

Editorial

This edition of SACQ will hit the streets less than a month before April 22, the day on which South Africans go to the polls to vote in a new government. It is thus a good time to reflect on the extent to which we can expect a change in approach to crime and the criminal justice system by considering how the three parties most likely to share the majority of votes – the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Congress of the People (COPE) – propose to address crime.

The ANC's election manifesto has changed little since 1999 in terms of how the party proposes to deal with crime, although there have been minor adjustments in terms of how the problem of crime is understood.

In 1999 the ANC placed the problem of crime in a historical context, referring to the 'heritage of crime and corruption' bestowed by apartheid. It referred to the government having 'inherited' a criminal justice system that was 'pervaded with the lawlessness and criminality of that era'. Although the party made reference to the link between crime and social conditions by referring to poverty and social inequality as social causes of crime, this understanding was not carried through in its five 'keys to dealing with crime', that focused strongly on strengthening the criminal justice system, reducing the number of guns in society, and harsher sentencing regimes.

In the ANC's 2004 election manifesto the link between social conditions and the problem of crime was left out entirely, and indeed much less attention was paid to how the party would deal with crime. The ANC did, however, commit itself to increasing the size of the SAPS, improving the court system, and dealing more effectively with corruption. Ironically the manifesto placed significant emphasis on the Scorpions and the value the unit would bring to the fight against crime and corruption.

The ANC's 2009 election manifesto deals with the problem of crime in a little more detail. However, in line with the previous manifesto, while the causes of crime are alluded to, they are not named. Despite committing to deal with the unspecified 'causes of crime', the manifesto emphasises the strengthening of the criminal justice system: better co-operation between departments of the criminal justice system and a larger police service. The ANC also proposes to 'mobilise communities to participate in combating crime through establishing street committees and community courts, amongst others'. The undefined 'amongst others' may be reason for concern, and one hopes that the ANC will be mindful of the need to prevent vigilantism while increasing community involvement in combating crime. COPE too needs to consider the dangers that its proposed 'Youth Cadet Service' may pose.

Given the dramatic focus on corruption in the ranks of the ruling party as a result both of the charges against Jacob Zuma, and the revelations of fraud, deception and corruption by the former ANC spokesperson, Carl Niehaus, it is unsurprising that the Democratic Alliance foregrounds cronyism and corruption as the most important threats to society. The DA presents itself as the antidote to a 'closed, crony society for some' and emphasises accountable governance.

In relation to crime, though, the DA has little to offer that is different from the ANC. It too promises more police, setting a target of 250 000 as opposed to the 190 000 it claims is the state's target for 2010. The DA

too places a great deal of faith in the ability of a improved criminal justice system to deal with crime, and, like the ANC of 1999, seems to believe that harsher sentences will be a deterrent to criminals. However, one positive aspect of the DA's approach is the recognition of the harmful effect of prison, particularly on young offenders, and the need to divert young, first time offenders out of the criminal justice system.

COPE also plays to the perception that the current leadership of the ANC is compromised by corruption, by emphasising early in its manifesto its commitment to 'leaders who are honest servants of the people' and to transparency in the awarding of tenders. In an interesting departure from the manifestos of the ANC and DA that reflect an inherent belief in the centrality of the criminal justice system to reducing crime, COPE foregrounds 'work with communities, community-based organisations and NGOs to build safer places where we live,' and emphasises the need for specialised programmes to provide activities for youth.

COPE too promises South Africans more police, an integrated criminal justice system and the return of the Scorpions. Though how it plans to achieve this, should it win enough support in the election to be able to realise its promises, remains to be seen. COPE also promises a return of the specialised police units – no doubt a reaction to concern that the restructuring of the SAPS has reduced the capacity of the police to deal with specific categories of crime. But, like the other parties, COPE also seems to have faith in the ability of harsher sentences to reduce crime – proposing mandatory life sentences for 'habitual' offenders.

It would appear on the basis of these manifestos that South Africans might expect more of the same in terms of efforts to combat crime – a stronger focus on the criminal justice system and harsher sentences (that will exacerbate the already serious problem of prison overcrowding). It is a pity that more creative thought, informed by evidence-based research, has not been put into how crime will be dealt with by a future government.

The articles in this edition of SACQ reflect the continued search by researchers and practitioners to understand the high rate of violent crime in South Africa. Vanessa Barolsky and Suren Pillay argue that the high level of violent crime in South Africa has led to a 'radical problem of understanding' that can only be overcome by considering South Africa's violent crime problem in an international context. Louise Ehlers and Sean Tait write about the Open Society Foundation's efforts to implement a programme that is informed by the view that crime can only be managed by long-term systemic social change.

Reflecting the concern that South Africans have about high levels of public service corruption, Werner Webb and Andrew Faull provide views on how corruption should be stemmed in the criminal justice system, with Webb making the controversial argument that the prosecution of prominent political leaders on charges of corruption is not going to have the desired effect of reducing corruption in the public service.

Finally, as an antidote to these issues that command a great deal of public attention, Irma Labuschagne asks readers to question the validity of profiling as a tool to catch serial killers and asks difficult questions about how we define serial killers.

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