

Filling the Gap on the Left

The term of this Parliament expires on 13 April 2014. A new election has to be held within 90 days of that date, meaning before the middle of July 2014. Traditionally, however, elections in mid-winter are not popular. So the election will probably be held around late April/May in 2014. About 8 months from now. The elections are already a talking point.

The divisions within Cosatu, the emergence of Julius Malema's EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters) and the establishment of Agang are all helping to stimulate interest and debate. In this Newsletter I want to discuss the one obvious gap we still have in our political line-up – the gap on the left.

Lie of the land

There are 13 political parties represented in Parliament. The ANC has 65.9% of the MPs. To the left of the ANC are two parties, the PAC and Azapo, and they have 0.5% of MPs. Thus, the centre-left and left command 66.4% of MPs – one MP short of two-thirds.

The DA has 16.7% of the MPs in Parliament. There are nine more parties, which have a further 17% of MPs.

These numbers are the result of the national elections of 2009 and reflect Parliament's current composition. Things have changed a lot over the four and a half years since the last **Parliamentary** elections and the numbers probably understate the DA's current support.

Possible changes in 2014

In the **local government** elections of 2011 the DA got about 24% of the vote whilst smaller parties like COPE, the IFP and others lost ground. Expect to see an increase in the DA's support in the 2014 elections (from 16.7% to 24% and even more) and less support for the smaller parties (that 17% will fall sharply).

However, a healthy democracy requires more than a re-arrangement of opposition voters. What would constitute real progress would be if the DA succeeded in capturing more votes from the ANC, in addition to whatever it can get from existing opposition parties. That would be the game changer to watch for.

At this stage it is still unclear what Agang's impact on either opposition numbers or the ANC's support would be.

The other uncertainty is what can change on the left of our politics.

Empty on the left

Both the ANC itself and its critics would like to label it as a "left wing" party. The ANC likes to refer to itself as a "principled member of the left". The reality is of course different. It is much more a centre-left party or what the Europeans would call a "social democratic" party. It has traditional left wing positions in its programme, but its record in government is decidedly more centre-left than left.

This position is clearly illustrated if one compares the ANC's political position with a real organisation of the left, the trade union NUMSA. The latter is probably the best organised and most articulate

political organisation on the left of our politics. It is of course not formally a political party, but that does not preclude it from having a political programme.

The real lefties

NUMSA has come out strongly and vigorously against the National Development Plan, which is still getting consistent support from the ANC and President Zuma in spite of all the noises from various quarters. NUMSA stands for political control of the Reserve Bank and in the setting of interest rates. It believes that key companies like Sasol and Arcelor-Mittal should be nationalised; that the currency should be pegged; that a wealth tax should be introduced; that the budget deficit should be higher; that government social spending must be increased substantially; that imports should be curtailed artificially and in general that the state should play a much more aggressive and dominant role in the economy. This programme is considerably to the left of what the ANC is currently doing in government.

The disillusionment of at least some left wingers can be seen in the alienation that has developed between Mr Zwelenzima Vavi and the Zuma government. Six years ago at Polokwane Mr Vavi promised us a “swing to the left”. Last year in the run-up to Mangaung he again promised us a “Lula moment” – shorthand for more leftwing policies. None of these lurches to the left have materialised – partly explaining the disillusionment Mr Vavi is experiencing.

So we cannot in good conscience label the ANC as a party of the left. Centre-left, yes. Social-democratic, yes. Left, forget it.

A real party of the left?

Enter Mr Julius Malema and his Economic Freedom Fighters Party (EFF).

No nuances or ambiguities here. Land must be taken without compensation; mines nationalised; the full power of the state used to coerce – the latter position they share with fascist parties on the far right, but as we do not have such parties in mainstream SA, that irony is not a political problem.

How many votes can the EFF garner? Can it be one of the game changers of 2014?

The only hard data we have so far is from marketing research company Pondering Panda which found in a survey that 26% of people between 18 and 34 would vote for him. Put that into the demographic structure of the country and it translates into 12% of the vote. Almost twice the votes COPE got last time round and about half of what the DA got in the 2011 local government elections. That is a very credible performance for the first time round – if it materialises.

Of course, the 12% assumes that all potential voters actually register and vote; that they do not change their minds by Election Day and that Mr Malema will not be cut down by the ANC campaigning against him.

If the EFF does get 12% of the vote the question is how many of those will come from voters who have not previously participated in politics and how many from supporters of existing parties, primarily the ANC? The former will bring outsiders into politics which is a good thing; the latter will enhance competition, also a healthy development.

So What?

- Harold Wilson warned that one week in politics is a very long time. So we should not get ahead of ourselves 8 months or so before the election. But one outcome of next year's elections could very well be the emergence in our politics of a party with a real left wing programme.
- Because of the historical alliance between the ANC, the SACP and Cosatu we don't have a party with a left-wing platform on the ballot paper. (The SACP is not even Communist in name.) This is an obvious gap in the country's party political configuration.
- The space on the right is quite crowded with at least ten parties fighting for about one-third of the vote. Expect rationalisation and consolidation on that front.
- The emergence of a party of the left will force the ANC to defend itself against the left – we have already seen evidence of that. The Minister of Agriculture slapped down a suggestion by Mr Malema on land grabs in the most decisive public pronouncement she had made in a long time. The ANC Secretary-general for the first time criticised Zanu-PF for mismanagement in Zimbabwe when he responded to EFF comments on Zanu-PF. In responding to a real party of the left, the ANC will probably be pushed further to the centre.