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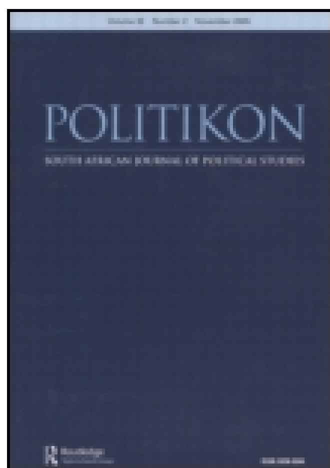

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The South African Government and the Application of Co-optive Power

NICOLA DE JAGER*

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ABSTRACT *The question of power remains critically important. South Africa provides a salient example of the relevance of soft or co-optive power. This paper investigates the South African government's use of two forms of co-optive power, namely, institutional centralisation and dispositional centralisation. The first refers to the centralising of the state apparatus as evidenced in the reformed Presidency. The second is highlighted in state-society relations as civil society is relegated to the role of implementer of state policy and its political space as an agent of accountability is severely constrained.*

Introduction

South Africa's first democratically elected government confronted a massive challenge: undividing the divided. The question of how to overcome differences in order to build a united nation is a complex one. On the one side, it is evident that, through its policies and legislation the government is acknowledging and encouraging the ethnic and cultural plurality of its citizens, so long as these differences are not mounted to contend with the government. On the other hand, the ANC-led government considers itself to be the 'only leader of the people' by virtue of democratic elections and therefore the only legitimate voice representing the views of the people. In addition, the government appears to be attempting to create unity via centralisation and promoting conformity as evidenced in the centralisation of the governmental structure and, in particular, the increasing control of the Presidency. Plurality, as demonstrated in and expressed through the multiplicity of civil society organisations, is too, being restrained with attempts to institutionalise the role of these organisations, and with civil society's function largely being confined to implementers of governmental policy. In essence, this paper will seek to investigate two trends: whether the South African government is succumbing to the global trend of centralisation and whether alternative views expressed through the medium of civil society are being silenced.

Since it is argued that South Africa is in a process of centralising power, the concept power will be addressed as a theoretical foundation of the paper. In particular, an explanation for co-optive power will be given. Second, the paper will turn to investigate the changes in South Africa's governmental structure as

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evidence of institutional centralisation. Third, the role of civil society will be assessed as an instrument of democracy and as an agent of accountability. Departing from this context, the state-civil society relationship will be analysed as an example of dispositional centralisation.

Theoretical foundations: power

The changing resources and faces of power

In politics the concept of power is usually conceived as a relationship, the ability of actor A to get actor B to do or not do something. Joseph Nye defines power as the 'ability to achieve one's purposes' (1997, p. 51). Heywood (2002, p. 11) recognises that there are many faces of power, listing three: power as decision making, power as agenda setting and power as thought control. Placed within the third face of power is Steven Lukes' (1974) understanding of power as the ability to influence another by shaping what the person thinks, wants and needs. This power is exercised through propaganda or the impact of ideology. Very basically, ideology is a set of ideas that forms the foundation of political organisation: it determines what the 'good life' should look like and how it can be achieved. Nye (2003, p. 57) distinguishes between hard power and soft power. Hard power rests on the ability to use the inducements ('carrots') and threats ('sticks') of economic and military might to make others follow your will. Whereas co-optive or soft power is a more indirect method of exercising power; it is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your objectives and values. Holsti (1995, pp. 126–127) similarly identifies what he refers to as 'structural power', which acknowledges that social relationships take place within a particular context of position, authority and tradition. If you have structural power you have the ability to set the rules of the game and determine the prevailing standards. Although Holsti and Nye largely use these distinctions to investigate power in international relations and, in particular, foreign policy, the terms can be equally instructive in the study of politics.

Important resources of soft power or structural power include: having the means to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others, through making one's objectives attractive and by determining the discourse or the framework of the debate (Nye, 2003, p. 57). 'Discourse has an intrinsic power to frame, set parameters, suggest agenda, help select policy options' (Muchie, 2004, p. 7) and thus is an important tool for those who are in a position to manufacture, name and control the discourse. Those who control the discourse are able, through rhetoric, to determine the 'us' and the 'them'. And, by the very nature of their position, which enables them to exercise soft power, they can disarm and discredit critical elements.

Therefore, to use Nye's terminology, hard power is more overt and recognisable, whereas soft power is subtle and not so easily identifiable, but no less important. This paper recognises two forms of soft or co-optive power: institutional centralisation and dispositional centralisation. Institutional centralisation ensures

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that decision making and policy making are centrally coordinated from where the 'rules of the game' emanate. Dispositional centralisation is achieved with the undermining of alternative views by setting the discourse and defining the functions that institutions besides the state can fulfil. It is essentially the determining of the rules of the game and the silencing of opposition or alternatives to those rules.

Party dominant systems

Including a brief overview of the characteristics of the so-called 'party dominant system' is meaningful in the discussion of power as maintaining dominance in a democratic system, it is argued, is a further example of the exercising of soft power. According to Friedman (1999, p. 99), a party dominant system is a democracy where there are regular elections, opposition parties are free to organise and express themselves, and civil liberties, for the most part, are respected. What distinguishes them from other democracies is the monopoly of power by one party. Since the party wins its position through democratic elections its dominance cannot be attained through force or deceit. Duverger (cited in Friedman, 1999, p. 100) defines such dominance as 'a question of influence rather than strength'. Since the dominant party holds power within a democracy its dominance is not a given and must therefore be continually maintained. Methods used to ensure dominance include: delegitimising the opposition; relying on and emphasising 'kinship' contacts between the citizens and government (Friedman, 1999, p. 101), for example through highlighting continually a shared past; the monopoly or near-monopoly of the public policy agenda; and the creation or perpetuation of an enemy to unite against, whether the enemy is real or not.

A party dominant system would fit in to what Southall (2003, pp. 74–75) recognises as 'low intensity' democracy, the road he believes South Africa is on—implying that the formal requirements for democracy are met, yet 'under conditions of decreasing competition and declining popular participation', where dissent and critical thought are steadily being overwhelmed through the processes of centralisation. Friedman similarly recognises that to best ensure its control a dominant party will need to dominate the formal polity as well as civil society (Friedman, 1999, p. 116).

SA government: party dominance through soft power

The initial party dominance of the South African government system by the ANC was a given with its wide support base due to its history as the victorious liberation movement. Its dominance has been confirmed by receiving an overwhelming majority in the 1994, 1999 and 2004 elections, yet due to the very nature of a democratic system, such dominance requires maintenance and strategy without the use of force or fraud, evidenced in autocracies and dictatorships. In other words, hard power is not an option for the ANC-led government; thus, the paper turns to investigate the use of instruments of soft power.

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Emanating from and within the South African government two manifestations of power are apparent, namely, institutional centralisation and dispositional centralisation. The methods used to ensure party dominance, as identified by Friedman (1999), are evident in the processes of institutional and dispositional centralisation. The first can be seen in the governmental structure via the strengthening of centralised control by an expanded Presidential office. The latter, dispositional centralisation, is less tangible, but is rather to be found when unravelling the power of discourse. It is asserted that the political space of South Africa's political and civil society is being contended and thereby severely restrained using the realm of discourse.

Institutional centralisation: the state apparatus

It cannot be denied that the ANC-led government of South Africa was handed an enormous challenge, leading the country after over 40 years of apartheid rule and segregation into democracy. But, as Galvin and Habib (2003, p. 865) point out: 'although the new South African government has adopted a range of policies that promote decentralisation, competing tendencies toward centralisation have become increasingly evident'.

The process of decentralisation was accepted by the ANC as the conclusion of constitutional negotiations (Niksic, 2004). The ANC was pressurised to concede on its pledge to unitary government by accommodating the interests of minority groups and thus it accepted a more federalised form of government. During the Multi-Party Negotiating Forum, greater levels of authority and responsibility to lower levels of government were agreed to. The Constitution and White Paper on Local Government's handling of decentralisation are considered to be on the cutting edge of international theory. Yet, in spite of the rhetorical assurance of decentralisation in policy papers and legislation, centripetal tendencies are undermining the implementation of these policies (Galvin and Habib, 2003, p. 866).

There are four possible reasons for this centralising tendency.

First, the apartheid system was based on a federal and supposedly decentralised, albeit warped, form of government, thus there is an understandable aversion to a federal system. It also explains why our system of government, even though it has a federal form is never referred to as such by the government.

Second, although national leaders may make eloquent statements in praise of decentralisation, in reality they tend to perceive it as undermining their capacity to administer development and to control the processes and resources thereof. Instead, they consider that centralisation enables better co-ordination.

Third, President Thabo Mbeki and many within the ANC government leadership have been trained within the radical Leninist school of thought, which gives pre-eminence to the role of the 'vanguard party' (Johnson, 2002, p. 222), thereby underpinning their understanding of a hierarchical relationship between rulers and ruled.

Then lastly, there is a growing worldwide tendency towards centralisation, a wave that South Africa appears determined to ride.

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During Mandela's tenure as president, a Presidential Review Commission was set up to review the functions and structure of the presidential office. It insisted that the Presidency should form the core of the system of governance, emphasising that the centralising of power was a growing trend among governments around the world. The report rationalised that the purpose of centralisation was to enable the heads of government to play a strong coordinating role towards the achievement of election promises. One of the recommendations was to merge the Offices of the President and Deputy President, because of overlapping support structures and functions, which were excessively costly. Of interest, is the outcome of the merger, whereas the combined staff complement of the former Offices of the President and Deputy President was 296, the restructured Presidency has a staff complement of 341 (The Presidency, 2000/2001, pp. 3–7).

In June 1997, the executive government, namely, the Cabinet, approved the establishment of an important new unit in the President's office. The Co-ordination and Implementation Unit (CIU) was designed to 'equip government with the strategic planning and management capacity it required' (Davis, 1999, p. 6). This unit then evolved into the Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Service (PCAS). When asked during an interview with the *Financial Mail* what the CIU was, Mbeki answered:

> It's an economic, a socio-economic co-ordinating unit. There has been a difficulty in the separation of departments, with each doing its own thing. When people think about foreign affairs, they normally think of the department of foreign affairs. But trade and industry is in foreign affairs, finance is in foreign affairs, defence is in foreign affairs, safety and security are in foreign affairs—a whole number of departments. You could have a situation where each one is pulling in different directions. So you need a co-ordinating unit, particularly with regard to economic questions. It is a unit of co-ordination (Bruce and Laurence, 1997).

The Policy Co-ordination and Advisory Service, consisting of five units, vets new policy and drafts legislation for tabling at Cabinet meetings. The units are accountable to no legislative body and it is mandatory for the ministries to refer all new policy documents and draft legislation to the Presidency for examination by the PCAS. The five units, namely, economic sector, intergovernmental co-ordination, social sector, criminal justice system, and international relations, are headed by chief directors. The chief directors are at least as powerful as the cabinet ministers, but with a salient difference; whereas the latter are accountable to Parliament, the chief directors are not. They are accountable to Mbeki alone. The likely result is that decisions will be made behind the scenes by the PCAS, while the ministers will be reduced to managers and marketers of the new policies (Chothia and Jacobs, 2002, pp. 151–153).

Further changes resulting from the reorganisation of the Presidency include the alteration of the relationship between the different levels of government as the centre is strengthened so the provinces are weakened. Provincial government's budget has been curtailed and is determined by the national Ministry of Finance. But, perhaps the biggest concern is the severely limited Parliament, whose committees lack sufficient funds to monitor the government and which

do not have access to the decisions of the PCAS (Chothia and Jacobs, 2002, p. 154). On the one hand, it seems to indicate the intention of the government to improve the co-ordination of its programmes, but it also raises the question of whether the Cabinet ministries and provincial governments are being sidelined. The restructuring has raised much concern with the central question being: 'how much of the restructuring is about improved co-ordination, and how much about power?'. The concern is regardless of whether the intentions are benign, the centralisation paves the way for the possibility of an imperial Presidency, (Chothia and Jacobs, 2002, pp. 149–151).

With the process of consolidation Mbeki has reduced the role of all but a few within the governmental apparatus to managers, marketers and implementers of policy handed down from the highest echelons of government. And those that maintain policy-making powers are accountable to the President alone. It appears that Mbeki's governmental restructuring is guided by, as Chothia and Jacobs (2002, p. 159) state it, the three Cs: Centralise, Co-ordinate and Control.

Agents of accountability

There are two primary spheres from where democratic accountability, towards constraining the power of the state, can emanate: political society and civil society. This paper, however, gives focus to civil society

Civil society

Civil society is an umbrella term and exactly which groupings of actors it covers is undeniably debatable. Taking a broad understanding of the term, civil society comprises a multiplicity of actors, including, amongst others, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), trade unions, churches, media, research institutions and think tanks, social movements, women's groups, environmental groups and human rights organisations. The contention over which roles civil society is expected to fulfil is evident in its numerous and diverging definitions. In Ikelegbe's (2001, pp. 2–3) words: 'A central hypothesis of the civil society paradigm is that it is the force for societal resistance to state excesses and the centerpiece organisationally, materially and ideologically of the social movements and protests for reform and change'. This definition is largely derived from the understanding of civil society as developed by thinkers such as John Locke and Adam Ferguson, that of a counteractive force to the centralising tendencies of the state.

On the other hand, Muchie (2004, p. 7) questions the validity of the above definition by strongly arguing that the strength of civil society and the state is not to be found in an adversarial relationship, but instead in partnership and cooperative arrangements. Habib (2003, p. 228) takes the middle ground in recognising the plurality of civil society's social and political agendas, which in turn will be reflected in state-society relations. By implication, it is only natural that some relationships between the state and civil society will be

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characterised by cooperation, while others will be characterised by conflict. Habib and Kotze (2002, p. 3) go on to define civil society as 'the organised expression of various interests and values operating in the triangular space between family, state and the market'. Civil society organisations (CSOs) therefore derive their legitimacy from their ability 'to bring new issues on the public agenda, provide information, act independently from government and business interests and from their closeness to the people on the ground' (Naidoo and Finn Heinrich, 2000).

This final definition reflects a more accurate description of civil society and its diversity of functions. Civil society celebrates plurality and diversity and this is considered to be a healthy state of affairs.

Dispositional centralisation: silencing civil society

As the previous discussion on the centralisation of South Africa's governmental system indicates a moving away of direct participation in the decision-making process from the citizen, civil society becomes the obvious other avenue for articulating the concerns and issues of South Africa's diverse population. While it is agreed that civil society need not be in opposition to the state, what is paramount and should not be negotiable is that it maintains its autonomy in terms of the state. With South Africa's promotion of state-society partnerships, characterised by the state setting the policy and determining the objectives, while civil society is reduced to implementer of state policy, the lines of separation are becoming indistinct and blurred. Civil society derives its very legitimacy from its ability to act and then to act independently. It is becoming clear that in South Africa this mandate of civil society is being strongly challenged by the government. The development of more formal and regulated civil society-state relations will subvert the character of civil society and compromise its role in enhancing democracy.

In rhetoric the plurality of civil society is acknowledged by South African politicians and government officials, yet there exists an expectation for a 'single homogenous set of relations between the state and civil society' (Habib, 2003, p. 239). Mbeki clearly finds fault with the counter-hegemonic role of civil society.[1] His reaction to this role of civil society is instructive:

> ... the democratic movement must resist the liberal concept of 'less government', which, while being presented as a philosophical approach towards the state in general, is in fact, aimed specifically at the weakening of the democratic state. The purpose of this offensive is precisely to deny the people the possibility to use the collective strength and means concentrated in the democratic state to bring about the transformation of society (cited in Johnson, 2002, p. 228).

Former President Nelson Mandela, had earlier assumed an equally dim view of organisations of civil society that sought to adopt the role of critical overseer of the ANC government and who served as channels for grass-roots grievances

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(Johnson 2002, p. 231). At the National Civil Society Conference in April 2001 Mandela is quoted as saying:

> We cannot approach the subject of civil society from the point of view that government represents an inherent negative force in society; and that civil society is needed to curb government. Such an approach runs the risk of projecting civil society as adjunct to the organised political opposition ... We cannot in the long term afford a situation where the majority of the population perceives civil society as something oppositional to their needs, wishes and interests because it is seen to instinctively oppose the government they voted into office.

At the same conference Mandela (2001) asserts that the challenge for society:

> ... is how various organs of civil society can co-operate to advance overall national goals of transformation ... and trust that these efforts at cooperative partnerships will bear fruit for our society ... In that manner we can ensure that the energies of civil society are harnessed for the progress and unity rather than for division and dissipation of efforts.

In the ANC document, *The State and Social Transformation*, it is stated that the government is 'the only vehicle which possess the capacity to act as the leader of the people in their struggle to establish a truly democratic state' (ANC, 1996, p. 1). The document goes on to point out 'the importance of community-based and non-governmental organisations in the system of governance of the democratic state' (1996, p. 6). Thus, civil society must fit in with and advance the national goals as set by the state. Muchie (2004, p. 4) makes a poignant statement when he says, concerning the concept of civil society: 'It matters how the concept is appropriated and for whom and by whom?'. In terms of the civil society-state relations, it appears that the state is assigned the role of: knowledge producer, policy developer, decision maker and writer of the agenda for social transformation, whereas, civil society should support the government through the mobilisation and implementation of governmental directives. Thus, according to the state, civil society must serve the goals set by the state otherwise it has no function.

Mbeki's understanding of civil society is reflected in Muchie's (2004, p. 2) work, where partnership between the state and civil society is promoted as the necessary requirement for 'constructing social cohesion'. Muchie's advocacy of this unitary role for civil society can be understood as a reaction to the branding of African states as 'failed' states whilst civil society is lifted on a pedestal and attributed with the ability to ensure democracy. Delving into his arguments may help in understanding the South African government's expectation of civil society. Muchie has three main arguments, which he uses to bolster his case against a conflictual or accountability-type state-society relationship and, thereby promoting state-society partnership to be non-conflicting and cooperative. Muchie (2004, p. 1) asserts that the shift of donor funding from the state to civil society affirms his argument that 'donors arrogate the power of controlling the discourse and rhetoric for promotion of the NGOs and the demotion of the State' (2004, p. 6). A second argument developed by Muchie (2004, p. 6) is that the African state has been further eroded through the defection of civil servants to the supposedly more lucrative civil society sector. Third, he claims that the

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'state retreat has been yoked with the revival of free-market ideology and civil society' (2004, p. 7).

The above is instructive in understanding the African state's suspicion of civil society and would be an understandable cause for greater regulation of civil society, except that the above is not true for the South African context. At the outset it is acknowledged that civil society is certainly not always 'civil', as demonstrated by the vigilantism of groups like People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD) and the perception that it is the panacea to the country's social problems is equally misguided. South Africa too is certainly not categorised as a failed state; in fact, it has been greatly praised for its ten successful years of democracy.

Regarding the movement of funding from the state to civil society, in South Africa a different phenomenon has taken place. In the 1970s and 1980s during the conflictual politics of apartheid, a plethora of initiatives and organisations arose in opposition to the state, and it was these civil society organisations that many donors funded (Hearn, 2000). But, with the elections of 1994, there was a significant shift of 'democracy assistance' or aid towards the state with the aim of strengthening government structures. For example, Denmark described its assistance programme to South Africa as 'targeted towards facilitating the transition from an authoritarian minority rule to a democratic system of government' (Hearn, 2000). Instead it was CSOs that felt the financial crunch as 'foreign donors redirected their funding away from CSOs to the state' (Habib, 2003, p. 234). Even in those situations where donors like the European Union committed to funding both government and civil society, most of the funds are to be administered by government-controlled agencies like the National Development Agency (Fioramonti, 2004).

Second, it is in fact civil society that has felt the 'brain drain' as many institution and movement leaders from during the anti-apartheid struggle moved into governmental positions with the 1994 regime change (Habib and Taylor, 1999).

Third, there is a misconception that liberalisation or the introduction of the free market necessarily leads to the retreat of the state. A study by Dan Rodrik (2000, p. 232) indicates a 'positive correlation between a nation's openness to trade and the amount of its spending on social programmes'. Rodrik affirms that his results are not confined to OECD countries, but that developing countries exhibit similar patterns. Thus there are two seemingly contradictory trends: 'the growth of trade and the growth of government' (Rodrik, 2000, p. 230). In South Africa, one of the reasons for the decline in the number of CSOs has been attributed to the ANC-government reclaiming its role as service provider (Fioramonti, 2004).

In light of the above it is difficult to understand the government's aversion to the possibility of a plurality of roles that can be fulfilled by civil society, including that of an accountability force. Civil society is not a threat to the state; from the above discussion it is clear the opposite is in fact true. In any normal healthy relationship there will be a certain amount of conflict and disagreement, to negate this as a possibility is to promote an unhealthy relationship where inevitably one party must have its goals and values suppressed and subverted to that of the other.

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Such conflictual engagement, often done with a desire for the best possible solution, is the positive result of allowing oneself to be accountable to another. Thus, perhaps the problem lies with the term 'counter-hegemonic function' as it has immediate negative connotations. An alternative could be: state-accountability, thus some CSOs could fulfil the role of keeping the state accountable to its promises made and to ensuring a democratic South Africa.

The South African government describes its domestic policy as one that is 'people-centred'. In February 2004, during his State of the Nation Address, Mbeki quoted Nelson Mandela affirming his commitment to the statement: 'The government I have the honour to lead and I dare say the masses who elected us to serve in this role, are inspired by the single vision of creating a people-centred society.' If this is so then it should be celebrating the plurality of voices that CSOs represent as they maintain a check on government to not take its citizens for granted and creates the possibility of a people-centred country.

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Conclusions

An increasing intolerance of dissention and alternative views is becoming apparent in our fledgling democracy. In addition, the enactment of processes to centralise government structures and social discourse is closing avenues for autonomous and independent thought. As with those government officials outside the Presidency, civil society is in the process of being relegated to manager and implementer of government policy, shrouded in the much-touted discourse of 'public-private-partnership', cooperation and consolidation.

South Africa is indeed a rainbow nation with its plurality of races, cultures and languages—differences, accentuated during the apartheid regime in order to create division. Overcoming these differences in order to establish a South African national identity is a challenging task. South Africa's Constitution serves to protect, encourage and celebrate the pluralism of this nation. Whereas the 'closing in of the ranks' of the government and the increasing lack of tolerance for opposition, whether it is expressed in terms of political parties, inside the government itself or in CSOs, serves to once again accentuate the divisions as it breeds fear and ethnic nationalisms.

The viewpoint is taken that civil society celebrates plurality and diversity. It is only natural that some relationships between the state and civil society will be characterised by collaboration and cooperation, and others will be characterised by contestation and conflict. This paper asserts that this is a healthy state of affairs of a democracy and should be encouraged. Although perhaps the potentially conflictual role of civil society needs redefining, from that of countering hegemonic state tendencies to, instead, maintaining state-accountability. The South African government argues that after all it is a democracy voted into power by the people. Surely it will not have an issue with the people keeping it to its word?

Notes

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1. Not all within the ANC are in agreement regarding this understanding of civil society. An ANC MP, Ben Turok, at an IDASA workshop in 2003, is quoted as saying: 'Civil society is needed because it acts as a check on power. One thing we must never have is an ANC one-party state, and a vibrant civil society will help to prevent this' (Turok, 2003).

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