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The History Of The Anc

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The History Of The Anc: A Century of Struggle and Resilience

The African National Congress, widely known as the ANC, stands as one of the most significant liberation movements in modern world history. For more than a century, this organisation has shaped the political and social landscape of South Africa, guiding the nation from the depths of colonial oppression and apartheid to the promise of democracy. Understanding the history of the ANC is not merely an academic exercise; it is a journey through the resilience of a people determined to reclaim their dignity, freedom, and future. This article explores the origins, key milestones, challenges, and enduring legacy of the ANC, offering a comprehensive look at how a movement born from frustration grew into a government of the people.

The Founding of the ANC: A Response to Injustice

The story of the ANC begins in the early 20th century, a time when the rights of black South Africans were systematically stripped away. Following the Anglo-Boer War and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, a series of discriminatory laws were enacted, laying the groundwork for what would become apartheid. It was in this climate of mounting repression that a group of educated African leaders, lawyers, and chiefs came together. On January 8, 1912, in Bloemfontein, they founded the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), which would later be renamed the African National Congress in 1923. The founding meeting was attended by delegates from across the country, representing various ethnic groups, a deliberate effort to create a unified front against racial oppression. The primary goal of the early ANC was not armed struggle but rather peaceful advocacy, petitions, and deputations to the British government, appealing for justice and equal rights.

Early Years: Petitioning for Change

During its first few decades, the ANC operated largely as a constitutional and legalistic organisation. Its leaders believed that reasoned argument and moral persuasion would eventually win the day. Key figures such as John Dube, the first president, and Sol Plaatje, a founding member and gifted writer, worked tirelessly to document the injustices faced by black South Africans. They travelled to London to plead their case before the British Parliament, but their appeals were largely ignored. The 1913 Land Act, which restricted black land ownership to a mere seven percent of the country, was a particularly devastating blow. Despite the ANC’s protests, the Act remained in force, cementing the economic marginalisation of the African majority. These early setbacks taught a crucial lesson: polite petitions alone would never dismantle the structures of white supremacy. However, the ANC’s commitment to unity and peaceful resistance laid a moral foundation that would prove vital in later decades.

The Shift to Mass Action and the Youth League

The 1940s marked a turning point in the history of the ANC. A new generation of activists, impatient with the slow pace of change, began to demand a more confrontational approach. In 1944, the ANC Youth League was formed, with young firebrands like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu at its helm. They argued that the ANC needed to move beyond elite lobbying and embrace mass action, strikes, and civil disobedience.

This ideological shift was influenced by the growing anti-colonial movements across Africa and the global struggle against fascism during World War II. The Youth League’s Programme of Action, adopted in 1949, called for boycotts, strikes, and defiance of unjust laws. This new militancy set the stage for the Defiance Campaign of 1952, a nationwide protest against apartheid laws that saw thousands of volunteers deliberately breaking segregation statutes. The campaign vastly expanded the ANC’s membership and established it as a genuine mass movement.

The Freedom Charter and the Congress Alliance

One of the most defining moments in the history of the ANC occurred in 1955 with the adoption of the Freedom Charter. The ANC, together with allied organisations such as the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People’s Organisation, and the Congress of Democrats, formed the Congress Alliance. Together, they organised the Congress of the People in Kliptown, where nearly three thousand delegates gathered to approve a visionary document. The Freedom Charter boldly declared that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." It demanded a non-racial democracy, equal rights, land reform, and economic justice. The Charter became the ideological compass of the liberation struggle, inspiring generations of activists. In response, the apartheid government arrested 156 leaders, including Nelson Mandela, in what became known as the Treason Trial. Although the trial ended in acquittals, it demonstrated that the state would go to any lengths to crush dissent.

The Turn to Armed Struggle

The Sharpeville Massacre of March 21, 1960, marked another watershed moment in the history of the ANC. On that day, police opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing 69 people. The apartheid government subsequently banned the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress, driving them underground. It became clear that nonviolent resistance alone could not defeat a regime prepared to murder its own citizens. In response, the ANC, in partnership with the South African Communist Party, formed Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), or "Spear of the Nation," in 1961. Nelson Mandela was appointed as its first commander. MK adopted a strategy of sabotage, targeting government installations and infrastructure while avoiding civilian casualties, in an effort to force the regime to negotiate. The launch of the armed struggle marked a profound shift in the ANC’s tactics, though it always maintained that violence was a defensive response to state terror.

Imprisonment and the Toll of Repression

The early 1960s were devastating for the ANC leadership. In 1962, Nelson Mandela was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. The following year, the police raided the ANC’s underground headquarters at Rivonia, arresting key members of the high command. The Rivonia Trial became a global cause célèbre, with Mandela delivering his iconic speech from the dock, declaring that he was prepared to die for the ideal of a free and democratic society. He and his comrades were sentenced to life in prison, spending the next 27 years on Robben Island. Meanwhile, Oliver Tambo, who had escaped into exile, rebuilt the ANC’s international network. From bases in Tanzania, Zambia, and London, the ANC established diplomatic missions, secured support from the United Nations, and mobilised solidarity movements across the world. The 1970s were a decade of rebuilding, as the ANC focused on guerrilla training and political education within the exiled community and inside the country.

The Soweto Uprising and the Resurgence of Resistance

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 breathed new life into the liberation struggle. When thousands of students took to the streets to protest the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction, the apartheid police responded with horrifying brutality. The images of dying children, like Hector Pieterson, were broadcast around the world, galvanising international condemnation. The uprising led to an exodus of young people leaving South Africa to join the ANC in exile. Many of these "Soweto generation" recruits received military training and returned as MK cadres. The 1980s witnessed an intensification of the struggle, with internal mass movements like the United Democratic Front (UDF) coordinating resistance inside the country in close alignment with the ANC. The regime

found itself increasingly isolated, both domestically and internationally, as sanctions and divestment campaigns took their toll.

Negotiations and the Transition to Democracy

The 1990s were a period of extraordinary change. On February 2, 1990, President F.W. de Klerk unbanned the ANC and other liberation movements, and on February 11, Nelson Mandela walked free from Victor Verster Prison. The history of the ANC entered its most complex phase: the transition from liberation movement to governing party. Negotiations between the ANC and the apartheid government were fraught with tension, mistrust, and violence. However, the leadership of Mandela and the ANC’s negotiating team, including figure like Cyril Ramaphosa and Thabo Mbeki, steered the process toward a historic compromise. In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections. The ANC won overwhelmingly with 62.6 percent of the vote, and Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first black president of South Africa. The moment was a triumph for the ANC’s long and painful struggle, a testament to the sacrifices of countless activists and ordinary citizens.

The ANC in Government: Achievements and Challenges

Since 1994, the ANC has been the dominant political force in South Africa. Under Mandela, the government focused on reconciliation and building democratic institutions. The subsequent presidencies of Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa have each faced distinct challenges. The ANC government has achieved significant progress in expanding access to housing, electricity, clean water, and social grants for millions of South Africans. The Constitution of 1996, which enshrines a comprehensive bill of rights, stands as a lasting achievement. However, the ANC has also faced serious criticisms. Corruption, particularly during the Zuma administration, eroded public trust. Economic inequality remains stubbornly high, and the party has struggled to deliver on promises of land reform, job creation, and quality education. Internal factionalism and leadership battles have also weakened the organisation, leading to declining electoral support. In the 2024 general elections, the ANC lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since 1994, forcing it into a coalition government with opposition parties. This marked a new and uncertain chapter in the ANC’s long history.

The Enduring Legacy of the ANC

Despite its recent struggles, the legacy of the ANC remains deeply woven into the fabric of South Africa. The organisation played an irreplaceable role in dismantling one of the most brutal systems of racial oppression the world has ever seen. Its leaders, from Albert Luthuli to Nelson Mandela, from Oliver Tambo to Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, became icons of resistance and human dignity. The ANC’s history is also a story of ordinary people: the miners who downed tools, the women who marched against pass laws, the students who faced tear gas and bullets, and the communities who sheltered freedom fighters. This collective courage transformed a nation. As South Africa navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the history of the ANC serves as both an inspiration and a cautionary tale. It reminds us that movements must constantly renew themselves, remain accountable to their people, and never lose sight of the values that inspired their founding.

Conclusion

The history of the ANC is a narrative of extraordinary perseverance, moral clarity, and human sacrifice. From its humble beginnings in Bloemfontein in 1912 to its role as the ruling party of a democratic South Africa, the ANC has been at the heart of the country’s most defining struggles. Its journey reflects the broader arc of the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements, offering lessons in organisation, resilience, and the power of collective action. While the ANC today faces internal and external pressures, its historical achievements remain undeniable. Understanding this history is essential for anyone who wishes to grasp the complexities of modern South Africa and the ongoing challenges of building a just and equitable society. The story of the ANC is far

from over, but its first century has already secured its place in the pantheon of great liberation movements. As South Africans continue to shape their future, the values of the Freedom Charter and the sacrifices of those who fought for freedom will continue to light the way.

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