

Multi-Party Government in South Africa

Before 1994, I believed in democracy. My theatre group was affiliated to the United Democratic Front and we joined in the opposition to the apartheid government's attempt to turn African people into aliens in their own country. My attitude then was that once we got rid of an oppressive government, we would achieve democracy. It was a naive, taken-for-granted understanding – similar to the naiveté that is driving revolutionary movements in the world today.

My first misgivings came when I saw the ANC wooing Africans, Coloureds and Indians who had collaborated with the apartheid government and had been co-opted into structures that reinforced apartheid. Such people were not brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; they became members of parliament in the new government.

Next I was disturbed by the fact that I had to vote for a party not an individual; I had no say in choosing the person to represent me. This didn't feel like government *by* the people, only *of* the people. The government was not an extension of me; it was separate from me.

Once I had cast my vote, I could not directly influence government. I had given away my power and had not invested in governance that kept me in mind.

I didn't question the setting up of a multi-party system. We had opted for consensual politics and that made sense: parties finding ways to accommodate and resolve differences. When I saw the system in operation, however, I realised that the multi-system did not work in the way I had imagined it would.

The ANC gets two thirds of the electoral vote and the remaining one third is split between about a dozen parties. And this is the way it will be for the foreseeable future. To me, this means I live in a one-party system not a multi-party system. There will not be the regular turnover in government between liberals and conservatives that keeps government to a minimum of honesty. We are wide open to corruption in all aspects of administration.

And it seems that I was completely mistaken in thinking that the multi-party system means consensual government. The same adversarial style is adopted in the South African parliament as obtains in a two party system. There is the same kind of disparagement, cheers and jeers, for differing points of view. But then consensus is really irrelevant. The ANC government does not need to be involved in discussion and debate; it has a large enough majority to assert its will on parliament and the people. It has the power to change the constitution, to curtail freedom of speech and to control the country's finances.

I have been completely disabused of the notion of a working democracy. And looking around the world, it appears that corruption in government is rife everywhere. For me, the obverse side of corruption is poverty and I don't know of any country in the world in which there is no poverty.

But that may just be my ignorance. If there is such a miracle as a country free of poverty, it will be a country in which democracy works.