

Cracks in South Africa's governing alliance could cost the ANC dearly

Dirk Kotze, Professor in Political Science, University of South Africa, observes the party-political developments in South Africa and shares his perceptions prior to the local government elections on 3 August 2016. He contends:

South Africa has been governed by the *African National Congress* (ANC) since 1994. The party has operated in an alliance with two other players – the *South African Communist Party* (SACP) and the *Congress of South African Trade Unions* (Cosatu), known as the [Tripartite Alliance](#). But the arrangement has become increasingly fractious, so much so that it could, for the first time, badly damage the ANC's performance in the upcoming [local elections](#).

South Africa's governing alliance should be understood as a product of history. The ANC and Communist Party formed a partnership in the late 1940s and the trade union body the *South African Congress of Trade Unions* (Sactu), the pre-cursor to the current union federation Cosatu, joined them in 1955 to form the *Congress Alliance*. They united to produce the [Freedom Charter](#), viewed as the ANC-led alliance's blueprint for an equal, non*racial* and democratic society.

After the apartheid-government unbanned black liberation movements and released political prisoners in the 1990s, the ANC and the largest domestic anti-apartheid organisation, the *United Democratic Front*, merged and Sactu was replaced by Cosatu in the alliance. In the negotiations on a new constitution for the country the alliance was represented by the ANC and SACP.

The new South Africa and the alliance

All alliance-partners were represented in the first government that was formed after the 1994 elections. There was relative harmony at this point as all were united behind the [Reconstruction and Development Programme](#) [RDP].

The first serious policy fault-lines began to emerge two years later when the government adopted a new macroeconomic policy. The introduction of *Growth, Employment and Redistribution* ([GEAR](#)), plus President Thabo Mbeki's particular style of leadership, led to the marginalisation of the SACP and Cosatu. Their members nevertheless continued to vote for the ANC.

The SACP always regarded itself as the vanguard of the *Tripartite Alliance*, in the sense of providing the ideological and intellectual [leadership](#). It was difficult to sustain this role during the Mbeki period. At the ANC's National Conference in **Polokwane in 2007**, the new ANC-President, Jacob Zuma, promised their rehabilitation into the mainstream.

The SACP's contribution in elections is virtually impossible to quantify because of overlapping membership between the three alliance members, as well as the spillover effect it has on extended family-members and acquaintances.

But an analysis of membership-numbers and electoral support suggests that in the 2014 elections only about 10% of the ANC's electoral support came from paid-up members of the alliance. That year more than **11 million** South Africans [voted for the ANC](#). At the time Cosatu had a membership of almost two million, the SACP 220,000 members (2015) while the ANC reached its apex in 2012 with more than a million [members](#).

The fault-lines

There are at least three fault-lines in the alliance:

- internal strains within the trade union federation, Cosatu;

- tensions between the ANC and the SACP; and
- fractiousness over the ANC's succession process which will result in a new leader being elected in 2017.

The trade-union federation suffered a [major split](#) when eight unions joined the *National Union of Metalworkers of SA* (Numsa) to support the federation's then general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi. Unions that remained in the federation included the *National Union of Mineworkers*, the *National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union* and the *South African Democratic Teachers Union*. Several national union-leaders also remained in the federation, including its president S'dumo Dlamini. A major source of contention was around the unions' independence in relation to political organisations.

The split was also partly an extension of the ANC's [internal power struggles](#) between those supporting Zuma and those who are either independent or supporters of deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa.

There was also a regional component. Many union branches in the ANC's traditional stronghold, the Eastern Cape, are pro-Vavi. In pro-Zuma provinces, such as KwaZulu-Natal, the Dlamini-Cosatu faction is prominent.

So who now has the dominant influence in the Tripartite Alliance? Traditionally the SACP assumed that role but in several recent ANC-elections three provincial premiers (known as [the Premier League](#)) have come to the fore. The anti-Communist league has served as the pro-Zuma provincial lobby, effectively wanting to circumvent the alliance in favour of provincial caucusing in the ANC. SACP-members are excluded from these processes.

The SACP's power has further been eroded by tensions that have emerged around its general secretary [Blade Nzimande](#) who is also the national Minister of Higher Education and Training. Attempts by student-organisations to hijack the **independent student-movement** in 2015 led to the ANC-aligned *SA Students Congress* (Sasco) [criticising Nzimande](#) for not implementing the ANC's free education policy. The *Young Communist League* responded to Sasco by accusing their criticism of Nzimande as criticism of the SACP.

The 2017 national succession considerations also constitute a fault-line in the alliance. It has already developed into a contest between Zuma's and Ramaphosa's supporters. The Zuma-group includes the ANC Youth and Women's Leagues, the Dlamini-Cosatu group, the *uMkhonto weSizwe Veterans' League* and provinces linked to the [Premier League](#). The Ramaphosa-group includes provinces like Gauteng, Western Cape and Limpopo, most of the SACP and some unions in Cosatu.

The chances at the polls

These fault-lines and ANC-factionalism are clearly not new developments. What might be new is that they can start to influence the voting patterns of alliance-supporters.

For the 2016 local elections the SACP has publicly called its supporters to vote for the ANC. It is unpredictable what the members of [Numsa](#), which enjoys enormous support among unionised workers in the motor-industry, will do but it could have a significant impact on the results in the automotive centres like Tshwane (Rosslyn) and the Eastern Cape (Buffalo City and Nelson Mandela Bay). These metropolitan areas are generally regarded as the [most contested points](#) for the ANC. Most unionised workers in the huge industry, which includes Volkswagen, General Motors, BMW and Mercedes Benz, belong to Numsa.

It is likely that the ANC's national average will for the first time decline to below 60%. An unknown factor is the [Economic Freedom Fighters](#) (EFF). It is the [strongest](#) in Gauteng, Limpopo and the North

West. The EFF's voter turnout is still unknown but it might follow the ANC's pattern. With anything more than 15% in Gauteng it can play a key role in local coalition governments.

In the past the *Tripartite Alliance* provided the diversity of support for the ANC which secured its majority. Lately the fault-lines in the alliance reinforce much of the factionalism in the ANC, while the ANC's internal power struggles are also duplicated in the alliance-members. Many would argue that the alliance effectively came to an end with the split in Cosatu and the emergence of the so-called Premier League. As a result Cosatu and the ANC lost almost a million members in total between 2012 and 2015.

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