

## **THE SACP AND ELECTIONS: IS THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE WHOLE GREATER AND BETTER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS?**

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The South African Communist Party (SACP) has ultimately decided to operationalise its desire to contest elections as a separate entity. 'Ultimately' because the party has been inching towards this decision for years now. The matter was broached in the 2000s, with a reluctant Party leadership – under pressure from the membership – kicking the can shorter and shorter distances down the road.

At its 2007 Congress, the SACP had resolved to contest elections 'in the context of a reconfigured Alliance' and mandated the Central Committee (CC) to examine how this would be done. This decision was not seriously pursued, and the subsequent 2012 Congress 'was not satisfied that the mandate for the CC Commission had been adequately fulfilled'. The matter was taken further in 2017 when the Congress resolved that the SACP 'must actively contest elections', within or outside 'the umbrella of a re-configured Alliance'.

The snowball effect has brought us to where we are today, with the 2024 Special Congress agreeing with the SACP General Secretary that '...from now on we are contesting all elections starting with the [next] local government elections'. Reports suggest that most of the current leadership is fully aligned with this standpoint.

While discussions on this momentous decision are still to take place between the Party, the ANC and COSATU – and civic association SANCO – it does throw many fundamental questions into bold relief. Most common in public commentary are issues around the magnitude of electoral support the party can garner and the constitutional and organisational implications for the ANC, under whose umbrella the Alliance has contested elections since 1994. Important as these questions are, there are even more fundamental ones about ideological and strategic implications for the conceptualisation and conduct of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) as hitherto commonly understood by the ANC and the SACP.

And so, does the SACP command significant electoral support? Given the paucity of data on this, the matter can only be assessed speculatively.

Reference has been made to the Metsimaholo municipality where, in December 2017, the SACP separately took part in municipality-wide by-elections. But that experience is too specific for any objective extrapolation to be made. Local leaders of the ANC, which was the leading party in the council with 19 out of 42 seats, were accused of poor service delivery, corruption and maltreatment of workers; and no corrective action was being taken by the ANC's provincial and national structures. The SACP felt it had to enter the electoral fray; and in the event, it gained the same number of seats (3) as the ANC lost; and virtually all the other parties moved sideways.

In broader electoral contestation, it is quite possible that the SACP could draw support from a 'new' constituency thus far not already being harvested by the ANC and the professed 'socialist-oriented' parties such as the EFF, MK Party, AZAPO and the PAC. But it is also possible that it could simply cannibalise ANC support as shown in Metsimaholo. Further, there is also the possibility of rendering a sizeable chunk of ANC supporters too confused and/or conflicted to rock up at voting stations, thus suppressing the vote of both the ANC and the SACP.

In other words, as in the Gestalt theory of philosophy and natural science: when a system (in this case the Tripartite Alliance) is constituted from different components, the system usually enjoys properties that are different from just the sum of its parts. Because 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts' – as supposedly argued by philosopher Aristotle – the ANC and the SACP may both be losers in this new arrangement.

This is a challenge that has confronted many organisations, including listed commercial companies. Large, diversified corporations usually complain about a share price being discounted due to the many individual subsidiaries. A break-up and disposals are then engineered – sometimes leading to success on the modelling ramp that is the 'amorphous market' and in other instances, leading to disaster.

Beyond these speculative thoughts, the closest to opinion surveys assessing support for an SACP-type workers' party are the following:

- An Afrobarometer Survey (2014 /2015) which found that about 53% of respondents agree or strongly agree that South Africa should have a labour/workers' party that would promote worker's interests. However, almost the same proportion (54%) were critical of COSATU for being more concerned about political power than the interests of workers.
- A survey by IPSOS (2014), reported on by Eddie Webster and Mark Orkin which put the support for 'a new political party, a workers' or labour party' at about 33%, while a further 39% felt 'maybe' such a party would assist in solving the country's problems.
- In the same report, Webster and Orkin refer to a 2012 survey by CASE among a sample of COSATU shop stewards, which established that 65% of these would vote for a party formed by COSATU.

There may be other such opinion surveys; but a salutary lesson from actual elections is the experience of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) formed by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) with a membership of some 300 thousand: it mustered about 30-thousand votes in 2019 (0.14 percent of the aggregate) and did not get a single legislature seat. What is also notable is that the ANC (and its allies) have been haemorrhaging support especially in urban centres where the majority of workers are located.

It is therefore a major leap of faith on the part of the SACP to enter the electoral terrain independently at this stage.

What about the organisational and constitutional implication? Much has correctly been made of the conundrum that would arise for dual membership between the ANC and the Party, and specifically the ANC's definition of 'acts of misconduct' which include standing in elections or acting in support of another, opposing, party or candidate. While it may have been possible to turn a blind eye in Metsimaholo, this would not be possible when the infractions are left, right, front, back and centre!

It may well be that the Party has creative proposals on managing these issues within the ambit of 'a reconfigured Alliance': if there is a common will between the SACP and the ANC, there may be a way to navigate the organisational complexities. But short of amending the ANC constitution or adopting a special resolution at the 2025 National General Council, this would be well-nigh impossible – and a messy divorce would then be in the offing!

Issues of ideology and strategy (and related tactics) present even more complex challenges.

At face value, it would be difficult, in the midst of splinters having brought the ANC below the 50 percent mark in the last general election, to sustain an argument that the Party's decision is in the best interest of all the forces of fundamental change.

Because of this 2024 post-election coincidence, it is tempting to reduce the decision to the fall-out around the formation of the Government of National Unity. The Party is profoundly disappointed that the ANC has gone into a polygamous marriage that includes the neo-liberal Democratic Alliance.

It is somewhat reassuring that the confusion around whether the Party prefers a government (minority or otherwise) that includes some form of partnership with the MK Party has been clarified. The SACP correctly characterises that party as an assembly of beneficiaries of systemic corruption and state capture. And it has also pointed to the eclectic opportunism of the MK Party, which combines 'radical economic transformation' rhetoric with backward conservatism, ethnic chauvinism, dictatorial tendencies and dependence on strange financial benefactors.

What is intriguing, though, is whether the EFF, which is the SACP's preferred partner, is much different in relation to some of the MK Party's malign attributes! Reference in this regard can be made to some of its financial benefactors, corrupt practices at the most senior level as reported around VBS Mutual Bank and the experience of entrenched corrupt practices as recounted by ANC cadres in Ekurhuleni and other municipalities. This is besides the manifestations of dictatorial and disruptive tendencies. In the SACP's own words in 2023, the EFF is a 'proto-fascist party' steeped in 'political thuggery, lawlessness and anarchy'.

On the 2024 post-election governance arrangements, the ANC has explained, inter alia, that: firstly, all parties had been invited and some excluded themselves through outrageous demands and/or policy approaches on GNU founding principles; secondly, given the characterisation of the MK Party and EFF above, too close a relationship with either of them would be a suffocating embrace, one with the effect of re-introducing the very viruses that the ANC's renewal efforts are meant to expunge from its body; thirdly, promotion of the EFF (and MK Party) as parties of government would strengthen relatively large political entities fishing in the same electoral pond as the ANC; and lastly, the GNU as currently constituted brings on board political representatives of all the sectors that are meant to forge a social compact.

On the other hand, notwithstanding the discordant huffing and puffing by some GNU partners on a few matters of detail, the signatories have embraced a progressive Statement of Intent and are expected soon to adopt a 5-year Medium Term Development Plan that is expected, in essence, to reflect social transformation objectives as espoused by the ANC. Lest we forget, these objectives are firmly entrenched in South Africa's Constitution.

Now, back to the more profound and complex matters of ideology and strategy...

Treatises have been written about the relationship between the ANC and the SACP (as well as the progressive trade union movement), reflecting the intersection in the erstwhile colonial system of national oppression, class super-exploitation and patriarchy. These strands fed into each other in defining this relationship – impacting on the ANC's outlook as it evolved into a disciplined force of

the Left and inversely refining the SACP's own strategic posture as an advocate of progressive nationalism.

Historically, much about this is expertly articulated in the SACP's 1962 programme, Road to South African Freedom and the ANC's 1969 Strategy and Tactics document. In the post-1994 era, the most recent conceptual articulation by the ANC is contained in its 2017 Strategy and Tactics document, and can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, the ANC's ultimate objective is the creation of a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous society – what it refers to as a National Democratic Society. As this strategic objective is progressively realised, the concentric circles of the broad national front would start to flow into each other, with increasing intertwining of Black and white interests along class lines. '...[T]he national question will [then] recede as a driving force for continuing change and class issues will assume greater prominence'.

Secondly, the nature of the society pursued by the ANC can be characterised as democracy with profound social content, as articulated in the 1943 African Claims in South Africa and the 1955 Freedom Charter. This is characterised as a developmental state with elements of the best traditions of social democracy, 'which include: a system which places the needs of the poor and social issues such as health care, education and a social safety net at the top of the national agenda; intense role of the state in economic life; pursuit of full employment; quest for equality; strong partnership with the trade union movement; and promotion of international solidarity'.

Thirdly, the ANC optimistically placed the target period for the attainment of primary features of the National Democratic Society in tandem with the attainment of the objectives set out in Vision 2030 and the National Development Plan (NDP). This optimism of course needs to be tempered due to the regression South Africa experienced in the past decade-and-a-half, but this is a story for another day. Important in the conceptualisation is that, when the National Democratic Society has been attained and when the national question recedes 'as a driving force for continuing change and class issues ... assume greater prominence', the historical mission of the ANC would have been realised. While it may, for a period, play the role of sustaining, refining and improving that socio-economic system, the ANC would perforce recede as the leader of continuing change.

Fourthly, the ANC views the SACP as a critical ally committed to thorough-going transformation, a necessary and important political voice of the working class which the ANC in turn recognises as a leader of the motive forces of change. To the extent that the SACP seeks to go further and attain a socialist society, it would then be the political force at the helm of that process. If (or when) this unfolds, some non-SACP members of the ANC may join the Party in that endeavour, others may simply assume an ambivalent posture while others may oppose it.

This has popularly been referred to as 'the two-stage theory'. But the SACP is correct to argue that elements of the purported two stages feed into one another, with some attributes of socialism finding expression in the social democratic content of the NDR and elements of today's class dynamics carrying over into the future. It is in this context that the Party developed the slogan, 'socialism is the future – build it now!'

This task of pursuing socialism in the South African context, the SACP has all along argued, entails efforts on its part to ensure as radical a process of current social transformation as possible by, among others, impacting on the thinking, the planning, the operations and the conduct of the ANC as the leader of the NDR – by dint of the quality of the Party's theory, praxis and cadres. Herein lies the fundamental question about the Party's strategy and tactics: should it throw up its hands in despair, put a spanner in the electoral works at this deeply sensitive period and abandon the ANC and thus leave it open largely to other influences? This seems to be an admission of defeat and an eschewal of a historical responsibility.

To recapitulate: such is the essence, the speculative basis and the timing of the SACP's decision on elections that it could lead to the weakening of both the ANC and the SACP and, by extension, the National Democratic Revolution and the Party's pursuit of socialism.

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