

INTRODUCTION

The significance of the 2009 elections

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South Africa held its fourth national election on 22 April 2009, a date preceded by a series of unprecedented events. The hitherto dominant ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), had split in the latter part of 2008, spawning a new political party, the Congress of the People (Cope). Earlier, at the party's 2007 National Conference, ANC members had elected Jacob Zuma, which meant he was virtually certain to become the party's presidential candidate in 2009. In September 2008 the party had forced Thabo Mbeki to resign as the country's president. Although Mbeki had lost the race for ANC president to Zuma, he had received a decent 40 per cent or so of the votes cast at the conference and gained public sympathy because of the manner in which he handled his resignation as president of the Republic.

For the ANC president to become the party's presidential candidate was not in and of itself unusual, but the fact that it was Zuma was intriguing. Zuma was still subject to a criminal investigation on fraud charges and had earlier been acquitted of raping a friend's daughter. He had admitted that he had had intercourse with the HIV-positive woman and that, though knowing her HIV status, he had not used protection.

Thus, the 2009 elections promised to yield atypical results, while also generating a level of popular excitement unseen since the 1994 elections that brought democracy to the country. The ANC fielded a morally compromised presidential candidate in Zuma and among the contesting parties was Cope, a splinter group from the ANC formed by Thabo Mbeki sympathisers. Cope seemed poised to benefit from its association with Mbeki as well as to woo voters who were possibly repulsed by Zuma's candidature.

The new party would, however, face a stiff challenge from the Democratic Alliance (DA) for the status of official opposition. Most of the DA's support came from the Western Cape, where it controlled the Cape Town Metro, while the ANC controlled the provincial government. Voters in that province were almost equally divided between the ANC and the DA, and vacillated between the two parties. Any event, however minor, could tilt the vote either way. The split and consequent ructions within the provincial ANC thus seemed to favour the DA.

The ANC premier, Ebrahim Rasool, was fired from his position for allegedly having supported Mbeki's failed bid for the ANC presidency. The populous Muslim community in Cape Town, where Rasool is held in high standing, could not have received the news favourably. ANC provincial leaders were at loggerheads. The party's provincial secretary, Mcebisi Skwatsha, was stabbed, allegedly by a member of a rival faction whose region the party had disbanded. Though it remained unclear whether the DA would remain the official opposition in Parliament, it certainly seemed set to wrest control of the Western Province from the ANC.

Thus, for the first time since South Africa's democratic breakthrough, the electoral outcome was not clear cut, a fact that generated considerable interest in the elections. New voters, especially young people, were registered in numbers unknown since 2000. The majority of these were concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Jacob Zuma's home province, where the ANC was locked in a titanic struggle with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which faced a stiff challenge from the ANC, especially among voters who might have been attracted to the IFP because of its traditional Zulu appeal. Zuma is a traditionalist who, as ANC provincial chairperson, had served in the provincial administration. Unlike the party in the Western Cape, the KZN ANC was overwhelmingly behind Zuma's candidature.

Intense competition raised the spectre of high levels of violence. Previous electoral rounds had been marred by violence, especially in KZN. But, that was not the only concern for the Electoral Commission (IEC), the body with the task of administering the elections. The Constitutional Court had just handed down a landmark judgement allowing South African citizens based overseas to cast their votes in the capitals of their host countries. It was left to the IEC to ensure that the judicial ruling was put into practice.

The results of the elections were as confounding as they were confirmatory of expectations. This issue of the *Journal of African Elections* analyses the manner in which the IEC managed the election and draws out the key implications of the results. The way an election is run is critical in determining the credibility of the outcome. Drawing on his inside knowledge of the IEC Kealeboga Maphunye takes us through the process of preparing for an election, especially informing us how the institution was able to meet the challenges posed by South African citizens voting abroad. Most importantly, Maphunye shows how the IEC has improved progressively, introducing innovations that enabled the largest possible number of citizens not only to register but to cast their votes with relative ease on election day. However, as Maphunye points out, measures introduced to make voting convenient may also have unintended consequences that conflict with the initial objective.

Part of the success of the 2009 elections was the relatively low levels of violence. This was partly due to the efforts of the IEC, which has prioritised this problem since 1994. Vanessa Barolsky, however, cautions that the declining levels of violence do not, as the dominant argument holds, necessarily presuppose the maturity of our democracy. Violent protests erupted soon after the elections in many communities throughout the country. Whether or not violence erupts, Barolsky asserts, has little to do with the maturity or otherwise of the democratic system. Rather violence stems from the contested nature of democracy itself, especially in a society defined by inequality and uneven power relations. Thus, Barolsky advises, we should not take the presence or absence of violence as a statement of the failure or success of our electoral democracy, but rather strive to deepen our understanding of the nature of democratic society, especially the way power functions and its impact on the various classes.

The health of South Africa's democracy, however, argue Ebrahim Fakir, Zandile Bhengu and Josefine K Larsen, received a boost from the relatively high levels of registration among the youth compared to those in previous elections. Fakir et al probe the reasons behind this phenomenon.

Mcebisi Ndletyana and Brown Maaba posit the resurgence of Zulu ethno-nationalism, sparked by Jacob Zuma's presidential candidature, as one explanation for the unusually high voter registration rates, particularly in KZN. Ndletyana and Maaba contend that the manner in which Zuma campaigned for the ANC presidency especially, partly as a defence strategy in his legal trials, revived Zulu ethno-nationalism, which not only benefited Zuma's presidential prospects in the party but also minimised the ANC's electoral slide.

Outside of KZN, however, the ANC experienced a significant dip. Ndletyana ascribes this to the split within the party and the subsequent formation of Cope, which registered notable gains in provinces where the ANC was hit by leadership schisms. Contrary to expectations, however, Cope did not attract trans-racial support, nor did the party have a strong appeal amongst the black middle class. Rather, Ndletyana shows, it found support in black working-class communities throughout the country.

According to Thabisi Hoeane Cope's trans-ethnic appeal affirms the relative marginality of ethnicity as a factor in swaying voters' political choice. Rivals had cast Cope as a Xhosa-inspired and dominated party, but the spread of its electoral support proved otherwise. While Hoeane concedes that Zulu ethno-nationalism may have played a role in the ANC's sudden rise in the KZN, on the whole ethnicity may have little influence on how voters cast their ballots.

Cherrel Africa reiterates a similar view, with specific reference to the Western Cape, where ethnicity had been accorded a dominant influence on voting behaviour. There, the historically liberal and English DA won an outright

majority, buoyed largely by coloured voters. The same voters, Africa explains, had previously made the ANC the largest party in the province. Africa homes in on the specific non-identity factors that swayed political support in favour of the DA.

Ultimately, however, the election results, as Joseph Kivilu and Ronnie Mmotlane show, did not correspond to poll predictions. Cope performed worse and the ANC better than pollsters had predicted. Kivilu and Mmotlane explain the inconsistency, showing how recent predictions differ from previous ones, and make a determination on whether polls have become better or worse. Their analysis will hopefully enable scholars and election observers to develop a realistic appreciation of polls in the future.