



Political Party Coalition Building and Splitting in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Effects on Representative Democracy and Party System

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Introduction

Political party coalitions in post-Apartheid South Africa have evolved from forced marriages under the framework of the constitutionally-entrenched Governments of National (and provincial) Unity (GNU), to marriages of convenience, which became commonplace particularly since the second democratic elections of 1999, with political parties coming together to achieve some common goals. It is observable that the coming together of political parties and the eventual coalition splits occurred as political parties and leaders pursued their desire to access or maintain political power at the national and/or provincial levels.

This paper seeks to investigate the effects of coalition building and splitting on representative democracy and the party system in South Africa. It reviews some of the major party coalitions which took place in the post-Apartheid era and determines what brought political parties together, why an alliance has survived over many years, why others have fallen apart one by one, and what have been the consequences of post-Apartheid party coalition building and break up on representative democracy and party system in South Africa.

1. The Governing Tripartite Alliance: Enduring despite the Contradictions

The alliance between the ANC, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) started well before the end of Apartheid. Actually, the alliance, better known as the Tripartite Alliance, was initiated with a view to ending Apartheid by all means and establishing a non-racial, inclusive and democratic political and socio-economic dispensation. Eventually, the alliance succeeded to achieve this outcome when the struggle in the factories¹ combined with other forms of resistance played a substantial role in forcing the National Party (NP) to renounce to the Apartheid system, as this system became increasingly counter-productive towards the economy, thus rendering Apartheid unsustainable. The alliance became more formalised and better structured and organised with the unbanning of the former liberation movements, including the ANC and the SACP. For this reason as well as because of its importance, the Tripartite Alliance is deliberately and exceptionally studied here under "post-Apartheid coalitions".

As soon as it assumed power, the ANC launched the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a programme conceptualised ahead of the first democratic elections of April 1994 in collaboration with its Tripartite Alliance partners, which was aimed at uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the historically marginalized poor, through extensive redistribution of wealth. With time, it became obvious that the ANC had to make some serious choices. As the government of the day, the ANC had to consider the needs and interests of a much larger constituency than its traditional constituency, and to make a choice between implementing its then socialist ideology and adopting more market-oriented policies. In mid-1996, the ANC adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), a macro-economic programme that espouses neo-liberal policies. This phase marked the beginning of open tensions between the ANC and its alliance partners who opposed GEAR publicly, by condemning privatisation, jobless growth and the ever-decreasing role of the state in the economy in a country characterised by increasing inequalities with large segments of the society living below the poverty line.

The divisions between the ANC and its partners have been deepening since that time. Recently, President Thabo Mbeki warned those members of COSATU and SACP strongly opposed to the ANC's macro-economic policies, by referring to them as "the ultra-left", and inviting them to leave the alliance or align themselves to the views and policies of the ANC. At the ANC's December 2002's congress, many observers expected further divisions between the Tripartite Alliance partners. Some observers had even predicted that the alliance would not survive in the near future given the extent of the divergences within the alliance. Although they came out of the December 2002 congress further diminished, COSATU and SACP representatives did not leave the Tripartite Alliance. Therefore the question "what keeps the alliance together despite such deep ideological cleavages and divergent class interests?" is worth asking. The other worthwhile question is "what does this development within the Tripartite Alliance mean for democracy and party system in South Africa as a whole?"

Dale McKinley argues that "the ANC's pursuit of an elite-led liberal democratic and deracialised capitalism has precipitated serious ideological opposition, class confrontation, and more general political debate and dissent within its own ranks and those of its alliance partners" [and] "through a combination of outright political intimidation, ideological mysticism and the co-option [...] of key ANC 'trouble-makers' and COSATU/SACP leaders into his governmental inner-circle, Mbeki had largely succeeded in quashing genuine opposition and controlling the

boundaries of debate”². In other words, the authors see this coalition as stifling democracy. In the same article Mckinley gives accounts of summits at which robust written and verbal exchanges took place, sometime publicly, between the Tripartite Alliance partners, contradicting his main argument that the absence of debate and political intolerance and intimidation are rife in the Tripartite Alliance.

The glues that keep the Tripartite Alliance together are probably the long tradition of working together under difficult circumstances, the power and job opportunities provided by the ANC, and the adoption of and adherence by some key leaders of COSATU and SACP themselves to neo-liberalism ideology to the detriment of the socialist ideals. Is it unacceptable that the ANC leadership assert itself as the main alliance partner and resist the attempts by its “junior” partners to revert to budget straining socialist policies? Is such assertiveness undemocratic? COSATU and SACP cannot claim more space in the alliance than the ANC itself. If they really need such space to criticise ANC’s policies and, more importantly, to advance effectively the legitimate interests of the working classes and the poor that they claim to represent, they should consider other options. The left wing of the Tripartite Alliance has three choices at least: (i) to capitulate and align itself completely to the ANC neo-liberal policies, (ii) to quit the alliance and form a new left wing party, and (iii) to remain in the alliance with the hope to influence policy making from within. The COSATU/SACP group seems to have opted for the last solution, namely, to remain in the alliance and attempt to influence its policies through inside work.

The failure of the alliance left to achieve its objective at this time should not be seen as a reflection of the lack of democracy within the Tripartite Alliance but the increased assertiveness of the ANC to play by its own rule as the government of the day. The dynamics within the Tripartite Alliance should not be seen as a proof that representative democracy is being undermined or that party system in the country is being weakened. It is important to see the contradictions within the alliance as a natural evolution. The “reformists”, led by Mbeki, and the so-called “ultra left” are all members of the same alliance with essentially similar convictions on the ultimate goals and the vision of the alliance but differing on the strategies as to how to achieve these goals and vision. This is not atypical. Even old political parties in stable Western democracies have different tendencies within themselves. At this stage, the reformists in the ANC have the upper hand. The lesser the governing party would need its left wing to maintain power, the lesser it would pay attention to their demands and vice-versa. The reformists are only using their high numbers to advance their agenda.

There is nothing undemocratic about this. Is this not precisely what democracy is all about, in this specific case?

2. The Government of National Unity: Coalition or Cohabitation?

South Africa's transitional constitution provided for a power-sharing mechanism for five years. This mechanism was intended to ensuring, *inter alia*, governmental continuity, political inclusiveness and racial reconciliation. The ANC, the NP and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) formed the first democratic, non-racial Government of National Unity in 1994. President Nelson Mandela led the government, assisted by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki. Former President Frederik de Klerk was (the second) Deputy President in the GNU. IFP's Magosuthu Buthelezi was appointed Minister of Home Affairs. In addition, each of the government partners had a number of ministerial positions in the GNU, calculated to the pro rata of their percentage votes. Furthermore, the IFP and ANC entered in alliance in Kwazulu Natal with a view to preserving peace in the traumatised province. The Kwazulu Natal government of provincial unity served essentially as a conflict management mechanism.

From the very beginning, tensions between the ANC and the NP emerged in the GNU. Differences of ideology and social backgrounds, and the weight of history haunted the "coalition". Personal animosity between President Mandela and Deputy President de Klerk did not help the situation. This was not a coalition but a cohabitation or a forced marriage.

The NP had a dilemma. It was not certain whether to remain in a government where it had little room for manoeuvre or to quit in order to play fully its role in the lower house as the leader of the opposition. As a minority party in the government, the NP could not influence policy in the face of the ANC's massive representation. In addition, the ANC's full adoption of neo-liberal policies made the NP redundant. On the other hand, the NP's Apartheid baggage reduced its respectability as a value-based opposition, given its background of racial injustice, largely unaccountable governance and human rights abuses. De Klerk and the NP resigned from the GNU late in 1996.

The gradual adoption by the ANC of a neo-liberal-based macro-economic framework resembling remarkably the neo-liberal policies strongly advocated by the NP³ ensured the smooth economic continuity between the NP and the ANC, and demonstrated that the former ruling party inspired somewhat the ANC in this regard. This influence probably started during the negotiations for a transition pact and culminated during the cohabitation in the GNU where the NP acted as the protector

of business community interests. The eventual adhesion by the ANC to neo-liberal policies outdated the relevance of the NP in the GNU. The eventual withdrawal of the NP from the GNU did not affect the marriage of convenience between the ANC and the IFP, which, by now, has last close to ten years both at the national and provincial levels.

The GNU provided an opportunity for very dissimilar political parties to work jointly in the cabinet. Within two years of the cohabitation, the ANC, the NP and the IFP had harmonised their views on a number of policy issues. One of the most striking policy issues was the formal adoption by the ANC of neo-liberal policy supported by the NP and the IFP.

3. The Democratic Alliance: a two-headed Monster

The Democratic Alliance (DA) was formed in June 2000 and comprised initially the Democratic Party (DP), the New National Party (NNP), formerly known as the National Party, and the negligible Federal Alliance (FA). Its ultimate objective was to keep the ANC out of power, though the latter was the winner of the provincial elections in the Western Cape with a simple majority. The fusion of these historically white political parties was largely seen as a racial reconfiguration, a prelude to a racial polarisation in South Africa's politics⁴. The alliance partners campaigned under a single banner in the 2000 local government elections and were planning to transform the coalition into a political party by the 2004 general elections. Tony Leon became DA's national leader given the fact that he came second after the ANC in the 1999 national elections, and Martinus van Schalkwyk, the deputy national leader.

However, Tony Leon's leadership was questioned in the Western Cape by the NNP faction of the DA where the latter had received more votes than Leon's DP in the 1999 provincial election. In addition, the DA leader was nervous because the NNP continued to have its caucus within the DA, which limited the integration of the alliance partners. Furthermore, Coloured segments of the alliance that constituted the power base of the NNP complained that the DA leadership lacked the political will and thus failed to deal with "the complex and contradictory questions of race and class as they permeate South African society"⁷. Tensions between the two leaders were detectable and the final clash unavoidable. The street-naming initiative by the then Cape Town Mayor, Peter Marais who came from the NNP faction, offered an occasion for Leon and van Schalkwyk to "come to blows in the streets".

This saga started soon after Marais initiated a process leading to the renaming of Adderley and Wale streets in Cape Town after Nelson

Mandela and FW de Klerk respectively. The Mayor was accused of lacking transparency in the process. A commission headed by Advocate Willem Heath was set up. Despite the fact that the Heath Commission cleared Marais eventually, Leon insisted that Marais should resign for bringing the party in controversy, which van Schalkwyk opposed vehemently. The animosity and leadership struggle between the two DA national leaders led to a polarisation within the alliance, essentially along the DP-NNP lines. According to most NNP supporters Leon's aggressive style unfortunately failed to contain the situation. The DA now consists only of the DP, significant numbers of NP dissidents and the FA.

Many analysts had predicted that the DA would be affected by the deep differences in terms of personal political aspirations of the two main leaders⁵, their different values and styles of opposition, and the lack of an agreed-upon political strategy⁶. None had envisaged that such a trivial matter would have disproportionately high damages on the alliance. Like the United Democratic Movement (UDM) in 1997-1998 who had two different leaders, Bantu Holomisa and Roelf Meyer, the DA was also a two-headed monster. The splitting within the DA has disenchanted segments of the electorate nationally and more particularly in the Western Cape. This development further weakens the party system in South Africa, as it has shown the inability of opposition parties to unite in the face of the ever-stronger ANC.

4. The ANC – NNP Coalition: Déjà Vu?

As the break up was deepening in the DA, the NNP and the ANC got more and more close to each other. Talks between the two parties culminated in the formation of a coalition between the ANC and the NNP. Of all the coalitions in the post-Apartheid South Africa, the ANC-NNP coalition has been to date the most opportunistic one. Its formation was based on the short-term selfish interests of the two parties. The NNP switched alliance in order to continue to control some political power in the Western Cape and for van Schalkwyk, to fulfil an old dream of becoming the Premier of the Western Cape. On the other hand, the ANC's wish of decapitating the DA and thus controlling the Western Cape was partly realised. The NNP and ANC's argument that they entered in alliance to minimise racial polarisation was a smokescreen. This realignment caused discontentment in the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance. The ANC-NNP alliance also made the IFP so nervous that it initiated discussions with the DA, exploring the possibility of working together.

History repeats itself. During the negotiations that led to the 1994 elections and the formation of the GNU, the NNP influenced the crafting of a

constitution that ensured its continued participation in government in the new South Africa in the name of national reconciliation and economic stability. Admittedly, at that time, such view was justified by the need to ensure continuity and reassure investors' confidence given that the ANC was still a novice in the area of running the government. In a *déjà vu* fashion, the NNP played again the anti-racial polarisation card in 2002, by conniving with the ANC to support the enactment of the controversial floor-crossing legislation, in order to remain in power in Western Cape. Both parties supported this legislation, which among other things, made it possible for members of a legislature (local council, provincial parliament or the national assembly) to quit their party for another without losing their membership of the legislature. Interestingly, during the debate in parliament on this issue, parties' arguments in favour or against the floor-crossing legislation tended to be motivated more by partisan interests rather than a long-term vision of a stable and accountable representative democracy and party system in the country. Ironically, the DP, who casts itself as the champion of liberal democratic values, had initially supported the floor-crossing legislation because it saw an opportunity to consolidate its membership.

Indeed, the floor-crossing legislation has weakened the party system and has the potential to destabilise the entire country, especially if the governing ANC experienced a major split from its own ranks. This could easily lead to a constitutional crisis. The impasse in the Kwazulu Natal legislature after the IFP threatened to call for early elections after losing a number of MPs to the ANC, was only resolved through backdoor negotiations between the two parties.

The experience of Lesotho in 1997 where the governing Basotho Congress Party (BCP) lost its majority in parliament through floor-crossing at the benefit of the newly formed Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), and the ensuing chaos after the May 1998 elections are illustrative of the unfairness of the system, especially when applied in a party list proportional representation system. The extent to which the legislation has affected the party system can be seen through the example of parties such as the NNP deserted by a substantial number of its Members of Parliament (MPs) to the DA, the Pan African Congress (PAC) losing one of its only three MPs, and one small party losing its single MP in parliament who chose to form a new party to probably represent himself. The UDM lost the majority of its parliamentarians to the ANC, who now has exceeded two-third majority in the national assembly, in-between elections.

It is obvious that the most damaging party coalition building in the post-Apartheid history of South Africa has been the new alliance between the ANC and the NNP because it took place at the expense of democratic representation, political stability and party system consolidation.

Conclusion

One of the most observable effects of party coalition building in South Africa has been that, by coming together, coalition partners have seen a gradual ideological and policy harmonization taking shape in South Africa polity. Accordingly, in today's South Africa, neo-liberalism has become the dominant ideology and policy. This development augurs that there would be essentially continuity and little disruption in policy making at the national and provincial levels for the foreseeable future, even in a hypothetical case of a government change. On the other hand, the dominance of neo-liberalism in South Africa has transformed the political debate amongst the country's main parties into a sort of monologue, which has resulted in large segments of the population, especially the poorer majority, somewhat inadequately represented.

Party coalitions in post-Apartheid South Africa have contributed to further reducing the ideological gap between the country's main parliamentary parties and actors. This evolution has naturally made the main opposition parties unattractive as a political alternative to the governing ANC because they have been unable to offer other policy options than neo-liberalism. On the other hand, splitting within the largest opposition coalition ever, the DA, has disillusioned many as to the ability of (opposition) parties to present a viable and sustainable alternative to the ANC. More importantly, the most damaging party coalition building in the post-Apartheid history of South Africa has been the new alliance between the ANC and the NNP, which was implemented through the enactment of the controversial floor-crossing legislation for short-term self-centred interests of the two parties.

The nature of party coalition building and splitting combined with the trend of the newly implemented floor-crossing legislation to affect the opposition not only by reducing its overall size considerably, but also by dividing them further, tend to exacerbate the weakening of the party system while gradually leading to a looming crisis of representation. The future of representative democracy and party system in South Africa will heavily depend on the emergence of political parties that would come together to form viable, well-structured and organised coalitions aimed essentially at standing for the interests of the poor majority whose interests are currently inadequately represented.

¹ Friedman, Steve: *Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970-1984*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987.

² McKinley, Dale: *Democracy, Power and Patronage: Debate and Opposition within the ANC and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994*, Seminar Report, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Rhodes University, Johannesburg, No 2, 2001, pp65-79.

³ Habib, Adam and Taylor, Rupert: *Political Alliances and Parliamentary Opposition in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, Seminar Report, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Rhodes University, Johannesburg, No 2, 2001, pp51-64.

⁴ Ibid, p51.

⁷ <http://www.idasa.org.za> of 22 May 2003.

⁵ Booyesen, Susan, *Election 1999 and Scenarios for Opposition Politics in South Africa*, Politikon, (1999), 26(2), pp249-258

⁶ Kotzé, Hennie, *The Potential Constituency of the DA: What dowries do the DP and the NNP Bring to the Marriage?* Seminar Report, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung and Rhodes University, Johannesburg, No 2, 2001, pp113-125