

The ANC's Polokwane conference sent important messages to the country, argues Kaizer Nyatumba

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Through its overwhelming rejection of President Thabo Mbeki and those close to him, the African National Congress has sent a number of critical messages to the country and the continent. Yet again, the ANC, the oldest liberation movement in Africa, has offered an example worthy of emulation by other parties on the continent.

What are these messages? The first one is a timely reminder to those in senior positions that they do not have an inalienable right to rule. Instead, power resides with ordinary members of the organization, to whom it rightfully belongs. It is the people who, through an election, delegate their power to a chosen leadership, for it to use that power responsibly between elections, and to account to the self-same people for the judicious use of that power.

The lesson is simple: get drunk with a sense of self importance and look down upon the rank-and-file members who put you in that position of power in the first place, and you are history. The people will take that power back and cut you down to size. That is what happened to Mbeki, Mosioua Lekota and company in Polokwane this week. These leaders had committed the fundamental error of looking down upon ANC members and treating them with complete disdain. Consistently, over a period of at least two-and-a-half years, ANC members had sent a message to the ANC leadership. They did this at the organisation's National General Council held at the University of Pretoria in June 2005, at the organisation's National Policy Conference at Gallagher Estate in Midrand around the middle of this year, and through nominations for the top leadership of the ANC for the 52nd National Conference just ended.

The message was simple: We do not trust you any longer, and we think that you are abusing State resources to victimize Jacob Zuma and others you do not like. We think that you have become power drunk and arrogant, and we would like you to step down at the end of your term and walk away with dignity. (The second most popular song at the conference in addition to "*Umshini Wami*" was *Awudedele abanye, awudedele abanye, awudedele uMsholozzi*, which means "Give way for others, give way for others, give way for Msholozzi.") Regrettably, that message went unheeded, hence the electoral humiliation by Mbeki and Company.

Interestingly, Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, who was firmly in the Mbeki camp and had been among those who had denounced the ANC Women's League for its nomination of Zuma for the ANC presidency, lost with the biggest margin (954 votes), compared to Mbeki's 824 loss, which was the smallest margin. The second biggest loss was suffered by Mosioua Lekota, who was rejected by 946 voting ANC delegates, followed by Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma

(906 votes against), Mbeki ally Joel Netshitenze (851 votes against) and Thoko Didiza (849 votes against), respectively.

The second - and most important - message sent by rank-and-file ANC members to their own organization, the country and all of Africa is that they do not want South Africa to become yet another typical African country, where leaders overstay their welcome in office and become presidents for life. While there are many who voted for Zuma because they believe that he is the right man for the job and because they believed that he had been treated unfairly by Mbeki and those close to him, others who supported him were voting more AGAINST Mbeki rather than FOR Zuma. Helping propel the Zuma tsunami, therefore, were deep anti-pathy towards Mbeki and resentment of his desire to hold on to the ANC presidency.

Therefore, not all those who voted for Zuma did so because they support or prefer him. A significant number among them merely wanted to stop Mbeki and they would have voted for any candidate standing against him in order to stop him. In fact, there are many other South Africans who felt the same. As I checked in at the airport in Johannesburg to Polokwane, the SAA employee checking me in told me to “come back with a new ANC president”. When I explained that I was a business guest at the conference and not an ANC delegate, he said that while he would have preferred Cyril Ramaphosa or Tokyo Sexwale for the ANC presidency, as a delegate he would be voting for Zuma, nevertheless, in order to avoid a situation where South Africa ended up with “a president for life”.

Clearly, then, the ANC - as well as the country - has learnt well the lessons taught to us by many other countries on the continent: that is, presidents of countries and parties must come and go, and not become a permanent feature on the political landscape.

My view, clearly shared by the majority in the ANC, is that Mbeki was wrong and ill advised to stand for a third term as ANC president. And once he had stood, he was wrong and ill advised to remain in the contest until the very end, thus suffering the kind of humiliating defeat - almost a third of ANC voters rejected him - that he suffered. Some of us would have preferred to remember him for the many things that he has done for the country, and not for his humiliating rejection by his own organization.

Clearly, Mbeki had no confidence either in Zuma or in any ANC leader, and considered himself indispensable. His intention was to continue to rule the country by remote control from Luthuli House, with whoever he would have chosen to run the country taking instructions from him. After all, as president of the ruling party, for which the majority of South Africans would have voted, he would have been in a far stronger position than the president of the country whom he would have deployed in that position. Such a situation would have not been good for the country (it caused chaos in Namibia and Malawi). This is why the ANC members had pronounced, at their National Policy Conference, that they would “prefer” a situation where the president of the organization is also president of the country.

The lame excuse repeatedly given by Mbeki, that he was merely responding to the wishes of those who had nominated him, did not wash with me. The fact that he was nominated by some people in the Eastern Cape did not mean that he had to accept the nomination.

Surely, the man can say “No, thank you,” just as Cosatu’s Zwelinzima Vavi did when he was nominated for the National Executive Committee? I waited in vain to hear this question posed to him by the media; to my bitter surprise, this most relevant of questions was never posed.

Had Mbeki retained the ANC presidency, most likely some of his supporters would be heard, late next year or early in 2009, suggesting an amendment of the country’s Constitution so that Mbeki would serve a third term as the country’s president. How would he respond, then, to such calls from his misguided supporters? Would he agree to that because “the people” want him and he can’t disappoint them?

There is a lot wrong with that kind of logic. There is absolutely nothing that says because you have been asked to do something, then you have to do it. If that were the case, clearly that chop-logic would suggest that whoever is approached by a suitor would have to agree to a relationship with that person because, after all, “the suitor propositioned/wanted me and I could not say no.” Surely, better logic is expected of those considered to be intellectuals.

The third message sent by the ANC delegates to the country is that, however highly the institution thinks of itself, the Fourth Estate has no influence in delegates’ voting patterns. Over a period of about two-and-a-half years, Zuma has been presented in the media as a joke and a bumbling idiot, with much made of the fact that he is not a Sussex University-educated intellectual. Despite his apology to the country (in fact, the mere ability to own up to some wrongs and apologise is a tremendous commendation) following his trial - and subsequent acquittal - for alleged rape, Zuma has continued to be lampooned in the media, repeatedly cartooned with a shower over his head. With the exception of inputs from Aubrey Matshiqi, Steven Friedman, Siphos Seepe and Dr Xolela Mangcu as independent political analysts, and reporting from Business-Day’s Karima Brown and Vukani Mde as well as Independent Newspapers’s Jeremy Gordon, much of the reporting and commentary in the run-up to the ANC conference has been biased against Zuma. Indeed, some publications, like *The Star*, called on ANC delegates to reject Zuma and vote for Mbeki. Yet, none of that made a difference. In fact, together with the bluster from various Cabinet Ministers and other people in Government following the ANC Women’s League’s narrow decision in favour of Jacob Zuma, this worked in Zuma’s favour. After all, the instinctive human reaction is to reject a bulldog and to rally around the underdog. That is among the things that happened in Limpopo: ANC delegates refused to be dictated to by the supposedly all-knowing elite. People read newspapers, listen to radio and watch TV in order to get reliable, unbiased information so that they can make up their own minds, not in order to be dictated to or to get the gospel according to this or that media institution.

The fourth message from Polokwane is that democracy means the will of the people, and not the will of the elite. However much some detested the decision by a narrow majority of the ANC Women's League to come out in favour of Zuma for the ANC presidency, the fact remains that that had been the outcome of a democratic process. The people who had attended the ANCWL nominating meeting had soberly applied their minds to the situation and voted in the way they had done. To have insults and abuse heaped on such people, with the unseemly and undignified spectacle of people in Mbeki's Cabinet gleefully joining in such insults, revealed a very worrying interpretation and understanding of democracy.

When are democratic decisions accepted – only when you agree with the outcome? That sets a very dangerous precedent. Think back to 1994, if you will. What would have happened to this country if the then National Party, which was in charge of the levers of power, had refused to accept the outcome of those founding democratic elections? Think back, too, to 2004. What would have happened in KwaZulu-Natal if the Inkatha Freedom Party had refused to concede defeat to the ANC in that province?

Clearly, Mbeki's Cabinet supporters had been roused to action not by the fact that the ANCWL had not nominated a woman for the ANC presidency; rather, they were moved to action by the fact that the ANCWL had nominated Zuma, and not their hero at the Union Buildings. In desperation, even Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang felt moved to condemn the nomination – as if there is still somebody in the country who takes seriously anything she says.

This anti-democratic practice, and the concomitant abuse of state resources (SABC, for instance) as well as the planting of damaging rumours about Zuma, worked against Mbeki in the end. ANC delegates saw through it all; it strengthened their resolve to vote for Zuma and bring an end to the unedifying spectacle.

At the ANC conference itself in Polokwane, many in the Mbeki camp and the media repeatedly presented Zuma's vocal supporters as undisciplined. Why? Just because they had strongly signalled their lack of confidence in the Mbeki camp by booing them or singing when those in that camp spoke. Sure, this was embarrassing, but it was an expression of freedom of speech and signalled the deep-seated anger with Mbeki and those close to him. When people boo the Prime Minister and shout at him in the British Parliament, the oldest one in the world, they are seen as exercising their freedom of speech to indicate disagreement or disapproval, and they are not said to be undisciplined.

Clearly, times have changed and many things have happened, thus leading to the practices to which the organization is unaccustomed or with which it is

uncomfortable. It is important for the organization to acknowledge the new reality and to seek to harness – rather than reject - it.

In conclusion, two thoughts. His failings and weaknesses notwithstanding, Mbeki has done a lot for the country. It is important that we acknowledge that. It is for this reason that some of us would have preferred to remember him fondly. It is most unfortunate, therefore, that following his unwise decision to stand for re-election and to stay in the race until the end, he will be remembered for years to come as the president who wanted to hold on to power and ended up humiliated and rejected on the conference floor by his own organization. That is very unfortunate and very sad.

Secondly, the country can – and should – draw a lot of encouragement from what has happened in the ANC in Limpopo and in the lead-up to Limpopo. Its essence is this: that internal democracy in the ANC is alive and well. This is something to be celebrated, especially since there is no opposition party worthy of the name in South Africa. This means that real opposition exists within the ANC itself.

This is vitally important, because it means that ANC members have regained their voices and will never again keep quiet when they see things going wrong. It means, simply, that no other ANC president will ever be as powerful – and feared – as Mbeki was. It means that ANC members will stand ready to reject the new leadership at the next conference, should it also develop imperious tendencies. That is fundamentally in the country's best interests.

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