

DA as an Opposition – Lessons from 20 years of Democracy



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Twenty years since the founding of South Africa's democracy, the country's existing parties appear not fit for the needs of the majority of voters. Any political party serious about winning an election in South Africa must grab a significant slice of the black vote, the majority of whom have been voting for the African National Congress (ANC) since the dawn of non-racial democracy in 1994.

The mass of black supporters of the ANC, battered by frequent broken promises, endemic corruption by party leaders and officials, and poor public services, appear to be ready to break their sacred attachment to the ANC and to vote for alternatives. The violent community protests sweeping across the country – mostly by ANC members or supporters – is a sure sign that ordinary people are losing faith in the ANC. Yet, very few of the opposition parties are identifying with protesters on the spot when they protest against poor service delivery, corruption or indifferent public officials. This fact alone shows the disconnect between ordinary citizens and their problems, and with opposition parties.

The fact that many opposition parties are not yet appealing – politically and especially economically – to the ANC's mass base is providing the current ANC leadership with a valuable lifeline while also entrenching extraordinary high levels of complacency in its leadership ranks.

The result: South Africa remains paralysed at all levels – stagnant growth, pedestrian job creation, poor public service delivery, and poor a quality democracy.

Old configurations and credibility Alternative opposition parties appear either too white, or too tainted by their participation in the apartheid structures, or too ethnically-based, such as the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), or too small a reach and organised around one leader, such as the United Democratic Front (UDF), or too ideologically extreme, such as the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the new far-left socialist parties, or simply too disorganised to be taken seriously.

An important measure of credibility among black voters still remains the extent to which a political leader or party has been part of the struggle for liberation or not. Wrongly or rightly, the Democratic Alliance (DA), which has also swallowed some members of the former apartheid ruling party (the National Party), is still perceived by many black South Africans as being part of the apartheid edifice.

The ANC, under President Zuma, has retreated into a very narrow African nationalism, clearly reckoning that it can continue to stay in power if it focuses

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on its poor black constituencies, because these constituencies do appear to believe they have no political home elsewhere.

The botched unity attempts between South Africa's official, white led, opposition party, the DA, and the newly formed starter-party, Agang, led by former Black Consciousness activist Mamphela Ramphele, to create a new non-racial opposition, has shown, 20 years after apartheid, how difficult it still is to build opposition unity across the country's deep black and white racial divide.

The failed DA-Agang attempt to bring a black candidate at head of the DA, has dented Ramphele and Agang's credibility, and has reinforced perceptions among some disillusioned ANC supporters that the DA is a "white" party. The failed DA-Agang merger and the turmoil in which the Congress of the People (COPE) has plunged (after almost 1 million voters within 3 months of its existence) is likely to make black voters who are looking for political alternatives more wary of current and new opposition parties.

Which are the ANC constituencies unhappy with the party?

The Black Middle Class

Black middle class people who are unhappy with the ANC either stay away from the polls or vote for parties such as COPE rather than vote for the DA. Since the disintegration of COPE, many may vote for Agang.

Youth

The ANC is particularly vulnerable among the urban black youth. South Africa has a "youth bulge" with those under 35 years making up 77% of the population. Statistics SA figures show the unemployment rate among youth is around 36%. The so-called 'born frees' – who were born after 1994, and therefore started their lives in a democratic South Africa – are now voting for the first time. This post-1994 generation, with no memory of the "struggle", does not have the same emotional attachment to the ANC and its leaders as their parents.

From an electoral political point of view the SA youth can be broadly divided into two groups. The first is the small proportion who went to good schools, go on to tertiary education, and secure employment. This group is the "new advantaged" and makes up roughly 20% of the overall youth between the ages of 15 to 35 years. This group is relatively open to vote for opposition parties such as the DA, COPE and Agang.

The second group is the 80% who come from state schools in the townships and rural areas. They are likely to be the group who have not completed school or those who completed school are so poorly educated, they struggle to make it in the jobs market. They are predominantly black, from poorer and working class backgrounds. This group could be called the "new disadvantaged". This group makes up the bulk of the 71% of the youth unemployed. In terms of numbers, they are the most politically significant. The new disadvantaged group has reason to be resentful being on the margins of the economy, while seeing middle class black and white peers doing

well. This group is more susceptible to populist messages, like those coming from former ANC Youth League Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). This group, notoriously, does not register to vote in elections nor do they vote. If they do turn out in their numbers, they may help secure Malema's EFF with between 2-8% of the national vote, with most of the youth votes likely to come from the Gauteng region.

Black Women

Black women as a constituency, unless highly educated, are one of the most politically neglected constituencies. They are more likely to be unemployed, suffer the burden of poor public services proportionally more, and suffer the consequences – broken families, violence, and a breakdown of moral norms and the failure of moral leadership in public life in South Africa.

There is a deep gulf between the call for women's equality in South Africa's model constitution and society's predominantly archaic public attitudes towards women. Continuing patriarchy in society means that women lack equality in sexual relationships, the family, workplace, culture, the economy, politics and society. Little has changed for many black women in the rural areas, where conservative traditional leaders and archaic attitudes and norms towards women hold sway.

For any opposition party, consistently and genuinely mobilising women may yield rich pickings.

Why not vote for current opposition parties?

Orientation

The majority of black voters, in terms of economic beliefs, appear to be situated on the mainstream Left, even if they may be socially or political conservative. However, most of the mainstream opposition parties and new parties formed after 1994 are, in terms of economic orientation at least, to the Right of the ANC and the ANC's mass black support.

The opposition DA is entrenched on the economic centre right – with mostly neo-liberal policies. COPE was hived off from the ANC's right flank. Because it broke from the ANC, and was seen as predominantly black with former members of the ANC in its leadership, it left the perception among many black ANC supporters that it would care *more* about the specific issues that worries the majority of black voters, and would favour social justice in the economic and social arenas.

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Agang was also established on the ANC's right flank. Yet, because it was started by Ramphela, a former Black Consciousness Movement leader, it had, like COPE, "black credentials" and had the potential to talk credibly not only on the issues that matter to the black majority, but also on economic justice. Yet, in its policy stances and emphases, Agang appeared more likely to appeal to South Africa's small black

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middle class – inadequate to win national elections, rather than the majority black township and rural poor.

A number of smaller far-left socialist parties have formed since the ANC's 2007 Polokwane conference. In truth, they are too pie-in-the-sky ideological to be relevant to ordinary black people struggling with the daily dilemmas of how to put bread on the table or care for families.

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Expelled former ANC Youth League President Julius Malema, astutely understands the large vacuum in SA's electoral firmament, and embedded his new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the country's first out-and-out populist and youth party, with leftist economic messages. However, Malema's populist message may appeal to the restless youth, but it is unlikely to appeal to the masses of mature and sensible middle ground of ANC supporters – however disaffected they may be with the current ANC.

But, if the EFF transforms itself into a social movement party, and successfully aligns itself with breakaway members of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), and many of South Africa's disgruntled grassroots and community groups, it may take sizeable chunks of votes from the ANC.

In the perceptions of many black voters, the DA appears to be not only opposed to any state involvement to provide services, but ready to dismantle the state. Yet many blacks see the state after apartheid as an important source of development.

For others, there is also a perception that the DA is uncritically in favour of "white" business. This is a rather crucial point. "Pro white" business is often a pseudonym among some black ANC supporters that means supporting the apartheid-era South African business model of low wages, little skills and few benefits for blacks, while pursuing astronomical profit targets and huge executive compensation.

Since 1994, the buying of political protection from the ANC by offloading black economic empowerment shares by appointments to boards of highly connected ANC leaders, rather than the genuine empowerment option of giving company shares directly to employees and surrounding communities, to create genuine company stakeholders, has become to be seen – fairly or not – as part of the South African "white business" model.

Marikana

The Marikana massacre was an ideal disaster under the Zuma government for the opposition to pounce. At Marikana, South Africa's business model of low wages, little skills and benefits was on trial. The continued culture of violence, or "shoot-to-kill" within state institutions such as the police was under scrutiny at Marikana. But Marikana also pointed to the fact that a black life still counts for very little among state institutions. Yet, the opposition criticised government only for its ineptness in general terms, rather than on all these critical counts, come unequivocal to publicly condemn each of these practices which evoke such deep emotions among many black South Africans. The ANC and government leaders were slow to show their compassion to the effected communities who have lost loved ones at the Marikana

massacre. Here was an opportunity for opposition leaders to actually go to the communities, be seen to care, provide human solidarity and practical help.

In the absence of the opposition, civil society leaders, such as Bishop Paul Verryn and Bishop Johannes Seoka, stepped in to provide solidarity. Julius Malema, the leader of the EFF, for opportunistic reasons rather than anything else, was there too to give a helping hand – at least he understood.

The DA, and, off course, other opposition parties, also, to show that it cared about black lives should have criticised the ANC government for its ineffectiveness in transforming the police culture to a human-rights based culture, but should have criticised Lonmin also for its business model, and should have been present in the aftermath of the Marikana massacre comforting the community and providing practical help.

Social Grants

Opposition parties also appear not to care about the issues that black supporters of the ANC worry about. For example, the DA's vocal criticism of social grants – which mostly goes to poor blacks, is often fuelling the perception that the DA, as a “white” party, opposes state help to blacks. Agang appeared to send out the same message. There is a real fear among black recipients of social grants that under a DA government the social grants will be taken away. Off course this fear has also been conveniently stoked by some ANC apparatchiks.

Social welfare grants now support about 15.2 million South Africans, according to the Treasury, up from 2.5 million in 1998. These figures should be placed within the context of eligible votes (at 31.4 million) and registered voters (at 25.3 million).

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The DA's former CEO Ryan Coetzee identified the party's dilemma correctly, when he argued that a DA leader must show that he or she cares as deeply about “delivery issues that affects black South Africans as (it does) about those issues that affect whites”.

Is there a way out of South Africa's political party stalemate?

Disillusioned ANC members could proverbially close their eyes and vote *en masse* against their natural instincts for opposition parties that may not appeal to their economic, social and political views. This demands a new maturity among voters. This does not appear to be an immediate possibility.

In any event to do so, opposition parties much change their selling strategy to the black majority, to a new argument which is based on them openly acknowledging to disillusioned black ANC supporters that they may differ fundamentally from them on almost every issue, yet they should vote for them notwithstanding, in order to make the ANC more accountable.

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Opposition parties must focus their campaigns on the message that unless the ANC faces the prospect that its members will vote for other parties and therefore it may lose elections, the ANC leadership will have little motivation to change for the better.

Clearly, many disillusioned ordinary ANC voters and supporters do not appear to fully grasp that if one stays away from the polls, the ANC will return to power again and will continue in its complacent mould. Its members will continue to vote for them, because the opposition is not relevant (to black ANC supporters), and its angry members will stay away from the polls – allowing representatives to be re-elected in almost perpetuity, albeit with ever smaller margins.

To attract the black poor, rural and working class constituencies, will mean the DA will demand a cultural and leadership change from the DA. Such a sea-change in the DA may push away current white supporters who brought the DA where it is now – and at the same time, in spite of blacking the DA leadership, it may still not be guarantee the vote from a mass black voter base.

The success of the ANC is the fact that it is not an ordinary political party but is an omnipresent movement. The ANC is present in almost every nook and cranny of society: in the affairs of the humblest local village council, sport organisations, even organizing funerals for members. This means that the ANC is almost perceived as part of the everyday life of people. For the opposition parties to be successful they must do the same. So far the DA has failed to do this. Agang was not even close to doing so.

Can the DA remake itself to align with the black majority voters?

For many unhappy ANC supporters and members, the DA, in spite of the appointments of a number of a key black leaders, is still perceived to be as a

white-dominated party, mostly interested in white interests, and shying away from confronting economic redress for the black disadvantaged, and lacking “struggle” credentials (of being an experienced leader in the anti-apartheid struggle), so crucial for political credibility at this moment in SA’s history. The DA attempted to rectify these perceptions by appointing Ramphela as its presidential candidate. Ramphela had the struggle and ‘black’ credentials and the authority to talk about economic redress. Although the DA have promising black leaders such as parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko and Gauteng provincial leader Mmusi Maimane, they lack Mamphela Ramphela’s gravitas and long struggle and public service history.

Furthermore, individuals such as Maimane and Mazibuko, not to detract from their talent, are middle class blacks, who may easier be attracted to the DA and can fit easily into the DA culture. Similarly, white middle class DA supporters have some affinity with Ramphela, the cosmopolitan former Managing Director of the World Bank, with her liberal views and polished appearance.

But South Africa’s black middle class is very small – and they are more ready to move to other parties, including the DA. However, to really challenge the ANC, the DA needs mass black support, among the poor, working class and black youth.

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The DA's remarkable success so far has been to attract most white and, arguably, other minority voters. However, in doing so, particularly during the DA's 1999 election 'fight back' campaign platform, which interpreted by many black ANC supporters as whites fighting 'back' against blacks or a black government.

By adopting this strategy, the DA won over the sections of the minority electorate apprehensive of a black government. However, the party may have lost the better part of a generation of black voters looking for credible alternatives in the political centre. This is the challenge for DA leader Helen Zille now: how to persuade a potential vast black voting base that the party is not anti-black.

A better strategy then would have been to emphasise the DA's rich, and more liberal anti-apartheid past credentials – this means projecting itself as a non-racial liberation movement or party – and carve out a post-apartheid position around a non-racial, caring and social justice platform.

It would be silly to expect the DA to suddenly change into a part of the Left to appeal to the economic instincts of the mass black majority. The problem is that the DA's strand of 'liberalism' is more conservative than 'liberal'. It is more pre-David Cameron British Conservative Party, then Bill Clinton or Barack Obama US Democratic Party.

Yet, for liberalism to be relevant in South Africa, it must be of the Clinton/Obama variety. But one can still make the point that the lesson for the DA of how a party can remake itself is the British Conservative Party under David Cameron. In order to remain relevant Cameron has even dismissed the 'holy grails' of British Conservatism, accepting that the market cannot be left unfettered and that state intervention is important to guide the market when it comes to delivery of social services and help vulnerable communities.

The DA must come up with more balanced and nuanced responses to affirmative action and black economic empowerment, rather than appearing to just going on about how it disadvantages whites, or over-emphasising that South Africans of 'Indian' and 'Coloured' background are now again discriminated against, this time because they are allegedly not black enough.

Yet the continuing legacy of apartheid segregation: lack of skills, employment, property and social capital, cannot be wished away. However, the DA must – and they have the capacity – to come up with a credible alternative to affirmative action and BEE that will accommodate both the black expectations of redress and white fear of losing out.

It must also provide new answers to South Africa's current business model, whether in mining or agriculture. Clearly, the reality is that the model of low wages, migrant labour and minimal skills transfer and provision of basic amenities for ordinary workers – and huge remuneration and benefits for executives – is not sustainable.

It must come up with better economic empowerment policies. Off course BEE is simply the wrong policy, because it empowers a small elite, mostly because of their political capital – their closeness to the ANC, rather than their proven ability to set

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up and manage bricks and mortar businesses. The DA can call for the empowerment of the more than 5 million black small businesses.

The current BEE strategy in which mining and other companies partner with senior ANC leaders and trade unionists – as happened at Lonmin’s Marikana mine also – as insurance against transformation pressure is discredited. The DA can push for elements of direct shareholding in for workers in companies. Employees and communities as “co-owners” would then share in the yearly dividends when profits are made and share in the losses during downturns. It could push for BEE strategies that focus on genuine transfer of skills and wealth through providing housing; and other alternatives, such as empowering surrounding communities.

Although, clearly the Western Cape province is better run than most ANC controlled ones, the DA should have made a point of developing poorer black townships, building partnerships with business in the Western Cape to rolling out more sustainable forms of black empowerment, roll-out mass artisanship for young blacks, and pushing for better conditions for black South Africans working in sectors that have been associated in the black imagination for being particularly exploitative since colonialism and apartheid, such as agriculture.

Adopting schools in the surrounding communities, providing teacher, resources and better schools to the community, is not only a cheaper BEE strategy, but it also wins the support of the workers, communities in a more sustainable way, it is a better protection against political pressures to enrich a few well-connected “political capitalists”. Beneficiaries of such a system are likely to defend the company more vociferously.

When the DA won the Western Cape in the 2009 elections it had the opportunity to show it can govern competently, more accountably, and more inclusively and be less corrupt. But it also had the opportunity to show that it can govern in the interests of poorer black South Africans in the areas under their political control. Its record in power has been mixed.

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for black South Africans working in sectors that have been associated in the black imagination for being particularly exploitative since colonialism and apartheid, such as agriculture. Starting off by appointing an all-white male provincial Cabinet was a massive blunder.

Collapsing South Africa’s main opposition parties into one

To really break the mould of black-liberation-party (the ANC), against white-apartheid-party (the DA), will need to amalgamation of most of the other centre-right and liberal black and white opposition parties, such as COPE, the Inkatha Freedom Party and the United Democratic Movement, into one giant opposition or grand coalition.

Such a grand coalition will make it difficult for the ANC to target the opposition as “white”, anti-transformation or too insignificant. For another, such a giant opposition party coalition will have a better chance of convincing a disillusioned ANC black voter who may want to vote for opposition parties, but may now feel

that they are too insignificant to stand any realistic chance of winning an election, and therefore rather not vote.

In such a coalition, the opposition parties will retain their identities and leaderships, but fight the election together against the ANC, agreeing among each other in which regions each will stand against the ANC and supporting each other.

Rebalancing South Africa’s political party system

South Africa’s democratic system could best served by a genuinely democratic, mainstream trade union-based party, à la Brazil’s Socialist Party (PT), which would be to the left of the ANC, with the ANC remaining at the left-of-centre, and the current opposition parties on the right, and the populist Economic Freedom Fighters and the far-left socialist parties on the flanks.

Cosatu’s largest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) is mulling over launching a trade union based political party. The low-skilled and unskilled “working” class, which trade unions claim to organise, appears now to be unhappy with the performance of the ANC government.

The unhappiness appears to be among both the employed and the unemployed in black townships and informal settlements. The unemployed decries a lack of jobs, opportunities, lack of housing and poor public services. The employed complain poor public services and the lack of an adequate “social wage” erode their income.

Although Malema’s EFF is targeting the black non-youth working class with its populist economic messages, this group may be more open to a trade union-based party. The arrival of a new trade union movement-based party, has the potential to breathe new energy into SA’s paralysed party political system.

The botched merger attempts between the DA and Agang, the continuing chaos in COPE, the inability of most opposition parties to remake themselves by becoming more relevant to the black majority will mean that the ANC, no matter how ineffective, will retain its stranglehold. For another, unless they remake themselves, current opposition parties will be overtaking by new opposition parties such as the EFF and the possible coming new trade union-based party.