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THE LONG DECLINE OF SOUTH AFRICA'S ANC

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In South Africa on 29 May 2024, seventy parties and more than fourteen-thousand candidates contested 887 seats comprising the 400-member National Assembly plus the legislatures of the nine provinces. The long-ruling African National Congress (ANC), for thirty years the outright majority party, lost its exclusive grip on power. Rejected by voters angry at corruption and bad governance—South Africa has made world news in recent years because of chronic electricity shortages—and challenged by breakaway factions running their own candidate slates, the ANC saw its vote share plummet to barely more than 40 percent, down from 57 percent in 2019. It dropped from 230 to 159 seats in the directly elected National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament.

The ANC will continue in government because it is still the largest single party, but it has had to negotiate a coalition agreement to do so. Cyril Ramaphosa, the ANC head whom the National Assembly had elected as president of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) in February 2018, will remain in office but as leader of a coalition and no longer as the top official in a single party that commands an outright parliamentary majority.

Coalition politics revolving around a plurality party that has fallen from dominant-party status look to be South Africa's future. This confounds some observers, and suggests that the "stately decline" of dominant-party systems is possible in Africa, despite a regional pattern of slipping dominant parties that find ways—underhanded and sometimes violent—to retain their exclusive hold on power.

In the early 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, South Africa made its

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way out of the dead end of white-minority apartheid rule in order to move toward nonracial democracy. In April 1994, the ANC, which had been the leading group in the struggle against apartheid, resoundingly won the first democratic election with close to 63 percent of the vote. It has held power nationally ever since, and entered 2024 controlling eight of nine provinces and the vast bulk of local governments. The ANC reached a vote-share peak of 69.7 percent in 2004, then began a slide in public confidence and popularity. In the local elections held across the country in 2012, its vote share was just 45.6 percent, leaving it still the country's largest single party but well short of its past lofty stature.

Successful liberation movements such as the ANC turn themselves into political parties. Their character as parties springs from the nature of the struggle they faced and the strategies their foes used against them, as well as militarism, authoritarianism, secrecy, and the manner in which victory came about.

Every published poll leading up to the 2024 election forecast a drop of several percentage points from that already unprecedented low point, this time with the national government at stake. Coalition government, already a feature at the local level, was firmly on the national agenda. A decades-old dominant-party system, these surveys predicted, was about to lose its dominant party. The ANC would not disappear, but neither would it be what it had been. It would need the support of other parties, especially the Democratic Alliance or DA (87 seats), to stay in office.

Successful liberation movements such as the ANC turn themselves into political parties. Their character as parties springs from the nature of the struggle they faced and the strategies their foes used against them, as well as militarism, authoritarianism, secrecy, and the manner in which victory came about. (The ANC did not mount a successful military campaign, for example, but negotiated a settlement.) The literature on liberation movements as governments in Africa is sizeable, and none of it makes for hopeful reading. In crude summary, these movements-turned-parties enter government at their (and voters') most optimistic, and early rule is equitable and redistributive. Thereafter, criticism and opposition are equated with a lack of patriotism, and summarily silenced; corruption expands exponentially; voter intimidation and election rigging routinely occur; and "big man" leaders emerge. Unceasing rule by the ruling party becomes the norm as democracy wanes.

In South Africa's vicinity are found examples of this narrative. Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe all have ruling parties that have been in charge since independence and have survived elections (at

times with barely 51 percent in presidential contests) by dishonest and sometimes brutal means despite falling voter support. Much academic and popular literature in South Africa has focused on the inevitability of the ANC's descent into corruption, cronyism, racism, and hostility to human rights. With pluralism among South African voters rising, accompanied by readiness to criticize the ANC for being corrupt, power-addicted, and untrustworthy, many analysts believe that the ANC will replicate the regional pattern of silencing opponents while using various forms of neopatrimonialism to buy votes and keep power.

Conservative commenters have argued for years that elections in South Africa are "racial censuses" in which black voters will repeatedly and blindly vote for a black ANC, regardless of that party's behavior. For one analyst, this was a "worrying notion not only because of the persistence of such strong racial cleavages but because of the difficulties it presents for the development of a properly competitive multiparty system."[1] Others wrote of "prolonged ANC dominant party rule" which would make "the survival of a liberal democracy in South Africa" an "open question."[2]

The argument rested on the assumption of an eternal ANC majority ruling over a system from which "the vital elements of democracy, namely genuine competition and uncertainty in electoral outcomes, are removed."[3] Much of the literature during Jacob Zuma's term as president (2009–18) spoke of what Anthony Butler described as "the alleged 'Zanufication' of the ANC," meaning that South Africa was going down the ruinous path of Zimbabwe under its longtime ruling party ZANU-PF, which committed ethnic massacres while causing hyperinflation and a socioeconomic collapse.[4] The entire *oeuvre* drew on a racialized assumption that black South African voters would look only to race and not their own interests.

By imposing coalition government on the ANC, voters have shown this approach to be racist and wrong. By accepting its ballot-box defeat, moreover, the ANC has directly refuted the entire body of literature. The ANC does not enjoy a forever majority, and black South Africans can and do vote on more than race.

Mandela's Good Example

South Africa had the last colonial regime to be removed in southern Africa, and has become the first country in the region to (at least partly) dislodge its liberation-movement-turned-ruling-party, after just thirty years. Nelson Mandela, president from 1994 to 1999, presaged this by setting a deliberately different example from his regional peers. Addressing the national legislature in February 1999, he called it a "matter of great pride that we have established a dispensation in which no-one, not even the President, is above the law."[5] Less than two months later,

[197.91.242.215] Project MUSE (2024-10-01 16:13 GMT)

he announced that he would not run for a constitutionally permitted second term, but would leave office at the end of his mandate and retire to private life. It was "unparalleled on the African continent, and signalled his determination to counter that blight on post-colonial Africa, the ruler-for-life syndrome."[6] The leader of the ANC had openly bucked the regional trend. By accepting defeat as a party in 2024, the ANC set up a milestone locally and regionally.

The point is not to paint a rosy picture of the ANC as a political party—that would be difficult, given the levels of venality and sheer incompetence its officials have shown. It is, however, important to look at the 2024 election on its own terms, not as part of a preconceived narrative about "African basket cases." South Africa has opposition parties and a civil society that keep the ANC government under scrutiny. Kgalema Motlanthe, who served as RSA president from 2008 to 2009, said publicly in 2017 that "it would be good" for the ANC to lose the 2019 election because "those elements who are in it for the largesse will quit it, will desert it and only then would the possibility arise for salvaging whatever is left."[7] In 2024, that wish was granted at least in part as the ANC lost sole possession of power.

Popular sentiment has followed a similar trajectory, starting with widespread enthusiasm for Archbishop Desmond Tutu's "Rainbow Nation" in the 1990s and ending three decades later in deep pessimism. Whether we use Afrobarometer data or the South African Social Attitudes Survey, the results are the same: a profound sense that things are going wrong in a country headed in the wrong direction.

Over the last three decades, South Africa's economy grew with the global commodities boom of the 2000s, then faced stiff headwinds caused by state capture[8] and massive corruption in the 2010s before being buffeted further by the covid-19 lockdowns. The World Bank's overview cites "weak structural growth," the failure of job creation to keep up with the size of the aspiring workforce, and rolling electric-power cuts ("load shedding") while noting that inequality is sharper than almost anywhere else in the world while the 2023 poverty rate was almost 63 percent, with low intergenerational mobility.

As the 2022 national census shows, the ANC can claim accomplishments. The 1996 census found 65 percent of the populace living in formal dwellings, a figure that had risen to almost 89 percent by 2022. Likewise, much larger shares of South Africans had finished school, had been able to connect their homes to water-borne sewage systems, and lived in jurisdictions where the local government bore the duty of trash removal. The full list of achievements is longer and proves that, corruption notwithstanding, ANC governments both nationally and provincially have overseen service delivery and infrastructure building that is basic to a "better life for all," as the ANC's 1994 election slogan put it. If this seems like governments merely "doing their jobs," let us recall

that never before had *any* government in South Africa *ever* provided such services and infrastructure as a matter of right to South Africans who were not white.[9]

At the same time, unemployment has reached levels not seen outside war zones and now stands, according to the government agency Statistics South Africa, at an agonizing 41 percent by the expanded definition that includes discouraged job seekers who have given up looking for work. President Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) denied that AIDS is caused by HIV, which drastically slowed the ANC government's response to the disease. As of 2022, close to 13 percent of South Africans were living with HIV. Mbeki's successor Jacob Zuma oversaw corruption so massive and destruction of state capacity so severe that Ramaphosa would call Zuma's time in office "nine wasted years." State capture cost the economy an estimated US$17 billion.[10] Mass rolling blackouts began in 2008 and have become the norm. In 2021, Zuma supporters mounted an insurrection that led to an estimated 354 deaths and drained $2.7 billion from the economy.[11] As in many places, the covid lockdowns in South Africa created fresh opportunities for costly corruption.[12]

Realizing the distrust, the ANC included in its 2024 election manifesto the following remarkable passage:

> The hardship and suffering of many has [*sic*] led them to believe that ANC leaders care only about themselves, that we are soft on corruption, and that we do not care about the suffering of ordinary people. We admit we made mistakes as the ANC, with some members and leaders undermining institutions of the democratic state and advancing selfish personal interests.[13]

Despite the ANC's failings, the national government that it has run for three decades has done more for black South Africans than any government in the country's history—of this there can be no doubt. All politics is conducted with reference to the ANC (mainly its faults), and other parties measure themselves against it. Not only does it have its liberation history behind it, but it has become embedded in the minds of many voters as *their* party, which makes competing with it a tall challenge.

Many millions of South Africans can still point to material benefits provided by ANC governments, from houses to infrastructure to social grants. In preelection focus groups, a number of older African women were straightforward. They were well aware of problems such as corruption—"they [the ANC] must do the right things," one of them said—but they lived in houses that the ANC government had provided, and they planned to show their appreciation by voting for the ANC again.

The challenge facing all opposition parties is that the ANC is to the exclusion of all others *the* party of liberation and freedom, and of service and infrastructure provision as well. It remains the party that overwhelming numbers of black South Africans say in focus groups they

[197.91.242.215] Project MUSE (2024-10-01 16:13 GMT)

would *want* to vote for, had the ANC itself not put that out of reach by its faults and misdeeds. The ANC remains at the heart of electoral calculus and decisionmaking for the vast majority of voters, as it does for the opposition.

The ANC Faces the Voters

Surveys taken in the run-up to South Africa's 2024 general election showed a wounded and decaying ANC laboring under public-approval ratings as low as 39 percent, but still with the largest support base of any single party. The DA was polling at 19 percent while, far to its left, the aggressively populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) were at 15 percent. The remaining parties and independents divided the quarter or so of the electorate that was left. There was no clear antagonist, but rather multiple oppositions of different sizes, advocating different agendas and leaving the ANC to dominate the field even in defeat.

The ANC has been in stately decline since the mid-2000s. It dropped below 60 percent in 2019 shortly after the period of state capture and frenzied looting had come to a symbolic end with the removal of Jacob Zuma from party leadership and his resignation as RSA president. When the ANC made Cyril Ramaphosa its new leader and the National Assembly chose him to be president, he promised a "new dawn." Ramaphosa was and is crucial to the ANC's electoral prospects. He has near universal name recognition and consistently rates above 50 percent approval in polls, which no other national political figure can match. With his personal popularity so much higher than that of his party, Ramaphosa joins Mandela as the only president who "lifts" the ANC in the polls: All other presidents have been considerably less popular than the party.

The ANC holds its in-house polling results close, but it surely knew that it was going to drop below 50 percent, and internal discussions about the need for national- and provincial-level coalitions must have begun well before voting day. According to surveys based on fieldwork, the ANC's support in early 2024 was a dismal 39 percent among registered voters. With self-declared nonvoters removed, the number barely rose, to 41 percent. This was no longer a stately decline but a cataclysmic plummet.

The election was for national and provincial legislatures. If we turn to the provinces, the contours of ANC and opposition support become clear. The ANC polled above the 50 percent mark only in its two traditional strongholds (both of which are rural): Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. Even there slippage could be seen, however: The ANC's 2019 vote shares in Limpopo and the Eastern Cape, respectively, had been 76 and 69 percent, but it was polling at 59 and 57 percent in 2024. The actual results turned out better, as the ANC took Limpopo with 73 percent and the Eastern Cape with 62 percent.

The ANC did manage a fairly healthy win in North West (58 percent), scraped to victory in the Free State (52 percent) and Mpumalanga (51 percent), and managed a bare 49 percent in the Northern Cape. The real trouble lay in the three provinces which together are home to about two-thirds of South Africa's 63 million people and which account for most of the country's economic growth—Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), and the Western Cape. In these three, the ANC did very poorly. Polls predicted losses and losses are what happened, though with surprising twists.

In the Western Cape, whose capital and largest city is Cape Town, the ANC slid from 29 percent in 2019 to 24 percent in polls taken five years later—half of what the DA was pulling in that province. The ANC's actual election result was worse still at just 20 percent. The DA, a conservative party with distant liberal credentials, has governed the Western Cape since 2009. While early polls had the DA looking vulnerable at 42 percent, it campaigned impressively and won the province with 55 percent (only a point off its 2019 showing).

Nationally, the DA attracts about a fifth of the vote. The party likes to point to its management of the Western Cape as a model of good governance, but cannot mount a nationwide challenge. Even in defeat, the ANC won around double the DA's national vote share despite a two-year Commission of Inquiry into state capture that heard from 278 witnesses and gathered almost 160,000 pages of evidence laying bare the true extent of ANC corruption. The DA runs under the slogan "Rescue South Africa" but has yet to show that it can draw even a quarter of the vote.

In Gauteng, the province that contains Johannesburg and Pretoria, the ANC's decline has been especially steep. It barely carried the province in 2019 with 50.2 percent, and in 2024 both polled and finished at 35 percent. Even with the support of only a little more than a third of the Gauteng electorate, however, the ANC retains the province's single largest vote share and remains the decider on coalition partners and terms.

Of the three major provinces, Gauteng was the only one where the EFF made a significant showing in preelection surveys, receiving 17 percent. On election day, it won 13 percent. Nationally, it lost ground, going from 11 percent in 2019 to 10 percent in 2024, despite its slogan calling the latter year "Our 1994." This too is remarkable: One might have expected a better showing by a party that offers a utopian socialist vision combined with healthy doses of populism, antiwhite sentiment, and violent protest in a country where violence is normalized, poverty is profoundly racialized, and whose biggest city (Johannesburg) is the planet's most unequal municipality. In sum, despite offering ideologically different positions from both each other and the ANC, neither the DA on the center-right nor the EFF on the left did more than tread water in 2024. It may be that between them they framed the ANC as the party

[197.91.242.215] Project MUSE (2024-10-01 16:13 GMT)

of the center and hence the median voter, which should give the ANC some sense of how to govern going forward.

The results from KZN differed strikingly from those anywhere else in the country. In late 2023, former president Zuma founded his own party. He called it uMkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation or MK), which had been the name of the ANC's paramilitary wing from 1961 to 1994 (when apartheid ended, the MK was integrated into the South African National Defence Force). The 82-year-old Zuma strongly emphasizes his Zulu ethnicity, conservative social views, and dislike for constitutional democracy.

Zuma's MK overshadowed the EFF by adopting a more radically populist stance and style all down the line. Zuma is far better liked in KZN than his successor Ramaphosa. Research during the bitter power struggle over the RSA presidency that went on between the two in 2017–18 showed that Ramaphosa's roots in a "minority" ethnolinguistic group (the Venda) actively worked against him only in KZN, giving Zuma something to play on.[14] Also creating complications for the ANC is the longtime presence of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in the province. The IFP has campaigned on the basis of Zulu ethnicity since it reluctantly joined the 1994 election, and it continues to be an electorally significant presence in KZN, if not nationally.

Early surveys identified a large slice of undecided voters in KZN (about 20 percent), which helps to explain why Zuma's MK was able to become prominent there so quickly. The new party drew media coverage as it gathered many of those identified by the state-capture commission[15] along with others who had taken part in the botched July 2021 pro-Zuma insurrection. Even before MK's launch, the ANC was polling at 26 percent. On election day, MK won 45 percent of the KZN vote to the ANC's 17 percent, the DA's 13 percent, and the EFF's 2.4 percent. MK also beat the EFF into third place nationally (15 versus 10 percent, 58 versus 39 seats). Coming from nowhere, the MK's performance was undeniably impressive.

The provinces of Gauteng, KZN, and Mpumalanga all have substantial Zulu-speaking populations, but the IFP ran there too and outside KZN it fared dismally. The worrying conclusion, therefore, is that MK's toxic mix of identity politics, saber-rattling rhetoric, rubbishing of the 1997 Constitution for placing constraints on majoritarianism, promotion of politicians associated with corruption, and repeated antiwhite comments proved attractive. Unlike the DA and the EFF, MK has no ideology to speak of. It does not bode well for South African politics that a party such as MK is the only one that will look back on 2024 with satisfaction.

The ANC lost its majorities in Gauteng and KZN, and continued losing support in the Western Cape. It cannot remain on the same trajectory—dropping 17 percentage points nationally in five years is not sustainable. The party has now formed a coalition government without

having majority control of any of the three provinces that account for the lion's share of South Africa's GNP.

Among the ANC's problems is that it is fast becoming a rural party in an urbanizing country. In metropolitan areas, the ANC took 33 percent in a survey that I conducted six months before the 2024 vote, just 10 points ahead of the DA. In semi-urban areas, the ANC fared slightly better at 38 percent—but the DA and the EFF remained constant. As urbanization continues apace, the ANC should be deeply concerned: It has lost the cities; the rural vote did not save it from slipping below majority status in 2024, and will not do so in future.

The Opposition: Revolving Around the ANC

The opposition parties have become increasingly vituperative regarding the ongoing (non)performance of the ANC, meaning both its elected officials and those party members who receive jobs in the public service via a practice called "cadre deployment." In 2024, the cumulative experience of decades of ANC governance should have been enough to fuel a genuine electoral challenge, but it did not.

The DA, with the second-largest seat share in the National Assembly going into the 2024 contest, was the official opposition. Its manifesto rejected the ANC's "obsession with race-based policies" and warned of imminent "state collapse."[16] Liberalizing the economy, allowing market competition into infrastructure delivery, decentralization, and opposing "state control" were the cornerstones of this "Rescue Plan" agenda.

Yet the DA seemed resigned to not winning in 2024. It called itself the "anchor tenant" in a broad eleven-party group (the EFF was not a member), in which the DA was the dominant player. While the ANC used its manifesto to apologize, the DA asked voters more to stop the ANC (by voting for any of the eleven parties) than to back the DA. Thus even as it insisted on South Africa's state of crisis and the need for rescue, the manifesto foreword written by DA leader John Steenhuisen said "Only the DA has the size, experience and demonstrated track-record of good governance to serve as the anchor for a stable and successful Multi-Party Charter government."

Alongside tone-deaf messaging on issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, the DA appeared to be campaigning hard to *not* win the election. Coalition government was clearly imminent for all parties, but to campaign for it as the best outcome from the get-go at least had novelty value. The DA saw South Africa's core troubles as deriving from too much state control and ANC misrule: all post-1994 problems. Without an "original sin" to decry as the EFF decries the 1994 settlement, the DA was left to attack the character of ANC leaders, a tricky act for a white-led and overwhelmingly white-supported party.

The EFF is rather different. Its manifesto in its very title demands an

[197.91.242.215] Project MUSE (2024-10-01 16:13 GMT)

end to electricity cuts ("load shedding").[17] After that populist message come 258 pages of painfully detailed plans for everything and everyone in the country. The EFF calls itself a "revolutionary socialist emancipation movement," and sets out a grand vision in which an omnipotent (not merely capable) state will oversee widespread nationalization plus a set of social policies which, while admirable in their generosity, cannot conceivably be implemented in a middle-income country. The EFF document also continues taking rhetorical shots at whites, or "white minority settlers," noting that "all the means of economic survival and existence continue to be controlled by the white minority."

The EFF claims to represent a younger generation "not part of the 1994 elite pact," which refuses "to be silenced with so-called reconciliation." Oddly, the EFF campaign manifesto forgets to ask for votes: Its highly detailed policy blueprint is posited as sufficient. Thus, while the ANC apologized and the DA sketched a multiparty route to power, the EFF offered a socialist alternative with overweening government control but never appealed for votes. The EFF identified "the 1994 elite pact" as the original sin and core problem, from which other ills flowed: The solution had to be reversing or significantly amending what was decided in 1994.

Smaller parties all bashed the ANC in manifestos that varied in tone more than content: The challenges posed to South Africa by poverty, inequality, and unemployment ensured that all parties' campaigns would focus on these issues. Two, however, stand out. The first is that of the IFP, which chose to run under grinning images of the late Mangosuthu Buthelezi (1928–2023), who had led the party while it managed an apartheid-era bantustan. The IFP manifesto closes with praise of how he handled this role.[18] This is a remarkable position to adopt in a society where the reality of apartheid is a lived memory and where violence linked to Inkatha is perhaps even more vividly recalled. The IFP argued for an open economy while soothing its rural base with a declaration that there is "no urban future that excludes rural communities." There was populist misdirection in the form of calls for military action against "illegal foreigners," as if foreigners are the key problem facing South Africa. (To be fair, the issue appeared in virtually every party manifesto.)

The other standout was the latecomer MK. Its manifesto alone simply never mentions the ANC—with former ANC head Jacob Zuma in MK's top slot followed by a congeries of cabinet ministers and allies from his time in power, bringing up the ANC would have been rather like pointing at a mirror. The MK platform's view is simple: South Africa needs to return to the idyll of 1651, the year before Jan van Riebeeck of the Dutch East India Company sailed into Table Bay where Cape Town now stands and triggered "our prolonged period of national shame."[19] After thus implying that the EFF's notion of the core problem is off by 343 years, the MK manifesto blames poverty and inequality on white theft of land and resources, and charges that "South African society is domi-

nated culturally, artistically, spiritually, and economically by a minority group with an alien culture." The proposed solution is to scrap the 1996 Constitution in favor of parliamentary supremacy, with an unelected upper house of traditional leaders, while nationalizing mines and banks and veering sharply away from "neoliberalism."

But MK's appeal did not lie in ideologically informed or coherent messaging; it lay in identity politics combined with violent, racialized rhetoric exceeding that of even the EFF. As noted, the appeal of this toxic mix was strong enough to springboard MK to its third-place finish in 2024. This is not to say that the electorate had no ideological differences to consider. But the parties diagnosed the problem differently—was it the ANC, or the arrival of settlers in 1652, or the negotiated settlement of 1994, or whites, or foreigners, or too much capitalism, or too little capitalism, or too little versus too much state control, and so on. The list is roughly as long as the list of parties.

Predictably, the myriad opposition parties squabbled with one another as much as they criticized the ANC. The DA noted in its manifesto that the country faced a "coalition of corruption" if the EFF formed a coalition with the ANC. John Steenhuisen later accused smaller parties that were snapping at his DA's heels in the Western Cape of being "mercenary" and "popcorn parties"—an odd position for a politician seeking to form a broad multiparty coalition. At least one of the parties he criticized retorted that the DA leader was a racist.[20] That the ANC was sitting on four in ten votes a month shy of election day says as much about the immature state of opposition politics as it does about the loyalty of core ANC voters.

The ANC Is Dead. Long Live the ANC!

When Zuma launched MK, those ANC voters and members who felt unhappy with Ramaphosa's approach and hankered for the days of unbridled corruption suddenly had an alternative to their liking. The new party offered aggressive stances on issues such as land restitution, the role of traditional leaders, hostility to whites, dislike for the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—and for the "ANC of Ramaphosa." The MK campaign clearly drew away many ANC members but also created an opportunity for Ramaphosa to break free of the shackles with which his first term had been bound by Zuma's allies within the ANC. Their influence—and a lot of baggage that the ANC had gathered over the decades—had been removed.

The ANC has long prided itself on being a broad church. It has a formal alliance with the South African Communist Party and the Congress of South African Trade Unions, but has members that cover the full spectrum of views, from archcapitalist to ultraleftist. This includes people of high principle, and those with no moral compass whatsoever. Smuts

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Ngonyama, an Mbeki ally, famously said "I did not join the struggle to be poor." Many clearly did join the ANC to become very rich, however, and by any means necessary. After Ramaphosa's narrow victory over Zuma's ex-wife at the December 2017 party conference, ANC messaging under the new leader was all about "unity." This became an excuse not to pursue those identified by the state-capture commission, most obviously Zuma himself, the high enabler of state capture. All these figures remained within the ANC's broad church. Intraparty factions fought one another, deadlocking Ramaphosa's government. Voters have made clear their disillusionment with this, taking away the ANC's outright majority.

Throughout the election campaign, the word most commonly heard was "change." Overwhelmingly, it was used to mean "change away from the ANC." In an extraordinary twist, Ramaphosa has become the engine of change, starting with change not away from but* within *the ANC.

With the election behind him, Ramaphosa took a major gamble. Like Mandela in 1994, he formed a Government of National Unity (GNU). He carefully took the DA, the IFP, and many small parties into the fold while leaving out both the MK and the EFF. (At the time of this writing in August 2024, the GNU comprises ten parties controlling 287 seats.)Ramaphosa has chosen a centrist, market-friendly path. The socialism of the EFF and the more inchoate messaging of MK and their shared Africanism and hostility to whites have all been rejected. He has thrown down the gauntlet before all those who hanker after the old days and the old ways.

Pushing to the provincial level the strategy of an ANC-led grand coalition forming a *cordon sanitaire* against more extreme elements, the ANC, DA, IFP, and tiny IFP-spinoff National Freedom Party (NFP) formed a Provincial Unity Government in the KZN Legislature. The ANC, DA, and IFP together have 40 seats and with the NFP's single seat their coalition has a majority in the 80-seat body. The MK has 37 seats based on its 45 percent of the 2024 vote but with the EFF (the only other party left outside the coalition) controlling just a pair of seats, the MK is shut out of the provincial government.

In Gauteng, however, ANC factionalism made itself felt. With the MK and the EFF demanding that the ANC cease working with "white parties" in favor of a coalition with the MK and the EFF, the Gauteng ANC took the strategically questionable decision of rejecting the DA along with the MK and the EFF. The Gauteng Provincial Unity Government includes the ANC, the IFP, the Patriotic Alliance, and a new party, Rise Mzansi. This coalition's 32 seats make it a minority government in the 80-seat Gauteng Legislature. "Anything but the DA" seemed to be

the message despite the DA's control over 22 seats. While Ramaphosa seems to have realized that the ANC must adapt or wither away, his Gauteng colleagues think otherwise and are betting that appeals to race will trump governance failures.

Ramaphosa's decision to ally with the DA has left him open to EFF and MK charges that he is colluding in a "return to apartheid." Both had asked to join the GNU on condition that "white parties" be excluded. Ramaphosa has cleverly put the Land Affairs Ministry, a key cabinet portfolio in postapartheid South Africa, into the hands of the only MP from the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the original Africanist party that split from the ANC in 1959—and distinctly not into "white" hands. Nonetheless, race matters a lot in South Africa. Ramaphosa has entered a deal with the DA and the more conservative (and white) Freedom Front Plus, which won 1.4 percent of the vote and six seats, and whose leader Pieter Groenewald now holds the portfolio of the Ministry of Correctional Services. There will be some kind of reckoning for Ramaphosa's coalition-building choices.

In democratic South Africa, no president has ever finished two full terms. Ramaphosa will almost certainly maintain the trend. But he has completely changed the ANC itself. The broad church is gone. He has freed the ANC to become a middle-class, business-friendly party of all races. He has made two gambles. The first is that an ideologically coherent ANC, without many of those tainted by corruption, is more electable than the current ANC. The second is that a centrist coalition focused on delivering public services and infrastructure in an honest, efficient, reliable manner will see the markets respond, the economy grow, and opportunities arrive to meet the huge challenge of unemployment. The laying down of these two wagers has been a remarkable step.

Throughout the election campaign, the word most commonly heard was "change." Overwhelmingly, it was used to mean "change away from the ANC." In an extraordinary twist, Ramaphosa has become the engine of change, starting with change not away from but *within* the ANC.

NOTES

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