

Fr. Seán O' Leary M.Afr
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The African National Congress Centenary Celebrations

On Sunday January 12th 2012, the African National Congress (ANC) celebrated its one-hundredth birthday. Though it is notoriously riddled with factions, the party put on a brave face of unity. South African president and ANC party leader Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki, whom Zuma had previously deposed, participated, while aging Nelson Mandela, the hero and a major architect of the transition to non-racial democracy did not attend because of his fragile health. This is a political party that gave the world two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Mandela and Albert Luthuli.

One hundred years is a long time and no one disputes the fact that a milestone like this in the history of any organization, and not least the ANC, ought to be celebrated in a dignified fashion. What took place in Bloemfontein, the cradle of the ANC, was far from dignified. The celebrations began with a game of golf on the Friday before for the 'elite of the elite' sending out as it did the wrong message. Golf, the game associated with powerful elites is fine, but for a political party celebrating 100 years of struggle and in a country where 25% of people are unemployed and over 30% live below the poverty datum line, a game of golf was perhaps not the best image to give. And indeed the rest of the celebration was conducted in the same manner. While the party faithful wined and dined the ordinary rank and file ANC poor supporters were turned away in their hundreds.

The weekend did have one redeeming feature with an ecumenical and inter-faith Church service which took place in the very Church where the ANC was founded on that day in 1912. What was interesting to see was who was present and who was not. Though the President and virtually the whole cabinet was not in attendance the Deputy-President Kgalega Motlanthe, and a strong contender to be the next president in 2014, was present. There seemed to be more pastors than politicians, with the Reverend Jessie Jackson from the USA as a key speaker. However, it was nice to see so many pastors praying for those who gave their lives on all sides in the struggle and imploring God's blessing on the nation for the future.

To their credit the ANC informed by the vision in the Freedom Charter of 1947, have always held that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. Steady progress is being made towards a united, non-sexist, non-racial, democratic and more prosperous future.

In 2009 the ANC decided to focus on five priorities in which could make a difference in the lives of the poor within a short space of time. These prioritise are: education, health, rural development and land reform, the fight against crime as well as the creation of decent work.

The centenary led to reflection about where South Africa and the ANC are going. ANC operatives have appropriated for themselves the mantle of the struggle against apartheid, whether intentionally or not, shoving aside the memory of other players, such as the Pan African Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness Movement. But, that also means that liberal public opinion holds the ANC accountable for preserving the ideals of that struggle – non-racial democracy and a commitment to public service. A series of squalid scandals and failure by ANC politicians to deliver fundamental services has tarnished the party. So, too, have political missteps such as the ANC government's refusal to issue a visa to the Dalai Lama to attend the eightieth birthday of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in an effort to curry favor with Beijing. The archbishop, an icon of the liberation movement comparable only to Mandela (though never a member of the ANC), has denounced the party's lack of morality in some of the same terms he once denounced the old white-supremacist National Party and apartheid.

In South Africa, still dominated by the politics of race, the ANC remains the primary voice of the black population, the overwhelming majority. The emerging black middle class also supports it. That support is not going to go away anytime soon, and the party is likely to remain the principal party of government for a long time. South Africa remains a bastion of white economic privilege, with little redistribution of wealth and profound black poverty despite high-profile black empowerment schemes. It is no surprise that within the party, there are voices calling for radical economic and social policy initiatives that recall Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, including the nationalization of the mines and the seizure without compensation of white-owned land. Such an agenda is difficult to reconcile with South Africa's (and the ANC's) historic commitment to the rule of law and liberal democracy. That is a dilemma that the ANC faces.

Though the right to celebrate 100 years of existence is not in question the ANC are off to a bad start by what happened in Bloemfontein on that historical weekend. However, we are told that 2012 is a year of celebration. The hope now is that the ANC will have learnt from their regrettable start and prepare more celebrations that are both dignified and honor the memory of so many women and men, young and old, who gave their lives for the country we have today.

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