Reflections on South Africa’s 2009 election
Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

Sanusha Naidu [1]
Thursday, May 7, 2009 - 03:00

South Africa’s 2009 national election was not a dull affair to say the least. Vibrant, unpredictable and perhaps the greatest showing of voter confidence (77.30 per cent) since 1994, there was no room for complacency amongst the main political parties. Until polling stations were closed, political parties continued their election canvassing with the hope of making a last minute surge.

As soon as the first results started to pour in on Thursday 23 April, the overriding question was whether the African National Congress (ANC) would retain its two-thirds majority. For most of the day the latter question and the pending impact of the Congress of the People (COPE) on the ANC’s electoral confidence became the preoccupation amongst commentators. By Friday, it was a fait accompli that the ANC was the overall winner, even though it dipped in and out of the two-thirds zone.

Clearly some of the smaller opposition parties had been left limping. Even though the emergence of COPE did little to dent the ANC’s electoral support, it had become the grim reaper for the smaller opposition parties, who had to battle with the ‘new kid on the block’ to retain their electoral significance.

Yet one should not discount COPE’s performance. Being only four months old, the party managed to do well, albeit not in a way matching the hype of market research surveys predicting in some instances an overly optimistic performance of between 15 to 20 per cent. Perhaps, as my taxi driver commented, ‘If we knew more about COPE, especially its policies and who was its actual leadership to be represented in parliament, then we would have more confidence in them and their policies.’

That aside, COPE has definitely made its mark on South Africa’s electoral landscape. With 30 seats in the National Assembly, it is now one step closer towards demonstrating the kind of integrity politics that became the hallmark of its electoral campaign. But the COPE leadership would do well to remember that they have more to prove than their ANC counterparts, not least because of their brand, legacy and questionable loyalty which makes them the opponents that the ANC executive, its backbenchers and constituencies will want to thwart at every turn.

Therefore as much as COPE will like to be the ANC’s Achilles heel in government, it will also have to contend with the shadow of the official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA). The DA pulled out all the stops, especially after its initial attempt to engage COPE in a grand opposition coalition (if the need arose) was rebuffed by the COPE leadership. As it turned out the DA made strategic gains and increased its profile in parliament by 17 seats. Whether the COPE factor or the ‘Stop Zuma’ campaign did the trick, the DA has definitely emerged a stronger opposition party with its leader, Helen Zille, adding almost a million new voters to its electoral base. But the DA still remains a minority party of choice, especially amongst the coloured electorate in the Western Cape.

By concentrating efforts on retaining control of the Cape Town municipality and, in particular, winning the provincial election in the Western Cape through an outright majority, there are concerns that the party could run the risk of confining itself to regional politics instead of taking on the mantle of being the official opposition in government. This was further exemplified by the fact that Zille, the party boss, put herself forward for the position of Western Cape premier, thereby leaving all kinds of speculation as to who will be a capable candidate of choice in filling the opposition leader’s place in parliament in holding the ruling party accountable and keeping its MPs on their toes.

Nevertheless and in all fairness, the DA reaped its reward in the Western Cape by becoming the first political party to actually win a majority in the province. Buoyed by this emphatic victory, the DA will ensure that it continues with its strategy of making the Western Cape a beacon for social service delivery and poverty reduction programmes vis-à-vis the performance of the ANC in other provinces, especially the Eastern Cape, which is considered to be one of the poorest provinces in the country with a grievous socio-economic delivery record.

As much as the ANC can feel undone by its performance in the Western Cape, after initially having
controlled the province through a fragile coalition, the party has managed to stabilise its support in KwaZulu Natal by a convincing margin. The massive inroads the ANC made into Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) strongholds of northern KwaZulu Natal are testimony to the party’s performance at the administrative helm of the province for five years. Whether it was the ‘Zuma’ factor or the undeniable decline, undermined by its ethnic regional identity, of the Zulu nationalist party since 1994, the ANC had strategically positioned itself amongst the economically indigent through the rolling-out of, inter alia, infrastructure programmes and the social grants system.

On aggregate the ANC’s marginal losses in several provinces, notwithstanding its steep decline in the Eastern Cape, were offset by its more than 15 per cent increase in support in KwaZulu Natal. Whereas in 2004 the ANC entered into an alliance with the Indian-based party the Minority Front to give it control over the province, this time the ANC confidently gained more than a substantial majority to govern the province on its own. So while the ‘coloured vote’ continues to be a variable in the Western Cape, in KwaZulu Natal it seems that the ‘Indian vote’ has lost that appeal. And for parties like the Minority Front that relied on a ‘kingmaker status’ in the past, they now have to be confident that their previous engagements and good graces with the ANC will hold them in good stead under the current Zuma administration, especially for their political lifeline.

But while the ANC may want to headline their triumph over the IFP in KwaZulu Natal, relations on the ground remain volatile between supporters. The ANC administration in KwaZulu Natal therefore needs to be mindful of these tensions and be willing at every turn to engage in an inclusive government and to work towards peaceful coexistence with the IFP, something that Zuma himself alluded to during his address to the National Assembly after being elected as the fourth democratic president of South Africa.

Overall the 2009 election posed serious challenges for the opposition parties. With the New National Party’s (NNP) dissolution after the 2004 election, it seems that its main support base has shifted towards the DA and COPE in the Northern Cape and Western Cape respectively. For the Independent Democrats (ID), the IFP and a host of smaller parties there is now a real need for introspection around how to position themselves in the run-up to the 2011 local government elections. By the same token, while the DA can feel vindicated by its performance, it still needs to develop a coherent strategy that will enable it to make significant inroads into the majority of the African working-class, despite regaining the Indian working-class vote and consolidating its presence within working-class coloured communities. Similarly COPE must also translate its gains into more viable strategies and develop a coherent identity amongst the electorate so that it mitigates the risk of contracting its future support base, as has been the case with other African political parties like the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO).

Yet, in the final analysis, the ANC’s electoral fight-back cannot be overlooked. From boardrooms to shebeens, the ANC ran an impressive multi-pronged election campaign that was as much about Zuma as it was about the COPE factor and the programme of economic empowerment. Of course having a R200 million piggy bank does go a long way too, but now the real work begins.

As Zuma announces his cabinet, he is mindful that the expectation of the electorate that has returned the ANC to power with a majority mandate cannot be taken for granted, the calls by the Anti-Privatisation Forum or the Landless People's Movement to boycott the election entirely notwithstanding. This Zuma has to do while reconciling the expectations of various individuals and constituencies who have carried him to the union buildings. And Zuma has begun to push his own stamp of doing things by cautioning against inertia in the civil service, stating that he ‘does not owe anyone anything’. Of course, the first step towards this is to recognise that the majority of the South African electorate did not vote with their hearts but rather with their feet and for that better life which they were promised.

As Fazila Farouk recently wrote, ‘South Africa’s poor want jobs and houses. They deserve these and more’ [3]. And this is what Zuma’s famous ‘Umshini Wami’ must provide today, and not only the rhetoric of the past. Perhaps the warning issued by my taxi driver is something the ANC and Zuma will do well to heed: ‘I voted for the ANC today because they have improved my life. But they still have a lot to more like better housing and more jobs. They have until the 2011 local elections.’
Sanusha Naidu is the research director of Fahamu's China in Africa programme. She was also an independent political analyst and was part of the SABC's (South African Broadcasting Corporation) 2009 election analyst panel.

Please send comments to editor@pambazuka.org or comment online at http://www.pambazuka.org.

Categories: Comment & analysis
Issue Number: 431

Following Jacob Zuma and the African National Congress's (ANC) victory in the 2009 South African election, Sanusha Naidu considers the role of the Congress of the People (COPE) and the country's other parties in chipping away at the ANC's dominance within much of the country. While the ANC's victory proved conclusive, the emergence of parties like COPE and the Democratic Alliance (DA) reveals a political landscape very much in flux, a situation strongly reflective of the South African electorate...

Category: Governance
Country: South Africa

Source URL: https://www.pambazuka.org/node/54686

Links:
[1] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/5503
[5] mailto:editor@pambazuka.org
[8] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/5896
[12] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3287