

Is ANC bent on radical policies? Here's why the answer is no



© EWN The ANC's newly elected top six acknowledge their supporters at the party's national conference at Nasrec in Johannesburg on 18 December 2017.

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When media cover a political party conference decision, it is best to report on the entire resolution, not just the exciting bits. This may reduce the audience but will improve accuracy.

The point seems to have been forgotten in reporting on a resolution on land expropriation passed at the December conference of South Africa's governing party, the African National Congress.

Media announced that the party endorsed changing the Constitution to allow the government to expropriate land without compensation. This, with a resolution calling for the "nationalisation" of the South African Reserve Bank, and one urging the government to speedily implement an announcement by President Jacob Zuma that children of poor families would receive free higher education, were widely quoted as evidence that the ANC had embraced economic radicalism.

But a closer look at the details of land resolution and the context of the other two shows that the most radical decision adopted by the conference were not these but one that has been largely ignored – a proposal which would give greater power over land to rural people, not traditional leaders.

CAVEATS ON LAND EXPROPRIATIONS

Reporting on the land expropriation decision mentions only half the resolution. The ANC has endorsed the change, but, according to the chair of its economic transformation committee, Enoch Godongwana, only if two conditions are met. It must not threaten food security or impact on the rest of the economy.

This almost certainly means that the resolution means the opposite of what is reported – in effect, it rejected changing the Constitution to allow expropriation without compensation.

Whether changing the constitution would damage food security is a matter of opinion. But, since there is no shortage of voices insisting that it would, the condition provides a handy escape hatch for a government which does not want to make the change.

The second condition is the clincher. It is impossible to allow for land expropriation without compensation without affecting the rest of the economy. A measure which alters property rights in one sector sends a message that others may be due for the same fate. Even if only some investors came to this conclusion – and the chances are that just about all

will – the economy will be affected. So, to say the change will only be introduced if the economy is unaffected is to say it won't happen.

Political realities explain why the resolution was phrased in this way. One ANC faction wanted the constitutional change, the other did not. But the sceptics knew of widespread anger inside the ANC (and outside it) at the slow pace of land reform. Insisting that there was no need for a change would not have been credible – it would mean being seen to agree that whites should hold on to most productive land.

The only way out for the opponents was to agree on the principle but to hedge it with conditions which can't be seen to endorse white privilege. The fact that they succeeded in including the conditions suggests that they are strong enough to prevent the change.

RESERVE BANK CHANGES UNLIKELY ANY TIME SOON

Similar realities shaped the decision to endorse "nationalising" the central bank. This would not affect its mandate or independence. It would simply end a quirk – that South Africa's central bank is owned by private shareholders. The change would be entirely symbolic.

In a climate in which there is widespread unhappiness with continued black economic exclusion, agreeing to a change which would change nothing was an obvious response. This is particularly so since the change is unlikely any time soon.

In private discussions, ANC economic policymakers note that the money needed to buy out the private shareholders of the South African Reserve Bank is not available. And so this may be one of many governing party resolutions – in all democracies – which are never implemented because they pose practical difficulties.

FREE HIGHER EDUCATION

The tertiary education change may be implemented, at least for a year. It has proved hugely controversial and may create headaches for universities and colleges because it has not been carefully costed and planned. But it is no change to ANC or government policy.

Zuma's announcement is repeatedly described as an agreement to free higher education but it isn't. It doesn't apply to all students – only to those who are "poor and working class" - anyone whose household income is below R350 000 a year.

That students who cannot afford higher education should not pay for it is already government and ANC policy, which is why the conference did not see a need to endorse the announcement – it simply urged that it be implemented quickly. It is also accepted by just about everyone concerned about fairness in education. It is very different to the demand that all higher education be free since those who can afford to pay will still be charged fees.

It is not clear whether practicalities will allow Zuma's announcement to be implemented in full. But, even if it is, this is no shift to the left.

So the ANC has not emerged from the conference as a more "radical" party. Its economic policy resolutions remain within the framework which has governed its thinking for years.

This does not mean it will leave the economy untouched: there is agreement across the factions that change which includes more people is essential. But it does mean that change will be negotiated and will respect perceived realities in the marketplace.

A REAL RADICAL RESOLUTION

What of the change virtually no-one noticed? Media coverage and debate remains dominated by the middle class and so the concerns of people at the grassroots are almost always ignored. This explains why a proposed change that would limit the power of traditional leaders over land passed largely unnoticed.

According to an ANC briefing at the conference, it decided that control over land should rest with communities, not chiefs. In principle, this should enable rural people to stop traditional leaders using land for their own purposes at their expense, which has brought "state capture" to the countryside and has triggered conflict.

The resolution may prove hard to implement because it may be difficult for rural people to hold traditional leaders to account. And, like all conference resolutions, it may never become law because traditional leaders may lobby against it.

But, if it did become law, it may make far more difference to far more people than the "radical" resolutions which have hogged print and broadcast headlines.

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