

The Grassroots Transformation of the African National Congress in the 1940s-1950s

Nelson Mandela's 1994 inauguration as South Africa's first democratically elected president soothed decades of racial tensions in that country. State-sanctioned racism, known as apartheid, crumbled under the spasms of the violence that shook Johannesburg and other cities in the 1980s, but apartheid's eventual destruction became possible because of strategic changes among the left in the 1940s and 1950s. The African National Congress (ANC), originally founded as an interest group for the educated African elite, in the 1940s and 1950s forged a wide coalition of workers and intellectuals to challenge apartheid's legitimacy. Together with the South African Communist Party (SACP), the mid-century ANC became a broad-based grassroots organization committed to nonracial democracy. The ANC's transformation happened because demographic and economic changes in the 1930s and 1940s shifted the ANC's constituent base from rural areas to the cities, especially Johannesburg, and the new members pushed the Congress toward more confrontational and ambitious ends. Recogniz-

ing the latent power of the frustrated urban masses, new leadership in the ANC incorporated organic strikes and boycotts in the 1940s into a more coherent and durable movement during the 1950s. The masses and leadership developed a symbiotic relationship; the former offered economic leverage and popular legitimacy, while the latter articulated a vision of racial equality to counter the Nationalists' oppressive paternalism. The state cracked down on the better organized ANC-led movement in the 1960s, but the closer relationship between the ANC leadership and grassroots carried the movement through its difficult times on the long walk to freedom. South Africa still faces serious racial disparities, but its progress from the apartheid age shows the efficacy of a broad-based movement in affecting significant change. Contemporary progressives might model the ANC's structure and strategy as they pursue their agendas.

The Dutch first settled in South Africa in 1657, but their small population and rural lifestyle precluded any racial dominance.¹ Occasional skirmishes over land or cattle peppered an

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otherwise peaceful racial coexistence until the discovery of precious metals in the 1860s. The British, who had come to South Africa during the Napoleonic Wars, became interested in the mineral-rich interior. The descendants of the Dutch settlers, now known as Afrikaners, resented the British incursions and fought the South African War at the turn of the century. The British won a costly victory for control over the natural resources, but reached an understanding with the agriculturally inclined Afrikaners to together exploit African labor on the farms and in the mines. As historian Bernard Muga-bane notes, "Africans and their welfare were sacrificed to promote an abiding settlement for the whites."² The Treaty of Vereengiging ended hostilities in 1902 and precipitated a series of laws that solidified economic and political dominance by whites.

The British and Afrikaners consummated their peace in the 1910 Union Act, which established the regions of Natal, Cape, Transvaal and the Orange Free State as a single British colony. The economic needs of the British mine owners influenced the political agreement between the British and Afrikaners.³ The newly unified South African state passed several laws that forced African men to work part of the year in the mines or on Afrikaner farms, and spend the rest on barren reserves. Harold Wolpe, a South African specialist, terms this arrangement the "dual economy," since Africans split their time between industrial and agrarian labor.⁴ Uprooted from their homes, Africans became more vulnerable to whites' economic hegemony.

The new government augmented its economic disenfranchisement of the African community with socially debilitating policies that divided the

African population. For example, the 1927 Native Administration Act empowered compliant tribal chiefs in the reserves to deter any unified African resistance. More importantly, social legislation constructed a regime of racial hierarchies that informed later Nationalist policy. This state ideology posited a world strictly separated by racial groups of varying degrees of advancement, and healthy social relations depended on clearly defined group roles. The compliant tribal chiefs, then, promoted the state's racial paradigm, since they accepted and profited from the racial divisions. Some groups began to challenge this framework in the early 20th century by forwarding new conceptions of group relations. African nationalists, black trade unionists, and Marxist groups challenged the economic and social order by rejecting the state's interpretation of race. Unfortunately, internecine disputes and the respective groups' strict organizational structures stymied their efforts to change South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century. Political resistance to white rule took shape in the 1910s, but floundered until the ANC and SACP together embraced grassroots influence.¹

The first unified African nationalist movement began when Pixley Ka Izake Seme, an African educated in the United States and Britain, called on 60 educated Africans to meet at Bloemfontein on Jan 8th, 1912 to "together devise ways and means of forming our national union for the purpose of creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges" by forming a National Congress, the forerunner to the ANC.⁵ Few Africans had any rights or privileges to defend, making this nascent ANC an intrinsically elitist organization. The Congress accepted

i. I distinguish political resistance from military resistance, which effectively ended after the British annexation of Zululand in 1887.

support from sympathetic whites, but welcomed no non-Africans to its membership. Its narrow focus led it to concentrate on small issues germane only to the small African upper class. For example, its first major campaign attempted to defend the limited African franchise in the Western Cape Province, where blacks able to pass a "civilization test" could vote. The ANC's effort garnered little support outside those few Africans concerned with limited voting rights, and ultimately failed to protect what rights that some Africans could claim at the time.⁶ The ANC failed to attract a large following in the decades after its birth, and labor groups soon eclipsed it as Africans' political voice.

While the early ANC was focusing on the political rights of "civilized" Africans, the state continued to push most of the black population into the capitalist economy. Draconian labor laws like the 1916 Labor Registration Act funneled Africans into low-wage, unskilled labor. Wretched conditions, especially in the gold mines, eventually provoked organic resistance, but black workers lacked the organization to effectively wield their latent economic power. In 1920, forty thousand Africans walked out of the mines on the Rand, prompting one newspaper to observe that "The strike is undoubtedly an instinctive mass revolt against their whole status ...The Native Congress had very little to (do) with the movement...The strike is in no man's control."⁷ The ANC's hands-off approach is unsurprising, given its outlook in 1920. Conditions in the gold mines had little to do with the ANC's emphasis on voting rights in Western Cape; the mineworkers' goals fell outside the ANC's mission, namely, to protect rather than extend the limited African rights.

The African mineworkers also fell outside the constituency of the Communist Party. Though tens of thou-

sands of striking workers would likely have garnered communist support in any European country, South Africa's racial dynamics estranged the striking black miners from the white workers who made up the International Socialist League (ISL), the forerunner the SACP. Though one ISL leader, S.P. Bunting, fought to unite white and black workers, his pleas came to no avail. Despite the racial progressivism of one its leaders, the ISL responded to its white base and idly observed the strike.⁸ The communists surrendered their chance to lead a multiracial working class movement in 1922, when it supported white demands for preferential racial treatment.

The 1922 strike began when the Chamber of Mines announced a higher ratio of black to white workers, prompting fears among whites that African workers would depress wages and threaten jobs. Groups of Afrikaner workers branded themselves "commandos", on the model of Boer guerrillas from the South African War, and led the strike under the slogan "Workers of the World unite for a White South Africa."⁹ Though some communist leaders discouraged such outright racial animosity, most dismissed African workers as irrelevant "pre-proletariats", prompting many black workers to associate communism with the white working class. The communists' acquiescence to white racism alienated the Party from most black workers, but it hardly won it deep support among whites. A Labor-Nationalist Pact government won the 1924 election with the support of the white working class, co-opting the communists' white base.¹⁰ Abandoned by the white working class, the communists tried to repair relations with the black population, but it took nearly thirty years for the Communist Party to integrate with the ANC.

The racial tensions on the Rand foreshadowed the friction to come

with South Africa's impending demographic upheaval. Whereas blacks had mostly lived in rural areas and worked seasonally on the fields or in the mines, that "dual economy" began to collapse in the 1920s, precipitating an exodus to urban areas and a revolution within the political movements. A drought in 1922-23 devastated small black farms across the country, making city life marginally superior to the subsistence farming that had supported Africans for half the year.¹¹ A trickle toward the cities turned into a flood when the Second World War soon increased urban labor demands, and this industrialization attracted most of the former subsistence farmers to cities, especially Johannesburg. The population of Africans living in urban areas more than doubled from 1921 to 1945, and Johannesburg's 5,500 new factories drew over 150,000 new black residents in that period.¹²

The African political leadership only slowly adjusted to the new demographic realities. The International Commercial Workers Union briefly unified over a hundred thousand newly urbanized Africans in the 1920s, but failed to mount any powerful strikes or leverage any concessions for its members. Lacking any accomplishments, the ICU's support dwindled toward the end of the 1920s, but the ANC hardly sought to organize the ICU's constituency of new urban blacks.¹³ Instead, it focused its efforts on opposing Prime Minister Hertzog's Native Bills, which completely removed Africans from the voting rolls in Western Cape Province.¹⁴ The ANC's failure to halt the Afrikaner assault on blacks' limited political rights brought the ANC to a crossroads. It could quietly dissolve itself, as some old-guard members suggested, or it could re-orient its goals and tactics by embracing the plight of the new urban black population.¹⁵ Inspired by organic resistance among urban Africans, young

ANC activists like Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo sought to incorporate city dwelling Africans and their causes into the ANC. Younger ANC members pushed a structural overhaul of the organization that encouraged wider participation among the African masses, and their participation in turn changed the ANC's mission and strategy.

A series of clashes over housing and transportation rights outside Johannesburg gave impetus to those arguing for a broader base and mission for the ANC. Tens of thousands of Africans filled factory jobs in Johannesburg, but restrictive land laws shunted the newcomers to the city's periphery. Tents and shanties popped up on the strips of vacant land surrounding Johannesburg, the population reliant upon white owned bus companies to take them to work in the downtown factories.¹⁶ The bus companies exploited their very captive market by arbitrarily raising rates in 1942, prompting a mass town-meeting, unsanctioned by the ANC, which resulted in a bus boycott. For eleven months, tens of thousands of Africans walked 24 miles round-trip to the factories every day, eventually forcing the bus companies to reduce their fares.¹⁷

Just like the 1920 Rand mine strike, the bus boycott proceeded without much organizational support. Unlike that earlier incarnation of African resistance, though, the progressive leadership this time sought to turn popular discontent into a viable political force. Dr. Alfred Xuma took the reins of the ANC in 1940, and though a moderate himself, he recognized that the ANC needed to expand its recruitment, lest it follow the ICU's path to oblivion. The ANC's failure to stop the Hertzog Native Bills was indicative of a weak organization, and its membership numbered less than 4000 — hardly enough to represent the hundreds of thousands Africans that were just permanently entering the white-controlled

economy.¹⁸ Xuma presided over the 1942 ANC Convention, which birthed two important developments. First, it authorized Anton Lembede, A.P. Mda, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela to form a Youth League to promote causes relevant to the mostly young new urban African class. Second, these first Youth Leaguers successfully pushed the Congress to hire a community organizer to build better relations with people like the bus boycotters.¹⁹ The existence of a community organizer signaled a shift within the ANC. No longer would it limit itself to protest letters and deputations, which do not require broad participation, but it would build upon the groundswell of political unrest begun by the bus boycotters. By hiring a community organizer, the ANC made clear its commitment to ally itself with the urban masses.

The new ANC leaders branched out to both the larger black population, as well as to leftist white leaders. The ANC adopted a new constitution at its 1943 convention that welcomed anyone, regardless of race, that supported its goals.²⁰ Though some black nationalists initially distrusted white and Indian allies, they worked together to articulate a platform acceptable to all. The CPSA, then the only viable political home for progressive whites, also sought common ground with the ANC.ⁱⁱ The Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU), a previously marginal player, elected J.B. Marks its leader in 1943.²¹ As a leader in both the Communist Party and the ANC, Marks strengthened the bridges between the two groups and encouraged more assertive action, especially by organized labor.

The Communist Party welcomed

closer ties with the ANC, and had been trying to improve relations with the black community since the 1922 white strike debacle. The Party sponsored broad-ranging night schools for African workers and organized black unions. The Communist Party also published a "Native Republic Thesis" that situated South Africa's racial tensions within a larger class narrative. Importantly, the Thesis called for nonracial democracy as a step toward a classless society, thereby aligning itself closely with the ANC's stated goals. The state banned the Party in 1950, pushing many of its members into the ANC. The party reformed underground as a more dynamic and diverse organization than previously existed. To evade the law, small, independent "discussion clubs" met in private homes. Absent a stultifying Central Committee, the SACP pursued closer cooperation with the ANC.²² Some ANC Youth Leaguers met the mostly white SACP with suspicion, but the two groups both sought nonracial democracy, and by the early 1950s they became officially aligned. The SACP imbued the growing ANC with more activist zeal, and together the groups organized the mass protests of the 1950s.

State racism wore heavily on black South Africa for the first half of the twentieth century, but the 1948 election of the Nationalist Party made a bad situation worse. The Nationalists campaigned on a platform of white chauvinism, and their policy of "separate development" ossified South Africa's already stark racial divide. Just as the formation of a united South Africa in 1910 preceded a flurry of discriminatory legislation, the election of the Afrikaner government unleashed a cascade of racial laws. The Popula-

ii. *Cape Province hosted a small Liberal Party, but it had virtually no voice in interracial dialogue in the 1940s. See: Richard Dale "Review: Liberalism's Failure in South Africa" The Review of Politics 35.4 (1973), 573.*

tion Registration Act of 1950 assigned all citizens a specific race — white, African, South Asian, or Coloured. The Mixed Marriages Act prohibited interracial marriage, while the Group Areas Act strengthened the government's hand in racial zoning and pass laws. Unlike the left's inchoate response in the 1910s, though, progressives in the 1950s unified and fought for an alternative vision for South Africa, based on equality rather than group hierarchy

The ANC's 1949 Annual Conference showcased the movement's more coherent and assertive approach. Youth League leaders Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu drafted a Programme of Action to outline the ANC's response to the new government. The ANC's new manifesto invited closer cooperation with allied groups, leading to a Joint Planning Council to coordinate strategy with organizations like the South African Indian Congress.²³ The Council soon undertook the largest and most intellectually coherent endeavor ever staged by government opponents. On November 8, 1951, the Council resolved to stage a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience to target apartheid's six cornerstone laws (Population Registration Act, Group Areas Act, Separate Registration of Voters Act, Bantu Authorities Act, Natives Act, and Suppression of Communism Act).²⁴ This Defiance Campaign, set to begin June 26th, 1952, invited all apartheid opponents to join. Walter Sisulu, J.B. Marks, and other ANC and trade union leaders canvassed the country, speaking at rallies and meetings, to encourage widespread participation. As National Volunteer-in-Chief, Mandela traveled the country to set up committees at every ANC branch, with local Volunteers-in-Chief spearheading recruitment efforts.²⁵ The masses had proven their willingness push against the state during the bus boycotts; with

an active organizing campaign, the ANC turned popular enthusiasm into a targeted and sustained mission. On June 26th, 1952, thousands of black South Africans, as well as allied Indians and whites, purposefully broke apartheid's cornerstone laws. Blacks entered white areas and anti-government speakers gave public addresses, forcing police to arrest nonviolent activists. Peaceful protesters filled up jails across the country, signaling popular commitment to the ANC's new assertive agenda. Unlike the intermittent protests and unorganized strikes on the early 20th century, the Defiance Campaign funneled popular anger into a well defined mission to expose apartheid's absurdity.

Apartheid survived the Defiance Campaign. Few volunteers could afford to miss work, and the ANC feared that a fizzling campaign would devolve into violence. Riots broke out in Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg in November as police arrested peaceful protesters. The Campaign's organizers faced more serious charges for inciting the unrest, and the ANC began to focus on their legal defense. Nonetheless, the Campaign established the ANC as a mass movement. Its membership swelled by tens of thousands, convincing its leaders to solicit popular suggestions for a new manifesto written its constituents.²⁶ The public enthusiastically responded; Mandela recalls that contributions "came on serviettes, on paper torn from exercise books, on scraps of foolscap, and the backs of our own leaflets. It was humbling to see how the suggestions of ordinary people were often far ahead of the leaders."²⁷ The ANC compiled the responses into the Freedom Charter, which it presented to an enthusiastic rally outside Johannesburg on June 25th, 1955. The Freedom Charter defined the ANC's mission, namely, to create a nonracial social democracy in South Africa.²⁸ All the ANC's subse-

quent actions rested upon the thoughts articulated in the Freedom Charter.

The Freedom Charter's inspiring language served its compilers well. The government feared a popular movement grounded in clear thinking. The state banned the Congress in 1960, forcing its leaders into exile or hiding. Mandela and five other leaders were convicted of treason in 1964 and sentenced to life imprisonment; for nearly 30 years they drew strength from the knowledge that their actions earned popular support. Indeed, the ANC survived brutal government crackdowns because of the bonds it built with the South African masses. Though its strategy varied through the years, the ANC ultimately forced and won free elections in 1994 because it maintained the grassroots model developed in the 1940s and 1950s.

Contemporary movements can learn from the ANC's bottom-up model. The Congress failed as an interest group for the elite, but thrived when it incorporated a broader base. Its suc-

cess depended, though, on its ability to cogently articulate the popular agenda. The Freedom Charter expressed the hopes of the African masses, and embodied the relationship the ANC developed between its leadership and member base in the preceding decades. The ANC organized and compiled the public suggestions, but the public authored the message. Political groups today could learn from the ANC's balance of popular legitimacy and visionary leadership. The present anti-war movement, for example, consists of countless eccentric groups pursuing different strategies; the leaders of organized labor, on the other hand, seem more intent on maintaining access to power than representing most workers. No one can expect utopia from human led endeavors, and contemporary struggles can only hope for progress toward their goals, but South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy shows that broad based movements can built lasting and fruitful connections with the public.

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