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# Länderbericht

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## South Africa before the elections: New hope?

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- On 29 May 2024, elections will be held in South Africa for the National Assembly and all provincial legislatures. After years of economic decline, the country is in urgent need of a new direction.
- According to polls, Nelson Mandela's party, the ANC, will fall short of an outright majority at national level for the first time since the end of apartheid in 1994 but will nevertheless continue to govern as the largest party. At the same time, the South African party landscape is increasingly diversifying, with new parties proposing solutions to the country's numerous challenges.
- It is uncertain in which political configuration the ANC will govern South Africa after the election, as several election outcomes are possible. This uncertainty increases the potential for political violence before and after the elections.

## Election year 2024 - a decisive year for South Africa

Thirty years after the end of apartheid, the seventh election to the National Assembly and the nine provincial legislatures will take place in South Africa on 29 May 2024. These elections will be the most important ones since 1994, as political realignment is needed in almost all policy areas. Over the past fifteen years, the country's socio-economic development has fallen far short of self-imposed targets and urgently needs to correct course. Economic growth has stagnated since the 2019 parliamentary elections and amounted to 0,6% in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Unemployment remains at a very high level of 41%.<sup>2</sup> Social inequality has also continued to rise sharply in all areas of people's lives, including in health and education. These failures are associated with high crime rates (especially gang crime), which affect the poor most.

Against this backdrop and reinforced by a high level of corruption and clientelism among the political elite, many South Africans have lost confidence in Nelson Mandela's party, the African National Congress (ANC), and are taking refuge in abstention.<sup>3</sup> The ANC's approval ratings have been declining for years. Although there are doubts about the predictive power of current election polls in South Africa, it is expected that the former liberation movement will not win an absolute majority at national level for the first time. The party, which has been spoilt for success, will therefore need one or more coalition partners to remain in power.

In parallel to the ANC's falling approval ratings, numerous new parties have been registered in a highly fragmented and dynamic party system. These are predominantly break-aways from the ANC and the largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). Even if the outcome of the elections is uncertain and therefore political uncertainty is high, one thing seems clear: the de facto "one-party rule" of the ANC is coming to an end. This will strengthen party pluralism. Many South Africans associate this with a hope for necessary reforms and more social and political participation.

**The elections in South Africa are of considerable importance for Germany.** The rainbow nation is an economic and political giant on the African continent, which is becoming increasingly important for Germany. **Economically**, South Africa has the largest and most industrialised economy in Africa. The country is our most important trading partner on the continent with an annual trade volume of more than 20 billion Euro. Over 600 German companies are active in South Africa and have recently made long-term investments, particularly in the automotive industry. At the same time, Germany and South Africa are closely linked by a strong "people-to-people" relationship: South Africa is a popular destination for German tourists.

**Politically**, the country acts as a voice of the so-called Global South. South Africa serves as a mediator and supports many peace missions within Africa and is therefore an important point of contact for Germany in the region. At the same time, South Africa is increasingly distancing itself from Western partners in terms of foreign policy. The genocide indictment against Israel at the International Court of Justice, the traditionally close ties with Russia (which were maintained even after the war of aggression against Ukraine) and cooperation with countries such as Iran in the expanded BRICS format are also bringing Germany and South Africa's relations to a crossroads.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics South Africa (2024): Media Release – Embargo: Tuesday 05 March 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Statistics South Africa (2024): Media Release – Embargo Tuesday 20 February 2024.

<sup>3</sup> During the 2019 National Assembly election, the official voter turnout was 66 %, see Henning Suhr: South Africa has voted: ANC loses popularity - Ramaphosa does not, KAS Country Report, [Wahlbericht Südafrika 2019 \(kas.de\)](#).

## New parties for disappointed voters?

In 2022, over 80 % of South Africans stated in a nationwide survey that they believe the country is moving in the wrong direction.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, trust in political parties and politicians is rapidly declining. Many South Africans therefore have a desire for political alternatives, which has led to the formation of new parties in recent years. Previously, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) were considered alternatives to the ANC in the **centre-right spectrum**. The DA (2019 national parliamentary election result: 20,8 %) has a successful government record, particularly in the Western Cape province. Nationally, however, the party is still perceived as a party of the white minority.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the DA has lost support among parts of its electorate in recent months due to its pro-Israeli stance. The second major competitor in the centre-right spectrum, the KAS partner party IFP (2019 National Assembly election result: 3,4 %), supports a market economy and federalism and differentiates itself by representing a conservative, traditional view of society. The party, which is strongly anchored in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, has experienced continuous growth in support since the last local elections in 2021. However, new direct competitors have entered the political arena. The ActionSA party was founded before the last local elections in 2021. Led by the former mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba, the party has since established itself in the province of Gauteng in particular. ActionSA focuses on issues of internal security and a free market economy. Build One South Africa (BOSA), the party founded in 2022 by Mmusi Maimane, the former DA chairperson, began as a grassroots movement of independent candidates. BOSA has set itself the goal of implementing modern labour market and education reforms. The Rise Mzansi party, founded in April 2023, appears to be finding support particularly in South Africa's urban centres. Although its programme is similar to that of the DA and ActionSA, its communication is much more targeted at structurally disadvantaged population groups. This resonates with many people and makes the party the most promising centrist "newcomer" in this election, especially among young voters.

In the **centre-left spectrum**, there have been several splits from the ANC to date. Of particular note here are the radical left-wing populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), founded in 2013 under the leadership of the former chairman of the ANC youth organisation, Julius Malema, and the Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party, which was founded at the end of 2023. MK is led by former President Jacob Zuma and is named after the former military wing of the ANC.<sup>6</sup> The 82-year-old Zuma himself was charged with massive corruption in office and deliberate undermining of state institutions (the era of so-called State Capture) and was even briefly imprisoned in 2021 for contempt of court. However, he was granted immunity from prosecution last year by decree of the current President Cyril Ramaphosa. Supported by good poll ratings, MK has quickly established itself as a serious competitor to the ANC and EFF, but also to the IFP. Especially in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, Zuma still enjoys great popularity as a former state president and Zulu (keyword: ethnic component as an electoral factor). In terms of content, the party focuses on expropriation without compensation, nationalisation and the strengthening of traditional leaders at the expense of democratic institutions. With his "revenge project", Zuma apparently also wants to inflict lasting political damage on his archenemy Ramaphosa, who forced him out of office six years ago. It cannot be ruled out that MK supporters will resort to violent means if their electoral goals are not achieved. To put it in a nutshell: The fear of possible political unrest or other violence during the election campaign in South Africa has become part of the public debate, primarily due to the "phenomenon" of the MK party.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Brenthurst Foundation (2022): South Africans Overwhelmingly Favour a National Coalition to Govern the Country – Electoral Survey, [South Africans Overwhelmingly Favour a National Coalition to Govern the Country – Electoral Survey | The Brenthurst Foundation](#).

<sup>5</sup> The Western Cape is the only one of South Africa's nine provinces where the opposition is in power. In the other eight provinces, the ANC has an absolute majority.

<sup>6</sup> According to recent developments, which cannot yet be fully assessed at the time of publication of this report, it is also possible that Jacob Zuma will be forced out of the MK party due to internal infighting.

<sup>7</sup> As early as July 2021, there was serious social unrest in KwaZulu-Natal after Jacob Zuma was imprisoned for contempt of court (refusal to testify before the State Capture Commission), which subsequently spread to the province of Gauteng.

**51 parties** are competing for the 400 seats in the National Assembly. Unlike in Germany, there is no fixed percentage threshold. Furthermore, for the first time, **independent candidates** can also stand for election to the National Assembly. This will be made possible by a comprehensive reform of electoral law in April 2023.<sup>8</sup> Primarily due to high admission hurdles and a lack of funding for individual candidates, only six independent candidates will ultimately stand for the national election in all nine provinces across the country.<sup>9</sup>

### **Do the new parties represent a real alternative for disappointed voters?**

The ideological alignment of voters between the centre-right and centre-left spectrum remains largely unchanged. According to current survey results, the ANC (~41 %), EFF (~12 %) and MK (~10 %) have combined approval ratings that roughly correspond to the ANC's 2014 election result. The DA, on the other hand, remains constant nationally in the 20-25 % range, which can be attributed to the party's strong mobilisation capacity in its own electoral camp. However, the DA does not appear to be tapping into any new voter groups beyond this, at least not to any great extent. It is also noticeable that in the economically strong provinces of Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape (which together account for around two thirds of South Africa's economic power), the traditionally strong ANC and DA parties are losing support. MK, ActionSA, BOSA and Rise Mzansi, which are competing at national level for the first time, are benefiting from this, especially regionally. At the same time, they are cannibalising other small parties in their political segment. In the left-wing political camp, on the other hand, there appears to be a migration of voters from the ANC and the EFF to the MK party.

As in other countries, voters' choice of party depends increasingly on the leading candidate. Parties on either side of the political spectrum show high similarities in respect of their party manifestos, leading to an increased focus on party leaders as a means of differentiation. Hence, the election campaign is becoming gradually more personalised. Whether it is Ramaphosa for the ANC, Malema for the EFF, Zuma for the MK or, in the case of the IFP, even the recently deceased party founder Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi: charismatic leaders dominate the election campaign coverage. Aspects of regional identity have a reinforcing effect here.

Before 2024, opposition parties have not been able to benefit nationally to any great extent from the steady decline of the ruling party and thus were not able to offer a credible and competent alternative to the ANC. The personal sensitivities of opposition party representatives have mostly overshadowed any overlap in terms of content. This makes the Multi-Party Charter For South Africa (MPC), which was founded in summer 2023, all the more positive: Under the leadership of the DA, several parties from the centre-right camp (including the IFP and ActionSA) signed an agreement to work together on the basis of shared values and principles as well as overlapping policy content. It represents a kind of exploratory agreement before the elections and an attempt to offer an electable government alternative to the ANC. This preparation is laudable as the South African constitution only allows 14 days to form a government after the election. Even if the MPC is undoubtedly a step in the right direction to strengthen the coalition capacity among opposition parties, it should not be overlooked that to date, opposition parties such as Rise Mzansi or BOSA are not part of the initiative and that MPC members have a combined approval rating of around 35 % according to current polls. As a result, the MPC is far from a majority to form a government at national level. The centrifugal forces within the MPC have also increased recently due to the lack of government prospects. Both the DA and the IFP (which is currently polling at around 4-5 %) recently speculated publicly about a "government of national unity" (similar to Mandela's in 1994) as to whether a coalition with the ANC would be necessary to prevent a left-wing populist government consisting of the ANC and EFF.

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<sup>8</sup> IEC (2023): Electoral Commission welcomes the signing of the Electoral Amendment Bill into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa, [Electoral Commission : News Article \(elections.org.za\)](https://www.elections.org.za/news-articles/electoral-commission-welcomes-the-signing-of-the-electoral-amendment-bill-into-law-by-president-cyril-ramaphosa).

<sup>9</sup> Only one of them, Zacki Achmat, a well-known former anti-apartheid and LGBTQI+ activist who has been campaigning for years, especially for AIDS sufferers, is considered to have a serious chance of entering the National Assembly.

## South Africa on election day

Just under 27,8 million South Africans, or almost 68 % of all eligible voters, have registered to vote in the upcoming elections to the National Assembly and provincial legislatures. Voter turnout has been declining for years, but no turnaround is expected, despite the importance of these elections and the new party formations described above. This is because the disillusionment with politics that has grown over the years is too entrenched in society.

The South African Electoral Commission (IEC) is generally regarded as election-tested, independent and, in the opinion of many South Africans, largely trustworthy, despite the challenge that the IEC's budget has been declining for years, which makes for operational difficulties. This election represents an important stress test for the IEC: Polls suggesting the ANC losing its absolute majority (anxiety-inducing to the ruling party), an electoral law reform in 2023 as well as public and legal disagreements with political parties (especially with the MK over Zuma's admission to the election) mean that the work of the IEC is under especial scrutiny this time. Nevertheless, experts assume that the IEC will fulfil its requirements and ensure an orderly and valid election process in the spirit of South African democracy. As in many countries around the world, the important issue of "fake news/disinformation campaigns" is also a challenge meriting attention.<sup>10</sup>

## Possible scenarios regarding the election outcome

Despite all predictions, the effectiveness of the ANC's campaigning and ability to mobilise support, particularly in the hot campaign phase, should not be underestimated. The party is strongly represented throughout civil society, across the country (including in rural areas) and has the state apparatus on its side with key positions in politics and administration filled with loyal supporters (keyword: "cadre deployment"). Furthermore, Cyril Ramaphosa is still the most popular politician in South Africa, although the president's popularity has recently waned considerably. Even ANC politicians critical of Ramaphosa – such as former President Thabo Mbeki – have recognised what is at stake and are campaigning intensively for the ANC. Winning an absolute majority again with just over 50 % of the vote cannot be ruled out but is unlikely at the time of writing. The level of voter turnout will be a decisive factor. If voter turnout is low (especially among young voters) and mobilisation in rural regions is high, the ANC's results may turn out better than in current polling. The scenarios presented below therefore assume that the ANC will receive another five-year mandate from the electorate at national level on 29 May 2024, but that it will lose its absolute majority. The ruling party will depend on one or more coalition partners in future.<sup>11</sup> Experts consider it almost impossible that a government can be formed at national level without the former liberation movement. Given these assumptions, the formation of a government will depend crucially on how much support the ruling party loses and how internal ANC dynamics develop after the election results are announced. In the event of a very poor election result, the ANC's well-known infighting could break out and Cyril Ramaphosa be replaced by a party rival (speculation is centred on the person of Deputy President Paul Mashatile).

### Scenario 1: ANC just under 50 %

In a governing coalition, the party will get to above the 50 % mark by purchasing smaller parties or independent MPs to the ANC through the allocation of offices. A similar approach is already being taken at local level (for example in the Johannesburg City Council). Instead of implementing necessary reforms, the status quo is cemented in such a constellation. This is likely to lead to continuous economic decline and increasing social instability in the country. Without pressure to reform, the ANC is unlikely to fundamentally renew itself institutionally, which means that the party will continue its downward trend. If Cyril Ramaphosa remains president in this coalition government, he would probably not prevent the ANC's decline, but merely delay it.

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<sup>10</sup> For example, a video circulated on social media in March 2024 that falsely identified Donald Trump as a supporter of the MK party (see: van Damme (2024): How can we safeguard South Africa's hard-won free and fair elections in the age of disinformation? [Disinformation, governance and the South African election - ISS African Futures](#)).

<sup>11</sup> There are undoubtedly other conceivable ("interim") scenarios, such as the toleration of an ANC minority government by certain opposition parties. These will not be described in this report due to the need to minimise complexity.

**Scenario 2: A significantly weakened ANC will enter into a coalition with the EFF (and possibly also with the MK party)**

In what the DA calls a "doomsday scenario", Ramaphosa will probably no longer be president of the country and moderate forces within the ANC will be marginalised. This radical left-wing populist party alliance would likely focus on nationalisation (including of banks and mines), expropriate assets without compensation – particularly land in the agricultural sector, but potentially there are many more targets – and massively deter investors by expanding state intervention in the private sector. Poverty and inequality are likely to continue to rise in South Africa. Moreover, such an alliance would be fatal for the social cohesion of the country: the EFF rejects the conciliatory policies of the post-apartheid era and often lashes out against minority groups within South Africa. In terms of foreign policy, cooperation with Russia and China would deepen.

**Scenario 3: Coalition of the centre (ANC with DA and/or IFP or with MPC parties)**

This broad coalition - led by President Ramaphosa - would likely break up rigid structures and initiate reforms that focus on growth and employment. This would create a real opportunity for the country. In terms of foreign policy, this coalition would not distance itself any further from the West. However, to realise such an alliance, political actors would have to overcome personal and substantive divides. This applies in particular to an ANC-DA coalition, as the parties are far apart in terms of their policies and have no basis of trust. Alternatively, the IFP would offer itself as a junior partner in a centrist coalition, as the parties - despite their violent conflicts in the early 1990s - have already governed together at national level as well as in the province of KwaZulu-Natal during the unity government after 1994. However, such a coalition government would only be stable if the IFP succeeds in persuading the ANC to embrace reform in key policy areas and curb the rampant corruption in the previous government. The ANC could also benefit from this in the long term, as a centrist coalition would keep the permanent left-wing rival EFF away from the power apparatus and thus possibly weaken it in the long term. Julius Malema, as chairman of the EFF, would increasingly be perceived by the population as a permanent opposition politician with no prospect of government participation and might therefore lose his lustre on the national stage in the long term.

Despite the numerous challenges facing the country, an increasingly dynamic, competitive party landscape may provide the impetus for necessary reforms that would benefit not only the country but also the parties themselves. Selected opposition parties participating in provincial governments (e.g. Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal) would provide energy for reform, gain governing experience and convince voters of their political character and problem-solving skills in day-to-day business. For many opposition parties, this is a great opportunity to gain further support in the local elections in 2026 and the elections for the National Assembly and provincial legislatures in 2029. On the other hand, there is a risk that a fragmenting party spectrum will make it more difficult to form a stable government due to an inability to compromise, which would impair the ability to act politically in day-to-day coalition work. Apart from the "Government of National Unity" formed by Mandela in 1994, there is no experience of forming coalitions at the highest state level in South Africa.

All the scenarios described above suggest that South Africa will enter a new era after the elections. As a young democracy, the country can build on strong state institutions and a stable constitution, which serve as a legitimising factor and, where necessary, as a corrective. This is an absolute advantage for the country at the southern tip of Africa.

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