South African Elections 2014: After the Party, the Long View

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Matthew Kustenbauder.
“South African Elections 2014: After the Party, the Long View.”
Democracy in Africa, 21 & 23 July 2014†

Matthew Kustenbauder unpacks the 2014 South African election results, highlighting historic trends, new developments, and future possibilities. This article considers the longue durée of politics in the country post-1994, including the decline of the ANC, the strengthening of the DA, a growing urban-rural divide, as well as mixed results for the deepening of ‘non-racial’ democracy in South Africa. Matthew is a Fulbright Fellow and PhD candidate in history at Harvard University.

The South African press paid scant attention to the remarkable results of the largest democratic elections on earth. About the same time as South Africa’s elections were taking place, the Indian National Congress, the venerable liberation party that dominated Indian politics since independence in 1947, was decimated at the polls. Few commentators drew the obvious comparisons, seeing in the political developments of India – a country whose history has long been intertwined with South Africa’s – a harbinger of things to come.

No doubt, most South Africans were busy basking in the glow of their own elections success, if not recovering from campaign season fatigue. Although critics complained of slow returns, and despite some isolated incidents of violence and ballot tampering, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) announced with confidence that South Africa’s 2014 general elections were free and fair.

The people had spoken, delivering the African National Congress (ANC) another five-year mandate as ruling party with 62% of the vote. President Jacob Zuma kicked off celebrations of what was dubbed another landslide victory.

Nevertheless, sober analysis of the 2014 elections reveals mixed results, both for the ANC and for the deepening of non-racial democracy in South Africa. My analysis here frames the 2014 elections in historical context to identify trends since 1994, to understand how those trends might affect new developments in the political landscape, and to pinpoint future possibilities.

† I am grateful to Bill Freund for his support and our many conversations on things historical and political during my time as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Please direct all correspondence to the author at: Harvard University, Department of History; 201 Robinson Hall, 35 Quincy Street; Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; USA. Email: matthew.kustenbauder@post.harvard.edu. This document is the author’s original essay. Links to the final version, published as a two-part series, may be found here:
The rise and decline of the ANC.

The metanarrative of the last twenty years is the growth and decline of the ANC. No matter how presidential spokesperson Mac Maharaj spins it, the ANC returns to Parliament with 15 fewer seats than before, and 30 fewer than when it was at the height of its power in 2004. Indeed, this is the worst result for the ANC ever in its twenty-year election history.

But the beat goes on, and the continent’s oldest living liberation movement isn’t leaving the stage anytime soon. Renewal is integral to the party’s identity, and the apparatchiks know how to deal with scandal. (Anthony Butler provides a short but sweet synopsis in The Idea of the ANC.1) Political pundits and those in the opposition underestimate the ANC’s resilience, and real achievements, at their own risk.

The ANC’s key challenge, meanwhile, is how cadre deployment and internal, less-than-transparent accountability processes can adapt to the demands of the modern democratic state. This point is tied to economic questions posed by investors, foreign and domestic alike. How can the ANC address years of policy incoherence that undermines investor confidence? How can the party steer the ship of state through tumultuous waters, while simultaneously holding the Tripartite Alliance together? These represent a formidable set of challenges that may prove insurmountable, even for the ANC.

The party of Mandela is no more immune from decay and decline than the party of Mahatma Gandhi. And if history is any indication, as Greg Mills and Jeffrey Herbst have pointed out in their edited volume, Africa’s Third Liberation, the post-independence shelf life of Africa’s liberation movements qua political parties is roughly twenty years.2 With even more ‘born frees’ and urbanites voting in 2019, the ANC may find that it is approaching its sell-by date.

The DA’s steady but slow growth.

An accompanying leitmotif, alongside the ANC’s rise and decline, is the steady, albeit slow, growth of the official political opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA). As DA leaders past and present, Tony Leon and Helen Zille, trumpet: The DA is the only party that has grown consistently since 1994. While this may be true, the harsh reality is that the DA began with less than 2 percent vote share. It has taken twenty long years to win the trust of a modest 22 percent of South African voters.

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Nevertheless, the DA remains the winner in terms of overall gains in this election. The DA has garnered over 4 million votes, increased its national vote share by five percentage points since 2009, sent twenty-two more MPs to Parliament, and dispelled the myth that it had reached its plateau.

Never in the history of South Africa’s non-racial democracy has an opposition party enjoyed the clout that the DA now has – 89 seats in Parliament; firm control of the Western Cape province, second wealthiest in the country; and twenty years of consistent growth in every province.

The closest any opposition party came to this was in 1994, when the incumbent Nationalist Party (NP) won 82 parliamentary seats and control of the Western Cape. In the same election, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) secured 43 seats and control of the province of KwaZulu-Natal. While this arguably constituted the most diverse moment in post-apartheid political history, both parties were fatally flawed. The NP didn’t survive the first five years, while the IFP has endured a long, slow process of stagnation, factionalism, and cannibalization by the ANC, leaving it today with only 10 seats in parliament.

DA leaders will leverage their position as the official opposition in national Parliament and six of the nine provincial legislatures, which will keep it front and centre in the media spotlight. As they did in these elections, the DA will continue — in upcoming by-elections, the 2016 municipal elections, and the 2019 national elections — to showcase their strengths, arguing that they have achieved a sterling performance in the Western Cape and juxtaposing this against the failed audits, corruption scandals, and collapse of basic service provision in municipalities and provinces governed by the ANC.

While the bad news for the DA is the slow rate of its gains, there are several silver linings. Its performance at the ballot box is not the by-product of media hype. We see how media hype worked out for AgangSA, yielding a pitiful two parliamentary seats. Nor is DA success the result of slowing economic growth, rising unemployment, and increasing inequality, an unholy union that continues to spawn growing ranks of lumpen youth susceptible to the radical populism of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The EFF’s twenty-five MPs have shaken up parliament with radical rhetoric and unorthodox sartorial styles, but they’ve enjoyed few concrete successes to date. Rather, the DA’s gains have been achieved by well-established party machinery and, most importantly, trust built between the party and its voting constituency. People believe service delivery and clean government will prevail under the DA’s watch.

As it continues to diversify its candidates and its voting base, the DA could begin to reflect the non-racial, democratic South Africa that still needs to be built. In 2009, only 0.8% of the
country’s black population supported the DA. In 2014, that figure had shifted to 6%. Certainly, this number is still small, but the increase is significant. The ANC’s frequent criticism that the DA is a white party simply doesn’t hold water any longer. The days of South African elections being a ‘racial census’ could be numbered.

*A growing urban-rural divide.*

A final election trend that receives scant attention but is one of the most consistent and important: the increasing divide between urban and rural voters. Without doubt, the ANC’s popularity has taken the worst beating in and around South Africa’s major cities. Ironically, this is where service delivery is best, upward mobility is most likely, and modern conveniences abound, but it is also where education levels and expectations are highest.

This trend is most apparent in the highly urbanised province of Gauteng. In elections for the provincial legislature, the ANC lost more than 10 percentage points and squeaked by with only 54% of the vote. Meanwhile the DA, who have their sights set on gaining control of the country’s economic heartland, increased its share by almost 9 percentage points to 31%. If opposition parties drive the ANC below 50% in 2019, and trends suggest they will, the result would be a more diverse and competitive political playing field.

The ANC’s urban vote decline is playing out even more sharply in the metros themselves, with the ANC receiving only 49% in Port Elizabeth and in Pretoria, 52% in Johannesburg, and 55% in Ekurhuleni (East Rand). These figures represent a ten-point slide from the last general election in most instances, and in some cases over a twenty-point slide from their high water mark.

Although the elections this May were for provincial and national government, the numbers do serve as a reliable bellwether for the upcoming 2016 municipal elections. When charted together, the local and general election trends for these cities show a steady, precipitous slide for the ANC that, if left unchecked, will deliver to the opposition control over five of South Africa’s eight metros in 2016.

There is little evidence that the ANC will be able to stem the tide of this political change. Certainly, demographic trends are not in their favour. South Africa’s urban population increased from 52% to 62% between 1990 and 2010, and it is estimated that the country will be over 70 percent urban by 2030.

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This could be a cause for celebration by the DA. In the recent elections, the DA made impressive gains in urban areas, even though its support within the townships of provinces like Gauteng remained relatively limited.\(^6\) It is troubling for the ANC, however, which has maintained its vote share over the years by consolidating its support in rural areas (especially in populous KwaZulu-Natal) to compensate for the decline of its urban constituency.

These trends should push smart urbanisation policies to the top of the agenda for all political parties, with positive implications for the way South Africa’s major cities are governed.\(^7\) In a recent *Global Policy* article, Will Attwell notes that cities the world over are drivers of innovation, economic development, and job creation.\(^8\) They are typically leaner, enjoy greater autonomy, and have the capacity to be more nimble and effective in response to change than lumbering provincial or national governments. City executives and urban residents alike are also more pragmatic, prioritising practical concerns about infrastructure investment, urban planning, branding, and economic growth over ideology.

This promise, however, has not always been fulfilled in South Africa, where corruption, neglect, and exclusion on the part of the government, as well as an ambivalence over the desirability of urbanisation have hampered the urban futures. It is no surprise, then, that South Africa’s urban voters are in the vanguard in political developments. With even more people moving to cities by 2016 and 2019, these will be the spaces to watch in those elections. As the metros go, so goes the nation.

**Mixed results for deepening non-racial democracy.**

The quest for non-racialism was at the forefront of the Congress Alliance and the United Democratic Front in the final years of apartheid. It also became one of the keystones of South Africa’s new constitution.

Many now worry, however, that any political will to pursue ‘non-racialism’ has long gone. The deep sense of national mourning and outpouring of praise for Nelson Mandela upon his death, just months before the elections, seemed informed in no small part by the sinking feeling that the ‘rainbow nation’ dream may be coming to an end as well.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) “Where will the Rainbow End? South Africa is a better place than in 1994, but it is going in the wrong direction,” *The Economist*, 3 May 2014.
Race continues to play a powerful but complex role in shaping everyday interactions in South Africa. While some scholars have argued that poverty and riches trump racial identity, most would contend that this is not uniformly the case. In fact, race and class are far less intertwined now than ever before. For instance, black South Africans now represent the majority of the middle class and substantial numbers of upper class as well.

Nevertheless, the 2011 census showed that race and class were still tied. The average annual income of a white household is around 365,000 rand; the average for coloured households stood at 251,500 rand; Indian households were at an average of 251,000 rand, and black households earned 60,600 rand on average. What is more, the gini coefficient in the country is growing.

As David Everatt points out, ‘Racism and race obsession is fuelled by inequality – social as well as economic – and if the non-racial project is not about redistribution and attacking inequality, it will fail’. But how should this economic redress be pursued?

The ruling party seems determined to use race as a proxy for economic disadvantage. Recent attempts by the ANC to push new laws that would impose rigid hiring quotas based on the country’s racial demographics have proved highly controversial. As well as being condemned as economically unsound, they also appear to have exacerbated the feeling amongst Indian and coloured South Africans that they are being marginalised within affirmative action policies. Such moves have fuelled accusations that the ANC has slipped away from the reconciliation project and down the path of racial nationalism.

Nor does the EFF’s recent arrival to opposition politics bode well for non-racial democracy or, indeed, inclusive democracy more broadly. The EFF represents a departure from previous parties in that it is a radical leftist party, but it also gives voice to a growing sense of malaise amongst those who feel the system is failing them. Malema’s populism is unlikely to fizzle until a legitimate party of the left forms out of the labour movement, splintering the ANC-SACP-COSATU Tripartite Alliance. Until then, the EFF will continue to garner popular support and significant coverage, domestically and internationally.

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Unfortunately, the EFF and the ANC have not offered concrete solutions to address poor economic growth, stubborn inequality, and widespread unemployment. But the DA has also fallen short on this crucial front. It may well have worked towards building a non-racial party reflective of the future South Africa it wishes to govern, but without broader economic change, such non-racialism will remain elusive. Contrary to the DA’s campaign claims, no amount of good governance and service delivery will catalyze South Africa’s economy to grow by 8 percent. Such promises are a dangerous pipe dream, which raises unrealistic expectations and fuels frustration with democratic politics.

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It is too bad that India’s political watershed drew little attention or comment on these shores. Some of the comparisons are tantalizing.

Like the ANC, the Indian National Congress struggled for decades to transform its liberation movement into a modern political party. The failure of its populist-socialist economic policies and autocracy under Indira Gandhi soured Indian public opinion and undermined international confidence in the Congress’s ability to lead the country into the future. Likewise, the sins of incumbency – corruption, cadre deployment, and infighting – destroyed the party from within. Both Congresses are broad-church liberation movements, presided over by an ageing cabal of dynasts, loyalists, and insiders, who treat the party and the country like it is theirs to rule by divine right.

Narendra Modi’s victorious BJP Party, meanwhile, like the DA, began as a relatively minor opposition party, which gained momentum under the leadership of a pragmatic, pro-market, small government premier who cut through red tape, tamped down corruption, and brought economic growth and progress to Gujarat state in the west of the country. Though associated with Hindu nationalism, BJP’s vision for India attracted many non-Hindu voters, who were convinced by Modi’s track record that the party would bring economic growth, jobs, and progress to the nation.

India may not provide a perfect analogy; its economy, politics, and problems are more complex and, in many ways, different from South Africa’s. Yet the parallels are compelling and the lessons instructive. If South Africa is to avoid the middle-income trap, transcend its history of racial nationalism, and deepen democracy, its politicians cannot continue with their business-as-usual approach. The future of South Africa depends on it.