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44th National Conference: Letter on "certain tendencies" from Dr. A. B. Xuma

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The President-General and Delegates to the Annual Conference of the African National Congress.
Fellow Africans,

I send you, one and all, heartiest greetings. My apologies and regrets for inability to attend this important Annual Conference.

In following up the affairs of the African National Congress one is alarmed as well as distressed over certain tendencies which have developed in Congress in recent years.

These tendencies are undermining and weakening the Congress as a National Liberation Movement and mouthpiece of the African people. To mention but a few I would say:

1. The African National Congress has lost its identity as a National Liberation Movement with a policy of its own and distinct African Leadership. One hears or reads of statements by the "Congresses" and one hardly ever gets the standpoint of the African National Congress. As such, many Africans are confused and wonder who are their leaders and whom must they follow as a consequence.

2. The National Movement is disintegrating into splinters of disaffected groups, such as the ANC (National-Minded Block) and the Bantu National Congress, besides the African National Congress. This causes much confusion in the loyalty of the Africans.

We cannot ignore these divisions whatever their respective strength. Their very existence weakens and undermines and brings mockery to our National struggle as a National aspiration of our people.

Then I remind you that when I took over leadership of the Congress in 1940 the Transvaal was divided into seven sections, Natal into two and the Cape Province into two and the Orange Free State could only claim Bloemfontein for the Congress.

Now you can see why my heart bleeds when I see the emergence of these splits, cracks, antagonisms and struggle for of lice for personal reasons and control of the Organisation which we had healed and buried after I took over the leadership. There were none in 1949.

3. The National Congress seems to fear to face criticisms constructive and otherwise from its following and others. People who voice their reasonable and considered views on Congress policy and/or no policy and on actions in the name of the African National Congress are referred to as "sellers-out" or "agents" or "friends of the Government" instead of being shown where they are wrong.

Many who dare to criticise the hierarchy have been expelled or "liquidated" individually or en masse without a democratic hearing.

This attitude is foreign to Congress as a democratic movement and smacks of totalitarianism or authoritarianism which a movement like Congress cannot countenance and still claim to be fighting for freedom from domination and suppression.

4. The Congress leadership seems to have turned their backs against the African National Congress Nation-building Programme of the 1940's and have even forgotten the Congress Charter of Human Rights "The Africans' Claims" in South Africa of December 16, 1945, which can only be superseded by the Charter of Human Rights of the United Nations instead of other vague, inconclusive so-called charters, which merely defer and confuse the Africans' just and immediate claims.

Congress agreed in 1946 to co-operate with other non-European fellow-nationals on all points of common interest but insisted that the respective national organisations must maintain their identity as integrated regiments in the struggle for common citizenship.

This was intended to make each organisation play its full part in the struggle and bear the necessary sacrifices. It was to avoid the danger of sections using others without making sacrifices themselves.

Many of the delegates are new in Congress. To them I say: Ask the old stalwarts with whom I have struggled in the forties where we stood then.

Above all, ask my "Kindergarten Boys" of the African National Congress Youth League whose foundation representatives met with me in my library at home and were baptised and established by me and the late Mr. R. V. Selope Thema at the BMSC in Johannesburg as the African National Congress Youth League, what they stood for. To them I say remember the 1940's, Remember Africa!

5. By acting on the principle "of action for action's sake and for propaganda reasons" instead of aiming at achieving results, Congress, through the Defiance Campaign, the Western Areas Removal Scheme and the School Boycott, the Congress aroused vain hopes in the breasts of the struggling Africans and made promises of "secret weapons" and "provision of services" for which no preparations were made.

It will be wise for Congress not to embark on revolutionary tactics unless the leaders with the rank are prepared to pay the price.

If leaders arouse the masses and the leaders then fail the masses in the testing hour the loyalty and faith of the masses is shaken in the leadership, and what is worse, in the Organisation itself.

Such actions, under the circumstances, tended to set the clock of our progress back many years.

I appeal to the Annual Conference to rescind its resolution of School Boycott.

With no effective alternative system of education, the boycott of schools with its interference with children and teachers, is bound to be worse for African progress than Bantu Education; in fact, it is not only negative but harmful in that in the long run, it will cause the African people to turn against the ANC.

I must appeal to all delegates to make this Conference one of the most constructive conferences, for examination and re-assessment of our methods, policies and attitudes.

One and all must realise no one else will ever free the Africans but the Africans themselves.

Their genuine friends can help them, but the Africans themselves must rely on themselves.

We must learn to do things for ourselves in order to grow, to plan our programme and campaigns and rely upon our own leadership.

Until we can do that, have faith in ourselves as well as self-reliance, depend upon our inner strength, we do not deserve freedom and could not maintain it if it were offered us on a platter.

Let us re-organise our people, re-integrate the African National Congress as the mouthpiece of the African people.

We must organise ourselves not against other nationals, or to gain anything at anyone else's expense, but only that we must gain strength in our unity because "charity begins at home" and there can be no internationalism without nationalism.

Leadership means service for and not domination over others.

True and genuine leaders serve the cause of the people and do not expect the cause to serve them or become a source of profit and honour for them.

Africa expects all her sons and daughters to serve the cause of the people loyally, sincerely and honestly.

Let us close ranks, fellow-Africans and do our duty.

I wish your deliberations every success.

"Right not might, freedom not serfdom." Yours for the cause,

A B Xuma

1. Published in The World, 28 January 1956