

South Africa's May 2024 Elections

June 7, 2024

South Africa held national and provincial elections on May 29, 2024. After a two-decade [decline in voter support](#), the African National Congress (ANC) [lost](#) its National Assembly (NA) majority and, as the NA elects the president, its unitary control over the executive branch. The ANC had held that majority since the first racially inclusive post-apartheid elections in 1994. Talks are [underway](#) between the ANC and other parties to form a governing coalition—with implications for South African policy orientations, including foreign policy stances about which multiple Members of Congress have expressed concern. The election outcome poses a major challenge to President and ANC leader Cyril Ramaphosa, in office since 2018.

Vote: Outcome and Process

The ANC won 40% of the 2024 [national vote](#) and 159 out of 400 NA seats, sharply down from elections in 2019—when it won 58% of the vote and 230 seats—while the opposition [Democratic Alliance](#) (DA) remained the second-largest party, winning 22% of votes and 87 seats, slightly up from 2019. Top runners-up included two ANC splinter parties—[uMkhonto weSizwe](#) (MK), a new party led by former President Jacob Zuma (15%, 58 seats) and the [Economic Freedom Fighters](#) (EFF), led by ex-ANC youth wing leader-turned-ANC critic Julius Malema (10%, 39 seats). Fifth was the [Inkatha Freedom Party](#) (IFP; 4%, 17 seats), a longtime NA seat-holder.

The MK was among seven parties that won seats for the first time in the 2024 polls, which featured a [historically low](#) 59% voter [turnout](#) rate and [52 participating parties](#). Voters selected parties to fill half of NA seats at the national level, and at the provincial level elected parties or independents for remaining seats, allocated to the country's nine provinces based on population size. Voters also chose parties or independents for seats in provincial legislatures, which are each to select 10 of 90 National Council of Provinces (upper house) members in proportion to party ratios within their ranks.

Election Issues

The election came amid [concern expressed](#) by some Members of Congress over South Africa's close [ties with Russia](#), the People's Republic of [China](#), and [Iran](#); and the ANC government's international [legal interventions](#) regarding the [Israel-Hamas conflict](#). The makeup of South Africa's new governing coalition [could affect its position](#) on these issues. While the DA has criticized the ANC's approach to the Israel-

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Hamas conflict and to Russia, [some observers](#) have predicted that an ANC-MK-EFF alliance might bring South Africa closer to these U.S. adversaries or geostrategic competitors—though the MK and EFF [election manifestos](#)’ foreign policy statements are limited.

While foreign policy likely was important to some voters, domestic issues reportedly were most prominent. Respondents in a pre-poll [Afrobarometer](#) survey cited the [32.9% unemployment rate](#) as the top issue (71% of respondents), followed by electricity cuts, corruption, living costs, poverty, economic management, crime/security, water access, education, and housing. Also at issue were pre-election ANC [pledges](#) to permanently extend COVID-19-era [income grants](#) and enact a [national health insurance](#) system; widespread [anti-immigrant attitudes](#); [land redistribution](#), potentially of expropriated private land; and ANC [patronage appointments](#).

ANC and MK Challenger

The ideologically leftist ANC has in practice melded support for private sector-led growth with state-centric economic planning and a large social welfare system. Its post-1994 electoral support has been rooted in its leading [anti-apartheid struggle](#) role and efforts to overcome apartheid’s stark, enduring racial and socioeconomic inequality legacies. ANC voter support has waned over time, amid reported public service inadequacies and endemic corruption, notably “[state capture](#),” a form of systematized graft that emerged under ex-president [Jacob Zuma](#). Zuma [resigned](#) under pressure and was replaced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in 2018.

The rise of the MK presented a serious electoral challenge to the ANC, which suspended Zuma in late 2023 and unsuccessfully sued to halt the new party’s use of the MK name and logo, which are those of the ANC’s anti-apartheid-era armed wing. Zuma, who has [criticized](#) Ramaphosa’s own [non-reporting of income](#), was [disqualified](#) as a 2024 MK NA candidate over his [conviction](#) for refusing to testify to a [judicial commission](#) on state capture. Zuma, a populist, has vowed [retribution against](#) the Ramaphosa-led ANC and engaged in bitter [spoiler rhetoric](#). The MK’s 15% of the vote [exceeded some predictions](#) and helped prevent an ANC majority.

Coalition Prospects

The time available for inter-party coalition negotiations is limited. Per the [constitution](#), members of the NA, South Africa’s lower house, must choose the president from among their own ranks within [two weeks](#) of the [results announcement](#), and the winner must be sworn-in within [five days thereafter](#)—barring [possible litigation](#) delays.

Some in the ANC and some [investors](#) reportedly favor a centrist coalition [with the DA and IFP](#). While left-leaning ANC members reportedly prefer a coalition with the radical EFF and/or MK over the DA—which is ideologically centrist but [criticized](#) by some as a predominantly White party—the ANC reportedly has [rejected an MK demand](#) that President Ramaphosa resign prior to any negotiations. ANC leaders are reportedly now considering a possible [national unity government](#) inclusive of multiple parties.

Congress: Potential Implications

Some in Congress may closely monitor South Africa’s coalition talks, given their potential implications for South Africa’s foreign policy and bilateral relations. An ANC-DA coalition could seek to foster greater U.S.-South Africa’s foreign policy alignment, whereas an ANC-EFF-and/or MK coalition could signal a closer alignment with the forementioned U.S. adversaries and foster strains in bilateral ties.

Regardless of the outcome, some in Congress [have proposed](#) a mandatory comprehensive review of U.S.-South Africa relations and a determination of whether South Africa’s foreign policy has undermined U.S. national security or foreign policy interests, as some [Members have contended](#). A positive finding could affect South Africa’s eligibility for U.S. trade benefits under the [African Growth and Opportunity Act](#) (AGOA), as could an out-of-cycle AGOA eligibility review called for under S. 4110, an AGOA reauthorization bill. The Biden Administration has called South Africa “[an anchor](#)” for global peace and

prosperity. South Africa receives substantial [U.S. assistance](#), notably to [counter HIV/AIDS](#), and is a top U.S. regional trade and investment partner.

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