

# Ex-Kremlin official tells of SACP, ANC relationship

## Analysis

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A FORMER Kremlin official tells an interesting story of his encounter with two prominent exiled South African political leaders in the late '80s just before the unbanning of the liberation movements.

Chris Hani, then a powerful figure within the banned South African Communist Party, was on holiday with his family in Moscow when he encountered the official with whom he was well acquainted. Asked by the Kremlin official just how long he thought they would remain outside South Africa as exiles fighting for liberation, Hani replied that perhaps another 10 years.

A few days later in Moscow still, the same official met Thabo Mbeki – then a close confidant of ANC president Oliver Tambo – and asked him the same question. Mbeki responded that he thought an unbanning of liberation movements in South Africa would perhaps happen in a year or two.

History, of course, proved Mbeki right and he went on to become the second democratically elected president of South Africa. Had the lethal shot of a right-wing lunatic not ended Hani's life in 1993, we would have been witness to how his political fortunes would have turned after democracy.

This analogy paints a stark picture of how the South African Communist Party, despite being in alliance with ANC all these years, has often been treated as the unwanted stepchild. History shows that as far back as 1987 Mbeki was involved in clandestine talks with representatives of the apartheid regime about a possible unbanning of the liberation movements and how a new South Africa would take shape.

There are many schools of thought about how many people within the ANC and its alliance partners were actually privy to these talks, but if the Kremlin official's version of the two encounters is to be believed, the leadership of the Communist Party was kept largely in the dark.

The South African Communist Party has an interesting history. It traces back to 1921 when white blue collar workers dominated the organised labour movement and, inspired by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, sought to create a vehicle that would change the political landscape at the time. Realising that such a movement needed to be broader than white blue collar workers if it was to succeed



**REMEMBERED:** Supporters of the SACP wearing T-shirts of the late anti-apartheid activist Chris Hani would have been witness to how his political fortunes turned after democracy. PICTURE UP

in effecting political change, the Communist Party of South Africa, as it was known then, sought to fraternise with black liberation movements.

The ANC, then a party of the educated urbanised blacks, rejected these overtures in the 1930s, suspicious of communism and its aims. But this changed in the 1950s and the parties developed a working relationship when apartheid, in all its evil form, started taking shape. The SACP was the first to be banned by the National Party government, followed by other liberation movements.

In exile, this relationship continued and many communists held cross-party membership, even though their identities were often kept under wraps for fear of reprisals.

When the liberation movements came back to reorganise in South Africa after 1990, there was a push for the SACP to disband and throw its lot in with the ANC. Those advocating for this position were eventually defeated, with the Communist Party keeping its identity and ideology but forming part of the strategic alliance with the ANC, labour federation Cosatu and

civic organisation Sanco to collectively champion the struggle for freedom and the advancement of the National Democratic Revolution.

President Nelson Mandela embraced the communists, welcoming them in his Cabinet and keeping a close working relationship with their leaders in his government.

The relationship between the communists and the ANC, however, deteriorated under president Thabo Mbeki. Leaders who had made his Cabinet on the communist ticket such as Charles Ngakala, Sydney Mufamadi and Alec Erwin were co-opted into Mbeki's inner circle, much to the chagrin of the Communist Party faithful.

They were eventually removed from its structures and new leaders emerged. It is these leaders, most especially general secretary Blade Nzimande, who would play a pivotal role in the eventual ousting of Mbeki in Polokwane and later as president of the country.

In the period after 2009, the honeymoon period between the SACP and its preferred ANC leader, President Jacob Zuma, was extremely rocky. Nzimande himself, his deputy

Jeremy Cronin and former Young Communist leader Buti Manamela were rewarded with positions in the Zuma executive. But even at the height of this relationship, an air of mistrust between the communists and the nationalists in the ANC always hung in the air.

This year things have come to a head. The relationship with Zuma has plummeted and the Communist Party is on another mission to oust a sitting president of the country. Solly Mapaila, second deputy to Nzimande, has been the most vocal on this, but the SACP leader and Higher Education Minister has of late entered the fray.

Speaking at the Curries Fountain sports ground in Durban at an event celebrating the life of Hani, Nzimande reiterated the call made by his organisation's politburo that Zuma must step down as president of the country.

"Our danger facing us is the weakening of our movement because of factionalism and the alliance is unable to cohere and to lead. It is because of some of these things that SACP and Cosatu have reached ... the very decision that the president must step down as part of

finding the solution. It is not a nice thing, but it is necessary to say it."

The question that begs an answer, however, is if the SACP and its leaders hold such strong views on Zuma, why are they serving in his Cabinet at his behest? Why did they not resign en masse as they had threatened to if Zuma fired Pravin Gordhan as finance minister? Secondly, if the SACP feels that factional fighting in the ANC is placing the alliance at risk of collapse, why does it not contest elections on its own?

The answer varies depending on the political ideology of those you speak to. Those who have no regard for the SACP say it won't contest elections on its own for fear that it might only attract 4% or 5% of the vote and be relegated to opposition obscurity in Parliament with a handful of seats.

Some have felt very strongly that the recent posture of the SACP, to the extent of marching with those that carry an insidious laced narrative of regime change, is a move towards weakening the ANC in the run up to it contesting elections in 2019.

This, if true, is based on the speculation of the ANC moving towards losing power in the forthcoming elections. The SACP seems to be planning its exit from the alliance, not in defence of our revolutionary gains but in an attempt to guard at whatever cost its place at the table.

Those communists argue, however, that the SACP has always been the intellectual leaders of the strategic alliance and that the party just needs to rescue the ANC from one of the factions in order to resume its role of providing intellectual leadership.

Whatever happens to the alliance and the SACP's future in it, it is worth noting that a segment of the ANC leadership – even back in exile and political wilderness – has always mistrusted the SACP. Nzimande and company need to decide what the best strategy is for their organisation and their own political aspirations. To what end does it serve their purpose to continue shouting at Zuma, imploring him to resign, while attending fortnightly Cabinet meetings with him?

That cannot be good for the ANC, the SACP or the country at large.

It is time the SACP took that dreaded step. Either stay in an alliance with the ANC and respect its democratic centralism and the right to choose its own leaders, or contest elections on their own and make a play for state power.

They cannot have it both ways and yet we who say this are not "captured".

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