

Between Polarisation and Populism

South Africa's Fragile Political Centre



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In a Nutshell

Three decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa's young democracy is currently facing profound challenges. Persistent social inequality and the legacy of racial segregation continue to intensify political polarisation. Following the loss of votes by the African National Congress (ANC) in 2024 and the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) with the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and other parties, it seems that – at least for the time being – an era of fragmentation and coalition-building has begun.

The fragmentation of the party system is deepening, driven in part by the rise of populist forces such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), uMkhonto

weSizwe (MK), and the Patriotic Alliance (PA). Polarising platforms and ethnic identity politics are making the formation of consensus-based majorities more difficult.

The political centre is weakened and struggling to build stable, reform-oriented coalitions. This situation has complicated reliable governance and exacerbated social tensions.

Although the DA is regarded as a party of integrity and has a largely positive record in government, it reaches key sections of the population only to a limited extent as it has thus far failed to adequately address social inequality. Its future depends on credibly linking economically liberal approaches with social justice.

The Authors



Gregor Jaecke is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's South Africa Office, based in Cape Town.



Dr Christoph Wiedenroth was Trainee at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's South Africa Office until January 2026.

The rise and fall of the ANC

The release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 marked the beginning of the end of apartheid and led to South Africa's first free elections in 1994, which were won by the African National Congress (ANC) under Mandela's leadership.¹ Until 2024, the party had consistently secured an absolute majority at the national level and played a key role in the country's transformation in terms of both politics and civil society. South Africa is now regarded as a consolidated democracy with an active network of civic organisations. However, the ANC failed to translate political transformation into sustainable economic development. Although a more diverse middle class emerged, particularly in the decade following the end of apartheid, social inequality continued to rise: Today, South Africa ranks among the most unequal countries in the world, and this inequality impacts on all areas of life. Low growth, high unemployment, crime, and unequal access to both quality education and healthcare are widely seen as major governance failures and are primarily attributed to the ANC. Since the end of 2007, the former liberation movement has also increasingly been associated with both corruption and patronage networks reaching into the highest levels of government. However, in recognition of its role in the struggle for freedom, the ANC remained popular for a long time.

The national elections of 29 May 2024 marked a historic turning point in South Africa's party system. For the first time, the ANC lost its absolute majority, securing only around 40 per cent of the vote.² The election signalled the end of the dominant-party system and the beginning

of a coalition era. Opinion polls suggesting further losses for the ANC indicate that this trend towards coalition politics is likely to intensify in the long term, though it remains to be seen whether this will become a lasting structural feature of the South African party system or remain a transitional phase. At the end of June 2024, the ANC formed a Government of National Unity (GNU) with ten parties, including the economically liberal DA, the socially conservative IFP, and several smaller groupings. The GNU marks a profound transformation: Decades of single-party dominance have given way to a fragmented multi-party system. Although the ANC and DA together secured more than 50 per cent of the vote in 2024 and thus also a parliamentary majority, a broader GNU was nevertheless formed. Strategic considerations were the key factor here: Externally, the aim was to signal unity and broaden the government's base, while internally, the ANC sought to demonstrate to its supporters that it was not entering into a bilateral coalition solely with its long-standing rival, the DA, but was instead including additional parties that were less critical of the ANC. Eighteen parties are now represented in the 400-seat National Assembly, 13 of which have fewer than ten seats. Observers therefore describe South Africa as a "coalition country".³ This fragmentation reflects not only the decline of a dominant party, but also intensified political competition and a higher degree of pluralism.

The increasingly differentiated party landscape is shaped in particular by the rise of populist forces on both the left and the right, thereby placing growing pressure on the political centre.

Overview of the South African party landscape (Excerpt)

- ACDP (African Christian Democratic Party)
- ActionSA
- ANC (African National Congress, part of the GNU)
- BOSA (Build One South Africa)
- DA (Democratic Alliance, part of the GNU)
- EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters)
- FF Plus (Freedom Front Plus, part of the GNU)
- IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party, part of the GNU)
- MK-Partei (uMkhonto weSizwe)
- PA (Patriotic Alliance, part of the GNU)

Cleavages and ideologies in the party system

The South African party spectrum can initially be organised along a classic left–right axis. On the left, several breakaway movements from the ANC have emerged, most notably the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which was founded in 2013. Under the leadership of Julius Malema, the former head of the ANC Youth League, the EFF quickly established itself as a radical-left Marxist-populist force. With demands for nationalisation and expropriation without compensation, it appealed particularly to young and disadvantaged voters.⁴ In the 2024 elections, the EFF secured just under 10 per cent of the vote but lost support compared with in 2019 because its increasingly radical positions and refusal to join a GNU had attracted broad criticism from voters.

The establishment of uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) at the end of 2023 under former President and ANC chair Jacob Zuma marked a further significant shift on the left. From a standing start, the party won almost 15 per cent of the vote in the 2024 national elections.⁵ It combines a left-wing economic programme with a populist, identity-driven style of politics that is rooted in traditional authority structures and that is accompanied by a socially conservative view of women and family. Despite its recent electoral

success, internal conflicts and organisational weaknesses have thus far prevented MK from establishing itself as an effective opposition force at the national level. Like other ANC breakaways, MK's focus is less on cooperation than on weakening the former liberation movement, thereby further intensifying polarisation within the party system.

Although the centre-left camp remains clearly dominant, the opposing camp is gradually gaining stability and political significance.

On the right, the Democratic Alliance clearly stands out as the most powerful force within its camp. At the same time, numerous smaller parties have been established in the centre to centre-right segment of the political spectrum. Between 2004 and 2014, the DA nearly doubled its share of the national vote, reaching a peak of 22.2 per cent in 2014.⁶ It is economically liberal and regarded as particularly credible on issues of good governance. In the 2024 elections, the DA secured 21.8 per cent of the vote – again the second-highest share nationwide – and has long governed the economically successful Western Cape province.⁷ Although the centre-left camp remains clearly dominant,⁸ the opposing camp is gradually gaining stability and political significance. This trend is reinforced by rising support for the Inkatha Freedom Party – a socially conservative, federalist, economically liberal party. Under its leader, Velenkosini Hlabisa, the IFP has returned to national government responsibility for the first time since 2004 and leads the provincial government in the key province of Kwa-Zulu-Natal.

The centre-right spectrum has been expanded by DA breakaways Build One South Africa (BOSA) and ActionSA. Both of these small parties pursue economically liberal policies, emphasise the rule of law, and present themselves as pragmatic,

inclusive – i.e., non-ethnically defined – alternatives in political competition. The African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) positions itself within the Christian democratic spectrum but exhibits strong elements of fundamentalist religious programming. Since religious-denominational issues have not played a key role in South African elections to date, the ACDP’s impact at the national level remains limited. Its vote share is marginal, and its role in party politics largely symbolic. The right-wing spectrum is further complemented by the Patriotic Alliance (PA) – a nationalist-populist force. This party increasingly focuses on South Africa’s Coloured community⁹ and deliberately employs xenophobic rhetoric in order to mobilise support. In the most recent elections, it secured two per cent of the vote.¹⁰

However, South Africa’s party landscape cannot be reduced to a classic left–right framework. Indeed, many parties avoid clear ideological self-positioning in order to not exclude particular voter groups within a diverse electorate.

Instead, thematic and socio-cultural cleavages shape political competition, often going beyond traditional left–right categories. For example, the above-described MK Party combines economically left-wing demands – that is, redistribution, state intervention, and social redress – with a socially conservative value framework centred on tradition, authority, and cultural identity. Such an apparently contradictory profile becomes intelligible only in the context of additional structural features and conflict lines within the South African party system.

1. *Constitutional loyalty*: A key line of division in South Africa’s party system runs between forces that consistently emphasise adherence to the constitution – such as the DA and the IFP – and those that seek to weaken the rule of law in favour of traditional leadership structures, as exemplified by the MK Party. This divide is also visible within individual parties. Within the ANC, for instance, the moderate, constitutionally minded wing



Political hybrid: Former President Jacob Zuma’s MK party combines left-wing economic policy with a traditionalist view of society. Photo: © Xinhua, Imago.

around President Cyril Ramaphosa faces a more radical, revolutionary faction that is currently weakened.

2. *Identity politics*: Voting behaviour in South Africa partly follows ethnic lines and historically rooted party loyalties. Parties such as the ANC, the IFP, the MK, and the right-wing conservative minority-oriented Afrikaner party Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus) mobilise specific voter groups, while others seek to transcend such divisions and appeal more broadly. One thing is clear: Social, economic, and regional factors are gaining importance relative to identity politics alone. With a younger population, traditional loyalties – for example, towards the ANC – are gradually eroding. Nevertheless, more than three decades after the end of apartheid, ethnic characteristics such as skin colour remain a central structural and defining factor in South African politics and society, with lasting implications for voting behaviour.¹¹

Against the backdrop of a persistently precarious socio-economic situation, populist narratives are gaining increasing traction.

3. *Intra-party decision-making structures*: A large proportion of South African parties are strongly centred on charismatic leaders who dominate strategy and programme, often at the expense of internal party democracy. By contrast, a small number of strongly institutionalised parties – such as the ANC and the DA – determine their course through internal democratic processes and present this course collectively through a broad cadre of officials.

Challenges facing the political centre

Against the backdrop of a persistently precarious socio-economic situation, populist narratives

are gaining increasing traction in South Africa. In particular, the MK Party, the EFF on the left, and the PA on the right are pursuing a personalised style of politics that relies heavily on identity-based mobilisation. This style places charismatic leaders at the centre of political communication and reduces complex policy issues to personalised messages. Party institutions and collective decision-making processes recede into the background. Combined with identity-based narratives, this situation produces an emotionalised political style that offers clear points of identification, sharpens social cleavages, and facilitates rapid mobilisation. For example, the EFF primarily appeals to young, urban Black voters affected by both unemployment and a lack of prospects, while the PA draws most of its support from the Coloured community and gains traction with a migration-critical and law-and-order agenda.

All these political forces highlight different lived realities, intensify socio-political cleavages rhetorically, and – like populists worldwide – offer seemingly simple solutions to complex problems. Left-wing and right-wing variants often closely resemble one another in both style and strategy. At the heart of their programme-based mobilisation lies the question of distribution: namely access to employment, education, healthcare, and public services for specific ethnic groups. Populist narratives additionally draw on issues that are particularly emotionally charged in the context of social inequality, including crime prevention, migration, public security, and social provision. The multifaceted and far-reaching effects of populism on South African society should not be underestimated: Indeed, populism sharpens existing cleavages, intensifies social tensions, and contributes significantly to both polarisation and the growing emotionalisation of political discourse.

Lacking a formal threshold, the electoral system further facilitates the entry of very small parties into both the national parliament and provincial legislatures. In the National Assembly, 14 of the 18 parties that are currently represented hold less than five per cent of the vote. This institutional

framework also encourages the formation of new populist parties since they have realistic prospects of entering parliament with comparatively small vote shares.

Background situation and strategy for a successful repositioning of the centre-right in South Africa

The increasing fragmentation of the South African party system confronts centre-right forces with a dual challenge: They must counter populist movements effectively but at the same time also secure their own political coherence and capacity for action. Against this background, it is worth more closely examining the position of the DA, which is widely regarded as the classic representative of the centre-right in South Africa. The party benefits from a strong nationwide organisational structure and is generally perceived as being ethically sound – that is, free from corruption, mismanagement, and clientelism. Its long-standing record of governance in the Western Cape – where it has governed with an absolute majority for many years – demonstrates its programme-based and operational capacity to promote long-term economic growth and employment. The central weakness of the DA lies in its limited ability to reach the Black majority population due to its insufficient programme-based and communicative engagement with the enduring social inequalities rooted in the apartheid era. Many South Africans criticise the party for placing too much trust in the regulatory power of the market and for showing too little willingness to address structural inequality through state intervention. As long as the party fails to do more to support redress measures – that is, by addressing structural disadvantages resulting from racial segregation – or to introduce transformative legislation (e.g. by addressing issues such as redistribution, quotas, and targeted support for disadvantaged groups), it will not be perceived as a credible alternative to left-wing forces by the majority of the Black population.

The DA's meritocratic understanding of politics – which links social advancement primarily

to merit and competence – collides with South Africa's structural realities. Despite individual capabilities, social progress remains unattainable for many because unequal starting conditions in access to education, land, and economic opportunity mean that merit alone is insufficient. These barriers are deeply rooted in the legacy of apartheid and persist today in the form of unequal wealth distribution, spatial segregation, and limited employment opportunities. Meritocracy thus remains a normative ideal that is promoted as a guiding principle of political modernisation but that is hardly realisable without accompanying state measures that create genuine equality of opportunity. While the ANC and left-wing populist parties advocate radical redress and far-reaching transformation, the DA appears distant in the eyes of many voters and rejects key elements of this agenda. As a result, the centre-right camp remains unable to secure a majority while at the same time providing political opponents with opportunities for attack. Meanwhile, these opponents deliberately promote the narrative that the DA is seeking to restore the apartheid system. Although empirically unfounded, this accusation resonates strongly among key voter segments and limits the party's capacity for mobilisation, particularly among the Black majority. At the same time, the DA's cautious programme-based and communicative engagement with enduring structures of inequality suggests that it fears losing support among its core white voters. It thus finds itself in a dilemma between preserving its traditional base and expanding its broader societal legitimacy.

Seven of the ten senior representatives who were elected at the 2023 DA party congress belong to the white population group.

The DA has prospects of success only if it dares to strike a balance between economically liberal principles on the one hand and the requirements





Ready for the next step? The Democratic Alliance has firmly established itself as the leading force within the centre-right camp. However, if it wants to become a party capable of securing a majority, it will need to become more appealing to the Black majority population. The picture shows outgoing party leader John Steenhuisen. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

of social justice through social transformation and redress on the other hand.¹² While criticising ANC policies may have sufficed in the past, it is now crucial to credibly manage the transition from an opposition party to an effective government party. This situation requires that the DA preserve its political identity while remaining capable of compromise within the GNU – particularly in its relationship with the ANC – in order to contribute to the success of the overall coalition. Managing this dual expectation has emerged as a key task – and one that is anything but straightforward. The tensions to which this situation has given rise are illustrated by the adoption of the 2025 national budget, which nearly led to a breakdown of the coalition due to serious disagreements between the DA and the ANC. Beyond programme-based repositioning, further development of the DA would also need to be reflected in the composition of

its leadership. Of the ten senior representatives elected at the 2023 party congress, seven belong to the white population group, which thus hardly reflects South Africa’s demographic reality, in which more than 80 per cent of the population is Black.¹³ This discrepancy points to a structural deficit in representation that significantly limits the party’s integrative capacity. At the same time, the DA’s party congress in April 2026 offers an opportunity to set the first substantive and personnel-related course for its future direction.

The remaining centre-right spectrum is characterised by a proliferation of micro-parties, new formations, and pronounced populist tendencies. These new parties – including breakaways from the DA – do not contribute to stabilising the political centre, instead intensifying its fragmentation and limiting its integrative capacity. They compete with one another for the same electorate,

Fig. 1: Success factors for parties in South Africa, differentiated by political camp

Factor	Relevance to the centre-right camp	Relevance to the centre-left camp
Recognition of the legacy of apartheid and an inclusive political style.	The clear acknowledgement of the inequalities that persist from apartheid is essential in order to gain credibility and support beyond traditional voter segments, particularly among the Black majority population.	A central element of the centre-left's programme that shapes political narratives, that is partly linked to redistribution demands, and that simultaneously serves as a primary mobilisation factor.
An ethically sound political style combined with transparency and accountability.	A political style that establishes integrity, transparency, and accountability as key points of distinction from the ANC and left-wing populist forces. A consistent emphasis on these elements remains indispensable to the credibility and appeal of this camp.	Necessary when it comes to regaining legitimacy because corruption and nepotism weigh particularly heavily on left-leaning parties. Demands for social justice, redistribution, and equality must be credibly pursued by linking them to transparency and accountability.
Good governance and a positive track record.	Required in order to demonstrate governing competence through successful work at all political levels, to build on this continuously, and to highlight past achievements.	The dominant camp is expected to significantly improve its hitherto modest record in government across all political levels, to address existing deficits, and thereby also to regain lost trust.
Leadership figures.	The integrity, national visibility, and broad societal appeal of party leaders are key determinants of success in mobilising beyond the party's core base.	Leadership figures strongly shape this camp. Charisma and credibility are essential.

operate with weak organisational structures, are often paralysed by personal rivalries, and lack a coherent nationwide presence. The limited integrative capacity of South Africa's centre-right spectrum is illustrated by the case of ActionSA: Despite occasional mobilisation gains at the regional level, its pronounced competitive stance towards the DA and its rivalry with other small parties prevent any consolidating effect within the centre-right camp. At present, the BOSA party is seeking to establish a consolidated centrist movement through cooperation with smaller parties. Its aim is to combine a market-oriented policy approach with an inclusive, non-ethnically defined model of society. The success of this initiative remains uncertain, but it does underline the fact that the future of the right-of-centre political camp in South Africa does not depend solely on the growth of the DA. The key factor here will be the ability to consolidate democratically oriented forces within this spectrum and to thereby secure institutional stability and programme-based coherence. The following factors

are crucial for parties in both the centre-right and centre-left camps when it comes to withstanding populist forces while achieving broad societal resonance in South Africa:

1. *Recognition of the legacy of apartheid and an inclusive political style without ideological narrowing:* Parties must openly acknowledge the enduring impact of racial inequality rooted in apartheid while overcoming ethnic, social, and regional divides. A largely non-ideological approach is required because citizens primarily expect pragmatic solutions to concrete problems.
2. *Integrity, transparency, and accountability:* A consistent rejection of corruption and nepotism combined with credible, values-based leadership. This includes transparency in political decision-making, clear oversight mechanisms, and the strengthening of independent institutions for monitoring state action.

3. *Good governance and a positive track record:* Reliable governance and policies focused on practical outcomes constitute key resources of political credibility. It is also advantageous if parties can demonstrate a proven positive record in government that shows that they are capable of governing successfully.
4. *Leadership figures:* National visibility, broad societal appeal, and the personal integrity of party leaders are decisive in building trust and enabling successful mobilisation.

These four determinants of success constitute general framework conditions for all parties in South Africa. In a further analytical step, these preconditions can be applied to democratic forces in both the centre-left and centre-right camps and can be translated into more specific strategic recommendations, thereby resulting in the overall picture presented in Figure 1.

In order for these determinants to take effect, a robust party organisation is required along with clear decision-making processes, reliable local structures, professional communication, and a realistic prospect of governing. The points outlined above – particularly factors two to four – undoubtedly also apply to other national contexts. By contrast, the first factor is highly specific to South Africa and to the country’s particular social and historical trajectory. In this regard, the enduring legacy of apartheid must be taken into account as it continues to shape social inequality and political dynamics.

Conclusion: The perspective of an integrative catch-all party of the political centre

The decline of the ANC as a long-standing governing party has led to profound fragmentation and polarisation within the South African party system while simultaneously encouraging coalition formation. Populist forces are gaining strength, whereas the political centre remains too weak to secure reliable reform majorities. Three decades after the democratic breakthrough, South Africa thus faces the central challenge of ensuring political stability and

reform capacity despite declining trust in parties and institutions.¹⁴

The largest party within the centre-right spectrum – the DA – has the potential to develop into a South African catch-all party, as described by Otto Kirchheimer – that is, a party that is capable of appealing to broad sections of the electorate beyond clear class or social milieu boundaries and thereby also of exerting an integrative effect that transcends traditional loyalties.¹⁵ Both its increasing strategic openness within the GNU – reflected in a growing willingness to contribute actively to overall governmental stability through pragmatic and compromise-oriented action – and its emphasis on integrity and good governance point in this direction. However, without a clear acknowledgement of the enduring social inequalities rooted in apartheid, the DA will remain only partially accessible to the Black majority population. As the strongest force within the centre-left camp, the ANC has largely lost its binding effect due to decades of mismanagement, corruption, and a weak governing record. At the same time, Nelson Mandela’s party has thus far proved either unwilling or unable to initiate substantive reforms that would be capable of sustainably restoring confidence in its governing competence. The future of the political centre in South Africa therefore increasingly depends on whether the DA has the courage and determination to formulate a credible offer to a diverse electorate and thereby to establish itself as a durable majority party.

– translated from German –

- 1 Detailed background information on the 2024 election – including a comprehensive analysis of the historical trajectory, the social and economic crisis prior to the vote, assessments of the election campaigns, and summaries of voter turnout – has been provided by Schulz-Herzenberg and Southall (2024, n. 2). This is the fourth study in a series on South Africa's parliamentary elections that is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung South Africa.
- 2 Schulz-Herzberg, Collette / Southall, Roger 2024: Election 2024, South Africa Countdown to Coalition, Auckland Park, pp. 232 f.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 1-270.
- 4 Bauer, Nikolaus 2024: South Africa's Easy Election Guide: Who to Vote for in 2024?, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, ESI Press, pp. 1-119, 22 Jan 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/9uqs> [17 Feb 2025].
- 5 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Voting behaviour in 2024 indicates that the ANC, EFF, and MK together achieved roughly the share of the vote that the ANC alone had secured in 1999 and 2004. Many former ANC voters thus remain within the left-wing camp in that they either support the EFF or MK or join the largest "voter group" in the country: namely that of non-voters. While the ANC is losing direct strength, the political camp that is shaped by its history and ideology remains dominant.
- 9 The term "Coloured community" in South Africa refers to a historically constructed population group of mixed ancestry that is concentrated primarily in the Western Cape. During apartheid, this community occupied an ambivalent position between discrimination and relative privilege and is still regarded today as a distinct political voter base; Encyclopædia Britannica 2026: Coloured people, 23 Jan 2026, in: <https://ogy.de/wr3c> [7 Jan 2025].
- 10 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2.
- 11 Van Onselen, Gareth 2024: Elections 2024 [15]: Mapping ANC, DA, MK and EFF support by race, Inside Politics, 24 Jun 2024, in: <https://ogy.de/4gp1> [7 Jan 2025].
- 12 Standard Bank 2025: Assessing the state of the DA, Newsletter, 6 Nov 2025.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Schulz-Herzberg / Southall 2024, n. 2, pp. 82 f.
- 15 A "catch-all party" – as conceptualised by Otto Kirchheimer – refers to a party type that emerged after the Second World War and that seeks to attract voters from as many social strata as possible rather than to represent a specific class or worldview. It is characterised by ideological moderation, vote maximisation, leadership hierarchy, and relatively weak membership ties in order to appeal to a broad centre; Krouwel, André 2003: Otto Kirchheimer and the Catch-All Party, Western European Politics 26: 2, Apr 2003, pp. 23-40, in: <https://ogy.de/pqky> [17 Jan 2026].