

# South Africa: ANC Headed for Split as Ethnic Tension Rises

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*As South African political parties bicker over the best contender to lead them they are also headed for possible future tribal riots writes **Peter Kagwanja and Ernest Waititu.***

A bitter power struggle between various factions of South Africa's elite has whipped up ethnic politics, threatening the national consensus that held the country together. Since President Thabo Mbeki, was forced out of the Union Building, communal consciousness has peaked, and a split within the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Africa's oldest political party, looks almost certain.

A powerful group of pro-Mbeki politicians, led by the party's fiery former chairman and former Defence minister, Mosioua Lekota, has already served "divorce papers" on the ruling party, accusing the new team, led by Jacob Zuma, of endangering democracy, flouting the rule of law and sowing the seeds of ethnicity in politics.

Consolidating the country's now uncertain democracy demands a careful return to elite consensus, avoiding ethnic fragmentation and revitalising civil society.

Long before Mbeki's ouster, the country had already experienced bouts of ethno-nationalism. The power struggle within the ANC today reflects the rising tide of communal consciousness, now believed to be poised to drive global politics for generations to come.

The rise in ethnicity in South African politics is worrying veterans of the anti-apartheid resistance. While delivering the fifth annual Ashley Kriel Memorial Youth lecture at the University of Western Cape in July, one of the founders of the United Democratic Front (UDF), Allan Boesak, accused the ANC of recreating apartheid's system of racial and ethnic categorisation, demeaning coloured citizens "ruthlessly and thoughtlessly".

Ethnic nationalism is fast replacing civic nationalism and solidarity, which gave the nation a common rallying point against the ethno-centricism of the apartheid era.

Ethnic orientation has been a fundamental feature in the ANC since its founding, but the escalation of the Mbeki-Zuma tussle has given the ethnic question new meaning. The clash between the two major political players, and by extension their ethnic groups, has turned ethno-nationalism into the axis around which politics in South Africa is increasingly coming to rotate.

It is no wonder, then, that the ANC is on the brink of an <sup>1</sup> ethnic split, with officials close to Mbeki, led by Lekota,



saying as much. "It seems that we are serving today divorce papers," Lekota said, before expressing misgivings about what he called undemocratic tendencies in the party, which he said had betrayed its own principles.

What is happening in the ANC is a culmination of months of ethnic battles within the party. Mbeki's decision to stand for a third term as the party's president raised the stakes in the run-up to its 52nd National Conference in Polokwane last year. As Somadoda Fikeni notes in his forthcoming book, *State of the Nation*, this decision stirred ethnic antagonism to dangerous levels.

Plans to end Xhosa dominance in the party never featured in the party's public discussions or among its alliance partners, but the idea was always raised in debates within and outside the party. The "dynastic" lineage of Xhosa heavyweights, from Oliver Tambo to Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, was widely invoked to justify Mbeki's succession by a non-Xhosa as party leader, and ultimately, State President. "There were signs of ethnic mobilisation among the Zulu, who rallied behind Zuma and showed little tolerance for any internal deviation in that region", writes Fikeni.

Likewise, the ANC leadership in Mbeki's Eastern Cape homeland declared support for their son in his bid for party's presidency. Zuma's KwaZulu Natal Province (KNP) responded by declaring support for their son, with his ardent supporters wearing T-shirts bearing the words, "100 per cent Zulu Boy". It is not surprising, therefore, that Mbeki received a hostile reception when he went to KwaZulu Natal for the reburial of liberation veteran Moses Mabhida, and for the celebration of the Gandhi legacy.

This intense ethnic animosity undermines a century of efforts to counter ethnicity in the liberation movement. Countering communal consciousness has been a central component of ANC politics. Rotation of top positions and subtle procedural conventions have discouraged ethnic mobilisation. But Mbeki's succession after three decades of Oliver Tambo's and Nelson Mandela's leadership was bound to revive ethnic sentiments. And it is his battle with Zuma that gave new impetus to this.

Zuma's alleged role in the arms deal has been interpreted in some quarters as a plot by a "Xhosa cabal" to deny a Zulu the presidency. Still, the ANC remains the only institution in South Africa capable of managing the society's fundamental conflicts. The absence of an effective opposition has made the ruling party elite extremely complacent. A splinter within the ANC could greatly weaken the party and entrench ethno-nationalism. Shifting ethnic imbalances as a result of the various strategies to distribute wealth are likely to increase tension within and between communities in South Africa.

It is unlikely that Zuma and his team will deliver on all the expectations of the various constituencies supporting them. This could lead to frustration, feelings of ethnic disaffection and marginalisation, deepening the ethno-nationalist ideologies and sensibilities.

Unfortunately, weak, lethargic and provincial opposition parties and former liberation movements in South Africa lack the vision, tact, ideological force or political capacity to halt the country's tragic slide to ethno-nationalism. Shades of ethno-nationalism have inadvertently prevented the main opposition parties from exploiting the troubles within the ANC house and its declining nationalist appeal to get to power and strengthen the ideals of a civic nation and citizenship.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) is South Africa's main opposition party. It descended from the Democratic Party after forming an alliance with the New National Party (NNP). The DA has been identified mainly with white, English-speaking South Africans. The DA's marriage of convenience with the mainly Afrikaner NNP in the run-up to the 1999 elections may have succeeded in uniting South Africa's white voters and prevented the ANC from winning the Western Cape provincial government. But the collapse of the party's short-lived alliance with NNP pushed a sizeable segment of Afrikaners into an alliance with the ANC.

The DA has since been unable to shake off the perception that it champions the interests of whites. Indeed, the party has largely succeeded in rallying whites behind it through its focused campaign on issues such as escalating violent crime and corruption, which it casts largely as a failure of the ANC leadership. Its fierce opposition to almost all the ANC's black empowerment policies and economic transformation strategies, which it views as an assault on white privileges, has cemented its position as the voice of the white minority.

However, its failure to offer alternative ways of pulling 2 the black majority out of poverty has progressively



alienated it, sealing its fate as an electoral force outside the white-dominated areas. Its cynical exploitation of apartheid-era racial divisions to counter ANC dominance has won the DA substantial support among coloured and Indian voters, especially in Western Cape, a card it will inevitably play in 2009.

Now led by Tony Leon's successor, Helen Zille, the party has a realistic chance of capturing the Western Cape if the ANC does not resolve its internal divisions fast. The party has a template in coalition-building in the Cape Metropolitan Council, where it brought together smaller parties to win the crucial municipality. But the DA has a lot of work to do to win into its ranks senior black leaders and to transform itself into a political outfit capable of building a credible multi-racial constituency.

Similarly, while the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) remains a formidable player in South African politics, it has yet to make inroads outside its KwaZulu-Natal turf. While it was the dominant party from 1994-1999 in its core constituency -- areas inhabited by Zulus people in KwaZulu-Natal and hostels in Gauteng -- the IFP's vote-base shrunk significantly in 2004.

Complicating Inkatha's chances is the fact that KZN is Zuma's home province and expected to be the main source of his presidential vote in 2009. Besides, the IFP founder and long-time leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, has announced his intention of stepping down in 2009.

A strategic coalition with the Democratic Alliance might be its surest defence against an ANC onslaught, a strategy pundits of the two parties are reportedly contemplating. Despite this, the spectre of a culture of ethnic violence involving the IFP and ANC supporters haunts the prospects of a peaceful election. The problem with other parties like the United Democratic Movement (UDM) and the Independent Democrats is their over-reliance on a single leader, with the former reliant on Bantu Holomisa and the latter on Patricia de Lille. However, the Independent Democrats, a breakaway of the PAC, seems to be faring better than the other opposition parties.

Apart from weak national profiles, these parties are prone to ethno-nationalism linked to the ethnic formations of their regions or constituencies. It is fair to conclude that, despite the serious internal problems facing the ANC, the opposition hardly poses a threat to its dominance. Ultimately, the opposition's chances for survival depend on a vibrant democracy based on a civic vision of the nation and citizenship. Yet subtle blips of ethno-nationalism threaten this "nationalist consensus" that underpinned South Africa's transition to democracy.

The lingering question is whether South Africa's opposition parties have the requisite vision, tact and political will to forge a united front to effectively challenge or wrest power from the ANC like the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) did in Zimbabwe.

The events taking place in South Africa will cause ripples across Africa, where Mbeki's African Renaissance has been embraced as a unifying ideology that seeks to revitalise African nationalism to promote stability, economic growth and development. The resurgence of ethno-nationalism in South Africa has dimmed the future of Mbeki's African Renaissance project.

The push for an African Renaissance is rooted in the old movements of pan-Africanism, including Kwame Nkrumah's African Personality and Aimé Césaire's Negritude. The project has its recent roots in Mbeki's famous "I am an African" speech, delivered on behalf of the ANC on the occasion of the adoption of the new democratic Constitution in May 1996. Mbeki's renaissance project is also struggling to recover from the xenophobic attacks in May this year, in which 65 people were killed.

Mbeki's defeat by Zuma, and his eventual exit from power has created uncertainty over the future of Pretoria's pan-Africanists and the political capacity of the African Renaissance project.

One of the enduring legacies of apartheid in South Africa is the transformation of race and ethnicity into both legal and political identities, resulting in a sharply divided society that is still grappling with the question of identity -- the palpable tension between its "white" and "African", "West" and "Africa" identities.

South Africa's identity became a topic of a high profile Africa-wide debate in the mid 1990s under the banner, "South Africa and Africa: Within or Apart?" where it was noted that apartheid South Africa "has stood aside and



apart from the rest of the continent".

The question, then, is whether a post-apartheid South Africa would stand with Africa against the continent's international isolation.

Mbeki's Africa Renaissance project was a step in this direction. With the slide to ethno-nationalism and the looming break-up of the party that gave birth to the renaissance project, the idea of a South Africa that stands with the rest of Africa may all be botched.

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