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South Africa's Political Landscape May 2011

President Jacob Zuma is now half-way through his first term of office. There is no doubt that individuals, with their own biography and temperaments, stamp their personal imprints on the presidency. Mandela's (1994 to 1999) reconciliatory presidency was a product of his almost messianic appeal. This coincided well with the imperative to oversee a very delicate shift of power from 'white' supremacy to 'black' democratic rule. Comfortable in public limelight, Mandela spent most of his presidency in reconciliatory activities.

On the other hand, Thabo Mbeki in the presidency from 1999 to 2008 was a man of solitary demeanour. Once Mandela vacated the office for retirement, Mbeki re-organised the presidency to suit his intellectual character and propensity to be hands on. The presidency was collapsed into one office, with the policy function located there. Mbeki had strong ideas, the patience for details and thus insisted in steering their gestation into policy. Departments did not have to undertake much conceptual work, but rather received policy directives from above. Their job was to implement, then await a grilling season from the 'Chief' on their progress.

Two years down the line the question can be asked, which way has Jacob Zuma's presidency gone? A sufficient track-record exists to permit observations. His is a hands-off approach which has unleashed personal energies and encouraged initiatives among his ministers. Individual ministers have impressed, coming up with various policies to remedy problems, especially in local government, health and education. The dismembering of the policy unit in the presidency does pose a concern regarding cohesiveness of government machinery. Some interpret this as either South Africa having a cabinet of equals or presidential authority is simply wanting! What is new in this presidency is that ministers seem comfortable having a go at each other in public. The fear is if colleagues don't get along, and this seems to be clearly the case with the South African cabinet, collective work stands to suffer.

Alongside the enthusiastic work of individual ministers a counter narrative of a presidency impervious to public morality is emerging. Personal beliefs are important in the public domain to the extent that they reinforce our shared values. All love their ancestral village, but it sends a different message if the president's village starts getting more attention

than the rest. It creates the impression that the president is working from home. A popular feeling may start building up that, if you want your village or province to get ahead of others, elect a home-boy for president. That's how ethnic identities become politicised and elections degenerate into an ethnic arithmetic to get a majority, ethnic coalition. Then the home-front and home-boys benefit to the neglect of the rest. There is mounting evidence of this narrow-minded political posturing increasing in South Africa today.

Effective government depends on the strength of institutional checks and balances. The president is writing his own script. It is possible to look back at this moment and see a slight improvement in the delivery of social services, leading to a slight reversal of poverty and widening access to education and health. Or, Zuma could become a sophisticated version of Mobuto Sese Seko, under whose presidency the home front, family and close associates count more than the country. The jury is still out and the remaining time of his first stay in office allows him to determine a favourable outcome.

Scandal after scandal concerning high ranking officials is almost a daily occurrence. For example, South Africa's national police chief stands accused of spending taxpayers' money unlawfully. A Cabinet minister reportedly used public funds to live in a luxury hotel and fly first-class. And the wife of another minister was convicted of dealing drugs. As the scandals mount, South Africans have yet to get explanations, let alone action. Recently, businesspeople and government officials from around the world attended a World Economic Forum meeting in Cape Town, discussing prospects for development and good government on the continent. But analysts say those successes have been undermined by a deep undercurrent of corruption driven by greed since the advent of democracy. A culture of entitlement undermines genuine efforts at good governance. Nonetheless, South Africa prides itself in having key weapons to fight against corruption, including an independent judiciary and feisty media. Attempts over the past year or so to gag the media and influence the judiciary have failed and this is South Africa's saving grace.

Elections are an important barometer to gauge public sentiment. The May 18 local government elections featured the highest number of independent candidates making the contest not only a test of the ruling party's service delivery, but also of the party's push for hegemony over the political landscape. Aside from service delivery protests, at an all time high since 1994, the African National Congress's attempt to accommodate community participation in nominating councillors opened a Pandora's Box of grievances and protests. On-going community protests over service delivery and the imposition of unwanted councillors highlight tension between allowing communities a say in who should directly represent them and the political power plays in ANC structures. The ANC's democratic centralism has struggled to accommodate local dynamics where the communities want a greater say in who is nominated and greater accountability of those elected. Up to now councillors have been criticised in many communities for being largely absent.

During the run up to the May 18 local elections analysts predicted a turn out of about 50% of the electorate and the ruling ANC party to drop about 10% from the 68% overall vote they received in the 2009 general elections.

Well the analysts had it wrong yet again. Turnout was higher than expected at 57.5%, which in any country at local elections is very high; up from 49% in the last local elections. This underscores the importance the democratic process is for ordinary South Africans. People clearly want to have a say in who they want to govern them. Nor did the ANC drop 10% as predicted. Their overall vote was over 64%, about the same as the last local government elections in 2006. In any democracy the ruling party usually do poorly at local government elections but this has not happened in South Africa. Despite all the protests over service delivery, high unemployment, crime and over 12 million people still living below the poverty data line (less than \$1 a day) the ruling party still command the support of the majority of the people in the country. Nor is there any indication that there will be any change in the foreseeable future.

There was a significant political shift in the May local elections. Though a multiplicity of parties contested the elections most at the local level there were in the South African political scenario about six parties that had any relevant support. Four of these have almost disappeared. The Democratic Alliance (DA), which is the main opposition party to the ruling African National Congress Alliance (ANC) have made significant gains. In 2006 they pulled 16% and in this election, their figure rose to over 22%. Clearly South Africa is moving to a two-party state. The DA have improved at every election since their inception. However, this has not been at the expense of the ruling party, but rather at the expense of many other minority parties. One can predict that a lot of these minority parties will either disappear in the near future or join the DA to form a vibrant and challenging opposition to the ruling party. The next Presidential and general election in South Africa is foreseen for 2014. It is unlikely that the ANC would lose but it is probable that the DA will continue to marginally increase their national vote.

The fact that the DA did so well at the local elections is not a guarantee that they will do as well in the general elections. They have a lot of work to do to shed the niggling perception that they are still the party of the white population. Having said that it is fair to say that they have made significant inroads in the black population as shown in the results of the May 2011 local elections!

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