

COALITION POLITICS: MOONSHOT OR A HOWL IN THE DARK?

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Earlier this week, final preparations for the launch of South Africa's electoral version of Battlestar Galactica were made public.

The countdown to August has started, as the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), ActionSA, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the United Independent Movement (UIM) and the two-year old Spectrum National Party inch towards their national convention. According to DA leader – lead pilot of the 'moonshot' mission – a few other parties are expected to hitch a ride or at least attend the launch as observers.

As expected, the announcement has added fuel to the excitement among pundits who wager that the African National Congress (ANC) will be brought some distance below 50 percent even at national level. Depending on where one stands on the political spectrum, such an outcome would represent welcome progress or an unmitigated disaster.

If the 2021 local government elections are used as a bellwether, it is instructive that the ANC not only dipped below 50 percent on aggregate. It also went down by more than nine percentage points in four provinces, compared to 2016. It had already been trending downwards since 2009.

The leader of the moonshot pact, the DA, has however also had mixed fortunes. In 2021 its overall support decreased by some five percentage points compared to 2016. In the Western Cape – where it is the incumbent – it declined by about nine percentage points.

It can be argued that the moonshot pact is a creative solution to the existential crisis the DA has had to manage in recent years: how to approach issues of racial redress, haemorrhaging support among white Afrikaner and Coloured communities; and the departure of senior Black leaders. The crisis boils down to how the party defines liberalism in as unequal a society as ours, with its racial fault-lines.

Faced with this dilemma, the DA seems to have settled on defending its right flank and fishing from a smaller pond, by consolidating white support which had remained solid at 90 percent in this community. The coalition pact allows it to have its cake and eat it: by pursuing this approach while drawing partners to pad vulnerable flanks and sue for national office.

Besides party mobilisation in the white community and supportive media analysts, all manner of 'apolitical' platforms such as country clubs and golf estate community forums are being marshalled to ensure success.

Some of the scenarios being painted in these sessions include:

- reducing national electoral support for the ANC so far below 50 percent that it would not be able to retain political office through a coalition with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the so-called 'Doomsday scenario'
- even if this fails in 2024, the opposition pact should ensure a majority in the 'main' provinces of the Western Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal and pursue federalist devolution of powers
- mobilising for the largest voter turnout possible among DA supporters while encouraging the opposite especially in African townships and among the Black middle strata

- persuading public servants at national and provincial levels to support the pact by assuring them that there would not be wholesale dismissals even of those perceived to be aligned to the ANC.

This, of course, is the stuff of democratic electoral politics.

But, among those who genuinely wish to see fundamental transformation of South African society from its apartheid past, there is genuine fear that such a project would bring an end to the efforts to attain the ideals of the Freedom Charter and the country's Constitution. This applies particularly to economic and social rights.

This apprehension is more than just about narrow party-political preferences. Leave aside the claims about effective delivery which have been so spectacularly debunked in places such as Tshwane, there are two important conceptual issues at play. The first one is about the essence of the socio-economic platform espoused by the leader of the moonshot alliance. The second one relates to whether the Constitution is capable of imposing limits on extreme radicalism from both the right and the left of the political spectrum.

Given South Africa's challenges of poverty and inequality, defined largely by race and gender, concern about the DA's socio-economic policies attaches to, among others: promotion of whole-sale privatisation of state assets, antipathy towards Black economic empowerment, and suggestions of cheap labour through an overly flexible labour market. On the whole, the DA seems to believe in an unbridled free market, with increased social grants and cash transfers thrown in as a sop. Insulting references to 'tribal chiefs', 'tribal boundaries' and 'tribal subjects' in sections of its policy documents do underline, to borrow a phrase, the party's attitude of mind.

What about protections afforded by the Constitution against extreme right and left policies?

The starting point is that the basic law of the land is a broad canvas; and South Africa relies on the judiciary to define the limits within which the free will of political players can be exercised. The concern however is that policy and administrative actions – at either end of the political spectrum – that may appear innocuous, can insidiously threaten the transformative essence of the democratic order.

State capture is one such instance. Expropriation of land without compensation combined with state ownership of all land is another example, which would result in such enormous power to state functionaries as to encourage dictatorial conduct and corruption. The DA's socio-economic platform does have elements of concerning extremes. Would the judiciary be able to prevent this?

Related to both these issues is foreign policy and where South Africa would locate itself under a moonshot pact. To illustrate this pointedly: Would a moonshot government abandon support for Palestinians' quest for freedom and statehood, given the affinity to the Israeli government and its right-wing Prime Minister demonstrated, for instance, during then-leader of the DA Mmusi Maimane's 2017 visit, and Johannesburg leader Mpho Phalatse's 2018 infamous 'friends of Israel' speech for which she had to apologise?

What about the current government's firm 'one-China' policy? Considering the 2016 visit to Taiwan by the DA's then-mayor of Tshwane, Solly Msimanga, would we see South Africa perhaps becoming a

sixth member of the current 'Five Eyes' alliance of English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States) that seems bent on preventing the global rise and pre-eminence of an Oriental power?

All this and more inform the apprehension among those who genuinely care about South Africa's journey from its apartheid past. Beyond party-political preferences, this concern also relates to our nation's true values, at the centre of which is a democratic and humane system in which all social rights are progressively and speedily realised.

Of course, the Battlestar Galactica effort may well turn out to be a case of merely howling at the moon. The ANC is striving to reverse its fortunes: emphasising the fundamental changes that have taken place since 1994; acknowledging the wasted years of state capture which were followed by Covid-19; and, in government, focussing on immediate challenges such as loadshedding, the logistics nightmare and the spike in crime.

Many do believe that, with all the reforms and the focus on implementation, the economy should start growing at 3 percent of GDP and higher sooner than expected.

However, all scenarios – especially those with the most uncertain variables – deserve reflection. South Africans cannot afford to be caught off-guard.

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