in respect of the political culture of the modern here and now.

What this is leading us towards or has led us the production or reproduction of instrumental history. At its extreme this can take us towards the gross deformities of what Terence Ranger has termed as Patriotic History in Zimbabwe. But even in its more ordinary versions it presents problems to what I might term the professional historian. As history becomes more politically instrumental it tends to be more homogenized and stripped down. Inconsistencies, the ignoble, even the human get airbrushed out. Most critically, failures cannot be adequately addressed because the grand narrative of struggle is ultimately heroic and correct. At the same time as history becomes more politically serviceable, it becomes more boring, predictable, more bland, since it is always the authorized version the established grand narrative to which appeal is made.

This leads me to the view that the most interesting and instructive history of the ANC currently is that which comes out of the fragments and which is mostly amateur and autobiographic. This doesn't deny the grand narrative but provides divergent local perspectives and hugely enriches our perspectives if we step back from the grand narrative and refocus on the fragment. What this also means that the 100 year history of the ANC represents both a treasure trove of extraordinary episodes, magnetic personalities and instructive moments, as well as a Pandora's box out of which something uncomfortable or unsettling is always likely to emerge. This conference as I see it, is committed to uncovering that treasure trove and opening that box. This I suspect will stand in contrast to the principle thrust of the centenary celebrations of the ANC in 2012. For that Pandora's box is likely to be tightly clamped down.

What I want to do today with the forty minutes available to me in this keynote address is to explore some of the less familiar moments and themes which that rich treasure trove of struggle history contains. I focus mainly but not exclusively on the ANC, and on the sweep of that history from early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the unbanning of the ANC and other political parties in February 1990, with an emphasis especially on the period up to the 1970s.

From its foundation the ANC appealed to and sought to appeal to, and more infrequently to mobilize, a number of distinct and potentially conflictual constituencies. These were first the traditional leaders of South Africa –its kings and its chiefs, secondly south Africa’s Christian educated elite—its doctors, lawyers, journalists, clergymen and teachers. Thirdly the urban masses and fourthly its rural populace. Later the Youth would be added for this mix. Since the 1950s and more especially the 1980s south Africans have been accustomed to conceding primary political weight to the role of the masses. This is in a number of important sense true. However, when this urban bias is read back into the entire history of the ANC it is profoundly distorting. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the urban masses barely featured as a major national political force. This was the consequence of two primary factors of which most contemporary South Africans are aware, but whose political implications are rarely fully grasped. The first was the success, until mid 1940s of the twin systems of urban racial residential segregation and migrant labour, which between them conspired to keep South Africa’s black urban population migrant, separated and transient. As a result most urban centres in South Africa only contained a small percentage of long term, settled urban Africans whose political struggles were confined parochial and highly episodic. To take one example even in late 1940s, 80% of this working black urban populations spent less than 2 years working in Witwatersrand towns. Only PE and Free state towns had a significant permanently resident African urban.

Contributing equally if not more substantially to this pattern of transience and mobility was the continued attachment of the overwhelming majority of Africans to the land. This again is a massively under recognized aspect of South Africa’s past—the ICU for example which totally eclipsed the ANC, for much of the 1920s as a political force, attained its greatest influence as a result of penetrating the hitherto closed world of farm labourers especially in Natal and the Transvaal, who were suffering an unrelenting squeezes on their subsistence and lifestyles. What motivated many farm labourers to join the ICU was the promise of an undefined freedom and the hope that they might regain access to their lost lands. Many African migrants and residents in the reserves also retained a profound if sometimes contested attachment to traditional authorities and tribal land. For this population towns were places whose sole virtue was to generate wages with which to purchase cattle, pay tax, get married and buy clothes, and

ultimately to sustain a rural livelihood. Otherwise they – the towns that is - were viewed and were described as the wilderness, in contrast to the reserves which were characterized by freedom, the absence of constant state surveillance or the need to pay in cash to obtain the necessities of life. For much of the period up to the 1940s such populations viewed the ANC as largely irrelevant to their own most pressing needs of life—one elderly ex-migrant labourer that I interviewed earlier this year in Limpopo Province said he never felt that the ANC was interested in rural areas (at least until Groutville's chief Albert Luthuli became president) And they remained resolutely outside of its orbit – except I should say in the important struggles on betterment in the 1940s especially in the Transvaal.

These class like and horizontal lines of division between the ANC's actual and potential political constituencies were also overlain by vertical ones as well. The SANNC's constitution adopted in 1919 mirrored that of the white Union of South Africa which created a division between 4 Provinces. The practical effect of this—especially given the size of and obstacles to communication in South Africa—few phones—no cell phone (story) meant provincial leaderships remained substantially isolated from each other. Here the Cape in particular held aloof. Because of the qualified franchise enjoyed by Africans in the Cape, and the fact that the 1913 land Act was found by the courts to be inapplicable to the Cape, the educated leadership in Eastern Cape in particular played a peripheral role in ANC politics until the franchise was withdrawn by the Herzog Native Act of 1936. The black residents of Free State were in their own way exceptional. They had no serious African reserves and were consigned white farms and small rural towns.

What seems to have cemented at least an initial façade of unity amongst the remaining 3 provincial congresses was the issue of land. When the 1913 Land Act was passed, Africans, usually through the agency of chiefs were in the process of a massive buy back of land above all in the former Transvaal. Indeed one of the express objectives of the 1913 Land Act was to interdict this process and confine Africans to a miniscule 7.7% of the country's land mass. Once the 1913 Land Act was passed—which happened in a remarkably short space of time, chiefs led the fight against the Act contributing vast amounts of money to finance the campaign. Chiefs at

this point were arguably the most important section of ANC alliance—or at least co-equal to the educated Christian elite. The elite for their part—and this often overlooked in the literature—were equally bent on the acquisition of land. A near continuous theme in the history of black politics up until World War II is the quest to acquire land while one of the most conspicuous forms of organization at that time—above all 1930s, was the co-operative geared to buy land. All of this has wide and indeed current political significance which I will now try and sum up.

1. Traditional authorities albeit intermittently and certainly in a steadily progressively diminishing manner played an important role in ANC politics. Admittedly these traditional authorities became steadily more discredited from 1950s onward and especially through the Bantustan era—but their ability to stage such a remarkable political comeback after 1994 is at least partially grounded on a prior reality of which the Mandela generation of political leaders who substantially determined South Africa's future after 1994 were acutely aware. Certainly in today's context they ransack their history to find progressive pasts which they often can seek to use to cover up their later more discreditable roles.
2. The black elite- black middle class was for decades the dominant force in ANC politics. This black middle class attracted a great deal of political and academic interest up until the 1950s even 1960s, but they dropped off the political radar almost totally—to be replaced by a near exclusive preoccupation with the urban masses, above all in the late 1970s and 1980s. Like the chiefs however the black elite as black middle class has now staged a remarkable comeback. In roots, I would contend, need to be found in the earlier period when they were ignored. Much of the ANC recent political past becomes more intelligible when viewed from this perspective.
3. The urban masses feature only sporadically in this unfolding story. Often dramatically as well, but still in episodic, discontinuous fashion.
4. ANC was only the loosest kind of national movement up to the 1950s. It comprised in effect congeries of regional and sub regional groupings. One moment which has been totally overlooked in the literature is when Pixley Ka izaka Seme, President General of ANC tried to amend the ANC constitution in the early 1930s by breaking down the 4

provincial ANC congresses into 9. How far this mirrored South Africa's post 1994 Provincial dispensation would be fascinating to know. I have uncovered no information on this point. All I do know is that the proposal stirred up a hornets nest of controversy in the Transvaal which was confronted with this prospect of breaking up into 3 parts.

A related and second key issue which has not attracted the attention it deserves in ANC history, largely because it is a political thistle which is very uncomfortable to grasp, is ethnicity. The steady erosion of the elite economic position, combined with the equally steady contraction of political space available to them during Hertzog's premiership had surprising and unexpected outcomes in the realm of elite politics. Spurned by the white political establishment, they retreated into a combination of economic self help and an ideological re-orientation towards ethnicities and chiefs. The way this was pursued in Natal by the Dube faction of the Natal African Congress, through a flirtation with the Zulu King, and the formation of the early Inkatha in the 1920s is relatively well known in the literature. The Natal case is usually viewed as an aberration, and the South African liberation struggle has otherwise been singled out and hailed as betraying negligible evidence of ethnic division. This is a proposition that needs to be questioned and tested. And since we in fact know relatively little about the ANC prior to the 1950s it seems important to know more than we do today about how far this is true and what is legacy for the present. We are certainly confronted by Provincial rivalries in South Africa today. But do ethnic divisions lurk below the surface? The best known ethnic division in the recent history of the liberation struggle in South Africa has been between Xhosa and Zulu, particularly in the 1990s. What underlay it, besides the political project of Buthelezi still remains a little obscure. One point that I can make unequivocally, is that despite the apparent certainties of political commentators it had no roots in the deep past only surfacing in the ANC's external military wing in the 1970s. One argument one might propose is that it was the outcome of competition between two roughly equally balanced socio-economic elites. If that is the case it places the elites, middle class once again in the spotlight, while also allowing me to shift its angle into another inclination.

From the perspective of the 1930s another and possibly much more significant vector of ethnic conflict centred on the Witwatersrand and revolved around competition between Nguni and Sotho. This in many ways was premised on the opposite - the unbalanced social and economic weight of the two groups of elites, the Xhosa/Zulu being massively advantaged in terms of missionary and secondary education. By 1930 this had become exacerbated by the effect of the Great Depression. People were being thrown out of jobs. In this context at least some of the Sotho/Tswana elite on the Rand began to articulate strong opposition to Xhosa/Zulu rivals for elite jobs. Like everyone else they looked to a deeper history to provide them with a category and a name. The one they found was Ndebele—which connoted marauder in North Sotho and referred to the first waves of Nguni speaking immigrants/inlanders into the Transvaal in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. It even formed its own congress of ANC which persisted until the early 1940s but one which was founded on an elite re-articulation of ethnicity and not a traditional one. Generally a little known part of the ANC is past is the extent to which the Provincial ANC were fractured by ethnic and other divisions in interwar years.—Every provincial congress split into 2-3 parts. One question to consider is how far this resonates today? My own anecdotal information mainly former my students of 5 years ago—was that the dominant Xhosa speakers in the new political dispensation was widely resented by others. Does the same apply to Zulu today? Will there ever be a Sotho backlash? Or is South Africa too resolutely anti-ethnic to allow this? Probably, I feel, but given the past, it is certainly not something that we can take for granted.

From the 1940s another shift in the ethnic balance in the national ANC became evident. Increasingly, Xhosa speakers came to dominate its highest positions along with its generational balance as well as young professionals. The reasons for this are far from self-evident. Certainly the withdrawal of the Cape Africa franchise in 1936 had a galvanizing effect on Cape African politics which can be credited for part of the shift. Again Port Elizabeth too is often pictured as the seed bed or hothouse of Cape African politics, and as feeding significantly into this process, but upon closer examination this proves highly misleading. Up until the early 1940s the Port Elizabeth ANC was fractured and politically inert. Only in the late 1940s did it assume what has been assumed as its traditional role. This in turn has two roots—the resurgence of a largely African SACP in Port Elizabeth—and the bout of industrialization and urbanization which

accompanied World War II and which also propelled large numbers of Xhosa speaking, mission educated elite to the Witwatersrand from where they became dominated by Transvaal and national provincial politics.

At the same time, despite the political quiescence of the 1930s, in the last years of that decade and certainly in the first part of the 1940s, a silent revolution was underway. African women were streaming into the towns and would soon give rise to a second urban generation out of which the new phenomenon of the tsotsi would emerge. Both have been short changed if not generally ignored in the histories of the ANC. Here a few elite African women like Charlotte Maxeke feature (but although not prominently) but the mass of African women remain anonymous and hidden. Yet, if you look at the histories of the localities, the fragments, women clearly emerge as the driving forces of radical community politics—Germiston's League of African women 1000 strong, being one case. Springs beerhall boycotting women after the war were another. What needs to be reintegrated into the history of the struggle is the history of these groups. This I suggest has most profound implications for the history of the ANC than may at first appear. The realm of political activity for men was the Provincial or the National. The realm of women's political activity was the local and it seems to have been generally conceded did not fall within the realm of the political. In my view it was only when these two dimensions of political activity were linked that a real struggle could be waged. This had to await the 1950s, and it was not waged for long, being largely snuffed out in the 1960s by state repression. Where, I wonder, are we today? Is another rapprochement between the local and the central in sight or even conceivable?

A third key component of black political culture which emerged in this period was the riot—again at a local level. The riot has never been seriously interrogated or theorized in South Africa, yet from 1940 on became a central element in struggle politics, so much so that police authorities for the first time began to compile a register and profile of riots. The principal participants in riots which began to explode with the 1937 Vereeniging disturbances, were women and youth (often delinquents). The riots in which they increasingly frequently participated had a deeply ambiguous character and elicited deeply ambiguous responses



especially among the senior ranks of the ANC. On the one hand they had growing significance in the armoury of struggle: on the other they were either actually or potentially out of control and even perpetrators of abuse. Increasingly I would argue the ANC galvanized into new directions by the phenomenon of the local riot—in no case more so than in Cato Manor riots of 1949. What I am saying here should already be striking a chord with those who follow local politics—the 2000s have increasingly been punctuated by local riots. It seems a persistent part of black political culture. Are there connections between old and new? What were the differences? What does this betoken? The whole subject needs and integrated scrutiny which it has not yet attracted. Let me offer one concluding footnote remark in this respect. It seems to me that a significant part of the success of at least urban apartheid was bringing women under control firstly via pass but critically the new township urban household where they were re-subjected to the authority of men.

The 1940s witnessed the rise of the riot. Like so many other features of black ANC struggle politics this was intimately related to accelerated industrialization and urbanization. A new generation of black workers now flooded into the towns, jamming themselves into backyard shanties in African locations, African freehold townships like Alexandra and servants quarters in white suburban families. For reasons that remain to be fully explained this was also the decade when Africans finally demanded *en masse* to be recognized as urban. Two pivotal events signal the shift. The 1943-4 Alexander bus boycott, and the land invasions in Orlando West lead by James Sofasonke Mpanza—again in 1944. A further sign was the growth of a black trade union movement on the Rand which peaked in 1944. What both the bus boycott and the land invasions were demanding for Africans was to be considered as fully urban. This right or this status the city and central government authorities were reluctantly forced to concede. This amounted to a major shift in the overall political terrain in South Africa to which apartheid was the response. It also generated new elements in the repertoire of struggle. Boycotts, stayaways, land invasions, riots and strikes, which would be partly fused together in the politics of the 1950s. The only problem at this point was that the ANC was totally absent from them all. Instead new leaderships took control, aspects of which would ultimately be absorbed into ANC politics—the first the proletarian mass meeting which directed the boycott over 9 weeks;

Nelson Mandela in his autobiography testifies that this made him now no longer a spectator but a participant and the charismatic, prophet like, despotic, chieflike leadership of Mpanza. The struggle between these in different fragments of the ANC proceeds. Much of this would be synthesized in the new generation of black political struggle in South African in the 1950s.

Now a key question confronts us which is how did the ANC survive this lengthy period of fracture and impotence and what lessons if any this holds for later times. I would isolate 5 factors.

1. ANC in particular was periodically galvanised by the more outrageous repressive exploitative politics of white government—Herzog Bills 1936; Apartheid 1948; banning 1960, June 16<sup>th</sup> 1976 riots when the organization was languishing in the doldrums.
2. This was generally not an instant reflex response. Often rival groups and organizations made the running in mobilizing oppositions to these new acts—the All Africa Convention 1936; the Africa Democratic Party of Hyman Basner in 1944, the PAC in 1959, and BC 1976. The ANC's great strength in such situations was to re-imagine itself, to strike out in new policy directions and to re-configure the balance between its constituencies. It was the ANC's dismal non showing in the Alexandra bus boycott in 1944 and the consequent formation of the ADP which led to the formation of the ANC Youth League and a new focus on the urban. It was 1949 Cato Manor riots when Durban Africans attacked and slaughtered India as which triggered ANC into new policy directions of joint action with other racial groups; it was Sharpeville and its consequences that led to armed struggle at least partly with a view to preempting other groups who were already moving in that direction. And it was the 1976 riots led by BC which led it to refocus on the urban and youth.
3. Furthermore, it must also be recognized that a major element in the ANCs successful survival was the failure, the fragmentation, the loss of steam on the part of its rivals. What this could mean is that the ANC survived because and only so long as its rivals were weaker and more beset by divisions. This has been repeatedly demonstrated over the years. Major fragments split off like Bantu Holomisa, and COPE but for a variety of

reasons, often internal these cannot maintain their thrust. Here ANC retains dominance by default.

4. In the 1950s moreover ANC re-established central control over Provincial Congresses, suppressing their constant internal divisions. This again is a key theme in ANC history and a critical link today. Leave the Province to themselves and they split. Suppress their independence of autonomy and they sulk. In the present day context this exercise of central control can be done that much more effectively due to new communication: cell, email than the Face book, note Sharpeville pictures – a major issue to which we do not pay enough attention – Egypt first facebook or twitter revolt.
5. Finally we must attribute massive role in ANC resurgence to SACP which revived itself in the early 1940s, a good 5 years before the ANC in which among other things constructed a large but ultimately fragile T U movement on the Rand which further strengthened this growing mass character of the ANC and self-absorption with ANC after its 1950 banning.

The role of the communist party in the history of the liberation struggle deserves attention from more than one reason. Together with the ANC Youth League it was responsible, as just mentioned, for the radicalization of African politics in the 1940s, and arguably even more responsible for the turn towards the masses. But perhaps its most contribution to the course of struggle in South Africa was its entrenchment of multi racialism, and co-operation between sympathetic elements of different racial groups. Up until the end of the 1940s the ANC might co-operate with other groups in individual campaigns but, it refused to enter long term alliances, as for example, was evident in its relationship with the All Africa Convention; above all it had an African membership and was African led. The shift towards multi-racialism and the congress Alliance was spearheaded by the CPSA, which itself recorded membership on a non-racial basis and was further pushed forward by the shock of the Cato Manor riots. The role of the Indian communists was thus pivotal in these events. I wonder what the situation is today.

Up until 1950 the ANC remained resolutely African in character, with Mandela leading the anti-alliance anti-collaboration camp. Then things were radically transformed by the banning of the

SACP in 1950 and its absorption into the ranks of the African and Indian Congresses. Out of this emerged first the Defiance Campaign (Indian and African) and the Congress Alliance, the COP and the Freedom Charter.

Within the ANC proper the final shift away from a purely African self definition on the part of the ANC was with the Tambo constitution of 1958—who has ever heard of this. This was in turn overtaken by the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, which was substantially the creation of the SACP, and which was comprehensively non-racial in character. Alongside the formation of the Congress Alliance this amounted to a seismic shift which would leave its imprint on South African politics up until today.

The issue must nevertheless be faced of how strong and durable is this tradition within the ANC. Up until the mid 1980s, for example, non-Africans could not hold office in the ANC. Conversely though from the start the UDF was multi-racial in composition and leadership. Which I wonder is the more authentic voice. It is a critical question which has raised itself recently in the internal politics of the ANC. To me there seems to me to be a deep ambiguity and ambivalence among ordinary South Africans on this issue, which is profoundly influenced—to return to my initial theme—by the history of the past 50 years. And this in turn raises the question of periodisation although in an unconventional way. The main value of historical distance is not disengagement but perspective. Apartheid which seemed to be omnipresent at the time lasted only 40 years. We are now twenty years away, while the earlier history of the ANC lasted 41 years. How do we weigh this?

My final issue which I am going to raise, but which I am not going to try and answer, is how democratic is the ANC? Here it seems to me a great deal more work and research needs to be done. We need to know more about the dry and boring issues which South African historians mostly avoid. Such as who is entitled to vote in ANC elections; how far does (and has) the centre dictated to the localities—the fragments. What do successive constitutions say? How far are constitutions observed and which constitution—that of the country or the ANC—with ultimately trump the other—or can they simply co-exist?

So to conclude, despite major recent advances – SADET volumes, Peter Limb’s new book recently published, Heather Hughes Dube biography, much much more needs to be done. It will enrich our history, it can contribute enormously to internal debates and internal democratic process in the ANC. What seems clear to me is whether we stay where we are or whether we reconstitute the history of the ANCEs fragments and totality. History will matter. Hence the importance of this Conference this week.

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