

ARTICLE FOR FM ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Although we have a democratic electoral system, it is one of the worst instances of unaccountable politics as far as the average voter is concerned. The current system, which is a closed list proportional system, does not give any voter access to a public representative accountable to the area where he or she lives. The party, as the ANC does, can allocate a representative to a particular area but that gives no binding influence on the part of the voter over such a public representative.

It is often forgotten that the current electoral system was seen as a "transitional mechanism" by the Constitutional Court, to help South Africa through the difficulties of a first, open general election in 1994. It was specifically stated that by the 1999 General Election the final electoral system had to be in place. It wasn't and an Electoral task team was appointed by Cabinet and in 2001 to investigate and propose a final electoral system. I was appointed as co Chair. We took evidence from a number of NGO's and all the political parties in Parliament. Whilst the E.T.T. was in session, Parliament decided to introduce floor crossing. This further eroded the principle of democratic accountability. It was quite extraordinary but almost all the leadership of political parties favoured the current electoral system as well as floor crossing. Both mechanisms placed enormous power in the hands of party bosses to appoint public representatives. The average voter had no say whatsoever.

My warning at the time was that such a situation would lead to either apathy or aggressive anarchy – both instances of voter powerlessness. Since then we have had Khutsong, Orange Farm the burning of busses, stone throwing at cops etc. All signs that the current electoral system makes it difficult, if not, impossible for voters to confront public representatives about their grievances.

More interesting, I have been approached by old ANC members in good standing from Soweto. They talk about forming a new political movement because the current ANC is corrupt and abuses patronage. They claim that their anger is widespread and not only confined to Soweto. However, after some protracted discussions, they discovered that they were largely ignorant of the problems that they would encounter with the current electoral system should they wish to contest the next general election. They now say their rallying cry is "Know your M.P!". I have no idea how widespread their disillusionment is, but I do not think it is insignificant.

Another interesting development is COSATU and the SACP demand that there should be a three-way and equal division between themselves and the current ANC in appointing new members of Parliament for the next General Election. This would seriously entrench the unaccountable nature of the current electoral system and leave the average voter even more powerless in determining who the public representative should be.

The extra-ordinary irony is that the Polokwane election of Jacob Zuma was far more representative and democratic than any general election we have had since 1994. Every branch of the ANC elected a representative to go to Polokwane and vote for a new leader. Zuma won. One would have thought that Zuma would be far more outspoken for the need to change the current electoral system on his Polokwane experience. Not a word thus far.

The prospects of change in the current electoral system before the next General Election seem remote. Consequently dispensing patronage and co-opting elites will be the order of the day. South Africa has extra-ordinary space for civil society action and there is a depoliticised military security system. Consequently, I do not see a violent upheaval and challenge to the incumbents in power. But there could be a proliferation of aggressive anarchy across the country which will have serious,

if not, fatal consequences for the unity and cohesion of the ANC as the governing party.

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