



## Summary

# South African Perspectives: The Domestic and International Implications of South Africa's 2024 Elections

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## Background

National elections were held in South Africa on 29 May 2024. The *African National Congress* (ANC) lost its absolute majority in the National Assembly for the first time since the end of apartheid in 1994. The country, which has been struggling for some time with stagnating economic growth, electricity shortages, high crime, and high unemployment, now has two weeks to form a government.

This development is being followed with great interest not only nationally, but also internationally. South Africa is one of Germany's key partners on the African continent. The BRICS member will host the G20 summit in 2025 and has made headlines both for its move to sue Israel at the International Court of Justice and for its position on Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

## Highlights

- Although the ANC lost its absolute majority in the National Assembly and significantly more votes than expected, the election results must also be analysed in the context of the provincial elections. Not only does the ANC still have a majority in the National Assembly, but it also provides the majority of delegates to the regional parliaments and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), the upper house of the bicameral parliament.
- The tight schedule stipulated by the constitution for forming a government poses a particular challenge for coalition negotiations. According to the constitution, parliament must convene for its constituent session within two weeks and elect both the Speaker of Parliament and the President. The strict timeline could lead to fewer formal commitments and coalition constellations, which in turn could undermine the stability of the government.
- In addition to inter-party power struggles, the internal dynamics of the various wings within the ANC are expected to play a significant role in the coalition negotiations and possible coalition forms.
- No major changes are to be expected in South Africa's foreign policy, particularly regarding the support for Palestine and relations with Russia. The pragmatic principle of "agree to disagree" is

## Welcome Remarks

### **Sabine Odhiambo**

Secretary General,  
German Africa Foundation

## Discussion

### **Mohamed Cassimjee**

Geopolitical analyst and  
consultant

### **Qaanitah Hunter**

Journalist and author of the  
book „Who will rule South  
Africa?“

### **Dr Maxine Rubin**

Research associate, GIGA

### **Prof Dr Zwelethu**

#### **Jolobe**

Head of the political science  
institute at the University of  
Cape Town

## Moderation

### **Prof Dr Christian von Soest**

Head of the research  
programme „peace and  
security“, GIGA



also expected to continue in German-South African relations, which are considered to be very good despite some differences in foreign policy views. Both countries also share the common objective of promoting multilateralism and the rule of law in the international system.

### **Election results and turnout**

Compared to the last parliamentary elections in 2019, the ANC recorded losses of 17.3% and only received 40.2% of the votes. However, in the context of the results of the provincial elections, the ANC's loss of power was far less significant than the 17.3% loss would initially imply, emphasised Prof Dr Jolobe, among others. The ANC managed to remain the strongest force in seven of the nine provinces, which means that the party will continue to have the majority of delegates both in the regional parliaments and in the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), the upper house of the bicameral parliament. The NCOP, which is made up of ten delegates per province, plays a central role in the legislative process. The ANC also remains the strongest force in the National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, despite losing its absolute majority by a clear margin.

The second strongest party is the *Democratic Alliance* (DA), which, however, with 21.8% of the vote, only gained 1% compared to the 2019 elections and was therefore hardly able to benefit from the ANC's loss, according to Dr Rubin. The big winner of the elections was the newly founded *uMkhonto weSizwe* (MK) party, which was supported by South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma and immediately came in third. With an election result of 14.6% of the vote, the MK party benefited the most from the ANC's losses and replaced the *Economic Freedom Fighters* (EFF) as the third strongest party in parliament. With 9.5% of the vote, the EFF, like the DA, was barely able to change its 2019 result. To understand the loss of ANC voters, it was also necessary to take a closer look at the voter turnout, emphasised Dr Rubin. Although this was around two-thirds at 58.6%, the figure only refers to the number of eligible voters who had registered to vote in advance. The actual turnout of all eligible voters, on the other hand, was only around 38%. Many of the traditional ANC voters, including those from the suburbs and townships, had stayed away from this year's election due to their frustration with the ruling party, including over power cuts (*load shedding*). If one looked at the voter turnout in past elections, it became clear that a lower voter turnout was usually accompanied by poorer election result for the ANC, Dr Rubin continued. It was also striking that both the EFF and the MK party were splinter parties of the ANC.

### **Domestic repercussions of the elections**

According to the law, a (coalition) government had to be formed within two weeks, explained Dr Rubin. Qaanitah Hunter added that 18 June had already been set by the Chief Justice as the day on which the new National Assembly would hold its constituent sitting, in which the President would be elected as well as the Speaker of Parliament. Within this timeline, the ANC must now enter into more or less formal agreements with other parties in order to secure the re-election of President Cyril Ramaphosa. The short timeline is the most critical point here, explained Hunter. A deal that must be negotiated in such a brief time would entail the risk of non-formalised agreements. This in turn could lead to the government's course being changed halfway through. The panellists discussed various coalition options, including between the ANC, the DA and the *Inkatha Freedom Party* (IFP), a so-called Government of National unity as well as the option of a minority government, which Prof Dr Jolobe and Hunter, among others, emphasised was definitely an option in view of the hyper-fragmentation of the opposition. The big challenge with the latter option, however, is that the wheels of the administration are already turning very



slowly, Hunter added. Furthermore, there is no limit to votes of no confidence. The Speaker of the National Assembly, for example, could be replaced every three months by a vote of no confidence and even the President could be removed. This in turn could lead to great uncertainty and instability. At the same time, according to Hunter, particularly the small parties would now test their power. When choosing coalition partners, the panel agreed, the internal power dynamics of the various camps within the ANC must also be considered. Various potential coalition partners also set clear conditions for a coalition even before the exploratory talks began. When asked whether the ideological rifts between the various parties were not too great to form a stable governing coalition, Prof Dr Jolobe replied that although there were indeed major ideological differences, coalition governments at both local and provincial level had shown in the past that party interests were not congruent with ideology and that stable coalitions could be formed. The question of the stability of a government coalition at national level also plays a vital role in the consideration of forming a so-called *Government of National Unity*, explained Hunter. This more comprehensive form of a coalition, which would also include smaller parties, would on the one hand make it possible to accommodate the internal wings of the ANC as well as the trade unions and, for example, dispel fears of a shift to the right through a coalition with the DA and IFP. On the other hand, the emerging provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal, where the MK party was able to secure the most votes, could also be better integrated.

Coalition building also plays a key role in view of the major domestic political challenges which South Africa is currently facing, explained Dr Rubin and others. There is cross-party consensus that stagnating economic growth, the high unemployment rate - especially among the younger population - rising poverty and inequality, infrastructural problems such as limited access to water and the instability of the electricity supply, which are not only affecting the population but also industry, as well as the increase in violent crime and gender-based violence are among the most pressing challenges. However, the parties would take quite different positions on how to overcome these challenges, which are difficult to reconcile.

### **Political Impact of the election at international level**

As the ANC continues to hold the majority in parliament, the panel agreed that the election would have minor impact on South Africa's foreign policy. Although former Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor, who lost her parliamentary seat, was a prominent figure in South Africa's lawsuit against Israel at the International Criminal Court and the pro-Palestine campaign, this would not have a fundamental impact on the direction of South Africa's foreign policy, according to Prof Dr Jolobe, as this would be determined by the President and not the Foreign Minister. Despite Russia's chairmanship this year, no change in attitude is to be expected with regard to BRICS or BRICS Plus. South Africa will continue to pursue a non-aligned foreign policy and maintain close relations with countries such as China or Russia and promote South-South cooperation, while also intensifying its relations with the USA, for example. However, South Africa's non-alignment and stance towards Russia as well as South Africa's support for Palestine would be perceived as contradictory, especially in Europe and the USA, explained Dr Rubin. As a result, South Africa's lawsuit against Israel before the International Criminal Court and the arguments put forward here in favour of a principled foreign policy would be perceived as contradictory to South Africa's stance in the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. However, Prof Dr Jolobe made it clear that this was not a contradiction for either South Africa's government or its population. On the one hand, it was important not to confuse non-alignment with neutrality. Non-alignment merely meant that South Africa does not want to be involved in the struggle between two large power blocs - and Ramaphosa's government, like



the USA, had interpreted the Russia-Ukraine war in the context of two power blocs. Secondly, the ANC had historically maintained close relations with Palestine due to its experience of apartheid.

### **German- South African relations**

Despite different foreign policy stances towards Israel and Russia, relations between Germany and South Africa are considered particularly good. Both countries were democratic middle powers that pursue the common goal of promoting multilateralism and the rule of law in the international system, said Dr Rubin. The opposing attitudes towards Russia and Israel would be dealt with pragmatically and the principle of "agree to disagree" would be followed, Dr Rubin continued. The close relations between Germany and South Africa, which should of course also be seen in the broader context of EU-South Africa relations and EU-SADC relations, are evident at both a diplomatic and economic level. Mohamed Cassimjee reported that Germany had already hosted a South African delegation before the elections to discuss coalition-building. Besides that, there are also important and wide-ranging relationships in trade, which amounts to over 20 billion euros. Thereby, exports to Germany, compared to other countries, are value adding. In addition, 600 German companies are active in South Africa, which have created around 100,000 jobs and invested around 6.2 billion euros in the country. Germany is also the largest donor to the *Just Energy Transition Partnership* of the G7 countries with 8.5 billion US dollars and has already successfully implemented projects in South Africa as part of this partnership. However, Cassimjee warned that the direction of the future governing coalition would also have an impact on the economy and the investment climate. In the event of a centre or centre-right coalition, little will change; however, if a populist coalition is formed, this could cause uncertainty regarding the profitability of investments. The orientation of the coalition could also play a role in the green energy transition, with the MK party, for example, rejecting the coal phase-out.