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An anatomy of the 2009 elections

Daniel Silke examines the significance of the results for ANC and opposition.

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South Africa's fourth democratic elections since 1994 exposed some key fissures in the country's body politic yet also confirmed some long-standing trends. Domestic party politics has always been largely the domain of the African National Congress - fighting to either increase its monolithic dominance of public support within a single-dominant political party structure or fending off smaller and less significant opposition entities usually from minority communities. This election was no different - yet the unique circumstances following last year's un-ceremonial early dismissal of outgoing President Thabo Mbeki together with the ascent to the power by Mbeki's successor, the controversial Jacob Zuma., dominated the campaign.

In fact, the entire poll was dominated almost entirely by the persona of Jacob Zuma. Acquitted on rape charges three years ago and implicated in an ongoing graft and corruption scandal involving a very controversial and questionable arms scandal, Zuma was bound to illicit howls of derision from intellectuals. The 'chattering classes' were quick to laugh him off as eminently unsuitable for public office and to denigrate him for his lack of formal education. Coupled with his now infamous views on unprotected sex and the transmission of HIV/AIDS, Zuma's every word and deed became the focus of the campaign - to the detriment of most other policy debates.

All South Africa's political parties produced glossy and detailed election manifestos that dealt in varying degrees of detail with the perennial issues of 'service delivery' - particularly in education, health care and poverty alleviation. But, it was still Jacob Zuma and his suitability as future President that continued to occupy the minds of the media and analysts alike. Few voters would've been able to articulate policy nuances of the differing parties - but most had a view on Zuma.

And, with only a few weeks to go before Election Day, Zuma's fortunes were enhanced when the National Prosecuting Authority announced it was dropping the prosecution against him (pertaining to the arms scandal) as there was evidence of a political conspiracy to undermine his ascent to the throne of the Presidency. Zuma had therefore been thrown a vital lifeline and one which the ANC used to good effect. Already promoting Zuma as part of their campaign, the 'personality cult' was exacerbated. Zuma addressed vast crowds in stadia across the country - vindicated by the dropping of the graft investigation.

These issues contributed to a high degree of political drama in the run-up to the April poll. In addition, the ANC was for the first time, starting down a new wildcard opposition party, the Congress of the People (COPE). Born out of those disaffected by Mbeki's dismissal last year, COPE had become the darling of the media. In December 2008, with key Mbeki loyalists now ditching their lifelong home in the ANC and joining the new party, the ANC seemed on the skids. COPE had charismatic leaders with high profiles - yet their close association with the increasingly unpopular Mbeki years made them vulnerable to attack.

The new party had promised to shake up the support base of the ANC. Born from the same liberation movement and deriving much of its support from Black voters, the party represented the first real challenge to the ANC - from within its own fold. Rising tides of internal dissent within the ANC contributed to COPE's early lead in the publicity stakes, but its own infighting and leadership squabbles quickly offset this.

The party commendably tried to find fresh leadership blood in the articulate Bishop Mvume Dandala. It desperately wanted to move away from leadership figures who had been tainted by their overt support for Mbeki. However, in doing so it unleashed internal squabbles and eventually had to settle for promoting Dandala as its Presidential candidate but alongside party heavyweight Terror Lekota who felt slighted by Dandala's occupation of the #1 position on the party list. This confusion was to taint the COPE campaign along with a lack of resources and poor organization.

With the ANC fighting an insurrection from its own disaffected, the country's Liberal opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) smelt blood. Buoyed by the very efficient and irrepressible Helen Zille - the Mayor of Cape Town and party leader - the party saw the ANC's squabbles as a chance to increase their footprint within the electorate. Zille's public profile as Mayor had been exceptionally high. Her ability to make impressive strides in managing the City of Cape Town along with her appeal to a much broader coalition of class and ethnic groups made her a force within the campaign.

Traditionally, the party had always appealed to the middle classes - mainly white. Zille now was able to reach beyond these confines and try to establish a more racially (and class) diverse support base. Still, the old voting patterns of race allegiance which had been a characteristic of all elections since 1994, persisted. However, Zille's forthright manner and the fact that she could boast of a major City where her party was able to make a difference boosted her appeal. In the final week of the campaign, the DA took a more robust message to the electorate, asking them to "Stop Zuma" and stop the ANC from getting the more symbolic 2/3rd majority which would enable the ruling party to change the constitution of the country on its own.

The election results were quite significant, even though the ANC retained its dominance in almost every sphere of the body politic. It dropped a mere 4 percentage points from its all time high in 2004 to record some 65.9% of the vote. In international terms, the shedding of a few percentage points seems insignificant - yet in the South African context, it was a key feature of the overall result. The ANC did not achieve the 2/3rd majority it has in the previous parliament. Opposition parties, especially the DA have now claimed that it was their concerted efforts that kept the ANC support at lower levels.

Secondly, the DA managed its best ever election result. Although a very distant second at 16.6% of the total vote, the party upped its voting number to almost 3m from 1.9m in 2004. It therefore managed to up its tally of support by more than one third and it consolidated its role as the official opposition within the country. This, despite the additional challenge from the predominantly black COPE.

The DA's biggest success was resting power from the ANC in the Western Cape provincial parliament. Party leader, Helen Zille, will now move to occupy the senior position of Western Cape Premier in the hope that the party will use its provincial platform to further build on party support in the 2011 local government elections and in the 2014 national campaign. In a reversal of 1994, the DA polled over 1m votes in province winning just over 50% of the vote compared to the ANC's 31%.

Although the DA's vote is impressive, it still represents the ever-present ethnic census so characteristic of polling in South Africa. In the Western Cape, some 30% of the population is black - clearly representing the ANC's final result there. The DA barely made any inroads amongst blacks but was able to shore up massive support from Coloured (mixed race) citizens who represent the ethnic majority in the province. Needless to say, the party scored impressive tallies in predominantly white polling areas. Across the rest of the country, DA support also increased - but largely on the backs of white, coloured and Indian voters. The party will now have 67 MP's up from just fewer than 50.

COPE's election results were somewhat more ambiguous. Achieving 7.4% of the vote might sound fairly insignificant, but the new party did manage to garner well over 1m votes - not bad for a party some 4 months old and without state funding due to its lack of previous parliamentary representation. Party bosses certainly put that spin on the outcome but in reality, COPE promised much more. In fact, a showing of 10% would've been enough to place it as a possible serious growth threat to the ANC next time round and secure some sort of critical mass. Instead, the party of the disaffected Mbeki-ites failed to galvanize the black electorate.

Ambiguously though, COPE's vote when added to the DA's 3m tally does show a greater stomach for voting against the

ANC. In fact, the mere existence of COPE and its ability to win 30 seats makes it the most successful black opposition party in the post-1994 era. The key test will be to gauge if the party can play a sustained and credible role in public life. Can its newly elected MP's and leadership personalities develop this new style of opposition rather than allow it to dissipate and dissolve as has been the case with previous discontents from the ANC? The commitment and skills of COPE's 30 MP's can be enough to forge impressive growth next time round - but only if the party works incredibly hard on all fronts.

The relative success of both the DA and COPE offset a decline in support for smaller opposition parties. The Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom party (IFP) saw its support drop to 4.5% as Zulu nationalists found Jacob Zuma much more appealing than the IFP's aging Mangosuthu Buthelezi. In fact, the ANC trounced the IFP in KwaZulu Natal taking full control of that province for the first time with over 60% of the provincial ballot. Zulu ethnicity had definitely played a role in shoring up support for the ANC and thereby offsetting the decline to COPE amongst intellectuals and urban dwellers.

Other small parties fared poorly losing substantial ground to the larger opposition groups and the DA in particular. South Africa's opposition voters increasingly in this election ditched their old sectional loyalties and centralized their support for the stronger players in this section of the political marketplace.

The results do reflect some important trends and shifts. The size of the ANC win, despite its loss of support in percentage terms represents yet another example of the power and cache of the liberation movement - well beyond that of its political personalities. With Zuma so vilified by all and sundry, the ANC can be well proud of its electoral achievements. Most opinion polls showed that ANC supporters often themselves held a scepticism for Zuma but clearly were more than willing to vote for Zuma's party.

Secondly, the ANC ran an exceptionally efficient campaign. Granted, their healthy coffers were boosted by as yet undisclosed foreign donations. However, the existence of COPE somehow galvanized the party structures which had fallen into disarray during the Mbeki era. Like anyone facing new competition, the ANC dusted itself off and went back to its people. It campaigned vigorously and this bore fruit.

Thirdly, the ANC campaign was quite innovative. The party has an unnatural ability to act as government and opposition - virtually simultaneously. The nature of the ANC's tripartite alliance means that vigorous debate on policy and implantation occurs within party and increasingly in the public eye. Last year saw the party reject the inefficiencies of policy and frustrations with leadership as practiced by Mbeki. It went through an internal process of cleansing itself and in so doing, pulled no punches in admitting its failures to deliver.

This open and honest assessment coupled with a very useful scapegoat in the outgoing Mbeki administration looked at times as if it was the country's opposition taking aim at the ruling party. Instead it was the South African Communist Party or the Trade Unionists (COSATU) who were making the running. Their vocal voices of criticism enabled the ANC to look as though it was coming clean - admitting its faults and listening to alternatives.

This strategy - perhaps more part of the ritual of the ANC since 1994 - is extraordinarily effective in endearing voters. It offers voters the chance to continue voting for a party that is aware of its short-comings and has the ability to fix them. Coupled with the power that the ANC enjoys - and its ability to use that power to improve the lives of people - it's a heady mix that should not be underestimated. Add to this the unpopular Mbeki presidency, and there was every chance that the revitalized ANC would claw back many lost or wavering supporters.

South Africans clearly want to vote for a party with power. And, the ANC has a surfeit of it. Even if it has failed, its campaign held out the hope that things would get better - that it would rectify its errors and deliver that 'better life for all'. With the ANC in control in eight out of nine provinces and with a massive parliamentary majority, this message was right on the money. Power and Hope combined in a way in which no other political party could hope to compete. In fact, the ANC's message of Hope was substantially more positive than the scare tactics employed by the opposition and does pose further questions for opposition strategies in the future.

Fourthly, despite the ridiculing, Jacob Zuma was the antithesis to his predecessor. Mbeki was cold, aloof and an intellectual. Zuma was seen as warm, a people's person and a populist. For all the sniggering at him and the ever present ethical cloud, Zuma got down and danced with the people - literally and figuratively. ANC supporters wanted someone who would be seen to be on their side - and Zuma personified this.

So for all the success of the ANC, the opposition didn't do too badly. For the first time, opposition became legitimized in the body politic. Although criticised by the ANC for being colonial in nature and racist in thinking, South Africans were exposed to opposition politicians and personalities like never before. The media gave extensive coverage to all parties and even the much maligned state broadcaster, the SABC, hosted regular multi-party debates. With TV advertising allowed for the first time, South Africans became much more aware of the full spectrum of opinion. It was as though opposition had become institutionalised within our politics - for the first time.

The DA and COPE together look an interesting prospect. Both need each other. The DA desperately needs some modicum of black support while COPE seems hamstrung by logistical inefficiencies and leadership squabbled. They also need the minority votes that the DA have now maximised. Ironically, much of the DA's support came from poor Coloured voters - a break from the party's class-based past - but it still cannot even get the urban black sophisticate into its fold.

In a sense, the election points the way for a coming together in 2014 of a non-racial opposition movement - one that combines the best of both these parties. If this is to be the case, this election will be seen as one that planted some small seeds in the unification and de-racialization of opposition (and politics) in South Africa.

In addition, the DA's victory in the Western Cape affords the party the opportunity to shine at a provincial level - away from its metropolitan base. Whether it can harness the constraints of provincial powers and mould them into something tangible remains to be seen. But, the opportunity is there for a vigorous opposition to gain access to a bureaucracy and contrast itself with the monopoly that the ANC held previously. More and more power is falling out of the ANC's grasp - albeit incrementally. As centers of power move away from the ruling party, South Africans will be offered more points of comparison in assessing service delivery. This can only enhance and mature democratic state further.

In a sense, both the ANC and DA are a flipside of themselves. The ANC was locked out, in this election, from minority votes. And, the DA the same with the majority black population. From a national level, the ANC's inability to get minority votes stems from the Mbeki era and a more Africanist approach to politics - seemingly favouring the majority at the expense of minorities. If President Zuma wishes to turn this around, he will have to be much more inclusive and adopt a style more reminiscent of Nelson Mandela in reaching out to all South Africans. Indeed, Zuma more than any other ANC leader has the ability to do this. If he gets it right, minority voters will warm to him - and will also reward the ANC in local elections in 2011.

The DA will need to counter the ANC-created perception that it will benefit its own and thereby exclude blacks living in the Western Cape from delivery benefits. Ironically then, both these major parties need to spend time and energy on those who did not vote for them - in order to score future political points.

Finally, the sun now rises on the era of Jacob Zuma. President Zuma will find delivery complex and often very difficult. The ANC remains an ideologically divided political party. It's competing interests exacerbated by Zuma's use of the SACP, COSATU and the ANC's vocal Youth League to bolster his internal support in his battle with Mbeki and the Law. It is now payback time and the competing entities will not only want positions in the new government, but they will want policy shifts as well. And, to top it all, the ANC still has a capitalist core component that will have to be managed along-side the Leftists.

These problems have always been under the surface within the ANC - and always kept at bay. But, Zuma's ascent to the

Presidency has seen him call in favours - and his backers may not be so unforgiving if they don't get their place in the sun. Add to the mix the most serious economic recession the ANC has had to face since coming to office and the ability to deliver and implement becomes seriously curtailed. Can Zuma steer this ship - with a more consolidated opposition more entrenched than ever. It won't be easy!

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