

Müller, Melanie

**Research Report**

## Competition for the ANC: Dominant party losing youth and poorer sections of South African population

SWP Comments, No. 18/2017

**Provided in Cooperation with:**

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

*Suggested Citation:* Müller, Melanie (2017) : Competition for the ANC: Dominant party losing youth and poorer sections of South African population, SWP Comments, No. 18/2017, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256450>

**Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:**

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

**Terms of use:**

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*

# Competition for the ANC

**Dominant Party Losing Youth and Poorer Sections of South African Population**

*Melanie Müller*

South Africa's governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), will elect a new president in December 2017. This person will also stand for the office of President of South Africa at the beginning of 2019 when President Jacob Zuma reaches the maximum number of two consecutive terms allowed by the country's constitution. It is currently unclear whether he can finish his final term. Since the dismissal of finance minister, Pravin Gordhan, resistance against Zuma has reached a new climax. A broad alliance of civil society groups, trade unions and party representatives, even some from within his own party, have called for his resignation. Although these protests are aimed directly at Zuma, the causes of the dissatisfaction lie deeper. The ANC has not been able to successfully address the country's social challenges. In addition, corruption and mismanagement have shaken confidence. For a long time, the former liberation movement was considered the only party to vote for by the black population. In the past four years, however, the ANC has faced serious competition from the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Given the loss of meaning of the ANC, the South African party system is changing.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the ANC failed to achieve a two-thirds majority – for the first time in the history of democratic South Africa. In the 2016 local elections, its share of votes even fell below 50 percent in its stronghold of Johannesburg. That approval for the ANC would wane has been repeatedly predicted since 1994. However, so far, the Party has always been able to secure power. The reasons for this are complex: the ANC purposefully expanded its influence after the transition to democracy. Like other liberation movements, it was able to incorporate different social groups into the political system and into its

network. However, the ANC did not succeed in overcoming social injustice in South Africa, as promised.

## The importance of the ANC after Apartheid

It is impossible to understand South African society today and the importance of the ANC without looking at its history. The Apartheid regime (1948-1991) divided the population into four groups on the basis of racist criteria (Blacks, Coloureds, Indians, Whites) and ascribed the Whites a higher social status because, supposedly, they were the

only 'civilized' group. The regime then adopted laws for the separation of society based on these classifications. By the end of Apartheid, the proportion of black South Africans was around 75 percent, the Coloureds ten percent and the Indians three percent. The ruling white group accounted for around ten percent of the whole population. The Apartheid regime allocated particular residential areas to the population groups, with the black districts being the most under-resourced. The fragmentation of society affected all spheres of life: for example, black students had to study at their own, inadequately financed universities and black schools were also desperately underfunded. Non-white workers were also forbidden to engage in certain higher-value activities.

The ANC assumed a leading role in opposing Apartheid. In the mid-1960s, the South African government banned the liberation movement and then imprisoned prominent actors, such as Nelson Mandela. However, other ANC members organized international resistance to the system of Apartheid from exile. Although the ANC was by no means the only oppositional force – there were other political organizations as well as a massive civil society revolt against the regime – it achieved a dominant position, not least through its international network. Since the first free elections in 1994, the ANC has been governing at the national level in a three-party alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Only the ANC stood at the parliamentary elections in South Africa. The two other parties received a fixed share of ANC seats.

Large sections of civil society were also included in the corporatist state model which initially left little room for genuine opposition. Although the political system in South Africa is principally based on a multi-party system, to date, it has actually been a one-party system. The ANC has succeeded in smashing any emerging opposition and politically integrating parts of it

or relegating it to non-parliamentary opposition. The only party to establish itself as an opposition in the National Assembly is the Democratic Alliance (DA) which has also governed the Western Cape Province since 2009 and currently holds 89 of 400 parliamentary seats. For the black population, voting for the DA was taboo for a long time, since it was considered a party of the white population and, in the initial years of democracy, it primarily sought support from Whites, Indians and Coloureds.

### **Substantial social inequality and widespread corruption**

The lack of prospects for many parts of the population has led to considerable dissatisfaction with the ANC. Since 1994, the government has succeeded in reducing rates of poverty and developing the supply of water and electricity in South Africa. However, living conditions are still very bad in many areas. Almost half of the South African population lives in poverty. Black South Africans are still the worst affected group at 54 percent of the population, followed by Coloureds at 27.6 percent. Rates of poverty in the rural provinces of Limpopo and Eastern Cape are around 60 percent. Even in Cape Town, the richest city in the country, a quarter of the population lives in poverty. South Africa is now one of the countries with the highest economic inequality in the world. According to official sources, the unemployment rate in the last quarter of 2016 was 26.5 percent. Among the black population it was as high as 30 percent whereas, among the white population, it was only 6.6 percent. In addition, between 6 and 15 percent of the population is considered underemployed, meaning they engage in an activity that is underpaid and/or does not correspond to their qualifications.

A second aspect increasing dissatisfaction among the population is poor governance: corruption, mismanagement and cronyism now pervade South African politics. The perception of those whose situation has not improved over the last

two and a half decades is that parts of the ANC have allied with business to enrich themselves at the expense of the population. Jacob Zuma has further reinforced this widespread view of corruption among the elites with his scandals: he maintains a close relationship with the Gupta family which has participating interests in various sectors of the economy. The family has frequently benefitted from ties to Zuma and has even influenced political decisions. This scandal was documented in a State of Capture Report by Thuli Madonsela, the then Public Protector of the state of South Africa. Madonsela also revealed that Zuma had misappropriated public funds to renovate his private estate in Nkandla. This has not yet led to any serious political consequences for Zuma. He has succeeded in building up a network of allies within the ANC that protects him and also benefits politically. The office of Public Protector has now been taken over by a successor sympathetic to the President.

Another incisive event for the South African population was the violent breakup of a miners' strike in 2012. Police shot 34 striking workers at the Marikana platinum mine and the incident was captured on South African television cameras. This approach was reminiscent of the Apartheid regime's violent crushing of protests by black South Africans in Sharpeville in 1960. Many South Africans were shocked that a similar event could happen under an ANC-led government. Many now call it the Marikana massacre, equating it with the Sharpeville massacre.

### **Social developments, political alternatives**

The ANC is still the party of choice for the emerging black middle class, even though dissatisfaction is growing within this group. The situation is different, however, among groups whose economic status has not improved since the end of Apartheid. Large parts of this lower strata have turned their backs on the ANC since the end of the 1990s and have primarily become socially engaged. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have

succeeded in making these groups a political offer with their left-wing populist rhetoric: in 2014, not long after they were founded, they won 25 seats in the South African parliament with a good 6 percent of the vote.

### **Satisfied middle class**

Historically, the black middle class – even though its share of population under Apartheid was small – has played a significant political role in South Africa. Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the number of black children receiving general school education rose from 588,000 to 2.7 million. In 1969 and 1970 two black universities were founded giving a few black students an academic education. Members of this middle class also contributed to resistance against Apartheid, reaching its climax in the late 1970s. They were, and still are today, party members or committed ANC voters. According to a study by Stellenbosch University, the size of the black middle class rose from 350,000 to three million between 1993 and 2012. In order to qualify as middle class, the study used a minimum annual income of 25,000 rand (equivalent to 3250 US dollars in 2000 prices). Another calculation assumes an increase to 3.8 million people by 2011 and, correspondingly, a rise in the middle class to seven percent of the black population. Other studies involving not only income, but also aspects such as permanent employment, the ability to read and write, access to basic supplies (water, electricity and sanitation) and also ownership of certain items (television, radio or refrigerator), produce even higher figures, namely an increase in the middle class to 27 percent of the black population by 2008.

Many black South Africans have benefited from programmes aimed at eliminating the consequences of discrimination under Apartheid. Dissatisfaction with the ANC is, therefore, less widespread among those in the middle class with positive future prospects. In general, awareness of the harmful consequences of corruption and the criteria for good governance are growing. Voting for

the DA is still not a popular option among the black population, however, in 2011 four percent of black South Africans said they would consider voting for them. The highest proportion of this four percent belonged to the middle class. In recent years, the DA has changed its personnel and its image. In May 2015, Mmusi Maimane was elected the first black Federal Leader of the party. Maimane and other aspiring politicians are working hard to shake off the old spirit of the party. When former DA Leader, Helen Zille, commented on Twitter in mid-March 2017 that colonialism had also brought benefits, the new leadership responded immediately: Maimane publicly disagreed with Zille, even though she is the Premier of Western Cape, the only province the DA governs. The party also called for disciplinary action against Zille, emphasizing in this context that its objective was to build an economically prosperous and non-racist democracy. The DA could become an attractive option for parts of the black middle class growing up without economic concerns and committed to democratic and economic values.

#### **At the lower end**

At the lower end of the middle class, the economic reality is somewhat different: members of the lower middle class living in precarious conditions are at risk of sliding into poverty. Almost half of South Africans live in poverty; almost 20 percent in extreme poverty. Since the end of the 1990s, mass protests have been repeatedly held against the poor living conditions in South African townships and in rural areas. The starting point was the privatization of basic supply companies from 1996, with the result that the poor, i.e. black, population strata suffered severely. Families who could no longer pay their electricity bills were, for example, disconnected from supply, even though the South African constitution guarantees a right to electricity. In addition, 22 percent of those living in Johannesburg and almost 19 percent of those in Cape Town live in informal settlements, that is

in housing without adequate access to running water, electricity or sanitation.

There are various social movements specifically engaged in ensuring general access to services of general interest. These local groups are important because they represent the interests of those left behind. Many informal settlements or townships with high rates of poverty complain that the ANC no longer represents them. Mismanagement and corruption as well as the ignorance of local politicians to the needs of the poor have shaken trust in those in government. One consequence of this is violence. Crime rates in the townships and informal settlements are already very high and the tension is clearly felt. Political violence escalates quickly here. Demonstrators ignite refuse bins or tyres and destroy houses or shops to draw attention to the poor local conditions. For many groups, political violence appears to be the only way of attracting attention to their plight. Increasingly, violence is directed against migrants from other African countries: 2017 saw many large-scale xenophobic attacks. The reasons for this are not only found in the characteristics of South African society resulting from the Apartheid period, but also in the poor living conditions and the fact that these attacks are ignored politically. The hatred is directed at those who are even lower in the social hierarchy.

#### **The EFF as an alternative**

Before being elected President of the ANC in 2007, Jacob Zuma promised to address South Africa's social problems. At the time, he beat Thabo Mbeki whom large sections of the population accused of neglecting social challenges in favour of growth-oriented policies after he came to power in 1999. Zuma, however, disappointed those that elected him as President in 2009. There have been several attempts in recent years to build a social-democratic or left-leaning party as an alternative to the ANC, most recently by the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA). Follow-

ing criticism from the Tripartite Alliance, it was excluded from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 2014 and has since been working to forge an alliance between trade unions and social movements. So far, these efforts have been unsuccessful. They have not been able to unite the working class with the lower classes and thus form a political alternative to the ANC which can integrate a large portion of the population. In addition, the ANC has repeatedly managed to discredit such initiatives.

In contrast, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have succeeded in reaching the lower strata: the party was founded by Julius Malema in 2013 and instantly became the third strongest force in the 2014 South African elections. The EFF are a party political alternative for the poor strata. Their goal is to redistribute prosperity in South Africa, a claim that strongly appeals to those who have not yet benefited from South Africa's economic boom. Certain characteristics displayed by EFF actors are also important for their credibility: male members of parliament wear red shirts representing workers' garb and the women wear a costume reminiscent of clothes worn by domestic workers. This symbolism, the anti-capitalist rhetoric, but also the EFF's presence on the streets, explain the success of the party.

One of the EFF's key demands is the redistribution of land. At the end of Apartheid, 87 percent of South African land was owned by white people. In the first five years of democracy, the ANC wanted to redistribute 30 percent of land to the black population. In 2010, they had only achieved 8 percent. The reasons for failing to redistribute the land are complex and are not just due to a lack of will by the government, but the EFF has put this issue back on the political agenda. Land reform has been intensively debated again since 2016.

However, Malema's populist invectives repeatedly contain threats against white, but also against black, rich South Africans and are, therefore, dangerous because these invectives fuel the already aggressive politi-

cal climate. But Malema's political calculations are working because with this rhetoric he is able to win over angry parts of the population with few prospects. Since the demonstrations against Zuma, the EFF have increasingly distanced themselves from the violence. Meanwhile, even the DA is cooperating with the EFF to weaken Zuma. In parliament, too, these very opposing parties are already supporting each other.

### **A new generation is growing up**

One new development is the increasingly politicized younger generation. The under-34s make up two-thirds of the South African population. It is mainly young South Africans who are staging protests in the townships as well as in rural areas – not least because the lack of prospects is disaffecting this age group. South African students have also been going out on the streets since October 2015. They are demonstrating for better study conditions and for a more just society. These developments are especially dangerous for the ANC because young voters who did not grow up under Apartheid are far less committed to the ANC than their parents and grandparents. They are challenging the ANC and even the iconic figure of Nelson Mandela.

### **Lack of future prospects**

Young South Africans born after Apartheid have the greatest hopes, but their current prospects are bleak: more than half of South Africans under the age of 24 live in poverty. The rate of poverty is only lower in the 25-to-34-year-old age group, but is still at 38.7 percent. According to the International Labour Organization, youth unemployment in the whole country is 52 percent. Studies have shown that poor career prospects at a young age frequently affect career outlooks in the long term. The reasons for the high youth unemployment in South Africa lie mainly in unimplemented reforms of the country's education system. It is one of the worst in the world among middle-income

countries and is also very poor compared to the rest of Africa. Under these conditions, young South Africans without a university education often find it difficult to find a job.

But the situation is also difficult at universities. South African students have been demonstrating since October 2015. The protests were organized under the hashtag '#FeesMustFall' because they were directly connected to the government's announcement that study fees would increase. There are various forms of support for students in South Africa. However, these funds are not sufficient to cover the higher fees which especially affect poorer families. In addition, state benefits are only available to some students. Emerging middle-class families usually earn too much to claim them. However, their income is not enough to cover their children's study costs or even to take out private loans. As a result, poverty influences study conditions. At the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, students stay at the university overnight, for example, because they have to travel long distances to get there and cannot afford accommodation. The protesters have allied themselves with the teaching staff and with workers in the university service sector whose jobs have been outsourced to external providers and have been precarious ever since.

### **Political break with the ANC generation**

The students are not only concerned with improving their own economic situations, but also with general political and social change. The protests have often been compared with those of the 1968 movement in Europe and the US because they are the expression of a generational conflict. The ANC is viewed very negatively by large numbers of demonstrators. The students are even criticizing the iconic figure of Nelson Mandela: they are suggesting that, after the transition to democracy, he had made too many economic compromises to maintain social peace in South Africa. Although young demonstrators were born in freedom, they

do not feel free, but continue to be stigmatized by the legacy of Apartheid. As a result, their demands also include the decolonization of the universities. Students at the University of Cape Town demanded the removal of symbols evoking the colonial era. The curricula are also to be revised to take more account of African political philosophy and non-Western theories. More black scientists should be appointed at universities. Students also reject teaching in Afrikaans at some universities.

Overall, South Africa's youth is becoming increasingly disappointed with the political system and with the ANC. A study by the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies from 2016 shows that only 33 percent of 18-to-19-year-olds were registered to vote in national elections. Nevertheless, among 20-to-29-year-olds, the figure was 64 percent. Young South Africans believe that protests are more effective in bringing about social change than voting for a political party. While, previously, they tended to vote for the same party as their parents, the share of young voters voting for the ANC is now only 30 percent, for the EFF this figure is 49 percent and for the DA 14 percent. There have been no political alliances between student movements and any parties, to date. The EFF played an important role in supporting the protests at the University of Pretoria, but this was an exception. Nevertheless, the impact of student protests should not be underestimated as they make a contribution towards re-politicizing the youth of South Africa. It is assumed that more of them will go out and vote at the next elections in 2019 and, therefore, unsurprising that all political parties, even the ANC, are heavily canvassing the student vote. Jacob Zuma has since suspended the increase in study fees, but rejection of the President is now so widespread among the young population that even this step has not made him more popular.

## Outlook

The long predicted downfall of the ANC has not been abrupt, but it has begun. The EFF has now become a second opposition party which, unlike the DA, has succeeded in winning over broader sections of the black population. But even the DA is no longer considered unelectable. Young South Africans, who are increasingly turning away from the ANC, will play a greater role in the 2019 elections. The ANC must increase its efforts to regain the lost trust and to achieve this will take more than just Jacob Zuma's resignation. An even greater influence on the future of the governing party will be the question of who succeeds him.

Two options are currently being discussed. The first is 'business as usual': Zuma wants someone from his own network to succeed him, someone who will not only secure his legacy but also protect him against any criminal consequences when his term of office ends. His current favourite is his ex-wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma who, until January 2017, was Chairperson of the African Union Commission. Her proximity to Zuma is also her greatest weakness. Another solution might be Malusi Gigaba, the new finance minister, who is particularly favoured by the ANC's powerful youth organization. The 45-year-old intends to reach younger voters but Gigaba is also an active supporter of Zuma. If the President's policies are simply continued, this would lead to the population further losing confidence in the party. There might even be a split within the ANC.

The second conceivable option is that Cyril Ramaphosa, the current Deputy President of South Africa, will be voted in at the ANC's 54th National Conference. He is supported by the ANC in the northern province of Gauteng, by COSATU and by the South African Communist Party. Ramaphosa is not the best candidate. Politically, he has no longer been uncontroversial since the Marikana massacre. He had called for greater police intervention only a few days before the workers were murdered. His ties to the economy are too close for many South Afri-

cans, he is one of the richest men in the country. Ramaphosa is trying very hard to regain his lost credibility. He officially apologized for the Marikana massacre in early May 2017, almost five years after the event, but this was a tactical move that brought him more criticism than trust. There are, however, no other suitable candidates on the horizon. In recent years, the power struggles within the ANC have been fought so bitterly that there are only a few prominent representatives in the party who are able to act independently and who could stand against Zuma or Ramaphosa without their own network.

Current developments in the ANC have seriously damaged the political and economic stability of South Africa. The sacking of finance minister Pravin Gordhan is a good example: rating agencies subsequently downgraded the creditworthiness of the country. In the South African Development Community (SADC), South Africa is increasingly losing its leadership role which is important for the stability of the region because domestic policy determines day-to-day business. It is a source of some concern that internal political tensions are increasingly turning into violence. This is exacerbating the situation in South Africa which already has major problems with crime and violence. The government under Jacob Zuma has done little to de-escalate the protests. Protests are repeatedly quashed or violently suppressed by groups supporting the ANC. South Africa's weekly newspaper, the *Mail & Guardian*, reported that ANC members who publicly speak out against Jacob Zuma have received death threats. Even though South African democracy is still considered stable, these developments should be observed closely. If Zuma successfully continues his policies of patronage and corruption through a successor he approves of, the political situation in South Africa might deteriorate further. This would also endanger stability in southern Africa.

© Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2017  
All rights reserved

These Comments reflect the author's views.

**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
[www.swp-berlin.org](http://www.swp-berlin.org)  
[swp@swp-berlin.org](mailto:swp@swp-berlin.org)

ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Martin Haynes

(English version of  
SWP-Aktuell 35/2017)