

Christian Manahl* - 2 July 2024

A New Era or a Storm in a Tea Pot?

South Africa After the ANC Lost Its Parliamentary Majority

The ANC's wake-up call

Close to half of the world's population in 64 countries and in the European Union are called to the polls in 2024¹, but not all of these elections brought or will bring great surprises. Vladimir Putin's re-election in March was as much a foregone conclusion as the continued tenure of Narendra Modi in India after the world's biggest electoral exercise there, albeit with a diminished influence of his Bhahartiya Janata Party. By contrast, South Africa's election on 29 May was among the most consequential: For the first time since the end of Apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC), the historic liberation movement that dominated South African politics since in 1994, lost its parliamentary majority. Qualified by some as a "historic defeat"², this has returned the country to coalition politics³ after two and a half decades of ANC governments. In a shrewd tactical move, the ANC invited all parties to form a government of national unity (GNU), and ten out of the 18 parties represented in the new parliament took up the offer⁴. Some – notably the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and uMkhonto we Siswe (MK) – declined and decided to stay in the opposition. The new South African government is therefore not an all-encompassing GNU, but a broad coalition.

In order to better understand the perspectives and challenges of the new executive, it is worth looking at the detailed results of the election⁵: The ANC obtained 40.18% of the vote and 159 out of the 400 seats in the National Assembly, which is a dramatic drop from the 230 seats gained in 2019. The Democratic Alliance (DA), the economically conservative party hitherto in the opposition, obtained 21,81% and 87 seats, remaining steady with three more than in the last election. Julius Malema's populist EFF, which

had progressively risen since its formation in 2013, surprisingly lost 5 seats and slipped below the symbolic 10% margin. By contrast, the only recently formed uMkhonto we Siswe (MK), led by ANC dissident and former president Jacob Zuma, scored a stunning 14,58% of the vote and got 58 seats.

President Ramaphosa has acknowledged the results and, following a meeting of the ANC's National Executive Council on 7 June, invited all political parties to form a government of national unity (GNU) in order to "tackle the pressing issues that South Africans want to be addressed"⁶, including job creation and inclusive economic growth, the high cost of living, service delivery, crime and corruption. Ramaphosa mentioned that potential partners must commit to basic values, notably respect for the Constitution, the rule of law, social justice and equity, and non-racialism. This should be common sense, but it (deliberately ?) presented a hurdle for the MK, as Zuma said last February that he wants to do away with the Constitution and also an amnesty for the various corruption offenses which he committed.

Analysis of voting patterns

Zuma's defection and the parliamentary gate-crashing of the MK is an annoyance for the ANC, but as the dust settles, the results are less surprising than they may seem at first sight. The electoral decline of the ANC is an inevitable consequence of broken promises to deliver a reform of the economy and to overcome glaring social injustices. Half of the country's population still lives in poverty and one third is unemployed; the unemployment rate for South Africans aged 15 to 34 has even risen to 45.4% in 2024. In the decade from 2013 to 2023, the economy

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was barely escaping stagnation with an average annual growth rate of only 1.8%⁷, as South Africa's politics was mired in corruption and its infrastructure suffered from chronic underinvestment and neglect, which eventually lead to massive power outages.

Since much of the corruption and mismanagement happened during Zuma's presidency (2009 to 2018), the remarkable electoral success of his new party may look surprising. In reality, it was partly a protest vote *against the ANC* rather than a vote for Zuma, and partly an ethnically motivated vote of the Zulu population, which has traditionally been suspicious of the ANC. Already in the elections of 1994, the Zulu-dominated Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) took the majority of the votes in Kwazulu-Natal province, and the IFP also managed this time to obtain a small increase – 17 seats as compared to 14 in the 2019 elections.

As a protest movement, the MK has likely stolen votes not only from the ANC but also from the EFF, which suffered a serious setback, probably due to credibility issues of its leaders, whose lavish lifestyle contrasts with the proclaimed representation of South Africa's poor and disenfranchised population. With only 39 seats in the new National Assembly, the EFF was not an attractive coalition partner for the ANC, as such an agreement would have fallen short of the 201 majority required to elect the president or effectively pass legislation.

The DA's steady position of now 87 seats (slightly up from the 84 achieved in the last elections but two seats short of the 89 obtained in 2014) is somewhat surprising, as the white leadership⁸ could have caused the party a disadvantage in a country where the horrors of the Apartheid regime are still a vivid memory for many, and where racial injustice is still deeply entrenched in the economy. One may imagine that there was a particularly high electoral participation of the white minority, and the Indian business class has probably also voted in big numbers for the DA. However, the two groups combined represent barely a tenth of the country's population, which means that a significant number of black and "coloured"⁹ voters have chosen the DA. This reflects not only declining confidence in the ANC, but also an interesting distrust towards the populist left-wing policies of the EEF. An important factor in favour of the DA may have been the fact that many marginalised and unemployed people have lost faith in seeing an improvement of their lives through democratic

participation and therefore abstained. Overall voter turnout stood at only 58.64%.

Political and economic perspectives

Commentators have been quick to announce "a new political path"¹⁰ or "a watershed moment in the country's political and developmental journey"¹¹, but the elections will perhaps bring more changes to South Africa's politics than changes of policies. In spite of its comparative decline, the ANC remains the strongest political force of South Africa by a wide margin. Even if the second, third and fourth political parties (DA, MK and EFF) had decided to join forces, they would not achieve a parliamentary majority. While they could reach the bar of 201 seats by including additional smaller parties, such a coalition could hardly survive because of huge ideological differences and antagonistic positions on key issues like black empowerment, land re-distribution, and the nationalization or privatisation of key sectors of the economy. The grand coalition between the ANC and the DA, with some additional smaller parties, was therefore an almost logical consequence of the election results.

An eminent academic has argued that the ANC's loss of the parliamentary majority will bring stability rather than change¹² because the ANC will remain the dominant force in South African politics at least until the next elections, and also because the necessary balancing of interests within a coalition as well as among the ANC's internal factions will prevent it from implementing any radical policy changes. Nevertheless, the new coalition benefits from a comfortable majority that should facilitate the adoption and enforcement of reforms. If the coalition succeeds in overcoming the well-known ideological differences between its two major partners, the ANC and the DA, and puts the country's interest's first, it has the possibility of lifting South Africa out of economic stagnation and addressing widespread poverty and inequality.

The new government needs to juggle two urgent priorities that are not easy to reconcile: economic reform and fiscal consolidation on the one hand, and tackling unemployment and social injustice on the other. The latter task is not only a moral imperative, but also politically important, because the two biggest opposition parties, the EEF and the MK, have a certain potential of mobilising the masses and

causing unrest. This potential does not only concern their own respective constituencies, but also the single biggest group that emerged from the recent elections – the almost 60% who did not vote. Considering the drastic inequalities and the still simmering racial tensions, South Africa cannot afford to postpone the improvement of living conditions of the poorest segments of its society until economic growth picks up again in a couple of years. The government must mitigate social hardships in parallel with economic reforms. In this respect, it will need – and deserves – the help of international partners, in particular its Western partners.

The future in perspective and relations with the European Union

South Africa has struggled for many years with serious economic and socio-political problems, but these challenges need to be seen against basic facts that are often overshadowed by the news of the day. South Africa is the continent's most industrialised nation and its biggest economy¹³. It has the biggest middle class of all sub-Saharan African countries. In spite of the occasionally toxic rhetoric of politicians and recurrent sectarian violence, it is a beacon of democracy with solid institutions, a strong judiciary, and a vibrant civil society. It is also an important international player and a vocal representative of the Global South, as well as a country which plays a significant role in the energy transition – not in spite of its structural challenges, but because of them: many of the difficulties of South Africa, like high hydrocarbon dependency, are typical for developing countries, and South Africa's experience in tackling them can indicate the way forward for many others.

In November 2021 at COP 26, South Africa announced the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP), the first-ever internationally supported decarbonisation programme which drew support from the US, the UK, France, Germany, and the European Union in the order of 8.5 billion US\$. The JETP has faced serious difficulties¹⁴, but it remains an important pilot pro-

gram to accelerate decarbonisation in the context of a developing country. Power outages, termed in South Africa as “load shedding”, have long been identified as one of the main obstacles to economic growth, and no future government of South Africa can ignore this problem. The new government has an eminent interest in working with international partners to breathe new life into the JETP and speed up the energy transition in order to take advantage of the tremendous potential of renewable energy. The EU and its member states are the most important trade and investment partners of South Africa¹⁵, and the two sides are natural allies to promote a transition to clean energy worldwide, and particularly on the African continent.

South Africa's international relations are and will remain complex, influenced by Apartheid-era relations of the ANC with the Soviet Union and South Africa's self-perception as a champion of the Global South. South Africa will not become an ally of the West, but it will also not adopt an antagonistic attitude towards the European Union or the US. With the DA as the ANC's most important partner in the new coalition, it will likely strengthen its cooperation with Western partners. However, like many countries of the Global South and for reasons extensively analysed¹⁶, South Africa does not want to get drawn into a new Cold War in the accelerating polarization due to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the China-US rivalry. Understanding and respecting this position is essential in order to maintain constructive and mutually beneficial relations with a country that remains a regional economic leader and an example of democracy on a continent with tremendous political and economic challenges.

With the new coalition government, South Africa has a chance to leave behind a decade of economic stagnation and to make a renewed effort to overcome deep social and racial injustices inherited from Apartheid. The European Union, together with other international partners, should encourage it and help it succeed in this endeavour.

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