

**SOME (COMRADELY) REFLECTIONS ON THE CENTENARY
CELEBRATION OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS (ANC)
AND THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY EVENTS IN BLOEMFONTEIN,
SOUTH AFRICA, JANUARY 7-8, 2012**

by
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*To point a moral to a comrade
First pamphlet
It isn't that things are easy,
Nor is it being easy
that's essential.*

.... . . .
*The effort we make
Is neither great nor small
It is*

*What it has to be
(Marcelino dos Santos,
Vice President PR Mozambique, 1970-81)*

.... . . .
*Hide nothing from the masses of our people
Tell no lies
Expose lies wherever they are told
Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures
no easy victories.
(Amilcar Cabral, leader, PAIGC liberation movement 1963-73)*

*...I have walked that long road to freedom.
I have tried not to falter;
I have made mistakes along the way.
But I have discovered the secret that after
climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are
many more hills to climb...
Nelson Mandela, President South Africa 1994-99)*

Introduction

I was quite happy when I received a letter on ANC letterhead in mid-December inviting me to the ANC Centenary Celebration in Bloemfontein January 8, 2012. It was an honor of a special sort.

My relationship with the ANC goes back a few years. My first exposure to the ANC was when I participated in an Antioch College Year Abroad at the University College of Dar Es Salaam in 1965-66. There, my best friends were South African students, both ANC and PAC, who like me, were enrolled at the University.

I spent a lot of time with them around the ANC and FRELIMO offices then located on Independence Avenue “near the Chinese Restaurant.” I used to go in and out of the offices looking for publications and talking to people there. It became a normal thing to see and chat with people like J.B. Marks, Josiah Jele and Oliver Tambo.

My early ANC “connectivity” was deepened when in 1968 I spent six months in London working with Basil Davidson and Polly Gaster’s Committee for Freedom in Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau (CFMAG). During this period I also regularly volunteered in the London Anti Apartheid Movement office (AAM) then located on Charlotte Street, near the Goodge Street tube station. In those days the AAM was run by Ethel de Keyser and she connected me to other leading figures in London like CLR James and his wife, Selma James. But my real education came from working and spending time with people like Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Albie Sachs and Stephanie Kemp, Alan Brooks, Bloke Modisane and Abdul Minty.

The orientation and instruction from Dar Es Salaam and London began bearing heavy fruit when in 1979, I joined the staff of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Program to Combat Racism (PCR) as program director and research secretary. One of the greatest highlights of three years work based in Geneva, Switzerland (the WCC’s headquarters) was accompanying then ANC President Oliver R. Tambo to a session of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) discussing the Geneva Accords’ protection of prisoners of war and civilian non-combatants. It was a singular honor to be present as President Tambo formally presented the ANC’s position on these critical questions.

So, on December 29th this year, I rejoiced when family and friends generously raised the money for me to fly to Bloemfontein, South Africa for the ANC Centenary Celebration in the middle of peak Southern Africa holiday travel time. I did not travel alone for I felt that I was there representing numbers of people across the USA who had actualized my getting there. Neither was I alone in another way, as a Columbia College friend traveled to the Celebration as well, making a photomontage of the festivities.

I

The African National Congress (ANC) was founded January 8, 1912 in Bloemfontein, South Africa (recently re-named Mangaung) at a conference attended by nearly two hundred delegates. Those in attendance were a mix of teachers, clerks, messengers, and traders. Amongst the group was Rev. Walter Rubusana; Alfred Mangena; Charlotte Maxeke an American-educated teacher and graduate of the AME Church’s Wilberforce University in southwestern Ohio; and John Langalibalele Dube who would become the ANC’s first president.

Originally called the South African Native National Congress (SANN), and formed with the intent to build a broad following amongst the African people, from its earliest days the ANC was viewed as a threat by the South African government. It is important to note the context of the founding of the ANC. Not a recreational association, the ANC was an organization founded in struggle and for struggle.

In 1910, the various white settler colonies of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State (whose capital is Bloemfontein) joined together to form the Union of South Africa. Eighteen months after the founding of the ANC the Natives Land Act was passed on June 20, 1913, stripping black people of 80% of their land and making black people's physical movement outside their reserves permissible only if they could prove they were performing labor for white people.

For the occasion of the ANC's Centenary Celebration, the National Executive Committee of the ANC (NEC) issued a lengthy political statement entitled:

January 8 Statement 2012
The Year of Unity in Diversity
1912- 2012, Celebrating 100 Years of Selfless Struggle

Essentially, the January 8 Statement is a narrative of ANC history set within the framework of South Africa's history. After the historical section, with highlights of some key lessons from that history, the statement identifies major challenges that lie ahead. Interestingly, the 1993 Revolutionary Democratic Program (RDP) and the even older 1955 Freedom Charter are identified as the main blueprints to be used as the basis for future work.

The statement's two main emphases for the present period are: 1) transforming the quality of life for all South Africans, especially the poor, through building the economy and creating jobs; and 2) the empowerment of women.

The last sections of the January 8 Statement are a salutation to ANC people who died in 2011 and various messages of support from:

- 1) The ANC Women's League (ANCWL)
- 2) The ANC Veteran's League (ANCVL)
- 3) The South African Communist Party (SACP)
- 4) The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATV)
- 5) The South African National Civics Organization (SANCO)

Significantly, there is no message of support from the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) included in this section, however a message of support was placed on the ANCYL web site dated 08 January 2012. (Most commentators felt that, though Centenary organizers alleged that the absence of an ANCYL support message was due to the message arriving too late to Centenary headquarters, the real reason was the continuing conflict between the leadership of the ANC and the controversial Youth League leader, Julius Malema)

The festivities began in Mangaung on a traditional note with a Friday night vigil at the Wesleyan church and the ceremonial slaughtering of a bull – all under the watchful eyes of chiefs, headmen and healers, most of whom were members of the Congress of Traditional Leaders (CONTRALES).

On Saturday, January 7th President Jacob Zuma gave a President's Dinner, a formal, catered affair, under a tent with more than 1700 invited guests and additional 'guests' arriving throughout the evening. The dinner began at 4:00 pm and was still going on at my departure around 1:00 am. Cyril Ramaphosa, the former general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), now a prominent businessman, was one of two MC's who introduced the twenty speakers during the course of the dinner.

Despite its length and the extensive agenda, the dinner was for me a highlight. The speakers included the current presidents of Ethiopia, Tanzania, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, Uganda and Rwanda. Neither President Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe) nor President Jose Eduardo dos Santos (Angola) showed up at the centenary. Kenneth Kaunda, past president of Zambia, received a standing ovation as he walked to the speaker's stage singing. Most present knew and were recognizing the tremendous contribution that Zambia and the Zambian people had made in the struggle to end apartheid. Another person who magnetized the audience with his presence was Ahmed Kathrada, the former Robben Island cellmate and close friend to Nelson Mandela. As it developed "Kathy", as he is affectionately known, was the closest to any presence of Mandela at the Centenary festivities. Throughout the weekend, "Madiba" and **his giant absence** due to his not feeling well was the proverbial "elephant-in-the-room," each and every moment, at each and every event.

But the person who made the dinner a meaningful event was someone who is totally unknown to most non-ANC people and little known to even some of the most ardent South Africa watchers. Her name: Ruth Mompati. She was "not prepared to talk", she said, after finally reaching the stage, delayed as the audience sang a song that was identified as 'her song'. She then revealed that she had just been asked to speak (perhaps one of those 'faux-pas' moments when an organizer realizes that the whole speakers platform does not have a woman)

Ruth Mompati started with the ANC as the typist for Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo in their Johannesburg law practice from 1953-1961. She was a founding member of the multi racial Federation of South African Woman (FEDSAW) in 1953. (Incidentally FEDSAW was a multi-racial organization long before the ANC became one) During her years in exile and after her military training she was the head of the ANC Women's Section in Tanzania and a member of the NEC. In the early 1980's she was both chief representative of the ANC in the United Kingdom and head of the ANC's Board of Religious Affairs.

Ruth's words to the dinner were spare, clear and from her heart. She basically said we must become the ANC we once were and stop the fighting and corruption. Her eloquence and her message resulted in a standing ovation.

Another speaker who received a standing ovation before he even reached the podium was the venerated Cuban leader, Jorge Risquet who spoke on behalf of Cuba's Revolutionary Council. The applause was an unequivocal statement of gratitude for Cuba's contribution to the Southern African liberation movements and to ending apartheid, a contribution that includes the thousands of Cuban men and women combatants who died fighting apartheid forces in Angola and Namibia.

Another aspect of the dinner that stands out for me was getting to see friends and comrades that I had not seen for years. I ran into Zeph Makgetla and Neva Seidman, a couple that I first met in Lusaka Zambia in 1974 when Neva was in her teens. Since then she has served as COSATU's chief economist and today Zeph, her husband, once a leading Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) cadre is South Africa's ambassador to Greece. Every time I turned around there was another friend, another comrade, another person who has been my teacher on my own road. The poet Keorapste Kgositile, who I first met in Dar Es Salaam in 1968 when he was the University of Dar Es Salaam's artist in residence; former Robben Island prisoner with Mandela, Namibian leader Toivo ya Toivo and his American-born lawyer wife, Mrs. Vicki ya Toivo; these three have been like family to me all these years. Marcelino dos Santos, vice president of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and a founder of FRELIMO along with Eduardo Mondlane, made the long trip to Mangaung on the train from Maputo. I turn to greet him and see Josiah Jele, first ANC Representative to the United Nations whom my oldest son is named after. Josiah and I used to discuss jazz together from time to time and munch on samosas in Dar Es Salaam cafes. I turned back to Marcelino but bumped instead into Rev. Frank Chikane and Rev. Molefe Tsele, prominent United Democratic Front (UDF) activists who in the late 1990's left the church ranks and joined the administration of President Thabo Mbeki who succeeded Nelson Mandela.

So many past comrades and friends are now gone. My mind keeps bringing up all those who would have wanted to be at the Centenary Celebration were they still alive. I think of Mfanafuthi "Johnny" Makatini, once the ANC's chief representative in the United States. I think of Denis Brutus and Alex LaGuma, of Di Scott and Lifford Cenge, the last two being amongst that lengthy list of South Africans who were often the moving force behind local anti-apartheid groups all over the USA. Nevertheless, meeting all these friends and comrades throughout the evening was wonderful... even as I reluctantly realized that this meeting could well be our last encounter.

II

Pixley ka Isaka Seme's Clarion call in 1911...

"It is conclusively urgent that this Congress should meet this year,
The demon of racialism,
The aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud,
The animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas,
Between the Basutos and every other Native
... must be buried and forgotten;
We are one people.
These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of ail our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance to-day."

Sunday, January 8, 2012. The Centenary Day in Bloemfontein/ Mangaung was a clear and very hot day. It was the kind of day that attorney Pixley ka Isaka Seme might have wished for when he issued his historic 1911 call to have a congress to unite the various South African tribes. The people responded then. And on January 8, 2012, the South African people responded anew. Estimates vary on

the number of people who came to Mangaung but none are less than 100,000. My feeling is that that Sunday (almost all 100,000 folk were trying to get into that 48,000 seat Bloemfontein Free State Stadium.(renovated in 2010 for the World Cup) What an outpouring of folk! The ramps entering the stadium were packed past over-flowing and young (mostly inexperienced) women with arms locked were desperately trying to keep people moving in and out of the right entrances. Lying along the sides of the ramps were hundreds of older women tired out from long bus and train rides to reach Mangaung. Despite the intensity and confusion, I was struck by what an amazing mobilization it was and how much it was a physical exclamation point to the announcement made by President Zuma during his speech that "the membership of the ANC stands at more than 1 million members."

The impressive numbers mobilized for the Centenary reminded me of a cardinal point once made to me by a Swedish academician about how "participation" was one of the main barometers of a legitimate liberation movement. Watching all those people I thought about all the "challenges" that the ANC felt, all of its weaknesses and failings. I knew that all those people knew all that and then some. And yet they turned out. They mobilized for what, "warts and all," as the expression goes, was their ANC.

As I watched and listened to President Zuma speak about the ANC's century-long commitment to building a 'non-racist,' 'non-sexist' South Africa, I simultaneously was thinking about two things. The first was a thought about all the white comrades, many of them stalwarts at the ANC, well-known people like Ruth First and Bram Fischer, little-known people like Alan Brooks and Janet Cherry, who in a sense had ceased to be 'white' in my mind. Second, I was thinking that in all the time spent in Bloemfontein for the Centenary, I had not seen white people from Bloemfontein. In fact, international

‘whites’ from Sweden, France, Germany, the USA and the UK, in the VIP delegation were the only white people I saw. It was as if the local whites had, after renting their homes to the visiting black delegates and gaining great profits, (some rentals were as high as \$3500/two days) exercised a pre-emptory ‘white flight’ and left the city to those who wanted to call it Mangaung, instead of its “proper name,” Bloemfontein. It brings up the fact that outside of urban centers like Cape Town and a few progressive pockets. Many areas of South Africa, especially in small towns and on the farms, are yet populated by whites who live as if apartheid never ended. Thus, the reality is that making South Africa truly “non-racist” is a major hill yet to be climbed.

After listening to President Zuma’s stadium speech, I read it very carefully. It was not the ANC at its best. For instance, one of the points he makes is that a major strength of the ANC is its capacity, when necessary, to critically review its performance and renew itself. The Morogoro Conference in 1969 was such a moment. The quality of race relations and the quality of gender relations in South Africa today constitute a challenge in South Africa’s historical odyssey. Though there is an increasingly visible black middle class, race relations are glossed over as if everything is “dandy.” Simultaneously, the levels of rape and violence against women are totally unacceptable. Both race and gender relations are “unfinished business” that should be high on the government’s agenda (and in my opinion should have been highlighted as priorities in the President’s speech).

Long time NEC member, Pallo Jordan, in a persuasive article written for South Africa’s Mail + Guardian newspaper January 5 2012 points critically at another arena where the ANC has much work yet to be undertaken, i.e., the arena of personal gain and careerism. He quite accurately situates it within the growing class struggle dynamics intensifying within South Africa today. He cogently notes:

“The tensions within the ANC, so often cast as competition for elective posts, are rooted in the changing material conditions of life of the various strata that today make up its constituency and reflect recently acquired social mobility by black South Africans.”

Former Minister Jordan (in an obvious reference to the historical trajectory of the Pan African Congress (PAC)) continues on to comment that it has been the capacity of the ANC to see the evil and ‘grasp it by its horns’ that has “ensured that the ANC remained relevant while other movements dithered, then withered”.

More substantive input and commentary was provided by yet another source - one that had long traveled the path of liberation with the ANC in the South African struggle. On December 28, key activist church people in South Africa issued Kairos Southern Africa: Theological and Ethical reflections on the 2012 Centenary Celebrations of the African National Congress. (*The entire Kairos statement is an attachment to this reflection*) It was dubbed in brief “A Word to the ANC, in these times” and was issued with the following sense of responsibility and earnestness’: “(we pass these words on)... in a spirit of appreciation and gratitude for you...where we can raise some concerns as friends...

especially given the levels of poverty and inequality in our country...” [author’s note: South Africa has an official 24% unemployment rate and one of the most unequal wealth/poverty ratios in the world]

“We also [pass these words on] knowing that many Christian leaders were involved in the formation and nurturing of the ANC over the years and we therefore continue to feel a sense of responsibility for its existence and what it does...”

The Kairos statement continues on to congratulate the ANC as the oldest and one of the most resilient liberation movements on the continent. It then very candidly notes some of the church’s role supporting colonialism and, on the other hand, the role of some of the churches in bridging early instances of rebellion against colonialism (like the Ethiopian religious movements) with the emergence of modern nationalist movements like the ANC in the 1910’s and 1920’s.

The statement then lists some nine selected major “concerns.” Two concerns that stood out to me were: 1) corruption including how political parties are funded; and 2) being in solidarity with the oppressed across the world, “especially those in Africa as well as the Palestinian people.” The statement concludes (with an obvious bow towards Dr. Martin Luther King and his world-renown “I have a Dream” speech) putting forward a dream for South Africa and a ringing condemnation of today’s new global Mammon (money).

The Kairos Statement- a response to the ANC Centenary Statement- reminded me that steadily, the issues in South Africa and those in the United States assume greater and greater symmetry. Years ago during the anti-apartheid struggle years, a good friend of mine, a former Antioch College colleague named Norrie Davis, created a wonderful poster. It showed two sets of manacled hands and underneath was the caption “Freeing South Africa, freeing ourselves.” The Kairos Statement also reminded me that there is a great mass of South Africans who are yet prepared to mobilize anew for the values that underlay the centuries- long struggle to end white supremacy and apartheid.

South Africans yet struggle against economic oppression, inequality and patterns of institutionalized race and gender injustice. It is no longer a system called ‘apartheid’ that is the enemy but rather new manifestations of global, neo-liberal capitalism. And the longer South Africans struggle, the more it appears that, with some altered clothing and different languages, it is “*the same enemy, same fight*” as here in the USA.