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Southall, Roger

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Roger Southall

# The 'Dominant Party Debate' in South Africa

### *Abstract:*

The persistence of the debate about whether the African National Congress (ANC) can or should be characterized as a „dominant party" was illustrated by exchanges between the country's leading political parties during the 2004 general election. The ANC, which views its hegemony as expressing its popularity, rejects its depiction as a 'dominant party' as inherently hostile, conservative and racist. In contrast, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and its associated analysts warn against dangers posed to democracy by the ANC's arrogance, freedom from accountability, and its ambitions to extend increasing control over the state and society. After a review of the central tenets of the debate, the present article suggests that both sets of antagonists exaggerate their case. In contrast, whilst accepting that the ANC's electoral and political hegemony does carry threats to democracy, it also proposes that the ability of the ANC to extend its dominance is subject to considerable limitations. This argument is pursued through analysis of such factors as the multidimensionality of party dominance, the extent to which the ANC's attempted centralization of power is constrained by constitutional, political and economic realities, the perpetuation of debate within the ANC and between itself and its principal allied organizations, and finally the difficulties faced by the ANC in imposing its authority upon a society as complex as that of South Africa. The conclusion argues that the dominant party thesis, whilst too often exaggerated, is too important and insightful to be abandoned, and that careful analysis suggests that the basis of ANC dominance is far from static, and is likely to be subjected to considerable challenge over coming years.

The „dominant party" debate in South Africa just won't go away! Indeed, in the lead up to the 2004 general elections, it became a major focus of public attention, for there was a universal expectation that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) would secure a repeat massive victory at the polls.

In the event, this was to be more than realized in practice. At the „liberation elections" of 1994 it had received 62.65% of the vote for the national parliament; and in 1999 it increased its majority to 66.35%. Now, in 2004, it was to secure fully 69.68% of the vote, as well as winning control of the two provinces out of the nine created in 1994 which had hitherto escaped its control. For the most prominent exponent of the „party dominance" theory in South Africa, Professor Herman Giliomee, this was merely to reinforce concerns that the very essence of democracy in South Africa was at risk (Giliomee 2004).

Giliomee – with different associates – had been primarily responsible for articulating the theory of party dominance with particular regard to the ANC within the academy following the earlier elections (Giliomee & Simkins 1999; Giliomee, Myburgh and Schlemmer 2001). During the 2004 election campaign it was to be taken up by the principal opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), which repeated previous warnings about the dangers of ANC dominance, viewed as overweaning arrogance and freedom from accountability. Having warned of the dangers of the ANC securing a two-thirds majority in the 1999 election, which would enable it to change the constitution unassisted by support from any other party, DA leader Tony Leon now demanded assurance from ANC leader Thabo Mbeki that he would not change the rules in the coming parliament to enable himself to run for a hitherto constitutionally-forbidden third term as President.

The ANC response, penned in part by President Mbeki himself (Mbeki 2004), was that the concept of party dominance was inherently conservative, and that even where it was not deployed directly in the interests of the DA, it served as a cover for white interests which have an inherent distrust of black governance, and which were suggesting, at base, that the ANC was „anti-democratic". Insistence upon „the necessity of a potential changeover of power in the foreseeable future (as) a basic test of whether (South Africa is) a democracy" was not argument, but dogma. The ANC-led government was not only subject in its actions to a range of constitutional constraints but was also bringing changes for the better to ordinary people's lives. The majority of South Africans wanted a common society and a unifying mode of politics rather than the racial divisiveness peddled by the DA (Suttner 2004a).

I would argue that the persistence of the 'Dominant Party Debate' indicates its continuing centrality to our understanding of the dynamics and prospects of democracy in SA. However, I would also like to propose that the debate has become somewhat static, and that we now need to concentrate our attention as much on how politics in SA may be changing as on how it is staying the same.

## Defining party dominance

The idea of the ANC as a dominant party starts from the obvious fact of its overwhelming popular majority, and its apparent invincibility at the polls (at least in the immediate post-apartheid era). Basing themselves on the classic statement of Pempel (1990), Giliomee and Simkins (1999) define dominant parties as those which:

• Establish electoral dominance for an uninterrupted and prolonged period;

• Enjoy dominance in the formation of governments;

• Enjoy dominance in determining public agenda, notably with regard to pursuit of a „historical project".

They argue that there is a fundamental tension between dominant party rule and democracy, and that whereas party dominance can pave the way to competitive democracy, in others it can lead to façade democracy or barely concealed authoritarianism.

Pempel's notion of party dominance is based primarily on European experience. It is also important to note that it is addressing a particular kind of democratic party system. Parties may dominate, partly by bending electoral rules, but ultimately the notion admits that they are re-elected because an electorate wants them re-elected. It clearly follows from this perspective that the Swedish social democrats were a dominant party, but the NSDAP in Nazi-Germany was not, for it rode roughshod over the constitution and rendered the political system wholly undemocratic, completely nullifying the electoral system. How far dominant parties may bend rules and manipulate systems without wholly subverting democracy is clearly a matter for debate: democracy" after all is often measured on something of a sliding scale. But the fundamental distinction between party dominance secured by popular endorsement and non-democratic, authoritarian or fascist rule remains.

Giliomee and Simkins accept this distinction but go on to argue that dominant parties in semi-industrialised countries, such as South Africa are more likely to abuse power than those in the industrialized countries studied by Pempel. This is basically because in less advanced and more unequal (semi-industrialised) countries a capitalist state has difficulty in establishing real autonomy from capitalist interests on which it is dependent for investment decisions.

This provides the springboard for analysis of SA under the ANC as a dominant party state.

*Roger Southall*

## The 'Dominant Party Debate' in SA

Giliomee, Myburgh and Schlemmer (2004) argue that post-1994 South Africa is characterized by:

• A lack of uncertainty about electoral outcomes. South African elections take on the characteristic of a „racial census", which is admitted to be a complex, not a crude phenomenon, requiring disaggregation. Opposition therefore becomes peripheralised.

• A highly centralized and hierarchical state, which the ANC has inherited from the NP. This means minorities are barely protected, the neutrality of the civil service is subverted, and the autonomy of independent bodies like the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is eroded.

• The delegitimisation of significant opposition, which is presented as opposed to „transformation", at the same time as the ANC is extending party control over the state.

• The (post-Leninist) centralization of power within the ruling party, leading to the circumscription of internal party democracy.

South Africa, they conclude, „has achieved majority legitimacy but at the cost of minority alienation" (ibid 180). Majoritarianism has triumphed over consociationalism and checks and balances.

Many of these arguments are echoed by the DA. For instance, Selfe (2004) has proposed:

• Prolonged and unchallenged concentration of power leads to the abuse of power.

• The presence of opposition parties as „alternative governments" is the best means of keeping governments honest.

• Where as in South Africa one party holds an overwhelming majority and the possibility of change is null and void, the ruling party no longer has to account for its failures and the slide to a one-party state begins.

• Party dominance, which undermines parliament, renders the ruling party unaccountable.

Writing in the heat of the recent election campaign, Selfe went on to express confidence that South Africa will not remain a one-party dominant state for very much longer, and that there will be a day when the ANC loses power and becomes an opposition. Yet the very logic of the argument, which he is presenting, actually undermines this rhetorical optimism, and the conclusion, often drawn from this sort of analysis, is that South Africa is on the road to becoming another

Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, it is important to note that, although left-wing critics of the ANC do not utilize the framework of the „dominant party" thesis directly, they nonetheless endorse many of its central elements, with Dale McKinley, an activist who was expelled from the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 2000, arguing initially that the ANC and SACP hierarchies (which are formally linked together with the Congress of South African Trade Unions in the Tripartite Alliance) had clamped down on internal party and internal Alliance debate (McKinley 2001) and latterly, upon popular political protest (McKinley 2004).

In contrast to the above, critics of the dominant party thesis argue that:

• Those who argue the dominant party thesis have a fundamental objection to what has been democratically decided. This often shades into racism.

• Electoral dominance does not mean that South Africa is undemocratic. Those opposed to the government have the constitutional right and actual freedom to vote for the opposition.

• The necessity of a potential changeover of power in the foreseeable future cannot be a basic test of democracy. The ANC cannot be blamed for its own popularity.

• The rule of the ANC is checked by a range of constitutional institutions which support democracy and often expose corruption and record decisions that go against the government.

• Continued harping by the opposition upon the ANC as a dominant party, which undermines minority protections and interests works against the notion of a common South African nationhood (Maloka 2001; Suttner 2004).

My argument is that whilst the dominant party theorists tend to overstate their case, their critics similarly overstate theirs and furthermore, overlook the complexities and nuances of the „dominant party" argument. Nor does it help that the debate too readily becomes perjorative, and that „dominant party" theorists are too readily dismissed as motivated by racism. Now, although the DA has been often accused by commentators of at times pressing buttons which send out identifiably subterranean racist messages, just as in response, the ANC is regularly deemed to be playing a „race card" of its own (Mare 2001), it is important to distinguish between the intellectual structure and coherence of the dominant party argument (of which racism has no part) and how the dominant party argument may be used (or rather, mis-used). The concern here is with the former, rather than the latter. In short, it is proposed here that the party dominance idea does have a lot to say about South Africa,

it is suggestive about the nature of South African democracy, and that hence the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater.

As proposed elsewhere (Southall 2004):

• A „weak" version of the dominant party thesis is much more productive and multidimensional than theorists such as Giliomee et al allow.

• This recognizes that for reasons of history the ANC enjoys a 'natural' majority, and that it is democratically elected.

• It acknowledges that the ANC has embarked upon a considerable centralization of power and has blurred boundaries between the party and the state, but argues that in doing so it has encountered significant limits.

• The drive to centralize power in party flows at least in part from the commendable desires of imposing fiscal discipline, driving development and curbing corruption. In other words, the ANC is at least in its own vision engaged in a process of modernising the state.

• The ANC is a „broad church" and as such is the site of struggle between a variety of ideological persuasions and political practices. Countercurrents of democratic centralism and participatory democracy coexist. Hence we find that vigorous (often vicious) debates and scraps take place between different components of the Tripartite Alliance.

• Even if the ANC has the intention to dominate the state, in practice it does not have the capacity to impose itself upon society. Even the apartheid state failed to do this, and failed to contain mass discontent.

My argument here is that in order to move towards a more nuanced and useful understanding of a changing party system we need to elaborate upon these various features of South Africa as a „weak dominant party state".

## „Weak" party dominance in South Africa

An interpretation, which views the dominance of the ANC as „weak", or qualified by factors beyond its control, accepts many of Giliomee's and Simkins' premises. In summary, it recognises the tension between party dominance and democracy. It recognizes the dangers to accountability posed by a party which can dominate parliament and which has the power to change (or just undermine) the constitution. It recognises the dangers posed by a party which has power to erode the independence of other institutions. Furthermore, it recognises the dangers of a party which can wield its financial powers to establish networks of patronage at national, provincial and local government levels. However, it also recognizes that the power of the ANC to impose itself upon the state

and upon society is also subject to considerable limitations (including its own democratic and liberatory traditions). Let us now explore how aspects of these pressures and counter-pressures play themselves out.


## *The multidimensionality of party dominance*

One of the key fears which lie behind the notion of the ANC as a dominant party is that it will follow the examples of other African nationalist and liberation movements in moving to „de jure" or „de facto" one-partyism. Indeed, I have myself argued that there is an inherent logic to the nature of a national liberation struggle which results in authoritarianism, and that „once having attained national independence, the inexorable logic of national liberation seems to be to suppress rather than to liberate democracy" (Southall 2003a: 256). I argue this on the basis of a case-study of post-liberation, post-apartheid developments in Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa which proposes that:

• In their drive to liberate countries from colonial and/ or apartheid rule, national liberation movements (NLMs) are driven to create nations and to deny or suppress cultural and historical diversities amongst those who have been oppressed. To overcome the risks or reality of tribalisms or difference, there is a perceived need to maintain a notion of monolithic national unity.

• The armed struggles waged by NLMs in southern Africa were directed at wresting state power from colonial and/or settler control. The capture of state power was followed by the construction of dominant party states wherein control of state machinery was utilized to delegitimise opposition, denounce minorities who mobilize on issues vital to them, and to erect a „culture of entitlement" to state resources for the new power-holders.

• In any former settler colony, continuing racial inequities in ownership skewed in favour of a white minority are perpetually available as a cause for political mobilization, allowing the new-powerholders to mobilize around historic racial rather than newly emerging class-divisions.

However, whilst exploring how these tendencies have worked themselves out in all three countries I also consider how the liberal democratic model, which has been touted as their antidote has itself promoted elitism and acute societal inequalities of power and wealth (despite being a necessary dimension of any progression to a genuine liberation). I also indicate that many of the worst aspects of authoritarianism have been ameliorated in South Africa by such phenomena as the non-racial tradition of the ANC. An optimistic interpretation of the ANC's status as a dominant party, I suggest, is that:

It is the very complexity of the South African situation and the fact that the democratic settlement was based upon the agreement to co-exist and cooperate of countervailing forces which could not defeat each other, that will work to constrain the more authoritarian values and practices of the ANC in power (Southall 2003a: 262).

At the base of such argumentation, is a set of reasons as to why South Africa, although sharing some considerable structural and political-cultural similarities, is unlikely to become „another Zimbabwe", that is, a „failed state" characterized by brutal authoritarianism, societal decay and stagnant or negative economic growth.

The ANC's sensitivity to the „dominant party" thesis is undoubtedly fueled by an acute defensiveness about the broader African record. The deeply authoritarian nature of most post-independence regimes is intellectually recognized as expressed notably by President Mbeki's stress upon the necessity of „good governance" as a major plank of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). Yet emotional acceptance of authoritarianism as the norm is much more difficult, precisely because it conjures up deeply worrying suggestions that there is something inherent in the African situation which produces it. Denial of the deeply unpleasant reality is therefore readily combined with understandable post-colonial umbrage at suggestions of African inequality or „unreadiness" for democracy. Hence willingness to defend present-day Zimbabwe as embodying „democracy", albeit challenged by the strains of confronting post-colonial racial inequalities, is matched by insistence that developments taking place in that country will not repeat themselves in South Africa. The need to „defend Africa" is simultaneous with the need for South Africa to differentiate itself from it. Yet it is precisely the latter aspect of this contradiction, which helps us to understand why party dominance in South Africa is unlikely to transform into „one partyism".

One-party states were established in African countries where:

• Triumphant nationalist parties were able to capture states which under colonialism had been neither constrained by independent institutions nor by civil society.

• The economy centred around the export of one or two primary commodities, and hence was easily available for „capture and control" through nationalization, state „partnerships" or taxation.

The political economy of post-apartheid South African society is much more complicated. I would therefore propose, in contrast, that:

•    South Africa is a constitutional state, where the government is at least notionally constrained by independent bodies such as the constitutional court and various „democracy promoting" commissions (the Human Rights Commission, the Gender Commission, the Independent Electoral Commission and

so on). Suttner (2004b) propounds the ANC party-line when he argues that these protections are real. Against this, Giliomee and others argue that whilst the rights-based constitution adopted in 1994 and updated in 1996 is admirable, it is failing in practice, and that the separation of powers and rights of minorities are being negated by the ANC's capture of both the state and the „democracy promoting" commissions. For instance, the ANC is destroying the autonomy of watchdog committees in parliament at the same time as the Constitutional Court is increasingly shunned by minorities who believe that it regularly finds in favour of the majority party (Giliomee 2004). The latter position is probably the stronger one in that there is some considerable evidence pointing to the undermining of the ability of standing committees to call the government to account (Calland 1999; Southall 2003b), even though no major studies of the effectiveness (or otherwise) of the „democracy-promoting institutions" have yet entered the public domain. Nonetheless, this is a far cry from any suggestion that the constitution has become a cypher. The reality is much more contested, and individual rights are undoubtedly far more protected than they were under apartheid. Likewise, any erosion of minority rights (notably of Afrikaners, about whom Giliomee is particularly exercised) needs to be balanced against the collective rights, notably of the poor, which have been considerably advanced under the constitution.

• There is a strong case for arguing that the independence of the SABC has been undermined since 1994. The recently appointed board has been widely accused of being stuffed with partisans of the ANC, and there were numerous criticisms during the recent election that the SABC gave saturation coverage to the ruling party at the direct expense of the opposition parties. Nonetheless, a recent study suggests that although the SABC's role during the recent elections was controversial, the ANC was not disproportionately favoured by the state broadcaster, and if it „received the most coverage on both radio and television", this reflected its being the largest party and the one which generated most news (Davis 2005). Meanwhile, awkward questions continue to be posed by investigative journalists, throughout the media (including the SABC, yet notably by those working for the weekly and weekend newspapers). On the whole, the major press-groups are owned by large-scale capital, and are relatively even-handed, combining support with sharp criticism of the government. Certainly, the ANC regularly complains that its failings, whether of policy or concerning allegations of corruption, are the subject of too fulsome and biased reporting (e.g. Turok 2004).

• The economy is semi-industrialised and dominated by large-scale corporations, many of which are transnationals, owing their allegiance to countries other than South Africa. There is an established (white) bourgeoisie which is

not immediately dependent on the state. Giliomee (2004) argues that although it is important for big business to play a counter-vailing role to government in the absence of an alternative government, the South African corporate sector has consistently failed to play such a role since 1924, when the Nationalists first took power. Instead, he argues, under both apartheid and the ANC, it has been wholly comfortable with one-party domination, with the large conglomerates principally interested in currying favour with the ruling party to obtain state contracts and concessions. However, what Giliomee fails to add is that, whilst the apartheid government was itself to be subject to belated pressure to amend its ways, and was to propelled towards negotiations with the ANC by the refusal of mainly American banks to roll over its international debts in 1986, the ANC faces a situation where it is much more immediately subject to international investment sanction and veto. Since 1994, the economy has become progressively more open as South Africa has sought to adjust and compete in the rapidly globalising economy. The effort to secure foreign investment remains central to the government's economic strategy, and certain South African conglomerates have been allowed to de-list from the country and to register overseas. It is not just, as Giliomee and others argue, that efforts by the government to promote black economic empowerment by making heavy demands upon the corporate sector may automatically retard economic growth. It is also that corporate resistance and a new reluctance of foreign firms to invest may lead to the state moderating its strategy for BEE. The large conglomerates are unlikely to be actively democratic forces. However, in a globalising world, they may well work to prevent or dilute a concentration of power in a country, such as South Africa, which is competing with others for their investment.

As a result of the 1990s wave of democratization, African one-partyism has given way virtually everywhere to elections which are (more *or* less) competitive, and there has been a considerably greater „circulation of elites" than previously. Changes of government, from Nigeria to Kenya, by elections are becoming increasingly regularized, although many governments seek to bend electoral rules in the interests of survival. Yet it is only in a handful of southern African states (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia and possibly Lesotho) that the parties have become „dominant" in the sense that, even if (as in Namibia) they employ degrees of coercion to hang on to power, they retain a popular hegemony. This is surely their great strength – yet it is also their locus of potential vulnerability, for the structural limitations of their economies, which cannot support expanding populations, are almost bound to lead to an erosion of their popularity in the face of policy and „delivery" deficiencies. Party dominance may be real, yet in southern Africa it is very far from being a proto-monolithic phenomenon.

## Centralization and the blurring of party and state

There is a strong case for arguing that the ANC has embarked upon a centralization of power, under a strong presidency. The ANC has sought to claw back much ground which it lost during the constitutional negotiations, and which notably, saw the establishment of the new provinces and a quasi-federalism. Yet under the ANC much effort has been exerted to prevent quasi-federalism becoming the real thing (Southall 2000). I with the ANC having imposed, in practice, a highly centralized form of rule. The enormous financial control which the state wields from the centre, with the provinces being funded almost wholly (95%) from central budget, has been deliberately utilized to curb autonomy, which has been otherwise contained by maintenance of the simultaneity of provincial with national elections. Ths was completed by the machinery of „deployment" whereby politicians are „deployed" from province to national institutions (and the reverse), and to the civil service and other state institutions, even if, as Hawker (2004) has demonstrated, the ANC ability to manage deployment has by no means been absolute, and has had to make a number of compromises which have limited presidential/NEC prerogative. Federal tendencies have also been negated, within both the party and the state, by the President's appointment of the premiers. Indeed, in the recent election, Mbeki declined to nominate the ANC's candidates for the premierships in advance. This was manifestly to contain rivalries within the party during the campaign, but in the eyes of many, the decision advanced party interests at the expense of the rights of choice of the electorate. Mbeki's subsequent appointment of eight new premiers after the election, whilst welcomed as replacing certain underperforming predecessors, was equally interpreted as the imposition of those who owed their loyalty directly to him rather than to provincial interests (*Business Day*, 22 April 2004; *Sunday Times*, 25 April 2004).

Giliomee, Myburg and Schlemmer (2001: 170) have argued that the list system of voting has allowed „the party leadership to place loyalists in key positions, and at the same time compensate those who have lost out in internal power struggles through redeployment to comfortable but less strategic posts". Their particular concern is that the independence of the state and civil service has been increasingly undermined by the appointment to leading positions of ANC loyalists, whose primary allegiance is to the party which appointed them. However, a detailed study of post-1994 „redeployments" by Hawker (2004) has demonstrated that this seriously exaggerates the reach of the party leadership. The ANC's „deployment" strategy works at one level to make rational allocations of scarce, well trained and capable, human resources. Prior to the previous election, of the 60 members of the ANC's National Executive Committee, 47 had been deployed to the National Assembly, 7 to party positions, and only 2 to diplomatic positions. Of the remainder, 3 had gone into business and 1 had not

been deployed. Meanwhile, of the sixty ANC MPs who had resigned from the National Assembly after their election in 1999, only 9 had moved to diplomatic positions or posts in the civil service. In contrast, 7 had moved to party positions, 12 to become Ministers in the provinces, Mayors or members of the National Chamber of Provinces (the upper House of Parliament), 5 to business, and 1 to a civic body. 15 had made „stormy" or „managed" exits (i.e. they were not deployed anywhere), and the destination of 4 other was unknown (although clearly not to any prominent position). Hawker (2004: 113) concludes that „the overweening power of the presidential executive, though asserted, has been less than absolute, and compromise as much as conflict and banishment has marked the passage of many members through the (National) Assembly".

Of course, there is much more to the story than transfer to state positions of people who hold elected party office. Probably, more pervasive is the appointment of persons who are known to be sympathetic to the ANC to the civil service, parastatals and supposedly politically neutral „organs of state", such as the Democracy Promoting institutions and the boards of the SABC and government research agencies (such as the Human Sciences Research Council). At one level, this is unexceptional in a country where majority sentiment, as expressed in successive elections, favours the ruling party. It is also reflective of post-1994 affirmative recruitment, which has engaged in the reversal of past inequalities and the achievement of „representivity". At this stage, however, it cannot be deemed an unqualified subordination of the state to party interests, unless minority interests and viewpoints are systematically excluded, but casual observation suggests that, on the whole, they are not. However, this is not to ignore the danger that the present situation may be beginning to replicate that under apartheid whereby, although public servants were constrained by law (from 1957) of participating in party politics, a tacit affirmative action policy represented a strategy of patronage for the National Party (Posel 2000: 55-56). However, according to Naidoo (2004), the question of political influence on the contemporary public service remains undecided, and it is clear that he leans towards an interpretation which views it, as under Mbeki, principally concerned with the efficient conduct of its business.

The ANC sees itself as the vehicle of transformation of the political economy towards a goal of equity and growth. To this end, most particularly since 1999, it has embarked upon a project of black economic empowerment which has seen it attempt to promote black-owned corporations, a black capitalist class and black advance into the established (white) corporate sector in order to drive domestic, „patriotic" investment. The success of this enterprise has been highly uneven, and the private sector remains overwhelmingly dominated by whites. Nonetheless, a black presence in business is growing, and the financial rewards for those blacks who make a success of the corporate sector can be astonishing. The government has brought forth a panoply of measures, from legislation which requires appropriate measures of „empowerment" for the award of official contracts through to demands that the different industrial sectors come up with

„charters" that set empowerment targets to be achieved within a defined time-span, which is designed to expand opportunities for an emergent black middle-class dramatically. As a consequence, there is considerable evidence of a lurch towards „crony capitalism", in which corporations, whether owned by blacks or whites, deem political connections necessary for their expansion (Southall 2004, 2005). In this context, ANC politicians seem far more eager to go into business than into the civil service, and equally, senior civil servants seem keener to „re-deploy" to the private sector than to step across into the cauldron of politics. In short, the blurring of party and state seems considerably less of a phenomenon in the present era than the politicization of business.

## Centralization as modernization?

Inherent in much of the critique of the ANC as a dominant party is that the blurring of party and state entails a politicized appropriation of public re-sources. Lying behind this is a sense of South Africa as increasingly ruled by a „nomenklatura", a new class which accesses power, prosperity and privilege through membership and approval of the party. This fits easily into variant images of the ANC as replicating Soviet-style rule, African one-party kleptoc-racies or South-East Asian-style crony capitalist regimes. None of these per-spectives is complimentary, which is one reason why the ANC is so vehement in rejecting the model of „party dominance". It argues, in contrast, that in so far as it is engaged in a project of centralization of state authority, this is in the cause of modernization and development.[1]

From the ANC's perspective, its task since 1994 has been to create a mod-ern, democratic state out of the backward-looking inheritance of apartheid. This entailed fashioning an efficient machinery of governance out of the amalgam of a racially-divided central authority and „self-governing" and juridically „independent" African „homelands". NP rule since 1948 repre-sented „forty lost years" (O'Meara 1996) during which patronage rather than technical competence had been the principal criterion for advance in the cen-tral civil service, corruption had been endemic in the homelands, and deliber-ate suppression of black educational and scientific advance had left an enor-mous backlog of skills and capacity amongst the black majority. Whilst apart-heid had overseen the creation of advanced infrastructure on behalf of whites,

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1 The role of the ANC as a „modernising force" rather than as a „dominant party" was stressed by one of the party's leading intellectuals, Firoz Cachalia, in his vigorous critique of my chapter on 'The State of Party Politics' at the launch of the HSRC's first issue of a new series on *The State of the Nation* (Daniel, Habib and Southall (2004)) in September 2005.

this was based upon the deliberate underdevelopment and degradation of the „black economy". The ANC's mission was consequently, not only the democratization of an inequitable, oppressive, ramshackle and largely inefficient state, but its total transformation.

During the negotiations process, the ANC had had to compromise its preference for a unitary state with the creation of the nine new provinces, which represented something of a devolution of power from the centre. However, once in power, the ANC has been determined to ensure that the provinces, most of which have incorporated the former homelands, shall not become obstacles to a common vision of identity, growth and development for the „new South Africa". Nor, in particular, should they become regional chiefdoms through which party barons rule via corruption and patronage. It is to this end that Mbeki, as head of both party and state, has insisted upon the central appointment (and mid-term replacement if necessary) of provincial premiers, and that from 1994 onwards, determined efforts have been made to prevent South Africa's quasi-federalism becoming the real thing. Meanwhile, the ANC's „deployment and redeployment" of human resources between national and provincial institutions encourages a unified vision of the state, as does the functioning of a single Public Service Commission and a common set of public service rules and regulations.

The ANC maintains (albeit more off than on the record) that the wisdom of its centralizing drive is demonstrated by the very real difficulties it has encountered in establishing functioning machineries of state in provinces such as the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga, both of which have been characterized by high levels of corruption and inefficiency, reflective of their incorporation of predecessor homeland administrations. Given the urgency of overcoming the divisions of South Africa's „two economies", one largely white and rich, the other largely black and poor and which continue to display urban/rural and regional dimensions, „development and delivery" is far more likely to be achieved through the control and guidance of a centralizing, technically proficient elite than through the dispersal of power favoured by advocates of federalism.

Given the realities on the ground in the provinces, it is difficult to deny the power of this vision. Of course, its practical implementation encounters the continuing realities of huge shortages of skilled personpower and capacity at central state level. Nor can it be maintained that the ANC itself is a smoothly functioning and rational machinery, particularly in the wake of widespread allegations of corruption concerning the arms deal (notably involving Deputy President Zuma), resulting divisions between rival party factions at national level, and the prospect of a battle for the presidential succession that is looming prior to the next election. Nonetheless, „dominant party" theorists will find it easier to find fault with the implementation of the ANC's self-image of its modernizing role than with the project itself.

## The ANC as a site of struggle

Dominant party theorists such as Giliomee and leftist critics of the ANC and Tripartite Alliance such as McKinley stress centralization of power within the party and the suppression of internal debate. My argument in this regard is that this element has been much exaggerated, and that the ANC must continue to be recognized as a „broad church", which is composed of diverse elements (nationalists, Africanists, Marxists, careerists and so on), and as a party which continues to have strong internal democratic traditions, which constrain centralizing tendencies. Suttner's important current work upon the history of the ANC would also emphasise the party as an amalgam of a diversity of indigenous, modern, gendered and generational cultures.[2] It is against this background that I have proposed previously that, in the absence of parliamentary opposition parties which are themselves heavily constrained either by their historical origins or their numerical weakness, key policy debates which take place in South Africa actually occur within the party and within the Tripartite Alliance, rather than outside the party in parliament (Southall 2003c).

This is not to deny that Giliomee and McKinley and others are correct to be concerned about various efforts to limit or silence debate which have been made by the party leadership through power and authority rather than through argument. Under both Mandela and Mbeki, these have often been phrased in terms of the delegitimisation of a so-called „ultra-left" which is deemed to have penetrated the Alliance. Nonetheless, COSATU in particular remains a constituency which has certain veto powers, and which the ANC leadership has to listen to. Of course, intra-party debate tends to die down during election campaigns; and intra-party debates, by their nature, exclude those who are outside the party. So they can only ever be a limited substitute for wider debate. Yet they are real, and they deny depiction of the ANC as monolithic.

### *The ANC has limited capacity to impose itself upon society*

As noted above, South Africa is a complex society, with a relatively lively civil society, and has multiple cultural and regional traditions as well as a diverse economy. This truism invites reflection upon the outcome of the recent general elections:

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2   The author has enjoyed a debate with Suttner over the characteristics of national liberation movements (Suttner 2004b,c) and has benefited greatly from his on-going work on the diverse cultures of the ANC (e.g. Suttner 2004d).

• As noted above, the 2004 general elections saw the ANC take nearly 70% of the vote for the National Assembly and capture control of all nine provinces. In contrast, the opposition parties – with only minor exceptions – performed badly. The DA, the official opposition, gained 400 000 votes and increased its proportion of the total votes cast from 9.56% in 1999 to 12.37% in 2004. However, this improvement was far less than it had anticipated, and was drawn overwhelmingly from a transfer of conservative white support from the formerly ruling New National Party (NNP) (whose vote collapsed from 6.86% of the poll in 1999 to a derisory 1.65% in 2004) rather than from black voters as the DA had hoped. Nor did the DA's involvement in a so-called „Coalition of Change" with the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) assist its cause, for the latter lost both votes and control over KwaZulu-Natal. Despite much publicity given to the new Independent Democratic Party (ID) of Patrica De Lille as a prospective new force, it took only 1.73% of the vote, and appears to have drawn heavily from her own Coloured community. Small gains in votes for other minor parties were cancelled out by losses to others. Overall, therefore, the opposition parties remain as fragmented (along racial, ethnic and regional lines) as ever, although since the election the leader of the NNP has accepted a post in government and has announced the future merger of his party into the ANC.

• However, observers are convinced that the ANC cannot live on the „liberation dividend" for ever. As time wears on, the ANC will become increasingly vulnerable to attacks on issues, notably HIV/AIDS, growing unemployment and delivery deficits (Daniel 2004). „Identity voting" may give way to „issue voting" (or ANC voters may orient themselves to alternative identities).

• There is some considerable suggestion of voter alienation resulting from party dominance. The ANC's proportion of the vote may have increased, but it did so in the context of a lower voter turnout (75.5% in 2004 compared with 87.1% in 1999) and the failure to register as voters of 6.76 million eligible persons, a particularly large proportion of whom would appear to be potential first-time voters. Overall, survey evidence indicates variously: deep distrust amongst the population of politicians, a widespread sense amongst opposition voters that they cannot influence government, and a feeling amongst the youth that the political parties do not represent their interests.[3] Meanwhile, there is a wider view that the ANC is committed to particular constituencies (e.g. business and labour) and ignores other interests. Hence there is the prospect that the weight of opposition may shift to social movements outside parliament.

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3  This is born out by the South African Social Attitudes Survey, conducted in October 2003, which is presently being processed by the Human Sciences Research Council

• There has already been much speculation and argument that South Africa will only have an alternative government if the Tripartite Alliance breaks up and COSATU and the SACP form a party of the left (Habib and Taylor 2001). The counter-argument is that, even if this would bedesirable, it is unrealistic to expect it to happen in the foreseeable future. A survey recently conducted amongst members of COSATU indicates no decrease in the level of their support for the ANC as compared with that given in both 1994 and 1999,[4] and confirms analysis that – whatever policy differences the trade union movement may have with the ruling party – it represents the interests of workers who are employed in the „core" economy, and who are relatively advantaged vis-à-vis the informally employed. Consequently, it is much more likely that serious opposition to government will occur from organizations mobilizing around particular causes, of which the Treatment Action Campaign, which fights on behalf of those with HIV/AIDS, is the forerunner, and from resistance organizations of the poor and dispossessed, based in the townships which the NP was able to control in the 1980s only with the assistance of the military, around service issues like electricity and water cut-offs, school fees, and so on. However, the political forms which such initiatives might take, and the strategies which they might adopt, remain to be seen, and it cannot be assumed that they will take the form of a political party seeking to displace the ANC. Indeed, it is equally likely that such discontents will themselves feed into the party and the Tripartite Alliance, and render them more diverse than they are at the moment. We may yet see the paradox that the more dominant the ANC is electorally, the more factionalised it may become politically.

These trends are likely to shift the sands of South African politics, and to challenge or change the shape of the „dominance" of the ANC over the next decade or so.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that, however much it may distress the ANC, the dominant party thesis is too important, and indeed too insightful, to be dismissed out of hand. It addresses major issues concerning democratic consolidation, notably concerning the tendency for dominant parties to become more illiberal the more they become entrenched. Its particular strength, in the South African context, has

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4  The survey, presently being written up, was undertaken by the Sociology of Work Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand and the Democracy and Governance Research Programme of the Human Sciences Research Council. Support for the ANC amongst COSATU workers stood at 73% in 2004 compared to 75% in both 1994 and 1998 (as found in predecessor surveys).

to be the way in which the ANC has set about the delegitimisation of the DA, which it consistently demonises as racist, Eurocentric and unpatriotic.[5] Against this, few unbiased observers would deny that, for all its limitations and inability to pull much support from beyond the white community, it is the DA which has been far the most effective opposition body in rendering the ANC publicly accountable, most especially over issues of corruption. From this perspective, it has to be said that the ANC's refusal to engage with the dilemmas for democracy posed by its dominance, and the lack of an alternative government, is particularly worrying.

The argument here is not that the dominant party thesis is „wrong", but that is has been overstated by its principal proponents, who have tended to portray the ANC as a behometh intent upon extinguishing democratic (especially minority) rights which are embodied in the constitution. In repudiating this implication, its defenders like Suttner (2004b) are correct to riposte that it has been the ANC which has been the harbinger of democracy in South Africa, and which is primarily responsible for the human rights based nature of the constitution. Its dominance indicates its continuing popularity, largely amongst the majority of South Africans who historically were subject to racial oppression. And as Piombo (2005) stresses – upon the basis of collective study of the recent election – this in turn is a product of continuing hard work and campaigning, as the ANC has actively sought to avoid the atrophy and fracturing of the party which has afflicted other liberation movements in Africa following their movement into power after independence. Meanwhile, there are those who propose that only a dominant party with the moral authority and hegemony possessed by the ANC could have hoped to lead South Africa out of the dire circumstances of pre-1994 to a newly democratic dispensation (Brooks 2004:19), even if recurrent victories at the polls and the extension of the ANC's control over the entire state apparatus are very likely to lead to greater arrogance, despite recent post-election pleas by Mbeki for humility. Nonetheless, the ANC's domination of society may be far less secure than appears in the wake of the recent election victory, for an emergent authoritarianism will have to override not merely constitutional constraints and internal party diversity, but societal discontents that are likely to arise out of failures of the ANC's performance in government to meet the aspirations of a larger, more youthful population in an increasingly globalised world. ANC dominance, in short, is not static, and is likely to undergo considerable challenge over coming years.

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5   „The April election witnessed an effusion of anti-DA venom which went well beyond robust electioneering to suggest a coordinated campaign to demonise and delegitimise. The charge of racism was repeatedly levelled, embellished with attempts to portray Leon as a latter-day Josef Goebbels." (Forrest 2004).

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### Zusammenfassung

Die andauernde Debatte über die Frage, ob der African National Congress (ANC) als sogenannte „Dominante Partei" bezeichnet werden kann oder sollte, wurde durch die Diskussion zwischen den führenden politischen Parteien des Landes während der landesweiten Wahlen 2004 illustriert. Der ANC, der seine Hegemonie als Ausdruck seiner Popularität sieht, lehnt seine Charakterisierung als „Dominante Partei" als inhärent feindselig, konservativ und rassistisch ab. Im Gegensatz dazu warnen die Democratic Alliance (DA) und ihr nahestehende Analysten vor Gefahren für die Demokratie, die verursacht würden durch die Arroganz des ANC, seine Freiheit von Verantwortlichkeit und seine Ambitionen, die erweiterte Kontrolle in Staat und Gesellschaft auszubauen. Nach einem Überblick über die Kerngedanken der Debatte zeigt der vorliegende Artikel auf, dass die Kontrahenten ihre Argumente jeweils übertreiben. Unter Anerkennung der Tatsache, dass der Wahlsieg und die politische Hegemonie des ANC Gefahren für die Demokratie darstellen, stellt der Artikel im Gegensatz die These auf, dass die Fähigkeit des ANC seine Dominanz zu erweitern, erheblichen Beschränkungen unterliegt. Dieses Argument wird gestützt durch Analysefaktoren, wie die Multidimensionalität der Parteien-Dominanz, die Einschränkungen der Versuche des ANC Macht durch konstitutionelle, politische und ökonomische Realitäten einschränken zu zentralisieren, die Aufrechterhaltung der Debatte innerhalb des ANC und zwischen ihm und ihm grundsätzlich verbundenen Organisationen, und schließlich die Schwierigkeiten, mit denen der ANC konfrontiert wird, beim Versuch, seine Autorität einer Gesellschaft, die so komplex ist wie Südafrika, aufzuzwingen.

Die Schlussfolgerung lautet, dass die These von der „Dominanten Partei", zu bedeutend und zu aufschlussreich ist, um sie fallen zu lassen, auch wenn sie oft übertrieben wird. Sorgfältige Analysen legen nahe, dass die Grundlage der ANC-Dominanz weit davon entfernt ist, statisch zu sein, und im übrigen in kommenden Jahren erheblichen Herausforderungen unterworfen sein wird.

### Schlüsselwörter

*Südafrikanische Republik, Politische Partei, Hegemonie, African National Congress, Democratic Alliance (South Africa), Politische Macht, Wahlen, Übergang zwischen politischen Systemen, Wissenschaftlicher Diskurs*

*Roger Southall*

### *Résumé*

Le débat persistant sur la question de savoir si l'African National Congress (ANC) peut ou devrait être qualifié de „parti dominant" a été illustré par les discussions entre les grands partis politiques du pays lors des élections nationales de 2004. L'ANC qui voit dans son hégémonie, l'expression de sa popularité, réfute la dénomination de „parti dominant" comme intrinsèquement hostile, conservatrice et raciste. A l'opposé de cela , la Democratic Alliance (DA) et ses proches analystes mettent en garde contre les dangers pour la démocratie qui seraient causés par l'arrogance de l'ANC, par sa grande liberté dans la prise de responsabilité et ses ambitions d'étendre toujours plus son contrôle sur l'Etat et la société.

Après un survol des idées centrales de ce débat, le présent article montre que les différents protagonistes exagèrent de part et d'autre leurs arguments. Tout en reconnaissant que les victoires électorales et l'hégémonie politique de l'ANC puissent comporter des dangers pour la démocratie, l'article soutient néanmoins la thèse que la capacité de l'ANC à étendre sa dominance fait l'objet de limitations considérables. Cet argument s'appuie sur l'analyse de facteurs comme le caractère multidimensionnel de la dominance d'un parti, les limites posées aux tentatives de l'ANC de centraliser le pouvoir par les réalités constitutionnelles, politiques et économiques, la persistance de débats au sein de l'ANC et entre celui-ci et ses proches organisations et finalement les difficultés auxquelles l'ANC est confronté dans sa tentative d'imposer son autorité à une société si complexe que celle de l'Afrique du Sud.

En conclusion, l'auteur affirme que la thèse du „parti dominant" est trop importante et instructive pour être abandonnée même si elle est souvent exagérée. Des analyses précises montrent que le fondement de la dominance de l'ANC est loin d'être statique et sera en outre soumise à des défis considérables dans les années à venir.

### *Mots clés*

*Afrique du Sud, parti politique, hégémonie, African National Congress, Democratic Alliance (South Africa), pouvoir politique, élection/vote, transition entre systèmes politiques différents, dialogue scientifique*

**Roger Southall** is Distinguished Research Fellow, Democracy and Governance, Human Sciences Research Council. He was previously Professor of Political Studies at Rhodes University, South Africa.Prior to this he worked at universities in Uganda, Lesotho, Canada and the United Kingdom. He has published widely in African Studies, and is a co-editor (with John Daniel and Jessica Lutchman) of *The State of the Nation: South Africa 2004-05*, HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2005. He may be contacted at rsouthall@hsrc.ac.za