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The state of party politics: Struggles within the Tripartite Alliance and the decline of opposition

Roger Southall

> I think there are tendencies now of what some of us refer to as the zanufication of the ANC. You can see features of that, of a bureaucratisation of the struggle: thanks very much. It was important that you were mobilised then, but now we are in power, in power on your behalf: Relax and we'll deliver ... It would be a renunciation of the possibilities of the situation (the continuing existence of the Tripartite Alliance), to abandon the ANC to the neo-liberals ... For me what's most important about the breaking of the DA alliance ... it's the defeat of a particular project which was the most racial, subliminal mobilisation of minority communities in a pessimistic project about majority rule and democracy in our country. (Cronin 2002)

What was as fascinating as ANC MP and South African Communist Party (SACP) Deputy General Secretary Jeremy Cronin's interview with Irish academic Helena Sheehan, was the ANC's reaction to the interview. Following a crude attack on him by Dumisani Makhaye (a fellow National Executive Committee (NEC) member) as both a Trotskyist and would-be 'white messiah' (*Sowetan* 29.07.02), Cronin was to be censured by the NEC and required to apologise, which he did. Yet ironically, what emerges from a reading of the Cronin interview is not only how he is defending the ANC against charges that it has sold out to capitalism and/or is sliding towards Stalinist bureaucratism, but also a consciousness of the enormous fluidity of the forces at play within the party and how its future remains underdetermined.

Much conventional analysis focuses on how the ANC, which took 63 per cent of the popular vote in South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, is becoming increasingly dominant at the expense of political opposition (Giliomee, Myburgh & Schlemmer 2001; Southall 1994). The ANC assumed

office as the leading constituent of the government of national unity (GNU), which included representation of the former ruling NP (which had won 20 per cent of the vote) and the (largely Zulu-ethnic) Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (which had taken ten per cent). This left the task of opposition in the hands of the small Democratic Party (DP) (1,7 per cent) and three other minor parties.

However, the prospects for the viability of opposition had appeared to increase when, following promulgation of South Africa's final Constitution in 1996 (as provided for by the transitional agreement), the NP left the GNU. Subsequently, having seen its support (now seven per cent) wither away in favour of the more robustly critical DP (now ten per cent) in the second election in 1999, it had agreed to merge with the latter in the DA, designed to counter prospective ANC 'tyranny'. However, rapidly finding itself in danger of becoming subordinated to the DP, the by now New National Party (NNP) chose to negotiate re-entry into the government in junior partnership to the ANC. While the official rhetoric of renewed ANC-NNP cooperation pronounced a shift to racial co-operation in contrast to the DA's alleged national divisiveness, alternative opinion saw the NNP as undermining democracy in return for short-term gains of petty power and patronage. For some this merely confirmed the prognostication that democracy will only begin to flourish in South Africa when the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the SACP, the ruling party's partners in the so-called 'Tripartite Alliance' (hereafter the Alliance), break away from the ANC to construct an opposition party of the left, whose socialist programme will enable it to attract a mass-based, popular following.

This paper will utilise the Cronin interview to explore the key aspects of this debate, which are indicated by the quotations above. By examining recent developments it will ask: Is the ANC becoming more bureaucratised and less internally democratic? Is the ANC becoming increasingly dominant over its partners in the Alliance? And is the ANC's extending dominance of the political arena leading to the decline of political opposition?

The bureaucratisation of the ANC?

In 2002 the ANC attracted widespread criticism for its endorsement of Robert Mugabe's Zanu, which stood accused of having rigged both parliamentary (2000) and presidential (2002) elections in a bid to retain power. However,

what really seems to have irked the ANC about Cronin's interview, is his assertion that it is showing signs of 'zanufication', by which he meant tendencies to acute bureaucratisation at the expense of internal democracy.

Ottaway, writing before 1994, argued that the ANC's transition from a liberation movement to a political party would be difficult. Liberation movements inhabit environments which are uncongenial for democracy, while also stressing unity, rejecting partisan divisions and promoting the illusion that they stand for an entire nation. In contrast, political parties operating in a democratic environment do not pretend to represent an entire nation, but particular constituencies. 'Transition to democracy is not impossible, but neither is the much less attractive alternative of another form of authoritarianism' (Ottaway 1991: 82).

Cronin argues that many of the practices of today's ANC are inherited from exile, where the movement's social and geographical isolation encouraged an unquestioning intellectual certainty about the course of struggle that diverged from the realities on the ground. Priority was given to securing positions in a bureaucratic and military apparatus that would provide standing in the future, and factionalism and patronage prevailed. The exile tradition has translated into the ANC today exhibiting similar tendencies. The commitment to liberatory goals remains, yet the popular energies needed to realise them are subject to an institutionalisation and bureaucratism stemming from the movement's remoteness from its mass base. Hence, whereas the ANC swept into power on the basis of the highly progressive RDP, which put a premium on popular mobilisation, its replacement by the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy from around 1996 has seen a shift to the adoption of policies to be 'delivered' that may be 'people-centred' but are not 'people-driven'.

This transformation is not so much a product of betrayal by the ANC leadership as an outcome of the negotiated transition to democratisation having left large-scale capital in South Africa undefeated. In a post-Cold War world, the necessity of engaging with capital has led to the emergence of a new black capitalist class aligned to the ANC and not just bound to the state apparatus, as in Zimbabwe. This means that there are powerful forces within the ANC that have a financial independence, and that there are a multiplicity of centres of power within the broad movement. Cronin suggests that this imparts to the ANC a fluidity which, whilst making it prone to factionalism, also makes it open to influence from the left, not least because of the

continued weight within the movement of a militant trade union movement. Even if a bourgeois, right wing of the party is dominant, it faces an internal challenge which indicates that the inevitability of bureaucratisation and the pursuit of untrammelled capitalism cannot be assumed.

Before exploring how recent developments within the ANC accord or otherwise with Cronin's analysis, it is instructive to note two major points. First, ANC-speak still attempts to justify the party's embrace of capitalism by reference to the two-stage theory of liberation (national independence first, socialism second), in which the present era is referred to as that of the national democratic revolution (NDR). This is a phrase which – as the late Joe Slovo observed – can be used so ambiguously that it can describe a whole range of situations whose only common feature is that successful assault on an existing social order has not yet matured into socialism. Slovo's position, writing in the mid-1970s, was therefore that, based on a revolutionary seizure of state power, the NDR would have to be characterised by the proletariat being politically dominant and playing the leading role in the post-revolutionary struggles to establish a new socialist order (Slovo 1976). Cronin, thinking aloud in the early 2000s, appears to have abandoned the historicist schema implied by the NDR, and is attempting to assess the balance of class forces within the liberation movement in the wake of the ANC's less-than-revolutionary acquisition of state power. Yet he also attacks Saul (2001), who views capitalism in South Africa as tragically triumphant, and McKinley (2001), who depicts ANC pro-capitalist policies as unambiguous evidence that the revolution has been betrayed, as both offering simplistic and demobilising analyses which foreclose a progressive future. The ANC may be subject to regressive tendencies, yet it is not beyond possible redemption.

The second observation is that Cronin is offering a far more nuanced analysis of the ANC than those who uncomplicatedly depict it as an overwhelmingly dominant party. Such a view is associated with those (Giliomee & Simkins 1999; Giliomee, Myburgh & Schlemmer 2001) who have proposed that since 1994 the ANC has misused its position as a democratically-elected government to extend its domination over state and society. The large African majority in society guarantees the ANC electoral dominance, and opposition is delegitimised as racist as, simultaneously, constitutional defences of minority rights are being weakened. Demographic representativity and affirmative action are being used to empower a black elite while a project of transformation is pursued to capture control of all major institutions in

society. Meanwhile, a Leninist strategy of democratic centralism is employed to close down internal debate in its own ranks while the political opposition is increasingly inhibited by the manipulation of parliamentary and other rules in the ANC's favour. Opposition voters are being marginalised as the ANC marches South Africa along the road to African despotism.

Such a view would seem to overstate the capacity of the ANC to impose itself on a society that is hugely diverse, mobile and can, if necessary, call on deep traditions of popular protest to oppression. Yet what Cronin is also stressing is that, even if the party hierarchy aspires to dominance, the ANC itself is far from being a monolith. Instead, in his version of reality it emerges as an arena of marked contestation between different factions, classes and ideological tendencies, in which an emergent African bourgeoisie may at present be dominant, yet which is nonetheless constrained by democratic impulses that emanate from the trade unions and popular masses.

Cronin implies that rather than Ottaway's 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' styles of operation being alternatives for the ANC, they actually co-exist. This is scarcely surprising, for the ANC, in returning from exile, had to re-engage and absorb a popular-democratic political culture which not only resonated throughout its own earlier, pre-exile history, but also was made manifest by such internal organisations as the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Cosatu, which all claimed allegiance to the broader, historical Congress tradition. This simultaneity of political traditions almost inevitably results in mixed modes of behaviour by the party leadership. Nonetheless, Cronin seems to be largely in agreement with Friedman (*Business Day* 12.04.02) who suggests that the exile, authoritarian tendency is pre-eminent.

Centralising versus centrifugal tendencies

In so far as today's ANC is top-down, a major impulse derives from an effort to centralise power around the presidency. This has gained momentum particularly since 1999 under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki. Several examples of this tendency suggest themselves. One is structural: this has involved the creation of a Presidential Support Unit, whose particular role was announced to be the provision of advice to the President concerning international affairs, notably with regard to Africa (*Business Day* 22.02.02). This is a task that traditionally has fallen within the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Instead, the new unit reports to the Minister of Intelligence,

while simultaneously an internal restructuring of the presidency has been designed to enhance the latter's role to engage in 'critical strategic planning' (*Business Day* 18.02.02). While those around the presidency disclaim any aspirations to centralisation, Mbeki's hands-on style of governance would appear to be encouraging just that.

A common accompaniment of centralisation is the development of a politics of personalised supremacy, whereby dominant leaders impose policies, inhibit debate and suppress real or imagined challenges to their leadership. Under Mbeki this has most notoriously resulted in the AIDS debacle. Emanating from the presumed consequences of challenging the President's widely publicised doubts over whether the HIV virus leads to AIDS (as upheld by almost all leading scientists), government policy concerning treatment of the disease (notably distribution of prophylactic drugs) was to be hobbled by his Cabinet's acquiescence to his position. Yet it was also determined, on the one hand, by a sycophantic endorsement of his views by various party ideologists and, on the other, by the reluctance of leading ANC members to engage him in what was literally a matter of life and death for alarming numbers of the party's supporters. It was therefore left to civil society organisations, working closely with doctors, to break the logjam in policy by convincing the Constitutional Court that the government's inaction was unconstitutional. Ironically, they enjoyed the support of former President Nelson Mandela, who while professing his undying loyalty to the ANC, intervened publicly in favour of unhindered drugs provision to HIV-positive sufferers in order to increase pressure on the government to change its position (*The Sunday Independent* 10.03.02). It was precisely interventions such as these that led to alleged attempts by the party hierarchy to 'muzzle Madiba', to achieve the tricky business of preventing Mandela from embarrassing them politically (*Mail & Guardian* 01–07.03.02). Musings about the proper role of an ex-president, whether he should be constitutionally constrained from playing any active role in political affairs, appear to continue.

Widespread criticism of the government stance on HIV/AIDS, along with tensions arising out of its conservative economic policy, alleged lack of delivery of services to poor people at local level, and other discontents, were to fuel rumours that, for the first time in more than 50 years, the ANC might face an open contest for the party leadership at its five-yearly party congress in December 2002. Party culture had long upheld that such matters were best conducted well out of public view, but now it was being suggested that Mbeki

might find himself facing a challenge. However, any such eventuality was averted by a revealing incident early in that year when (the late) Steve Tshwete, an Mbeki loyalist and then Minister for Safety and Security, launched a blistering attack on three major figures in the party (Matthews Phosa, Cyril Ramaphosa and Tokyo Sexwale) who were alleged to be planning to oust Mbeki, which he followed by setting up an official investigation. Although Tshwete later apologised to the trio (who had protested their innocence), the performance was designed to warn off anyone who might have the temerity to pretend to the throne (*Business Day* 28.03.02).

If the strangulation of debate about HIV/AIDS was one instance of the ANC's apparent continued preference for the political habits of exile rather than those of democracy, then its endorsement of the result of the presidential election in Zimbabwe was an even more blatant one. Mugabe secured re-election as president in February 2002 through a combination of outright thuggery, blatant intimidation of the opposition, manipulation of the voting process and a crude rigging of the vote-counting process (Bush & Szeftel 2002; Sachikonye 2002). Even so, the ANC – despite rejection of the result by international electoral monitors and (greatly to its credit) the SADC parliamentary monitoring team – joined fellow African governments and the then OAU in proclaiming the result as legitimate, in a display that was widely condemned as proclaiming that African leaderships would look after their own. To be sure, the Mbeki government wrapped the Zimbabwe issue in a package of 'quiet diplomacy', which was supposedly designed to find an 'African solution' (the essence of which was that the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, having been denied the election, should join Zanu as a junior partner in a government of national unity). Yet more revealing was the manner in which the ANC deployed its parliamentary majority to declare the election legitimate. As the *Mail & Guardian* (22–27.03.02) observed, the ANC – once the pride of democrats for the level of humanity and intelligence it brought to the struggle against apartheid – was betraying its own traditions. The writer, Rob Amato, added that by allowing the presidency to dominate the party on such a hugely symbolic issue, the ANC was undermining the independence of parliament and the separation of powers supposedly built into the Constitution (*The Sunday Independent* 24.03.02).

All this would appear to endorse Giliomee's thesis that democratic centralism is shutting down debate inside the ANC. Yet that interpretation is too simple, for the leadership is either permissive of, or unable, to wholly shut down inde-

pendent internal activity. For example, Mbeki has consistently attempted to determine who becomes premiers of the seven (of the nine) provinces that are unambiguously controlled by the ANC, yet has not always succeeded.

Hawker (2000) has demonstrated how, initially, the ANC did not impose premiers on the new provinces, but sought to 'shepherd' them into office by adhering to the rule that every premier should first be elected by local party members as chair of the respective Provincial Executive Committee, before being ratified as premier. In practice, however, between 1994 and 1999 the central party intervened to replace three of the original premiers, and in two other cases, local party members defied the centre to elect their own preferred candidates to the provincial chairpersonship.

Similar tensions emerged in the run-up to the 2002 ANC National Congress. Popo Molefe, Premier of North West Province, who was seeking the appointment of Molefi Sefularo as his successor as provincial chair (and hence, by implication, also to his premiership following his intended retirement in 2004), decided to run for re-election himself to block the candidature of Thandi Modise, chair of the parliamentary portfolio committee on defence, who was being backed by the provincial ANCYL (*Business Day* 18.06.02). Winkie Direko, Premier of the Free State, and favoured by the central party, came off second best to Ace Magashule, who had previously been a key member of a group that had tried to oust Mosiuoa Lekota when he was that province's premier (*Sowetan* 29.07.02). Fish Mahlalela, previously sacked as a member of Mpumalanga's executive committee, defeated Premier Ndaweni Mahlangu, despite the central party's deployment of a team of heavyweights to support him (*Business Day* 25.03.02); and in Limpopo (formerly Northern Province), Premier Ngoako Ramatlhodi had to work hard to overcome vigorous challengers (*Sowetan* 28.10.02). Similarly, Makhenkesi Stofile, Premier of the Eastern Cape, faced down a campaign to replace him by Mluleke George, although in this case the national ANC overrode the election on the grounds of widespread electoral irregularities. Stofile's position was temporarily upheld, but only at the expense of his having to accede to national pressure to dismiss provincial ministers deemed to be responsible for provincial discontents (*Business Day* 25.11.02 & 02.12.02; *Sunday Times* 24.11.02).

There can be no denying the dominance of the central government (which provides over 90 per cent of the budget of the provinces), yet this has not

always ensured its own way of imposing provincial leaders, especially in the context of provincial party elections where it has not wanted to stand accused of acting undemocratically. In any case, a centralisation of the party is by no means incompatible with the co-existence of factional power plays, which can pass as democracy. What is far more testing is where the party hierarchy is subjected to challenge over ideology and policy.

The right, the left and the Tripartite Alliance

Although the Alliance is formally a partnership, the ANC is the leading element. The communist wing (SACP) remains a separate political party, yet it has no autonomous public representation; those of its members who sit in parliament do so as ANC members of parliament (MPs). Meanwhile, a significant number of Cosatu federation and union officials have been elected to parliament under ANC auspices, at the cost of withdrawing from full-time trade union work. Hence, while the ANC claims that it provides for seamless representation of its tripartite partners in parliament, numerous commentators argue that they have been rendered subordinate (Habib & Taylor 2001, McKinley 2001), an impression which has gained ground by the easy manner in which leading ministers, who are SACP members, have attached themselves to the implementation of an economic strategy which leftist critics describe as unashamedly capitalist and neoliberal. In this context, strains have begun to appear within the Alliance, with mounting debate about its continuing viability and desirability. Most certainly there is developing debate, particularly within Cosatu, about the possibility of joining the SACP in leaving the Alliance and forming a labour-backed, mass party of opposition to an ANC which is becoming increasingly dominated by a bourgeois, right wing.

In his interview with Sheehan, Cronin attempts to locate the changes in relations between the Alliance partners in a historical context. His starting point is that by the late 1980s the SACP had become little more than 'a kind of network' inside the ANC, which was not asserting its own profile and vision of class politics strongly enough. During the growth inside South Africa of 'mass socialist organisation', centred around the new breed of trade unions that developed from the 1970s, the SACP had been sidelined. It was left to Slovo to re-think the relevance of the party, given its huge popularity within South Africa after its unbanning in 1990, even though by then the Soviet Union had collapsed.

Cronin identifies a post-exile widening of the divide between the right and left of the liberation movement as having taken place in 1990, when half the central committee of the SACP quietly resigned. Those who left 'constitute basically the core of the ANC leadership at present' (Cronin 2002). They argued that their open identification with the party would embarrass the ANC. Their departure was also a reflection of prior divisions between a grouping led by Mbeki (whose view was that the SACP would not be able to survive the struggle era) and another led by Chris Hani and Joe Slovo. So scepticism about the party came particularly, though not exclusively, from exile ranks. On the other hand, there were those such as Hani who had benefited enormously from Soviet solidarity yet were critical of the reality of actually existing socialism, and those like Harry Gwala, a hard-line Stalinist. The latter argued for the SACP to remain a tightly-disciplined vanguardist party; the former (with whom Cronin identified) favoured a more open approach to party membership and political debate. Whereas the Stalinist wing tended to view the negotiation process as a sell-out (arguing for insurrection to rescue the situation), the Hani grouping viewed mass mobilisation as necessary for negotiations to succeed. It was the latter, more pluralistic wing of the party, that became dominant after 1994.

The approach adopted by this wing of the party argued that although South Africa had been liberated politically, socialism had been rolled back and an emergent capitalist class within the ANC was rapidly linking up with 'an undefeated capital'. The task of the SACP consequently resolved into being a 'strategic force' within the ANC, which meant moving beyond being a handful of intellectuals to developing a mass organisation. Today there are about 80 000 signed-up members, yet the active cadreship is only around 18 000, many of whom are based in the union movement. Even so, argues Cronin, its influence within the Alliance 'is much greater than its membership', allowing it to engage an 'enormously complicated terrain' (Cronin 2002).

The ANC won the 1994 election on the basis of a highly progressive programme. The emphasis of the RDP was on coaxing and disciplining the dominant private sector into helping to overcome huge historical racial and social inequities, without which there could be no sustainable future for capitalism in South Africa. It was a multi-class project in which popular working-class forces were required to co-operate with capital, yet in which popular mobilisation was required to prevent the private sector from taking short-term profits. Nonetheless, argues Cronin, the ANC, or 'significant parts' of it, 'got seduced' by the neoliberal paradigm (Cronin 2002).

Cronin admits that the ANC right has probably won more rounds than the left. Gear was an attempt to establish capitalist hegemony yet, in order to succeed, it had to deliver. It aimed to succeed through privatisation, the attraction of massive flows of foreign, direct investment and, critically, the consolidation of a black bourgeoisie. In practice, however, macroeconomic constraints act as brakes on growth. Various inequality-widening accumulation trends may be hard to reverse. Yet there is nothing inevitable about Saul's 'tragedy', for not only is the neoliberal agenda losing direction globally, but within South Africa it has been strongly contested, and battles have been won by Cosatu about issues such as privatisation. For this reason, the SACP and Cosatu should stay inside the Alliance rather than launching their own party. The left project is not about running away from power, but using the state to realise whatever progressive potentialities exist.

Cronin recognises that such a strategy opens the SACP to allegations that it is betraying the revolution. Yet the ANC cannot be abandoned to the neoliberals. To be sure, there has been massive fallout within the Alliance, with SACP and Cosatu opposition to privatisation leading to 'very nasty attempts' to expel the left from the ANC (Cronin 2002). Indeed, presidential anger was particularly aroused by Cosatu's anti-privatisation strike in August 2001, which was timed to embarrass the government during its hosting of the World Conference against Racism. Following the strike, there were moves to deal dictatorially with the left, yet the feedback which the ANC obtained was that there was overwhelming support for the Alliance and a sense that the SACP remained a guarantor of the movement's radical democratic credentials. So the objective must be to make the Alliance open to debate about policy and to correct the mistakes that are made.

Struggles within the Alliance: tensions between the ANC and SACP

Tensions between the ANC and its partners have been more open since the 1998 SACP Congress when then President Mandela and Deputy President Mbeki challenged the left to toe the line or leave the Alliance.

An Alliance summit in early April 2002 was designed to smooth strongly-held differences over Gear. It resulted in an announcement of a major shift in government policy away from reliance on foreign investment to domestic investment (with the pensions and life assurances industries being objects of particular attention). It also affirmed the working class as 'the leading social

motivating force' in the NDR, and referred to the Alliance as playing an active role in promoting employment, wealth redistribution and local and community empowerment. It was hailed, therefore, as providing the Alliance with something of a new start in the wake of the anti-privatisation strike in August 2000. Yet differences remained, with Cosatu and the SACP tiptoeing around the issue of the ANC's treatment of HIV/AIDS, and the ANC urging its partners to assume a less hidebound approach to privatisation by viewing it as a 'restructuring of state assets' for growth and development (*Business Day* 05.04.02; *Mail & Guardian* 12–18.04.02). Mbeki's views of how the Alliance partners should conceive their role was to be underlined about a month later when he declared that South Africa needed a 'new worker' dedicated to the collective good of the nation, the continent and the world (*Business Day* 22.05.02).

The summit may have smoothed relations between the Alliance partners, yet by now questions relating to its continuation were commonplace. Hence a paper prepared for the SACP's 11th Congress in July 2002 and entitled 'A socialist approach to the consolidation of the National Democratic Revolution', faced up to the possibility of a future split: 'Is an eventual socialist transition likely to be led by the SACP in opposition to the ANC – or is it to be an SACP-inspired, but ANC-led, transition, the so-called Cuban option?' (*The Sunday Independent* 12.05.2000). Other documents called for the party to put up its own candidates in elections, stating that there was no contradiction between an independent SACP and the ANC continuing as the leading force in the NDR (*Sunday Times* 16.06.02). However, the run-up to the Congress was to be dominated by the row that erupted after Cronin's interview with Sheehan became public. Senior ANC figures, led by Smuts Ngonyama, the party's Head of Presidency, reacted furiously to Cronin's allegations about the ANC's 'zanufication' – claiming he was spreading deliberate lies and was totally out of order. Sam Shilowa, former Cosatu General Secretary, now Premier of Gauteng and still a member of the SACP's central committee, asserted that Cronin's views were not those held by the SACP (*Business Day* 16, 18, 19.07.02). However, Shilowa was the one out of tune, for the SACP leadership rapidly closed ranks, accusing Ngonyama of attempting to assassinate Cronin's character, and dismissing the ANC's utterances as unwarranted. Blade Nzimande, Secretary General of the SACP, attacked as racist accusations by some ANC members that the SACP was controlled by whites.

In the wake of all this excitement, the Congress was almost an anti-climax, foreshadowed by Nzimande's reassertion of the SACP's subordination to the ANC (*Mail & Guardian* 19–25.07.02). There were anti-socialists in the ANC, yet the message from the grassroots was that the Alliance organisations should resolve their differences. What Cronin had been saying with regard to the 'zanufication' of the ANC was that any liberation movement was in danger of becoming bureaucratised after getting into power. The role of the SACP, therefore, was to maintain the revolutionary morality of the liberation struggle. The SACP would not be putting up its own candidates for election in 2004, and it would not like to see the Alliance splitting up. 'What people don't realise is that breaking the Alliance means splitting all three organisations. You are talking of two million Cosatu workers, more than 80 per cent ANC members' (Cronin 2002). Alliance structures therefore needed to be re-examined for communist voices to be heard better.

At the Congress Mbeki pronounced that there were no problems in the relations between the ANC and SACP, and Nzimande declared that the Alliance remained central for advancing the gains made since 1994. Furthermore, although key Mbeki allies (notably Essop Pahad, Minister in the Presidency, and Jeff Radebe, Minister for Public Enterprises) were voted off the Central Committee, various prominent trade unionists withdrew their challenges to other ministers. The outcome was a central committee which the party stressed did not reflect anti-government sentiment. Even so, the party called for a comprehensive review of the government's plans for restructuring state enterprises (privatisation), and a more development-oriented economic strategy.

But beneath the surface of renewed goodwill, tensions remained. Cronin was re-elected Deputy Secretary General of the party with strong support, yet was soon to eat humble pie by issuing his public apology to the ANC for having spoken out of turn. Significantly too, in a report presented to the SACP central committee, a warning was given that the ANC was increasingly finding itself on the wrong side of mass campaigns against poverty, job losses and HIV/AIDS (*Sowetan* 21.07.02). Such warnings were issued following the announcement by Cosatu that a further planned anti-privatisation strike would go ahead in early October. This came as a surprise as Cosatu had earlier agreed with the government that it would suspend its anti-privatisation campaign until a growth and development summit that would be held under the auspices of Nedlac. However, Cosatu protested that the government had

reneged on its promise to address its concerns before pressing ahead with privatisation (citing a recent announcement of the sale of 30 per cent of electricity generation and the concessioning of ports). Cosatu's move excited vocal support at the SACP Congress.

Such developments did not go down well with the ANC, which moved to quell dissent by declaring at a four-day policy conference at the end of September, that the resolutions it had adopted were all binding on its members. The SACP responded by repeating its warning that the ANC was increasingly on the wrong side of mass campaigns and that it was vacating political space that was being occupied by 'populist' organisations (*Business Day* 22.09.02).

Struggles within the Alliance: tensions between the ANC and Cosatu

On the eve of Cosatu's anti-privatisation strike, Mbeki launched a major attack on what he termed 'the ultra-left'. Without naming either the SACP or Cosatu, he criticised all those within the Alliance who treated the government and the ANC as their enemy, and accused 'the ultra-left' of abusing internal democracy by seeking to advance its agenda against policies adopted by the ANC's most senior decision-making structures. Paradoxically, he also attacked it as being in cahoots with 'right-wing' elements such as the DA, a party seeking to protect white minority privilege.

The attack on the 'ultra-left' reflected the ANC's increasing frustration at criticism to which it was especially vulnerable. Dismissing the DA as right-wing and racist was easy. Far less easy was the repudiation of criticisms from organisations that claimed to speak for the ANC's constituency. From this perspective, it was the duty of the SACP and Cosatu to educate the masses about the twists and turns of the struggle in a country where the bulk of capital remained in private hands. However, this was rendered particularly problematic by the fact that Cosatu admitted people who did not belong to the ANC and did not share its vision. It was they who provided the impetus for the formation of a workers' party to challenge the ANC. Such an ultra-left, explained Kgalema Motlanthe, ANC Secretary General, was an undisciplined international phenomenon that viewed the state as an employer, and hence an enemy of the working class (*Business Day* 03.10.02). Furthermore, a paper issuing out of the ANC's Policy Education Unit, written by NEC members Jabu Moleketi and Josiah Jele, argued that this left had consistently tried to mobilise other groups, domestically and globally, to join in a campaign

against the government's neoliberalism. It claimed the ANC has become the instrument of the South African bourgeoisie, and has destroyed internal democracy and the independence of all organisations outside its orbit. Its hope is that it will trample over the ANC, and march on to a victorious socialist revolution, yet in so doing it is willing to work hand in hand with the forces of neoliberalism (*Business Day* 03.10.02).

Cronin responded, arguing that by lumping Cosatu and the SACP with fringe parties, Moleketi and Jele were guilty of McCarthyism (*Business Day* 06.10.02). Cosatu leaders also rejected the ultra-left labelling of the trade union movement as seeking to divert attention from real issues like economic policy, poverty, unemployment and disease.

However brave the face that they put on such matters, Cosatu (and by implication the SACP) were to be severely weakened by the extremely moderate response by workers to the privatisation strike. Cosatu claimed that 60 per cent of workers downed tools, but the South African Chamber of Business said the figure was only 15 per cent, while government claimed that only six per cent of public servants went on strike. Government ministers underscored the support for the strike given by organisations such as the Landless People's Movement and the Anti-Privatisation Forum and proclaimed the strike a failure, accused Cosatu of misleading workers and claimed a crisis in its leadership. Mbeki repeated the claim in his weekly column on the ANC's website, accusing Cosatu's leaders of using workers to 'destroy' the ANC by making them go on strike. Cosatu responded by accusing the ANC of attempting to drive a wedge between its leadership and its members, and complained that the government was seeking to undermine a number of its affiliates by infiltrating intelligence operatives into its membership (*Mail & Guardian* 04–10.10.02).

For the time being at least, the government had triumphed. It had ridden the strike with ease, and had forced Cosatu onto the defensive. Increasingly it looked as though the ground was being prepared for a major offensive against the left at the ANC's National Conference at the end of the year. In the event, however, the conference concluded in a truce: Cosatu failed in a bid to secure significantly increased representation on the NEC, yet it suffered no major attack. But a show of unity could not obscure the differences that remained, and the fact that Cosatu was regarded by ANC leadership as being as much a problem to be contained as an asset.

Perspectives on the Alliance

For the moment the Alliance remains in place, and there is every indication that it will do so for at least the forthcoming general election expected in 2004. Yet there can be no doubt equally that its foundations have been severely shaken by the bitter infighting. These internal travails would appear to have confirmed the political supremacy of the ANC, and a marked shift in the balance of forces against what the government and its representatives have labeled the 'ultra-left'. One interpretation of this transformation is that the SACP has had to learn the hard way that, after 1994, the communist tail is no longer in a position to wag the ANC dog. It has also had to learn that it does not represent the landless and the homeless any more than Cosatu can claim to represent the unemployed and the very poor. An alternative perspective is that the ANC is in peril of assuming a political arrogance that, like the apartheid government before it, may cause it to fall victim to popular resistance that began when those in power chose to decide what was good for the people. Yet another view is that the country has to be governed and that the ANC is determined to do so by dividing its opposition and occupying the centreground.

The decline of opposition

The decision by the NNP in November 2001 to leave the DA to again work in co-operation with the ANC was a massive setback for the opposition. The split in the DA was a result of the NNP's resentment at its alleged arrogant treatment by the 'old DP', difficulties in aligning its conservatism to the liberalism of the DP, doubts about the wisdom of the DA's robust oppositionist style, and not least, its discomfort at being totally removed from office. Whatever the reasons, the NNP's move signified to many the increasingly unassailable dominance of the ANC and the hollowness of South African democracy.

Cronin acknowledged that many on the left would characterise the ANC's new linkage with the NNP as getting into bed with the former oppressors. Yet for him the more important point was that the breaking of the DA signified the defeat of the latter's alleged project to mobilise minorities on racial grounds against the consequences of majority rule. At one level, the tie-up with the NNP was just short-term politics, yet at another it was far more profound: it was about developing a multi-party democracy. The NNP represented a mixture of neoliberalism and minority concerns, yet it was possible

to enter a multi-party relationship with them. This was competitive 'but not just intransigence on every issue, which is where the Leon thing was going' (Cronin 2002).

Cronin's analysis touched a chord played by the DA's major critics, which was that party leader Tony Leon – who had presided over the increase in the DA's share of the vote between 1994 and 1999 – was mobilising support by fanning minority racial fears. For its part, the DA declared itself fully committed to non-racialism, and increasingly claimed that the ANC's strenuous pursuit of black empowerment was akin to a neo-apartheid racial nationalism. Not surprisingly, therefore, some commentators were to see in the NNP's withdrawal from the DA, a chance for a realignment of opposition politics. In a rather different spin from those hoping to see a new socialist opposition, this alternative vision looked to the formation of a new party which would fight the ANC on its own chosen turf, the political centre (*Business Day* 07.11.02).

Whatever the longer-term possibilities, the implosion of the DA appeared set to have far-reaching shorter-term consequences. First, it implied a rearrangement of coalitions at provincial and local government level in favour of the ANC and NNP; secondly, it undermined the DA's attempt to present itself as a party of principled competence; and thirdly, it threatened to extend the ANC's electoral hegemony.

The rearrangement of coalitions

In the 1999 elections the ANC swept to power (as it had done in 1994) in seven out of the nine provinces. The odd two out were KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. In the former, the outcome was that the IFP – led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi – which mobilised around Zulu ethnic-nationalism, assumed the leadership (with 34 seats in the provincial legislature) in a coalition with the ANC (32 seats), with the DP and NNP taking seven and three seats respectively. In the latter, the ANC was the largest party, with 18 seats, but was scuttled into opposition by the formation of a coalition between the NNP (17 seats) and the DP (five seats). The NNP's withdrawal from the DA threatened both these coalitions. On the one hand, the ANC-IFP coalition at national level had been perpetually tense, with Buthelezi's authority as Minister of Home Affairs being constrained by ANC manoeuvrings, while provincially the IFP evinced concern that the ANC was determined to secure control. On the other hand, the ANC had felt cheated by its exclusion from power in the

Western Cape and seemed bent on revenge. Meanwhile, at the 2000 local government elections, which the DP and NNP fought in combination, the DA won control of a handful of municipal councils around the country, of which by far the most notable and wounding to the ANC's pride, was that of Cape Town. Again, the rift in the DA appeared likely to throw this to the ANC-NNP.

However, the fly in the ointment as far as the ANC and NNP were concerned was the provision in the Constitution that prevented floor-crossing. Hence, even after the NNP pulled out of the DA, it was left in a state of limbo. Although there was no constitutional barrier to NNP MPs and Members of Provincial Legislatures (MPLs) joining their party in new coalition agreements in the national and provincial legislatures, those who wanted to cross to the DA would lose their seats. At municipal level, where councillors elected on a DA ticket crossed to the NNP, they would similarly lose their seats.

The situation was further complicated by the NNP being split, with many representatives having to balance short-term calculations of political gain offered by coalition with the ANC against perhaps longer-term hopes of survival as members of the DA. The crisis in the NNP was dramatised by the revolt of Gerald Morkel, Premier of the Western Cape, against the NNP leader, Marthinus van Schalkwyk, moving his party into alliance with the ANC. After various legal challenges failed, Morkel was eventually ousted as premier and leader of the Western Cape NNP in November 2001, following which Peter Marais (previously DA Mayor of Cape Town) took his place as head of a new NNP-ANC provincial government.

Marais's move into the premiership was in line with a deal whereby the ANC would assume the mayoralty of Cape Town, while the NNP led the coalition at provincial level. Leadership of other municipalities that fell to the coalition would be decided according to which of the two parties had the larger number of councillors. There was also some indication that the NNP would also be rewarded at national level by positions in government. However, for all this to happen, the ANC-NNP had to overcome the constitutional barrier.

This was to be greatly facilitated by the dredging up of Section 13 of Annexure A of Schedule 6 of the final Constitution, which amended Section 23 of Schedule 2 of the Interim Constitution (1994). That clause allowed for a law enabling floor-crossing in national and regional legislatures to be passed without necessitating cumbersome constitutional amendments. The subsequent *Loss or Retention of Membership of National and Provincial Legislatures Bill* sought to provide for the legality of floor-crossing by representatives a year after their election, although it was to have been conditional on its being effected by the President after consultation with leaders of the political parties in the National Assembly and/or the premiers. Local councillors were to be accorded the same right through a similar amendment to the 1998 *Municipal Structures Act*. However, after public outcry claiming that these provisions would concentrate too much power in the hands of the President, who would be able to manipulate the process in favour of the majority party, a new measure was brought forward which would establish two pre-determined periods per annum in which representatives would be able to cross the floor without losing their seats. However, the proviso was that such a crossing would be allowed only if it involved at least ten per cent of the party's seats. This eventually passed through parliament in June 2002 (Habib & Nadvi 2002).

In the event, the legislation was challenged by the small United Democratic Movement (UDM) in a series of moves in the Cape High Court and the Constitutional Court, on the major grounds that it offended against the logic of proportional representation (whereby voters sent representatives to parliament in given proportions which should not be changed by floor-crossing). This put on hold an extensive game of musical chairs around the country before the Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the constitutionality of the floor-crossing legislation in October 2002. This opened the doors to floor-crossing at all levels, with the biggest impact taking place at local level where the DA lost control of half the councils it had won in 2000, these now falling to the ANC-NNP. During the 15-day period allowed, 555 local government councillors crossed the floor (417 from the DA – 340 back to the NNP, 51 to the ANC, the rest to other parties). Van Schalkwyk claimed it as a triumph, but as the DA was swift to point out, in the 2000 elections the NNP had taken 612 councillors into the DA (*Business Day*, 23, 25.10.02).

The one piece of the jigsaw that failed to fall into place was KwaZulu-Natal where five members of the legislature who had announced their decision to cross to the ANC – from the DA (2), IFP (2) and UDM (1) – found themselves expelled prematurely by their parties from the provincial legislature before the floor-crossing window was opened. This meant that leadership of the provincial government continued to lie with the IFP Premier, Lionel Mtshali, who proceeded to dismiss two ANC Members of the Executive Committee (MECs) and to replace them by DA appointees. When the ANC threatened retrospective legislation that would reinstate the five expelled MPLs and allow them to

cross the floor, hence enabling it to take control of the provincial government, the IFP threatened to call a provincial election.

Relations between the ANC and IFP plunged into crisis as the former maintained that an early election would be unconstitutional in that, pending parliament's agreement on possible reform of the electoral system, there was no legislation in place concerning the running of an election. When the IFP held its ground, the ANC backed down (either because its constitutional case was weak and/or because it was reluctant to provoke renewed social conflict in KwaZulu-Natal), leaving the IFP in power. The incident highlighted mounting tensions between the ANC and IFP at national and provincial level, and increased speculation that the ANC's deal with the NNP foreshadows the end of its coalition with the IFP.

The erosion of the DA's reputation

The DA was always bound to be a difficult marriage of differing philosophies and practices. The DP had presented itself as a party of liberal principle and combative opposition; on the other hand, the NNP viewed itself as a party of conservatism, dedicated to the protection of minority rights, and inclined to political pragmatism. Yet the overwhelming membership of both parties swallowed their doubts when the DA was formed, not least because Tony Leon looked like a winner: he had hugely improved the DP vote in 1999, and he now evinced confidence in a future whereby the DA would work hard to cut the ANC's majority to less than 50 per cent of the popular vote in the next election, expected in 2004. *Sotto voce*, he seemed to be saying: the DA will clean up the combined white vote, take on board the majority of coloureds who would have been brought by the NNP, and aim to make significant inroads into African communities alienated by the failures of the ANC. Leon also projected his party as one of principled efficiency and determined to serve as a counterweight to ANC hegemony and excess. The problem was that he bit off more than he could chew.

The implosion of the DA was precipitated by an absurd saga that took place in Cape Town. After assuming office as Mayor of Cape Town in 1999, Peter Marais, one of the NNP's leading coloured politicians, went in search of quick credit by proposing to name two of the city's major streets after former Presidents Mandela and De Klerk. However, he became embroiled in a scandal when it emerged that a poll of residents to decide on the issue was being

doctored. Marais was to be formally exonerated, but the DA was tarnished and Leon called for his resignation. When he refused, Leon threatened disciplinary action. The NNP fought back. Van Schalkwyk, deputy leader of the DA by virtue of his NNP leadership, attacked Leon, who responded with an ultimatum: accept Marais's expulsion or face disciplinary action. But there was a sub-plot to the action in that van Schalkwyk was also scheming to replace Morkel as premier. The upshot was that the NNP walked out of the DA and joined up with the ANC. Van Schalkwyk presented the NNP's shift as an act for the good of the country: the DP was committed to opposition for opposition's sake, and its background as the vehicle of well-off whites had transformed it into the new party of racial privilege. In contrast, the NNP saw opposition only as a means to an end, and were dedicated to racial co-operation. Such talk failed to go down well with many members of the ANC (Cosatu rejected the link with the NNP 'with contempt') (*Star* 08.11.01), or with the DA, which portrayed van Schalkwyk's move as about 'positions, privileges and perks' (*Mail & Guardian* 19–25.10.01). Nonetheless, it was the DA that suffered the most in the short term.

Leon's reputation for political acuity was severely damaged, and many now questioned the wisdom of his link with the NNP in the first place. Yet even more damaging were the allegations that emerged in the wake of the break-up that the DA had accepted donations from Jurgen Harksen, a hugely rich German who had ingratiated himself with the professional, social and political elite in the Cape and who apparently sought to use the influence he gained thereby to stall extradition proceedings against him instituted by Germany. The initial focus centred on the relationship between Harksen and Morkel, the Western Cape's DA leader. This was to be investigated by a commission established (with considerable glee) by the new NNP-led Western Cape government. Morkel and Harksen were hung out to dry, and in the process more and more evidence dribbled out that various DA leaders, including Leon, had been embroiled in dubious contacts with a fugitive from German justice. Although the DA insisted that it had not taken money from Harksen, although it would not have broken any law even if it had, and although there was strong suggestion that the ANC had also accepted money from him, the entire affair – which dragged on through early 2002 – undermined the party's self-alignment with the politics of principle and suggested that it would act as venally as any other one if and when it was placed in positions of power.

The extension of ANC hegemony

The status of the ANC as a dominant party has rested on its nearly two-thirds, largely African support amongst the South African population. Yet it was precisely the DP's hugely improved performance and the NNP's collapse in 1999 which gave the impetus to the formation of the DA. Subsequently, when the DA proceeded to take 22 per cent of the vote in the local government elections in 2000,* Leon was buoyant about making inroads into the ANC's majority in the future.

Cronin's accusation that the DA was essentially engaged in a project of mobilising opposition around racial minority concerns was a theme loudly proclaimed by the ANC. Its seduction of the NNP, therefore, would be seen arguably to have had two objectives. First, to draw the NNP's remaining base among white and coloured voters into the ANC's camp, thereby rendering the DA more vulnerable to the charge that it was 'lily-white'. Second, to effectively suffocate the NNP, the party of apartheid, in a bear hug which offered short-term gains for highly dubious advantages in the future. While the DA continues to proclaim its determination to make inroads into black communities, its bid to construct a wider opposition has been halted in its tracks. To be sure, the closeness between the ANC and NNP has precipitated a warming of relations between the DA and the IFP, which could lead to a working relationship at the next election. Likewise, there is some talk about the DA working more closely with the UDM, formed by Bantu Holomisa, the former strongman of the Transkei military, following his expulsion from the ANC in 1997. Yet as the IFP is identified with Zulu ethnicity and the UDM has become principally a vehicle for promoting former Transkei discontents, linkages with either or both would be highly problematic. An opposition based on such an alliance would likely be a patchwork quilt of tensions, which could easily pull apart at the seams.

Finally, the implosion of the DA brings one more prospect into view – that of the ANC extending its direct control over all nine provinces. For the moment, attainment of that goal has been delayed, but the ANC is confident that what it regards as the final 'liberation' of the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal is just around the corner.

Towards 'low intensity' democracy?

South Africa's dominant party system seems embarked on the road to 'low-intensity' democracy. This implies that the formal requirements of democracy

are met, yet under conditions of decreasing competition and declining popular participation. ANC domination of the political arena is being extended increasingly, challenges to its rule being steadily overwhelmed, and its own internal democracy eroded. As critics as disparate as Giliomee and McKinley suggest, this represents a substantial challenge to the quality and depth of democracy. Yet Cronin is correct to look beyond their essentially uniform views of the ANC/SACP as a monolith, for recent developments point to the correctness of his perspective of the Alliance as a site of struggle. This has to qualify his suggestion as to the extent of the ANC's bureaucratisation, a term which is far more appropriate than 'zanufication', which suggests not just Stalinist tendencies but also crooked militarism, corruption, basket economics, fraudulent elections and a dedication to lawlessness.

Two further points remain. First, the struggles within the Alliance are fought out according to certain ideological conventions and political constraints. Increasingly the leadership of the ANC makes no secret that socialism as a goal has been abandoned. Even so, internal battles continue to be fought out in the dreary phraseology of the NDR, a device which has lost all relevance in the post-Cold War era, and as Slovo pointed out so long ago, can be used to justify virtually anything. More to the point, the internal struggles have something of the quality of a phoney war in that all talk of the SACP and Cosatu hiving off from the ANC to form a left opposition is bounded by the recognition by its key protagonists of the huge risks involved. Hence Cronin's argument that it is wiser for the left to use whatever influence it has from within.

Second, it cannot be assumed from such developments that the ANC is becoming the unambiguous vehicle of an emergent Africa bourgeoisie and is moving uncomplicatedly to the right. To be sure, there is a significant element of this. The ANC's black empowerment strategy is deliberately intent on creating a black capitalist class that will challenge the hegemony of the white-run corporates, and the government's macroeconomic policy is fiscally conservative and designed to foster capitalist growth. Even so, such a strategy can only be legitimated in terms that are redistributionist, for although Cosatu remains on the periphery of policy-making, it possesses a potential veto-power, rooted in the capacity of the black working class to withdraw their political support and, at times, to strike. As Cronin implies, the continued existence of a relatively strong and militant trade union movement serves as a major constraint on ANC economic policy, and continues to force concessions.

However, what the recent campaign against the 'ultra-left' may indicate precisely is an attempt to undermine the trade union movement, thereby freeing the way for a shift towards a more flexible labour market that is more capital-friendly. It is here that classic questions abound about the relationship between the state and capital, about the former ruling on behalf of the latter and so on. Meanwhile, to make the matter even more complex, it would appear that by and large the party hierarchy is rooted more in government than anywhere else, and is constituting a political class which, although developing linkages to capital via the award of tenders and so on, remains distinctively a different stratum. Hence the exile faction, which is often identified with Mbeki, continues to fight its corner, at least against the left, with a tortured Marxian rhetoric that harks back to the days of Soviet solidarity. To confront the left it is deemed necessary to sound more correctly left than they, while simultaneously the party moves to capture the political centre from its various rivals.

If in nothing else, Cronin is correct to observe that the present era is one of enormous fluidity whose present meaning is difficult to identify.

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