



Hans Maria Hejñ: South Africa's Political Opposition Parties – Taking Stock 13 Years after the First Free Elections

When, early in 1990, the newly-elected South African president, Frederik Willem de Klerk, announced the readmission of the country's political parties that were prohibited during the apartheid regime, a dynamic got under way in South Africa which brought about a comprehensive system change. The first free elections were held four years later, and since then, the number of opposition parties in the country has grown markedly. However, the proportional-representation system that was also adopted in 1994 resulted in a fragmentation of the party landscape. In the elections of 2004, the ruling ANC won 69.69 percent of the votes. It obtained 279 of the 400 parliamentary seats, while the remaining 121 seats went to ten other political parties. This trend has since continued, revealing the dilemma of the opposition in South Africa's parliament: More and more opposition parties have to share an increasingly shrinking share of the vote and thus become less and less important. To get a clearer picture of the situation, let us take a look at South Africa's five biggest opposition parties.

Having suffered a constant loss of power since 1994, the New National Party (NNP), which has been mutating permanently since its foundation in 1914, was dissolved in 2005. Although it changed its name several times, the party always remained the “white” party, the “architect of apartheid”. When its leader, Mr de Klerk, abolished racial segregation and the prohibition of black liberation movements – the cornerstone of apartheid – in 1989, the fate of the party was sealed. Mr de Klerk envisaged a gradual transition during which the state would not be able to do without white officials who, in turn, would remain loyal to the party – or so Mr de Klerk assumed. However, the party leader and president of the state was wrong: When the ANC won the elections under Nelson Mandela, the nationwide substitution of white by black officials began. And as the ANC's position grew more dominant, the NNP declined. In the elections of 2004, the NNP did not even jump the one-percent hurdle in seven of the country's nine provinces. After Mr de Klerk withdrew from politics in 1997, the party did part with some of its members whose names were too closely linked to the apartheid regime; however, it did not succeed in casting off its stigma. Moreover, in the elections of 1999, many members of the NNP's white electoral base went over to the DP, another disaster for the NNP, which split into an ANC-friendly and an ANC-critical camp. The Democratic Alliance (DA), the result of a temporary merger of the NNP and the DP, did not last very long. The NNP soon cancelled the alliance and turned towards the ANC to conclude a cooperation agreement which, however, was hardly more productive. Numerous voters of the NNP once again turned their backs on the party. When, after the adoption of the floor-crossing bill in 2002, almost one third of the NNP parliamentarians changed their party allegiance, the party's end had come: The NNP dissolved itself in April 2005.

Having advocated a non-racial, democratic, and Western-oriented society even in the apartheid era, liberalism has a long tradition of parliamentary representation in South Africa. Therefore, the Democratic Party (DP) which was founded in 1989 is certainly not a reinvention of liberalism in the

country. The party is bound by the principle of engagement politics, i.e. the willingness to speak with any political group. However, the dilemma of the DP is that it lost its 'white' electoral base as it opened up to other ethnic groups. The party is perceived as a power of the centre which works far more effectively than the NNP. What is more, in the election campaign of 1999, the slogan 'Fight back!', which was directed against the government, convinced more voters than the cooperation strategy of the NNP. The merger of the DP and the NNP to form the Democratic Alliance, which took place in 2000, had less serious consequences for the liberals than for the NNP, although the alliance remained difficult because of the impaired cooperation between the two party leaders, Mr van Schalkwyk (NNP) and Mr Leon (DP), among other things. However, the DP won another 500,000 votes in 2004 and today, it is the biggest opposition party, thanks to the successful style of leadership of its leader, Tony Leon, and other factors.

Another party affected by a constant downward trend is the ethnically-oriented Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which is rooted especially in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, 90 percent of its supporters being Zulus. Meanwhile, however, the IFP's ambition of being the sole representative of the Zulus and the sole support of the Zulu monarchy is crumbling: In 2004, the party was beaten by the ANC even in its home province. The IFP's loss of weight has taken away much of its persuasive power at the national level. The disappearance of the traditional tribal culture and the increase in urbanity were and are playing their part as well. While in 1996, after the NP's withdrawal from the government of national unity, the grass-roots level of the party remained stable, and the leader of the party, Mr Buthelezi, was highly esteemed as the deputy of Mr Mandela and Mr Mbeki, the following years of the coalition with the ANC resulted in the party losing its credibility as the country's formative opposition power. By now, the IFP is in a deep crisis, causing the party leader, Mr Buthelezi, to speak of the need for an essential 'renovation and reorientation of the party' only recently. If the IFP wants to recover some of its influence in 2009, its only option is to consolidate its programme and personnel, to practice self-criticism, and to strive for cohesion.

Established in 1997, the United Democratic Movement (UDM) was founded by three politicians, namely Roelf Meyer, Bantu Holomisa, and Sisifo Nkabinde. Mr Meyer in his time was active in the moderate wing of the NP but was expelled from the party in 1996 after accusing it of a still ethnically-oriented policy. Mr Holomisa was a figurehead of the ANC for a long time, and from 1987 to 1994, he headed the government of the Transkei Homeland. Mr Nkabinde belonged to the militant wing of the ANC during the apartheid era but was expelled later on. After Nkabinde was murdered early in 1999, the appearance of the socialist-oriented UDM, which now preferentially appealed to the black lower classes, was primarily shaped by Holomisa. In 1999, the party succeeded in obtaining three percent of the vote straight away, but its share decreased again in 2004. Furthermore, internal disagreements, power struggles, and mismanagement as well as the later defection of many of its own MPs are making things very hard for the UDM. If it primarily seeks to contain the dangers of floor-crossing, the only future objective of the party, which says 'we will unite South Africa', 'we will address poverty', and 'we will set free the creative power inherent in our society', can be its own consolidation.

Finally, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), founded in 1993, sees itself as a party of Christian religious groups, endeavouring to carry the influence of Christianity beyond the church and into politics. At the centre of the party stands its founder, Pastor Dr Kenneth Joseph Meshoe, who also became the party's president in 1993, with far-ranging powers. Having always emphasised its openness towards as many Christian groups as possible in South Africa, the ACDP advocates transforming the country on the basis of Christian religious values. However, the radical fundamentalist approach of the party, which from the time of its foundation was able to expand its share of the vote steadily, is undeniable. This approach manifests itself, for example, in certain statements by the ACDP, according to which abortion, being murder of the unborn, should be

prohibited categorically and the death penalty reintroduced.

A comparison of South Africa's current opposition parties shows that since 1994, only the ACDP and the DA have succeeded in striking roots at the national level and expanding their share of the vote. The IFP and the UDM, on the other hand, lost many votes to the ANC, both at the national and the regional level. Any steps taken by the opposition parties to break the dominance of the ANC were doomed to failure – even the diverse attempts at forming alliances. The reasons for this certainly lie in the lack of party programmes, the absence of a multi-ethnic approach, and excessive personality worship. The opposition parties are currently pinning their hopes on a split of the ANC and on the perspective of forming coalitions with the resultant splinter groups. The next South African parliamentary elections will presumably take place in 2009. It remains to be seen whether the opposition parties will by then have succeeded in putting a stop to their decline, which has lasted for one and a half decades now.