

# ANC No Longer Assured of Victory in South Africa

On 1 November 2021, South Africa held its local government elections. For the last few years, the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's ruling party since 1994, has been taking the brunt of frustration for corruption, persistent poverty and a raft of other challenges, such as unemployment and social inequalities. Despite these troubles, the party has always been confident of victory at the polls. In fact, the ANC had become so complacent and entitled to electoral victory that some of its leaders have [asserted](#) that the party will rule South Africa until the return of Jesus Christ. However, the current voting patterns, voter turnout, and frustrations with the political system and leaders demonstrate that the ruling party can no longer take victory for granted.

Those who think that the ANC will rule forever might want to look at the 2019 General Elections and the 2021 municipal elections as a reality check. Even before one talks about the results and how participants fared, the dwindling turnout of voters is a troubling reality. In the [2016 municipal elections](#), voter turnout was 57.94%, which reduced to 45.71% in the 2021 elections. A number of reasons could be adduced for this. In 2021, one might be tempted to attribute this low turnout to how COVID-19 has affected people's lives and movement. In South Africa's case, however, this argument does not currently go far because movement is no longer restricted during the day.

A more fundamental reason, one that indicts the South African political system, is that voters have begun to feel indifference towards elections in South Africa. Frustrated citizens, who faithfully vote but whose daily challenges and needs remain unaddressed, choose to either change their voting

patterns or withhold their votes by boycotting elections. In extreme cases, this might lead to a general hostility towards electoral politics and the democratic processes that they entail. The responsibility to remedy this resides with those in power and the parties that oppose them. Those in power bear the responsibility of visibly improving the lot of those whose votes they seek to court. The opposition, on the other hand, has to persuade prospective voters that they are better alternatives and deserve to be placed in authority. The ANC, as the party in government, naturally incurs the primary responsibility for voter apathy and lack of participation.

Another major talking point about the 2021 municipal elections is the performance of the two dominant parties, the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA). In the 2016 elections, the ANC and DA got 53.91% and 26% respectively. In 2021, the ANC reduced its tally to 46.04% and the DA to 21.83%. Again, several issues, some self-inflicted, are responsible for these declines. The ANC has been in power for 27 years – the entire gamut of South Africa's post-apartheid era. While it has made strides in providing amenities such as housing, sanitation, education and employment opportunities, it has also been deficient in substantially transforming or changing a socio-economic structure that is simply impregnable for previously disadvantaged South Africans. This translates into the persistent economic exclusion of black South Africans. It's worth noting that the ANC had well-intentioned initiatives such as [Affirmative Action](#) and the [Reconstruction and Development Programme](#) to remedy the situation. However, these initiatives were infected by tokenism and incompetence, thereby benefitting a few 'connected' people while leaving the poor in their fringe position.

Worse still, factors such as recent cases of corruption and factional wrangles have further eroded the party's integrity. As I write this, the party's Secretary-General, Ace Magashule, is under suspension and is in court facing [allegations](#) of

corruption. Furthermore, the short [imprisonment](#) of former president Jacob Zuma in July 2021, which led to protests in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, further divided the party. All these factors, happening in an election year, were bound to have a telling impact on the performance of the ANC.

From ANC's woes, one would expect that the DA, as the main opposition, would benefit. Voter percentages show that this has not been the case. The DA has suffered its own mortal blows. It has failed to shake off the belief that it is [a racist party](#). In light of the gains that have been made by smaller parties (such as the Economic Freedom Fighters, Inkatha Freedom Party and the Freedom Front Plus) and a noticeable maiden performance by ActionSA, many hope that, in subsequent elections, the incorrigibility on the part of the dominant parties will be penalized.

For the ANC, the last two municipal elections (2016 and 2021) point to a rot that is gnawing at the party. Apart from issues of service delivery which are keenly felt by many South Africans, the party also has to do a comprehensive in-house cleaning. Moreover, the ANC will also have to gird itself for difficult discussions with those they might seek coalitions with. This is so because, in some quarters, the ANC has become so unpopular that associating with it might be costly for some political players. Finally, young people, especially with no tangible memory of apartheid, will demand that their circumstances be improved, regardless of who is in power. Consequently, the ANC can no longer be complacent that it will rule in perpetuity. The fact that it played a seminal role in bringing about the end of apartheid and thus securing suffrage for black South Africans does not entitle it to unthinking endorsement.

Indications are that the ANC might not rule until the Second Coming, after all.