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## THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

— LISA M. GONZÁLEZ —

In April 1994, while the world looked on mesmerized, the Republic of South Africa held its first democratic election in which blacks were allowed to participate. The election saw the peaceful collapse of apartheid, the country's former system of institutionalized racism, and the creation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) in its place. With Nelson Mandela as the country's newly elected president and F.W. DeKlerk, former president under the apartheid regime, as a deputy president, the GNU has striven for national reconciliation on all fronts. As the transitional government, the GNU is based on power sharing to promote unity and inclusion. It has also been charged with writing a new constitution to reflect the new South Africa.

In a country long divided by race, fear, and hate, the walls of segregation are finally being pulled down. The resulting political transformation is nothing less than monumental. Not only have the changes themselves been impressive, but the degree of political maturity, organization, and goodwill surrounding them has surpassed all expectations. The weeks leading up to the April 1994 election were tense, but the massive violence predicted by many did not occur. Instead, the world was awed by images of black South Africans waiting peacefully in line for two and three days to exercise their right to vote, and by stories of whites, for the first time ever, serving refreshments to the blacks in queue. At the conclusion of the election, the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's oldest and largest liberation movement, had undeniably won the day.

Two years later, South Africa is out of the international limelight. When its citizens took a second major step toward democracy in November 1995, holding local elections in most of the country, the event passed with little notice. Because of the peaceful national election, South Africa has come to be regarded as a wonderful success story and international attention has now turned elsewhere. However, the 1994 election itself is no indicator of South Africa's real political success. South Africa has only just begun the long transition to democracy. The first election was the easy part. The hard work of ensuring

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that democracy flourishes is only starting; its success will rest far more on the performance and strength of political parties than on the holding of elections.

The existence of multiple strong political parties is crucial to the future of a democratic South Africa for a number of reasons. First, from a structural point of view, the country's party list proportional representation system elevates the party to a higher and more powerful role than in many other countries, such as the United States. Second, ANC acquisition of a disproportionate amount of political power, due to significant financial and organizational backing at home and abroad, combined with the inability of other parties to mobilize themselves as tight political units, could turn South Africa into yet another one-party state. Without an active opposition to keep the ruling party accountable, there is little difference between a one-party state and an authoritarian regime. Third, many of the current political parties are still caught somewhere between assuming their full role as parties and remaining entrenched as liberation movements. Although some of these groups have existed for decades, they often lack basic organizational skills, financial management, and the accountability of a political party.

South Africa is in a fragile position. Democracy is slowly starting to permeate society, but more attention must be devoted to political parties other than the ANC. Further, these groups must transform themselves from liberation movements to accountable, representative political parties. Before the next national elections in three years' time, political parties must assert themselves, solidify their roles, and firmly establish positions in the political reality of the nation.

#### **Structural Issues:**

##### **Proportional Representation, Party Lists, and Power Sharing**

South Africa has adopted a party list proportional representation electoral system. This method of translating votes into political seats attempts to proportionally represent voters based on their party affiliation. Instead of voting directly for a candidate, people vote for the political party to which they belong. Each party then receives a percentage of seats in the National Assembly corresponding to the percentage of votes it received. Parliamentarians, in turn, elect the president, who is usually the leader of the majority party. In the 1994 election, the ANC received 63 percent of the vote and, thus, 63 percent of the seats in the National Assembly. Parliament then elected ANC president Nelson Mandela as the president of South Africa.

As the 1994 election revealed, the ANC is the dominant party in South Africa. It now controls the executive and legislative branches of the national government. It also has overwhelming control of the provincial and local governments. The problem is that no real challenge to the ANC exists. South Africa is implementing a strong party system in which the more powerful the party, the more powerful its role in government—but it has only one strong

party, the ANC. There is general agreement that the party list system is the best system possible for South Africa. Indeed, more parties received seats in parliament than they would have under other electoral systems.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this system has an easy voting process and its proportional nature is well-suited to an ethnically diverse society. But a major drawback is that it makes it difficult for weak parties to mobilize into the strong ones that the system requires.

In the party list system, the party receives only as many votes as it has members. Campaigns for membership, therefore, must be ongoing. Building membership requires, among other things, money and political office-holding experience to show potential members that the party is effective. For a fledgling party, this is a Catch-22. It cannot get members without experience and money, but cannot get experience and money without members. The small party may be doomed to marginality and may even face extinction if its members switch parties in frustration. Furthermore, by emphasizing the party and downplaying individuals, the party list system may also limit the degree to which charismatic leadership—sometimes the only means for a struggling party to build momentum—can bolster a marginalized party.

Another structural mechanism that may seriously affect the future of opposition parties is power sharing—or lack thereof. In keeping with the spirit of the GNU, the interim constitution stipulated a division of the executive branch. Each party obtaining at least 80 seats in the National Assembly was allowed to appoint a deputy president. South Africa now has two: DeKlerk of the National Party (NP) and Cyril Ramaphosa of the ANC. Each party holding at least 20 seats was entitled to a number of seats in the cabinet proportional to its National Assembly representation. The ANC has 18 of the 27 seats, with the NP and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) having six and three, respectively. South Africa's cabinet is a powerful body, and Mandela has been very generous in the cabinet positions he has accorded the members of these other parties. The power-sharing guarantees have given the NP and IFP an influential role they otherwise would not have had, and in the process have placed some limits on ANC dominance.

Unfortunately, when the GNU expires in 1999, so too will these power-sharing guarantees. They will not be written into the new constitution. It is possible that they may be retained informally but, once Mandela leaves office, other ANC members may not be as committed to reconciliation. They may be more concerned with consolidating or exploiting their own party's power.

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### ANC Dominance and the Political Landscape

None of the rival South African parties is presently capable of defeating or seriously challenging the ANC. In the 1994 election, the closest competitors to the ANC's 63 percent of the vote were hardly in the same league: the NP received 20 percent and the IFP 10 percent. While each displays some regional strength, neither party has the national appeal of the ANC. The IFP is strongest in KwaZulu/Natal province, where it received 41 percent of the vote, while the NP's base is concentrated in the Western Cape and Northern Cape provinces, where it won 53 percent and 40 percent, respectively. The Freedom Front received just over 2 percent of the vote, the Democratic Party (DP) just under 2 percent, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) about 1 percent, and the African Christian Democratic Party even less.

The NP has reportedly been strategizing, since January 1995, as to how to increase its role as a strong opposition.<sup>2</sup> Yet effective opposition may well have to come from a party that has broader appeal to blacks. South African Vuyse Myeka wrote, "White opposition politics has been discredited and the main hope for black opposition, the Pan-Africanist Congress, is in tatters. A new black opposition party is needed."<sup>3</sup>

Currently, no viable opposition, be it black or white, is emerging. This was most recently demonstrated by the local elections in late 1995 in which the ANC repeated its stellar performance from the previous year. In a somewhat complicated arrangement allowing 60 percent of the seats to be contested on an individual candidate basis and the remainder by proportional representation, the ANC's vote tally was approximately 60 to 65 percent. The NP came in second with 20 to 25 percent, and the Freedom Front was a distant third with 6 percent. Local elections were not held in KwaZulu/Natal—or in the Cape Town metropolitan area—and consequently the IFP received less than 1 percent of the vote in the areas that did go to the polls.

Voting along racial lines has been a problem for all parties. The NP, which did not perform as well as it had expected, only narrowly winning control in Pretoria and losing some of its command in the Western Cape, has been trying to change its image. The bottom line is that its "packaging is still too white."<sup>4</sup> And just as the NP failed to increase—and even lost—support among blacks, the ANC failed to gain more of the white vote. Perhaps a strong NP, so recently the proponent of apartheid, is not a realistic option. In fact, there is a belief among some South Africans, at least in Johannesburg, that the NP was purposefully holding back because of its racial history and never would assume a greater role. For whatever reason it fared poorly, from a purely organizational point of view, it is unfortunate. The NP is the party with the most experience and presently possesses the highest potential to fill the role of opposition to the ANC.

As for the DP, it did not make significant gains over the prior year despite being praised just before the local elections as "showing signs of becoming a very good opposition."<sup>5</sup> The PAC has been another disappointment. Billing itself as the alternative to the ANC-IFP rivalry, it was expected to have an

improved showing. But party leaders were shocked at their poor results, especially in the traditionally supportive Eastern Cape.

This situation calls for more attention to the other parties and civic associations so that they can get "up to speed" and participate more effectively in the political process. South Africa's civil society has previously been instrumental in building political awareness and ideally could also assist in the transformations of the political parties.<sup>6</sup> Many groups traditionally linked with the ANC received financial assistance to support the liberation struggle. Now that apartheid has collapsed and the ANC is the government, this money is simply being channeled through the government, leaving the other parties and civic organizations without appropriate financial resources. Similarly, a human resources drain is taking place as more and more talented people leave these groups and join the ANC-led government.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, the ANC, with its tremendous backing, is forging ahead. In 1994, it received campaign supervision from Stanley Greenberg and Frank Greer, two of the men who ran Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. It employed South Africa's most successful advertising company to direct the ANC's public relations and media blitz, and conducted national surveys to help construct its platform. If a group has the resources to procure the best advisers, it is clearly entitled to do so. However, expenditures like these are not possible for most of the other parties. As ANC power grows, the gulf between it and the other parties widens. In addition, having been in power for two years, the ANC is also gaining important legislative experience. It will be very difficult for members of the other parties, especially as-yet unelected individuals, to compete against this experience. The ANC is consolidating its power not only as a campaign organization but as a governmental body, and other parties are getting left further behind.

### **From Liberation Movement to Political Party**

The inability of some South African parties to fulfill their role as the opposition lies, in part, in their roots. A liberation movement is not the same as a political party. Many parties are still grappling with their changed mandates and are not performing adequately in their new roles. While it is possible for a liberation movement to transform itself into a political party, the failure rate is higher than the success rate.<sup>8</sup> Accountability, financial management, campaign strategy and development, party platform development, and the use of the media are all areas in which these groups have had little, if any, experience. Yet, no two parties are alike. Each is grappling with its own set of problems and is at a different stage of development.

For example, one South African liberation movement that has turned into a political party suffers from severe financial mismanagement.<sup>9</sup> Among other things, its personnel have little understanding of basic internal controls and, in many of the branch offices, they have not implemented even simple precautionary steps like locking the petty cash box. Members of the party's fi-

nance department recently participated in a financial management seminar at which some major rifts were uncovered. Perhaps most disconcerting was the disagreement as to whether party membership dues were to flow from central headquarters down to the branches or vice versa. Headquarters felt it should be financially supported by the branch offices, but the branches expected headquarters to provide them with funds. Despite recognition of this major disagreement, no solution was devised. Financial difficulty is the major reason why this party is not a more active, effective player in the political arena—and it likely will be a long while before this changes.

Another party suffers from severe communication breakdowns, both internal and external, that have contributed to numerous crises. Despite telephone

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and fax capabilities, there is little interchange between the parliamentarians, party headquarters, regional branches, and key party members. Compounding the problem, there is no clearly stated platform; the party's diverse membership results in the lack of a uniform vision of what the party represents. Parliamentarians often act independently of the rest of the party, leaks to the press are common, and inaccurate information is disseminated regularly. A significant amount of time that could be spent on constructive, proactive endeavors is instead spent on damage control. The ensuing negative media image could preclude future success regardless of how well-organized the party becomes.

Until quite recently, all these previously banned groups operated as underground liberation movements. As such, they were not accountable to their constituents in the

same way that legitimate political parties in liberal democracies should be. In many parties, power is concentrated in the hands of a select few. Although intraparty elections are held regularly, there are no accepted standards of behavior to ensure that the parties act democratically. Corruption and violence run rampant throughout the ANC as well as the more extreme IFP. Apparently not even Mandela is above this. In July 1995, he was implicated in the Shell House Murders, a 1994 incident in which ANC gunmen were ordered to "shoot to kill" IFP members at a rally.

While these parties are now subject to the same laws as everyone else for any crimes they commit, there is nothing—neither laws on the books nor a democratic tradition within the parties—to stop any of them from becoming mini-dictatorships. Old habits die hard. The ANC, with its parliamentary majority, could freely transfer its authoritarian policies to the National Assembly and other government structures. If ANC dominance continued in

this fashion, South African democracy would become nothing more than a facade.

The National Party, although never a liberation movement, deserves brief mention when discussing organizational transformations. Despite being the governing body for almost 50 years, it is also facing accountability for the first time. Apartheid was a system of secrecy, under which there was little of the openness that has characterized the negotiating forums and governmental practices of the past few years. As the system evolves and opens up, the NP is also struggling to fit into its changed role.

### A Glimmer of Hope?

The ANC's predominant success to date does not preclude the chance of multiparty democracy triumphing in South Africa. Opportunities will arise for others to move into positions of power, especially if disillusionment with the ANC-led government increases. Indeed, there appears to be a pervasive feeling of disappointment with the government among many South Africans. Few of the expected economic improvements have materialized and there is a belief that the new government is corrupt. This only makes the opposition appear more attractive. The two areas where ANC dominance is weakest, KwaZulu/Natal and Cape Town, are also the two places yet to hold local elections. While much of the delay has revolved around the demarcation of wards, in KwaZulu/Natal the IFP has waged a violent struggle to establish a stronger power base. The IFP believed that the longer it could stave off the elections, the more disillusioned the people would become with the ANC government and the more support it would receive when elections did take place. The elections were slated for March 31, 1996 but were postponed for several months because the ward disputes and security concerns were not yet resolved. Their outcome may help strengthen the weak opposition.

The ANC has been trying to consolidate a strong central government and a strong executive, especially while the parliament is new and inexperienced. It alone is quickly filling the power vacuum, and this process may continue for some time. South Africa's democracy is young and fragile and hard times certainly lay ahead. But the will and spirit that have led the country this far can carry South Africa through to a more democratic future. South Africans are disappointed but not despairing. They have not given up on the system. For the system to work effectively, however, opposition political parties must carve out a solid role in the political future of the country. This is no small feat, to be sure, but it can happen.

### Notes

1. Andrew Reynolds, "The Results," in *Election '94 South Africa: The Campaigns, Results and Future Prospects*, ed. Andrew Reynolds (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 214-216.
2. *Weekly Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), January 13, 1995.
3. *Weekly Mail & Guardian* (Johannesburg), April 27, 1994.

4. *Cape Times* (Cape Town), November 20, 1995.
5. Ibid.
6. Vincent Maphai, "Prospects for a Democratic South Africa," *International Affairs* 69 (April 1993), 232.
7. These problems were highlighted by Geria Augusto, Visiting Professor at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, in a lecture on civil society and South Africa, November 30, 1995.
8. Maphai, 230.
9. This information comes from the author's experience working for the International Republican Institute in Johannesburg, from May to August 1995. For the sake of confidentiality, no parties are referred to by name when addressing their specific problems.

