

# The Congress of The People (COPE) leadership under siege: The beginning of the end?

Chitja Twala  
*Department of History*  
*University of the Free State*  
twalacm@ufs.ac.za

## *Abstract*

The article attempts to respond to the controversy of leadership squabbles within the ranks of the Congress of the People (COPE). For the past few years, COPE has become the home of divisions, factions and character assassination. It is argued in the article that based on the malicious practices by some leaders of this organisation, it might lose the realisation of its fundamental vision as an alternative voice for South Africa. It is contended that COPE is not divided along the lines of ideological differences, but due to leadership personalities and preferences.

**Keywords:** COPE; Mosiuoa ‘Terror’ Lekota; Mbazima Shilowa; Mvume Dandala; Leadership; Political squabbles; Leadership conflicts.

## **Introduction**

When the Congress of the People (COPE) was officially launched in December 2008 in Bloemfontein, it could not in the least be foreseen that in less than two years, the party would be battling with leadership squabbles. I argue in this article that the crisis in COPE is a result of internal squabbles which is a manifestation of the crisis of leadership. Ironically, the squabbles came from its founding fathers, namely Mosiuoa ‘Terror’ Lekota and Mbazima Shilowa, who were interim President and Deputy President respectively. With Lekota being accused of dividing the party with his alleged dictatorial views and leadership style and Shilowa viewed as having joined the party for self-enrichment, the party therefore lacked a uniting symbolic figure at the helm.

The singular defining element of COPE’s organisational crisis was that the leadership had lost credibility and to a certain extent, failed to restore

it throughout its almost two years of existence. The period of Lekota and Shilowa's leadership created an organisational mode of perpetual instability, internal conflict and lack of focus on what really mattered, namely challenging the African National Congress (ANC) and making some inroads into the latter's electorate. It is clear that even though the crisis of leadership did not apply uniformly throughout the structures of the party, the overall picture remained the same.

It should be noted that since 2009 the ongoing battles have developed into a public dispute between what has become known as the Lekota group and the Shilowa group. Without doubt, leadership squabbles have taken their toll on COPE, which since its formation, has struggled to make its presence felt, despite being South Africa's third largest political party with 37 representatives in the National Assembly (NA). Engulfed in leadership squabbles, it remains to be seen as to whether COPE will be equal to the task of being an alternative to the ANC.

In this article the root problem of these squabbles in the party which was dubbed 'an alternative to the African National Congress (ANC)' is explored. It focuses mainly on the political leadership squabbles of COPE as presented by both academics and journalists. The article also attempts to answer the following questions about the leadership squabbles within COPE: Is the ANC involved in destabilising COPE as one of the opposition parties? Apart from the ANC, is there another force that is attempting to destabilise COPE? Why are some members of COPE returning to the ANC? Are the squabbles amongst the leaders of COPE ideological or personal? Can the leadership squabbles within COPE be seen as the party being at war with itself? The article further highlights the impact of the squabbles on the membership of the party.

Despite the vibe caused and the rationale behind the formation of COPE, the article intends to trace the missteps that led to the leadership squabbles of the party that 1,3 million voters who voted for it during the April 2009 general elections had thought would become an important political option

to the ANC.<sup>1</sup> However, with the leadership squabbles during and after those elections, the party has experienced difficulties in putting its house in order.

For the purpose of this article and due to its contemporary nature, a number of newspaper and academic articles were consulted. Oral testimonies were also taken into consideration. The information from all these sources proved to be of value for this article.

### **A brief historical background to the formation of COPE**

I argue in this article that unless the ongoing wrangling is brought to a halt, the leadership issue resolved once and for all at elective conferences nationally and provincially, and discipline imposed, COPE will fail dismally to make an impact in the local government elections which are scheduled for May 2011. Failure to resolve the leadership squabbles could also cause the party to become increasingly irrelevant in the South African political landscape. In order to fully understand the leadership squabbles within COPE, a brief historical background with reference to its formation is necessary. The possible reasons that inform the squabbles for leadership within COPE are also discussed.

After the Polokwane Conference of the ANC in December 2007, it became clear that a split in the party was imminent.<sup>2</sup> Those defeated in Polokwane were said to be disillusioned with the new incoming leadership of Jacob Zuma. Animosity, because of leadership squabbles within the ANC intensified until

- 
- 1 For more information on COPE and the April 2009 elections see JCM Venter & N Glober, "South African National Elections, 1994-2009: A contextual comparison", *Journal for Contemporary History*, (35)3, December 2010, pp. 1-20; C Twala, "The Congress of the People (COPE): A new political dynamic during the April 2009 campaign and election?", *Journal for Contemporary History*, (35)3, December 2010, pp. 89-111; PW Heydenrych, "The 2009 South African elections: Implications for the provinces", *Journal for Contemporary History*, (35)3, December 2010, pp. 112-129; A Duvenhage, "Die algemene verkiesing van 2009 en die post-verkiesingsomgewing in Suid-Afrika: Enkele strategiese perspektiewe", *Journal for Contemporary History*, (35)3, December 2010, pp. 149-178; S Booysen, "Congress of the People: Between foothold of hope and slippery slope", in R Southall & J Daniel (eds), *Zunami! The 2009 South African elections* (Johannesburg, 2009), pp. 85-86; M Ndletyana, "Congress of the People: A promise betrayed", *Journal of African Elections*, 9(2), 2010, 32-55.
  - 2 For more information on the Polokwane Conference of the ANC, see S Fikeni, "The Polokwane moment and South Africa's democracy at the crossroads", in P Kagwanja & K Kondlo, *State of the Nation: South Africa 2008* (Cape Town, 2009), pp. 3-34; 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; B Pottinger, *The Mbeki legacy* (Cape Town, 2008), p. 321; M Ndletyana, "COPE – The beginning of the resolution of ideological contestation within the African National Congress", Seminar Paper presented at the University of South Africa (UNISA), 29 July 2009, p. 2; Pottinger, pp. 322-328; African National Congress, "Political report to the ANC's 52<sup>nd</sup> national conference" (African National Congress, Polokwane, 17 December 2007); WM Gumede, "South Africa: Jacob Zuma and the difficulties of consolidating South Africa's democracy", *African Affairs*, 107(427), pp. 261-271.

mid-2008 when a proposal for the formation of a new political party came to the fore by those who were deemed to be dissatisfied with the leadership that had been chosen in Polokwane.<sup>3</sup> When Lekota served ‘divorce papers’ on the ANC, it was clear that the ruling party, for the first time since 1994, faced an opposition coming from within its structure. The hosting of a successful convention in Sandton added fresh impetus to the politics of South Africa.<sup>4</sup> With Zuma being what some termed a ‘flawed candidate’ for the presidency of the ANC and later President of South Africa, the country was receptive to a new party to begin to undermine the ANC’s majority. L Piper and H Matisonn also explained that the emergence of COPE promised a more meaningful party pluralism and would be taking the pressure for democratic competition off the ANC’s internal processes in the future.<sup>5</sup> A Butler of the University of the Witwatersrand argued on a positive note that the formation of COPE provided a home for some of the most reviled Mbeki loyalists. It also made it easier for many Mbeki loyalists to remain in the ANC because desertions to the new party could be electorally dangerous.<sup>6</sup> Political analyst, X Mangcu accepts political misjudgment of Lekota by stating:<sup>7</sup>

One of my biggest mistakes as a political commentator was a suggestion I made that the ANC ought to look to Mosiuoa Lekota as a successor to Mbeki. The argument was motivated by the following reasoning. For fifteen years the ANC had been run by individuals and factions that had spent the better part of their lives either in prison (as with Nelson Mandela) or in exile (as with Thabo Mbeki). While Mandela did a brilliant job in bringing us back from the precipice of racial conflagration and while Mbeki did his bit in trumpeting transformation, neither had experience of the mass democratic movement. South Africa, it seemed to me, needed a leader who would steer it away from Mbeki’s racial nativism and the authoritarian leadership characteristic of the ANC’s exile culture. I was warned by many in the ANC that I did not understand their organisation or Lekota. Apparently Lekota had ensconced himself in the bosom of Mbeki’s power network... Lekota approached politics like a street fighter: brash, abrasive and outright rude. Once in a radio interview with John Perlman he called me a ‘young man’ who did not understand the ANC. Those were the days when he was still defending the ANC.

---

3 M Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The dream deferred* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2009), p. 334.

4 R Louw, “Suspension of Mosiuoa 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.

5 L Piper & H Matisonn, “Democracy by accident: The rise of Zuma and the renaissance of the tripartite alliance”, *Representation*, 45(2), 2009, p. 143.

6 A Butler, “The African National Congress under Jacob Zuma”, J Daniel, P Naidoo et.al., *New South African Review 1: 2010: Development or decline?* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2010), p. 173.

7 X Mangcu, *The democratic moment: South Africa’s prospects under Jacob Zuma* (Jacana Media, Sunnyside, 2009), p. 119.

The subject of the formation of COPE elicited academic debates from historians, politicians and political scientists alike. For example, I wrote the following about COPE's formation: "It remains to be seen whether COPE will not be a shapeless amoeba that picks up everything and everyone who has a gripe about Zuma's ANC."<sup>8</sup>

The recalling of Mbeki as the country's president was one other reason for the formation of COPE. R Kasrils, former Minister of Intelligence, wrote in the *Mail & Guardian* that the formation of COPE was a result of the ANC leadership's failure to heal wounds and build unity after the Polokwane conference. He accused the new leadership of being vicious and relentless in humiliating and marginalising anyone perceived to have been in the so-called Mbeki camp.<sup>9</sup> After Lekota had served the 'divorce papers' on the ANC and the formation of COPE was on the cards for those disgruntled ANC members, it was interesting to monitor the differences between COPE and the ANC.<sup>10</sup> In essence, the leadership of COPE had to convince the supporters at odds with the ANC not to stay and fight the party from within. Although a new party was necessary to highlight the ANC's faults, the supporters needed to be convinced about the fundamental differences between the new party and the ANC. This was a dilemma with which any party breaking away from the ANC was confronted.<sup>11</sup>

The formation of COPE was welcomed as an indication of the maturity of democracy in South Africa. It was launched on 16 December 2008, was heralded as the alternative party to the ANC and promised to contest the April 2009 election. The launching conference was held at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. About 3 000 delegates attended the conference.<sup>12</sup> The leadership squabbles that had confronted the ANC before the launch of COPE are still being experienced by the leadership of this party. I contend that this is due to the fact that most of COPE's members and leaders came from the ANC; perhaps they brought their past differences with them to the

---

8 C Twala, "The formation of the Congress of the People (COPE): A realistic challenge to the ANC?" *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34(2), June 2009, p. 126.

9 *Mail & Guardian*, 17-23 October 2008. See also S Booysen, "Congress of the People: Between foothold of hope and slippery slope", in R Southall and J Daniel (eds), *Zunami! The 2009 South African elections* (Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2009), p. 87.

10 R Louw, (ed.), "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.

11 C Twala, "The formation of the Congress of the People (COPE)..." *Journal for Contemporary History*, 34(2), June 2009, p. 127.

12 *The Times*, 19 December 2008; *Sunday Times*, 2 November 2008; R Louw, (ed.), " 'Rainbow' COPE launches and girds itself for elections", *Southern Africa Report*, 27(1), 9 January 2009, pp. 2-3.

new party. Without doubt, the advent of COPE kept the ANC's leadership on its toes. It became clear that the latter was going to be challenged by a new party comprising people who came from its ranks.

It should be noted that the advent of COPE had an immediate impact upon the South African public, as well as on the ANC. The ANC was confronted with a situation in which it had to counter COPE's activities, as well as defend itself against the allegations made against it, of being a party allegedly promoting corruption. Furthermore, L Piper and H Matisonn argue that through the emergence of COPE, changes in the South African political landscape have been matched by a concern over the future of the country. According to them, much of this has to do with the character of Zuma as a leader, because over the last few years he has been portrayed in the public realm as a corrupt politician, directly involved in receiving money from the French arms manufacturer, T Holdings. Indeed, his financial adviser, S Shaik, was convicted on corruption and fraud charges in 2007 for payments he and his companies had made to Zuma. Piper and Matisonn further argue that Zuma has also been portrayed as a misogynist, both for being a traditional Zulu patriarch (as evidenced by his polygamy), and by charges of rape that had been brought against him in 2006 by a 31-year-old family friend with whom he admitted to have had sex.<sup>13</sup> Zuma's ascendance to the presidency of the ANC and later of the country was seen by Piper in terms of personality-based politics which led to the formation of COPE.<sup>14</sup>

## **Possible reasons for the leadership squabbles within COPE**

### ***Policy differences or principles?***

Essentially, the challenge COPE faced from the start was that it was not formed because of differences around policy and principles but out of anger at the events at Polokwane when ANC 'president', T Mbeki, and those who supported him, were defeated and subjected to a barrage of insults. Therefore, the policies presented by COPE to the electorate ahead of the April 2009 general elections did not differ significantly from those of the ANC.<sup>15</sup> It was

---

13 L Piper & H Matisonn, "Democracy by accident..." *Representation*, 45(2), 2009, p. 145. For more information on this see also A Feinstein, *After the party: A personal and political journey inside the ANC* (Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007), pp. 208-236.

14 L Piper, "The Zuma watershed: From post-apartheid to post-colonial politics in South Africa", *Representation* 42(2), 2009, pp. 101-102.

15 *The Herald*, 3 May 2010.

clear that COPE's 'fragile' ideological foundation made it vulnerable. From the outset, COPE never clearly distinguished itself from the ANC. COPE was accused by the ANC of trying to hijack its identity and traditions. Reference was made to the fact that COPE had accused the ANC of having deviated from the Freedom Charter and that it suddenly was becoming an anti-corruption champion.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, some of COPE's leaders were at some point in the ANC leadership and in governmental positions.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, I opine in this article that until such time that COPE presents clear policies that set it apart from the ANC, leadership squabbles will continue because members who joined the party left the ANC because of the struggle for leadership positions, an action which later resulted in the recalling of Mbeki as the country's president. In short, there were arguments that some members of COPE brought these 'bad' habits with them into the new party. As indicated above, without a clearly defined ideological identity, COPE remained in the shadow of the ANC and was likely to inherit the ruling party's culture of bitter leadership battles.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Reverend Dandala's presidential candidacy***

The main problems within COPE continued when the Rev'd. M Dandala<sup>19</sup> became COPE's presidential candidate during the April 2009 elections. Parachuting Dandala into this position was an attempt to quell the leadership squabbles between Lekota and Shilowa. Dandala was regarded as a 'political outsider'.<sup>20</sup> Although the political analysts and commentators welcomed the move of bringing in Dandala to neutralise the leadership squabbles within the

---

16 Lekota and his supporters claimed that the post-Polokwane leadership of the ANC, through their utterances and actions, digressed from the Freedom Charter. The enmity between the COPE founder members and the ANC was not about whether the Freedom Charter was good or bad as in 1959 when the Africanists broke away from the ANC, but whether the ANC had deviated from policy. For more information on the 1959 events, read T Lodge, "The Pan-Africanist Congress, 1959-1990", in I Liebenberg, F Lortan, et.al., *The long march: The story of the struggle for liberation in South Africa* (Penrose Book Printers, Pretoria, 1994), pp. 104-124.

17 *Citizen*, 4 June 2010.

18 COPE was deliberately launched as a fresh, young and progressive alternative to the ANC, but unlike the ANC, the party had no struggle roots. The name, Congress of the People tried to evoke the 1956 Freedom Charter. This was an effort to erase perceptions that the party had been founded because of sour grapes over the ousting of Mbeki. See *Star*, 28 May 2010.

19 On 23 February 2009, the COPE CNC finalised the process of the selection of its candidate for the position of President of the Republic of South Africa. Dandala was an experienced leader of the Methodist Church and civil society.

20 Although the leadership of COPE supported the presidential candidacy of Dandala, there were mixed feeling by the party's members about this. Dandala was viewed as an imposed leader who had no background concerning the founding principles of COPE.

party, this move was interpreted by Lekota and his supporters as ‘a motion of no confidence’ in his (Lekota’s) leadership. Some arguments posed by both political analysts and commentators was that when Dandala was made the presidential candidate of the party, Lekota should have stepped aside, but this did not happen because he continued being president of the party. Despite the availability of Dandala as a presidential candidate, Lekota’s ambitions to lead the party continued.<sup>21</sup>

It may be argued that the above was going to assist Lekota in protecting his political integrity because it was clear that if he were to continue leading the party, Shilowa’s supporters would resist. For example, Mangcu argued that by accepting the presidential candidacy of COPE, Dandala confirmed that he was at the forefront of those who lost with Mbeki at Polokwane. Therefore, Dandala had to put up a political fight against a formidable competitor such as Zuma. It was clear from the outset that this parachuting of Dandala into the leadership position was not going to be sustainable. The battle for leadership continued when shortly before the election campaign Lekota announced that the election posters and the ballot papers would carry his face instead of Dandala’s.<sup>22</sup> Without doubt, this announcement further complicated matters as it was not clear to the electorate as to who really represented COPE. Thus, COPE entered into an election race without a clear message about who was ultimately in charge, Lekota or Dandala.

Image 1: The cartoon below depicts the struggle for leadership within COPE.



Source: *The Times*, 14 July 2009

<sup>21</sup> *Sowetan*, 18 June 2010.

<sup>22</sup> X Mangcu, *The democratic moment ...*, (Sunnyside, 2009), pp. 121-122.



It is, however, interesting to note that prior to the April 2009 elections, COPE's leaders did not call one another names as has been the case shortly before its policy conference. During this period, COPE was projected as the party that could 'save the ANC from itself' and save South Africa from one-party domination.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this was an attempt to present a united front against the ANC, whilst at the same time the leaders were harbouring hatred for one another. After the April 2009 elections, it became clear that there existed two factions within COPE; namely, one that supported Lekota and the other in favour of Shilowa. Without doubt, these two distinct groupings within COPE led to its polarisation. It was also unclear as to why these two leaders would be at each other's throats if they both subscribed to the vision of COPE. It may be argued that the clash between these two leaders was a personal one underpinned by the struggle for leadership of the party.

Although the party managed to garner about 1,3 million votes during the elections, cracks became evident. In the main, the battle was about who controlled COPE. On the one hand, there were arguments that Dandala, as the leader of the party in Parliament, was to have more say in the party's affairs. On the other, there were arguments that Lekota as the party's President should be in control. In that confusion, there were other supporters of the party who backed Shilowa as the leader who could take over from Lekota as President during the party's elective conference which was scheduled for the beginning of 2010.

### ***The problems with the holding of the party's conference and continued mudslinging by leaders***

On Monday 26 April 2010, the Congress National Committee (CNC) had intended to hold a special meeting to discuss, amongst other things, the question of holding a conference towards the end of May. The meeting had to be called off because members did not form a quorum. It was not surprising when members such as P Dexter, H Ndude and S Ngonyama who were said to be siding with Lekota, did not attend. These members allegedly heard about a plot to pass a vote of no confidence in Lekota during the planned meeting.<sup>24</sup> Their absence from the meeting led to the meeting being cancelled. A Mda

---

<sup>23</sup> R Southall, "The Congress of the People: Challenges for South African democracy", *Representation*, (45)2, July 2009, pp. 173-190.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times*, 30 April 2010.

of the COPE Youth Movement stated the following about non-attendance at the meeting:<sup>25</sup>

Lekota has consistently dispatched SMSes to influence members not to attend the meeting of the special CNC on Monday April 26, 2010. COPE Youth Movement also notes that Ndude, Ngonyama and Dexter, who have failed in executing their tasks, became champions of anarchy unleashed by Lekota to undermine the integrity of Lobe. Lekota is unleashing a 'mafia and thug approach' every time he does not get his way.

By 4 October 2009, Shilowa issued a conciliatory statement when he addressed the party's two-day strategy workshop at the Aloe Ridge Hotel, Muldersdrift. He remarked:<sup>26</sup>

As COPE followers, we should leave our ANC baggage of infighting and factionalism behind and focus on our new organisation. Don't reinvent the wheel for your own sake. We don't to look like the ANC... Let's not be internally focused. Our own internal issues should not generate negative publicity for the party.

Besides the above-mentioned problems, in an attempt to prevent Shilowa from contesting the party's presidential portfolio, Lekota alleged that there were financial irregularities with funds allocated to the party by Parliament. Shilowa was accused of mismanaging the party's funds. The persistence of internal problems such as the alleged misuse of party resources, poor financial control, weak administrative systems, an ineffective infrastructure and weak disciplinary systems, suggested a lack of authoritative leadership, either collectively or in the individuals at leadership level, to improve the situation.

Lekota was also prepared to ask the Auditor-General, T Nombembe, to be a state witness in any case arising from what he alleged to be the disappearance of millions of rand from COPE's parliamentary funds. Lekota argued that Shilowa failed to account for about R20 million in the parliamentary funds. The R20 million had been entrusted to Shilowa by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) as COPE's share of funding made available to parties represented in Parliament by the National Treasury.

Although the issue of alleged mismanagement of COPE's funds proved to be important, the two leaders were in a life-and-death struggle over the leadership of the party. The move by Lekota to force Shilowa to account for

---

<sup>25</sup> *Sowetan*, 28 April 2010.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, 5 October 2009.

the funds was propelled by the fact that A Louw of the Cape Town firm Visser Louw Professional Accountants made an affidavit that confirmed that he had been asked by Shilowa to audit the party's books. Louw explained the following about his situation as an auditor:<sup>27</sup>

I was employed only at the beginning of March, but noticed that in my appointment letter, Shilowa had backdated my appointment to 1 June 2009. I realised that should I remain silent on this matter, it will appear as if I performed certain auditing functions from that date, when in truth and in fact, I did not perform these functions at that stage. I rejected the appointment on that basis and agreed to do an internal audit of the accounts since the inception of Cope, but not on a backdated basis, although it included the review of accounts backdated... The invoice I was asked to submit would have created the same false impression and would have defrauded to pay for work that was never undertaken.

On 29 April 2010 COPE's leaders in Parliament, Dandala and Lobe came out against the call by Lekota for a forensic audit of the party's parliamentary finances. In a joint statement Dandala and Lobe defended Shilowa and dismissed Lekota's claims indicating that the CNC was aware of the concern over parliamentary funds and that the audited statements were being prepared.<sup>28</sup> Faced with possible disciplinary charges for publicly attacking Shilowa, Lekota chose to apologise for questioning the integrity of his colleague during or before a meeting of COPE's national committee.<sup>29</sup>

The above act by Lekota of accusing Shilowa of the mismanagement of the party's funds was interpreted as an attempt to discredit him. When these allegations emerged, Shilowa was abroad. Shilowa's group also retaliated by indicating that Lekota had made a R3 million claim against COPE for work done by a printing company known as the 'Black Sheep Concepts'. The company was said to have close ties with Lekota. It was alleged that Lekota wanted to render COPE bankrupt for not being able to hold a conference. The allegations were denied by Lekota who argued that it was a smear campaign intended to oust him from his position as President of the party. Supporters of Lekota however, accused Shilowa of trying to divert attention from allegations that he was using funds allocated by Parliament for constituency work to run his election campaign.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Star*, 11 May 2010.

<sup>28</sup> *Sowetan*, 30 April 2010.

<sup>29</sup> R Louw, (ed.), "COPE's Lekota-Shilowa rift destroying concept of opposition alliance and helping to keep SA a one-party dominant state", *Southern Africa Report*, (28)18, 7 May 2010, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *The Times*, 26 May 2010.

As if the above accusations levelled against Shilowa were not enough, Lekota further declared that Shilowa awarded a R580 000 contract to a company, C-Yoyo Logistics, owned by the COPE Youth Movement Secretary, M Booi, who was said to be in a key position in campaigning for Shilowa to become President of the party. Lekota claimed that the contract was awarded without any tendering process having been followed.<sup>31</sup> The above-mentioned contract money included thousands spent on 'branded carpets', picture frames, leather couches, banners, gold-plated name plates and coffee tables. Lekota also alleged that the campaigns against him were part of a move to remove him from the party's presidency to cover up the alleged irregularities by Shilowa.<sup>32</sup>

The matter was complicated further by the release of a report from Mazars Audit and Accounting firm. This report cleared Shilowa of any wrongdoing in as far as the party's funds were concerned. The report indicated that the funds had been spent for the purposes authorised.<sup>33</sup> However, the auditor's report was rejected by Lekota who viewed it as a cover-up for Shilowa's acts. Lekota's attack on Shilowa and the spirited reaction it drew, clearly indicated that the party was in serious disarray, riven by faction fighting and personality clashes.

Besides having other senior members of the party supporting Shilowa, the COPE Youth Movement also endorsed him as the preferred candidate to lead the party. The movement blamed Lekota for the failure of the party to attract members who initially sympathised with the group that had broken away from the ANC to form COPE. They also blamed him for failing to lure some of his former colleagues in Mbeki's administration, who had initially endorsed the formation of COPE. This was an indication that the whole COPE idea hinged on the argument that Mbeki had been ill-treated by the ANC who unilaterally dismissed a sitting president without the voters having a say. Lekota was also blamed for securing funding from the Afrikaans business communities, a campaign which yielded little results, but served to isolate black funders because the party became associated with the Afrikaner business people. Lekota's decision to pay homage to the slain Afrikaner

---

31 R Louw, (ed.), "COPE in the struggle for power between Lekota and Shilowa", *Southern Africa Report*, 28(17), 30 April 2010, p. 6.

32 *Sowetan*, 30 April 2010; *Rapport*, 9 May 2010.

33 *Sowetan*, 8 June 2010.

Weerstandsbeweging (AWB)<sup>34</sup> leader, E Terre'Blanche, was also negatively interpreted by the youth movement and cost him politically.<sup>35</sup>

On 1 and 2 May 2010, through Lekota's instructions, the CNC convened a meeting in Johannesburg with the aim of ironing out leadership issues. Surprisingly, this meeting was called while Shilowa was still in Japan on a birthday holiday. As early as Friday 30 April 2010, COPE structures in KwaZulu-Natal threw their weight behind Lekota when they called for Shilowa's suspension due to allegations of financial mismanagement. The chairperson of the party's South Coast region, B Khushi, stated:<sup>36</sup>

It's an allegation, if he's got nothing to hide; he must step down as chief whip and accounting officer, pending an investigation. This must be done before the conference... If the comrade is guilty, he must be expelled.

On the other hand, N Gqomo, the Eastern Cape provincial leader remarked that:<sup>37</sup>

Any call for the suspension of Shilowa is wrong; it is disingenuous and uncalled for. We are talking here about an angry president, a paranoid president who is scared of contestation. COPE is not a one man led party such as the UDM.

The above two statements by the provincial leaders of COPE clearly show that the party was in crisis. The impression given by these two leaders indicate that the party was divided into two factions. It was therefore up to Lekota and Shilowa to reconcile in order to save the party from further divisions. However, from these leaders, no one wanted to bow down or reach a compromise. The following section addresses the controversial May 2010 policy conference and clearly highlights the issue that a compromise was far from possible.

---

34 The Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) is a South African white separatist movement founded on 7 July 1973 by conservative Afrikaners in Heidelberg. Since its inception, the AWB has attracted criticism from the liberal anti-apartheid activists. The AWB's founding members included Eugene Terre'Blanche who subsequently occupied the post of leader until his assassination in 2009. The AWB's origin lay in an earlier right-wing party, the Herstigte Nasionale Party which vehemently opposed the reforms of the Apartheid government from 1966 onwards. For more information on the AWB see H Kotze & A Greyling, *Political organizations in South Africa: A-Z*, (Tafelberg Publishers, Cape Town, 1994), pp. 97-102.

35 *Sowetan*, 16 April 2010.

36 *Sunday Times*, 2 May 2010.

37 *Sunday Times*, 2 May 2010.

## **The controversial May 2010 policy conference**

COPE was meant to hold its policy conference at the St George Hotel near Pretoria on Friday 28 May 2010. This day, in fact, witnessed an unpredictable political drama due to the differences and tensions that existed between the party members. The Shilowa group turned the conference into an elective one.<sup>38</sup> It had been apparent for weeks before the day of the conference that Lekota was on the political back foot in the race to become the first elected leader of the party. It was therefore convenient for the Lekota group to highlight *prima facie* irregularities in the process of auditing branches and memberships. These were, of course, legitimate concerns as the integrity of the elective conference would depend on a credible branch and membership verification process.<sup>39</sup> Equally, the Shilowa group downplayed the above-mentioned concerns, possibly for their own political gain. This group wanted to proceed with an elective conference which would most likely see Shilowa emerge as party leader.

The Shilowa group insisted on holding the conference with the aim of it being an elective one, while the Lekota group indicated that the party was not ready to hold such a conference, and therefore called for its postponement.<sup>40</sup> The latter group argued the following against holding the conference: Firstly, of the 2 000 odd branches who were supposed to send delegates to the conference, half were said to have been disqualified because it was alleged that they were not properly registered. This meant that almost half of the 1,3 million COPE voters would be eliminated in matters of policy and leadership. For the Lekota group, the above reasons were justification enough to stop the conference from being a policy or an elective one. Against this backdrop, it was not surprising that the weekend of 27-30 May 2010 would end in a showdown between the two factions. In trying to address this problem, Lekota stated the following:<sup>41</sup>

This is a complicated issue. I have said before and will say it again: We, Shilowa, Lobe, Dandala and I are caretaker leaders until such time as we can say, with integrity that we were democratically elected. A true democratic process has not been implemented until now; we as a party were simply too

---

38 Lekota's group wanted him as President, P Dexter as first Deputy President, J Killian as second Deputy President and S Ngonyama as General Secretary. The other faction wanted Shilowa in the top spot, C Lobe as first Deputy, M George as second Deputy and M Dandala as General Secretary. However, Dandala later resigned as a member of COPE.

39 *Business Day*, 31 May 2010.

40 *Sunday Independent*, 30 May 2010.

41 *Sunday Independent*, 23 May 2010.

young. This national congress was meant to put this matter to rest. However, in order to make this congress legitimate, democracy has to start in the branches and work its way up to the eventual leadership. If the branch audit process is flawed or biased, everything thereafter is flawed. We should not be having a congress to 'save face' or because we, as leaders, are too proud to admit we are not prepared.

Secondly, the CNC had failed to pass the budget before thinking about holding the conference. The party needed to get some funding before its plans for holding a conference could be facilitated. Lekota argued that after getting the funds, the treasurer should present the recommendations to the Congress Working Committee (CWC) first. According to Lekota, this was supposed to happen on Monday 24 May 2010 during the CWC meeting. Procedurally, this was to be approved on 27 May 2010, the day the conference was scheduled to start. Thirdly, Lekota lamented that COPE's audit procedure was in arrears and that that could lead to the party's funds being frozen. If the funds were frozen, it would be difficult to hold the conference.<sup>42</sup>

Although the above arguments by Lekota necessitated the postponement of the conference, a counter argument came from the Secretary-General of the party, C Lobe. Lobe was viewed by the Lekota group as a Shilowa supporter. The counter arguments that she advanced were regarded as coming from the Shilowa group, despite the fact that she spoke as Secretary-General of COPE. Lobe disagreed with Lekota when she stated:<sup>43</sup>

The national leadership made a deliberate decision at the beginning of this year to steer the organisation towards this important milestone... In an unfortunate development, certain leaders of COPE have been making calls outside the organisation's structures for the congress to be postponed. Unacceptably, these calls were not made in a meeting of the national leadership convened last weekend... The books are being audited at head office and in parliament. Both processes are going smoothly. In fact the CNC has already approved, preliminarily, the treasurer's report that will serve next week in front of the congress.

The above mentioned verbal attacks were an indication that COPE was beset by internal organisational weaknesses and tensions instead of exercising a powerful political challenge to the ANC. In spite of the differences on the handling of the party members, such as the holding of the elective conference, COPE's future was being contested by forces that prioritised personal influence

---

<sup>42</sup> *Sunday Times*, 23 May 2010.

<sup>43</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 23 May 2010.

and those that wanted to concentrate on building organisational power.

In a compromise bid to avoid court action to call off the planned conference, the CNC decided a week before the conference to focus the party's attention on policy matters rather than make it an elective one. A decision to save the party was reached by the delegates. The delegates recommended that both Lekota and Shilowa would remain in their respective positions until the elective conference in September 2010.<sup>44</sup> It was surprising that on Friday 28 May 2010, delegates voted to revert back to an elective conference. It was interesting to note that despite the refusal by Lekota for the conference to be held, the Shilowa group continued holding the purported policy conference. A vote of no confidence in Lekota and Dexter was declared. Shilowa, therefore, became the party's interim President.<sup>45</sup> To the surprise of many of Lekota's supporters, what was supposed to be a policy conference turned out to be an elective one. They argued that this was done to eject Lekota from the leadership position.<sup>46</sup> This prompted some in the Lekota group to accuse fellow members of luring them to an event which was, all along, intended to be an elective one.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that both leaders, Lekota and Shilowa, were silent when COPE was being factionalised in their names. Questions to be asked are: What divided these two leaders as President and Deputy President of COPE? Was there any ideological or management conflict between Lekota and Shilowa? Even if COPE wanted to hold its elective conference in September 2010, it was clear that leadership squabbles would persist if the following were not defined: provision of the guidelines in the nomination process which should define parameters of lobbying; having membership numbers audited in order to avoid mushrooming of membership and branches just before an elective conference; an electoral body to be instituted in order to supervise the auditing of branches, nominations and elections because these two factions cannot be referees and players at the same time. However, the above did not happen and COPE experienced further leadership squabbles because the policy conference never took place in September 2010.

The public discord was not only between Lekota and Shilowa. Other members of the party at leadership level attacked one another in attempts to defend either of the two leaders. For example, on Monday 26 April 2010 Dexter

---

<sup>44</sup> *The Times*, 28 May 2010.

<sup>45</sup> *Beeld*, 8 June 2010.

<sup>46</sup> *Sunday Times*, 30 May 2010.



and A Nkuhlu were at each other's throats when interviewed by Radio Metro on the Sakhina Talk-show. Nkulu justified Shilowa's attempts to contest the presidential position. This interview degenerated into a mudslinging exercise by the above-mentioned leaders of COPE.<sup>47</sup>

### **Lekota and the court interdict**

Lekota and his supporters staged a walkout at what was supposed to be a policy conference which turned into being an elective conference. At this conference Shilowa was nominated unopposed by his supporters as the party's new President.<sup>48</sup> In response to this, Lekota went to the Johannesburg High Court to prevent the alleged 'hijacking' of the party by Shilowa's group, given the earlier decision by the CNC not to have an elective conference which overruled the decision. In court papers Lekota also wanted COPE's accounts to be placed under curatorship while a full forensic audit was conducted.<sup>49</sup> During the conference, a quorum of delegates successfully passed a vote of no confidence in both Lekota and the party's national spokesperson, P Dexter. Lekota's lawyer, A Kika, confirmed he had lodged the appeal for the vote of no confidence in Lekota to be set aside and for his reinstatement as party President. Lekota also wanted the court to prevent COPE's leadership from axing any Member of Parliament (MP) or legislators in provinces.<sup>50</sup>

Justifying their walkout during the conference proceedings, Dexter explained:<sup>51</sup>

The core founding leadership of COPE has decided to withdraw from the conference and to institute an urgent court interdict to prevent the hijacking of the party by a factionalist group set on destroying it, and to prevent further abuse of party resources. The plan to oust Lekota was apparently hatched on Thursday morning soon after he had agreed to allow the congress to continue.

Tensions ran high between the two factions on Friday 28 May 2010 as Shilowa, Lobe and other party leaders had to be heavily protected by bodyguards. The two rival groups sang provocative songs. Several Lekota supporters had placards that read: "Shilowa, go back to your ANC bosses and tell them the plan has failed"; and "No Lekota, no COPE" as well as

---

47 Sakhina Talk-show on Radio Metro, 26 April 2010.

48 *Business Day*, 31 May 2010.

49 *Sunday Independent*, 30 May 2010.

50 *Star*, 2 June 2010.

51 *Sunday Times*, 30 May 2010.

“Lekota is our leader”.<sup>52</sup> Lekota supporters also described Shilowa’s faction as “an aggressive, cavalier party that plays fast and loose with public money”.<sup>53</sup> Shilowa supporters in turn, praised their leader in their slogans. This was a clear indication that the party had been torn apart by the power struggle between Lekota and Shilowa for the presidency of the party.

Judge M Makume ruled that the election which took place during the conference was in contravention of a resolution by COPE’s CNC. Makume indicated that the party was interdicted from conducting elections and that the act had to be deferred for four months. Responding to the court interdict, Shilowa said the party would investigate whether there were grounds to appeal against the decision. Lekota’s action angered Shilowa’s group to the extent that they proposed a motion that he and Dexter be expelled from the party.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, it remained to be seen as to whether the move would be successful or not.

On 1 June 2010, Shilowa as the acting COPE President filed a separate appeal in the Johannesburg High Court against Judge Makume’s decision to grant Lekota an interdict prohibiting the party from holding elections for a new leadership.<sup>55</sup> It became clear that the fate of COPE was not likely to be determined by Lekota or Shilowa, but the courts. Judge R Mathopo reinstated Lekota as the party’s leader and stated that Shilowa’s nomination to the position was unconstitutional. The reinstatement of Lekota proved to be victorious for him and his supporters.<sup>56</sup>

The struggle for leadership between the two leaders continued when Shilowa applied to the Johannesburg High Court to appeal against the reinstatement of Lekota. Shilowa’s appeal, if successful, would suspend the court ruling by Judge Mathopo. Although Shilowa was convinced that his appeal would be successful, he also believed that the leadership squabbles within COPE would be resolved by an elective conference of the party. For Shilowa, this was a political challenge which needed a political solution.<sup>57</sup> Shilowa further maintained that no leader should be imposed on COPE through a court ruling. According to Shilowa, the court ruling was compromising the will of

---

52 *Sunday Independent*, 30 May 2010.

53 *Sowetan*, 19 May 2010.

54 *Sunday Independent*, 30 May 2010.

55 *Star*, 2 June 2010.

56 *Beeld*, 7 June 2010.

57 *Star*, 8 June 2010.

the majority of legitimate COPE members.<sup>58</sup> It may be argued that whatever the outcome of the legal battles, a permanent solution would be based on the will of the members of the party through their delegations during an elective conference.

What complicated matters further was the lock-out of Lekota from entering his Braamfontein party offices on Monday 31 May 2010. This was an indication that the infighting within COPE was still far from at an end. As a vote of confidence in him was passed on 28 May 2010, the lock-out was a sign that he was not needed anymore as the leader of the party. However, it should be noted that the lock-out was carried out by Shilowa's group. This action was expected to culminate in Lekota's expulsion from the party. Lekota's offices were to be locked until his party membership had been clarified. There were feelings in Shilowa's group that the court interdict by Lekota did not nullify decisions taken by delegates at the conference. This included nominating Shilowa as the new party's President and the declaration of a vote of no confidence in Lekota. According to S Ngwena, a senior COPE member, Lekota had first to face a disciplinary hearing for taking the party to court before his membership of the party could be decided. The lock-out followed a chaotic conference that resulted in Lekota and his deputy, Shilowa, addressing two separate factions.<sup>59</sup> Lekota's critics lambasted him arguing that he was using the courts to cling to power and wanted to isolate him as he was viewed as a person who did not want to work within the collective body.<sup>60</sup>

I contend that in the light of the current leadership squabbles in COPE, it was not a wise decision for the party to defer the election of its leadership to a later stage while operating with an interim leadership. This arrangement had the potential to create further problems at the time of the election of the new leadership, as it might be difficult for the incumbents to relinquish their positions.

As a new party, without all the structures in place, COPE avoided a potentially damaging leadership contest because it was still trying to find its feet amid a hostile onslaught from the ANC. The non-existence of working internal systems, policies, processes and even functioning internal structures at the time led to the postponing the handling of this issue until a later stage when a bruising leadership contest emerged. Giving the party the benefit of

---

58 *Citizen*, 8 June 2010.

59 *The Times*, 31 May 2010.

60 *Sunday Independent*, 13 June 2010.

the doubt for such a decision to delay the question of having a democratically elected leadership structure, it was clear that the interim leadership would find it difficult to avoid a leadership contest. It was clear that a leadership that was not democratically elected suffered from a lack of political authority and credibility.<sup>61</sup>

Another argument is that the immediate beneficiary of the schism within COPE would undoubtedly be the ANC, since the chance of a self-destructing and divided COPE being posted would mean gains for the ANC in the 2011 local government elections. One could argue that South Africa would be the immediate and main beneficiary, as COPE would deepen plural politics and democracy. Within that context, the ANC will benefit and adapt in order to survive. Another probable beneficiary could be the Democratic Alliance (DA). Those who voted for COPE as a potential alternative to the ANC in the 2009 election, but who are still reluctant to vote for the ANC, may vote for the DA as the only viable alternative to the ANC.<sup>62</sup> Lambasting COPE members for running to the courts to resolve their problems, T Madonsela of the ANC noted:<sup>63</sup>

COPE members lost it all when they failed to concentrate on building the party. Whatever problem they failed to resolve, they resorted to the courts. I think that showed the level of poor leadership COPE has. Both Lekota and Shilowa should step down in the interest of the party. It is clear that their ambitions supersede the party's policies. The biggest mistake that COPE made from the outset was not to elect the leadership in its inaugural conference in Bloemfontein. To me, that could have solved the leadership problems that COPE is faced with today. What started as a threat to the ANC is now a party focusing on fighting their legal battles. The sooner the members of COPE choose a leadership in a proper democratic way the better. Nevertheless, I foresee more problems for COPE in the future.

### **The resignation of Dandala from COPE**

COPE faced another leadership crisis when its parliamentary leader, Dandala, resigned on 1 June 2010 after having been frustrated by the party's public quarrelling in the courts. Dandala resigned not only as parliamentary leader, but also as COPE's MP and member of the party's national working committee

---

61 Personal view by the author.

62 R Louw, (ed.), "As COPE leaders Lekota and Shilowa struggle for supremacy, the party descends into self-destruct mode", *Southern Africa Report*, 28(22), 4 June 2010, p. 2.

63 C Twala (Personal Collection), interview, T Madonsela (Member of the ANC, Bloemfontein), 19 April 2011.

(NWC).<sup>64</sup> His resignation also triggered the resignation of other high profile leaders; for example, A Nkuhlu. Dandala claimed that ethically and morally it had become untenable for him to cling to the position of parliamentary leader if the leadership was at each other's throats. The resignation of Dandala had detrimental effects on the party as he was, in the main, regarded as a compromise leader who had come to join the party without any political baggage from the ANC, unlike Lekota and Shilowa. Therefore, his resignation brought about new infighting within the party because Lekota was viewed by his supporters as the next one to become a parliamentary leader.<sup>65</sup> Shilowa's supporters, on the other hand, were not prepared to allow Lekota to be the parliamentary leader. As in the previous incidents between the supporters of these two leaders, there is the likelihood that this matter, like all others previously, would be determined by the courts.

Dandala's resignation was an indication that COPE's noble agenda of being an alternative party to the ANC had been diverted by the party which had spent much of its young life focusing on the leadership squabbles between Lekota and Shilowa. It might be argued that Dandala could not continue leading the party in Parliament because of the leadership squabbles that persisted within COPE.<sup>66</sup> Although initially Dandala's leadership was viewed as not aligned to Lekota or Shilowa, when the leadership squabbles intensified, he appeared to be siding with Shilowa. Dandala's resignation came a few months after COPE's second Deputy President, L Odendaal, had resigned (July 2009). She joined the ANC in February 2010.<sup>67</sup>

The resignation of Dandala could finally give Lekota the opportunity to lead the party in Parliament. Lekota's supporters wanted him to take up the reins as parliamentary leader, while Shilowa's backers wanted Dandala to withdraw his resignation letter. The matter was to be resolved by the CNC of the party. Without doubt, having Lekota leading the party in Parliament could once more result in leadership battles between the two camps. From the start, Dandala was an odd choice to lead the party because he was brought in as a presidential candidate. He was never really profiled by political analysts and commentators as one of the founders of COPE. It is argued that Dandala's selection was the realisation of an urgent need to provide a 'clean start' to challenge the ANC government in South Africa, because the latter was allegedly seen by COPE

---

<sup>64</sup> *Star*, 24 June 2010.

<sup>65</sup> *Star*, 22 June 2010.

<sup>66</sup> *Star*, 24 June 2010.

<sup>67</sup> *Mail & Guardian*, 1 March 2010.

members as a party with corrupt leaders. It should however be noted that in the few months that Dandala was involved as the party's parliamentary leader, he did not make remarkable inroads into destabilising the ANC. It may be argued further that Dandala's departure was due to his embarrassment over the clash between Lekota and Shilowa and it can be taken as an indication of the extent to which the party needs to clean itself up as it looks forward to contesting the 2011 local government elections. Mda blamed Lekota and his supporters for having ensured that Dandala would not finish his term as parliamentary leader, so as to pave the way for Lekota to take up the position. Besides the issue of Dandala, Mda was stripped all her leadership positions, faced disciplinary actions and was accused of having called COPE's Deputy General-Secretary D Carter a '*stupid, token white bitch*'.<sup>68</sup> The above incident further complicated the leadership issue within COPE.

As indicated previously and to show the intensity of the leadership squabbles, on 13 July 2010 the Johannesburg High Court dismissed the Shilowa faction's bid to stop Lekota from being the party's leader in Parliament.<sup>69</sup> Shilowa's ambitions of becoming the party's leader were dealt another blow when the resigned Dandala claimed that he had been kept in the dark about party finances. In a twist in the saga, by distancing himself from the earlier statements that the party's funds were in good control, Dandala revealed that he knew little about the management of the party's R20 million parliamentary budget, though he was the party's parliamentary leader.<sup>70</sup> Another blow which came Shilowa's way was the resignation of his chief lobbyists, A Nkuhlu. The below-mentioned statement as issued by Nkuhlu during his resignation also tells a story of another kind:<sup>71</sup>

I am quitting COPE and going to concentrate on my business. As I depart from the political scene, I have an abiding sense of revulsion and a deep sense of disappointment that an idea (of an opposition party) was betrayed by coterie of leaders hell bent on greed for power, positions and survival politics, devoid of principles and a failure to realise that they are the servants of the people. In summary, COPE has descended into gutter politics and has become a monumental failure to the goodwill, hopes and aspirations of the 1,3 million supporters who voted for it in the last national elections.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Sunday Independent*, 4 October 2009.

<sup>69</sup> *Sowetan*, 15 July 2010; *Rapport*, 18 July 2010.

<sup>70</sup> *The Times*, 16 July 2010.

<sup>71</sup> *Sunday Times*, 18 July 2010.

Nkuhlu's statement indicates that there were high expectations from the people who voted for COPE in terms of making it an alternative opposition to the ANC. Without doubt, the advent of COPE was interpreted by many politicians and historians as a seed for developing democracy in South Africa. The leadership squabbles that engulfed the party, to a certain extent, compromised its integrity.

## **Conclusion**

The first two years of COPE's existence have been marked by increasing acrimony and a fight for control, with little in the form of a unified policy and image emerging. Attempts by COPE's leadership to paper over the cracks succeeded only in entrenching the impression that it is too deeply enmeshed in denial. It is argued that the leadership fight damaged the credibility of the organisation and that it should begin to regain public trust. In order to solve its problems, the author is of the opinion that the party needs an urgent political solution. It is further suggested that the two leaders of COPE need to swallow their pride and egos, step aside and use the rescheduling of the leadership contest to the September 2010 elective conference as an opportunity for the party to scout for a new leader. Such a leader should be unencumbered by loyalty to either Lekota or Shilowa, and should emerge democratically and enjoy the support of both in rebuilding COPE. Confronted by the leadership squabbles, confidence in COPE's ability to act as a catalyst for a major political re-alignment capable of diminishing the dominance of the ANC, and thereby transforming South Africa from a one-party dominant state to a multiparty democracy, is gradually waning. The vacuum that is presented by the lack of policy mandates and entrenched leadership has the potential to compromise COPE even further. Testimony to this is the damage wrought by the leadership wrangles and 'back-stabbing' that have strait-jacketed the party. With this deeply entrenched political bickering, the party's 1,3 million voters are wondering whether there is hope for COPE, and whether the party could garner the same support a second time around. Without doubt, the voters have good reasons to feel disappointed.

Lekota and Shilowa's acrimonious clashes and hostilities have characterised their relations since the formation of the party. They are from different schools of thought, but of the same ideological origin. They are both good organisers, with Shilowa growing up in the unions and Lekota emerging from the Black

Consciousness philosophy and graduating from the mass movement of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The author opines in this article that if either of these two leaders wins at the September 2010 conference, there will be a continuation of another disastrous, factional conflict and a vicious cycle of power struggle.

Unless COPE solves its leadership problems, the party will continue losing prominent members. To date, leaders such as M Hlongwane, L Odendaal, A Boesak and S Grinrod have left the party. COPE's performance in Parliament has not been that spectacular, even though its MPs include former Members of the Executive Council (MECs), premiers and deputy ministers. The party is policy deficient and its political direction and identity are still uncertain. When she resigned, Odendaal complained of infighting and poor leadership in COPE and joined the ANC.<sup>72</sup> In order to resolve the leadership squabbles within COPE, I suggest that the party should appoint an interim leader. This could help in shifting the focus from the courts and these two leaders, to building branches in preparing for elections. The author is conscious of the fact that this could be rejected by the supporters of these two leaders because the current leadership of COPE was put in place by the party's conference.

I am mindful of the fact that by the time this article is read, the political situation within COPE might be different in terms of its leadership structures. S Magadla asks questions that need to be answered about the leadership of COPE, which include the following: Will COPE be able to hold onto the 1,3 million voters who put them into Parliament in the 2009 elections? Or, has the party in-fighting given effect to Zuma's prediction that COPE would have a short life and that its supporters are likely to find themselves stranded and resort to going back to the ANC?<sup>73</sup> As regards the durability of COPE as a force to reckon with in as far as South Africa's political landscape is concerned, its future rests heavily on the prospects of handling its leadership squabbles. I further opine that the rift is a deep fault line inherited from the ANC. To a certain extent, the ANC has managed to reconcile with former COPE members who have rejoined it, but the same cannot be said for COPE.

Due to leadership squabbles within the party, by April 2011 the following senior leaders had left the party and some had re-joined the ANC: JJ Tabane (former spokesperson of the party); L Kupe (former national congress

---

72 R Louw, (ed.), "COPE in a struggle for power between Lekota and Shilowa" *Southern Africa Report*, 28(17), 30 April 2010, p. 8.

73 *The Times*, 29 June 2010.



committee member); and J Ngcebetsha (former Gauteng chairman), of whom were paraded in front of the media by the Gauteng ANC for having 'returned home'. The above were not the only leaders to leave COPE. Other leaders who dumped COPE ahead of the May 2011 local government elections included S Moloto and N Mompoti.<sup>74</sup>

While COPE started with an incredible energy and a significant impact, it quickly degenerated into a morass of leadership struggles, policy fudges and endless debates mostly left unresolved, bad organisational practices and a culture that mimicked the ANC. When the party contested the May 2011 local government elections, the most repeatedly asked questions were as follows: What happened to the self-proclaimed notion that the party would offer a new way of doing things? What happened to the promise of honest, accountable and transparent leadership? During the local government elections, COPE managed 2, 1% support of the total votes. This was an indication that the leaders spent much time addressing the party's leadership squabbles rather than concentrating on building it. After the May 2011 elections, COPE promised to concentrate on the 2014 general elections.

---

<sup>74</sup> *City Press*, 24 April 2011.