

## THE RAINBOW AGAINST THE AFRICAN SKY OR AFRICAN HEGEMONY IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT?

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*Nation-Formation and Nation Building*, the ANC discussion document released this July deals with such crucial issues for South Africa as the nationality question and the nature of the nation. It has provoked much less debate than it deserves - surprisingly so, for it is one of the few documents that lays an ideological foundation for the policy of the party in every possible sphere from economy to education and defines its attitude towards the role and place of individuals and groups (both cultural and social) in the present and future South Africa. In December, it is likely to be adopted as policy.

To understand the significance and the broader meaning of the document one has to put it in historical perspective and to identify what is new and what is old in it, what has changed and what is still the same. The document re-affirms the ANC's non-racial stance and its allegiance to the policy of deracialising South African society. At the same time it reiterates and stresses the party's adherence to its thesis that 'the liberation of Black people in general and Africans in particular' should be the main content of the National Democratic Revolution - which, according to ANC thinking, South Africa is going through now. It does mention 'the South African nation in the making' and 'the campaign for a "New Patriotism" which is critical to nation-building' but the document stresses the African nature of this emerging nation. The party puts its weight behind the image of the South African nation as 'an African nation on the African continent ... in outlook, in the style and content of its media, in its cultural expression, in its food, in the language accents of its children'. Moreover, the authors of the document indicate that 'what is required is a continuing battle to assert African hegemony in the context of a multi-cultural and non-racial society'.

A heavy stress on Africanness does not preclude the authors of the document from recognising as a reality the diversity and persistence of cultural, religious and other identities in South Africa and within the ranks of their own

organisation. Furthermore, the document states that 'to deny the reality of these identities by the democratic movement is to create a vacuum which can easily be exploited by counter-revolution'. This is a strong statement compared to very cautious references to diversity in earlier documents.

The document clarifies the ANC's ideas on the class contents of its nationality policy and on the class nature of its new African South African nation when it defines the central task of the National Democratic Revolution as 'the improvement of the quality of life of the especially poor' who are 'by definition mostly black'. However, it goes on to say that because 'the objective of the NDR is not the creation of a socialist or communist society', this task 'entails the building of a black bourgeoisie' and 'the fast growth of a black middle strata'.

Significantly, this picture is very different from the one presented in the earlier internal ANC document which was discussed by the ANC parliamentary caucus at the end of May. According to media reports, this earlier document stated that 'as transformation advances, the culture, values and interests of the African working class and its allies will increasingly come to constitute the core of the new South Africa' and that nonracialism 'should be given more specific cultural and class content, reflecting primarily the position of the African working class and its allies' (*Sunday Independent*, May 25, 1997). *Nation-Formation and Nation Building* makes no mention of the African proletariat and its culture, values and interests. Instead it speaks about the improvement of the quality of life of 'the poor' the majority of whom are 'blacks in general and Africans in particular', and of the building of the black bourgeoisie and black 'middle strata'.

This marked change could mean several things. It could mean, for example, that the first document connected the predominance of 'the culture, values and interests of the African working class' with the second, socialist, stage of the revolution ('as transformation advances') and then this second stage was simply omitted from the later version. It could also mean that the consensus during the debate ruled out 'narrow, exclusive Africanism' (*Mail and Guardian*, May 23, 1997) for the time being - and this was reflected in *Nation-Formation and Nation Building*. Or else there had been a lot of lobbying during the time between the publication of the two documents and the second document reflected the mellowing of the position of the authors. This is just guesswork based on media reports. What one does not need to guess is the fact that the whole debate has been provoked by the intensity of Africanist feeling and the strengthening of Africanist tendencies within the ANC.

The Africanist thrust of the present debate has to be viewed in the context of the Africanist tradition of the ANC during the first decades of its existence and of the Africanist trend within it in its later years, the trend that was most strongly

represented in the 1940s by the ANC Youth League. In those days the ANC's Africanism was devoid of class connotations and expressed itself in terms of political unity rather than cultural homogeneity. The situation began to change from the middle of the 1950s when *The Freedom Charter* became the basic program document of all Charterist organisations, the ANC among them. This program aimed at providing a platform for a broader unity of anti-apartheid and democratic forces but not at creating a South African nation or even a closer unity which was later called non-racialism. Its clauses pertaining to nationhood – 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and White' and 'all people shall have equal rights to use their own language and to develop their own folk culture and customs' – stress cultural diversity under the future democratic political dispensation (as in Mandela, 1978). Gradually, however, the ANC's reaction to the divisive policy of apartheid on the one hand and its closer contact, and then practical merger, with the South African Communist Party on the other made it supplement its nationalist platform with ideas of class solidarity across the national and racial borders, of non-racialism and emphasis on the class nature of the nationality problem in South Africa. The break away of the PAC in 1959 may have weakened the Africanist ethos of the organisation but it has never been wiped out – far from it. At the important Morogoro consultative conference in 1969, strong opposition to the admission of non-Africans to the ANC stemmed not only from the Congress itself but also from within the SACP (albeit for different reasons). The conference defeated this opposition but admission to the NEC remained reserved for Africans for another 16 years until the 1985 Kabwe conference.

The idea of a single national identity based on the merger of cultures which stemmed from the SACP's concept of the 'nation in the making' may have influenced the ANC's thinking but in its official documents, the organisation repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the Charterist ideal of the South African nation as a union based on cultural diversity and equality. The *Constitutional Guidelines* prepared at the end of the 1980s declared: 'It shall be state policy to promote the growth of a single national identity ... the state shall recognise the linguistic and cultural diversity of the people ...' The 1994 election document *A Better Life for All* referred to 'a nation built by developing our different cultures, beliefs and languages as a source of our common strength' (ANC, 1994).

Strangely, Africanism may have been boosted by the SACP's ideology of 'colonialism of a special type' and the resulting need for a two-stage revolution where the content of the first stage is 'the national liberation of the African people' first formulated in the 1962 programme of the party and officially adopted by the ANC at the Morogoro conference. Joe Slovo's 'nation in the

making' could also have fed into the same sentiment for he attributed the key role in nation-building to the African working class. 'It is certainly the emerging proletariat', he wrote, 'which has become the key class force for nation-building. As the most politically conscious and advanced social force in our revolution our black working class is, at the same time, the most internationalist and the most committed to national cohesion' (Slovo, nd).

On the surface *Nation-Formation and Nation Building* seems to have imbibed these ideas but in fact it does not repeat any of them exactly. It is close to traditional ANC Africanism without the reference to class - but then there was no talk of 'African hegemony' in those days. Even the 'Proletarian Africanism' of the initial ANC document discussed in May already testified that while African working class is indeed prepared to play the key role in nation-building, its idea of nationhood is somewhat different from that of Slovo who wrote of 'one united nation, embracing all our ethnic communities' and of the 'national culture which is shared by different ethnic groups' (Slovo, nd). The kind of nationhood that is described in *Nation-Formation and Nation Building* does not exactly correlate with Slovo's ideas either, for it refers to 'African nation' and 'African hegemony', not 'the key role of the African working class' in the process of nation-building.

Closer to the new ANC document may be the old slogan of 'an independent native South African republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' republic, with full equal rights for all races, black, coloured and white' (South African Communists Speak, 1981), which was offered to the Communist Party of South Africa by the Communist International and adopted by 1928. It was soon abandoned but it must have left a deep trace in the hearts of many Communists for it successfully mingled their nationalist and socialist aspirations. The words 'native South African republic' may be seen as incorporating Africanism in general and 'African hegemony' in particular, and the mention of 'equal rights for all national minorities' takes care of 'the context of multi-cultural and non-racial society'. What falls out of the new definition is the Charterist concept of a nation as a political union based on equality and diversity and Slovo's idea of the merger of cultures into one cultural entity. The 'rainbow', something intrinsically though not sharply divided and yet indivisible, a term which is said to have been coined by Archbishop Tutu, was a successful albeit a romanticised representation of the Charterist interpretation of the South African nation. *Nation-Formation and Nation Building* challenges its usefulness and cautions against the possibility that it might consist of 'black Africans who pay allegiance to Africa, whites who pay allegiance to Europe, Indians who pay allegiance to India and Coloureds somewhere in the unidentified middle of the

rainbow'. If the new policy is officially adopted the rainbow ideal will cease to exist and Thabo Mbeki's powerful speech on the adoption of the new constitution in 1996, 'I am an African', which was the embodiment of the 'rainbow' spirit would no longer apply.

Except for the 'new Patriotism', the ANC nation-building text offers little to those who are neither African nor poor black. There are several reasons for the ANC's change of heart and its willingness to risk the possibility of alienating whole layers of South Africa's population on the basis of race and class at the moment which seems least appropriate, when the effort and sacrifice of the whole society but first of all of its formerly privileged (or less underprivileged) groups are needed to achieve precisely the goal that the ANC is aiming at - that of economic upliftment of the African majority. Several cultural, intellectual, ideological and political tendencies - diverse and sometimes directly the opposite - that have appeared or have become more pronounced in South African society since the 1994 elections made the ANC change its priorities and influenced the thinking of the authors of the document.

One of these tendencies is the renaissance of multiple African cultures and languages which had been on the one hand denigrated by the apartheid regime and on the other stigmatised by the anti-apartheid forces as being used by apartheid to divide African peoples. The 'flowering of African cultures' envisaged and propagated by Joe Slovo (1992) would have begun with the demise of apartheid in any case but the government has further stipulated it by its policy of promoting African languages and cultures. According to a recent census, the majority of South Africans see themselves first of all as 'Africans', 'Zulus', 'Christians', 'Protestants', 'Moslems', etc, and only a small minority refers to themselves as 'South Africans'. This minority comes primarily from coloured and white groups, mostly English-speakers among the latter (Kotze, 1997).

The 'flowering of cultures' has, in turn, led to the growth of group self-consciousness and assertiveness, the political result of which is a certain degree of 'ethnocisation' of politics and political perceptions. Not that it had not been there before 1994 but then the stakes were much lower and, more importantly, perception of a common enemy, given the enemy's divisive strategy, played it down within the anti-apartheid movement. Media reports from the May debate gave some idea of the growing extent of the problem now.

Three years ago it was difficult to imagine that anything like 'there are too many Indians in Cabinet' could have been openly said by a top ANC official - even though (or particularly though) he went on to say that it 'does not worry' him since 'the issue is that they must insure that their policies put African people

in power, in their departments and the constituencies to which they are linked' (*Mail and Guardian*, May 23, 1997). Now this declaration has become just normal. It has become just normal that ethnicity plays a very important role in ANC's appointments for key positions in the provinces. In fact, the *Nation-Formation and Nation Building document* itself states that while there should be no 'ethnic, racial, language and class arithmetic in composing the leadership structures ... attention should always be paid to these broad groupings because a critical mass can be reached where the perceptions of dominance can take root'.

Another new development is that Africanism as a perception (not as a distinct political movement or party) has gained momentum more than ever before both inside and outside the ranks of the ANC and its allies. It could hardly have been expected that this would not happen with the black majority coming to power. The re-assertion of pride, the invention and re-invention of black identity, styles and fashions, culture, even ideology ('ubuntu'), the discovery of 'Africanness', even if only in the form of re-naming of places and personalities, the re-invention and revision of a black legacy in search of a new, a particularly African way forward - all this is a natural reaction to the past. This is a challenge to the psychological legacy of decades, and sometimes centuries, of humiliation. The whole continent has gone or is going through this process and it would be strange if South Africa was spared and, indeed, if in a country with such a long and recent history of racism this reaction did not go overboard. What come as a surprise, however, is the fact that today this Africanist tendency is expressed much more vigorously and in much stronger terms by the ANC leadership, Communists among them, than either by the PAC or BC groupings.

'Flowering' of African cultures on the one hand and Africanism on the other may seem to work in different directions but in fact they do not. Each plays its own role in different political circumstances and at different social and political levels and the two constantly interact to strengthen and feed one another. Among other things the renaissance of Africanism is reflected in the 'Africanist' interpretation of affirmative action policy. When it comes to job applications, particularly in tertiary educational institutions, black candidates from other African countries and even from the United States are often perceived as being somewhat more authentic than local white and sometimes even non-white - but not African - candidates and appointed over their heads.

One of the important applications and expressions of the new spirit of 'Africanness' (and another factor to feed into the upsurge of Africanism) is the government's policy in Africa. Not only has South Africa 'returned' to the African continent to play a prominent and energetic part in its politics, not only

does it see itself, justifiably, as a decisive role player in the economy and politics of the Southern African region but it also aspires to the role of the moral leader of the continent, its judge and speaker to the outside world. The first step to achieving this is 'Africanisation' of the image of the country in both cultural and ideological sense. The nervous reaction of the government to the signs of rejection by other African states of South Africa's leading role on the continent on the grounds that it is not African enough (Nigeria's challenge to Mandela being one such example) betrayed a lack of confidence of its own position in this matter.

The same is true about political perceptions inside the country. A prominent PAC member has recently said that Mandela's government is 'like a coconut - black outside and super-white inside' (*Sunday Independent* May 25, 1997). The ANC leadership is, of course, painfully aware of the fact that many of its own supporters would subscribe to this metaphor. While there is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the party's African electorate will stay with it for almost the indefinite future no matter what, there is equally little doubt that the disappointment and frustrations among its electorate may lead to losing at least some votes to the parties to the left of the ANC, both within and outside the ANC coalition. There is no need to dwell on the reasons for these disappointments and frustrations. The expectations of the African community had been so high and diverse, and South Africa's problems so numerous and deep-seated that frustrations were bound to be there even if the policy and the performance of the government were flawless. But with the next general elections in sight these frustrations and the attempts to mitigate them by boosting the national pride of the majority of the ANC's electorate would become a more and more powerful factor behind the policy of the ruling party - whatever else it does.

Political emotions and feelings of the 'non-African' minorities understandably play a much smaller role in the ANC's political considerations now than they had before the 1994 election. Despite the ANC's particular stress on non-racialism before the elections the vote was racially divided and the party came out of it more overwhelmingly 'African' than it seemed to have hoped for. The crushing moral and political defeat of the white far right-wing parties before and during the elections and their virtual disappearance from the political arena also contributed to the same political trend, giving a clear signal that the political danger to the ANC from these quarters no longer exists. Had the National Party stayed in the Government of National Unity, the emotions of its electorate would perhaps have to be considered. Now that it stands compromised by the findings of the TRC and weakened by internal crisis, its reaction to the new interpretation of nationhood by the ANC can be ignored. The same is, of course, true about the

DP because of its small numbers and, despite its active role as a parliamentary opposition, its obvious inability and unwillingness to get itself involved in a serious fall-out with the government.

The weakening of the mostly 'non-African' parties has given the black leadership of this country in general and a part of the ANC leadership in particular, yet another powerful weapon to curb the frustrations of their electorate. It is becoming increasingly easy to write off the failures of the government on the one hand and to blame the frustrations of black electorate on the other on white racism and the alleged unwillingness of the white community to support change. It is not by chance that more often than not the first reaction of the government and of its various representatives to any criticism is the outcry 'racism'. Remarkably, the further the South African society is on the road of dismantling the apartheid structures and institutions and the firmer the new order stands on its feet, the more common accusations of racism and the stronger their wording. Racism is, no doubt, still there - the whole mentality of the society is permeated with race, or, to be more precise, with what the apartheid regime depicted as race - but, strangely, what one hears of is not the racism of the far right-wingers (which is, again, still there all right) but rather racism of 'neo-liberals' (always in inverted commas) or of this or that particular author, journalist, or academic. This is not surprising for real racists no longer constitute an active opposition or even engage in criticising the government and the only ideological and moral challenge to it among the non-Africans comes from the liberal political quarters.

To sum up, the new definition of nationhood is a wonderful political tool for consolidating the support and mobilising the electorate behind the ANC leadership. Its Africanness knocks the main weapon out of the hands of the PAC and seizes it for the ANC while its appeal to 'the poor' consolidates the ANC's union with the SACP and COSATU. Even in terms of its negotiations with the IFP Africanism is a much more powerful card to play than 'rainbowism'. Virtually all political developments in the past three years point in one direction: at this particular moment of South Africa's history a nationalist stance offers a better political potential to the ANC than non-racialism, whether based on class solidarity or on 'rainbow' all-inclusive nationhood.

Historical parallels of the ANC's new nationality policy are not very encouraging. After winning the struggle for independence, African nationalism in other African countries, whether associated with various 'African socialisms', or not, have at best led to the growth of African bureaucratic bourgeoisie - despite the fact that the aspiration to uplift the impoverished majority was in some cases no less sincere there than it is here - and in worst cases served as a smoke screen



for the plundering of the national resources by the new elites. It may not happen in South Africa. After all, the ANC political circles are well aware of the traps on this road - almost four decades have lapsed since 1960, the year of African independence, and the experience of other countries could not have been lost on the ANC leadership.

Yet, the question that featured most prominently during the May debate was the distribution of positions in the public service. There is little doubt that the whole debate was triggered by the grievances about the lack of Africanisation of the public sector and the perceived predominance of the minorities in this sphere, even though this may include ANC appointees. So what is at stake? Is it the economic empowerment of the masses? Or is it the redistribution of positions in the public service? COSATU's Sam Shilowa left no doubt that it is, indeed, the latter. '... People should focus', he said, 'on how we ensure that the public service is representative. It is wrong that there is no proportionate representation in our civil service, where policy is formulated and implemented. We would like to see Africans participate in wealth creation and benefiting from the change' (*Sunday Independent*, May 25, 1997). It is highly doubtful that it is going to be the working class who will benefit from this kind of economic empowerment.

This said, not only the outcome but even the formulation and the implementation of the proposed policy, is far from clear. Another ANC discussion policy document of a more general nature, *Building the Foundation for a Better Life*, released simultaneously with *Nation-Formation and Nation Building* mentions an 'African nation' and 'the affirmation of our Africanness as a nation' but also stresses 'equality among the racial, ethnic, language, cultural and religious communities' within 'a united nation', 'multiple identities' in 'the melting pot of broad South Africanism', the importance of 'an over-arching identity of being South African' and even the role of the whites in the liberation movement (1997:6-7). All this indicates a strengthening of the non-racialist stand in this document compared to the previous two, although a 'South African nation' whether 'in the making' or not, is still left out and 'an identity of being South African' is offered only to those 'who are indeed South African' (without any explanation of what this 'indeed' implies). This, in turn, means that the definition is open for change and that only the practical steps of the government can - and will - show the real meaning of the new nationality policy of the ruling party, who is going to benefit from it, and how.

In the past the ANC has often been criticised by friends and enemies alike for the lack of clarity of its position on the nationality question. This lack of clarity was, however, a very successful tactic, whether conscious or unconscious, for the party's main goal of the time, namely, mobilisation. It permitted

inclusiveness and pluralism of opinions and left room for a debate the results of which were in any case non-binding for they did not have to be tested against political and economic realities and implemented in practice. It is the first time now that a concept of a nation and nationality policy as construed by the party will directly affect the policy of the government and the lives of the people.

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