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South African exile and its impact on the new elite of the ANC

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I first came across South African exiles as a student in the GDR in the 1960s. Later they were continuous partners in my diplomatic and solidarity work, be it in Lusaka in the 1970s, at the United Nations in New York, at various international conferences and meetings, and again in Harare in the 1980s. More recently I found these former exiles involved in changing their home country. In the course of these decades I have seen many of them growing up, maturing and changing, developing their personal profile. And I asked myself, what role did those years and decades in exile play in the life of these people? That initiated my research on the South African exile, resulting in a book, published in 2004 in Germany.

While liberation struggle and decolonisation have been one of the main features of international developments in the second half of 20th century, political exile has been another important feature. In South African history enforced exile of anti-Apartheid activists during the period from 1960 to 1990 has had a decisive impact on the development of the liberation struggle. It was during those years that the ANC, weakened and fragmented by the onslaught of the Apartheid regime in the early 1960s, became the politically dominant and internationally recognised force of the South African liberation struggle. There is good reason to ask the question about the impact of exile and exile experience on the shaping of the new political elite. Here I will have to limit myself to South African exile experience as such. I will not be able to reflect on various organisations, its relationship and competition. With the gradual development of the liberation struggle specific focus will be given to the ANC.

The exile – places and environment

South African exile has spread worldwide. I focussed my research on exile in the UK, specifically London, and in the African Frontline states. London was important in the field of politics, diplomacy, propaganda and communications as well as for the underground struggle. It served as a kind of second headquarters and a think-tank for the ANC. It was convenient as a place of contact, a centre of political cohesion and organisation. The big South African exile community there had strong links with South Africa. The experience in the Frontline states on the other hand was of interest because of post-colonial developments and the major role of human relationship there. Within the ANC London was perceived with ambivalence because

of various political and ideological influences. It was here, that political discussion within the ANC was most active, including criticism and dissent. But the organisation also received important political and ideological input.

At an early stage the exile headquarters of the ANC had been established in Tanzania and later being moved to Zambia. Frontline states became more and more important for transit and communication and for the training of cadres. With the years political gravity moved from London to Lusaka. Exile in those newly independent states gave South Africans the chance to experience the spirit of the “free Africa” as well as the challenges and problems of post-colonial developments. White South Africans considered their exile experiences in the Frontline states as being of specific importance, realising how “African” they were. After Soweto an increasing number of South African refugees had to be looked after, most of them in neighbouring countries. These countries have also been very much in the focus of the destabilisation policy of the Apartheid regime.

The exile environment, political culture, social engagement and other experiences had a noticeable impact. But the thesis that exiles are deeply influenced by the socio-economic conditions and policies of their host countries cannot be confirmed. Exiles were usually critical of their host countries. In Europe they didn't like the rather impersonal relationships and the lack of warmth between people. South Africans came from a background of communal support and close collaboration. Obviously there was a clash of various traditions, cultural and ideological influences like that of hierarchical African structures, Eastern centralism, Western pluralism and liberalism.

ANC: the organization in exile

After serious blows in the early 1960s the ANC managed not only to re-establish itself, but also to use exile for creating structures and programmes as well as to train its cadres. This as well as a growing support within South Africa and the international solidarity allowed the ANC to establish itself as the leading force in the national liberation struggle. Solidarity support for refugees, the offer and distribution of scholarships also strengthened its position. Professional, political and military training of cadres became an important instrument of strength of the ANC in exile.

Structures of the political exile played a substantial role to overcome hardships and losses of the individual exiles. South African identity helped to forge a community. The ANC successfully integrated and activated refugees by offering itself as the “family” and as a broad

church for South Africans abroad. This policy included elements of influence and of control, varying in different places of exile. It was not only here that the ANC managed to activate substantial academic resources for the liberation struggle. Strategic analytical and policy papers originated from London, Maputo and Lusaka. South African exiles contributed to professional and political debates in their host countries and engaged in post-colonial developments in African countries.

As a “government in waiting” the ANC was finally able to secure international recognition and support. At a later stage ANC exile structures, which have been dubbed structures of a "state in exile" by observers, became important for structural changes in the post-Apartheid South Africa. Thus roots of politics of the ANC-led South African government can be traced back to exile ideas and experiences.

In exile the ANC leadership managed to secure the unity of the organization despite continuous ideological as well as strategic and tactical quarrels. Factionalism was a problem, but that was not only typical for the South African exile. There were the day-to-day problems of exile life, social and physical insecurity, the permanent danger of attacks by the regime. The ANC was able to avoid or managed to handle serious crises, partly because conflicting issues were set aside or postponed. But the ANC also had to establish commissions to investigate faults and misdoings within its own ranks. Exiles refer to experiences of undemocratic culture, centralism and authoritarian behaviour, which – according to the mainstream – have been superimposed by the integrative role of the ANC. Loyalty to the ANC became a crucial factor brought back home as an exile heritage.

Biographies of exile

In the course of my research I focused a biographical study on the impact of exile and exile experience. Biographies from different population groups, generations and hierarchical structures were analyzed in their complexity from their social and family background, from youth experiences in South Africa through exile conditions, experiences and effects, to the return to South Africa and subsequent reorientation. Most exiles I interviewed considered exile a dominant feature, some of them even the most important experience in their life.

History has proved that - contrary to the fears of many who went into enforced exile - exile did not mean political extinction. The opposite could be the case. It was no surprise that – returning from exile - quite a number of new faces appeared in the leadership of the ANC beside the Tambos, Nzos etc.

Exile conditions included opportunities, but also hardships and losses. Education, training, socio-cultural socialization, political involvement, experiences and observations in the respective host countries as well as international interaction with other peoples, cultures and ideas were of great advantage and have been instrumental for shaping ANC leadership personalities in prolonged exile. Very often exile brought South Africans together in a way they hadn't experienced back home. But there were also the hardships and losses like the loss of communal roots which people had identified with, the loss of family. Exile was very often isolation, it was a struggle of survival.

Processes of political socialization in exile proved to be complex. Biographies of exiles and their personal development have been shaped by education and training, political integration and tasks within the ANC, by discipline and structures of exile, by experiences and cosmopolitanism. Exile conditions differed substantially from place to place. In London South Africans were able to integrate into British society and could become economically self-sufficient, looking after themselves, whereas in the Frontline states most exiles depended on support from or through the ANC.

Diverse impacts of Exil

In most cases exile had a decisive impact on the professional and political as well as personal development and shaping of exiles. Exile qualifications and experiences explain primarily careers and positions of former exiles in today's South Africa without underestimating personal connections, friendships and networks. The totality of different exile experiences seems to be important criteria for a political career in the new South Africa. It was the combination of international exposure world wide as well as the regional African context of the struggle against Apartheid.

The evaluation of exile is very ambivalent. Positive aspects by and large seem to prevail. Very important was the exposure of people who sometimes came from rather remote areas, they had the opportunity to interact with people from different cultures and traditions and could thus broaden their horizons. Positive was also the experience of being part of an international campaign against Apartheid, an experience of international solidarity. Political tolerance was another new experience for some. Many exiles underline how beneficial education was for them, living in different cultures, widening the horizon, learn to live with different peoples from different parts of the world. Many exiles had the advantage to be able to acquire skills they hadn't been able to obtain inside SA, especially those who were black and who had grown up under Bantu education.

But there was also the other side. Many exiles considered it a major disadvantage to miss the active involvement in the struggle inside the country, to have been removed from the heart of the struggle. Many South Africans abroad were separated and isolated. People got demoralised where there was a lack of contacts with other South Africans. Isolation was a major problem. Political exile was often overshadowed by the permanent danger of threats and attacks. Many exiles had traumatic experiences of that kind. There have been cases where South Africans couldn't cope with exile, where it deformed or destroyed their personalities. Negative experiences resulting from deep psychological impacts of exile have been neglected or marginalised partly due to a mentality of victory in the new South Africa.

Difficult conditions and the clandestine nature of the struggle created a fertile ground for undemocratic, centralistic and authoritarian tendencies. Some colleagues have been focussing their research on these aspects. A comparative analysis on the impact of the different conditions of the struggle inside the country and in exile on the development of the political culture as well as on personalities might offer interesting conclusions.

Exile was of specific importance for women. Abdul Minty underlined the importance of the gender issue in exile: *"All of us from South Africa from all racial groups come from societies which are very insensitive on the rights of women. Here the experiences in the Nordic countries and some other European countries had a decisive influence."* Obviously it took some time and hard work of women activists to overcome traditional hurdles, specifically in male-dominated sections like MK. Many female leaders in the new South Africa originate from the various exile generations.

Exile and re-orientation in a changing world

South African liberation struggle was influenced by international developments from the anti-colonial independence struggle in Asia and Africa to world-wide globalisation. International solidarity was most important, but there was also the conflict between Moscow and Beijing which left its marks. The Cold War had an enormous impact. The hostile attitude of Western governments on the one hand and the massive support the ANC received from the socialist countries on the other hand did make an impression. There was a close relationship with the socialist countries and the ANC took sides on international issues. The collapse of socialist developments in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe did, therefore, come as a deep shock.

A change of generations took place within the ANC leadership with new cadres coming in many of whom obtained their political, professional and also personal profile in exile. When South African exiles returned home in the early 1990s observers raised the question about their future role in the composition and policy of the “re-united” ANC. Would exiles be able to stand their ground against the “dynastic power” of the “internals”? The expected show-down did not occur.

Contrary to expectations of many observers the exile-ANC managed its return to South Africa and the restructuring of its organisation without any major turmoil. Besides the massive support of their followers inside the country, exile structures, trained and experienced as well as loyal cadres, academic/professional input and international experiences helped the ANC to quickly assume political leadership in the new South Africa. The ANC had the prevailing image of a liberating force waging an armed struggle. Exiles had the advantage of education, training, political, structural and international experience. Hierarchical structures, discipline and efficiency of exile proved to be significant. Experiences at differing places were valuable, in the 1980s the Frontline states with the headquarters in Lusaka and with MK structures definitely played a significant role.

Back in South Africa former exiles dominated the leadership of the ANC in the 1990s. Out of 60 to 70 NEC members between 34 and 38 were former exiles, even more in the NWC (11 to 16 out of the 19 to 24 members). Looking at election results at ANC conferences, in those years exiles have been extremely popular. A substantial number of cabinet members in the new South African government between 1994 and 2004 had received political, military or professional training in exile.

Many former exiles had gained bureaucratic experience in the well-structured apparatus of the exile-ANC which enabled them to take up crucial positions in the higher echelons of post-Apartheid South Africa. Some exiles of the early generations, having devoted their whole life to the struggle, did however, not find a fitting place. More recently in South Africa exile experience as such did not play that role any longer, but even today it still is considered a point of reference. Exile has offered a number of important experiences that are today reflected in the South African constitution as well as in foreign policy, in political culture, in professionalism, international contacts etc. But with new generations emerging time will eventually reduce exile to an object of historical research.