

African National Congress strikes coalition deal with apartheid-era party

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South Africa's National Assembly re-elected Cyril Ramaphosa to the presidency for a second five-year term, after his African National Congress (ANC) Party struck a last-minute coalition deal with the right-wing Democratic Alliance (DA), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the Patriotic Alliance.

The Democratic Alliance is made up of the remnants of parties from the apartheid era, including the National Party that ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1994.

The National Assembly elected an ANC politician as speaker and a DA lawmaker as deputy speaker. Ramaphosa will be sworn in as president Wednesday and then unveil a new cabinet expected to include DA members.

The coalition deal follows the May 29 elections in which the ANC, synonymous with the decades-long struggle against South Africa's hated racist regime, suffered its worst electoral result since taking office after the first post-apartheid election in 1994. This, along with the record low voter registration and turnout, testifies to the decline of the ANC's political authority among broad layers of the working class, above all the younger generation.

The ANC won just 40 percent of the vote, giving it 159 of the 400 seats in parliament. Its loss of around 16 percent of the vote was the uMkhonto weSizwe's (MK Party's) gain. The MK is the newly formed breakaway party of former ANC President Jacob Zuma, who was ousted from power at the hands of Ramaphosa in 2018 over long-standing corruption.

Following the elections, Ramaphosa proposed a national unity government. But after two weeks of backroom talks and political horse trading, he was able to secure his political survival only by turning to John Steenhuisen's Democratic Alliance, whose rabidly pro-business party came second, winning 22 percent of the vote.

DA leaders justified overturning last year's resolution never to work with the ANC, saying that it was important to prevent a "doomsday coalition" between the ANC and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Steenhuisen said that it was essential to come together and collaborate to prevent subversive forces filling the political vacuum, adding, "It's the patriotic thing to do."

Zuma's MK Party, which got the third highest vote share, refused to work with the ANC as long as Ramaphosa remained leader. It disputed the election results, claiming the election had not been either free or fair, and called on South Africa's top court to stop Friday's convening of parliament. The election commission defended results that were accepted by the other main

parties.

The EFF, an ANC splinter group led by Julius Malema that utilises leftist and hardline black nationalist phraseology and won nearly 10 percent of the vote, likewise refused to work with the ANC.

The ANC's coalition also includes the small Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a right-wing, Zulu nationalist party, with which it had fought a virtual civil war during the late 1980s and early 1990s that left thousands dead and threatened to derail the 1994 election. The inclusion of the IFP, which received 3.8 percent of the vote, provides the ANC a means of deflecting criticism for working with the white-led DA. Velenkosini Hlabisa, Inkatha's leader, said, "This presents an important opportunity between the two political parties to heal the wounds of the past."

A fourth member of the coalition is the deeply reactionary Patriotic Alliance (PA), which received 2 percent of the vote. The PA, which wants to bring back the death penalty and deport illegal immigrants, has its support base in South Africa's communities in the Gauteng and Western Cape provinces.

Ramaphosa called the agreement with the DA a "new birth, a new era for our country," adding that it was time for parties "to overcome their differences and to work together." He has agreed an eight-page document governing their coalition, including fine phrases about decision-making based on consensus, respect for the constitution and opposition to racism and sexism, with a priority to be given to "rapid, inclusive and sustainable economic growth." The financial markets, heaving a sigh of relief, approved of the deal, with the rand, South Africa's currency, rallying slightly against the dollar.

Ramaphosa's embrace of the Democratic Alliance—until now the official opposition party—and other right-wing parties, at the risk of splintering his faction-ridden ANC, is the logical expression of its pro-capitalist agenda. The ANC had from its inception a bourgeois nationalist program. Notwithstanding the socialist phraseology borrowed from the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), the ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter guaranteed bourgeois property rights and upheld the institutions of the capitalist state. That is why, after years of violently suppressing the ANC, the apartheid government of President F.W. De Clerk turned to Nelson Mandela and his ANC in 1990 to prevent a social revolution.

The ANC, with its pro-business agenda aimed at encouraging inward investment into South Africa—known unofficially as "cautious Thatcherism" after Britain's notoriously pro-market

prime minister of the 1980s—did nothing to improve the social conditions of the vast majority of South Africans. They still today live in conditions of utmost squalor, without secure access to electricity or running water, plagued by rampant crime, corruption, poverty and astronomic unemployment levels, particularly among South Africa’s predominantly young population.

While white South Africans continue to control the majority of the national wealth, the ANC’s Black Economic Empowerment programme enabled a thin layer of black businessmen and a handful of black politicians and trade union leaders to enrich themselves and provide a social base for the post-apartheid regime. Ramaphosa, the former head of the miners’ union, has an estimated personal wealth of \$450 million—dwarfing that of his rival Zuma.

Ramaphosa’s decision to cut a deal with the vehemently pro-market and pro-Washington Democratic Alliance sparked fears among ANC members that it signals the end of affirmative action and even token efforts to end poverty. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the trade union federation that is a key member of the ANC “Tripartite Alliance” along with the SACP, had threatened to quit the alliance if it entered government with the DA.

The ANC sought to counter this, with party official Fikile Mbalula pointing out that in the first government of national unity in 1994, the ANC’s coalition included the National Party, the party of apartheid! He asked rhetorically, “We went into government with people who took us to jail. Did we die? We didn’t. Did we survive that moment? We did.”

Cutting a deal with the Democratic Alliance means intensifying a programme of class war at home in the interest of South African and international capital under conditions where South Africa, the world’s most unequal society, is a social and political powder keg. It is likely to entail closer relations with US imperialism under conditions where the ANC had sought to use its economic relations with China, Russia, Iran and Cuba and its membership of the BRICS group of countries as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the Washington-dominated financial and political institutions.

There was a noticeable absence of any discussion during the election campaign of the global war initiated by US imperialism of which the NATO-instigated war with Russia over Ukraine, the imperialist-backed Israeli genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and Washington’s military-strategic offensive against China are three key arenas.

The ANC has for decades supported the Palestinians, most recently bringing charges of genocide and war crimes against Israel to the International Court of Justice. In relation to the US proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, Pretoria has refused to fall in line with Washington—abstaining on six UN resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, refusing to implement sanctions against Russia and appealing to the International Criminal Court not to enforce an arrest warrant on Vladimir Putin so the Russian president could visit their country.

Last year, South Africa carried out naval exercises with China and Russia, seriously straining relations with Washington. In May 2023, US ambassador to South Africa Reuben Brigety called a

press conference to denounce South Africa for selling weapons to Russia, without producing any evidence to back his claim.

None of this was the subject of any debate during the election campaign, even though the ANC and DA hold opposing views on all these issues.

The fracturing of the ANC and its disastrous election results gives a pale and distorted indication of the mass anger against the whole rotten capitalist set-up of post-apartheid South Africa. There have been numerous and very bitter working-class struggles, most notably the 2012 miners’ strike where Ramaphosa’s demand for a police clampdown precipitated the Marikana massacre of 34 striking miners, who were shot dead at a mine owned by the Lonmin group where the former head of the National Union of Mineworkers was a non-executive director.

Since then, the “Butcher of Marikana” has done everything he could to prop up South African capitalism, cutting corporate taxation as he drove down workers’ pay, reneging on public sector wage deals and slashing living standards. It has earned him the undying hatred of South African workers. Striking gold miners at Sibanye-Stillwater booed Ramaphosa—COSATU’s guest of honour—off the stage at the 2022 May Day rally in Rustenburg, the centre of the country’s mining region.

Repeated strikes for higher wages by metalworkers, public sector workers, teachers, healthcare and transport workers, as well as one- and two-day mass protest strikes have been systematically isolated by COSATU and the trade unions that are politically tied to the ANC.

The elections have underscored that the ANC is sitting on a political and social volcano. The new ANC-Democratic Alliance government will be a regime of extreme crisis.

But to defeat the incoming government’s efforts to cut public services, wages and working conditions in the interest of big business and to orientate South Africa to American imperialism’s global war, the working class must unite its struggles and mobilize its independent strength against all the political representatives of South African capitalism. This means fighting for a workers’ government and the development of a global working-class offensive for socialism and against imperialist war.



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