

# Time for the ruling party to leave trenches of struggle behind



Barney Mthombathi

IT'S always good to have a sense of what irks the soul of the ANC, what it's ruminating on, or the ideas colliding in its collective head.

The discussion documents that the organisation released this week in preparation for its national general council in October should therefore merit the attention of all interested in South Africa's future. They cover the gamut of areas and policies, and give us a sense of where the ANC is at and where it wants to transport us — both with regard to transforming society and where it wants to locate the country in the global firmament.

Most discussions about the ANC or the government have been so dominated by its malfeasance that there has been little interrogation of its policies and the context in which they are crafted. Any consideration of the issues

raised in a limited space can only be brief and selective. But that's no reason not to take a stab at it.

As is so often the case with the ANC, reality frequently collides with ideological fantasy. A wise Italian once remarked that everything can change, but not the language that we carry inside us. That is so true of the ANC. One often wishes that it would snap out of its exile (or is it

revolutionary?) mindset.

Its language hasn't changed. It's the language of exile, of struggle, of the trenches; it's archaic. It has to realise that it is no longer fighting a power. It is the power.

In its fallible hands it holds the future not only of its partisans but of millions of others. It should learn to wear power with some swagger and humility, not with a chip on its shoulder.

Reading through the documents, an alien from Mars would think the ANC was still waging the struggle against apartheid or was preparing for its ground-breaking conference in Morogoro in 1969. There's a lot of war talk. The documents are littered with references to balance of forces, battle plans, war rooms and everybody else "ganging up" against the ANC.

For a party that is in its third

decade in almost absolute power, there's a conspicuous absence of the sure-footedness or steady-as-she-goes attitude of somebody who's learnt to master — and enjoy — the levers of power. It's like "everybody is out to get us" — a lot of lashing out, interspersed with self-pity, gripes and grievances.

Some outlandish claims jump out at you: "More than 94% have access to water, 84% have access to sanitation, 81% of our people have electricity [and] 71% of South Africans have refuse removed from their home."

It's a bold statement. What does "access" to water and sanitation mean? Does it refer to running water or flushing toilets? Such a loose use of words is obviously meant to mislead.

According to the World Bank, around 19 million — about a third —

of South Africa's population is rural. Given the underdevelopment and poverty of our rural areas and the increasing proliferation of squatter camps or slums in urban areas, there is no way that such figures with respect to access to water and sanitation can be true. That should be obvious to even a casual observer.

Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokonyane was parroting these figures, unchallenged, on TV the other day.

As Goebbels said, if you tell a big enough lie and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.

The majority of people in rural areas relieve themselves in pit latrines, if not in the open. Running water in most cases is a pipe dream.

To state that 71% have the luxury of refuse removal is pure baloney. Somebody is sucking his thumb.

It is ironic that the ANC, which by its own say-so towers over everything else, should be complaining about its incompetence in getting its message across or its inability to set the national agenda.

"The media space is filled by raging attacks on the positions of the movement and the national democratic revolution by ultra-left and neoliberal forces," it says.

It bewails the fact that the organisation has not been able to counter such an onslaught and that ANC spokesmen are "largely lone voices". ANC and government spokesmen are often shocking, but in most cases the problem is the message, not the messenger.

And it's not true that the ANC doesn't set the agenda. It does, by what it's doing and saying.

But what it cannot do is control the perception of public opinion, and

therein lies its problem.

A few years ago the ANC identified communication as a weakness. A Department of Communications was established after the last election. And lo and behold, Faith Muthambi was appointed minister, compounding the initial problem. It's as if somebody thought Hlaudi Motsoeneng needed a twin. It's a formidable combination.

The ANC should just grow up. Of course it'll cop most of the criticism. It is now in power and the buck stops with it. And worse than a bad press is no press at all. In politics, that's as good as being in purgatory.

Comment on this: write to [tellus@sundaytimes.co.za](mailto:tellus@sundaytimes.co.za) or SMS us at 33971

[www.timeslive.co.za](http://www.timeslive.co.za)