

# Political Party System and Democratization: South Africa, 1994-2009

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**Abstract**— This paper argues that South Africa's political party system has been compounded and inhibited by fragmentation perpetuated by frequent splits, counter-splits, mergers and increased number of parties; as the country ushered into a new era of democratization. An important starting point for comprehending South Africa's party-political system is examining the tendencies surrounding the desire to maintain political power by those who already possess it; versus the desire of those out of office wanting to obtain it. These tendencies reduce and erode the development of a uniting political system – an aspiration of modern societies. In this regard, the actions and ambitions of both political elites in and out office alike, plays thereby allowing the elites to shape to shape party politics according to their desires.

**Keywords**— Democratization, political party systems, political parties, South Africa.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Political party systems play a key role in shaping democracies. In democracies parties serve as organized, two-way links between the people and the government, both representing popular will and helping to shape it. Party systems bring these multi-purpose organizations into direct contact with one another, providing an arena in which they can compete with one another or cooperate to achieve policy objectives and ensure party survival. Zielinski (2002:1) maintains that: although their precise prescriptions differ, the quality of democracy depends largely on the characteristics of the political party system.

This paper, however, argues that South Africa's political party system has been compounded and inhibited by fragmentation perpetuated by frequent splits, counter-splits, mergers and increased number of parties; as the country ushered into a new era of democratization. An important starting point for comprehending South Africa's party-political system is examining the tendencies surrounding the desire to maintain political power by those who already possess it; versus the desire of those out of office wanting to obtain it. These tendencies reduce and erode the development of a uniting political system – an aspiration of modern societies. In this regard, the actions and ambitions of both political elites in

and out office alike, plays thereby allowing the elites to shape to shape party politics according to their desires.

This analysis emphasizes the profound influence of political party system on democratization. The collapse of apartheid regime affected the political party system leaving it to be reconstituted by political elites in the circumstances that limited connection between societies and politics. The changes that were made over the government system since the early 1990s reinforced party-political system susceptible to behavior. Until the link between party political leadership and societies is re-established; and, the behavior of the elites is shaped by the promotion of national interests rather than their own, party political system in South Africa will remain fragmented.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. Section one discusses how the collapse of apartheid regime granted the elites a freeway to reconstitute party politics. Section two and three describe major political developments in the country since 1990. Section four draws on evidence described in the preceding two sections to outline the character of South Africa's political party system in the period between 1994 and 2009, while the last section offers a general conclusion.

## II. THE DEATH OF APARTHIED REGIME AND ITS IMPACT SOUTH AFRICA'S POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM

According to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986:1), competitive elections provoke party transformation and that is the fundamental reason why founding elections are so important in transition to democracy. The first competitive elections in South Africa were held in April 1994 as part of governments' transition to multi-party democracy. Though dubbed reformers, none of the new and the old political parties showed a character of national unity but, an expression of sub-national or ethnic, regional, religious or supra-natural identities. Others like the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) had no roots and did not pronounce any explicit ideology. Dubrow (2010:1) states that party ideology is the most crucial factor in party politics because it helps to accumulate parliamentary support.

The overriding issues of the election campaigns for most of the parties were reforms based on basic freedoms. The campaigns plus the subsequent election results stimulated the growth of alliances, coalitions and creation of new political parties based on fear of domination. For instance, already in

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October 1991 the ANC achieved a measure of strength by forming the Patriotic Front (PF) with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC); and, the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO). However, the front (alliance) did not materialize as tension grew between the PAC and ANC. According to Rantete (1998:257), the PAC accused the ANC of entering secret undertakings with the government and arranging constitutional negotiations with the government without consulting or informing its allies. Sellstrom (2002:514) shares a similar view but adds that the front did not work because AZAPO demanded that the homeland parties resign from 'system-oriented structures' before they 'sit with patriots' in the envisaged launch of the front which was to be held in Durban in late October 1991.

In between September and October 1993 two other alliances were formed. These were the Concerned South African Group (COSAG) and the Freedom Alliance (FA). They were constituted by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) led by Gatsha Buthelezi; the Conservative Party (CP) led by Ferdie Hartzenberg, the Bophuthatswana and Ciskei Bantustans of Lucas Mangope and Oupa Gqozo respectively (ANC Today, 2004:1). In addition, they were joined by a more militant Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) led by Eugene Terre'Blanche. These alliances too, did not work. The COSAG members became increasingly aware that if they did not participate in such a forum, they would have little influence on the outcomes. By January 1993 they agreed to resume multi-party talks at the Convention for Democratic South Africa (CODESA) thus, ceasing to exist.

In the country's first democratic elections which were to follow in April 1994, nineteen (19) political parties, representing the country's diverse constituencies, participated in the electoral process. Except for the African Christian Democratic Party (which gained two seats in the National Assembly and seats in three of the nine provincial legislatures), none received more than one percent of the vote. These parties included the Sports Organization for Collective Contributions and Equal Rights (SOCCER), the Keep It Straight and Simple Party (KISS), the Women's Rights Peace Party (WRPP), the Worker's List Party (WLP), the Ximoko Progressive Party (XPP), the Africa Muslim Party (AMP), the African Democratic Movement (ADM), the African Moderates Congress Party (AMCP), the Dikwankwetla Party of South Africa (DPSA), the Federal Party (FP), the Luso-South Africa Party (LUSAP), and the Minority Front (MF). Political parties which initiated the reforms therefore could not counter their initial goals, and their strategies too, could not prevent them from splits, counter-splits and creation of new political parties.

The mass movement which had begun to take shape during the 1950s was crumbling in the hands of the apartheid regime. Two of the most prominent organizations, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) were banned and their leadership went into forced exile with the apartheid regime continuing to dominate and brutally annihilate whatever move towards political inclination. As

such, political parties only operated as illegal opposition forces. On the contrary, most of them did not have an action program as was the case with the ANC. Mthimkhulu (1999:1), is of the view that the organization had sets of policy documents and programs most important of which being the 'Freedom Charter'. But the ANC too, could not use the document due to its illegal status in the country during the period 1960 to 1990. After the system that banned them had disappeared, political party system South Africa remained incoherent in character, with political leadership only defining itself in opposition to the apartheid regime.

During 48 years of apartheid rule in South Africa, political party system was rendered remarkably disjointed and disunited in the sense that the socio-economic and political benefits were only for the apartheid regime and its personnel. Due to illegal status, political parties were unable to prompt for a unified political system. They only operated outside the country. In addition, there was a general retreat from political engagements as people began to experiment and experience the hardships created by the military and apartheid conditions under which they were governed. Thus, during the period prior to the 1990s elections, the roots for development of a genuine political party system were shallow in South Africa.

To some extent however, the founding elections appear to have reversed the trend, but there was no incentive for political party leadership to utilize such a vacuum to develop a unifying and a coherent political party system. The collapse of the apartheid regime left the political leadership holding the reins of power and could claim legitimacy on the basis that they had been elected by the majority. After the institution of the multi-party politics, the old factional tendencies cropped up once again. The one meaningful change which is clear was Nelson Mandela's appointment as his second Deputy President, the leader of the National Party, F.W. De Klerk in the Government of National Unity (GNU) that was instituted by the former in 1994. Their relations however, turned sour as De Klerk grew impatient due to alleged exclusion from the major decision-making processes. He pulled his party out of the coalition with the ANC citing as his reason, its exclusion in the executive decision-making process (see 3 below).

There were no legal political party- government connection and therefore, the political systems in South Africa before 1993. The adoption of the 1993 Interim Constitution and a full constitution in 1996 legitimately created such a political link. The constitutions made the government believe that it had a direct control of the political playing fields. For political leadership, the constitutions meant one thing- protection of the hold on to political power through direct electoral mandate. But most noticeable was: the political party leadership's inability to use the legal map paved by the constitutions to reconstruct and consolidate the political party system in the country. Consequently, this fuelled the conflict between their supporters on one hand; and, the government supporters on the other – thereby creating further, alliances, fragmentations, and new political parties. As this happened, the question remained:

which formulas to apply to the new political environment? (Lintini,1995:174). Despite all these, South Africa held its first democratic election in 1994; second in 1999; third in 2004; and, fourth in 2009.

### III. THE ARRIVAL OF NEW RULE-MAKERS IN THE NEW POLITICAL ARENA: 1994- 1999 ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The 1994- 1999 in South Africa marked a change in the life history of political parties as; they became part of the rule-makers for the political game in a new political arena alongside their governments. Upon winning most of the votes in the April 1994, the ANC formed coalition government with the NP and the IFP. This coalition could not however survive squabbles and splits. In 1996 the NP withdrew from the coalition in protest to what it called the ANC's dominance of the decision making of the executive branch of the government. At the same time, the name of the NP was changed to New National Party (NNP) under the leadership of Martinus van Schalkwyk.

Besides the constitutional differences, the ANC and the NP had their internal squabbles at the party level which resulted in splits. One clear incident was the formation of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) in 1997 by Bantu Holomisa the former ANC member and Roelf Meyer; the former National Party Cabinet Minister. The aim of UDM was to become an alternative government. This partnership too, could not last as Meyer quit politics to pursue other interests. The IFP however, remained in the coalition government but was not appointed to serve again after the 2004 elections.

What the above scenarios explains was a failure for political leadership to forge a strong partnership and coalition even when circumstance permitted. Instead, they reverted to isolationist tendencies as opposed to regrouping from the position of strength; through coalitions and legal path provided by adopted the interim constitution. Coalitions create conducive conditions to effective policy formulation which in turn can facilitate a stronger and more responsive party. In addition, Moon (1995:1-25), observed that where the role of political crafting is acknowledged it is through modes of elite' interaction rather than leadership per se. Therefore, the incentive for South Africa's political parties to gain access to political power through coalition formation, worked against this end.

In the 1999 elections in South Africa the ANC increased its majority to a point short of two- thirds of the total in contrast to the 62 percent vote it won in the 1994 elections. The Democratic Party (DP) on the other hand, increased its vote in 1994 and 1999, making it official opposition in the place of the NP which suffered organizational crisis as well as, defections to opposing parties. Most of the political parties which participated in the elections were relegated to the background.

However, when the second five- year term of parliament started in June 1999, the ANC sort to marginalize the DP by denying it to chair the portfolio committees. This was the

official arrangement in parliament before. Consequently, the DP accused the ANC of not respecting parliamentary democracy and being intolerant of the opposition. This trend revealed similarities between the ANC and the African leaders who after independence moved away from multi- party democracy to one- party system. In that regard, the ANC and the DP above operated in an atmosphere characterized by squabbles as was the ANC and the NP after the 1994 elections. From this analysis, it becomes clear that party politics in South Africa belied the expectation that learning progresses from experience because of how they operated especially as new rule-makers arrived in the new political arena.

### IV. THE TAXIS TO PARLIAMENT: 2004- 2009 ELECTIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In examining the 2004 and the 2009 National Assembly elections in South Africa, it appears that the party-political system was taking a new political route. One reason for that were the emergence and the growth of "taxi parties". The term "taxi party" is used here to refer to formations and individuals who come to canvass usually, on the eve of elections with the sole purpose just jetting into the government as if it is mini-bus. The term was also used to describe the same situation in Russia during the 'Duma' elections of 1999- 2000 (Riggs, 2004:5).

South Africa held its third and fourth democratic elections in 2004 and 2009 respectively. As this happened many political parties emerged on the political scene. Twenty-one (21) parties participated in the 2004 election and twenty (26) in the 2009 election as compared to 19 which took part in 1994 and 16 in 1999. These new formations included the Democratic Alliance (DA); the Independent of Democrats (ID) and, the Congress of the People (COPE).

In both the 2004 and the 2009 elections, the ANC however, emerged victorious winning many the parliament's four hundred seats. It was followed by the DA. The ID was also amongst the top five in 2004 whilst the newly formed COPE also added its voice in the top five during the 2009 election.

Taking a closer examination of the political situation, a different picture emerges. First, is that the formations which were created on the eve of elections and competed in those elections managed to win seats at the expense of the older parties. Second, is that the main political contenders continued to dominate each election cycle. Third, is that new parties emerged as new rules were put in place. Fourth, is that new parties also come into being especially, if a member of a political party rises to occasion. It is against this background that parties formed on the eve of elections are referred to as taxis to the parliament.

### V. TESTING THE EVIDENCE

Van Biezen (2004: Abstract) argues that political parties are obstacles to democracy but representative governments cannot work without them. The nature of the party therefore plays a role in political party systems. In South Africa, the party-

political system is elite orientated and driven by demand and supply factors. Before the collapse of the apartheid regime, the system was on the demand site. This is the cases even though it was limited. After they were legalized, the situation became that of a supply-side with political party leadership. The alliances and formations that emerged on the eve and after the 1994 election are unmistakable evidence in this regard.

The issue of private motivation and self-centeredness is undoubtedly another factor which plays a role in party politics. Sadchikov (1999:1) observed that politicians lack viable career and with the enticing perks of political office, they seek private gain through corrupt practices. The taxi parties, the phenomenon of floor-crossing and other visible formations and alliances that are born and die every election cycle explain the role of fear in democratization as the country transited from apartheid to majority rule. In effect, the election cycle which began in South Africa is unmistakable evidence of how political elites gained or lost control of political party system due to opportunism.

Squarely related issue of self-centeredness is the character of political elites. Riggs (2004:9) maintains that party leaders are better known as technocrats. The sudden demise of apartheid regime left the political leadership with the task of transforming political party system. In this case many of them believed that they possess expertise to accomplish this task but, instead founded parties to advance their own desires. The parties and the alliances which emerged on the eve and after the founding election in South Africa as reflected in their structures as well as, how they die or survive points to the character of the political elites. Thus, the formation of parties such as the ACDP provides adequate evidence of how political elites are often referred as technocrats in accomplishing national tasks in democratization processes.

Perhaps, more evident is the issue of self-importance. Kegley (2009:70) maintains that leaders themselves seek to create impressions of their own self-importance while attributing extraordinary powers other leaders. Furthermore, political leaders make assumptions about personalities of their counterparts, consciously or unconsciously. This in turn influences their behaviour. Kegley (70) adds that leaders react differently to the positions they occupy. All are influenced by the role and expectations that by law or tradition steer the decision-maker to behave in conformity with prevailing expectations about the role is to be performed. Generally, most people submissively act in accordance with the customary rules that define the position they hold, behaving as their predecessors tended to behave when they held the same positions. Kegley, further shares the view that other leaders are by personality or preference more bold and ambitious, and they seek to decisively escape the confines of their new roles by redefining how it will be performed. The resignation of Thabo Mbeki as president of South Africa and ANC; the formation of COPE, and Jacob Zuma's rise to political power clearly fit within the issue of self-importance as outlined here.

But what are the prospects for South Africa's political party

system? The supply side of the country's political party seems to possess little chances of growing parties rooted in their societies because it is fragmented. There are however, problems with this analogy. According to (Brader & Tucker, 2001:1) people voting for parties can differentiate between ideology and identification. Furthermore, and most significant, is that people cannot vote for a party which is not there or the party that has dissolved itself without giving an account of its actions at the end of its term in office. Riggs (2004:10) observed that even though parties with longevity are inattentive to the demands of the wider public; and often harkens more to their own visions or line their own pockets, they still win people's votes.

Given the number of alliances, parties and formations during the country's democratization, becomes clear that the party-political system does not have a democratic heritage. It is unlikely to see political party system in which leaders internalizes the sense of putting the public good above private interest- the most important function of a political party (Riggs,2004:10). Furthermore, the fragmentations, alliances and many of the newly formed parties do not assist in forging links with the societies but a show of determination resulting from fear; either to hold on to political power or to obtain political office.

The founding election in South Africa represents a lost opportunity. It is possible that, had the political leadership chosen to rally the masses when the demand for parties was still high they could have avoided fragmentations over the country's political system especially, when time permits. The constitutions that were adopted in South Africa are unmistakable evidence in this regard.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Bibby (1996:1) observed that progressive reformers succeed in imposing upon party's severe regulations which pass legislation that strip them of such functions as control of the nominating process. He argues that political parties function in an environment that is not altogether hospitable. This therefore, renders the nexus between fragmentations, democratization and political party system valid.

Palme (2010:1) however, attributes it to the normality of political system as leading political parties; representing a broad 'right' and 'left' emerges on the political arena- especially if the new party is not organized along ethnic line and has a mix of personalities in its ruling structures. Birnir (2007:41) attributes this linkage to the electoral system but concedes that it does not predetermine the impact that a party will have in government and on the society. In democracies that have risen across Africa since 1990s, the weakness of political parties remains a major vulnerability (Lodge:2006:1). Suttner (2006:1), shares the view that dominant political party systems are a paradigm within which to enquire though may prove to be more of an obstacle than an advantage.

The conclusions suggested in this paper have been the hallmark of South Africa's political party system in the period

between 1994 and 2009. The alliances and other new political creations were merely an attempt at resolution mechanisms of last resort in the absence of a strong and a uniting political party system. Such elite-concluded agreements do not always work unless elites are able to mobilise their constituencies. It is no surprise therefore that the coalitions end up in splits.

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