

# Party political funding a civil society issue

The issue of party political funding remains unresolved and continues to rear its ugly head. **Hassen Lorgat** argues why this issue is important for unions and broader civil society.

**A**t the beginning of October IDASA sponsored a symposium on political donations. It provided me with the opportunity to reconnect with an issue of importance to unions and NGOs.

As a trade unionist in a former life, I argued that unionists must stand for an accountable and inclusive democracy. It was one of the reasons why unions, during the early days and particularly in the 1980s, were so particular about dues paying members. Some of us may today regard this as crude, but the belief was that union members had to control unions (the vehicle) as well as the strategy (the means) to achieve socialism or a worker controlled society. Participatory democracy, debates and strikes were all seen as tools to be used to build and consolidate strong united, national industrial unions to play a role in society.

I argued then, that for us, 'one person one vote' was essential to deepen our democracy and that all our votes count equally. But our vote will not carry the same weight today if some black empowerment comrade pays our membership fees to our local ANC branch and buys our votes to put him into our local authority. Thus, regulating private donations of political parties is essential to ensure that our democratic gains made since 1994 are not whittled away.

The symposium, addressed by various international experts Professor Keith Ewing, Kings College, London; and, Professor Akiko

Ejima, University of Meiji, Tokyo confirmed what is already included in the African Union's Convention Against Corruption adopted in Maputo in June 2003. It states that political activities in a multiparty system is fertile ground for corruption, and thus the Convention seeks to prevent the use of proceeds of corruption to finance political parties.

It also seeks to ensure transparency in political parties. These sections conform with the principles that the meeting identified, in particular, the key one that regulation (of political party funding) is preferred as a means to ensure dignity of the electorate and the voting process. It was agreed that regulations should:

- Heed the importance of contextual factors and that no one model can be imposed on any country.
- Prevent and eliminate corruption.
- Ensure adequate funding of parties to allow them to perform multiple functions.
- Encourage citizen participation and engagement in political parties.
- Promote equality and fairness between electors, parties and candidates.
- Transparency and disclosure are main pillars for control.
- Attract and maintain public support and awareness. The media, in

particular, is charged with a great job of providing information that is credible and educative, and which the public can use to make up their own minds.

Presentations at the symposium are evidence that differing views exist. For example, UK corporations, generally, argued that disclosure affects their rights to privacy, freedom of association; freedom of expression; arbitrary search and seizure. Professor Hewing who works with the UK Labour Party and the TUC (Trade Union Congress) agreed that whilst all donations must be recorded and transparent - unions were the most accountable and transparent actors in the society today. UK unions had to have a formal mandate to vote funds for a political party of their choice, courtesy of Thatcher. While, in contrast, corporations often failed to refer to their share holders when deciding which party to back.

Unions in South Africa should develop a position on this issue. They should dispel any notion of being compared to corporates as both being blocs that distort the smooth running of our democracy. Unions are the collective voice of individual workers and this must not be weakened by asking union support for parties to be individualised, or fragmented.

The symposium found that undisclosed donations are a problem because of a range of factors including the potential for buying political favours; getting help in legislative processes; obtaining contracts and the potential impact on the democratic process by possibly undermining it.

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