

More of the same?

Taking stock of South Africa's electoral landscape in the run-up to the 2014 elections

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Introduction

The upcoming 2014 election will be South Africa's fifth democratic election at national and provincial level. This will be a celebratory election because it marks the twentieth anniversary of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. At the same time, the election comes during a period of heightened citizen dissatisfaction amid numerous socio-economic challenges. Usually, the campaign period starts in earnest once the election date is announced by the President; however, for this election parties have started actively campaigning as early as first quarter 2013. The country has also seen the emergence of new political parties headed by important political figures. With these developments, what can we expect in the 2014 election? This paper provides a brief synopsis of the changes in South Africa's electoral landscape since 1994. It also looks to trends in the 2011 Local Government Election for insights into what we can expect in 2014, and examines events that could influence the upcoming election.

The Context

South Africa has a closed-list Proportional Representation (PR) electoral system for national and provincial elections. Voters elect parties, not individual candidates. A party contests an election after establishing a list of its candidates, and party candidates are awarded seats based on the percentage of votes won by the party. The National Assembly has 400 members. The number of seats that a party occupies in the Assembly is proportionate to the number of votes received in the preceding election.¹

The advantages and disadvantages of the PR system have been widely debated in South Africa. On the one hand, issues of accountability have been raised due to the limited direct contact between voters and 'their' allocated representatives between elections. On the other, the PR system ensures that a broader range of minority political parties gain representation, which is important in a country as heterogeneous as South Africa.¹

Elections have become institutionalized in South Africa. South Africa has a well-established electoral regulatory framework, electoral machinery and a culture of election observation. The administration of elections has improved enormously since the founding elections of 1994. Indeed, the administration of elections in South Africa has been widely hailed as a resounding success. In the last twenty years, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has conducted four municipal elections (in years 1995/1996, 2000, 2006 and 2011) and four national and provincial elections (1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009). The IEC has also invested in technologically sophisticated systems. Since 1999 the IEC has won several high profile, international awards for professionalism and technical innovation.²

Surveys conducted by the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) show that South Africans believe elections in South Africa to be free and fair. Based on an assessment of voter interviews from a representative sample of voting stations, the HSRC found that the voting public provided an exceptionally favourable evaluation of the management performance of the IEC and the conduct of officials at voting stations.³ (More recently, the Office of the Public Protector released a report that found that the current chairperson of the IEC violated procurement regulations in securing a lease for the IEC's head office. The report was referred to parliament for further scrutiny which decided it could not accede to her request to intervene in the matter. While potentially damaging to the image of the IEC, this matter is not likely to have any effect on operations of the IEC.)⁴

Should contestation between political parties show the potential to develop into violence in the 2014 elections, there are sufficient mechanisms to deal with these and ensure a smooth-running election. In fact, election-related conflict and violence has decreased dramatically since 1994. This is largely due to the fact that South Africa has a conflict management system to manage election-related disputes. This includes a Code of Conduct that is based on the consent of all political parties and enforced via conflict panels established in each province by the IEC. Parties can also lodge complaints with the Electoral Court.⁵ Any reported irregularity is dealt with in a swift and transparent manner. In the run-up to the 2009 election, conflict between the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and a breakaway party, Congress of the People (COPE) raised fears that the campaign and election would be disrupted by violence and intimidation. As a result, the Election Monitoring Network (EMN) appointed a team of approximately 500 politically independent community members nationwide to monitor election-related abuse or violence and the South African Civil Society Election Coalition (SACSEC), a national initiative of more than 40 non-governmental and faith-based organisations, mobilised approximately 2000 observers to observe all facets of the elections.⁶ They were found to be overwhelmingly free and fair.

In 2011, the internal candidate selection processes of the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) were marked by considerable tension and occasional serious violence. Acrimony between the IFP and the National Freedom Party (a breakaway party from the IFP) also fuelled political volatility in Kwa-Zulu Natal in the run up to the 2011 election. This was largely contained by election monitoring structures and the EMN concluded that the pre-election campaign environment in 2011 was a peaceful one.⁷

Election campaigning in South Africa is by no means a docile affair with fierce competition displayed by all political parties. Nevertheless, political parties can, by and large, campaign freely. Despite the fact that the ANC has won by a large margin in all democratic elections, the party does not appear to take the election results as a foregone conclusion. During the campaign period political party representatives and leaders make a concerted effort to connect with communities. The media also turns the spotlight on political matters and political parties, media houses, research companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often collaborate to conduct surveys and other research projects to assess the mood of voters.

Registration and Turnout

South Africa has witnessed an increase in voter registration. At the time of the 2011 election the Voting Age Population (VAP) was estimated to be 31,342,194 voters and 23,654,347 (75.4 per cent) of the VAP were registered to vote.⁸ The IEC opened voting stations for registration on the 9th and 10th of November, 2013.⁹ The IEC is also collaborating with the Department of Basic Education to increase voter registration among the youth.¹⁰

A key trend has been the steady decline in turnout since the first democratic election of 1994. Participation as a proportion of the estimated voting age population declined from 86 per cent in 1994 to 72 per cent in 1999. It declined more dramatically (to 58 per cent) in 2004, increasing slightly, to 60 per cent, in 2009.¹¹ This declining turnout may be fuelled by widespread disillusionment about the harsh conditions under which people live, including chronic unemployment and continued, racialized inequality.

Trends in Party Support

The number of parties contesting the elections has grown since the founding elections. The IEC website indicates that there are 230 registered political parties as of November 2013. Of these, 145 are national parties and 85 are registered in various provinces. The largest proportion of provincial parties (36) is located in the Western Cape.¹² It is not yet known how many parties will contest nationally or provincially in next year's election.

The ANC has won landslide victories in every national election that has been held since the transition to democracy. The party's proportion of total votes cast at the national level increased from 62 per cent in 1994 to 66 per cent in 1999, and again to 70 per cent in 2004, dropping back to 66 per cent in 2009.¹³ Thus, the ANC enjoys widespread support from a majority of South Africans.

That said, in 2009 the ANC lost support in every province at the provincial level with the exception of Kwa-Zulu Natal. Part of the reason for this loss was a new entrant to the political landscape in 2009. The Congress of the People (COPE) was formed as a result of an ANC leadership battle between Jacob Zuma and Thabo Mbeki in 2008. Zuma became the president of the ANC while Mbeki was still the president of South Africa. In September 2008 a court judgement provided the basis for a vote of no confidence in then President Mbeki. Mbeki tendered his resignation live on television and ANC deputy-president Kgalema Motlanthe became South Africa's acting President. As a result of these events, a split occurred in the ANC and the Congress of the People was formed under the leadership of Mosiuoa Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa. COPE managed to secure 7.42 per cent of the vote at national level. COPE also obtained "official opposition" status in several provinces.¹⁴

Despite an increased number of political parties, there has been a definite move away from smaller parties since 1994.¹⁵ The Democratic Alliance (DA) is the only opposition party that has been able to increase its vote share among South African voters. The party increased its support base from 1.7 per cent in 1994 to 9.56 per cent in 1999, 12.4 per cent in 2004 and up to 16.7 per cent in 2009.¹⁶ The DA is therefore currently the largest opposition party in South Africa. It also won the 2009 election by an outright majority in the Western Cape. It must be noted that the Western Cape is a politically unique province where electoral trends stand in sharp contrast to those in the rest of South Africa. Outcomes in the Western Cape have been unpredictable, with all democratic elections being highly contested.

This has resulted in three different political parties assuming power in the province. The New National Party (NNP) gained control of the Western Cape in 1994 and 1999, the ANC in 2004 and the DA in 2009.¹⁷

The other highly contested province is Kwa-Zulu Natal. This province was initially controlled by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). Unlike the DA, the IFP has been on a downward trajectory. At a national level, the IFP's support dropped from 10.54 per cent to 4.55 per cent. The IFP also lost control of Kwa-Zulu Natal in 2004. In 2009, the ANC won the province with an outright majority.¹⁸

Challenges Facing the ANC

The ANC faces a number of challenges as it prepares for the 2014 elections. The election comes during a period of heightened citizen dissatisfaction and amid numerous socio-economic challenges. According to an Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2011, jobs, crime and housing remain the most urgent issues that people believe national government should address and, for the first time, corruption was ranked as issue number four by respondents.¹⁹

The ANC has always faced criticism from opposition parties; however, the second decade of democracy has seen increased criticism from party supporters. Many ANC supporters are unhappy with the quality of services delivered in poor communities (as evidenced by the escalating number of service delivery protests).²⁰ Protests, strikes and demonstrations continue to mark South Africa's political landscape. The televised death of community activist Andries Tatane in 2011 at the hands of police in the Free State highlighted issues of community frustration and police brutality.²¹ Even more shocking to the South African public was the lethal use of force by the South African Police Services in what has become known as the "Marikana Massacre" in August 2012.²²

The ANC has also faced criticism from its trade union partner, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), for the rollout of highway tolling fees in Gauteng²³ as well as sections of the National Development Plan.²⁴ Other civil society formations such as Right2Know lead a campaign against legislation, which threatens media freedom²⁵ while Section 27 exposes inefficiencies in the public school system.²⁶ The recent upgrade of President Jacob Zuma's private residence in Kwa-Zulu Natal at a cost of approximately R200-million also cast a negative spotlight on the ANC. The DA has gone to court to compel the Department of Public Works to provide them with a copy of a classified task team report which investigated the expenditure. In the meantime, the Public Protector's Office is also compiling a report on the matter.²⁷

The rift between the ANC and its youth league has also been a significant challenge for the organization. This division culminated in the expulsion of the former leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema. Initially a vocal and controversial supporter of Zuma, Malema was both stripped from his position and expelled from the party ANC for sowing divisions within the party and bringing the party into disrepute.²⁸ (Malema has since formed a political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, which will contest the election in 2014.)

New Political Parties Contesting in the 2014 Election

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is one of several new political formations that will contest the 2014 elections. The EFF is primarily targeting disaffected ANC voters, particularly the youth. Just as COPE raised the political temperature and re-ignited the ANC's campaign efforts in 2009, the EFF is likely to have a similar effect on the 2014 elections. Malema officially launched the party in Marikana on the 13th of October, 2013. The leader of the EFF, who is currently facing charges of fraud and money laundering, remains a controversial figure.²⁹ The policy statements of the EFF are also quite controversial, so much so that the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), requested the application be declined on constitutional grounds because the EFF "propagates the nationalisation of land, mines, banks and other assets without compensation and, in particular, on a racial basis".³⁰ This request was dismissed by the IEC and the EFF's application was approved.³¹ The EFF could also end up trimming the ANC's support base in the 2014 elections.

AgangSA is another political party that has received widespread media attention. Agang means "to build" in Sesotho. In February 2013, academic and anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele announced her entry to South African party politics at a press briefing at Constitution Hill in Johannesburg. AgangSA was formally launched in June 2013 as a political party to contest the 2014 elections.³² Much of the party's statements and campaigning have critiqued the performance of the ANC government.³³ AgangSA is primarily targeting voters who have opted out of the system. Like the EFF, AgangSA has also targeted youth voters, especially the "born free" generation; however, this consists of a very small pool of voters (the IEC indicates that only 10% of 18 and 19 year olds in the country are currently registered as voters.³⁴). While AgangSA may not overtly target DA voters, the possibility remains that AgangSA may dilute the DA's support base. In the absence of survey data on voting intention, predictions of support for these new parties are difficult to make.

What can we expect in the 2014 election?

While the 2011 election results are not strictly comparable to the 2009 election results, they provide some insight into what we can expect in the 2014 election. In the 2011 Local Government Election the ANC again asserted its strength at the polls. Thus, regardless of the plethora of challenges facing the party, it is likely to retain its electoral dominance. The twenty-year anniversary of democracy is likely to be a central theme in the ANC's campaign. The party is likely to continue previous campaign themes that emphasize its achievements, acknowledge its shortcomings and draw attention to future plans. Although the ANC faced many challenges as it entered the 2009 and 2011 elections, these challenges did not result in a major loss of support at the polls. ANC voters demonstrate their dissatisfaction through protest action - rather than at the ballot box. People may take their anger to the streets but not necessarily transfer their vote to an opposition party. They are more likely to abstain than vote for a different party.³⁵

Despite the vocal challenge to the DA by the ANC, the former is likely to retain its majority in the Western Cape. This is evidenced by the fact that the DA consolidated its Western Cape support base in the 2011 local government elections - to the detriment of small opposition parties.³⁶ The DA is likely to continue previous campaign themes which critique the ANC, emphasize its achievements in the Western Cape and draws attention to their policy alternatives. An additional component to the DA's campaign is the "Know your DA" campaign. This campaign focuses on the anti-apartheid stance taken by Helen Suzman and current DA leader Helen Zille.³⁷ The DA faces the difficult challenge of attracting voters who have not supported them in the past while simultaneously retaining their existing constituency.³⁸

COPE suffered a dramatic loss in the 2011 local government election, most likely due to the public leadership battle that occurred in the party. Between 2009 and 2011 both Mosiuoa Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa laid claim to the leadership of COPE. In 2011 both sets of leaders wanted to submit candidate lists to the IEC. The matter was referred to court, which ruled that Mosiuoa Lekota was the lawful president of COPE. This public leadership battle clearly tarnished the image of COPE.

The IFP also faced a leadership crises resulting in a major split in the party. The National Freedom Party (NFP) was launched by former party chairperson Zanele ka Magwaza in February 2011. The newly-formed NFP contested the 2011 local government elections and decided on a national campaign appealing to women. In the 2011 Local Government Election the NFP managed to garner 11.06 per cent of the provincial vote in Kwa-Zulu Natal (compared to the IFP's 17.33 per cent).³⁹

Conclusion

The above-mentioned national trends are likely to continue in the 2014 elections, although provincially interesting contests are likely to occur in Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. The DA has indicated that it views Gauteng as a strategically important province and is running a high-visibility campaign spearheaded by national spokesperson Mmusi Maimane.⁴⁰ In 2009, the DA won about a fifth of the votes in Gauteng (21.86 per cent), while COPE managed to secure 7.78 per cent of the provincial vote. In the Eastern Cape, the DA only won 9.99 per cent in 2009 while COPE won 13.67 per cent.⁴¹ In the 2011 Local Government Election the DA increased its vote share in Nelson Mandela Bay, a key Eastern Cape region. Here the DA's support base increased from 24.9 per cent in 2006 to 40.24 per cent in 2011.⁴² Data from an Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2011 indicated that respondents in the Eastern Cape display low levels of support for President Zuma and for the provincial leader of the Eastern Cape.⁴³ The Western Cape could once again be an attention-grabbing province since the DA won the province by a narrow majority in 2009 and could see its support base diluted by AgangSA.

Since such a large proportion of voters have opted to abstain in recent elections and voter turnout is such a critical factor in determining the election results, the 2014 election will be a high-stakes affair marked by intense campaigning. The question is which party will be able to convince supporters or potential supporters to turn up and cast a ballot in their favour.

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Cherrel Africa is Head of the Political Studies Department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Africa holds a PhD in South African politics from the University of Cape Town. She specializes in research methodology and design with a particular emphasis on public opinion and survey research. She has a wide range of content interests including South African politics, democracy and governance, elections and election campaigns as well as political communication. She has served as an election analyst for both the SABC and E-tv and worked closely with the Election Monitoring Network (EMN) in monitoring the 2011 local government election.

Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed by the author do not necessarily represent those of the Hanns Seidel Foundation

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