

ANC's crushing electoral defeat

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South Africa is in the throes of a deepening political and social crisis. The precipitous electoral loss of the African National Congress (ANC) by a whopping 17 percentage points, from 57% to 40% in general elections held on 29 May 2024, was a signal of this deepening political and social crisis. It was a decisive rejection of the ANC by voters, following the ANC's political dominance for 30 years, during which the ANC presided over a neoliberal economic development that wrought dire development outcomes such as a high level of unemployment, massive poverty, huge income and wealth inequality, rural and urban underdevelopment and poor delivery of basic public services by the state. This was accompanied by a widespread corruption within the state, leading to a decline of confidence in public institutions.

The voters have rejected the ANC for its neoliberal development project and its wide spread corruption within the state in the last 30 years. But voters did not vote for a party to succeed the ANC as a ruling party; even worse, they did not vote for parties that will help exit the deepening neoliberal crisis. The viable alternatives that are needed to exit the neoliberal crisis cannot be found among mainstream parties. That's why South Africa is in the throes of a deepening political and social crisis.

Going into this election, it was largely expected that ANC was to fall below 50%. That is a big dynamic of this election because it implies the break of the ANC's 30-years-long dominance of electoral politics, since the official fall of apartheid in 1994.

Political Shockwaves

Most survey polls before the elections were putting ANC at 45%, tending toward 40%. But then the general expectation was that the ANC was going to get anything between 45% to 50%. In that case, forming a coalition government would not be such a nightmare because they would simply pick up small parties to patch up to get 50% plus. Now that the fall is so steep at 40%, shockwaves have been sent throughout the political system in South Africa.

Another big shocker of this election was the spectacular performance by former President, Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party [not to be confused with the military wing of the ANC], just after six months after its formation. MK won 14.58% of the national vote, and received 45% in Kwazulu-Natal province, which is the second largest province where some 20% of the SA population lives. They also registered significant electoral victories in Gauteng, the province with the largest share(24%) of the population, and in Mpumalanga where they won 17% of the provincial vote, bringing the ANC down from 70% to 51%. MK's surge definitely happened at the expense of the ANC, because they share the same electoral base with the ANC. MK is a splinter party that was formed by Jacob Zuma, a former president of the ANC and the country, who enjoys large popularity among ANC members and supporters, despite being corrupt and conservative.

This article analyses the political and social dynamics that set the context for the ANC's crushing electoral defeat and the implications of the election results for the realignment of political and social forces.

Why Did the ANC Dominate for 30 years, Without a Challenge?

The first democratic election of April 1994 was a victory of the national liberation struggle over apartheid. Led by Nelson Mandela, the ANC won the 1994 election by a landslide victory of 62 % and earned the mantle of being the sole party of national liberation, with a mandate to lead the people to the promised land of a truly liberated South Africa, where there is “a better life for all.” The ANC earned the sole mantle of being a party of national liberation because other liberation movements that fought in the struggle against apartheid, alongside the ANC, had significantly weakened by 1994 and never revived the post-apartheid South Africa.



From the 1980s into early 1990s, the ANC succeeded in inserting itself within and allying itself with major mass movements of the anti-apartheid historical bloc, organised around the United Democratic Front, which included hundreds of affiliates drawn from the youth and students movements, the civics, trade unions, the women's movement, church organisations, sports organisations etc. In a way, the ANC succeeded in establishing itself as the leader of a powerful anti-apartheid historical bloc going into 1994 and beyond. So, for the first 15 years, even up to 20 years, of the last 30 years, the ANC enjoyed large active support, deriving from the legitimacy it had as a governing party of national liberation, following the fall of apartheid. Thus, it was difficult to effectively challenge the ANC from outside.

However, these mass movements allied to the ANC were autonomous and often challenged the ANC leadership when it was necessary. For instance, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) fiercely challenged the ANC when it adopted a neoliberal macroeconomic policy, Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1996. It was GEAR that significantly consolidated the neoliberal restructuring of the economy in post-apartheid South Africa from a coherent policy framework.

By 1999, the ANC succeeded in co-opting a considerable number of the leading personnel of mass movements into government and business positions, through affirmative action and black economic empowerment schemes. Civics were no longer independent social movements of residents organised within the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), they had now joined the ANC led alliance with the South African Communist Party and Cosatu, to make it tripartite plus one. Once the leadership of mass movements was co-opted by the ruling ANC, and their autonomy was lost, these mass movements eventually collapsed into the ANC fold, leading to the dissolution of the anti-apartheid historical bloc in the early 2000s.

Thirty years is certainly a long enough period to fail, trying to pursue a development strategy and trying again, and again, until you succeed. But with the ANC, the failure has been dismal because they were not committed to any sovereign radical development project. Instead, they succumbed fully to the dominant neoliberal development philosophy that allots a decisive role to market forces.

As the neoliberal crisis, of dire development outcomes combined with widespread corruption within the state, was reaching maturity around 2009, the ANC's legitimacy started to seriously erode. At this stage, the transformation of the of the ANC from a leftist national liberation movement into a centrist neoliberal party had come full circle, with the ANC fully established as an agency of neoliberal economic development and a link to international finance capital. To this you add the widespread corruption of the ANC that was already running very deep within the state.

Thus, from 2009, when Zuma who is associated with the worst forms of corruption, ascended to presidency, the ANC electoral decline has been irreversible. They declined from 69.69% in 2004 to 65.90% in 2009, to 62.10% in 2014, down to 57.50% in 2019. As you can see though the decline has been a solid trajectory, it was with smaller margins of 3.79 and 3.80 to 4.60 percentage points. That is why this election's crushing defeat of 17 percentage points, from 230 seats to 159 seats in the National Assembly, has shocked them to the core. It caught them off guard; whilst dreaming in their slumber about their self-convinced eternal dominant might; "the glorious movement" as they are fond of referring to the ANC.

What could have halted and reversed this decline, is a genuine renewal of the ANC to rid itself of corruption and pursue a genuinely meaningful social transformation that fulfils the promise of a better life for all, by redistributing income and wealth in favour of the black majority, extending social wage to include a basic income, pursuing a sovereign industrial policy and improving the delivery of public services such as health, education, housing, public transport, etc.

ANC Engaged in a Fake Renewal

But sadly the ANC instead engaged in a fake renewal process; they have been pretending to be engaged in a renewal process to self-correct, since Jacob Zuma left the ANC presidency in 2017. This sham of a renewal process has made matters worse for them because they claimed they were ditching corruption and embarking on a radical economic transformation; to restructure the Reserve Bank, implement a radical land reform, and redistribute wealth and income for the benefit of the poor black majority. None of this happened, because they were never committed.

Now they are more discredited, even worse than in the Zuma years, because they don't have a Zuma and other discredited corrupt elements to scapegoat for their mess. If you want to see that did they did nothing about corruption, look no further than their list of members of parliament due to be sworn in following this election. You will see many of those implicated by a statutory commission

of inquiry into state capture and corruption (the Zondo Commission). The minister of sports and culture was arrested just a week after elections, on charges of receiving bribes worth R1.6-million (\$89,000) from a business man who received government contracts worth R400-million (\$22-million).

Worse even, their current President, Cyril Ramaphosa, whose ascent to high office was based on an anti-corruption ticket, has a big cloud hanging over his head: the Phala Phala scandal that involves the theft of a stack of cash of more than half a million U.S. dollars from his Phala Phala farm, of which the real source remains unexplained.

In November 2022, the ANC used its majority in parliament, to block the impeachment inquiry arising from serious violations and crimes by the President at Phala Phala, as established *prima facie* by the Independent Panel of two retired judges and one senior advocate. The formal reason they advanced when they were quashing the recommended parliamentary inquiry was that the President had taken the report of the Independent Panel on review in court. Once the ANC parliamentary majority voted down the report, the President went back to court to withdraw his review on grounds that the report of the Independent Panel had become academic since parliament had rejected it. Those were pure monkey tricks of the ANC to evade accountability!

The matter of Phala Phala has now been taken to the Constitutional Court by Economic Freedom Fighters, to challenge the irrational decision of parliament by ANC majority. The EFF application has been set down for hearing in the coming months. If the court rules that parliament acted irrationally on the Phala Phala matter, and refers it back to parliament conduct impeachment inquiry that will destabilise the new Government of National Unity(GNU). More about the GNU below.

The arrest of the speaker of parliament following a R4.5-million(\$25,000) bribe scandal in April 2024, during an election period, also added fuel to the flames.

Unemployment, low growth rates, low investment levels, inequality, poverty, the poor delivery of public services including health, education and housing, and the deterioration of public infrastructure have all gotten worse since Ramaphosa took over at the 2017 ANC conference, on the back of a radical economic transformation that was going to improve the lot of the poor black masses. There are no radical policy interventions that have been put in place since Cyril took over. So both the proclaimed anti-corruption stance and radical economic policies, which are the twin pillars of the sham ANC renewal, have fallen flat.

On the contrary, we have witnessed heightened neoliberal austerity of budget cuts in important public services, including health, education, housing and roads, and on government workers' wages. Austerity has also extended to the reactionary, tight monetary policy of increasing interest rates. This is supposed to fight off inflation. But that inflation that did not come from the oversupply of money as a result of wages increases or a high consumer spending, but came from price increases by monopoly corporations and from imports due to breaks in global supply chains, following the Covid slump. This fiscal and monetary austerity has worsened the cost of living for poor families, workers and the middle classes.

The Neoliberal Crisis and the Rise Rightwing Forces Such As MK

The neoliberal crisis tends to polarize societies through inequality and other exclusive development outcomes such as unemployment, precarious labour, poverty, underdevelopment and the squeezing of the middle classes. Add to this, the discredited ruling classes (both the political and economic), a declining democracy, and the absence of a coherent radical sovereign development project to exit the impasse of the neoliberal crisis. This social decay has set the stage for the far-right and neofascist forces to rise and mobilise on the basis of social exclusion and blaming others; mainstream parties and institutions, including foreigners and other racial groups.

The lower voter turnouts over the past two elections is a sign of a declining democracy, where the voter turnout was 66% in 2019, dropping from 73% in 2014 and dropping further down to the low of 58% now in 2024. The voter turnout is has always been in the 70's, except for 1999 where it was 89%. This is worse when you include the fact that 15 million eligible voters did not bother to register to vote. This means that out of 42 million eligible voters, only 16 million turned up to vote in this election, which puts the actual voter turnout at 38%.

It is in this context of the social decay and crisis of neoliberal capitalism that rightwing populist parties such as MK, tend to gain the center stage by blaming the ruling ANC without presenting any viable alternative. Even though they use an anti-capitalist and the radical economic transformation, they don't really mean it, they only do it to mobilise the working classes and poor communities who constitute their base.

Apart from exploiting the neoliberal crisis without posing a positive vision, MK was riding on the popularity of corrupt and reactionary Jacob Zuma within the ANC base. MK tends to be more strong in the KZN and two other provinces with a significant size of Zulu ethnic communities, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. This is because Zuma is steeped in Zulu nationalism politics and cultural identity/symbolism.

However the decisive factor in MK's spectacular electoral performance is Zuma's popularity within the ANC's electoral base. That is why ANC's demolition from 54% to a low of 16.99% in KZN can only be attributed to the spectacular rise of MK, which got 45% in KZN. MK acquired a large electoral support in KZN by dispossessing the ANC because of Zuma who is popular among ANC supporters.

Despite MK's posture as a leftist party, in their manifesto, they openly declares support of conservative ideas such as giving more constitutional power to unaccountable traditional leaders and even making elected politicians subordinate to traditional leaders. They also declare that they will abolish the checks and balances that come with the current constitutional order, and replace it with an unchecked order of a parliamentary supremacy wherein "the majority" will rule unconstrained by the checks from the judiciary. They also make it clear that they will bring back the apartheid era military conscription to instill discipline in our youth.

The other rightwing populist party that was on the rise in this election is the Patriotic Alliance that won 9 seats in the National Assembly. PA is led by two ex-convicts who mobilise the mixed race communities (who make up 8.2% against the 81.4% black African) on a racialised communitarian ideology that combines with a crude ferment of xenophobia that openly calls for the expulsion of all foreigners, irrespective of their legal status.

Dilemmas of Forming Coalition Government for the ANC

Now that the ANC got 40% of the vote, the shortfall to form a government is too big. Unlike the expected 45%, in which case they would simply ask small parties into a coalition, and they would be spared the drama that comes with big parties. The three big parties-DA, EFF and MK—bring drama into coalition negotiations because of their diametrically opposed ideologies and policies.

Democratic Alliance (DA) is a liberal conservative party that is openly steeped in neoliberal policy positions that include: fiscal and monetary austerity, privatization, free trade, flexible exchange rate, cuts in public spending, tax reductions for corporates and high-income earners, deregulation of business activities, liberalisation of capital controls, labour market flexibility. They also don't support transformation policies that in the context of South Africa that are aimed at bringing about substantive social equality that do away with the legacy of apartheid and colonialism and mitigate the effects of the neoliberal crisis. These include affirmative action, land reform that transfers land to black communities, national minimum wage, workers rights, national health insurance, basic income grant.

The transformation policies that the DA opposes are mandated in the country's Constitution, so as to realise Bill of Rights and the substantive social equality through the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights.

The social base of the DA is the white community that makes up only 7.3% of the SA population (4.7 million whites out a total population of 62 million), yet they remain most economically and socially privileged and powerful racial group, 30 years after the official fall of apartheid because genuine social transformation measures that redress past imbalances and advance a better life for all, were never implemented after 1994.

The option of a coalition with the DA was initially rejected by the mass base and the left wing of the ANC, in its National Executive Committee, by the SACP and COSATU. But it was the preferred option by the ANC establishment, so they found a way to impose it from above.

The difference between ANC's neoliberalism and DA's is that the DA is open and actively committed in its articulation of neoliberal policies, whereas the ANC's embrace of neoliberalism is because their lack of a sovereign development strategy and bourgeois capitulation out of pressure from big business and finance capital. That's why the ANC still has a leftist National Democratic Revolution political strategy, even though it is inadequate, and a social wage to protect the poor from extreme poverty, even though it gets limited by budget cuts stemming the austerity fiscal policy they pursue.

The ANC could go into a coalition with Economic Freedom Fighters. The EFF has made it clear that it will not go into a coalition that has DA, this is despite their backing of the DA in local governments, following 2016 election results that did not produce outright winners, like in this 2024 elections. On the other hand, DA has also made it clear that they will not go in coalition where EFF is also a partner. This made it difficult for the ANC to have both the EFF and DA in one coalition government at the same time, thus the ANC chose the DA.

The EFF is a leftist nationalist organisation that is led by the charismatic Julius Malema, who was ANC's youth league in 2012 when he was expelled in 2012 for advocating the nationalisation of mines and expropriation of land without compensation. He, together with his fellow youth league comrade, Floyd Shivhambo, with whom he was expelled from the ANC, formed the EFF in 2013.

The EFF is typical bourgeois parliamentary party that is only interested in political office. Though they sound more radical than the ANC, they are cut from the same cloth as the ANC and are trapped in old, exhausted national liberation ideological framework. They don't have a clear left vision of challenging the neoliberal capitalism that has been developing in South Africa over the last 30 years. They are stagnating around 10% of the vote, for two successive elections now. And because they have their eyes on government office, they are becoming fatigued and frustrated with voters and venting in a way that shows the strategic limitations of left politics that purport to advance the social demands of the popular classes. The other day, Malema said they will no longer support poor communities that do not vote for them.

MK does not seem willing to participate in a coalition with the ANC. There is just too much hostility between the two.

A better coalition option for the ANC that could succeed without drama of big parties, would be working with small parties. But the ANC is not inclined toward this option. They did not go for this option because they thought ignoring the DA when it was such a highly preferred choice of big business and finance capital would be suicidal in the context of their own sworn neoliberal ideology that they have been committed to over the last 30 years.



But if the ANC was prepared to ditch neoliberalism, as their own renewal process promises, they would embark on building a sovereign economic project that would be so robust so as to withstand the shocks coming from the backlash of capital and financial markets, at least in the medium to long term. In that case the effect of the backlash would only be a temporary setback. The option of working with small parties, without the DA, remains unattractive to them not because it can't work. It can work if they change their economic policy and thinking, they have no courage and inclination to ditch neoliberalism and move toward a sovereign development project that delinks from the neoliberal global capitalism. That's why the political and social crisis is going to get worse. The ANC is simply not capable of resolving it.

The ANC has announced that they are forming a coalition with the DA as the main partner. They call this coalition a Government of National Unity. This so called GNU does not have clear a

purpose and criterion of establishment as distinct from an ordinary coalition, unlike the GNU that was constitutionally prescribed in 1994, that had a clear purpose of managing the transition to white minority rule to a democratic dispensation. The 2024 GNU is all about deals between parliamentary parties. The negotiations for this so called GNU are conducted in a veil of secrecy, the public only gets to know of the deals once they are finalised. 25 days after voting the composition of national government was yet to be announced. This has never happened before.

Alongside the GNU, they have called for a National Dialogue process—involving political parties, civil society, labour, business, and other sectors—to discuss critical challenges facing the country and develop a national social compact to enable the country to meet the aspirations of the neoliberal National Development Plan (NDP). This National Dialogue is already a nonstarter, a failure, because it seeks to enforce a neoliberal consensus based on an already failed neoliberal development strategy, the NDP itself.

In all honesty it is not a GNU, but a coalition based on a neoliberal pact that is already on shaky grounds because it cannot address the very social and political crisis that gave rise to it, within the framework of neoliberalism.

The GNU minimum programme that has been announced does not herald a break with the neoliberalism of the past 30 years. It's all neoliberal business as usual. Only revolutionary measures can help us to exit the neoliberal crisis. The ANC-DA government cannot meet that challenge. Even if the coalition will finally include EFF and more parties in the final deal to make it a grand coalition, for as long as neoliberalism is not abandoned, and replaced with audacious measures, the deep social crisis will persist and get worse. It is up to the left and popular classes to pose a radical political challenge. Without revolutionary measures such as income and wealth redistribution, state-led sovereign industrialisation with a corresponding macro-economic management that delinks from neoliberal global system, the deal-making of the political elites will deepen the social crisis instead of building national cohesion and unity.

The Way Forward From a Left Perspective: Prospects for a Left Renewal in South Africa

The left was absent in this election because it is too weak as a political force. Of course there are small left parties such as the Bolsheviks Party of South Africa and African People's Convention that participated but performed way dismally, did not get a seat in the national assembly or any of the provincial legislatures. The left will be absent in all future elections if does not rebuild strong political and social forces to pose radical alternatives on the electoral terrain and beyond. The left has to rebuild by intensifying mass struggles that advance social demands of popular classes as they build formidable mass movements. These demands are easy to articulate because the deepening neoliberal crisis has accentuated them in the dire developmental outcomes it has produced; high levels of unemployment, massive poverty, huge wealth and income inequalities, underdevelopment in rural and urban areas, the energy crisis, and the ecological crisis.

Popular classes and the left must organise and wage struggles for pressing social demands which include the basic income grant, permanent employment in public sector schemes and industries, and the delivery of quality free basic services such as housing, sanitation, water, electricity, roads, education, health, transport, and communication. These can be easily sacrificed by a version of national unity that will require respect for the markets and investors. The ANC-DA coalition means

that workers, poor communities and the unemployed must develop the capacity, means and tools to sustain their vigilance against.

The ANC crisis has become an intrinsic part of the neoliberal capitalist crisis deepening in our country and globally. A meaningful exit out of this crisis is not to renew or reform the ANC. That is not possible. The ANC has to be transcended by a social revolutionary advance in order to exit from the deepening neoliberal crisis. Mass movements waging mass struggles and registering decisive victories must be built urgently. Of course, that has to be done outside elections but then exert political weight on elections, on the basis of political victories scored before elections, not after. Failure by the left and popular classes to live up to this task and challenge will perpetuate the ruinous crisis as it gets worse.

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