

The ANC's constitutional guidelines

# Democracy, Socialism, and the future



## DARYL GLASER looks at some of the issues raised by the African National Congress's draft constitutional guidelines for a future South Africa

The ANC's recently-released draft constitutional guidelines involve the first significant elaboration of the Freedom Charter since its adoption in 1955.

But it is difficult to judge whether the guidelines are a coherent blueprint for a future society, or a tactical intervention to broaden the ANC's base, widen its appeal and accelerate progress towards a negotiated settlement.

In the broad opposition camp, there will be a variety of responses to the draft guidelines. Two are already predictable:

\*liberals will welcome the guidelines as an affirmation of the centrality of liberal-democratic

principles and as a programme involving pragmatic economic change; and

\*the far left will dismiss them as 'bourgeois' and 'reformist', proof of the absence of genuine socialist commitment in the congress movement, and as an omen of a neo-colonial sellout to capital and its allies.

Neither response is adequate, especially for those concerned with a democratic socialist future for South Africa.

The ANC guidelines represent, in several respects, a welcome and important advance over the Freedom Charter. Some critics have dismissed the Charter as a 'bourgeois' set of demands. Yet some of the Charter's

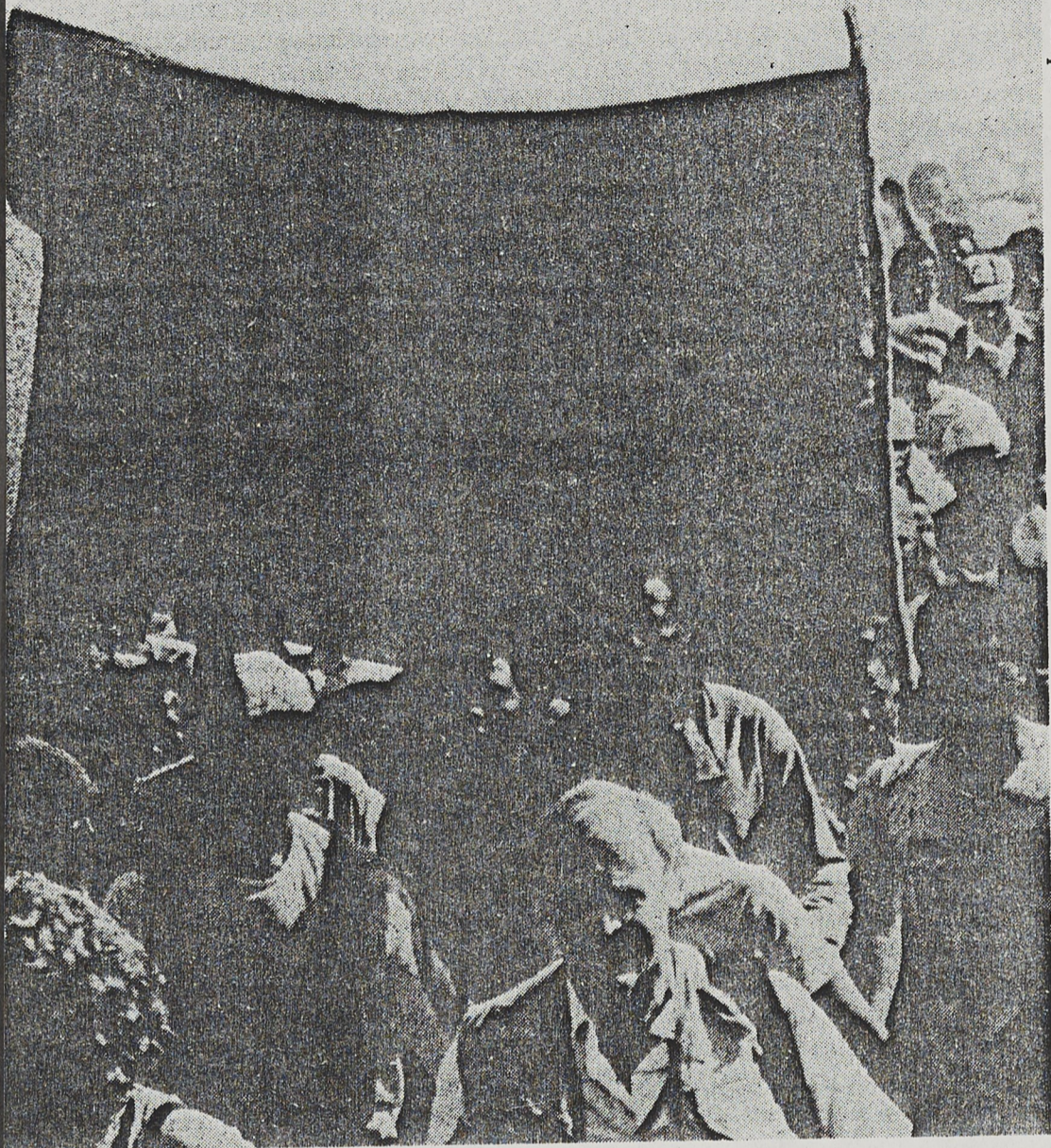
central deficiencies have been in the area of basic democratic rights which, far from being bourgeois, are crucial to the democratic self-expression of the proletariat. These include the right to form trade unions independent of the state and ruling party, and the right to strike in defence of union demands.

They also include the right of all people - including workers - to associate politically and form and vote for parties of their choice. And they include the right to free expression and criticism subject only to restrictions on racism and tribalism. These democratic rights, never explicitly affirmed in the Freedom Charter, are defended in the ANC document:

This is a positive development. For socialism can never be demo-

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Sandy Smit - Afrapix



cratic without genuine political pluralism and a guarantee of civil liberties. In their absence it becomes impossible to counter this tendency towards bureaucratic centralism and political authoritarianism that has existed in countries following socialist paths of development.

There can also be no other way of establishing a genuinely representative political system, based on popular consent, and able to accommodate the divergent interests that are certain to continue, even amongst progressive social sectors, in societies building socialism.

Political pluralism and civil liberties are also crucial to 'direct' or 'participatory' democracy. Without free association and expression, even mass-based and grassroots political organs lose their democratic character. They become parochial, blandly consensual, and objects of manipulation by self-appointed and

unchallenged elites.

These political rights are, moreover, a matter of life and death for the independent and far left which, without their protection, stand to be easily isolated and crushed under a post-revolutionary dispensation. Those on the far left who today dismiss the constitutional guidelines as populist may in future invoke its clauses in their own defence. These rights are therefore critical to the maintenance of a flourishing and diverse socialist political culture.

The ANC's constitutional guidelines are especially welcome when seen against the authoritarian record of orthodox communism and nationalism in the third world, as well as in the USSR and Eastern Europe. South African opposition politics has seen more than its fair share of political intolerance, internecine war between rival tendencies and attempts to achieve political

monopolies, whether in local township precincts or national politics.

There has, until now, been little ground for optimism about the prospects for political democracy in a future South Africa. Provided that the ANC guidelines are more than a tactical ruse designed to achieve short-term objectives, they do encourage that hope.

One of the central tasks for independent and far-left groupings is to ensure that the ANC is held to the democratic clauses of its own constitutional guidelines, both now and in the future.

The economic programme offered is more difficult to assess. There are those on the far left who will cry foul at the slightest mention of 'mixed economy' or preserving a 'private sector', viewing any reference to them as proof of the ANC's abandonment of socialist goals and its descent into social democracy.

However, all but the most adventurist will admit that a substantial transitional period of 'mixed economy' is unavoidable in South Africa.

The economic and political consequences of a hastily-conceived programme of nationalisation are certain to be disastrous: breakdown of functioning economic structures; the premature, gratuitous alienation of strategically or numerically significant social sectors; and an inevitable slide into bureaucratic, centralised and statist patterns of economic management.

There is currently a world-wide debate over the 'economics of feasible socialism' amongst radical economists, taking place against a background of wide-ranging economic restructuring in virtually every country building socialism.

The overwhelming thrust is towards some variant of 'market socialism', usually based on different systems of ownership including - alongside the state sector - private sectors based on family and co-operative enterprises.

Without attempting any assessment of the necessity or desirability of market socialism, it seems intellectually and politically dogmatic to rule out in advance the possibility of mixed forms of ownership.

Finally, the term 'market socialism' is fraught with ambiguity. It

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The SACP's Joe Slovo



Chris Hani of the ANC



The ANC's Joe Modise



ANC President Oliver Tambo

can include anything from a British-style capitalist welfare state to the systems operative in China or Poland. In itself the reference to mixed economy in the ANC guidelines means little, and is far less 'revealing' than the ANC's left critics claim.

Nonetheless, it is disappointing that the guidelines fail to hold out a more radical vision of South Africa's longer-term economic future.

While mixed forms of ownership may not be incompatible with socialism, the longer-term economic and political entrenchment of a monopoly capitalist sector might be. On this issue, the Freedom Charter is clearer than the draft guidelines. The partly decentralised economic management implicit in the ANC's new economic clauses, may, in important sectors, be preferable to central planning.

But the guidelines make no mention of the need for decentralisation to be accompanied by an extension of worker self-management and participation at the enterprise level. Here too the Charter, with its call for 'democratic organs of self-government' offers, if anything, a more convincing democratic vision.

While the trade union rights and workers' charter proposed in the constitutional guidelines are of critical importance, they may, in the absence of a significant degree of democratic economic management, result in the confinement of working-class organisations to a purely defensive role.

And while democratic socialism must be rooted in popular consent and seek the support of more than just the working class, it is a rather blandly populist conception of socialism which fails to define any kind of leading or hegemonic rôle for the working class.

**T**he constitutional guidelines fail even to raise some of the other classic questions of socialist transition: the mental/manual division of labour, the divide between town and countryside, patriarchy and the 'agrarian question', to mention a few.

The adoption of highly desirable democratic features - a free press, independent unions, a plurality of political parties - is not therefore accompanied by serious consideration of socialism in any advanced sense.

The exclusion of these questions from the constitutional guidelines will be defended by some as tactically necessary to avoid alienating certain constituencies; alternatively as reflecting a desire not to spell out a too-detailed blueprint and thereby pre-empt future democratic discussion.

But there are other - and more worrying - possibilities. One is that socialism has been abandoned as a serious goal for the foreseeable future, and displaced from the agenda of contemporary political discussion and mobilisation. That would run counter to the insistent demands for socialist politics coming from organised workers and black youth inside South Africa.

Another possibility is equally worrying: that the ANC document is merely a statement about the content of a 'national-democratic stage' of revolution, and that the democratic clauses contained in it have no particular relevance for the 'stage' of transition to socialism. That would allow for a transition to socialism under the leadership of a single entrenched ruling party fused with the state and ruling through totalitarian methods: a 'second stage' bereft of all the positive democratic features - political pluralism and civil liberties - that the ANC constitutional guidelines affirm.

This demonstrates the central danger of any constitutional document cast within the logic of two-stage theory. Not (as the far left fears) that it renders inevitable a reformist, 'neo-colonial' outcome. That is a possibility, but not inevitable.

The real danger of 'stagism' is that it might offer a choice of nightmares: *either* some more-or-less redistributive capitalist regime of 'national democracy', *or* a transition to 'socialism' based on bureaucratic dictatorship along the lines of Eastern Europe.

A long-term vision of democratic socialism must involve a commitment to empowering the working class and ending the rule of capital, while at the same time recognising that the freedoms of expression and association the ANC guidelines proclaim are central to socialism itself.

It remains to be seen whether the new constitutional guidelines mark a shift towards that kind of politics.