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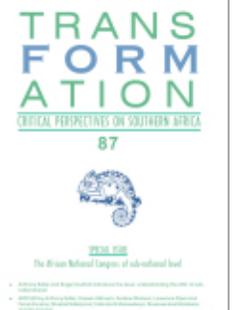
## The politics of numbers: national membership growth and subnational power competition in the African National Congress

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Transformation: Critical Perspectives on Southern Africa, Volume 87, 2015,  
pp. 13-31 (Article)

Published by Transformation

DOI: [10.1353/trn.2015.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2015.0008)



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# Article

## The politics of numbers: national membership growth and subnational power competition in the African National Congress

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### **Abstract**

The ANC has experienced rapid membership growth in recent years. This paper explores competing explanations for this growth, and concludes that subnational political competition and national factional conflicts, rather than deliberate membership recruitment campaigns, have been the primary drivers of increased numbers. The paper goes on to assess the implications of this dynamic of membership change for party organisational challenges.

### **Introduction**

The African national Congress (ANC) has grown rapidly over the past decade. At the movement's 2002 Stellenbosch conference, membership was reported to be a little over 400,000. By the time of the ANC's 52nd national conference in Polokwane in 2007, total numbers had increased to more than 620,000. Five years later, at the 53<sup>rd</sup> national conference at Mangaung, audited membership was reported to be more than 1.2 million (ANC 2012a). How can this growth be explained? And what are its implications for party management?

After the banning of the ANC was lifted in 1990, it was re-built in the form of a mass movement. However, although the ordinary branch was situated at the heart of the organisation's elective, selective and policy choices, ANC elites continued to exert control through a mix of procedural manipulation, patronage, co-option, and invented tradition (ANC 1997a, ANC 1997b, ANC 2001). The result was circumscribed internal democracy but relative political stability (Butler 2005).

The ANC's character has changed as membership has grown and leadership steering capacity has eroded. According to longstanding leaders, many of the ANC's new members exhibit little respect for inherited conventions of authority and seniority. There is widespread ignorance about the movement's history and its core values. Further, the spread of 'money-politics' and 'careerism' have turned the ANC into a stepping-stone to personal gain. Meanwhile, private wealth has been recycled into internal ANC elections to secure further intra-party power for its holders. Internal elections and candidate selection processes have become increasingly disfigured at all levels by factional conflict and, not infrequently, by violence (Motlanthe 2005, Netshitenzhe 2012, Butler 2010).

The paper begins with a descriptive overview of membership trends. It goes on in a second section to explore competing explanations for how and why these changes in membership have come about. ANC leaders have described membership growth as a product of rational recruitment strategies of a national leadership pursuing some more desirable party size, shape or character. The different philosophies that allegedly lay behind such recruitment strategies are explored in this second section. The evidence presented in the remainder of the paper, however, suggests that it was political competition rather than recruitment planning that drove change. Struggles for inclusion on candidate lists, and factional battles to secure leadership positions, have been the key drivers of growth in recorded membership numbers.

The third section of the paper explores these underlying dynamics by means of an analysis of the candidate list process for the 2010 local government elections and the role of membership numbers in provincial leadership elections. It also explores the implications of factional contestation in the national leadership struggle that culminated in the 2012 Mangaung conference. The paper considers the relationship between membership growth, party management systems, and deep organisational challenges. It concludes with an assessment of the prospects for effective membership system reform.

### **Membership trends since 1991**

ANC membership data, as we shall see, are profoundly unreliable, and they have been of doubtful accuracy since the party was reconstituted on South African soil in the early 1990s. The first available membership estimates were presented by then secretary general Alfred Nzo at the national elective conference held in Durban at the end of 1991.

**Table 1. ANC membership estimates, mid-1991**

<i>Region</i>	<i>February 1991</i>	<i>June 1991</i>
PWV	62,202	77,429
N Transvaal	5,736	22,160
E Transvaal	42,164	65,000
W Transvaal	3,750	11,262
N Cape	2,138	15,260
E Cape	24,633	57,854
W Cape	30,000	53,000
Border	35,689	65,228
Transkei	18,031	36,937
N Natal	-	2,500
Natal Midlands	20,051	26,401
S Natal	27,720	50,596
N OFS	5,507	20,554
S OFS	11,699	15,000
Total	289,320	521,181

Source: Adapted from ANC 1991

The heroic approximations and rounding-up that characterise these data offer a clear signal that they cannot be taken as accurate representations of actual recruitment outcomes. Nevertheless, the data do suggest that the ANC was ambitious in its early membership drives, in bantustans, urban and rural areas – with the one striking exception being Northern Natal. After the qualified euphoria of the 1994 elections, the recorded membership of the ANC stabilised at around 400,000 until close to the end of the decade. The remarkable political achievement of the ‘transition’ cooled the political temperature across the country and party activism became a less urgent imperative. Towards the end of the decade, however, the membership numbers presented by successive secretary-generals suggested a pattern of accelerating growth (see table 2). This rise in members was especially marked in advance of elective conferences, most notably the 52<sup>nd</sup> national conference in 2007 and the 53<sup>rd</sup> national conference in 2012.

Between conferences, membership growth slowed or even went into reverse in some provinces, a pattern especially marked in Free State, Mpumalanga, and Northern Cape, where branches (with their ostensible members) appeared to be resuscitated just in time to participate in elective conferences. In some other provinces, for example Gauteng and North West, growth was steadier, but it was nevertheless rapid enough to result in a doubling of numbers in the decade after 2002. Most extraordinary of all,

membership in Limpopo increased four-fold while in KwaZulu-Natal it multiplied six-fold over the same period.

**Table 2. ANC Membership from 1997**

<i>Province</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2012 Jan</i>	<i>2012 June</i>
E Cape	44,684	89,167	70,651	153,164	161,161	225,597	187,585
Free State	40,184	33,115	38,331	61,310	41,627	76,334	121,074
Gauteng	42,824	52,764	58,223	59,909	70,305	121,223	134,909
KZN	64,998	53,531	75,035	102,742	192,618	244,900	331,820
Limpopo	68,560	44,107	56,474	67,632	101,971	114,385	161,868
Mpumalanga	38,044	48,588	48,239	54,913	46,405	98,892	132,729
N Cape	19,894	24,390	21,608	37,267	37,122	42,342	36,428
North West	35,800	41,388	39,006	47,353	57,911	60,319	75,145
W Cape	30,790	29,796	33,141	36,237	40,427	43,397	38,499
<b>Total</b>	<b>385,778</b>	<b>416,846</b>	<b>440,708</b>	<b>621,237</b>	<b>749,112</b>	<b>1,027,389</b>	<b>1,220,057</b>

Source: Adapted from ANC 2007a, 2012b

## **Explaining membership growth: a national recruitment thesis**

### *An elite organisation debates how to recruit ‘the masses’?*

Across the history of the ANC, there has been ambivalence and controversy among the leadership about the merits of recruiting a mass membership. The movement was established as a representative body for the chiefs and African professional classes of the country, and the region, in 1913. The ANC maintained an elite character during the first four decades of its existence, targeting its recruitment programmes primarily at educated Africans who had passed through missionary schools.

The elitist character of the ANC began to change only in the 1940s, in part as a result of burgeoning urbanisation during the country’s second industrial revolution. The still-tiny ANC stated in 1942 (somewhat fancifully) that its objective was to build a membership of one million (ANC 2012b); in reality membership was only around 4,000 in 1945 (Dubow 2000: 20). Unlike the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), however, the ANC was not comfortable with, or adept at, the techniques of mass political mobilisation in towns and cities.

The CPSA organised anti-pass campaigns and other expressions of black political protest in this decade. These included bus boycotts, strikes, land invasions, stay-aways and localised riots. The ANC played very little role in organising this tide of resistance. In 1943, under what remained an elitist

leadership, the party published its 'African Claims' document that for the first time included demands for self-government and political rights for Africans. However, its central intention was to recruit African graduates rather than to build a mass political party.

It took intensified racial oppression to compel a reluctant ANC to respond with mass political mobilisation. After the end of World War II, the government tried to turn back the tide of African urbanisation using aggressive segregationist controls. African, coloured and Indian political leaders were driven to stronger collaboration. At the same time, a new generation of activists began to transform the Congress Youth League (CYL) into a vehicle for urban mass protest politics. Starting in 1952 with the Defiance Campaign, a prolonged shift to mass political mobilisation continued across the 1950s (Butler 2013).

After Sharpeville, however, the ANC and other anti-apartheid parties were banned. ANC leaders were forced to abandon domestic struggle and the fledgling mass party virtually ceased to exist inside the country for three decades. The leadership was obliged to turn to armed struggle, sometimes reluctantly, and the ANC became primarily an exile movement with a membership reduced to the low thousands (Macmillan 2009). Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), a joint creation of the ANC and the CPSA (now restyled as the South African Communist Party or SACP) became the largely ineffectual instrument of the ANC's exile military bureaucracy.

### ***Internal mobilisation as apartheid falls***

The mass struggle within South Africa thereafter unfolded at an unbridgeable distance from the ANC's exile leadership. The Soweto uprising in 1976 was followed by an outflow of young activists, many of who were absorbed into the ANC camps. Mass pro-ANC organisation in the country, however, was to occur primarily in the 1980s, through two umbrella organisations that were aligned with, but not subservient to, the ANC: the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

When the ANC was unbanned in 1990, and recruitment to the movement began in earnest, these organised mass movements were one key to early ANC successes. Trade union membership grew from around 800,000 in 1980, to 1,250,000 in 1983, and around 2 million by 1988 (Macun 2002: 36). Within Cosatu there were sharp differences of opinion and philosophy about the appropriate relationship between trade unions and the liberation movement. Nevertheless, the biggest union by far, the National Union of Mineworkers,

had adopted the Freedom Charter in 1987 and elected Nelson Mandela as its honorary president (Butler 2008: 188).

The second mass formation that was broadly ANC-aligned, the UDF, also deliberated its relationship to the ANC. Many of the organisations that comprised the UDF – mostly notably the churches – had an ambivalent attitude towards an ANC because of the liberation movement's close interrelationship with the SACP. Nevertheless, more than a year before the UDF's dissolution, its national executive committee (NEC) resolved that 'the UDF should participate fully in the establishment of ANC branches' (Seekings 2000: 265). Many UDF leaders took up senior positions in the ANC. 'Charterists' on the ground in the UDF, especially inland, were often happy to escape a UDF leadership that was widely perceived to be dominated by Indian and coloured leaders from the coastal cities. Organisations representing women and the youth often folded themselves into the ANC's Women's and Youth Leagues (ANCWL and ANCYL) before the dissolution of the UDF. Youth leaders who managed patronage networks and acted as power brokers during the transitional period were often later absorbed into ANC-controlled provincial governments.<sup>1</sup>

Further ANC recruitment resulted from deals struck between the ANC and bantustan leaders who were seeking a rapprochement with the future party of government. Some such leaders (for example Transkei's Bantu Holomisa) had a long history of association with the ANC. Other bantustan leaders took a more cautious approach to the rise of the liberation movement but recognised that full or partial incorporation within the ANC held out better prospects than frontal competition with it.

### ***Leadership strategies***

In the early 1990s, ambivalence about mass politics persisted within an ANC leadership that was still dominated by exiles and Robben Islanders. The interim leadership core that was set up to manage the ANC's rebirth as a mass party was chaired by Walter Sisulu and included Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, and Mac Maharaj. It established the legal framework necessary to operate as a political party, created a headquarters, developed a strategy for building the ANC at branch level, and planned a recruitment system based on 14 regions, each of which was assigned professional organisers. Prominent local and exile politicians were deployed to serve on the regional interim committees in the bigger regions, such as Border, Eastern Cape, Transkei, South Natal, and Midlands (ANC 1991: 9-10).

Secretary general Alfred Nzo, an ageing exile stalwart, was not a natural

leader for a mass political movement. Like many exiles, he was alienated from ‘the masses’ on whose behalf he claimed to speak. He was aware, however, that mass organisation was a prerequisite for ANC success in post-apartheid politics. In his report to the Durban conference in 1991, Nzo observed that ‘mass activity is a vital component of our overall strategic direction’ (ANC 1991: 18).

Nzo cited a World Social Study suggesting that the ANC had the support of just ‘44% of South Africans – of all races – in the city, countryside and within and without the homelands’. He also quoted with some alarm a report in *The Star* newspaper that the ANC ‘might be pressed to win a simple majority in a national election’ (ANC 1991: 11). ‘It would be blatantly naïve of us’, Nzo observed, ‘to become complacent’ or to ‘act as if under no circumstances whatsoever can the ANC be threatened or even removed from the leadership pedestal it now occupies’ (ANC 1991: 11). An activist base, he argued, was essential to mobilise electors and to educate the populace about the movement’s programme of government. Nzo, moreover, recognised that a racially diverse membership was an important component of the ANC’s legitimacy claims and he observed with concern that ‘we are not making much progress in respect of the Coloured, Indian and White populations’ (ANC 1991: 14).

Nzo (seemingly rather reluctantly) conceded that ‘if we correctly believe that the masses are the makers of history then they must be involved in the process of decision-making’ (ANC 1991: 19). Many Cosatu and UDF leaders challenged instrumental conceptions of membership, however, and they possessed the organisational skills and experience to attempt more ambitious forms of mass mobilisation. There were also calls for a more participatory or transformative conception of mass politics from elements within the SACP.

### ***Boats, taps, and permanent mobilisation***

Writing in the *African Communist*, in a piece that synthesised and clarified the issues at stake, SACP intellectual Jeremy Cronin distinguished between ‘three kinds of strategic outlook informing our national liberation movement’, which he characterised as ‘the boat, the tap and the Leipzig way’ (Cronin 1992). The ‘don’t rock the boat’ outlook privileged elite pacting over mass action, on the grounds of a ‘strategic convergence between responsible leaders on the side of both the regime and the national liberation movement’. The moderate centre, on this view, had to be ‘given the space and time to get on with the task’, and mass struggle must be contained to avoid disrupting negotiations. The second ‘turning on the tap’ position, according to the

SACP leader, was to view mass struggle as an instrument to assist elite negotiators. 'Struggle', on this elitist and instrumentalist view, 'is essentially envisaged as a weapon "to bring the other side to its senses"'.

Cronin favoured a third 'Leipzig Way' (a terminology derived from recently concluded popular struggles against Communist ruling parties in Eastern Europe). This model, according to Cronin, conceived of a mass uprising that builds 'dual power', over-throws an incumbent regime and 'replaces it with the emergent organs of popular power. It is a perspective in which the people transfer power to themselves in an insurrectionary moment' (Cronin 1992).

Cronin conceded that 'our present political situation is neither on the brink of an insurrectionary moment, nor is it blocked ... We are now living in an extremely fluid political conjuncture'. He concurred with critics that 'there are particular dangers and weaknesses in propagating a strategy whose medium term success is at best uncertain'. Nevertheless, he insisted that only 'a process of self-empowerment by the popular masses spear-headed by the working class' could ensure that 'we carry a mobilised, organised mass constituency into and through the process of constitutional negotiations, and onwards'. The ideal, he claimed, was 'to achieve both a significant negotiations breakthrough and maintain mass momentum ... When we have a democratically elected government, mass mobilisation will be just as essential, but now, amongst other things, to enable the implementation of its popular mandate' (Cronin 1992).

Cronin's warning about the dangers of demobilisation and statism was prescient. But his insistence that the ANC needed to 'rebuild and reawaken the web of relatively independent mass democratic formations and struggles that characterised the 1980s' was not influential within the ANC leadership at the time.

The movement's evolution from a party of exile (and prison) to a mass movement bequeathed an uneasy juxtaposition of hierarchical and democratic centralist ideals (from the exile movement) and mass organisational ambitions (primarily from domestic anti-apartheid struggle). Meanwhile, as an electoral party in a representative democracy, the ANC also had to become more 'catch-all' in character (Lodge 2004).

### ***Better fewer but better?***

Debate over the appropriate size and composition of the ANC's membership was subdued in the Thabo Mbeki era. The relative stability of membership

numbers nevertheless ended with the election of Mbeki to the presidency of the ANC. His rise generated enthusiasm, and perhaps other changes in the politics of the Eastern Cape, and these helped to transform it into the biggest ANC province by membership (a matter to which we return later in the paper).

Mbeki nevertheless advanced a conservative recruitment philosophy. In an address to an ANC policy conference in Kempton Park on September 27, 2002, he argued that the ANC requires ‘the kind of cadre of our movement ... who strives at all times to raise his or her political consciousness ... who works continuously to improve his or her skills to enhance his or her capacity to serve the people of South Africa ... who is loyal to the movement, dedicated to its cause and respects the discipline of a movement she or he would have joined voluntarily, with no compulsion by anybody’ (Mbeki 2002). It may be that ‘not everybody accepts what some may consider to be burdensome obligations of membership of the ANC’, the ANC president continued. ‘We are permanently interested in increasing the size and strength of our movement. Nevertheless I am convinced that we must also pay particular attention to the principle – better fewer, but better!’

This phrase was borrowed (with great intellectual license) from a paper written by Vladimir Lenin six years after the Russian revolution. Lenin had explored how the Communist Party could effectively manage a state bureaucracy. Mbeki’s emphasis, by contrast, was on disciplinary mechanisms and on the doctrine of democratic centralism. He encouraged delegates ‘to express themselves freely on all the matters on our agenda’, claiming that ‘we must sustain the spirit of open debate that has informed our preparations for this Conference’. But ‘when we have taken our decisions’, he insisted, ‘we must therefore respect and defend the agreed positions of the movement’ (Mbeki 2002).

### ***Bigger can be better***

In the years that followed Mbeki’s speech, membership soared in KZN and Eastern Cape, the ‘home provinces’ of the president and his deputy, Jacob Zuma, the two contenders for the ANC presidency. The pattern of membership growth cannot plausibly be presented as an outcome of any overall national strategy concerning recruitment and it culminated in the major political confrontation at the Polokwane conference in 2007 (which space does not permit us to analyse here).

At Polokwane, the movement resolved to grow across the country as a

whole, and this culminated in the Imvuselelo campaign, launched in 2010. This campaign was ostensibly designed to realise a conference resolution charging the National Executive Committee to ‘take steps to practically implement the target set by the 1942 Conference of 1 million members by the time of centenary celebrations’. The intention of the ANC, secretary general Gwede Mantashe later observed, was to complement recruitment with ‘intensive branch political education programmes to improve the quality of members’ (ANC 2012b, 3.1.1.) Indeed, he asserted in a somewhat Hegelian manner at the 2012 conference at Mangaung that, ‘quantity and quality are not mutually exclusive’ because ‘active political education and involvement of membership in the political life of the organisation can transform the quantity into quality’ (ANC 2012b). The nascent electoral threat posed by the Democratic Alliance, he further argued, offers a ‘reminder that there will be need for a bigger machinery and visible presence in all the wards’. A bigger membership would be ‘a necessary step in building the necessary capacity for taking on any competition in future ... The ANC should ideally have 2.5 million members to be competitive’. Finally, Mantashe insisted that, ‘every South African has the potential of becoming a good member of the ANC and we should not assume otherwise’. He could not but concede that the ANC ‘cannot deliberately stop people from joining it’ (ANC 2012b: 3.2.2).

### **Subnational determinants of membership growth: candidate lists**

While debates about recruitment and quality continued, sub-national politics was relentlessly driving an increase in numbers. In part this was because party membership was useful to communities: the state was broadly insensitive to the needs of citizens, and party networks served as instruments for communities to unlock state resources (Bénit-Gbaffou 2012) – as well as for individuals to access and control resources for private gain (Motlanthe 2005).

The ANC describes itself as a mass organisation and branches are ostensibly the ‘basic unit of the organisation’ (ANC 2007b: 23.1). Only a branch in ‘good standing’ is entitled to participate in elective and policy conferences. But competing national, provincial, regional and local leaders try to secure the power that comes with support from accredited voting delegates. The resulting manipulation was explored in a confidential NEC report on the widely disputed candidate list process for the 2010 local government elections, entitled ‘The investigating task team on list and other disputes’, henceforth the TT (ANC 2012d).

### ***The Task Team Report***

At Mangaung, ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe selectively quoted some of the findings of the TT appointed by the NEC to probe irregularities in the candidate selection process for the 2010 local government elections (ANC 2012d). Chaired by Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the team included two NEC members (Naledi Pandor and Ellen Molekane) and respected veterans, including Lehlohonolo Moloi, Nonzwakazi Sigxashe and Archie Whitehead.

The 2010 list process was meant to be conducted according to the ‘Final guidelines for the local government candidate selection process: 2010 local government elections’ prepared by the NEC (ANC 2010). After numerous complaints from across the country about how the list process unfolded in practice, and formal letters of complaint to the secretary general, the TT was asked to investigate departures from the guidelines and manipulations of processes designed ‘to get to predetermined outcomes’ (ANC 2012d: 2).

In an apparently exhaustive study, TT members investigated the entire list process, from the operations of branch meetings, to screening committees and public consultation meetings, in a total of 419 wards. It also interviewed members of regional list committees, regional executive committees, provincial list committees and provincial executive committees. The key finding of the TT with regard to the membership system concerned prevalent modes of manipulation of the system. In particular, ‘instances of either “bulk membership” or “gatekeeping” were a common feature’ (ANC 2012d: 1-2).

Bulk membership buying involves ‘the depositing of membership money with the bank and obtaining bank stamps on blank forms that were then filled in before, or even at, meetings, sometimes using the names of people who were not even ANC members’ (ANC 2012d: 2). ‘The observed trend’, the TT continued, ‘is that members are no more treated as important human beings’. Instead, ‘the focus is more on consolidation of membership in terms of people but rather the buying of forms which can be given to anyone as they can be owned by those that have resources’ (ANC 2012d: 13).

There were also ‘numerous instances of parallel membership regimes within a single branch’. In such cases, local power-brokers held on to membership forms and refused ‘to hand them to the appropriate office’. The ‘owners’ of these forms then used them to make quorate meetings impossible. Other regrettable practices included the organisation of boycotts (also in order to make quorums impossible) and the emergence of ‘parallel memberships’, especially in the Eastern Cape, in which competing branch and regional structures often held meetings in different venues (ANC 2012d:

2). In two provinces, members were excluded from branch meetings because their names did not appear on informal lists of members acceptable to provincial power-brokers (ANC 2012d: 2).

In another common abuse, activists found reasons to disallow branch meetings until the ‘three meeting rule’ kicked in. This allowed a meeting to be held without quorum, so rendering it vulnerable to manipulation by a small group of members (ANC 2012d: 3). ‘Screening committees’ that were meant to vet candidates were routinely manipulated, and in many cases there was no screening at all (ANC 2012d: 5). Businesspeople keen to seize local government office on occasion joined the ANC only after securing nomination by the use of nefarious practices (ANC 2012d: 5). Such outsiders often ‘exerted undue pressure and influence on members of the branch to choose certain candidates who would facilitate for them to get tenders and other business opportunities’ (ANC 2012d: 13). On occasion, this involved ‘buying of bulk membership for certain people who would be used to ensure that certain candidates [were] nominated and selected’ (ANC 2012d: 13). ‘Conversely’, the team noted, ‘some branch members prevent other people from joining the organisation’ (ANC 2012d: 13).

The devastating catalogue of abuses identified by the TT exhibited various provincial variations. Free State provincial leaders, for example, brazenly overturned properly reached nominations (ANC 2012d: 6). In North West, there was ‘deep seated factionalism, tribalism, regionalism, gatekeeping and bulk buying of membership’ (ANC 2012d: 8). The Eastern Cape experienced proliferating ‘parallel structures’. But the problems the TT exposed were mostly of a systemic character and afflicted pretty much every part of the organisation. ‘It is worth noting’, the final report observed, that, ‘almost every province had experienced violent protests and growing intolerance emanating from amongst others dissatisfaction with the nomination and selection of candidates’ processes’ (ANC 2012d: 4).

The report (which has never been publicly released) set out clearly many of the local dynamics that underlie membership number growth. The TT also reported that provincial and national deployees, sent to branch meetings to resolve disputes and to ensure an open contest, failed to serve as effective arbiters. Indeed provincial leaders apparently failed to supervise registration and verification processes, and turned a blind eye (at best) to illegitimate participation from outside branches and to other forms of manipulation (ANC 2012d: 3).

## **Manipulation in the provinces: the Free State conference of 2012**

‘Branch members’ can participate in candidate selection contests whether they are real human beings or ghost paper membership forms. They can also participate in competitions for ANC leadership positions at sub-national level. At Mangaung, Mantashe observed that two kinds of manipulation have been especially prevalent. First, members are ‘falling through the cracks, either as a result of gatekeeping or mere inefficiency in capturing of membership’. Gatekeeping, according to Mantashe, ‘is not a technical problem but a political one, wherein members of the ANC are deliberately excluded from processes’ (ANC 2012b). Second, an opposing tendency sees the creation of inactive or ‘paper members’ who are ‘recruited’ (or whose existence is manufactured) ‘by leaders with political and economic aspirations’.

Manipulation in provincial level ANC elections has been explored by the constitutional court as a result of a legal action brought by members in the Free State upset about improper processes in advance of, and during, the province’s regional conference in mid-2012. The appellants ‘sought to review the lawfulness of the Free State regional conference and the decision of the ANC to accept the outcome of that conference’. They claimed that the ANC ‘ignored and failed to investigate’ alleged irregularities and that the provincial secretary ‘deliberately turned a blind eye to these discrepancies, which were brought to its attention on numerous occasions’ (Constitutional Court 2012: Section 46). The appellants’ material grievances concerned ‘the question whether the delegates to the elective Provincial Conference had been properly accredited and audited as required by the ANC’s constitution and its Membership Audit Guidelines’. The answer, according to the justices, was that they had not been so accredited or audited (Constitutional Court 2012: Section 90).

Delegates often had not been ‘duly mandated or elected’ at ‘a properly constituted branch general meeting of ANC members in good standing’. There were instances of ‘the manipulation of the membership numbers in specific branches’, which enabled factional leaders ‘to send delegates to the provincial conference or to send a different number of delegates than they would lawfully be entitled to’, or even ‘to purportedly make a quorum or fail to quorate’. The court also found compelling evidence of ‘the exclusion of bona fide delegates who had been elected at properly constituted branch general meetings’ and the shutting out of ‘members in good standing from participating in the election of delegates’. In addition, there was ‘the

establishment of parallel structures and the decision to allow and sanction the participation at the provincial conference of ‘delegates’ from parallel structures in respect of which disputes had not been resolved, as well as permitting more than one parallel branch to qualify for the provincial conference’ (Constitutional Court 2012: Section 90). The court appended to its judgement detailed evidence concerning these manipulations of process.

In a striking parallel with the conclusions of the secretive TT investigation, the justices found that NEC members deployed in audit teams were incompetent or partisan. They also failed ‘to give branches an opportunity to query the audit findings in breach of the audit guidelines’ or to ‘give recognition to nominations legitimately made by ANC branches in respect of the membership of the provincial executive committee’ (Constitutional Court 2012: Section 90).

De Vos (2012) observes that, ‘reading through these list of irregularities, it is difficult not to conclude that those in charge of the Free State ANC and some NEC members who supported the re-election of the Provincial Executive Committee (and perhaps President Jacob Zuma), at best turned a blind eye to serious irregularities and pre-conference vote rigging and at worst participated in it’. It is to this relationship between provincial and national levels that we now turn.

## **National leadership: the road to Mangaung**

### ***Selective recruitment and exclusion incentives***

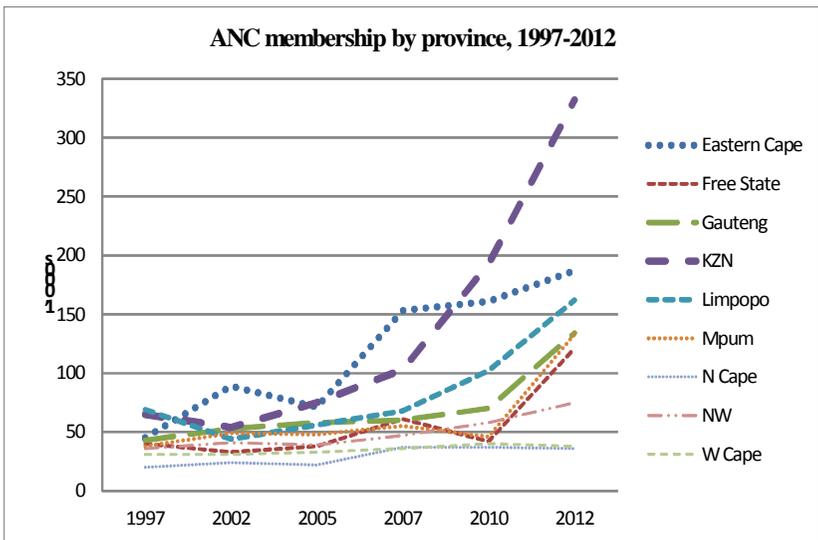
Secretary general Mantashe observed at the Mangaung conference that some provinces had recruited more members than others. ‘They must be commended for continuing to drive the campaign beyond the centenary celebrations’, he noted. However, he drily observed, ‘let us hope that the driving force behind the campaign was not just a desire to have more delegates to the national conference’ (ANC 2012b, 3.1.2.).

Membership numbers have played a big part in campaigns for national leadership positions since 1991. ANC leaders face incentives to increase audited ‘membership’ in regions and provinces in which they are popular (and in which their factional allies enjoy organisational control) and to minimise delegate numbers from areas controlled by their opponents. This creates incentives to use procedural manipulation to disqualify members or whole branches from such elections. Selective recruitment and exclusion ultimately turns around the institution of the branch because of the role assigned to it in the ANC constitution. Ninety per cent of delegates come

from ‘properly constituted branch general meetings’ (ANC 2007b: 10). The number of delegates is broadly in proportion to paid up membership, and each branch ‘in good standing’ is entitled to at least one delegate (ANC 2007b: 11).

After 1997, when Thabo Mbeki became ANC president, the Eastern Cape’s comparative membership statistics began to change. The bigger ANC provinces previously shared broadly similar membership numbers, and the Eastern Cape was smaller than its KZN and Limpopo counterparts. By the end of Thabo Mbeki’s first term as ANC president in 2002, however, Eastern Cape had leapfrogged its peers to become the biggest province by far (see diagram 1).

**Diagram 1**



Source: Adapted from ANC 2007a, 2012b

Perhaps as a result of delusions of indispensability that grip many incumbent factions, the president’s allies (and perhaps the president himself) seemed determined to retain control of both the ANC and the state, after the end of Mbeki’s expected two terms. This dynamic culminated in Mbeki’s decision to ‘make himself available’ for a third term as ANC president in 2007. Mbeki manufactured a situation in which his deputy, Jacob Zuma, was his only conceivable challenger. But this putative successor had then (predictably

and perhaps not coincidentally) fallen under a cloud of corruption investigations.

The growth in ANC membership in Eastern Cape during Mbeki's second term as ANC leader in part reflects the national leader's particular popularity in his home province or among his ethnic constituency. It also reflects the power that an incumbent enjoys to ramp up recruitment selectively. The ANC leadership in KZN, however, was a political actor in its own right, with resources to deploy and opportunities to seize. It proved able to capitalise on the steady deterioration of support for the Inkatha Freedom Party. The 2007 Polokwane conference saw Mbeki's ejection from the ANC presidency by a cross-national anti-Mbeki coalition. Although the anti-Mbeki majority enjoyed support in all provinces (including a third of delegates from the Eastern Cape) it was bolstered by the almost universal backing for Zuma's leadership bid that he enjoyed in his own home province of KZN.

Before the 2012 Mangaung conference, membership numbers again rose. In Limpopo and KZN, membership grew (at an accelerating rate) across the whole period between the conferences, with KZN membership tripling between 2007 and 2012. Other provinces in which Zuma enjoyed strong support also grew very rapidly: Mpumalanga saw expansion (at least on paper) from 55,000 to 132,000; and Free State membership rose to a new high of more than 120,000 according to what were controversial audited data from June 2012. Provinces in which Zuma enjoyed less popularity saw membership decline over the same five-year period.

Two months before Mangaung, according to some reports, provincial and regional auditors colluded with national auditors to inflate membership numbers selectively so as to favour Zuma's re-election bid. Branches were allegedly allowed to push up members if they were perceived to be pro-Zuma, and to import members from other branches to reach delegate-eligibility thresholds. There were also more reports of ghost members, with one source in the Nkomati region claiming that 'leaders believe that, for every 100 members you are entitled to send two delegates to Mangaung... They pumped in R600 000 to pay for membership' (*Mail & Guardian* October 12, 2012).

Mantashe observed at Mangaung that 620 of the ANC's 4,307 branches (which amounted to 14 per cent of the total) did not qualify to send delegates to the conference. Most of these branches came from the Eastern Cape, the North West and the Western Cape – a reflection, according to Mantashe, of 'the fact that in the majority of branches there is little or no political life' (ANC

2012b). But Zuma's allies controlled senior ANC positions in these provinces and may have used their influence to undermine anti-Zuma branches.

### **Prospects and potential reforms**

Zuma has condemned the electoral perversions from which he appears to have benefited. The ANC, he has asserted, needs to review its election systems 'in order to enhance internal democracy, credibility of the process, as well as the integrity and suitability of candidates' (ANC 2012c). Such changes are necessary to 'protect the ANC from the tyranny of slates, factions and money'.

The 2012 conference endorsed a new focus on organisational issues, announcing (not for the first time) a 'decade of the cadre' and a 'comprehensive political school system'. Activists will allegedly be subjected to 'performance monitoring'; 'firm and consistent action' will instil discipline; and 'integrity commissions' will purportedly blossom (ANC 2013: 4-6). Inside Luthuli House, ANC head quarters, an information technology revolution will apparently sweep aside antiquated membership and communications systems.

Mantashe has spoken about the benefits that will flow from 'workshops to train branch representatives on the membership audit' and improvements in record keeping. The secretary general has also identified ways to minimise membership gatekeeping by centralising membership card distribution. In Mantashe's eyes, 'empowering the branches and members will ultimately save the movement'. He also, however, argues that, 'unless the ANC invests sufficient resources in the appropriate IT system, problems of membership management will visit us from time to time... Modern technology is not a luxury and there should not be any reluctance in investing in it' (ANC 2012b: 3.1.3).

These positive proposals may well be too little and too late. Money-fuelled lobbying plays a prominent role in almost every city and province. Cycles of money and power connect public offices to ANC positions. Auditing, accreditation, and record-keeping systems are deeply distrusted. Three times in every five years, the movement is paralysed by elective or candidate list processes.

The weaknesses of internal systems meanwhile threaten to undermine the ANC's ability to perform the broader functions of a political party or liberation movement. It will find it increasingly hard to serve as a strong

bridge between activist citizens and the national political elite, because it can neither communicate the discontents of ordinary people to the leadership effectively nor serve as an instrument for the political education and mobilisation of the poor. A movement with technologically backward internal systems, rampant factionalism, and exploding membership numbers is taking enormous risks with its own future. A contested internal election that possesses an ethnic or regional dimension could easily pose a threat to the very survival of the ANC.

## Note

1. I am grateful to Colin Bundy, Tom Lodge, and Jeremy Seekings for these suggestions.

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