

African National Congress suffers electoral collapse, as its rotten record is underscored by the death of de Klerk

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Recent nationwide municipal elections in South Africa delivered President Cyril Ramaphosa's African National Congress (ANC) just 46 percent of the vote, the first time it had failed to cross the 50 percent threshold.

It was by far the ANC's worst result since taking office in the 1994 elections following the end of the hated apartheid regime and minority white rule.

According to the official tally:

- The ANC won 46 percent of the vote, compared to 54 percent in the 2016 municipal elections
- The main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA), which gets most of its support from white and coloured (SA's term for multiracial citizens) voters, won 22 percent, compared to 27 percent in 2016
- Julius Malema's black nationalist Economic Freedom Fighters won 10 percent, compared to 8 percent in 2016
- The Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), based on Zulu ethno-nationalism, won 6 percent
- The largely Afrikaner nationalist Freedom Front Plus Party won 2 percent and
- The newly formed ActionSA, whose leader has made vociferous xenophobic remarks, also won 2 percent.

The ANC suffered defeats in key cities including Johannesburg, Pretoria and Gqeberha (previously known as Port Elizabeth) and lost its majority in KwaZulu-Natal, by far the largest ANC region and home province of former President Jacob Zuma. It holds a majority in 161 of the 250 councils, down from 176 in 213 councils in 2016, while the DA has a majority in 13 and the IFP in 10. A total of 66 municipalities are hung.

The debacle was expressed not only in the loss of votes for the ANC and the main opposition parties. Voter turnout was just 47 percent of South Africa's 26 million registered voters, 11 percentage points down on the last election. But even this fails to capture the extent of the debacle. More than 13 million of South Africa's 40 million people eligible to vote—one in three eligible voters—mainly first-time voters disillusioned with electoral politics, did not bother to register.

It follows ANC losses in both the municipal elections in 2016 and the parliamentary elections in 2019 as anger mounted over widespread corruption. In 2018, Ramaphosa's faction in the ANC forced then President Zuma to resign over longstanding claims of corruption, amid fears his actions and those of his cronies were impacting adversely on South Africa's business interests at home and abroad and costing the ANC electoral support.

Earlier this year, the 79-year-old Zuma, a veteran of the anti-

apartheid struggle since the age of 17—serving a 10-year prison sentence on Robben Island in the 1960s alongside Nelson Mandela, and a member of the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP) until 1990—received a 15-month prison sentence for contempt of court for refusing to testify before the Zondo Commission into corruption and state capture. Protests by his supporters, largely in KwaZulu-Natal, morphed into a wider movement against the ANC government. Released two months later after being granted medical parole, Zuma now faces a long-postponed trial for fraud and corruption relating to payments made for a 1999 arms deal.

Ramaphosa, Zuma's successor, likewise expresses the trajectory of the ANC and its politics. A former leader of South Africa's largest trade union, the National Union of Mineworkers, Ramaphosa became ANC general secretary in 1991. He soon became a multi-millionaire and in 2012, in his capacity as a shareholder in the Lonmin mines in Marikana, he called on the authorities to take action against striking miners. This was orchestrated by the ANC government and its allies in the official trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), with the security forces firing on the strikers, killing 34 and wounding 78 others.

On becoming president, South Africa's richest politician promised to root out ANC corruption, revive the country's flagging economy and reduce unemployment, especially among the youth, in a bid to restore the ANC's electoral fortunes. Far from achieving this, he has presided over a deepening economic crisis that has turned South Africa, with one of the highest levels of income inequality in the world, into a social tinder box.

While the ANC deputy Secretary General Jessie Duarte stressed, "We're not losers, we are the winning party," there is no question that the faction-ridden ANC leadership is dismayed at the result. Ramaphosa is likely to face a leadership challenge from within the ANC or be forced to fire some of his more openly corrupt colleagues, potentially precipitating splits in the party.

What is playing out is an historic collapse in the ANC's popular support. In the most immediate sense this is the price paid for its handling of the pandemic, the vaccination rollout, power outages, water shortages, rising prices, the 34 percent unemployment rate and endemic corruption. But this is only the end product of the failure of the ANC to advance the social interests of the millions of black workers who looked to it for leadership and an end to the grotesque inequalities that characterized white minority rule under apartheid. The ANC has instead, having rescued capitalist rule, presided over a deepening of social and economic inequality while a thin layer of

black bourgeois clustered around the party have reaped the benefits of “Black Economic Empowerment” as stooges and frontmen for the major corporations.

The ANC’s difficulties would not have been helped by the efforts of international figures and the corporate-controlled media to eulogise F. W. de Klerk, South Africa’s last president under apartheid, who died last week. Nothing better epitomizes the ANC’s role in suppressing the revolutionary strivings of the workers and oppressed masses than the reappearance of de Klerk in the role of Banquo’s ghost—reminding everyone of its great political crime.

It was de Klerk who in 1990 announced the end of the reviled apartheid regime, lifting of the 30-year ban on the ANC, releasing Mandela from prison and opening the way for universal suffrage that would bring the ANC to power in the 1994 elections.

But those praising de Klerk as a “man of courage” are perpetrating a deeply cynical fraud. Steeped from childhood in apartheid politics, he became a legislator for the ruling National Party in 1972, entering P. W. Botha’s cabinet in 1978 and serving for years as his right-hand man, before becoming president in late 1989.

De Klerk decided to work with the ANC as the only means to preserve South African capitalism and indeed to prevent its collapse, which would have set off a chain reaction throughout the former colonies of the imperialist powers.

De Klerk made his surprise announcement in January 1990, after South Africa’s apartheid regime had faced years of mass protests and strikes since 1984, losing control over the black, working-class townships and teetering on the brink of civil war.

His act of realpolitik in seeking a modus vivendi with the ANC can be compared to a degree with the adoption by his contemporary, Mikhail Gorbachev, of certain limited democratic measures (glasnost) to placate popular opposition, while he presided over an economic programme of marketisation (perestroika), that set the course for capitalist restoration. Capitalist restoration proved catastrophic for the mass of the population in the former Soviet Union, while a small layer of old bureaucrats and new capitalists usurped state owned property and made fabulous fortunes.

De Klerk’s action was likewise bound up with saving all that could be saved for South Africa’s capitalist elite. Like Gorbachev, who relied on the disorientation of the working class after decades of Stalinist rule and the support of petty-bourgeois dissidents, de Klerk understood that only Mandela and the ANC could provide the capitalist class with a political life jacket. The ANC’s political perspective, like that of its allies in the Stalinist South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, utilized the Stalinist two-stage theory to proclaim the formal end of apartheid as a democratic revolution and a necessary stage before any struggle for socialism could be mounted. This reflected the aim of petty-bourgeois social layers to develop a black bourgeoisie standing alongside its white counterparts—politically dominant even though possessing less economic power.

The ANC, no less horrified than the white bourgeoisie by the militancy of workers and youth in the townships, channeled everything into a negotiated programme of “democratic reforms” that preserved the wealth and property of the international corporations and the country’s white capitalist rulers, ditching all pledges to take the banks, mines and major industries into public ownership and signing secret agreements with the International Monetary Fund to implement free market policies and open up South Africa to international capital.

The ANC served as a means of suppressing the black working class whose revolutionary struggles threatened the continuation of South African capitalism in a period of rapid transition, during which the globalisation of production had become widespread, rendering nationalist and autarkic regimes, including South Africa’s apartheid regime, obsolete.

ANC governments, first under Mandela, who even appointed de Klerk to serve as his deputy, then Thabo Mbeki, Zuma and now Ramaphosa, are now widely seen by South African workers as the corrupt representatives of a wealthy ruling establishment they once claimed to oppose. Like its counterparts in the Middle East and Africa, the ANC was unable to provide any solutions to the social and economic problems confronting the working class and peasantry. Its only response to steeply escalating social tensions is repression, arrests and the lethal crushing of protests and strikes.

Once again, the South African bourgeoisie confronts a working class seeking to advance its independent social interests, embodied most recently in last month’s three-week-long strike by 155,000 steel and metal workers that was betrayed by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa.

The path of the ANC from opposition to co-option has been replicated across Africa and the Middle East, including the Palestine Liberation Organization, which pursued similar policies, making its peace with imperialism and pursuing wealth and privilege for a narrow layer following the first intifada that erupted in 1987.

The national bourgeoisie, dependent upon imperialism and fearful of the working masses below it, cannot resolve the fundamental democratic, economic and social problems confronting the masses.

There is no way forward for the working class in South Africa or anywhere else other than through the class struggle and socialist revolution. This means breaking with the capitalist politics of the ANC and building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, whose perspective and programme are based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated by Leon Trotsky.

Trotsky established that in countries like South Africa with a belated capitalist development, genuine democracy, including the resolution of the land question for the peasant masses, can only be achieved by the working-class taking power into its own hands, overthrowing capitalism as part of an international struggle to put an end to imperialism and establish world socialism.



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