

Renew or Perish

by Crystal Orderson



As the African National Congress, ANC celebrated its 113th anniversary in Cape Town, President Cyril Ramaphosa used the moment to critically reflect on the politically bruising election that took place in May last year, in which the ANC lost its majority. He also urged party faithful that the movement must either rejuvenate itself or perish.

CAPE TOWN - 2024 was a bruising political year for Africa's oldest liberation movement, the 113-year-old African National Congress. It dropped its electoral support to a shocking 40%, a loss of 17% compared to the 57% it received in 2019. In Cape Town and the Western Cape, the ANC only received 19.5% of the vote in the May election, down from 28.6% in 2019.

Despite these bleak numbers, the ANC held its anniversary celebrations in Cape Town. The much-anticipated January 8th statement, as it's known, was delivered against the background of an ANC that is no longer the dominant party and is now co-governing with the DA and nine other parties, including the IFP and others, in a government of national unity called GNU.

The ANC celebrated its 113th birthday at the Mandela Park stadium in Khayelitsha, the sprawling township on the outskirts of one of Africa's most popular holiday destinations, Cape Town. The stadium's location contrasts sharply with the multi-million-dollar homes just a few kilometers away in a city that the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) has controlled for nearly two decades. The party's national executive committee members and several cabinet ministers spent the week in the City crisscrossing areas on the Cape Flats like Phillipi, Khayelitsha, and Delft, but opted not to go to the other areas, like Hanover Park, Heideveld, or even Mitchells Plain, where unemployment and gang violence are ravaging communities.

The ANC stated that they focussed on areas where they have garnered support and engage with the grassroots to understand their lived realities. Communities informed the senior ANC leaders about the persistent issues of unemployment and housing. It seemed as though the party had given up on garnering any additional support and had given up on making any further inroads on the Cape Flats.



A fast moving train

Mandela park stadium's capacity was limited to 2000 seats, despite its potential to hold up to 20,000 people. This is significantly smaller than the Cape Town stadium in, where the ANC celebrated its 103rd anniversary 10 years ago, drawing in over 60,000 attendees. The ANC NEC member Lindiwe Zulu, reflecting on the 113th anniversary, was frank and said the Jan 8th statement is the first where the party had lost voters and allowed for some self-reflection. 'The self-reflection is that when we came into power, we had no experience of running a government, and in 1994, Black people had never been given an opportunity to govern,' she said.

'We have learned lessons in governing, and now it's about what the ANC needs to do in government and as the leading party. Ramaphosa, she added, is providing members with a clear roadmap for action. 'It's a moving train and we must do right by the ANC and the people of South Africa.

Indeed, it's a fast-moving train where economic readdress is becoming more urgent by the minute and one does wonder aloud whether the party faithful realize how fast the train is moving and some are already arguing that it crashed.

2025: The year of Renewal

However, the rank and file of the ANC, primarily older members, braved the hot Cape Town sun to listen to ANC president. Ramaphosa delivered a 30-page speech in over 100 minutes, with the theme:

"The year of renewal to make the ANC a more effective instrument of the people to achieve the vision of the freedom charter —The People Shall Govern! The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!" Ramaphosa outlined six priority actions and specific tasks for the upcoming year.

Central to his message was the commitment to transform the ANC into a more effective instrument for the people it represents, emphasising accountability and responsiveness. With the focus areas being:

1. Decisive and visible action to renew the ANC;
2. Fix local government and ensure water and energy security;
3. Speed up inclusive economic growth to create jobs;
4. Strengthen the fight against crime and corruption and build safe communities;
5. Build a South Africa that belongs to all through a National Dialogue;
6. Build a better Africa and a better world.

By outlining six priority actions and tasks, Ramaphosa not only addressed the pressing challenges but also trying to instil a sense of hope for revitalisation within the party. This strategic focus on renewal reflected a desire to reconnect with citizens and reinvigorate trust in leadership, positioning the ANC to better serve its constituents in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.



Ramaphosa asserted that the ANC must "renew or perish" and that the May election provided the party with a crucial lesson: Take people for granted, and they won't vote for you.

'To renew and rebuild the ANC so that it can provide decisive and ethical leadership in the resolution of our country's problems and the realisation of the vision of the Freedom Charter.' Corruption and incompetent cabinet ministers have plagued the party, with little or no accountability.

Government of National Unity: A tactical initiative

However, Ramaphosa added that the ANC still leads and has the majority of ministers in the cabinet. He added that state power will always be in the hands of the ANC but that the May election was a 'strategic setback' and described the GNU as a 'tactical initiative.' The party now shares power with several political parties and can no longer make crucial decision on its own, THE GNU like any new marriage is still defining the parameters and no surprise there's been some teething problems.

'Our own experience and the experiences of many revolutionary movements show that there are moments where conditions require that you work with your opponents to secure space for the revolution to regain momentum. To pursue the National Democratic Revolution effectively, the democratic movement needs to have a decisive influence over the state and a clear mandate to govern in pursuit of fundamental change'.

Ramaphosa further pointed out that without state power, the NDR will not succeed, and the party has to improve our economy's ability to create wealth and employment for all.

The ANC has never been short of identifying the problems and knows what to do, yet it doesn't. What will 2025 mean for the ANC now that they part of the GNU? It means compromise and that as our democracy matures, the ANC may lose further electoral support in the next election in 2029. Ramaphosa and his executive knows that unemployment and inequality remains our biggest challenge.

Ramaphosa also took a thinly veiled swipe and new political parties and without mentions Jacob Zuma's Umkhonto we Sizwe party said: 'Counter-revolutionary forces and state capture groups are still trying to break the ANC' this pointing to several splinter groups that have attempted to form new parties as 'merely aiming for access to state power and Ramaphosa emphasised that 'they remain weak and will never defeat the ANC. Zuma's 6 months old MKP won 14.6% of the national vote but is not part of the GNU.

With all these political issues, Ramaphosa will have to navigate being head of government and also as leader of the ANC navigate the changing political terrain, including the growing dissent and anger in communities amid high unemployment and crime rates.

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Cosatu's Zingisi Losi who also addressed the gathering summarised the realities: 'Whilst we celebrate our victories, we cannot rest when gangs are rampant in Manenberg and Tafelsig, schools are overcrowded in Crossroads and Eastridge, filth is overflowing on the streets of Mfuleni and Phillipi. We dare not rest when 4 out of 10 South Africans cannot find work and we remain the world's most unequal society.'

She said that the ANC and its Alliance partners including Cosatu and the SA Communist Party must be 'united, on the ground, with the people, leading government and ensuring it delivers for workers and the poor'. We are confident the ANC is on the path of renewal, that the state is being cleansed and rebuilt, and the economy will turn the corner we hope her words will ring true.

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WEBSITE
IJR.ORG.ZA



EMAIL US
INFO@IJR.ORG.ZA

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