

South Africa: Setback for ANC in local elections

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Although the African National Congress (ANC) has won a majority of the popular vote in this week's local elections, the result represents a considerable setback for the government of President Mbeki. By Thursday morning, 14.5 million ward and proportional votes had been counted, showing 59 percent support for the ANC and 23 percent for the Democratic Alliance (DA). This represented an increase for the parties constituting the DA, which had received 19 percent in the last municipal elections held in 1995 and 13 percent in the general election held last year.

The ANC has so far won a majority in 106 of the 284 newly organised municipalities, the DA 16 and the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) 10.

Later returns from the rural areas may increase the ANC's share of the vote, but DA leader Tony Leon was confident that his party would win 24 percent of the popular vote in the final tally. He said the DA went into the election with three objectives—to increase its share of the vote over the general election last year, to gain an outright victory in Cape Town and to establish a presence among black voters. He boasted that the party had succeeded in all its aims.

DA supporters—mainly whites and people of Asian and Indian origin—turned out to vote in large numbers. The DA even won some support in the townships, gaining five percent in Soweto and seven percent in Alexandria.

However, this increased showing was primarily the result of a significant abstention by the working class black population. The overall turnout was around 50 percent, a drop of almost 16 percent since last year's elections. The refusal of large numbers of black workers to go to the polls and vote for the ANC expressed a deep dissatisfaction with President Thabo Mbeki and his government. There is a gulf developing

between the highly privileged ruling elite and the vast majority of the population, resulting in a growing alienation from the parliamentary system that was established in South Africa just six years ago.

The Democratic Alliance was formed in June this year through a merger between the Democratic Party (DP), the New National Party and the Federal Alliance. The Democratic Party was originally founded in 1959, when members of the United Party broke away to form the Progressive Party in South Africa's all-white parliament. In 1970 they became the official opposition. Throughout the 1980s the Progressive Party lost support in the face of growing black resistance to apartheid. In the 1987 election, the far-right Conservative Party won more parliamentary seats than the Progressive Party. In 1989 the Progressive Party merged with two newly emerged liberal groups to form the Democratic Party.

A few months later the ban on the ANC was lifted. The DP was faced with the choice, to ally itself with the ANC or to remain as an independent force. A few members joined the ANC, but the majority were hostile to the ANC's association with the South African Communist Party and the DP emerged as a right wing opposition "free market" party.

This June it formed the Democratic Alliance with the New National Party, the party based upon the old National Party that had imposed the hated apartheid system.

The fact that such a formation can raise its head as a political organisation in South Africa today—and even win support among the black population—indicates the extent to which the ANC has abandoned any pretence of defending the interests of its black working class supporters.

Since 1994 the ANC has repeatedly promised to

address the burning issues of unemployment, bad housing, inadequate education and health provision and a lack of the most basic facilities such as running water and electricity. But the conditions of millions of families have either not improved or even worsened since the days of the apartheid regime.

The DA's improved results were not because of any significant increase in support for its policies. Its campaign was largely conducted as a negative operation aimed against the record of the ANC government, especially on HIV/Aids, unemployment and the provision of basic services.

South Africa has the fastest growing Aids epidemic in the world. One in five adults are now infected with HIV, with no access to treatment. The rate of infection is said to be rising at the rate of 2,000 a day.

The ANC has refused to address this devastating situation. They have denied anti-retroviral drugs to HIV sufferers, including pregnant women who need them to protect their babies from infection. Until very recently President Mbeki even questioned the link between HIV and Aids.

The DA saw the HIV/Aids issue as a vote winner and Tony Leon held meetings across the country promising anti-retroviral drugs to pregnant women and rape victims. He travelled to Europe and returned with a promise of cheaper drugs.

Before the election, the ANC tried to remedy the situation by pulling Mbeki out of the Aids debate. They restated the "official position" of the ANC National Executive Committee—that "its policies and programmes are based on the thesis that HIV causes Aids". Their advice was "abstain, be faithful and use condoms". The issue of HIV/Aids was hardly referred to in the ANC's local government manifesto.

Although the official rate of unemployment in South Africa currently stands at 23 percent, the real rate is approaching 40 percent. More than one million jobs have been lost in the official economy since 1994. The vast majority of new jobs are in the untaxed and uninsured "informal sector", with poverty wages varying between \$45 and \$70 a month. The recent fire tragedy at the Esschem factory in Lenasia, Johannesburg gives some indication of the conditions to which many workers in South Africa are subjected.

Only two weeks ago a cholera epidemic swept through KwaZulu Natal infecting more than 5,000

people with the disease. Events like this are the result of the impoverished and unsanitary conditions in which millions of families are forced to live.



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