

Zuma and his men drain the magic from Nelson's fairyland

The African National Congress is in a woeful state. With Nelson Mandela, its great moral leader, gone, it is continually rent by factional struggles, corrupt from top to bottom and increasingly divided along tribal lines, its poor record of governance reflected in repeated national downgrades by the credit rating agencies.

Although it is clear that President Jacob Zuma will lead the ANC to victory in next year's elections, the party is expected to lose ground almost everywhere save in Zuma's home province of KwaZulu-Natal, where Zulu tribal support continues to consolidate behind him, greatly assisted by all manner of pork-barrel projects from which the province has benefited.

The ANC is losing ground in all the big cities and in the next local elections could well lose Johannesburg, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth (as well as Cape Town, which it has already lost to the Democratic Alliance).

More and more it is dependent on the country's most backward rural areas, where it can rely on the (well-rewarded) traditional chiefs to marshal the vote for it. This is increasingly making the ANC look like one of the old Bantustan ruling parties that presided over the apartheid-era tribal homelands.

This process is symbolised by the national scandal over Zuma's home village of Nkandla, where a virtual royal homestead has been built for him by the state. Here Zuma lives with his multiple wives and many children, with high-tech devices keeping track of his still more numerous cattle. In effect Zuma has created a feudal homestead rivaling that of the Zulu king — all built with public money. The country's warships are in dock and its aircraft grounded because so large a proportion of the

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defence budget is spent on a fleet of helicopters to fly Zuma and his retinue in and out of Nkandla.

All of which makes Zuma unpopular — witness the repeated booing of him at Mandela's memorial service. And the sight of the president helping himself so generously from the national exchequer encourages equally bare-faced corruption by ministers, civil servants, municipal bosses and the police.

He has carried out such a successful party recruitment campaign in KwaZulu-Natal that the province now dominates the ANC, providing more than half its national executive.

This situation is fuelling ethnic tensions, which are bound to become greater once the election next year reveals the party's even heavier reliance on the Zulu vote. Already the ANC-supporting Congress of South African Trade Unions is badly split, with most of the opposition to its Zulu (and pro-Zuma) president, Sdumo Dlamini, coming from Xhosas in the Eastern Cape.

Moreover, despite the

election of Cyril Ramaphosa (from the low-status Venda tribe) as Zuma's deputy, the realisation is setting in that Zuma's successor will be a Zulu, probably the former KwaZulu-Natal premier Zweli Mkhize.

The boss of a security company that has provided bodyguards for many ANC leaders told me: "Mandela's party is now long dead. For some years now the ANC has been a federation of warlords." Similarly, Omry Makgoale, an ANC guerrilla fighter who used to be Oliver Tambo's bodyguard, said: "There's nothing to be done with the ANC now. It's been completely taken over by gangsters."

The ANC might be forgiven all this if its policies were working, but they aren't. Unemployment is over 40% and growing. The country is desperately dependent on foreign investment — it is running large trade and budget deficits — and yet its Communist minister of trade, Rob Davies, is cancelling one investment protection treaty after another, despite the shrill protests of the EU, which accounts for more than 80% of foreign investment.

Similarly, the government has recently announced that it wishes to expropriate 51% of all the foreign companies involved in the country's huge private security business. It is also forcing through extreme new black economic empowerment and affirmative action laws, as if determined to repel foreign investment.

Debt interest is already the fastest-growing part of the national budget and with South Africa now borrowing money from abroad to pay for its civil servants and its social welfare handouts, the country is in danger of falling into a

classical debt trap in which it has to borrow more and more just to pay old debts.

This is what is making the credit rating agencies so nervous, and further downgrades cannot be ruled out, which means South Africa may have to opt for a bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Should this occur, it would be a signal that, despite its brave start under Mandela, the ANC has simply failed to govern the country effectively.

"Perhaps people learnt the wrong things from Mandela," said the historian Charles van Onselen. "There was so much symbolism; indeed Mandela was almost nothing but symbolism."

"And there were so many anniversaries to celebrate — Sharpeville [the massacre of 69 demonstrators outside a police station in 1960], the Treason Trial [in which Mandela was one of 156 accused in 1956], the foundation of the ANC in 1912 and many more dates."

"The ANC loved nothing better than such symbolic celebration. So they got used to living in a sort of fairyland where people could be appointed to key jobs — which they couldn't do — because they were symbolic. The result has been a complete dissociation between merit and achievement or appointment, with many of the most competent people put out of jobs because they've got the wrong skin colour. You can't really run a complex society like that."

What is clear is that the ANC underestimated how difficult it would be to govern such a large, various and divided country. "The Afrikaner Nationalists struggled to govern," said the historian Hermann Giliomee, "and they only had to satisfy a racial oligarchy. Governing this country democratically calls for political and technical skills which this government simply doesn't have."

Andrew Sullivan is away

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