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In opposition and in power: the African National Congress and the theory and practice of participatory democracy (with particular reference to 1980s 'people's power' and policy formulation)

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Abstract

The period of 'people's power' in South Africa from 1985-7 represented for many participants a form of participatory, and often prefigurative, democracy. In the post-1994 period South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) has committed to participatory democracy alongside representative democratic government. There has, however, been no clearly articulated theory of participatory democracy within the ANC. Through a combination of interviews and analysis of primary documents (including policy frameworks, legislation, discussion documents, guidance and other commentary), this thesis analyses the ANC's understanding of participatory democracy as both a liberation movement in opposition and a government in power. While making a contribution to normative democratic debate, the thesis also challenges arguments which suggest that the democracy established in post-1994 South Africa is unrelated to people's power or that people's power in its entirety represented a superior form of democracy. Instead, it is argued that people's power constituted a variety of overlapping themes and discourses. Elements were rooted in radical democratic theory, community activism, and ideas of popular empowerment. However it was also markedly influenced by Marxist-Leninist thought and a dominant notion of vanguardism. Overall, people's power embraced a largely unitary form of democracy in which participation could only be exercised within the framework of the liberation movement.

Into the democratic era, many of the ideas informing people's power were woven into policy on participatory democracy. What also emerged, however, were new ideas and influences from development theory, governance discourse and international best practice. While these strands have themselves created conceptual tension - between the dual demands of performance and efficiency and citizen participation - public policy nonetheless provides politically pluralistic mechanisms for citizen influence. This thesis argues that alongside public policy discourse is a separate and distinct discourse of participation from the ANC as a movement. Here, vanguardism remains the dominant conceptual thread in which participation is seen as a means of fulfilling the NDR and extending ANC hegemony. As such, the teleological nature of participation as conceived by the ANC risks undermining the public policy objective of increasing citizen influence.