

“The real Chris Hani”

Interview of Chris Hani by Vicki Erenstein Ya Toivo

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Introduction

The South African Communist Party held its Eighth Congress December 5-8, 1991, in Johannesburg. This was the first open congress held by the SACP since it was declared illegal by the apartheid regime in 1950. Attended by 400 delegates, by the leaders of the SACP's partners in the tripartite alliance, the ANC and COSATU, by international guests and by numerous observers and journalists, the Congress established the SACP's complete emergence from underground and its role as a rapidly growing party of South Africa's working class. Chris Hani, member of the National Executive Committee of the ANC and Chief of Staff of Umkhonto we Sizwe, was elected general secretary of the SACP and former General Secretary Joe Slovo was elected chairman. This interview was conducted by **Vicki Erenstein Ya Toivo** on Chris Hani's first morning at his new post.

Q: The Congress of the SACP has taken place on the eve of CODESA [Convention for a Democratic South Africa], where the question of the transfer of power to the South African people is on the agenda. Is this transfer of power imminent?

A: I would be careful about saying that it is imminent. It certainly is an item which looms very high on the agenda of CODESA. The main objective of CODESA as far as the perceptions of the ANC and the Communist Party are concerned is to bring about the speedy transfer of power from the minority to the majority in this country. We say, for instance, that CODESA should consider the creation of a climate for political participation. Second, CODESA should begin to discuss the issue of broad constitutional principles. Third, CODESA should also deal with the issue of an interim government.

Why an interim government? We are thoroughly convinced that the present government cannot be in charge of the processes of transition. It cannot be both a referee and a player. Therefore, we need an interim government which would have as its main function to facilitate conditions for the convening of a constituent assembly. It is our view that only a sovereign constituent assembly, made up of elected representatives of all of the people of South Africa, can handle the task of drafting a new constitution. That constitution is the one that should be used to elect a new democratic government. Therefore, at CODESA we are going to place before the representatives of the different political parties the need for the speedy setting up of an interim government.

Q: Which issues do you think will be the most difficult to resolve at CODESA?

A: We don't see an easy process. I think it's going to be stuck on the refusal of the Pretoria regime to accede to an interim government. But it is unacceptable to both the party and the ANC that the Pretoria regime should impose itself on the people of South Africa to determine the transitional authority. The transitional authority must be one that is acceptable to all the people of South Africa and surely the Nationalist Party is not acceptable. But we have always said that negotiations are a terrain of struggle. For us, our success will revolve around the degree of support that we are able to garner on the part of the people, on the part of the oppressed people of South Africa and other democratic sections. This government must be pushed and pressurized to agree to the principle of an interim government and to legislate for an interim government so that it should have the force of law. In the view of the party and the ANC, this interim government should be established as soon as possible, so that the process of setting up the constituent assembly may be completed in less than 18 months.

Q: Does that mean that you expect the elections for the constituent assembly to take place within 18 months?

A: Yes, that is the feeling of the ANC and the party. But we are aware of the fact that this is an issue of negotiations. We are going to listen very carefully and attentively to the responses of other parties in the course of the meeting of CODESA. But we are going there with this position.

Q: Will economic issues be part of the negotiations at CODESA?

A: No, there will just be a general stating of principles, but there will be no substantive discussions of economic matters.

Q: Do you intend to create a forum for the discussions of economic issues?

A: Already, the tripartite alliance [ANC, SACP, COSATU D Ed.] has its own economic policy forum, called the EPF. We are preparing positions on economic matters together with the ANC and COSATU. I am aware of the fact that COSATU has gone further to say that there should be economic negotiations because this government is rushing to introduce in this country new economic policies and is in a hurry to implement them. This government is thoroughly discredited in the eyes of the majority of the people in this country. You have seen this yourself with VAT [the newly-imposed Value Added Tax – Ed.]. They imposed VAT unilaterally. There was so much anger and resentment that is still there. The government is rapidly pushing for privatization without discussing the issue with COSATU, the Party and other organizations. We say that this government has no right to do that, especially at a time when political negotiations are taking place. We feel that once negotiations

begin, the regime should not be allowed to adopt new economic policies unless there are ongoing discussions on the part of relevant and competent bodies in this country. If changes in economic policies are to be made, this cannot be done unilaterally. There must be thorough discussion with the trade union movement, with the ANC, with the Communist Party and various other organizations.

Q: What is the difference between the role of CODESA in adopting constitutional principles and that of the constituent assembly?

A: At CODESA, we are going to push for the acceptance that this should be one united, non-racial, democratic and non-sexist country, for acceptance of the principle of one person, one vote in democratic elections, for a legislature, an executive and an independent judiciary. Those are the broad principles that we will advance, together with the proposal for an interim government and a constituent assembly. With respect to economic matters, we will generalize that there should be redistribution of the wealth of this country in order to address the problems of the majority, who are poor. But we don't feel that CODESA should begin to discuss what sort of economic policies should be adopted in this country.

The constituent assembly will be a body which is representative. We must remember that CODESA is composed of organizations that have not come with a mandate. Nobody knows the strength of the different organizations there. Some organizations may have no mandate or even a constituency. We are not sure that some of them represent anybody. That is why CODESA can only adopt broad general principles. But the nitty gritty of the constitution must be discussed by the constituent assembly, for example, such questions as: what will be the power of the central government; do we need two legislative houses and if so, what will be their power; if we decide upon a unitary state, what will be the powers of the regions; will the regions exercise some form of autonomy, and in what areas; what is going to be the power of local government.

There is a feeling on the part of the ANC and the Communist Party that government must be nearer to the people as much as possible. You cannot be nearer to the people as much as possible unless you have regional legislative assemblies and local governments that deal with local or regional matters. Democracy cannot just be at the top. It must come down to the grass roots. These are some of the things that must be discussed by the constituent assembly.

In addition, we must discuss how often elections will take place, whether the president should be elected by popular elections or by parliament, whether there should be a prime minister, and whether he should be appointed by the president or elected by parliament; whether we will adopt proportional representation; what will be the role of traditional chiefs, of trade unions. The constitution in its detailed form should be discussed by elected representatives of the people.

Q: Will the SACP play a role independent from the ANC at CODESA?

A: We are a party of the working class. So we want our focus to be on the working class. We don't want the interests of the working class to be marginalized in the course of negotiations. We must ensure that the workers actually play a role and that their aspirations are articulated in the course of negotiations. We are going to be playing our role together with the African National Congress and COSATU. We will strategize together. We will support the positions of the ANC because we have been part of the formulation of those positions. At the same time, we want to establish our right as an independent political formation to participate at the talks.

Q: Would the Communist Party participate in the interim government?

A: The view of the Party, and there is an ongoing discussion on this, is that the party should not encumber itself with high profile participation in the interim government. The interim government is a government of national unity and within it there would be people from different social and political organizations, as well as from the churches and even big business. In other words, it should be people who are generally acceptable to all of the parties.

Our party has a big role in terms of mobilizing the working class and the poor for future elections. It is my view that our party should devote much of its attention to preparing the working people in this country for democratic elections so that we have an effective presence in the legislative assemblies in the future. But that does not rule out some people within the party at a lower level, some technocrats of the party, participating in an interim government.

We shall, of course, be monitoring the interim government. We want to feel free to criticize it if it adopts wrong policies. An interim government is not elected, but it is a government of appointees with a very, very restricted mandate. We will participate in making recommendations for membership in that interim government, but I can't see some of the senior leaders of the party playing a role in the interim government.

THE PARTY CONGRESS

Q: Turning to the Party Congress, it was reported that the party has 25,000 members, 95 percent of whom have joined since the public launch of the party in July 1990. How did this tremendous growth happen? Do you expect it to continue?

A: We were surprised. The growth exceeded our expectations. But we know the reasons for the support the party is enjoying in this country. We have been principled in the fight against apartheid and white domination in this country. Many Communists sacrificed, they have died in the armed struggle and the mass struggle against apartheid. Communist leaders featured in the different phases of the national liberation struggle. This was a source of tremendous inspiration to the oppressed people within the country.

Second, the government did a lot of work for us by abeling us as the main enemies of the state. The government reserved its most vitriolic attacks for the party. It passed the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950 to outlaw the party. We were the first organization to be outlawed in this country. It followed that by banning people under the Suppression Communism Act. It was felt in the minds of the people that Communists were the real enemies of this oppressive state. So the support is also a reaction to the hysterical anti-Communism that exists in this country. But also, our Party, although it was very small for a long time, was very consistent and was ready to sacrifice in the course of the fierce battles against apartheid.

But to go back to the question of growth, the growth was in the form of a leap forward from August of this year, when we started to re-establish an organizational core of the party. In June or July of this year, our membership was about seven or eight thousand. But from then on, it took off. After this Congress, I believe that we are going to see a tremendous growth of the party. We have now an elected leadership and will have a Politburo that will pay a lot of attention to the party. We will have a core at party headquarters that will be in dynamic contact with the regions and the branches. We will not remain in our offices all of the time. We will take rounds, visiting the regions, addressing branches and holding seminars with members of the party.

We will step up our campaign to deepen political education. We are also going to have a role in mass campaigns, especially those focusing on the plight of the workers and the poor, to demand the release of political prisoners, for houses, against inflation and VAT, demands for the lowering of prices on bread and other essential commodities that are consumed by the poor in this country. We will also build bilateral contacts between the party and the unions affiliated with COSATU to discuss joint strategies between the party and some of these unions and will call upon the regions of the party to maintain close liaison with ANC and COSATU at the branch and regional levels. So the party is going to have a visible profile.

Q: You and Chairman Joe Slovo had projected a vision of democratic socialism for South Africa, but the delegates to the Congress voted to remove the adjective “democratic” from the references in the draft constitution and the manifesto to the party’s socialist objective. How do you assess this?

A: I don’t think that a lot should be read into the decision to remove the adjective “democratic.” We should read rather the contributions of the delegates as to why the adjective [changed to “word” D Ed.] democratic should be removed. You must remember that there was a clear commitment on the part of the delegates to the democratization of the party. We equally declared our commitment to a multi-party system of government. We even said that the party must recognize the right of each and every party to exist and organize in South Africa. We said that even in our quest for a leading role in society that we would do this in competition or contest with other

political organizations or formations. But the majority of delegates felt that we must not say because of the distortions of socialism that have occurred that therefore socialism is not democratic. They are arguing that socialism as defined or explained by its founding fathers is democratic and that by saying “democratic” socialism you are implying that socialism is inherently undemocratic. And they feel that we are beginning to feel guilty about what is happening in the Soviet Union and the other Eastern European countries as if we are arguing that it was socialism that was responsible for all the problems they had.

I remember one delegate stood up to say that we must not confuse the tool with the worker; that if a worker makes a mistake using that tool, it is not the fault of the tool, but the fault of the worker; that the distortions were due to the subjective mistakes of the Communist parties or socialist parties of Eastern Europe and that socialism remains basically a champion of democracy and the rights of the people, especially the working people. This was put to the vote and the argument that “democratic” should be removed prevailed, despite the fact that Joe and myself felt that given the present situation of what has happened in Europe we ought to emphasize our commitment to democracy by including the adjective.

But I think the comrades are emphasizing that it is not the adjective but our own practice in building the Communist Party, in our own program, in accepting pluralism, in accepting competition with other parties for a leading role in the society, in other words, it is going to be our own democratic practices which are going to show whether we are democratic or not.

Q: Is socialism simply a far off vision for South Africa or does the party see a path to socialism?

A: I don't think it's a very remote vision. We accept the theory of stages, but we are not even rigid about that. In any country, there could be leaps, depending on the objective and subjective situations. We are saying now strongly that we stand for the victory of the national democratic revolution, which will lead to the democratization of our society. That will be revolutionary, because our people will for the first time in their history be given the vote to decide on their own government. We are going to push for that government to have working-class representatives, Communists and trade unionists in its ranks, within the alliance. Together with the ANC, we are saying that the economy is going to be mixed, because we want growing participation of the workers in the economy of this country.

It is true that we have not come with a fine definition of this participation. We would like, for instance, that the workers be involved at the point of production in determining the policies of companies, together with their employers. Second, we want to retain the option of nationalization. We must consider nationalizing some of the industries in the interest of empowering the workers. We must move away from this situation where nationalization in Eastern Europe became bureaucratic and had

nothing to do with people's participation. We must democratize it. The trade unions and people's representatives should be involved in running nationalized industries. We must also look for joint partnership on certain concerns with industry. We must examine cooperative ownership in some industries. In other words, we must see how we can pull into the economy as many people as possible through their different organizations.

We feel that part of the problem in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was that only the Communist Party played a powerful role. We feel other democratic organizations should be involved in the problems of the economy of this country, discussing, for instance, how do we generate economic growth so that there can be more jobs, what strategies should we evolve to attract foreign investment that should be in the interest of expanding the South African economy, not just in the interest of these multinational companies squeezing our people as much as possible in order to have profits. So the party sees that vision.

At the same time, the party says that is the beginning of our march towards socialism. We must make sure that our vision for socialism is not diminished. But you cannot have a time frame because you must always be guided by the objective situation. Certainly we will try to restrict the pre-eminence of private enterprise by encouraging more forms of people's participation in the economy as much as possible. But this is part of the class struggle. Some of the issues are going to be determined by the attitude of the capitalist class. Others will also be determined by the type of government we have and how strong is the working-class element in that government. That will be the subjective factor. It is also going to be determined by the ability of the party in alliance with COSATU to formulate a coherent policy for the advancement of the workers and the poor of this country and to devise effective strategies in the struggle against the capitalist class under new conditions.

Q: What role do you see for the international community and for the forces which have demonstrated solidarity with the national liberation struggle?

A: We believe that there is a need to resuscitate the bonds of solidarity among progressive forces throughout the world. We have to look at the collapse of those strong bonds. At one time the international Communist movement was a formidable force, but now it is non-existent. We have not come together as Communist parties to do a post mortem, to ask where did we go wrong?

We cannot do this in a grandiose manner given the difficult objective conditions. Many parties, even our own, have problems. But I think, in a small way, some parties now must begin the process of coming together and defining areas of common activity and common interest. For instance, how do we counter the increasing growth of the United States as the only super power? Is this in the interest of humanity?

How do we stop the armaments race? It is no longer a race between the Soviet Union and the United States of America. But how do we stop the growing militarization, which tends to have an effect on the standard of living of the working people? How do we make sure that the military industrial complex does not stoke areas of tension and conflict throughout the world, does not, for instance, exploit regional problems like in Iraq and Kuwait in order to have a market for its arsenal? How to insure that there is a peaceful solution to regional problems? How do we get rid of the accumulated nuclear arsenal? How do we mobilize people throughout the world to bring about general disarmament in the world so that the monies that are spent on arms are used to improve the standards of living? How do we focus on all these issues? Second, how do we insure that we try to make our environment clean, improve the health of the people throughout the world, solve the problem of AIDS and the decline in life expectancy?

We as Communist parties must discuss how to reassert our position in society as we did several years ago, participating in demonstrations against the offensive of capital, demonstrating for peace. How do we bring about the unity in action of the peoples of the world in pursuit of the interests of the working class and the broad democratic forces? In other words, how do we capture the initiatives that we have lost to capitalism? How do we together contribute to the fight against illiteracy and disease, which are still problems in probably 80 percent of the world, in Asia, Africa and Latin America? These are the problems that we should begin to focus our attention on as Communist parties. How to exchange experiences, how to inspire one another, because now there is a growing despondency and frustration on the part of many Communist movements throughout the world. We have got to stop this because that despondency and frustration plays into the hands of the capitalists, who are continuing to turn their backs on the majority of humanity.

Q: Does your party expect to take any initiative to bring Communist parties together?

A: We shall be consulting with Communist parties and we must not have unrealistic expectations. We were heartened by the visits of international guests to our congress and for us that's the beginning of once more restoring internationalism. And we are going to be communicating with other Communist parties to raise certain issues. We shall start in Africa to explore whether there are still existing some Communists or left-wing parties. I think we need to broaden to include parties that are not regarded as orthodox Communist parties. We have to bring in left-wing parties and environmental groups and identify areas of common interest. I don't think that we should just remain a clan. We have to move out of that narrow way in which the international Communist movement acted in the past.

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