

A New Democratic Era: Coalition Politics and the Decline of One-Party Dominance in South Africa

It is often argued that history tends to repeat itself, sometimes as fact, and at other times as coincidence. The political histories of India and South Africa provide compelling evidence of this assertion. Both nations endured protracted struggles against British colonialism and racial subjugation, ultimately achieving independence through the leadership of their respective liberation movements: the Indian National Congress (INC) and the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC was founded in 1912 in response to systemic racial discrimination institutionalized by colonial authorities in South Africa. Over the course of 82 years, the ANC led campaigns of resistance, ranging from nonviolent petitions to armed struggle, culminating in the end of apartheid and the country's first democratic elections in 1994 (Lodge, 2003).

Figures such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu symbolized the ANC's resilience. Its prolonged struggle, far longer than India's, underscored the brutality of apartheid and the endurance of liberation politics. Following independence, each party dominated national politics for nearly three decades, before encountering significant electoral challenges. After independence, both parties embraced democratic values while assuming political power in their respective nations. The INC and the ANC utilized their limited resources to the fullest, pursued an equidistant foreign policy, and adopted the philosophy of *Antyodaya* (upliftment of the last person) ensuring inclusive development.

An interesting coincidence lies in the fact that both parties maintained political dominance for nearly three decades after independence. In India, the Congress remained in power from 1947 until 1977, but in the 1977 general election, it lost to the opposition Janata Party. Similarly, in South Africa, the ANC retained undisputed dominance for three decades (1994-2024) after independence, in 2024 general election the party witnessed a sharp decline in seats. Following the dismantling of apartheid, the ANC swept to power in 1994, capturing nearly 63% of the vote. It maintained dominance through successive elections in 1999 (66%), 2004 (70%), 2009 (65%), and 2014 (62%), consolidating its status as South Africa's hegemonic party (Southall, 2019). The ANC's liberation legacy, coupled with its role in drafting a democratic constitution, ensured sustained public support. However, corruption, economic mismanagement, and

governance failures eroded its legitimacy. In the seventh general election of 2024, the ANC's vote share fell below 50% for the first time since independence, forcing it to rely on coalition partners to remain in power (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024)

South Africa's 2024 general election marks one of the most iconic events in the country's democratic history - a shift that marked a new beginning between ideology and political order. Since the transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has been not only the bread and butter but also the symbolic guardian of the Liberation Party. For three decades they have dominated national politics, winning parliamentary majorities and shaping the country's political landscape like an almost unstoppable political force. But the 2024 election will shatter this entire paradigm. For the first time since the inception of democracy, the ANC failed to secure an absolute majority - an outcome that reflected widespread democratic disillusionment and the growing pluralism of South African politics. The election had significant historical significance. It marked the 30th anniversary of democracy - a milestone that offered an opportunity for both celebration and introspection. The ANC sought to present itself as the custodian of the liberation struggle, with Nelson Mandela and subsequent leaders emphasising the legacy. But the reality showed that the status of the liberation struggle alone was no longer enough to address the country's deep socio-economic problems. Decades of high unemployment, memorial scandals, energy crises and backwardness had weakened the ANC's supporters. By 2024 it was clear that basing the legitimacy of the anti-apartheid struggle alone was not possible. The results of the 2024 general elections brought this erosion to the fore.

The ANC won just 40.2 percent of the national vote, translating into 159 seats in the 400-member National Assembly. In contrast, it won 57.5 percent of the vote and 230 seats in 2019 (CNBC, 2024). This was the biggest drop in its history and brought an end to its one-party dominance. Voter turnout also highlighted the prevailing disappointment. Only 58.6 percent turned out—the lowest percentage in post-apartheid South Africa (Deutsche Welle, 2024). Young voters, especially those born after 1994, felt that the promises of democracy had remained unfulfilled. Their disengagement from the electoral process was not just apathy but active disillusionment—a feeling that the democratic system itself had failed to deliver meaningful change.

Yet, voter disengagement is only part of the story. Many abstained from voting, but many others shifted allegiances and consolidated new or revived parties. The most notable example

was the rise of the Ukhonto we Sizwe (MK) party under the leadership of former president Jacob Zuma. Zuma, who resigned amid corruption allegations in 2018, made a surprise return to the political stage. Using his personal charisma, ethnic ties to the Zulu community and the language of ‘betrayal’ by the ANC leadership, Zuma mobilised millions of disaffected voters. The MK party won nearly 14 per cent of the vote and 58 parliamentary seats, snatching the ANC’s stronghold in KwaZulu-Natal. This was not just a regional shift; it was a shake-up of the ANC’s traditional electoral base, showing that historic allegiances to the liberation movement could be replaced by appeals to ethnic identity and populist discontent (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Democratic Alliance (DA) consolidated its position as the main opposition party, winning 21.8 percent of the vote and 87 seats. This performance reflected its stable support among the urban middle class, business elites and minority communities, particularly in the Western Cape, which remains its stronghold. Although the DA has long been criticised for failing to expand its base beyond minorities, its strong governance in the Western Cape strengthened its credibility in the face of the ANC's service-delivery failures. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by Julius Malema, once a staunch voice of redistribution, lost some momentum and was reduced to 9.5 percent of the vote and 39 seats. Its demands for land expropriation and nationalisation of industries remained popular among some sections of the youth, but it faced stiff competition from Zuma’s MK party in attracting protest voters. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), meanwhile, made slight gains and won 17 seats, driven by Zulu nationalist sentiment, but was overshadowed by MK’s dominance in KwaZulu-Natal (Financial Times, 2024).

Behind these political dynamics were real issues that dissatisfied voters. Unemployment remains the biggest challenge—the official rate was above 32 percent in 2024 and above 60 percent among youth. The country still has one of the highest Gini coefficients in the world, reflecting its deep inequality. The ANC, once seen as the party of redistribution, was seen as incapable of solving these economic woes. Corruption added to this dismay. The “state capture” scandal under Zuma, exposed by the Zondo commission, laid bare the deep rot in governance. Ramaphosa promised reforms, but progress has been uneven. South Africans suffered from frequent power cuts (load shedding) that crippled industry and daily life. Water crises, crumbling infrastructure and violence in many areas exposed the state's incompetence. The ANC was punished for these failures, while opposition parties rallied support by promising

better governance. Zuma's MK party, in particular, presented these problems not as a mere failure of capacity but as a betrayal of the liberation legacy.

The symbolic importance of the 2024 election went beyond the numbers. It signalled a generational shift. For older voters the ANC was still the party of Mandela and struggle. But for the young, who have only seen post-apartheid life, the ANC was only the ruling party—and associated with its failures. This generational shift explains the nostalgia and the rise of alternative appeals like MK, which presents populist politics as a form of resistance against the ‘established order’.

Analytically, the 2024 election reflects a crisis of both legitimacy and participation in South Africa’s democracy. Legitimacy eroded because the ANC could no longer claim a majority. Participation declined because citizens distanced themselves, even as some sought alternatives. But these crises also contain the seeds of renewal. Fragmentation of power ensures that no single party can monopolise the state. Coalition politics, even if messy, can ultimately enrich democracy because it forces elites to be more accountable.

Viewed in a broader context, South Africa’s 2024 election mirrors the pattern of other post-liberation democracies such as Zimbabwe and Namibia, where ruling parties, once symbols of independence movements, gradually lost their legitimacy due to governance failures. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) have argued, dominant-party systems often undermine democracy when left unchecked. Joshi, Ranjan, and Sircar’s (2022) concept of a “fundamental shift in electoral behavior.” As Joshi, Ranjan, and Sircar noted in their study of India, the distribution of welfare schemes, mechanisms of direct engagement with citizens, and the weakening of intermediary institutions have brought about fundamental shifts in voter loyalty. A similar development has taken place in South Africa. Here too, people’s loyalties are no longer solely grounded in history or symbolic identity; instead, they have begun to expect quality governance, practical performance, and coalition accountability. The people reminded the ANC that its history of liberation is honourable but cannot be a substitute for effective governance.

The ANC’s vote share fell from about 57.5% in 2019 to around 40.2% in 2024, illustrating that voters have retreated from traditional loyalties. Their expectations can no longer be satisfied merely through promises or symbolic leadership; rather, demands for public service delivery, anti-corruption measures, transparency in governance, and economic justice have intensified as never before. The decline in voter turnout—from approximately 66% in 2019 to about 58.6%

in 2024, is another indication of this transformation, showing that voters are searching for alternatives capable of addressing their livelihoods, everyday struggles, and existential concerns. Young voters, urban residents, and those affected by critical issues such as unemployment, power shortages, and poor public services have voiced their discontent through the ballot box.

At the end, it can be said that South Africa in 2024 has moved beyond mere democratic normalization toward a democratic realignment. Citizens' expectations have become more assertive, their voting decisions more decisive, and their demands for governmental accountability more pressing. This shift represents not just a change in political power, but a transformation in electoral behaviour and the very spirit of democracy.

***Views are personal**

Author

Abhishek Kumar

PhD Scholar

Department of African Studies

University Of Delhi -110007

Email – Abhishekit08@gmail.com

Forwarded By

Dr. Rashmi Kapoor

Associate Professor

Department of African Studies

University of Delhi -110007

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