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What is the fate of the ANC? A Critical Analysis of the Party's Demise in South Africa's 2024 General Elections

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Abstract

This article problematises the fate of the African National Congress in South Africa in relation to the country's 2024 general elections. The authors critically analyse the party's demise following its dominance in SA politics and its ongoing decline in the last decade. In doing so, the authors consider both the internal and external challenges of the party and unpack whether the decline of the party, which has been in power for almost three decades, is because of favouritism for another political party or a demand for alternative policies. The article is a desktop study that relies entirely on secondary sources. The authors made use of thematic analysis in its broadest form. Among the findings of this article is that the ongoing decline of the ANC should not be regarded as a preference by the electorate for an alternative party and that the decreasing voter turnout and voter apathy must be alarming to the state of voter behaviour in the country entirely. The authors further suggest that opposition parties must prioritise engaging and showcasing themselves as the envisaged alternative that will bring the interest of the people of South Africa to the fore.

Keywords: *African National Congress, Democratic Alliance, Economic Freedom Fighters, General Elections, South Africa.*

Introduction

The year 2024 will mark at least three decades of the African National Congress (ANC) dominance in South African politics (Desai, 2022). Despite the party framing the party system of SA into that of a dominant party due to it successfully winning the six general elections of the country (Masina 2021; Rupiah 2022), it is worth mentioning that there has been a decline in its dominance, at least in the recent past. Following the 2016 elections, the hegemony of the ANC and the dominant-party system in South Africa (SA) was coming to an end at least since the dawn of democracy was realised (Masina, 2021). It is because of the latter that the discourse of SA after the ANC has been ongoing and what that would mean to the organisation that has been in power since democracy. Malala (2022) asserts that SA needs to move beyond a hope that is linked to the ANC and that would only occur if the party itself withers, dies, and makes way for a more contested political terrain.

There is no gain in saying that the ANC has not been performing well in local government elections. As such, there have been a lot of hung municipalities, including the three metros of Nelson Mandela Bay,

the City of Tshwane, and the City of Johannesburg, following the 2019 local government elections (Masina 2021), even where the ANC has been dominating and ruling. The decline in support of the ANC at the local level could, as such, be mirrored nationally in 2024. Hence the ongoing speculation that in 2024, the ANC will fall under 50% in the national and provincial elections and that if the party avoids a defeat, coalition government will be the order of the day (Schulz-Herzenberg & Mattes 2023).

The authors of this article here sought to enter the debate on the declining force of the ANC in SA. Admittedly, liberation movements in Africa have been losing power, and the same is argued to be the case for SA's ANC, which has enjoyed dominance since 1994 (Mbandlwa, 2023). Without entirely speculating on whether or not the ANC will fall under 50% in the next provincial and national elections, the authors unpack key issues that contribute to the party's demise. As is, there have been several authors who have dealt with the question of the fate of the party in SA (see Malala 2022; Schulz-Herzenberg & Mattes 2023). Below, the authors mention a few of such contributions and how their work herein seeks to enhance the ongoing debate.

Mashele and Qobo's (2017) book titled "The Fall of the ANC Continues: What's Next? unpacks the state of politics in the country, which is defined by corruption, factionalism, nepotism, maladministration, and incompetent public servants. In the book, the authors propose that if the party fails to self-correct, this will result in the state being in tatters. The authors further propose a need for urgent political change as political governance under the ANC has collapsed. Hence the ongoing question of what will follow after the fall of the ANC and what will be the fate of the country afterwards.

Williams (2023) mentions that there are three dominant views on the reasons for the demise of the ANC, namely: (1) bad governance in numerous municipalities as well as several national and provincial departments led by the party; (2) lack of support by the private sector, which is evident by little to no investments. (3) leadership battle between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Drawing from the above, Williams (2023); however, provides a different perspective on the demise of the party by tracing the problem of the downfall of the ANC beyond the 2017 battle to the death of ideology in SA politics following the election of the ANC in power in 1994.

Complementing the above view, Kgalema Motlanthe, the former president of South Africa, mentioned recently that the time of the ANC in power is coming to an end and that this is due to the party confronting a crisis of its own making (Southall 2022). How can opposition parties convince dissatisfied voters that they are a credible alternative? Schulz-Herzenberg and Mattes (2023) contend that SA elections in the past two decades have been based on the confluence of two trends, namely (1) the decline in support for the ANC and (2) the decline in voter turnout, which later helped the ANC stay in power despite its dismal governance record.

From the above, it is safe to mention that the discourse on the demise of the ANC is growing, and as much as it is important to think of SA after the ANC, scholars in this discourse ought to deliberate on the party's failures and what that would mean for the future of SA moving forward. Hence, the need to problematise the envisaged climate of uncertainty in SA, where the future of the country is unclear with the dying of the party that delivered the country into democracy, is coming to an end.

The article is qualitative research (desktop study) that purposefully sampled over 20 relevant and available sources to problematise and make sense of the declining dominance of the ANC in SA politics and further debate the findings fate moving towards the 2024 general elections (Neumann 2003). The article is primarily descriptive but contains elements of exploration and explanation. It is descriptive, as it seeks to provide a detailed account of the fate of the ANC in SA politics. It is also partly exploratory as it explores the various challenges the ANC faces internally as well as externally as a political party in the changing coalition crisis. Lastly, the explanatory elements in this article attempt to explain *why* the growing decline of the ANC's dominance by answering whether the latter is a result of favouritism for an alternative party or a need for a different set of policies to address the various chronic challenges in which SA finds itself.

The African National Congress (ANC) Internal Challenges

Like any other political party, the ANC has its own internal challenges that vary from leadership crises, factionalism, corruption, breakaway parties, and governance (Mashele & Qobo 2017; Masina 2021). The leadership crisis in the ANC, for instance, can be traced as far back as

democratic rule in the country (Rupiah 2022). When the party, through its ready-to-govern policy, claimed to prepare its comrades to lead strategic positions when winning power, it failed to deploy capable cadres. Of course, cadre deployment is not an ANC phenomenon and, as such, should not be critiqued as something new in politics, as various countries in the continent and abroad do implement it (Shava & Chamisa 2018; Swanepoel 2021; Mlambo 2023). The challenges of cadre deployment in the ANC are a result of the party using issues such as struggle credentials to occupy public sector positions. We have at least in the past witnessed members of the organisation pronouncing that they did not go to exile to suffer¹. The latter of course spills over to the corruption evident in the organisations and various state entities they lead (Chitiga-Mabugu, Maisonnave, Henseler, and Mabugu 2021). It is also worth noting that corruption in the party is not something traceable to members in the low ranks but is also noticeable even in the executive leadership of the party (du Plessis 2022; Maseko, & Zane 2022). Admittedly, President Jacob Zuma, during his tenure, was implicated in various corruption cases, including the so-called state capture and the Nkandla debacle (Shai 2017; Rapanyane 2021; Semosa & Legodi 2023). Similarly, the incumbent President of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa, was allegedly implicated in corruption through his Phala-Phala farm, wherein money was stashed and stolen from his game farm (Myeni 2022; Roelf 2022). Now, despite the party's way of dealing with the leadership crisis and corruption through legalising cadre deployment, work shopping for their public servants, and implementing the step aside rule, there is no gain in saying that corruption is still present in the party and various institutions where their members are leading (Friedman 2018; Rupiah 2022).

Another challenge facing the ANC is the issue of factionalism within the party. When Ramaphosa became president, it was believed that the question of factionalism in the party would be dealt with. For instance, Ramaphosa used the Unity flagship to garner support for his presidency within the party (BBC News 2018; Nkoala 2023). However, that has not been a reality, as factionalism through ethnic as well as provincial border lines has been evident (Mukwedeya 2015; Derby 2023). Not only that, even during the party's conferences, the two recent factions, namely the

¹Smuts Ngonyama in 2004

Radical Economic Transformation (RET) as well as the political elite that supported Ramaphosa, were evidently dominating the political spectrum of the country (Terblanche 2021). Ramaphosa's corner is the political elite, who are seen cosying up to foreign investors and largely white corporations in SA (Rupia 2022). On the other hand, the RET, which is argued to be against the so called white control (Rupia 2022).

Another issue that contributed to not only the challenges of the ANC but the total decline of the party's dominance in the country is the numerous breakaway parties from the ANC (Swanepoel 2022). Focusing at least on parties that have broken away since the advent of democracy, such as the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Congress of the People (COPE), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and the African Congress for Transformation (ACT), it is worth mentioning that such breakaway parties from the ANC are because of factionalism or the expulsion of a prominent leader of the ANC (Gumede 2008; Booysen 2015). As a result, they get to leave with a significant membership, which, as mentioned earlier, is another contributing factor to the declining dominance of the party in SA (Booyesen 2015).

A preference for another party?

For the longest time, the ANC has been the so-called people's party, wherein South Africans, irrespective of their race, are for the party (of course, this could be debatable as whites remain a minority in the country and geographical location as well as age have extensively associated themselves with the party). As such, irrespective of how the country has always had numerous political parties contesting for elections, the ANC has received favour and association due to it being among the liberation movements as well as the oldest organisation in the country and the continent of Africa (Booyesen 2015). Due to various socialisation agents such as family and education among others, the majority of black people have always regarded the ANC as the only political home that can pursue the mandate that most people face (Booyesen 2011).

As mentioned earlier, wherein we dealt with various internal challenges of the ANC that have enormous contributions to the party's dominance in SA politics, this section then delves into another key theme of understanding what could be the root factors the declining ANC. For instance, various political commentators have problematised

the emergence of new parties to the declining dominance of the ANC (Isaacs 2021; Cilliers 2022). Of course, there have been numerous parties, such as UDM in 1998, COPE in 2008, and the EFF in 2013, and most recently African Democratic Change (ADC) in 2017, just to mention a few that broke out of the ANC for one reason or another (Mjo 2018). As such, the so-called breakaway parties have also left with a significant membership number. However, the breakaway parties mentioned earlier have not entirely threatened the dominance of the ANC. Of course, unlike the other parties that broke away from the ANC, the EFF has steadily grown in numbers and has even today become the third largest political party in SA (Mtimka & Prevost, 2023).

Admittedly, there have been alternative parties that have been formed in recent years, such as Action SA, which is argued to be a break from the official opposition party in SA, namely the Democratic Alliance (DA) (Mjo 2018). These newly formed organisations have managed to secure seats in either the municipal, provincial, and/or national assemblies (Ibid). Be that as it may, the ongoing coalition crisis due to the decline of the ANC has of course been argued by various scholars and political commentators to not be a result of the electorate decision to favour alternative political parties but rather a declining voter turnout in recent years (Booyesen 2015). Admittedly, a fragmented opposition contributes to the prolonged reign of dominant parties (Isike 2019).

Among the beneficiaries of the ANC decline are specific interest groups that maintain support and have distinct geographic patterns (Friedman 2020). Citizen's forums are made up of ordinary members of society who put in their time, money, and resources to plug holes. Some are even contesting elections. An example being residents of Ficksburg in the Free State province, the Setsoso service delivery forum (SSDF), as well as Makana Citizens Front in the Eastern Cape Province (Rupiah 2022). Indeed, as Rupiah (2022) asserts, South Africa is now in the same heat as countries with proportional representation electoral systems. The future of the ANC and SA may be in coalitions (Rupiah 2022).

Against this background, it is safe to say the electorate in SA does not entirely view the DA or EFF as the alternative, at least at the moment (Walsh 2023). The latter is so given their perception and loyalty to sticking to the "devil they know" in the form of the ANC (Ritchie 2021). The growing negative views on opposition and the ongoing beliefs as espoused by Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg (2016), that the

opposition is ill equipped to lead, govern, or represent them speak to the low turnout by the electorate to vote. The so-called no viable alternative is said to be among the reasons for the withdrawal from the electorate to find a rational option, hence the ANC continuing to win elections from the shrinking electorate (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg 2016).

Demand for alternative policies?

The ANC policies, which later became SA policies, have changed from being people-centred to neo-liberal (Fourie 2022). From the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of 1994 to the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Framework (GEAR) in 1995 (Fine 1995; Steyn 2005), the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA) in 2005 (Bond 2007), the New Growth Path (NGP), and the National Development Plan (NDP) in 2013 (Moyo & Mamabolo 2014). Since its first democratic elections and the ANC's majority win, which led to its heading, the Government of National Unity (GNU) has implemented various policies to rebuild and transform the economy after years of apartheid regimes, economic isolation, and financial sanctions enforced by the international community (Mosala 2016).

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) was chosen by the ANC as the primary socio-economic programme (Mosala 2016). Simply put, as a socio-economic policy, the RDP was meant to create a more equal society through reconstruction and development as well as strengthen democracy for all South Africans with the aim of addressing and redressing the inherited gross inequalities of apartheid, socially, economically, and spatially. The RDP was successful in some areas, such as social security, in which the government established a very extensive welfare system (Mosala, Venter, & Bain 2017). Although the RDP was argued to be the cornerstone of government, it failed to improve the economic growth of the country (Mosala, Venter, & Bain 2017).

The government then introduced a macroeconomic policy framework called Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1996 to improve the country's economic growth, which was meant to assist the government in meeting social investment needs (Fine 1995). Among things incorporated to stimulate economic growth and investment were reducing fiscal deficits, lowering inflation, maintaining

exchange rate stability, decreasing barriers to trade, and liberalising capital flows (Mosala 2016). Despite these latter achievements, private investment, job creation, and GDP growth indicators were disappointing. Low levels of economic growth and private investment were not enough to reduce the country's unemployment rate.

In 2005, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa was then implemented (Bond 2007). ASGISA concretised the aims of the RDP of building a united, democratic, non-sexist, and non-racial society and a single integrated economy (Bond 2007). While there were successes in the implementation of ASGISA, there were shortfalls that had to be considered by the government for improvement. After the fall of President Thabo Mbeki, ASGISA was replaced with the New Growth Path (GNP), which was announced by Jacob Zuma during his 'State of the Nation' address in 2010 (Koma 2013). GNP recognised that structural unemployment remains extremely high; poverty and inequality are deeper than ever before (Ibid.). As such, the GNP was meant to decrease the triple challenges mentioned in the latter (Legodi 2020).

In 2013 the government introduced the National Development Plan (NDP)-2030 as South Africa's long-term socio-economic development roadmap (SAHO). This is said to be the blueprint for a future economic and socio-economic development strategy for the country as of 2012/13 at Mangaung in December 2018 (SAHO & Koma 2013). The NDP, which is neo-liberal, has been argued to be the real detachment of the ANC from being a people's party to now being the organisation that serves the interests of the neo-liberal capitalistic market that we find ourselves in today. Due to the neo-liberal bent of the ANC throughout time, the challenges of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the triple challenge of unemployment, inequality, and poverty, and crime among others, have worsened to a point of cul de sac, as argued by ordinary people on the ground (Legodi 2020). This shows how the majority of South Africans view the ANC and SA politics today and further showcases where we are and what we ought to expect in terms of voter turnout in the upcoming general elections. Even with Ramaphosa's so-called renewal, the party has remained in rhetoric that failed to attract the party's previous supporters to the polls (Gouws & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2016.).

Conclusion and Way Forward

This article has problematised the fate of the ANC in SA politics and what to expect moving towards the 2024 general elections. The authors have unpacked the various internal and external challenges the party faces and thus answered the primary reasons why there is such a growing perception of the dying ANC in the country. As a party that led SA into democracy, just like the rest of the liberation movements the later turned into political parties, SA fails to keep up and solve the various challenges South Africans face today.

As a way forward, the authors in this article enhance the ongoing discourse that indeed the fate of the ANC and its demise moving towards the 2024 general elections is evident. The party, in as much as it has attempted to resolve various challenges in the country and beyond, will not go back to its glorious stature due to its failure to resonate with the people of the country and its loyal electorate, which have abandoned participating in elections. Perhaps the growing decline will assist and save SA from the dominant ANC, which has provided leaders who do not care about the interests of the people in general.

Inasmuch as coalitions have been disastrous in the country and the prospects of a coalition government are more of a reality, the authors submit that this indeed could be said to be the fate of the ANC, either as part of a coalition government or rather as an end to the ruling of the oldest liberation movement in the continent.

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