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Second chance for South Africa?

by GWYNNE DYER

Cyril Ramaphosa is the president of South Africa again, but everything else is different. He got his job back in a vote late on Friday, but only because at the last moment he managed to cobble together a coalition that has a majority in parliament. It's so new that the coalition partners still haven't agreed on who does what in the new government.

It took so long because his African National Congress had zero experience in making coalitions. It never needed to. Ever since the end of apartheid (white minority rule) thirty years ago, the ANC won a clear majority in every election, formed every government, and ruled alone.

This time it got only 40% of the vote, and frankly it didn't even deserve that. South African official statistics are dodgy (always a bad sign), but 45% of younger South Africans are unemployed. Gross domestic product per capita has actually fallen by a quarter in the past fifteen years. This is slow-motion economic collapse, and it's the fault of the ANC.

Maybe it didn't have to be that way. The economy grew at a reasonable rate under presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, but it fell off a cliff under Jacob Zuma in 2009-2018 and is still in free fall. This April was the first month in more than a decade when there were not frequent, usually daily power cuts all over the country.

The simple explanation for this is that Mandela and Mbeki were honest men who ran a tight ship, whereas under Zuma fraud, theft, bribery and corruption of all sorts blossomed and flourished at the heart of government. The more complicated truth is that the circumstances under which the ANC came to power made that kind of collapse almost inevitable.

There was plenty of corruption and venality under the old apartheid state too, but the former white rulers were prosperous people who understood how much they could cream off the state institutions without wrecking the economy. The new guys were less savvy, more brazen, and in more of a hurry.

The ANC, like most revolutionary movements, was made up of people who had sacrificed for many years ? indeed, many had died or spent decades in jail ? and they were only human. When the day of liberation finally arrived, many of the victorious survivors felt entitled to a little compensation for all those lost years.

There were white members of the ANC who also made great sacrifices, but most of them were not poor. The great majority of the ANC's members were black Africans without much in the way of money or property, and when victory came it was a bit late in their lives to start climbing some conventional career ladder to assure their financial futures.

This didn't automatically make them corrupt, but it did incline them to look for official positions in the state apparatus ? and it did expose them to the temptation to exploit their public positions for private gain. Some resisted, and some did not.

The corruption was therefore contained under Mandela and Mbeki, but exploded when Zuma, himself tremendously corrupt, won first the ANC leadership in 2007 and then the presidency in 2009. (Why did so many of the ANC ?cadres' vote for a man who they knew was corrupt? I leave that to your imagination.)

The deeper problem was that there was no real opposition to the ANC. It was still doing some good work ? low-cost housing, rural electrification and clean running water, for example ? so a grateful majority of South Africans kept voting for it. But the fraud went unpunished, the economic damage got worse and worse, and the public finally lost patience.

The recent election shows that the ANC's model is decisively broken. The public now holds it to account, and in practice it will have to make coalitions with other parties to form governments. That is as it should be: thirty years as effectively a one-party state has not

been good for South Africa.

The coalition that emerged last Friday is promising. The ANC's main partner is the Democratic Alliance, a party that traditionally got most of its votes from the minorities, ?Coloured' (mixed-race), white and Asian, but now attracts a significant number of black African votes as well.

Equally important is the fact that neither the Marxist, anti-white Economic Freedom Fighters nor the Zulu nationalist uMkhonto we Sizwe party recently created by Jacob Zuma (both originally breakaway factions of the ANC) is in the government.

The ANC has rejected a coalition with the extremists, and the DA brings the minorities and a pro-business orientation to the table. It's certainly not guaranteed, but it is now possible to believe that South Africa is getting a second chance.