

The Future of the ANC in South Africa: Cross-Roads and Blind Corners

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With high level corruption scandals, bitter leadership rivalries and battles for the very ideological soul of the party, the African National Congress (ANC) has not had a more turbulent 18 months since the party split in the late 1950's. The party leadership's response to this crisis will define both the future of the ANC and of South Africa itself.

The ANC has been racked by internal conflict for the past few years, but this has acutely intensified after the sacking of Deputy State President Jacob Zuma and the subsequent race for the ANC presidency. It's worth revisiting the Zuma saga as it is a central feature of the current discontent. In June 2005, Jacob Zuma was dismissed as South Africa's Deputy President by President Thabo Mbeki after the judiciary found that there was a "generally corrupt relationship" between Zuma and close friend and financial advisor Schabir Shaik during the much investigated 1999 Arms Deal. Zuma retained his post as Deputy President of the ANC, but was largely ousted from governing roles by Mbeki. Zuma quickly set his sights on the 2009 state presidency and consequently, the party presidency in December 2007, under a cloud of suspicion and a looming court date to answer graft allegations.

He took advantage of another sweeping trend in the country; discontent with service delivery. Poorer communities in 2006 and 2007 spent much of their time protesting about the lack of essential services in their communities, and Mbeki's heavy-handed, and often aloof approach responding to these challenges earned him no plaudits among disaffected communities. At that time, there were rumblings from the two key ANC alliance partners, the Council of SA Trade Unions (COSATU) and the SA Communist Party (SACP), about splits in the alliance and the need for a new ideological direction within the party.

This new direction was based upon a redirected strategic focus on poverty-alleviation and employment, as opposed to relying on the classical macro-economic model of "trickle-down economics". It presented a challenge to the incumbent leadership's view of the ANC future policy direction and concurrently, it presented Jacob Zuma with his ticket to the presidency. Zuma latched on to these concerns and made himself the spokesman for the Left, modelling himself as a "man of the people" against Mbeki as a "man of the elite". The bitter fighting for the ANC presidency position between Mbeki and Zuma, both in ideology and rhetoric, was brutal on the party, splitting the ANC into two distinct ideological camps, and presenting a real challenge for the future of the party.

Zuma's victory in the ANC presidential race means that he will take over the State Presidency in 2009 but he, as with the party itself, is hampered by a graft court case in June this year. Should he be found guilty, the widely respected and much less controversial ANC Deputy President, Kgalema Motlante, would assume the party presidency and thus the state presidency. The key challenge for the ANC for the next few years though, is unity. The ANC membership has delivered a stinging rebuke to the ANC leadership and its direction, and Zuma's primary role will initially be in fostering party unity between the divided camps. There has also been a visible shift away from "liberation party voting" (where members blindly vote for the ANC and its current leadership out of duty to the party that brought them liberation), which brings enhanced pressure on the party in terms of policy and service delivery.

The 2009 elections will be a critical bell-weather of the damage done to the ANC, and the numbers to watch will not necessarily be the ANC's total share of vote, but the poll turnouts. The ANC has never faced such a split in member

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wishes, but few will be able to stomach voting for another party, such is the strength of “liberation party voting” principle. Markinor (a South African research house) studies have shown that Zuma holds only 40% of the ANC base, and this will prove a heavy burden to carry into the state presidency. How to gauge this trend will be in voter turnout, in how many ANC members will essentially abstain from voting as a show of their lack of support for Zuma.

For the long-term however, the party has to find a comfortable new ideological direction. Specifically, this means a new policy direction which meets the needs of increased poverty alleviation, increases in employment and vast improvements in service delivery, whilst still maintaining strong economic growth and a commitment to the free market, so demanded by the international investment community. The ANC has always considered itself a “broad church”, cobbling diverse and often competing factions under its party umbrella. The last two years suggest that this may no longer be possible.

The ANC’s most powerful electoral tool is that it is the only political party in South Africa with governing experience; the only viable option for making the country work. But this is a false harbour in the next decade. Much has been made of the threats of splitting the tripartite alliance from the SACP and Cosatu, but this is a red herring. The SACP and Cosatu are not governing options without realistic policy, and according to much research done by Markinor, large tracts of their base would continue to vote ANC anyway. The real threat of the next decade is that the traditionally loyal ANC electorate starts to interpret these internal problems as a failing government. The real threat comes not from horizontal alliance partners, but from vertical ideological groups within the party. A disgruntled group of senior and powerful ANC leaders, with enough figureheads to carry significant portions of the electorate, could make heavy inroads into the ANC’s traditional voting power. This was a difficult option under Mbeki, who had a paranoid and almost Machiavellian control over the party structures and those in the upper echelons of ANC power. After 2009, however, with a new president of the country, it will be more of a possibility.

It is current belief though that with the intensely divisive succession battle over, the party membership should be able to unite behind their new leadership, at least for an interim “grace period”. The party membership is painfully aware of the damage that these battles have caused, and such is the respect for the party, rhetoric should settle down in the near term. The ANC party’s internal process forbids active campaign for positions in preference for nominations from the floor. Consequentially, none of the new leadership has had to do much work in explaining their policy positions or offering any idea of the future direction of the party. The next 2-3 years will form this grace period where the new leadership will be given an opportunity to prove their worth.

Ultimately, it will all rely on the governing strength of the next president of South Africa (Zuma or Motlanthe) and the leadership that he puts in place. If service delivery is improved, and if the left wing of the party is given more of a voice, these vulnerabilities will undoubtedly be healed, and the ANC should see another decade of powerful control. But there are many worrying signs for the ANC at present. Never has there been such internal dissent within the ANC’s structures, and there are large splits in the various factions within the party, as hard as the leadership tries to paper these over. Were one of these factions to split off in the next five years, and should these problems continue for the ANC, there could be significant long-term concerns for the party’s governing position. The opportunity is not yet fully formed, but there are undoubtedly factions within the ANC slip-streaming until they feel the gap is there. Zuma as president would have less of Mbeki’s stiffness and much more affability with the electorate, which should buy the ANC time to make real changes in provincial government and service delivery. In sum, there is undoubtedly time for the party to rectify its vulnerabilities, but it will take much fortitude and vastly improved communication with the electorate.

Jonty Fisher authors the political commentary site The Fishbowl . He has also written for ThoughtLeader, the editorial blog of the Mail and Guardian