



Response

May 13th, 2019

A Clear Mandate

In a narrow sense, the big winners in last week's election were the Economic Freedom Fighters, the Freedom Front Plus, the Inkatha Freedom Party, and the African Christian Democratic Party. They grew their support by between 160% (FF+) and 41% (IFP) – all very solid performances.

The election was also a success for the African Transformation Movement, Good, and Al Jama-Ah, all of which will enter Parliament for the first time.

On the downside, the election was not a happy experience for the Congress of the People, the United Democratic Movement, the National Freedom Party, and the African Independent Congress; all of them saw their support drop by half or more, leaving them with just one or two seats each. The African People's Convention and Agang SA fared even worse, and will not return to Parliament.

In a broader sense, though, the biggest winners were the ANC and the DA, the two largest parties going into the election, and emerging from it. This, despite the fact that they lost 7.5% and 6.6% of their 2014 share of the vote respectively.

It is easy to be carried away by the numbers, but the reality is that it makes little difference that the FF+ will send 10 MPs to Cape Town instead of its previous four; or that the ANC will send 230 instead of 249. The balance of power has not shifted in any noticeable way. The allocation of speaking time may change slightly in favour of the EFF; the DA may be a smidgen more stretched in its coverage of portfolio committees; we can expect to hear a lot from Good's Patricia 'Aunty Pat' de Lille, and probably a little less from COPE's Mosiuoa Lekota and the UDM's Bantu Holomisa; and who knows what the ATM and Al Jama-Ah will bring to the legislature? But at the end of the day, the ANC has retained an absolute, and very workable, majority.

This key fact is reinforced if one considers that, with the sole exception of the land expropriation question, all of the main commitments of Cyril Ramaphosa's ANC find an echo in the DA's demands: eradicating corruption; sorting out Eskom and other state enterprises; repairing the institutions wrecked by Jacob Zuma; addressing unemployment, poverty and inequality; and growing the economy. In other words, if the ANC and the DA stay true to their stated intentions, they should find it relatively easy to work together on most legislative and policy priorities. (And if they do decide to work together, there is nothing that the rest of the parties can do about it – the ANC and DA hold 78% of the seats.)

The Ramaphosa version of the ANC on the one hand, and the DA on the other, are both parties of the political centre – if this were a European country, they would occupy the same broadly social-democratic space. Their differences are not so much about *what* to achieve as about *how* to achieve it.

This analysis may be a little unfair to the EFF. It has demonstrated impressive growth in its relatively brief history – from 6.35% in 2014, to 8.2% in the 2016 local government elections, to 10.8% now. If it manages to sustain its rate of growth, it could take 18% in 2024 – and be a real threat to the DA. But that is a long way off, and much political water will yet flow under many bridges.

For now, more than three-quarters of the voters have asked the two biggest parties to get on with the job of turning the country around. It is not a coincidence that they have retained control of all the provinces between them; or that, in five of the nine, they are each other's official opposition. (Neither is it a coincidence that they also control all of the metropolitan municipalities, and the lion's share of the smaller councils.)

The mandate is clear. The electorate is not looking for extreme solutions. The centripetal force in our politics still holds sway.

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