



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

Multi-Member Constituency model trumps Single Seat Constituency model ***By Daryl Swanepoel***

In view of the Constitutional Court judgement declaring the current Electoral Act unconstitutional, South Africa is compelled to open up the electoral reform discussion. But, in any event, judgement or not, a reboot of the country's electoral system is seriously needed. Not because the current system hasn't served South Africa, but rather, because South African society has changed since 1994, and now demands a greater sense of accountability from the political dispensation.

The country currently uses a closed party-list proportional representation system, in which parties are represented in proportion to their electoral support. Voters *have no* influence on who the party puts forward as its candidates, nor the order in which a party's candidates are ranked for election. This system, with 200 seats allocated between the nine provinces and 200 seats allocated to a national compensatory list to reach full proportionality, was probably what was best in 1994, at the system's inception, but the political development since then means that it is no longer adequate.

Many are now calling for a constituency-based model, which makes it easier – some would even say possible – to hold parliamentarians more to account to those that elect them and to be more representative of their interests, than is now the case. But within the constituency model, there are two types of constituencies that need to be very carefully considered, as they are not created equal in terms of their strengths and weaknesses.

The first is the single seat constituency model – in other words, a winner-takes-all majority election system. One of the main advantages of this system is that it allows for the possibility of holding particular politicians to account and getting rid of them individually, if necessary. However, in South Africa, given that the country is not homogeneous in its make-up, the single seat constituency model is dangerous, because we could end up with a number of provinces in which constituencies are represented wall to wall by a single political party, with the opposition parties relegated to the compensatory proportional list.

Even though this would result in general proportionality, it does not necessarily reflect the geographical spread of the votes those parties may achieve and, therefore, the diversity within that particular province. Indeed, it is quite conceivable that a small political party that has its major support in, for example, Gauteng, ends up with its representatives drawn from other provinces. Such a situation would negate the goal of improving accountability and representativity, in that what one really wants is a local MP that will stand up for your interests and who you can approach and discuss things with. You lose that as an opposition party in the single seat constituency model.

Another disadvantage of the single seat constituency model is that it would make it very difficult for an independent candidate to be elected. In a single seat constituency system, it is normally the bigger parties that succeed, with smaller parties and independents confronted with an uphill, even improbable chance of being elected.

The Inclusive Society Institute (ISI) believes that the second system, the multi-member constituency (MMC) model, is better suited to promote accountability and representativity in terms of the geographical and community diversity dimensions of South Africa. In order to achieve a true democracy and social cohesion, we need to adopt a system that not only results in overall general proportionality, as is the constitutional requirement, but also ensures that representatives are drawn from the many different communities across the country.

The ISI is proposing 66 multi-member constituencies around the country, where we basically have mini-proportional representation (PR) elections within each of those multi-member constituencies. The Institute suggest basing them on the district municipalities, using boundaries that are already in place in order to avoid a completely new delimitation of the country. Each MMC would have between three and seven representatives, depending on population size. In the larger cities, like Cape Town, where there is a very large population, one would use the subregions as the MMC boundaries. In effect, there would be about eight multi-member constituencies in Cape Town. In that way, we would ensure that throughout the country, we're guaranteed to have multi-party representation from every constituency. And we can ensure that the diversity of racial, cultural and ethnic groups is properly represented in the National Assembly.

Thus, local voters would be represented in proportion to the local strength of their parties, with overall proportionality enabled through a compensatory list. In order to ensure a greater degree accountability and local representation, 300 seats will be allocated to the MMCs, with 100 compensatory seats to ensure that "in general proportional representation" is achieved.

In that the MMCs will each elect a modest number of members for each of the legislatures, a much closer rapport between voters and representatives elected in the local areas will be ensured. This will certainly increase the level of accountability and can also be expected to increase the level of social cohesion, as voters in a particular MMC have something in common: the opportunity to elect *their* MPs, who might engage with the local voters and their various associations in defending the area's interests in the legislature to a far greater extent than the current system allows for.

The proposal presented by the Inclusive Society Institute is well worth considering, in that the only real change from the current system is that the number of lower-tier constituencies – which are currently the nine provinces – will change to 66 smaller multi-member constituencies. It ensures greater accountability and representivity without sacrificing the checks and balances that the current system holds for ensuring effective representation of the diverse interests in the country, and social cohesion. To achieve such, the MMC-system certainly trumps the single-seat system.

South African society now has a unique, once in a lifetime, opportunity to engage in a much-needed conversation about how the country's democracy can best be structured to ensure that South Africa prospers, develops, and eventually becomes the country we want it to be. Let's think it through carefully, and make the right choice.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the content of the Institute's recent workshop on elections and coalitions.