

OPENING ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY PRESIDENT COMRADE THABO MBEKI TO THE 19TH CONGRESS OF THE ANC YOUTH LEAGUE (29 FEBRUARY - 3 MARCH 1996) DURBAN, 29 February 1996

COMRADE CHAIRPERSON
COMRADES

Allow me to begin my task today by joining the KwaZulu/Natal chairperson of your organisation in welcoming your all to this historical milestone, the 19th Congress of the ANC Youth League.

Greetings from the President and the ANC NEC.

I am honoured to have the opportunity to address this gathering because I am fully conscious of its historical significance as the first ANC Youth League Congress since that political watershed of April 27 1994.

This fact alone makes this Congress an occasion for a great celebration of the triumph of the forces of democracy and peace over the dark forces of colonialism and Apartheid. April 27 1994 represents our most singular break with the past, a departure from the history of imperialism and colonialism which characterised our life since 1652, to a history of self-determination and hope.

At last we have joined the march with the rest of the world where our destiny is in our own hands.

Comrade Chairperson,

This Congress should also serve as a council of war, a crucible which must prepare us for difficult challenges and battles that still lie ahead. Ahead of us lies yet that noble goal of creating the South African society that is envisaged in the Freedom Charter.

This Congress takes place at a time when the paramount agenda of the day is the practical construction of the society of our cherished dream. Today we are grappling with the real and practical programme designed to institute a social, political, economic and constitutional order which will result in the realisation of that dream

We have set in motion a process whose aim is to build the unity of our people as well as to consolidate the unity and integrity of the country. We are busy setting up institutions and programmes designed to guarantee that never again will race and gender be an obstacle to political and economic fulfilment of the individual or the attainment of the legitimate aspirations of any social group.

Indeed, our democracy is deepening and expanding, creating the necessary opening for development, prosperity and peace.

The attainment of these goals constitutes the strategic objective of the national liberation struggle. Our quest to attain this objective should serve as a beacon to this organisation, which is an integral and strategic part of the ANC. This requires of us that we conduct the business of this Congress with extraordinary seriousness, a sense of our historic mission and unqualified dedication to the cause of the people.

History has also bequeathed upon this Congress the duty to deliberate and fashion political programmes

in a year in which the people of our country will be observing other milestone anniversaries. Here I would like to refer to the following events;

The 20th anniversary of the Soweto Uprising.

The 40th anniversary of the adoption of the Freedom Charter by the ANC at its conference in 1956.

The 35th anniversary of the formation of the People's Army, Umkhonto weSizwe.

The 40th anniversary of the historic march by women on Pretoria in 1956 and the 75th anniversary of the formation of the South African Communist Party.

The political significance of all these anniversaries can only serve to enrich the outcome of this Congress, which carries with it the significance of history being made.

The formation of the ANCYL in 1944 was a firm beginning of the South African youth movement. The adoption of its 1949 Programme of Action by the ANC transformed our movement into a truly mass national movement which formed part of a larger continental anti-colonialist upsurge which saw a number of African countries attaining their liberation in the wake of the 2nd World War.

Within the ANC itself, the Youth League functioned as the training ground for ANC cadres and leaders who played a prominent role in the life of the ANC. The contribution of the Youth League to the political culture of mass struggles served as a point of reference in the conduct of struggle by all democratic national youth formations for the decades that followed its formation. Such has been the quality of the contribution of the Youth League in the overall development of the national liberation movement.

Comrades,

The 19th ANC Youth League Congress has been convened at the time when the political triumph of the national liberation movement has opened a new frontier of struggle. We have defined our strategic goal in this new period as reconstruction and development. This is our current and paramount national agenda, a policy and a programme which envisages transformation and democratisation at all levels of society and the provision of a better life for all our people.

The success of this Congress will be judged by its ability to work out policy positions and a clear programme of action whose fundamental thrust will be the promotion of the agenda of transformation and the enhancement of the process of democratisation.

The policy positions and the programme of action which will come out of your deliberations will have meaning only if they will help to propel forward the programme of reconstruction and development.

In order to ensure that such policy positions and such a programme of action indeed do emerge from your deliberations, this Congress will have to pose to itself a few fundamental questions. It is the ability of this Congress to find the best possible answers to these questions which will guarantee that the outcome of the Congress will greatly enrich the agenda and the programme of the national liberation movement.

The first question to be posed is what is the character of the current phase of the democratic struggle and what constitutes the most fundamental tasks of this phase.

The discussion around this question will have to recognise the legacy which we have inherited from many decades of Apartheid rule. The main content of change in this phase remains the elimination of all forms of discrimination on the bases of race and ethnicity.

Vast disparities in terms of race and gender as well as uneven development between rural and urban communities continue to characterise many areas of our social life.

We consider the attainment of political democracy as a precondition for the continuing struggle aimed at the achievement of full social economic emancipation for all the people.

Commendable progress is already being made in putting building blocks aimed at ensuring the democratisation of the political order the deracialisation and rebuilding of the economy, the public service, security organs of state, social services and cultural institutions.

The success of our policy of reconciliation, national unity and nation-building also depends on the progress we make in addressing the political and socio-economic divisions in the conditions of life of the people.

An essential element in the content of transformation is to ensure that people themselves assume the central role in the transformation and betterment of their own lives. The people themselves must be empowered to intervene in the decision-making and implementation process of reconstruction and development.

It is for that reason that the success of the local government elections in KwaZulu/Natal and the Western Cape metropole in May will give full meaning to the slogan "Let Us Make It Happen Where We Live!". The completion of this task will also ensure that the people themselves in all the townships, villages, formal settlements, towns and cities are the real vehicle for democratic and social transformation. The task of expanding and consolidating the democratic achievement should encompass the urgent and important task of promoting peace and security. It is only the forces of reaction and destabilisation that stand to gain from continuing political violence in KwaZulu/Natal and parts of Gauteng.

Taxi violence, criminal violence, white collar crime, intra-ethnic conflicts and economic sabotage, all impact negatively on our struggle to give birth to the new South Africa.

We need to speed up the implementation of the new and democratic education dispensation. That is one of the ways in which we can move with certainty and speed towards creating a common and positive South African identity, help to forge a skilled and integrated civil society, building a sustainable economic foundation and provide more jobs to the greatest number of people. The field of education, whether exemplified by recent events at Potgietersrus or evidenced by continuing struggles for transformation in many tertiary institutions, is going to continue to serve as a barometer indicative of the challenge we continue to face as a result of the conflict between democratic action for transformation and conservative reaction to maintain the status quo in many areas of our society.

The ANC Youth League should place itself in the forefront of these struggles. We rely on the Youth League to enter this area of struggle and help to raise the level of debate to a new national outlook aimed at the overall modernisation of our society.

The second question to be answered is what is the place and the role of the ANC Youth League in particular and the democratic national youth movement in general in promoting the agenda of national

democracy.

An important point to be made here is that the ANC Youth League is the political vehicle of the ANC whose task is the political mobilisation the youth into action for change and the education of young people on the policies and principles of the movement. Its primary task is the promotion of the political and organisation agenda of the ANC. At no stage can the ANC Youth League take political positions which are separate from those of the ANC. Politically, the League is the Youth League of the ANC.

The task of expanding and consolidating democracy and transformation requires the mobilisation of the greatest number of the youth of our country. It is a task which goes beyond the membership of the League. It is for that reason that the democratic movement as a whole should take the responsibility to ensure that we find the best possible mechanism to establish tactical and strategic alliances of the democratic formations of the youth and work for the establishment of a democratic national youth forum.

Such a forum is crucial in the effort of empowering and developing the youth.

The current national character of the youth League is also not reflective of the real capacity of the democratic movement to reach out to all national groups in our society.

There is an on-going debate currently taking place in the Western Cape and to a certain extent in the Northern Cape which relates to the National question. The Youth League cannot ignore this debate. This debate relates directly to the task of uniting disadvantaged communities and building a truly non-racial democracy.

Thirdly, we have to ask ourselves the question that, given the tasks of th currently phase of our struggle, what is the nature and character of the ANC Youth League which is best suited for the performance of these task.

In responding to this question, we have already said that the policies and programmes of the Youth League should be based on the broad political perspective of the ANC.

The Youth League should also constantly seek to cultivate layers of cadreship which will seek to equip the organisation with the ability to adapt to the challenges of governance and at the same time ensure the growth and vibrancy of the organisation.

We need to realise that our participation in the machineries of governance and state is a strategic achievement of the struggle for national liberation. This achievement should be utilised to take the struggle to new height.

It is not possible to separate the interests of the ANC from the interest of the people. For the first time in the history of our country the democratic voice of the majority sets the agenda for the government of the day.

The ANC is attending to the urgent challenge to work out a political education programme which will derive its mission from the totality of our political and organisational experience in the conduct of struggle. it will draw its content from that experience as well as the experience of other social movements around the world which are involved in similar endeavours to better the conditions of life of the people.

It should be emphasised that the nature of the task of governance and transformation as well as

constitutional changes which have taken place require that we take a fresh look at the constitutional structures of our own democratic organisations.

There might be a need to restructure our political structures in such a way that organs of governance and delivery should not hamper but rather facilitate our organisational work.

For the programme of action of the ANC Youth League to enjoy wide appeal and continue to generate the active support of the youth, it will have to relate to the task of governance, empowerment, transformation and delivery to the people. This programme should be geared towards ensuring maximum galvanisation of young people in the task of empowerment and delivery as well as the achievement to the overall transformation objectives of the ANC.

To that extent, the political education programme will have to relate itself to building a cadreship which is politically and ideologically equipped to defend as well as advance the best interests of the country and the people.

The political structures of the ANC Youth League can derive strength from the challenges of giving guidance and practical exemplary leadership to the struggles of ordinary people to empower their communities.

Fourthly, we have to find new and innovative methods of building the organisational capacity of the ANC Youth League. Today the task of building a vibrant and growing ANC Youth League - a League capable of replenishing its ranks many times over - can only be achieved by a Youth League which can correctly identify the tasks of the moment, exercise effective leadership of the youth at all levels of governance and delivery and thus earn itself an honoured place among the forward detachments for transformation.

We are glad that the Parliamentary Ad-hoc Committee to spearhead the national Youth Commission Bill through parliament has been established. We hope that this development sets the stage for a wider debate on the critical question of youth empowerment and a speedy progress towards the establishment of the National Youth Commission.

On the side of government, I can report that consultation is under way for the establishment of a youth structure within the Presidency. This structure will be charged with the task of ensuring that the President effectively leads and monitors the process of empowering and developing the youth. Part of the delay in this process pertains to the on-going discussion on the current budgetary constraints in the office of the President.

Comrade Chairperson,

The confidence our people continue to put on the ANC places a great challenge and an enormous responsibility on our shoulders. The people have proved that they are ready and capable of governing. The Youth League must continue to make its own contribution to our further success in meeting the challenges ahead of us.

We must continue to draw inspiration from the dedication of the founding fathers of the ANC Youth League, from the tradition of heroic struggles of the youth over the decades as we sustain the momentum of the struggle for the accomplishment of the mission of national emancipation.

We who are alive today are witness to a generation upon whose shoulders history has conferred

unprecedented responsibilities and in whose hands it has placed limitless possibilities.

We are living in the age of a social and economic revolution. It is the era of our national renaissance. We cannot dare disappoint the millions who banker for democratic and social change in their lives.

The regenerated and strengthened ANC Youth League must continue to play its role as a front-line fighting force in that continuing struggle for fundamental change and a better life for all our people.

We wish the 19th Congress success.

THANK YOU

Issued by: African National Congress

<EOD>