

The Revenge of the Splinter Parties

The latest poll is very telling. It shows that the number of voters who will not vote for any of the three major parties has grown from 12 percent to 18 percent.

There is clearly a fragmentation of the vote going on. Here are some of the reasons why:

The drop in ANC support is caused partly by the emergence of the Socialist Worker's Party. COSATU split over the issue of impunity and those who supported Vavi and Jim formed SAFTU. The SACP very nearly walked out as well, but decided to stay in the ruling alliance, rather than split. So a lot of the Leftist vote has left the ANC – and will benefit the new party on the Left.

Another Leftist party is the EFF, although many claim that it is dangerously Populist rather than Leftist. But even though the EFF's support is gaining a bit, it is facing one critical loss. One of the new parties that has emerged represents Security Guards. There are 1.8 million security guards in South Africa – ten times more than there are policemen and women. When the EFF came out of nowhere in 2014 to win six percent of the vote, it claimed to represent non-Unionized workers like gas jockeys, domestic workers – and security guards. So this new party will cost the EFF some votes.

Meanwhile the DA had a big spat with "Aunty Pat", who then founded GOOD. This probably accounts for the polls detecting a drop in support for the DA.

But the dark horse in this race is the ATM. It has massive support from the African-initiated churches. On the whole, these are more traditionalist than Leftist. For example, they support the return of the death penalty. This movement is to the 2019 elections what the COPE-boom was to the 2009 elections and what the EFF-boom was to the 2014 elections. It is coming out of nowhere to garner a significant share of the vote.

Conservative voters in KwaZulu Natal may also return to the IFP. Its own splinter party has lost its lustre and the intrepid Buthelezi seems to be making a come-back. He is consolidating the IFP vote in his Zulu heartland, at a moment when the ANC is weak because of its identity crisis.

Other erstwhile smaller parties like the UDM, ACDP and COPE have established constituencies that will probably hold firm, or grow – benefiting from the general disappointment in the ANC's focus on in-fighting instead of service delivery.

The simple fact that there are 48 parties to choose from, will drain away votes from the "big three". It is a kind of "centrifugal force" that counters the "gravitational attraction" of the big parties. In 2014 there were only 29 parties contesting the election, and 13 of those won at least one seat in parliament. This trend suggests that there could be over 20 parties in the next parliament, and this erodes support for the big parties.

The more the DA shrinks, the closer it gets to the size of other parties. This bodes well for Coalition because the real contender in this election is not another party, but a Coalition. The closer that Coalition partners are to one another in relative size, the better the dynamic of Coalition can work.

Julius Malema could be the next Deputy President, alongside President Maimane. But a Coalition is a Joint Venture. It is distinct from any of its partners. That Coalition will have to define its own set of “tolerable compromises”. This will require such mechanisms as “indicative voting” and “ranked-choice voting” – to find convergence on policy issues.

However, there are several commonalities that can bond partners into a strong Coalition. They all want clean government, and punishment not amnesty for the perpetrators of corruption and patronage. They want changes in governance such as a smaller Cabinet, more space for constituency voting instead of party lists, and more transparency. They want Parliament – not a party – to provide oversight of the Executive branch. And they want better representation of all age groups in governance.

The combination of President Maimane and Deputy President Malema would go a long way to bringing down the average age of those in high office!