

End of African National Congress hegemony: ANC vote slumps to 40 percent in South African election

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The African National Congress (ANC) lost its overall majority in last Wednesday's national (parliamentary) and provincial elections in South Africa. The ANC has long dominated South Africa's political scene, both in opposition to the hated apartheid regime and while in office following the first post-apartheid election in 1994.

The ANC leader, President Cyril Ramaphosa, saw his party's share of the vote fall from 57 percent in the 2019 elections, itself a record low, to just 40 percent, much lower than the most pessimistic forecasts. He and his faction-ridden party will now be forced to seek coalition partners to remain in office, if, indeed, he is not pushed out as the price for reaching a deal with some of the other parties.

The collapse in the ANC's vote expresses the protracted political and economic crisis gripping the South African bourgeoisie. The political uncertainty rattled the financial markets, with the rand, South Africa's currency, falling by 2 percent against the dollar; the main share index dropping by 2.3 percent; and interest rates charged by the financial predators to hold local-currency South African bonds jumping by eight basis points, to 12.13 percent.

So disenchanted with 30 years of ANC rule is South Africa's predominantly young population that just 40 percent of young people registered to vote in the election. Preliminary indications from the electoral commission late on Thursday are that voter turnout was about 59 percent of the 27 million people (out of a population of 61 million) registered to vote, down from 66 percent in 2019.

Ramaphosa, the former head of the National Union of Mineworkers and ANC general secretary, who since has become a multi-millionaire, won the 2019 elections with a pledge to root out the ANC's endemic corruption, epitomised by former president Jacob Zuma's naked corruption. The scale of the corruption has made foreign capital and international financial institutions reluctant to deal with the country.

Driving the disaffection with the ANC has been the party's failure to improve living conditions for all but the country's new black corporate elite under its Black Economic Empowerment policy. Key infrastructure and industries such as

electricity and transport were broken up and sold to leading members and supporters of the ANC at rock bottom prices, leading to massive inefficiencies, grotesque levels of corruption and soaring inequality, making South Africa the most unequal country on the planet, according to the World Bank.

While the economy grew at around 3.5 percent a year after the end of apartheid, following the 2008 world financial crisis socio-economic conditions plummeted. The COVID-19 pandemic further weakened the already fragile economy, with GDP per capita already lower in 2019 than in 2008, before falling to \$6,190 in 2023. This was about the same level as in 2005.

Meanwhile, billions of rand in emergency funding allocated in response to the financial crisis only fueled the corruption. Unemployment is at record levels. Officially running at 32 percent, it is far higher among young people, more than half of whom have no regular jobs.

The World Bank estimated the poverty rate at 62 percent in 2023, with some 47 percent of South Africans relying on state welfare to survive. High fuel and food prices hit the poor the hardest.

While inflation averaged 6.0 percent in 2023, it was 9.3 percent for those at the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution. People are now forced to endure extended power outages and water shortages on a daily basis. Forty percent of piped water is lost before it reaches customers.

Along with falling living standards, public services, where they exist at all, have deteriorated. Crime has surged. The World Bank estimates that crime—much of it organized—costs the country at least 10 percent of GDP annually. Few murders are solved.

Such is the competition for party jobs, particularly in the municipalities, which play a significant role in the delivery of public services and in socio-economic development, that assassination attempts on politicians and officials have claimed the lives of 37 people, according to the conflict-monitoring group ACLED.

While there were 70 parties on the national and provincial ballots, and 52 on just the national ballot, the ANC and four

other parties received 90 percent of the votes.

It was UMkhonto weSizwe (MK), named after “Spear of the Nation,” the ANC’s armed wing during the struggle against apartheid, that benefited from the ANC’s collapse, winning 14.6 percent of the national vote, to come in third, with the other three parties largely maintaining their 2019 vote.

MK was launched last December by former ANC President Zuma and his ANC supporters. The 82-year-old Zuma, who was forced to resign the presidency in 2018 amid a series of corruption scandals going back years, was himself disqualified from standing in the elections, having served a prison term for contempt of court in 2021 and soon to face a trial for corruption. Winning 45 percent of the vote in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa’s second most populous province and Zuma’s home province, MK is expected to form the provincial government there.

However, MK has refused to join an ANC government under Ramaphosa, whom it holds responsible for Zuma’s ouster. In July 2021, days of angry riots broke out, triggered by Zuma’s jailing, which soon morphed into wider protests against poverty and the ANC government. More than 100 people were killed in fights between the rival factions and at the hands of the police.

Another ANC splinter group, the radical-posturing Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), came in fourth, with 9.5 percent of the vote. The EFF is led by Julius Malema. He was expelled, along with other leaders of the ANC’s Youth League who wanted to use the Youth League to gain entry into the ranks of the more established black bourgeoisie, which had garnered its wealth and position through the ANC’s Black Economic Empowerment policy. Malema has called for social housing in white-owned areas, the nationalization of almost all institutions, and the redistribution of land without compensation for white South Africans.

The largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), is widely seen as representing the interests of South Africa’s white minority and of business. It came in second with 21.79 percent of the vote. It has close relations with Washington and has supported Israel’s war against the Palestinians in Gaza, in contrast to the ANC, which has refused to support the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and which filed the genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which, like Zuma’s MK party, gets most of its support from Zulu people, took 3.85 percent of the vote, much the same as in 2019.

In the provincial elections, the ANC gained a majority in five of South Africa’s nine provinces: Limpopo (74 percent), the Eastern Cape (63 percent), North West (58 percent), Free State (53 percent) and Mpumalanga (52 percent). It leads in the Northern Cape (49 percent) and Gauteng (36 percent), home to Johannesburg, the country’s commercial capital and largest city, and the capital Pretoria, but will need coalition partners to form governments.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) looks set to continue to

govern the Western Cape (53 percent), as it has done since 2009, while Zuma’s MK party has trounced the ANC’s 18 percent of the vote, with 46 percent in KwaZulu-Natal.

With almost all votes counted under a new three-ballot proportional representation system, the final result is expected Monday evening, after which the new 400-member National Assembly must sit within 14 days and elect a new president by a simple majority vote, who then forms a government.

The ANC’s electoral collapse and the political crisis it has exacerbated express the inability of the national bourgeoisie to improve the social conditions of the working class and rural poor. The ANC came to power in 1994 pledged to rescue South African capitalism, as the globalisation of production rendered the country’s nationalist and autarkic apartheid regime unviable, amid fears that the rising militancy of the South African working class could spell the end of capitalist rule in the country.

Based on the trade unions organized under the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), the ANC’s role was to suppress the revolutionary strivings of the black working class while creating a black capitalist class to take its place alongside the white capitalists. This was sanctified politically on the basis of the SACP’s Stalinist two-stage theory, which proclaimed the formal end of apartheid as a democratic revolution and a necessary stage before any struggle for socialism could commence.

The ANC’s path from opposition to co-option has been replicated across Africa and the Middle East. The national bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of revolution from below, cannot resolve the fundamental democratic, economic and social problems confronting the masses.

Only the working class, which creates society’s wealth, can do that. It means breaking with the capitalist politics of the ANC and adopting a socialist and internationalist programme to unite the working class across the African continent and in the imperialist centres to take power and overthrow capitalism.



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