

FINANCIAL MAIL

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South Africa has just celebrated its fifth anniversary as a democracy under a predominantly Liberal Democratic constitution. By all accounts, we are a very young democracy. This shows particularly in our Parliamentary politics. The divisions between Government and Opposition parties have very little to do with a long tradition of ideological disputes between them in election contests. The divisions reflect the pre-democratic history of South Africa and the relative roles played by parties in aiding or obstructing democracy. Even as recently as the Freedom Day rally at Umtata, Mandela was quick to ask Holomisa : "Where were you when it mattered?" This ploy is still the easier one with which to mobilise support, rather than long arguments about the merits of socialism vs capitalism, human rights vs the rule of law, fiscal discipline vs the delivery of services.

There are no deep principled issues of difference between Government and most, if not all opposition parties. All are against crime; for employment, maintaining the rule of law; providing essential services such as housing, health, education etc. All that parties do when they go into the hustings is to either say the other lot are lying when they declare such commitments, or are not working hard enough to achieve these goals. The divisions lie in the selective emphasis on commonly shared goals rather than in deep principled divisions about their merits.

So, where does real opposition to Government lie? By this I do not mean that opposition parties do not try as hard as they can to oppose Government. Of course they do. The point is, are they capable of constraining the decisions of Government? Obviously their combined total of votes in Parliament cannot frustrate the will of Government - even without a 2/3rds majority. (By the way, there are not many historical precedents where Governments used a 2/3rds majority to suspend the constitution. More likely, it is when a Governing party is threatened with defeat (Nigeria, Algeria) or when powerful interest groups such as the military and business stage a coup, (Chile, 1973) that constitutions are suspended.) The question is rather, what are the factors that constrain the decisions of Government and why does the Governing party take them seriously? I am afraid to say that currently, they largely fall outside the scope of conventional party politics.

The first constraint is the internal divisions within the ANC itself. The real political/ideological battle is playing itself out there. The tension between RDP and GEAR : democratic centralism and liberal democracy; labour and business. These are the age old fault lines that divide parties in older democracies. They have not yet matured into party political divisions in Parliamentary politics in South Africa. It would seem that those divisions have become increasingly blurred in even so-called mature democracies since the collapse of organised communism; (vide, Clinton, Blair, Jospin and Schroöder) My guess is that Thabo Mbeki is going to cope with these internal disputes by tightening his control over the ANC through political appointments and integrating and co-ordinating policy from his office as President. Until this is effectively done, decision making in Government will be constrained by the unsettled nature of its internal disputes.

The second constraint has to do with the nebulous term of globalization. How does the Government cope with the increasing flexibility and transferability of capital, technology, information and skills? In short, how does it stay on the bus of the international economy in such a way that it can contribute to domestic economic growth. If the Government really wanted to pursue a policy of festive socialism and deficit spending, it would not have bothered with institutions such as IMF and World Bank, annual jamborees like the World Economic Forum and the Governments of the USA, UK, Germany etc. The big difference between the ANC in the liberation struggle and the ANC in Government lies in the constraints these factors have played on their decision making. Investors will leave in droves not because the combined opposition is down by 10% or the ANC has a 2/3rd majority, but because the ANC deliberately ignores the constraints of globalization.

The third constraint has to do with traditionalism. A substantial section of the electorate, +- 25% live under, and accept, traditional authority. A traditional leader is neither elected, nor accountable in terms of the basic tenets of liberal democracy. Almost all parties have gone out to woo them, none more so than the ANC. In Mozambique Frelimo tried to "kill the Tribe in order to build the Nation". They almost killed the Nation and gave the tribes to Renamo. The ANC seems determined not to let that happen to them. Both capitalism and socialism are ideologies pursuing modernity. Traditionalism is seen as a major constraint. Yet, Thabo Mbeki, steeped in the intellectual climate of modernity in Europe for most of his exiled life, is seen solemnly explaining to traditional leaders how the ANC is going to accommodate them over the next five years. His dealing with ethnic Afrikaners is a variation on the same theme. It is commonly accepted that permanently excluded hostile minorities in "a functioning democracy can be an important source of instability." That is why the reality of Nkosi's and Indunas will remain a powerful constraint on government decision making in rural South Africa.

One can go on to explore the constraining effects of organised labour and business, regional instability etc., but the point has been made. None of the constraints mentioned are owned or monopolised by any opposition party. If any one of them did so, it would have been taken far more seriously by the ANC. In the nature of the case, these constraints are not easy to make the preserve of any party in Parliamentary politics.

So, does this mean that Parliamentary politics is irrelevant? No, not at all. We are at the very beginning of establishing a democratic culture in South Africa. Party political competition is an essential ingredient for this. Voters have to accept that to oppose is legitimate, can be effective and may some day even peacefully change the Government. In the fledgling party political competition in South Africa, certain values gain currency and certain traditions are created. What will these be for South Africa? So far it is not quite clear, but there are worrying signs. If the price we have to pay for institutionalising party political competition is to democratize racial competition and intolerance, then all that will have changed is that, before, whites undemocratically oppressed blacks and now, blacks can democratically oppress whites. For the sake of sacrifices of the past, and for the promises of the future, both the ANC and opposition parties have an obligation to avoid this. But then, the battles in the hustings are seldom driven by such lofty considerations. The short term gain in gathering whatever votes are available is easily discounted against any long term damage that may result.