

FOCUS South Africa



In the shadow of the debate about Thabo Mbeki's successor

ANC Policy Conference

From 27 until 30 June 2006 more than 1.500 members of the *African National Congress* (ANC) met in Midrand near Johannesburg to discuss the future political programme of South Africa's biggest party. Since the end of apartheid, the ANC has governed the country with a broad majority. Despite a great need for discussion about the labour market, the state's role in the economy and the high crime rate, the debate was mainly about the following questions: Who will be the nation's next president? Who will be the next president of the ANC? And will he also participate in the race for the state's highest position, as has been the case so far? Different concepts for the economy, as well as social and security policy, and the reformation of the party structure were also put on the table, though this discussion quickly moved to the background.

"Precisely because what we will do over the next few days is of such central importance to the millions of South Africans, of all races, ages, geographic dispersal, men and women, it is imperative that we approach our work with all necessary seriousness."

Thabo Mbeki at the opening session of the conference

In the forefront of the conference

This conference “has absolutely nothing to do with who is or will be a leader of the African National Congress,” said the ANC and state president, Thabo Mbeki, in his opening address at this year’s ANC *Policy Conference*. This was an attempt to postpone the discussion about his successor at the conference’s outset. However, it was in vain. For weeks several South African newspapers had engaged in early speculations about competition between the party’s deputy president, Jacob Zuma, and businessman and former premier of Gauteng province, Tokyo Sexwale, for the party’s top job.

The ANC’s *Policy Conference* is supposed to be a forum at which party members discuss the party’s political programme for years to come, and several topics were on this year’s schedule. The spectrum ranged from the national economic policy to organisational reform to the design of the judicial system. Even if no decisions are made during



the conference, its recommendations may be used as guidelines for the ANC’s *Party Congress* in December later this year. The weeks preceding the conference were determined by public service wage strikes. Teachers and other state employees demanded a 12 per cent increase on their wages. Thus, labour union representatives took the occasion of the ANC’s first press conferences about the *Policy Conference* as a platform for their demands.

In addition, attention was given to the latest figures of the country’s labour market. From January until March 2007, only 17.000 new jobs had been created – merely a fragment of the targeted 139.500 workplaces necessary to reach the goal of halving poverty and reducing the unemployment rate by 25 per cent by 2014. Those disappointing figures were used immediately by the ANC’s left wing, as well as by the Tri-partite Alliance partners – the *South African Communist Party* (SACP) and the *Congress of South African Trade Unions* (COSATU), the country’s biggest labour union umbrella organisation – to draw attention to the failure of the current economic policy.

Before the conference started, COSATU declared in an official statement that employment was far too high for an upper-middle-income country and claimed that the economy needed to be transformed, not merely managed. “It is not enough,” said COSATU spokesman Patrick Craven, “to insert a few black faces into the court of privilege, while the underlying racial, class and gender contradictions remain unresolved or get even worse.”

“To the left, to the left?”

The ANC’s left wing was dominated by delegates of the KwaZulu-Natal province, representatives of the youth organisation *ANC Youth League*, as well as those from the alliance partners COSATU and SACP. Again, they denounced the leader’s economic policy as business friendly and neo-liberal. The SACP’s deputy general secretary, Jeremy Cronin, claimed: “We cannot leave things to the market. Even capitalists would understand the imperative of an interventionist state.” And in its headline for the article about the conference, South Africa’s biggest weekly newspaper *The Mail & Guardian* picked up a line from American singer Beyoncé’s current hit, “To the left, to the left?”, predicting a move of the ANC to the left.

Although South Africa’s economy is flourishing, there are a number of problems that negatively affect its future development. These include increasing social inequality and the prevailing actual discrimination against the non-white population. In the hope of increasing direct foreign investments to create new jobs and more equal distribution of wealth, the South African government admitted open markets, privatisation and a climate for investments with the introduction of the *Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy* (GEAR) in 1996. However, the success of the macro-economic strategy was limited – which explains the criticism. Thus, in addition to initiatives like the *Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative* (ASGISA), the ruling party has discussed a further development of South Africa to a developmental state. Here the debate is about the extent of state intervention in the economy to boost further growth and to create new jobs.

The so-called Asian tigers – South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong – which succeeded in gro-



Results of the ANC Policy Conference

Land possession: The delegates recommended that the ANC should find new regulations for land ownership by foreigners. However, ownership should not be prohibited in general. The legal right to expropriate property for public purposes and in the public interest, and its constitutionality, was reaffirmed.

Health: South Africa needs its own pharmaceutical companies to ensure affordability of drugs. The delegates reaffirmed that it was necessary to establish a *National Health Insurance System*.

Basic income grant: The implementation of wider basic income grants was rejected, but the debate continues.

Policy institute: The delegates agreed unanimously on the implementation of a political school for party members.

Education: The programmes for the introduction of free education will be intensified. Mathematics and the natural sciences will be made mandatory.

office, and for bypassing the party in certain decisions. Consequently, the conference tried to redefine the ANC's role in the political course of the country.

Regarding the future, it has been proposed that the party's president would no longer appoint the candidates for the offices of provincial premiers; instead they should be appointed by the ANC's *National Executive Committee* (NEC) with involvement of each provincial ANC executive committee. A very similar procedure will be introduced for the nomination of mayoral candidates in the bigger cities.

wing from developing countries to industrial nations within two centuries and which still exhibit high economic growth, are taken as positive examples. However, Joel Netshitenzhe, member of the *ANC National Executive Committee* pointed out South Africa's special historical and societal characteristics: "[We] would need to look not only at issues pertaining to economic growth, but also at how to restructure the economy to ensure participation by black people at all levels of the economy."

Cronin agreed that capitalist forces were part of the current economic and political situation and could not simply be declared as evil. "That monopoly capital, by and at large, is not always going to be spontaneously sympathetic to what we're trying to do, I think is a given, and is well appreciated across the board in the ANC. But the problem in South Africa is that you've got an extraordinarily concentrated, highly advanced capitalist sector, which has squashed out and squeezed out small and medium capital," said Cronin. For instance, South Africa has just four banks and one brewery. Thus it is one of government's major tasks to promote the development of small and middle-sized businesses, to create new jobs.

Constraints of the ANC president's competence

Again and again, ANC and state president Thabo Mbeki is blamed for pursuing policies which aim to concentrate as much power as possible in the president's

Moreover, the ANC's left wing – particularly the supporters of deputy president Jacob Zuma – proposed the party executive should shift more rights in favour of the general secretary. However, this motion has not yet been decided.

The succession debate

During the ANC's *Party Congress* in December this year, the question of Thabo Mbeki's succession as ANC president will be decided. Until now, it has been an unwritten rule that the party's president is also asked to run in the next presidential elections. As Mbeki's second term in the state president's office will end in 2009, the constitution outlaws his candidature for a third.

Three options for the nomination of ANC candidates for the state president's office have been discussed: first, the party's president runs automatically for the state's highest office. Second, the NEC decides on the candidature. Third, members of the *Party Congress* in December nominate the candidate.

One possible candidate for both offices is the party's Deputy President and South Africa's former Deputy President, Jacob Zuma. His supporters are mainly located in the party's left wing, in his home province, Kwa-Zulu-Natal, and within the *ANC Youth League*. Due to several scandals, however, Zuma's candidature is cont-

roversial. First, as chairman of the armament committee, he was ensnared in a corruption scandal for which he might find himself in court again this year. He was also accused – and acquitted – of rape, which has nevertheless harmed his reputation.

Within the rather conservative camp of the current president, Thabo Mbeki, Zuma is considered unacceptable. Thus, at the forefront of the *Policy Conference*, a possible innovation was discussed, which has become known as *Two Centres of Power*. It envisions that the State President's office cannot be filled together with the office of the party president. Whether or not this concept was put on the table primarily to prevent Zuma's candidacy to both offices remains speculation.

Thabo Mbeki also announced that if the leadership asked him to stay, he was willing to do so, and indicated during an interview with the public broadcaster, SABC, that he would be available for a third term as ANC president. In contrast, Zuma said that there was no need for debate on the issue, as the ANC had established procedures on how to elect its president and those should be adhered to.

At the end of the conference, the official statement concerning the question of succession reads that the ANC president should 'preferably' be the ANC candidate for the nation's president. That way, finally both camps of the ANC were able to celebrate. "No matter who stands for

the party presidency, the people have spoken and will not allow themselves to be manipulated," commented one delegate.

The invisible third

Analysts vary between three scenarios: first, a neutral candidate could win the race – for instance ANC General Secretary, Kgalema Motlanthe or Foreign Affairs Minister, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. Second, it is also possible that a former freedom fighter and current economic tycoon, such as Tokyo Sexwale, succeeds in becoming the party president; or third, the left wing might take over, possibly through Jacob Zuma.

The first two possibilities would lead to continuity and stability, but it is unclear what consequences a left-leaning ANC president and presidential candidate might have. The weekly newspaper *Financial Mail* characterises the ANC as especially vulnerable to populism, in particular concerning economic policy, and suspects a departure from responsible and sustainable policies. Overall, even after the decision on the country's next president, analysts still assume a continuation of the previous policies, as institutional and global constraints do not allow much space for experiments.

While Mbeki and Zuma were at the centre of attention of the media and party members, Sexwale remained in the background. Yet, during the days and weeks



Who will be ANC's next presidential candidate?



KGALEMA MOTLANTHE
ANC General Secretary



NKOSAZANA DLAMINI-ZUMA
Minister of Foreign Affairs



JACOB ZUMA
current ANC Deputy President



TOKYO SEXWALE
former Gauteng Premier

before the conference, the media was dominated by his possible candidacy.

Just a few weeks ago, in a BBC interview, he declared that he would accept a nomination for the office of the ANC president, if it were in the party's interest. However, especially within the left camp, Sexwale's candidature encountered resistance, as the former ANC politician has achieved a mogul-like position with his shift to a role in business ten years ago.

In Midrand, barely anybody mentioned the possible candidacy of Sexwale. Both during the opening as well as the closing address of Thabo Mbeki, he sat with the business delegation in the back part of the hall. The South African daily newspaper *City Press* even titled an article: "Sexwale out in the cold at ANC's policy conference." However, he might well be successful as a candidate, if he manages to overcome the party's polarisation between Mbeki and Zuma.

Conclusion

The actual content of the conference was discussed behind closed doors and despite the dominance of the succession debate, president Mbeki tried to sell the meeting as "highly successful": "The proceedings and results of our Conference confirm that the ANC continues to live up to its obligation to play its role as a trusted leader, a loyal servant of the people, and an agent for change."

ANC General Secretary Kgalema Motlanthe agreed and closed the conference with the assurance that the ANC would remain the "strategic centre of power", which undertook the task of leading the state and society. "This is it. The ANC is back in control," cheered one delegate.

SACP's General Secretary Blade Nzimande also welcomed the new path taken, as the *Communist Party* mainly agrees with the delegate's decisions.

Despite the ongoing dissent concerning the question of candidacy, the *ANC Policy Conference* resulted in a greater consensus within the party. However, the questions regarding the next ANC president, the per-

sonal union of party and state presidency, as well as the party's future direction remain.

The conference is solely able to give recommendations; final decisions will be made at the congress in December. Thus, until the party congress in the city of Polokwane, in Limpopo province, the discussion will continue – with unknown results. ■

Editorial

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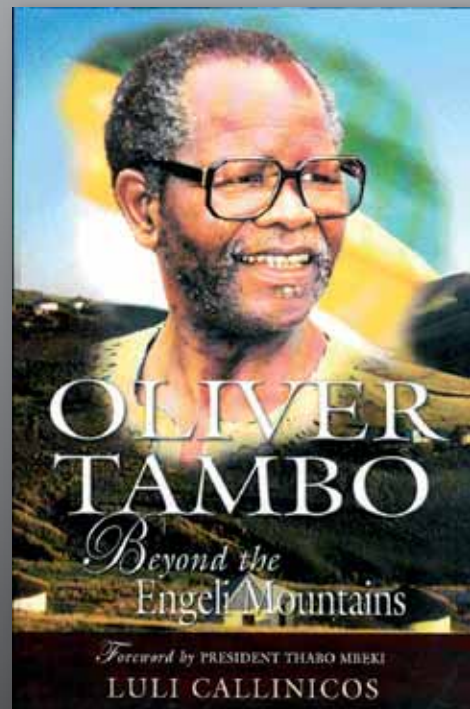
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