

The state of political parties and electoral politics in South Africa



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Introduction

The state of political parties in South Africa can generally be described as fragile. South African parties are often characterised by high levels of factionalism and by top heavy leadership structures with historically communal patterns of mobilisation, as opposed to mobilisation around core values or shared interests. Seemingly immobilised by our past's continuing legacies, our political parties have stagnated, unable to cross boundaries set by apartheid.

Some of these features are not unique to South African parties but, due to a unique blend of factors, affect South Africa disproportionately. At the heart of this situation are the formal institutions of South Africa's democracy, particularly our Proportional Representation (PR) list system of elections, added to which are the restrictive procedures of parliament both of which give inordinate power to party leaders. Our recent historical legacy exacerbates the situation still further. This in turn is not helped by the fact that we are a young democracy. Having said this, South Africa's party landscape is bound to change over time as we develop into a mature democracy, provided we, as a society, take cognisance of the state of affairs and act to resolve the issues confronting us.

Proportional Representation and Parliamentary procedure

Most political parties in South Africa are highly fractious and suffer from extraordinarily high levels of factionalism. Whilst factionalism is not unique to South African politics – since faction formation is part of democratic processes – the levels of occurrence of this phenomenon in our country is such that it often has a debilitating effect on parties.

Several reasons contribute to this particular tendency, chief amongst which is our use of the Proportional Representation closed list system of elections. All closed list systems ultimately become winner takes all contests between competing factions, making affiliation to a faction or voting bloc essential for any aspiring candidate. In contrast, constituency type systems permit different factions to succeed in different constituencies, without the need for forming factions. Depending on the type of leadership selection in a given party, this contest may start well before the listing process itself, when party leaderships are contested, since the winning leader's faction will have the most influence on the outcomes of the lists, which in turn

further enhances their grip on the party. It should therefore come as no surprise that leadership contests in South Africa take on a particularly acrimonious character.

Some parties do attempt to mitigate the divisive effects of the listing processes by introducing mechanisms like single transferable votes, but ultimately PR lists by their very nature are inherently prone to political insider trading, and therefore factionalism.

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The implications of the PR listing process go even further. Despite attempts by some parties to incorporate a merit basis to determine the nature of their candidate lists, the need for faction formation renders any consideration of merit completely inconsequential to the final outcome. Neither performance, nor the approval of the ordinary members and voters in a putative constituency, can have any bearing on a candidate's nomination – an element which also contributes to a high level of MP

turnover affecting the level parliamentary institutional knowledge and the quality of party representation. It is, therefore, no accident that a yawning gulf exists between ordinary South Africans and their representatives.

Power relations within South African parties lie decisively with party leaders, particularly in parliament at the expense of ordinary members, members of parliament, and ultimately at the cost of accountability to voters. The PR system employed in South Africa is aided and abetted by the rules and procedures of Parliament itself, which give parties and caucus leaders the whip hand over MPs.

Party lists not only give leaders a big say as to who goes parliament, but also give leaders control over their MPs when they get there. Since PR lists require MPs to be members of a party, the loss of their party membership alone, means they forfeit their parliamentary seat. No Member of Parliament with any aspirations can therefore afford to vote on their conscience, or express the will of their constituents against the party leadership, without risking the loss of their seats. Needless to say, this gives enormous power to party bosses whose interests takes precedence over popular will.

Voters were understandably irate over the introduction of floor crossing legislation, since votes were cast for parties, not individual MPs under the PR list system. Being unable to hold individual parliamentarians accountable, the public quite rightly pointed out that floor crossing under a PR list system effectively disenfranchised them. What voters don't realise, however, is that no MP elected from their preferred party's list can hold their own party to account for promises made during campaigning by voting to uphold a particular point on the party's manifesto, should the party choose to renege on that promise. Nor can any MP vote according to the interests and wishes of their constituents on any issue when those wishes are at odds with the interests of the party they may have voted for. Changing to a constituency based system would allow MPs to vote with their constituents' interests without the threat of losing their seats. This however would entail the possibility of floor crossing.

To make matters worse, parliamentary rules and procedures make it near impossible for any MP to make contributions independently of the party whips and the caucus leadership. Motions, member's statements, and subjects for discussion, while

officially the preserve of ordinary members, are *de facto* allocated to each party and not individual MPs. It is therefore caucus leaders' sole prerogative as to who will move motions and what the content of those motions will be. To detract further from MP's roles, debates and time allocations for them are allotted to parties directly and, consequently, are at the complete discretion of the caucus leadership, thus denying MPs any opportunity to make independent contributions. The right to ask questions is the only parliamentary intervention directly available to MPs, but even then there are no guarantees that they will appear high up enough on the order paper to be answered.

The emasculation of MPs by subjecting them almost entirely to the whim of party bosses and by electing them almost anomalously from lists severely weakens political parties themselves. Since merit plays no determining role in the formation of lists and elected MPs have little opportunity or need to petition ordinary party members – appealing instead to the leadership – ordinary members are left with little means to influence party direction, leading to low levels of activism and participation. In cases where MPs do make convincing contributions to debates, they are not accredited for their efforts, as votes are predetermined along party lines. Conversely, members who make no meaningful contributions are shielded from scrutiny. The net effect on party structures is to weaken independent thought within parties, so that South African parties tend to lack the robust debate encountered in other democracies. Factional rivalry is then mistaken for substantive debate.

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Political Mobilisation

Unique to South Africa is our country's recent past, which has a profound effect on the state of our parties and our politics in general. Mobilisation for electoral support takes place on a basis of historical racial divisions, rather than on any differing policy alternatives offered, leaving little distinction between parties on the basis of values, discernable ideology or shared interests.

Recent trends in most developed democracies have seen distinctions of ideology and political traditions between parties becoming increasingly blurred. As a result, ideology plays an ever decreasing role in mobilising support during elections, with parties relying on distinctive policy alternatives on a few key issues to mobilise support. In South Africa not only has the lack of ideological distinction become more pronounced than in established democracies, but differing ideology has never been the basis for electoral mobilisation since 1994. Rather, electoral support has been grounded on our past divisions and not on any contestation for the electoral middle ground, which is the main reason for the demise of distinct political traditions in established democracies. Whilst political parties in South Africa do characterise themselves in one or other ideological mould (not unlike western parties), the truth is that the major parties are more akin to "broad churches" bringing together anyone opposing their opponents, in contrast to coalescing around a set of policy goals (as is the case in western democracies).

The ANC, for example, grew from initially being a liberation movement into a political party, self described as a "broad church" consisting of differing ideologies in opposition to apartheid. The Democratic Alliance (DA) on the other hand, has

progressively become a “broad church”, bringing together people with different world views and from different political traditions, with the sole purpose of opposing the ANC. This is clearly manifested in the rhetoric and messaging used by these two parties in particular, to mobilise votes at election time. Once diluted of the rhetorical language, the ANC’s core message is to vote to prevent a return to apartheid, while the DA’s message is to vote in order to curb the ANC’s power. Other parties either have never professed any single ideology as core to their existence, or limit themselves to representing a geographical or cultural enclave. There are, however, exceptions with smaller parties like the ACDP, AZAPO, the PAC and their splinters, who do attempt to mobilise votes on the basis of defined values.

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Despite protestations to the contrary, and with the exception of parties like the ACDP and AZAPO, parties in South Africa are not defined by a set of core values. Take the two main parties as examples. Within the DA there are strong proponents of social issues, like gay marriage and abortion on demand being accommodated, and at the same time there are equally strong opponents of those same social issues. There are free market libertarians and interventionist, social democrats and liberals and conservative Christians,

all singing from the same hymn sheet, albeit only mumbling the uncomfortably conflicting verses. None of this matters, however, since opposing the ANC is what unites the DA, not shared values.

The ANC, on the other hand, represents within its make-up various strings of thought, ranging from nationalism to socialism, those who believe in privatisation and those who want more nationalisation. Current debates regarding economic policies within the party are conducted by camps with such divergent opinions, offering completely conflicting policies, that it is scarcely plausible that they co-exist in the same political party. In most democracies it would be inconceivable that such opposing ideas could be held by top decision makers in one party simultaneously, without that party tearing itself apart. Yet in South Africa we think nothing of it. Such differences in both the DA and ANC must raise questions of vulnerability to splitting were the political situation to change unexpectedly.

Thus far there are few signs to indicate voter exchange between parties outside of historically racial political traditions, making our party political set-up highly stratified according to race. Though it must be said, this it is not due to ordinary South Africans being predisposed to the notions racial solidarity. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of South Africans, given adequate leadership and the opportunity, will opt for non-racialism. This situation persists because all our parties, including those established since democracy (with the possible exception of the ACDP), have their origins in pre-democratic South Africa in one way or another and seem to lack the leadership skills needed to appeal to the desired values and spirit of the new South Africa. Underlining it all are the still unresolved issues of massive inequality and security fears affecting different groups differently, which, if resolved, would go a long way to changing the *status quo*. Aggravating the situation once again is our PR list system of elections, buttressing this lamentable feature of post-apartheid politics and allowing elections to resemble racial censuses.

A Work in Progress

It also needs to be kept in mind that we are a fledgling democracy, with still developing institutions that need time to mature and grow. Our parties, as part of this maturing process are no different and which, with the right internal reforms, will develop to eventually resemble modern parties in other democratic societies, but with a uniquely African character.

We must bear in mind that some of our parties were liberation movements not too long ago, or were parties with traditions particular to a time and circumstance no longer existing, while others still are new parties altogether. Whatever the case, parties need to discover new traditions and *modus operandi* to accommodate new and changing circumstances; a difficult process when considering the diversity in language, experiences and social customs existing in different parts of the country. Some former liberation movements in particular have not fully adjusted their organisational cultures, rhetoric and mannerisms, which were geared for militant struggle, to ones more in tune with democratic contestation and political accommodation. Over time this will be rectified as both our democracy and the political parties operating within it mature and adapt to the changed environment. Parties with a history in pre-democracy electoral politics are also still learning to accommodate new ways of thinking and of interacting with new constituents.

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Future Trajectories

For our country to move beyond its past legacies to a more ‘normal’ state of affairs, a great deal of realignment and reform will have to take place. Statutory reform of our political institutions is a fitting place to start. Political parties, however, will also have to adjust their approach by repositioning themselves to reflect shifts in their electorate base.

If our political parties are to be transformed into robust institutions, receptive to the wishes of the electorate and fit to play their democratic roles, then our electoral system in particular needs to change. As we have seen above, the PR list system plays a major contributory factor to most of the ailments plaguing political parties in South Africa today. As long as we continue to use this system, parties will continue to have overly strong leadership and weak public representatives beset by factionalism, and remain unresponsive to the needs of ordinary citizens, while continuing to be ethnically stratified. Without this reform, we run the risk of Parliament’s relevance increasingly being undermined by extra-parliamentary means of expressions, like service delivery protests and NGO-lead court battles. The replacement of PR lists with constituencies would allow for floor crossing – regulated by suitable checks and balances acceptable to the general public making MPs directly accountable to their constituents not their party bosses.

Political reform should be taken further than just the reform of the electoral system if political parties and MPs are to become more relevant to South Africans’ lives. Parliament, as an institution, needs to reform its procedures and practices to create the space for its members to hold the Executive and party leaders to account, in turn

becoming more accountable to the voters. The will of the people would be better represented when individual MPs are allocated speaking time, debate opportunities and members' statements as of right, as opposed to parties receiving these privileges. Such reforms will transform Parliament from being a mere rubber stamp to a genuine forum for citizen agenda. Reforming parliamentary procedures will have the added benefit of promoting a more dynamic, yet less antagonistic, interaction between MPs and parties in Parliament.

In addition to the institutional reforms that need to take place, reforms within and between political parties are just as necessary. The greatest impetus for change will come from voters, since, as voters change, so will the political dynamic compelling parties to respond and adapt if they are to remain relevant, inevitably leading to new alignments in our political landscape. The manifestation of this will come in the form of parties either being completely transformed, or new parties being born in the spirit of the new South Africa, without any association to the divisions of the old South Africa. Conceived in the spirit of our new democracy, in tune with our new realities, and imbued with the insight that has come from some 20 years of democracy, these new parties will be better placed to deal with the real state of affairs that is the cornerstone of our current stagnation – deep inequality and insecurity.