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The Continent

**Somehow,
the ANC
is still
standing**



Photo: Per-Anders
Pettersson/Getty Images

The bakkie stops here:
ANC campaigners on the
stump ahead of South
Africa's elections on 29
May. Photo: Per-Anders
Pettersson/Getty Images



This is (still) ANC country

The big takeaway from this election is less about the weaknesses of the African National Congress, and more about its enduring strength.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Simon Allison in Johannesburg

There are plenty of good reasons for South Africans not to vote for the African National Congress.

The oldest liberation movement in Africa has now led the government of South Africa for 30 years. Over time, its weaknesses have compounded, and been repeatedly exposed under the relentless glare of media and civil society.

So dominant has its rule been that its failures have become those of the country, too: the corruption, the crime, the failure

to create jobs, the rising cost of living, the glaring inequalities, and the lack of preparedness for the unfolding climate crisis. In the most obvious metaphor for its decline, the party in power can no longer keep the power on – except, curiously, in the months leading up to next week's election, when the state utility burned billions of rands worth of diesel to temporarily suspend rolling blackouts.

And yet, on Wednesday, citizens of Africa's largest economy will almost certainly vote the ANC into office once again. Its victory will not be as emphatic as usual – the party has never previously

won less than 62% in a national election – and its majority may not even be absolute. It may have to form a coalition. But even the most damning polls suggest that 40% of the country will once more put their faith in the party of Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela (and, more recently and less laudably, of Jacob Zuma and Cyril Ramaphosa). That number is edging higher as the election draws nearer.

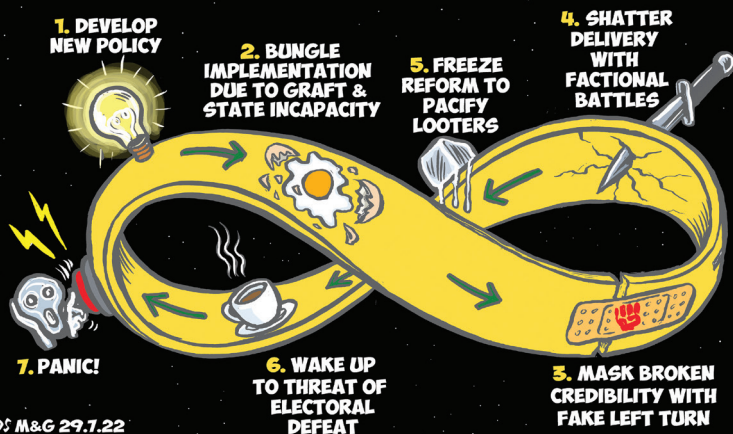
In some countries, support for the ruling party is vastly inflated by gerrymandering and ballot-rigging. This is not the case in South Africa, where there is little suggestion that the election will be anything other than one where people can vote freely. The ANC really is still the most popular party in the country.

This is partly due to the “liberation dividend” – a loyalty enjoyed by many liberation movements when they

eventually do take power. This loyalty is not entirely misplaced. For all its faults, South Africa has plenty of reasons to be grateful to the ANC. It ushered in multiparty democracy in 1994, and avoided a civil war. In office, it dismantled the apartheid regime and extended basic services – designed by the apartheid government to service only the white minority – to most of the country. It also enabled the creation of one of the world’s most liberal Constitutions, and an environment where media are able to publish in the public interest, often detailing the ANC’s failures.

For many voters, especially those who lived through the horrors of apartheid, nothing the ANC can do is worse than the government it replaced. This point is often overlooked by foreign commentators with short memories. In an especially

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egregious example of this, Britain's *The Times* wrote last week that "30 years after black people got the vote, South Africa is the most unequal society on Earth" – as if, somehow, South Africa was more equal under white supremacist rule.

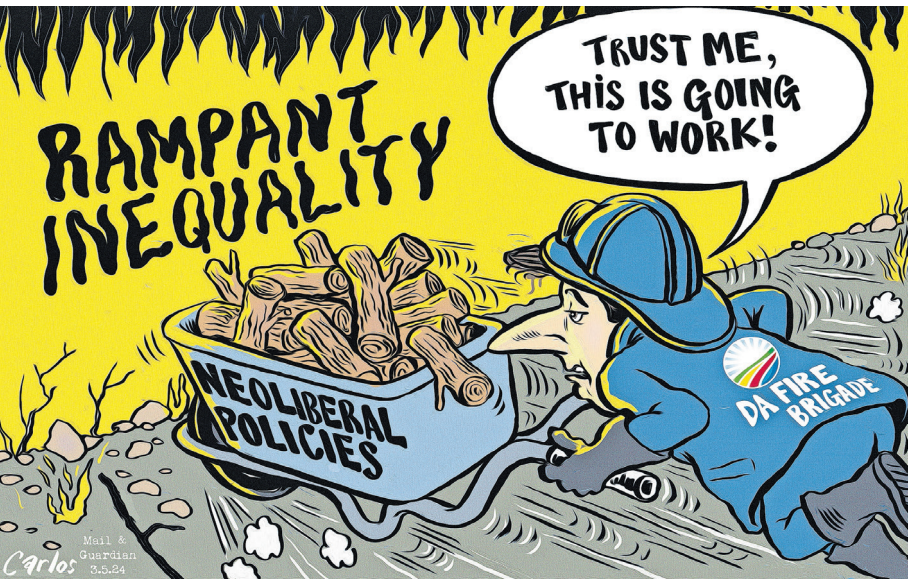
The ghosts of apartheid

It helps the ANC enormously that the official opposition has done so little to banish apartheid's ghosts. The Democratic Alliance has had just one black leader in its history, Mmusi Maimane – and it booted him after a disappointing electoral performance in 2019. Former DA leader Tony Leon later described Maimane's tenure as a "failed experiment" and, sure enough, the party replaced Maimane with a white man.

Fed up, a succession of senior black officials have left, reinforcing perceptions it is a white-run party that caters to elites.

"The racism I experienced in the DA was not overt. Rather, it was that less honest, covert, paternalistic, difficult-to-put-your-finger-on-it kind of racism," said Herman Mashaba, a former DA mayor who quit to start his own party, writing in the *Mail & Guardian* in 2021. "It was the kind of racism that questioned why we were spending time delivering services to informal settlements when they don't represent 'traditional DA voters' and 'those who pay the rates.'"

In response to a question from *The Continent*, the DA's leader John Steenhuisen said comments like these came from people who were "bitter and angry" after losing party leadership contests. But he appeared tone deaf when it came to the sensitive issue of race relations in South Africa. When asked if the country was ready for another white man as president, he compared himself to



Barack Obama, “a minority in America, and he was able to get elected”.

The prospect of John Steenhuisen getting himself elected is slim, however. He has said that winning just 22% of the vote would be a major achievement for the DA – a strikingly limited ambition for a well-established opposition party operating in a free and fair political environment, and competing against a corrupt and scandal-prone ruling party.

Other opposition parties are making plenty of noise, but failing to attract support in the kind of numbers that would pose a real threat to the ANC. The Economic Freedom Fighters, led by Julius Malema, is on track for around 10% of the vote, according to polls, matching its performance from last time.

Newcomers uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK), led by former president Jacob Zuma, are the biggest surprise. Polls put them at around 13%, but their appeal is largely limited to areas of the country – like KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng – with large Zulu populations. And the Constitutional Court last week ruled that Zuma, sentenced to time in jail for contempt of court, cannot stand for the national Parliament, which thwarts some of their higher ambitions.

But while there is no doubt that the ANC will remain the most popular party in the country, it should still be worried about the decline in its support. The extent of its worries will depend on the



exact percentage of that decline. Should it retain over 50% of the vote, then it will have a majority of seats in the National Assembly – and that will allow it to appoint the president unilaterally. If it dips to 40% or below, it will need to work with at least one major opposition group – the DA, the EFF or MK – in order to form a government. If the track record of local government coalitions is anything to go by, this will be a messy process.

The most likely scenario is that the ANC receives somewhere between 40% and 50% of the vote. This should allow it to form a coalition government with smaller parties – outfits like the newly-formed Rise Mzansi, whose policies are strikingly similar to those of the ANC, but who position themselves as the “grown-ups” in the room in any coalition scenario. They will be able to extract minor concessions, but won’t be in a position to shape the government as a whole.

This is still ANC country, after all – at least until 2029. ■

Want to know more about next week’s election? *The Continent*’s partner Democracy in Africa is helping organise an X Space that will break down all that is at stake, with people in the know. Set a reminder [here](#).

Zuma's revenge

The former South African leader won't be president again – but he could still decide this election.

Andile Zulu

The biggest shock of this electoral season was former president Jacob Zuma's announcement that he was running for political office again – but not on the ticket of the African National Congress, which he served during the anti-apartheid struggle and then as president for two terms. Instead, Zuma is leading a brand-new, upstart party called uMkhonto weSizwe, which controversially takes its name (which translates as “Spear of the Nation”) from the ANC's armed wing during the struggle.

The new party is polling extremely well, attracting around 13% of the vote in some predictions, which would make it the third-largest opposition group in the country. Zuma's past, however, may finally have caught up with him.

The former president of South Africa was this week barred from running for Parliament by the Constitutional Court, due to a previous criminal conviction. As the president is chosen from among members of Parliament, this means he can't be president either.

The judgment came as a relief to his critics, who view him as a corrupt, lawless and destabilising force in South African politics.

That criminal conviction, handed down in 2021 by the same court, is a good example of what those critics are worried about. It came after Zuma repeatedly refused to testify before an official inquiry into widespread corruption – “state capture”, as South Africans call it – that happened while he was president.

He was supposed to serve 15 months in prison, but was released on medical parole after a few days behind bars. While he was in jail, there were deadly riots in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, leaving more than 350 people dead and causing 50-billion rands (\$2.7-billion) in damage to the economy.

But despite his history of personal scandals and his disastrous tenure as president of the republic – which ended when the ruling party recalled him in 2017 – Zuma remains an enormously popular figure in some parts of the country.

There are three reasons for this.

First, the failures of his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa. When Ramaphosa succeeded Zuma, he promised to usher in a “new dawn” – eradicating corruption, reducing unemployment and ending the energy crisis. But that new dawn never arrived.

Instead, under Ramaphosa's neoliberal policies – including austerity measures that have slashed government spending



Poll vaulter: Jacob Zuma's new party uMkhonto we Sizwe is projected to gut ANC support. Photo: Ihsaan Haffejee/Anadolu via Getty Images

on public goods and social services – the economy has stagnated, in the short term, at least. Zuma, on the other hand, promises radical transformation in the name of the economically marginalised and politically neglected majority. It is a compelling campaign pitch, even if Zuma's own time in government did little to advance that agenda.

Second, Zuma is the most adaptable and strategic – not to mention Machiavellian – politician in South Africa today. He has a gift for discrediting his opponents and adopting populist talking points, always presenting himself as leading the political struggle against the economic elites who have frustrated South Africa's attempts to redress the toxic legacies of apartheid.

No matter that, all too often, this populism is hollow: just take his signature “radical economic transformation” policy, announced during his second term in office, which was neither radical nor transformative – unless you were within Zuma's extensive patronage network.

Finally, Zuma excels at portraying himself as an anti-establishment figure who is unjustly persecuted by white capitalists and black sell-outs.

Zuma merges this narrative with appeals to Zulu nationalism. He is proud of his own Zulu identity, and uses this to appeal to the substantial numbers of Zulu people who feel that KwaZulu-Natal, their ancestral home, has been severely neglected by the ruling party. This appeal to Zulu culture, at times militaristic and chauvinistic, can translate into a significant number of votes.

It is these votes that keep Zuma relevant. With the ruling party likely to need to form a coalition to stay in power, MK's large projected share of the vote makes it a potential partner, and Zuma a potential kingmaker. But what price would he demand for his support – and what would it cost the country? ■

Andile Zulu is a political essayist who runs the Born Free Blues blog



Cutting edge:
The border fence between South Africa and Zimbabwe near Musina. Photo: Phill Magakoe/AFP

Blame the neighbours, build a bigger wall

Anti-immigrant sentiment has become a major theme in the run-up to South Africa's elections.

Jan Bornman

Last week, state investigators conducted simultaneous raids at all five of South Africa's refugee reception centres. They said they were looking for evidence of corruption, but the timing – with an election around the corner – was telling.

ActionSA, a minor opposition party, welcomed the move. “It has taken this government too long to finally see reason that South Africa, and its appallingly porous borders, has an immigration crisis,” it said in a statement.

Porous borders, illegal foreigners and “the immigration crisis” are a big part of

ActionSA's electoral campaign. The party is led by former Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba, who was accused by immigrant rights groups of inciting Afrophobic violence while in office.

Another minor party, the Patriotic Alliance, is even more explicit in its attacks on foreigners. Its leader, Gayton McKenzie – a convicted bank robber – has warned undocumented migrants that this is the year that “we are coming for you”.

In January, McKenzie ran up and down along South Africa's border with Zimbabwe near Beitbridge in Limpopo with members of his party. They attempted to “intercept” people crossing

the border without documents.

In echoes of rightwing sentiments heard in Europe and the United States, the Patriotic Alliance wants to build a wall along South Africa's 4,862km-long land border, and blames undocumented foreigners for South Africa's high crime statistics, and for abusing social services. These claims do not stand up to scrutiny.

"What we find is, there is really no basis in terms of the evidence available to suggest that there is a correlation between the increase in undocumented migrants and crime," said Ringisai Chikohomero, a researcher at the Institute for Security Studies. "And there is no scientific basis to suggest that foreigners are putting pressure on social services."

Neither the Patriotic Alliance nor ActionSA are making much headway in the polls, with both polling at 3% or less. But these ideas are finding their way into the rhetoric of mainstream parties, and even the government, led by the African National Congress.

This was evident not only in the raids on refugee centres, but also in a controversial policy document by the department of home affairs. This calls for South Africa to temporarily withdraw from two major international agreements on refugee protection, and would make it significantly more difficult for asylum seekers to obtain citizenship.

Lawyers for Human Rights said that the government policy document "does not read coherently, nor does it provide credible sources for the statements it makes, or the statistics it provides. As a public policy document, this is



Borderline disorder personality: Small parties are stoking Afrophobic hatred.

unacceptable."

Despite this criticism, the ANC has made this proposed policy the foundation of its own immigration policy.

For migrants already in South Africa – many of whom have lived through previous cycles of Afrophobic violence – the hardening political rhetoric could have serious consequences.

Jean Bwasa, a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the founder of Rights 2 Live Africa, said: "Every election cycle, the migrant becomes the scapegoat because they are supposedly stealing jobs. But we don't take into account that migrants are creating jobs in this country and they also contribute to this society."

"People like Gayton McKenzie and Herman Mashaba don't necessarily see this. So it is important that we single out the contributions of migrants in South Africa," Bwasa said. "At the moment we live in fear because we know it is an election year. We are very cautious where we go, what we do, and what we say." ■

Jan Bornman is a freelance journalist based in Johannesburg, South Africa



Photo: Marco Longari/AFP

PHOTO ESSAY

On the campaign trail



Thank you, next: (Above) A man waves the flag, calling vacant land squatters to a meeting. (Below) Supporters of the new Rise Mzansi party gather for a community meeting. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



Chain reaction: An uMkhonto we Sizwe supporter protests against the court ruling that declared ex-president Jacob Zuma ineligible to stand in the elections. Photo: Marco Longari/AFP



Code red: A crowd welcomes the Economic Freedom Fighters party president Julius Malema in Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal. Photo: Per-Anders Pettersson/Getty Images



Playing the field: A band of musicians roll out their top brass as they wait to perform at a campaign rally in Cape Town.
Photo: Gianluigi Guercia/AFP



Couch to MK: A supporter of the ANC meets with members of the uMkhonto we Sizwe party in Munsieville near Krugersdorp.
Photo: Emmanuel Croset/AFP



In the middle, Cyril: President Cyril Ramaphosa out on the stump during an ANC door-to-door canvassing tour of Ekurhuleni.

Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP



Neighbourhood watch: A supporter of the African Congress for Transformation looks over other parties' election posters in Sharpeville. Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP

Are elections on the continent more free than fair?

If freedom and fairness are essential traits of high-quality elections, there's mixed news from Africa.

On the positive side, Afrobarometer surveys in 39 countries show that Africans overwhelmingly report feeling “completely free” (65%) or “somewhat free” (20%) to vote for the candidate of their choice without feeling pressured.

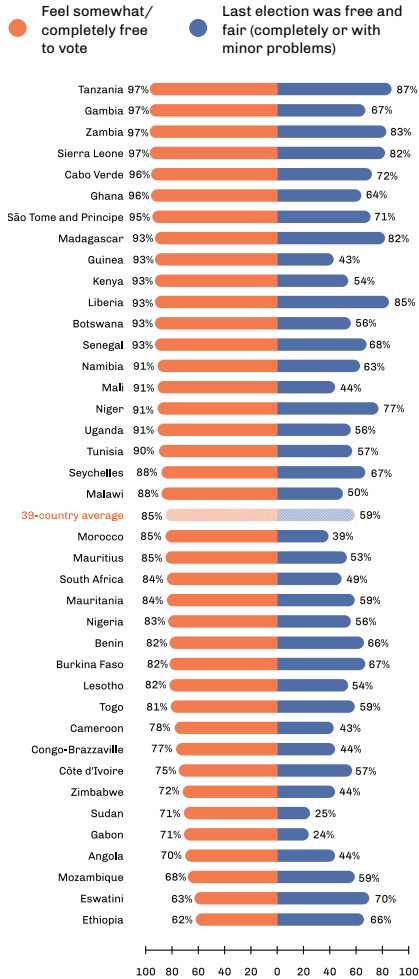
This sense of freedom is almost universal (97% “completely” or “somewhat” free) in the Gambia, Zambia, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. It is far less widespread in Ethiopia (62%) and Eswatini (63%).

A far slimmer majority (59%) report that their last national elections were free and fair (“completely” or with “minor problems”). A third (34%) disagree.

These assessments vary dramatically across countries: Almost nine out of 10 Tanzanians (87%) and Liberians (85%) report generally free and fair elections, but just one-fourth of Gabonese (24%) and Sudanese (25%) say the same.

On average across 31 countries surveyed consistently since 2014/2015, the perception of elections as generally free and fair has dipped from 64% to 58%.

Data: Free and fair elections | 39 African countries | 2021/2023



Source: Afrobarometer is a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/- two to three percentage points.