

Party Dominance ‘Theory’: Of What Value?

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ABSTRACT This paper critiques the alleged value of the notion of ‘party dominance’ or the ‘dominant party system’, mainly propagated in South Africa by Roger Southall, Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins, and very much in vogue amongst scholars in the Netherlands, and to some extent in the USA and other places. Its overseas lineage is traced and its explanatory powers critiqued. It is argued that the approach is flawed democratically in being anti-popular and that it also lacks explanatory value. It is argued that it is neither a theory nor a system.

Theories are not simply a product of rational discourse but also thrive in relation to prevailing interests

(Mamdani, Mkandawire and Wamba, 1993, p. 109)

The notion of a dominant party, usually described by those who deploy the concept, as a theory or a system, refers to a category of parties/political organisations that have successively won election victories and whose future defeat cannot be envisaged or is unlikely for the foreseeable future. It is a term that has been applied to a great variety of parties or organisations ranging from the right wing Guomintang in Taiwan to the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa. It has included such parties as the Social Democrats in Sweden, the Liberal Democrats in Japan, the Christian Democrats in Italy and the Indian National Congress in India. Many of the parties that were previously dominant are no longer in power. The dominance of some parties is perceived by many scholars as more of a danger than that of others, and this, it will be argued, relates less to scholarship than the ideological position of the particular party and authors.

As a theory to describe a phenomenon which is said to lead to various negative results, the writings of T.J. Pempel (1990, as indicated by Giliomee and Simkins, 1999, p. xv) have recently attracted much attention. But the approach has been around for a long time. In fact, Maurice Duverger (1954) wrote of the phenomenon decades before Pempel in the original French edition of 1951, with a degree of misgiving. It has also been previously mentioned by W.H. Morris Jones in 1971 (see also Sartori, 1976).

The notion of a ‘dominant party’, where one organisation or party is so electorally powerful as to render it unlikely to be defeated in the foreseeable future, has not always been a source of concern. Such misgivings and the intensity with which they are felt seem related to particular countries at particular times. The Indian Congress’s dominance in the years after independence was in fact seen as a source of stability and conducive to democratic consolidation (Reddy, 2005). The dominance of the Japanese, Swedish and certain other parties over decades, while no longer existing, was generally not raised as a problematic issue by many democracy theorists. It is, however, raised as problematic in Africa, in particular in relation to South Africa, where the ANC may be unlikely to face defeat for some time (Southall, 1998, 2005; Giliomee and Simkins, 1999).

What is striking about the notion is that it is primarily a preoccupation amongst sections of the academy and hardly appears to be discussed in the ‘real world of politics’. The reasons for hurling abuse or raising reservations in polite scholarly language regarding the quality of a dominant party do not appear to rest very much on this question of how politics is actually practised, the range of conditions that shape what happens in that realm of human activity.

The notion of a ‘dominant party’ system or ‘party dominance/predominance’ is not one that preoccupies the left in South Africa. It is not raised, as far as I am aware, within the ANC and its allies, even where there are tensions between the ANC and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)/South African Communist Party (SACP). Neither COSATU nor the SACP refer to the electoral strength of the ANC as an issue or something they regret, even at the time of writing (September 2006) when relations between the allies are at an all-time low. While the leadership of President Mbeki has been described by the SACP as ‘dictatorial’, they express no problem with ANC electoral predominance per se.

Nor is it a factor with forces that regard themselves as further to the left. Insofar as they may argue with the ANC it is not in terms of the organisation’s electoral dominance. In the case of this category, it sometimes relates to their placing little weight on elections as a route to transformation (c.f. Ashwin Desai ‘we don’t want the fucking vote’, cited in Sachs, 2003). While Southall claims that the ANC is concerned about being called a ‘dominant party’ that concern does not feature to a significant degree in its literature, and in all my experience in the organisation or contact with its members over the period since it achieved electoral dominance, I have never heard it once mentioned.¹

The electoral dominance and the unlikelihood of defeat of the ANC by opposition parties preoccupy more conservative writers, like Giliomee and Simkins (1999). Southall (1998, 2005) while positioning himself differently at a political level nevertheless adopts the same paradigm. Many others refer to this phenomenon as a feature of the South African political landscape, which is self-evident, though Lodge (1999, ch. 1, for example pp. 4–5) is not certain as to whether it is a negative development or not.

As with many such phenomena, how parties or modes of government are perceived tends to depend on *who it is that is dominant*, and the relationship that the specific mode of dominance has to the interests of various other states,

individuals and institutions. There are variants of this in the Reagan distinction between dictators who were 'ours' and those of another kind, that is, of a more left wing inclination.

What is the significance of this fixation on party predominance being located primarily on the right in southern Africa? I am not suggesting that that renders the concept invalid and that it means the dangers it indicates are thereby smokescreens merely because the people concerned are hostile to democracy in some cases or, in the case of Southall, have substantial reservations about national liberation movements per se, claiming an inevitable trajectory of liberation movements towards authoritarianism (Southall, 2003; Suttner, 2004c).

In fact, much of this literature does alert us to real dangers to democracy, though it is not clear that these can be attributed to the presence or absence of dominant parties. I think the dangers need to be carefully researched, though it may be that the 'dominant party' as a paradigm within which to enquire may prove to be more of an obstacle than an advantage.

T.J. Pempel (1999, pp. x–xi) himself cautions that there are 'many ways in which the same institutional container, namely a dominant single party, has the potential to hold quite different contents, depending on the numerous other conditions within the political system in which it is created' (see also Lodge, 1999, ch. 1). This cautionary phrase is found in the foreword to a book edited by Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins (1999), drawing conclusions from its various contributions. Giliomee and Simkins, it will be seen, are not as cautious in their own claims.

What Pempel says is significant in a more general sense in that electoral dominance in itself does not predetermine the impact that a particular party will have, in government and on the society as a whole. That is mediated by a variety of factors quite unrelated to its electoral support. A party of the masses which wins overwhelming support may still lack economic power. Consequently, despite its popularity and apparently unassailable political position, it does not therefore follow that it has a free hand. It may have a freer hand in relation to political opponents in parliament than it has in society at large. This may also apply to less conservative forces, where supporters of a popular party in elections, may still oppose it over certain social issues. Dominance is therefore always conditional and mediated by factors outside of the site where electoral dominance is primarily manifested – in parliament and the state. As soon as the electorally dominant party seeks to transmit that dominance outside that chamber it encounters a range of variables that may limit or enhance the power it in fact commands.

Even in the state itself it may not always be possible to ensure compliance with and implementation of its policies by officials. This is especially the case where a radical government is not able to deploy sufficient numbers of its own cadres with the required skills in the civil service. Old civil servants then have the opportunity to stress continuity with the past as if civil service administration is a practice which has professional norms that are invariable, serving whoever is the government of the day. These people then become the custodians of institutional memory and 'how things must be done' in order to comply with this or that rule. Rules in

bureaucracy, it should be remembered, can usually be counter-balanced with other rules, depending on what the civil servant wants to see succeed and what he or she wants to block.

Consequently, we may conclude that the same institutional container, as Pempel says, may be more or less constrained in different situations. The conditions under which one wins an election are various, the victory merely being one of the factors that bear on what can and cannot be done by the dominant party. This again is not factored into much of the literature of our times, supporting party dominance as an explanatory device.

But from where does this obsession with the dominance of a party derive?

The notion of the dominant party ‘system’ (Bogaards, 2004, pp. 174, 175, 178), although sounding new, in fact belongs to a well-established paradigm found in writings of conservative political scientists where dogmatic prescriptions are laid down to establish whether or not a country qualifies as a democracy (Huntington, 1991; Jung and Shapiro, 1995).²

The dominant party debate relates to the ‘consolidation of democracy’ question, sometimes mockingly referred to as ‘consolidology’ (Beetham, 2000) and that debate in ‘the dominant’ US political science discipline turns on the necessity of a potential ‘circulation of elites’, that is, there must be reasonable possibility of the defeat of the ruling party, before democracy can be said to be consolidated. Where such potential defeat is unlikely in the foreseeable future, democracy cannot be said to be consolidated (Suttner, 2004a). There is a link between this dominance and ‘consolidology’ approach to political transformation required by conceptions of ‘good governance’ found in relation to structural adjustment programmes in Africa. These have tended to encourage an instrumentalist/checklist notion of democracy, focusing on a limited range of questions like elections and multi-partyism (under the guise of competitive politics), constitutional reviews limiting presidential terms and similar factors.

What is interesting about this dogmatism, for it is nothing but an assertion turned into a supposed scientific law, is that it can be shown that there are numerous other mechanisms for safeguarding democracy besides the strength of opposition parties. The approach in fact fetishises the notion of elected opposition and electoral politics generally. Just as a party with overwhelmingly strength is necessarily a danger, the strength of electoral opposition is supposedly inherently good for democracy. Whether or not one is dealing with a democratic situation turns on the strength of electoral opposition to the ruling party/organisation. It does not consider democratic action, whether of an oppositional or other kind outside of parliament.

The dominant party debate in turn, neglects focus on the *character*, the specificity of opposition parties – their history in a particular society, and directs its attention to the flaws (which are often validly noted) of the ruling party/organisation. It does not consider why the party is dominant and *what this says about the nature and history of the electoral opposition*.

In truth, one cannot separate the dominance of one from the character and flaws of the other. There are reasons why opposition parties may never become ruling parties and these cannot be excluded from the examination. They may have little bearing on whether the flaws of the dominant party are ever remedied. It may remain in power, perpetrating the deeds that these authors correctly allude to, but the real cause of the abuses may remain unexamined because of this obsession with the weakness of opposition parties in relation to the ruling party. In other words, if one is concerned with democracy, fixation over one party's dominance to the neglect of other factors may derail any quest for understanding the conditions which need to be in place in order to achieve substantial democratisation.

Dominant parties may not last forever, as is dramatically demonstrated by the implosion of the Soviet Communist Party, which was of course not just dominant but the sole party for most periods after 1917. Dominant parties may fall but the fixation on opposition parties as a necessary potential ruling party diverts attention from programmatic, transformational and other issues of democratisation. We need to be asking what factors are or are not conducive to democratisation and, if excessive dominance is a question that is of primary relevance, to what type of democracy and transformational programmes that is applicable.

Some funders fetishise electoral opposition to the point where they continually hold conferences of rag-tag groups calling themselves parties, whose representativity and survivability are in serious doubt. The phrase used in South Africa is that they 'represent only their jackets'. Their virtue is in 'being an opposition party'. The qualities that may render them incapable of becoming a sustainable government are considered of secondary significance. One may occasionally see a situation where such grouplets temporarily come together to dislodge an unpopular dominant party, but the moment of power tends to see continuity of practices, which were the reasons for removing the previous ruling party. Being united almost purely through their opposition to the former ruling party they tend to be without a programme. Over time their unity tends to erode. In short, dislodging of dominant parties has generally tended to have little to do with the establishment or expansion of democracy.

My claims that the lineage of this approach lies in the dogma that democracy depends on regular changes of governing party, is borne out by Giliomee and Simkins (1999). Here are samples of their statements:

True protection for the citizens of a liberal democracy lies less in the separation of powers or a Bill of Rights than in the actual use of elections to change bad and corrupt governments (p. xviii).

A liberal democratic regime can be defined as one in which the executive power is constrained, minority groups express their interests effectively, party competition is strong and electoral outcomes are uncertain with an alternation of ruling party constituting a real prospect. *As a result* rights are effectively protected and enjoyed, and corruption is kept within bounds. Dominant party regimes in developing countries lack these features in significant ways (p. 2, emphasis added).³

They take this further and counsel the powerful to 'break up' into smaller units in the interests of their version of democracy:

It is in the consolidation phase that the difference between the dominant and the competitive systems becomes increasingly distinct. Dominant parties, particularly if they are liberation or revolutionary movements, tend first to become identified with and then synonymous with the regime they established. For a competitive democratic system to come about it is necessary for a dominant party to break up into a variety of organisations which represent the different interests and conflicts of a real country rather than of an idealised 'oppressed nation' (p. 12).

One is struck by the political *naïveté* in such advice, how it obviously emanates from the university classroom, rather than much insight into actual political experience. Who is likely to listen to advice that they should break up into a variety of organisations? What is interesting about these excerpts is that the existence of a dominant party is contrasted with there being a competitive system. Yet the party has become predominant purely through a competitive system, which has pronounced that party to be overwhelmingly popular. In the ordinary meaning of words, that a party may continue to win competitive elections indefinitely does not impugn the existence of a competitive system. Bogaards is, however, correct when he distinguishes between dominant parties and authoritarian dominant parties, the latter being ones that create conditions of oppression for opponents making it hard to displace them:

[T]he dominant *authoritarian* party system, in which one-party dominance is maintained by extra-democratic means. The authoritarian dominant party does not allow for competition on an equal basis and alternation in power is only a theoretical possibility (Bogaards, 2004, p. 178).⁴

Now that obstacle is overcome through that electoral dominance being depicted in South Africa as achieved through a 'racial census' (Giliomee and Simkins, 1999). In other words, Africans vote as Africans for Africans. Ethnic cleavages determine voting patterns. There is no thought involved in voting. One can never displace the ANC because the Africans are the majority and they will always vote for the predominantly African party.⁵

This is not very subtle racism. It is very clear from any observation of ANC support and even organisational workings that the way in which members and supporters relate to the organisation is with deep loyalty that overcomes disappointments. But it is nevertheless conditional support, support that includes sometimes very strident criticism. It may entail great patience, but that is not because of an indefinite 'racial loyalty' but an underrated political maturity, where supporters understand it takes time to change and even though dissatisfied with the pace, they realise it is not simple. Furthermore, if 'racial census' were an explanation why has the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which is almost exclusively Zulu in membership and support base, not gained greater electoral success?

The situation in Zimbabwe illustrates that the masses are not as gullible as some commentators make out. The overwhelming popularity of the Mugabe regime at the time of independence is no longer the case. This is not to say that the

Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is ready to replace Zimbabwean African National Union (Patriotic Front) (ZANU (PF)). It is clear, however, that ZANU misrule is not accepted with equanimity; there is no longer a sense that 'things will come right'. The liberation dividend has run out and people have at best a degree of cynicism towards the dominant ZANU.

It will be seen below that I also am concerned with the extent to which the liberation movement becomes identified with the regime it establishes and 'the nation', though for different reasons from these authors. This is a complex issue related to colonial and apartheid history, where in the absence of the franchise most liberation movements claimed the status of the sole and authentic representative of the people of particular territories. In the context of apartheid it was an important political recognition of the illegitimacy of the regime and what turned out to be an albeit over-stated estimation of the degree of support of the liberation movements. The danger is that having enjoyed this status there may be a tendency – as in Zimbabwe – to regard elections as merely confirmatory of a pre-existing right to represent the people of the country concerned, a status already earned and in such cases a reluctance to treat elections as a valid basis for removal from power.

Party dominance and pluralism

Regarding Simkins and Giliomee's (1999) counsel that 'dominant parties' break up into a variety of organisations which represent the different interests and conflicts of a real country rather than of an idealised 'oppressed nation' (their inverted commas) – this need not be through the formation of parties. I suspect that 'iron like cleavages' make the authors prefer parties. My view is that the electoral fixation diverts attention from a real need to recognise that the ruling organisation/party is *not the nation*. It ignores alternative organisations that are not necessarily electorally orientated, that need also to be formed to meet particular social needs.

Paradoxically then, while focusing on pluralism in the electoral arena, *the dominant party theorists neglect the wider notion of pluralism* which is embodied in a concept of democracy which does not see the ruling organisation/party or even that party together with opposition parties, embodying every interest of the nation. A number of sectoral organisations or social movements representing a wide range of interests need to be formed – from below – in order to realise these aspirations (Bridges, 1978, pp. 132ff). This is a notion of pluralism that meets hostility in our continent and certainly is neglected in the narrow area of politics within which dominant party theorists direct their attention. This is part of the broader conservatism of their orientation, on which I will elaborate, which is hostile to the presence of the masses in political developments, in a general sense.

While a dominant left wing party may have its political power constrained by a range of conservative forces, it may also find that left progressive forces outside of the parliamentary setting set limits on what it can do, or compel it to do some things. The *notion of the possible* cannot be determined by the dominant party

alone and broad pluralism is one of the more democratic ways of deepening and broadening representation in national debates (Bridges, 1978).

The dangers that are alluded to

That one comes to wrong answers may not mean that one has asked the wrong questions or that one has not pointed to real problems (with or without finding adequate solutions). Many of the authors preoccupied with the dominant party ask valid questions and point to real dangers. One of these is the tendency of dominant parties to conflate party and state and to appoint party officials to senior positions irrespective of their having the required qualities.

It is true that many *ruling* parties in Africa and elsewhere tend to appoint party loyalists to positions, *whether or not they are 'dominant parties'*. This may be most flagrantly the case in the United States (the object of worship by most of the supporters of these approaches). And in a sense that is one illustration of the problem being referred to not being a special feature of dominant parties. Whether or not a party qualifies as dominant, that is, one that is repeatedly returned to office, there is a tendency of ruling parties to appoint people who are party loyalists to positions. In fact, there may be good reason to do this in certain situations, for example, where security dangers are great. In such conditions one does not look for professors of criminology to head your police, but for someone whom one trusts and can be relied on to prevent a *coup d'état*. One subordinates abstract theorisation to firm action.

At the same time not all 'dominant parties' practise or are able to exercise patronage in the civil service. It is quite an interesting research question: how is entry to the civil service controlled at various levels in various countries? To what extent is it independent of the party in power and to what extent does the tendency to appoint loyalists relate to parties in general as opposed to being a quality especially attributable to 'dominant parties'. To what extent has the state as an institution achieved a degree of autonomy enabling it in certain countries or situations to frustrate attempts to dilute its alternative view as to how things should be done and promote and prevent recruiting that undermines this?

Insofar as the ANC in South Africa may have appointed many top officials, it also inherited many others. It is only in recent times that white dominance of the civil service has been gradually limited or ended. This results from different qualities influencing admission, in particular, account being taken of historical disabilities suffered by black people. The notion of 'historical disability' does not appear to be equated with support for ANC, certainly not at the lower levels. Also, there is the question of 'institutional memory', whose bearers were usually those who have been in the civil service longest and can continue to exercise influence on direction after ruptures like the defeat of apartheid.

It may also be worth considering whether one can be hegemonic – in the Gramscian sense – of propounding a vision of society adopted by most of society, from whatever class they may have come, without being electorally

dominant. The legacy of decades of social democratic rule in Sweden has not been removed, although somewhat modified, through its minority status and also brief (and again at the time of writing) displacement from government. The basic welfare state system with high taxation and substantial public benefits remains in place. What are described as cutbacks on welfare in Sweden are laughable compared with what one finds in places like the UK or has never been in place in the US. Is this a case of social democrats exercising hegemony without majority electoral support, something which is quite compatible with Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony?

In Zambia there was a situation where Kaunda and United National Independence Party (UNIP) were thrown out of office, partly because the spoils system was making people sufficiently disillusioned to forget the heady days when UNIP had led Zambia to independence. Within a short while, the same phenomenon had been instituted by officials of the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) and those who were disaffected were warned that they would not 'eat' if they did not eat with them and stay within the party. What this seems to indicate is that the real problems need to be addressed in a wider enquiry, which includes but goes beyond the character of individual parties but tries to find the root of corruption and patronage and its social bases (Tordoff, 2002, p. 134 and ch. 5 generally).

Dominant party system approach hostile to popular politics

What I have tried to show thus far is that the dominant party 'system' is deeply flawed as a mode of analysis and lacks explanatory capacity. But it is also a very conservative approach to politics. Its fundamental political assumptions are restricted to one form of democracy, electoral politics and hostile to popular politics. This is manifest in the obsession with the quality of *electoral opposition and its sidelining or ignoring of popular political activity organised in other ways*. The assumption in this approach is that other forms of organisation and opposition are of limited importance or a separate matter from the consolidation of their version of democracy.

Possibly it is a feature of the earlier dogma that I referred to about what constitutes and consolidates democracy. Those theories emerged or re-emerged in the context of recent transitions and the concerns that drove them were that militant forces had to be contained and that elite pacts had to be formed which marginalised the masses. A negotiating partner had to be found who would be able to keep followers under control and also secure a non-radical transition.

The approach tends to lead to a narrow focus on electoralism and the functioning of the ruling party and alleged operations within it. Over time the party itself in its form and functioning tends to undergo change and the processes of government lead to marginalisation and exclusion of many who may have been closely connected with its operations in the past. And this may include the mass base that brought it to power.

It has been indicated that there is another way of looking at opposition, taking one beyond a lamentation over electoral results. One needs to ask whether the

dominant party theorising is not in reality based on a conception that limits the potential scope of democracy to representative democracy, instead of focusing on opposition or *politics* in the widest social terms, allowing for the broadest popular involvement.

The masses and democracy

It appears that the advocates of the dominant party notion have close affinity with a number of elite models – consociationalism, versions of pluralism that stress stability over participation, and, as indicated, dogmatic notions of consolidation depending on the strength and potential of opposition to displace the party in power.

Now there are variations within these approaches. But what they all have in common is a focus on parties as the key areas of concern in establishing whether or not democracy is being achieved, advanced and impeded.

As far as I am aware, while there are many who utilise the notion of a dominant party approach as an obstacle to democracy there appear to be very few scholarly opponents.⁶ The explanation of various ills in some political systems on this basis operates without debate.

Given what has already been said, I want to centre my critique of the notion of a dominant party as being an explanatory device around the question of democracy. We can spend much time on the question of what the quality of electoral opposition may be and what the consequence for accountability and the blurring of party with state may be where such a party is overwhelmingly dominant.

The problem with this approach, which I have engaged, is that it assumes that the meaning of democracy is given and it is in fact restricted to representative democracy. It is relatively unusual in these times to see any adjective attached to the word democracy (as is admittedly done by Giliomee and Simkins (1999) to their credit, where in the one case quoted they speak of ‘liberal democracy’, above, although more generally they do not make the distinction between that and ‘democracy’ per se). Its meaning is supposedly self-evident and waves of democratisation apply to transitions from systems without elections to ones where elections are held (important as such transitions, however imperfect, may be). That is said to be democracy. The question is then closed.

In restricting the definition and hence its focus to a particular version of democracy, representative or liberal democracy, there is consequently not concern with the mass role in democracy. Insofar as this has featured in some discussions of transitions or transition ‘theory’, conclusions based on what has happened in certain transitions to electoral democracy, the question or problem is seen as finding a set of partners both of whom can constrain their supporters, especially the potentially unruly masses (Williams, 1983; Suttner, 2006).

The most important element of the critique of the dominant party notion that has been advanced in this contribution is that it is exclusively concerned with elections. But any concept of democracy needs to address the question of *meanings of democracy in the plural* and it must ask whether the trajectory of a country is to bear the imprint of the original meaning of democracy, which refers to

government by the people, or whether we disregard that and relate purely to what is the dominant mode of realising democracy today, that is, through indirect means.⁷

It has been asked whether the transition to notions of good governance has tended to dilute the mass character of political parties with emphasis on a ruling party or organisation's capacity to deliver, supplanting the connection between that party and the masses.⁸ This is a trend that is found in Europe and signs of which may be evident in South Africa, though there is currently a backlash against it. One could go further and enquire whether beyond establishing whether or not the party represents the masses, the masses are themselves independent actors and how that relationship is managed if it is appropriate to use such a term or more likely the term 'negotiated'.

In its original meaning it was unthinkable that the people would not directly govern, that there should be the mediation of parties or other representative bodies (Arblaster, 2002). They would rule directly. Thus Aristotle writes:

A democracy exists whenever those who are free and not well off, being in the majority, are in control of government, an oligarchy when control lies with the rich and well-born, these being few (Aristotle, 1962, p. 155).

The first, and most truly so called, variety of democracy is that which is based on the principle of equality. In such the law lays down that the poor shall not enjoy any advantage over the rich, that neither class shall dominate the other but both shall be exactly similar. For if, as is generally held, freedom is especially to be found in democracy, and also equality, this condition is best realised when all share in equal measure the whole *politeia*. But since the people are the more numerous class and the decision of the majority prevails, such apparent inequality does not prevent its being a democracy (Aristotle, 1962, p. 159).

Pericles, without the same emphasis on the poor, nevertheless stresses direct majority rule:

Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people (Thucydides, 1972, p. 143).

Ellen Meiksins Wood traces the process whereby ancient democracy conferred a unique status on subordinate classes, whereas the modern concept belongs in the main to a different trajectory. While the trajectory of ancient democracy led to the elevation of the demos, the modern history leads to their displacement in most cases by propertied classes (Wood, 1995, p. 204 and ch. 7 generally).

In the recent history of South Africa, and no doubt there are other examples including aspects of the Portuguese revolution of 1974, the masses have taken direct action, though not thereby governing the state as a whole (Neocosmos, 1998; Suttner, 2004b, 2005).

It is not the object, here, to advance a clear position as to how the disjuncture between the original meaning of democracy and its present equation with representative democracy should be resolved. It is merely sought to demonstrate that the dominant party theorists are not concerned with this question, for their

focus deals purely with relations between and relative strengths of those who purport to represent the masses.

There is no desire to hear the voice of these masses or to develop a modality for their playing a direct role on the stage of history, for – one can surmise – that most of these theorists equate the masses with that which is unruly and necessary to contain (Williams, 1983; Rudé, 1964). While some scholars are prepared to deal with the masses in archives, the theorists with whom this contribution is concerned might even shrink from an encounter in such store rooms.

For the peoples of Africa who have long been denied democracy under colonial rule, who have had sovereignty restored to them through independence or liberation from apartheid rule, the question that arises is what the quality of that sovereignty is. Is it purely one of relationship between states or do we ask what happens behind that sovereignty, whether the playing out of politics represents a state imposing its will, through the mediation of a dominant party or an alternation of parties, or whether it is a popular sovereignty where the will of the people finds many ways of expressing itself?

This is said in the spirit of re-examining the mass role in politics, in establishing whether the rules of governance would inevitably wipe out that mass influence. Now if the answer to that question may be debatable, are we not seeing in the so-called theory of dominant parties a variant of analysis which sees politics as played out by leaders or elites? Is that not in itself a reason why a democrat, who sees the people playing a role beyond elections, should find the approach problematic?

Dominant party approach – of what utility?

Given that the advancing of party dominance as a problem is undemocratic in its focus, it does not follow that it is without explanatory value. The notion of a dominant party is variously described as a theory (Southall, 2005, p. 62) or a system (Bogaards, 2004). For something to be a theory it must be an explanatory device; it must be able to show how the existence of dominance relates to other factors. Thus Heywood writes:

In academic discourse . . . a theory is an *explanatory proposition*, an idea or set of ideas that in some way *seeks to impose order or meaning upon phenomena*. As such, all enquiry proceeds through the construction of theories, sometimes thought of as hypotheses – that is, explanatory propositions waiting to be tested (Heywood, 2004, p. 10, emphasis added).

Likewise, more generally, John Frow writes that a theory is:

A scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of factors or phenomena; a hypothesis that has been confirmed or established by observation or experiment, and is propounded or accepted as accounting for the known facts; a statement of what are held to be the general laws, principles, or causes of something known or observed.

Central to this definition is the notion of the systematic relations holding between the components of an explanatory model, and the differentiation of theory from the more tentative conception of a hypothesis. (2005, p. 347, emphasis added)

Authors in this field, certainly in southern Africa, fail to show a causal link between dominance and the various ills that they claim will flow from dominance. It is true that ANC, FRELIMO and BDP may conflate state and party in various appointments where some people do not necessarily merit where they are placed. This may impact negatively on the functioning of some institutions. But it is not clear that this is a specific feature of dominant parties alone, undesirable as it may be.

Nor do the supporters of this mode of analysis show that dominance explains any facet of ANC rule or incapacity to rule effectively as seen in the current crisis of the organisation.⁹ Nor can it throw much light in itself on the crisis in Zimbabwe, where ZANU has at times been described as a dominant party. The crisis has been exacerbated with the emergence of a degree of electoral challenge to ZANU rather than at its moment of greatest electoral predominance.

If I am correct in saying that the approach lacks explanatory powers, the so-called theory is merely a prediction of consequences flowing from dominance, a prediction whose connection has to be demonstrated in every case as specifically applicable to this category of ruling dominant parties within our subcontinent

Something is significant theoretically if it is an explanatory device. To warn of dangers is not to prove that those dangers were realised and none of the proponents prove this is or was so and if they occurred that the reason related to dominance. A nexus has to be established between electoral dominance and a particular consequence and that electoral opposition being stronger is a necessary remedy. Thus far the notion of the dominant party cannot be described as a theory but merely a description of a phenomenon. As such it has no *explanatory powers whatsoever and its utility has still to be shown*.

Bogaards (2004) refers to it as a system but that too is not accurate. In this case the conventional South African Concise Oxford English Dictionary (2002, p. 1189) will suffice when it defines a system as 'a complex whole; a set of things working together as a mechanism or interconnecting network. . . . an organised scheme or method . . .'. The dominance arises as a phenomenon that derives from other factors played out in an *electoral system*. The dominance of a party is a factor that one describes. The systemic element lies in electoral arrangements, what their nature is, whether this facilitates fragmentation or consolidation of parties and similar factors.

In short, far from the notion of a dominant party being too insightful to abandon, as Southall (2005) suggests, its insights – should there be any – have still to be revealed. What we have in reality is a replication in a slightly different form of the dogma of the necessity of democracy being founded on the potential defeat of a ruling party/organisation in the foreseeable future. This is coupled with the fetishisation of electoral dominance that fails to acknowledge conditionality in the existence and types of opposition parties. As a purported theory it is certainly

without any scientific basis whatsoever. It is not a theory or a systemic phenomenon, but a description of a reality, from which conclusions and notions of consolidation of democracy are illegitimately drawn. As such its relevance, explanatory power and utility stand at this point as nil.

The ANC government, Zimbabwe and many others face problems and indeed crises. These are in many cases far from resolution, but as indicated, the so-called dominant party 'theory' has until now had *nothing* to contribute to such questions. This is especially so because the dominant party approach has nothing to say about the masses, whose role is a variable that cannot simply be ignored.

I am definitely not thereby suggesting that everything in politics must be resolved by a particular party or organisation that may happen to be dominant. Indeed that is why I pointed to the notion of pluralism meaning more than multi-partyism. Even if that is so, no one interested in democratic development can be expected to draw on vacuous insights regarding dominance, since they have little bearing on anything that is currently causing crises or enable us to understand the past and possible future trajectories of the states in the region. This needs a framework that gives adequate weight to various sites of power, different factors impeding the facilitation of the execution of one or other policy or direction.

More importantly the approach does not point to any form of resolution of crises or type of politics that will contribute towards democratisation in the sense of greater popular involvement. It is consequently an inherently conservative approach, un conducive to popular political activity.

Studies on other parts of the world do not, as I read them, suggest that the political consequences attributed to party dominance necessarily follow or that political conditions in the countries concerned can be explained by such dominance. Each country has specific factors, internally and externally, which mean that dominance is played out differently.

Internal democracy

Having criticised the dominant party approach does not mean that I am thereby asserting that the absence of alternative electoral parties means that debate within the dominant party is sufficiently vibrant to suffice. That is what some ruling parties/organisations wish us to believe.

It is sometimes contended that the dominant party may contain within its modes of operation openings for internal debate that are sufficiently significant to mitigate the dangers that the proponents of the dominance approach indicate. If debate with opposition is contemptuous because they represent a miniscule proportion of the population often hostile to what are projected as national transformational goals, it is argued that debate within a dominant political organisation may often be very robust. This is because the organisation or party contains within it and tolerates distinct factions or tendencies which represent a wide range of society's interests (Reddy, 2005, appears to accept this to a large extent).

At the level of politics pure and simple, there is no doubt that debate within the ANC in the early 1990s was more significant than that between the ANC and its future electoral opponents insofar as one is concerned with future directions of democracy and transformation. But assuming, again, that one discounts the significance of the contribution of the formal opposition parties, that is not the only site one should look to for progressive debate (that is, debate which relates to popular aspirations for empowerment and a better life). Now in this period when the ANC is engaged in internecine disputes over succession and neglecting questions surrounding its overall social programme, the need for alternative forums may be greater than before if every person or group of people with distinct interests want to have these incorporated in a future programme.

My argument or objections against the dominant party approach would not rest on the degree of internal democracy that is present in some such parties. It varies greatly between such organisations and parties and may alter a great deal over time. It may be that a particular dominant party contains within it very vibrant debate at a particular moment, for example the PT (Party of Labour) of Brazil as ruling party is not necessarily classified as a dominant party, but it has institutionalised factions as platforms, formally recognised within the party. The notion of internal debate is then supposedly part of the running of a party.

But conditions alter in the life of any party/organisation and some circumstances are more conducive than others for democratic debate and conditions may change so drastically that under some situations a party previously characterised by internal debate starts to constrict it. The obvious situation is where it is faced by some serious threat or is declared illegal and cannot afford the luxury of conventional debate. The attempts to balance coping with oppression with consultation vary from case to case, especially in militarised situations where command structures are inherently antagonistic to democratic discussion. Nevertheless it still varies greatly within any illegal organisation, in that not every member operates in a location where debate is precluded, and even if it is possible, not every such party takes the opportunity to use or suppress it.

An alternative approach, similar to that previously used by some that defended one-party states, is to refer to the building of consensus as a factor in such parties. It is sometimes suggested that mechanisms for building and maintaining consensus in older liberation movements ensure that there is space for discussion but that this leads ultimately to a consensus, as indicated in Callinicos's biography of Oliver Tambo. Callinicos links Tambo's practice to that which he experienced growing up in an Amaondo village:

The Amaondo, like many polities in southern Africa, had a consensus approach to decision-making, a feature that was to become characteristic of resolutions passed in the African National Congress, particularly under the presidencies of Chief Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo. . . This supremely prudent practice of never straying too far away from their constituencies was to play a profoundly important role in the African National Congress under Tambo's guidance during the exile years. The culture of community involvement and answerability was thus inculcated from childhood (Callinicos, 2004, pp. 34–5. This is a theme that recurs repeatedly in the book).

The suggestion then is that this bears a relation or manifests continuity with older African traditions. It is debatable to what extent these traditions persist and to what extent the character of a consensus marks both expression of a common view and also suppression of distinct tendencies. Consensus is not agreement. It means that what is common is stressed and where the distinct views that are not embraced in the consensus are to find expression is not clear. They are heard but by being part of a caucus or a consensus-based organisation, they can never have distinct organisational expression.

Now I mention illegality because we are dealing with the life of a party that may pass through many phases where even from a period of illegality its dominance may be in the process of creation, as was the case with many national liberation movements in this region. But a key moment impacting on internal democracy is the rise to power of the dominant party. That situation sets in motion a relationship between the organisation and the government/state that it dominates that often militates against internal democracy. The tendency is towards centralisation in the cabinet and presidency and often downgrading in the importance of the movement/party that has led the struggle to attain power. Consequently, while a party may retain the same name over a considerable period, it does not mean that it is the same organisation and the changes it undergoes tend to have an impact on the extent to which the organisation practises internal democracy, and in the case of ascension to government, whether it becomes a transmission belt for 'its' government or whether it retains a role as driver of policies and hence continues to debate and give direction or creatively interact with government.

One should also factor in here that the category of parties to which we refer are structured in a variety of ways and pursue a variety of programmes. Some have never professed to see democracy beyond voting in periodic elections. Others claim to be the bearers of the interests of the masses who have put them there. These parties are funded in diverse ways and these all change over time. Consequently the impact that this has on internal democracy cannot be measured once and for all, at any one moment.

Power and pluralism

Two factors that have emerged in the above discussion need further attention, though what follows does not pretend to do justice to either, insofar as a fuller elaboration is required. Central to the critique of the notion of a dominant party as explanatory device was the question of power and the sites where it is exercised. Also the issue of pluralism was advanced, paradoxically, as a basis for criticising the approach. It is ironical because the dominant party notion is in fact often advanced in the name of promoting pluralism.

The question of power is assumed by the dominant party theorists as something deriving from electoral victory, constantly repeated and apparently irreversible. From that it is assumed that a particular organisation or party will be able to do more or less what it likes without checks and balances. Those protections that

may be found in constitutional mechanisms in certain states are usually said to be inadequate in the face of this supposed juggernaut constituted by electoral favour.

Is this an adequate notion of power and the sites where power is exercised, both by those who are elected in this way and by those who may present obstacles to their rule? It is in the first place an extremely instrumentalist notion of power, shared in fact by most liberation movements and Marxist-Leninists. The notion sees the state as a thing that one has to capture. For the dominant party theorist it is taken hold of through the elections. For the Marxist who is engaged in revolution or the liberation movement fighting colonialism/apartheid it is the moment of seizure of the state or transfer of power that is significant. At that point a thing called power is in the hands of one or other group with one or other orientation and they can then make or remake according to the character of society they want to see.

In reality power is a complex phenomenon and best described, as Poulantzas did so eloquently, as a set of relationships which have to be transformed or negotiated in order to achieve one or other objective, wherever one is located. Being elected to parliament is one site from which one can relate to other sites where opponents or supporters are located with whom one has to interact in order to achieve one's objectives. It is not a thing that one has grasped after wrestling with an opponent but a relationship that has to be managed/negotiated/struggled over in order to achieve a particular objective. Poulantzas has correctly remarked:

To take or capture state power is not simply to lay hands on part of the state machinery in order to replace it with a second power. Power is not a quantifiable substance held by the state that must be taken out of its hands, but rather a series of relations among the various social classes. . . The State is neither a thing-instrument that may be taken away, nor a fortress that may be penetrated by means of a wooden horse, nor yet a safe that may be cracked by burglary: it is the heart of the exercise of political power (Poulantzas, 2000, pp. 257–8. See also Gramsci, 1971, p. 92; and Hobsbawm, 1982, p. 24ff, on Antonio Gramsci's focus before and beyond the moment of 'transfer of power').

What this means is that there are limits on the possible. If one writes that a new democratic government has not expropriated big white farmers (in a place like South Africa, or at an earlier stage in Zimbabwe) and therefore cannot solve issues of land distribution, that is a statement of fact. But what a thorough scholarship needs to do is to unpack why that may be the case. The reality may be that the early years of post-colonial/apartheid, democratic rule required stability and that stability would have been threatened by strong action against such farmers. Likewise conservative macroeconomic policies are determined often through a correct or mistaken calculation of the impact that big business can have in impeding local and foreign investment or in damaging the power of the currency. It is not local emerging black business that has the power to influence foreign capital and the Standard and Poors and others who give a credit rating to a country. It is established capital that can do that. Consequently, these considerations need to be understood when one considers why something is resisted and factor it into one's thinking. In the same way, when the gold mines in South Africa paid low

wages, it was not purely because of immoral indifference to the plight of their workers, but unions had to recognise that mining in South Africa was deep level and consequently, because of expense, very price-sensitive. If the price of gold went down it was harder to pay higher wages and survive. That was not morality, but the conditions of engagement between capital, its environment of mining, and the workers. The phenomenon needs explanation in that it conditioned what was possible to achieve as unionists.

The criticism of the dominant party approach has also rested on a notion of pluralism, which in conventional literature on political parties seems to be restricted to multi-party elections and democracy. The argument presented in this paper is related to what has been said of sites of power, because it is connected to the notion of a range of sites where people are the bearers of specific interests. These interests may under certain situations be adequately articulated by a political party or they may not in some cases – even where particular sectors do support that party. It is simply that the interests and identities concerned cannot be reduced to the scope of operation of a political party. The notion of pluralism that I am advancing is one where one recognises this multiplicity of interests and also identities. These cannot simply be assumed to be addressed in the programme or identity or qualities of a political party or organisation. George Bridges writes from a democratic and socialist perspective:

The society which emerges from this process will take a pluralist form. Power and authority will be vested not in the revolutionary party but in the broad democratic alliance. The elements which comprise the alliance for change will not vanish or become subordinate to a 'universal caretaker' but remain to form crucial links in a system of power.

...The enlargement and enrichment of the democratic terrain is itself a decisive weapon in a popular victory in this struggle, denying the space to undemocratic and reactionary forces. This does not preclude the use of coercion, or legal measures against those challenging democratic, constitutional gains.

A pluralist system does not only depend on institutional arrangements, but on the nature of the relationship between the elements making up the new historic bloc. Crucial here is the notion of autonomy, of the irreducibility of specific components to one 'central' element, be it the revolutionary vanguard, or the labour movement. Unless the autonomous existence within a broad alliance is projected to the structure of power under socialism, no stable alliance can be constructed. Specific social/political interests need space to pursue their particular concerns, because these actually reflect responses to oppressions experienced within capitalism – sexual, racial, national, etc.

These have a relative autonomy from the direct capitalist exploitation of the proletariat and at critical conjunctures can advance to the foreground of political struggle. Thus they cannot be seen as epiphenomenal or essentially reflective of one central oppression (Bridges, 1978, p. 132)

Writing as a socialist, Bridges says that while a socialist economy may eliminate capitalist exploitation, 'there is no spontaneous automatic or overnight elimination of the *experienced* oppressions of capitalism. . . These battles need to

be fought out pluralistically by a range of democratic movements' (Bridges, 1978, pp. 132–3).

The notion of democracy being advanced here, within which dominant parties and other phenomena are considered, is one where all these interests ought to find a way of expression, whether in opposition to a ruling party or independent of it. The modes of expressing these interests may vary and as far as possible it should be possible to accommodate such variation.

The liberation movements in our region very often depicted themselves and were seen as the embodiment of the nation in the process of becoming (Suttner, 2004a, 2004c). Indeed, in the context of colonial and apartheid division of peoples and the spreading of animosity between ethnic groups, it was often necessary to unite, to stress unity rather than distinct identities in the face of artificial divisions fostered in order to retain colonial/apartheid overlordship.

On attainment of liberation, the emphasis on unity has tended to continue and to lead to suppression or discouragement or at least disparagement of alternative organisations, outside of the hegemony of the dominant party/liberation movement. The reality that such a liberation movement or dominant party cannot represent every interest is not fully acknowledged and those who form such organisations are often depicted as dissidents who have taken this socio-political path because of frustrated ambitions within the ruling party/organisation.¹⁰

In summary, the argument presented here is that a focus on a centre is mistaken because there are many centres; there are many places where relationships of power exist. The focus on electoralism is of course totally inadequate to uncover power relationships because its focus is so ephemeral.

If one accepts that power relationships must be seen as located in these ways, we then need to broaden the notion of pluralism that is being worked with to incorporate the right and necessity of people to organise themselves around a variety of issues related to these areas where contestation may occur. We cannot therefore accept Heywood's (2000, p. 175) definition of political pluralism denoting 'the existence of electoral choice and a competitive party system'.

The contestation may relate to a variety of issues already engaged in the past or they may relate to issues that we experience now or do not know of but will arise in the future. We cannot predict just as we could not predict in the past what would be all the issues over which people would want to engage. But we need in principle to recognise the right and the necessity for them to be able to do so.

With this type of approach we do not put any one factor, whether the dominance of a party or the existence of an opposition organised in whatever way as the only factor of relevance to democracy. We recognise that the relevant factors are multi-fold and given the range of these sites we need some humility in trying to unpack the modes of working that will need our understanding.

The question to ask is how the popular will can be realised (or openly admit that one is disregarding that). That will and those aspirations may be realised through conventional representative democracy, but we also need to probe what are the problems and possibilities beyond that.

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Notes

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- 1. I have in the past been in the leadership of the ANC, SACP and UDF and although not in structures at this time, maintain contact with various figures.
- 2. At the outset, notions of popular democracy, originally associated with the meaning of the concept are not entertained at all. In fact, one of the objects of the exercise is to erect defences against the masses threatening the type of democracy that is envisaged. On the changing notions of the people and their place in concepts of democracy over time, see Arblaster (2002).
- 3. Note the use of words connoting causality without any demonstration of a causal link.
- 4. Emphasis in original. It should be noted, however, that alternation in power may only be a theoretical possibility in cases where there is not an authoritarian dominant party. It may be, as was the case in the ANC until recently, where the potential of defeat seemed more or less impossible. It may still be the case in that current opposition parties may not pose a threat. But the present crisis of the organisation makes the possibility of a serious split not unthinkable and the consequences, while unlikely to dislodge the organisation's dominance, could make it conceivable (c.f. Suttner, 2007).
- 5. This notion fits squarely into one trend in a lineage stretching back to ancient times, contrasting the wisdom of a small, usually wealthy group, with the ignorant masses (Arblaster, 2002).
- 6. Thiven Reddy indicates in a historical comparison that the Indian National Congress, while being a dominant party/organisation, did not incur the criticism currently experienced by the ANC, and he argues for various mechanisms that are counterweights to 'dominance'. It is an empirical study rather than both an empirical and theoretical questioning of the notion of dominance per se as is done here (Reddy, 2005).
- 7. See Bottomore (1993, p. 41): 'Representative government, parties and elections are now seen increasingly as providing an essential framework but as inadequate by themselves to establish a democratic society in the more radical sense of government by the people'.
- 8. At a Friedrich Ebert Stiftung conference in Maputo in 2004.
- 9. This crisis is returned to in Suttner (2007).
- 10. Personal experience in listening to discussions among ANC members and leaders.

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