

**KAS-SCHOLAR
OPINION PIECE**

**The MK Party Phenomenon:
Investigating the explosive debut of South
Africa's third largest party**

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1. Background

After years of opposition and ANC-splinter parties being unable to capitalise on the failures of the ANC, the 2024 newcomer uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP), led by former President Jacob Zuma recorded the biggest gain in national assembly seats (58 out of 400), of all parties in all general elections after 1994 (Independent Electoral Commission 2024), with the runner-up being the Democratic Alliance's (then called the Democratic Party) with 31 seats gained in 1999. It also became the largest party in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Provincial Legislature with 46.25% of seats and the Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature where it was the second largest party with 17.65% of seats. This impressive election debut, is what the study will refer to as the MK Party (MKP) phenomenon. Two explanations have emerged to explain the occurrence of this phenomenon: the first argues that Zuma's popularity was the main reason for the party's success (Peyton & Hlophe 2024; Buccus 2024) and the second poses that the party successfully positioned itself as a home for the large group of disillusioned ANC voters (Booyesen 2024). However, these explanations have not been tested through substantive studying and to fill this gap, this short online article will do exactly this through the research question:

Why did the MK Party receive the third most votes in the 2024 South African general election?

The following sub-questions will help in answering the research question:

- *What was the MKP's election campaign messaging platform?*
- *Who voted for the MKP?*
- *Was a vote for the MKP a vote for Zuma and/or a protest by traditional ANC voters against the ANC?*

2. Methodology

The article will be a desktop-level qualitative study that will inductively (no predetermined theoretical lenses) investigate the MKP phenomenon to mitigate against any potential bias.

2.1 Identifying the MKP campaign platform

As a result of its scope, the study will delimit itself by only focusing on the MKP campaign messaging platform in the 2024 general election and accept the wide-spread consensus that Zuma was by far the most politically credible figure within the party's platform. To do this, the study will review the targeted issues, symbolism utilised and interpretation of the social-, political- and economic- situation in South Africa in the party's campaign messaging. This will be achieved through secondary sources like its leadership speeches, the party's election manifesto, election advertisements and press releases.

2.2 Establishing who voted for the MKP and why

The second step of the study will be to map and analyse MKP voter behaviour. Collette Schulz-Herzenberg (2019: 475) showed that South Africans evaluate parties' leadership on both the provincial and national level and accordingly often vote for different parties on the two ballots. From this, it is assumed that voters connected Zuma to the MKP on the national ballot (where his face appeared next to the party too). Accordingly, the movement of national support in general elections since 2004 will be tracked to identify the overlapping of Zuma supporters and ANC voters in 2004 to 2019, with MKP voters in 2024. Again, to delimit the study and because Zuma and politicians in general, perform differently in the different provinces, the study will only look at the movement of support on the national ballots in KZN and Mpumalanga, where the MKP performed the best.

Lastly, MKP supporters will be profiled by establishing their race, home language, income, residential type and age. All of this will be done through the collection and utilisation of secondary data and secondary sources. With

all of this, the established MKP campaign platform, movement support and voter base demographics, will be matched with the proposed explanations of the MKP phenomenon to test their credibility. Using the study's findings, future research avenues will be identified and potential scenarios for the MKP's future electoral performance will be presented.

3. Taking back the people's fight

In his address on the 16th of December 2023, Zuma announced that he would not be campaigning for the ANC and would vote for the MKP. The announcement document, distributed by the JG Zuma Foundation, is a demonization of the ANC in its current state ("ANC of Ramaphosa") as a captured organisation. The ANC's capture and inability to achieve social and economic transformation is poised as a betrayal of the organisation's history and responsibility as the leader of the struggle for social and economic transformation. Zuma argues a need for a renewed fight for the liberation of the marginalised in South Africa and that the MKP will fulfil this need.

The MKP's "The People's Mandate" election manifesto presents eight pillars to address the failed post-apartheid reconstruction under a liberal constitution (MK Party 2024a). These are: 1. Reclaiming the African -culture and -values, 2. Reclaiming previously stolen land and resources, 3. Reclaiming government and traditional leaders' power, 4. Reclaiming the economy from neoliberal market policies, 5. Building South Africa's human capital and technological capabilities, 6. Reclaiming housing and public transport, 7. Reclaiming the safety and security of South Africans and 8. Reclaiming the sovereignty and international position of South Africa. Throughout these pillars, the proposed steps to achieving them are underpinned by increased nationalisation, limiting private and foreign ownership in key economic sectors, the centralisation of power, increasing the importance of traditional social

institutions, the redistribution of resources and the expansion of the social welfare state.

The MKP's campaign slogan, found on most of its campaigning material was "Mayibuye!", an isiXhosa word meaning "may it return" or "may it be restored". Corinne Sandwith (2024) explains the historical symbolism of the word as a liberation rallying cry from as far back as the early 1920s in South Africa, deeply connected to the black struggle and the ANC. This historical struggle symbolism is similarly present in the party's name and connection to the uMkhonto weSizwe military wing of the ANC (South African History Online 2024).

The MKP's press statements were filled with a mix of: 1. general political matters like addressing the organisation's structure and commenting on events in the political landscape and 2. the same political issues raised in Zuma's 16th December speech (Mutsila 2023) and the party's manifesto. Using Atlas.ti to thematically code sentences in Zuma's speech, the party's manifesto and its press statements leading up to the election (MK Party 2024b), the top issues focused on by the MKP's campaign messaging, in order of frequency, was: social justice/injustice, inequality, corruption, economic development, social issues, education, colonialism, nationalism and empowerment.

It can then be concluded that there is a clear golden thread through the MKP's campaign messaging, that formed its campaign platform. The MKP ran on the call to take back and restore the people's fight against social- and economic- injustice, incurred under colonialism and apartheid and which has failed miserably after being captured by corrupt liberal forces, led by President Cyril Ramaphosa and white monopoly capital.

4. Tracking voter movements

KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) National Election Results						
	ANC	IFP	DA	EFF	NFP	MKP
2004	47,47%	34,87%	10%			
2009	+16,50%	-14,35%	+0,33%			
2014	+1,34%	-10,35%	+3,02%	1,97%	6,43%	
2019	-9,84%	+4,41%	+0,89%	+7,99%	-4,99%	
2024	-38,05%	+2,70%	-0,67%	-7,49%	-0,90%	45,35%
2024	17,42%	17,28%	13,57%	2,47%	0,54%	45,35%

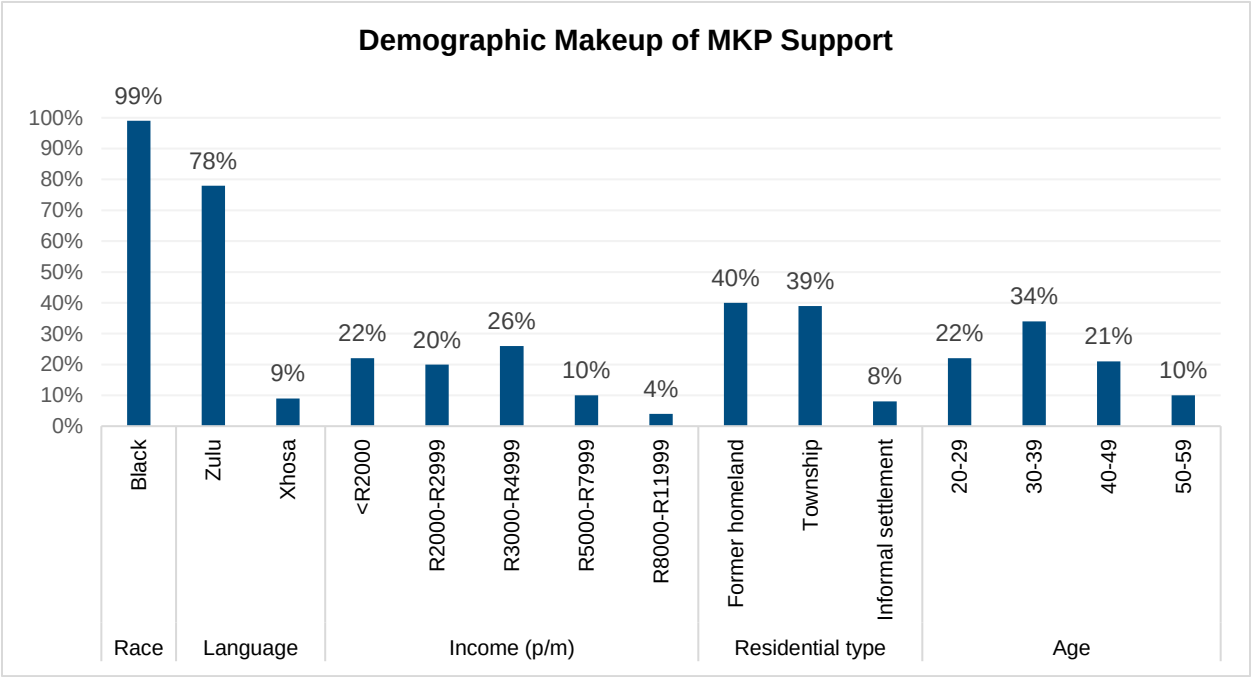
Figure 1: KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) national election results from 2004 to 2024 (Independent Electoral Commission 2024), with the coloured cells showcasing the change in support compared to the previous year. Note: The EFF and NFP only debuted in 2014 and the MKP in 2024.

Tracking the movement of support between the 2009 and 2024 national election results in KZN (see Figure 1), it is firstly clear that the vast majority of the MKP's 45,35% share of support in 2024 was taken from the ANC which experienced a decrease of 38.05% and followed by the EFF, with its 7.49% decrease. During Zuma's leadership of the ANC in the 2009 general election, the party's support in KZN increased by 16.5%, which was largely taken from the IFP whose support decreased by 14.35%. In 2014 with Zuma still at the helm, the party again increased its support by a much less impressive (on the surface) 1.34%. However, the support gained by die DA, EFF and NFP (combined 11.42%) could not have solely come from the IFP (10.35% decrease), meaning the ANC under Zuma in 2014 grew its aggregate support even after losing voters to the DA and EFF (with the NFP likely only taking its support from the IFP from which it split).

Mpumalanga National Election Results					
	ANC	DA	VF+	EFF	MKP
2004	86,34%	7,17%	1,06%		
2009	-0,53%	+0,43%	-0,23%		
2014	-7,01%	+2,44%	+0,02%	6,15%	
2019	-6,57%	-0,92%	+1,81%	+5,36%	
2024	-20,65%	+2,78%	-1,20%	+1,86%	17,02%
2024	51,58%	12,02%	1,53%	13,87%	17,02%

Figure 2: Mpumalanga national election results from 2004 to 2024 (Independent Electoral Commission 2024), with the coloured cells showcasing the change in a party’s support compared to the previous year. Note: The EFF only debuted in 2014 and the MKP in 2024.

In contrast to support following Zuma in KZN, there seems to be no disruptions based on the ANC’s leadership in the trend of support for the ANC in Mpumalanga under Zuma in 2009 and 2014 and Ramaphosa in 2019 (see Figure 2), with a continuous trend of decreasing support and most of it lost to the EFF after its debut in 2014. However, there is a major crash in support for the ANC in 2024 with a 20,65% decrease in votes on the national ballot and the vast majority of the lost support going to the debutant MKP (received 17,02%).



5. The MKP voter

Figure 3: The demographic makeup of the MKP’s supporters. Focusing on the largest subgroupings that encompass more than 80% of its supporters (Social Research Foundation 2024a 2024b 2024c 2024d 2024e).

The Social Research Foundation's recent survey of 7196 registered voters between April and May 2024 with a 2% margin of error, provides a clear picture of the MKP's supporters. MKP supporters are almost exclusively black (99%) and more than three quarter's home language is Zulu (78%). 68% of MKP supporters fall below the country's median monthly income of R5200 (Statistics South Africa 2024) and the vast majority (87%) of its supporters live in rural areas. Lastly, the age distribution of MKP supporters is relatively even, with the largest subgroup of 30–39 years old making up a third of the party's support.

6. Analysis

Accordingly, bringing together the MKP's campaign platform, the observed movement of support in KZN and Mpumalanga and the demographic makeup of the MKP's support shows that explanations of the MKP phenomenon as voters merely following Zuma are insufficient. While there is a trend of support following Zuma's leadership in KZN, it does not necessarily account for the level of support gained by the MKP at 45.35% when the ANC under Zuma's leadership only grew by 17.84% and only decreased by 9,84% under Ramaphosa in 2019. Additionally in Mpumalanga, there is no such trend, leaving the Zuma followers explanation largely unsubstantiated by the movement of support.

However, the explanation of disillusioned ANC voters moving to the MKP remains intact. The MKP's campaign platform of taking back the people's fight against economic- and social injustice- from a captured ANC, perfectly positioned the party as a home for disillusioned ANC voters. This could also explain the level of support the MKP received in KZN and why it successfully penetrated Mpumalanga too. Furthermore, the demographics of MKP supporters fits into this explanation and why its campaign platform resonated with these voters. The average MKP supporter is black, with a median income

lower than the national average, that lives in a rural area and is younger than 40 years old (Social Research Foundation 2024d). Therefore, the average MKP supporter was younger than 11 years old when Apartheid ended and would have less nostalgia for the ANC's liberation days and therefore less partisan than the generation of their parents. Yet still, they inherited the economic- and social- burdens inflicted by Apartheid and left unresolved under the ANC.

This article suggests then, that the average MKP supporter used to support the ANC (with most of the MKP's support coming from the ANC) but became disillusioned as a result of its mounting failures to deliver economic- and social- justice post-apartheid and found the MKP's campaign platform, backed by the political credibility of Zuma, to resonate with them.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the explanation of the MKP phenomenon as Zuma supporters following him does not hold. However, it is clear that the MKP's campaign platform, the way the party portrayed the contemporary state of social and economic South Africa and the use of symbolism, together with the political credibility of Zuma's leadership, perfectly positioned the party as a home for the large number of voters who had grown disillusioned with the ANC at the helm of social- and economic- liberation.

a) Future elections

Recent by-elections results for the MKP have showed serious inconsistencies, with the party failing to win wards where they took first place in the 2024 general election (Sussman 2024a), but winning wards in traditional ANC strongholds like the North West (Sussman 2024b). However, the list of political stalwarts that have joined MKP after its explosive election debut is extensive and growing, including names like: former Deputy President of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Floyd Shivambu, the former Public Protector, Busisiwe

Mkhwebane and former KZN Premier, Willies Mchunu (Radebe 2024). These names should bring plenty more political credibility to the party. The party also has newfound political ammo as the official opposition Nationally and in KZN and Mpumalanga. If used effectively, it can suppress support for the governing parties by framing and publicly cross examining their performance.

The MKP's by-election inconsistencies could be a sign of weak grassroots organisation, which is crucial to the upcoming 2026 local government elections where half of municipal seats are won through first-past-the-post¹ ward elections, where parties need to field locally appealing candidates. While new members with substantial national political credibility and its official opposition status could play well into the 2029 general elections, their utility is less applicable to the local level and in convincing voters looking for candidates to address their local issues. With this peculiar threat to the MKP's electoral future, it poached Floyd Shivambu and employed him as its national organiser, with his decades of experience at the EFF, which itself surpassed its national support levels from its debut in the 2014 general elections to the 2016 local elections. This was well calculated, showing a serious understanding of what's needed for the upcoming local elections, leading to the conclusion that the party's support levels should remain stable from 2024 to 2026.

¹ Meaning, only the party with the most votes in a ward, gets its seat.

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