MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS SHAKE UP SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS

By Sarah Graveline

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A woman, center, wearing a traditional dress with the face of South African President Jacob Zuma, waits with others outside a polling station to cast her ballot during municipal elections in Khayelitsha township on the outskirts of Cape Town, South Africa, Wednesday, August 3, 2016. (Source: AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam.)

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STRANGERS IN A FAMILIAR LAND: A REFERENDUM ON IVOIRITÉ?

By Hilary Matfess

President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire seems to be making progress on his 2015 campaign promise to deliver a new constitution to the country. On July 14, 2016, the Ivorian National Assembly voted to organize a constitutional referendum in the fall. Although details at this point are scant, the proposed constitution will likely favor a decentralized form of government and include provisions for creating a senate, as well as the position of vice president. In a more controversial move, however, the constitution will scrap the provision demanding that presidential candidates prove that both of their parents are "natural born Ivorians" to qualify for the position. This provision was used specifically to prevent Ouattara from running for president in the 2000 election. If not delicately managed, the constitutional referendum could well reignite the country's long-simmering civil conflict. _more..._

President Alassane Ouattara speaks to the Associated Press during an interview in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, Thursday, October 29, 2015. (Source: AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam.)

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Voters are Frustrated with the ANC

Voter frustration with the ANC is in part predicated on corruption and political mismanagement at the national level. South African President Jacob Zuma, in office since May 2009, has faced at least five major scandals that have led the opposition to publicly question his fitness for office. In April, Zuma narrowly avoided being impeached by parliament after a long-running battle over his decision to accept state money for $16 million worth of upgrades to his private residence in Nkandla.

Zuma has also overseen a variety of staffing scandals that have damaged the ANC's credibility. In December 2015, Zuma abruptly fired his finance minister and appointed successively two inexperienced ANC members to the position before public outrage led Zuma to appoint former finance minister Pravin Gordhan. The scandal caused the South African rand to tumble, harming South Africa's already-struggling economy. Zuma responded to corruption within the South African Police Service by appointing Mangwashi "Riah" Phiyega, a civilian, as the National Commissioner in June 2012. In July 2016, she was suspended from office after being found unfit for duty by a national commission investigating the Marikana massacre, in which 44 protesting miners were killed by police during her tenure. Zuma has also been criticized for appointing Hlaudi Motsoeneng as COO of the South African Broadcasting Corporation—a series of journalists have alleged that Motsoeneng inappropriately censors negative coverage of Zuma or the ANC.

Although national-level scandals have harmed the ANC's reputation, local mismanagement and service delivery failures are the most pressing concerns for voters. Analysts argue that these failures are in part due to the financial incentives driving competition for local offices. Given South Africa's high unemployment rate, gaining a paid position within local government is one of the few ways ordinary South Africans can ensure their own financial security. Once in office, however, there are few incentives for local government officials to work to improve their communities. Since 2010, each year there have been on average 150 protests related to poor municipal service delivery within South Africa. This figure is nearly four times as high as it was during the mid-2000s.

The financial benefits available to public officeholders have also led to outbreaks of violence between factions pressing for their candidate to be nominated by a political party on the ballot this month. In June and July, 12 ANC leaders were killed in Kwa Zulu-Natal province in conflicts over nomination lists. Similarly, in Tshwane municipality five people were killed during protests over the ANC's nomination for mayor.

Democratic Alliance and Economic Freedom Fighters: Better Alternatives?

Two opposition parties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), attempted to capitalize on widespread dissatisfaction with the ANC in their national campaigns. Although the DA and EFF have markedly divergent platforms, early results show that the two parties have forced the ANC into a tight race in the key metropolitan areas of Johannesburg and Tshwane (including Pretoria), while the DA is on track to unseat the ANC in Nelson Mandela Bay (including Port Elizabeth).

The DA is more established than the EFF. It won 22 percent of the vote in the 2014 elections, and it is campaigning on the strength of its reforms in the Western Cape, where it has controlled local government since 2009. The DA is handicapped, however, by public perceptions that it is a white, urban party. Led from 2007 through 2015 by Helen Zille, a white former journalist, the DA has performed best in the Western Cape, the only province where black South Africans do not constitute the majority of the population. To combat this perception, the DA elected Mmusi Maimane as its first black leader in 2015. Young and social-media savvy, Maimane has sought to convince voters that the DA has built more successfully on Mandela's legacy than the ANC, which he argues has become corrupt and cut off from its origins.

The EFF has also made criticism of the ANC central to its campaign. The party was founded in 2013 by Julius Malema, the former President of the ANC Youth League who was expelled from the party after vocally criticizing Zuma. As head of the EFF, Malema has won attention and support through incendiary rhetoric. In one speech he threatened to "remove the government through the barrel of a gun." The EFF's policies are equally radical, calling for land to be expropriated without compensation and for mines and banks to be nationalized.

Conclusion

South Africa's 2016 municipal elections have unleashed a wave of voter dissatisfaction that will continue to challenge the ANC in the lead-up to national elections. While the ANC has generally achieved polling success based on its history and the strength of its brand, there are signs that its political power is waning. Historically, the ANC has built support through its membership in the Tripartite Alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). But increasing tension between the ANC and the SACP, combined with the breakoff of several key unions from Cosatu, means that the alliance no longer carries the same influence among voters that it did in the immediate post-apartheid era.

Increasingly, South Africans are willing to look outside the ANC in search of solutions to a persistently weak economy and a 26.7 percent unemployment rate. Municipal campaigns in Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay have drawn attention to the ANC's failures and, as the elections apparently have shown, caused many South Africans to seriously consider alternatives to the ruling party. In the face of widespread discontent, the ANC is reaching a crossroads. It must demonstrate its ability to bring corruption under control and strengthen service delivery or face a continued erosion of support leading up to the 2019 national elections.

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History of Identity Conflicts and "Ivoirité"

The debate over Ivorian citizenship can be traced to the country's independence from France in 1960. The first constitution after independence asserted that those living within the new nation's borders before independence would be considered citizens. This big tent approach did not endure beyond

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the softly authoritarian tenure of the country's first president, Felix Houphouet-Boigny. After his death, multiparty elections were re-established in the early 1990s, and the definition of citizenship became an issue. Resentment toward France, the former colonial power, and toward "strangers" (immigrants from neighboring countries) had simmered for years, but the 1990s saw the development of an exclusionary set of conditions for citizenship. Henri Konan Bedie, the President of Côte d'Ivoire from 1993 to 1999, developed the concept of "Ivoirité" or "Ivorian-ness," which politicized the citizenship debate in a new and volatile way by emphasizing divisions among groups that considered themselves Ivorian. The brand of patriotism that emerged from this definition has been described as "ultranationalist and extremely violent."

The concept was an exclusionary one, as it divided Ivorians along ethno-political and regional lines. In particular, the concept of Ivoirité was considered by many to marginalize Muslims in the north, where there is a higher rate of immigration. In 2000, a hasty referendum on the restriction of the presidency to those who met Ivoritié conditions disqualified Ouattara from that election and forced him to demonstrate his parents' lineage in subsequent elections. Many have traced the perception of the referendum as "a blatant attempt to curtail Ouattara's rising power and the political participation of northerners" to the country's 2002 civil war. This conflict saw a coalition of armed rebels from the north, called the "Forces Nouvelles de Côte D'Ivore," fighting the "Young Patriots," from the country's south. More than 1,000 people are thought to have died in the fighting.

Debates over who is "truly Ivorian" were also behind the 2011 crisis in the country. The violence followed the 2010 presidential election there, in which Ouattara proved his eligibility and won, according to international observers. His main opponent, incumbent Laurent Gbagbo, whose support was largely in the Christian south, refused to concede defeat. The resulting violence claimed more than 3,000 lives and displaced more than 500,000 people. The conflict ended with Gbagbo's indictment by the International Criminal Court and Ouattara being sworn in as the president.

Moving Forward

The wounds of the 2011 conflict are still evident in the country, and Ivoirité remains a potent political force. The proposed referendum may stir up ethnic resentment and xenophobia, possibly resulting in violence. Although lacking sufficient cohesion and representation to stop the referendum bill, a group of more than 20 opposition political parties have agreed to campaign against proceeding with the constitutional referendum.

The issue of what defines a citizen is a pressing matter, not merely a question of symbolism. According to Sayre Nyce of Refugees International, Ivoirite's definition of a "true" citizen as someone with two natural-born Ivorian parents "renders about 30 percent of the Ivory Coast's 16 million inhabitants foreign." The Ivoirian government has estimated that at least 700,000 people are stateless within the country's borders. These people cannot work legally in Cote d'Ivoire, nor can they access government services and assistance.

The process of documenting identity is also in need of reform. At present, obtaining an Ivorian ID card can cost between $40 and $100. For many, this price is simply too high—especially since formal employment without an Ivorian ID is nearly impossible to come by. As one undocumented woman in Cote d'Ivoire put it, "being stateless is like not having an identity."

The issues to be debated in the constitutional referendum extend beyond the question of identity and include restructuring the country's legislative and executive branches. Although these issues are worthy of debate, it seems possible that they will be crowded out by divisive identity discussions. The election of President Ouattara did not put to rest the notion of Ivoirité, and ethno-political and geographic divisions in the country remain potent. Although Ouattara won re-election in 2015, anti-Northern, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim sentiments were prominent in that campaign.

Conclusions

Although Côte D'Ivoire has been relatively peaceful and stable under President Ouattara, if he follows through on his 2015 campaign promise to bring about a constitutional referendum, it is possible the proposed changes will reignite the sort of identity politics that claimed thousands of lives over the past 15 years. The international community, while supporting democratic constitutional reform, should be alert to the prospect of violence and instability as the referendum nears. Providing financial and technical support to the constitutional drafting process and ensuring that the referendum abides by the highest standards of transparency could help legitimize the process and ease tensions among those who feel marginalized.

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