

MZUKISI QOBO: ANC's options are stark: modernise or perish

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THE concern that should preoccupy African National Congress (ANC) leaders today is what it will take to keep the party relevant and fit for the future. Its options are stark: modernise or perish. The existential crisis afflicting the ANC is not unique to it. Many other liberation movements or revolutionary parties have been prone to and often succumbed to it.

For Zimbabwe's Zanu (PF), such a moment came at the dawn of the new millennium. President Robert Mugabe's party hit a crisis of credibility and legitimacy just when the country reached two decades since liberation.

At the heart of its political regression were failures of leadership and the weakening bond between party and society.

In his book on the Chinese Communist Party — Cadres and Corruption — Chinese scholar Xiaobo Lu points out that "involution (regression) takes place when a ruling party, in dealing with a change of environment, opts to retain pre-existing modes and ethos rather than to adopt new ones". It hides behind slogans, rhetoric and history rather than face the brutal realities of change.

It does not take much to discern symptoms of the ANC's own political regression, as these were well summarised in ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe's organisational report at the ANC's national general council in 2010. Mantashe lamented the rise of ill-discipline, infighting and the influence of money in party structures. Beyond Luthuli House, what has come to epitomise the crisis of the ANC in government is an absent leader who seems more interested in securing his own survival in the party than mastering the complexities of governing.

The party lacks a defining theme for governance and a coherent story about what SA could become as a nation. Poorly articulated economic policies, with competing priorities and egos in the economic cluster; a generally weak bureaucratic machinery piloted by party cadres at the top; and a crisis of confidence in foreign policy are symptoms of the ANC's regression.

Unless the ANC is willing to make tough choices to modernise itself, its time may be running out. The ANC needs to undertake major restructuring in three critical areas if it is to remain relevant.

First, it needs to dispense with its backward-looking narrative about SA, which places undue emphasis on race, and champion a forward-looking and an inclusive agenda for change. It needs to decide whether it is a party of liberation frozen in time or a political instrument that aligns its agenda closely with the desires and hopes of the broader society.

In his autobiography, *The Third Man*, Peter Mandelson, the former British secretary of business and one of the architects of New Labour, relates the arduous journey the Labour Party undertook to transform

itself from a party beholden to the trade unions and sectional interests into a modern electoral machine that had a credible policy agenda and that also appealed to the middle classes. Until Tony Blair assumed Labour's leadership in 1995, the party had been moribund for more than a decade, having suffered defeat at the hands of Margaret Thatcher's Tories. The ANC does not need to face a crushing defeat before it acts.

Second, the ANC needs to reflect deeply on the kind of leaders it elects, especially as the president of the ANC seamlessly becomes president of the country.

We should not be victims of a mediocre succession process in the party.

The leader the party appoints should be ethically and intellectually grounded, especially since SA battles with the scourge of corruption and needs fresh ideas about building the economy.

Finally, the ANC should overhaul its policy-making template. Currently, for any major policy to make it to government, it needs to go through a tortuously slow party process. It is first debated at the national general council, then sent to the national working committee for processing, then a study is commissioned, after which this is processed by the committee again. It is then disseminated to the ANC's branches before it is sent back to the party's national policy conference. Only then does it get elevated to the national conference for resolution.

Surely this is no way to run a modern government and party. Economic actors need decisions made quickly or they look elsewhere. Besides, this cumbersome process has become a hazard because the ANC is now partly a front for narrow, self-serving factional interests.

The ANC needs to understand that it is no longer a freedom-struggle movement but a governing institution that needs to serve the interests of broader society. Failure to rethink its character and redefine its approach to leadership could cost it dearly in future.

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