

OPINION PIECE

THE LIMITS OF LIBERATION HISTORY

South Africa's Elections in Retrospect

Stephen Chan

Stephen Chan is Professor of World Politics at SOAS, University of London

My interest in South Africa's elections goes back several decades; I was present at South Africa's 2024 elections, as I had been at most of the country's elections since majority rule in 1993. I lived among the ANC when it was exiled in Lusaka and came to know its aspirations and, in the aftermath of 1994, watched it fulfil some of those aspirations while also setting out on a long journey of mistakes.

It was with a sense of foreboding that I flew from London to South Africa. The opinion polls uniformly had the ANC losing its majority. They only differed in predicting by how much the first electoral defeat was likely to be. But the polls were not the source of my foreboding. That came from the stubborn refusal of all my ANC friends and contacts to believe them. To the end, some were sure they could win, even if only by a narrow margin. This in itself reflected a party out of touch with the shifting of mood in South Africa, and unable to appreciate or at least estimate the pronounced groundswell of disillusionment with the government.

The level of poverty had visibly increased in the past few years and was impossible to ignore in the township of Alexandra (not far from the luxury of Sandton), but also in the outlying township of Thembisa as well as Kliptown in Soweto. These areas were familiar to me from previous visits, and I have done voluntary work on more than one occasion in Kliptown. I have to admit at being horrified by how far conditions had degenerated.

Perhaps this is in part a reflection on what emerged in 1994 after the four years of protracted negotiations following the release of Mandela in 1990 – that members of parliament should be elected from party list candidates, i.e. it was not a constituency-based parliament. This was a requirement of the National Party, the party of apartheid, seeking at least a residual representation in parliament in a future where integration would destroy white majority constituencies.

The election of 2024 itself was calm. Old war horses were wheeled out as the ANC at the last minute sought to reassure what it thought was its core vote that it

still wore the mantle of liberation. Tokyo Sexwale and Thabo Mbeki appeared at rallies, grinning, pumping hands, muttering 'hail fellow well met's. I joked that Mbeki looked as if he was pumped up on steroids. No one appealed to the young. The legacy of liberation was all that seemed to matter, and the future not at all.

But it had been Mbeki, following Mandela's own lead, who had institutionalised cadre deployment in terms of which loyalty to (and membership of) the ANC was more important than professional expertise. This was probably unavoidable in what was intended as an era of transformation, but it meant many key positions were mishandled by those newly appointed. Old systems of public administration were adopted, as no one had a strategic reform plan for public procedures. But the systems were designed in an apartheid era primarily to benefit a white minority and were stretched to accommodate an entire nation on an equal basis. And cadre deployment led quite easily, perhaps seamlessly, to cronyism – something greatly exacerbated in the Zuma era that followed Mbeki's.

Mbeki had spent more years in exile than he had lived in South Africa. On his return after the release of Mandela the country was as strange to him as it was to Mandela. Whether in exile or in prison, the task of governing a vast and complex nation was a huge challenge to those who had not been part of the nation's growth.

As the international figurehead of the ANC Mbeki had travelled much, and was inspired by the positive discrimination policies of the USA. His policies of BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) and its souped-up successor, BBEE (Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment) were designed to jump-start black entrepreneurship and, all other things being equal, new black firms were to be given preferential treatment in the award of municipal contracts. But many of the new firms were not well run and their workers not well trained. Housing units in particular, long a staple ANC promise, were often shoddily built. With many new firms seeking the same contracts, bribery of officials began to occur. The quality of the housing units did not improve.

By the time Zuma became president, corruption had grown into an epidemic and had almost become, for the firms and figures concerned, a parallel taxation system – meaning even less quality input into projects, now sometimes on a national scale. Huge state-owned companies became feeding troughs and in particular, utilities dealing with electricity and transport suffered very visibly.

Added to this was the vicious feuding that developed within party ranks and subsequent splinters. First Julius Malema left to found the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in 2013 and then, later in the run-up to the 2024 elections, Jacob Zuma founded the MK (uMkhonto we Sizwe). Both had a benchmark commitment to nationalisation (in Zuma's case perhaps to enhance the ease of corruption by having to deal with only one proprietor), but they also reflected bitter personality disputes. In particular, Zuma seemed to have had a grudge against Ramaphosa

for succeeding him in what he considered his rightful role as president. As it was, the MK's nationalisation policies were largely inchoate, but the personal animosity was not lost on the electorate, especially outside KwaZulu-Natal, the heartland of Zuma and the MK. In addition, Zuma's 15-month jail sentence for contempt of court in 2021 means that he was not eligible to stand in the May 29 election so he was unable to take his place in the new parliament.

Personality politics were not confined to the ANC in the run-up to the 2024 elections. The DA (Democratic Alliance) saw very little love lost between the deposed black leader, the technocratic Mmusi Maimane and the new white leader John Steenhuisen – the latter often eclipsed by early DA leader Helen Zille. It was she who conducted most of the negotiations with the ANC after the elections had delivered a hung parliament. If Zuma's Zulu support harked towards ethnic politics, the DA certainly gave the impression of white domination in its party hierarchy.

Maimane formed his own small party to contest the elections, and its manifesto, firmly centred on the question of unemployment, was by far the most well thought-out in the forest of policies that emerged in these elections.

All parties, great and small, devised elaborate policy manifestos. Few elaborated on how the policies could be financed. But, insofar as there were huge ideological cleavages – nationalisation on the one hand, and a completely free market on the other – little policy debate was possible. The electorate was left with making its choice based on issues of disappointment with the ANC's performance, but no clear-cut affiliation to anyone else's promises or policies.

The perfect storm of energy, productivity and transport meltdowns – and their direct link with employment – were obvious, almost tangible; but no one could promise convincingly to calm the storm. The composite of storm-fighters that emerged as the GNU (Government of National Unity) seemed itself far from convincing. A gnu in any case is a wildebeest, a somewhat ridiculous looking animal with a huge hump and head. It is more gainly than it appears but at time of writing we have yet to see the gainliness of the GNU.

The often vexatious negotiations towards the GNU saw the public second coming of Helen Zille, the original leader of the DA who stepped down amidst a furore caused by her comment that colonialism had after all brought some benefits to the country. A fierce negotiator, she often seemed to overshadow Steenhuisen. It was a renaissance of the sheer doggedness and courage of Zille who as a young journalist had exposed the death of Steve Biko at the hands of the police. But there was a basic flaw in her asking for too much too soon, e.g. the deputy presidency for Steenhuisen. It meant every compromise was a retreat. The real difficulty was that the DA's share of the vote had not greatly increased from the two previous elections. It was essentially static. It was the ANC share of the vote

that had plummeted like a rock. Because the ANC was weakened did not mean the DA was automatically strengthened in its bargaining position. There were far too many other players in the mix.

The EFF and MK took themselves out of the GNU stakes at an early stage. Bitterness towards Ramaphosa by Zuma (who had been ruled ineligible by the courts to enter parliament), and antipathy to any sharing of power that might involve the DA, were clearly visible. But that took two big parties out of the GNU equation. It was a case of who could command the smaller parties.

It wasn't the DA. The ANC adroitly and deliberately fashioned a bloated cabinet with several parties represented. There were enough interests at stake to outflank any single thrust against the ANC from within the GNU coalition. Steenhuisen had to accept the Ministry of Agriculture, the highest position on offer, but he has no obvious professional background or qualifications in agriculture. A curious form of 'enemy cadre deployment'.

Alliances were enough to hold the MK even in the provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal, and the ANC rode roughshod over the DA in the hotly-contested elections in Gauteng. A national GNU didn't necessarily mean provincial counterparts. In a real if rather conditional sense, therefore, the ANC won. It is the strongest part of the GNU, it can divide and rule if need be. But it also means that it is the ANC, if it makes too many mistakes that offend any of its GNU partners, that stands most of all to fall from grace.

Can this assemblage, this wildebeest, govern South Africa with the reforms, disciplines and, above all for the ANC, cadre sacrifices that will be required? The one thing Malema said some years ago that made perfect sense was that all public servants should be forced to go back to school and learn how to do their jobs. Malema himself set the example and went to university and graduated at Masters level. His own front bench, for all its noise, is well qualified. Strangely, he is the attractive face of the opposition – not Zuma, who has reached the age that, without power to nourish him, and who must watch a deputy lead the MK in parliament, will be seen less in the forefront of South African politics.

But Ramaphosa is also not exactly young. So, 'can the government deliver reform?' remains the first question. Ramaphosa's speeches accepting the need for coalition-style unity were masterful and contrite. But, after Ramaphosa, who can only serve this new term as president and will not be eligible for another, who? There is no obvious younger generation that has been brought to the fore by the ANC. No young stars worked the hustings like Mbeki and Sexwale. And all parties in and out of the GNU will be looking in some way to shine over the next five years, burnishing their credentials for what may be the even more historic elections of 2029. And this begs the question of whether the party of liberation will be too aged to appear vigorous and engaged any more.