

ANC Dominance and Democratic Consolidation in South Africa

Abstract

On May 10th 1994 the world joined millions of South Africans to witness Nelson Mandela ascend a podium in Pretoria and take the oath of office as the first president of the newly freed South Africa. This moment marked the end of the country's arduous road to freedom, but did not guarantee its survival as a democracy. While many relished in the negotiated transition to democracy, which had been deemed a "miracle," Mr. Mandela kept his eyes to the horizon where multiple challenges to the young democracy threatened to take center stage.

Since that historic day, the African National Congress (ANC) has consistently received approximately 70 percent of electorate support and has ultimately become the dominant party within South Africa. The party's ability to maintain staggering power is largely due to its symbolic association with the liberation movement against apartheid. This essay investigates how South Africa's dominant party system may be its greatest challenge to democratic consolidation. A democracy is considered consolidated when democracy becomes "the only game in town."¹ In other words, the populace accepts the legitimacy of the political system and allows it to endure. Although the ANC has been able to win elections and maintain unrivaled power since 1994, their performance has failed to resolve inequalities established by the apartheid regime. Internal friction within the ANC, in addition to unaccountability and inability to provide adequate land reform has drastically undermined the legitimacy of the government. If the ANC continues to be reluctant to address the imminent threats on the horizon, the future of democratic stability in South Africa will remain uncertain.

¹ Sodaro, Michael Joseph, and Nathan J. Brown. "Conditions for Democracy and Democratization." In *Comparative politics: a global introduction*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001. 215-241.

What is Democratic Consolidation?

The concept of democratic consolidation was popularized by political scientists during the last quarter century following the “third-wave” of global democratization, in which 60 countries, formerly characterized by authoritarian regimes, moved toward democratic rule.² Since the “third wave,” various definitions attempting to describe exactly what consolidation entails have been put forth. The presence of assorted definitions has led some political scientists to claim that consolidation is seldom understood because examinations into the subject are abstract and have no “clearly identifiable benchmarks.”³ In other words, it is difficult to understand exactly when a country can be considered democratically consolidated. However, the concept of consolidation is generally viewed as the ultimate end goal of democratization in which democracy becomes “the only game in town” where no one can imagine acting outside of established institutions and democratic practices because those institutions and practices have become deeply ingrained within society.⁴

The internalization of democracy within a society can be broadly indicated behaviorally, attitudinally and institutionally. First, behavioral consolidation is evident when there are no significant attempts to overthrow the democratic regime or secede from the state. Secondly, attitudinal consolidation pertains to society’s belief and commitment to upholding democratic procedures. Institutional consolidation (sometimes referred to as constitutional) is apparent when governmental and non-governmental forces resolve conflicts within the bounds of laws endorsed by the democratic process.⁵ These indicators, when analyzed through the lens of structural context, become illustrative and play the important role of identifying the areas that may either hinder or promote democratic consolidation. The structural context of a country refers to its

² Schedler, Andreas . "What is Democratic Consolidation?." *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 91.

³ Mottiar, Shauna . "Democratic Consolidation in South Africa." *EISA* January (2002): 1-8.

⁴ Sodaro and Brown, "Conditions for Democracy," 215-216.

⁵ Mottiar, “Democratic Consolidation,” 1.

socio-economic development. Conditions within the structure of a country such as inequality, crime and poverty play a major role in shaping societal attitudes. Those attitudes develop into behavior that is essentially a manifestation of the conditions which effect democratic consolidation. Although many political scientists may claim the concept of democratic consolidation is incredibly ambiguous, behavioral, attitudinal and institutional indicators can provide illustrations of the success and failures of democracy within a structural context; thus, testifying to the status of the end goal of democratization-consolidation.

Moreover, socio-economic development (contextualized structural conditions) is primarily the responsibility of the regime leading the country. Samuel P. Huntington, in reference to “third wave” democracies, claimed that the major challenge for these democracies is not the possibility of being overthrown but erosion caused by the gradual weakening of democracy by those elected to lead.⁶ Legitimacy is thus an essential element to democratic survival. Political scientist, Adrian Leftwich proposes that a democratic polity cannot survive and become consolidated unless it boasts legitimacy.⁷ Both constitutional and political legitimacy must be accepted in order to maintain democratic stability. In other words, for democracy to become “the only game in town” legitimacy must exist through the acceptance of the formal structure of laws regulating the competition, distribution and organization of power.⁸ Leaders must ultimately adhere to the rules of the political game. In order for democracy to endure, losers must abide by the result of elections while conversely, winners must understand that they are not in power forever and will have to compete again.⁹ Democracies will achieve a peaceful transfer of power-a major criteria for a stable democracy-if legitimacy exists among the

⁶ Huntington, Samuel P.. "Democracy for the Long Haul." *Journal of Democracy* 7 (1996): 9.

⁷ Leftwich, Adrian. "Democratic Governance in the Third World." In *States of development: on the primacy of politics in development*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000. 136.

⁸ Ibid. 137.

⁹ Ibid. 139.

political elite.

Furthermore, Huntington's "two-turnover test" stresses the importance of a legitimate peaceful transfer of power in a democratic system. It advocates that "a democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party that took power in the initial election at the time of transition loses a subsequent election and turns power over to those election winners, and then those election winners proceed to peacefully turn over power to the winner of a later election."¹⁰ In a dominant party system, like that of South Africa, no such transfer of power has occurred. With regard to the behavioral indicator, Huntington's "two turnover test" would deem the absence of a transfer of power as anti-democratic behavior. The biggest test to a democracy is a peaceful transfer of power; if this continues to be a farfetched concept in South Africa it will remain unknown whether or not the African National Congress (ANC) would really accept losing a national election.¹¹

The Dominant Party System

The African National Congress (ANC) has solidified its role as the dominant party within South Africa by receiving approximately 70 percent of electorate support in national elections following the historic 1994 election of Nelson Mandela. In a dominant party system, multiple parties compete for power, but only one party wins consecutive elections.¹² This structure arguably may have played an important role in establishing the foundations of a democratic regime in the infancy of the newly freed South Africa because it is more stable than a system characterized by multiple fragmented parties. However, dominant parties have the ability to be incredibly undemocratic, looting the economy, intimidating minorities, and participating only in

¹⁰ Huntington, Samuel P.. "How Long?." In *The third wave: democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 266-267.

¹¹ Schedler, "What is Democratic Consolidation?" 98.

¹² Sodaro and Brown, "Conditions for Democracy," 251-52.

elections they know they can win.¹³ Unfortunately, the negative impacts of dominant parties increase the longer they remain in power.¹⁴ Because the dominant party system is so unbalanced in the favor of one recurring winner, opposition becomes discouraged. The absence of opposition to the ruling party ultimately eliminates the threat of losing power which affects the accountability of the government. When a genuine electoral challenge finally does emerge, a dominant party system is likely to become either a competitive multi-party state or an authoritarian one-party regime.¹⁵

Since the ANC's rise to dominance in South Africa at the end of apartheid, elections have been entirely predictable. Mandy Rossouw, a political reporter at the *Mail & Guardian* in South Africa, describes election time as an occurrence every five years where the ANC beats the "we won liberation for our people" drum to attract voters.¹⁶ The symbolic history of the ANC as the party of liberation has allowed it to receive the majority of votes in elections regardless of the party's performance. Political scientist, Tom Lodge, claims that the supporters of the dominant party will be fairly uncritical if the party represents a racial majority in a society which has a history of racial conflict and oppression.¹⁷ The ANC is renowned as a driving force during South's Africa's struggle for freedom. Following years of nonviolent protest against apartheid, the ANC developed a military wing called Umkhonto we Sizwe ("Spear of the Nation") in 1961 in the wake of being banned as a political party.¹⁸ This wing of the ANC favored "hard targets"

¹³ Butler, Anthony . "How Democratic is the African National Congress?." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, no. 4 (2005): 735.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Rossouw, Mandy. "Letter from Johannesburg: The ANC's Party Crashers." *foreign affairs* 88, no. 2 (2009): 1-4. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/letters-from/letter-from-johannesburg-the-anc%C3%A2%E2%82%AC%E2%84%A2s-party-crashers> (accessed August 5, 2011).

¹⁷ Lodge, Tom. "Democracy in a Dominant Party System." In *Politics in South Africa: from Mandela to Mbeki*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 154.

¹⁸ Joyce, Peter. *The making of a nation: South Africa's road to freedom*. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007. 120-121.

and carried out acts of sabotage against police stations, post offices, electrical substations and railway installations instead of putting civilians at risk.¹⁹ The response from the apartheid government was a violent one. Policies were implemented giving law enforcement the tools necessary to discourage involvement in Umkhonto we Sizwe and association with the ANC. Among the policies were the Sabotage Act and General Law Amendment Act. The former allowed the restriction of any persons the regime disliked, while the latter included a “ninety-day” clause that enabled every police officer with the authority to detain any person suspected of “political activities” for up to three months without a warrant.²⁰ Once the liberation movement turned violent, the struggle for freedom in South Africa made waves throughout the world. It was a cause that many devoted their lives to, and has become an era in South Africa equitable to the achievement of independence and freedom movements in other countries around the world. The ANC was a key player in the struggle for freedom in South Africa, and has been remembered as such by their constituents.

While opposition parties have always existed in South Africa, they have never posed a significant political threat to ANC dominance because they have no way to acquire the type of legitimacy the ANC has through its historic role in the liberation movement. This could ultimately discourage not only challenges from opposition parties but participation from South Africans in the electoral process altogether. This effect on the electorate was evident in the two national elections following 1994. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), the number of valid votes declined from over 19.5 million in 1994 to 15.9 million in 1999.²¹ Likewise, in 2004 valid votes in the national election

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ International IDEA. "Voter turnout data for South Africa (Parliamentary)." International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?country=ZA (accessed September 22, 2011).

dropped to 15.6 million.²² In addition to votes, the ANC's active membership has also declined, most likely because South African politics have become less exciting and more predictable.²³

Political scientist, Adam Przeworski theorizes democratic elections as "a process of institutionalizing uncertainty," claiming that because democratic politics involves open competition for power, no group should be certain of winning.²⁴ If the ANC is aware of its capability to use its symbolic history in order to recruit approximately 70 percent of votes in national elections, then South Africans are aware of whom the winners and losers are well before the polls close. The only viable challenge to ANC dominance would be a political schism from within since opposition parties have been unable to attract votes from the South African black majority.

Recent Challenge to ANC Dominance

A recent rift prior to the 2009 South African national elections introduced the country to its first black opposition party. The Congress of the People (COPE) was formed in 2008 following a split between ANC leadership in 2005. The rift within the ANC began when former president, Thabo Mbeki, fired his deputy Jacob Zuma in June of 2005. He was fired when it was discovered that his financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, was found guilty of corruption.²⁵ Though Zuma was implicated in the crime, no charges were brought against him. In the midst of the corruption case, Zuma was also accused, but ultimately acquitted of raping a young HIV-positive woman. The onslaught of bad press called for serious damage control on the part of President Mbeki. However, when he chose to fire Zuma, the ANC's rank and file revolted and demanded Zuma's reinstatement.²⁶ The uprising forced Mbeki to reinstate Jacob Zuma as the ANC's deputy

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 160.

²⁴ Leftwich, "Democratic Governance in the Third World," 138-39.

²⁵ Rossouw, "Letter from Johannesburg: The ANC's Party Crashers."

²⁶ Ibid.

president, but he refused to reinstate him as the second in command of South Africa. Despite these efforts to maintain control of the party, the ANC fired Thabo Mbeki in September of 2008. This move by the ANC created a ripple effect that was felt a week later when eleven of the President's ministers and three deputy ministers loyal to Mbeki all resigned.²⁷ These events laid the groundwork for the establishment of COPE, the first black opposition party in South Africa. COPE styled their campaign around the "hope and change" mantra borrowed from Barack Obama in the United States as an attempt to attract voters fed up with the ANC's poor service delivery record, unaccountability and corruption.²⁸

Although the ANC won re-election in 2009 to another five-year term and captured 264 seats of the 400 seat national assembly (three short of two-thirds majority required to alter the constitution), the schism within the party before the election made politics in South Africa interesting again. One indicator is that on Election Day voter turnout increased by over 2 million votes from the 2004 national election.²⁹ While there was no doubt that the ANC would remain the ruling party and elect their leader Jacob Zuma to the presidency, the precedent set by COPE as the first legitimate contender briefly redrew the line between the ANC and the South African government. Although this line has been blurred since 1994, COPE's presence gave South Africans a taste of democratic electoral competition in the 2009 national election. Unfortunately, COPE's dismal performance in the 2011 municipal elections crushed the hope that the party would become a perennial challenger to the ANC, but nevertheless this precedent has the ability to re-establish Przeworski's notion of democratic elections as "a process of institutionalizing uncertainty." Once the ANC realizes that there is a possibility of viable competition emerging from the periphery, they will be inclined to accept responsibility for their actions in regard to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ International IDEA, "Voter turnout data for South Africa (Parliamentary)."

corruption and poor social-service delivery. This isn't to say that the ANC will be ousted within the next election, but the mere presence of a worthy opponent that could cost the ANC parliamentary seats and authority within the provinces of South Africa, will ultimately persuade the party to become more accountable.

The Future of Democracy in South Africa

According to the recent Political Risk Services (PRS) report on South Africa, the most likely regime scenario within the next five years resembles the current situation in South Africa.³⁰ While the 2009 election established a precedent for viable political opposition to the ANC, the party will most likely retain its dominance for the next five years.³¹ The PRS analysis admits that during their five-year forecast period the ANC will most likely control the presidency and legislature, but will also face daunting challenges that may have negative implications on the future of democracy if they are not addressed.

Internally, according to the PRS, the ANC will continue to struggle appeasing both advocates of the liberal economic policies introduced during the Mbeki administration and a leftist bloc that favors a socialist policy.³² Internal friction between the ANC's socialists and liberals was forecasted to be the cause of a split within the party since the 1990s.³³ The party has often regarded itself as a "big tent" capable of accommodating a multitude of ideologies. The ANC could easily accommodate different ideologies during its fight against apartheid. The different factions within the ANC ultimately put their differences aside to unite against the ruling white minority. Now that the goal of freedom has been achieved, it is only a matter of time before rifts in the ANC will become more prominent. With this in mind, it may be easier to think of the current ANC as a coalition of parties under one banner. Within the ANC there are three

³⁰ Political Risk Services (PRS) is a widely accepted system of independent political risk forecasting.

³¹ *South Africa Country Report*. East Syracuse, NY: The PRS Group, Inc., 2010. P 13-14

³² *Ibid.* 14

³³ Rossouw, "Letter from Johannesburg: The ANC's Party Crashers."

primary factions, also known as the Tripartite Alliance, which include: ANC proper, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSTAU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).³⁴ COSTAU is arguably the most powerful group represented in the Tripartite Alliance. It is South Africa's largest trade union federation boasting over 1.8 million members.³⁵ This number of members makes COSTAU an important voting bloc within the ANC which gives it enormous potential to influence President Zuma's economic policy. For example, the wages of South African workers have struggled to keep pace with the cost of living, resulting in workers strikes across a variety of sectors during the annual midyear period when unions negotiate wages and benefits for their members.³⁶ If President Zuma does not appease the unions, he could lose electoral support from a major voting bloc he needs to be re-elected. Unfortunately, in order to bridge the gap between competing ideologies within the ANC, President Zuma will have to make compromises to appease both wings. The circumstances of this balancing act may drastically affect the route he decides to take with economic policy in the future-an uncertainty that may discourage investors.

Additionally, there seems to be a developing internal struggle between the ANC and the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). The Youth League was established in 1944 to recruit, unite, consolidate and discipline African youth to become the future leaders of South Africa.³⁷ Recently, the ANCYL displayed its abilities to unite the ANC's young rank and file by mobilizing support for Jacob Zuma's reinstatement and the eventual firing of former President Thabo Mbeki in 2008. However, controlling the ANCYL has also become a challenge. The president of the ANCYL, Julius Malema, has become critically renowned for issuing reckless

³⁴ Stratfor. "Rifts Challenge South Africa's Ruling Party." Stratfor. August 4, 2011.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ ANC Youth League Manifesto-1944

statements pertaining to the nationalization of South African industries and mines, in addition to racially divisive statements that fuel an already sensitive issue in South Africa.³⁸ For example, Malema has become a strong advocate for radical land reform. He has praised Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe, for implementing policies that returned the country's land to its rightful owners.³⁹ These calls for retribution critically point out the ANC's failure to provide adequate land reform with racially motivated undertones. Unlike other issues in South Africa such as unemployment and income disparity, land inequality is easy for the black majority to understand because of its historical roots.⁴⁰ Although he may remain on the fringe of the party right now, Malema's charisma could potentially bring him to the helm of a populist movement behind the land reform issue alone. He is gaining popularity and will continue to do so if the ANC does not make significant improvements to the daily lives of the black majority. While it seems that ANC party leaders have been reluctant to punish Malema for his seemingly reckless actions, it is clear that he is aspiring to an even higher position within the party. The ANCYL has the potential to really shake the party up in the future.

Additionally, South Africa's socio-economic disparities continue to undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state. The country's high crime rate is largely attributable to excessive poverty and unemployment. Despite the government's recurring pledges to combat rising crime rates by providing better training for police and security officials, the magnitude of crime continues to surpass the capabilities of security services.⁴¹ According to the 2009 Rule of Law Index, South Africa received its lowest scores in accountability of military, police, and prison officials in addition to the ability to enforce a stable law that protects "security of the

³⁸ Stratfor, "Rifts Challenge South Africa's Ruling Party."

³⁹ Atuahene, Bernadette. "South Africa's Land Reform Crisis." *foreign affairs* 90, no. 4 (2011): 124.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 122.

⁴¹ *South Africa Country Report*. East Syracuse, NY: The PRS Group, Inc., 2010. P 20

person.”⁴² The Rule of Law Index classifies “laws that protect the security of person” as a fundamental right. South Africa is often regarded as a shining light on the African continent, boasting one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, but in comparison to countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Upper/Middle Africa, South Africa fairs worse overall when it comes to protecting fundamental rights. The implications of the inability to rectify this situation will undoubtedly result in steady above-average crime rates that are exacerbated by the unaccountability of security forces.

Furthermore, the government’s inability to adequately address land reform has the potential to cause mass social uprising. The minority white ruling class stole large quantities of land from black Africans through the Natives Land Act of 1913. This law prohibited blacks from owning land that was not in a “scheduled area.” These scheduled areas were overpopulated tribal lands that would later become the Transkei, Ciskei and Kwazulu homelands—the bedrock of the apartheid regime’s network of areas set aside as black homelands, or “Bantustans.”⁴³ During the struggle for freedom, reclaiming this stolen land became a rallying cry for the liberation movement. However, fairly redistributing this land has proven to be a real challenge to the ANC. When Nelson Mandela took office in 1994, approximately 87 percent of South Africa’s land was owned by whites, who made up ten percent of the entire population.⁴⁴ With consultation from the World Bank, the ANC created a plan to redistribute 30 percent of the land owned by whites to blacks by 1999, however in 2010 only eight percent of land had been reallocated.⁴⁵

The sentiments throughout the black community testify to the fact that land reform is a major issue. In 2009, political scientist James Gibson conducted a survey of 3,700 South

⁴² World Justice Project. "Rule of Law Index – South Africa ." World Justice Map .
<http://www.worldjusticemap.org/?q=node/278> (accessed September 23, 2011).

⁴³ Joyce, *The making of a nation: South Africa's road to freedom*, 43.

⁴⁴ Atuahene, "South Africa's Land Reform Crisis," 121.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Africans about land reform and found that over 85 percent of black respondents believed that “most land in South Africa was taken unfairly by white settlers, and they therefore have no right to the land today.”⁴⁶ Gibson also found that over 66 percent of these black respondents believed that “land must be returned to blacks in South Africa, no matter what the consequences are for the current owner and for political stability in the country.”⁴⁷ The PRS also warned that landless blacks’ sense of entitlement to the land they deemed “stolen” could result in an upsurge in illegal land seizures across the country. Section 25 of the new South African constitution provides guidelines for a process for land redistribution in a fair manner. It states that “South Africans whose property was dispossessed after 1913 as a result of racially discriminatory practices are entitled either to restitution of that property or to equitable redress.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, this hasn’t happened in South Africa. The ANC has underfunded land reform projects and failed to assist the recipients of property or equitable redress stated in section 25 of the constitution. Their actions may have only successfully suggested to members of the black majority that they are not serious about land reform.

While it has been clearly forecasted that the ANC will likely remain politically untouchable within the next five years, despite developing internal friction, they are still economically vulnerable. This vulnerability directly translates to their inability to provide adequate land reform to the black South African majority. Because the ANC relies heavily on capital from white South Africans and foreign investment in order to maintain a healthy economy, the ANC cannot pursue policies that may compromise capital.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, if the ANC continues to underfund land reform projects and ignore the black majority that feels entitled to regain their land, they may in fact begin to seize land themselves and create total

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Atuahene, "South Africa's Land Reform Crisis," 122.

⁴⁹ Ibid.124.

unrest and chaos.

Conclusion

Although South Africa may not resemble the stereotypical developing country, it still faces an array of challenges to democratic consolidation. Among these challenges is the dominance of the African National Congress (ANC). Democratic consolidation is the ultimate goal of democratization in which democracy becomes “the only game in town” where no one can imagine acting outside of established institutions and democratic practices because those institutions and practices have become deeply ingrained within society. Members of society demonstrate their acceptance or rejection of democracy through behavior that is driven by attitudes that reflect the conditions within society. In order for these members to accept democracy and allow it to endure, the state and its institutions must be legitimate. An important indicator of the health of a democracy is its ability to sustain a peaceful transference of power. According to Huntington’s “two turnover test” South Africa exemplifies an undemocratic characteristic in that it has not experienced a transfer of power. If there is no open competition for power, the winners and losers are certain who they are. While the dominant party structure had its benefits during the infancy of South African democracy, dominant parties have the ability to become increasingly undemocratic the longer they remain in power. If the ANC cannot lose an election there isn’t a democratic institution that can hold leaders accountable.

While the Congress of the People (COPE) emerged from within the ANC and established the precedent for viable opposition in the 2009 national election, the party later faltered in the 2011 municipal election. It is still unlikely that the ANC will be ousted anytime soon unless it endures a major internal schism. The ANC was able to operate as a Tripartite Alliance (ANC proper, COSTAU and SACP) when each faction was battling a common enemy-apartheid. Fortunately, that enemy has been defeated, but friction between competing ideologies in the

party may soon take center stage and yield a different ANC or multi-party system in the future.

Additionally, the role the ANC Youth League and its current president, Julius Malema, will play in the future of South African democracy is also unknown. Malema has advocated for the nationalization of industries and mines as well as invoked racially divisive speech that could potentially provoke a social uprising in the midst of daily socio-economic challenges and inadequate land reform.

Unfortunately, we cannot forecast exactly what the ANC will look like in the future. But its policies and practices will undoubtedly shape democracy in South Africa as long as the country is characterized by the dominant party system. With major problems like crime, poverty and land reform looming like a storm cloud over Cape Town's Table Mountain, South Africa may be a thunderclap away from unrest. The ANC will have to face these challenges and balance internal politics in order to make significant improvements to the everyday lives of South African citizens. It is a tall order that leaves the future of democracy vulnerable.