

South Africa wrestles with internal divisions as it confronts a punitive Trump

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South African President Cyril Ramaphosa launched a National Dialogue this month in hopes of reaching a consensus on the country's future.

PHILL MAGAKOE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

South Africa, facing fierce pressure from U.S. President [Donald Trump's](#) increasingly punitive attacks, is struggling to maintain a united front under a shaky coalition government beset by factional feuding and corruption scandals.

Mr. Trump has zeroed in on South Africa as one of his favourite targets this year, hitting it with a relentless barrage of tariff hikes, aid cuts, boycotted meetings and repeated criticism of its crime and racial issues.

His campaign has triggered an anxious debate in South Africa over how to respond. But its coalition government has been on the brink of collapse for months, unable to agree on a strategy to tackle the country's stagnant economy. And the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is badly divided, its factions jostling in an unofficial leadership race.

This month, President [Cyril Ramaphosa](#) launched what he calls a National Dialogue, hoping to reach a consensus on the country's future. But his biggest coalition partner, the Democratic Alliance (DA) party, is boycotting the dialogue. So too are some of South Africa's most prominent civil society groups, trade unions and politicians, including former president Thabo Mbeki. Many complain about the dialogue's expensive cost and its lack of political independence.

[South Africa facing prospect of job losses after Trump announces 30-per-cent tariff](#)

[Brazil to join Gaza genocide case against Israel, led by South Africa, at ICJ](#)

Powerful figures in Mr. Ramaphosa's party, the ANC, are urging him to dump the DA from the coalition and replace it with a far-left party, the Economic Freedom Fighters, even though the EFF would further inflame South Africa's relations with Washington.

While he has resisted those demands, Mr. Ramaphosa has agreed to seek new coalition members, diluting the DA's power and sparking new questions about the coalition's future.

Even outside the coalition squabbles, Mr. Ramaphosa is battling to keep a lid on domestic tensions. Top leaders of his security forces have recently gone rogue in a series of defiant gestures that exposed the government's weakness.

A police commander, flanked by armed men in combat fatigues, called a news conference last month to accuse the government of corruption and political interference. Then the national army chief, General Ruzizani Maphwanya, flew to Tehran to issue an unauthorized statement of praise for Iran's regime, prompting a rebuke from the President.

The army chief's Iran visit will further complicate efforts to negotiate a trade deal with Mr. Trump, who has made clear that his tariff hikes are partly linked to his anger at South Africa's foreign and domestic policies.

Mr. Ramaphosa is expected to step down as ANC leader in 2027, and his party is already distracted by the backroom contest among his potential successors, even as the ANC's popularity continues to decline.

Despite promising a "new dawn" for the country, Mr. Ramaphosa has failed to make a dent in South Africa's high unemployment rate, which climbed to 33.2 per cent this month, compared with 27 per cent when he took office in 2018. Economic growth has fallen below 1 per cent annually, offering little hope for the country's poor.

In response, many South Africans are blaming African migrants. Mobs of anti-foreigner vigilantes have caused chaos by descending on dozens of hospitals and

medical clinics in an illegal campaign to prevent migrants from getting health care. Even pregnant women and HIV patients have been turned away.

“We will need to have difficult conversations about many issues,” Mr. Ramaphosa told about 1,200 delegates in a university hall in Pretoria last week as he launched the National Dialogue.

He pointed to an unequal society and a faltering economy. “Why do so many people live in abject poverty?” he asked. “Why, after decades of democracy, are the prospects for a white child so much better than those of a Black child? Why do clinics run out of medicine? Why do taps run dry?”

As the ANC loses support, tumbling to less than 40 per cent in last year’s election after decades of comfortable majorities, many South Africans are looking instead to maverick figures to shake up the landscape. The latest popular hero is Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the provincial police commander who sparked a sensation at last month’s news conference by alleging that Police Minister Senzo Mchunu was interfering in police operations to protect corrupt associates.

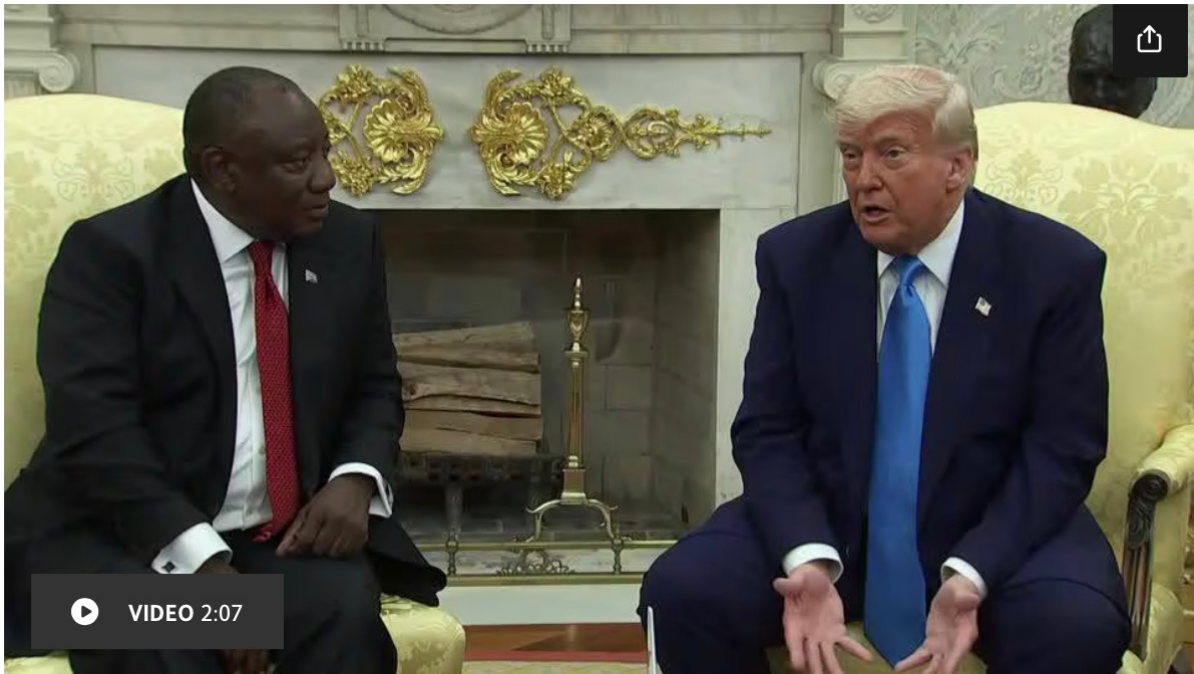
Mr. Mkhwanazi, wearing a full combat uniform as masked policemen brandished assault rifles on either side of him, vowed that he was ready for battle. “Even if it means to pay with my life, let it be,” he said.

Mr. Ramaphosa was soon forced to respond. He placed his Police Minister on special leave and announced a commission of inquiry.

His biggest crisis, however, is the 30-per-cent tariff that Mr. Trump has imposed on South African goods – a move that could destroy up to 100,000 jobs in key sectors such as automotive manufacturing and citrus farming.

His attempts to negotiate a trade deal have gotten nowhere, partly because of political factors. In his latest tariff order on July 31, Mr. Trump made it clear that some trading partners have failed “to take adequate steps to align sufficiently with the United States on economic and national security matters.” There was little doubt that he included South Africa in that category, after hitting the country with one of his biggest tariff hikes worldwide.

Pro-Trump commentators in the United States have already seized on the army chief’s visit to Tehran as further evidence of South African disloyalty. The police commander’s allegations of corruption have given more ammunition to the White House as the trade talks drag on.



U.S. President Donald Trump confronted South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa at the White House on May 21 with the most contentious areas of dispute between the countries.

REUTERS

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