



## The State of SA's Political Opposition

### 1. Introduction

An eighteenth century French lawyer called Joseph de Maistre observed, probably disapprovingly, 'Every nation gets the government it deserves.' But do nations also get the opposition parties they deserve?

The African National Congress is now in its 27<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of governance; in all that time it has never dipped below 50% of the vote, and has usually won 60% or more. This has been achieved in elections which are acknowledged as free and fair, and in which a plethora of parties has appeared on the ballot. Voters have certainly not lacked for choice – on paper at least.

The ANC usually attributes its remarkable performance to the fact that, despite some obvious failings, it has delivered on its promise of 'a better life for all'. Of course, this is a claim that many outside the ANC, including expert commentators, strongly contest. Instead, they point to the 'liberation dividend' and note that many of the political movements that brought liberation to other African countries enjoyed decades of popularity and uninterrupted power.<sup>1</sup> There is also the 'Madiba effect' – some people's support for a party which they recognize to have become increasingly venal flows from their unshakable loyalty to the memory of an iconic figure.

Apart from these factors, though, there is another important consideration – arguably, the electorate has simply never been offered a sufficiently viable and attractive alternative. Even when conditions have favoured them, our opposition parties have seldom been able to capture the imagination of the majority of the electorate.

### 2. Background

The last few years have been a gift to South Africa's opposition parties. The governing ANC has been in an almost continuous state of upheaval and factionalism, despite Cyril Ramaphosa's best efforts to unify it. Organisationally, it struggles to pay its staff on time and it is a while since its paid-up membership showed any growth. There are regular reports that its branches are moribund between elections. Politically, it can no longer rely on the unquestioning support of its alliance partners, including COSATU, which has traditionally supplied much of its presence on the ground, especially in election campaigns.

The ANC can also not claim much when it comes to efficient and clean governance. One judicial commission after another has uncovered maladministration and corruption in every corner of government, mostly the fruit of what Mr Ramaphosa terms 'the nine wasted years' of the Zuma administration. And then, just in case anyone assumed that corruption had departed the political scene in 2017 along with Mr Zuma and his circle, came a sadly predictable slew of graft allegations surrounding the procurement of emergency protective equipment and other measures taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At last count, the Special Investigative Unit was looking into no fewer than 921 cases in this regard.

Many of the largest State-owned Enterprises (SOEs), which are among the economy's most vital assets, are in a mess. Eskom's debt has reached half a trillion Rands and it has no clear plan about how to deal with it, while, at the same time, the utility warns us that load-shedding will be a reality

until at least the end of 2021. South African Airways continues to swallow tens of billions of Rands, with no guarantee at all that it will fly again once the pandemic is over. Denel, the SABC and the Landbank cannot continue to function without major injections of capital, and the less said about the state of our commuter railways, the better.

This list is far from exhaustive (we have not mentioned persistent unemployment and poverty, the unresolved land question, endemic violence, dysfunctional state hospitals, etc.), but it would be more than sufficient in countries like Germany, the UK, Australia, Japan or even the USA, to ensure that the opposition would win the next election; or indeed, that the government would fall *before* it reached the end of its term. Here, though, this depressing report-card is unlikely to result in anything more than a fall of a few percentage points for the ANC in the next election. Why?

### **3. The State of the Opposition**

A quick overview of the 2019 elections outcome shows that the ANC took 57.5% of the vote, the Democratic Alliance 20.8% and the Economic Freedom Fighters 10.8%; between them they account for virtually 90% of the vote. The next biggest was the Inkatha Freedom Party (3.4%), followed by the Freedom Front Plus (2.4%). None of the remaining nine parties represented in Parliament managed even 1% of the vote.

Without discounting the relevance of the minor parties, some of which represent important sectors and niche constituencies, it is really only the DA and the EFF, and in the Zulu-speaking heartland of KwaZulu-Natal, the IFP, that could have been expected to take significant advantage of the ANC's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Instead, though, both the DA and the EFF have been experiencing great difficulties of their own.

#### **3.1. The DA**

In the wake of its slightly disappointing 2019 result (it was down about 6% compared to its 2014 tally) the DA made a number of leadership changes. Helen Zille returned as the chair of its Federal Council and, within days, both the party's

first black leader, Mmusi Maimane, and its high-profile Mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba, resigned their positions and left the party. So did the Eastern Cape veteran, close Maimane ally, and Zille rival, Athol Trollip.

Rightly or wrongly, this was widely perceived to be a reaction by the 'old school' white DA to what they saw as Mr Maimane's failure to grow the party's support base. South African politics being what it is, this instantly took on racial overtones, especially when it was recalled how the DA's first black parliamentary leader, Lindiwe Mazibuko, had been squeezed out a year or two earlier, allegedly as a result of a falling-out with Ms Zille.

The real reasons behind all these moves can be debated endlessly, but there is no doubt that the DA's image as a party in which people of all races can find a home, and which is serious about winning large numbers of black votes, was badly dented. Its most recent leadership moves, with John Steenhuisen defeating Mbali Ntuli to become party leader, and its long-serving Gauteng head, John Moody, resigning and alleging a 'purge' of black leaders like him, have only reinforced this perception – and perceptions are just as important as realities in politics.

So, while the ANC was at its most vulnerable point for many years, the main opposition party was experiencing organisational instability of its own making.

At a policy level, too, the DA seems to have abandoned the idea of reaching out to the majority of black voters and showing that it understands their concerns and has answers for them. Its reassertion of 'classic liberal values' (minimal state intervention in the economy; sanctification of private property rights; and a rejection of race as a metric for government social interventions) can only distance it from this sector of the population – the very sector upon whose support any party must depend for ultimate electoral success.

Some of the decisions taken at its recent federal congress seem to reinforce the idea that the DA is more set on winning back votes that it supposedly lost to the Freedom Front Plus in the last election than on expanding its appeal to township voters. Declaring farm attacks to be a hate crime can be seen in this light, as also the resolution rejecting expropriation without compensation under any circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

#### **3.2. The EFF**

This party's difficulties are of an altogether different type. There is not much indication of leadership rivalries in the EFF, or of major

ideological or strategic battles. Cynics might put this down to Julius Malema's iron grip on the party, and note that anyone who has seriously challenged him has quickly been sidelined. And, given its origins and membership, the EFF doesn't have to deal with allegations of old-style white racism.

Instead, it has to deal with the fact that three of its top leaders are on trial for assault (Mr Malema and former national spokesperson Mbuyiseni Ndlozi for allegedly assaulting a police officer at Winnie Madikizela-Mandela's funeral; and deputy leader Floyd Shivambu for allegedly assaulting a journalist at Parliament). In addition, Mr Malema faces five charges relating to the alleged unlawful possession and discharge of a firearm. Meanwhile, both Mr Malema and Mr Shivambu are implicated in the VBS Bank scandal; and the Zondo Commission of Enquiry has subpoenaed Mr Malema's banking records.

While the principle of innocent until proven guilty clearly applies to all these matters, it is an extraordinary situation when the leadership of a party finds itself embroiled in so much criminal litigation. In the case of the EFF, however, it is not entirely surprising. Its leadership has always trodden a fine line between demagoguery and incitement to violence; and Mr Malema's sources of wealth, in particular, have been obscure ever since his pre-EFF days as leader of the ANC Youth League.

But the party's problems reach deeper than just its leadership's legal travails. It lacks the kind of coherent and feasible policies that might enable it to attract substantial votes away from the ANC. Its manifesto in 2019 was broadly regarded as populist – full of promises that were either undeliverable or unsustainable; enough to lift it to 10% of the vote, but not enough to seriously threaten the ANC's dominance.

It is telling that neither of these parties seems to be in a position to benefit from the internal problems and external challenges facing the governing party. This impression has been reinforced during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Both the DA and the EFF have criticised aspects of the government's response, but neither put forward alternative plans that grabbed the public's attention. Not even the DA's strong performance as the Western Cape's governing party seems to have helped it. There have been no COVID-related corruption scandals in the province; temporary hospitals and ICUs were

established rapidly; an effective contact-tracing operation was put in place; and – against the wishes of the national education department – the school feeding system was maintained almost throughout the lockdown period. If even such a solid performance cannot win the DA greater support in other parts of the country, then clearly its image problem is a deep-seated one.

But there is another, more general, problem that bedevils the opposition as a whole – its inability to present a united, never mind unified, front. This has been highlighted, for the umpteenth time, by the formation of yet another opposition party.

#### **4. Action SA and Personality Politics**

At the end of August the former Johannesburg Mayor, Herman Mashaba, launched his new party, Action SA. Its website<sup>3</sup> punts the usual list of values – rule of law, social justice, economic prosperity, ethical leadership – that most parties claim to subscribe to, and is full of the kind of clichés that politicians seem unable to avoid – “The time for talking is over, South Africa needs action!” “Act as One to build a prosperous, non-racial and secure future for all South Africans.”

At first glance, there is not much at a policy level to distinguish it from the DA or from any of our other centrist or centre-right parties – COPE, GOOD, the UDM, etc. In fact, most of Action SA's policies are not a million miles removed from what the ANC's policies purport to be.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that much the same kind of assessment could have been made about the UDM, COPE, the Independent Democrats, Agang SA, or GOOD at the time when those parties were founded tells us something – that they are based primarily on personalities rather than on policies. And the fact that none of these parties has ever grown into a significant political force only underlines the point.

Parties that are built around a single personality seldom thrive.<sup>5</sup> Such individuals are often ego-driven and find it impossible to share power or to subject themselves to the disciplines and compromises that are needed if a party is to grow its base and attract people from various social spectra. Initially, they attract some support and a few high-profile names join them, often disgruntled refugees from other parties. But sooner or later their top-down leadership style

and lack of dispersed power structures brings about a collapse.

The continual coming and going of small, personality-driven parties may give an impression of a vibrant and creative democracy, but in fact it risks undermining the credibility of the system; politics comes to be seen as a kind of celebrity reality show with regular new episodes featuring the country's latest self-appointed saviour.

## 5. The Loss of Talent

Another downside of our continually splintering political opposition is that some very skilled and talented politicians are effectively lost to public life. Their new parties may not earn enough votes to win a seat in Parliament and, even if they do, they usually find themselves without sufficient financial and other resources to make much of an impact on the national scene.

The former DA leader, Mmusi Maimane, is a case in point. He has started what he prefers to call a 'movement' – the One South Africa Movement – as opposed to a party, but it amounts to the same thing. Like Action SA, it may win a couple of seats here and there in next year's local government elections, but there is no indication that it will grow into anything that would provide Mr Maimane with a national platform for his ideas.

The charismatic and independent-minded former ANC MP, Makhosi Khoza, left the governing party in 2017 in protest against corruption, and since then has formed her own short-lived party (African Democratic Change), worked for an anti-corruption NGO, joined the New Nation Movement (which campaigns for changes to the electoral system) and is now on the leadership team of Mr Mashaba's new party.

Going further back, the former COSATU General Secretary and Premier of Gauteng, Mbazima Shilowa, was lost to formal politics when he fell out with Mosiuoa Lekota over the leadership of COPE ten years ago. Others, like the UDM's Bantu Holomisa, hang on by their fingernails, but as with COPE, the UDM is a shadow of what it was when it was formed, and many experienced MPs of both parties have lost their seats.

It is often speculated that there will be a major realignment in South African politics only if and when the ANC splits, with the nationalist/populist wing going one way and the modernist/reforming wing the other. But commentators have been predicting such a split for quite a while and nothing has happened yet.

Imagine, instead, a realignment based on a coming-together of some of the parties and individuals mentioned earlier. A party that could harness the experience of Mr Lekota and General Holomisa, the energy of Mr Maimane and Dr Khoza, the acumen of Mr Mashaba, the organisational abilities of Mr Shilowa, and so on, would seriously shake up the current political scene and offer voters a much better option than any of these people can manage on their own.

## 6. Conclusion

"To live is to change," said St John Henry Newman, "and to be perfect is to have changed often." Democracy feeds on change and in particular on the potential for a change in government. When one party, no matter how good and competent it is, becomes entrenched a kind of entropy ensues. People become bored and elections hold no excitement. Democratic governance is taken for granted. When the entrenched party is neither good nor competent, the same thing happens, but the consequences are much worse.

For change to happen in a democracy there has to be a viable option or set of options. It is the existence of such options that results in the regular and healthy changes in governing party that we see in countries like the USA, the UK and most West European nations. When the voters make a poor choice the existence of real options means that it can be corrected before too long – as we have just observed in the USA.

Our opposition parties and personalities are failing to provide the electorate with the kind of option that makes change possible. Until they do, our democracy is unlikely to develop and deepen and fulfil its promise of a better life for all.

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<sup>1</sup> Albeit very few of them did so by winning regular, free and fair elections. Most established one party states or rigged their polls to ensure their grip on power.

<sup>2</sup> The point here is not to argue against, or for, these policies, but merely to suggest that they tend to identify the party with what are generally seen as white concerns. A full list of the DA's policy resolutions can be found at <https://www.da.org.za/dacongress2020>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.actionsa.org.za/>

<sup>4</sup> The one distinguishing feature of Action SA's platform is its more blatant rhetoric on 'illegal immigrants'. While rejecting xenophobia, the party proposes stronger border protections and the reservation of certain job categories for South African citizens. This is in line with Mr Mashaba's stance as Johannesburg mayor, when he was known to blame some of the city's infrastructural and crime issues on foreigners.

<sup>5</sup> The EFF may be an exception in this regard, since it is very much built around Julius Malema and yet it has done well electorally since it broke away from the ANC in 2013. However, it had the great advantage of taking with it a large number of ANC Youth League members spread around the country, giving it a head start in terms of structure and regional diversity.



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