

The Beginnings of Accountability?: South Africa's Fourth Election and its Implications for Governance

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Theme: South Africa has just experienced its most competitive election yet. The governing African National Congress was forced to compete for votes for the first time and lost some ground as a result. This ARI examines the implications for government accountability, effective governance and competitive politics.

Summary: South Africa's fourth election was the most competitive yet: it was the first since the country became a democracy in which the ruling African National Congress lost votes to opposition parties. The fact that significant electoral competition was not accompanied by significant electoral violence suggests that the country is better able to cope with competitive politics than had been feared. This result could also inject new incentives for accountability into a polity in which these pressures have been weak, and this in turn could ensure the effective government which the society will need if it is to soften the impact of the global economic crisis. But the result is ambiguous: whether it does prompt more accountability will depend on the interpretation which the ANC places on the outcome.

Analysis: Nobody would have noticed it by following the campaign, but South Africa's recent election will play a key role not only in the country's political development but in shaping its response to the global financial crisis.

The election, South Africa's fourth since it became a democracy, was widely seen as the most important since the first universal franchise ballot in 1994. The ruling African National Congress, which has dominated electoral politics and increased its share of the vote in every election, faced a challenge from the Congress of the People (COPE), a breakaway whose leaders left the ruling party in protest at its decision to remove former President Thabo Mbeki in September 2008. The ANC also faced a challenge from the opposition Democratic Alliance in the Western Cape Province and press reports indicated that opinion polls commissioned by the ruling party showed that it was losing support among its traditional voters. All of this suggested that 2009 could be the first election in which the ANC seemed set to lose votes. This introduced an element of greater competition which, in turn, heightened interest among voters in a society whose levels of electoral participation are already high, particularly as the results of elections are not in doubt: some three million new voters registered.¹

In the event, the ANC did lose some ground: its share of the national vote dropped by around 4 percentage points, from over 69% to just under 66% –the shift is a little sharper than it seems because the ANC benefited from a drop in the vote of the Inkatha Freedom

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¹ Nthambeleni Gabara, 'Voters' roll grows to 23-million', *South Africa Info*, <http://www.southafrica.info/about/democracy/elections-110209.htm>

Party (IFP) in the KwaZulu Natal Province— Without this, it would have lost more ground nationally. It also lost the Western Cape to the DA. The result, however, was not as conclusive as some media commentaries predicted: journalists and some commentators expected the ANC to do much worse and so its setback was described and analysed in some media as a triumph.² And, while the heightened competition between parties did produce some electoral violence, the levels were much less than had been feared.³ This suggests that, despite the pre-election enthusiasm, this year's vote turned out to be a non-event. It is certainly true that the shift in voting trends was far less dramatic than some commentaries had imagined. But the result may yet prove crucial to the country's immediate economic and political future.

The Global Crisis and Accountable Government

To understand the election's possible impact and implications, we need to place it in context. South Africa, too, has been affected by the global financial crisis: while its financial system has proved more resilient than that of many others—the major banks continue to operate without state support—it has inevitably been affected by declines in investment and exports and is experiencing its first recession in 17 years.⁴ These developments followed a change of leadership within the ANC which saw Mbeki lose the presidency of the ruling party to Jacob Zuma; the ANC's left-wing allies, the Congress of South African Trade Unions and SA Communist Party, backed Zuma, and so the change in leadership was watched with some anxiety by business people concerned that economic policy would move leftwards.

Expectations or fears of a shift leftwards were always exaggerated⁵—but they have also been rendered far less relevant by the economic crisis—. Like other market economies, South Africa needs to adjust to the global crisis by expanding fiscal policy to take up the slack left by declining public investment. The more active role for the public sector which the left wants is now the subject of consensus supported by business—a task team of business, labour and other key private actors has recommended a set of actions designed to address the crisis—. And so the issue is now not whether the government will intervene, since all key interests believe it must, but whether it will do that effectively.

It is generally acknowledged that government has often not been effective over the past few years—it will clearly have to perform much better over the next few—. While technical competence plays a role in determining how effective government is, the most important requirement is that it become more accountable for, if government does not feel a need to account to citizens for its actions, it is unlikely to ensure that the technical capacity required is available.

While the task team established by the government may enable business, labour and other organised interests to hold it to account, this is only part of what is needed. A key requirement will be a government better able to address the needs of the grassroots poor—and this is not possible unless it becomes more accountable to these citizens—. Effectiveness in dealing with poverty has been hampered over the past decade by the

² See for example, *Sunday Times*, 26/IV/2009.

³ Election Monitoring Network Press Statement, 20/IV/2009,
http://www.idasa.org.za/index.asp?page=programme_details.asp%3FRID%3D75.

⁴ 'Shrinking factory output points to rates cut', *Business Day*, 13/IV/2009.

⁵ 'Just how 'left' is the Zuma ANC's "leftward" shift?', *Business Day*,
<http://www.businessday.co.za/articles/ManagementAndLeadership.aspx?ID=BD4A874696>.

reality that the government has not been in touch with the needs of the poor⁶ and not accountable to them. A more effective response requires more accountability.

The Election and Accountability

The election has an important potential bearing on prospects for more accountable government. Leaders are unlikely to feel a need to account to voters if they feel they can take re-election for granted. And, for much of the 15 years since South Africa became a democracy, government leaders have been in this position: ANC leaders seemed able to govern for as long as they wish and this obviously weakens pressures for accountability – indeed, it tends to ensure that the electorate is taken for granted–. This began to change in December 2007 when Zuma defeated Mbeki. This was the first time an ANC President had been defeated in an ANC election for some 60 years and it signalled to the movement's leaders that they could no longer rely on party activists to re-elect them. No ANC leader can now assume re-election and so they are now likely to be far more likely to feel themselves accountable to the rest of the ANC.

But this on its own does not ensure a government more accountable to citizens –indeed, it could ensure that government is interested only in the concerns of ruling party activists which are not always those of citizens–. Much of 2008's politics were of this sort: decisions seemed to reflect what party activists wanted only, which is one reason why the ANC's polls recorded a drop in support. To name but one example of this tendency of political leadership to respond to other politicians rather than citizens, the ruling party disbanded a specialist investigative unit which is deeply unpopular among ANC politicians without consulting a public worried about high crime rates.⁷ Accountability to citizens requires not only that ruling party politicians fear removal by their colleagues, but that they fear too that voters might punish them if they do not serve them adequately. The prospect that the ANC might need to spend the election campaign seeking voter support raised the possibility that politicians might make more of an effort to learn about voters' concerns and take them seriously. But the election's effect on party competition went further, raising the prospect of greater accountability across the party spectrum but also posing some risks to political stability.

Electoral politics in South Africa since 1994 has been far less competitive than surface impressions might suggest. An important feature of the 1994 election was the large number of 'no go areas' in which one or other party dominated and rivals found it difficult to campaign.⁸ Since then, it has become progressively easier for parties to campaign in each others' territory but there has been little incentive to do this.

Electoral choices in South Africa are shaped by identities:⁹ voters tend to remain loyal to parties which represent their identity group (defined by a complex mix of race, language and culture). This means that parties tend to dominate the geographic areas in which their supporters live: the ANC would tend to dominate the urban townships in which the black poor live, the DA the suburbs which are still dominated by racial minorities and the IFP the Zulu-speaking traditional rural voters of KwaZulu Natal. There has been little point in

⁶ Steven Friedman, 'South Africa: Globalization and the Politics of Redistribution', in Joseph S. Tulchin & Gary Bland (Eds.), *Getting Globalization Right: The Dilemmas of Inequality*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2005.

⁷ 'Let's pretend to consult', *City Press*, 2/VIII/2008, http://jv.news24.com/City_Press/Features/0,,186-1696_2368908_00.html.

⁸ Reports, Information Analysis Unit, Independent Electoral Commission, 1994.

⁹ Steven Friedman, "Who We Are: Voter Participation, Rationality and the 1999 Election", *Politikon*, November 1999.

campaigning in rivals' areas given the strength of identity voting and so the larger parties have tended to concentrate on mobilising their own supporters, not competing for those who support their rivals. Elections were thus free and fair but largely uncompetitive.

The 2009 election challenged this pattern. The emergence of the breakaway COPE meant that there was, for the first time, serious competition for the votes of the majority who support the ANC. Heightened contest in KwaZulu Natal saw the ANC trying to make gains in the rural areas traditionally dominated by the IFP, while the latter tried to win support in the urban areas where the ANC has held sway. And in the Western Cape, the DA rallied voters who had supported the ANC in the previous election.

This posed a significant risk of electoral violence. South African politicians have arguably never experienced vigorous electoral competition and so there was no guarantee that they would allow opponents to campaign in their areas: the danger was heightened by the reality that local political power-holders are often used to monopolising their areas and do not take kindly to competition.

But it also held out the promise of greater accountability, a result which sent a clear message that voters were not to be taken for granted promised to place new pressures on politicians to take voters' concerns far more seriously. Given these possibilities, how are we to understand the result?

The Election and South African Democracy

The relatively low levels of electoral violence and overt expressions of intolerance were clearly an important democratic advance. Violence and intolerance were not, as noted above, entirely absent: there were isolated killings in KwaZulu Natal, in some cases parties were prevented from holding meetings in areas controlled by rivals, and some voters were told that they would only receive the social grants and government services to which they are entitled if they voted for particular parties (usually the ANC). Traditional leaders were in some cases accused of telling their subjects to vote for specific parties.¹⁰ But, given that levels of competition were higher than in any previous election, qualified optimism that South Africa is readier for competitive politics than many commentators had believed seems justified.

The effect on accountability is less clear. It is, first, worth mentioning that this election was far less a break with the past than it may seem. It did not end identity voting, it simply gave it new expression. The ANC did not lose some ground because some of its voters abandoned their identities. It did so because some felt that their ANC identity was best expressed through COPE and because many voters in the Western Cape, who had voted ANC in 2004, moved to the DA because they were alienated by the Province's ANC leadership, who they found culturally and politically foreign.

The DA gained from the identity-based swing in the Western Cape and because its supporters among racial minorities came out to vote in great numbers in an attempt to stop a Jacob Zuma-led ANC winning two thirds of the vote. It reached out to black African voters but without noticeable success.

COPE won most of its votes from traditional ANC supporters who feel its new leadership has led the movement astray. Its vote was limited because most ANC voters felt it had not

¹⁰ Election Monitoring Network Press Statement.

done what a credible challenger to the ruling party will have to do –convince them that it is a better guardian of the ANC tradition than the ANC itself–. This is not the first time a party has tried to project itself as a home for people who wanted to throw off the old politics only to become a vehicle for some very old identities –two smaller parties share this experience–.

A feature of the election was a drop in support for smaller parties, but this happened because their voters moved to the bigger opposition parties who they felt were better vehicles for opposition identities.

Finally, the swing from the IFP continues a trend in which its voters drift to the ANC as they reduce their ties to the rural areas –and a growing sense among people in traditional communities that they might be better protected by the ANC one led by a Zulu-speaker with a taste for tradition–.

But it did introduce new dynamics which may take politics in different directions. COPE may have failed to meet its own exaggerated expectations but it will be a presence in the national and provincial parliaments. This should increase the pressure on the governing party to show voters it cares about them. The difference between this opposition and that which has gone before is that it competes for the ANC's vote pool; the ANC will surely be less likely to take its voters for granted if the opposition is a party for which its supporters could conceivably vote.

Secondly, the result was not clear enough to send an unambiguous message to ANC strategists, so prospects for accountability will be shaped by how the ANC chooses to interpret the result. It could decide that the result shows that its voters remain loyal despite all the pre-ballot warnings of disaffection, an attitude which would be greatly strengthened by the media's insistence that the ANC was sure to do far worse than it actually did. If ANC leaders adopt this view, it would take its mandate as a signal to continue business as usual.

This would ignore the extent to which many of its voters supported it despite grave misgivings about the way its leadership has appeared to conduct power struggles over the past year while ignoring its support base. And it would probably prevent the ANC from resolving its internal divisions: politicians who assume that their party will win whatever happens have little incentive to stop power grabs for fear of alienating voters. If the ANC follows this path, government will be far less accountable than citizens want, but it may face new breakaways and more voter support for its rivals.

It could, however, choose to read the signs: that some voters were telling it that they do not feel that it listens to them and that many more voted for it because they remain loyal to it despite sharing this view. It would then see this poll as a signal to heal its internal differences and to connect with its voters. Citizens would enjoy more accountable government and the ANC would prolong its appeal to the electorate.

Conclusion

The Election and Current Challenges

How is the ANC likely to interpret the result? Towards the end of the election campaign, there was some evidence that it was aware that accountability to citizens is a priority. Zuma promised voters that machinery would be introduced to ensure that citizens who felt

that government officials were not providing adequate public service would be able to complain about them.¹¹ The new government has been eager to assert that it will listen more to citizens' concerns about government ineffectiveness: it has appointed a new planning commission under former Finance Minister Trevor Manuel (who is very popular among business people) and a new minister for monitoring and evaluation of government performance. In both cases, it clearly wants to signal that it knows that voters want it to respond to them better. And the new President signalled in his acceptance speech that addressing the economic crisis would be his priority,¹² thus indicating that he knows that his government will be judged in part by its ability to protect citizens from undue economic hardship.

Nevertheless, it is far too early to predict confidently that the election will prompt the government to respond to the challenge of providing the sort of government service for which citizens hope. The new government leadership is very diverse, the politicians who supported Zuma were united by little more than their opposition to former President Mbeki and some in the new government are former Mbeki supporters, adding to the diversity. The next election for ANC President is due in 2012 and Zuma has suggested that he may not be available for a second term –some media reports have claimed, therefore, that the battle to succeed him has already begun–.

All of this has potentially negative implications for accountability and effectiveness in two ways. First, it could ensure that divisions within the new government prevent it from governing effectively because ANC leaders are too concerned with their power struggles to address national priorities. Secondly, it could force Zuma and other government leaders to concentrate on holding the leadership group together and this could mean that a great deal of attention is paid to the concerns of politicians but little or none to those of citizens. The new cabinet Zuma has appointed is the biggest in the country's democratic history because so many differing factions and individuals must be accommodated to prevent conflict in the ANC leadership. This inclusive approach could make for more effective government by reducing resistance to government plans. But it could also mean that government is being structured in a way which ensures that politicians are catered for at the expense of voters.

It is, of course, highly possible that the next five years will see an uneven combination of greater accountability mixed with continued concern for politicians rather than voters. Real politics is usually more messy and uneven than the neat explanations of social commentators would suggest. Inevitably, different ANC leaders will interpret the election result and the government priorities it requires differently, adding to the unevenness. What does seem clear, however, is that the effectiveness of government performance in the light of the economic crisis will be the key issue of the Zuma presidency, and that South Africa's ability to weather the storm will depend in part on whether governing party politicians understand the result as a cause for self-congratulation or a warning.

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¹¹ 'Zuma appeals for joint effort to fix hurdles', *Business Day*, 20/IV/2009.

¹² 'Zuma promises five years of hard work', *South African Government Information*, <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2009/09050810551001.htm>.