

South Africa's 2014 Elections: A Signpost Rather than a Turning Point

Written by Stephen Grootes

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STEPHEN GROOTES, APR 4 2014

South Africa's May 7th elections are expected to be the most exciting since the African National Congress (ANC) became the country's government in 1994. The number of opposition voices has grown, the "liberation dividend" that the ruling ANC received after being the major force for freedom during Apartheid is waning, and the government of President Jacob Zuma is mired in scandal. However, this election may prove to be only a signpost towards what could be bigger changes in the elections of 2019.

To say that politics in South Africa have always been dominated, to an extent, by the country's racial history is almost stating the obvious. While some claim Apartheid "ended" in 1994, its impact on society was so huge that most South Africans still live with it today. Most black people are poorer than most white people, and thus have less access to higher education and opportunities, more generally. At the same time, white people fear they could lose their property and their place of prominence in society.

Between these two groups, South Africa now has a growing black middle class. These are people who almost see both sides of things: they have property and position to protect, and they also suffered under Apartheid. It is this group that is currently the hardest fought battleground for votes in 2014.

The ANC is very popular in rural areas and among poorer parts of the population. It has a very capable election campaign machine and is the only organisation with a truly national reach. There is only one small town where it cannot be out-campaigned. On election day, its network of branches and regions will work hard to get out the vote of people known to be ANC supporters.

For many of these people, the ANC does, as Zuma likes to put it, "have a good story to tell.". Roads have been tarred, schools have been built, electricity and toilets have been installed, and social grants have been paid. Life is immeasurably better, compared to 1994. Quite rationally, this has been the focus of the ANC's campaign: life is better, and will continue to get better, under the ANC.

However, within the more urban areas – where people tend to consume their politics mediated through the media, rather than through ANC branch meetings – the ANC's image has been tainted by scandal. In particular, the image of Zuma himself has taken a beating. Last year, the Gupta family, known to be close to Zuma, landed a jet of guests at South Africa's air force base and proudly told radio reporters they were there for a wedding. They had flouted all laws regarding the use of a military base, and it turned out they had not gone through passport control, either. No senior officials were strongly punished, amid claims they were all protected by Zuma.

But the hardest part for the ANC has been the continuing Nkandla scandal. Nkandla is an area of Kwa-Zulu/Natal, where Zuma has built a large residence for himself and his family (he is polygamous, has four wives, and will not confirm how many children he has, but he is thought to have at least twenty). A report by the Public Protector found that huge amounts of government money were spent on the property in the name of "security upgrades." Some of these, like a "firepool reservoir" (complete with pool cleaner) and an amphitheater, have become the butt of jokes within South African popular culture. The ANC's response has been to protect Zuma, despite some of its veteran

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leaders sharply criticising his behaviour.

This has allowed the main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), to claim Zuma “stole” government money and heads a corrupt administration. While the DA appears to have solid support among the country’s minority groups (particularly among white voters), its main aim is to make a breakthrough into the black, urban, middle-class constituency. To do this, it has put forward several strong, young, black candidates. While Helen Zille (who is white and the premier of the Western Cape, the one province controlled by the DA) is the party’s main media symbol, Mmusi Maimane is its candidate for premier of Gauteng. As a result, it is he who is most often quoted in the media. He has modeled his campaign on U.S. President Barak Obama’s 2008 election victory, with a very similar speaking style and large, well-orchestrated rallies.

The other opposition party that appears to be gaining traction is the newly formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Formed just last year by Julius Malema (who was expelled from the ANC after leading its Youth League), the EFF has been preaching a radical economic message, promising to take land from whites, nationalise huge swathes of the economy, and push for quicker change. Malema appears to be popular among younger people, particularly unemployed men, who sport his red beret symbol in many urban areas. However, he does not have the structure and machinery of the DA and ANC, which will count against him on election day. He is also facing serious criminal charges, relating to the alleged manipulation of provincial government tenders in Limpopo when he was still with the ANC. That said, he has campaigned heavily in Marikana, after an incident where forty-two people died following the shooting of police by striking mineworkers. He is very strong in this area, which appears to be denied to the ANC.

At this stage, the ANC is guaranteed to claim victory this year, but the size of its majority could change. It won just under 66% in 2009, and it seems likely to regain over 60% of the vote this year. The DA seems likely to increase its share from around 16% to perhaps over 20%. Predictions for the EFF range from 1% to 10%, depending on whom you ask.

The rest of the votes will be taken up by smaller parties. Their share has been decreasing consistently over the last ten years. Parties like the Inkhata Freedom Party and the United Democratic Movement have become small organisations, campaigning among certain language groups. These parties seem likely to lose more votes this year.

Strange as it may seem, 2014 may not be remembered in South Africa for an election, but for a bigger story currently playing out. The Congress of South African Trade Unions, the biggest political organisation in the country, which has always strongly supported the ANC, is currently going through a process of splitting. Most people – including the ANC, it seems – believe that a new “workers’ party” will form out of that split. Should that happen, that new formation could be a very real contender to put the ANC under pressure in the 2019 elections.

This means the 2014 elections could be the last that see the main contest as one between just the ANC and the DA.

About the author:

Stephen Grootes is the senior political reporter for Eyewitness News, the host of the Midday Report on Talk Radio 702 and 567 Cape Talk, and a political writer for Daily Maverick. He has covered politics in South Africa for nearly ten years, with a special focus on the ANC, and has daily contact with the country’s decision-makers. He is the author of *S.A. Politics Unspun*.