By [John Eligon]

John Eligon is the Johannesburg bureau chief for The Times, covering countries in southern Africa.

- May 21, 2024

The campaign to keep the African National Congress in power kicked off, unofficially, under a scorching January sun in a packed soccer stadium. Addressing the crowd was Cyril Ramaphosa, president of South Africa and the A.N.C., Africa's oldest liberation movement, which was at the forefront in the battle against apartheid and has governed the country since the first fully democratic elections in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected president. Ramaphosa was at Mandela's side in those years, serving as a chief negotiator to end apartheid and later as a top A.N.C. official. But the tone he struck at the kickoff event, which was also the A.N.C.'s annual birthday celebration, was one of anger and even, perhaps, political desperation.

Speaking to thousands of loyalists, he took direct aim at what he wanted everyone to believe was the biggest threat to the country. “Anti-transformation forces,” he said, were “working very hard to undermine the gains of our freedom that we’ve made over three decades.” The A.N.C.’s opponents were “real snakes,” he went on, who were intent on sabotaging the party and taking the country back to the days of apartheid.

Ramaphosa had reason to worry. National elections are scheduled for May 29, and polls suggest that the A.N.C. may slip below 50 percent of the national vote for the first time. It would mark a low point in the steady erosion of the party’s popularity. During the days of the freedom struggle, fighting a clear enemy made it easy for a majority of South Africans — and many around the world — to rally around the party. The A.N.C. lived off that reputation. But as many South Africans continue to scrape by, voters have become disenchanted. After peaking at just under 70 percent of the vote in the third democratic election in 2004, the A.N.C.’s share was at 57.5 percent in 2019, the last time national elections were held. If the party loses its absolute majority this year, it most likely won’t be because voters have flocked to other parties but because its own disgruntled supporters have stayed home.

Ramaphosa’s event was designed to reawaken some of the excitement of the party’s earlier era. The stadium boomed with chants like “We thank you, A.N.C., today we are joyful!” and it was hard to miss the gestures of solidarity with other liberation movements. Hanging high above the crowd was a Cuban flag, a reminder that Cuba was an important ally in the A.N.C.’s armed struggle. Perhaps even more noteworthy was the Palestinian flag that also flew above the crowd. The A.N.C. has for many years likened the conditions in which Palestinians live to apartheid, and the Ramaphosa administration has been outspoken in its criticism of the war in Gaza, bringing charges of genocide against Israel to the International Court of Justice in December. Drawing on the A.N.C.’s aura as a party of freedom fighters, the Ramaphosa administration has positioned itself as uniquely capable of standing up against what it regards as Western-supported atrocities.

The spectators, who included officials from the liberation movements that now govern Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola and Mozambique, soaked up the event as if it were a spiritual experience. But for many South Africans, A.N.C. nostalgia cannot mask the country’s many problems. South Africa today struggles to provide the most basic needs for its people. Electricity and water outages are frequent. Unemployment is at 42 percent, if you include those who have

stopped looking for work. The murder rate is among the highest in the world (six and a half times higher than in the United States), and most South Africans live in poverty. Since the end of apartheid, inequality has actually grown. You can see it in the tin shacks near rows of office towers and upscale malls or in the affluent, largely white suburbs north of Johannesburg, where often the only Black people you see have traveled from far-flung townships to tend lawns or care for children.

The A.N.C.'s heroic reputation for upending racist rule — creating a free society with strong democratic institutions and the continent's largest economy — is now trumped by anger over its inability to improve living conditions for the majority. This is true even for the generation that experienced the indignities of apartheid. The younger generation, which did not live through the freedom struggle, is increasingly focused on eliminating the racial and economic inequalities they believe the A.N.C. has not done enough to mitigate.

Weeks before the rally, Ramaphosa's predecessor-turned-nemesis, Jacob Zuma, announced that he was supporting a new party formed to run against the A.N.C. — a move that fueled Ramaphosa's fury at the rally. But it is not just former A.N.C. members over whom Ramaphosa must triumph. More than 50 parties are competing nationally, and there is a real possibility that the A.N.C. may end up as part of a coalition that restricts its power. All this could take South Africa in a direction the A.N.C. cannot control. An alliance with the leftist Economic Freedom Fighters, for instance, may force the A.N.C. to move aggressively to seize white-owned land or to nationalize mines. By contrast, an alliance with the center-right Democratic Alliance, the largest opposition party, might thwart the A.N.C.'s efforts to make companies provide more opportunities for the Black majority.
African National Congress loyalists at Ramaphosa's campaign rally. The A.N.C., which led the fight against apartheid, has steadily lost support over the years because of its failure to improve the lives of most South Africans.Credit...Andile Buka for The New York Times
"We are in a sort of dead-end situation," says Roger Southall, an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, who has studied liberation movements in Africa. The A.N.C. may cling to power, he added, "but they don't have the capacity or the ideas to govern."

Founded in 1912, the A.N.C. has been a dominant force not only in South Africa's national politics but also in the revolt against colonialism that reshaped the continent in the second half of the 20th century. The A.N.C. was

formed just two years after Afrikaner and English settlers created the Union of South Africa and excluded the Black majority from political power. It was meant to be a parliament for all African people — hence, *African* National Congress — recognizing a struggle that transcended colonial boundaries. Among its founders were professionals but also traditional chiefs. And because South Africa had a regionally dominant economy and one of the few universities on the continent that admitted Black people, it attracted workers and students from other African countries, who received their political education alongside A.N.C. activists and student leaders.

As a result, the A.N.C. helped form the pan-Africanist ideologies of the continent's independence struggles. In 1962, when Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah, addressed an Africanist conference, he recited a speech delivered decades earlier by an A.N.C. founder, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, that was imbued with pan-Africanist ideology. That same year, Robert Mugabe, who studied in South Africa before becoming the founding prime minister of an independent Zimbabwe, invoked the concept of "nonracialism," a central tenet of the A.N.C., during a television interview about his country's fight against colonialism: "We regard an individual as an individual, and that everybody must be accorded his full political rights."

As country after country in Africa gained independence, from the late 1950s through the 1980s, the A.N.C. found itself in the rear guard, the last movement battling to break white-minority rule. Because the apartheid regime banned the A.N.C. in 1960, forcing the organization to set up bases in other nations, many of its leaders had been in exile or prison for years when it finally came to power in the 1990s. They returned to a country they did not know well and had to work to integrate with the freedom fighters from grass-roots organizations that helped topple the regime. There were vigorous debates over how much direct control the A.N.C. should exert over the state. Those tensions still resonate, at times driving factional battles within the party that prevent the government from getting things done.

Many of South Africa's current failures can be traced to its earliest days. Friction between new Black leaders and the existing, predominantly white civil service led to high turnover, often crippling the new government, says Khulu Mbatha, who spent 15 years with the A.N.C. in exile and then served in the first administration. Pallo Jordan, a former A.N.C. leader who was a minister in Mandela's cabinet, says the government also made mistakes in courting private investment. It anticipated, for example, that the private sector would invest in

the country's nationalized power stations. That never happened, and the power grid has remained unstable. But perhaps the party's biggest failure, Jordan says, was not preparing members for the temptations they would face as stewards of the state.

Jordan says that as minister of environmental affairs, he made $7,000 a month, compared with $50 a month during the period leading up to the first democratic elections. When he served as minister, Jordan says, a property developer offered to build homes in Black townships if he approved a development on environmentally sensitive land. Jordan says he told the developer no. But many others did not resist such quid pro quos. Corruption became endemic in the A.N.C. For many South Africans, Zuma, the former president, is emblematic of what is known as "state capture": taking over government institutions and using them for self-enrichment.

Jay Naidoo, who was also a minister in Mandela's cabinet, told me that when the A.N.C. was banned, it "attracted only the most powerful individuals of integrity" because, "you could get tortured, you could get detained, you could get killed." He went on: "What do we get after that? It's like every mercenary and everyone that had a quick buck to make. Every corrupt, individual soul. Getting into the A.N.C. was a way to get to the feeding trough."

Lining up to get into an A.N.C. rally. Voters feel a strong connection to the party, but this time that may not be enough for the party to keep its governing majority. Credit...Andile Buka for The New York Times

In mid-February, I followed two leaders of a local A.N.C. branch, Sibusiso Kunene and Nthabiseng Matsimele, as they canvassed their neighborhood in the hardscrabble township Boipatong, about an hour south of Johannesburg in Gauteng Province. Kunene and Matsimele, who both got jobs through a program begun by the province's premier, regularly knock on doors, perform community service and triage local problems, all part of an effort to show that the party still gets things done for its constituents. When I joined them, the community of modest bungalows was in darkness, part of the timed rolling blackouts known euphemistically as load shedding. Load shedding is one of the most potent symbols of the A.N.C.'s failure to govern effectively, a result of years of mismanagement and corruption within the state-owned power company, Eskom, that have left the grid unable to keep up with demand.

When Matsimele and Kunene knocked on Priscilla Mpho's door, she was sitting in the dark, missing one of her favorite soap operas. Matsimele told Priscilla that they "would like to know of any issues that you might have."

"Yooh!" Priscilla said. "There are a lot."

Priscilla, who asked that only her first and middle names be used to protect her privacy, is a retired teacher. She lives in a two-bedroom house on a street that the government paved for the first time only six months earlier. Speaking from behind an iron security gate, she said she had to pay a private company to collect her garbage because the city wasn't doing it. Her three children were unemployed. Her daughter had lost her job with a major steel producer, a casualty of the decline in South Africa's manufacturing sector, caused in part by the country's crumbling ports and railroads. Because her children couldn't help her out financially, Priscilla said, there was no food in her house.

"For the past 30 years, we had problems," Kunene conceded. "But now we're trying by all means to fix all those problems." That was only because of the election, Priscilla shot back with a snicker. Priscilla has voted for the A.N.C. in every election since 1994 and loves the party "because it took us out of apartheid." But as she watched Boipatong crumble, that loyalty waned.

"They make me angry," she said. "Why do they do wrong things? Why are they corrupt? You know, we are just confused." She added: "Maybe I won't even go vote."

Zuko Godlimpi, who at 32 is the youngest member of the A.N.C.'s executive committee, concedes that South Africa's progress has had its ups and downs. Most people have access to electricity now, but there are frequent blackouts. More people have access to education, but they face a grim job market when they graduate. Urban infrastructure has improved, but it has not been able to keep up with the flood of migrants from rural areas where there are virtually no economic opportunities. But he stressed that the A.N.C. had plans to solve the economic malaise, in large part by reinvigorating the country's manufacturing sector.

A volunteer for the African National Congress in Boipatong, South Africa, canvassed voters in May.Credit...Andile Buka for The New York Times

While corruption and its effects may be what angers South Africans most — watching A.N.C. leaders amass wealth while ordinary citizens beg for loose change at traffic lights — the party has struggled for other reasons too. Intraparty factionalism has kept the A.N.C. from carrying out a smooth

transition between leaders since Mandela left office in 1999. The party is often dismissive of its critics and tends to close ranks when its leaders are accused of wrongdoing. When Ramaphosa faced impeachment two years ago, after more than half a million dollars was found stashed in a couch at his game farm, the party ordered its parliamentary members to quash it or risk discipline. (Ramaphosa has denied any misconduct.) “They think they can be in power without representing the people,” Mbatha, a former international relations adviser to Ramaphosa, says. “There’s an element of arrogance, there’s an element of dictatorship.”

The party also maintains allegiance to allies from the anti-apartheid struggle, like Russia, and cheers fellow liberation organizations, like ZANU-PF of Zimbabwe, even when doing so goes against South Africa’s interests. ZANU-PF has been widely accused of rigging elections, human rights abuses and economic mismanagement, prompting many Zimbabweans to cross into South Africa illegally, leading the A.N.C. to blame them for burdening the country’s troubled economy.

What has kept the A.N.C. in power, perhaps more than anything, is the lack of inspiring alternatives. Opposition parties often campaign on anti-A.N.C. messages, rather than giving voters a reason to choose them. To counter this, the A.N.C. has embarked on a public-relations campaign to promote what it has accomplished, and it is not above threatening those who insist on unflattering coverage. A leaked audio recording of a meeting among top A.N.C. officials in April captured Ramaphosa saying that wherever there has been negative reporting, the party would “take that up.” “We want fair treatment,” he said. “Even more than fair treatment, because we are the governing party. The TV stations have no right to be negative toward us and always either not reporting on our activities or just continuously branding us in a negative way.”

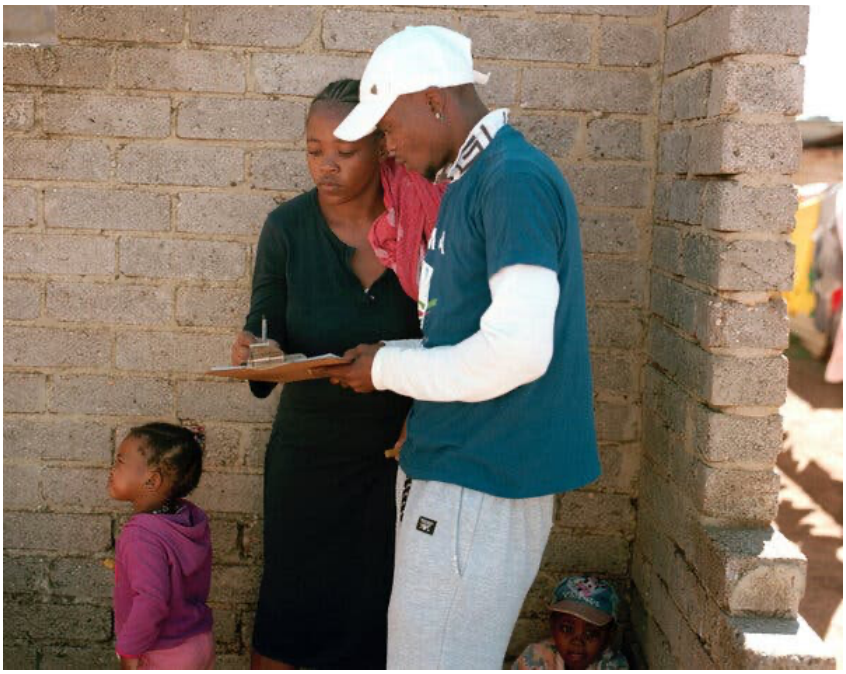
Another part of the A.N.C.’s strategy lies in stressing the instability that might result from a coalition government. At the local level, dysfunctional examples — mayors cycling in and out of office after months or even days; angry clashes between parties — abound. But the A.N.C. also leans heavily into South Africa’s fraught racial dynamics, warning that the opposition will take the country back to the days of apartheid. The A.N.C.’s biggest challenger, the Democratic Alliance, has a diverse leadership but also a reputation as the “white party.” Its top officials are white, it has lost some prominent Black members and it sometimes employs its own racially driven politics of fear to cater to the far right. The group has, for instance, warned of a “sharp rise” in

murders on farms (most are white-owned), even though there is no data to support that assertion.

It is not, Godlimpi says, that the Democratic Alliance would reinstate racial segregation but that their policies would have a similar effect. We were seated in a restaurant in an affluent suburb of Johannesburg that was once exclusively white. Godlimpi gestured to the tables around us: He and I were two of only a handful of Black patrons.

“That’s what apartheid is,” he said, “that’s what it was.”

The region that best represents many of the dynamics that confront the A.N.C. across the country is the Vaal Triangle. It is part of the Sedibeng district, a flat expanse larger than Rhode Island with plenty of grassy prairie. Sprawling factories, many of them shuttered, dot the landscape, as do a diverse mix of residential communities: multilevel modern homes, modest bungalows, shacks made of corrugated iron. More than a million people live there. Unemployment hovers around 50 percent. Once an industrial center, it has experienced a steep decline, particularly in steel manufacturing, which has shed more than 214,000 jobs since 2008. It is now more readily associated with potholed roads, trash-littered fields and a broken sewer system that pollutes local water sources.



A worker for the Democratic Alliance, a rival to the A.N.C., in Evaton West, South Africa. Credit…Andile Buka for The New York Times

The Vaal also has historical resonance for the A.N.C. One of its oldest townships was the site of a defining moment in the struggle against apartheid: the 1960 Sharpeville massacre, during which the police opened fire on thousands of peaceful demonstrators protesting restrictions on the movement of Black people, killing at least 69. Nearly 40 years later, it was in Sharpeville that Mandela signed the country's new Constitution into law.

In mid-March, a special election was held in Emfuleni, the largest municipality in the Vaal, to select the replacement for a councilman who had died. The A.N.C. once dominated the municipality, but the Democratic Alliance is now making inroads, pointing to its record governing neighboring Midvaal and arguing that it can do a better job not just here but in the country as a whole.

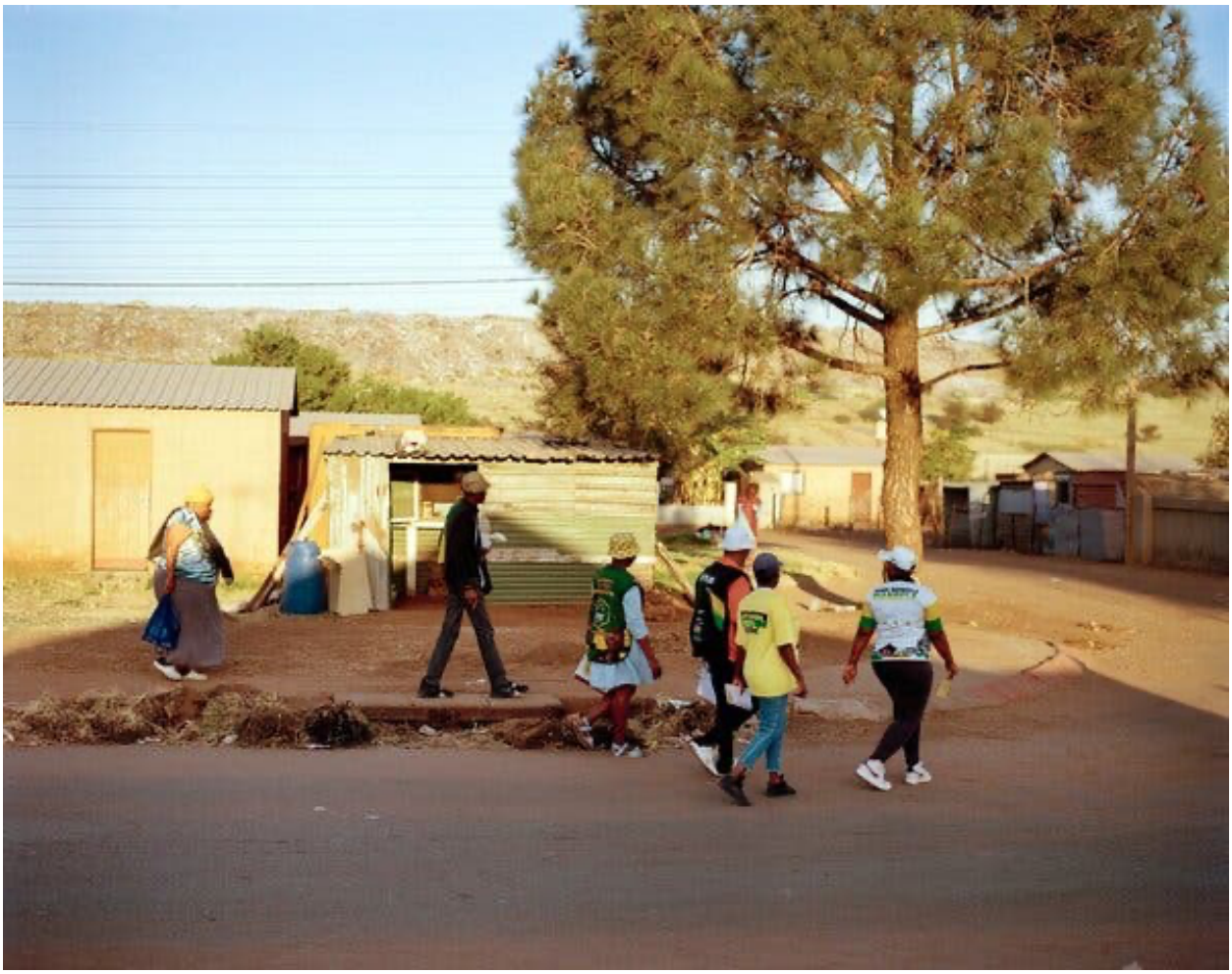
The council election felt like a dress rehearsal for the national contest. Crowds of people sporting a kaleidoscope of colors hung out of vans and stood on the backs of pickup trucks, shouting slogans, dancing to South African house music and waving posters bearing the smiling faces of politicians. The sun was blazing, and red dirt choked the air, but everyone seemed in high spirits.

"Fight, A.N.C., fight!" yelled supporters of the governing party. "Push, A.N.C., push!"

"Look at these thieves!" chanted the A.N.C.'s political opponents. "They are now shaking. We are not nervous. Come 2024!"

The A.N.C. had deployed Ntjanyana Phala, a councilman in Boipatong, a township in Emfuleni, to oversee the campaign to retain this seat. He bounced from one voting station to the next, constantly on his cellphone. As determined as he was to deliver the result his party wanted, he said he didn't believe the A.N.C. could get more than 50 percent of the vote nationally. "For us to survive, we must just beg," he said. "If we pray, then the ancestors of the A.N.C. are always with us. We might get it, but we get it through prayers."

Phala's own start with the organization began when he was 9, and he and other children would visit the home of a neighbor who claimed to be a pastor. The "pastor" was an A.N.C. activist named Ernest Sotsu who led the children in a few hymns and then would turn to preaching the gospel of Black liberation. The A.N.C. of those days, Phala said, mobilized the people against the establishment. Today the A.N.C. is the establishment. "We are no more in charge on the ground," he said.



A.N.C. volunteers walking door-to-door in an underserved part of Boipatong before the election on May 29. Credit...Andile Buka for The New York Times

As Phala helped mount a get-out-the-vote operation, a group of men in gold A.N.C. T-shirts unloaded portable toilets from the back of a truck and left them in front of shacks throughout Ramaphosa, an informal settlement with no piped water or electricity that is predominantly Black; it is the part of the ward with the most support for the A.N.C. South Africans often half-joke that things miraculously get done around election time: Roads are paved, transformers repaired, government-constructed homes allocated. Solly Msimanga, the Democratic Alliance candidate for premier of Gauteng Province, told me that the toilet delivery on Election Day was tantamount to vote buying. Phala was evasive about the timing but said the A.N.C. was just doing its job: “When you are in an election season, that’s when you push more because you’ve got an objective to achieve.”

The following morning, it was clear things had gone exactly as the A.N.C. hoped. It retained the seat, increased its margin of victory and achieved a turnout of 60 percent in its stronghold; only 30 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the part of the ward most favorable to the Democratic Alliance. Political observers say that even those South Africans who complain relentlessly about the A.N.C. often feel such a strong connection to the party that they can't do anything but vote for it. For Phala, the result confirmed "that people, as much as they have challenges, they still believe that the A.N.C. can provide. People are prepared, they just need to be engaged."

But just three days later, local volunteers were complaining that Phala was not engaging enough with his constituents and it was hurting the party. Matsimele and Kunene, the A.N.C. members I followed as they canvassed their Boipatong neighborhood, took me to a rural area of Phala's ward to see what was going on. At a strip mall that houses a liquor store and a butcher shop, Pascalis Ntlele, a 58-year-old A.N.C. volunteer who lives in the area, was hanging out with community members in the parking lot. Ntlele began to list his complaints: Residents wanted government public-works jobs in the community, but they all seemed to be going to people who did not live there. They needed a sports field for children repaired and the abandoned municipal building to be reopened. People are so fed up, Ntlele said, it would be hard to get them to the polls on Election Day. "Something went wrong," Ntlele said. "It's no longer the same party that we used to know, that liberated us."

For Kunene it was important to understand what was troubling volunteers like Ntlele. Whatever the A.N.C.'s flaws are, he believes only it can deliver a more equitable society.

"This is the only Black party that took us out of poverty, out of oppression," Kunene said. "It's like Jesus."

Read by Prentice Onayemi
Narration produced by Anna Diamond
Engineered by Devin Murphy

John Eligon is the Johannesburg bureau chief for The Times, covering a wide range of events and trends that influence and shape the lives of ordinary people across southern Africa. More about John Eligon

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/21/magazine/south-africa-elections-anc.html