

## **South Africa's Elections 2014: More than more of the same?**

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On 7 May 2014, less than half a year after the death of Nelson Mandela, South Africans elected for the fourth time since 1994 the national parliament and the provincial governments. In a generally relaxed climate, all seemed well in the rainbow nation. Most parties welcomed the results. But had they and the people reasons for optimism? South Africa's 'unfinished liberation' (Beresford 2014), in combination with the neo-patrimonial politics in the ANC (Lodge 2014), invited for explorations to which extent politics and governance under the ANC would put democracy at risk (Southall 2014a and 2014b). This Briefing cannot engage with the more fundamental issues at stake, but offers little comfort.

### **Before the Elections**

On Sunday (4 May) the African National Congress (ANC) held its final rally in the Johannesburg FNB stadium, which had been the arena for the public ceremony commemorating Nelson Mandela in December 2013. Then jeered and booed at by the crowd, precautionary measures were taken to protect the party president and head of state Jacob Zuma from a similar embarrassment. Those in the fully occupied 95,000-seater venue were recruited and scrutinized by party cadres to eliminate another humiliating experience.

Frustration over a lack of delivery had been growing during Zuma's first term in office, which made him the hitherto most unpopular president in democratic South Africa. On 2 May the Durban based shack dweller movement Abahlali baseMjondolo asked his almost 30,000 members to cast a 'tactical vote' for the Democratic Alliance (DA) to teach the ANC a lesson. Another much discussed initiative was the 'Vote No' campaign initiated by former Security Minister Ronnie Kasrils. It mobilized for either voting for one of the small parties or spoiling the ballot paper to remind the ANC that it needed to return to practices guided by its original values and principles (Kasrils 2014).

Ahead of Election Day President Zuma for the first time expressed himself on the controversial "Nkandlagate". The scandal had disclosed large public funds being pumped into a private retirement residence for Zuma and his family as an abuse of

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government authority and taxpayers money. Speaking at a press conference on 5 May, Zuma dismissed allegations to be personally involved in the dubious transactions. He was confident that this was an issue for the media and the opposition, but not for the supporters of the ANC (City Press 2014). He claimed this will not 'affect how they vote. This is an issue raised by bright people [those who think they know better].' (Letsoalo 2014)

But for many, the choice had already been to opt out of the voting game. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) had announced an overall registration level of 81% among the voting age population (VAP) of 18 years and older. This was however based on the 2011 census figures of 31.4 million. In contrast, the 2013 population estimates suggested some 1.3 million more people (32.7 million) in the eligible age group. Based on the adjusted data, 78% of the VAP had actually registered (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014: 21)..

While the ANC and the DA focused on their employment creation policies as a major campaign theme, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) issued a statement on 5 May. It endorsed the 'Vote No' campaign and called on its members to vote for any of the small parties, but not the DA, or to spoil their votes. While it distanced itself from the decision of the shack dwellers' movement to make a 'tactical vote' for the DA, UPM defended the right to make such a controversial shift and stressed the need for 'a serious and respectful conversation among all left forces about strategy and tactics for the long struggle ahead' (UPM 2014).

'The battle for the future commences', commented the director of the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG): 'Just 20 years after the vast majority of South Africans won the franchise, the public broadcaster, the print media and the Independent Electoral Commission are now reduced to begging people to vote. It's not Kasrils and his cohorts who are spoiling the vote, it's the ANC and all the parties of the elite.' (Gentle 2014)

### **During the Elections**

Only few violent incidents were reported during the day and night of 7 May, and even the "hot spots" turned out to be characterized by what could be called an orderly conduct. Considering the violent trajectory in the torn apart country marred by racial and occasional ethnic divisions, with politically motivated killings still a regular occurrence, this suggested a true "rainbow nation" spirit. But behind the peaceful façade another reality was hardly acknowledged by the media (Poplak 2014).

Polling stations closed at 9 pm. As from midnight the first results trickled in, and updates were reported live in the national television broadcasters since the early morning hours. With 95% of the votes counted by early Friday morning (9 May) the IEC expected the final results during the afternoon. This was rather wishful thinking. Irritation caused the discovery of dumped ballot papers from a polling station in Pretoria and a similar incidence in Alexandra. Reportedly in both cases the votes were previously counted and the final results authorized by the party observers. A disaster in

the case of a necessary recount was thereby averted. But it remained a much-discussed embarrassment for the IEC, whose performance was far from being flawless. A more serious concern emerged when the news broke that the vote counting in Gauteng had come to a grinding standstill on Thursday evening. This frustrated the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which had high expectations for their performance in the capital(ist) center of the mining industry. 'At exactly 17H59, the ANC was at 50.21% of the Gauteng vote and immediately after that, the Gauteng results started to slow down and almost came to an absolute halt because the ANC was heading towards below 50% of the Gauteng vote', the EFF (2014) stated. As from the early morning hours of Friday, however, the Gauteng vote count picked up momentum and the ANC increased the above 50% level by cruising into a more comforting zone of 52 plus percent.

When voting discrepancies between the IEC vote count announced and the audited count by election observers were reported from some polling stations in Gauteng and the Western Cape the legitimacy of the exercise was for another moment at risk (Pillay 2014a). By Saturday morning the EFF considered to launch an official objection. During the early afternoon, however, party leader Julius Malema declared in a statement, 'whatever shenanigans they did we accept, it's part of the school fees you pay. There are no perfect elections. We don't want a civil war, we don't want this country in ashes. We love this country of Nelson Mandela.' (Pillay 2014b) On early Saturday evening, IEC chairperson Pansy Tlakula could announce the official election end result.<sup>1</sup>

## **Election Results**

There were no big surprises when it came to the distribution of the 400 seats for the national assembly among 13 out of 29 competing parties (for details see the table). The ANC remained the dominant party with minor losses, The DA was strengthened as the official opposition and the EFF became a third force. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had to share votes with its breakaway National Freedom Party (NFP).

While the IFP under the aging autocratic Mangosuthu Buthelezi faces a bleak future, it remains to be seen to which extent the EFF can consolidate its status. Hitherto the new kids on the bloc - think of the Congress of the People (COPE) - lasted hardly longer than just one legislative period. The COPE's support base seemingly had returned to the ANC, which compensated for some of the losses to the EFF and the DA. Mamphele Ramphele's newly created AGANG does not have to bother about the future: with just two seats in parliament her party turned out to be a stillborn child. Ramphele finally even opted out of accepting a mandate in parliament, ending her political career before it had really started. In contrast, Bantu Holomisa expressed relief that his United Democratic Movement (UDM) survived. The worse results five years ago suggested that they were to be written off from the parliamentary scene. Eight of the 13 parties in parliament received less votes than those spoilt. They are the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the UDM, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), COPE and the African Independent Congress (AIC), AGANG, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African People's Convention (APC).

*Official results for the parties voted into parliament*

<i>Party</i>	<i>Votes</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Seats</i>
ANC	11,436,921	62.15%	249
DA	4,091,584	22.23%	89
EFF	1,169,259	6.35%	25
IFP	441,854	2.40%	10
NFP	288,742	1.57%	6
UDM	184,636	1.00%	4
VF PLUS	165,715	0.90%	4
COPE	123,235	0.67%	3
ACDP	104,039	0.57%	3
AIC	97,642	0.53%	3
AGANG SA	52,350	0.28%	2
PAC	37,784	0.21%	1
APC	30,676	0.17%	1

The 'Vote No' campaigners considered their mission as accomplished, given that the more than 250,000 spoilt votes would place them as the sixth biggest party. Spokesperson Louise Colvin commented: 'Given our history and the deep seated loyalty South Africans have for the proud liberation movement, we believe these elections mark a turning point where voters are prepared to shift from voting for a party to voting to strengthen the opposition.' (Mail & Guardian 2014) This interpretation bordered to the usual party-political declamatory routines. After all, the number of spoilt ballot papers was not significantly higher than in the previous election. It more so seems that despite these optimistic tones the fundamental protest failed to achieve the intended effect. If it would not be for the EFF, South African politics would remain largely business as usual. Minor shifts in the power balance on the level of some provincial authorities, however, promise a possible battleground for future control in some municipalities during the next local elections (particularly in parts of the Eastern Cape).

The DA failed to replace the ANC as provincial government in Gauteng, but increased its votes by almost half to over 30%. Gauteng, with a growing black middle class might well emerge as the next serious arena (Everett 2014), given that this middle class is a new factor (Friedman 2014). The DA also became the official opposition in KwaZulu Natal thanks to the IFP-NFP split of votes. Equally comforting for the party was the consolidation of the Western Cape stronghold with more than 56%. But the EFF replaced the DA as the official opposition in its stronghold provinces of Limpopo and North West, and secured a two-digit result in Gauteng.

While the ANC maintained its dominance, the Gauteng vote – just like some results elsewhere - at a closer look did not confirm anything close to a bright performance. This

election has not been another rubber-stamping exercise. There are signals of a shifting ground. While the ANC appeared confident to have survived the range of scandals and in-fights unharmed, it has no reasons for complacency. The dissenting voices from the grassroots were louder and more radical than ever before.

### After the Elections

The attention now focuses on the possible emergence of a new left party (de Wet 2014) seeking to attract support from parts of the former tripartite alliance of the ANC, the South African Communist Party and in particular the frustrated segments of the internally divided Congress of South African Trade Unions (Bond 2014). But the positioning of the EFF and the expectations of its supporters will be a contributing factor, given that the EFF is not the firm alternative it claims to be: ‘Once the dust of electoral slogans has settled one could imagine that the EFF accepts deals with the ANC, and probably quite easy so with a leader like Malema who seems not to be bound by ideological principles.’ (Wehmhörner 2014: 6)

Despite the relief over the smooth elections, which allow South Africa to maintain its international reputation, the social divide and the gross inequalities do not go away. Nor does the large-scale self-enrichment of a new (and old) elite evaporate and disappear. The problems are not closer to a solution, and the antagonisms of a crude class society with extreme income discrepancies, spiced with a grain of (at times not so) sublime racism as a residual category for policy-makers, have not been reduced.

Finally, there is another, hidden story, documented by a noteworthy drop in the voter turn out over the last 20 years. One quarter of those registered for the 2014 elections did not go to the polls and a quarter million of voters spoiled the ballots. Put into proportion with the VAP the picture looks even bleaker in terms of proportional support to the ANC (Schulz-Herzenberg 2014: 25):

	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
Estimated VAP	22.7m	22.6m	27.4m	29.9m	32.7m
VAP registered	n.a.	80.4%	75.4%	77.4%	77.7%
Voter turnout	n.a.	89.3%	76.7%	77.3%	73.5%
VAP turnout	86.0%	71.8%	57.8%	59.8%	57.1%
Valid ANC votes	62.6%	66.4%	69.7%	65.9%	62.2%
VAP ANC vote	53.8%	46.9%	39.6%	38.8%	35.0%
VAP opposition vote	32.1%	23.7%	17.2%	20.1%	21.3%
Abstaining votes	14.0%	28.2%	42.2%	40.2%	43.0%

Engel (2014) suggests that ‘adjusted figures would show that the ANC in fact had lost 10.41 per cent of its 2009 votes, and the DA had gained by 26.77 per cent.’ But the biggest portion among the electorate remains those, who did not bother to vote for any of the parties. Notwithstanding this trend, President Zuma welcomed the results as ‘reaffirmation that South Africa indeed has a good story to tell’ (Mataboge 2014). But the ‘good story’ might only be, as Wehmhörner (2014: 2) suggests, that the social

milieus defined 'by race and its apartheid past change slowly and do not yet allow for large swings in electoral patterns'. Dale McKinley (2014) put the record straight:

the almost 13 million who decided not to participate in the 2014 elections (whether registered or not) are effectively airbrushed from the picture, while the 11,5 million who voted for the ANC become 'the people'. Stalin would be smiling approvingly. (...) In his post-election speech President Zuma stated that the ANC's electoral victory represents an 'overwhelming mandate from our people ... and reaffirms that the ANC remains the only true hope for the majority of our people'. Clearly, he and his organisation have not read the whole story.

The two stories one can read into the elections, i.e. the victory for the ANC contrasting with a gradual erosion of legitimacy through a stronger opposition and those not participating in the voting act, illustrate the fundamental divide in South African society. Outside observers might have concluded that national and provincial elections are not a big deal for South Africans. This might be an oversight of what is really going on at the grassroots. As observed by Richard Poplak (2014), who was in Alexandra the night when the ballot boxes went temporarily missing, 'the fact that we are all fellow citizens united by democratic expression doesn't seem to mean much. For the men standing by the fire, the only ballots that speak are those that were not counted.'

The Friday during the election-week (9 May) happened to mark the tenth anniversary of the drug related death of the 39-year old singer Brenda Fassie. The "Queen of Pop" was despite (or maybe also because of) her non-conformist behavior an icon in democratic South Africa. Her songs and video clips were repeatedly broadcasted during the election reporting. South Africans might well have danced and sung along to the tunes of "MaBrrr", as she was fondly called, but more so as an act of resilience and perseverance (which "MaBrrr" kind of symbolized in her short and excessive life too) than as signs of joy and relief. – An act of defiance by people, who do not abandon hope for the future but brave the challenges of life with laughter instead of tears. They might need this attitude to survive. As an opinion article commenting on the new cabinet concluded: 'Hold on to your seats. Zuma's second term promises to be as bumpy a ride as his first.' (Qobo/Draper 2014) But while Zuma's party leadership could be perceived as 'electoral liability' (Southall 2014c), Phiri (2014) offered a warning reminder that who ever would replace Zuma 'operates within relationships and structures that have enabled abuse to become well-established'. – The platinum miners on strike since several months into 2014 would most likely - as so many other South Africans threatened by or living in destitution - have absolutely no reason to question this sobering conclusion. At the end, elections in 2014 as much as in 1994 were mainly about the composition of a team of players in what can be termed an elite pact, which induced controlled change – and resulted in changed control.

### **Note on Contributor**

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Full details on the national and provincial voting figures are accessible at the IEC web page: <http://www.elections.org.za/resultsNPE2014/>.