

Has Guaranteed Electoral Success Left the ANC Complacent?

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OLIVIA MCQUILLAN, AUG 10 2013

In a recent interview, the South African Finance Minister described South Africa's democracy as "a nineteen year old teenager" (HARDtalk 2013), defending it from claims that it might be losing touch with voters. Yet, despite its mere teenage years of experience as a democracy, the party has seen a "deep and instinctive loyalty" from the black majority as the party that delivered freedom (Harding 2012). However, there is evidence that the tides may be turning as the poor are becoming increasingly "disillusioned" (Davids and Gaibie 2011: 252) with the African National Congress (ANC). This essay will explore whether this "electoral dominance" (Cheeseman 2010: 145) thus far, has resulted in the ANC becoming complacent.

The ANC was formed as a national liberation movement in 1912 and last year celebrated its 100th anniversary (ANC 2011). The party still considers itself a movement, having progressed from an illegal, underground, anti-apartheid movement, to the ruling democratic party. It remains however, "of and for the people" (De Jager 2006: 79). The liberation movement quickly had to learn the ways of legitimate state government and thus, without any experience of governing, public expectations of the ANC were unrealistically high. Describing itself as a movement has been criticised, as it suggests that, as a movement "of the people", it is difficult to oppose. This raises issues of accountability. Unlike a party which is accountable to the electorate, a movement is not. Thus, describing itself as a movement blurs the distinction between government and society (De Jager 2006: 79). This essay will expand on these accountability concerns and the growing accusations of corruption that may stem from mounting complacency within the party.

The ANC has long relied on their irreversible association with Nelson Mandela. The Godly "sanctification" (Maylam 2009: 28) of Mandela mirrors the ANC's view that "God expects [them] to rule this country" (Zuma in Marais 2011: 423). They are frequently accused of using Mandela's name "as a prop" (Polgreen 2013) to retain loyal voters. A recent example of this was a video of an old and frail Mandela released on 29th April 2013. The ANC were widely criticised for using Mandela "to remind voters of the party's noble roots" (Polgreen 2013). By relying on their history as the "motherhood of liberation" (Marais 2011: 435), the party can be seen as complacent today. The ANC can remain sure of public support, particularly among older, black voters who can remember first-hand the experiences of white oppression. These voters see the personal cost of ANC members, like Mandela's suffering twenty-seven years in prison, and consequently view the ANC as a party that "suffered with its people" (Southern 2011: 295).

Recent election results still surround the ANC with an "aura of invincibility" (Hamill 2010: 4). However, the pattern in recent years is of a slow decreasing support for the ANC. Hamill (2010: 4) described the fourth consecutive ANC victory in 2009 as "inevitable", yet he recognises a "modest but discernible damage" to the party caused by growing support for opposition. With a 77.3% turnout, the ANC secured 65.3% of the vote in 2009; forsaking 16.6% to the Democratic Alliance (DA) and 7.4% to the newly formed Congress of the People (COPE). The ANC lost a mere 3.7% on the election of 2004, when the ANC secured 69.6% of the vote and the DA gained 12.3% (Hamill 2004: 691, Hamill 2010: 9). Despite this minimal reduction, Hamill sees this result as evidence of the first "indication that a seismic shift in the country's electoral political [is] feasible" and that South Africa could one day see an end to the ANC's hegemony (Hamill 2010: 9). Despite the seemingly small COPE percentage in 2009, it is worthy of note and reflects a significant performance given the party had formed just months before after a number of ANC leaders

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chose to leave the party, after a period of infighting. Winning four consecutive elections with well over sixty percent majorities would be considered “abnormal” (Hamill 2010: 4) in a Western democracy. Even in South Africa, the ANC can remain complacent, in the knowledge that they are more than likely to guarantee electoral success in 2014.

Despite the growing opposition, the ANC in reality remains unchallenged for succession and it is this “lack of an effective opposition within and outside the ANC that has bred extraordinary complacency” (Gumede 2008: 263). South Africa has been described as a “party-dominant system”: a democracy with regular elections, free opposition but with a “monopoly of power by one party” (Friedman 1999: 99 in De Jager 2006: 64). Party-dominant systems have been criticised as leading to “complacency, arrogance and possibly corruption” due to a lack of “fear of the ballot” (Heywood 2002: 263). De Jager (2006: 72) maintains that political parties alone are not a sufficient measure of democracy, but that strong opposition parties are necessary to prevent progression to tyranny or repression which could result from a one-party state. A strong opposition is needed to “guard against the erosion of the autonomy of democratic institutions and can replace a governing body that has outstayed its welcome” (Butler 2004: 119).

Coupled with the necessity of opposition parties, a strong civil society is needed to act as a “critical overseer of the ANC government” (De Jager 2006: 73) and to “consolidate its infant democracy” (Gumede 2008: 261). However, Mandela himself has expressed caution about civil society acting as the overseer, holding the government to account. He feared that this would create a negative view of the country’s politics, requiring civil society to “curb government” (Mandela 2001 in De Jager 2006: 73). Furthermore, given the majority support and loyalty of the ANC, civil society oversight may prove impossible, as criticising the government could seem to be an act of disloyalty to the party who gave the people freedom. Consequently, strong opposition parties remain a more favourable method of ensuring accountability. South Africa is therefore currently in a precarious position, with limited strength of opposition the ANC can grow complacent.

Concerns over accountability stretch to the personal lives, as well as the political lives, of ANC leaders. Despite the majority supporting the ANC, their reputation is becoming tarnished by corruption scandals and officials living flashy lifestyles that far exceed their legitimate ANC pay (BBC 8th January 2012). The growing inequality in the country is fuelling a deep sense of resentment from the poor at the “disjuncture between the reality of life in the townships and rural areas and the shining mirage of economic boom in the suburbs” (Gumede 2008: 262). Many see that the ANC has not “done enough to improve the lives of the poor” (BBC 8th January 2012) in their nineteen years in power, and the country is slowly becoming impatient for change. Having supported the ANC for nineteen years, poor black South Africans are “now demanding democratic dividends” (Gumede 2008: 262).

In 2013, Britain stated it would cease to give South Africa economic aid as it had become the “regions economic powerhouse” (HARDtalk 2013). Although South Africa has criticised Britain for their decision, it reflects a change in the international perception of the country. However, despite “formidable progress” (HARDtalk 2013) the unemployment rate remains 23% higher for black South Africans than their white counterparts; mirroring high inequality. A further example is that of flushed toilets: 57% of the population have access to flushed toilets in 2012, compared with 50% in 2002 (HARDtalk 2013). This slow incremental improvement is at odds with the expectations of the people and perhaps reflects a complacent ANC, who, without the pressure of uncertain elections, have little incentive to take fast, meaningful action to bring about tangible improvements to the masses.

High poverty is not only a social issue but also a political one. Low-income earners are much more likely to trust political parties than high-income earners (Mafunisa 2004: 494). Despite black household incomes having risen by 170% since 2002, average black income remains considerably lower than white; average annual income of a white household is 365,000 rand and of a black household is 60,600 rand (BBC 30th October 2012). These figures reflect significant improvements in living standards during the ANC’s rule, however they have made little progress in narrowing the race inequality gap. Although the public remains largely supportive of the ANC they are not apathetic towards corruption or slow progress. Mafunisa (2004: 495) notes that an “apathetic public, ignorant of its rights and acquiescent in the face of administrative abuse, provides an ideal breeding ground for complacency and corruption”. However, the public seems to be growing impatient with slow progress and thus cannot be described as apathetic.

Allegations of corruption in South Africa are growing increasingly common. In 1999, a multi-billion dollar deal

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intended to modernise South Africa's defences, namely, the Strategic Defence Procurement Package widely known as 'the arms deal', was initiated. It was soon met with allegations of fraud and corruption. The arms deal was criticised for "unexplained irregularities", "conflicts of interest" and for its seemingly "endless escalation of costs" (Butler 2004: 158). The deal was controversial due to its scale and the ANC were deeply criticised for corruption of such a size. To counter such large-scale, public allegations of corruption, the Anti-corruption task team was formed in 2010 to find and convict corrupt officials. Since its founding three years ago, thirty-two people have been convicted. In addition to this effort to end corruption, the South African government plans to publish the names and details of convicted corrupt officials in pamphlets, newspapers and broadcasting on the radio (SouthAfrica.info 2013). The ANC hopes that both the founding of the corruption task team and the publishing of convicted officials names and details will help ensure accountability and prove to the public that they are not complacent. With a "free press and independent courts, it still has the chance of winning the war on corruption" (Allen 2012).

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that the country recognizes:

"the injustice of [its] past... [and aims] to heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (South African Government Information 2011).

Despite the slow progress towards this goal, the ANC has made significant improvements considering the challenges they faced when they came to power in 1994. According to Mafunisa, (2004: 490) "good governance (especially trust, accountability and ethics) is the cornerstone of reconstruction and sustainable development". Addressing the issues discussed in this essay, such as accountability and corruption, will help the population regain the essential trust in the ANC. The ANC is not unique in its alleged complacency; all institutions "whether they be states, civil society organisations or political parties, are guided and controlled by individuals capable of mismanagement, corruption and self-interested pursuits" (De Jager 2006: 70). Therefore, the ANC, like any institution, needs to be aware of its weaknesses and allow observant agents of accountability. Inevitable election success has allowed the ANC to grow complacent but with a more vigilant opposition and civil society this can be managed and overcome.

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