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Ethnic diversity and democratic stability in South Africa

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Abstract

The thesis examines the extent to which South Africa can be regarded as a stable democracy, with reference to Eckstein's conception of the elements necessary for stability and an historical account of the role of the political mobilisation of ethnicity. According to Eckstein, democracies are stable if they demonstrate persistence in pattern, effective decision-making institutions and genuine democratic practices. In 2019 South Africans embarked on another successful electoral process, again selecting the ANC to govern for 5 more years. These were the sixth democratic elections since 1994, which satisfied the first condition of endurance. However, due to the legacies of apartheid, particularly the manipulation of ethnic divisions by the colonial state and the apartheid system of governance, South Africa remains a divided country with different systems of governance often at loggerheads in the rural areas in particular. Residents in rural areas are subject to the decisions of traditional leaders and democratically elected municipal councillors. The clash between these two forms of authority makes the conditions of effective decision-making institutions hard to come by and often malfunctional, in that traditional leaders continue to exercise various administrative capacities, especially with regard to land rights, thus making municipal decisions ineffective. Furthermore, the fact that South Africans tend to cast their votes based on ethnic preferences and allegiances instead of party policies makes the achievement of Eckstein's third element – genuine democracy – at least questionable. This research report thus brings out the partly hidden dynamics of the persistent role of ethnicity in South African politics and thus questions South Africa's democratic stability.