

South African elections 2009: an analysis

Anthony Egan SJ

The 2009 elections in South Africa were billed as the most competitive that the country has seen since the end of apartheid. Anthony Egan SJ analyses the voting that led to the victory of the African National Congress, and looks at the challenges facing President Jacob Zuma.

With a 77.3% voter turnout, and relatively few irregularities and incidents of intimidation, the 2009 South African General Election can be considered a success for democracy, whether on the African continent or elsewhere. Whatever the glitches – insufficient ballot papers at some polling stations, accusations of ballot stuffing in parts of KwaZulu Natal – the election of April 22nd reminded many observers of the 1994 election: huge turnout, high interest, lots of campaigning, loads of debate.

No big surprises

The African National Congress (ANC; see appendix 1 for a list of acronyms of political parties) victory was itself unsurprising. Few analysts seriously considered the possibility that the ANC would lose. To do so would have meant that the combined opposition could muster 51% of the popular vote. Given that since 1994 the ANC has always polled between 62 and 70% of the vote, such a cataclysmic drop – even with growing discontent over ANC failures of delivery, alleged corruption and dislike among some ANC supporters for Jacob Zuma – was highly unlikely.

In any case a grand upset did not happen. The ANC polled 65.90% of the national vote, as well as winning 8 out of 9 provinces overwhelmingly. The Democratic Alliance (DA) polled 16.66% of the national vote, increasing its share considerably since 2004 and winning the Western Cape Province by a clear, if small,



outright majority (51.46%). The Congress of the People (COPE), the party formed mainly by ANC dissidents 130 days before the election, gained 7.42% nationally, and were in second place in 4 of 9 provinces. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), previously the 'third party' in South African electoral politics, gained only 4.55% nationally, and lost resoundingly to the ANC in its traditional heartland, KwaZulu Natal. (See appendix 2 for a summary of the national election results.)

Despite bitter infighting, the emergence of COPE, and 'a spotty governing record and the precarious position of its leader, Jacob Zuma'¹, the ANC won the election on a number of grounds:

1. The Struggle Credentials: The ANC has captured the public imagination as the party of liberation from apartheid. Though such a claim is somewhat exaggerated – it was never the sole liberation movement, nor did it singlehandedly liberate South Africa – its preeminence has kept up its popularity with the masses. The poor may grouse about poor service delivery, but their sense of loyalty almost approximates the devotion of a fundamentalist religion. To vote other than ANC, to many, would be a cross between treason and heresy. Though presumptuous and perhaps a little blasphemous, Jacob Zuma's claim that the ANC would be in power in South Africa 'until Jesus' Second Coming' may be an expression of this blind faith.

2. Brilliant Campaigning: The ANC are masters of running a slick election campaign. Posters and adverts are carefully constructed to maximise the sense of loyalty of the party faithful – a combination of promises of a better life, appeals to loyalty and the memory of the struggle. In addition the personailty of Jacob Zuma as a ‘man of the people’, not a foreign-educated member of an elite ANC dynasty, played its part.

3. Finances: The ANC had substantially more finances to run their campaign than any other party. Even if the claim that the ANC blocked the Dalai Lama’s visit to South Africa in exchange for Chinese funding is untrue, the ANC ‘war chest’ was considerable. Prominent business persons like Tokyo Sexwale and Cyril Ramaphosa no doubt helped to raise funds among business elites. Media saturation by the ANC helped to make its presence and message felt everywhere, from megacities to deep rural villages.

4. Economic Need: The average ANC supporter/voter is poor to very poor. S/he has not benefitted from the South African economic growth of recent years. Although many of their needs have not been met by previous ANC governments, many feel that under other ruling parties – DA, COPE or a DA-COPE Coalition – their prospects would be even worse. Questions about ANC members’ corruption, mismanagement or personal moral character are irrelevant to them.

The big question: two thirds or not?

The question that pundits debated was whether the ANC would retain a two-thirds majority in parliament. This was important because any attempt to change the Constitution requires a two-thirds majority, and there had been talk of an ANC plan to either do away with or strictly limit the independence of provincial and local government. Such a move would have consolidated the ANC’s power over the country: in effect legislatures and city councils could become mere implementers of policy rather than having (albeit limited) discretionary powers over local and regional matters.

Political analyst Adam Habib² correctly predicted that attaining a two-thirds majority would be very close, almost impossible to judge until the last votes had been counted. The ANC missed their two-thirds

majority by about 0.8%. On the surface the ANC has not appeared too worried – their hope is that they will be able (as in the past) to go into coalition with one or two minority parties, like the Minority Front, to get two-thirds if necessary.

The ‘new kids’: Congress of the People (COPE)

The big surprise of the 2009 election was the relatively remarkable showing of the Congress of the People, a party barely 130 days old on April 22nd, who scooped a respectable 7.42% (30 seats) in the national poll. From nowhere it became the third party in parliament, and the official opposition in four provinces. For a new party to debut with such a splash suggests considerable possibilities.

The establishment of COPE can be seen as a consequence of the victory at Polokwane of Jacob Zuma and the ‘populist’ faction over the centrist and middle class supporters of Thabo Mbeki. Most of the leadership of COPE had close ties to Mbeki and shared his cautious (some might charge elitist) economic and social vision. Those disillusioned with the direction the ANC was taking – its increasingly populist tone that at times, particularly within Zuma’s supporters in the Youth League, lurched towards loutishness and contempt for the rule of law – started to doubt whether they could remain within the ANC family.

The resignation of two prominent Mbeki supporters, Patrick ‘Terror’ Lekota and Mbazima Sam Shilowa, led to discussions about forming a new political party that would express the ‘best of the tradition’ of the ANC before it became, in their eyes, corrupted. Gradually, amidst successive attempts by the ANC to block the registration of the party’s name³, COPE grew in number as disaffected ANC members joined it. Drawing on many of the ANC’s programmes, COPE presented itself as a progressive, non-racial alternative to both the ANC, which it saw as increasingly corrupt and authoritarian, and the mainly minority-based DA.

From its beginnings, COPE was a much weaker party, with far less campaign funds than the ANC. A few redefections to the ANC⁴ further weakened COPE, as did a battle for the leadership of the party. Despite this, COPE gained significant support among sections

of the black middle class, particularly young black professionals, and among minorities (white, Coloured, Indian) who welcomed a new non-racial party committed to clean government.

In some ways, COPE is the natural outcome of a 'broad church' formation like the ANC – communists, socialists, liberals, African traditionalists, Christian, and so on. For years it has become clear that such a broad movement, often with members whose interests conflict, is untenable in the long term. Should the left wing of the ANC find that the new Zuma government does not meet their agenda sufficiently, it is possible that another split away from the ANC – even a new socialist party – might emerge before 2014.

Similarly, it is possible that COPE may well gain support over the next five years, particularly if the ANC does not clean up its act – solid economic policies that enhance the economy and improve service delivery (particularly in education, health care and social services), as well as stronger and effective anti-crime programmes and genuine activities to roll back the levels of public service corruption, are now required of them. Then again, divisions within COPE between the older ANC defectors and political newcomers, as well as division with COPE leadership, may fragment the party. It's too soon to say which way COPE will go, but its remarkable first time performance suggests that it has a constituency that could well increase if the ANC fails to deliver between 2009 and 2014.

Opposition: growth, decline and realignments

The Democratic Alliance (DA) increased its proportion of the national vote and won the Western Cape provincial elections. This surprised some commentators, particularly those who thought it might lose ground to COPE. On closer inspection, although the DA remained the official opposition, its position within many provinces has changed, slipping to third place behind the ANC and COPE (in the North West Province, Northern Cape and Free State). Its growth nationally cannot be denied, but many observers feel that it may now have reached its peak, particularly if one reads the DA's success as a representation of racial minority interests.

The reason for its growth may be something about its change in leadership style. Under Helen Zille, a former journalist with struggle credentials and with a more open and engaging personality than her predecessor Tony Leon, the DA has gained popularity in the Western Cape⁵. Her mayorship of Cape Town has also made her popular, given that it is one of the relatively better run of South Africa's megacities. Zille and her colleagues have also tried to break into the poorer 'townships' of the Western Cape, traditionally ANC strongholds, with mixed success.

The smaller opposition parties were largely wiped out. The ID, ACDP, FF+ and UDM, with a combined 12 seats in parliament, clearly lost not so much to the ANC as to the DA and COPE. In the case of the ID we can read the drop in its support against the growth of the DA's support and the emergence of COPE, who probably took away a significant proportion of their support base. The ID's fairly disastrous performance in its heartland, the Western and Northern Cape Provinces, illustrate this. COPE emerged as runner up in Northern Cape, pushing the DA to third and the ID to fourth place, and as third party in the Western Cape, a position previously held by the ID.

Many ID voters have evidently aligned themselves with COPE or the DA. The probable case in the Western Cape is that ID voters who sensed a possible DA victory voted strategically; those who felt they could not vote for the DA or ANC moved to COPE. Disaffected ANC voters in the Western Cape may also have chosen 'to COPE' rather than stay away from the polls.

The UDM, in effect a regional party in the Eastern Cape Province, was also perhaps a victim of the 'new kids'. In heavy ANC territory, COPE became the official opposition, with the UDM falling to a dismal fourth place (4.13% of the Eastern Cape vote). The fact that the ANC won overwhelmingly in the Eastern Cape (68.82%) also suggests that, contrary to the predictions of some observers of an ANC collapse in its historical heartland after the 'Zulu ascendancy' (i.e. the presidency of Jacob Zuma), identity politics is less significant here than was claimed.

The dramatic decline of the smaller parties – some, like the PAC, founded in 1957, gained 1 seat in the

national parliament – perhaps represents a new trend among South Africans away from ‘sentimental’ voting towards the strategic use of their ballot to build a stronger opposition. This has not, however, led to the emergence of a single new opposition party.

Even if it had been tried before April 22nd, it is highly unlikely that a ‘grand coalition’ of centre right, far right, and far left, could have been formed. While among some opposition parties like the DA, ID, UDM, FF+ and COPE there has been a strategic *toenadering* [drawing together], other parties like AZAPO (1 national seat) and the PAC would have been uneasy with such an alliance. Similarly the ACDP (who won 3 seats nationally) would probably have rejected a coalition unless its conservative Christian agenda had been more strongly advanced. The IFP (18 seats in the Assembly) and its splinter factions (no seats in parliament), deeply embedded in Zulu cultural nationalism, would have been faced with deep tensions between opposing its most hated foe (the ANC) and supporting a presidency of a ‘100% Zulu boy’.

The absence of a ‘religious vote’

There is no evidence of a clear correlation between religious belief and voting patterns. The ACDP, a Pentecostal-fundamentalist Christian party, suffered a considerable decline in its share of the vote. Given the high level of socially conservative Pentecostal and African Independent Christianity in the country, this may seem surprising on one level. But closer examination reveals a different story.

Religious parties have never fared well: at its best, ACDP has only ever had 6 seats in parliament. Muslim parties have had similar showings in the Western Cape legislature. The reason for this is that the roughly 85% of South Africans who profess some or other religion do not vote according to conviction. This is partly because of explicit or implicit historical sympathies of many religious groups for the ANC’s liberation agenda⁶, and partly because few religious groups promote single issue voting. There is no

explicitly ‘pro-life’/anti-abortion advocacy by the churches (which would implicitly promote the ACDP). Many churches, including the Catholic Church, advocate a ‘vote according to conscience’ perspective, one that takes a range of social and political agenda into account. In addition, many churches have effectively withdrawn from the political arena since 1994.

Significantly, though, many parties actively courted churches, particularly the African Independent Churches. Jacob Zuma, for example, regularly attended many of these churches on Sundays during the election campaign.

The future?

South Africa faces another 5 years of ANC government. Zuma and his cabinet will have to address the conflicting issues facing a country that has, since 2008, started to go into economic recession. Given his constituency, he is faced with meeting the basic needs of all those who voted for him – the business elites that supported him as well as the vast army of poor who elected him.

This is no mean feat. If he veers too far to the left, business will be against him. If he maintains the Mbeki programme of economic growth at the cost of service delivery, he will alienate himself from his base. Perhaps the greatest challenge he faces is making good on service delivery, which has in the past been hampered by institutional inefficiency. If he gets this right, while also reducing crime rates and increasing South African competitiveness in the global market, the scandals with which he has been tarnished (and which have never been adequately resolved in court) may well be forgotten and even forgiven.

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¹ Mxolisi Ncube, 'Zuma, ANC Win Despite Big Flaws', World Politics Review, 28 April 2009 (<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/article.aspx?id=3661>)

). The decision of the National Prosecuting Authority not to proceed with corruption charges shortly before the election probably added nothing to Zuma's existing support. True believers seemed not to care whether Zuma was involved in arms sale corruption – his promise to help the poor trumped any question of guilt.

² Habib is Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Advancement at the University of Johannesburg. He was one of a series of speakers at the Jesuit Institute Lenten Lectures 2009.

³ The Congress of the People (1955) was an event organised by, among others, the ANC to draft an alternative constitution for South Africa during the apartheid era. COPE's choice of name was clearly an attempt to affirm itself as solidly within the classical ANC tradition. The courts ruled that an historical event could not be 'copyrighted' and that the name could not in itself be owned by the ANC.

⁴ Including one of its key campaign managers.

⁵ The Western Cape is also the only province with a numerical majority of minorities, mostly Coloureds (persons of mixed racial ancestry) and whites.

⁶ See, for example: T. A. Borer, *Challenging the State: Churches as political actors in South Africa, 1980-1994* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998); P. Walshe, *Prophetic Christianity in contemporary South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1995).

Appendix 1

ACRONYMS OF SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

ANC	– African National Congress
DA	– Democratic Alliance
COPE	– Congress of the People
IFP	– Inkatha Freedom Party
FF+	– Freedom Front Plus
UDM	– United Democratic Movement
ID	– Independent Democrats
ACDP	– African Christian Democratic Party
AZAPO	– Azanian Peoples' Organisation

Appendix 2

NATIONAL ELECTION RESULTS (Key Parties Only)

Party	% of vote	Seats in Assembly
African National Congress	65.90	264
Democratic Alliance	16.66	67
Congress of the People	7.42	30
Inkatha Freedom Party	4.55	18
Independent Democrats	0.92	4
United Democratic Movement	0.85	4
Freedom Front Plus	0.83	4
African Christian Democratic Party	0.81	3
United Christian Democratic Party	0.37	2
Pan African Congress	0.27	1
Minority Front	0.25	1
Azanian Peoples' Organisation	0.22	1
African People's Congress	0.20	1

Notes:

1. There are 400 seats in the National Assembly.
2. South Africa has since 1994 used a proportional representation system based on party lists.

Sources:

Politicsweb (<http://www.politicsweb.co.za>); *Sunday Times* (SA), April 26, 2009.