

A Sense of Direction – Déjà vu All Over Again

Trending observed in the last election is expected to intensify in 2019. In all, 29 parties contested the 2014 elections and 13 of those won at least one seat.

The ANC dropped in the last election in 2014 from 264 seats it had held previously to 249 seats. This net loss of 15 seats was largely due to the advent of the EFF which won 25 seats.

So EFF also cut into the support of the smaller parties like COPE, which dropped back from their previous polling position. Of the smaller parties, only the Freedom Front held its own at 4 seats. The EFF literally came out of nowhere, taking 25 seats – 15 from the ANC and 10 from the other small parties.

The DA grew to 89 seats, from the 67 seats that it had held previously. So it gained by 22 seats.

Of the smaller parties, the IFP suffered from an internal split as well as the ANC (which lost a block of its support to the EFF). The splinter NFP won 6 seats and the IFP won 10 seats – a combined block of 16 seats that limited the DA and EFF gains in KwaZulu Natal.

Finally, a total of 21 seats was split between 8 other small parties, namely UDM, Freedom Front, COPE, ACDP, AIC, Agang, PAC and APC. Of the 29 parties that contested the elections, 16 (over half) did not score enough to get even 1 seat.

In 2019, the same trending appears to be continuing. The ANC vote will shrink further, as there are now 48 parties contesting the elections. This creates a natural “centrifugal force” to counter the “gravitational attraction” of the ruling alliance.

If even half of those 48 parties win seats, that will mean 24 parties with at least one seat – up from 13 parties in 2014.

Some people expect to see the EFF grow, but there is one mitigating factor. One of the new parties that has registered represents Security Guards. There are 1.8 million security guards in South Africa – over ten for each policeman. The EFF has claimed to represent non-unionized workers like gas jockeys, domestic workers and security guards. So this block of support may be lost to the EFF?

In KZN, the IFP seems to be consolidating its support. The splinter party has all but fizzled out. The in-fighting in the ANC has become so intense that it may cause voters either just not to turn out to vote, or else to rather vote for the IFP – or one of the new parties.

One new party is the ATM, which has roots in the Africa-initiated churches. These are more traditionalist than Leftist, so they may not support the far Left parties? In fact, many pundits are saying that the ATM is the “dark horse” in the 2019 elections. The church-aligned parties even support the return of the death penalty – as does the IFP. They want law and order and that means that they will not be pleased with the tarnished reputations of leaders in both the ANC and the EFF. The ATM could come out of nowhere this time around, like the EFF did last time.

In all, the end-result will be attrition for ANC support. More parties mean more centrifugal force because voters have more choices. Even if those parties don't win enough to get 1 seat, they are still bleeding support away from those who had it last time. So the ANC will be the biggest loser in that sense, because it has always been the biggest winner.

The DA and the EFF are both likely to keep growing, eroding away the ANC's support base.

The DA is gunning for Gauteng province too – where the density of voters is highest of all. If the DA can take Gauteng, given its track-record in its two major metros since the “mid-terms” in 2016, that constitutes a huge block of votes in the national count. The second most populous province is KZN, where a resurgence of support for the IFP, will constitute another huge block of national votes. If South Africa had an “electoral college” like the USA, these two provinces would be like California and Texas – a must-win scenario, to secure overall victory.

The ATM could become the power-broker after the elections? It could have significant influence within a Coalition.

Expect to see not just 13 parties in Parliament, but at least 20. This also erodes ANC support.

The truth is, there is nothing really new in these trends – they have been with us since the last elections, but they are now intensifying.

It is always hard to measure a “stay-away”. That will also hurt the ANC. But boycotting elections is un-democratic. It is better to vote, and to spoil your ballot. Then it is counted – as an abstention. That is a visible way to exercise your freedom of expression – if you think that the ruling alliance needs to take some time off – to heal itself.

When the votes are counted, it could be very close. The ANC will be weakened, and possibly even displaced by a DA-led Coalition of opposition parties. All that remains to be seen is whether that happens in these elections, or in 2024, because the way things are going is clear to see.