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Farewell to the ANC as we knew it

By Adrian Hadland

The African National Congress that many South Africans knew and had voted for since 1994 has gone. In its place is a party in which "the moral compass has been thrown overboard" and that is now characterised by greed, corruption and inefficiency., says Alex Boraine, former deputy chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Speaking this week in the latest Difficult Dialogues - a series of public discussions on controversial topics, supported by the Cape Argus - Boraine said he thought the time was ripe for a major realignment of the political system.

"I am an optimist, let's grab the moment," he told the audience on Wednesday evening.

"This is such an exciting time to be in South Africa, because you don't quite know what's going to happen next."

He suggested, just as he argued in a recently published book, that a black-led initiative to consolidate popular support for a movement that vowed to respect the values of the democratic constitution could have an immensely powerful appeal across racial, party, ethnic and provincial lines.

But unseating the ANC would be no mean feat.

The party has been around for 100 years. "It has tradition, dance, song. It's not just a political vehicle, it's a family - and you can't easily ask people to leave their family."

But recent developments, most notably public statements by former senior ANC officials Mosiuoa Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa, were an indication that people within the ANC had become fed-up.

There was a feeling the ANC was no longer the organisation that won three general elections on the basis of its adherence to the values of the Freedom Charter and the constitution, Boraine argued.

"It's so great to hear these voices saying what they are saying, saying to (the ANC Youth League) ... you can't do that."

Boraine, a former MP who founded the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) and who heads a centre for transitional justice in New York, said that for several years debates on South African politics had been concerned with trying to understand the workings of the majority party.

There had been no genuine attempt to contest power in a political system that was severely lacking in its capacity to introduce and enforce accountability.

"Accountability is central to democracy," Boraine said.

Professor Wilmot James, the convenor of the Difficult Dialogues debates on behalf of the Economic Justice Initiative, spoke about how the lack of accountability had been a key reason motivating calls to overhaul the electoral system.

He was part of an electoral task team appointed in 2002 by the then Home Affairs Minister, Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Chaired by Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, the team reported to Cabinet early in 2003.

Its report, according to James, called for substantial changes to the electoral system, including the introduction of 300 constituency-based MPs, in addition to 100 elected according to party lists.

The mix of constituency and proportionally representative party list is called the multi-member constituency system.

James said it was fortunate there were already 69 constituencies demarcated and ready to go in the form of district councils. This meant there would be no need to go through a lengthy and possibly controversial process of redrawing boundaries in a new system.

Each district council would have between three and seven MPs, depending on the number in it.

The Slabbert report also suggested a simple way of designing a new ballot paper with pictures of candidates and symbols of parties. This would allow voters to select their own MP for the constituency and chose a party for the list.

"The report said four fundamental values should be held in balance: fairness, inclusiveness, simplicity, accountability. Of the four, the last involved the most discussion by the electoral task team," James told the audience at UCT.

He added a survey conducted by the task team found that proportional representation (PR) - the current electoral system - was the least favoured democratic system.

The task team rejected the Westminster single victor constituency system as they believed it subverted fairness and inhibited inclusivity.

Sadly, said James, though the shift to a multi-member constitutional system had been the recommendation of the majority of the task team and Cabinet agreed the matter should be taken further after the 2005 election, this was not done.

"Why was it killed? Because the PR system creates powerful party bosses and out of self-interest, they've opted not to change it."

Announcing at the event that he had agreed to stand in the next election on the list of the Democratic Alliance, James said he would press the government to reconsider the recommendations of the task team.

He added that a new electoral system would not require an amendment to the constitution, which demanded only proportionality. Instead, a new law was needed that could be passed by Parliament.

Journalist and activist Zubeida Jaffer told Difficult Dialogues the decision not to elect the president directly but instead to mandate Parliament to choose its leader, had been taken in fraught circumstances in the early 1990s.

"We were dealing with a divided nation, a fractious situation which could easily have gone to civil war."

Then, it was the right decision as the indirect election of a president allowed for compromises around power-sharing.

Indeed, if South Africa had gone for the direct route, recent events would not have occurred. We would not have seen the removal of Thabo Mbeki nor the rise to power of Kgalema Motlanthe, Jaffer said.

She warned against switching too rapidly from an indirect to a direct way of electing the president.

"Zimbabwe has direct presidential elections and this is clearly not a direct panacea for all ills."

Jaffer said there were benefits to both the direct and indirect election of a national president.

Direct election meant the president could only be removed by impeachment: "The problem is if we sit with someone who is a disaster."

In a winner-take-all system, direct election could also mean the president was appointed by a minority. In Zambia, 29% of national votes were sufficient for the ruling party to appoint the top executive.

"If we have a free-for-all, we could have a situation where a particular racial or ethnic group can muster the kind of support that will give them the presidency but will harm the national interest and the capacity for nation-building," Jaffer said.

A third problem with direct election of a president was it could create two centres of power.

"We've already had some experience of that, but we could create a situation where the president and Parliament are both directly elected and are in opposition to each other."

Jaffer said it would be unfortunate if the debate on a preferred electoral system over-simplified things.

"I do sense we could sit with a situation where emotions are so high that we once again will simplify and think we can choose a solution that will solve all our problems. If we accept nothing is going to solve all our problems and we are willing to take the best out of different models, we should be all right."

The present situation was untenable. "We feel such a distance between the leaders and the people and there is a sense of being disempowered - and we need to do something about that," Jaffer said.

"We have set up a system that has not been accountable and that has separated leaders from their communities. We desperately have to feel that we have got a say."

- The Difficult Dialogues debate was the sixth in the series, which resumes on November 5 at 6pm at the Sea Point Civic Centre. "The post-election crisis in Kenya: Lessons learned" will be presented by Dr Willy Mutunga.

Wilmot James has recused himself from chairing future sessions in the series.

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