

# THE FORMATION OF THE CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLE (COPE): A REALISTIC CHALLENGE TO THE ANC?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the Limpopo Conference of the ANC in December 2007, it became clear that a split in the party was imminent.<sup>2</sup> Those defeated in Limpopo were said to be disillusioned with the new incoming leadership of Jacob Zuma. Cracks of leadership squabbles within the ANC continued until mid-2008 when a new political party was formed by those who were deemed dissatisfied with the leadership that had been chosen in Limpopo. Some political analysts argued that the formation of the Congress of the People (COPE) provided South Africans with an unprecedented opportunity to end the race-based voting patterns that had characterized the country's politics since 1994.

When Mosiuoa Lekota famously served “divorce papers” on the ANC, it was clear that the ruling party for the first time since 1994 faced an opposition coming from its rank and file members. The hosting of a successful convention in Sandton added fresh impetus to the politics of South Africa. With Zuma being what some termed a “flawed candidate” for the presidency of South Africa, the country was fertile for a new party to gnaw away at the ANC's majority. It remained to be seen whether COPE would not be a shapeless amoeba that picks up everything and everyone who have a gripe against Zuma's ANC. The article provides both a narrative and an analysis on the questions raised about the formation of COPE and the possible reasons for the formation of COPE are scrutinized. It highlights the ideological differences between COPE and the ANC.

Historians and political analysts have different interpretations of what COPE is and what it stands for. There were people who said COPE consisted of a group of traitors, élitists, those who failed to be elected at Polokwane, people sulking and disaffected. The article tackles the track record of the people behind the formation of

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on the Limpopo Conference of the ANC see C Twala, "An historical overview of the 52<sup>nd</sup> conference of the African National Congress in Limpopo", *Journal for Contemporary History* 33(3), December 2008, pp. 156-176. See also S Fikeni, "The Polokwane moment and South Africa's democracy at the crossroads", in P Kagwanja and K Kondlo, *State of the Nation South Africa 2008* (Cape Town, 2009), pp. 3-34.

COPE and argues that since its unbanning in 1990, the ANC experienced a challenge from within which led to the formation of COPE.

After having served the “divorce papers” to the ANC, it remained to be seen as to what would differentiate COPE from the ANC. In reality, COPE needed structure to underpin the idea of a split from the ANC. It had to give the voters in 2009 something different because it would be competing for the same voters’ base. Lekota had to convince the supporters at odds not to stay and fight the ANC from within. Although a new party was needed to highlight the ANC’s faults, the supporters needed to be convinced about the fundamental differences between the new party and the ANC. This is a dilemma that any party breaking away from the ANC confronts. It is not the author’s intention to discuss COPE’s participation in the 2009 elections, but the election results are scrutinized in order to shed some light on whether COPE was a realistic challenge to the ANC. COPE had to offer something fresh on the political scene. Its leaders had to convince its supporters that it was not a vestige of the ANC and had to refrain from sounding like the ANC.

For the purpose of this article, a number of newspaper articles and academic articles were consulted. No chapters in books or books in general are available as yet which addresses the question of the formation of COPE. Oral testimonies were also taken into consideration. The information from all these sources proved to be of value.

## **2. POSITIONING OF COPE IN SOUTH AFRICA’S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE**

It was argued that the information of COPE would change the political landscape of South Africa. Political analysts were confronted with a dilemma of positioning COPE in as far as the politics of the country was concerned. It was expected that COPE would usher in another dimension in the politics of the country. There were predictions that the formation of COPE would present a major challenge to the ANC’s constituency. Although the party was too new for the analysts to form a coherent picture of the party’s development over the next few years, it came at the right time to usher in a new dimension by providing a wider choice for the electorate in the 2009 general election. It was hoped that COPE would provide a political home for the disgruntled members of the other political parties, particularly those from the ANC. The fact that its leadership was drawn from the ranks of a party that was known for almost a century as a political home for the majority of the Africans, it was therefore virtually impossible to separate COPE and specifically its leaders from the ANC and its 14 years trajectory as a ruling party. It is within this framework that the formation of COPE should be understood. At the centre of the formation of COPE was the belief by its founders that, though Zuma was popular with ANC branches, the general voting population did not want him as the country’s president.

### 3. POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE FORMATION OF COPE

President Thabo Mbeki's term was to have expired in April 2009, but many in the ANC felt that he needed to leave office sooner. Finally, in September 2008, Mbeki's critics had a reason to fire him after Chris Nicholson, a High Court judge with good human rights credentials, had dismissed the corruption charges against Zuma on the basis of a technicality and found that Zuma had had grounds to allege a political conspiracy against him, as the evidence before Nicholson was strong that Mbeki had meddled in his case.<sup>3</sup> Political analysts, historians and journalists alike argue that to a certain extent the judgement by Judge Nicholson on the involvement of former President Thabo Mbeki in Zuma's case was the main reason for and contributed to the formation of COPE in December 2008.<sup>4</sup> Nicholson argued that Mbeki and his cabinet had criminally compromised the independence of the prosecutor through "political meddling". He also went beyond his boundaries when he saw it fit to criticize Mbeki for running for a third term as party president and for firing Zuma in 2005.<sup>5</sup> This judgement by Nicholson worsened the rift between the pro-Mbeki and pro-Zuma groups within the ANC.

Immediately following Nicholson's September 2008 judgement, a special meeting of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC was called, and it was decided, after approximately 14 hours of debate, to "recall" the president. Zuma opposed the action and indicated that Mbeki's term would end in seven months' time.<sup>6</sup> Privately he argued that Mbeki should be allowed to depart with dignity and that his remaining in the position was necessary for a smooth transition. Zuma and other more moderate ANC leaders were unable to prevent the putsch. Emotions and a desire for vengeance trumped reason, and leading the charge were other ANC leaders who had been personal victims<sup>7</sup> of Mbeki's machinations. According to these leaders who wanted Mbeki to vacate his post, they were doing exactly what Mbeki had done to Zuma when he had relieved him from being the Deputy President

<sup>3</sup> Justice C Nicholson, "Judgement in the matter between Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma and National Director of Public Prosecutions", 11 September 2008. See also R Louw (ed.), "Nicholson judgment: Jacob Zuma's supporters celebrate while stung NPA starts appeal process", *Southern Africa Report* 26(38), 19 September 2008, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> M Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki The dream deferred* (Johannesburg, 2009), p. 334.

<sup>5</sup> On the issue of the firing of Zuma, for more information read D Wessels, "Die afdanking van adjunkpresident Jacob Zuma: 'n Sage in politieke kommunikasie (I)", *Journal for Contemporary History* 32(1), June 2007, pp. 149-172. See also D Wessels, "Die afdanking van adjunkpresident Jacob Zuma: 'n Sage in politieke kommunikasie (II)", *Journal for Contemporary History* 32(2), December 2007, pp. 56-77. See also D Wessels, "Die afdanking van adjunkpresident Jacob Zuma: 'n Sage in politieke kommunikasie (III)", *Journal for Contemporary History* 33(3), December 2008, pp. 132-155.

<sup>6</sup> *The Star*, 15 September 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Including amongst others Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale and Matthews Phosa who had been accused in 2001 of plotting a *coup* against Mbeki.

of South Africa in 2005, using an incomplete legal process to justify what was in essence a political decision.<sup>8</sup>

In an interview Thabang Selemela, member of the ANC in Bloemfontein, argued: “I think long before the Polokwane conference, Lekota had taken a decision to leave the ANC. The question of the formation of the new party was in the pipeline even before Polokwane. People like Lekota were angry about what had happened in Polokwane. They could not accept the outcomes of a democratic process.”<sup>9</sup>

Former Minister of Intelligence, Ronnie Kasrils, wrote in the *Mail and Guardian* that the formation of COPE was a result of the ANC’s leadership’s failure to heal wounds and build unity after the Polokwane conference. He charged the new leadership of being vicious and relentless in humiliating and marginalizing anyone perceived to have been in the so-called Mbeki camp. He further argued that those premiers, mayors and councillors who showed solidarity with Mbeki were targeted and that led to disagreements. According to Kasrils, the disagreements were not with the ANC policies, but all about democracy and conduct within the party. After Polokwane, a kind of a witch-hunt was unleashed by the Zuma group.<sup>10</sup>

One other reason that led to the formation of COPE was the accusation levelled by the anti-Zuma group that the ANC was betraying the course of the Freedom Charter. This group claimed to be the protectors of the Freedom Charter which, according to them, the ANC wanted to monopolize. Professor Raymond Suttner, head of the Walter and Albertina Sisulu Knowledge and Heritage Unit at the University of South Africa, quoted Oliver Tambo’s speech of 8 January 1980 in the *Daily Dispatch*: “The Freedom Charter contains the fundamental perspective of the vast majority of the people of South Africa of the kind of liberation that all of us are fighting for. Hence it is not merely the Freedom Charter of the African National Congress and its allies. Rather it is the charter of the people of South Africa for liberation.” Suttner argued that it was uncalled for that the ANC should initiate litigation to prevent others from using the Freedom Charter. According to him, no one has a patent on South Africa’s freedom struggle. Suttner further argued that this was why, during the period of the ANC’s illegality, many church and other groups adopted the charter.<sup>11</sup> He applauded the formation of COPE as a sign that the Zuma-led ANC, which stands for personal enrichment and power, was meeting with resistance. Suttner was of the opinion that if the ANC was to advance the claim to be the main bearer of the spirit of the Freedom Charter and the heritage of struggle with any credibility, it should reflect on how it conducts itself, including the ZANU–PF style of breaking up meetings and

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<sup>8</sup> Gevisser, p. 335.

<sup>9</sup> *Twala collection*. Interview with Mr TM Selemela, ANC member, Bloemfontein, 30 April 2009.

<sup>10</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 17-23 October 2008.

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Dispatch*, 25 November 2008.

general political intolerance. Suttner described the situation within the ANC as the “zanufication” of the ANC by the current leaders.<sup>12</sup> Suttner further stated:

“I think we are entering a very dangerous situation, where ZANU–PF tactics are employed by ANC leaders against those who appear to be posing a serious threat... There are signs of fragility in the Zuma camp as some silently rejoiced at or approved Julius Malema’s behaviour and public utterances, while others like Kgalema Motlanthe openly condemned Malema’s actions and political intolerance.”<sup>13</sup>

Besides the question of the Freedom Charter, Moeletsi Mbeki, a political analyst, argued that the split within the ANC had a class dimension and that where the middle class is compromised, there will always be problems. He argued that the ANC had adopted a policy to protect the wrongdoers and ignore the rule of law. That necessitated the middle class to abandon the ruling party.<sup>14</sup> Willie Madisha was of the opinion that the formation of the new party would be a victory for the dismantling of the centralization of power and that would mean a renewal of democracy for all the people of South Africa. He further accused the ANC of a purposeful abandonment of a revolutionary political culture.<sup>15</sup>

Another view held on the formation of COPE emanates from the long-term political conflict that existed between Lekota and Zuma.<sup>16</sup> Just before the ANC was unbanned in 1990, Lekota had been sent to southern Natal to lead the Mass Democratic Movement. When the ANC was eventually unbanned, Lekota was chosen to be the party’s interim leader in the region. He was, however, replaced by Durban–born Jeff Radebe at the first regional conference. By this time Zuma was also back in the country, although his focus seemed to be mainly on negotiations with the apartheid state. What also made matters worse between these two leaders was the ANC National Executive Committee decision in 1991 to replace Zuma with Lekota as the head of intelligence. Zuma could not understand why the ANC waited until he had gone abroad before replacing him with Lekota, a leader who had no experience of running ANC intelligence. Zuma and Alfred Nzo were, at the time, the most senior intelligence officers in the NEC.<sup>17</sup> After 1994, Lekota and Zuma were embroiled in a number of other disagreements. In 1996, Zuma was among senior ANC leaders who were unhappy with Lekota’s premiership of the Free State. Zuma was the Party’s national chairperson and KwaZulu–Natal leader at the time. He was among those who deemed Lekota’s conflicts with Pat Matosa, who was the Free

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Sowetan*, 30 October 2008.

<sup>14</sup> *Financial Mail*, 7 November 2008.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Lekota was particularly singled out in Polokwane because it was believed that it was he who had antagonized the ANCYL and COSATU in the run–up to the conference: railing against the singing of “uMshini wami” and insisting that no T-shirts promoting individuals would be allowed. Lekota lambasted Zuma for singing liberation songs like “Umshini wami” like a pop star. He thought they should sing songs that advocate and announce policy or that popularize the policy of the ANC.

<sup>17</sup> *The Times*, 26 November 2008.

State ANC chairperson, unacceptable. As a result, Lekota was ousted as Free State premier, with some of the party's leaders accusing him of thinking he was "above" the ANC.<sup>18</sup>

There were arguments that the split within the ANC was not at all about the constitution. It was about the anger of the defeat at Polokwane and the humiliating recall of Mbeki as president. It was more about dislike and contempt for ANC president Jacob Zuma and others in the leadership cohort that had won at Polokwane. Solly Mkhathshwa, the interim leader of the newly envisaged party in Limpopo, summarized what many of the affected felt:

"The provincial conference of the ANC was sold and rigged. It was like Polokwane. We were in a majority but lost the elections. Now Limpopo is ready for the new party and our majority is even bigger than before...The ANC has been hijacked by COSATU and the SACP and is no longer doing what it's supposed to do. We don't want South Africa to be led by communists: it will mean that outside investors won't want to come here. And we don't want to be led by COSATU either. We need to produce people who are competent in the world. If COSATU leads us, then we will be incompetent workers and citizens."<sup>19</sup>

Mkhathshwa further argued:

"The people of Limpopo are waiting with bated breath to be liberated from Egypt to the land of Canaan. We have been insulted, it is enough. We are tired of being treated like opposition parties within our party. We are leaving them, we are going with Comrade Terror."<sup>20</sup>

It was interesting to note that though these were the basic issues forcing people out of the ANC, it was the reckless disregard for constitutional values expressed by ANC leaders that presented the new entity with a potential popular electoral platform that centred on defending the constitution. Rather than arguing about who had more claim to the Freedom Charter<sup>21</sup> what at first appeared to be the reason for forming the new party, uniting around the constitution would give the new party an appeal that goes beyond former ANC members and voters. African National Congress Youth League leader, Julius Malema, together with ANC Secretary-general Gwede Mantashe, were largely seen as being responsible for recklessness and were to be blamed for most of the people leaving the ANC. Malema was frequently singled out

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Financial Mail*, 7 November 2008.

<sup>20</sup> *City Press*, 12 October 2008.

<sup>21</sup> It was not ironic that the Freedom Charter that had split the ANC in 1959 was once again the cause of the organization's latest breakaway, almost 50 years down the line. The dichotomy though carved a divergent proclivity, with the first breakaway being against, and the current one being for the Freedom Charter. Interestingly communists and their influences were and are still at the core of these conflicts. Robert Sobukwe opposed this policy document on the basis that it was a deviation from the movement's policy, with the proclamation that "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white". While acting diametrically opposite to the Africanists of the 1950s, Lekota and his supporters claimed that the post-Polokwane leadership, through their utterances and actions, have digressed from the Charter. The current enmity was not about whether the Charter was good or bad as in 1959, but whether the ANC had deviated from policy. For more information on this read T Lodge, "The Pan-Africanist Congress, 1959-1990", in I Liebenberg, F Lortan, B Nel and G van der Westhuizen (eds), *The long march The story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa* (Pretoria, 1994), pp. 104-124.

as a symbol of moral decay, as was Zuma, whose silence during Malema's utterances led to the questioning of his integrity. Pouring cold water on the formation of the new party, Mantashe stated that there was no crisis within the ANC.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. A ROCKY PATH TO THE FORMATION OF COPE

On Wednesday 8 October 2008, Lekota addressed a much awaited press conference in Sandton. It was at this press conference where he formally announced that he was serving "divorce papers" on the ANC and planning to convene a national convention open to all South Africans.<sup>23</sup> His address was dubbed "the real challenge to Zuma's ANC". Under Zuma, Lekota believed that things had gone bad for those unseated in Limpopo during the ANC Conference. Lekota stated the following about the ANC under Zuma's leadership:

"The ANC started veering away from the course that attracted us to its ranks. T-shirts are printed with tribalist slogans decorated with the face of some very senior members of the ANC but no condemnation from the ruling party. Songs that advocate violence are sung when we are supposed to promote peace and development."<sup>24</sup>

In this media address, Lekota announced that he would be "serving divorce papers" on the ANC but he stopped short of announcing the new party. He said that with the situation prevailing within the ANC, it seemed they were logically moving in that direction. The announcement by Lekota of "serving divorce papers" on the ANC implied a plan to break away. Lekota further stated that his grouping would organize a national convention where all South Africans in and out of the ANC would be invited to decide which route to take. This announcement was an indication that Lekota and his group were not prepared to operate within the ANC under Zuma's leadership. When he made the announcement of "serving divorce papers", he had already started coordinating structures in all the nine provinces with an aim of forming a political party.<sup>25</sup> The new break away party included people like Mluleki George (former Deputy Minister of Defence), Willie Madisha (former COSATU president), Jabu Moleketi (former Deputy Minister of Finance), Philip Dexter (former SACP treasurer), Smuts Ngonyama (former ANC head of communication), and Mlungisi Hlongwane (SANCO president).<sup>26</sup>

The question that was mostly asked about the above-mentioned leaders was whether they were just political mavericks unwilling to accept defeat at Polokwane, or were they brave leaders of a new political force to be reckoned with. These leaders

<sup>22</sup> *City Press*, 2 November 2008.

<sup>23</sup> R Louw, "Suspension of Mosioua Lekota is certain to lead to split in ANC and possible formation of new party", *Southern Africa Report* 26(42), 17 October 2008, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Sowetan*, 9 October 2008.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

were viewed by the ANC as mere power-hungry opportunists. Although there were criticisms levelled against them, they believed that they could make a difference in a country that desperately needed change in view of the ANC's assault on democracy and the rule of law. In protecting itself, the ANC unleashed a formidable propaganda machine to try and discredit them. This suggested that the ANC to a certain extent feared the formation of the new party. As early as November 2008, the ANC announced its plan to kick out all "disloyal" members from the party including former deputy president Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka who was suspected of being linked to COPE. COPE leaders were accused by the ANC leadership of using the resignations of prominent ANC leaders like Charlotte Lobe, Leonard Ramatlakane and Lyndall Shope-Mafole in an attempt to destabilize the ANC and win support.<sup>27</sup>

Zuma dismissed the possibility of the forming of a breakaway party by the disgruntled members like Lekota. Matthews Phosa, ANC's treasurer-general saw the seriousness of the formation of the breakaway party, hence 24 hours after Lekota's announcement he extended an olive branch to the dissidents. Responding to a statement by Lekota that he was "serving divorce papers" on the party, Phosa adopted a conciliatory approach saying:

"The ANC would try to find an internal solution to the matter. We are in the middle of a consultation to see how we can reconcile. If you think that we will throw a stone at Terror (Lekota), we will disappoint you. We are uniting our members behind the party. We will hold a meeting today with Lekota because the ANC has a duty to give leadership in the matter. The meeting will discuss all the concerns that the former defence minister raised at a press conference yesterday and in an earlier open letter to ANC general-secretary Gwede Mantashe. Lekota and all those aggrieved will be engaged in several meetings to find a solution. If the discussions break down, the ANC will not be accused of not talking to its members. Focusing on anger and retribution is not on our agenda. We do not believe that our marriage has irrevocably broken down... We also are not going to take disciplinary action against such people because that won't help, the ANC wants stability, peace and reconciliation among its members."<sup>28</sup>

While Phosa appeared to have a reconciliatory approach to resolve the disagreements between Lekota and the ANC, Pallo Jordan, an NEC member, took a swipe at Lekota and his supporters when he *inter alia* stated:

"Terror Lekota is a sore loser who is attempting to create a breakaway party from the ANC because he cannot cope with losing his leadership position... Those voted out at Polokwane were not the first to be voted out of office in the ANC. You have to come back and fight another day and be re-elected or not. If you remember Duma Nokwe, who was the secretary-general of the ANC when the party was banned, he was removed while the party was in exile. But he stayed, did his work and was later re-elected. Lekota should have considered the history of the breakaway movements from the ANC and would have seen they were and are not successful. Someone such as Terror should have looked carefully at people who have done that (walked away). In 1958 Robert Sobukwe also served divorce papers on the ANC to start the PAC in 1959. Where is the PAC today?"<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 5-11 December 2008.

<sup>28</sup> *Sowetan*, 9 October 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 10-16 October 2008.

After the announcement by Lekota of “serving divorce papers” to the ANC on 13 October 2008, the National Working Committee (NWC) of the ANC held a meeting in Bloemfontein where a decision was taken to suspend both Lekota and George. After the suspension of these leaders, the NWC issued the following statement:

“Any other ANC members involved in setting up a party in opposition to the ruling party would suffer the same fate. Whatever grievances or concerns any ANC members may have, that does not give them a licence to defy decisions of ANC structures, to destabilize the organization, or to engage in factional activity. The NWC believes that this action will address any confusion that may have been created by people speaking for the ANC at meetings not arranged or sanctioned by the ANC. The ANC cannot allow its structures to be used for purposes of undermining and betraying the organization.”<sup>30</sup>

It was interesting to note the unanimous support by the opposition parties when they welcomed the call by Lekota for a national convention whereby a decision to form a new political party would be taken. The Democratic Party (DA) leader, Helen Zille, said the “disintegration of the ANC” was good for the country and welcomed “this exciting new era” as an opportunity for the realignment of South African politics. Zille stated that the DA shared Lekota’s rejection of resurgent tribalism in the ANC, the anti-constitutional rhetoric of ANC president Zuma’s supporters and the illegal and constitutional idea of a “political solution” to the 783 counts of alleged bribery with which Zuma had been charged.<sup>31</sup>

Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, said while it was not his habit to comment on the internal affairs of any political party, the situation in the country had now reached a point where the divide between the ruling party and the state was affecting the country’s future. He said the current period reminded him of the moment in 1979 when the ANC and the IFP broke apart, saying his comments at the time – that “nobody owns the ANC copyright” – were as valid today as they were then, and that the ANC had abandoned its founding values.<sup>32</sup> The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) leader, Kenneth Meshoe, also joined the chorus of those who supported Lekota. Meshoe said that the significant issues raised by Lekota warranted further discussion and agreed that constitutional institutions such as the courts had suffered under the new ANC leadership. He stated:

“The highly personalized attacks on Lekota, particularly by the South African Communist Party, are a cause for concern. These reactions show a high level of intolerance. If you differ with the ANC then you are ‘unpatriotic’ or ‘counter-revolutionary’.”<sup>33</sup>

The Independent Democrats (ID) leader, Patricia de Lille, said she was not surprised by Lekota’s announcement, as the infighting in the ANC had reached breaking point. De Lille stated that the ANC should respect the principles and in-

<sup>30</sup> *The Star*, 14 October 2008.

<sup>31</sup> *Sowetan*, 23 October 2008.

<sup>32</sup> *The Star*, 9 October 2008.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

stitutions of democracy and stand against attacks on the courts and the constitution. Her sentiments were also echoed by the United Democratic Movement (UDM) leader, Bantu Holomisa. Holomisa was more circumspect, suggesting that an ANC split would simply represent a “rearranging of the deckchairs” but he nonetheless commended Lekota for “biting the bullet by issuing a statement of intent”. He warned:

“Zuma and his group must now be hanging their heads in shame because they are reaping what they have sown by targeting and purging supporters of former president Thabo Mbeki.”<sup>34</sup>

Impatient and anxious supporters of Lekota wanted him to form a new party soon. On 24 October 2008, Lekota had a meeting with young professionals at the Jerusalem Church where he told his supporters that the calling of the convention was not out of loyalty for former president Mbeki, but because of the ANC’s departure from its founding principles. He cited the verbal attacks his supporters had endured during a meeting in Orange Farm, Gauteng, and remarks made by Senzo Mchunu, the ANC leader in KwaZulu–Natal, who was quoted as having said that the ANC would “crush” Lekota’s group if they would come to lobby for support in his province.<sup>35</sup> At Lekota’s meeting at Orange Farm, a group of ANC supporters hurled insults at his supporters, calling them “rebels”, “sellouts”, “counter-revolutionaries” and “dogs”. Some even chanted “Kill Lekota” and “Kill Shilowa” slogans.<sup>36</sup> These attacks took place in spite of pledges by Zuma and some of his co-leaders not to countenance assaults on COPE supporters or disruption of its meetings. Who would have thought that years after the armed struggle had been abandoned, leaders like Julius Malema, Angie Motshega and others would be talking about “killing”, “eliminating” and “crushing” their political opponents? Though there are other reasons which led to the establishment of Lekota’s party, there can be no doubt that the outrageous, provocative and inflammatory statements of Malema alienated many people from the ANC and made them supportive of a breakaway party. On the question of visiting the pro-ANC territories, political analyst Prince Mashele gave a warning to Lekota and his entourage that they ought to be careful when visiting ANC strongholds, especially in townships, rural areas and squatter camps. He said the clashes at Orange Farm were a sign of the “higher degree” political intolerance in the rank-and-file membership of the ANC.<sup>37</sup> One can conclude that the ANC’s strategy to organize its members to disrupt Lekota’s meetings was an indication that its members had gone into panic mode and viewed the imminent launch of COPE as a real challenge to it.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *City Press*, 26 October 2008.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

Rumours of infiltration by the new party were spread by the ANC leadership. Zuma alleged that the ANC's NEC had been infiltrated by Lekota sympathizers. In an exclusive interview with *City Press* at his Johannesburg home, Zuma expressed his frustration at senior ANC leaders who remained within the NEC but who sided with the dissidents led by Lekota. Zuma said the ANC's "hands are tied" and leaders must be "guarded" in dealing with supporters of the splinter group formed by disgruntled ANC members. He added that it was difficult to devise an effective counter-strategy when people suspected that some of those with whom they were discussing strategy would relay it to the new party.<sup>38</sup> These fears by Zuma were fuelled by Shilowa when he indicated that many ANC leaders had planned to resign at strategic times. It remained a mystery as to how the ANC would deal with that problem. One strategy that the ANC suggested was to sideline such members from ANC activities. Senior members who were targeted included Mlambo-Ngcuka, Sydney Mufamadi, Saki Macozoma, Supra Mahupelo, Sello Moloto and Rueben Mohlaloga.<sup>39</sup> The University of Limpopo political analyst, Professor Lesiba Teffo, stated the following about Zuma's suspicions:

"If he suspects people and sniffs them out based merely on speculation or intelligence, he might end up pushing innocent souls out of the party. The problem is that Lekota and his allies have publicly claimed they have supporters in the NEC and this was confirmed by recent resignations from the committee. So when they say they still have support in the ANC, you can't take that lightly. My sense is that people are ready to jump ship. They are waiting for opportune times to do so. If they are not high on the ANC list, they will be most likely to jump."<sup>40</sup>

In order to stop what was known as the "COPE tsunami", the ANC decided on embarking on a concerted campaign to stem the erosion of its power base by Lekota's breakaway party. The ANC also decided that not only would it tackle the new party head-on by questioning the trustworthiness of its leaders but would talk to the public in a bid to shore up its base. As part of its campaign the ANC would deploy ANC President Zuma and NEC members to do door to door campaigning; undertake its election campaign earlier than usual; and set up a "war room" to respond swiftly to initiatives and efforts by the new party. The primary weapon was to brand Lekota and other leaders of the breakaway as untrustworthy. Before joining the cabinet, he had been Free State Premier and failed to disclose his assets (2003) in the Free State businesses in parliament's register of members' interests, as requested by law. He never disclosed that he was a director of the Landzicht Winery in the Free State and its holding company, GWK Corporation. GWK Landzicht regularly supplied wine for provincial government functions and had links to the Free State Department of Economic Affairs. He also failed to disclose shares held in BZL Petroleum, which

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 November 2008.

<sup>39</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 5-11 November 2008.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

distributed diesel to farmers and businesses in the Free State.<sup>41</sup> On the question of Khutsong, Lekota showed his untrustworthiness by ridiculing the residents of that township as if they were not members of the ruling party. Although Lekota claimed that that was an oversight from his side, his detractors used that to show his untrustworthiness.

Fikile Mbalula alleged that Mbeki was the mastermind behind the formation of COPE. Mbalula said Mluleki George, who had served as deputy minister in Mbeki's administration, told a meeting in the Eastern Cape in mid-October that they had Mbeki's full backing. Mbalula stated *inter alia*:

“When he (George) announced their intention to form a political party after the sacking of the president, he said in that meeting that they had the backing of Mbeki and that they had met with him not once, not twice, but thrice. It was a week before the big Wednesday, the press conference called by Terror Lekota at which he announced his intention to hold a convention. George announced that they had the full support of Mbeki. He (Mbeki) has not vehemently announced his displeasure or his being against it. On a daily basis, people go to Mbeki's house to seek a fresh mandate.”<sup>42</sup>

The above allegations were denied by George who referred to Mbalula as a habitual liar. He questioned Mbalula's source of information. According to George it was interesting to note that the ANC was trying to find out about the whereabouts of Mbeki. The fact that the ANC had recalled Mbeki from being the country's president was an indication that his services were no more needed within the ANC. It was therefore ironic that the ANC had spied on him to find out whether he supported COPE or not.<sup>43</sup> As early as October 2008, in defence of Mbeki, Lekota stated that whether Mbeki was with them or not, was irrelevant. He was responding to reports by the ANC secretary-general, Gwede Mantashe, that Mbeki had written a letter to Zuma pledging his continued support for the ANC. Lekota accused the ANC of hypocrisy, saying “after dumping Mbeki the ANC is now dusting him off to use him in their election campaign”.<sup>44</sup> Lekota was however quick to indicate that he was not forming a new party because of loyalty to Mbeki. He stated: “I feel quite insulted when people say I am doing this out of loyalty...I didn't join the organization on the basis of one or other individual but because I was attracted by its principles and policies...When you follow individuals, you lose sight of principle, and that's why I don't follow individuals.”<sup>45</sup>

Before and after the launch of COPE, there were vicious attacks on Mbeki by Zuma loyalists. Their reason for doing so was the conviction that Mbeki was the hidden orchestrator of the alleged political conspiracy to indict the ANC president and its national presidential candidate, Jacob Zuma, with corruption related charges

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<sup>41</sup> *Saturday Star*, 11 October 2008.

<sup>42</sup> *City Press*, 7 December 2008.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Sowetan*, 30 October 2008.

<sup>45</sup> *Saturday Star*, 11 October 2008.

in order to thwart his presidential ambitions. Although Zuma refrained from frontal attacks on Mbeki in his public statements, he linked Mbeki to the decision by the former National Director of Public Prosecution (NDPP), Vusi Pikoli, to indict him in June 2005, thereby indirectly accusing Mbeki of manipulating the prosecution for his own political ends. Zuma's loyalists therefore concluded that, having failed to press charges against Zuma, Mbeki was behind the formation of COPE.<sup>46</sup>

At this stage Onkgopotse JJ Tabane wrote the following in the *Business Day* about the intolerant nature of the ANC:

“The veiled threat issued by ANC leaders for COPE not to organize from within its ranks is as irresponsible as it is bizarre. Where else can opposition parties mobilize if it is not within the ranks of the existing parties? Must the DA and IFP issue the same threat? Given that at the heart of the breakaway is unhappiness with the ANC, does it not follow that the so-called dissident members will talk firstly with fellow members internally – something the ANC leaders have been encouraging? This double-speak is what has come to characterize the ANC leadership of late.”<sup>47</sup>

In a clear move to stop in its tracks the momentum building around the notion of a national convention as organized by Lekota and his group that would lead to the formation of the new party, the NWC stated that the axe would also fall on any other members who had indicated in words or action their intention to establish a party in opposition. The NWC also recommended to the NEC on 15 October 2008 that provincial structures should be ordered to take disciplinary action against any such individuals. It was clear that rather than waiting for Lekota to finalize the “divorce papers” that he said he was serving on the ANC, the ANC's decision makers decided to go on the offensive and to strike first.

Phillip Dexter, a member of the convention's steering committee, said that the convention was about the formation of a new multiparty movement, a united voice of those concerned and who were angry at the leadership of the ANC for threatening the spirit of the pre-1994 Convention for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa). The Shilowa-Lekota (Shikota) organization, as it was known, then intended to give impetus to the formation of the first post-transition era breakaway from the ANC. The proposed party was to be launched after the conference on 16 December.<sup>48</sup> It was also important for this party to come with a name soon if it was to comply with the requirements of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) ahead of the 2009 election. On Friday, 31 October 2008, the ANC tried and failed to get an interdict to prevent the national convention or party-to-be from infringing on the ruling party's “brand”, for example by referring to itself as the South African National Congress.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>46</sup> R Louw, “Vicious attacks on Thabo Mbeki by Zuma loyalists”, *Southern Africa Report* 27(16), 17 April 2009, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Business Day*, 3 December 2008.

<sup>48</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 2 November 2008.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

On 1 November the convention was held and attended by more than 4 000 delegates from around the country. Opposition parties also attended the convention. The ANC and its allies were conspicuous by their absence. Since the announcement of the convention, the alliance's political leadership futilely attempted to portray its organizers as a bunch of élite spoilers, disaffected members of the ANC who did not get elected at Polokwane, and angry people.<sup>50</sup>

Vusi Mavimbela, former National Intelligence Agency director-general, wrote in the *Sunday Times* that it was surprising that the leaders of the convention accused the post-Polokwane leadership of the ANC of a host of political sins, including purging, marginalization, the recall of Mbeki, the hijacking of the ANC by COSATU and the SACP and suppression of democratic debate. The ANC leadership equally pointed out that the pre-Polokwane ANC leadership, over which Lekota presided as chairperson, could also be accused of the same political sins.<sup>51</sup>

## 5. THE LAUNCH OF COPE IN DECEMBER 2008

The formation of COPE was welcomed as an indication of the maturity of democracy in South Africa. However, there were worrying tendencies which emerged in this party at its embryonic stage. It was accused of exaggerating its support by releasing unaudited numbers. Perhaps this was done for propaganda reasons. It was announced by COPE leaders that the ANC had lost total support in the Eastern Cape, but when Zuma visited the area, the number of ANC supporters that turned out to show their support dispelled those claims. It was also interesting to note that a few weeks before the launch of COPE in Bloemfontein, its leaders seemed to have been in the midst of an identity and leadership crisis. Several days before its launch, the organizers had been sending mixed messages as to where exactly the intended gathering for a convention would take place. Before the launch COPE had organized a convention in Bloemfontein for 2 November. Charlotte Lobe, a member of the organizing committee, told the *Saturday Star* that they had moved the venue from Bloemfontein to Pretoria for logistical reasons. There were allegations that the ANC leadership in the Free State vowed that they would not allow the launch of COPE to take place in the provincial capital, the birthplace of the ANC. Lobe, an ex-ANC NEC member, denied that the venue change was due to threats by some Free State ANC leaders to disrupt the convention of 2 November. She explained that it was just that they could not find enough accommodation for the expected 4 000 delegates in Bloemfontein because the principal of the Central University of Technology, Professor Thandwa Mthembu, was rumoured to have refused permission for COPE to hold a convention

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<sup>50</sup> *Mail and Guardian*, 20 November 2008.

<sup>51</sup> *Sunday Times*, 2 November 2008.

at his campus.<sup>52</sup> Lekota stated that he was aware that some individuals had made threatening calls to the university to prevent him using the venue, despite the fact that it had already been paid for. When Lekota went to Orange Farm to drum up support for COPE, he said Bloemfontein was set to host the convention and later a launch. He stated the following to his supporters at Orange Farm: “I can confirm today that the convention is going ahead on 2 November in Bloemfontein. Let’s go to Mangaung to talk about what’s going on and how we are going to defend our democracy and improve the lives of our people.”<sup>53</sup> After these utterances by Lekota, his supporters burst into song with *Siyaya eMangaung* (we are going to Mangaung).<sup>54</sup> The above statements were also echoed by Mbazima Shilowa who told the COPE supporters at the University of Johannesburg: “No amount of obstacles, of intimidation, of vilification, of insult is going to stop us from forging ahead.”<sup>55</sup>

When COPE was launched after 16 December 2008, it was heralded as the alternative party to the ANC and it promised to contest the April 2009 election. With the slogan “COPE bring hope”, it was seen as going to be an alternative political home for the disgruntled members of the ANC. The conference was also expected to officially endorse the interim leadership. The question mostly asked about COPE was, would it be different from the ANC that gave birth to it? It was clear that it was to contest for the same constituency as the ANC in order to entrench itself as an alternative to the ANC. It was also interesting to note that COPE claimed the same struggle heritage and heroes as the ANC. This therefore made the line of differences between these two parties very thin. What was to count in COPE’s favour was the fact that it projected itself as a new party for the people and bearing no responsibility for the ANC’s mistakes since 1994. One advantage for the launch of COPE was that it was provided with a rare opportunity to tap into the ready-made support base of the ANC. Another advantage was that they pinned their hopes on the following four elements which they deemed important for the success of the new party: to campaign for defending the constitution and constitutional values; to advocate strong moral values such as respect and compassion; to seek a renewal of democracy through electoral reform; and to campaign for freedom and equality before the law.

Besides the above distinguishing elements, there were other reforms envisaged by the new party, which included distancing itself from the ANC’s communist allies; support to nonpolitical trade unionism; and to part ways with important aspects of ANC political culture. Some of the ANC’s “revolutionary” practices like the centralization of power and collapse of the distinction between party and state, became the rallying points for COPE. What the South Africans wanted to know about this new party was:

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<sup>52</sup> *Saturday Star*, 25 October 2008.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *The Star*, 28 October 2008.

Who would be the face of COPE? Who was going to embody the vision and become the brand personality? Who was going to appeal to the political consumers when the election time comes? Who would pull at the heartstrings in rural South Africa ahead of Zuma? What would COPE entice the electorate with, which was not said by the ANC? Failure to answer the above-mentioned questions would be detrimental to the successful launch of COPE.

A political analyst, Zamikhaya Maseti, stated that COPE's strong point was that it was trying to depict itself as a party which was not trapped in liberation politics like the ANC. According to him, the ANC claimed that it had liberated the majority of South Africans, something that people were not really interested in. The South Africans wanted a party that was progressive, embracing all the citizens of the country, irrespective of ideological differences. COPE provided such hope. Maseti was of the opinion that, unlike within the ANC, COPE's leadership would come from various sectors of communities. He warned that COPE should not be seen as a political refugee camp for the disgruntled members of the ANC, but should be viewed as an alternative party with a different ideology from that of the ANC. However, this was something that would not be easily achieved by COPE because its membership pool was basically that of the ANC.<sup>56</sup>

Analyzing the formation of COPE and its chances as an alternative political choice to the ANC, Choice Makhetha, a political analyst from the University of the Free State, agreed with Maseti that COPE was armed with leadership expertise from Mbeki's administration. The leaders of COPE like Lekota, Shilowa, George and others had served in that administration, therefore they knew the shortcomings of the ANC government, something that could count in their favour. She argued that the fact that the ANC to a certain extent condoned the militancy of the ANCYL was counter-productive and profiled COPE's image. COPE exaggerated the fear of violence and victimization, that caused the ANC to be viewed as a violent political party.<sup>57</sup>

It was surprising that both organizations opted to have their rallies in Bloemfontein on the said date. Lekota launched his party starting at the University of the Free State and later moved to a cricket stadium in Bloemfontein. Zuma and his ANC supporters also had a rally at the Seisa Ramabolu stadium to address the youth

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<sup>56</sup> *SABC 2 News coverage of the launch of COPE*, 16 December 2008.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) veterans in Bloemfontein.<sup>58</sup> Both Lekota and Zuma hoped that the turnout at their respective rallies would demonstrate their popularity ahead of the 2009 election. The two men, who had spent much of the previous 18 years as senior ANC leaders plotting the destruction of other political parties in successive elections, were now sworn political enemies.

COPE's three-day launch conference at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein kicked off with more than 3 000 delegates buoyed by the new party's psychological victories over the ANC the previous week. A week before the launching of COPE, it beat the ANC when the Pretoria High Court ruled that the party could continue to use its name. The ANC contended that the name "Congress of the People" was part of its heritage and should be protected as such. Therefore the ANC sought to restrain COPE from using this name. ANC secretary-general Mantashe said in a 28 page affidavit that the splinter group's proposed name would "confuse or deceive" the public, including donors and potential donors into believing that it was associated with the ANC.<sup>59</sup> In his opening address, COPE leader, Lekota, told the crowd, which included foreign dignitaries from Britain and Germany, that since the formation of his party, the ANC had become paranoid. This had led to individuals suspected of being sympathetic to COPE being targeted. He said:

"This has been a week of victories... Public servants now talk in whispers when they discuss COPE. Men and women with whom we worked and shared jokes now have to look the other way when we by chance come upon each other along the corridors of state buildings and then explain when we meet elsewhere that they risk losing their jobs if they are seen to befriend us... Many South Africans are disillusioned with the ANC-led government, but the advent of COPE has now revived their hope for a better future."<sup>60</sup>

The conference offered the delegates an opportunity to deliberate on the party's policy document. Among others the document called for the reviewing of the electoral system, black economic empowerment (BEE), the professionalization of the public service, and the importance of depoliticization of the public service. In order to reform the electoral system, provision had to be made for a mixed system of direct and proportional representation. The system for independently electing

<sup>58</sup> Addressing the MK veterans at Seisa Ramabolu Stadium, Jacob Zuma stated: "Now, 47 years later, we call on our former combatants to defend the ANC from attempts to sow disunity and confusion in its ranks. As part of this organizational work we must as former MK combatants be at the heart of the establishment of street and village committees and re-establishment of ANC volunteer cops." It was strange for Zuma to call for the support of the MK veterans, a call that had never been made since the ANC took power in 1994. This call to return to the structures that dominated the organization in the closing stages of the fight against the apartheid regime caused consternation to COPE's members. Zuma blamed Thabo Mbeki for having ignored the MK veterans. He also accused COPE's leaders of trying to absolve themselves of responsibility for the failures of the ANC over 15 years. He called on the ANC to accelerate the Polokwane conference resolution that MK veterans should be financially supported. Zuma asked the MK veterans to play a leading role in forming street committees to fight crime and that they should educate the South African public about how other African countries supported the liberation struggle.

<sup>59</sup> *The Times*, 19 December 2008; *Sunday Times*, 2 November 2008.

<sup>60</sup> *Sowetan*, 15 December 2008.

the president, deputy president, the nine premiers and executive mayors was also discussed. On BEE, COPE's policy document argued that the party should take into cognizance the fact that economic inequalities were becoming more class-based than racial. It continued to state that social tensions were not only limited to interracial tensions, intrarace tensions along class lines were also slowly emerging. This was more accentuated within the black race where the emergence of the black élite created a new fault-line, namely the haves and the have nots. COPE also rallied support by arguing that due to the faulty implementation of the BEE policy, South Africa was faced with another emerging problem, that of the poor whites.<sup>61</sup> In his speech during the launch of COPE, Lekota accused the ANC of having ceased to be a democratic organization because of a purging of leadership, and that it had been taken over by COSATU and the Communists.

The party used the launch to confirm its leadership by consensus rather than through election. Kwandiwe Kondlo, executive director of the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC's) democracy and governance programme applauded COPE for positioning itself during its launch as a modern political party that did not need to invoke history, and that it would be largely defined by its policies and how it engages with the ruling party. According to Kondlo, the ANC's response to the formation of COPE had been confused and had showed a lack of strategic foresight.<sup>62</sup> Siphso Seepe, president of South African Race Relations, was critical of the formation of COPE and said that it was suffering an "identity crisis" and accused Lekota of being "trapped" in former President Thabo Mbeki's shadow.<sup>63</sup>

COPE pulled out all stops to end their conference on a high note. To the surprise of the conference delegates, it started when Allan Boesak<sup>64</sup> and his wife, Elna, walked into the hall. Boesak, known for his rousing orations, did not disappoint. His chant for his new party was: "There has never been a time like this." He further said:

"I think of times of the past and I think there never has been a time like this. I was there at Sharpeville when our people were killed on streets...but there has never been a time like this...In 1994 I stood at the cradle of democracy and saw for ourselves and our children a new future and I said to myself, there has never been a time like this...since then, our hopes have not been met, our dreams have been trampled upon...we are carving a new path..."

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Financial Mail*, 19 December 2008.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> There were political analysts who argued that by having Allan Boesak as a member, COPE squandered its opportunity of garnering votes from the growing number of South Africans who were appalled by the increasing evidence that the ruling ANC was mired in corruption. These analysts contend that Boesak was still blighted by the marks of corruption, having fallen from grace when he had been imprisoned in 2000 after having been found guilty of transferring money meant for his Foundation for Peace and Justice to a private account. In an attempt to justify its decision of further nominating him as its Western Cape premier candidate, COPE argued that as Boesak had been pardoned by former President Mbeki, his conviction had been erased, therefore that did not disqualify him as a standard bearer of moral integrity. For more information see R Louw, "Congress of the People's promotion of Boesak for Western Cape premiership mars claim to moral superiority over ANC", *Southern Africa Report* 27(9), 6 March 2009, p. 1.

there has never been a time like this...I am going to serve my country, if you can find a position where I can serve my country, but I cannot serve within the ranks of the ANC anymore."<sup>65</sup>

There were a few surprises when the new party announced its leaders on the last day of its launch. As expected, the former Western Cape ANC chairman, Boesak, who had joined the party earlier, was not chosen as one of the deputy presidents. One other expectation was that Mluleki George, a co-founder of COPE, was going to be given the deputy presidency, but that did not happen. This distinction went to a white Gauteng entrepreneur, Lynda Odendaal. Another complete surprise was the appointment of Diedre Carter, a white Pietermaritzburg woman, to the position of deputy secretary-general. Lekota retained his position as president. The other deputy presidency went to Mbazima Shilowa. The party's secretary-general was Lobe; treasurer-general was Hilda Ndude; head of policy was given to Smuts Ngonyama; national organizer was Mluleki George; head of communications was Phillip Dexter; and head of international affairs was Lyndall Shope-Mafole. Apparently getting the right mix of leaders dominated much of the discussion over the three days of the conference. The aim was to show that COPE was more than a breakaway party from the ANC. A need was also seen to accommodate the many people who had become involved in the party after the Sandton national convention. Odendaal and Carter represented that grouping. With leadership battles taking their toll on South African political parties, the COPE frontrunners all emphasized that they were there to serve.<sup>66</sup> In another surprise move, COPE included sacked National Prosecuting Authority head Vusi Pikoli's wife, Girly Majola-Pikoli in its executive.<sup>67</sup> Some of the leaders chosen were unknown even to delegates attending the party's launch. During the launch it was still not known as to whether Lekota would be the party's presidential candidate or not for the 2009 election. COPE leaders repeatedly said the leader of the party would not necessarily be its presidential candidate. This left space for leaders who had not yet resigned from other parties to come forward as possible candidates in the 2009 poll.

Before the launch, COPE was criticized that it was élitist and attracted controversial characters. COPE chief information officer, JJ Tabane, told *City Press* that people should not believe ANC "propaganda" that his party did not care about the rural poor and that it was focused on TV lights, the internet and new technologies to woo the urban middle class voter. Zuma labelled COPE a party of professionals and the élite who met in Sandton and were unconcerned with the welfare of poor rural people. Asked about the limitations imposed by reliance on the internet and microphones, Tabane said: "After spending years in government communications you

<sup>65</sup> *Witness*, 17 December 2008; *The Times*, 17 December 2008.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Business Day*, 17 December 2008.

would assume we understand that. We have internalized what is called development communications. So we have no illusions that we will sit in the studio and think we have done our work. But we will sit in the studio because there are millions of people with access to radio, with cellphones and so on. We are not going to ignore that. But that's not where it ends. That is why we have media liaisons headed by Siphon Ngwema. We've got campaigns and outreaches; we have internal communications to mobilize our members and an editorial department because you've got to manage the written word."<sup>68</sup>

After the launch of COPE, Lekota indicated the following in the *City Press*:

"When we announced the possible formation of an alternative party to the ANC last year, a number of strange tendencies appeared in our country. The first was the unleashing of vitriolic hate speech on those of us who piloted this development. Secondly, our meetings were violently disrupted. Thirdly, our supporters were accused of inviting the disrupters to the meetings. Fourthly, ANC leaders accused our supporters of provoking their members by carrying out the perfectly democratic practice of criticizing the ruling party...The culture of violence by members or supporters of the ANC against voters who hold different views is fast becoming a daily feature of our society."<sup>69</sup>

It was interesting to note that a day before the launch, the question whether to call each other "comrade" or not was discussed. There were people within COPE who were not comfortable with calling each other "comrades" as that was viewed to be in line with the ANC tradition. Leaving the question with delegates for debate, Lekota pointed out that the dictionary defined "comrade" as someone who "shares one's activities" as well as a socialist or communist but insisted that COPE was not a socialist nor a communist organization. He stated that COPE was open to whoever wants to join it if they believe in it.<sup>70</sup>

In making concluding remarks after the launch, Lekota told the delegates:

"When history books are written, all of you will be remembered for your bravery, your foresight and willpower to act decisively when the minute came that you realized our country was sliding on a downward path. To the people of South Africa, we say this leadership is ready to serve you, and will do so with the humility, the decency and dignity you deserve."<sup>71</sup>

The above statement by Lekota was a clear indication that COPE was going to be a party which aimed at challenging the ANC in the 2009 election. The new party positioned itself as an alternative to the ruling ANC.

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<sup>68</sup> *City Press*, 14 December 2008.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 January 2009.

<sup>70</sup> *Cape Times*, 15 December 2008.

<sup>71</sup> R Louw, "'Rainbow' COPE launches and girds itself for elections", *Southern Africa Report* 27(1), 9 January 2009, pp. 2-3.

## 6. CONCLUSION

When Lekota and Shilowa broke away from the ANC and formed COPE they claimed to speak for the 40 percent of ANC members who had voted for Mbeki in Polokwane. They further claimed that COPE was destined to be a realistic challenge to the ANC. The move by Lekota and Shilowa to form COPE as an envisaged challenge to the ANC created a buzz and attempted to be the first major shake-up of the ANC since 1994. The potential was there for COPE to be a realistic challenge to the ANC. COPE's first consultative meetings in Cape Town and the Eastern Cape were well attended and struck a chord with many. When it announced that about 50 ANC MPs would cross to it, the ANC went into panic mode. Six months later COPE failed to show its might by drawing about 7 percent of the votes during the April 2009 general elections. Its ambitious target of being a realistic challenge to the ANC failed to materialize as it only managed to be the official opposition in the following provinces: Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, North West, Free State and Limpopo. The COPE factor therefore to a certain extent reduced the ANC's provincial majority. Perhaps it was premature for COPE to pronounce itself as a realistic or alternative challenge to the ANC whilst it experienced "teething" problems versus a well established ANC which had been in existence for almost a century. What COPE did successfully was to invigorate ANC supporters and spur the ruling party's election machinery into its highest gear since 1994. COPE's formation and participation in the 2009 general elections electrified the election campaigns and forced the ANC to intensify its election campaigns. With the national hype around the formation of COPE, the ANC itself did not expect that landslide 65, 9 percent victory. There is no doubt that COPE's arrival changed the nature of opposition politics. A number of smaller parties lost huge numbers of votes to COPE. The ANC also lost votes in many provinces. Although COPE failed to be a realistic challenge to the ANC, it was however not a "black DA" or an "ANC light" as referred to by the ANC.