

ABSTRACT

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OPPOSITION PARTIES OF SOUTH AFRICA'S 2009 GENERAL ELECTION

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South Africa has been a dominant party democracy since the end of apartheid in 1994. The country's fourth open election took place after a turbulent period within the ANC which led to the defeat of President Thabo Mbeki as party leader by Jacob Zuma at Polokwane in December 2007 and the subsequent enforced departure of Mbeki from the Presidency before the end of his second term. This led to the first open split in the ANC and the formation of a breakaway party, the Congress of the People (COPE). The formation of COPE did not end infighting within the ANC, which seriously weakened the party both nationally and provincially, especially in the Western Cape. As memories of the liberation struggle fade, and disenchantment with continuing poverty and inequality grows, the ANC's liberation struggle credentials might be expected to assume less importance, especially among younger voters who registered in larger numbers than before in 2009. Whilst ANC victory remained assured in 2009, COPE and other opposition parties had an opportunity to make serious inroads on its dominance. The official Opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA), made unprecedented efforts to reach the black African majority, to shed its image of white, middle-class privilege and to win the Western Cape Province.

The paper analyses the significance of the election outcome for the future of democratic opposition to the ANC. Has COPE achieved a sufficient base on which to build significant opposition? Can the DA continue the growth achieved and make progress in other provinces? Does the poor performance of smaller parties signal the potential consolidation of opposition to the ANC? How best can opposition parties collectively counter ANC dominance? Underlying these questions is the fundamental issue of whether democratic consolidation requires the genuine possibility of regime change.