



## **Werner Böhler: The Development of Political Parties in Young Democracies – South Africa**

For more than thirteen years now, South Africa has had a democratic system which is based on one of the most liberal constitutions in the world. It guarantees the political liberties, and it has by now given the country three elections – in 1994, 1999, and 2004 – which may be regarded as free and fair. South African democracy is on its way towards consolidation.

Despite these positive aspects, a closer look at the political-party system also reveals some undesirable developments caused, among other things, by the pronounced dominance of one party and the weak, fragmented opposition within the country. These developments may be described on the basis of several facts: The political arena is controlled by the ruling ANC, which only hesitantly pushed ahead its formation process and is still considered a liberation movement. Together with the communist SACP and the trade union federation COSATU, the ANC constitutes a tripartite alliance which also shapes the ruling party's understanding of political planning. Within the ANC, power struggles are on the rise, the dividing line running between the party's president, Mr Mbeki, and his vice president. At the moment, the SACP is vehemently discussing whether it should withdraw from the tripartite coalition and appear as an independent party in the elections of 2009. And finally, the option of splitting the ANC itself is being discussed.

The current opposition constitutes no alternative to the ANC either in programme or in content. At 12.37 percent, the biggest opposition party, the DA, which belongs to the International Liberals, has practically exhausted its stock of potential voters. The IPF is shrinking, and it is perceived as a merely regional party rooted predominantly in the Zulu country. The United Democratic Movement (UDM), which was founded in 1996, intended to establish itself in the political centre but, having won only 2.28 percent of the vote in 2004, it remains concentrated in the Eastern Cape province. Established in 2004, the essentially social democratic Independent Democrats (ID) obtained only 1.73 percent in the 2004 elections; they are rooted mainly in the Western Cape province. Founded as a post-apartheid party in 1993, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), which shows some fundamentalist features, addresses Christian religious groups. At the national level, a total of 91 political parties are currently registered with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).

To sum up, it may be said that, even 16 years after the fall of the apartheid regime, South Africa still has a party system headed by a dominant ruling party, that the opposition has been unable so far to field a party that appeals to a broad range of voters but is not ethnically oriented, and that the ANC will remain the formative power in South Africa in the near future. Nevertheless, tensions within the ruling party – caused, among other things, by alterations in the career objectives of young ANC activists, centralist decision-making structures, burgeoning corruption, latent inter-ethnic competition, and growing dissatisfaction with the deficits in the service sector – have increased.

South Africa's constitution is based on the principle of maximum inclusion. All social or ethnic groups, including small minorities, are to be given a chance of representation. Thus, political parties are not subject to any legal restrictions whatsoever. Any citizen may found a party; there are no barring clauses for entering parliament. That these regulations do not contribute towards establishing a sound multi-party system is obvious.

The country's constitution, which was adopted in 1996, demands a proportional composition of parliament. Members greatly depend on their party as the elections themselves are conducted only on the basis of party lists, not constituencies. Thus, MPs do not feel accountable to their voters. The parties themselves are hardly founded on programmes, so that there is no question of voters identifying with their content – a problem especially for young, small, and unconsolidated political parties.

At first, the constitution did not provide for floor-crossing, i.e. for MPs changing their party allegiance without relinquishing their seats. However, an amendment of 2002 legitimised the practice, putting the smaller political parties *de facto* at a disadvantage and strengthening the dominance of the ANC.

Party funding is firmly regulated both at the national and the provincial level. 90 percent of the state funds are distributed among the parties in proportion to the number of their parliament seats at the two levels. Ten percent are distributed among the nine provincial parliaments, depending once again on their membership. Furthermore, parties are free to use private funding. In this, the corporate sector plays a particularly important role as a sponsor of parties, which are by no means obliged to publish figures or name their donors. Especially the ANC probably benefits from this, as it holds practically all ministerial and functional offices at both the national and the provincial level. The challenge this fact implies for the country's democracy is obvious.

Formally, political participation in South Africa is decreasing; however, compared with other democracies, it may still be regarded as high. Nevertheless, election turnouts are declining. According to an Afrobarometer survey carried out in March 2006, the reason for this lies in the growing distrust towards politicians and political parties.

There are diverse factors responsible for this tendency: On the one hand, there is the dissatisfaction of the ANC voters who still have not had their share of the 'better life' promised to them. On the other, the opposition has not yet been able to present itself as a plausible alternative. To the young generation of South Africans, apartheid is not a personal experience but past history. And finally, the country's social structure has changed – a black middle class has developed; young blacks hold leading positions in the economy, while backsliders among the white population are the talk of the nation. However, there still is no strategic response to all these changes from the political parties.

As a result of the need for reforms described above, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation's cooperation with political parties focusses especially on certain objectives, reflected in the fact that the strategic concept of its national programme is divided into two parts: Political education activities that focus on the local level, and a subject-oriented political dialogue implemented in political counselling, forums, symposiums, conferences, workshops, publications and the like.

To implement the education programme, the Democratic Development Programme (DDP) was established in 1993. This programme has always been open to all political parties, although it retained its historical connection with the IFP. The programme addresses political and young

leaders of the democratic opposition. The political dialogue programme, on the other hand, aims at establishing a multi-party system, a stable government, and a proper range of opposition parties. In other words – it endeavours to strengthen the political party system and thus, ultimately, to consolidate democracy in South Africa as such.