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INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC REFLECTION

A STRATEGIC OVERVIEW OF ELECTION 2024

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INTRODUCTION

This paper interrogates major trends in the outcome of the 2024 national and provincial elections against the backdrop of South Africa's broad political economy.

Virtually all analyses of the elections converge at the self-evident conclusion that a fundamental shift has occurred in South Africa's body politic. But, in large measure, that is where the consensus ends.

Among the questions that need further interrogation is whether the plummeting of the ANC's support implies the death of the liberation idea! Is South Africa's ideological centre of gravity shifting left- or right-wards? What are the implications of the coalescence of the centre-left and the centre-right in the multi-party Government of National Unity (GNU), and is it conceptually appropriate to draw parallels between the current GNU and the 1994 political arrangement?

None of these questions lend themselves to easy answers. However, the electoral facts and figures do point to important macrosocial trends.

Starting with high-level data, extrapolations are then made on broader issues such as identity and socio-economic orientations, as well as political coalitions and social compacting.

VOTER PARTICIPATION

While there has been contestation around population figures, the estimates of a voting population of 39.75m and a voters' roll of 27.78m are accepted as a frame of reference. The gap between eligibility and registration was between 6 and 8 million since 1999, and it grew to 10 million in 2019. By 2024, it had reached 12 million. From 80 percent in 2014 and 72 percent in 2019, the level of registration in 2024 was at 69.9 percent.

Turnout during voting has also been on the decline: it stood at 58.64 percent in 2024, compared to 89 percent in 1999, 77 percent in 2004 and 2009, 74 percent in 2014 and 66 percent in 2019. Across the provinces, the lowest turnout was in the North West province, followed by Limpopo and Eastern Cape.

In terms of age categories, the younger cohort remains under-represented (Figure 1). Many have decried this trend, suggesting poor political engagement by young people. It has also been argued that life-cycle responsibilities and alternate forms of youth civic engagement account for this trend (MISTRA: 2021).

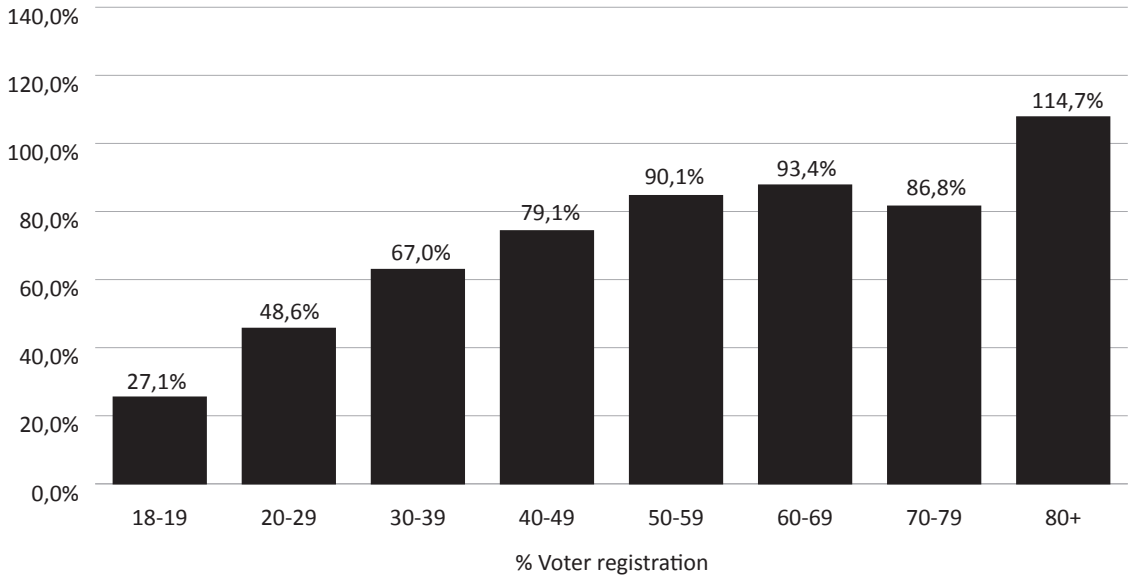


Figure 1: Percentage of registered voters by age against voting age population

Source: Calculated from IEC Dashboard. https://www.elections.org.za/NPEDashboard/app/dashboard.html, accessed 12 July 2024. The VAP is based on StatsSA figures which may underestimate the 80+ VAP category.

SHIFTS IN VOTER PREFERENCES

18 parties gained seats in the National Assembly (from 52 contestants) compared to 14 (from 48 contestants) in 2019 and 13 (from 29 contestants) in 2014. Three of these parties have one representative each. While much legal and civic effort was expended to provide for participation by Independents, none of them gained a seat.

The decline in support for the ANC accelerated with a haemorrhaging of over 17 percentage pointspoints, as can be seen in Table 1 below. Though correlation and causality cannot be strictly proven, many splinters from the organisation seem to have affected the ANC's support over the years. Historically, these have included the United Democratic Movement (UDM), Congress of the People (COPE) and the African Transformation Movement (ATM). More significantly, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) has, since its first election in 2014, shown a level of staying power and was on an upward trajectory in both general and municipal elections. It however seems to have levelled off, with a slight decline in 2024.

Table 1:
National Results (main parties), 1994 - 2024

Party	1994 %	1999 %	2004 %	2009 %	2014 %	2019 %	2024 %
ANC	62,65	66,35	69,69	65,90	62,15	57,50	40.18
NP (NNP)	20,39	6,87	1,65	-	-	-	-
DA (DP)	1,73	9,56	12.37	16,66	22,23	20.77	21.81
M.K.	–	–	–	–	–	–	14.58
EFF	–	–	–	–	6.35	10,79	9.52
IFP	10,54	8,58	6,97	4,55	2, 40	3,38	3.85
PA	–	–	–	–	–	–	2.06
FF+				0,83	0,9	2,38	1.36
ActionSA	–	–	–	–	–	–	1.2
ACDP	0.45	1.43	1.60	0.81	0.57	0,84	0.6
UDM	–	3.42	2.28	0.83	1	0,45	0.49
Rise	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.42
BOSA	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.41
ATM	–	–	–	–	–	0,44	0.4
AlJamah	–	–	0,15	0,14	0,14	0,18	0.24
CCC	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.23
PAC	1,3%	0,7	0,73	0,3	0,21	0,19	0.23
UAT	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.22
GOOD	–	–	–	–	–	0,40%	0.18
COPE	–	–	–	7.42%	0.67%	0,27%	0.09

Source: https://www.elections.org.za/NPEDashboard/app/dashboard.html, accessed 06 June 2024

While the FF+ on the right penetrated Democratic Alliance support especially in 2019 – essentially among white Afrikaans-speakers – there was a slight reversal in the 2024 elections. Whether the splinters from the DA, in the form of ActionSA and BOSA, have had a significant impact on its performance is a matter of conjecture.

The surprise ticket of the 2024 elections is the uMkhonto weSizwe party (MK party) which, at 14.58 percent nationally, performed better than any new entrant since the advent of democracy – emerging as the third largest party and official opposition in parliament. At 45.35 percent in KwaZulu-Natal, it is the largest party; in Mpumalanga it is the Official Opposition with 16.97 percent; and in Gauteng it attained fourth place with 9.79 percent.

NATIONAL-LOCAL ELECTION BELLWETHERS AND THE IMPACT OF VARIED TURNOUT

The relationship between performance in local government and national/provincial elections is important from the point of view of broad forecasting. This is particularly significant in this GNU era because the surveys prior to, and the outcome of, the 2026/2027 local government elections (reflecting changes in political dynamics) may influence how parties in the GNU conduct themselves in relation to the national and provincial coalitions.

As shown in Figure 2, the ANC's performances in the 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021 local government elections were more or less replicated in the following national and provincial elections. Except for 2019 and given the leadership (and identity) upheavals it had experienced in that period, DA performances also reflected the same trend. This roughly applies to the EFF which, like the DA, is now either flatlining or slightly declining.

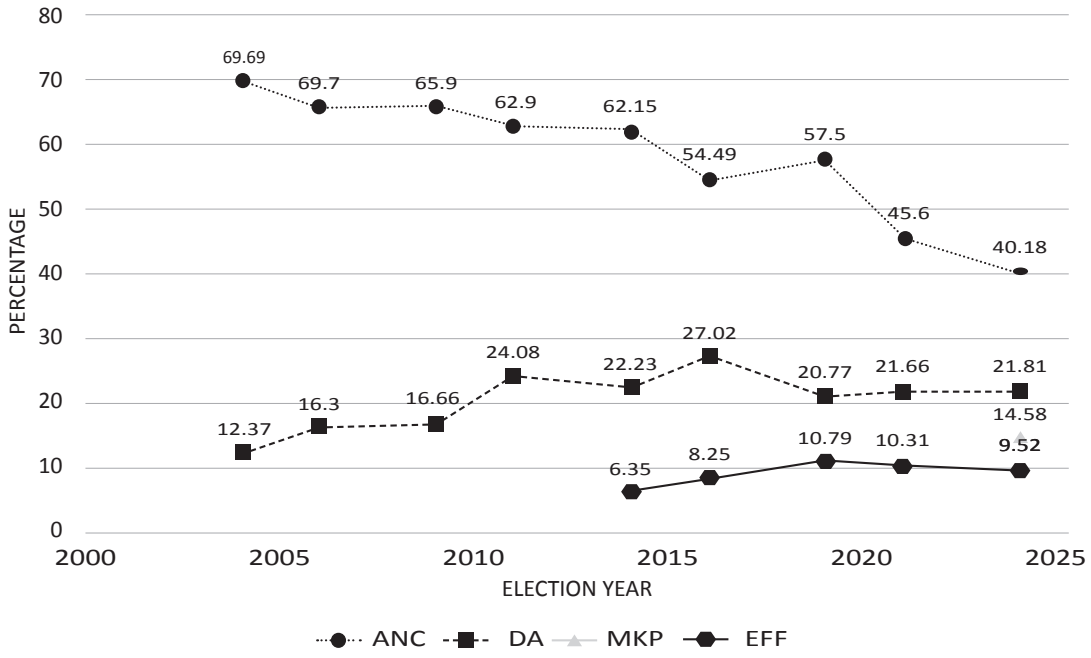


Figure 2: Eelection trends, 2004-2024 (national and local PR)

Source: Calculated from IEC National and Provincial Eelection Dashboard. 2024. https://www.elections.org.za/NPEDashboard/app/dashboard.html, accessed 07 June 2024

What about the impact of turnout in the various provinces and voting districts? As shown in Table 2, the provinces where the ANC performed well (Limpopo at 73.3 percent, Eastern Cape at 62.8 percent, and North West at 57.73) registered the lowest turnouts. This had the effect of eroding its aggregate national figures. The more intensely contested provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape, Gauteng and Western Cape (in that order) had higher turnouts on either side of 60 percent.

Table 2: Percentage (%) registration and turnout against StatsSA Voting Age Population (VAP) by province

Province	% Voter registration	% Turnout Election Day
Eastern Cape	84.7%	52.72%
Free State	76.0%	57.46%
Gauteng	59.9%	60.59%
KwaZulu-Natal	78.2%	61.83%
Limpopo	79.1%	51.42%
Mpumalanga	65.0%	57.08%
North West	64.9%	50.7%
Northern Cape	75.3%	60.93%
Western Cape	64.7%	59.79%
Out of country		
TOTAL	**69.9%**	**58.64%**

Source: VAP from StatsSA as projected to May 2024 and Turnout from IEC Results Dashboard. https://www.elections.org.za/NPEDashboard/app/dashboard.html, accessed 12 July 2024

Some extrapolation has been attempted on trends among white voters, taking into account the persistent legacy of racial spatial settlements (Dawie S, 2024). This of course needs to be qualified as the number of Black middle strata residing in the formerly 'white suburbs' increases. It is estimated (as reflected in Figure 3) that turnout among whites was 16 percentage points higher compared to African areas. The differential in 2019 was at 14 percentage points. Consequently, parties that perform well among Africans such as the ANC and EFF were negatively affected by this trend, while the DA benefitted.

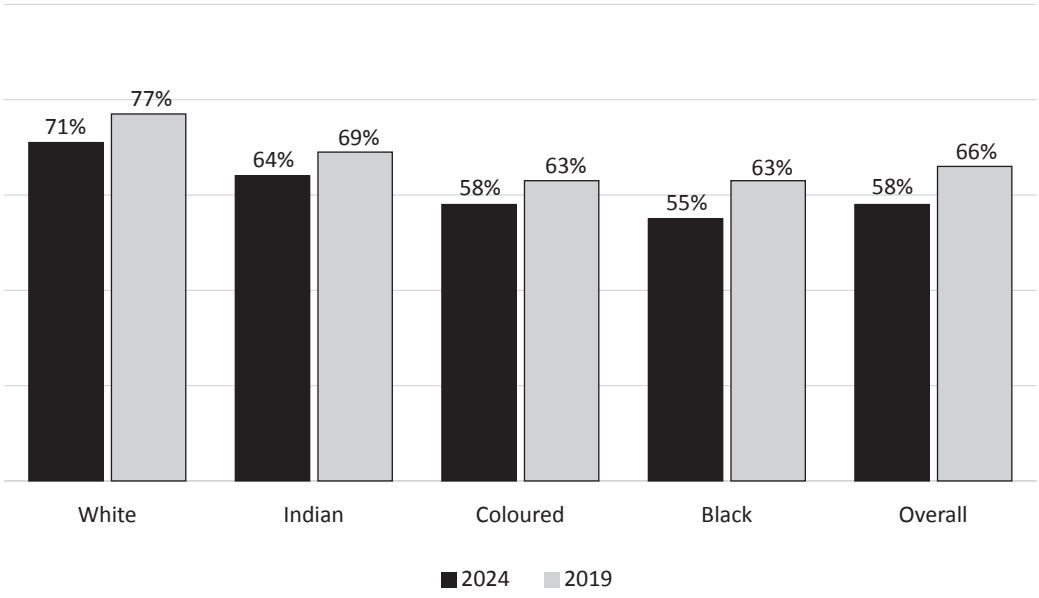


Figure 3: Voter Turnout by demographic group

Source: Dawie Scholtz. 2024. 2024 political earthquake: How shock results upended SA's electoral landscape. https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/fridaybriefing/dawie-scholtz-2024-political-earthquake-how-shock-results-upended-sas-electoral-landscape-20240606, accessed 12 July 2024.

The ANC has historically attracted more support in the national ballot per province than for provincial legislatures, and this was even more pronounced in 2019, suggesting an element of 'tactical voting' or 'split votes'. However, in 2024 the differences were quite limited; and, in Gauteng, the reverse was in fact the case (with 34.55 percent for national and 34.76 percent for the province).

Are there factors that may have had the effect of voter suppression in some areas? Attention has been drawn to the new requirement strictly to vote in one's voting district and the re-demarcation of some districts, slow administrative responses to malfunctioning of new Voter Registration Devices, and queue management. However, these factors did not have a significant impact on voter participation.

THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND IDENTITY

Of the four largest parties, the ANC, DA and EFF reflect a national spread across provinces, with a footprint that suggests appeal across regional identities. However, race still plays a central role in South Africa's voter preferences, a reflection of both identity and socio-economic factors.

The emergence of the MK party as the largest party in KwaZulu-Natal, and its tallies in Mpumalanga and Gauteng broadly mirror locations with an ethnic identity similar to that of its leader. In the remaining six provinces, the MK party mustered one representative each in four of them (Eastern Cape, Free State, Limpopo and North West). The ANC's support in KwaZulu-Natal collapsed dramatically (at over three times less from 54.22 percent to 16.99 percent). The EFF also experienced a dramatic decline (at four times less from 9.71 percent to 2.26 percent). While the IFP had been expected to improve – given its good performances in ward by-elections – it only gained two percentage points more to 18.07 percent. This suggests that, in addition to cannibalising ANC support, the MK party also ate into the support bases of the IFP and EFF.

The MK party seems to have achieved this through the following means: capitalising on the popularity of a former ANC President especially in areas of common ethnic identity and through related dog-whistles; expressly promising a reverse takeover of the ANC; leeching off the latter in organisational networks and allegedly through 'sleeper cells'; reportedly roping in networks of taxi bosses, madelangokubona (so-called 'construction mafia') and erstwhile beneficiaries of state capture; mouthing 'radical economic transformation' rhetoric and topping it all with an ultra-conservatism meant to appeal to traditional leaders and communities.

Another prominent newbie at national level is the Patriotic Alliance (PA). While it only got 6 660 votes (0.04 percent) in 2019, it is now the sixth largest party in the National Assembly with 2.06 percent and a hundred times more votes. Focussing largely on the Afrikaans-speaking section of the Coloured community, it gained most of its votes in parts of Northern Cape, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng (with no representation in the remaining five provinces). The Cape Coloured Congress also dabbled in the same pond.

The DA seemed, in terms of strategy and ambition, to de-emphasise its pursuit of the broader (African) constituency. Rather, it sought to reverse the haemorrhaging to the FF+ and focus on holding on to the bird in hand in terms of the white constituency – with additional support from the Coloured and Indian communities – and retaining the Western Cape while making progress in Gauteng.

In this context, what these outcomes underline is that, beyond the persisting Black-and-white divide and the hierarchies in-between, the demon of narrow ethnic identity has not been slayed: it burrows quiescent below the surface, susceptible to opportunistic exploitation. While there is a history to this in the ANC in the 2000s (and much earlier in the 1920s and 1930s) in KwaZulu-Natal, it would be speculative to attribute this to ethnic exceptionalism. But it is a matter that requires honest reflection in relation to national unity and social cohesion.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONING

Does the dramatic collapse of ANC support imply that the liberation idea has lost its shine? Or is this the decline of an organisational platform through which the majority of South Africans believed such liberation would be attained? Is the centre of gravity of South African politics stagnant or shifting left- or right-wards?

These questions are partly answered by examining the historical background and socio-economic platforms of the major players.

Parties that have their origins in the politics of the liberation movement (including as splinters) are, in the main: ANC, PAC/APC, Azapo, UDM, COPE, EFF, ATM and MK party. The aggregate support for this grouping was at 63.8 percent in 1994, 70.4 percent in 2019 and now stands at 66 percent.

Parties with a history in 'white politics' (NNP, DA and FF+) had a combined tally of 24.3 percent in 1994, 28 percent in 2019 and are currently at 23.77 percent. The DA-led Multi-Party Charter or 'moonshot pact' of 2024 garnered 28.82 percent of the vote.

This therefore suggests that the liberation idea still lives – the mass forces that seek the elimination of apartheid colonial relations remain committed to this ideal. However, a significant bloc among them – including millions who abstained – have lost confidence in the ANC as the pre-eminent organisational platform through which to attain this objective, .

What about the country's ideological centre of gravity? The economic postures of the various parties can broadly be categorised as follows:

- Left-of-centre (e.g. ANC, UDM, GOOD and COPE) started off at 62.6 percent in 1994, was at 59 percent in 2019 and currently stands at 44 percent.
- Right-of-centre (e.g. NNP, DA, IFP, ActionSA, ACDP) was at 35.3 percent in 1994, 27 percent in 2019 and is now at 29 percent.
- The combined professed far-left category (e.g. EFF, AZAPO, PAC) was at about one percent in 1994, grew to 11 percent in 2019 after the entry of the EFF and is now at 9.75 percent. However, if the MK party is added to this category given its 'radical economic transformation' (RET) rhetoric – though it is ultra-conservative on constitutional, social and traditional issues – the far-left category grows to 24.33 percent.

It should be acknowledged that, both in relation to historical background and economic policy, locating some of the parties defies scientific precision. For instance, taken as a whole, the MK party's platform would place it in the far-right; and the gulf between the EFF's policies and the conduct of its leaders is noticeably wide.

The category 'professed far-left' is used guardedly, taking into account these factors and the observation made about far-right parties elsewhere (such as France) tending to combine ultra-conservative socio-cultural policies, such as xenophobia, with pro-poor social platforms. In South Africa, appellations such as 'proto-fascist' have been used to describe some of the self-declared far-left parties. What should be acknowledged, though, is that the radical pro-poor rhetoric is largely what attracts the mass of supporters. As such, a distinction needs to be drawn between characterisation of these parties by social scientists or commentators on the one hand, and popular perceptions (especially among their supporters) on the other.

IMPERATIVE OF COALITION GOVERNANCE

In response to the election results, all manner of government permutations were considered by the various parties, including a minority ANC government with a confidence and supply arrangement among the major parties (ANC, DA and IFP). The DA (and later other parties) sued for meaningful representation in the Executive and legislatures. At the same time, there was deep antipathy in the ANC, and among its broader constituency including the Tri-Partite Alliance and organisations such as the Black Business Council, towards a narrow tie-up between the ANC and the DA. This is linked to the DA's policies on issues such as workers' rights and affirmative action, as well as a sense of angst among these strata that 'white business' initiated and supported forces against transformation.

Negotiations ultimately settled on a GNU with a broad platform articulated in the Statement of Intent (SoI) which underlines constitutionalism, economic reconstruction and recovery, workers' rights, social protection, redress and equity, community safety, a capable and ethical state with a professional bureaucracy, social cohesion and a just and equitable world order.

The GNU approach was also applied in KZN. It however floundered in Gauteng due to differences between and within the ANC and the DA. Gauteng has now settled on a minority government. In the Northern Cape, the ANC needed minimal support to get over the line.

Table 3: Parties in the Government of National Unity and balance of numbers			
As at 22 June 2024	**Total**	**GNU**	**Non-GNU**
African National Congress	159	159	–
Democratic Alliance	87	87	–
uMkhonto weSizwe (MK)	58	–	58
Economic Freedom Fighters	39	–	39
Inkatha Freedom Party	17	17	–
Patriotic Alliance	9	9	–
Freedom Front Plus	6	6	–
ActionSA	6	–	6
African Christian Democratic Party	3	–	3
United Democratic Movement	3	3	–
Rise Mzansi	2	2	–
Build One South Africa	2	–	2
African Transformation Movement	2	–	2
Al Jama-ah	2	2	–
National Coloured Congress	2	–	2
Pan Africanist Congress of Azania	1	1	–
United Africans Transfomration	1	–	1
Good	1	1	–
Totals	**400**	**287**	**113**
%	**100**	**71.75%**	**28.25%**
If DA Leaves:			
Totals		**200**	**200**
%		**50.00%**	**50.00%**

Source: ANC. 'ANC welcomes political parties to the Government of National Unity'. 22 June 2024. https://www.anc1912.org.za/anc-welcomes-political-parties-to-the-government-of-national-unity/

The GNU is made up of parties that command more than 70 percent of the vote (See Table 3). As if to illustrate the instability that can be generated without solid anchors, the one-seat United African Transformation withdrew a few days after joining, disenchanted with the allocation of executive and legislative responsibilities.

Excitement on allocation of executive positions and the style of 'new brooms' is to be expected; but it is substantive policy content that should guide any assessment of the GNU and on which it should be held to account. The government's platform for the coming five years, the Medium-term Development Programme (MTDP), is expected to elaborate on the principles in the National Development Plan (NDP), the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan (ERRP) and

the Statement of Intent. As articulated in the President's July Opening of Parliament Address, emphasis is placed on effective implementation.

What though, is the conceptual underpinning of the GNU? Is it similar to 'Mandela's Government of National Unity', as is popularly asserted?

The current coalition is not a constitutional imperative as was the case in 1994, when it was written into the Interim Constitution. Rather, it is a popular imposition dictated to by the election outcome. It happens against the backdrop of much progress over 30 years in changing South Africa for the better. Unlike in 1994, there is today a tested Constitution premised on strategic progressiveness. To that extent, the liberation ideal is now an abiding attribute of the South African polity and more than just the idea of 'the liberators'. The mistakes, reversals, missteps, foul-ups – and the ultra-conservative and other extreme fantasies – all must be judged in relation to the constitutional guardrails.

In the current context, where poverty and inequality are at unacceptable levels; where public and private resources do not seem to be directed at decisively dealing with these ills; where everyone seems to be for themselves in search of instant gratification…the need for social compacting to pursue the constitutional imperatives has long been realised, but unattained.

The GNU is thus a 21st century South African political contract which, by implication, brings together political voices of partners that are meant to forge a social compact: workers, middle strata, communities and captains of industry. As a (subconscious or subliminal) political expression of social compacting, the GNU is meant to lead the rest of society in clarifying long-term ideals, contributions that each social sector can make to realise these ideals, and the sacrifices required. The proposed National Dialogue may take the social compacting process forward.

The question of whether the ANC should have entered into a coalition with parties in the now diminished 'progressive caucus' in the form of the EFF, MK party, ATM, NCC and UAT, is answered in ANC circles by references to some of the attributes of the MK party and EFF: firstly, their policy postures and organisational practices; secondly, the ethical conduct and record of their leadership and related implications for societal and ANC organisational renewal; and thirdly, their political genesis and target market which make them direct competitors to the ANC.

Whether the GNU can be sustained will depend on the acumen of not just the politicians, but societal leadership at large.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION – PATH TO FORTUNE OR MISERIES?

To recapitulate: the liberation ideal has not been defeated in the 2024 elections. It is alive and well, dispersed across many platforms and in some instances hijacked by pretentious rhetoric. There are however trends – such as levels of participation, ethnic mobilisation within the Black community, and platforms that seek to undermine the various generations of constitutional rights – that pose an existential danger to the democratic project. Combined with this, is a growing tendency – that started more noticeably in 2019 – to question the legitimacy of the electoral process and the integrity of the IEC, more as a red herring than evidence-based critique.

The GNU will have to hew its way to higher rates of growth and development in complex domestic and global milieus. What is clear, though, is that socio-economic policy will need serious focus on the vulnerable (mainly unskilled and semiskilled workers, and women and youth). The electoral appeal of populism derives in part from a deep sense of social marginalisation.

The multiparty government should consciously avoid a political centre's macabre dance of death: a cold elite rationality which is desensitised to mass aspirations and sentiment and thus vulnerable to populist denigration. The coalition partners will also need to master tactics of managing electoral cycles, as poor opinion survey or election results in relation to the 2026/2027 municipal elections may impel conduct that undermines the broad coalition. Further, lessons can also be drawn from the 1996 departure of the National Party from the GNU which largely had to do with internal party dynamics, the rise of a more 'muscular oppositionist' Democratic Party, personality clashes and policy differences that included elements of the content of the 'final' 1996 Constitution.

When all is said and done, none among us would wish to be the butt of Bertold Brecht's satire, about a frustrated party hack in 1953 'East Germany' distributing a leaflet complaining that the people:

Had squandered the confidence of the government
And could only win it back
By redoubled work [quotas]. Would it not in that case
Be simpler for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

Brecht, Bertolt (2003). *Poetry and Prose*.

The ultimate sovereign in our body politic, the people, have spoken. They expect the leadership to respond appropriately, in pursuit of a better life for all.

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