

South Africa's 2014 Elections

Implications for domestic politics and South Africa's international relations

A report for the FCO

Dr Alexander Beresford

a.beresford@leeds.ac.uk

Summary

- The ANC remains dominant in elections, despite the unpopularity of its leadership, massive internal infighting and the emergence of a new opposition party to the left, the EFF. The nature of ANC support is poorly understood.
- The opposition parties – the DA and EFF - were unable to make significant inroads into the ANC's support. Where the ANC has lost some support is among the urban black middle class.
- The biggest threat to the ANC's hold on power – and political stability in general – remains its ability to contain the fallout from intense factional struggles over party leadership positions, which will climax at the party's 2017 leadership elections. These struggles are made more intense by patronage-based struggles at local levels.
- The ANC is extremely unlikely to shift to the left politically but a serious challenge to the ANC could emerge if the trade unions end their alliance with the ANC and form a workers' party, as they have threatened.
- The ANC is likely to be emboldened by its election victory and pursue its role in conflict mediation in Africa more aggressively in the coming years. It will also campaign more vigorously for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council and the FCO might be increasingly forced to take a clear stand on this issue.
- Little else will change in South Africa's policy orientation in the near future, although its fallout with Rwanda will continue to cause tension and instability within both the AU and Commonwealth.

Understanding ANC dominance

On 7th May South Africans went to the polls and voted overwhelmingly to return the African National Congress (ANC) to power for the fifth consecutive time since 1994. The ANC has commanded a remarkably consistent share of the vote since Nelson Mandela led the party to victory in the 1994 'freedom election.' This time, the ANC gained just over 62% of the vote, down about four percentage points from the 2009 election. Despite a slow decline in the ANC's vote share over the past two elections, this represented another landslide victory for the ANC by anyone's standards.

The important thing to understand is how the ANC maintained such a comfortable margin of victory despite a whole wave of scandals that have surrounded Jacob Zuma and his government. A particularly acute source of public outrage is the 'Nkandlagate' scandal, in which the President is alleged to have misused public money for 'security upgrades' to his personal homestead in Nkandla, KwaZulu Natal. These 'security upgrades' took place amidst a backdrop of unprecedented levels of protests and industrial action in democratic South Africa rooted in frustrations over the slow pace of socioeconomic transformation among the black majority. The country now has more recorded protests per capita than anywhere else in the world¹, and the Zuma government faced fierce criticism in 2012 when 34 striking mineworkers were killed by police, an incident which was framed by the opposition as a return to the bad old days of apartheid.

And yet, the ANC has not seen its voter base collapse, nor has it dipped enough to make the 2014 general election anything like close race. This is despite the fact that pollsters have recorded that Zuma was a significantly less popular than the ANC as a whole.²

To understand this we need to turn our attention to a number of factors, including:

- **There are fears that the leading opposition party, the Democratic Alliance, would reinstitute apartheid** were it to gain power. A recent poll suggests that nearly half of young South Africans hold this view.³ Such fears have, on occasion, been actively fanned by ANC politicians, such as Deputy ANC President Cyril Ramaphosa, who was recently caught warning voters that if they did not vote for the ANC 'the boers' would return to power.⁴
- However, the deep-rooted identification with the ANC is not rooted in racial identities alone. **South Africans are mindful of the improvements they have experienced in their everyday lives since 1994** – not least in terms of the extension of social grants to more than 16-million people – and are more patient with the ANC than most analysts expect or predict. These social democratic interventions play an important role in regenerating the ANC's identity among voters as a liberation movement continuing to fight their corner.⁵ The ANC does little to discourage such sentiments, of course, and a subtext of the party's campaign has been that a vote for the opposition would herald a reversion to the state of play before 1994.
- Research also suggests that **while ANC supporters might dislike an individual leader, this might not impact upon their loyalty towards the party as a whole**. One elderly voter in the Alexandra township in Johannesburg on polling day, for example, explained why, despite his distaste for Zuma, he still voted ANC: 'When your father gets old and starts to mess himself, do you abandon him? No, of course not! You stay with him and try to make him better again.' Such sentiments were expressed widely in an exit poll conducted by the University of Johannesburg on election day.

¹ <http://mg.co.za/article/2012-04-13-a-massive-rebellion-of-the-poor>

² This was detailed in a presentation given by James Morris of the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research group.

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³ <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-04-23-study-shows-most-surveyed-young-blacks-believe-da-would-bring-back-apartheid>

⁴ <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-11-11-ramaphosa-warns-voters-against-the-boers>

⁵ A Beresford (2012) "[The Politics of Regenerative Nationalism in South Africa](#)" *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 38 (4). pp. 863-884

- The **politics within rural areas** also deserves a far greater degree of attention than it currently receives. The ANC has carefully shored up its position in rural areas through its close association with traditional leaders, and it is difficult to estimate just how much influence these figures wield over voting behaviour. Moreover, the aforementioned issues surrounding state welfare dependency are all the more acute in rural areas, making the insinuation that access to such welfare would be jeopardised should the ANC lose power all the more potent.
- However, **the ANC has lost ground in particular regions like Gauteng**, and in large urban areas in general. The ANC lost over 10% of its vote in Gauteng, amid concerns raised by the provincial ANC leadership that Zuma was hugely unpopular among the sizeable middle class demographic in Gauteng.⁶ This result suggests that the ANC faces a difficult task in trying to attract middle class black voters back to the party, and this might force a greater degree of diversity in the ANC's campaigning strategy in future.

The opposition

The Democratic Alliance (DA) saw its share of the vote increase to 22%, up six percentage points from 2009, and it remains the ANC's closest rival numerically. A new political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, is promising more radical land reform and the nationalisation of the mines. Led by firebrand Julius Malema, the seven-month-old party received just over 6% of the vote. There are several things we can read from these results:

- **The DA's vote share only increased by a modest amount nationally**, especially when considering the amount of problems the ANC faced going into this election. This reflects not only the ANC's enduring appeal but also the incapacity of the DA to offer a credible and attractive alternative. The DA only managed to increase its share of the vote among black voters from 1% to 5.7%; a statistic which is all the more startling when one considers the complete implosion of the rival opposition party COPE.
- Ultimately, **there is little to differentiate the DA's policy agenda from that of the ANC** and the party would need to speak much more substantially and sensitively to concerns about issues like social grants in order to gain trust among poor black voters. The party's current rhetoric about curbing welfare dependency⁷ is unlikely to appeal to voters whose social grants form an essential part of their extended household's livelihood strategies. The DA's promises of achieving 8% growth by 2025 and creating 6 million new jobs also offers voters little that is notably different from the ANC's agenda. While poorer voters might be able to identify with a more tangible, interventionist approach to job creation, the DA would risk losing its core supports if it shifts to the left.
- The DA's medium term strategy appears to be **grooming a successor to current leader Helen Zille**. In particular, the DA will look to appoint its first black leader in an effort to counter the image of it being a party of narrow white interests. The recent resignation of leadership contender Lindiwe Mazibuko has now paved the way for a relatively smooth transition of power to Mmusi Maimane. Maimane will appeal to the young black middle class which the DA will target for future electoral growth. However, his youth and Obama-style oratory might have less appeal to a wider voting base and his recent pronouncements of being a 'proud liberal' would suggest his candidacy promises little change in the DA's policy orientation.⁸
- The Economic Freedom Fighters led by Julius Malema promised voters more radical land reform and the nationalisation of the mines. However, **polling data suggests that the EFF did not necessarily attract voters**

⁶ <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/politics/2013/10/01/anc-defends-zumas-appeal-to-middle-class-vote> see also <http://www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2014/05/16/anc-strategy-in-question-after-losses-in-gauteng>

⁷ In the DA manifesto this is ambiguously described as using grants as 'a means to lift people out of poverty, not keep people trapped there.' <http://www.da.org.za/docs/15652/DA%20Manifesto.pdf>

⁸ <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-05-29-mmusi-maimanes-parliamentary-leader-acceptance-speech>

on ideological grounds,⁹ and that many EFF voters could sway between the DA and EFF as a way to lodge a protest vote against the ANC. Exit poll interviews also suggested that EFF voters cited concerns over jobs and local employment issues as a reason for their support, rather than referring to the broader ideological promises of the party.

- **The EFF's greatest hope will be to consolidate its existing voter base in urban areas and to grow its support among the young, urban unemployed.** A recent survey suggests that the youth unemployment rate is conservatively estimated at being over 36%.¹⁰ This demographic could become the EFF's main voting base but to mobilize them would require a major increase in the party's organizational capacity.
- For now, the **EFF's strategy will be to continue punching above its organizational weight** by maintaining the large amount of press attention it already draws and positioning itself as the natural home of protest voters ahead of municipal elections in 2016. The EFF will also continue to align itself closely with communities and workers protesting against government and employers.

Are there threats to political stability, human rights and democracy?

- **It remains extremely unlikely that the ANC will now lurch to the left.** The ANC has demonstrated a consistently pro-market economic policy since 1994 with little variation. The president's recent 'State of the Nation' address offered little to suggest any radical break is imminent and that, if anything, the ANC now feels emboldened to take on its left-wing trade union allies over issues such as employment tax incentives.¹¹
- **One issue that could dramatically change the political scene would be the breakup of the alliance between the ANC and the trade unions.** The largest union federation, COSATU, is currently in alliance with the ANC but this relationship has been strained in recent years, with NUMSA (the largest COSATU affiliate) threatening to leave the federation and begin forming an independent workers' party.¹² The unions are powerful and have a strong organizational presence across the country. They would also be able to exploit the political space to the left of the ANC. However, NUMSA has always been the union most critical of the ANC and it remains to be seen whether a critical mass of COSATU affiliates would be drawn towards a new political formation. Both quantitative¹³ and qualitative¹⁴ research also suggests that union members would not necessarily welcome such a move, which would risk dividing the labour movement and potentially invite a draconian reaction from the ANC. Much will depend on how Zuma manages this relationship in the short term and whether the unions feel they can regain influence within the ANC in the build up to the party's 2017 leadership elections.¹⁵
- **The greatest challenge to the ANC remains its capacity to manage the fallout from internal factional struggles.** As the ANC's own documents admit,¹⁶ 'shadow tendencies' are emerging within the movement as

⁹ This was detailed in a presentation given by James Morris of the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research group.

¹⁰ <http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/64e44a004442321b82c88651e2c8725a/Youth-unemployment-soars:-Stats-SA-20140506>

¹¹ <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-06-18-vavi-on-zuma-sona-sa-economy-needs-radical-reconstruction>

¹² <http://www.bdlive.co.za/national/labour/2014/01/24/numsa-to-launch-political-school-in-drive-towards-new-alliance>

¹³ S. Buhlungu (ed) (2006) *Trade Unions and Democracy in South Africa*. Cape Town: HSRC Press

¹⁴ A Beresford (2009) "[Comrades 'Back on Track'? The Durability of the Tripartite Alliance in South Africa.](#)" *African Affairs*. 108 (432). pp. 391-412

¹⁵ For more on this see A Beresford (2014) "Neopatrimonial authority in South Africa" (available on request)

¹⁶ ANC (2012) *Organisational Renewal*.

rival factions launch all-or-nothing struggles in an effort to control access to jobs and business networks at local levels. This threatens both the ANC's internal cohesion and its capacity to deliver as a party of government. These struggles are likely to be intensified as we get closer to the election of ANC leaders in 2017.

- **Zuma will be emboldened by the election result and will see out his term as ANC leader until 2017.** At present it looks as if Zuma will try to ensure that he is succeeded by someone loyal to him, most likely Baleka Mbete or his former wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. The election of either of these candidates would not signal a major upheaval in ANC policy, which is largely determined by the party's policy conference (June 2017) preceding the leadership election (December 2017). If Zuma is unconfident in grooming a 'suitable' successor he may try to stand on for a 3rd term as ANC president, even though he is constitutionally prevented from running again as state president. The 'anyone-but-Zuma' (ABZ) faction is currently without a clear leadership contender, although anti-corruption and anti-patronage could become a clarion call that unites a 'coalition of the aggrieved'. The unions might also choose to make 2017 their 'last stand' in the ANC by throwing their weight behind someone sympathetic to their cause, most likely current COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi.
- **Corruption threatens to undermine accountability and economic development.** This commonly takes the form of dispensing jobs, housing, status, authority or business opportunities within private networks of patronage or simply using public resources for individual private ends. A great deal of attention, for example, has been directed towards the Nkandla scandal involving President Zuma. However, at local levels, corruption is entrenched because in some cases connecting to networks of patronage (and the access to resources and opportunities that they provide) forms a vital means of navigating poverty. The latter dynamic poses a challenge to normative anti-corruption campaigns promising to 'get tough' on the 'evils' of corruption. It should also be noted that that, at a higher level, the spread of corruption in South Africa has been aided and facilitated by international business interests, highlighting the need for coordinated international responses.
- **There are deep concerns that media freedoms are slowly being curbed.** This mainly revolves around the controversial 'secrecy bill' which is widely believed to curtail the capacity of the media to engage in the kinds of investigative journalism needed to uncover corruption scandals and hold government and business to account.
- Current trends suggest that **protests action and industrial unrest are likely to intensify in the coming years.** The root causes of this are socioeconomic: poverty is still deeply entrenched and both unemployment and inequality have risen since the ANC came to power. There are concerns that increasing incidences of police brutality – most notably the fallout resulting from the killing of mineworkers at Marikana in 2012 – could reflect the growth of a more violent relationship between state and society. One thing worth noting, however, is that a large number of the 'service delivery' protests might actually reflect internal ANC factional struggles rather than 'anti-ANC' sentiment. This happens when rival factions compete over the control of ANC branches and/or local positions of public authority.¹⁷
- **Race relations are currently well managed** and non-racialism remains a central cornerstone of public political discourse for now. However, there are indications that a small minority of political actors are beginning to use radicalized appeals in their campaigns. **Xenophobia also remains a major issue** and there is a strong possibility that we could witness the return of violent xenophobic attacks similar to those seen in 2008. Little has been done to address the issues at the roots of xenophobia and in recent years there have been high-profile incidences of human rights abuses of immigrants, sometimes at the hands of the police.¹⁸
- **Gender based violence (GBV) and homophobia remain a prominent feature of South African social life,** severely undermining women's and LGBT rights. This is rooted once again in issues of poverty and inequality but is also compounded by popular public attitudes that normalize rape and other forms of GBV.¹⁹ While the

¹⁷ K. Von Holdt (2013) "The Transition to Violent Democracy in South Africa" *Review of African Political Economy*.40 (138).

¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-26522787>

¹⁹ S Moffett (2006) "These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them': Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32 (1)

constitution is among the most progressive in the world, it remains to be seen whether the ANC government can/will tackle these attitudes and the entrenched patriarchal orders that sustain them.

Implications for South Africa as a global actor

South Africa has punched above its weight in international affairs since 1994. The ANC's impressive election victory and its recent accession into the BRICS community is likely to embolden Zuma's government both domestically and internationally. There are several core dimensions to look out for.

- **South African policy makers claim to have a unique mandate to lead conflict mediation efforts in Africa** owing to South Africa's historical experience of the negotiated transition from apartheid to democracy. It uses this to position itself at the heart of conflict mediation and democracy promotion on the continent. There are three core dimensions to this:
 - **1. Quiet diplomacy.** Rather than engaging in what it perceives to be the 'megaphone diplomacy' of Western states towards Africa, South Africa has generally avoided denouncing incumbent state elites when they perceive the participation of these elites in the peace process to be essential to sustainable democratic transitions: to publicly denounce them and sever ties would risk alienating these elites and jeopardise mediation efforts. Pretoria takes a stand that it is more productive to gently (and quietly) cajole each side of a conflict behind closed doors into making compromises and agreements.
 - **2. Transitional power sharing.** South Africa advocates transitional power sharing in the form of an inclusive settlement that offers all the leading protagonists a future stake in the country. Modelled on South Africa's Government of National Unity in the 1990s, this model attempts to reduce fears of a 'winner-takes-all' settlement, creating the space necessary for concessions to be made by all sides and reducing the risk of one side pulling out and potentially acting as 'spoilers' in the whole process.
 - **3. Transitional justice.** A third element of Pretoria's approach to peace building has been the promotion of a bespoke form of transitional justice tailored to promote, above all else, a stable transition to liberal democracy. Based on South Africa's own experience of transitional justice and its the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), this might require a blend of restorative and retributive justice, where the individual's right to pursue retributive justice through the prosecution of perpetrators might have to be foregone if such action were to jeopardise the peace process. The logic behind this is simple: if protagonists (particularly incumbent state elites) fear punitive sentencing for their crimes then they will have no incentive to seek peace.
- South Africa's approach is problematic and controversial, but it is **rationalized by South African policy makers as a necessary compromise for achieving substantive liberal ends, namely, durable, long term transitions to stable liberal democracy.** This approach came into direct conflict with the NATO powers' intervention in Libya and South Africa's approach to post-conflict justice and reconciliation contrasts sharply with what is seen as the one-dimensional and selective promotion of retributive justice by the ICC.²⁰
- **South Africa struggles with public diplomacy** and, in particular, getting its message across effectively in the media. Although South Africa boasts some highly effective diplomats, there are long term issues of under capacity that DIRCO is still dealing with and Pretoria struggles to rival the PR machines of larger powers.
- **South Africa will try to consolidate its identity as the 'go to' state for conflict mediation on the continent,** which will be made substantially easier by the election of former SA foreign minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma as the AU Commission Chairperson. The ANC government is likely to push its position more aggressively following its election victory as it continues to strive for continental leadership and grater global influence.

²⁰ For more on this debate over Libya see A. Beresford "[Mis]Understanding South Africa: Pretoria's Response to the Libya Crisis." (under review and available on request).

- **South Africa is ultimately in a similar position to both emerging and existing powers who see the African continent as a source of economic opportunity and a potential source instability.** It will, however, have to temper the pursuit of its national interests as an emerging power or risk of appearing as a domineering continental hegemon. This balancing behaviour is evident in its public statements. On the one hand South Africa positions itself as a champion of the South resisting 'neocolonialism' while on the other hand it makes no secret of its desire for greater international influence and its aims to promote pro-market reforms across the continent.
- **South Africa will continue to push with the IBSA bloc (India, Brazil, South Africa) for reforms to the UN Security Council** and, in particular, its claim for a permanent seat. It will also gain support from the BRICS for this position, and it is very clear that South Africa sees its BRICS membership as a major boost to its international significance. While existing Council members may be resistant to such moves, it has been argued that such initiatives could help to legitimate actions taken by the Council and bring vital alternative 'Southern' perspectives to the table regarding issues such as intervention.
- **Pretoria will continue to demonstrate 'balancing' middle power behaviour for the near future**, growing its influence within the BRICS while maintaining close ties with the West. Caution will likely guide South Africa's UN voting behaviour. This can be seen in South Africa's recent choice to abstain over issues such as the condemnation of Russia's role in the Crimea. Its vote to support the NATO powers over resolution 1973 (Libya) was widely regarded by South Africa to have been abused by the NATO powers, which might temporarily shake its confidence to step out of line with its BRICS partners in the near future.
- **South Africa and Rwanda are continuing a diplomatic row that could cause tension in both the Commonwealth and the AU.** The immediate source of the row is the allegation that Rwandan agents played a role in assassinations and attempted assassinations of Rwandan exiles in South Africa. However, it has longer-term roots in the rivalries between the two states and in particular their conflicting positions/interests regarding the conflict in the DRC.