

The power of the poor

William Gumede 28 April 2009

Jacob Zuma and the ANC ran a brilliant campaign that successfully framed the 2009 election as a face-off between well-off blacks and whites on the one hand and the poor black majority on the other -- rather than on an examination of the government's record in power.

Zuma was voted in by the majority of poor black South Africans, for whom little has changed since 1994. To win elections in South Africa the support of the black poor and working class in townships, rural areas and informal settlements, more than 60% of the population, is crucial.

Zuma successfully portrayed himself as "poor", identifying his personal marginalisation by former president Thabo Mbeki with the marginalisation of the poverty-stricken masses. He successfully distanced himself from the failures of the ANC government in the minds of poor voters, blaming them on Mbeki.

Throughout the election campaign, his strategists portrayed his camp, which now dominates the ANC, as an almost different party. They projected Zuma and the new leadership as more pro-poor and democratic -- and paradoxically less corrupt -- suggesting they will offer effective government.

Zuma tapped into a dramatic change in the mood of South Africa's poor black majority. Forgotten by the elite, they have run out of patience and are now demanding the economic dividends of democratic rule.

Some poorer South Africans blame democracy itself for their marginalisation, rather than government incompetence, leadership indifference and public corruption. For many, the 16 formidable charges Zuma sidestepped were "manufactured" by Mbeki and rich blacks and whites who oppose a poor "peasant" from Inkandla in rural KwaZulu-Natal.

Zuma successfully portrayed the abuse of democratic institutions by the Mbeki administration -- of which he was a member until 2005 -- as an attempt to exclude a downtrodden peasant and champion of the poor from the presidency and a manifestation of the marginalisation of the dispossessed under democracy.

Ominously, such framing creates a climate for political leaders to batter democratic institutions without risking much opposition from ordinary citizens. In their campaign against Zuma's corruption charges, the new ANC leadership closed down the Scorpions without consulting Parliament, which should have decided the issue, while repeatedly attacking critical media and judges who ruled against him.

Last week Zuma said the country's highest court, the Constitutional Court, is "not God". His supporters have launched a drive to purge Zuma critics in the ANC, government and state-owned companies. These are labelled as "coping" -- serving the Congress of the People.

He and some of his supporters also subtly played the ethnic card, encouraging Zulu-speakers to support him and claiming that Afrikaners are the "only real white South Africans". Such statements can only heighten ethnic divisions.

He has made many promises of policy and institutional reform, while providing little detail, no delivery timetable and no information on

what programmes will cost. Cosatu, his ally, has failed to peg its support for him on delivery targets and clear time frames.

South Africa is about to face the full brunt of the global financial crisis, with rising job losses across the economy. Yet neither the ANC nor the opposition parties have proposed clear remedies with time frames.

Cope was unable to counter the ANC's message that it forms part of a rich black and white cabal which opposes the interests of the poor. It and the DA focused their campaigns on Zuma's compromised morals and attacks on democratic institutions.

This may have resonated in the black and white middle classes, but it fell on stony ground among those living in shacks, without jobs or food, who cling to Zuma's promises of free healthcare, education and social grants.

One thing is clear: the glue that binds the different factions within the ANC family is not consensus over policies, the direction of the country or ideology, but getting Zuma elected president.

To capture the top office, he has assembled a disparate coalition by promising every group what it wants to hear. Often the pledges are contradictory and some of his supporters are heading for disappointment.

Dashed expectations and infighting in the coalition over how to address South Africa's urgent problems under a Zuma presidency may trigger another split in the ANC.

And he is unlikely to have the honeymoon period enjoyed by past ANC governments. If he fails to deliver the poor will also turn against him.

His initial response to these pressures is not encouraging. Not yet formally in power, he has copied many vices of the Mbeki era from which he has distanced himself.

To prove his detractors wrong, he must use the best talents of all South Africans from all race groups, whether they are critical of him, rather than rewarding incompetent cronies, dodgy financial backers or those from the same ethnic group.

He must do more than talk about defending the Constitution, and democratic institutions and values, but reflect such commitments in his behaviour.

As Zuma assumes the presidency, he would do well to heed the warning of ANC veteran Mac Maharaj: "It is actions that are going to inspire confidence."

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<http://www.mg.co.za/article/2009-04-25-the-power-of-poor>