The role of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the creation of a democratic civil-military relations tradition

James Ngculu

Introduction
The question of the contribution of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in creating and upholding strong civil-military relations is a subject that needs in-depth study. It is important, in particular to those of us in MK who were involved in this phase, to begin to initiate such a study and debate because of our experience and the intimacy of our knowledge.

This paper seeks to trace the history of MK, focusing on how the tradition of political accountability and subordination of MK soldiers to the political leadership was exercised. Of course, this tradition of accountability was not unique to MK. Many liberation movements in Southern Africa embraced traditions of political subordination with varying degrees of success. Similarly, in the struggle of the Vietnamese against French and American imperialism, strong political leadership of the guerilla formation was emphasized.

During their struggle against the Czar, the Bolsheviks developed the concept of Commissars, who were party loyalists charged with making sure that people ‘towed the party line’. This tradition of commissars was later to be adopted by many liberation movements including the ANC. I will reflect how this particular MK tradition contributed to the creation of strong civil-military relations in the democratic South Africa.

Overview of the political history of MK
The formation of MK—the military wing of the ANC—was announced on 16 December 1961. At the same time MK began a sabotage campaign against strategic installations throughout South Africa.

In the leaflet issued on 16 December 1961, MK high command made its political allegiance quite clear by stating:

“Umkhonto we Sizwe will carry on the struggle for freedom and democracy by methods, which are necessary to complement the actions of the established national liberation organizations. Umkhonto we Sizwe fully supports the national liberation movement and calls on members, jointly and individually to place themselves under the overall political guidance of the movement.”¹

During the initial stages of its formation MK avoided openly mentioning the ANC for tactical reasons. MK sought to protect the leadership of the ANC, in
particular those who had nothing to do with the decision to take the route of armed struggle, from reprisals by the South African government. Hence the manifesto further stated, ‘Umkhonto we Sizwe is a new independent body, formed by Africans...’

The manifesto then explained the role of MK in the overall strategy of the liberation movement:

“Umkhonto we Sizwe will be at the frontline of the people’s defence. It will be the fighting arm of the people against the government and its policies of race oppression. It will be the striking force of the people for liberty, for rights and for their final liberation... In these actions we are working in the best interest of all the people of this country... whose future happiness and well-being cannot be attained without the overthrow of the Nationalist Government, the abolition of white supremacy and the winning of liberty, democracy and full national rights and equality for the people of the country.”

In every revolutionary struggle, the resort to armed struggle is a response to the use of violence by the oppressor. The ANC leadership could not stand by and watch the abuse of South African citizens by the apartheid regime. But even at these early stages, political subordination was not compromised. As Nelson Mandela said during his trial in 1964:

“I did not plan it [sabotage] in a spirit of recklessness, nor because I have any love of violence. I planned it as a result of a calm and sober assessment of the political situation that had arisen from many years of tyranny, exploitation and oppression of my people by the whites.”

During this period, all MK functions including recruitment fell under the direction of the MK National High Command. The National High Command determined the tactics and targets and was also in charge of training, selection and finance. Regional Commands were responsible for the direction of local sabotage groups in their areas. Although it was not always obvious, the ANC leadership had control over MK High Command, and volunteers for MK came from the ANC or its allies. In an interview with the Guardian newspaper Oliver Tambo, president of the ANC, said: ‘it was a new situation. We decided then to embrace violence as a method of strike. We were still cautious. The strict rule was that sabotage should involve no injury to life.”

Operation Mayibuye (a strategy document of MK for the conduct of guerilla warfare) stated that ‘before operations take place, political authority will have been set up in secrecy in a friendly territory with a view to supervise the struggle both in its internal and external aspects.”

So, from the very beginning, MK emphasized that armed actions took place within a broader political context. This applied to the basic policy direction of the ANC but also points to the sense of the morality and justice that under-
pinned both the training of MK cadres and the conduct of the armed struggle. In a statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission the ANC said, ‘The temptation to resort to indiscriminate attacks was always there, but at all times, the principled approach of the movement would prevail.’

Tambo and other senior ANC leaders were instructed to leave South Africa in 1960 to prepare conditions for the ANC externally. The ANC knew that it would become necessary to set up an external presence as the repressive activities of the Nationalist Party Government increased in proportion to the gathering armed resistance. In 1962 Nelson Mandela travelled to various African states and to Europe to receive military training. As Mandela saw it his purpose was ‘To equip myself for the role which I might have to play if the struggle drifted into guerilla warfare.’

At the same time he made arrangements for MK recruits to undergo military training in Africa. Steadily from the year 1961 onwards, ANC cadres were being recruited to undergo training as MK soldiers.

The Rivonia arrests in 1964 presented enormous challenges to the organization. Francis Meli, a senior ANC member and editor of the ANC journal Sechaba, captured this period when he wrote:

“After Rivonia, the underground machinery of the liberation movement was almost completely destroyed, with the ANC and other political leaders in jail, exiled, banned or under one form of restriction or another. The external mission of the ANC to engage in vital international solidarity work began therefore to take over the onerous task of training people, infiltrating trained cadres, weapons and ammunition, resuscitating underground units, in short, the whole process of preparing an armed struggle.”

Of course, once this situation of exile became a reality, new challenges and problems emerged. South Africa was surrounded by colonies hostile to the liberation movement. Chief amongst these challenges was how to maintain control over the large numbers of trained soldiers awaiting deployment in the camps.

In 1967/68 the ANC entered into a military pact with the Zimbabwean African People’s Union (ZAPU). The pact outlined a plan for MK to fight its way to South Africa through Zimbabwe. Translated into practice this operation became the Wankie/Sipolilo Campaigns. These campaigns revealed certain weaknesses in the organization, which needed urgent attention. The most obvious weakness that was demonstrated was the relationship between the political and military leadership. It seemed that the prevailing motivation in the decision to go to Zimbabwe with ZAPU was based on immediate military imperatives rather than serious evaluation of the political conditions pertaining in Zimbabwe at the time.

The methods of mobilization in Zimbabwe never gave consideration to building a mass support base. The subjective considerations of the decision
tended to override the need for a careful analysis of the objective conditions for the mission. Thus the joint forces found in the actual combat situation that the ZIPRA forces were not well connected with the rural masses that were supposed to constitute their support base. The issue of cadre preparation for the eventuality of establishing an underground in Zimbabwe and mobilizing the masses to form a support base was not catered for adequately in their training. A decision was taken to hold a Conference in April 1969 at Morogoro in Tanzania, which later became known as the Morogoro Conference.

This was the first conference of the ANC since the Lobatse Conference in Botswana in 1962. The Morogoro Conference proposed to bring about organisational changes in the movement in terms of structure and framework and to formulate a plan to take the national liberation struggle forward. The following are some of the resolutions adopted by the conference:

The conference urges the National Executive Council (NEC) to give priority to:

- The provision of intensive political education for all sectors of the movement;
- the adoption of a code or oath which all revolutionaries in the ANC and MK should be governed and bound by;
- the provision of military training for all sectors of the movement.

It is important to note that for the first time the organization had to stress the need for a structured political education program. This was necessitated by the fact that ANC had entered the mode of armed struggle and there were many new recruits to the military wing who knew little or nothing about the politics of the ANC as an organisation.

The Morogoro Conference worked out a modern approach to the art and science of a political and military liberation struggle. The theory of armed struggle in the ANC/MK context was further developed and the Strategy and Tactics Document was adopted. The Strategy and Tactics Document saw the objective factors for the emergence of guerilla warfare as dependent on:

- The existence of a political leadership capable of gaining the organized allegiance of the people for armed struggle and which has both the experience and the ability to carry out the painstaking process of planning, preparation and overall conduct of operations.
- Readiness to respond to the strategy of armed struggle with all the enormous sacrifices which this involves.
- First extending and consolidating the ANC underground machinery. Military struggle was seen as forming only part of, and being guided by a broad political strategy.
- The document also recognized the primacy of the political leadership as unchallenged and supreme and that all revolutionary formations and levels (whether armed or not) were to be subordinate to this leadership.
The Morogoro Conference took a decision to change the politico-military structures of the ANC and the Revolutionary Council (RC) was established. The council was structured to consolidate the supremacy of political leadership. All ANC camps fell directly under the RC which was charged with:

- internal reconstruction and propaganda;
- planning and commencement of sustained guerilla operations; and
- infiltrating trained personnel back into South Africa.

The RC was under the direction and control of the National Executive Committee (NEC). Tambo, the ANC president, chaired the committee, which included both political and military leaders. The RC had a Military Council and Internal Reconstruction Unit. The Military Council was in charge of the camps and armed operations and the Internal Reconstruction Unit was responsible for building underground structures and for political mobilization.

**People’s war, people’s power**

The watershed in the history of the ANC and MK in the days of exile is the Morogoro Conference. The emphasis on the need for internal reconstruction of the ANC and the building of the underground that emerged from the conference proved to be a good strategy. This coupled with the release of some members of the ANC from detention and imprisonment in the late sixties and early seventies rekindled the forces of resistance. Later in the seventies, some propaganda units were established. Leaflet bombs, street broadcasts, reproduction of congress material and journals greatly contributed to the re-emergence of the spirit of resistance.

The 1976 student uprisings in Soweto and in other areas of South Africa once and for all proved to South Africa and the world that the people’s quest for freedom could never be suppressed by guns or oppressive laws. Many South African youths who left the country in 1976 subsequently joined the ANC and MK. The spirit of resistance continued to intensify right up to the eighties when there were mass uprisings in a number of townships in South Africa.

At the Kabwe Conference of the ANC in 1985 the issue of continuing tension around the lack of coordination between the political and military structures of the organisation was raised. The organization had recognized this tension when the restructuring took place in 1983 and the conference sought to emphasize the interdependence of the political and military structures of the organization. Some operations conducted in the seventies were designed to sustain a spirit of resistance and generate confidence in the organization. Armed actions helped considerably to create the atmosphere for political rejuvenation whilst on the other hand popular mass actions laid the basis for the introduction of sustained armed actions. People pointed to the need to main-
tain a well organised underground, linked to mass political revolutionary bases throughout the country in both rural and urban areas, and underscored that armed activities could not grow significantly either in scale or quality unless they met such a requirement.

Serious attention was given to mass mobilization during this period. Armed action was guided by the political leadership and care was taken to ensure that the balance between political and military activities was reflected at all levels of planning and in the way the resources were allocated. Organized combat activities were primarily guided by the needs of the political struggle.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) captures this succinctly in its programme *Path to Power* adopted in Cuba in 1989:

> The path to power lies with our masses. In recent years they have shown their immense resilience and strength. The harnessing of this mass political energy and the realisation of its enormous potential continues to be the dominant task of the liberation vanguard. It is a task which requires the firm rooting of the underground, consisting of political and military functions under political leadership and strengthening of all organs of the mass democratic movement.

Central to all the work of the ANC and MK was the question of fully preparing MK soldiers. This did not just entail military skills but also concentrated on political education and training. The commissariat played a critical role in this arena. MK adopted the Soviet model of having the commander deputized by the commissars. The commissars were responsible for the political, social and cultural life of the soldier. He or she had to be the ideologue of the organization who fully understood the policies of the ANC and was capable of communicating them to the soldiers. The commissar also had to be fully informed about and conversant with the international political situation. Some said a commissar was like the mother of soldiers. Commissars played a central role in the political education of MK soldiers. It was a rule that the political education program in the ANC became the central aspect of military training. MK operatives had to demonstrate military proficiency and have a thorough understanding of the policies and programs of the ANC as well as an understanding of the international situation. The political education emphasized that the enemy should not be defined simply in racial terms. The ANC educated its cadres in the four pillars of the revolution. That is:

- the underground;
- armed struggle;
- mass mobilization;
- international mobilization.
In this context, armed struggle was one of the four pillars of struggle and therefore had to be conducted in such a way that it reinforced rather than undermined the other pillars. In general, political training in MK was an integral part of military training. This training covered the history of the ANC, wars of resistance, international situation, Marxism-Leninism and also a weekly current events analysis and monthly political discussion. The ANC stated in its submission to the TRC in August 1966: ‘Once MK camps had been established, part of the training of every MK combatant was political and included insistence that the enemy should not be defined simply in racial terms.’

In April 1983 a Conference of all front and rear commanders and Commissars was held in Maputo to address the question of the conduct of the liberation struggle. One of the issues was the question of co-ordination between the military and the political axes of the struggle. Also under discussion during this period was the Politico–Military Council (PMC) document titled Planning for a People’s war, which was meant to generate wider discussion within the movement on the question of people’s war and people’s power. This document highlighted the question of creating a revolutionary base by arming the people.

In May 1983, new structures were introduced in the ANC underground. The RC was replaced by the PMC, which became the most senior body in the ANC after the NEC. Under the PMC the Military Headquarters (MHQ) and Internal Political Committee (IPC) were charged with armed struggle and mass mobilization respectively. The PMC was chaired by Oliver Tambo and included the General Secretaries of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). Members of the NEC headed the Secretariat. The PMC was charged with implementing decisions of the NEC regarding political and military leadership. National Intelligence (NAT) was responsible for intelligence and counter intelligence and was also accountable to the PMC. Regional PMCs (RPMCs) were set up to create a link between the PMC and structures in the forward areas. At a local level there were Area PMCs (APMCs).

This demonstrates how strong the political authority and control of MK was. MK cadres had to be educated in order to understand and appreciate the central role of the NEC. People had to internalise that the military line was derived from the political line, which came from the highest body of the ANC, the NEC.

At the Kabwe Conference, the ANC revised its Strategy and Tactics Document adopted at the Morogoro Conference in 1969. The primary perspective that emerged at Kabwe, was that the ANC should step up the all-round political and military offensive and prepare for a protracted people’s war. This was a departure from the Morogoro classical guerrilla warfare approach in rural areas, with urban areas playing a supportive role. Kabwe saw general insurrection as the logical culmination of a people’s war. This of course was in line with the ANC’s Green Book that states:
“preparation for the people’s armed struggle and its victorious conclusion is not solely a military question. This means that the armed struggle must be based on, and grow out of, mass political support and it must eventually involve a whole people, all military activities must, at every stage, be guided and determined by the need to generate political mobilization, organization and resistance, with the aim of progressively weakening the grip on the reins of political, military, economic, social and military actions.”

The Green Book referred to here was the product of a visit by an ANC Commission to Vietnam to learn from the Vietnamese on their successful conduct of a people’s war. The delegation reported in 1979 and the actual recommendations were implemented and consolidated in 1985 at Kabwe. The Strategy and Tactics Document adopted at Kabwe noted:

“The central issue of South African politics is the question of state power. […] The character of the South African ruling class and the fact that white minority apartheid rule is, by definition, rule by force of arms, makes it inevitable that we can only win people’s power through a combination of revolutionary violence in a protracted people’s war and mass political struggle, under the African National Congress.”

The emphasis was thus placed on building the ANC underground and organisations and trade unions, which would pursue the Congress line inside South Africa. It was in the 1980s that South Africa indeed became ungovernable and apartheid unworkable. Many observers in South Africa and abroad realised that this state of crisis indicated that people were no longer prepared to tolerate rule by the apartheid government. With this change new opportunities and challenges presented themselves to liberation movements.

The post-1990 period

In the 1980s, as indicated above, it became clear that the Nationalist Party Government was in an irreversible crisis and that the economy was in recession. Pressure on the apartheid regime to talk to the liberation movement, in particular the ANC, was brought to bear not only by the combination of armed and mass struggle, but by the international community and supporters of the regime internally. There were indications that there would be new developments and the ANC needed to prepare itself for any eventuality including a negotiated settlement. As Joe Slovo said in an interview in 1989, ‘We can make two mistakes about the present situation. One is to say that nothing has changed and the other is to exaggerate the changes.’
The ANC did not want to make either of those mistakes. In 1998, the organization had produced Constitutional Guidelines for a Democratic South Africa. Written into this set of guidelines was a section called:

“Basic guidelines for the foundation for government including justice, security and armed forces will be democratised and defined not in terms of loyalty to a government, but rather to the constitution.”15

In May 1990, the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA) took a delegation to meet the ANC. The delegation included retired and serving South African Defence Force (SADF) officers, military analysts, researchers, and officers from the Transkei, Ciskei, and Venda Defence Forces. Frederick van Zyl Slabbert, the head of IDASA, led the delegation. The ANC delegates were drawn from MHQ, the Department of Information and Propaganda (DIP), SACTU and the International Department. The delegation was led by John Nkadimeng and co-chaired by Thabo Mbeki (then head of the International Department of the ANC).

This was the first direct meeting between MK and the SADF and was predictably tense. After two days of intense discussions the meeting managed to reach consensus on the need for further discussions between MK and the SADF and the ultimate need to integrate the two forces. There was reluctance from some South African delegates who were concerned that:

• MK was a political army and the SADF a professional army.
• MK did not fight with the SADF but with the South African Police (SAP).
• There should be no Nuremberg trials in the post apartheid South Africa.

After heated debate it was agreed that the SADF could not be called a professional defence force and that MK was an army of liberation not a police force. It was agreed that there would be no Nuremberg-like trials but that ways should be found to address the question of atrocities and crimes against humanity. Lastly, it was agreed that South Africa would ultimately need a small defence force that would not pay allegiance to any political party but to the constitution. At the end of the meeting, there was a feeling of togetherness and commitment to a negotiated settlement in South Africa. The South African delegates for the first time realized that MK was not a rag-tag army of the ignorant and uncultured, but rather an army of South Africans committed to a democratic and non-racial government in the country.

It is perhaps at this meeting that the first seeds of integration were planted. With the unfolding of negotiations, the ANC adopted a number of principles and policy positions that were to be repeated in countless discussion documents and policy documents. At the Policy Conference of the ANC held on the 28-31 May 1992, the ANC adopted policy guidelines that were encapsulated in a document titled Ready to Govern. This document indicated that:
• Our future security forces will represent the democracy we are striving for.
• There is a need to change the way the security forces work. The Security Forces will only enjoy the support of the people if they have moral and political legitimacy.
• There can only be real peace and security if there is well being amongst our people.
• The Security Forces will respect human rights, non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy. They will not support any political party. Members of the Security Force cannot hold office in any political party.
• South Africa must work peacefully and co-operatively with its neighbours.
• Security Forces answer to those who have been democratically elected by the people, so they will be under the control of Parliament;
• The people have the right to information about the Security Forces.
• The Defence Force will respect all democratic international laws, treaties and conventions at all times.\footnote{It is clear that these provisions drafted in 1992 managed to find their place in the post 1994 democratic dispensation and they are also in evidence in the White Paper on Defence and in our constitution. The key principle underpinning the resolutions in the ANC Policy Conference in 1992 was that the armed forces of a democratic South Africa would have to be subordinate to democratic civil control and that appropriate structures to exercise that democratic control would need to be created. It would be these structures that would help parliament realise its work.}

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The researchers in the Military Research Group (MRG) became a central and effective policy development and research structure for the ANC. The MRG proved to be invaluable in particular during the CODESA period when the ANC needed to come up with clear proposals on integration and new structures.

One of the key observations in the ANC was that it was important that soldiers should be allowed to act as professionals and leave other things to politicians or civilians. There was strong motivation for the creation of a Ministry of Defence that would realign the power structures in the military after democratisation.\footnote{The Sub-Council on Defence—a substructure of the Transitional Executive Council (TEC)—mandated the Joint Military Co-ordinating Committee (JMCC) in February 1994 to establish a Ministry of Defence Work Group that would propose options for the creation of a Ministry of Defence. This Ministry of Defence should be governed by transparency, accountability, separation of power and legality.}

At the time a number of MK officers performed a central role in ensuring that the policies of the ANC were carried out and that the negotiated settle-
ment was adhered to. These officers with their strong political and ideological consciousness, their skills in negotiations and their initiative, managed to steer the integration process under difficult conditions. Today, in their various capacities within the Department of Defence and in Parliament, they continue to play a role in the maintenance of sound civil-military relations.

The experience of MK operatives in exile, especially their exposure to a wide range of different cultures in countries across Africa and Europe, has helped in the process of integration. The political expertise of these soldiers and their positive feelings toward civil communities, in particular Black communities, has contributed to ensuring a positive attitude among South African citizens to the new South African National Defence Force (SANDF).

**Challenges for the future**

Integration and the creation of the SANDF have contributed immensely to the stability of the new democracy. Although the integration of the armed forces started with a multitude of problems, the new SANDF is becoming unified.

At the outset of the integration process there were teething problems. The SADF soldiers struggled with accepting the MK soldiers as equals and the MK soldiers and other non-statutory force members faced problems in adjusting to a regular defence force. In addition to this, the integration process was slow and people were subjected to all sorts of exclusion tactics around ranking and placement. Many former MK and non-statutory defence force members were forced to endure prolonged stays at the assembly base at Walmansthal. At one point they decided to march about 40 km to the Union Buildings in order to draw the attention of the leadership to their problems.

Protests and marches also took place in other parts of the country by people who felt they were being unfairly treated in the integration process. A senior officer of the SANDF who was formerly a senior officer in MK, wrote a stinging memorandum on the way former non-statutory force members were being treated. He also noted that the majority of people being sent to military tribunals for offences such as absence without leave and similar misdemeanors, were mainly former non-statutory force members. These problems and others reached the attention of the leadership including former President Nelson Mandela, who assisted in resolving them.

Similar problems continued to emerge in the SANDF and these indicated an ongoing need for long term monitoring of integration in the defence force. The rationalization process, whereby SANDF force levels should be reduced to just 70,000 will present challenges. The central question of course is what will happen to demobilised soldiers. Creative solutions will need to be found that will not see these soldiers being thrown into the streets.
Civil-Military relations are a dynamic process. Credit must go to all those who played a positive role in the difficult period of transition. As a former MK officer, I am immensely proud of the discipline and selflessness of MK cadres in nurturing our democracy. They remained committed to building democracy in South Africa and were willing to make compromises and personal sacrifices.

However, there is a need to nurture the positive traditions and successes of civil–military relations in South Africa. As the culture of democracy becomes more firmly entrenched in South Africa and the pressures of oversight weigh heavily, there may be a tendency to become less vigilant in monitoring and enforcing policies that promote the highest good for civil-military relations in the long term.

As we continue to build stable civil-military relations, the most important thing a former MK cadre can do is to emulate the founders of MK by their high level of discipline, creativity and respect of civil supremacy over the armed forces.

**Endnotes**

1. Manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
5. *The Guardian*, June 1983. The ‘we’ Tambo refers to in this statement is the ANC leadership.
7. ANC statement to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996.
8. Nelson Mandela: The Struggle is My Life
10. Ibid.
11. ANC submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, August 1996.
12. Green Book – ANC Documents
13. ANC Strategy and Tactics Document adopted at Kabwe Conference 1985 of the ANC.
15. ANC Documents – files