

South African elections held amid rising social discontent and alienation from ANC

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8 May 2019

South African voters go to the polls today, a quarter century after the end of apartheid in 1994. They do so amid chronically high unemployment and vast social inequality worse even than under white minority rule.

If the African National Congress (ANC) secures a majority, as expected, this is more a testament to the political rottenness of the main opposition parties than to its continued political authority among broad layers of the working class, the younger generation above all.

The sixth election held since the end of apartheid will determine the composition of the National Assembly that forms the basis for the national government. Provincial and local elections are also contested across the country.

While nearly 50 parties are fielding candidates, the main challengers to the ruling ANC of President Cyril Ramaphosa, which currently holds the majority with 249 seats in the National Assembly, are the Democratic Alliance (DA) of Mmusi Maimane with 89 seats, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) of former ANC youth leader Julius Malema with 25 seats, and the Zulu-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) of Mangosuthu Buthelezi with 10 seats. The DA, EFF, and IFP are all anticipated to increase their share of the vote. But this will be a share of a declining vote, with large numbers expected to abstain.

While the government stresses that 75 percent of the country registered to vote ahead of the poll, the Electoral Commission of South Africa has expressed concern that this leaves around 10 million who have not—of which the majority, 6 million, are under the age of 30. The electoral commission predicts that voting by those under 20 will be at its lowest level since 1999.

The political alienation from and growing hostility towards the ANC are rooted in the party's sacrificing of the jobs, wages and essential social services on

which millions rely in the interest of preserving capitalist rule.

The ANC articulates the concerns of the South African bourgeoisie, including rich white farmers, as well as global mining corporations exploiting vital resources such as platinum and gold. It is staffed by numerous black millionaires who have enriched themselves through the policies of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as junior and not-so-junior partners of the major corporations.

Ramaphosa is the archetype—becoming one of the richest individuals in the country by trading on his former leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers during the struggle against apartheid. He is now worth an estimated \$550 million.

His path to the presidency was paved with the blood of the 34 miners massacred in 2012 at Lonmin's Marikana operation, while he was the company's BEE partner. While Ramaphosa owned a 9 percent share in the Lonmin, he excoriated the striking mineworkers as criminals, and pressured the authorities to "take action."

In contrast to this parasitic layer, most black South Africans live in appalling poverty.

South Africa remains the most economically unequal country in the world, according to the World Bank, with black workers systematically disadvantaged regarding wages and assets, and in levels of unemployment.

With a population of 60 million, South Africa is home to 10 billionaires who collectively control more than US\$30 billion. The top 1 percent own 70 percent of the country's wealth, while the bottom 60 percent own a mere 7 percent.

The unemployment rate in South Africa stands at 27.5 percent, with the jobless rate for young people

ages 18 to 35 standing at nearly 50 percent. With more than half of the population living below the poverty line, another survey found that this meant half of South Africans are in households with per capita income of US\$90 or less a month. Only 13 percent of all South Africans earn more than US\$6,000 a year.

Basic services such as electricity and running water are non-existent in many townships, leading to frequent protests, while the education system is such that nearly 80 percent of nine- and ten-year-olds are only semi-literate.

Speaking to *Reuters* regarding her reason for not voting, 20-year-old Petronela Mukhine, an unemployed resident of Alexandra, an impoverished section of Johannesburg, spoke of the ANC government's lack of concern for regular people. "They're all doing the bare minimum. We need change. A lot of people are unemployed, most of them don't have houses. They stay in shacks and it's not safe."

The ruling ANC, relying cynically on its credentials as leading the fight against apartheid, therefore no longer resonates with broad layers of South African youth.

Financial markets have indicated why they are lining up behind the ANC and see a strong win as a boost to their fortunes. Colin Coleman, chief of sub-Saharan Africa at Goldman Sachs Group Inc., told Bloomberg, "We need to get out of this election a strong mandate for structural reforms." He went on to underline Ramaphosa's non-negotiable aim to privatise state-owned assets, a move international banks and corporations are directing the ruling government to accomplish.

The ANC is also reported to be losing influence in black middle-class areas that were formerly strongholds, with many citing the endemic corruption within ruling circles and rejecting Ramaphosa's pledges of change from the era of former leader Jacob Zuma.

Ramaphosa's closest challenger, Mmusi Maimane of the DA, is a Christian pastor and former business consultant and a current member of the National Assembly. Maimane has campaigned using empty rhetoric and condemnation of the ANC, pointing out the ruling party's lack of delivering on its promises to improve the economy.

Malema's EFF claims to be a "radical, left, and anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement," centering its propaganda on demands for the seizure of white-owned estates and, less forthrightly, demands for nationalisation of key industries.

This is pure demagoguery, designed to secure a place at the table for the corrupt layers at the head of the EFF. Malema himself has an estimated personal wealth of \$2 million. Despite officially earning \$2,800 a month he owns several luxury villas, drives a Mercedes and wears a \$17,000 Breitling watch. He is, in short, a lower-ranking "tenderpreneur"—still living off the business contracts secured during his time with the ANC.

The ANC has also recognised the benefit of making empty promises on the land issue. It has pledged to implement a programme of land seizure from white farmers, without compensation. But it stresses that implementation would require a 67 percent electoral majority to change the constitution.

The ANC has long relied on the backing of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), part of the Triple Alliance along with the ANC and the South African Communist Party. But this collusion with the ANC and the bourgeoisie has severely undermined the standing of the unions.

In a rear-guard action seeking to rescue some measure of popular support, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest with 350,000 members, formed a federation with some smaller unions and a political vehicle, the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party. Its prospects in the election are slight, but its existence is proof that the union bureaucracy fears a genuine political realignment of the working class to the left.

In the absence of such a development, the election is a contest between rival groups of bourgeois politicians, vying over how best to carve up South Africa's economic resources and exploit its vast working class for the profits of international banks and corporations.



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