

The ANC can no longer pursue unity and renewal simultaneously

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Synopsis

This article argues that for a very long time the ANC has struggled to deal with its internal weaknesses, resulting in the pulverisation of the state, asserting that the ANC has thus far failed to shrug off negative public perceptions of being incompetent and corrupt. Placing emphasis on why the ANC is incapable of uniting and renewing at the same time all while holding up a mirror for the ANC to reflect on what kind of a leading party it wants to be.

Article

With the 2021 local government elections now behind us, the governing African National Congress, more than any other party in the land, has a mammoth task of self-introspecting and soul-searching. Of the 26.2 million registered voters, only 9 million turned out on voting day. While the ANC is yet to conduct a post-mortem of the elections, some of its lower structures in the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, including the party's former President Jacob Zuma, are already taking the leadership to task for the poor showing at the polls.

Some senior party leaders, notably ANC Women's League President Bathabile Dlamini, are hastening to conclude that those who abstained from voting did so because they could not amass the courage of voting for a different political party. This sentiment has been repeated by ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa, who seems to find solace in the fact that voters stayed away from the poll rather than giving their vote to opposition parties. This is a gross misdirection which signifies, once more, the ANC's failure to read the room.

For a very long time now, the ANC has struggled to deal with its internal weaknesses, resulting in the pulverisation of the state. Furthermore, the ANC has thus far failed to shrug off negative public perceptions of being incompetent and corrupt. At one time, even former Secretary-General Gwede Mantashe conceded that the party had become synonymous with corruption and state capture. As he said, this was a narrative which the ANC needed to confront forthrightly to win back the public's trust. That was in 2017.

The 54th ANC Conference held in 2017 mandated the newly elected leadership to prioritise unity and renewal. Accordingly, party President Cyril Ramaphosa has made uniting and renewing the ANC a central pillar of his ANC Presidency— a noble objective which continues to evade the party to this day.

As it turns out, the ANC cannot unite and renew at the same time. Ramaphosa's campaign for ANC the ANC Presidency was premised on re-establishing clean governance in the state. This was counterposed against the record of his predecessor who is accused of orchestrating state capture and overseeing the deterioration of the South African state. Ramaphosa promised ANC members a complete break with the immediate past. He set himself apart as a Captain who would steer the ship in the right direction during the most violent storms.

To achieve his ambitions, Ramaphosa needed a political super-structure that shares his vision, a capable bureaucracy and a sound fiscus. This seems to have become his biggest challenge. As one Black Business Council leader once asked, "how many Cabinet ministers share Ramaphosa's 'New Dawn' vision?".

At the same time, it has become clear that Ramaphosa cannot instil a new dawn without exorcising the ANC and government of the diabolic spirits that have hitherto possessed the party. Strong contestation within the party about its character and purpose have hobbled his ability to decisively reform both the ANC and the state in pursuit of a better life for all. Remnants of the Zuma era and beneficiaries of the largesse of state capture are refusing to be pushed into political oblivion without a fight. Ramaphosa is alive to this reality. In this probabilities' or '*compound lotteries*' game, to borrow from Nolan McCarty and Adam Meirowitz's book *Political Game Theory*, Ramaphosa is hamstrung by either fears or aspirations as his self-interest to remain at the helm and rationality intersect uncomfortably at a point of disequilibrium.

It has become blatantly clear that Ramaphosa's ANC cannot be responsive to societal needs without getting its house in order. Its compulsive preoccupation with unity is counter-intuitive and both politically and morally paradoxical for the renewal imperative. For the ANC to renew itself, it needs less platitudes and more decisiveness about its character. Among other things, this means putting in place a completely new rules book underpinned by an incontrovertible intolerance for ineptitude and corruption, a truly people-first ethos, and a leadership that evinces a sprit of patriotism and sacrifice. Such a rules book has a potential multiplier effect on effective service delivery.

The time has come for Ramaphosa's ANC to ask itself this pertinent question: "What kind of ANC is required to re-connect with the society it claims to be the leader of?" Are there lessons to be drawn from former President Thabo Mbeki's infamous "Better fewer, but better" mantra, which raised the ire of party membership and perplexed many South Africans when he called for quality membership as opposed to quantity?

Without denigrating the ANC's century-old concept of 'collective leadership', it is now almost perfectly obvious that the party president, which the Gauteng ANC in the build-up to the 2012 Mangaung national conference characterised as the "ultimate propagator and promoter of party values and principles", should lead the charge on renewal. The only other alternative is to do nothing and allow voters in the 2024 general elections to seal the fate of the once glorious movement and toss it into the dustbin of history.