

DIALOGUE SERIES

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA, SADC, AFRICA, AND GLOBAL SOUTH

“30 Years of Democratic Governance and the 2024 South African Elections: Taking Stock and Looking Forward”

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Introduction

By a stroke of coincidence, 2024 turns out to be an unprecedented year for elections in the world. Across each of the continents that make up the planet, major elections are scheduled to hold, most of them carrying a great significance that potentially presage an alternation of power and could produce game-changing outcomes. The elections taking place in 50 countries and involving about four billion people - from India to the United States, South Africa to Mexico, Senegal to Belgium, Ghana to Namibia, and places like Indonesia, Rwanda, and Russia, to cite a few of them -combine to make 2024 a record-breaking voting year, with over half of the population of the world either participating as the registered electorate or involved as concerned citizens. These elections are also taking place in the context of a complex admixture of crises and change both within individual countries and in the international system amidst an ongoing reshuffling of the global balance of power.

The crises that are both defining the contemporary domestic and global contexts, and flowing out of them are multifaceted and multidimensional. Commentators have characterised the times as being a period of poly-crisis encompassing various simultaneous and mutually-reinforcing challenges such as climate change, mass migrations within and across state boundaries, food price inflation and insecurity, prolonged extremist violence, the spread of a new populism, the retrenchment of the social state - and, with it, the erosion of the social contract -, recurrent episodes of pandemics, and frequent global financial and economic dislocations.

It is a season of crises within crises which is both conditioned and is being propelled by a complex dynamic of re-emergence, rise, stagnation, and decline among big and medium powers that is both the harbinger of the end of the post-1945 multilateral system and the construction of a new one.

Some of the instability that is being played out around the world - including inter-and inter-state wars- are products of an uncivil and disorderly politics of transition in global order. As one old order is gradually fading out and a new one is struggling to be born, we are witnesses to a new round of militarism and militarisation on a global scale, the resurgence across different geographies of political authoritarianism, the spread of political and religious extremism and intolerance that, inter alia, carry polarising consequence for society, reversals in historic and contemporary democratic advancements that speak to the increasing obsolescence of inherited political systems and institutions, and a new era of big power competition and rivalry which some commentators suggest is already evidence of a renewed Cold War.

Given the complex nature of the contemporary period in world affairs, what do the many elections that are holding in 2024 portend for citizens and the international system? This a question which lies at the heart of the many concerns that are being debated about the meaning of elections in times of profound uncertainty when key institutions of democratic governance are under an uncommon strain, including a high degree of citizen discontent and distrust. It is a question which applies as much to “mature” democracies as to “young” democracies. It feeds into the various efforts that are being deployed around the world to rethink democracy and recalibrate democratic systems in ways that can recentre them to address priority citizen concerns, including a truly sustainable and inclusive development, quality service delivery as part of renewed social bargain, and accountable government.

Thirty Years of Post-Apartheid Democratic Governance in South Africa

On 29 May 2024, South Africans will be going to the polls to elect new national and provincial governments. It will be the sixth democratic election the country will be holding since the defeat of formal institutionalised apartheid in the country. The 1994 elections that ushered South Africa to freedom and democracy came with the promise of taking the country into a new era of all-round transformation, reconciliation, and harmony. The “miracle” of a negotiated and peaceful transition from an odious apartheid order to a democratic system founded on a strong constitutionalism captured the imagination of peoples around the world. Within South Africa’s immediate neighbourhood of Southern Africa, an important impetus was given to regional cooperation and integration through a revamped Southern Africa Development Community (SADC).

Beyond Southern Africa, South Africa’s liberation from settler colonialism and apartheid discrimination also reverberated across Africa, marking the completion of the struggle for the liberation of the continental mainland from colonial domination. With that, the door was opened for the concentration of energies on the economic liberation of the continent from underdevelopment and dependence. South Africa’s key role in this quest was immediately played out at different levels, including the championing of a continental renaissance that encompassed, among others, the transition from the old Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to the African Union (AU), the launching of a new partnership for Africa’s development (NEPAD), the advancement of efforts towards an African economic community, and the adoption of a multi-year continental agenda for peace and progress known as Agenda 2063, among others.

Furthermore, the liberation of South Africa reverberated in positive ways across the Global South and the wider international system. From the injection of new momentum to various aspects of South-South cooperation to the active part which the country took as a flag bearer for Africa in multilateral fora such as the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the G-20, and the G-7, post-apartheid South Africa assumed an important role as a standard bearer of core values for mutual understanding and interdependence whilst combining forces with other actors to advocate necessary and long overdue reforms to the post-1945 global order. This commitment to reform partly explains the country’s adhesion to the BRICS and support for causes that are designed to advance fairness, equity, and justice in world affairs as most recently manifested in the case brought before the International Court of Justice on the war launched by Israel against Hamas in Gaza.

Post-apartheid elections in South Africa since the demise of official apartheid have been organised on a multiparty basis and, overall, the polls have been conducted with fairness, openness, and integrity. The results of elections as announced by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) have mostly been accepted by citizens and political parties as reflective of the wishes of the electorate. Those results have established the African National Congress (ANC) as the dominant party at the national level and in the majority of Provinces. However, over the years, the overall share of the vote commanded by the ANC has been declining at the same time as the South African political space has become much more fragmented. Taken together with a deep-rooted soul searching among South Africans about the state of the country and what the future holds, the stage is set for what promises to be the most intensely contested post-liberation election involving the highest number of political parties competing for votes since 1994.

Implications of the South African 2024 Elections: A Proposal for Action

The 2024 elections carry the symbolism of marking the 30th year of democratic politics in South Africa. Not surprisingly, there are competing perspectives as to what 30 years of freedom from settler colonialism and apartheid have meant for the people of the country generally, and especially for the black majority. It is an important question around which opinion is sharply divided. The polarisation of opinion has not only been fed by the usual and expected competition among politicians jostling for any and every advantage over their rivals; it has also been propelled by a huge dose of ahistoricism, selective amnesia, deliberately concocted fake news, and externally-driven or sponsored agendas for regime change.

Scenarios abound about the way in which the question about the road South Africa has travelled these past 30 years and what the future holds might be answered by the electorate on 29 May, 2024. Most pundits agree that 2024 will deliver the most keenly contested elections in the country since the dawn of freedom and liberation. Beyond this broad agreement, forecasts and predictions about what will actually happen are anyone's guess. However it goes, it is clear the elections will carry far-reaching implications domestically, sub-regionally, continentally, and beyond. Unpacking these implications is an important task which it is proposed to tackle through a series of convenings under the overall auspices of the Wits School of Governance.

To provide a comprehensive assessment of the meaning and implications of the 2024 elections, 10 inter-related sessions organised into six dialogue and conversation clusters will be convened during the month of April into mid-May 2024. The sessions will be structured as follows:

- **18 April 2024: Dialogue 1:** Mr. Mosotho Moepya, Chair of the IEC: IEC Preparedness for the Challenges of the 2024 Elections
- **25 April 2024: Dialogue 2:** In their Voices and through their Lenses (I): Conversations with (a) Cyril Ramaphosa; (b) John Steenhuisen; (c) Julius Malema
- **2 May 2024: Dialogue 3:** In their Voices and through their Lenses (II): A Panel Discussion with (a) Other Party Leaders Represented in Parliament; (b) Other Party Leaders Not Represented in Parliament & Selected Youth Leaders.
- **9 May 2024: Dialogue 4(a):** Panel Discussion on Women and Gender in the 2024 Elections: Dr. Hlengiwe Ndlovu; Dr. Keneilwe Sadie Mooketsane; Professor Puleng LenkaBula; Dr. Tendai Murisa.

- **9 May 2024: Dialogue 4(b):** Panel Discussion on the Implications of the 2024 Elections for SADC: Dr. Ibbo Mandaza; ; Mr. Brian Kagoro; Professor David Sebudubudu; Professor Geci Karuri-Sebina
- **16 May 2024: Dialogue 5:** Panel Discussion on Africa and the 2024 Elections: Professor Anthonia Simbine; Professor Karuti Kanyinga; Professor Remi Ajibewa; Dr. Palesa Sekhejane; Siphamandla Zondi.
- **16 May 2024: Dialogue 6:** Panel Discussion on South African Election 2024 and the World: Professor Chris Landsberg; Dr. Ekemini Eyita-Okon; Ms. Lebohang Pheko; Professor Tim Murithi; Ms. Olufunto Akinduro.

Each of the dialogue sessions is envisaged to run for between one and two hours and will be transmitted in live radio and television before an invited audience at the auditorium of the Wits School of Governance. The dialogues will be held in Thursdays at weekly intervals beginning from Thursday 18 April 2024 and ending in Thursday 16 May 2024.

The audience will be representative of different categories of stakeholders carefully selected to ensure a full coverage of the electorate. Participation is strictly by invitation. The auditorium of the Wits School of Governance will serve as the venue for the dialogues and conversations. 300 participants will be accommodated in the auditorium. Participation will be strictly by invitation and invited participants will be required to register ahead of the sessions that interest them.

The dialogues and conversations will be led by an invited moderator who will manage the interaction with a primary focus on the invited guest speakers and the main questions relevant for them to address. The sessions will also be transmitted on various social media channels. For the third dialogue session, the conversation with the leaders of the three biggest parties in Parliament will take place on the same day but in separate one-hour slots taking place one after the other. The sessions on the import of the elections for SADC, Africa, and the wider world will be organised as two-hour moderated panel discussions. A post-election assessment conference will be held after 29 May 2024 to review the election outcome. Participation will come before drawn from across Africa and the Diaspora.

Expected Impact and Output

The successful implementation of the programme will contribute significantly to:

- a. Encouraging an issue-based campaign for votes in an election which all believe is crucial.
- b. Allowing the voting public to hear the leading contenders for power first hand on the key questions wracking the minds of citizens, and make up their minds of who to entrust with their support.
- c. Providing information directly from the electoral umpire about its state of preparedness for organising the elections with professionalism.
- d. Providing perspectives from the SADC neighbours of South Africa, the rest of Africa and the wider world about the elections, with the benefit of sharing comparative. experience, dispelling any residual myths of exceptionalism, and conveying messages about sub-regional, continental, and global expectations.
- e. The promotion of a culture of engaged, informed, and civil dialogue and conversation as an important component of the democratic process.
- f. Publication of a book of conference proceedings on the post-election political map of South Africa and its implications.

Out of the dialogue, and beyond the live transmission of the proceedings, edited videos of the various sessions will be produced and made available on open access. A documentary of the entire series will also be produced at the end of the sessions, capturing the key points covered in each session. Various other digital outputs will also be produced, including podcasts from various sessions. A post-election pan-African conference to analyse the results of the election will be convened.