

NATIONAL NEWS

As rhetoric heats up in the province, ANC, IFP national leaders remain quiet

High-stakes poker in KwaZulu-Natal

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THE two largest political parties in KwaZulu-Natal — the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the African National Congress (ANC) — appear to have begun a game of high-stakes poker, with the Democratic Alliance (DA) making a bid to join the game.

At stake is control of government in SA's most populous province. For the moment, all the players are keeping their cards very close to their chests.

While the rhetoric is heating up in the province, neither party's national leadership has commented on these events, which could have implications for President Thabo Mbeki's cabinet.

Not too long ago, the IFP's partner in the provincial relationship, the ANC, held most of the cards. Having lured two MPLs away from the Democratic Alliance, another two from the IFP and one from the United Democratic Movement, the ANC looked poised to attain majority control in the provincial parliament.

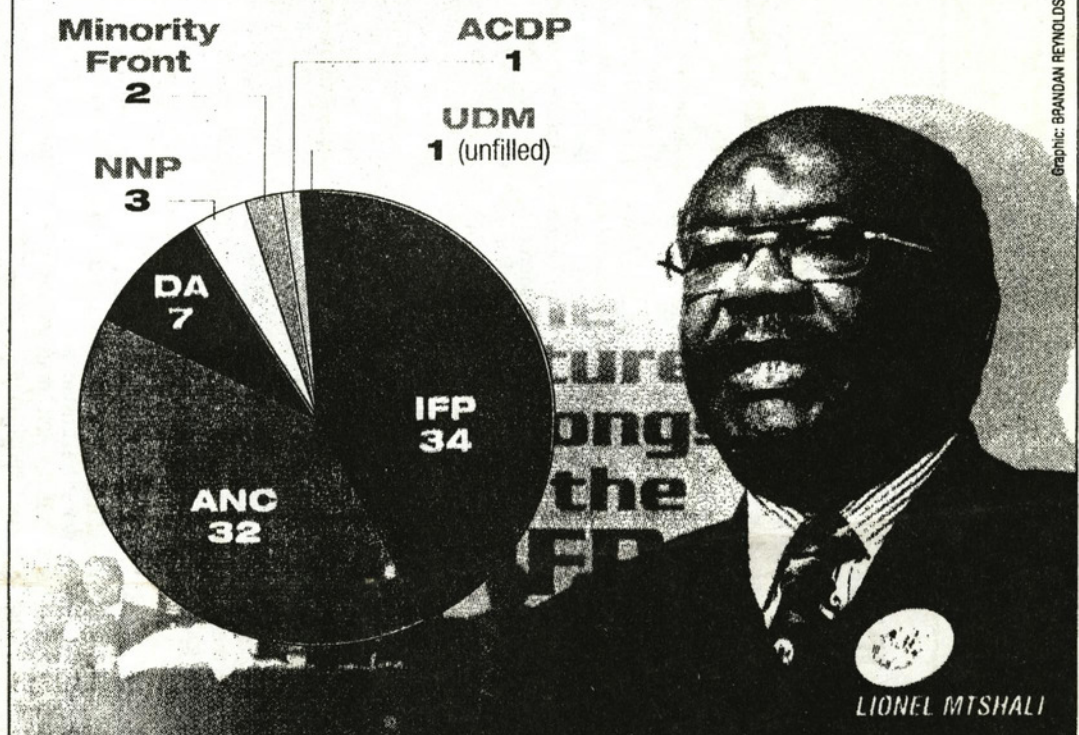
The ANC's 32 seats in the 80-seat legislature would have been augmented by the five defectors, along with support from three New National Party and two Minority Front members.

However, two successive Constitutional Court rulings left the five floor crossers out in the cold. Not only were the defectors kicked out of their own parties, but the development tipped the scales back in favour of the IFP, which has 34 seats. If it combines its support with the seven seats pledged by the DA, the IFP will have mustered enough numbers to dissolve the legislature and call for an election within 90 days.

And time may be of the essence. Next year Parliament is likely to enact an amendment that will retrospectively reinstate the five defectors, who will almost certainly defect and secure the ANC the premiership. So the IFP finds itself at a crossroads, and the party's leadership is carefully considering its options.

Commentators have interpreted a speech by KwaZulu-Natal premier Lionel Mtshali of the IFP on Tuesday as hinting at the pos-

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sibility of calling an early election. Such a poll and its consequences would pose some tough questions for party leaders, including at national level.

If, for example, the IFP ditched the ANC in KwaZulu-Natal, will it wreck the national coalition, in which IFP leaders hold seats in the ANC-majority cabinet?

Grandstanding and heated political rhetoric are nothing new in KwaZulu-Natal. Is the IFP bluffing? IFP spokesman Musa Zondi will not be pinned down on the subject of an early election.

"Whether it is a concrete decision I would not say because the national council of the IFP had not taken any specific decision on that particular issue," he says. The body is likely to meet next month and "a matter of such magnitude would definitely not escape the attention of the national council".

What would an election mean for the IFP's relationship with the ANC? "Well, the relations are already bumpy. I really do not think it would make any difference save to say it will establish

who would be in charge in that province. But relations in KwaZulu-Natal are icy and exist in name only," Zondi says.

DA KwaZulu-Natal leader Roger Burrows says the IFP-ANC partnership, as with any coalition, exists on a fairly fragile basis.

"I think that there has been positive benefit in the level of rhetoric that has been lowered, certainly until recently, that some departments have delivered, while others have not. It is a mixed bag. I believe the people of KwaZulu-Natal deserve more than what they are getting at the moment."

Zondi says the people of KwaZulu-Natal have benefited "hugely" from the absence of political violence. "The business investments you find in the province were largely inspired by the presence of the coalition government, which served as some kind of an insurance that things would be fine."

Zondi says the instability is constrained to the boardroom. "It has not spilled over to the street level, which I hope it would not.

"But of course, the presence of a tenuous relationship limited the capacity of the government of KwaZulu-Natal from spreading the benefit of that stability."

Asked to comment on the possibility of co-operation with the DA, which has pledged its support in the province if Mtshali calls for an election, Zondi says: "The DA is very much interested in working with us. But of course what is outstanding is what form it will take. There have not been any formal discussions that far."

ANC KwaZulu-Natal spokesman Mtholephi Mthimkhulu says the party is not afraid of an electoral contest. "Mtshali can go ahead if he wants to call an early election. The ANC is the last party to be scared of contesting elections because it fought for democracy in this country."

Mthimkhulu says it is surprising that Mtshali, a premier by arrangement between the ANC and the IFP, is acting as if he serves on the basis of his own electoral strength.

At this stage, only the brave will be placing bets.

INSIGHT

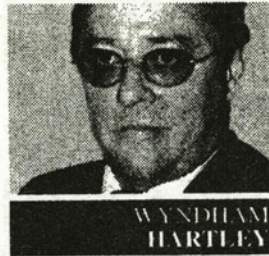
Cornered IFP playing for high stakes

KWAZULU-Natal's premier Lionel Mtshali has hinted that the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) might vote with the Democratic Alliance (DA) to dissolve the provincial legislature and take the nation's most politically volatile province into an early election. As a way of resolving the looming political crisis for the IFP in the province it smacks of desperation.

For now the IFP and the DA have won the most significant skirmish in the battle. Along with the United Democratic Movement, they successfully argued before the Constitutional Court that the five defectors who jumped the gun and defected to the African National Congress (ANC) should not be protected.

So the five were replaced and the power balance in the legislature maintained. However, Justice Minister Penuell Maduna has promised to go ahead with a retrospective amendment to the constitution which will force the five to be reinstated to their seats so that they can then give them to the ANC.

This will, of course, tip the scales in the legislature in favour of the ANC and New National Party (NNP)



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alliance. They would be expected to form a new government, leaving the largest party in the province, the IFP, out in the cold.

Clearly it is a situation Mtshali wants to avoid. Just for a start the use of the executive jet would pass to his successor, ANC provincial leader S'bu Ndebele.

An early election would be a desperate gamble and Ndebele has understood this all too clearly and accepted the challenge. No need to get the DA on board — as the ANC could vote to dissolve the legislature and go to early elections.

The first question which arises is who will pay for the election? The province? When asked in the past to hold a referendum on where the capital of KwaZulu-Natal should be located — Ulundi or Maritzburg — the argument has consistently been that there is not enough money to pay for it. So is there room in the provincial budget to pay for an election? I doubt it.

There is no unanimity in the IFP over this course of action. Some have pointed out that to hold an election in just one province would free up the ANC's national election

juggernaut to enter the province and contest the election.

Not only will the political leaders, transport, canvassers and other costly paraphernalia which goes with an election campaign be mobilised, but also the full resources of the state. If that old trick of no-go zones becomes a reality the ANC would be able to deploy as many police and military as it likes to safeguard its election workers.

In a normal general election all resources are spread across nine provinces. To have them concentrated in one province would simply be awesome.

Given the massive resources at the ANC's disposal — you can bet the entire leadership of the party will descend on the province to campaign — the ANC is likely to be almost irresistible and the chances of it improving its share of the vote would be substantial.

If the ANC does go ahead with the constitutional amendment, which will force the five to be reinstated, an election can only take place in about February or March next year. This will leave about a year before the next general election. The amendment will thus place power in the hands of the ANC/NNP for only 12 months.

If, however, they go for the early election option and the ANC comes

in with the expected landslide, the IFP will have lost power in the province for five years.

There are some who fondly believe that the IFP and the DA can improve their positions in an early election. There is little doubt that much of what the NNP got in the last election would be up for grabs and that very little of it would accrue to the ANC.

On the performance of the parties in 1999, the competition in the province is tight. The IFP won 40,45% of the vote, followed closely by the ANC (39,7%), then the DA with just under 10%, and the NNP (4%). The remaining 7% was split between smaller parties, such as the Minority Front (MF).

For the ANC to get outright control of the province it would have to get another 11%. If the NNP can muster say 2% and the MF keeps its 1%, which is promised to the ANC, then only 7% would be needed for the coalition of the three to get more than 50%. The question IFP and DA strategists need to answer is: will the 50,21% of the vote which the two earned together in 1999 hold firm?

It is said a week is a long time in politics. If the IFP and DA get this wrong they will find out that five years is an eternity in politics.

■ Hartley is Parliamentary Editor.