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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH**

**THE INSTITUTIONS OF  
REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

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CSSR Working Paper No. 85

Published by the Centre for Social Science Research  
University of Cape Town  
2004

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Price in Southern Africa (incl. VAT and postage): R 15.00

or it can be downloaded from our website  
<http://www.cssr.uct.ac.za/>

ISBN 0-77011-017-8

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RESEARCH

Democracy in Africa Research Unit

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November 2004

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# The Institutions of Representative Democracy<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This paper charts the development of the two institutions most central to the nature of representative democracy in South Africa: the electoral system and the National Assembly.<sup>2</sup> It reviews how developments since 1994 have shaped the institutional context in which political parties operate and compete for power. The paper first considers how the National Assembly has developed over the past ten years, reviewing the performance of parliament and its role in the consolidation of democracy. The second part of the paper focuses on the electoral system, reviewing the debate around electoral reform and discussing changes that have been introduced since 1999. In the conclusion, we suggest what the implications of these institutional developments are for the future of representative democracy in South Africa.*

## 1. Parliament in the Past Decade

In 1994, South Africa's first democratically elected parliament was expected to play a very different role than the essentially undemocratic, unrepresentative and largely inactive parliament of the Apartheid regime. According to the Constitution, South Africa's parliament should overcome the legacies of the past by enriching the political system with the values of multi-partyism, accountability, responsiveness and openness. Parliament is designed to instill

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<sup>1</sup> The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those solely of the authors and do not represent the views of the US government.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper we will interchangeably use the terms parliament and National Assembly. Although the South African parliament is bicameral, comprising the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces, we will not include the latter, less important chamber in our analysis here. For more information about the role and special character of the NCOP, see Murray and Nijzink (2002).

constitutional values into the political system and be a central agent in the realisation of human rights and the transformation of the country. In addition, parliament should provide a link between government and the people by educating the public about the democratic dispensation, by ensuring public participation in its processes and by being a role model for good governance and democratic values (Murray and Nijzink 2002). But how realistic are these constitutional expectations? Ten years after the first democratic elections, it seems appropriate to assess whether parliament has evolved in the way it was envisaged. Has parliament, being the country's main representative institution, lived up to its many challenges? How has it performed over the past ten years?

## **1.1 From Legislation to Oversight?**

In the period immediately after the 1994 election, parliament played a central role in the new democratic system. A major part of its work was to serve as the Constitutional Assembly and finalise the new South African Constitution, which it did in 1996. The first democratic parliament was also confronted with the task of passing an extensive government programme of legislation intended to replace Apartheid laws and address the most immediate problems of a society deeply divided by racism, poverty and inequality. In fulfilling this legislative task, the first parliament passed a total of 494 bills, an average of almost 100 bills per year. The legislative load decreased considerably during the second parliament. From 1999 to 2003, parliament passed a total of 313 bills, resulting in an average of about 63 bills per year. In other words, looking at the number of bills passed, parliament has become less active in the course of the past ten years (see Table 1).

The decrease in legislative output between the first and second parliament is not surprising. One would expect the workload to diminish once the first legislative programme of the new ANC government was put in place. Thus, the relatively heavy workload of the first parliament must be seen as a result of the transition to a democratic regime, whereas the decline in the number of bills passed during the second parliament can be regarded as a sign of 'normalisation'. However, the decrease in legislative output also suggests that parliament could be in danger of losing its central role in the democratic system if it fails to take an active stance and shift the emphasis in its activities from legislation to oversight and representation.

*Table 1: Number of Bills Passed by Parliament per Year*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Bills</i>
1994	52
1995	89
1996	108
1997	108
1998	137
1999	60
2000	70
2001	69
2002	75
2003*	39

*Source:* Annual Reports of Parliament.

*Note:* \* number of bills passed until November 2003.

Such a shift is particularly important in the context of a system of governance in which the initiative in public policy making lies with the executive. The South African parliament, like many of its counterparts elsewhere in the world, has a limited responsibility for making laws. Legislation is primarily prepared and drafted by the executive and presented to parliament for approval. It is parliament's responsibility to provide opportunities for public debate and public participation in the law making process and to ensure that legislation that is passed reflects policy choices acceptable to the majority (de Villiers 2001). Some parliamentary committees, especially in the first democratic parliament, have been pro-active and have redrafted and amended government legislation in a number of policy areas, most notably in the Justice portfolio, but not all committees have equally impressive track records when it comes to the scrutiny of government bills (Habib and Herzenberg forthcoming). Committees and individual MPs also have the right to initiate legislation, which is, unusually, enshrined in the Constitution, but so far legislative initiatives from individual members and committees have been scarce (Nijzink 2004). In other words, parliament's law-making activities are, to a large extent, limited to debating and passing government legislation. Therefore, it is imperative that parliament extends the emphasis in its work beyond law-making to include monitoring and overseeing the executive and the implementation of its policies, especially after the main legislative framework of the ANC government has been put in place.

The second parliament recognised that taking its responsibility of overseeing the executive more seriously could be the next step required to find its place in the political system in the longer term. In 1999, the National Assembly established a

sub-committee of the Rules committee to discuss parliament's oversight responsibility. The committee commissioned and discussed a report on how to strengthen oversight practices (Corder *et al* 1999). In addition, portfolio committees started to include oversight in their yearly programmes and some began to undertake so-called oversight visits (Annual Report for Parliament 1999).

These initiatives, however, have so far not resulted in vigorous oversight practices. The *Report on Parliamentary Oversight and Accountability* identified a number of resource and logistical problems that were restricting committees in their oversight activities but it did not address the crucial issue of political attitudes. As Nijzink has noted elsewhere,

even if all the resource and logistical problems could be solved, committees would only be transformed into instruments of oversight if committee chairs are not afraid to occasionally antagonize the minister; if the opposition is not set on turning every committee meeting into a mini-plenum; if committees succeed in focusing on policy implementation; and if members regard their committees as efficient parliamentary units established to develop expertise and manage information, rather than extensions of the party political divide (Nijzink 2001: 63).

These attitudinal changes have not yet happened. Instead, partisan power relations in parliamentary proceedings seem to have increased to the detriment of accountability and transparency.

Certain parliamentary committees that are typically less driven by partisan considerations than others, such as the public accounts committee or the committee dealing with members' initiatives for legislation, have become dominated by partisanship. Public accounts committees are usually less driven by partisan considerations when they conduct their business and assess whether money has been spent in accordance with budget decisions. Yet, after the 1999 election, rather than following common practice and appointing a member of an opposition party to chair the *Standing Committee on Public Accounts* (SCOPA), the ANC nominated an IFP member, Gavin Woods, as the chairperson. Since the IFP was a partner in the ANC-led government, the appointment was seen as a partisan attempt to influence committee procedures. The role of the SCOPA, has become the topic of even more explicitly partisan power play and debate, after alleged irregularities surrounding an arms deal appeared on the committee's agenda (Murray and Nijzink 2002).

Furthermore, although a parliamentary Code of Conduct was introduced in 1997

and parliament keeps a Register of Members' Interests to prevent conflicts of interest among representatives, there have been several instances when parliament failed to hold its members accountable. Prominent members, such as Winnie Madikezela-Mandela and Deputy President Jacob Zuma, have not taken parliament's internal processes of oversight as seriously as they should. On a number of occasions, the need to act decisively on any allegations of irregularity involving MPs seemed to have given way to more partisan considerations. Several ministers, including Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota, have been accused of not fully disclosing their financial interests, yet without repercussions from the side of parliament. The Chief Whip of the ANC in the first parliament, Tony Yengeni, was accused and convicted of corruption but parliament left it to the ANC to decide on his resignation, while the party, in turn, thought it best to depend on Yengeni's own conscience for this decision. In the second parliament, a new scandal broke around the irregular use of travel vouchers by more than just a handful of MPs. Again, parliament seems to have been slow in acting on allegations of any wrong-doing.

The lack of oversight practices and parliament's reluctance to hold its members to its code of conduct not only circumscribes the institution's independence, but is also beginning to undermine the public image of parliament. South Africans do not seem to regard parliament and its members as particularly trustworthy, a fact which further erodes the ability of parliament to exert its power in the face of executive dominance. Public opinion data from the Afrobarometer surveys show that the level of trust in parliament has decreased between the first and second parliament. The Afrobarometer asked people "how much of the time can you trust parliament to do what is right?" and found that the percentage of people answering 'most of the time' has sharply decreased, from 57% in 1998 to 34% in 2000. The same trend can be seen in figures for parliamentary job approval. In 1998, 64% of South Africans approved of the way parliament performed its job. According to the Afrobarometer surveys, this dropped to 45% in 2000. Also, 45% of South Africans think that most or almost all MPs are involved in corruption. This perception has been more constant over time: 41% in 1997, 44% in 1998 and 45% in 2000 (Mattes *et al* 2000). Clearly, these trends especially in perceptions of corruption, indicate that parliament has a pressing problem with regard to its public image and its responsibility as a role model for good governance.

## 1.2 The Role of Committees and Parties in Parliament

The previous section underscored the necessity for parliament to become more active in terms of overseeing policy implementation and holding its own members and the government accountable if it wants to ensure a central role for itself in the years to come. One way of addressing these issues would be to take the role and powers of parliamentary portfolio committees more seriously. The most important role of portfolio committees is to gather the information that is needed to make informed decisions about public policy and to develop expertise in the relevant policy area. Committees do the detailed work that underpins most parliamentary output and that is impractical if not impossible to do in plenary sittings. Because committees deal with the details of legislation and policy issues, party political differences will not always dominate, which leaves room for more problem-oriented discussion. Furthermore, committees can act as a contact point with the public, being the most practical forum for public participation. Thus, committees have the potential to provide a source of expertise outside the executive, a forum for public hearings, and less partisan, more problem-oriented discussion (Murray and Nijzink 2002).

Portfolio committees have considerable powers, at least on paper, to develop their potential. These powers are listed, unusually, in the Constitution itself. According to section 56, the National Assembly or any of its committees may:

- (a) summon any person to appear before it to give evidence on oath or affirmation, or to produce documents;
- (b) require any person or institution to report to it;
- (c) compel in terms of national legislation or the rules and orders, any person or institution to comply with a summons or requirement in terms of paragraph (a) or (b); and
- (d) receive petitions, representations or submissions from any interested persons or institutions.

Committees in the South African parliament do request organisations and individuals to make submissions or present reports, but they seldom use their other powers. They are able to function without relying on the tools provided in the Constitution. In the context of party political realities, these powers are clearly regarded as a last resort. Committees with a majority of members being members of the ruling party are understandably reluctant to summon ministers

or government officials (Murray and Nijzink 2002). Nevertheless, committees could be more assertive in compelling the executive to attend their meetings and report on certain matters. Portfolio committees often deal with a piece of government legislation without the minister being present. Some portfolio committees even extensively amend the government draft of a bill with the help of the legal drafter of the department without the minister being there. In many parliamentary systems, it would be unthinkable that the minister who takes political responsibility for a draft bill is absent from committee deliberations. In the National Assembly, it is apparently not regarded as a problem. In fact, it is sometimes in the course of the legislative process impossible to distinguish between the government draft and the version amended by the committee.

In other systems, the extensive power to summon people is only given to parliamentary committees in the case of an official inquiry. In other words, these powers are reserved for more extreme instances where overseeing government policy implementation warrants setting up an inquiry process with witnesses and special hearings. In the South African system, such a process does not have to be decided upon in order to use the power to summon. All committees have these powers to use at their discretion, which might, paradoxically, be the reason why they are not being used. Because the extensive powers are always available, even the threat of using them is not an instrument in the hands of parliament vis-a-vis the executive. It is as yet unclear if this is simply a consequence of the institutional design or if this points to a more general tendency towards fusion in South African executive-legislative relations.

A clear trend in the past ten years of parliamentary politics is that parties and partisan considerations are increasingly dominating parliamentary proceedings, even in areas where one would expect individual MPs to be able to deal with certain aspects of their work in an atmosphere of slightly relaxed party discipline. Public accounts for example is typically less party politicised. The same is true for the avenue of private member bills and even for certain forms of parliamentary questioning when MPs can raise issues that emerged during the time they spent in their constituencies. In all these areas, we find that there is less scope for individual MPs to make their mark outside the realm of strict party discipline. During the second parliament, SCOPA proceedings have become overly politicised, as noted above. The committee on members' legislative proposals has not managed to avoid the process becoming subject to majority rule right from the start and even questions during question time are no longer allocated on a first come first serve basis but allocated to parties according to their relative size in the House. The ANC apparently saw its members making little use of question time, while the opposition was more active in submitting questions. This situation seems to have been the reason for the ANC proposal to introduce a partisan element in the allocation of time to

members during question time.

Changing the procedures for questioning in such a way seemed a rather defensive move from the side of the ANC, but typical of the style of the ruling party in parliament during the last five years. Regardless of its overwhelming majority, the ANC seems to have become more reluctant to engage in open and robust deliberations. Most of the opposition, on the other hand, seems to be stuck in a largely rhetorical and confrontational style instead of choosing the route of constructive criticism. Again, this polarisation could be a sign of the 'normalisation' of parliamentary politics but one could also interpret it as an indication that parliament is losing its central role and is not the main forum to debate issues of public concern.

The growing irrelevance of parliament is also signalled by the fact that politicians do not seem to regard parliament as an important career goal. The ANC's practice of deploying its members together with turnover rates in parliament of 40 to 50% probably prevent this (see Piombo 2004). Although parliament seems to have become, to some extent, a training ground for ministerial talent, the governing party does not seem to regard parliament as an institution central to the overall goal of transforming the country. For example, during his first term, President Mbeki made it clear that parliament was not very high on his list of priorities. Mbeki reluctantly agreed to four question times per year when he would personally come to parliament to answer questions and gave his Deputy-President Jacob Zuma the task of dealing with parliament in his absence.

### **1.3 Transformative Legislature or Arena Parliament?**

One way of assessing the performance of parliament is to look at what Polsby (1990) calls "transformative capacity". Does parliament have an independent capacity to mould and transform proposals from different sources into laws? And, if so, is this capacity frequently exercised? Polsby actually classifies legislatures using a continuum with transformative legislatures on the one end and arena type parliaments on the other end. In transformative legislatures, a crucial transformation occurs between inputs from the political system and the final result of the legislative process. The internal structures and cultural norms of the institution as well as the division of labour within parliament are crucial for the way in which the legislature functions. The output of the legislature is primarily influenced by the following factors: the committee structure and appointment processes, the policy preferences of individual legislators, informal

legislative groupings and the operation of rules of internal procedure and customs such as seniority.

Arena parliaments, on the other hand, serve mainly as formalised settings for the interplay of significant political forces in the political system. The more open the regime, the more varied, representative and accountable the forces in the arena are. The main function of an arena type parliament is to question and debate government policy. In order to understand the policy making role of an arena parliament, one needs to study the social background of members, their links with civil society, the strategies of government and the civil service, the organisation of parliamentary parties and more importantly extra-parliamentary party politics. In other words, the impact of external forces is decisive in accounting for parliamentary outcomes.

Polsby proposes that the main influence on the independence or transformative capacity of legislatures lies in the character of parliamentary parties. There are three important ways in which this works. First, the broader the coalition embraced by the dominant parliamentary group, the more transformative the legislature. Secondly, the less centralised and hierarchical the management of the parliamentary party, the more transformative the legislature. Lastly, the less fixed and assured the legislative majorities on certain issues are, the more transformative the legislature (*ibid*). When we apply this theory to the South African case, we see that the dominant party in the South African parliament is fairly coalitional, in other words, the ANC embraces a diversity of social interests, while the opposition parties are far less coalitional. Looking further at the way parties control the process of candidate selection and nomination, we would have to classify South African parties as centralised and hierarchical. And finally, when we look at voting patterns in parliament, we consistently see the same fixed majority, in other words, there are no shifting majorities. All in all, we would expect the South African parliament to have a limited transformative capacity and thus be placed more towards the arena side of Polsby's continuum.

## **1.4 An Assessment**

Perhaps one would have expected the first and second democratic parliaments to shape policy or at least significantly contribute to policy making, especially with regard to the pressing issues of poverty, unemployment and social inequality. The need for widescale economic and social transformation seemed to call for an active role by the country's main representative institution. However, the South African parliament has not developed into a transformative institution, with the independent capacity to transform input from the political system into

policy outcomes. If anything, parliament has become less active and more reactive over time. This, on the one hand, raises questions about the centrality of parliament in the consolidation of democracy. On the other hand, one could take it as another sign of 'normalisation' of South African politics. Few parliaments around the world are the main agents of political or societal change. Initiative in public policy making lies primarily with governments and in the era of globalisation, many far reaching decisions are made in international fora.

Furthermore, if the trend towards a reactive parliament is accompanied by a stronger emphasis on parliament's oversight responsibility it does not necessarily constitute a problem in terms of the consolidation of representative democracy. But, although parliament has begun to study and discuss its oversight responsibility and portfolio committees undertake so called oversight visits on a more or less regular basis, we have not yet witnessed vibrant oversight practices in parliament.

During the past decade, parliament seems to have evolved more as an arena type of legislature in the sense that it has mainly served as a public forum to debate government policy. However, even as a public arena, parliament has not performed very well during the past 5 years. The challenge of overcoming the apartheid legacy of a gap of mistrust between government and citizens has only partially been met. The representative capacity of parliament and its members has not been fully utilised - not even within the limits of the current system of proportional representation, closed party lists and allocated constituencies- and the image of parliament amongst the public is not particularly good. Although parliament is obviously more representative in make-up than before 1994, it has not become the main forum for forging links between society and the state.

In other words, there are many remaining challenges. Some of these simply exist for all parliaments in parliamentary systems and relate to overseeing executive action. There are other challenges that seem to be linked to the way MPs are elected, more specifically those related to the representativeness and responsiveness of parliament and its members. These issues have given rise to an ongoing debate on electoral reform, which we discuss below. Finally, some challenges might be more typical for parliaments in young democracies: those related to the development of the institution and its image amongst the public. It is in this area that the South African parliament has made some progress over the past ten years, specifically in terms of institution building. But much remains to be done before the country's main representative institution meets all the expectations set out in the Constitution and plays a central role in building a lasting democratic culture.

## 2. Debating Electoral Reform

The question of electoral reform has been on the table in South Africa for some time and still shows no sign of having been resolved. Central to the debate is the growing realisation that the system of proportional representation based on closed party lists shows tendencies that could cause problems for the consolidation of democracy. Possible problems revolve around issues of accountability and visibility of MPs, and weak connections between representatives and their constituencies. These issues formed the core concerns that motivated parties from different sides of the political spectrum to advocate reform of the electoral system on the provincial and national levels.<sup>3</sup>

The debate on electoral reform began around the December 2000 local election, yet did not result in any action until March 2002, when the ANC established an Electoral Task Team (ETT), headed by Dr. F. van Zyl Slabbert, to review the system and suggest whether or not any changes should be made.<sup>4</sup> The team began its deliberations in May 2002, and was tasked to complete its report to Home Affairs Minister Mangosuthu Buthelezi by November 2002. The task team considered three types of electoral systems: the current party-list system of proportional representation; a mixed system with single-member constituencies balanced by proportional elements; and a constituency system, including single- and multi-member constituencies to ensure proportionality. The team evaluated the different systems according to four criteria: fairness, inclusivity, simplicity, and accountability (van Zyl Slabbert 2002). The ETT commissioned Professors Roger Southall (Human Sciences Research Council) and Robert Mattes (University of Cape Town) to undertake a “comprehensive survey of voters’ involvement in, and understanding of, current politics and the electoral system.”

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<sup>3</sup> In 2000, a new electoral system for the local tier of government was introduced, which we discuss elsewhere in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The other members of the committee were appointed primarily on the recommendations of the Department of Home Affairs and the Chair of the committee, and included: Raesibe Tladi (Director: Legal Services, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development; Tladi resigned on 13 August 2002 and was not replaced), Zamindlela Titus (Special Ministerial Adviser, Department of Provincial and Local Government), Adv Pansy Tlakula (Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Commission), S S van der Merwe (Commissioner, Electoral Commission), Norman du Plessis (Deputy Chief Electoral Officer, Electoral Commission: appointed by the Minister of Home Affairs), Adv Rufus Malatji (Chief Director: Legal Services, Department of Home Affairs), Professor Jørgen Elklit (Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Denmark), Professor Glenda Fick (School of Law, University of the Witwatersrand), Nicholas Haysom (Attorney in private practice), Dr Wilmot James (Executive Director, Social Cohesion and Integration Research Programme, Human Sciences Research Council), Dren Nupen (Director, Electoral Institute of Southern Africa), Tefo Raditapole (Attorney in private practice); *Report of the Electoral Task Team*, 1.3.2.

Working with four South African research survey companies, the survey was to be completed and analysed by late August 2002 (ETT Report, 1.5.1). The ETT also convened a two-day conference to debate various electoral systems and their likely impact in South Africa, the results of which were published in a report on 10 September 2002 (du Plessis 2002).

The task team delivered its report to Cabinet in January 2003. The document reflected disagreement amongst the members of the team. The majority recommended moderate change to the current electoral system and rejected the option of a mixed system of single-member constituencies balanced by party list elements to ensure overall proportionality.<sup>5</sup> They argued that the country already had a mixed system, since the nine provinces constituted nine multi-member districts (ETT Report, 4.5.1.1). The majority report recommended breaking down these large provincial constituencies, thus increasing the nine existing constituencies to 69 new ones, demarcated according to existing municipal and district council boundaries (*ibid*, 4.1.5.3). According to this proposal, the National Assembly would include 300 constituency representatives elected in the new districts, in addition to 100 members elected through proportional representation with closed national party lists. These recommendations including the rejection of single-member constituencies were based on the logic that the needs of fairness, representivity and inclusivity outweighed the concern with accountability, even though each was important.

The minority, on the other hand, felt that the current system should be retained.<sup>6</sup> Advocates of the minority view argued that the six major political parties that had participated in the two-day conference, as well as the majority of South Africans, were happy with the current system. The minority also argued that the logic advanced by the majority view was not adequate to justify changing the closed-list PR system at the national and provincial levels. If the main concern was accountability, then parliament should strengthen constituency offices, rather than “tinkering with the electoral model” (*ibid*, 5.6. - 5.7).

The Cabinet decided on 6 March 2003 to follow the minority recommendation, agreeing to retain the current electoral system and to reconsider changing it for the 2009 national and provincial elections. Buthelezi argued that there simply was not enough time to change the electoral system before the 2004 election (Bell 2004). The members of the task team had anticipated this reaction. In their report, they noted that from the outset, the team had been concerned that any suggestion for change that involved extensive re-education and re-demarcation

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<sup>5</sup> The majority report was endorsed by van Zyl Slabbert, Haysom, du Plessis, James, Elklit, Majatji, Fick and Nupen.

<sup>6</sup> The minority comprised members Raditapole, Titus, Tlakula, and van der Merwe.

of existing boundaries was simply impractical, given the time constraints due to the late date at which the reform evaluation had been initiated (ETT Report, 1.6).

The decision to maintain the current system reflected not only these practical concerns, but also additional factors. The Southall-Mattes survey had found a high degree of satisfaction with the current party-list system and a high level of knowledge about how the system worked. Southall and Mattes found that 74 percent of voters were “satisfied with the way we elect our government.” This evaluation seemed to be based on voters' assessment that the system was fair, inclusive, representative and effective: 72 percent of voters felt that the current system was “fair to all parties;” 81 percent that it ensured “we include many voices in Parliament”, 78 percent that it gave voters “a way to change the party in power” and 68 percent that it helped voters “hold the parties accountable for their actions” (*ibid*, 2.3). Therefore, according to the views of most South Africans, there was little wrong with the current system. The impetus for electoral reform seemed to be originating primarily from political analysts, academics, and people actively involved in the political process.

The ANC, on the other hand, had seemed reluctant to change the system even before the minority report recommended that no changes be made. The ANC's official position on the matter, taken by the National Executive Committee (NEC) in its July 2002 regular meeting, supported retaining proportional representation for national and local elections. The party argued that the system had been adopted before the 1994 election for purposes of inclusivity, and that, eight years later, the country still needed “to harness our inclusive political system in the interest of nation-building and national unity” (ANC 2002, paragraph 8). In theory, this position left room to adopt a new electoral system that combined constituency elements with proportionality, indicating that the party could genuinely be contemplating electoral reform. Yet, an ANC discussion document prepared for the 51<sup>st</sup> National Conference in September 2002 argued for retaining the current system. While stating that the party would consider different options, the document concluded that “[t]he current system in place affords a great degree of stability. It allows for fair representation and gives a voice to all. It has certainly allowed for a greater degree of participation of women, people with disabilities and other targeted groups than any other system could. The system is also simple and familiar to voters” (*ibid*, paragraph 26). In the light of this preference, the decision to follow the minority recommendation was not surprising and one could even question the sincerity of the official statement that the issue of electoral reform will be reconsidered before the 2009 election.

### **3. Electoral System Changes since 1999**

Although the matter of reforming the electoral system remains unresolved, between 1999 and 2004, there have been a number of changes in the institutional framework that structures elections and party politics in South Africa. The first was the use of a new electoral system for the local tier of government in December 2000. The second was the introduction of a window period to allow members of political parties to cross the floor in October 2002 and from March to April 2003. We will provide an overview of these institutional changes and highlight how they have impacted on the party political landscape and have structured electoral politics over the past five years.

#### **3.1 The 2000 Local Election**

The local election in December 2000 was the final step in the creation of a new system of local government, which replaced the transitional governing arrangements that had been in place since 1994 (Pottie 2000). The new system included a demarcation commission, which set the boundaries of the new local governments, and established 6 metropolitan councils, 41 district councils, 5 cross-border municipalities and 232 local councils. The number of local administrations was thus reduced from 864 to 284 and the number of local councilors from 12,000 to approximately 8,000. The new metropolitan councils, also called unicitys, amalgamated several urban local administrations into larger, more integrated municipal areas. Most of the new unicitys were renamed in the process: Pretoria became Tshwane; Durban - eThekweni; Port Elizabeth - Nelson Mandela Metropole; and the East Rand became Ekurhuleni. Johannesburg and Cape Town retained their original nomenclature. Apart from the unicitys, the new system comprises local councils in the smaller cities and towns and district councils covering wider geographic areas with lower population density.<sup>7</sup>

The demarcation process began as early as 1998, while the remaining legislation governing the new local government system was enacted in 2000.<sup>8</sup> This included the new Municipal Electoral Act, which established a mixed electoral system to

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<sup>7</sup> Information on these government structures can be found at <http://www.gov.za/structure/local-gov.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> There were four separate pieces of legislation that created the system of local elections and local government: the Municipal Demarcation Act (No. 27 of 1998), the Municipal Structures Act (No. 117 of 1998), the Municipal Electoral Act (No. 20 of 2000), and the Municipal Systems Act (No. 32 of 2000).

elect the new local councilors.<sup>9</sup> This electoral system was engineered to maintain overall proportionality, in accordance with the Constitution, by pairing party-list electoral rules with plurality-based constituencies. Roughly half of the local councilors were to be elected through party-list proportional representation, and half through a first-past-the-post (FPTP) ward system. The novel aspect of this system was the provision for ward candidates. Any person who was a resident of the municipality in which the ward was located and who appeared on that municipality's segment of the voter's roll could register to contest for a ward-candidate seat. In order to register as a ward candidate, an individual needed only 50 signatures, 35 of which had to be voters registered in the ward. This meant that candidates did not have to be members of a political party in order to contest the election. In other words, independent candidates could now participate in local elections.

About 690 independent candidates registered to contest the December 2000 local election, including approximately 80 ex-ANC councilors and a host of politicians who had left the newly formed Democratic Alliance (DA) because they felt that the NNP had sold its supporters out by joining forces with the DP (*Mail and Guardian*, 24-30 November 2000; see also Gumede and Haffajee 2000). Across the country, trade unionists, grassroots activists, and civic organisers began to form alliances with independent candidates and residents' associations. Some of the ex-ANC councilors coalesced into a loose forum, called the Anti-Privatisation Forum. This forum and several rate-payers associations remained politically active after the 2000 local election.<sup>10</sup> Even though many independent candidates did not actually win local council seats, the introduction of ward candidates made the system, at least at the local level, less party dominated.

Another important aspect of the 2000 local election was a realignment in opposition politics. Many of the smaller parties saw the support they had received in the 1999 national and provincial elections decrease in the local election. For example, the United Democratic Movement (UDM) experienced a decline from the 3.42 percent it had earned in the 1999 national election to just 1.4 percent in the 2000 local election. More importantly, in advance of the election, the Democratic Party (DP) and the New National Party (NNP) had decided to merge, thus creating the Democratic Alliance (DA). A constitutional prohibition on floor-crossing prevented the parties from merging at the national and provincial levels, but nothing prohibited them from registering a new party

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<sup>9</sup> For the text of the Act, see <http://www.gov.za/gazette/acts/2000/a27-00.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Since December 2000, the Anti-Privatisation Forum has become one of the social movements that has led the revitalisation of South Africa's traditionally vibrant, but in the 1990s quiescent, civil society.

to contest the local election. Therefore, in June 2000, six months before the election, the parties formed the DA and subsequently ran a joint election campaign. This realignment represented the first time that opposition parties in South Africa agreed to cooperate beyond the level of temporary electoral pacts or an agreement to create a coalition government. The new alliance was an attempt to integrate parties at the organisational level. The fact that the parties involved in the merger represented minority opposition voters rendered the new party open to criticisms of being anti-black and pro-white, a defender of minority privilege (for example, see *Business Day*, 8 December 2000. Mbeki labelled the new party an “unholy alliance, united by hatred for the ruling party rather than a commitment to serve the interests of the people”).

Despite these charges, the DA performed surprisingly well in the local election. It won nearly 25 percent of the votes nationwide, securing 1407 of the almost 8000 local councilor seats, and control over many local governments in the Western Cape, including Cape Town (Lund 2000; *Independent online*, 7 December 2000). The DA took control of the Cape Town municipality with 54 percent of the vote against the ANC's 36 percent. The DA also secured more than 30 percent of the vote in three metropolitan areas of Gauteng, polling 35 percent in Tshwane (Greater Pretoria), 33 percent in Johannesburg and 30 percent on the East Rand (Granelli 2000). Overall, the DA increased its vote share by 5.69 percent compared to what the component parties had earned in the 1999 national election.

However, the new party soon proved unstable.<sup>11</sup> The NNP, as the junior partner in the alliance, constantly felt derogated by what it saw as DP imperiousness. Compounding the divisions, the DA was unable to operate as a joint force in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures due to the fact that the constituent parties had to maintain separate party caucuses. By June 2001, the differences came to a head over a fiasco in the Western Cape, when DA major, Peter Marais (originally an NNP politician), started re-naming streets of Cape Town without following proper procedures. Marais has a long history as a populist politician and the DA leadership could not agree on how to deal with the situation. Compounding the problem, Marais was accused of corruption and sexual harassment, and again the constituent parties in the DA disagreed on how to deal with the allegations.

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<sup>11</sup> The supporters of the NNP and the DP had different perspectives on many policy issues and represented distinct interests in South African society (see Mattes and Piombo 2001 for an in-depth analysis).

The tensions in the DA had been brewing for some time,<sup>12</sup> and by July 2001 the conflicts over Marais, together with accusations of membership rigging and fraud, led to a vitriolic public exchange between high-ranking DA members from the DP and NNP sides (for example, see *Independent online* 10 October 2001). In early November, the NNP officially quit the alliance, after working out an agreement with the ANC that as it withdrew its participation in the DA it would form a coalition government with the ANC in the Western Cape, thus ending the DP-NNP coalition that had ruled the province since the 1999 election. This agreement enabled the NNP to retain provincial power positions in its last remaining stronghold. Yet, quitting the DA also created a serious problem, as the move left the NNP without any representatives at the local tier of government. Therefore, one of the key components of the pact between the ANC and the NNP was an agreement that the ANC would introduce legislation providing for floor-crossing, thus enabling the NNP councilors who were “stuck” in DA positions to “come home” to the NNP (*Daily News* 20 June 2002; Smith 2002).

### 3.2 Crossing the Floor

In late September 2001, the ANC started working on legislation permitting elected representatives at all tiers of government to defect from their political parties without losing their seats. In January 2002, the Justice and Local Government committees of the National Assembly introduced the floor-crossing legislation. At this point in time, the DA seemed worried about the possibility of losing control over the Cape Town unicity as a result of floor-crossing, but the party did not actively oppose the legislation. In fact, when it came to voting in the National Assembly on 11 June 2002, the bill passed with the support of the ANC, NNP, and DA.<sup>13</sup>

The floor-crossing legislation that was adopted in June was actually a package of four separate bills.<sup>14</sup> Together, they provided for the creation of two fifteen-day “window periods” between elections during which members of councils and

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<sup>12</sup> Since at least April 2001, indications of a rift between Leon and van Schalkwyk permeated the media (for just a few examples, see *news24.com* 2 April 2001; *Beeld* 2 April 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Before the vote, the members of the DA were divided over whether or not the party should oppose the bill (Pressly 2002).

<sup>14</sup> The Constitution of RSA Amendment Bill, the Constitution of RSA Second Amendment Bill, the Loss or Retention of Membership in National and Provincial Legislatures Bill, and the Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill.

legislatures could apply to switch from one party to another.<sup>15</sup> The legislation required that in order for a member to defect, at least ten-percent of the party's representatives in the council or legislature would have to agree and follow the move. However, for the initial "transitional" period, this ten-percent minimum would be waived. The waiver signaled a degree of political expediency and the lack of principled motivation of the new legislation.

The floor-crossing legislation set off a constitutional controversy. On the eve of the first window period, which was to commence at midnight on June 21, 2002, the UDM launched an urgent application with the Cape High Court to suspend the legislation. The UDM argued that it had been passed for reasons of political expediency and that it was unconstitutional, since the Constitution stipulated that the electoral system should be based on proportionality. At this point, the DA decided to oppose the legislation, even though the party had voted for it in the National Assembly. The DA and a number of small parties joined the UDM's application, arguing that the legislation violated the Constitution and had been passed to obliterate small opposition parties and cement a political deal between the ANC and the NNP. The ANC's counter-argument was that since the will of the people could change in the period between elections, the system should enable adjustments to the composition of councils and legislatures. Furthermore, as the Constitution did not stipulate the exact details of the electoral system but merely that the National Assembly must legislate a system that "results, in general, in proportional representation", the floor-crossing provisions were, according to the ANC, not inherently unconstitutional.

There are indications that the ANC did in fact agree to the floor-crossing legislation because it would help to limit competition from opposition parties, especially the DA. The ANC Chair of the Justice Committee of the National Assembly, Johnny de Lange, admitted that the legislation was motivated by the agreement with the NNP and a wish to deal with "the DA problem" (Comments reported in *Mail and Guardian* 6 June 2002 and Paton 2002). The ANC's desire to capture the provinces not yet under its control and to recapture control over the Cape Town municipal council clearly played an important role in the party's decision to create floor-crossing opportunities.

On 20 June 2002, the Cape High Court suspended the first floor-crossing window period and ruled in favour of the UDM. The Cape Court put the legislation on hold until the case could be reviewed by the Constitutional Court. Several politicians who had already submitted requests to switch parties were caught out by this interdict, and as a result, the High Courts in the Western Cape

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<sup>15</sup> The window period would open in September of the second and fourth year after an election.

and KwaZulu-Natal had to guarantee that these representatives could not be forced to resign from their respective parties until the matter had been settled.

The Constitutional Court did not take up the case until the first week of August and delivered a ruling on 4 October 2002. The Court argued that the political motivations behind the floor-crossing legislation were beyond its purview, and that it would focus solely on the issue of constitutionality. The Court found that the legislation was not inconsistent with the Constitution's proportionality principle, but that there had been a procedural flaw in using ordinary legislation rather than a constitutional amendment to effect the change at national and provincial levels. Therefore, the Court allowed the defection process to proceed at the local level, but ruled that a constitutional amendment was required for defections to take place in the provincial and national legislatures.

After the ruling, the Minister of Justice introduced the Constitution of RSA Fourth Amendment Bill, which provided for floor-crossing at national and provincial levels. The Minister also extended protection to the provincial and national representatives who had been exposed in June, stating that they could not be removed from their parties until the amendments had been voted on in parliament. At the same time, the window for municipal floor-crossing opened on 8 October and closed on 22 October 2002. Parliament passed the *Fourth Amendment Bill* on 20 March 2003, and the national and provincial floor-crossing window promptly opened on 21 March.

The cumulative result of both floor-crossing periods was an overall weakening of the opposition and strengthening of the ANC. The ruling party's controversial goal of a two-thirds majority became a reality. After the March-April window period the ANC's presence in the National Assembly had increased from 266 to 275 MPs, representing 68 percent of the NA seats. The opposition, which after 1999 had already experienced growing fragmentation, further disaggregated, as six new parties emerged at the national level, three of which held a seat in the NA.<sup>16</sup> The winner among the opposition was the DA, which gained 8 MPs, increasing its representation in the NA from 38 to 46 seats.<sup>17</sup> The ACDP also picked up one new MP, thus arriving at 7 seats. The UDM, which lost 10 of its 14 MPs, was worst hit, together with the Afrikaner Eenheidsbeweging (AEB),

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<sup>16</sup> These parties were: The Independent Democrats, the New Labour Party (Peter Marais), the Alliance for Democracy and Prosperity (Nelson Ramodike in Limpopo), the African Independent Movement (Teresa Millin, formerly of the IFP), Nasionale Aksie/National Action (Cassie Aucamp from the AEB), and the Peace and Development Party (founded by ex-IFP members Jan Slabbert and Farouk Cassim). For a description of these parties, see Merten (2003).

<sup>17</sup> During the window period in March-April, the DP dissolved itself and reconstituted as the DA, finalising the process that had begun in June 2001.

whose sole MP created a new party. The NNP saw its representation decline from 28 to 20 seats and the IFP lost three members, thus holding on to 31 seats. The PAC lost its most visible and popular politician, Patricia de Lille, who created a new party, the Independent Democrats.

*Table 2: Seat Allocation National Assembly Before and After 2003 Floor Crossing*

<i>Party</i>	<i>Before</i>	<i>After</i>
ACDP	6	7
AEB	1	-
ANC	266	275
AZAPO	1	1
DA	38	46
FA	2	2
FF	3	3
IFP	34	31
MF	1	1
NNP	28	20
PAC	3	2
UDM	14	4
UCDP	3	3

*Source:* Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, *State of Parties Represented in the National Assembly*, 5 April 2003.

*Note:* This table includes only those parties already represented in the NA before the floor crossing window period opened.

At the provincial level, the changes were perhaps even more significant. The ANC picked up enough defectors to enable the party to win shared control over the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the two provinces that had eluded the party in 1999. Thus, the ANC realised its goal of creating a “Parliament of Hope,” with the party controlling the NA and all nine provincial governments. At the local level, 555 councilors crossed the floor, with most (61%) moving from the DA to the NNP. The ANC gained 22% of the floor-crossers in the municipal defections. The NNP reconstituted itself at the local level, earning back 340 of its members from the DA and picking up a few additional councilors from other parties (*Independent online*, 24 October 2002). Five new parties formed at the local level,<sup>18</sup> and 21 local councils changed control; most

<sup>18</sup> These were the Universal Party, the Black Consciousness Party, the Sport Party, the Phumulela Rate Payer’s Association, and the Belastingbetalersvereniging (Tax Payers’ Association).

of these were situated in the Western Cape, representing transfers from DA to ANC-NNP control. Interestingly, given heated exchanges between the ANC and the DA, three of the transitions were to ANC-DA coalitions.

## 4. Conclusion

What has been the effect of all these developments and, more importantly, what does it mean for the future of representative democracy in South Africa?

Regarding the electoral system, the long-term effects of the incremental changes have yet to be discerned. The short-term impact of enabling floor crossing is clear: the ANC benefited, while the opposition fragmented even further. With the constitutional ban on floor crossing in place until 2003, party realignments between elections were practically non-existent, as politicians were reluctant to jump ship, and thus lose their jobs, mid-term (Piombo 2002). The new floor crossing provisions have taken away the institutional obstacles for such realignments. Therefore, in principle, they could have the effect of increasing the fluidity of a party system that has crystallised at an early stage in South Africa's democratic development. However, when the ten-percent threshold is enforced, the stabilising effects of the pre-existing system of proportional representation based on closed party lists are likely to be reproduced. It would probably be difficult to convince ten percent of a party's representatives to defect to another party or form a new party altogether, especially ten percent of ANC MPs or MPLs. Convincing ten percent of 279 MPs to defect would clearly require more effort than persuading ten percent of 20 members. Therefore, future realignments in the window periods for floor crossing are more likely to affect the smaller parties, and will probably not be to their benefit. It is too early, however, for definitive predictions in any direction.

However, there might be a more positive consequence of the institutional changes. In the longer term, the introduction of the provision for floor crossing could work to dilute some of the control party elites have over the career prospects of ordinary MPs. This could, in turn, facilitate parliament developing into a stronger institution capable of keeping executive dominance in check. Parliamentary committees may be more willing to engage in oversight practices and challenge party hierarchy if members are not completely dependent on their parties to hold on to their parliamentary seats. This degree of autonomy is important, because if parliament, being one of the country's main representative institutions, fails to fulfil its potential and live up to its responsibilities, the quality of South African democracy is likely to suffer.

Strengthening parliament and increasing the autonomy of its members could help to improve parliament's public image which further undermines the institution. Electoral reform could also solve image problems and aid accountability, by increasing the connections between parliamentarians and citizens. Under the current electoral system, there seems to be little sense of ownership of parliament amongst the public. In an Afrobarometer survey held in 2000, only 0.2% of South Africans reported having made contact with an MP (Mattes, *op. cit.*). This extremely low level of interaction between voters and their elected representatives provides another rationale to reconsider the electoral system and reopen the debate about electoral reform in advance of the 2009 election. For as long as parliament remains distant from ordinary South Africans, it will remain tangential to democratic consolidation.

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The Social Surveys Unit (SSU) promotes critical analysis of the methodology, ethics and results of South African social science research. One core activity is the Cape Area Panel Study of young adults in Cape Town. This study follows 4800 young people as they move from school into the labour market and adulthood. The SSU is also planning a survey for 2004 on aspects of social capital, crime, and attitudes toward inequality.

The Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) was established in 1975 as part of the School of Economics and joined the CSSR in 2002. SALDRU conducted the first national household survey in 1993 (the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development). More recently, SALDRU ran the Langeberg Integrated Family survey (1999) and the Khayelitsha/Mitchell's Plain Survey (2000). Current projects include research on public works programmes, poverty and inequality.

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