Are Political Parties Agents of Democratisation in Southern Africa?

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Abstract

Democracy, by definition, presupposes, inter alia, pluralist multi-party political competition. There cannot without political parties. Be that as it may, political parties can exist in a political system devoid of any democratic credentials. In a word, it is perfectly possible to have political parties without democracy, yet it is impossible to have democracy without political parties and regular multi-party contestation for state power. Essentially, political parties play a central role in the democratization process underway in many SADC countries today. All the fourteen countries that form SADC (with the exception of Swaziland) have embraced multiparty systems as part of the democratic transition from years of mono-party regimes, one-person rule and military juntas that marked their political systems since the mid-1960s. The only exception to this trend is represented by two countries, Botswana and Mauritius, which have operated multiparty liberal democracy since their independence in the 1960s. Thus, throughout the SADC region a particular trend of parties and party systems is clearly discernible: there are countries that operate no party systems (e.g. Swaziland); there are some countries (e.g. Zimbabwe) whereby the degree of political polarization and intolerance renders opposition parties toothless under conditions of a hegemonic and repressive rule; there are other countries that operate a dominant party system (e.g. Botswana and South Africa) and there are yet others which operate a thriving multi-party system in the strictest sense of the term (specifically Mauritius) and there is another country (DRC) whose party system is still fragmented and fragile given its very recent political transition. While the critical role of political parties in the democratization process in the SADC region is acknowledge, we argue that political parties in the SADC region face enormous challenges in their efforts to institutionalize, nurture and consolidate democratic governance. Five major challenges include, inter alia, (a) the dominant party syndrome prevailing in many SADC countries which places a limit to the depth of the democracy underway (b) lack ideological orientation and distinctive policy menus that differentiate parties to allow voters to make informed choices among candidates that stand for elections. Thirdly, political parties throughout the region exhibit a poor record in terms of national (c) lack of (or weak) regional and international alliances (e) a plethora of conflicts (intra-party and inter-party) that undermine the effectiveness of parties as key agents of democracy and (e) parties and their effectiveness are overwhelmingly dependent upon the type of leadership that they have. As key agents of democracy, parties need democrats with vision at their helm. If parties are not led by people who embrace democratic culture and practice, it is unlikely that governments would be led by democrats. As the old cliché goes, democracy requires democrats. All things being equal, political parties are (in theory) perfect schools for grooming democratic political leadership. To the extent that political parties
groom democrats and become key assets for democracy building/consolidation, we conclude that they are, indeed, agents of democratization in Southern Africa.

Introduction

Political parties have increasingly become a prominent feature of political systems in Africa, particularly since the onset of democratization in the early 1990s (see Salih, 2003; Matlosa, 2005; Kadima, 2006; Salih, 2006; Chege, 2006). Prior to the 1990s, the political systems in the region were marked predominantly by either mono-party, one-person or military regimes which did not create a political climate conducive to multiparty democracy. Today, all the fourteen member states of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), bar one (namely Swaziland) have embraced multiparty democracy in which a plethora of parties exist and participate in the political process including regular elections to contest state power, a function that, by definition, distinguishes parties from other organizations such as interest or pressure groups.

The International IDEA handbook on Funding of Political Parties and Election Campaign, aptly notes that “since the end of the cold war, combined internal and external pressures for democratization and good governance in Africa resulted in the reinstatement of multiparty politics and competitive elections in country after country” (2003:21). In essence, therefore, political parties have become, in a majority of SADC countries, a critical linchpin for the institutionalization, nurturing, deepening and consolidation of democracy.

This article investigates the key roles and functions of political parties in Southern Africa with a particular focus on whether parties are agents of democratization in the region or whether they retard the democracy-building process. The discussion, therefore, explores the state of political parties and their role in the democratization process confining its scope to the fourteen countries comprising the Southern African Development Community (SADC) namely Angola, Botswana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. We do not intend to provide a blow-by-blow account of parties in each one of these countries, but we will make relevant broad strokes of the state of parties across the region with appropriate examples where need be. The paper is organized into various sections. Following this introduction, the first section below deals with a conceptual understanding of the essence of parties to a functioning democratic system. The second section briefly outlines contemporary trends of party politics in Southern Africa. The third section chronicles in some detail the current state of parties in the region. The fourth section
outlines challenges facing internal functioning and structure of parties. The fifth section focuses our attention on women’s political participation through parties and parliaments. The last section wraps up the discussion and revisits the main observations in the paper.

**The Essence of Political Parties to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework**

Political parties have to be understood within the overall theory and practice of democracy. While democracy has proved a fairly nebulous term to grasp, there is a fair amount of consensus in the literature in respect of what political parties are and their role in a democratic system. Democracy can be defined (or should I say explained) in three different ways. Firstly a minimal definition (explanation) of democracy locates the theory and practice of democracy around two principles or values namely political competition or contestation and participation. The notion of contestation “captures the uncertain peaceful competition necessary for democratic rule, a principle which presumes the legitimacy of some opposition, the right to challenge the incumbents... the existence of free and fair elections and a consolidated party system” (Landman, 2005:20). Participation presupposes political control of the citizens over the people who govern on their behalf. This notion “captures the idea of popular sovereignty which presumes the protection of the right to vote as well as the existence of universal suffrage” (Landman, 2005:20). This is what is often referred to as procedural democracy. Secondly, the liberal notion of democracy extends its essence beyond just contestation and participation to include the protection and promotion of political rights and civil liberties. It includes other institutional dimensions (guarantees) such as accountability, transparency, constraint over leaders, representation of citizens, rule of law, property and minority rights. This is what liberal democracy is all about. Thirdly, the structuralist definition of democracy extends the theory and practice of democracy beyond procedural and institutional dimensions found in the earlier definitions and introduces the socio-economic dimensions. This is the defining feature of social democracy. In all the above definitions of democracy, it is evident that a democratic system has, of necessity, to be marked by political pluralism. One of the measures of the degree of pluralism in a political system is the existence and operations of political parties. This is so, because political parties compete for ideas and political power and promote citizen participation in the political process; they play a crucial role in ensuring that the institutional foundations of democracy are firmly grounded; and they espouse the promotion of a better socio-economic dispensation for the electorate. In essence, therefore, political parties are the hallmark of representative democracy (be it a procedural democracy, liberal democracy or social democracy). What then are political parties? What is their significance for democratic governance?
Political parties are organised groups that are formed with a sole purpose of articulating and aggregating the interests of the group, contesting control over state power and government and directing a country’s development process in line with their own ideological orientations and their policy frameworks. Hess perceives political parties as “groups of people who have joined forces to pursue their common political and social goals. Parties have been formed in all societies and states where the population actively participates in the political process. They enable the people thus organised—the party members—to articulate their political will and strive for the realisation of their political aims as a group” (1994:15). According to Maliyamkono and Kanyangolo “a political party is an organised association of people working together to compete for political office and promote agreed-upon policies” (2003: 41). Citing a renowned political scientist, Robert Dahl, Doorenspleet posits that “the existence of political parties competing for power within a framework that guarantees equal chances for all is one of the fundamental characteristics of a democratic regime. Political regimes that ban political opposition and competition among political parties for the votes of the people are not ‘competitive’ and as a consequence not democratic” (2003:173). Without political parties or in situations where parties are extremely weak and ineffective, politics is reduced to unbridled opportunism ad overt self-serving interests of individual politicians who may derail the nation-building process and the democracy project. Cited in Kellman, Doherty (2001:26), posits that “without strong political parties and political institutions that are accountable and effective, that can negotiate and articulate compromises to respond to conflicting demands, the door is effectively open to those populist leaders who will seek to bypass the institutions of government, especially a system of checks and balances, and the rule of law” (2004:15).

Sachikonye notes that “historically, political parties have played a pivotal role in founding and consolidating systems of governance. Parties aggregate diverse demands into coherent political programmes. They then translate these programmes into effective collective action through elections and legitimated control of political office” (2005:2). The primary reason for the existence of parties is to contest and capture state power (ideally through peaceful means). This peaceful means involve parties’ contestation over power through regular multiparty elections. Mohamed Salih aptly reminds us that “if political parties are institutional mechanisms for capturing and maintaining power, elections are the institutional mechanism through which political parties compete for power. Elections are rightful political activities in which citizens exercise their sovereign will in selecting their representatives, who eventually form or select the personnel and policy of government” (2001:35).

From the above conceptual discussions, it is evident that political parties are among the most important organisations in modern democracies; “students of political parties have commonly associated them with democracy itself. Democracy, it is argued, is a system of competitive political parties. The competitive electoral context, in which several political parties organise the alternatives
that face voters, is what identifies contemporary democracy (The Encyclopaedia of Democracy, 1995: 924). To a large measure, political parties, in theory, ought to advance political pluralism, enhance citizen participation in the political process, broaden representation of various political opinions and ideologies in the governance process, ensure peaceful and democratic transfer of political power at both national and local/community levels, enhance accountability of governments and accord the necessary legitimacy to both the government of the day and the political system as a whole.

Mohamed Salih reinforces the political significance of political parties to democracy by observing that in competitive political systems, parties provide “the connection between the party system and government on the one hand, and between government and society on the other” (2003:7). Thus, given that parties are an essential component of a representative democracy that ensure political competition and advance citizen participation, today “the debate is no longer whether there should be parties, but whether the party system should be pluralist or not” (Doorenspleet, 2003:169). It is important, though, to highlight at the onset that while political parties do play a critically crucial role in a vibrant and thriving democracy, they can also become an obstacle to both democratic transition and democratic consolidation. In a recent, fascinating research on political parties in Kenya, Alycia Kellman makes a plausible argument that “the study of political parties and the institutional structures that support them is inherently related to the study of democracy. Political parties serve as the primary link between government and society. As such, they have a unique role in fostering democratic governance and ensuring that it is responsive to societal needs. If they fail in this role, true democracy has little chance of surviving” (2004:10). She then comes to a logical conclusion that “political parties must be conceptualised as instruments that can either work for, or against, democratic forces. Ideally, political parties ‘help turn citizen interests and demands into policies and laws’ (…). However, if they fail in this mission, the whole democratic experiment can disintegrate” (2004:14-15).

The specific roles and effectiveness of political parties in a democracy is essentially determined by, inter alia, (a) the nature of the party system in place in a country; (b) the nature of the electoral system in place in a country; and (c) equally important, the effectiveness of a parliament in a given country.

A party system is important in determining exactly how political parties play the political game. In between the two extremes of a no-party system wherein political parties are not allowed to operate by law and a fragmented party system wherein far too many small and ineffective parties have mushroomed and proliferated within a context of an unstable political system, there are basically four (4) known party systems namely one party system (in which only one-party is dominant or is allowed
legal exists), two-party system or duopoly (wherein two parties are dominant), a dominant party system (in which even if many parties exist, only one is dominant) and a multiparty system (in which many parties exist and all enjoy equal chances of assuming power and controlling the state). Party systems influence greatly the way parties operate and how effective they become in aggregating demands and articulating the interests of the electorate. In some countries party systems are profoundly institutionalised and robust while in others they are less institutionalised and fragmented.

The electoral system sets boundaries for parties’ electoral contest for the control of state power by setting out the institutional framework for elections and defining formulae for calculation of votes into parliamentary seats. Evidence now abounds suggesting, in fact, that the two dominant electoral systems in Southern Africa, namely the British-style First-Past-The-Post and the Proportional Representation models, have their own distinctive impact on the nature of party organisation and party political representation in the legislature (see Matlosa, 2003a). Having contested elections, parties then undertake much of their political work in parliament; thus the effectiveness of any parliament also dependents overwhelmingly upon the vibrancy of political parties. Throughout the SADC region, there are basically two types of the legislature namely the unicameral and bicameral parliament.

It is abundantly evident from the extant literature that political parties are central to both democratisation and democratic consolidation (see also Kadima et. al, 2006). Be that as it may, historically and in contemporary times, in many developed and developing countries, parties tend to fail to play a political role that enhances their intrinsic institutional and functional value to democratisation and democratic consolidation. This trend does not only compound the fragility of democratic experiments especially in Africa, but it also denudes the significance and popularity of parties as primary links between governments and citizens in a society. Hence, Kellman poignantly observes that “while it is recognised that they can be crucial in the promotion of democracy, they [can equally be a hindrance] to its attainment as well” (2004:13). Citing Doherty (2001:29), Kellman further contends that “in emerging democracies worldwide, political parties are either weak, too personalistic, too constrained by oppressive governments, or too corrupt and out of touch to earn the respect of the public”(2004:13). Evidence abounds suggesting that on a global scale in both developed and developing democracies there is a glaring and systematic decline of public confidence in political parties and that in general mass parties are increasingly becoming obsolete. In a presentation on global challenges of democracy delivered during a workshop organised by EISA and International IDEA in December 2004, Roger Hallhag argued that while the support base of political parties in 13 West European democracies amounted to about 9.8% of the electorate, by the late 1990s this figure plummeted to a paltry 5.7% and is still falling (Hallhag, 2004). As table 1 below vividly illustrates, in terms of public trust and confidence, political parties are increasingly becoming
an endangered species globally, more so in Latin America and new European democracies and relatively (comparatively) less so in East Asian democracies and African democracies.

Table 1: Degree of Public Trust over Political Parties in Emerging Democracies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian Democracies</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New European Democracies</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 African Democracies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruling Parties</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition Parties</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hallhag, 2004

Thus, in all the emerging democracies, public trust for political parties is below 50%. However, in Africa there seems to be more public trust in ruling parties (46%) than in opposition parties (23%). This situation could be attributable to politics of patronage which is more effectively dispensed to the public or targeted clients by ruling parties and in turn the weakening and fragmentation of opposition parties which also often lack effective strategies for presenting viable alternative policy frameworks to ruling parties. In table 2 below we illustrate degree of public trust over political parties in selected SADC member states out of the 15 selected African States in which Afrobarometer undertook their latest opinion survey whose results were published in March 2004. From this data it is abundantly evident that ruling parties enjoy more support, confidence and trust than opposition parties. The table illustrates the opinions of respondents to a question “How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?” The two categories that we are interested in for the purpose of this paper are those dealing with ruling parties and opposition parties.

Table 2: Degree of Public Trust over Political Parties in the Selected SADC Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BOT</th>
<th>LES</th>
<th>MWI</th>
<th>MOZ</th>
<th>NAM</th>
<th>RSA</th>
<th>TAN</th>
<th>ZAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Ruling</td>
<td>A lot/A very great deal</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition</td>
<td>A little bit/Not at all</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
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From the table above, evidently the popularity of ruling parties is much greater in Tanzania, Mozambique, and Namibia than in Zambia, South Africa and Botswana. However, the irony of the figures for South Africa is that the degree of popularity of ruling and opposition parties does not seem to correlate with the electoral performance of the parties. The electoral outcomes in South Africa since 1994 up to 2004 seem to suggest that the ruling party enjoys much more popularity than the Afrobarometer data would make us believe. In a sense, therefore, the popularity of the ruling party would rank around levels such as the one in Mozambique and Namibia given not only the similarity of these as dominant party systems, but also the common tradition of liberation movement that the three countries share.

The more parties become unpopular in the eyes of the public, the more their mandate as agents of democracies is likely to diminish. Part of the explanatory argument why parties tend to fail to become drivers of the democratic process and also fail to democratise within themselves is precisely because, as Kellman rightly points out, they tend to have inevitable and inherent “oligarchic tendencies and are thus inherently undemocratic” (2004:14).

It will become clear in the subsequent discussion that party systems in Southern Africa have been in a state of flux over the past four decades since political independence experiencing a brief period of multi-partyism, abandoning multi-partyism and adopting a one-party system until recent efforts towards multi-party democratic systems as part of the global wave of democratisation that began in the early 1990s. It needs to be emphasised right from the on-set that while political parties are confronted with a myriad of challenges, opposition parties face even greater challenges partly due to political pressures placed upon them by ruling parties and partly due to their own internal weaknesses (see Olukoshi, 1998; Matlosa, 2006; Chiroro, 2006).

**Contemporary Trends of Parties and Democracy: A Contextual Framework**
The SADC region has witnessed political shifts that have influenced party systems and the way political parties operate with implications for democracy. After a majority of the countries attained independence in the 1960s, there was a brief existence of a multi-party system and, indeed, all the elections preceding political independence were contested by more than one party in each country. In all these elections, parties chose candidates to contest state power on their behalf in an open competitive system. However, the brief spell of multipartyism was soon replaced by the adoption, in many countries, of the one-party system. The two main exceptions to this pervasive trend were Botswana and Mauritius. Many other states adopted the one-party system of either *de jure* (Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi etc) or *de facto* (Lesotho, 1970-1986 etc) varieties. The implication of the one-party system was that it closed the political space for democratic politics in that multiparty contestation for state power was denied. Not only that. Even the elections would be contested by only one party (namely the ruling party). Thus, the democratic space was severely restricted. In other countries, such as Lesotho under the military rule (1986-1993), politics were banned, political parties outlawed and elections banished. Since the 1990s, the SADC region has made yet another shift back to multipartyism of the early 1960s. This has been marked by the re-introduction of multiparty politics, proliferation of political parties and the holding of regular multiparty elections contested by candidates representing their political parties and independent candidates depending on each country’s electoral system. Thus, in a nutshell, the SADC region has experienced three shifts in terms of parties and elections since independence. These are the multiparty system (Early 1960s-mid-60s), the one-party system (Mid-1960s-Early 1990s) and multiparty system (Early 1990s- To date). Each of these political epochs has had their own distinctive imprint on the democratic nature of the political systems over time. In this article we focus specifically on the current epoch of multi-party system in the SADC region.

The Current State of Political Parties and the Challenges for Democratisation

It is worth reiterating that political parties play a crucial role in democracies. Democracy is unthinkable without political parties (see Bratton et.al, 2005). According to the ACE Encyclopaedia, a political party is defined as “an organized group of people with at least roughly similar political aims and opinions, that seek to influence public policy by getting its candidates elected to public office” ([http://aceproject.org](http://aceproject.org)). The main functions of parties in any democratic system are to:

- Aggregate and articulate needs and problems of members and supporters;
- Socialize and educate voters and citizens in the functioning of the political and electoral system and generating general political values;
- Balance opposing demands and convert them into general policies;
- Activate and mobilize citizens into participating in political decisions and transforming their opinions into viable policy options;
- Channel public opinion from citizens to government; and
- Recruit and train candidates for public office (http://aceproject.org).

It is evident from the above remarks that political parties constitute the most critical institutional foundation or expression of a working democracy. A recent publication by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) notes that “political parties play a vital role in democratic governance. No democratic system can function without alternative parties and candidates. Political parties are crucial in aggregating interests, presenting political alternatives to citizens, nominating candidates and linking voters with elected public officials. Moreover, political parties can play a central role in generating cadres of leaders who promote democratic governance principles and monitor elected representatives” (2006:92).

Hague et. al, remind us that “party competition is the hallmark of liberal democracy. It is the device which makes governments responsive to the electorate, providing voters with some choice while also restricting that choice to a few broad alternatives” (Hague et al, 1992:236). Corroborating the UNDP (2006) and Hague et al (1992) above, Webb argues aptly that “political parties are universally regarded as essential components of democratic regimes and key vehicles in the process of securing effective political representation, mobilising voters, organising government and shaping public policy”(2005:631). If we accept the above observations by UNDP, Hague et. al and Webb, then the pertinent question to pose is what is the state of political parties and their contribution to democracy in Southern Africa today?

This is the pre-occupation of this section. To be sure, the state of political parties in Southern Africa today varies from one country to the other. However, we will raise key issues around this subject highlighting common trends throughout the region and variations between and among countries through a comparative perspective. Firstly, all SADC countries today have functioning multiparty systems with the exception of Swaziland where political parties still remain banned. They have in place constitutional and legal frameworks that allow the existence and operation of political parties and to all intents and purposes, this is a positive development. Be that as it may, having multiparty systems in place, together with constitutional and legal frameworks, is one thing, while institutionalizing effective parties and robust party systems is quite another. Although
In terms of party systems, the experience of Southern Africa is mixed. One country, namely Swaziland, operates a no-party system in part due to its authoritarian monarchical regime. Zimbabwe operated a multi-party system upon independence in 1980, but changed to a mono-party system in 1987. However, since independence, the political hegemony of the ruling ZANU-PF has been profoundly entrenched and was subjected to a serious challenged by the emergence of opposition parties since the latter part of the 1990s. Be that as it may, the opposition parties in Zimbabwe, including the major opposition (Movement for Democratic Change-MDC) remain paper tigers without a serious threat to the tight grip that ZANU-PF still has over the control of state power. Angola is still dominated overwhelmingly by the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) with the Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) as the main opposition. But Angola’s party system remains fluid and unstable because the country has not yet undergone a democratic transition since the abortive 1992 general election. Planned elections for 2008 and 2009 could lay foundations for a transition that would allow political parties to be firmly established and play their role in the democratization process. Only recently has the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) undergo a democratic transition with its transitional elections of July (parliamentary and first-round presidential) and October 2006 (second round presidential and provincial). This historic development has allowed parties to be formed, exist and contest state power. The DRC has the largest number of political parties in the SADC region estimated at around 270. This means that the party system in the DRC is extremely fragmented and borders on political anarchy. How do parties get sufficiently institutionalized under these circumstances becomes a major challenge and how a truly competitive multi-party systems emerges remains one of the big challenges for the post-conflict DRC. Part of the reasons why Angola and the DRC have not yet established robust and well-functioning party systems has a lot to do with their history of protracted violent conflict which has also affected adversely their political systems in terms of the postponement of the democracy project as priority has tended to be given to the peace project. New democratic transitions have happened in a majority of other SADC countries which have allowed for the political liberalization and ushering in of the multiparty system. These include Zambia (1991); Lesotho (1993); Malawi (1994); and Tanzania (1995). In all these countries, multi-partyism is rather frail and fragile given not only the lack of robustness of the party systems, but also the yet evolving process of institutionalization of democratic governance which is intermittently punctuated by different types of conflict. In three other countries, interesting democratic transformations with implications for parties and party systems have been underway too. Namibia (1989), South Africa (1994) and
Mozambique (1994) have undergone a double transition: transition from war to peace and transition from autocracy to democracy. This dual transition has allowed for multi-partyism to germinate and has allowed these countries to inculcate a culture of competitive politics where parties contest state power no longer through bullets but through ballots. Only two countries in SADC boast a long-enduring political tradition of stable liberal democracy wherein multi-partyism is entrenched. These are Botswana and Mauritius. While Botswana’s political system has evolved largely within the framework of the dominant party syndrome whereby the ruling BDP has never experienced electoral defeat since 1965 to date, Mauritius presents a different case whereby alternation of state power is a regular occurrence. Mauritius is the only country in the SADC region where power alternation has become an embedded aspect of the country’s political culture and thereby adding value to the consolidation of the country’s democracy. It is no exaggeration to argue that although stable, the critical test of Botswana’s liberal democracy will come when the ruling party is removed from power by an opposition and that situation is then followed by political stability.

The variations of party system, elaborated above, notwithstanding, virtually all the countries in Southern Africa operate dominant party systems cloaked behind the façade of multipartyism. What do we mean? SADC countries, including Botswana, the most celebrated stable liberal democracy in the region, are dominated by one party (often ruling parties) over a long duration of time under conditions of weak, fragmented and disjointed opposition parties. The main exception to this general regional trend is Mauritius where all parties have chances of alternating in controlling state power. Under conditions of a dominant party syndrome, uncertainty of election results tends to be compromised. However, on its own dominant party syndrome is not a serious threat to the institutionalization of democracy; it simply places limits to it. The first challenge facing political parties in the SADC region, therefore, rotates around the effectiveness of parties and the robustness of party systems.

Besides effectiveness of parties and the nature of party systems, it has been observed that political parties in Southern Africa tend to lack ideological clarity and distinctiveness. As a result, they look much the same to each other and they tend to raise similar campaign issues which often lack policy substance and are generally a shopping list of promises which hardly get fulfilled after elections. In a recent study undertaken by EISA on public outreach programmes of political parties, we have observed that often parties use four instruments of outreach namely (a) policy or political programme; (b) party manifestos; (c) voter education and (d) civic education (Kadima, Matlosa & Shale, 2006). It was observed that often these instruments are hardly used systematically given that in many instances individual leaders tend to loom larger than parties and as a result, the personality cult tends to take over the institutional life of political parties. Election
campaigns tend to revolve more around individuals rather than being predicated upon well-defined and ideologically delineated policy positions/proposals. Consequently even voters choose parties and candidates not so much on the basis of their policy proposals, but rather on the basis of personalities involved, patronage politics and ethnic/tribal/racial affinities. The first ever democratic multiparty election after 40 years held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is the most recent illustration of this stark reality. We observed during the election campaign in the DRC ahead of the presidential and parliamentary election of 30 July 2006 that vote-buying was generalized trend and this was exacerbated by the entrenched poverty and an entrenched culture of patronage or pork-barrel politics. This trend further fuels political corruption within political parties that becomes even more rampant during elections. The challenge here is for parties in the SADC region to become ideologically differentiated and be in a position to present clearly differentiated policy proposals as they campaign for elections so that the electorate choose their candidates on the basis of policies and not individuals and other consideration such as patronage politics etc.

Evidence abounds suggesting that political parties exhibit serious weaknesses in terms of forming alliances and coalitions at the national level with the exception of a few countries in the region including Mauritius, Malawi, South Africa and Mozambique (see Kadima, 2006). In other SADC countries, experiences with party alliances or coalitions at the national level has tended to be poor, often attempted only during elections and after the election the alliances or coalitions tend to die. Only recently, have we witnessed some efforts in this direction of forming more sustainable party coalitions in countries such as Lesotho, Botswana and Zambia. But these new efforts will have to be tested during general elections in these three countries scheduled for 2007, 2009 and 2006 respectively in order to gauge their sustainability in the long run. The fact of the matter is that political parties have a weakness in relating to each other and developing mutually beneficial pacts at the national level. This weakness extends to lack of sustainable international and regional linkages of parties with other like-minded parties and/or foundations.

The truth of the matter is simply that political parties in the SADC region have a poor track record in establishing and sustaining harmonious inter-party relations at the national level, regional/continental level and international level. At the national level, while often the relationships between the ruling party and opposition parties tends to be marked by mutual suspicion at best and outright hatred at worst, opposition parties themselves hardly ever relate to each other in a harmonious way. An interesting episode happened in the recent second round of the DRC presidential poll whereby the main contestants namely Joseph Kabila and Jean-Pierre Bemba could not campaign themselves ahead of the highly charged poll, but delegated this responsibility to their wives who criss-crossed the width and breadth of that big country. The reason was simply

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that the political atmosphere was tense and the two candidates cited security reasons for this ‘innovative’ campaigning approach. We hardly ever hear of regular national dialogue between ruling parties and opposition parties both during and in between elections. Leaders of ruling parties are known for refusing to engage opposition party leaders in national policy issues. More glaringly, some leaders of ruling parties would even refuse to hold national debates with opposition leaders during election campaign. Further more, coalition politics are not yet an entrenched political culture in the SADC region with the exception of Mauritius (See Kadima, 2006). As a consequence, parties hardly ever form coalitions either during or in between elections. However, this trend may be changing if the recent initiatives towards coalition building in Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi and Zambia are anything to go by. At the regional and international levels, political parties have failed to build cross border alliances with like-minded parties. Even their linkages with party internationals or foundations is driven more by the need to mobilize international resources over anything else. Political parties exhibit weaknesses in relation to building and strengthening inter-party relations within the national context, regionally and internationally.

Intra-party conflicts are a generalized trend in the SADC region. These conflicts may be covert or overt; violent or non-violent; prolonged or short-lived depending on the specific political context of each country. Intra-party conflicts, especially violent ones, are a result of lack of intra-party democracy. If dissent is prohibited within parties, members may find themselves resorting to unconstitutional means of expressing their dissatisfaction about the way parties are governed. Conflict within parties may be prolonged and protracted or may become more intensified only around election time in relation to selection of party leaders and nomination of election candidates. Lesotho’s 2007 general election was preceded by enormous intra-party tension, fragmentation, splits and floor-crossing in parliament. Almost all the major political parties in Lesotho namely the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), Basotho National Party (BNP), Marema-Tlou Freedom Party (MFP) and the ruling Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD) entered the general election of the 17th February 2007 having suffered internal faction-fighting and splits. The ruling party split had come by way of floor-crossing (See Matlosa and Shale, 2006) leading to the emergence of the new opposition party-All Basotho Convention (ABC). Some of the adverse effects of the in-fighting within parties are the all-pervasive phenomenon of party splits, party proliferation and the prevalent trend of independent election candidates in many countries today. In its general election of May 2004, Malawi had a large number of independent candidates and in fact these candidates, taken together, polled votes than parties and captured more seats than parties.
Another general challenge facing political parties in the SADC region revolves around leadership. Every organization is as good as its leadership. This principle applies to political parties too. Undoubtedly, therefore, the effectiveness and sustainability of these institutions are heavily dependent upon the caliber of their leadership. The main rationale for the very existence of parties is to contest for state power. Therefore, how badly or how well each party (both ruling and opposition) performs this primary task is overwhelmingly dependent upon how dynamic; how democratic and how visionary its leadership is. In a word, the leadership of the political parties influences greatly the dynamism of these organizations as key drivers of the democracy project. Even during election, the party leadership can either be a political asset or a liability. Parties are supposed to be a political school for the development of democratic leadership; a leadership that is groomed to make these institutions effective, but again a leadership that is groomed to lead the country. Thus, if political parties are unable to produce democratic leadership, this comes not only at a political cost to them, but at a huge cost to the country, because it means the country is likely to be led by undemocratic leaders without vision and the requisite dynamism. In other words, democracy both at the macro-level of the nation and the micro-level of the parties requires democrats and it is thus imperative upon party leadership to embrace democratic culture and practice.

**Internal Functioning & Structure of Political Parties**

The challenges that confront political parties in terms of entrenching intra-party democracy are many and varied. Camay and Gordon persuasively argue that "political competition is also severely limited when internal democracy is constrained. Many African political parties – especially dominant ones – engage in internal ‘dissent management’ leading to autocracy. They restrict voices within the party and discipline MPs and other members who disagree with leadership positions. They exercise strict control over the selection of party officials and candidates for public office" (2004:6). We will focus spotlight on four major internal functioning challenges for political parties rotating mainly around (a) selection/election of the party leadership, (b) party primary elections, (c) management and administration of the internal affairs of the party; and (d) policy/programme development.. We elaborate on each of these challenges below.

*Firstly, selection/election of the party Leadership* is as political an issue as the organizations themselves. Undoubtedly, the effectiveness and vibrancy of any political party in respect of its contribution to a working democracy is heavily dependent upon its leadership. Thus, a party’s performance during and in-between regular general and local government elections is determined, among other things, on how visionary its leadership is. In a word, a party can rise or
fall on the basis of the nature and character of its leadership cadre. In a majority of SADC countries the leadership issue still remains problematic. Leadership problems for many parties revolve around election of leadership; internal structures, hierarchy and accountability mechanisms; ethical codes of conduct by both the leadership and party rank and file; programme/policy development; international and regional networking among parties; national coalition formations among parties; party relations with the EMB and CSOs and parties’ communications strategies. Available evidence suggests that political parties face daunting challenges for institutionalizing accountable, transparent and visionary leadership that has the appropriate requisites for inculcation of democratic culture and practice both within the party and the nation at large. In other words, democracy both at the macro-level of the nation and the micro-level of the parties requires democrats and it is thus imperative upon party leadership to embrace democratic culture and practice.

Secondly, Primary Elections form another important litmus test of the extent and degree of the intra-party democracy within political parties. Often, the process of nomination of party candidates for purposes of contestation of state power during elections tends to be fraught with controversy and conflict due to the manner in which it is executed by the party leadership. The following issues become crucial in terms of the legitimacy of the outcome of primary elections: eligibility criteria for party candidacy; election process and procedure for party candidacy; and the type of electoral system used to select party candidates. Problems around primary elections rotate, inter alia, whether the process emphasizes centralized leadership control or it allows for the party rank and file to influence the selection process. These problems, to be sure, are rife in almost all the SADC countries irrespective of the electoral model each one of them operates. However, it is much more glaring in those countries that operated the British-style First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) which easily allows candidates to contest elections in their independent capacity. The challenge revolves around the degree of openness when nominations for candidates are made. Parties need to open up to their rank and file membership for the collective ownership of nominations and party lists. In fact, it is desirable that an independent and impartial body is engaged and involved during party nominations and drawing of party lists. This ensures that the process is monitored and observed by an external impartial body as in the case of the party list development process in South Africa which is facilitated and observed by EISA for various political parties.

Thirdly, Management of the internal affairs of the party is an important yardstick for the extent to which intra-party democracy is deepening in most of the SADC states. This issue is inextricably linked to the one around party leadership in some sense, but it is also dependent upon the ideological clarity and distinctiveness of each party as well as the relevance of its manifesto and programme. The management of party affairs involves the day-to-day running of party affairs,
building of national, provincial, district, community and village branches of parties, management of party resources both moveable and immovable. This also includes the development of manifestos and programmes as well as the organization regular meetings and conferences for parties. In those countries where the leadership of parties is rather autocratic then obviously the management of parties tends to be less transparent and accountable to the party rank and file. In those countries where the leadership is more open and fairly democratic the management of parties tends to be more transparent and accountable. It is imperative, therefore, that parties strive for an efficient, transparent and accountable management of party affairs if intra-party democracy is to be established and institutionalized. Further more, effective and efficient management systems have to be put in place from the village/community branches up to the national structures of parties if their management is to be adequately improved.

_Fourthly, policy and programme development_ determines the extent of effectiveness of parties especially when it comes to mobilisation of support base and contestation for state power. In this regard, what is crucial is how parties develop their policy positions by way of programmes and manifestos. By ands large, political parties experience difficulties developing policies and programmes. Parties hardly ever develop clear-cut ideological positions on a variety of issues. Consequently, political parties within each one of the SADC countries exhibit commonalities in ideological outlook and this situation presents the electorate with little political menu from which to make their choice during elections.

In a recent study that we undertook covering Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Zambia in 2005, we found out that in all the four countries both the ruling and the opposition parties had public outreach programmes. We investigated whether or not parties have an outreach programme with specific reference to four main tools namely

1. Policy formulation
2. Manifesto
3. Voter education and;
4. Civic education

We observed, however, that “while political parties may have policy documents, manifestos, voter education and civic education initiatives, these tools tend to be used, in some instances, in a less coherent and systematic fashion, thereby reducing the optimal utility and effectiveness of their public outreach programmes. We further observe that there is no clear or systematic consultative process between the parties and their members between the election periods. Some parties were able to say how the consultative process unfolds but were unable to prove definitively that it actually happens as it appeared that to most parties this was more in theory than in practice “(Kadima, et. Al, 2005: 10).
Women’s Political Participation

Gender equality is an imperative principle for the entrenchment and institutionalization of intra-party democracy surely. The Southern African experience in respect of women empowerment in both quantitative and qualitative terms is a mixed bag (Molokomme, 2000; Lowe-Morna, 2004; Ballington and Karam, 2005). The SADC member-states took a positive step in 1997 when they signed *The Gender and Development Declaration* in Blantyre, Malawi. The member states committed themselves individually and collectively to the following policy measures, among others:

- The achievement of equal gender representation in all key organs of the state and at least 30% target of women in key political and decision-making structures by 2005;
- Promoting women’s full access to and control over productive resources to reduce the level of poverty among women;
- Repealing and reforming all laws, amending constitutions and changing social practices which still subject women to discrimination; and
- Taking urgent measures to prevent and deal with the increasing levels of violence against women and children (Molokomme, 2002:42).

The table below illustrates the extent of women’s representation in legislatures in the SADC region. One of our findings is that in countries where women participate actively in party politics, their participation in legislatures tends to be higher. The reverse is also true: in countries where women’s participation in party politics is low, their participation in legislatures tends to be correspondingly lower.

**Table 3: Gender Representation in SADC Parliaments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Electoral System</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>% Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>FPTP-Block</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>Seats</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
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<td>---</td>
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<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Malawi</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lesotho</td>
<td>MMP</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Zimbabwe</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>FPTP</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Matlosa, 2005

On the basis of the data above, a plausible argument can be made that an electoral system can either facilitate or inhibit greater women’s participation in governance. Evidently the PR system seems more amenable to and conducive for enhancing gender equality in politics and increased participation of women. The converse is true for the FPTP system. Although PR, in and of itself, is not a sufficient guarantor for increased women’s participation in the legislature, it is surely a catalyst for gender equality in the political governance arena. Table 3 above depicts women’s participation in national assemblies in the SADC region and from this table evidently those countries using the PR electoral system are doing much better than those using the FPTP. It is clear from this table that the top two countries in terms of high women representation in Parliament are Mozambique (35%) and South Africa (33%) both of which operate the List-PR system. The bottom two countries on the list are Zimbabwe (10.0%) and Swaziland (3.1%) both of which operate the FPTP (plurality) system. A plausible argument can, therefore, be made that the PR is more conducive for the enhancement of gender equality in the legislature. In contrast, the FPTP is less amenable to gender equality and increased women’s participation in the legislature. However, even though the PR system tends to be more conducive to gender equality, it often requires to be complimented by deliberate gender quota systems as the South African and Mozambican experiences demonstrate. This in part explains why Tanzania is now ranked number two in SADC in terms of gender representation (with 30% representation of women in the legislature) despite its FPTP electoral model. This is due mainly to its high quota for women (around 35%).

One of the major factors that help us explain the picture above, is that although political culture embedded in the ideology of patriarchy is responsible for bad performance in a number of SADC countries, equally important is the nature of the electoral system in place in each of these states. It is abundantly clear that the best performers operate the PR system reputable for its tendency to enhance participation of various stakeholders in the political system. Thus, it could be argued that there is clearly a positive correlation between the adoption and implementation of the PR electoral...
system and the enhancement of women’s participation in the legislature, although other creative measures (such as the quota system, the Zebra-list of candidates etc) are still called for to supplement this system and achieve desirable results in the final analysis. The challenge therefore is that parties must ensure broader inclusiveness at the higher echelons of their governance by bringing in more women in position of leadership. Generally, both ruling parties and major opposition parties in the region are led by men and the executive committees are also dominated by men. We are yet to see women becoming leaders of ruling and opposition parties and not just cheerleaders. To this end, SADC member states should strive to achieve the benchmarks of the 1997 SADC Declaration on gender and development combined with the AU commitment since 2003 for gender parity in key positions of governance. This objective should not only be realised in parliaments and other organs of government, but should inform deliberate gender quotas within political parties themselves.

By Way of Conclusion

Political parties play a critical role in the democratisation process in Southern Africa today. While in one country (Swaziland) political parties are not allowed to exist and operate freely, in others, they exist, although a dominant party situation tends to entrench the political hegemony of ruling parties. In another country (Zimbabwe), the degree of political polarization and intolerance renders opposition parties toothless under conditions of a hegemonic and repressive rule. In one country (Mauritius) a vibrant multi-party system exists. The regional context for political parties in Southern Africa, therefore suggests that the mere existence of a multiplicity of parties is one thing while the leveling of the playing field to ensure that parties contribute to democratization freely and fairly is quite another. This observation speaks, in particular, to the often tense relationships between ruling and opposition parties and the use/abuse of state resources by ruling parties at the expense of opposition parties—both common features of the Southern African political landscape. While democratisation in many countries is fairly advanced at the macro-level of the nation-state, internal democracy within parties remains a major challenge. In other words, many SADC countries have made considerable strides in advancing democracy, while the key actors in the democracy process, political parties, have lagged behind in inculcating internal democratic ethos, practices and procedures. This, in part, explains the declining public trust towards political parties in most SADC countries. The declining public trust towards political parties could also be linked to the nature of environment (external) that they find themselves operating under as well as the nature of their internal functioning. Despite the enormous challenges facing political parties, they remain a critical pillar for democratic governance in Southern Africa. Where parties do not exist, democracy is well-nigh impossible. Thus, in order to ensure the effectiveness of parties the
above external and internal challenges facing them will need to be addressed by governments and parties themselves.

While the critical role of political parties in the democratization process in the SADC region is acknowledge, we have argued that political parties in the SADC region face enormous challenges in their efforts to institutionalize, nurture and consolidate democratic governance. We have isolated, in particular, five main ones. Firstly, the dominant party syndrome prevailing in many SADC countries puts limits to the depth of the democracy underway. Secondly, political parties seem to lack ideological orientation and policy menus that differentiate them and as such fail to allow voters to make informed choices among candidates that stand for elections. Thirdly, political parties throughout the region exhibit a poor record in terms of national, regional and international alliances. Fourthly, political parties are beset by a plethora of conflicts that undermine their effectiveness as key agents of democracy. Fifthly and finally, parties and their effectiveness are overwhelmingly dependent upon the type of leadership that they have. As key agents of democracy, parties need democrats with vision at their helm. If parties are not led by people who embrace democratic culture and practice, it is unlikely that governments would be led by democrats. As the old cliché goes, democracy requires democrats. All things being equal, political parties are (in theory) perfect schools for grooming democratic political leadership. To the extent that political parties groom democrats and become key assets for democracy building/consolidation, we conclude that they are, indeed, agents of democratization in Southern Africa.

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