

THE CONGRESS OF SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE UNIONS (COSATU) AND THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE: A MARRIAGE OF (IN)CONVENIENCE?¹

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Abstract

Since its formation in 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) had played a significant role in the political landscape of South Africa. From the start, COSATU appeared to be in support of the then banned African National Congress (ANC) when it adopted the Freedom Charter. This article highlights the relationship which exists between COSATU and the ANC as part of the Tripartite Alliance. The persistent animosity between the members of these two organisations is discussed.

Keywords: African National Congress; South African Communist Party; Congress of South African Trade Unions; alliances, Mass Democratic Movement; ideology; mass mobilization; democracy.

Sluutelwoorde: African National Congress; Suid-Afrikaanse Kommunistiese Party; Congress of South African Trade Unions; alliansies; Mass Democratic Movement; ideologie; massamobilisasie; demokrasie.

1. INTRODUCTION

For 25 years, since its formation in November 1985, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has played a significant role in shaping the political landscape of South Africa. The successes and challenges experienced by COSATU may be attributed to both its mandate as a union, representing the workers, as well as its role within the Tripartite Alliance.⁴ The recent mudslinging/animosity between the Tripartite Alliance members has the potential to cause a threat to the

1 The article is a revised version of the paper entitled *Reflecting on the 25 years of COSATU (1985-2010)* which was presented by Chitja Twala at the Historical Association for South Africa (HASA) conference, held at the University of the North-West (Potchefstroom Campus) on 23-25 July 2010.

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4 The parties which formed the Tripartite Alliance were the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

continuing existence of the alliance. In this article the authors argue that, despite the many years of combined struggle within the alliance, the organisations, namely the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU, have remained distinct with particular ideological and policy differences. Although these organisations seem to cooperate on most political matters, the authors however opined that, due to their policy differences, as suggested by some political analysts, it remains unlikely that they could merge to form a single party. The authors have noted that the Tripartite Alliance partners had for many years, assisted in sustaining and shaping one another's political manoeuvring, and this could be viewed as an important ingredient which makes the break-up of the alliance unlikely, but not impossible.

Recently, there are numerous unresolved issues within the alliance that strain the inter-relationship, particularly between COSATU and the ANC. Firstly, the issues include, *inter alia*, their distinctiveness in terms of how they interpret the *modus operandi* of dual membership. Secondly, the interpretation of the economic policies, which in most cases have led to the recent public spats between COSATU and the ANC, are causes of concern for the sustainability of the alliance. Evident to this was the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) President, Julius Malema's call for the nationalisation of the mines. This stance was however rejected by COSATU. Thirdly, leadership personalities of both organisations contribute to questions about the sustainability of the alliance. For example, Zwelinzima Vavi, the Secretary General of COSATU, labelling some Ministers in President Jacob Zuma's administration as "corrupt", causing a stir within the alliance partners. Although the other alliance partner, namely the SACP, also expressed differences with the ruling ANC, for the purposes of this article, attempts will be made to scrutinise only the role played by COSATU in this regard. It is however not the intention of the authors to downplay the role of the SACP as an alliance partner, but it should be noted that in an attempt to investigate as to whether the relationship between the ANC and COSATU was a marriage or a convenience, reference to the SACP will be made.

Several studies on COSATU have been undertaken,⁵ but few, if any, have been dedicated to the recent conflicts between COSATU and the ANC as partners

5 For more detailed information see S Buhlungu, *Trade unions and democracy: COSATU workers' political attitudes in South Africa* (Cape Town, 2006); J Baskin, *Striking back: A history of COSATU* (Johannesburg, 1991); L Orr, *Labour pains: Women's leadership and gender strategies in COSATU* (Johannesburg, 2006); SM Pityana, et al., *Beyond the factory floor: A survey of COSATU shop-stewards* (Johannesburg, 1992); R Naidoo, *Unions in transition: COSATU into the new millennium* (Johannesburg, 1999); DT McKinley, "COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994", in T Bramble and F Barchiesi, *The making of modern Africa: Rethinking the labour movement in the 'New South Africa'* (London, 2003); R Lambert and E Webster, "The re-emergence of political unionism in contemporary South Africa?", in W Cobbett and R Cohen,

in the alliance. This, to a certain extent, puts pressure on the sustainability of the alliance. The authors are equally aware that, for the sake of sustaining the alliance, both organisations prefer to downplay the existing conflicts. In order to understand the role played by COSATU within the Tripartite Alliance, the authors will attempt to highlight the following:

- A brief historical background on the formation and nature of COSATU.
- The formation of the Tripartite Alliance and its influence on the political landscape of South Africa.
- COSATU's role within the Tripartite Alliance.
- The challenges faced by COSATU within the Tripartite Alliance.
- An analysis of the recent debate on allegiance to the Tripartite Alliance with special reference to COSATU and the ANC whether the alliance is a marriage of convenience or not. However, the authors argue that the differences between the leadership of COSATU and the ANC are not clearly ideological.

Andries Bezuidenhout reported as early as 1999 that since the election of the ANC into government, and the involvement of COSATU in the alliance, it had become less clear how and when to support or contest issues, than was the situation with the apartheid government. Both organisations had become synonymous in the public eye.⁶ The article tries therefore to trace the reasons for the alleged lack

(eds), *Popular struggles in South Africa* (London, 1988); P Eidelberg, "The Unions and the African National Congress", *South African Historical Journal* 28, May 1993, pp. 270-291; A Bird and G Schreiner, "COSATU at the crossroads: Towards tripartite corporatism or democratic socialism?", *South African Labour Bulletin* 16(6), 1992, pp. 22-32; S Buhlungu, "COSATU and the elections", *South African Labour Bulletin* 18(2), 1996, pp. 7-17; K Gostner, "Contesting the transition: COSATU since the democratic elections", *South African Labour Bulletin* 20(1), 1996, pp. 34-39; S Buhlungu and K von Holdt, "Facing the future: COSATU defines its role", *South African Labour Bulletin* 18(5), 1994, pp. 48-56; J Baskin, "Unions at the crossroads: Can they make the transition?", *South African Labour Bulletin* 20(1), 1996, pp. 8-16; P Hirschsohn, "From grassroots democracy to national mobilisation: COSATU as a model of Social Movement Unionism", *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 19, 1998, pp. 633-666; DT McKinley, "The crisis of the left in contemporary South Africa", <<http://links.org.au/node/1154>>, 2009 (accessed on 21 June 2010); J Maree, "The COSATU participatory democratic tradition and South Africa's new parliament: Are they reconcilable?", *Africa Affairs* 97, 1998, pp. 29-51; J Lewis and E Randall, "The State of the Unions", *Review of African Political Economy* 35, May 1986, pp. 68-77; E Webster, "The two faces of the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa", *Review of African Political Economy* 39, September 1987, pp. 33-41.

- 6 A Bezuidenhout, "COSATU Special Congress: A wake-up call for workers' control", *South African Labour Bulletin* 23(5), October 1999, p. 65. For more information see also T Bramble, "Social Movement Unionism since the fall of apartheid: The case of NUMSA on the East Rand", in T Bramble and F Barchiesi (eds), *Rethinking the labour movement in the New South Africa* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 187-204; F Barchiesi, "Economic adjustment, political institutionalisation

of ability of COSATU to vigorously challenge issues which are deemed unfair to the workers. Although this has started long before Zuma's presidency, the authors tend to agree with Raymond Suttner, that beneath the surface of the Zuma-led ANC, there were differences within their immediate support base and backers that could, from the outset, lead to contradictions that might split the ANC. The ANC continued to have a primarily working-class base.⁷

For the purposes of this article, secondary sources, including books, chapters in books and journal articles were consulted. Owing to the contemporary nature of the topic under discussion, viewpoints conveyed in the newspaper articles have also been incorporated into the article to highlight the role played by COSATU as an alliance partner.

2. A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FORMATION AND NATURE OF COSATU

South Africa's union movement played a key role in the struggle against apartheid and class oppression. During the 1970s and 1980s the workers built up their unions into a powerful fighting force. To a certain extent, the unions succeeded in improving the material conditions of their members while, at the same time, taking on the labour imbalances created by the apartheid state. They kept the flag of freedom flying and became a symbol of anti-apartheid resistance, whilst the liberation movements were banned. This was also evident in the late 1980s, when other components of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) were suppressed.⁸

COSATU was formed on 30 November 1985, after more than four years of negotiations between, among others, the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA); the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU); the Azanian Congress of Trade Unions (AZACTU) and the South African Workers' Union (SAWU).⁹ On this day, 760 delegates from 33 unions, representing over 460 000 organised workers, gathered at the sports hall of the University of Natal in Durban. This was the launch of COSATU, which has become one of the most powerful workers' organisations in South Africa.

Although the constitution of the organisation had been agreed upon in principle, there were however some key issues which remained unresolved. The following were critical questions to be addressed: Would COSATU be politically

and social marginalisation: COSATU and the first democratic government (1994-1999)", *Transformation* 38, 1999, pp. 20-48.

7 R Suttner, "The Zuma project in crisis?" (unpublished manuscript), *s.a.*, p. 22.

8 J Baskin (ed.), p. 1.

9 H Kotze and A Greyling, *Political organisation in South Africa A-Z* (Cape Town, 1994), p. 271. See also Anon. "Brief history of COSATU", <<http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?include=docs/intropages/2009/webcont0709.html>>, 2009 (accessed on 11 June 2010).

aligned? What international policy would be best for COSATU? Who would be elected as office bearers?¹⁰ It however seemed strange that COSATU was launched with some issues unresolved. There was a sense of urgency and a widespread belief that the time was right to launch a new federation, due to the problems being experienced by workers around the country. After intense discussions at the launch, the following leaders were elected as office bearers: Elijah Barayi as President; Chris Dlamini as the first Vice-President; Makhulu Ledwaba as the second Vice-President; Maxwell Xulu was chosen as Treasurer; Jay Naidoo and Sydney Mufamadi were elected General Secretary and Assistant General Secretary, respectively.¹¹ COSATU managed to mobilise workers in great numbers. It was not surprising that in 1990, COSATU claimed more than 1,2 million members organised into 14 industrial unions.¹²

COSATU's main aim was to organise the unorganised workers to fight for the improvement of the material conditions of its members in particular, and workers in general. It also wanted to ensure the maximum involvement of workers in the national democratic struggle.¹³ It found itself in a head-on confrontation with the apartheid government when it expanded its focus from work issues to the national liberation movement. At the same time, it fiercely asserted its independent role within the liberation struggle. The adoption of the Freedom Charter by COSATU and many of its affiliates in 1987 removed all doubts whether it was identifying and seeing itself as part of the congress movement. Perhaps, this was the reason that, at a later stage, COSATU found itself forming what became known as the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the SACP. Although COSATU became part of the Tripartite Alliance in 1990, David Everatt argues that the alliance between the ANC and the SACP dated back a long way and did not start only in the early 1990s.¹⁴

Without doubt, COSATU played a significant role in acting as a political and administrative centre in providing strategic leadership for the trade union movements: co-ordinating their affairs; developing broad policies; ensuring that legislative gains translate into actual workers' gains; capacity building and involvement in the education of workers. The overriding principle of COSATU is worker control and democracy. This principle managed to sustain the organisation through the most repressive years of the struggle for political, economic and social

10 Baskin, *Striking back*..., p. 53.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

12 G Adler and E Webster, "Challenging transition theory: The labor movement, radical reform, and transition to democracy in South Africa", *Politics and society* 23(1), March 1995, p. 80.

13 Baskin, *Striking back* ..., p. 3.

14 For more information see D Everatt, "Alliance politics of a special type: the roots of the ANC/SACP Alliance, 1950-1954", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18(1), March 1991, pp. 19-39.

rights.¹⁵ COSATU rallies its members around the principle of the rejection of all forms of racism, believing that all workers, regardless of race, should be organised and united.

3. COSATU AND THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE

The Tripartite Alliance was formalised in June 1990, but COSATU was formally accepted as part of the alliance in July 1990. The aim was for other alliance partners, such as COSATU, to offer support to the ANC. Its mandate was to galvanise support for the ANC in order for it to become an efficient and effective organisation. Therefore, it was the responsibility of the alliance partners to organise both members and sympathisers of the ANC on a large scale; aggregating their interests; thrusting the demands of the dispossessed and oppressed to the forefront; and seizing political initiative in the process. Before 1994 COSATU had aligned itself politically with the ANC and supplied vital administrative support for the ANC's efforts to re-establish itself inside South Africa after its unbanning.¹⁶

The following points were agreed upon by the alliance partners: each organisation was independent and would develop its own positions on various issues and campaigns; the task of the alliance was to formulate a joint programme on agreed issues; the alliance was a strategic force with the central objective of dismantling apartheid and building a non-racial, democratic and unitary South Africa; the alliance was to take on a structural form at national, regional and local level with mandated representatives from each organisation; and the alliance had to work out how it related to a range of organisation and different class forces outside it.¹⁷ The above points were accepted by all the alliance partners, with the ANC being recognised as “the leader of the alliance”.¹⁸ During the early 1990s the alliance also aimed at helping to bring about a speedy political transition to a democracy through negotiations.¹⁹

15 SM Pityana and M Orkin, *Beyond the factory floor: A survey of COSATU shop-stewards* (Johannesburg, 1992), pp. 1-2. See also MA Sethunya, *COSATU as a role player in South African politics: A descriptive perspective* (Unpublished MA mini-dissertation, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 2004), p. 16.

16 T Lodge, “Policy processes within the African National Congress and the Tripartite Alliance”, *Politikon* 26(1), p. 7.

17 Baskin, p. 432.

18 For more information see E Webster, “The alliance under stress: Governing in a globalising world”, in R Southall (ed.), *Opposition and democracy in South Africa* (London, 2001), pp. 258-259.

19 It should be noted that the alliance also recognized the leading role of the ANC which derived from the common acceptance that the struggle was characterised by the central objective of the emancipation of the African majority and as it evolved, black people in general. As the South Africa economy developed and with rapid urbanisation, recognition of the centrality of the

Although at face value it appears as if the formation of the Tripartite Alliance was a smooth process, it was never the case. Both COSATU and the SACP were sceptical about their roles within the alliance. It was clear from the outset that the ANC was going to play a dominant role in the alliance. This could, in fact, relegate the other partners to playing minor roles. As early as November 1990, both COSATU and the SACP were doubtful about their involvement in the alliance with the ANC, as they were convinced that the ANC had its hands full in terms of concentrating on issues such as: organising structures; mass mobilisation; settling leadership problems; preparing for conferences; negotiating with the government; facilitating the return of exiles; and other administrative headaches.²⁰ It was therefore clear that some of the ANC's responsibilities were to be carried out by the partners in the alliance.

The enormous logistical problems, as experienced by the ANC, caused the organisation to battle to meet the expectations of the masses for instant results. For example, steeped in the traditions of mandates, accountability, collective action and democratic decisionmaking in working from the bottom upwards, unionists were particularly sensitive to the ANC's top-down approach and its perceived failure to consult on vital issues. One such issue was the suspension of the armed struggle, whereby the ANC was criticised for an inadequate consultation process.²¹ During the period of transition COSATU in particular noted that the ANC concentrated more on engaging the apartheid government on political matters and neglected its alliance partners. The alliance had to find a formula of linking the mass struggle with the negotiating process which was taking place at the time.

In the course of the political negotiations from 1990-1993, one of COSATU's more militant affiliates, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), called for the discontinuation of the alliance after the 1994 elections. NUMSA stated that there was a need for an independent workers' party to represent the interests of the South African working class within a post-apartheid era. This proposal by NUMSA was, however, rejected by COSATU.²²

Dale T McKinley, a full-time SACP leader and an activist during the 1990s, stated that after the April 1994 elections, COSATU and the SACP were no longer simply the other two-thirds of the alliance, but part of a governing coalition

African working class in particular, and black workers in general, to the struggle for national emancipation began to grow. For more information see Draft Discussion Document entitled: *Unity in action: Perspective of the African National Congress on the Programme of the Tripartite Alliance*, October 1998, p. 1.

20 *Sunday Times*, 25 November 1990.

21 *The Daily News*, 17 November 1990.

22 McKinley, "COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance", in Bramble and Barchiesi (eds), *The making of...*, p. 43; See also DT McKinley, "Debates and opposition within the ANC and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994", <<http://links.org.au/nodel/139>> (accessed on 21 June 2010).

whose allegiance would be to the ANC as government.²³ According to McKinley, the real problem that confronted COSATU during the period under the ANC's government was the following: Who would really own the means of production; the redistribution of wealth; meeting the basic material and social needs of workers; and worker rights.²⁴

As early as December 1994, Mbazima Shilowa of COSATU issued a seven-page document, listing the ANC government's policy shifts and then attacking them: privatisation, tariff abolition, wage freezes and cuts in social expenditure and the civil service.²⁵ Gregor Gall stated that following its close historical relationship with the ANC in the struggle to defeat apartheid, COSATU expected to have a large and influential role in the new government with reforms to increase members' rights at work, as well as the terms and conditions of employment.²⁶

It should be noted that in the period prior to 1994, many trade unionists raised the question of the likely dangers of a close relationship between labour and an ANC government. The central dangers, some argued, were that COSATU might become the labour wing of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and as a result, lose its independence and strength and thus the ability to protect its members. It further argued that the ANC could not be relied upon to implement any "socialist" measures.²⁷ However, there were others who stressed that the working class movement sought a good relationship with the ANC in order to influence it. The problem with this stance was that it would be difficult to challenge and contest policies for fear of rocking the boat.²⁸

In spite of the above-mentioned challenges, COSATU began the post-1994 period full of confidence that its membership in the alliance would provide the organised working class with the political and organisational means to influence, fundamentally, the character of the newly captured state and the socio-economic policies it would later implement. The expectation was to have a special political positioning of the leading force of the working class in the alliance.

As part of its contribution to the ANC led government, COSATU deployed 15 senior unionists to take their places as ANC politicians and encouraged its members to join the ranks of the new government bureaucracy. This was to further intensify the alliance with the ANC. For example, Jay Naidoo became the National Minister of RDP, but this portfolio ceased to exist in 1996. The termination of this portfolio

23 *Ibid.*

24 McKinley, "COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance ...", p. 43.

25 Lodge, p. 17.

26 G Gall, "Trade unions and the ANC in the 'New' South Africa", *Review of African Political Economy* 24(72), June 1997, p. 203.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 204.

28 K von Holdt, "COSATU Special Congress: The uncertain new era", *South African Labour Bulletin* 17(5), 1993, p. 22.

was a blow to COSATU as a partner in the alliance, as this was interpreted as one way of stripping the federation of its political muscle.²⁹ On a positive note, from COSATU's point of view, it was politically correct to release some of their top leaders to serve in government and in the ruling party. Embarking on this move, the federation wanted to ensure that what was agreed upon at alliance level was actually implemented by the ANC government. It was clear from COSATU that "shouting from the outside" was not always the most effective strategy with which to engage the ANC. Thus, it was important for the federation to have some members serving in high ranking portfolios within the ANC government.

On 29-30 August 2001, COSATU held a successful two-day national stay-away to oppose the ANC government's continued privatisation of basic services. The success of the stay-away was not surprising, given that opposition to privatisation had been on the agenda of the trade unions and the liberation movement for some time. The impact of privatisation which included retrenchments, increased user fees, poor services and water and electricity cut-offs was becoming increasingly apparent.³⁰ This bold stance, taken by COSATU, was an indication that the federation was prepared to launch a fierce challenge to the economic policies of the ANC.

4. THE TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE UNDER SIEGE?

The Zuma administration was expected to consolidate the achievements of the Mbeki administration and correct its failures. At the same time, the government had to effect much needed changes for which the more left-wing organisations within the alliance argued with regard to the social and economic dimensions of a development state.³¹ However, the existence of the Tripartite Alliance was accompanied by socio-economic problems. The following were, among others, some of the problems in the period 1994-2010:

4.1 Disagreements over the introduction and implementation of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme

It should be stressed that the ANC/COSATU relationship was moulded by the ANC's need to create a broad electoral base, together with COSATU's desire to influence government policies. Influence implied being given power in the ANC's

29 McKinley, "COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance ...", p. 46.

30 M van Driel, "Unions and privatisation in South Africa", in Bramble and Barchiesi (eds), *Rethinking...*, p. 62.

31 MH Maserumule, "Consolidating a developmental state agenda: a governance challenge", in Kondlo and MH Maserumule (eds), *The Zuma administration: Critical challenges* (Cape Town, 2010), p. 15.

policy-making processes and the capacity to deploy sanctions when confronted by an unsympathetic response.³²

COSATU was vehemently opposed to the ANC government's liberal reforms of macro-economic policies, such as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). When GEAR was introduced as the ANC government's economic policy, COSATU and the SACP argued that it was announced without having passed through the constitutional structures of the ANC or in consultation with the allied partners; thus leading to intensive debates around its implementation.³³ There were disagreements over its introduction as it was purported to be an imposition on the other alliance partners by the ANC.³⁴ It may be argued that the above was one of the many incidents where COSATU challenged the ANC.

With the introduction of GEAR, COSATU started viewing the alliance as a means of leading to privatisation.³⁵ Unlike the ANC, COSATU believed that privatisation would lead to significant job losses and an inability to provide job creation. This in return, it argued, would foster the casualisation of labour, with more and more workers being hired on limited fixed-term contracts of employment.³⁶ Privatisation often leads to retrenchment, as the new owners try to cut costs.³⁷ GEAR was criticised on the basis that both COSATU and the SACP were not allowed to take decisions on the macro-economic strategy of the government; only the ANC had the powers of decision making. Therefore, government policies were seen as deviating from the tenets of the ANC itself, while GEAR was viewed as insisting on competition and a reliance on markets as the way to fast-track the government's development agenda.

Despite the above criticisms, COSATU agreed that privatisation should be attempted only where investigations show that it would not undermine development. COSATU contended that GEAR was nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction by government officials in responding to the depreciation of the rand in early 1996. Furthermore, COSATU wanted the modification of GEAR in order to tackle the problems of unemployment and income disparities which had persisted even after the demise of apartheid in 1994. This was endorsed by Shilowa when

32 Sethunya, p. 25.

33 R Suttner, "African National Congress (ANC): Attainment of power, post-liberation phases and current crisis", *Historia* 52(1), May 2007, p. 20.

34 *Sowetan*, 4 September 1997.

35 Privatisation occurs when private companies do the actual service delivery and not the government. Examples of privatisation include: letting private companies compete with parastatals that provide basic services; private companies focusing on serving the rich and big businesses, thus cutting costs for them; selling shares in parastatals to "strategic partners", usually foreign companies that are expected to make enterprise more profitable and efficient.

36 Sethunya, p. 40.

37 E Hassen, "The anti-privatisation strike: Effects and implications", *South African Labour Bulletin* 25(5), 2001, pp. 31-35.

he argued that the issue was not how the ANC and COSATU differed on GEAR, but how, as an alliance, they could work towards socio-economic transformation in South Africa.³⁸

The above criticism of GEAR was further endorsed by John Duncan who wrote the following: "... this is the programme which is in line with the neo-liberal agenda being thrust on the world's developing nations, continues to evoke strong opposition on the basis that it is leading to more rather than less inequality. It favours big business with crucial aspects of the programme involving privatisation of state assets and the search for public and private partnerships."³⁹

Defending the introduction of GEAR and the implementation thereof, the ANC claimed that this programme would help in a competitive fast growing economy leading to sufficient jobs; a redistribution of income and opportunities in favour of the poor; and a society in which sound health, education and other services would be available to all. Although it appeared to be hard to convince COSATU to accept GEAR, in June 1996 the Treasury Director-General worsened the situation when she proclaimed that GEAR was a "non-negotiable" policy. Alexander Beresford argues that the ANC government's adoption of GEAR in 1996 fuelled a long-standing debate concerning the durability of an alliance between the federation and the ANC.⁴⁰

From as early as 2000/2001, both Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor stated that there were two possibilities available for the future of the alliance under the ANC's leadership. They argued that on the one hand, was the leadership and activist layer of COSATU and the SACP, many of whom wore multiple hats. According to Habib and Taylor, such leaders could move easily within the alliance when senior or government positions were allocated by the ANC. Committed to a socio-democratic political economy, this group placed its hope on the fact that a struggle could still be waged for the heart and soul of the ANC. On the other hand, there was a newly ascendant and converted layer of leadership who argued that the ANC's role was one of de-racialising the market economy without really rewarding the workers within the alliance.⁴¹

In most cases, within the alliance, COSATU demanded that the centre of policy-making should rest not with the ANC as leader of the alliance, but

38 *Sowetan*, 17 December 1997.

39 J Duncan, "Shifting broadcasting into GEAR", <<http://www.fxj.org.za/update/fedaprup/gear.htm>>, 1994, (accessed on 11 June 2010). See also, Z Vavi, "COSATU's 20th Anniversary, "20 years of heroic struggle for a better life for all", <<http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?include=docs/sp/2005/sp1127.html>>, 2005 (accessed on 11 June 2010).

40 A Beresford, "Comrades 'back on track?' The durability of the tripartite alliance in South Africa", *African Affairs*, May 14, 2009, p. 1.

41 A Habib and R Taylor (eds), "Political alliances and parliamentary opposition in post-apartheid South Africa", in R Southall, *Opposition and democracy in South Africa* (London, 2001), p. 222.

equally between the alliance partners. This was however viewed by some of the ANC leaders as an attempt by COSATU to hijack the ANC. It may be argued that allowing COSATU and the SACP to have an equal say in deciding the country's social, economical and political direction, would be understandable within the context of "coalition". The ANC, as the party for whom the electorate cast the vote on polling day, was ultimately and constitutionally responsible for what happens in South Africa.

4.2 Lack of discipline

Adam Habib wrote in the *Sunday Times* that the lack of discipline within the alliance partners was due to the fact that the union supported Zuma during the ANC's Polokwane Conference to oust Thabo Mbeki from the ANC's presidency, but in essence, lacked unity and discipline. He argued that many commentators observed that Zuma's supporters represented an assortment of individuals, nationalists, socialists, conservatives and established and aspirant business people, all of whom were united in the build-up to Polokwane. This group was beginning to show signs of fracture and bickering because the collective objective of ousting Mbeki had been achieved.⁴² Habib further argued that at the heart of the conflicts were serious differences about the goals South Africa should pursue and what policies it should advance.⁴³ It may be argued that the above example is just one of the many contributing factors to the lack of discipline within the Tripartite Alliance.

One would expect that the members of the Tripartite Alliance would abide by the governing rules of the partnership when addressing matters affecting them. It was not the case with some members of the Tripartite Alliance who, in recent times, have been at loggerheads with one another. It may be argued that perhaps the conflict was one who wielded more power, with reference to the control of the ANC. There were also arguments that the bickering and differences were not being engaged in, in a rigorous and "comradely" way; thus leading to verbal attacks. Even when there are debates nowadays, they are conducted as if they occur between enemies; with name calling, racial labelling and the personalisation of issues. The authors of this article argue that for the alliance partners to be united, they cannot afford another round of divisions after the bruising duel between Zuma and Mbeki prior to the Polokwane Conference. The authors further argue that the alliance partners should meet regularly in order to resolve the disciplinary problems because this has the potential to divide the Tripartite Alliance.

42 *Sunday Times*, 20 December 2009. See also J Lamprecht, "The end of the Tripartite Alliance in South Africa", <<http://www.globalpolitician.com/21140-south-africa>>, 2005 (accessed on 11 June 2010).

43 *Ibid.*

4.3 Verbal attacks by the leaders of the alliance over the question of the nationalisation of the mines

Recently, there have been various interests among the alliance partners to engage in what has been viewed as mudslinging by members of these organisations. This animosity probably started with the ANCYL President, Julius Malema, when he announced that he supported the policy of the nationalisation of the mines. In some of his verbal attacks, Malema accused COSATU and the SACP of trying to hijack the ANC. This was an indication of the lack of rigorous and “comradely” debates within the alliance partners. In return, both COSATU and the SACP leaders fiercely attacked Malema for his pronouncement, as they argued it was not the alliance’s standpoint. While denigrating Malema for such utterances, he was, in return, labelled by both COSATU and the SACP as a leader who was trying to hijack the ANC for his own benefit. Although the ANC’s leadership, including President Zuma, downplayed the existence of personality and ideological differences within the alliance partners, it was clear that the alliance was engulfed in serious problems. In an attempt to defend the alliance partners, Zuma uttered the following: “Various interests within the ANC/SACP/COSATU alliance are engaged in a robust political engagement and debate about the role of the alliance and its focus during this era of freedom and democracy. It is, however, not the first time that this has taken place.”⁴⁴

In analysing the above statement by Zuma, it becomes clear that he acknowledged the challenges that confronted the alliance partners, but had to issue unifying statements in an attempt to protect the integrity of the alliance. Zuma was also aware of the continuing public verbal attacks in which the leaders of the alliance were engaged. Although Zuma emphasised the issue of discipline to the alliance partners, it was however evident through the verbal attacks that discipline had been compromised. It may be argued that the verbal attacks which were launched through the media were testimony to the fact that the usual debating channels within the alliance were not adhered to. The ANC and its partners’ culture of vibrant exchange of ideas and a critical analysis of issues were compromised.

Zuma further stated: “The alliance is too deep-rooted and entrenched to be disrupted by activities or statements of a few of its members. The allies must instead focus on the primary task of uniting our people and uplifting them from poverty and deprivation. An alliance that is seen to be besieged with tension, squabbling and conflict does not inspire public confidence. As the leader of the alliance the ANC will play its role to ensure that we all operate optimally in defence and consolidation of our freedom, in meeting the goals of building a better life for

44 *Daily Dispatch*, 15 December 2009.

all our people. The alliance components also have a responsibility to defend the ANC, to support it and strengthen it.”⁴⁵

In spite of the intervention by Zuma, COSATU’s General Secretary, Vavi, addressed the Central Committee of the NUM in Ekurhuleni on 13 May 2010. In his address he warned that the labour federation was going to launch a “new wage campaign”, and also to campaign against the nationalisation of the mines as proposed by Julius Malema. Vavi stated that with the nationalisation of the mines, workers would not benefit if the process was driven by middle-class interests. According to him, it was COSATU’s responsibility, as one of the Tripartite Alliance partners, to challenge this. COSATU’s fight against the nationalisation of the mines was strengthened by Zuma’s pronouncement against it, saying that it was not government policy.⁴⁶

Another factor that caused COSATU and the ANC to gradually drift apart was the insistence of both COSATU and the SACP to have lifestyle audits on politicians, as well as cabinet ministers. The proposal of lifestyle audits by COSATU further triggered an outcry from ANC members. The revelations that leaders, such as Siphwe Nyanda and Malema accessed government tenders involving huge sums of money caused a stir within the alliance partners. This led to such leaders being referred to as “tenderpreneurs” by Blade Nzimande of the SACP and Vavi of COSATU. The latter organisation accused Zuma of taking sides when he expressed unhappiness about lifestyle audits that had been done informally on Malema and even questioned his obligation, as President, to sign a declaration on interests, based on a law that he had signed when acting as President in 2000.⁴⁷

4.4 Debates around the National Planning Commission (NPC)

The conflict between the nationalists and socialists, which did not coincide with the organisational boundaries of the Tripartite Alliance, extended into the public domain in the debate concerning the National Planning Commission (NPC). It should be noted that when the Minister in the Presidency, Trevor Manuel, moved to consolidate his position through the *Green Paper on National Strategic Planning*, COSATU interpreted it as a power grab and an attempt by the Mbeki camp to return and dominate government thinking. On behalf of COSATU, Vavi responded by launching a pre-emptive critique signalling that the alliance partners were on guard to ensure that their policy victories in Polokwane would not be thwarted.⁴⁸ The fact that Manuel served in Mbeki’s Cabinet as Minister of Finance and now occupying the NPC post in the presidency, was viewed as a misfit in Zuma’s administration.

45 *Ibid.*

46 *Business Day*, 14 May 2010.

47 Suttner, p. 23.

48 *Sunday Times*, 20 December 2009.

Manuel was therefore referred to as an “imperial minister”. It may be argued that this attack was highly personalised and unfair to Manuel who, in the main, was executing his duties as a Minister in the Zuma administration.

COSATU also reacted fiercely to the 25 names of people who were selected by Zuma to serve on the NPC. The federation indicated that civil society was underrepresented, raising questions as to whether the national plan would truly represent the majority. According to COSATU, the overall balance was skewed against the trade union and progressive movement.⁴⁹ Of COSATU’s 12 nominations, three appeared on the list. They were researcher, Dr Karl von Holdt, economist, Dr Christopher Malikane, and development academic, Prof Vivienne Taylor, of the University of Cape Town.⁵⁰

4.5 Charges against Vavi

In June 2010, COSATU was decidedly angry after reports that its alliance partner, the ANC, wanted to take disciplinary action against labour federations’ General Secretary, Vavi. Apparently, what really forced the ANC’s hand, were Vavi’s public utterances about how Zuma’s government was soft on corruption, especially if it involved members of his government or any of the ANC-linked new political leaders. Vavi, amongst others, criticised the government’s performance in general and in particular that of Communications Minister, Sphiwe Nyanda and Co-operative Governance Minister, Sicelo Shiceka.⁵¹ Vavi disputed the allegation that he was targeting the ANC leaders by labelling them as corrupt. He was further accused of contravening a decision of the party’s National Executive Council (NEC) not to attack alliance leaders in public.⁵² On 2 June 2010, COSATU’s Central Executive Committee (CEC) came out in support of Vavi, saying his expressions represented its concerns. The CEC also warned that any move to discipline Vavi could spell the end of the Tripartite Alliance.⁵³

49 The Commission would be headed by T Manuel and C Ramaphosa as Deputy Chairperson. Other Commissioners were: B Godsell; E Masilela; J Vilakazi; N Gosa; J Molwantwa; M Muller; M Altman; C Malikane; V Taylor; M Balintulo; V Mahlali; M Makgoba; J Netshitenzhe; T Goba; P Harrison; I Rensburg; J Coovadia; K von Holdt; M Karaan; T Essop; P Molo and V Maphai.

50 *Business Day*, 3 May 2010.

51 Vavi singled out S Nyanda and S Shiceka for investigation. Shiceka was accused of embellishing his qualifications on his CV and using his department’s funds for personal interests. Nyanda was said to have spent R500 000 on accommodation at luxury hotels in Cape Town, while his government-owned house was being renovated. On 3 June 2010, Nyanda threatened to sue Vavi for insinuating that he was corrupt if he (Vavi) did not issue any statement of apology. Vavi did not apologise and insisted that the ANC could not discipline him because he represented a separate body within the alliance. For more information see *The Times*, 4 June 2010; *Citizen*, 7 June 2010.

52 *Business Day*, 2 June 2010.

53 *Sowetan*, 3 June 2010.

According to CEC perceptions, Zuma's silence or his refusal to act, gave the impression that the government was soft on corruption, particularly if committed by members of the cabinet and/or senior party leaders. It remains to be seen as to whether the ANC can afford to forfeit a key element of the alliance, such as COSATU, simply because the ally, through Vavi, spoke what it perceived as "the truth". The ANC's disciplinary steps against Vavi would imply that any member of COSATU or the SACP, who joined the ANC, would have to disown his/her original organisation and accept only the discipline of the ANC. This would mean that such individuals would not be able to comment on behalf of the members who elected them to COSATU or the SACP.⁵⁴

Given the above scenario, it became clear that criticising the ANC was not a welcomed move against the party. It may be argued that COSATU, as an alliance partner, had the political integrity to challenge the ANC when it strayed from the mission of what was referred to as the "national democratic revolution".⁵⁵ It was clear therefore that, by instituting disciplinary measures against Vavi, the ANC was issuing a warning that criticisms were welcomed, provided they were addressed on the right platforms, as set up by the alliance partners. COSATU contended that the charges against Vavi were being pushed through by a faction within the ANC.⁵⁶ Karima Brown, political editor of *Business Day*, confirmed that in the strongest criticism yet by the ANC, led by Zuma, COSATU averred that certain ANC leaders, who viewed Vavi as a potential threat to the party's leadership race, wanted to malign him ahead of the ANC's elective conference in 2012.⁵⁷ The *Star* indicated the following: "The row over the call from within the ANC to discipline COSATU general-secretary Zwelinzima Vavi has little to do with trade unions and trade unionism and more to do with the scheduled ANC conference in 2012 ... Broadly, that battle is for political and ideological control between professed nationalists and SACP members within the ANC. Today, however, the battle is complicated by financial and personal interests, with trade unionists featuring prominently on both sides of the broad divide."⁵⁸

It may be argued that while Vavi, possibly with future political ambitions, helped build a mythology around Zuma as the champion of the left, the reality was that he [Vavi] had an organised constituency that needed bread and food. He had therefore also to listen to the workers' concerns. In trying to resolve the above problem, Vavi wrote a letter addressed to ANC Secretary General, Gwede Mantashe, requesting a meeting with the ANC. Defending his utterances, Vavi stated that

54 R Louw (ed.), "Vavi and unions angered by ANC plan to discipline him", *Southern Africa Report* 28(22), 4 June 2010, p. 4.

55 *Sowetan*, 3 June 2010.

56 *The Times*, 2 June 2010.

57 *Business Day*, 2 June 2010.

58 *Star*, 4 June 2010.

never, in the history of the alliance, did the leadership of one organisation tried to bring disciplinary charges against a leader of one of its partners. He challenged the ANC about the dual membership of the alliance members. Quoted by the *Star*, Vavi said the following in his letter referring to the alliance: “This decision would imply on the other hand that any member of COSATU or other organisations of the mass democratic movement, including the SACP, who joins the ANC, would have to disown his/her original organisation and accept only the discipline of the ANC. This would mean that he/she could not then speak out on behalf of the membership which elected him/her to office.”⁵⁹

While Vavi and COSATU fought tooth and nail to force the ANC to drop the charges against him, he was, at the same time, accused of being corrupt. Some members of the ANC alleged bribery of a journalist by a company in which Vavi’s wife was involved.⁶⁰ COSATU, in its engagement with the ANC, was requested to address the question of public spats with its members. The ANC, on the other hand, equally agreed to do the same.⁶¹ At a later stage, the ANC decided to drop the charges against Vavi. It may be argued that the ANC realised that it was too risky to proceed with the charges.

5. ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS WITHIN THE ALLIANCE

In an attempt to solve the unhealthy relationship that existed within the alliance, a summit was held as early as mid-November 2009. The alliance summit however failed to bear positive results in resolving the conflicts of the alliance partners. Both COSATU and the SACP went into this summit buoyed by their successes and influence; in having helped Zuma to ascend the country’s presidency. In the summit the alliance partners, powerful and influential as they were, were allowed to make their inputs, and thereafter lively debates were held. After lengthy deliberations, the ANC dictated the terms in giving direction to the alliance. It became clear that as long as COSATU and the SACP exist as independent organisations and contest elections as ANC members, they would subject themselves to the policies of the ANC.

Jovial Rantao commented in the *Star* that the alliance partners were well in their rights to want to influence and change the ANC policies. However, in doing so, the following options were recommended by Rantao for both COSATU and the SACP to adhere to: Firstly, the alliance had to come to an end and be replaced by a coalition, because the rules governing a coalition are different from those of an

59 *Ibid.*, 3 June 2010.

60 *Ibid.*, 12 April 2010; *Sunday Times*, 13 June 2010; See also M Makhanya, “Free our lefties from the Tripartite Alliance’s smothering embrace”, <<http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/columnists/article488930.ece/Free-our-lefties-fro...>>, 2010 (accessed on 15 June 2010).

61 R Louw (ed.), “ANC backs down charging COSATU leader Vavi”, *Southern Africa Report* 28(25), 25 June 2010, p. 2.

alliance. A coalition would mean that COSATU and the SACP would have to fight elections on their own and thereafter entered into a coalition with the ANC. The role of each member of the coalition would then depend on the support they were able to garner in an election. Secondly, the alliance partners could retain the *status quo* and engage, from time to time, in interesting political games, with the alliance partners continuing to fight for control of the ANC.⁶²

In April 2010, COSATU sent a 30-member delegation to meet the ANC to discuss their differences, but were met by a five member delegation from the ANC. This infuriated COSATU's delegation who felt that the ANC did not take it seriously, given the fact that in March 2010 the ANC's delegation, which included Zuma, met with the SACP. It was later discovered that some members of the ANC boycotted the meeting because they felt that Vavi and COSATU had insulted Zuma by insinuating that he was lenient in dealing with corrupt officials in his government. Another factor which angered the ANC members was the criticisms by COSATU on the State of the Nation Address in February 2010 by Zuma. After the address, Vavi lambasted Zuma indicating that the address did not embrace the workers' concerns which included unemployment and low wages.⁶³

Alex Amtaika, a political scientist from the University of the Free State, argued the following about the continued existence of the Tripartite Alliance: "These partners represent different interests of different people in South Africa. What brought them together was that there was a general objective; that is, to make sure that apartheid comes to an end. On that account they had a similar cause. After the collapse of the apartheid government in 1994 and the coming to power of the ANC, the new government had to serve the interests of almost all South Africans. The interests, the objectives and the responsibilities of the ANC changed, and on that front, one finds ambiguity in terms of the continued existence of the alliance."⁶⁴

6. CONCLUSION

Although there were differences between the ANC and COSATU as tripartite alliance partners, based on the above arguments and the fact that such issues are being addressed by the alliance partners, the authors do not believe that the current antagonism will lead to a split in the alliance, but that the cracks will be papered over as has happened in the past. COSATU, however, can no longer postpone a long-overdue debate about the implications of their leaders wearing too many hats in a challenged alliance climate. Both the ANC and COSATU should tackle this

62 *Star*, 20 November 2009.

63 *Sunday Independent*, 11 April 2010.

64 *Kompi collection*. Interview with Dr A Amtaika, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Political Science, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, 3 November 2010.

issue of disagreement before it leads to further enmity and unhappiness within the alliance partners.

What is problematic about the alliance is not that COSATU and the SACP want a greater say in governance in return for numbers they give to the ANC during elections, but rather it is that the partners seem to have failed to decide on how their partnership should work. The result of this lack of agreement is an ongoing battle for space at the table of real power.

It is clear from the above arguments that dual membership tends to provide a screen for political vendettas and personal enrichment; thus, taking up both time and resources throughout the alliance. In the process service delivery, both to communities and union members, suffers. The result is large-scale confusion and demoralisation, leading to apathy and, all too often, explosions of anger to the detriment of the workers and the jobless poor. This study shows that despite all the problems experienced by the alliance partners, the marriage between the ANC and COSATU is a convenient one. The threat of COSATU's walking out of the alliance and taking the SACP with it, is a far-fetched illusion. The two organisations are far more inclined to fight for influence in the ANC, as they did after being sidelined by former President Mbeki. The authors agree with Sakhela Buhlungu that while some observers argue that an alliance split is inevitable, others see it as essential for resuscitating a left-wing agenda in South African politics. COSATU's rank-and-file membership remained loyal to the ANC at elections and continues to support the alliance between their union federation and the party.⁶⁵

It is clear from the above arguments that Vavi is one of the few leaders within the Tripartite Alliance who challenges the ANC. In most of his speeches, Vavi did not instigate a split with the ANC, but he also reiterated his position that the alliance ought to be a strategic political centre and should not allow itself to be "used as hunter's dogs".⁶⁶ With the above utterance, Vavi was referring to the perceived tendency that before every election, workers were fed the "illusion" of the alliance's relative importance, only to have this brushed aside after an electoral victory. Under Zuma's administration, COSATU still complains about its marginalisation and a lack of effective consultation; something that it did not expect after orchestrating the demise of Mbeki.

Despite the above challenges facing COSATU and the alliance partners, Maphala Mosomane of ABSA opines: "I still believe that we do need a strong Tripartite Alliance. Without a relation with the labour federation, the government of

65 S Buhlungu, "Union-party alliances in the era of market regulation: the case of South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31(4), 2005, p. 714. See also S Buhlungu, "From 'Madiba magic' to 'Mbeki logic': Mbeki and the ANC's trade union allies", in S Jacobs and R Calland, *Thabo Mbeki's world: The politics and ideology of the South African President* (Pietermaritzburg, 2002), pp. 179-200.

66 *Sunday Times*, 18 April 2010.

the day is doomed for failure. When you scale the majority of the working class, it is much higher than that of affiliates to the ANC. So, the ruling party still needs that relationship with the alliance partners.”⁶⁷

Govan Ntlhaile of Barloworld argues:

“The Tripartite Alliance does not have a future in South Africa. The ANC is ruling South Africa and the South African Communist Party members are not real communists. There is no communism in South Africa ... I don't think the Tripartite Alliance will survive the next ten years. Ten years is actually too long.”⁶⁸

As mentioned previously and as suggested by Roger Southall, there has already been much speculation that South Africa will only have an alternative government if the Tripartite Alliance dissolves and both COSATU and the SACP form a party to the left.⁶⁹ The counter argument to the above assumption is that even if this is desirable, it is unrealistic to expect it to happen in the foreseeable future. Although the alliance might be viewed as a marriage of convenience for the ANC, COSATU will nevertheless remain an alliance partner for some time. However, the ANC should face reality and admit that in a normal society, the interests of a labour movement and those of the ruling party will more likely than not, be at odds. It is therefore not just COSATU and the SACP that need to come to terms with this “marriage”; the ANC also should be acutely aware of the realities of the new order.

67 *Kompi Collection*. Interview with Mr M Mosomane, Enterprise Development Consultant at ABSA, Bloemfontein, 2 November 2010.

68 *Ibid.*; Interview with Mr G Ntlhaile, Barloworld Sales Representative, Bloemfontein, 3 November 2010.

69 R Southall, “The ‘Dominant Party Debate’ in South Africa”, *Africa Spectrum* 40(1), 2005, p. 76.