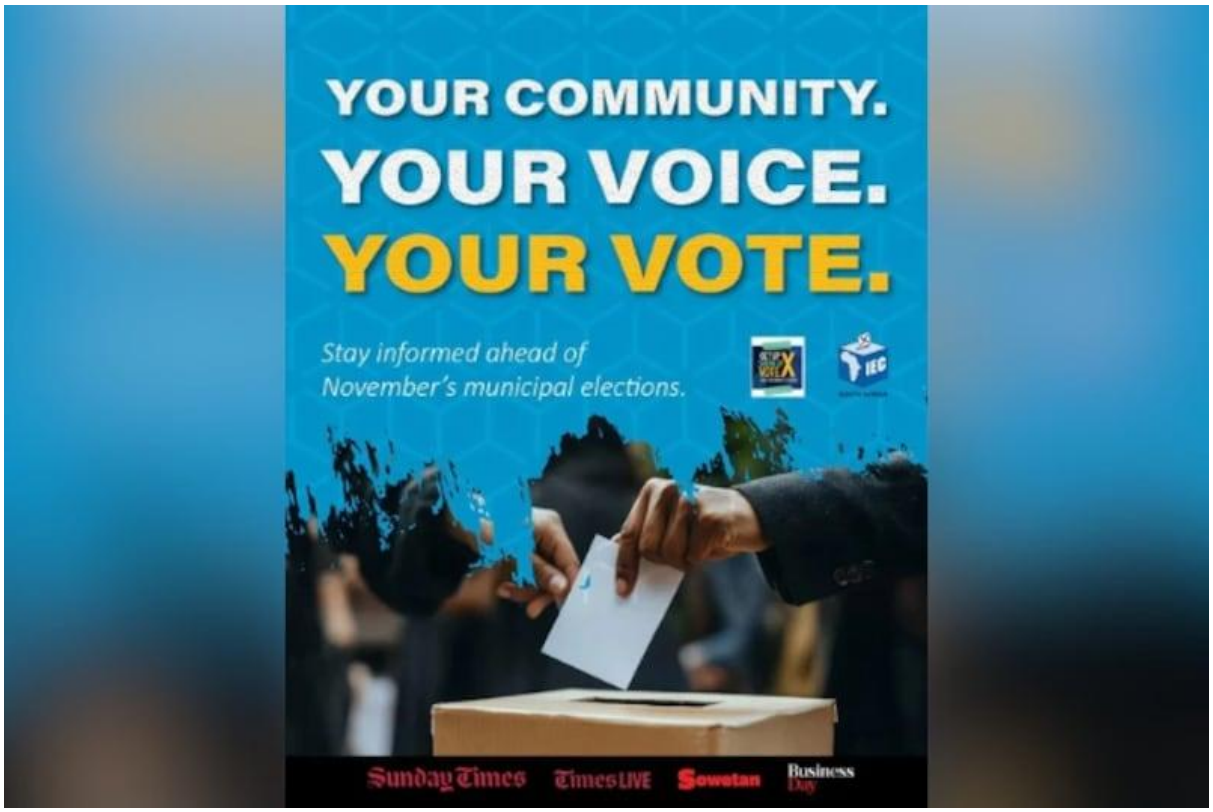
YACOOB ABBA OMAR | Are SA’s youth returning to the ballot box?

IEC data shows rising participation, but millions of young people remain unregistered



South Africa’s advantage is that its electoral system still works, the writer says. Its weakness is that young people no longer believe it works for them. Picture: supplied

From Dhaka to Kathmandu, Albania, Delhi, Dar es Salaam, Paris and Nairobi, a young generation squeezed by unemployment, ineffectual exam systems, poor education conditions and failing public services has turned to the street. Some of these protests have resulted in the collapse of governments, the firing of government ministers or naked repression from authorities.

South Africa has not had a Nepal or Bangladesh moment, and is unlikely to because its elections are still free and competitive. And as recent registration figures show, its youth are beginning to get hopeful for the democratic system.

For a decade young South Africans have voted less and less, while protests on campuses and in communities have continued. In 2026, for the first time in years, the registration figures point the other way: 46% of the new voters added during the June and August registration weekends were under 29.

In 2024, students in Bangladesh overthrew prime minister SheikhHasina's government over civil service job quotas. In 2025, Nepal's "Gen Z" protests toppled the government within 48 hours with the use of Discord, a network that emerged after a ban on social media.

Earlier this year India's Cockroach Janta Party forced the resignation of the education minister, then shifted its protests against the removal of more than 100-million people from the voters' roll. In France in the past few weeks, a blockade at a single high school over leaks, lack of heat in classroomsand missing teachers spread to about 640 schools and 30 universities, with about 7,000 arrests being recorded.

Protest is not a monopoly of the youth, but young people tend to lead it, becoming decisive when street protests find expression through the ballot. For example, in Kenya after the 2024 #RejectFinanceBill protests faded under repression, the **Niko Kadi** (I have my card) campaign used TikTok and local WhatsApp groups to register 2.6-million new voters in two weeks. Organisers are now recruiting young candidates for the 2027 elections.

The Human Sciences Research Council's long-run survey data shows that in South Africa the belief that voting makes a difference has collapsed across all age groups. Among Gen Z it fell from 35% in 2014 to 23% in 2024. Yet 63% of Gen Z still see voting as a civic duty, valuing the vote but doubting that the vote produces results.

Three factors contribute to this state of affairs: economic exclusion, especially given the high youth unemployment rate; weak political party responsiveness; and protest becoming the natural form of action for young people who feel excluded from formal politics.

However, it's not all doom and gloom: the Electoral Commission of South Africa's 2026 registration cycle was the strongest for young people in a decade. The June registration weekend recorded 2.9-million registrations, compared with 1.7-million for the 2021 local elections. After the August

registration weekend, the roll passed 29-million, about 2.1-million more than in May 2024, and 46% of new registrations were under the age of 29.

But the roll still covers only about 64% of eligible South Africans, and the addition of a few hundred thousand young registrants is small against the millions still missing. Nevertheless, there is reason for cautious optimism given that newly registered young voters tend to turn out. In 2021, 71% of registered 18-to-19-year-olds voted, double the 35% rate among 20-29. Those who register shortly before an election usually do so with the intention to vote.

South Africa's advantage is that its electoral system still works. Its weakness is that young people no longer believe it works for them. The registration surge of 2026 is the first sign in a decade that belief in our democratic system can be rebuilt.

The lesson from #FeesMustFall and from international experiences is that mobilisation without organisation fades, and organisation without a route to power is absorbed. If November 4 brings even a modest rise in youth turnout, it will show that the route is still open and that we may see more youthful energy entering local government and possibly other spheres.

If it does not, the energy will remain on the streets, where, as the international cases warn, it is far harder to produce lasting change.

• Abba Omar is director of operations at the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection.