Article

Members of members: the ANC’s Manzini Branch in Mpumalanga

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Abstract
The 1959 Constitution of the African National Congress and all subsequent constitutions have affirmed the role of the branch as ‘the basic unit’ of the organisation. This article uses a case study of an ANC branch in Mpumalanga province to explore the functions that the branch performs in the contemporary ANC. It proceeds to critically examine claims about the ostensibly ‘democratic’ character of branches’ role in the internal politics of the ANC.

Introduction
Tordoff (1993) identifies political mobilisation, policy formulation, patronage and communication as major functions of modern political parties. Similarly, Smith (2009: 109) states: ‘[p]olitical parties are most important institutions of political mobilization in the context of mass politics’. In democratic societies, parties – especially those which want to effect far-reaching changes in society – rely on the masses to vote them into power. In turn, it is mass based political parties which provide the ideologies, leadership and policies which governments rely upon for their legitimacy, while at the same time serving as the principal organs of communication between ruling elites and those on the ground. In post-colonial societies, parties have played a crucial role in institutionalising the state: the nationalist party was the only modern organisation which possessed popular authority. ‘In a sense, (therefore) it (was) the party that create(d) the state’ (Huntington, cited in Randall 1998: 2). It was through political parties that elites sought to bind new states together (the function of ‘political integration’), while at the same time relying upon the personal political support they could generate within the party to maintain their own power and gain access to state resources. The
study of political patronage and clientelism, whereby public goods are exchanged for political support, has therefore become a key focus of concern for understanding how parties operate.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of studies of the functioning of political parties in post-colonial Africa have focused upon the national level. This is a tendency which has been reproduced in post-apartheid South Africa in regard to the way in which the ruling African National Congress (ANC) operates. To be sure, there is recognition of the important role played by branches within the organisation, with Butler (2009), for instance, highlighting the importance of the ANC’s Imvuselelo campaign, launched after the 2004 elections in order to increase mass membership and thereby to renew branches, as a preface to the 2009 election campaign. Even so, such commentaries throw only limited light upon how such initiatives work out on the ground, leaving much to speculation. In contrast, this article will explore the operation of the ANC at a very local level, by looking at the functioning of the party’s Manzini branch in Mpumalanga. While, clearly, the case study approach has severe limitations, it is perhaps only through an accumulation of such studies – allowing some sort of comparison and generalisation – that a more coherent picture will be able to emerge.

The ANC branch as the basic unit of the organisation
The ANC Constitution (1994: 19) spells out that the branch is ‘the place where members exercise their basic democratic right to discuss and formulate policies’. It goes on to lay down that 90 per cent of voting delegates in all party conferences, whether regional, provincial or national, must be drawn from branches and that no leader shall be elected without belonging to a branch. In other words, in constitutional terms, it is branches that dominate the conferences which make the decisions and formulate the policies of the party, right up to the National Conference, the supreme ruling and controlling body of the ANC (ANC Constitution 2007: 10.1). As reaffirmed by Gwede Mantashe, the secretary general of the ANC in 2010, branches ‘are the primary organs of the ANC to which every member, including leadership, must belong. They are the umbilical cord of the ANC and communities, and the primary political school for the socialization of ANC members’ (ANC 2010). This highlights the power that the branches possess in constitutional terms, while simultaneously posing the question whether they exercise this power between as well as during congresses.

Such questions are sharpened by reference to Robert Michels’ (1958: 418)
theorisation regarding the *iron law of oligarchy*. ‘Every party organization’, he declares, ‘represents an oligarchical power grounded upon a democratic basis, we find everywhere electors and the elected. Also we find everywhere that the power of the elected leaders over the electing masses is almost unlimited. The oligarchical structure of the building suffocates the basic democratic principle’. He further asserts, ‘[i]t is the organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy’. His argument is that noble democratic principles are eroded as the party grows and becomes dominated by those elected to party office who displace the interests of the masses with their own.

With this in mind, this article explores how the Manzini branch operates, and whether this indicates that the majoritarian principle of democracy in the ANC still prevails or whether it is undermined as Michels has warned. As Swift (2002: 46) explains, Michels’ theory simply postulates that ‘democracy (is) undermined by the inevitable rise of an elite in any complex organization whether a modern political party or government’. Notionally, the centrality of the branch in the life of the ANC is based on participatory democracy, exemplifying the participation of the masses in the life of the organisation. Accordingly, the key issue here is whether participatory democracy at branch level is undermined by an elite using it for their own benefit and interests or whether power to realise preferences lies in the branch level or elsewhere.

The ANC’s ideal of participatory democracy as spelled out in its constitution allows members to shape policy through their branches. Yet this may mean that leaders are enabled to use branches to advance their own policies or ideas because it is delegates elected by branches who vote on policies and leadership of the party at higher levels. In practice, the ANC seems to operate according to a model of representative democracy with the National Executive Committee (NEC) making most of the decisions between conferences. Yet according to Michels, the tendency is for representative democracy to degenerate into oligarchy whereby elected leaders become detached from the needs and interests of the masses, who are only consulted during leadership elections where leaders descend upon them to lobby for their support and then leave them behind after they have been re-elected. To be sure, more than self-interest may underlie these dynamics. McNaughton (1996: 97), commenting upon Schumpeter, observes that the latter ‘understood that the role of the people in political decision making was inevitably limited’.

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It was simply not realistic for people with relatively little knowledge or understanding to become continuously involved in complex political argument. Rather, he observed, their role is reduced to ‘being able to choose freely between different groups of politicians each presenting competing sets of policies’. Members of the political party in this sense merely become voters of leaders, who then make decisions for them; their only activity is when they have to elect leaders to lead them.

It is against this background that this article explores the reality of party democracy on the ground floor within the ANC. Do branches offer members the space to continuously engage with their elected leaders and participation in political action of the leaders or are they just used for voting purposes and to legitimize leaders and the party?

The centrality of branches in leadership contests: ‘the Polokwane Narrative’

Jacob Dlamini (2009) argues that branches are central in explaining the rise of Jacob Zuma to the ANC’s presidency in 2007. He cautiously uses what he calls the ‘the Polokwane Narrative’ to explain how branches played a crucial role in the challenger’s ascendancy. He claims that the victory of Zuma in Polokwane was due to the revitalisation of branches which took back the ANC from the aloof and autocratic Thabo Mbeki. ‘[T]he narrative rests on two claims: the first is that what we saw in Polokwane in 2007 was an uprising by branch members fed up with a technocratic and aloof leadership. The second claim is that branches saved Jacob Zuma, the common man par excellence’ (Dlamini 2009: 2). However, Dlamini argues that the narrative which depicts ANC branches as uniform is not the case. It was in response to his argument that I undertook my study of the Manzini branch, in order to see if I could acquire an in-depth understanding on what happens in an ANC branch between elections, to understand the issues that are discussed in the branch and how it contributes in the life of the organisation.

There is widespread agreement that ANC branches played a crucial role in the dethroning of Thabo Mbeki. As Southall (2009a: 2) observes, from around 2001, Cosatu and the SACP had resolved to utilize ANC structures [mostly branches swelling the ranks of the ANC] to secure the election of a candidate of their own choice to succeed Mbeki as leader of the party, and by implication as president. Their choice fell upon Jacob Zuma, who, while having held high position within the ANC in exile, was not drawn from the party’s traditional aristocracy but came

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from a humble background, had little formal education and remained very much a ‘man of the people’.

Branches were the structure that secured Jacob Zuma the victory in Polokwane, the alliance structures (Cosatu and SACP) and the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) deploying their members within them to bring about the rise of Zuma to the party presidency. Nonetheless, as argued by Dlamini, this does not mean that ANC branches constituted a homogenous bloc, for the Polokwane vote tally recorded 1,505 votes (or just under 40 per cent) for the Mbeki camp compared to 2,329 votes received by Zuma.

In the lead up to Polokwane both Cosatu and the SACP had called upon their members to swell the ranks of the ANC so that they could influence policies of the party which they deemed to be ‘neo-liberal’ led by those they called ‘the 1996 class project’. Zuma was seen as the standard-bearer of the hopes of the left of the alliance – ‘[b]roadly the left had felt marginalized within the alliance since the adoption by the government of the pro-market, some said “neo-liberal”, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) programme in 1996’ (Southall 2009a: 2). This was viewed as the shift from a pro-working class or pro-poor Redistribution and Development Plan (RDP) which, in essence, constituted the party’s 1994 election manifesto. From this perspective, the only way the alliance could influence the ANC was through swelling its ranks and electing a new leader who would be sympathetic to the working class and the poor. Although it is now widely debated whether Zuma has delivered on his promise to the working class and the poor, branches continue to play a strategic role in the installation of leaders of the ANC. However, what is at issue is the extent to which their role and functioning can be meaningfully described as ‘democratic’.

While the ANC claims to have constantly upheld democracy, it is no more immune from manipulations of democratic principles than other parties. As pointed out by Kgalema Motlanthe, in the report he gave to the Polokwane conference in his then role as the party’s secretary-general, it is through the branches that the party offers members the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights. However, on occasion, branches become victims of manipulation by leaders:

the role of leadership is to guide and provide direction to branches, [but] during times of electoral contestation, certain leaders abuse their position and impose predetermined decisions and outcomes on branches, thus violating the democratic principle that these decisions are the prerogative of the members of the ANC, organized through their branches. (ANC 2007)
These challenges have affected the ANC severely, with Gwede Mantashe in the 2012 Mangaung conference stating that:

the most serious problem is the fact that in the majority of branches there is little or no political life. Branches are revived when they are heading for conferences and elections. Basically our branches are driven by the need to either nominate delegates or candidates for local government elections in the main. This is at the centre of membership that is not politically conscious and therefore susceptible to manipulation’. (ANC 2012)

Motlanthe had noted the same phenomenon in 2007:

[i]n many cases, membership becomes active during branch general meetings convened for the purposes of nominations, elections or report backs, but is dormant in between, with little participation in sustained activities and ongoing branch work. (ANC 2007)

Branches were then manipulated by individuals with leadership ambitions, seemingly confirming the analysis of Michels (1958) that the masses are only consulted when they have to elect leaders. Thus branches die between congresses and elections and are only revived when these events approach.

Motlanthe, in his organisational report to the Polokwane conference, highlighted some of the pressing challenges for branches. These included:

• leaving the entire responsibility of building the branch to just a few active members, with the rest remaining passive;
• disconnection between the ANC members and the branch organisation, and the absence of strong political consciousness amongst members;
• lack of adequate financial and administrative resources to run on-going campaigns and to manage the day-to-day affairs of the branch;
• challenges that seemed inevitably to arise from organising in the poorest and most marginalised sections of the community, notably including the issue of access to scarce resources;
• in some wards, especially in rural areas, the large size of a branch area makes convening regular meetings difficult;
• disunity, lack of cohesion and sectarian practices amongst branch leadership;
• and a lethargic attitude amongst some NEC and PEC members to the tasks of mass work and building branches.

Against these constraints, ‘many branches lacked self-confidence and the ability to function effectively as the basic units of the organization’ (ANC
2007). The 2007 conference resolved that to address these challenges or constraints the ANC had to:

- intensify the branch work in each community through the Imvuselelo – a campaign aimed at recruiting 1 million members by the time the ANC celebrates its centenary in January (2012);
- allocate resources to support branch work, including 100 per cent return of the membership fee to the branches;
- make branches the focus for political and ideological work by senior leadership and cadreship;
- implement a nationally driven branch political education programme;
- and to share good practice and experiences.

Thus it was that the Polokwane conference reaffirmed the party’s commitment to democratic principles. The resolution indicated that the ANC should take its branches seriously as the central structure that has to be functional at all times. But only a few years later, Mantashe was complaining at the 2010 NGC held in Durban that party structures might appear to be in good shape and theoretically strong, but:

… if there are no branches, or branches are weak, there is no organization, as there can be no organizational life. No campaign can be sustained if the branches are weak. (ANC 2010)

Mantashe further noted in 2012 at Mangaung conference that:

This is the centre of a membership that is not politically conscious and therefore susceptible to manipulation. These branches have no capacity to lead campaigns in their respective wards, creating space for other formations to lead these campaigns that end up being violent protests that reinforce the theme that nothing is happening. This has killed the culture of activism at branch level, making the ANC almost absent in communities. (ANC 2012)

But what happens if it remains the case that branches are only revived when it becomes time to conduct internal leadership campaigns or to nominate leaders for local government? It is with such questions in mind that we now turn to look at the life of the party branch in Manzini.

**The focus on the Manzini branch**

The Manzini branch falls under ward 7 of the Mbombela municipality in the former KaNgwane homeland (or bantustan), now Mpumalanga province, and had 217 members (a contested number) when the study was conducted.
The ward consists of three trusts: ‘¹ Chochocho, Phola (Magarula), and parts of Swalala, under the Masoyi tribal authority (Malabela and Ally 2011: 7). It is typical of the former homeland with high levels of unemployment and has a mixed housing and architectural structure which includes RDP houses, shacks and conventional formal housing. It has limited infrastructure but there is electricity, running water, tarred roads (albeit with many potholes), accessible schools and clinics.

The motivation for studying this particular branch was that I had undertaken research towards a degree in the branch, where I studied the functioning of ward committees. My selection was also informed by the fact that I am from the area where the branch is located. I secured permission to conduct the research through the chairperson and the secretary of the branch who allowed me entry to branch executive committee (BEC) and branch general meetings as an observer. The research consisted of in-depth semi structured interviews, informal discussions and participant observations in these meetings, allowing a qualitative assessment of how the branch functions in reality and its role within the wider ANC. A total of 33 recorded and informal interviews were conducted with branch members and the local leadership.

The research was undertaken before campaigning for the ANC’s conference at Mangaung in December 2013 got going, consequently it tends to reflects respondents’ views of the organisation in the wake of the 2007 Polokwane conference. Nonetheless, subsequent discussions with members of the branch confirm that the dynamics described below remain firmly in place.

The ANC branch in Manzini

Not a single meeting of the BEC that I attended attracted the full complement of the BEC members and, if anything, the turn-out at the branch’s general meeting was even worse. When putting the question to members of why attendance of the branch was so low, a variety of issues were raised.

Branch manipulation and suppression of internal democracy within the ANC Branch

Local party members were alive to the principles of ANC democracy. One respondent resorted to analogy in explaining that no new member of the party should expect rapid promotion:

just like a child, (he or she) can’t just walk, (he or she) must first start
by crawling before walking, thus we say [in the ANC] that the ‘branch is the most basic unit in the ANC’. For everyone to lead the ANC one has to start in the branch, lead your branch first, even [Jacob] Zuma is a member of a branch. (Interview July 18, 2010)

This interviewee stressed that the ANC’s constitution laid down that anyone who wants to be leader must belong to a branch, and that upper structures’ leaders had to be elected by branches. It was branches that nurtured leaders and inducted them into the traditions of the party. Nonetheless, the most widely reported complaint concerned an alleged lack of democracy:

They (local leaders or elites) manipulate branches because they want positions … because the branches are significant and if you want any leadership position in the ANC they will tell you that ‘start at the branch first’. Because you can’t say you want to go to the PEC [Provincial Executive Committee] who will put you there? Ofaka ngubani (who will put you there?), the only thing to do is to get people who will vote for you and you can only find them in branches. (Interview July 7, 2010)

In line with this sort of argument, many interviewees stated that leaders with leadership ambitions then manipulate branch outcomes during elections, with one suggesting that leaders ‘manage democracy’. ‘Democracy is managed, Shana,2 that’s what you do if you want to win conferences you need branches so you must manage democracy there’ (Interview October 11, 2014).

The managing of democracy about which he spoke referred to the predetermining of election outcomes of branch meetings and conferences by packing them with ‘your members’ or anyone who will vote in your favour. This leads to constant abuse of democratic principles, for those with leadership ambitions commonly resorted to such tactics through signing up ghost members or barring known opponents from attending meetings. Indeed, it was alleged by interviewees that branches might even be dissolved by party leaders at higher levels if they felt that they were likely to vote against their wishes.

The presence of distinct factions within the party was also recognised. One respondent argued that it was not uncommon for cadres with leadership ambitions to pay BEC leaders money to manipulate branch outcomes through the manipulation of membership lists. This then allowed them to influence the outcomes of bi-annual branch general meetings (BGMs) by
buying votes. Respondents validated Motlanthe’s complaints of ‘gatekeeping’, ‘ghost members’, ‘commercialization of membership’, the renting of members, and other forms of fraudulent and manipulative practices. One participant noted that some people had been enabled to join the branch because their membership fee of R12 had been paid for by someone in exchange for their agreeing to vote for them so as to secure a leadership position within the branch. Indeed, during my study, only those meetings that were held to elect branch executive positions or to nominate ANC candidates for local government elections were quorate. (The quorum for each meeting of the annual branch meeting and any other meeting where the branch makes nominations of candidates for elections within the ANC or for public representation or takes decisions relating to policy matters, is 50 per cent plus one of the total paid-up members of the branch). In contrast, meetings about mundane organisational matters were poorly attended.

**Factions and camps: ‘members-of-members’**

For all that the ANC has constantly denied the existence of factions within its ranks, the rent-a-member scenario shows otherwise. ‘You have people who say ANC members are their people, “bantfu bami” (my people)’, admitted one respondent, complaining that:

> because of such people then you have differences in the branch, when we have to launch (the branch) he will tell ‘his people’ not to come to the BGM so that the branch doesn’t form a quorum and it would not launch. (Interview July 18, 2010)

‘Members of members’ is how most of the participants termed this phenomenon where branch members referred to some members of the branch as ‘their’ members, and how such members are used to manipulate outcomes of branch elections. This phenomenon of members-of-members is one that undermines the democratic principles of the ANC as members are instructed how to participate in the movement, and to exercise not their own will but that of their handlers.

Those that have written about the emergence of the Congress of the People (COPE) post-Polokwane in 2008 argued that it emerged as a vehicle of those who had lost power, patronage and resources (eg Southall 2009b). Instability within the ANC would therefore follow from financial as much as ideological motivations. In contrast, those who had felt sidelined by Mbeki rallied behind a figure whom they viewed as providing greater opportunity to access state finance through tenders and other senior government jobs.
This argument has been further developed by Jan-Jan Joubert, who in his analysis of the Mpumalanga provincial conference in 2012, argues that the stakes were so high because ‘the party has [become] a get-rich-quick scheme for too many people. Leadership has, in many areas, become merely a way to distribute patronage, a tenderpreneurial tool, a commodity too lucrative to surrender under any circumstances, [and] a reason to fight bloody battles’ (Joubert 2012).

In Manzini, it was acknowledged that people would join camps because of the material rewards that they would obtain:

When we join these camps we have to know how it is going to benefit us, we cannot just join a camp without any reward. We cannot struggle and lobby for comrades only to advance their lives. (Interview July 20, 2010)

This respondent also noted that the high levels of unemployment in the area fueled the existence of these camps, as people aligned themselves to those that they believed could assist them in getting jobs, mostly within the municipality. Democracy within the branch therefore revolved around patronage, as would-be leaders offered their followers the prospect of employment or other material advantage were they to gain access to power. Money was necessary to maintain such camps:

[The money is the one that is making these comrades crazy because they [BEC] are given money and told what to do in the branch. They take the money and do as they are told … they then buy comrades alcohol and they win branches for certain camps. (Interview July 20, 2010)

Personal interest is proscribed in the oath that members take in joining the ANC, yet the reality – in Manzini, at least – is that democracy is undermined by the ‘member of members’ phenomenon. Or as some respondents put it, members were reduced to becoming ‘voting cattle’.

As noted by one activist observer in relation to the ANC’s Stellenbosch conference in 2002, this outcome is a product of weak branch structures and even weaker cadre development programmes, and when branches are only revitalised around elective processes (Potgieter-Gqubule 2010). Indeed, this was the case for the Manzini branch which was disbanded on July 29, 2010 after numerous attempts to hold the BGM had failed. Following this, a branch task team (BTT) was established by the Ehlandzeni regional deployee in the branch who chaired that meeting. The BTT was mandated with re-launching the branch, supposedly free of undemocratic tendencies, a task it formally completed on September 12, 2012. Even then the re-launch of the branch was
questioned by many who argued that it was a product of ‘dirty lobbying’, and that some of the members of the party had been ‘bought’ to vote for certain individuals to gain positions on the new BEC.

Branch leadership and ‘dirty lobbying’
This dirty lobbying to which members alluded is linked to the ‘members of members’ phenomenon. One respondent invited me to come and see how dirty lobbying happens when the branch was re-launched. He suggested that ‘members of members’ would be given lists of those for whom they would be required to vote for election to the BEC, adding that they would not be allowed to question the nominees, but merely to vote for them. And indeed, on September 12, 2010, when I attended the re-launch of the branch, lists were openly circulated. I managed to obtain one list, the nominees listed upon it were duly elected.

Some members of the branch left halfway through the meeting, arguing that democracy was being undermined, even though they acknowledged that lobbying was an established ANC tradition:

ANC democracy allows you to influence me and also allows me to influence you as well … but the problem now is that the membership that you saw in the BGM was a membership that had been bought membership cards by some individuals who wanted their votes. These people were then given a list on who should be the chairperson, deputy chairperson, secretary and so forth [BEC members]. Which then undermines democracy, this is ‘dirty lobbying’, as people do not apply their minds, they just do as their told. (Interview September 18, 2010)

This respondent further argued that ‘people only apply their minds when they have nothing to lose’, but in this case many who voted saw themselves as making an investment in the future. This was facilitated by the voting process, which was by show of hands, enabling those who had bought votes to check whom their clients were voting for.

Lobbying in the ANC is accepted and has been from its inception in 1912. As Febe Potgieter-Gqubule (2010) has stressed, the ‘ANC constitution and organizational rules gives any member the right to nominate, stand for election and to be voted for. This process by its nature meant contest among individuals and lobbying by their supporters’. However, what is challenged by many today is this entrenchment of the new tendency of ‘dirty lobbying’. It is manifestly an important factor which explains why certain members only surface at times of elections and then disappear between elections, thereby rendering branches otherwise dysfunctional. Yet not all members of the
Manzini branch were members of members, and there were some who saw the significance of participating in the branch’s other activities.

**Countervailing forces in the Manzini ANC**

You must not only participate in the ANC when it is election time, but must be a full member to influence decisions and policies of the ANC. Because the branch is the basic unit of the organization every decision that the ANC makes starts from the branch. (Interview August 29, 2010).

This respondent was not merely reciting the rhetoric of the ANC, as she indicated how she had participated in the making of a decision by the branch, which banned ward councilors from holding two jobs at the same time. She argued that there was a concern from communities that councilors were failing to deliver on services and that one of the reasons was the fact that some of them were holding down two demanding jobs simultaneously. Thus she argued that the decisions that the ANC has to make must come from branches, this is the reason that made me to join the branch because I did not want to say ‘I love the ANC’ and while not a full card carrying member, because if you don’t join it means that you won’t be able to influence the decisions. (Interview August 29, 2010)

Another interviewee stated in like manner:

Well, for me branches that’s where the power lies. That’s where the organisation is rooted. Without branches, an organisation will cease to exist. (Interview 1, November 27, 2014)

Many others were also of the view that even though branches face severe challenges, as highlighted above, they nonetheless had a role to play in the life of the ANC. Consequently, it was necessary for committed party members to continue to participate in branch meetings in the hope of shaping decisions of the movement. Such participants stressed that branches are not only about elections, but have a vital role to play in shaping and influencing the movement’s policies. However, as one member of the branch executive pointed out, the low turn-out in meetings between elections effectively reduced them to mere talk shows with no power to influence or discuss party policies:

it is useless to call these meetings if we don’t form a quorum. We end up having causes which do not make any change [or decision] in the life of the branch and you cannot make any decision in such meetings. (Interview July 7, 2010)
Another participant was similarly pessimistic and argued:

BGMs (in effect branches) are just mere talk shows. The one with the best Oxford dictionary English is regarded as progressive. Anyway branches don’t have power, decisions are imposed on branches from above structures…in addition, branches are useless, they only quorate when there are refreshments on the agenda. Aikhona! (Interview 2, November 27, 2014)

Indeed, this is what occurred at almost all the meetings that I attended. Most were inquorate, and ended up being simply discussions between the comrades on broader ANC politics and government issues or about communicating decisions from higher structures of the ANC.

**Conclusion**

The ANC branch in Manzini has been affected by many of the dubious practices highlighted in the various organisational reports made by the party’s secretary-generals at successive conferences, these including manipulation of voting, suppression of internal democracy, and the activities of factions and camps and dirty lobbying. These tendencies undermine the democratic principles that notionally underpin the organisation and confirm Michels’ iron law of oligarchy where minority interests supersede those of the majority of members and reduce members to mere voting cattle. From this single example, it is fair to say that the ballot by show of hands should have no place in party elections or in meetings in which there is no manifest consensus regarding policy. Although this will come with some logistical constraint, secret balloting is a route which the ANC should follow if it is to avoid the risk of falling victim to elite manipulation. Although this would demand significant commitment from the party, it would seem necessary if leaders are to be held to account and if branches are to become functional and vibrant. Secret balloting, properly conducted, would also allow members to participate freely in the organisation without fear of victimisation from factions within the party.

The energy that is shown by branches during elections is remarkable and the victories which the party regularly enjoys are a tribute to the mobilisational capacities of its branches. If such commitment could be displayed between elections, and were party branch members to be involved in door-to-door listening to their communities, many of the protests that are now sweeping the country might be forestalled, while the trend towards a declining turnout in elections might be arrested. As it is, ordinary people are prone to say
today that: ‘we only see the ANC when it wants our vote’. While the ANC’s constitution maintains that the branch is the basic unit of the organization, the reality of Manzini would seem to suggest otherwise.

Notes
1. A ‘trust’ in this case is land entrusted to the chief for the people. Residents do not have title deeds to the land that they occupy, with the tribal chief holding the land in trust for the community.
2. ‘Mshana’ is a Nguni word for nephew but is used loosely by ANC comrades and political activists to mean friend, colleague, comrade or cadre.

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