

'Floating voters' leave ANC but find no new home

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A SILENT revolution is underway among South Africa's voters, with an increasing number of "floating voters" no longer loyal to the ANC, but finding no home in the current opposition landscape.

Several new publications conclude that the time is probably not right for an alternative to the mass based ruling party, but most agree that a number of trends, if sustained, could alter voting patterns and eat into the ANC's overwhelming majority.

The academic articles fly in the face of an ANC attack on the media which criticised the publication of similar perceptions before and after this year's municipal elections.

The ANC this week, in an online weekly column, lashed out at journalists, saying they did a great disservice to their readers "by claiming political shifts where there are none, or by projecting their prejudices and preconceptions onto the South African electorate".

But in several chapters in two new books, including the HSRC's annual *State of the Nation* publication, an analysis of voting trends and the effects of protests as well as the impact of the independent candidates these spawned, highlight such shifts and the potential for a political realignment.

They come as the SA Communist Party (SACP) this weekend discusses its options for contesting state power, including whether it should go it alone at the polls. Its tripartite ally, Cosatu, at its recent congress, resolved on detailed steps to join forces, should this be decided.

Colette Schulz-Herzenberg, of UCT's political studies department, concludes on the basis of a detailed study of voting patterns between 1994

and 2006 that an increasing number of voters are no longer "overtly loyal" to one particular party or "long-standing partisan ties" when deciding where to make their crosses.

She found that while black voters were still more loyal, levels of partisanship were showing signs of decline among workers and the unemployed.

"The silent revolution may have its biggest hold among the youngest voters who are becoming less aligned and the new middle classes who show signs of growth in partisanship (often to the ruling party)," Schulz-Herzenberg said.

She stressed that the ANC still enjoyed mass appeal, but that this may become less broad-based, while its "vote share has decreased significantly" with "less than half of the electorate declaring themselves to be ANC partisans".

The voting percentage countrywide had declined in relation to the "eligible voting age population" from 53% to 39% since 1994.

While the ANC's electoral margins increased from 63% to 69%, its vote share had diminished accordingly. This was shown up through decreases in both voter registration and turnout.

Schulz-Herzenberg said the trend of voters becoming less loyal, but not choosing another party, was of concern.

Such voters generally tended to abstain and this, along with declining opposition support, could bring about a decline in incentives to parties in power to be "responsive and accountable to the citizenry".

This is confirmed in a chapter in a book on elections in southern Africa - *Outside the Ballot Box* - published by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA).

In a chapter on this year's

local government elections, Dr Dale McKinley, an academic and social movement activist, directly takes on the ANC's claims of increasing support.

Providing detailed statistics of the growing "no vote", he said this year's local poll provided "ample evidence the country has entered a terrain of low intensity and commodified democracy that is embedded within a neo-liberal political economy".

"It is a terrain that is constituted, in electoral terms, by a 'silent majority' that has

already opted out of electoral politics a mere 12 years after the first-ever democratic elections," McKinley states.

Also putting the overall eligible voter turnout close to 39% (and 48% of those registered) this year, he said the ANC's "overwhelming victory" amounted to just 32.5% of all registered voters and a mere 25.4% of all eligible voters. But, like others, he acknowledged that most opposition parties lost further ground to the ANC at the same time.

This week's ANC Today, however, stated: "As it happened, the ANC not only increased its share of the vote (in 2006). It also increased the absolute number of people who voted for it compared to the previous local government election. Even when the results were in, many media institutions had trouble

shedding their conviction that the ANC was losing support. Some went further, insulting and belittling those who had voted for the ANC."

In the light of the declining voter turnout, McKinley calls the claims by the ANC and commentators that democracy "has never been better", "wishful and/or propagandistic". He links the decline to the "creeping intolerance" shown by the



state's heavy-handed responses to local government and other protests, which many view as their only meaningful avenue to participate in democracy.

In another chapter in the HSRC's publication – on the protests and independent candidates in the 2006 elections – in-house researcher Mcebisi Ndletyana analysed the uneven and often poor performance of grass-roots alternatives and

independents at the polls despite the local disaffection.

He surprisingly concludes that many stood with a silent nod from the SACP, "suggesting an openness within the party towards an independent route".

Unlike many who dismiss voter decline as "apathy", Schulz-Herzenberg say the problem lies with the limited appeal of many opposition parties and predicts that any chance to increased political competition "still seems to pivot around intra-ANC contestation".

But the ANC will be fighting hard to counter this rising threat. In its response to recent articles over its declining image, it stated: "Although many challenges exist, the membership of the ANC is growing and its engagement with communities is improving".