



# Political Management of Ethnic Perceptions: An Assessment of the African National Congress

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the ANC has historically followed a moderate route – embracing tradition, whilst denouncing tribalism. Yet, this did not insulate the party from accusations of ethnic bias – a perception the leadership largely left unattended. But, entry into the arena of competitive politics has imposed a slight modification on the part of the party towards pandering to ethnic sentiments, albeit not officially acknowledged. The intention is not to cultivate political tribalism in a divisive sense. Rather, it is employed to cultivate among ethnic communities, which otherwise feel marginalised, a sense of identification with the ruling party. The party itself has done well to blunt the perception of ethnic bias to a point where it lacks popular resonance. That the perception itself still exists, reflects the saliency of (politicised) ethnic consciousness among the populace owing to past apartheid machinations in service of political hegemony.

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## Introduction

South Africa's political cohesion has been tested in recent years. Allegations of ethnic favouritism threaten to thwart current attempts at nation building. Newspapers and radio talk shows have been awash with discussions about the existence of an ethnic conspiracy within both the South African public sector and the African National Congress (ANC). Xhosa speaking groups, it has been alleged, are conspiring to preserve both the party and the public sector as their own domains of employment and influence, excluding the various other ethnic and language groups (*Pretoria News* 4 June 2002). These expressions of ethnic favouritism in both politics and government were also expressed in public discourse. Though the choice of leaders is technically the preserve of the ANC membership, some pundits even suggested before the December 2007 ANC conference that the ANC leadership needed to address the issue of 'ethnic favouritism' by making a public commitment that it would support the candidacy of a non-Xhosa speaker to succeed the incumbent president.<sup>1</sup>

Except for brief denials, the ANC leadership largely ignored allegations about tribalism since it came into power in 1994. The issue of ethnicity within the organisation and the country was only discussed at the organisational level in 2005 when it was tabled for discussion at the party's General Policy Council in June-July 2005. A discussion document titled 'The National Question', noted that 'ethnic prejudice persists'. This 'ethnic prejudice', the document noted, manifested itself in a various ways, including voting along ethnic lines such as 'amaZulu in KwaZulu'

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1 It is not uncommon in the ANC for the leadership to lobby for a particular individual prior to the election of office bearers. If friendly appeals fail to get rival candidates to bow out of a race, they are manoeuvred out. Nelson Mandela, then ANC president, nudged Mathews Phosa aside to ensure that Zuma was elected deputy-president of the ANC at the party's national conference in 1997. Mandela announced that Phosa had 'withdrawn from the race', when he had not. Phosa did not contradict the 'big-man', lest it appeared that he was challenging Mandela's integrity. Challenging Mandela's integrity would have alienated Phosa from many ANC supporters who immortalise Mandela.

voting ‘for their “own” party’. The document was quite open about tribal sentiments even within its own fold:

Others engage in low-intensity tribal mobilisation... in order to lobby support for positions in the ANC and in government. During the debate about provincial boundaries, tribal mobilisation took place among supporters of all parties, including the ANC. It was a rude reminder when even some of the most seasoned cadres of the liberation movement took positions on provincial boundaries based on tribal affiliation. Today it has become a habit among some to count the number of amaXhosa in the public service and in government. Accusations are made that many ministers and directors-general tend to appoint their own kind (ANC 2005).

The deliberation on ‘tribalism’ at the 2005 council was spurred by concern that ‘the call on the part of the founding fathers of the ANC to “bury the demon of tribalism” has not lost its validity’. However, the 2005 Council did not adopt any resolutions, especially to eliminate perceptions of ethnic bias within the ANC. Tribalism did not even receive a mere mention in the conference resolutions. Such silence, reflecting ambivalence towards a potentially dangerous issue, seems puzzling. For the ANC appreciated the danger that tribalism posed both to the unity of the organisation and the stability of South Africa’s political system. Yet it failed to adopt a resolution to thwart the resilience of this phenomenon within its fold and throughout society.

### **Contextual background: ethnicity and African nationalism**

Politicised ethnicity is not unique to post-apartheid South Africa. Nor is South Africa’s ruling nationalist party, the ANC, the only African nationalist organisation having to deal with this divisive phenomenon. Nationalist movements throughout Africa, both during and after colonialism, have had to grapple with this question. In most cases, African nationalist organisations came into being within a political context where ethnic identities had already been politicised. Ethnicity was the lynchpin

of colonial rule. Colonial bureaucracy promoted ethnic identification as a dominant medium of interaction between itself and the individual 'natives'. Access to state resources hinged on membership in one ethnic group or another. This was premised on the definition of 'natives', not as citizens within a nation-state, but as subjects that belonged to a particular ethnic community under a traditional authority. Thus a native could not lay any claims or demands for resources, shelter or security, from a colonial state, but from a traditional authority. The latter, in turn, demanded identification with that ethnic community and allegiance to its authority figure – a chief (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

The bifurcation of the citizens, on the one hand, and subjects, on the other, was itself revealing of the political *motif* on the part of the colonial state. The intention was to shore up colonial rule, as it provided the colonial state with a pretext to deny franchise to the numerically dominant indigenous population within a nation-state, whilst 'appearing noble' for granting natives rights within their 'own' indigenous institutions. Thus the settler population became a majority within the nation-state, supposedly free from any fears of being swamped over by the majority native population. Apart from the obvious strategy of divide and rule, the supposedly indigenous institutions of traditional rule had in fact become contaminated by colonial meddling. They no longer resembled the pre-colonial character that was largely defined by rule by consensus,<sup>2</sup> where a chief often followed the wishes of his subjects and was censured in case of a transgression. Rather, chiefs were appointed by the colonial authority, to which they had become accountable and were given powers that placed them beyond traditional censure. Essentially, chieftaincy was transformed into, as Mamdani puts it, a form of local despotism (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

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2 Pre-colonial forms of power and authority were, however, not entirely inclusive of all voices or tolerant of dissent. Often-times people held back criticism for fear that it might be construed as disloyalty, which would most likely invite punishment. Opinions of older and wealthy men tended to hold sway more than younger and ordinary men. Older men were considered wiser, and wealthy men wielded popular influence through patronage. See Soga 1939.

Colonialism, therefore, incubated ethnic identity – a cultural identity that rests on language and values – into a political identity with a heightened sense of consciousness approximating a dominant form of self-identification. Individuals accessed state resources to sustain their livelihood, whilst chiefs received patronage from the colonial state. There was a patron-client relationship – chiefs ensured popular obedience to the colonial-complicit customary rule, in return for ‘dubious’ titles, monetary rewards and control over local resources. Chiefs became ethnic entrepreneurs, while traditional institutions became markers of ethnicity.

Colonialism impacted unevenly on the various regions, a process that helped to intensify ethnic differentiation among the various ethnic groups inhabiting ethnicised regions. For instance, in a number of African countries, including South Africa, educational facilities were concentrated in particular regions inhabited by particular ethnic groups. The result of this misconstrued colonial developmental pattern, in most cases, was the production of an educated elite from specific ethnic regions. Nationalist movements in such countries ended up being dominated by members of the particular ethnic groups that had advanced education arising from uneven colonial development. The very presence (or feeling) of one group being advantaged over others created a grievance, especially on the part of those who aspired for leadership, but felt over-looked on account of their lack of requisite skills (given the elitist nature of early nationalist movements). Tribalism tended to be a convenient explanation for such exclusion or ethnic dominance (Berman 2004).

Nationalist movements reacted to ethnicity in two ways, each largely pre-figured by context. They either adopted a moderate stance that embraced traditional institutions, whilst denouncing tribalism in favour of unity; or a radical standpoint that called for the obliteration of ethnic identification or manifestation. Both reactions sought to undercut the divisive effect of ethnicity, which weakened the anti-colonial struggle. But, tribalism (or perceptions there-of) proved difficult to suppress, even by the radicals (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 1997:7-68).

Tribalism gained impetus from post-colonial competitive politics. In the post-colonial phase, leadership positions bestowed more than just a title. It came with access to state power and control over the allocation and distribution of resources. Access to state resources heightened the stakes, which could only be secured through popular support. Thus nationalists became ethnic entrepreneurs using ethnicity as a mobilising tool to create a support base that would catapult them to power. But that was not just a function of elite manipulation; it was also aided by popular (or ethnic) consent. Fellow ethnic members lent support towards their 'own' trusting that they would pay them back through greater access to state resources and provision of services (Ake 1993:4).

Access to material resources thus determines whether or not ethnic mobilisation finds popular resonance. Ethnic belonging is offered as explanation for one form of discrimination or another. Where there is no discrimination or seeming favouritism of one group over others, the possibility of a grievance arising is highly minimised.

### **Apartheid machinations and ethnic perceptions in South Africa**

That an accident of history acquired a conspiratorial appearance is largely a function of apartheid machinations. Colonialists, and later architects of apartheid, went to great lengths to give tribalism credence both rhetorically and through social re-engineering of residential spaces. The over-arching objective was political hegemony of a minority white rule over an African majority population.

The Union government, instituted after 1910, delivered the first salvo in the subjugation of Africans by defining them entirely as subjects of traditional rule, not citizens within a modern state. This was done through the promulgation of the Native Administrative Act in 1927. That law decreed that, henceforth, all Africans were tribes-people, whose natural habitat was a village under the rule of a chief. It did not matter how sophisticated or urbanised one considered oneself to be, the law

declared all Africans tribesmen by virtue of their African-ness. If for some weird reason, according to colonial logic, a group of Africans happened to be tribe-less, the Native Commissioner could easily constitute them into a tribe, find a village and assign a chief to rule over them (Mamdani 1996:62-108).

This was essentially institutional segregation, yet supposedly equal. Apartheid architects after 1948 added territorial segregation, but still retained ethnicity as its foundation. The African majority was reduced into multiple ethnic minorities and shoved into what were declared 'independent states', each ethnic group with its own. Whites kept 'South Africa' to themselves, and Africans, who were decreed citizens of one homeland or another, were 'justifiably' denied franchise and permanent residence within 'South Africa.' As Africans, who were supposedly innately tribal, the argument went, they exercised political rights within a tribal authority. Speaking in 1959, Minister of Bantu Affairs, M.C. de Wet Nel, put it thus:

The Zulu is proud to be a Zulu and the Xhosa proud to be a Xhosa and the Venda is proud to be a Venda, just as proud as they were a hundred years ago. The lesson we have learnt from history during the past three hundred years is that these ethnic groups, the whites as well as the Bantu, sought their greatest fulfilment, their greatest happiness and the best mutual relations on the basis of separate and individual development... the only basis on which peace, happiness and mutual confidence could be built up (Mare 1987:30).

Apartheid government did not let up an opportunity to promote ethnic consciousness where inter-ethnic mingling took place. Urban residence, within 'South Africa' was designed along ethnic lines. Soweto, for instance, a predominantly black residential area in Johannesburg, is notorious for its spatial demarcation along ethnic lines: Jabulani, Mdeni, Zola neighbourhoods were mostly populated by Zulu-speakers; Naledi, Moletsana, Mapetla by Sotho-speakers; and Chiawelo by Shangaan-speakers. Hostels and compounds, which accommodated mine-workers, were also

divided along ethnic lines. It must be noted, however, that ethnic consciousness among Africans also had an independent life of its own even within urban settings. Migrant workers, for instance, tended to form social networks with fellow home-boys within an urban setting. These networks provided both moral and material support to migrant workers within a strange urban environment often associated with danger. Most importantly, they reinforced ethnic consciousness for continued membership depended on one's display of loyalty towards ethnic practices. Thus they bore ethnic markers, as in a dress-code, and engaged in traditional rituals that set them apart from their urbanised counterparts (Mayer 1971; Wilson & Mafeje 1963).

Successive oppressive governments, therefore, utilised tribalism as a form of control. They were in fact following an old advice offered by the Governor of the Natal Colony, Theophilus Shepstone, in the early 1880s: that the 'main object of keeping natives under their own law is to ensure control over them'.<sup>3</sup> But the oppressors were not the only ones adept at ethnic manipulation. Opportunistic African politicians exploited ethnic stereotypes to build support bases for themselves. Gatsha Buthelezi, founder and current leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), distinguished himself as one such ethnic entrepreneur.

Buthelezi positioned his party as a proponent and guardian of the Zulu 'nation' and culture. Anyone who considered himself/herself a proud Zulu was encouraged, especially through the state controlled regional media and official rhetoric, to support the IFP. In some instances, locals

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3 In Shepstone's Natal, Zulu chiefs were primary administrators of customary law. Chieftaincy was remoulded and harnessed to serve the colonial project. The 1878 Code of Native Natal, which evolved to the Natal Code of Native Law in 1891, made the Governor-General supreme chief, empowering him to appoint and dismiss chiefs, break and remake tribes. Chiefs were no longer subject to the checks and balances measures that historically existed within the system of chieftaincy. Chiefs became accountable to the colonial administration and despotic towards their subjects. They issued commands and expected obedience from their subjects. The long-held customary practices of consultation and consensual decision-making no longer applied. Chiefs became local despots. See Mamdani 1997:67.

were coerced into supporting the IFP, as membership of the party became a pre-condition to employment into the civil service. Such ideas were also instilled through recruitment into State/party controlled formations such as Youth Brigade and United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA). All other political organisations that opposed the IFP, especially the ANC and its affiliates, were not just political rivals, but were declared enemies of the Zulu 'nation' itself. Speaking at a public meeting in 1989, Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini, explained it this way:

You know that the UDF and Cosatu have come into your midst to turn you against Inkatha. Why? Is it because Inkatha is led by a Zulu? I am not being party political... Does the ANC encourage you to be Zulu, to do your Zulu thing and play your Zulu role?... What does the UDF say about your Zuluness? (De Haas 1994:438).

How then, has South Africa's ruling African nationalist party, the ANC, dealt with political tribalism in post-apartheid South Africa? How salient is this phenomenon within contemporary society?

### **Tribalism and the ANC: a historical perspective**

Tribalism is not a recent concern within the ANC. Founders of the ANC at the very inception of the party warned against ethnicity and pleaded for unity. Writing on *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper, in October 24, 1911, Pixley ka Seme, stated:

... the aberrations of the Xosa-Fingo feud, the animosity that exists between the Zulus and the Tongaas, between the Basutos and every other Native must be buried and forgotten; it has shed among us sufficient blood! We are one people. These divisions, these jealousies, are the cause of all our woes and of all our backwardness and ignorance to-day (Karis 1972:72).

Decades later in 1949, Dr Alfred Xuma, ANC president then, reiterated similar sentiments as his predecessor at a meeting in Port Elizabeth:

Tribalism is the arch-enemy of our freedom and progress... The greatest danger to our unity is not the white man but the African

himself. In the past it was divisions that destroyed our race and reduced it to the position in which we found ourselves to-day. Let us therefore organize a crusade against tribalism as the first step in our struggle for national liberation (*Bantu World* 16 Jul 1949).

Xuma's concern was not without basis. African newspapers in the 1940s and 1950s were awash with reports of ethnic controversies within the ANC. The *Bantu World's* edition of April 12, 1944, for instance, was moved to laud the election of C. S. Ramohanoë as president of the Transvaal branch of the ANC as 'an exposure of the myth that Transvaal Africans wanted a Transvaal Mosuto to lead them'. It hailed this development as an indication that 'the age of narrow nationalism is past'. But, subsequent events proved that announcement premature. Three years later *Inkundla ya Bantu* newspaper reported that Ramohanoë sent around a circular citing tribalism as the reason for some of his colleagues disagreeing with him: 'These people have no policy except to splatter nasty glaring words of forming a tribal Congress whose leaders must be Bapedis' (Gerhart 2003). As the controversy evolved, the name-calling metamorphosised into 'Sotho versus Nguni'. This followed an executive vote of no confidence in Ramohanoë's presidency. But his supporters claimed that the motion lacked merit since, according to them, it was driven by Nguni-speakers and thus motivated by tribalism. They reasoned that the national president of the ANC, Alfred Xuma, 'has broken wantonly resolutions of Congress and has gone unpunished... Why then rush for a no-confidence motion now?' They attributed this 'inconsistency' to Xuma being Nguni, and Ramohanoë being Sotho.

Transvaal was not the only province caught up in ethnic bickering. *Inkundla* warned of a similar phenomenon happening in Natal. There 'no outside non-Zulu African is allowed to express any political opinions or suggestions', whilst 'the people are ripe for organization'. The newspaper went on to explain: 'A despicable aspect of this foreigner complex is the fact that it exploits the very tribalism which the White has boosted for our exploitation, and which is the very anti-thesis of the nationalism we are striving to cultivate and foster. But people who want to keep up

a myth of their own greatness will stop at nothing to gain their ends' (*Inkundla ya Bantu* 1 Feb 1949).

The ANC could not escape accusations of tribalism even in the post-1960 period, after it had been banned. The leadership reportedly instituted no less than five commissions to investigate tribalism within its ranks. The contents of these commissions were not widely publicised, and interested researchers have had difficulty locating them (Gerhart 2003). A few sketchy details are available, though. A meeting of the ANC's national executive committee (NEC) held in Luanda on 2-5 December 1981, for instance, discussed the issue of tribalism within the organisation. That meeting acknowledged 'that tribalism exists outside South Africa and is being used' by individual political leaders to promote their personal agendas. The meeting resolved that the 'ANC should study the phenomenon of tribalism and its various manifestations'. The NEC went further to commit itself to 'work-out the strategy of destroying' tribalism. That strategy would include educating 'its members to the dangers of tribalism'. The leadership also resolved that, as that: 'The ANC should root out tribalism out of its vocabulary even as a word. We should use such positive words as nationalities' (Gerhart 2003).

However, the adoption of new vocabulary did not eliminate the problem. Perceptions of tribalism within the organisation persisted right through the mid-1980s. Around the time of the 1985 Consultative Conference in Kabwe, Zambia, a member of the NEC, John Pule Motshabi, was still urging the leadership to eliminate 'tribal deployment, development and grooming for leadership'. Motshabi went on to plead: 'I therefore call for equal political selection from all ethnic groups among the Africans...' (Gerhart 2003).

Clearly, the ANC has been fraught with accusations of ethnic favouritism throughout its history. The leadership's response to this problem has been ambivalent. On the one hand, the ANC leadership has always frowned upon ethnicity. On the other hand, the same leadership has encouraged ethnicity by enveloping itself in the symbolism of traditional

ethnic institutions and values. First, the very founding of the ANC, as noted in Pixley ka Seme's inaugural speech, was based on an attempt to weld together the different ethnic groups into a cohesive whole. Second, the presence of traditional leaders at the founding meeting and their appointment into the 'Upper House' of the organisation sought to convey a sense of unity among all African ethnic groups. Third, whilst seeming to underplay ethnic distinctions for the sake of forging national cohesion, the ANC nonetheless sought to give itself an African ethnic imagery in its organisational business. Proceedings at conferences, for instance, simulated traditional practices. Typical of an *imbizo* gathering, traditional leaders recused themselves from deliberations by delegates, limiting their role only to announcing the consensus of views of the delegates. Thereafter, 'President-General would... have the last word, as ordinary members could not resume discussion of an issue after the chiefs had spoken' (Walshe 1971:210).

Yet, whilst enveloping themselves in traditional symbolism, ANC founders rejected the society and the value system traditional figures represented. Langailele Dube, the first ANC president elected in 1912, even encouraged his followers to strive towards 'higher places of civilization and Christianity – neither backwards into the slump of darkness nor downward into the abyss of antiquated tribal systems' (Walshe 1971:38). This reflected their Eurocentric orientation. As Christian converts and graduates of missionary schools, those nationalist leaders considered mastery of English culture an acceptable condition for equal treatment and rights. Dube couched the demand for African franchise in the language of civilisation:

We feel that the time has come when we should have some measure of legislative representation, some way of making our influence felt in the law-making powers. Our progress in the Gospel life and its accompanying civilization demands it... (Walshe 1971:39).

To be sure, the ANC's appropriation of traditional symbolism was intended to project Africans' familiarity with democracy, for the colonial

authority had denied Africans franchise on the pretext that they were unfamiliar with democracy. Nationalists, in turn, contended that chieftaincy was an epitome of Africans' democratic heritage. Nelson Mandela, who has a rural background and doubles as both royalty and nationalist, expresses this notion quite eloquently in his autobiography as he describes proceedings at a public gathering organised by a chief to discuss community affairs:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, and landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens (Mandela 1994:20).

Moreover, chiefly presence within the ANC depicted a sense of continuity with the past, particularly continuity of resistance against colonial rule. It conferred upon the ANC an imagery of a confluence of the old and young warriors against the same enemy for a similar objective. Nationalist leaders were heirs of the legacy of resistance bequeathed upon them by their predecessors who had fought, but failed to topple colonial rule. An ANC Youth League statement urging mass involvement in a National Day of Protest in 1950 put it thus:

The protest is to us a manifestation of all those divine stirrings of discontent of the African people since 6th April 1652, onward – through the period of the so-called Kaffir Wars, through the days of Dingana, through the days of Moshoeshe, through the days of Sekhukhuni... (Karis 1972:445).

Founded by Westernised African elite, the ANC shunned tribal identities, though revelling in their symbolism to gain popular legitimacy as the authentic representative of the nationalistic cause. This placed it in a contradictory location: aspiring towards a universal identity, whilst also adopting an essentialist posture.

Competitive politics in South Africa was to take place within a context where ethnicity was politicised. Thus both resources and terror were employed by the state to incite tribalism in South African society. Whether coerced or willingly, it was not unexpected that some people would view society through an ethnic perspective or identify themselves by an ethnic identity. A public opinion survey conducted in 1999 (<http://www.presidency.gov.za> accessed 6 Jun 2006) established that 23% of the African population defined themselves predominantly in ethnic terms (which declined to 14% by 2004).

How did the ANC deal with this situation, especially as it entered free and competitive politics in 1994?

### **Political management and natural dissolution: an unofficial policy**

Since it came into power in 1994, the ANC's official treatment of ethnicity and traditional leadership has been marked by two, somewhat contradictory elements. At the theoretical level the organisation has sought to underplay the saliency of politicised ethnicity within popular consciousness or the collective psyche, but at the practical level it has undertaken measures that appeal to ethnic sentiments.

The first and only figure to pen an authoritative insight on ANC thinking on tribalism in post-apartheid South Africa, was Pallo Jordan, who in 1997, in a paper titled 'The National Question and Nation Building', saw ethnicity and its guardian institution, traditional leadership, essentially as an artificial phenomenon moulded by colonial regimes to counter anti-colonial struggle and, subsequently, to shore up their rule. The extent to which ethnic consciousness does exist, argues Jordan, is not an 'articulation of a "psychological urge" ... to cohere as members of a unique ethnic community', but a function of the colonial distortion of traditional leadership and the material benefits bestowed upon such leaders.

Apartheid legislation, in its many forms, elevated traditional leaders into 'a caste of privileged Africans' in numerous and different ways. It removed popular censure on way-ward chiefs, converting a formerly accountable institution into a form of despotism, provided them with monetary rewards and unqualified control over local resources especially land, and gave them positions and status as 'Prime Ministers' of Bantustans. This was all on account of them being 'traditional' and thus placing value on them exhibiting their 'traditionality'. These 'traditional leaders' had a material interest in 'fostering ethnic consciousness by wielding totems, symbols and other paraphernalia of a particular "culture" or practices that differentiated their subjects from those of other chiefs'.

The net result of this colonial meddling, Jordan continues, was to cloak what was otherwise a fluid social phenomenon with an appearance of rigid naturality. Ethnic consciousness and allegiance to traditional leadership, for instance, dissolves in the face of economic development and the attendant process of urbanisation. Within an urban setup, individuals that formerly defined themselves solely in ethnic terms acquire multiple other identities, which they share with individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. Ethnicity thus decreases as a dominant factor in one's self-definition. The creation of Bantustans and the forced residence there-in was thus an attempt to freeze this process of urbanisation, as it threatened ethnic consciousness. A counter-measure to ethnic consciousness or mobilisation within post-apartheid society, thus Jordan proposed, is a policy regime and party behaviour that disregards ethnic identity. This policy has found expression at three levels: state-citizenry relationship; ANC's treatment of chieftaincy and tradition; and selection/election and assignment of party officials.

### **State-citizenry interaction**

The ANC-led government has tried to deal with the role of the state in the production of ethnic identities by restructuring the manner in which the national government interacts with both individual citizens and the

largely ethnically-defined provinces. Though retaining the provincial system of government inherited from the apartheid state, the national government determines budgetary allocations to various provinces on an equitable basis. It takes into consideration population size and the extent of socio-economic needs. Thus poorer provinces, which tend to be rural and dominated by one or other ethnic group – i.e. Mpumalanga, Limpopo, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, North-West – receive more for social expenditure than richer provinces – say Western Cape and Gauteng – which are urban-concentrated and ethnically diverse. Having de-ethnicised the post-apartheid state, ethnic identification, in relation to the state, is thus rendered unimportant and ethnic groupings have little cause to complain of neglect or marginalisation by national government from which they get equitable resources.

### **ANC and tradition: reform vs. appropriation**

As noted above, there has been a strong linkage between traditional institutions and ethnic consciousness in South Africa. Ethnic identification has been a prerequisite for access to residence and resources within tribal territories. In instances of competition among various political formations for support, ethnic consciousness was harnessed for political purposes. Members of a particular ethnic group were encouraged to vote for a particular ethnic party that purported to represent their values and history. Ethnic consciousness, therefore, can be politicised under particular conditions. A pre-emptive measure against politicisation of ethnicity is to eliminate conditions that incubate this phenomenon, or dilute the saliency of its primary source – i.e. ethnic consciousness.

To the extent that traditional institutions served as instruments of ethnic consciousness, this has been nullified by South Africa's democratisation. Africans are no longer coerced subjects of traditional authorities, but citizens with rights to services provided directly by the State. Ethnic identification or allegiance to a tribal authority is not a prerequisite for access to State services or resources. Free movement and residence

in urban areas has eliminated the need for African urban residents to maintain their tribal links as a way of securing access or residence to the country-side, which were previously administered by chiefs. Governance in rural areas is now under democratically elected councillors (Municipal Structures Act 1998).

Legislation on communal land seeks to divest chiefs of powers to allocate land in favour of a new body, the Land Administration Committee (LAC), whose membership will be elected and inclusive of government officials, with a strong bias for women representation. By insisting on the representation of women and electing a quarter of the membership, the legislation envisages that the LACs in particular will function in a democratic and sensitive manner towards women, who have historically been victims of discrimination (Communal Land Rights Act 2004).

The reforms, however, have also been accompanied by measures to placate chiefs. The position of traditional leadership remains a considerable source of patronage. Traditional leaders are still handsomely rewarded – i.e. monthly remuneration – even though they are simply symbolical cultural figures, without any official duties. Government bought them luxury cars, a practice that former President Mandela pushed for. As for those chiefs appointed under dubious circumstances or with dubious titles, they still retain their positions (Ndletyana 2006:143-188).

The combination of reforms, patronage and retention of powers of traditional authorities by the ANC government not only betrays its cautious political approach but also its pandering to ethnicity. Government seeks to reduce the significance of traditional leadership and adapt it to the democratic order, on the one hand, but also wants to avoid alienating chiefs on the other hand. Chiefs in KwaZulu-Natal, who tended to be sympathetic to the opposition IFP, posed a particular concern for the ANC-led government. The ANC was particularly concerned that political disagreements in KwaZulu-Natal were prone to flare up into violent confrontations. As a result, national government often took threats of violence from the IFP seriously. It delayed holding the 1995 local

elections, whilst other provinces went ahead for fear that they would be disrupted by hostile chiefs who felt that their demand for inclusion in local government had not been addressed by national government. Similar threats of violence were to force national government to postpone announcing the exact date for the 2000 local elections until the IFP-aligned chiefs felt their concerns had been adequately addressed. Notwithstanding the reforms, the ruling party seems careful not to undertake any action that will yield a disruptive effect on local rural governance (Ndletyana 2006:143-188).

The ANC believes that chiefs still hold significant influence over the local rural population which they use to sway political support. The ANC thus views chiefs as useful allies in its electioneering and it sometimes goes to great lengths to associate itself with the institution. For instance, during the 2000 election in the village of Xhwili in the Eastern Cape, the organisation even dissociated itself from own its allies who were anti-chiefs – i.e. the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) – to gain votes. ANC activists opposed SANCO presence in Xhwili, for fear that they would also be seen as anti-chiefs. One Xhwili leader explained: ‘We made a point of telling people that we were not SANCO. We told them we were ANC and that we worked with chiefs. The ANC was for chiefs, we would say to them’ (Ndletyana, 2006:198).

Even the urbane and sophisticated Thabo Mbeki got on the bandwagon of traditional symbolism to win votes during the 1999 national elections. Shortly before the 1999 elections, the ANC ‘re-introduced’ Mbeki to the Transkei countryside as a man with strong traditional roots, just like the local population. The organisation organised a traditional ceremony at his home village Ngcingwana, Dutywa, to ‘reacquaint’ him with his ancestors (after his return from exile). The ceremony was to be hosted by his *AmaZizi* clan, where he ‘would also undergo a cleansing ceremony to prepare him for the rigours’ of being president. The occasion was to be a purely traditional affair marked by the slaughter of a beast, traditional singing and Mbeki was to be dressed up in traditional attire. Contrary to his celebrated image of a renaissance man projected in urban areas,

during the occasion Mbeki was referred to by his clan-name, *Zizi*. The ANC disputed claims that the ceremony was an electioneering ploy, even though it was held during an election season. According to the organisation, the ceremony was a delayed event which had not been held in the last eight years because Mbeki was simply too busy (<http://www.iol.co.za> accessed 24 Dec 1998).

### **Ethnicity and the selection and election of ANC party officials**

Since 1994, the ANC's appointment of premiers and provincial chairpersons of the party have emphasised geographic belonging. ANC candidates are usually chosen on the basis of having local roots, interpreted in terms of nativity. Within the context of competitive politics where local politicians have a better understanding of local political dynamics and a better chance to receive political acceptance among local voters, this selection criterion makes political sense. This political approach, however, tends to reinforce ethnic identification in politics and society.

Two important appointments made by the ANC in the 1990s help to illustrate the above point: Jacob Zuma's election as provincial chairperson of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal in 1991 and Mosiuoa Terror Lekota's appointment as premier of Free State Province in 1994. Both appointments clearly show the ANC's pandering to ethnicity and its privileging of ethnic identity and nativity over political identity.

Jacob Zuma was elected chairperson of the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal in 1991 and re-elected in 1996. He became a member of the provincial government responsible for economic affairs in 1994. These appointments were incongruent with Zuma's political stature and background within the ANC and anti-apartheid politics, which put him in good stead for national politics.

Zuma was among the first recruits into the ANC's military wing, Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK), in the 1960s. He was captured and convicted to 10 years imprisonment at the notorious Robben Island Prison, where he made acquaintance with Mandela and other veterans of the liberation

movement. On his release in 1973, he fled into exile where he rose up the ranks of the MK to become head of intelligence. Zuma was also involved, alongside Mbeki, in the negotiation process right from the mid-1980s. By the 1990s, he was, therefore, a senior leader of the organisation set for national politics. His political peers, including Thabo Mbeki, Zola Skweyiya, Pallo Jordan and Joe Nhlanhla, all took prominent positions in national politics as ministers in Mandela's first non-racial cabinet, while Zuma was dispatched to the provinces.

The ANC's decision to assign Zuma to provincial politics was based on two main issues: his life-style and the ANC's rivalry with the IFP in KwaZulu-Natal. The IFP seemed to win the battle for political control of the predominantly Zulu-speaking KwaZulu-Natal. This stemmed, from the IFP's influence over the Zulu monarch, Goodwill Zwelithini, and the portrayal of the ANC as anti-Zulu or Xhosa-dominated. Most worrisome to the ANC, however, was the political violence between ANC and IFP supporters that raged through the province (fanned by reactionary elements within the police system), which the ANC partially ascribed to IFP's vilification of it as anti-Zulu (De Haas 1994).

In the ANC view, two things had to happen for the ANC to reverse this trend: wrestle the King away from the IFP and cultivate an image that resonated with province's ethnic-conscious voters. Zuma was seen as instrumental to that strategy succeeding. None of the ANC local leaders, though Zulu themselves, had the profile to pacify the monarch. They were enmeshed in the conflict and shared a modern and anti-tradition image that had been associated with the ANC and the UDF. Zuma was viewed as different by all accounts. He represented the traditional part of the ANC, especially Zulu tradition. He is a polygamist who still keeps a residence at his birth-place, Inkandla, which he visits regularly. Despite numerous years of exile, Zuma remained highly eloquent in vernacular, including Zulu folk-songs which he is so fond of singing. He was a regular feature at the traditional celebrations dressed up in traditional attire with a spear in hand, even after he had left provincial politics for the national scene as deputy-president of the country.

Zuma projected a non-threatening face of the ANC towards a suspicious 'Zulu' public and King. A major weekly, *City Press* (12 Jan 2003), described Zuma's impact in the KwaZulu-Natal politics as follows:

Zuma found himself being embraced not only by Zwelithini but became the only ANC leader who could move around with relative ease between Zulu traditional chiefs and indunas without causing consternation among them...He would wear Zulu traditional garb without anyone doubting his intentions.

Zuma's embracing of his Zulu ethnicity and tradition enabled him to strike a cordial relationship with the IFP leadership, especially the premier of the province, Frank Mdlalose, who became a crucial partner in the peace process. Zuma was also '... credited with ensuring Mandela held one of the first important meetings with the Zulu monarch at the King's KwaKhangela palace near Nongoma in 1996 where Mandela conveyed his desire to see Zwelithini calling an imbizo that would hopefully reconcile rival political parties in the province' (*City Press* 12 Jan 2003).

Zuma countered perceptions of an anti-Zulu ANC not only through regular public appearance alongside the King, but also through public statements that drew a close link between the ANC and the Zulu monarch. At one occasion organised to remember one of the Zulu Kings, Dinuzulu kaMpande, he said:

The hardships and suffering that King Dinuzulu went through for his people did not go unnoticed by the first liberation movement in Africa, the African National Congress. It was because of his opposition to white rule and his principled stand against colonialism that the ANC, when it was formed in 1912, made him a patron of the organisation, together with other traditional leaders of Southern Africa, like King Sobhuza and Moshoeshoe. The ANC respected the institutions of African traditional leadership as it continues to do so even today. King Dinuzulu supported the ANC and the ANC supported him (<http://www.gov.za/presidency>).

As a result of his political interaction with Zuma, King Zwelithini subsequently became impartial in the interparty rivalry between the ANC and the IFP. He began to associate with the leadership of both parties equally, reducing the perception that the ANC was less Zulu or was a nemesis of Zulus. The King even awarded the inaugural King Shaka Award to Nelson Mandela in 2001 in recognition of his contribution towards creating peace and democracy. This was a telling sign of improved relations, a far cry from the time when the King would not even meet Mandela. The IFP even feared that it was losing influence over the King to the ANC – a concern that prompted it in 2003 to rein him in by tightening the royal purse which the organisation controlled by virtue of being in control of the provincial government which in turn controlled budgetary allocations to the King. The IFP-controlled government refused to settle the King's son's school fees, totalling R93 834, and this resulted in the school suing the King. The ANC reacted furiously to this incident and denounced it as a deliberate act of 'humiliation' on the person of the King by the then IFP-controlled provincial government (<http://www.anc.org.za>).

Overall, the violence declined significantly in KwaZulu-Natal. Most observers and scholars ascribed this, inter alia, to Zuma's success in forging cordial relations with the IFP, especially the (IFP) provincial premier, Frank Mdlalose, between 1994 and 1999, and in softening the image of the ANC amongst the locals, particularly those who believed that the organization was anti-Zulu (Lodge 1999). The ANC subsequently made significant electoral gains. After losing the province by 32% to IFP's 50% in 1994, it narrowed the gap down to a three-percentage point in 1999 and eventually won the province in 2004 by 47% to the IFP's 35%. But, Zuma's deployment to KwaZulu-Natal revealed the ANC's privileging of geographical and ethnic origin over political origin in its politics.

Lekota's appointment as premier of Free State Province in 1994 provides another example of an ethnic-inspired appointment. Though born in Kroonstad (Free State), Lekota cut his political teeth in the KwaZulu-Natal. He had left Free State in his teens for schooling in Transkei (now part of the Eastern Cape Province) and later in KwaZulu-Natal where

he settled permanently, after enrolling at Turfloop University (now the University of the North, Limpopo Province). Lekota first dabbled in politics at Turfloop, as a member of South African Student Organisation (SASO). His activities landed him in prison at Robben Island for six years. This followed his involvement in organising illegal rallies – dubbed treason by the authorities – celebrating the independence of Mozambique in 1974 (Gastrow 1995).

On his release in 1982, Lekota went back to his adopted home, KwaZulu-Natal where he later rose up to national prominence. He became national publicity secretary of the UDF, a post he held whilst in and out of prison. Upon the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, Lekota was appointed ANC convener of Southern Natal region, making him responsible for leading local initiatives to re-establish the ANC. He ‘helped establish over 60 ANC branches in the area’ and was ‘centrally involved in attempts to establish peace initiatives in Natal’ (Gastrow 1995:119). Throughout his pre-1994 career, Lekota was never based in the Free State, except for a six-month stint in 1991 as an ANC organiser. He only returned to live there later after his appointment as premier in 1994.

But Lekota was basically an outsider in the local politics of Free State. This point was highlighted in his loss in party elections for provincial chairperson to Pat Matosa, a local hero, in 1993. This caused tension between Lekota, on the one hand, Matosa and his deputy, Ace Magashule, on the other hand. Matosa-Magashule and Lekota simply could not get along. The latter felt that they were more deserving of the position of Premier than the ‘political outsider’ Lekota, while Lekota felt they did not recognise his authority. At some point the ANC provincial executive led by Matosa and Magashula wanted to pass a motion of no-confidence in Lekota’s premiership. They were only dissuaded from doing so by senior ANC leaders such as Cyril Ramaphosa (Lodge 1999:18).

The only plausible explanation for Lekota’s assignment to Free State was his local roots and Sotho ethnic ties. This becomes even clearer when one considers that Lekota was taken out of KwaZulu-Natal, where he

had become a local hero, to lead the Free State. Lekota rose up to the highest level in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial hierarchy within the United Democratic Front (UDF). He was eventually appointed to lead efforts to re-establish the ANC in Southern Natal – a firm sign of his local popularity. Lekota's prominence in KwaZulu-Natal afforded the ANC an opportunity to transcend provincialism and affirm its nationalist identity. The KwaZulu-Natal membership of the UDF had taken the lead in this regard by embracing a Sotho-speaker from outside their province, but its national leadership halted this progressive movement by re-emphasising provincial belonging (nativism) and ethnic background instead. Throughout the post-1994 period, the ANC followed a similar strategy in the deployment of its senior office bearers.

## **Conclusion**

Ethnicity is not a salient phenomenon or destabilising factor in South Africa's contemporary politics. Despite a perception that the ANC leadership is an exclusive preserve for Xhosa-speakers, the party continues to garner significant electoral support across ethnic groups. And such perceptions have been undercut by state policies and rhetoric that disregards ethnic identity. However, a significant proportion of South Africans does define itself in ethnic terms, and the public debate that raged on in the media about the ANC and government being dominated by Xhosas indicates a potential for ethnicity to gain popular resonance. This is not surprising for a country where a substantial pool of resources was invested towards creating ethnic consciousness during apartheid.

The ANC has continued to view ethnicity as an artificial creation. Though averse to this phenomenon, the organisation has nonetheless employed ethnic and traditional symbolism. It has, by and large, used it positively, as in the case of Zuma and KwaZulu-Natal. The organisation has nevertheless succumbed to provincialism, which in the South African case, corresponds with ethnicity. There seems to be a conscious decision by the organisation to privilege geographic and ethnic origins

in the appointment of provincial leaders even in cases where better alternatives exist in the form of non-local leaders. This practice has in reality hindered efforts to overcome the apartheid legacy of tribalism and provincialism as well as attempts to develop a nationalist political identity.

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