



YOUNG COMMUNIST LEAGUE

BUA THURSDAYS

31 May 2012

COMPETING IDENTITIES OF A NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT

VERSUS ELECTORAL PARTY POLITICS:

CHALLENGES OF INCUMBENCY

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Thank you for the opportunity to share ideas with young Left activists on an issue that is fundamental to the definition of the character of the liberation movement and to the cause of social change. The theme itself is loaded, more in the sense of the extensiveness of issues to be covered. So I will only deal briefly with some of them.

Let me start off with general observations on the issue of competing identities and the challenges of incumbency.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Firstly, this issue of challenges of incumbency arises because we are concerned not so much with competing but contradictory identities: whether as cadres we have not become six-day sinners who on "Sundays" go for penance at rallies, branch and other meetings, BUA Thursdays and so on; but then revert to the sinner's default for the rest of the week!

Secondly, it seems that we have developed the tendency to deal with the "sins of incumbency" narrowly in terms of values, culture and traditions – as a subjective phenomenon – without reference to the class structure of South African society and the changing income dynamics since the attainment of democracy.

Thirdly, while themes of this kind oblige us to look at our weaknesses, we should not, in doing so, lose sight of the progress that our society has made since 1994. We should be proud that we have used the beach-head of the transition as a platform for political and socio-economic change, even if in many areas this may have been too slow and too tortuous.

Lastly, as we debate these issues, we need fully to appreciate that there is a movement out there among young people, who are using their sixth sense as a generation to identify their mission in history and making their own tryst with

destiny. To illustrate, this is graphically represented by the Young Professionals Forum, who have decided to mobilise their peers and society generally around Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan because, in their own words, the Plan is “The Freedom Charter of our time”. This sixth sense is also reflected in the call for “Economic Freedom in our Lifetime” popularised by the ANC Youth League. We can debate how to populate the slogan; but we cannot gainsay the fact that it is timely, apposite and appropriate to the current phase of social transformation. I am confident that the YCL is an active part of these stirrings among young people!

ORGANISATIONAL REVIEW AND INCUMBENCY

As we all know, the Organisational Renewal document released for discussion by the ANC makes many proposals on how to deal with the challenges of political incumbency. Some of the proposals are new, and others are a consolidation of old ideas that were unfortunately rejected at that fateful ANC National General Council in 2005.

Some of these proposals include:

- building a new corps of cadres with political, ethical as well as academic and technical acumen
- strengthening Luthuli House to be able to manage not only the exercise of political power and constitutional statecraft as well as the multitudes of members and supporters; but also how to relate to civil society – including intellectuals, artists and media – not as victim and protestor; but as leader
- the operationalisation of the decision on the Integrity Commission: a commission that will have the legitimacy and authority to call members who stray to order
- a radical shift in the management of leadership contestation so we can dispense with the current pretence that everyone is waiting for October when nominations will start, while people are actually organising factional meetings about slates in the middle of the night.

On the latter, we may need to go even further and state clearly that members who wish to stand for particular positions should declare, get vetted, afforded a platform in the branches and regions to explain their proposed value addition; and get disqualified if they break the rules. This is one of the things that we can learn from sister-parties such as Chama Cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania and FRELIMO in Mozambique.

Of profound relevance to this issue of incumbency and its impact on the organisation is how in 1994 the ANC transited into government. In the NEC Political

Report to the 1994 ANC Bloemfontein Conference, President Nelson Mandela made a pointed observation that we should take to heart even today:

“Never before has the ANC had to address such crucial questions about itself. Seldom before, have we experienced such dislocation as in the few months after the elections. In this regard, we should be self-critical about the manner in which we conducted ourselves in this period. Ours was not a planned entry into government. Except for the highest echelons, we did not have a plan for the deployment of cadres. We were disorganised, and behaved in a manner that could have endangered the revolution.”

It should be added that this formulation came from then Deputy President Walter Sisulu, at the last NEC meeting the day before the Conference as the NEC was finalising the President’s Political Report. Is history bearing him out – that we behaved then and are conducting ourselves now in a manner that endangers the revolution?

OBJECTIVE CONDITIONS: CHANGING CLASS STRUCTURE

Beyond these subjective factors that we have referred to above, relating to organizational questions, what are the objective circumstances that have spawned ‘the sins of incumbency’?

This is a fundamental issue that has not been sufficiently canvassed by the South African Left. The consequence of this is that we end up moralising about values and culture of struggle under conditions of freedom and a changing societal class structure.

What does not receive sufficient attention is that we have to implement the programme of social transformation in an advanced capitalist society, and in a small open economy under conditions of globalisation. So, in large measure, we have to manage the socio-economic system and the programmes of change taking this reality into account.

These programmes have to be undertaken in a society that has hitherto been characterised as Colonialism of a Special Type (with the colonisers or the metropolis and the colonised residing in one geographic entity, unlike in other former African colonies). As a result, we have to contend with lifestyles of the erstwhile metropolis (essentially the white community) that are profoundly pervasive.

Such lifestyles are based on a standard of living that is artificially high compared to today’s global “middle class”, in terms for instance of assets, number of cars per household, domestic assistants, swimming pools, emulation of the European “gentry” and so on.

In pursuit of non-racial equality, the Black middle and upper strata aspire to achieve that living standard of the metropolis; and many strive to do so in one fell swoop. Aggravating this is the global culture of short-termism in the conduct of business and material self-advancement.

It is in part a combination of these factors that has contributed to the levels of inequality we have in South African society today. The measure of income inequality (Gin co-efficient) in South Africa stands at 0.67 which, according to some estimates is the second highest in the world. In fact, 20% of the poorest South Africans earn 2.3% of the National Income, while the richest 20% earn about 70% of this National Income.

Contained in these dynamics of inequality is the fact that the class structure of South African society has massively changed in the 18 years of democracy. Extrapolating from work done on the South African “middle class” (Southall:2004; Visagie and Posel: 2011) and using measures of both income and affluence, the South African middle strata increased from about 10% of the population in 1994 to about 20% in 2011.

This is because of access particularly by the Black majority to education and skills, employment equity and economic empowerment – developments of which we should be proud. This has also been accelerated by the premium that society pays because of skills shortages. The largest growth of the middle strata has been among Africans, the absolute number of which has more than doubled since 1994.

Such progress – and the fact that the Black middle strata have been the most visible beneficiaries of the project of social transformation – should of course be celebrated.

What, though, is the relevance of this to the ‘sins of incumbency’?

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL INCUMBENCY

The fundamental implication of these social dynamics is that the changing class structure within the Black community, the burgeoning of Black middle and upper strata, is a direct or indirect consequence of the political project itself; or it happens because of opportunities in the political or public sphere.

These mainly First Generation middle and upper strata quite legitimately aspire and pursue the artificially high standard of living of the metropolis. This endeavour is legitimate because it forms part of the project of social change and non-racial equality. Yet, unlike their white counterparts, these emergent middle strata do not have historical assets, and they have large nuclear and extended families to support.

As a consequence, they have to rely on massive debt and/or patronage. Having dipped their toes into that lifestyle but with no such historical assets as are available to the white middle and upper strata, some then try to acquire the resources by hook or by crook.

Ascendancy to these higher rungs of the social ladder happens through a variety of channels, including:

- management positions in the civil service;

- ‘streetwise’ unemployed people who get into political leadership positions at local level and by the stroke of a pen become councillor and migrate to the middle strata (of course, other streetwise peers then want to displace them in ‘*phuma singene*’ mobilisation);
- the university student leadership where, besides perks attached to SRC positions, some student leaders now demand a seat in university tender committees to get kick-backs; and
- trade union leadership which exercises authority over pension funds amounting to billions of Rands, or even at shop-floor level where shop-stewards can influence catering and other service tenders.

While there is a new crop of young Black professionals and entrepreneurs who are rising on the social ladder only due to their skills and acumen and do not require affirmative action, these are still the exception that proves the rule.

In the main, the position of the emergent middle and upper strata is tenuous and insecure. The consequence of this is that, unlike the middle strata in “mature” class societies, the *raison d’être* of these emergent strata is not so much pride in the professions, or engagement in discourse on the nation’s vision, or the shaping of positive value systems for society. Rather, it is survival and climbing up the steep social ladder.

The sins of incumbency derive in large measure from this. Within parties, intra-party patronage and corruption take root. The political centre is unable to correct the local mediators to mass constituencies and the foot-soldiers on whom it relies to garner votes. In pursuit of numbers, a price is attached to a Conference delegate’s vote. And to paraphrase a lecturer at a recent Gauteng political education workshop, a toxic leadership then begets toxic members, some of whom actually demand financial and other incentives to vote in particular ways.

Within society, there develops among rebel-rousers, a nationalism of convenient victimhood, where radical slogans are used to hide incompetence and greed. The logic in this instance is: because you were oppressed, you can mess up, steal and plunder; and shout racism when challenged.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me posit five questions for further reflection.

Firstly, because this is an event of the Young Communist League, I wish to pose the question whether the leadership of the SACP are not finding themselves embroiled in competition for resources and factionalism in the ANC! Related to this is the question whether, by emphasising political office in terms of the Executive and the

legislatures as platforms for change, at the expense of organisation and mobilisation, they are not becoming so embedded in the mainstream of political patronage that they are in fact testing the limits of self-liquidation as a party!

The second issue is whether the ANC and the rest of the Tripartite Alliance can claim to have a legitimate, popular, confident and firm Centre able to exercise authority because it is not, itself, living in a glass house!

Thirdly, we need to reflect on the issue of whether the 'sins of incumbency' can be dealt with merely as an internal organisational issue! This is because, besides the class dynamics treated above, these sins affect – as we heard during the course of this week – infrastructure spending and payment for work done; delivery of text-books to poor children; quality of legislation passed by Parliament; and salary demands of lower middle strata in the public service as they demand the narrowing of the wage gap and advancement in the 'middle class' stakes...

The fourth issue is about political incumbency and the private sector. Besides issues of the binary partnerships in malfeasance between private and public actors, we need to reflect on whether we should not value the existence of a strong and autonomous private sector – in part a legacy of Colonialism of a Special Type. This is from the point of view of this discussion on 'sins of incumbency' in that this private sector does provide an alternative platform of 'middle and upper class' accumulation. Thus, unlike in many other former colonies, contestation for political power can become less of a matter of life and death. Arising from this is the question whether – besides matters of ethics – it is not in the strategic self-interest of political incumbents that those who depart the party political stage get employment and succeed in the private sector, so they should not feel obliged to invoke *phuma singene!*

Lastly, now that we have located, after so many years, the sweet-spot of one-million members and more, the ANC may need to ask itself the question whether it should not declare 2012 – 2022, the first ten years of its second century, the Decade of the Cadre, so we can clean up and improve quality!

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