



The Congress of the People and Freedom Charter:

A People's History

Ismail Vadi

Jacana Media: Auckland Park, 2015. 179pp

Reviewed by Howard Smith

Published in 2015 to coincide with the 60th Anniversary of the Congress of the People, Ismail Vadi's account of this historic event, the campaign that preceded it, and the Freedom Charter it produced is a valuable addition. Though containing little unique material, its value lies in the reflective descriptions of the forces that worked for its success – including the ANC, the Indian Congresses (Transvaal and Natal), the Coloured People's Organisation, the Congress of Democrats and the South African Congress of Trade Unions, together with organisations outside the Congress Alliance such as Liberal Party, the National Peace Council and newly founded Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW).

The strengths and weaknesses of the campaign for the Congress of the People are thoroughly assessed by region and social sector, along with its impact in rural areas, on the reviving trade union sector and among women. Its role in the development of the Congress organisations and their alliance receives particular attention. While the more feminist aspects of women's demands were not pursued, the socio-economic needs of women were canvassed and their aspirations were reflected in the Freedom Charter. Vadi also attributes the inclusion of

the clause "There Shall Be Peace and Friendship" to the participation of the National Peace Council.

Vadi also give useful attention to the ongoing debate about the socialist content of the Freedom Charter. Again the impact of forces engaged in the campaign – in this case, primarily the workers through trade unions – on the final document is assessed. As elsewhere, Vadi amplifies his assessment with both contemporary and more recent quotations. In this case, he includes Ben Turok's introduction of the economic clause, "The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth", at Kliptown on 26 June 1955, along with Steve Tshwete's 1985 view that the Freedom Charter represents "the maximum (demands) for the bourgeoisie and the minimum for the working class. In other words, the bourgeoisie will not strive for more than is contained in the Charter, while the working class will have sufficient cause to aspire beyond its demands."

While this publication has value as an introduction to its subjects – the quotations from a number of organisations' contemporary minutes and reports are of great interest and later interviews with individuals who were key players at the time – it also has weaknesses which I attribute to the publisher. While there is an adequate bibliography accompanying this text,

the reader would benefit from a list of selected further readings. It may seem to be a quibble to draw attention to the numerous errors of sentence construction, of fact (Ronald, not Roland, Press of SACTU), consistency (FEDSAW in the useful list of acronyms but FSAW in the footnotes) and of layout (asterisks identifying footnotes are so small as to be missed), they add up to a failure of rigorous editing. More serious is the disparity the reader has to accommodate between a 2015 publication that includes a 1995 Foreword by Walter Sisulu welcoming this history "on the 40th anniversary of the Freedom Charter" alongside Ahmed Kathrada's 2015 Foreword with similar appreciation "(in) the 60th Year of the Freedom Charter." Is this the first publication as Jacana claims? That the author's concluding chapter refers to the ANC government's 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme but not later developments in that decade and since suggests that this history sat unpublished for almost twenty years before Jacana rushed into publication with only a commissioned second foreword and no opportunity for the concluding chapter to be updated. The reader deserves a publication that is transparent about its genesis and that is up to date in its conclusions at the year of publication. [NA](#)