

Why South Africa's governing alliance is doing some serious stock-taking

By [Dirk Kotze](#)

2 Jul 2015

For the first time since South Africa held democratic elections 21 years ago leaders of the governing African National Congress (ANC) and its alliance partners, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), have gathered for a summit stretching over an [entire week](#).



The secrecy of the agenda invites the question: what is happening behind closed doors?

Given the grave difficulties afflicting the alliance, with the dangers this poses for President Jacob Zuma's hold on power, the summit can be viewed as a stocktaking of his progress so far. At the same time it is a strategic opportunity to address some outstanding matters.

The Tripartite Alliance is arguably the most important justification for the ANC continuing to claim that it is still a liberation movement and not a conventional political party. Whether it is very different from an old-generation social democratic party is open for debate.

The tripartite nature of the alliance is unusual. In Europe, social democratic parties forged alliances with trade unions but these arrangements disappeared in the 1990s. In other cases, trade union movements established opposition parties which eventually came to power - as happened in Poland and Zambia.

The history

This year marks the [60th anniversary](#) of the Freedom Charter, the document viewed by most members of the alliance as their loadstar. The anniversary is a reminder of the alliance's origin in the Congress Alliance during the 1950s.

Forty years later, and after the unbanning of the organisations, the three main partners as well as the South African National Civic Organisation were all integrated under a new alliance banner. According to the ANC, the alliance recognises the independence of each partner.

“ The Alliance is founded on a common commitment to the objectives of the [National Democratic Revolution](#) and the need to unite the largest possible cross-section of South Africans behind these objectives. ”

In the 1960s, the ANC and SACP developed the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) as a revolutionary strategy in its famous Strategy and Tactics [document](#). It conceptualised the first stage of their post-democracy approach.

The principles underpinning this goal were incorporated at an alliance conference in Durban in 1991. But the post-democracy landscape has proved difficult and ideological differences within the alliance have become increasingly marked about what South Africa's final destination should be. For the [SACP](#) and the socialists in the trade union federation, the NDR is the first stage of the two-stage theory of a socialist [revolution](#). On the other hand, the ANC - as a non-socialist movement - sees it as the final stage.

Rocky start to the new century

Approaches to the alliance were markedly different between former ANC and South African president Thabo Mbeki and Zuma. The Mbeki period was characterised by deep ideological differences, particularly over economic policy. The Zuma era has been dominated by organisational or factional fault-lines, sometimes accompanied by policy differences.

The alliance arguably reached its zenith in 1994. It reached consensus on an economic policy known as the Reconstruction and Development Programme ([RDP](#)). Also, members from each part of the alliance, including leaders of the communist party and trade unions, were asked to serve in the new government. But in 1996 the ANC alienated its two partners when it adopted a new neo-liberal macro-economic policy, known as [Growth, Employment and Redistribution \(Gear\)](#).

The ANC's national conference at Polokwane in [2007](#), at which Jacob Zuma defeated Mbeki as ANC president, was initially regarded as the return of the alliance. This was because Zuma was supported by Cosatu, the SACP as well as key provinces and the [ANC Youth League](#) led by Julius Malema.

The divisions deepen

The alliance suffered a setback at the ANC's national conference in 2012 when Deputy President [Kgalema Motlanthe](#) openly defied Zuma by contesting the top job. Zuma's victory was followed by a purge of senior ANC leaders. One consequence of this was that the ANC in Gauteng, the country's economic powerhouse, emerged openly as an anti-Zuma centre.

At the same time, the trade union body experienced the first serious signs of an existential crisis when its [biggest union](#), the National Union of Metalworkers of SA, refused to support the Government's new long-term macro-economic plan, the [National Development Plan](#).

A temporary sense of solidarity was restored to the federation by the urge to protect the National Union of Mineworkers, also a Cosatu-affiliate union, during the violent strike at platinum producer [Lonmin](#).

The next organisational setback was Malema's expulsion from the ANC and his establishment of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). This completely paralysed the ANC Youth League, which since its formation in 1944 had infused ANC strategies with [militancy](#). In effect, the new party under Malema's leadership challenged the alliance's legitimacy as the custodian of the Freedom Charter's values and its commitment to the NDR.

The consequences for the 2014 general election were significant. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa refused to support the ANC in the election. Later, the union announced its intention to form the [United Front](#) - partly as a counter for the alliance. Dissension intensified with the [suspension](#) of the federation's General Secretary [Zwelinzima Vavi](#).

The ANC's counter-measure to salvage Cosatu was to establish an [ANC task team](#) led by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa and Deputy Secretary-General Jessie Duarte. It met with little success.

Tensions within the union federation deepened. This year it voted to expel not only the general secretary but also its largest affiliate. This immediately prompted seven other unions within the federation to support the expelled union.

The split had indeed happened within the alliance, but ironically not between the ANC and the left, as had been anticipated, but within the union federation.

Unfinished business

Between 2014 and 2015 the purpose of the alliance for the Zuma government changed. It has become a vehicle for Zuma to consolidate and protect his power base in the ANC.

How well Zuma has done this will become clearer later in October when the ANC holds its all-important national general council. The meeting measures progress and maps out future priorities. In the past it has also been the bellwether of leadership changes in the alliance. Zuma needs to survive it without a groundswell of criticism against him if he is to see through his full term as president of the party to 2017 and of the country to 2019.

The main outstanding business items for Zuma are the divisions among the alliance partners as well as within the partners themselves.

The youth league remains paralysed by factionalism. The ANC Women's League is in no better shape. ANC provincial and regional structures are equally paralysed by divisions. Most revealing is the [in-fighting](#) in the eThekweni (Durban) region in anticipation of the Zuma succession contest. This is particularly significant because, for the first time, the coalition also has a regional bias. KwaZulu-Natal, Zuma's home base, is favoured when senior public or government appointments are made and ANC leaders identified.

At least three other provinces also have factional fault lines. Gauteng is even more forthright and openly opposes Zuma. Most recently the provincial chairperson, Paul Mashatile, opposed the police minister's report to exonerate Zuma from any repayment of the millions [spent](#) improperly on his Nkandla home.

Possibly the most detrimental implications of the attempted hegemony of Kwa-Zulu Natal is that it creates uncertainty about Ramaphosa, who comes from Limpopo in the north of the country, as the next president. Both Cosatu and the SACP are led by people who are pro-Zuma and have allegiances to Kwa-Zulu Natal.

This week's summit is the first since 2013, which lasted only two days. Now it is a whole week. Unity in the alliance is the overarching priority. For Zuma, the agenda is presumably a simple one: his political survival.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dirk Kotze is Professor in Political Science at University of South Africa.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>