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Zu'ming to victory

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Billed as a watershed, South Africa's fourth democratic election may well signal a shift in the political landscape of the country. While on the surface, the ANC won 65.9% of the vote, below the surface there are new currents, which may only fully develop in the next election of 2014. And South Africa might have passed its zenith in foreign policy engagement.

Johannesburg, 27 April 2009. Undoubtedly a well-executed, free and fair election, the run-up to the polls and the voting on 22 April 2009 stood in stark contrast to many experiences in the region.

The African National Congress (ANC) won an outright victory nationally, attaining close to a two-thirds majority (65.9%). Yet, this was below the 69.7% the ANC received in 2004. The same pattern was evident in the provinces. The ANC lost the Western Cape to the Democratic Alliance (DA), which won an outright majority (51.5%). In KwaZulu-Natal, the birthplace of ANC president Jacob Zuma, the ANC won a clear-cut victory for the first time since 1994, and substantially ate into the support of the largely Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party of Mangosuthu Buthelezi. In the remaining seven provinces, the ANC won convincingly, but with reduced majorities, compared with 2004.

Considered as a real challenger to the ANC, the Congress of the People (COPE), which broke away from the ANC late last year, did reasonably well given that they were established barely four months ago. It won 7.42% of the national vote, taking away some support from the ANC, and will be the official opposition in five of the nine provinces. COPE has done much better than any other new party formed after 1994, and has helped to consolidate the opposition vote largely around the DA and itself.

With a clear message, differentiating it from the ANC, and highlighting the efficiency with which it has been running the Cape Town metropolitan area since 2006, the DA was able to attract a sizeable number of votes from among so-called coloured townships in the Western Cape, and to increase its support in other provinces. Considered as a predominantly white liberal party, the Democratic Alliance's victory in the Western Cape and its increased support nationally from 12% in 2004 to 16.66% this year is largely due to its concerted effort to break out of this mould.

However, the decline in the ANC's majorities in many provinces should be read as a sign that the new administration should be more attentive and accountable to the people, rather than complacent in its support. COPE's emergence may inject a greater sense of accountability in the ANC, as its natural recruitment base will be among ANC members.

President Zuma faces many challenges: His natural constituency, the poor, are angry about poor service delivery. About half of South Africa's population still live in poverty despite the significant progress made since 1994. More than a quarter are jobless. Violent crime continues to be high, the police force rudderless, and social cohesion weak. Yet, although this election may see the start of a shift, the ANC's liberation credentials and 'identity' voting still determine how people vote. Zuma will have to move speedily to remove underperforming public servants, replace them with competent managers and fill vacancies. He will have to work on maintaining international market confidence in the economy, especially during this global downturn, and restore the public's trust in state institutions.



His many injudicious statements in the last few years raise questions about his judgement and about his belief in constitutionalism. From his traditionalist views about women and sex to his comments about the supremacy of the Constitutional Court and that Afrikaners are the only true white South Africans, he will have to work hard to convince many that his personal views will not trump the constitutional state. Although the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) dropped charges of corruption against him earlier in April because of procedural irregularities, which pointed to political motivation linked to the timing of the charging of Zuma in late 2007, the NPA decision also uncovered the erosion of the integrity and independence of state institutions, such as the National Intelligence Agency and the NPA, and their capture by factions within the ANC for party-political purposes. An emerging feature of the Mbeki administration was the convergence of party and state. In the ensuing battle for power between the two men, state institutions seemed to become fair game for both sides.

It is in this context that the concern around a two-thirds majority, which would allow the ANC to change the constitution unilaterally, plays itself out. The truth is that the ANC has not abused this power in the past, but the concern reflected a lack of trust by some constituencies in Zuma and his judgement. It is in these areas that Zuma will have to give priority attention to halt the erosion of institutional independence and democracy.

Unlike former president Mbeki, Zuma knows he has to be seen to be working on domestic problems, rather than solving international crises. But this will not translate into a withdrawal from pursuing an active foreign policy; rather this may now be run more clearly out of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs than the Presidency. Both the ANC's resolutions at its conference in 2007, and its election manifesto highlight a 'business as usual' approach to foreign engagement. A 'fairer and more humane international trade and financial system and a just world order' will remain at the core of its global governance agenda and will inform its outreach to other countries of the South and the manner it engages the North. Yet, the changing of the guard in the presidency and in other key ministries, begs the question of whether South Africa will continue to wield influence above its weight (although its engagement is assured) in the debates around global governance.

Determining Mbeki's legacy to South Africa's global engagement is probably left to the future, but one thing is clear that SA's golden age on the international stage reached its zenith under his presidency. With the constraints of a global financial crisis, and a more inwardly-focused president, SA will be viewed as a more 'ordinary' country, shorn of its post-1994 saintly status.

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