South Africa's Political Futures
The Positive and Negative Implications of One-party Dominance

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Rarely has a country so divided political analysts as contemporary South Africa. Ever since R.W. Johnson famously enquired 'How long will South Africa survive?'[1], a procession of doom-mongers has viewed its political trajectory through the lenses of post-colonial African decline, seeing its carefully managed 'transition to democracy' as just one more step along the road to civil war, rampant tribalism, and a one-party state. Well-wishers saw the new South Africa through quite different eyes, as a rainbow-coloured adventure bus unshackled by the 'miracle' of transition from the economic and social chains of apartheid. Many of its supporters even saw the African National Congress (ANC) as the glorious locomotive of continental renaissance, pulling its peoples into the African century.

The calm Mandela presidency exposed 1994's spectres of tribalism, ungovernability, and civil war as the creations of political leaders striving, in the heat of negotiation, to represent their constituents as inconsolable. The mobilisation of Zulu ethnicity proved to be an epiphenomenon of transition, and new stereotypes of the patient masses supplanted whites' lurid fantasies of the ungovernable youth. The ANC's qualified alliance with de Klerk's National Party rapidly proved a luxury, as the great Afrikaner institutions - the defence force, state bureaucracies, parastatals, and Afrikaans-medium universities - were neutralised cheaply and easily through pension guarantees, sunset clauses, and endlessly deferred rationalisation.

The myriad local forms of political opposition to apartheid faded away. The urban poor returned to the business of survival. Wider educational and economic opportunities, and affirmative action within public and private sectors, helped the wealthiest fifth of black South Africans to achieve substantial personal gains, and to build a sizeable black middle class for the first time. The economy did not boom, but neither did it collapse in a frenzy of populist redistribution. Indeed, an 'independent' central bank, conservative fiscal policy, revolutionised revenue collection, and an energetic finance ministry tamed inflation and banished a feared structural deficit. Rituals of reconciliation and restitution at

the same time created the appearance of a society determined to put its past firmly behind it.

However, while the doom-mongers' worst fears had not been realised, Mandela's magic was little consolation for the poor. Employment growth of around one million remained far below the levels required to absorb an expanding working age population, and worker retrenchments spread vulnerability to multiple dependants. Poverty became even more deeply entrenched for the poorest quarter of South Africans, with dismaying indicators of rural child mortality, quality of life, and life expectancy. The extension of public services to the population as a whole, moreover, progressed very unevenly. While the government set out attractive sectoral policy frameworks, and came close to hitting tough delivery targets in house building, electrification, water supply, and health, critics complained with increasing urgency that ordinary citizens were experiencing insufficient improvement in their living standards. By 1999, according to a major household survey, 70 percent of South Africans lived in a 'formal dwelling', up from two thirds in 1995; but the proportion living in informal housing (such as shacks) had increased by half to over 12 percent. Notwithstanding the claims of a water minister dubbed 'Mr Delivery', households with communal or individual access to clean water rose from 79 to just 83 percent. A vast and expensive electrification programme, driven by the giant parastatal Eskom, defied conventional energy planning wisdom to spread expensive electric lighting to almost three quarters of dwellings, while rendering alternatives to dangerous, polluting, and health-destroying household energy practices unaffordable, and failing to service nascent businesses.[2]

Mandela left office in 1999 extraordinarily popular, but his presidency was nevertheless widely considered to have failed the test of 'delivery'. The arrival of his reputedly more managerial and technocratic successor was for this reason greeted with excitement. Thabo Mbeki has not altogether disappointed these hopes over the past three years. He has overhauled the national policy making machinery, clustered government departments to improve policy co-ordination, and started to remake municipalities into the developmental agents of the state. At the same time, he has strengthened the hand of the formidable Treasury, demonstrated resolve in containing the growth of public debt, and built upon the personnel and policy strengths of Mandela's government. Mbeki's determination in foreign policy has created external alliances within and beyond Africa and broken down Pretoria's conventional isolation within the continent.

If it hit the ground running, however, Mbeki's administration had slowed markedly in domestic policy by the end of 2000. While citizens were sympathetic towards the government's difficulties in extending public services, the lack of employment opportunities and persistently high levels of crime were matters of profound and growing dissatisfaction for South Africans of all classes. In this unpromising context, a steady stream of scandals and challenges buffeted the government in 2001, creating unprecedented tensions. A major arms procurement package was hit by accusations of naivety, cost escalation, and high-level corruption. Inaction and confusion over the AIDS pandemic prompted protest and legal challenge, while the deepening crisis in Zimbabwe became a source of growing domestic contention. Division over economic policy within

the 'tripartite alliance' between the ANC, the South Africa Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) burst into the open in late 2001. Public vitriol culminated in an anti-privatisation strike, timed acutely by COSATU to embarrass the government in the midst of an international racism conference. The year ended with a major depreciation of the Rand. These many problems, however, were less cause for concern in themselves, than for the perversion of democratic institutions they precipitated, and for the crisis of mutual incomprehension they exposed between critics and supporters of the government.

The resultant fog of confusion has not been very much dispersed by academic analysis. International comparative scholars have unwaveringly applied the rarefied and unilluminating concept of 'democratic consolidation'. Domestic political analysts have more acutely analysed the tensions between government and opposition in a new democracy, and explored the relationships between extended one-party dominance and political accountability. Prognoses for the country's future, however, have remained just as diverse within South Africa as without, fuelled by uncertainty about the internal dynamics of the ANC, and by the dilemma that the country's democracy can seemingly neither dispense with, nor survive, the extended dominance of the 'liberation movement'. A number of more profound indeterminacies have licensed further speculation about South Africa's future. Will the executive eventually collide with the judiciary, and if so, what damage will this bring to political institutions? Will negative perceptions precipitate capital and skills flight? Will corruption cross thresholds into normality? And, above all, will the AIDS pandemic cause a crisis of governance and governability?

This article explores how diverse views of South Africa's future are sustained by genuine imponderables arising from the interaction between politics and policy. The first section draws on recent advances in the local academic literature to investigate the implications, positive and negative, of one-party electoral dominance. The second and third sections assess the reliability of the mechanisms by which an electorally dominant ANC government can be rendered politically accountable. The article closes with an analysis of the implications of the AIDS pandemic for South Africa's future.

Democratic Consolidation and One Party Dominance

Comparative social scientists claim that the performance of new democracies elsewhere can shed light on South Africa's prospects, and on the conditions it must meet if its democracy is to be 'consolidated'. Yet using comparative political analysis to predict or improve the future has not proven easy. It is difficult at the best of times to generalise about complex processes on the basis of a small number of cases, but well-nigh impossible when the comparative framework is based on wholly inappropriate categories. Models used to understand democracy in Africa have been shaped by data originating in quite different circumstances. The southern European experiences of 1974-6, influenced by individuals' deaths, colonial wars, and generational change, and spilling over into Latin American liberalisation, shattered previously deterministic explanatory frameworks. The rapid and bunched East and central European transitions, with their 'contagion effects'

and external precipitation in Moscow, forced a further productive rethinking. African 'democratisation', by contrast, was launched into an ocean of scholarly indifference, its distinct dynamic of post Cold War external engineering and imposed good governance largely ignored. The causal fallacy advanced by democracy promotion and protection experts everywhere – if specific features of enduring democracies are absent in a particular country, then, they must be introduced forthwith -- is least credible in Africa.

African intellectuals have long observed that democracy is a complex and disputed concept, and that its definition and measurement demand careful attention if data are to serve as a sound foundation for causal inference. While procedural and institutional conceptions of democracy may be convenient and intuitively attractive to North American scholars, intuitive appeal is not an appropriate basis for conceptual operationalisation. Nor can the inherent limitations of North American models be overcome simply by the addition of fresh (and often arbitrary) measures of political freedom and civil rights, or by belated (if welcome) attempts at more systematic indicator evaluation.[3] States are not simple data, but rather complex actors. Africa's states are externally vulnerable, often heavily indebted and aid-dependent, and currently face exceptional incentives to impress upon external evaluators their good governance credentials. South Africa would pay a heavy price for casting away the pre-requisites for its certification as a liberal democracy.

Unwilling to view their democracy through the distorting lenses of comparative scholarship, or to accept Freedom House-style typologies, The continent's leaders have instead donned the rosy spectacles of peer-review in mapping out an African route to good governance. While lamentably blind to the deficiencies of incumbents, such appraisals adopt an appropriately longer-term perspective on the entrenchment of democratic practices. The comparative literature, by contrast, looks little beyond the present, and proves disconcertingly unable to formulate a coherent answer to the question 'when is a consolidated democracy really consolidated?'[4]

South African scholars have used systematic cross-national analysis to identify broad sets of factors -- economic growth, stable political institutions, and an appropriate political culture -- that have elsewhere and in the past been associated with measures of democratic persistence. Yet each of these sets of factors in South Africa, according to one lucid analysis,[5] presents a 'paradox' rather than any clear basis for judgement. Macro-economic stability sits uneasily alongside low investment and extreme unemployment; state-of-the-art mechanisms of accountability are vitiated by one-party dominance; and a diverse civil society accompanies uneven commitment to democracy and participation. Domestic authors more commonly treat 'consolidation' as little more than a semantic issue, believing that the key formal attributes of liberal polyarchy are entrenched for the next decade or more. ANC electoral domination meanwhile precludes rotation in office or even a handover of power. The focus of investigation has therefore been on the quality of political life under a period of extended 'one-party dominance', and on the implications of such dominance for the longer-term future of the polity.

The near-universal expectation of protracted ANC electoral dominance is partly extrapolated from the tripartite ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance's two previous near two-thirds majorities in national elections. Even a recently touted 'coalition of hope' between four opposition parties -- the Inkatha Freedom Party, the Democratic Party, the United Democratic Movement, and the Pan Africanist Congress – could hope to muster only a third of the vote in the 2004 parliamentary elections. For this reason, observers see a split in the ruling alliance and the desertion of its followers *en masse* as necessary conditions for the emergence of an alternative government. While I shall argue that this possibility cannot be discounted, the ANC remains the only credible vehicle for the SACP's long-range historical ambitions, and provides organised labour's only reliable access to power.

South Africa's constitutional framework translates electoral dominance into a preponderance of political power in the executive and legislature. The 1996 constitution perpetuates the country's traditionally centralised system of executive authority. Despite certain 'concurrent powers' and a language of 'co-operative governance', the state is essentially unitary, with almost no revenue raising or legislative capacity delegated to the provinces. Parliament is a bloated and largely reactive policy-influencing legislature on the Westminster model, but with strict party discipline reinforced by a party-list proportional system permitting easy 'redeployment' of disloyal members.

The ANC's overwhelming power under this system has been greeted both positively and negatively. On the one hand, many analysts consider that only an extended period of political stability can establish the preconditions for the longer-term entrenchment of democracy. Like most new democracies, South Africa faces immense political and developmental challenges in a context of profound inequality, poverty, and social division. Any threat to ANC dominance, on this view, is also a threat to political stability and to the creation of legitimate political institutions. The ANC's widely shared self-conception as a national liberation movement helps it to contain conflict and to defuse racial or ethnic polarisation, and its consensual mechanisms help it to socialise and control potentially anti-democratic leaders.

As Schrire has recently emphasised, however, the ANC cannot absorb the many strains of transition on its own. Political competition is currently structured around historical (and therefore, he argues, ethnic or racial) affiliations, with no compelling ideological or policy conflicts setting the government against the opposition parties. For this reason, adversarial opposition – such as the Democratic Party's 1999 campaign on a 'fight back' manifesto -- will inevitably be interpreted in polarising racial or ethnic terms.[6] Co-operative politics -- as when the National Party helped stave off economic crisis by its participation in the 1994-6 government of national unity, or in the Inkatha Freedom Party's current alliance with the ANC, which contains violence in KwaZulu-Natal – is necessary to sustain democracy. Anti-ANC coalition building, moreover, undermines the benefits of co-operation and courts a dangerous ANC counter-reaction. Perhaps fortunately, such coalitions have so far found little credibility with voters, requiring malign alliances between dubious allies who have already swapped partners with abandon.

Not all commentators have greeted ANC dominance and the incorporation of the opposition as either necessary or positive. Critics on the right and radical left have each argued that the ANC is progressively closing down opposition and building the foundations of a new authoritarianism. 'Democracy', according to rightist critics Giliomee and Simkins, 'rests on countervailing power able to check tendencies towards authoritarian domination. The best counter is undoubtedly the presence of a strong opposition party that can guard against the erosion of the autonomy of democratic institutions and can replace a governing party that has outstayed its welcome.[7] Such sceptics argue that the ruling party is representing itself as the state rather than as a temporary incumbent, while other groups are losing the autonomy they require to compete. Ultimately the ANC's 'sheer preponderance of political power' will allow it to rule unilaterally and to abuse 'the advantages of incumbency and the state media to get re-elected time and again'.[8] Because it is radically dependent upon the investment decisions of capital, the ANC cannot use economic populism to secure its rule and so must secure its mass base through concessions to organised labour and appeals to racial solidarity.

Viewed as mutually exclusive by partisans and opponents of the government, such positive and negative reflections on ANC dominance, taken together, pose a stark dilemma. While South Africa cannot afford robust opposition, or a fragmentation of the liberation movement, neither can it afford the consequences of deepening ANC domination. South Africa's democracy is not robust enough to cope with fluidity and party system reconstruction because of the need to build sound, legitimate and trusted institutions. Yet the longer the ANC remains dominant, both electorally and in the executive, the more harm may be caused by state-party integration, patronage politics, opposition de-legitimation, and the abuse of incumbency. Such circumstances suggest only one attractive scenario. An extended period of ANC electoral dominance, over perhaps ten or fifteen years, will entrench the legitimacy of democratic institutions. At the same time, the government will face a real, but unrealised, threat of opposition defeat. It is latent opposition and non-electoral mechanisms, on this view, that will hold the government to account and check the abuse of concentrated power.

Holding a dominant party to account

While the very name of this journal expresses an Anglo-American intuition that party opposition plays the central role in democratic accountability, the workings of non-electoral mechanisms are highlighted in contemporary international scholarship. Even within relatively stable multi-party systems, voting cannot be used in a graduated or targeted way to punish individuals or factions for their misdeeds. Electors face massive informational and collective action problems, and it is rarely clear to even the best informed voter who is responsible (rather than scapegoated) for which specific transgression. Even multiple parties vigorously contesting numerous elections across decades, as post-war Italy demonstrates, cannot prevent an entrenched collusion between the rulers at the expense of the ruled.

'Alternative government' is rare because there are so few genuine two-party or routine coalition-alternating systems. Western Europe primarily enjoys dominant-bloc coalition

government, in which smaller opposition parties must act 'responsibly' to keep open the door to participation in future coalitions. New democracies, especially when presidential systems, have often lacked party system stability altogether, and have been subject to the vagaries of non-institutionalised leadership. Elsewhere, single parties have established themselves in positions of long-term dominance. In some cases, such as Mexico over an inordinately long period of stable one-party control, the party has proven a highly imperfect vehicle for holding political leaders to account (at least to the people). In others, notably post-independence India, the internal pluralism of the dominant party, and the influence of opposition 'parties of pressure' aligning themselves with governing party factions, helped secure extended if vulnerable periods of far wider accountability.[9]

ANC reaction to Zimbabwe's crudely manipulated 2002 election may have permanently altered the contours of South African political accountability. The leadership and a substantial body of opinion within the movement moved rapidly to applaud Zanu-PF's victory, and the South African parliament declared the election 'credible'. While there were clear political motivations for the President's ambivalence, the rapid abandonment of principles of political freedom by senior party figures and parliamentarians sent a clear signal about the ANC's likely future unwillingness to tolerate electoral defeat. Dunn, drawing conclusions from a recent cross-national exploration of political accountability, argues that while citizens must play some role at some time in the processes by which leaders are chosen, 'most of the weight, in seeking to secure accountability, has to be carried by the vigour of citizen participation and by the scope of rights and liberties open to citizens'.[10] Suspicions that the ANC will not be ready to cede power for the foreseeable future place additional strains on non-electoral mechanisms of accountability.

South Africa possesses an array of formal constitutionally-mandated checks to concentrated power, including legislative oversight, designated provincial powers, and independent oversight institutions: an auditor general, public protector, human rights and gender commissions, and an 'independent' reserve bank, broadcasting authority and electoral commission. The ANC government is also constrained by a supreme constitution containing a bill of rights. The vulnerability of these checks to executive power became clear in the course of 2001, with the government's major arms procurement programme the principal precipitant of crisis. The package is controversial for its scale, the naivety of its 'offset'-based financing, and for procedural irregularities including the incomplete briefing of cabinet. It was elements of high-level impropriety -- discounted luxury cars for politicians and civil servants and insufficiently rigorous checks on involved parties' relations with subcontractors – that brought most widespread criticism.

A very wide range of groups and institutions mobilised to protest and then formally to investigate these allegations, in what was in comparative terms an unusually thorough and public investigation of the notoriously corruption-prone area of arms procurement. The government's determination to control potential fallout from the unexpectedly probing investigations and to protect senior politicians and officials, however, led it to undermine the select committee on public accounts, the legislature's key and formerly non-partisan oversight institution. It then took steps that, in the eyes of many,

compromised the integrity of the offices of the auditor general and public protector. Already criticised for starving oversight bodies of resources, the ANC leadership resorted early to a racialisation of the allegations, and seemed to be castigating opponents for investigating impropriety. Rather than building the legitimacy of democratic institutions, these actions served to reiterate the movement's commitment to party over state mechanisms of accountability.

The rapidity with which other formal checks to the executive were subdued during the arms scandal has thrown the role of the judiciary into relief. The constitution licenses an activist bench, and entrenches judicial independence unusually carefully through a Judicial Services Commission that insulates appointments from party manipulation. An activist bench, however, poses special problems in South Africa. The constitution sets out a series of socio-economic rights – to adequate health care, housing, education, water, and so on – which the executive is responsible for 'progressively' realising. There have already been a series of high-profile challenges to government legislation and actions in areas such as arms procurement, housing policy and HIV-AIDS treatment. Repeated confrontation may ensue between the judiciary, acting on behalf of specific complainants, and an executive committed to sectorally co-ordinated and incremental policy change. The judiciary is exceptionally vulnerable to a campaign of de-legitimisation, especially because of its predominantly white composition, persistent racism in lower level court judgements, limited popular support for constitutional supremacy, and the lack of experience among the senior judiciary in making legal activism palatable to the political elite. Where the courts have found against the government, most recently over the provision of treatment to HIV-positive pregnant women, government ministers have equivocated in public as to whether court judgements must be obeyed, and already demonstrate a talent for quasi-compliance with judicial instructions. Just as the relationship between government and opposition parties cannot currently survive adversarial posturing, so judges and politicians alike will need carefully to moderate open conflict while they negotiate together and entrench boundaries between policy, politics, and the law.

Internal Pluralism and the Economic Limits to Bad Government

The opposition and the judiciary must clearly act with a degree of sensitivity in their negotiation with ANC power. The liberation movement, for its part, can entrench the legitimacy of democratic institutions only through willing compliance with judicial review and tolerance for mildly adversarial opposition. Currently, however, the ANC represents a parallel political order, its external relations with the formal political system driven by the need to accommodate internal conflict. Its internal pluralism is at the same time a necessary vehicle for debate and accountability in a dominant party system.

Understanding the ANC -- especially as it approaches a late-2002 national conference at which officers will be elected and policies set out for the next half-decade -- is made difficult by the extraordinary absence of systematic analysis of its political dynamics, membership, leadership recruitment, and generational change. The ANC's 'broad church' character brings together histories and practices associated with exile, military

organisation, domestic struggle, trade unionism, communism, and imprisonment, which together explain its complex behaviour. Both democratic and hierarchical traditions are evident, and 'consensus building' perhaps best describes the movement's central style of conflict resolution. This hazy and largely rosy received view of the movement is marred by two general tendencies – conflict and centralisation -- which have been much remarked since Mbeki's ascension to the presidency.

A product of exile, primarily surrounded by fellow exiles, Mbeki rose to unlikely prominence as Oliver Tambo's protégé and the son of a brilliant Robben Island-imprisoned ANC grandee. Always hostile to the politics of the provinces – the level at which the movement primarily exists for its mass membership – Mbeki has allowed national institutions to impose their authority increasingly widely and aggressively. The exile ANC leadership adopted 'democratic centralism' from its SACP ally, which in the early 1990s famously abandoned such Stalinist techniques while retaining a long-range commitment to Marxism. The ANC leadership, by contrast, was obliged to embrace capitalism, but retained democratic centralism as an instrument of political management. Since 1999 the centre has tightened control over 'cadre deployment' at all levels of the state, and has further developed the ideology of primary accountability to the liberation movement. The National Working Committee appoints officers of the parliamentary caucus, and parliamentary committee chairs, while insufficiently disciplined regional structures have been dissolved, and provincial premiers have been appointed against the wishes of provincial parties. Even local level executive mayors are centrally selected. The centre has also sanctioned the abuse of internal and external opponents as 'unpatriotic' or 'ultra-leftist', while potential challengers to Mbeki's authority and position – such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Matthews Phosa and Tokyo Sexwale, brilliant and charismatic struggle leaders already redeployed to the private sector – were investigated by the safety and security minister for placing the life of the president in danger.

Party centralisation, of course, is hardly unique to South Africa, and does not merely reflect Mbeki's need to play left against right within the movement. It also reflects the greater professionalism of his administration, and its determination to contain corruption and politicking in the provinces and municipalities. The adhesive idea of 'the struggle' used to bond a diverse movement together, but new generations of career-minded activists are increasingly immune to it. Given the movement's poorly institutionalised systems of leadership selection, officer election and internal debate, a degree of enhanced discipline was perhaps necessary. Recent tripartite alliance contestation has also seen the ANC centre combine confrontational exclusion with fraternal embrace of the unions. Unilateral imposition of a conservative Growth, Employment and Reconstruction (GEAR) macro-economic strategy, and disdainful treatment of union allies, inevitably prompted the unions to act as external interest groups using public campaigns to re-establish internal alliance influence. Such struggles are part of the stabilising role that champions of ANC dominance consider its greatest strength. It is indeed hard to see how conflicts of interest and opinion between trade union organisers and rural traditional leaders might be reconciled through any other conceivable set of institutions.

However, it is possible that the current leadership's limited political repertoire, and its enormous sensitivity to the personal and political insecurities of the president, may suppress internal pluralism or even weaken the fabric of the tripartite alliance. Popular participation seems to be in precipitous decline and ANC membership, after a period of centrally-driven region and branch 'reconstitution', has reportedly fallen from 300 000 in 1999 to less than 90 000 today. The SACP, has been assigned key cabinet positions that put it into conflict with COSATU, and has a membership that almost entirely overlaps with the ANC. Should opposition to the 'dual loyalties' of the communist leadership escalate, most would probably allow their SACP memberships to lapse. COSATU, by contrast, is a diverse and less manageable federation of unions, brought into alliance with the ANC primarily through anti-apartheid struggle, and through the mediation of an extraordinary generation of union activists now excluded from government. Many union leaders are hostile to the ANC's self-conception as heroic vehicle of national liberation and resent the preponderant voice of exile elites. COSATU has opposed government positions on a range of sensitive issues, and many of its leaders resent the growing roles of personal loyalty and racial solidarity in internal Alliance debate. The left's weakness, however, was highlighted by its January 2002 agreement that contentious issues henceforth be confined to party structures, within which there is growing unwillingness to cross senior party figures or members of major power blocs.

If the tripartite alliance is increasingly strained, there are also some doubts about the oft-presumed robustness of the ANC's voter base. Three important cautions are in order for those who view the movement's dominance as inevitable. Firstly, a growing number of voters express themselves as dissatisfied with the performance of the government, and indicate that they might be available to an appropriate opposition party. The ANC is therefore not insulated against effective challenge should its performance deteriorate. It may be the current absence of credible opposition parties reflecting the interests of the discontented, rather than unshakeable affiliation that secures current ANC control. Secondly, the implications for ANC support of slow economic growth, increasing unemployment, AIDS, and changing patterns of income and wealth distribution, are little understood. Comparativists have identified relationships between higher income levels, low inequality, and democratic persistence, but the implications of these findings for South Africa – with its complex and racialised reference groups – are uncertain.

Lastly, while analysts have explored the potential for urban populist opposition, we do not know very much about the too-easily assumed control of the ANC over the political allegiance of the rural poor. The social forces that can destroy or sustain democracy often lie in the countryside, a fact overlooked by most contemporary democratisation scholars.[11] While the black middle class and organised labour each has a voice in the movement, the far larger constituencies of the rural unemployed, the informally employed, the old, and -- increasingly -- AIDS-victims, have little leverage within the movement. Macro-economic conservatism precludes large-scale rural patronage, public service delivery has run aground beyond the towns, rural job-creation is a lost cause, and the political fallout of the AIDS pandemic remains difficult to predict. The unusual political sophistication of South Africa's rural areas at the same time militates strongly

against the effectiveness of consolatory populist racial appeals. Even if the centre is merely forced to shore up its support beyond the cities, this will in itself further strain the ANC's labour and urban alliances.

Many sceptics of the durability of checks and balances and internal pluralism nonetheless believe that wider, and often international, political and economic forces will help contain ANC power. The government is vulnerable to the exit of capital and skills, depends on business confidence to encourage investment, and is sensitive to pressure exerted by the countries of the OECD zone. The government has carefully avoided economic populism, and demonstrated vulnerability to external political pressure, for example in its April 2002 policy reversal on anti-retrovirals, when AIDS threatened to discredit the New Partnership for Africa's Development with its G8 partners.

Corruption is one significant problem for which external remedies might seem appropriate. International indices suggest South Africa is both major source and growing recipient of improper payments, with its vulnerability increased by black empowerment initiatives, procurement policy, political brokering of party-state-business relations, the business media's inability to identify new players, and a rapid expansion of continental business links. The ANC faces powerful incentives to deal with allegations within party structures, especially since corrupt behaviour is hard to bring to court, and so many cadres are implicated in questionable if not illegal activities. Unwillingness to permit high-profile prosecutions, and allegations of obstruction to investigation at the highest level, suggest that party leaders harbour the illusion that the problem can be politically managed. Yet it is international businesspeople themselves, acting severally, who are the key drivers of corruption. If corruption becomes entrenched, and passes certain thresholds of normality, only then will an external constraint come into play, as South Africa becomes regarded as 'just another African country', its international credibility destroyed.

The potential emigration of skilled workers also limits government freedom. More than 200 000 South Africans left permanently for English-speaking countries alone between 1989 and 1997, and analysts predict the next five years might see anywhere between 30 000 and 200 000 further departures. Émigrés, usually beneficiaries of South Africa's highly unequal educational provision, often bewail the limitations of the new South Africa in order to ease the guilt of exile. Rampant xenophobia has meanwhile limited legal in-migration to a few thousand per year with the economic benefits of immigration disregarded.[12]

Capital flight also threatens dire consequences, and the government is indeed preoccupied with limiting it; but this sword is double-edged. The exaggerated conservatism of macro-economic policy may have entrenched structural obstacles to faster growth, and so deepened investors' fears of eventual counter-reaction to sustained inequality. 'Perceptions', moreover, are elusive and unmanageable, and game theoretic perversions and potential vicious circles of collapsing credibility and confidence render the state's structural dependence on capital a hazardous disincentive to bad government.

The greatest danger these external disincentives to misbehaviour pose is that their supposedly non-negotiable status is so easily reinterpreted as 'western' imposition. Conservative macro-economic policy is seen by many South African intellectuals and activists as merely a redefined form of African subjugation to structural adjustment. While a growing number of skilled black workers are now joining white émigrés overseas, emigration is still sometimes welcomed as creating space for black advancement. The failure of international business to invest heavily in post-apartheid South Africa is widely attributed to racism and Afro-pessimism. More subtly, one of the few success stories of inward foreign direct investment, the household security market, was dealt a blow by an opportunistic post-September 11 portfolio committee proposal that such sensitive 'security-related' assets should henceforth be controlled by patriotic domestic consortiums. For 'economic reality' to serve as a check on government actions it will need to be interpreted in a less politically charged way.

AIDS

The scale of the AIDS pandemic is much clearer than its implications. Southern Africa's poverty, war-driven population movements, and hostel-based migrant labour system, have provided ideal conditions for the spread of the human immunodeficiency virus. South Africa has the world's largest absolute number of HIV-positive people, perhaps 5 out of its 45 million population, and can expect 7 million AIDS deaths, and 2 million AIDS-orphans, by the end of the decade. Spread by sexual contact, AIDS impacts most heavily on the working age population, raising dependency ratios and reducing productivity. Moreover, as a quarter of skilled workers and perhaps one in seven highly skilled workers become infected by 2005, AIDS will also severely undermine the human capital in the public service, business, and the professions that will be required to address the pandemic's consequences.

On paper, South Africa's democratic and unitary state possesses the perfect attributes for fighting AIDS. Divisions within the ANC, however, have led to a fiasco of policy reversal and intellectual confusion. The institutions set up to spearhead the battle against the disease are virtually inoperative, while stigma and confusion continue to undermine efforts at prevention. Four kinds of explanation have been offered for this unexpected state of disarray. The first focuses on President Mbeki's 'dissident' or 'denialist' position on the natural science of the disease, in which he claims that the causal relationship between HIV and AIDS is merely a 'thesis', that anti-retroviral treatments are more toxic than HIV itself, and that his senior AIDS advisory panel should therefore contain a balance of legitimate and dissident voices. A second explanation highlights the role of race in debates over HIV/AIDS. In March of this year, a long paper entitled 'Castro Hlongwane, Caravans, Cats, Geese, Foot and Mouth and Statistics: HIV/AIDS and the struggle for the humanisation of the African', was circulated to the ANC's National Executive by Mbeki-confidant and election strategist Peter Mokaba. This discussion document interpreted HIV/AIDS as a creation of the continent's enemies, described findings that the virus originated in Africa as 'insulting', and echoed the president's striking reflection that conventional AIDS science views

Africans as 'promiscuous carriers of germs.... doomed to a mortal end because of an unconquerable devotion to the sin of lust'. On this interpretation of policy confusion, a proud national liberation movement that takes history to be on its side has collided too violently with the intolerable reality of AIDS catastrophe, and it is the truth that has had to give way.

Two further factors help to explain why the ANC's wider constituencies have been unable to move a divided leadership towards a pragmatic policy formulation. The first is the government's inability to treat anything like the projected numbers of infected citizens, given intractable shortages of health professionals, infrastructure, and rural services such as water. AIDS-related expenditure demands across the public service, moreover, will severely limit the feasible growth of health and welfare budgets. Other governments in the region may have used the rural-urban divide to help manage AIDS health and governance impacts, and to limit the crowding out of urban public expenditure. While the movement has been bolstering once-shaky alliances with traditional leaders, however, it cannot expect that its own poor, unskilled, and stigmatised AIDS victims will continue to lie down and die quietly in the former homelands. An unusually sophisticated rural population, with extended historical experiences and networks in urban areas, will migrate or return to the towns and cities in search of treatment and hope, and stigmatisation is unlikely for long to inhibit the political organisation of these people.

For government to ration expenditure so as to defend the core economy, it needs to turn its back on universal access to medical treatment, and will presumably seek treatment partnerships with business through a restructured health insurance system. The dispersal of responsibility for the inconceivable suffering to come, however, is as much a political as a technical imperative. One may speculate that politics could take an unhealthy turn, as citizens – confronted by a political and administrative infrastructure itself eroded by AIDS – can muster less concern for 'democracy', find selective treatment unjust, refuse to pay for public services, or follow political leaders promising relief from despair. A key party political concern for ANC strategists may be that it must not become identified with a total war against the disease that it will lose inevitably, and, in the terms of its liberation movement theology, humiliatingly.

Conclusions

South Africa's fundamental political dilemma is that liberation movement domination is progressively malign but necessary if democratic practices and institutions are to become entrenched. Electoral defeat at the best of times represents a poorly calibrated and ineffective reaction to governing party misbehaviour, and in contemporary South African conditions it would represent a cure worse than almost any conceivable disease. Many other mechanisms – formal checks and balances, internal pluralism within the ANC, and the external impositions of capital – continue to constrain the actions of the executive, but each has fundamental drawbacks. The centre is progressively colonising independent checks on executive power, in the legislature, provinces, and independent oversight offices. The ANC's assorted alliances are becoming increasingly conflict-ridden

and cannot be relied upon to absorb societal antagonisms. Capital and skills flight set dangerously unpredictable limits to action. In each case, there is a threat of counter reaction should political entrepreneurs abuse racial polarisation to defend poor governance, cadre corruption, or perverse policy.

This complex but precarious structure of accountability now faces a series of blunt political challenges, each following its particular logic, but causally interconnected in complex ways. AIDS will reduce growth, damage business confidence and investment, and accelerate skills flight. One may speculate that it might destabilise the tripartite alliance, foster opposition in the countryside, and hamper the battle against corruption and financial mismanagement. Corruption, if it should escalate, will reduce the state's capacity to manage AIDS, and provide a rationale for destabilising opposition alliances. Skill and capital flight themselves may precipitate a reaction against business. Such potential relations between complex processes help explain the variety and uncertainty of prognoses for the country's future.

There has been much debate about President Mbeki's capacity to steer his country through these dark waters. Critics argue that his limited ability to generate trust and affection leaves the centre dangerously dependent on party manipulation and the rhetorics of race and national liberation. A more balanced appraisal would register the impossible combination of qualities the office of president currently demands, and the degree to which Mbeki's limitations simply reflect the exile movement's necessarily unappealing character. A state with so little autonomy from capital, that cannot control crime, extract service payments, or monitor its borders, is unlikely to pose any immediate threat to the opposition supporters who control the country's wealth. (Indeed, it may be that they pose too little immediate threat.) However, restriction of ANC internal debate, should it continue, will lead to more bad policy decisions, a fear given credence by the debacle of South African AIDS policy. Natural science represents a formally open structure of knowledge, in which conventions of contestability and evidence are supported by the willingness of powerful scientists to accept correction. The most successful political leaders may likewise be those with the least compliant followers, whose inevitable errors are therefore subject to correction.[13] The growing tendency among ANC supporters to identify the person of the president with the cause of national liberation itself might prove problematic even under the least error-prone national leader.

It is an inescapable conclusion, unwelcome to those who fear protracted one-party dominance, that a cohesive tripartite alliance, enjoying sustained and co-operative relations with opposition parties, offers South Africa the best hope of entrenching its highly imperfect democracy. The movement's popular reach and legitimacy help to render the majority's dire circumstances politically supportable, and its institutions ameliorate and contain the society's diverse conflicts. However, if the advertised benefits of a collaborative political order, marked by consensus and compromise within and between parties and institutions, are to be realised, this will require a more open and democratic-spirited politics that the ANC is currently able to muster.

[1] R.W. Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive?* Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1977.

[2] Statistics South Africa, *South Africa in Transition: Selected Findings from the October Household Survey of 1999 and Changes that have Occurred Between 1995 and 1999*, Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2001.

[3] Geraldo L. Munck and Jay Verkuilen, 'Conceptualising and Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indicators', *Comparative Political Studies, vol 35, no 1*, 2002, pp. 5-34.

[4] The notion 'end of consolidation' may be incoherent because of the 'institutionalised uncertainty' intrinsic to the concept of democracy. See Andreas Schedler, 'Taking Uncertainty Seriously: The Blurred Boundaries of Democratic Transition and Consolidation', *Democratization, vol 8, no 4*, 2001, pp. 1-22.

[5] Robert Mattes, 'South Africa: Democracy Without the People', *Journal of Democracy*, vol 13, no 1, 2002, pp.22-36; p.1.

[6] Robert Schrire, 'The Realities of Opposition in South Africa: Legitimacy, Strategies and Consequences', *Democratization, vol 8, no 1,* 2001, pp. 135-48.

[7] Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins, 'Conclusion', in H. Giliomee and C. Simkins (eds), *The Awkward Embrace: One-party Domination and Democracy,* Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1999, p. 337.

[8] Giliomee and Simkins, 'Conclusions', p.340.

[9] Roger Southall, 'Conclusions', *Democratization, vol 8, no 1*, 2001; Thiven Reddy, 'The Dominant Party and Democratic Consolidation', paper presented to the Department of Political Studies, University of Cape Town, 23 April 2002.

[10] John Dunn, 'Situating Democratic Political Accountability', in Adam Przeworski, Susan Stokes, and Bernard Manin (eds), *Democracy, Accountability and Representation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 329-44.

[11] Deborah J. Yashar, *Demanding Democracy: Reform and Reaction in Costa Rica and Guatemala, 1870s-1950s*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

[12] Jonathan Crush et al, *Losing our Minds: Migration and the 'Brain Drain' from South Africa*, Queen's University Ontario, Southern African Migration Project Policy Series No. 18, 2000.

[13] Keith Grint, *The Arts of Leadership,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.