

ANC wins South African elections in low voter turnout

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The African National Congress (ANC) gained a clear lead in South Africa's April 14 general elections, taking nearly 70 percent of the votes cast—more than the 66.4 percent in 1999 and 64 percent in 1994.

The ANC appears to have been able to rely on its history as the movement that 10 years ago negotiated the end of apartheid rule. Moreover, no real political alternative was presented to the predominantly black working class majority, despite the dramatic growth of unemployment and social inequality in South Africa under ANC rule. The trade union bureaucracy has remained loyal to the ANC. Unions have organised their members to turn out for the party at the polls.

Growing disaffection with the ANC was reflected in the turnout of about 77 percent (on the latest figures) of registered voters, compared to 89 percent in 1999. As well as the lower turnout, only 75 percent of the 27 million eligible to vote have registered, meaning that overall only 58 percent of those who could vote actually did so, compared to 64 percent in 1999 and 85 percent in 1994. Many commentators have pointed to the lack of interest in the election amongst South Africa's large youth population, who have been especially hit by unemployment and lack of job opportunities. Only 47 percent of those in the 18-25 age group registered to vote, with two thirds of young people saying they are not interested in official politics.

In second place, the Democratic Alliance (DA) led by Tony Leon increased its vote to about 13 percent, compared to only 9.5 percent in 1999. The DA appears to have taken most of the white vote, as the vote for the New National Party (NNP), the successor to the National Party that ruled under apartheid, collapsed. Leon advocates free market economic policies that are essentially similar to the ANC's, but has won support for his campaign for the provision of AIDS drugs.

The Zulu nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) won about 5 percent of the vote, and the NNP 2 percent.

The ANC has an outright majority in seven of South Africa's nine provinces. In KwaZulu-Natal, it is not yet clear whether the ANC has lost to the IFP, whilst in the Western Cape, it will probably be effectively in control by continuing its alliance with its former enemy, the NNP.

No parties of the radical left have intervened effectively in the elections. The Social Movement Indaba, an umbrella of 11 groups, split apart last month over whether or not to boycott the elections. The Anti-Privatisation Forum called for a spoilt ballot, the Landless People's Movement called for a complete boycott, and other organisations left it up to their members whether or not to vote.

The ANC has attempted to maintain its support by concentrating on local issues and holding "imbizos" in the townships—community meetings addressed by the ANC tops. It has made vague promises about creating 1 million jobs. Secretary-General Kgalema Motlanthe claimed the ANC was learning lessons from Zimbabwe, where the ruling Zanu-PF party rapidly lost support after cutting state spending in the 1990s.

The ANC's active members and local organisation have drastically declined, but it called on its supporters in big business to finance a \$10 million dollar election advertising campaign—more than twice the funding of the DA. The multinational Anglo American, for example, gave R6 million (\$0.91 million) for the election, half of which went to the ANC.

Although the ANC pledged to introduce a "people's contract" to create more employment, and boasted of the increases in housing, water and electricity provision since 1994, it has ruthlessly pursued economic policies

on behalf of big business. The rand has gained in value against world currencies as President Thabo Mbeki has implemented fiscal austerity, drastically reducing the national debt and the budget deficit. Millions of jobs have been slashed as privatisation policies have been introduced in the state sector.

Between 1995 and 2003, the official number of unemployed (strictly defined as those “actively seeking work”) rose from 1.9 million to more than 4.2 million. Official unemployment stands at 30.5 percent, but many experts say it is more than 40 percent. This particularly affects youth, with 50 percent of South Africa’s population below the age of 25, so that as many as 75 percent of those out of work are young people.

Forty-eight percent of the population are now living below the poverty line, earning less than R530 (\$84) a month, a huge increase from 28 percent of the population in 1995. Whilst the ANC claims that between 1994 and 2001, it provided 8 million more people with access to clean drinking water, there are still 7 million people without drinking water, a situation that has resulted in outbreaks of cholera in recent years.

South Africa is the country worst affected by AIDS, with 5.3 million people infected and as many as 600 related deaths each day. The ANC’s record on AIDS is appalling (see “South Africa’s health minister says of AIDS sufferers: Let them eat garlic” and “Questions raised about the South African AIDS initiative”). Both Mbeki and his minister of health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, have repeatedly played down the AIDS crisis. Although the ANC government said last November it was now committed to a national provision of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs—presumably as part of its election campaign—there has been no indication that it is taking the drugs rollout seriously. According to a *South African Mail and Guardian* report last month, only three provinces—Gauteng, the Western Cape, and possibly the Free State—would be able to provide free ARV treatment over the next year. In other provinces, health departments have no information about when the rollout will begin.

The ANC negotiated the end of apartheid in 1994 by agreeing to preserve capitalist social relations and suppressing the growing revolutionary movement in the working class townships. After 10 years, 98 percent of executive directors on Johannesburg’s listed companies

are still white. Only a tiny elite of black super-rich has benefited, whilst the vast majority have sunk deeper into poverty. The ANC’s policy of “black economic empowerment” makes it obligatory for companies to put a proportion of their ownership over the next few years into black hands. Share ownership and company directorships have been handed to influential ANC figures such as Eric Molobi, recently made deputy chairman of the Imperial Group; Patrice Motsepe, a rand billionaire said to be close to Mbeki; Cyril Ramaphosa, former ANC secretary general and now on the boards of many companies; and Tokyo Sexwale, previously ANC chief in Gauteng, now with interests in diamonds, banking and property. Some 10 percent of company directorships are now filled by blacks, compared to virtually none in 1994.

The effect of this policy has been to enrich a tiny minority of ANC supporters, while the majority of the population is left in conditions of poverty as bad as those that existed under apartheid. In the past, the ANC has always claimed that the constitution prevented it from carrying out the sweeping economic changes necessary to alleviate the poverty of the majority of its supporters. Although its overwhelming majority would give it the right to make constitutional changes, the ANC has promised big business in advance that it will not do so.



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