



16 December

*It's all systems go for the ANC's first Consultative Conference since 1985 — the movement's first legal conference inside the country since its was banned in 1961. In this special 15-page focus, **WORK IN PROGRESS** looks at some of the issues due to be discussed on December 16. We also look at the the SACP's expectations of the ANC, the role of the Youth and Women's Leagues — and, finally, offer an incisive 'delegates manual' for those attending their first ANC conference*

The search for political direction

There will be little time for celebration at the ANC consultative conference on December 16. There are too many serious challenges facing the organisation to allow for triumphalism, as Jenny Cargill reports

While the African National Congress (ANC) has downgraded its December 16 national conference to a consultative one, the gathering will be no less important.

The consultative conference will face two crucial challenges:

- to break the ANC's current organisational inertia; and
- to fill the vacuum on the key issue of strategy and tactics for the months ahead.

The movement's National Executive Committee (NEC) had perhaps little choice but to postpone a fully-fledged conference. Just two months from the scheduled date, only a handful of draft policy papers had been prepared, and still fewer had been distributed to branches for discussion. This threatened to taint the conference as undemocratic even before it started. Since the consultative conference has a more limited agenda, the distribution of papers and resolutions is more manageable, and the prospects for democratic participation by delegates, albeit around fewer issues, are improved.

Added to that, sluggish progress in negotiating the release of political prisoners and the return of exiles promised only limited representation from the two groups with the greatest experience of the movement and its current leadership. To have pushed ahead with a fully fledged national conference without their participation would have added to the growing restlessness in what is historically the ANC's inner core.

But the ANC still needs to demand of government the right to bring to the December conference a strong exile contingent. This, says one senior ANC source, will be vital to creating the necessary 'unity and trust in the build-up' to the proposed national



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June next year.

While downgraded in status, the conference needs to kick off with an understanding that serious organisational and strategic decisions cannot be delayed until June. As one ANC source puts it: 'Six months is too long to wait'.

In his view, this means that the pervading atmosphere at the conference must be one of 'openness', where delegates are not just voting fodder. Leadership adulation - with delegates being overawed by proceedings and 'names' - has to be avoided, he argues.

Regional conferences have already given pointers to possible pitfalls on December 16. Specifically, from the start, the conference needs to devise and agree on procedures which ensure people vote on the issues and are not just led by personalities.

Enough has already happened in the few months since the unbanning of the ANC to get a sense of the kind of issues that are likely to dominate the proceedings. And, with the impact of negotiations unfolding, debate is already underway on the most appropriate strategy and tactics for the coming months.

A growing view in ANC ranks is that the organisation is sorely missing a coherent plan that spells out all the elements in this current phase of struggle and how they inter-relate. Consequently, the organisation has slipped into a one-dimensional approach, with the talks having almost a monopoly on the movement's energies and resources.

Because of this, the ANC assertion that negotiations is a terrain of struggle in which the masses are involved has remained merely rhetorical.

Past ANC strategy was premised on four pillars of struggle: mass action, the underground, armed struggle, and international support for the democratic movement and the international isolation of the apartheid state.

The negotiating process begs a number of questions which the conference will need to debate vigorously. An ANC statement on the December 16 conference emphasised the agenda would include issues such as an interim government and constituent assembly. The government finds both these issues particularly contentious, and ANC negotiators have signalled some readiness to compromise on them. Delegates will no doubt want to express themselves on any such readiness to compromise: under what circumstances, if any, could such a compromise be tactically justified? How

conference next June.

The postponement of the national conference also provides the fledgling internal branches with time to get a better feel of the ANC, to form realistic opinions about individual members of the leadership, as well as to debate and test mechanisms of internal accountability and democracy.

The character of the national conference as it was initially envisaged was being shaped more by notions of the ANC being a government-in-waiting than by the challenges confronting a liberation movement still involved in struggle. Conference organiser and NEC member James Stuart said policy formulation was necessary not just to 'manage this period of transition', but to 'prepare for a future non-racial government'.

This agenda included a long list of policy papers, covering a number of issues - such as the environment - which would not have even earned a cursory mention before.

But a number of leading ANC members feel this concentration was inappropriate. The current political climate - in particular, the violence - has necessitated a re-ordering of priorities, they argue: the issue of struggle, and its component pillars must be re-asserted - though without losing sight of the longer term goals and policies.

As such, the December 16 conference will centre more on issues of the moment, such as the political situation, the state of ANC organisation, and strategy and tactics to guide the ANC through the

current period.

The postponement of NEC elections to June is both problematic and advantageous.

A leadership whose mandate has not only run its course, but was obtained from what is now just one section of the ANC (the exiles), will be taking the organisation into a crucial political phase - negotiations proper.

To some extent, the ANC has already tried to address this inadequacy. More often than not, NEC meetings today include Mass Democratic Movement (MDM), notably Cosatu, leaders. Usually young and well-schooled in grassroots politics, their presence necessarily changes the character of the NEC. However, this presence is discretionary, and not guaranteed.

It is still unclear whether the December conference will consider options for ensuring a more representative leadership. Options could include entrenching extended NEC meetings as an interim measure and electing a specific team for negotiations, for instance.

Currently, the ANC teams leading and facilitating talks are entirely dominated by people recently returned from exile. Should the ANC not be drawing on the immense experience of union leaders in negotiating, as well as the fine legal acumen of many home-based lawyers?

A point in favour of the postponement of elections is the extra time it gives members to get to know those in leadership positions, therefore providing the opportunity for a more rational vote in



Zuma: With all his commitments, is there time for organisational work?



Suttner ... ANC must dictate the pace of struggle from the streets

could leadership be kept democratically accountable to membership in the event of such a compromise, yet retain a necessary degree of flexibility?

But the crucial question before the conference isn't whether or not to negotiate and compromise tactically in the process. Rather, it is how to ensure a balanced and realistic strategy of which negotiations are merely one component part.

Currently, mass action is being heavily underlined by many ANC members as a guarantor of progress at the negotiating table. Recent political developments have made clear the struggle for constitutionalised democratic freedoms is by no means over.

In an article for the ANC mouthpiece, *Sechaba*, political education chief Raymond Suttner argues for the movement to 'focus very strongly' on 'our most powerful area - the political terrain'. He says while the ANC 'initiated the present process, we do not automatically retain the initiative'.

The ANC 'has to keep the momentum going and in fact ensure that we put the democratic forces in command, dictate the pace of struggle from the streets, townships, workplaces, etc', adds Suttner.

This emphasis demands that mass action is also discussed in the context of the ANC's relationship with the MDM and its alliance partners. And consultation between the the ANC, SACP and the MDM, it is widely acknowledged, must be radically improved.

International isolation is another pillar of struggle that will undoubtedly continue to command strategic attention. The most likely outcome is an endorsement of the current thinking on retaining international pressure in principle, while employing tactical flexibility.

The underground remains an element of the ANC's current political approach. It is, after all, guarantor of continued existence if the talks fail and South Africa returns to all-out repression of democratic opinion. Yet, in practice the underground appears to have been left out of current strategising. Both the Political Military Council (PMC) responsible overall for underground operations and its regional subsidiaries are no longer functioning. This makes the underground more abstract than real - a situation which is obviously difficult to sustain.

The ANC also has to consider whether it has the resources to retain at least a core of its underground, or whether both resources and personnel might be better

deployed elsewhere.

The underground also creates a dilemma for the ANC at the level of principle: can the ANC retain clandestinity at a time when it is trying to democratise its ranks?

Therefore, it is difficult to see the conference resolving to breathe new life into the underground. But clear decisions are necessary on it.

Umkhonto we Sizwe is a more complex problem. The ceasefire has transformed it into an army-on-hold, which remains nonetheless under pressure from Pretoria. So far there has been no clarity on how the ANC views MK's role - if it has any at all - in the negotiations.

The conference will have to give serious attention to the uncertainty and sense of insecurity which affects MK cadres inside the country and, more particularly, the 4 000-odd in camps abroad. Having been recruited, mobilised and trained for war, and having been prepared to make the supreme sacrifice,

they deserve and need (perhaps more so than many others) to be kept fully abreast of, and *involved in* developments towards a negotiated settlement.

Clear decisions on strategy and tactics will mean little if the December consultative conference does not adequately address another key item on the agenda, the state of the ANC's internal organisation.

In short, ANC organisation looks pretty shoddy.

Undoubtedly, problems of relocation from exile, the violence, and limited resources are inhibiting the ANC's ability to build a mass legal base.

But the ANC's organisational shortcomings are not adequately explained by these difficulties.

Structurally, the ANC has an Internal Leadership Core (ILC) tasked with building a new, legal and mass-based movement. Under it are two committees: the political and organising committees.

According to sources in ANC headquarters, the workload of political committee members has made it impossible for the committee to strategise on a daily basis.

The organising committee, say these sources, is also not functioning. The state has effectively blocked a number of members joining the committee: some do not have the necessary immunity to enter the country; Mac Maharaj is detained; and Ronnie Kasrils is in hiding to avoid arrest. Others like Jacob Zuma and Popo Molefe have numerous other commitments. And Chris Hani only returned to circulation in September, after weeks in the Transkei waiting for renewal of his indemnity.

The end result is dismal recruitment figures. While surveys put ANC support at more than 50 percent of the country's potential voters, actual membership is a mere 150 000.

Given that the political space for mobilisation has never been better, the conference must find this result intolerable. And it would be seriously amiss if it closes without suggesting workable solutions and appointing people who *can and will actually do the job*.

In essence, the conference needs to be less a celebration of achievements in struggle, and more a planning forum seeking solutions to a complex political process. The ANC cannot afford to let this chance at pulling together a coherent strategy and tactics slip away - as happened five years ago at Kabwe. •