Reviewing the 2019 South African National and Provincial Elections: Can the Centre hold?

Proceedings Report from the EISA Post-Election Conference, Crowne Plaza, Rosebank, 8-9 July 2019
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INTRODUCTION

For many, the dawn of democracy in South Africa held the promise of facilitating a dramatic shift from racism and oppression to inclusiveness and equality, and from systematised subjugation to rights-based freedom and development. Driven by notions of a “rainbow nation” and a relatively peaceful, negotiated transition from apartheid, the discourse of South Africa’s nascent democratic project transcended politics, economics and governance, and rested in the more mystical realm of miracles, “Madiba magic” and symbolic social cohesion.

But, 25 years on, this democratic project has been laced with a bitterness that is fuelled by uncertainty and a growing sense of despondency in political leadership specifically, and capitalist-democratic governance in general. In essence, what has prevailed in South Africa’s democratic project since 1994 could be seen as a gradual process of “hollowing out”, or diluting, of the qualities that made democracy in South Africa so promising. This as, in real terms, the country’s economy is adversely affected by persistent negligible growth, rampant unemployment and inherently unequal, and therefore unsustainable, modes of production.

The bleak economic situation is coupled with widespread and what is deemed to be systemic corruption within the state, as well as a global wave of economic, political and ideological, uncertainty. This only serves to substantiate the proposition that South Africa’s democracy, and the principles, institutions and practices that are meant to uphold it, are indeed being hollowed out. This has reached the point where the country’s most recent national and provincial elections were regarded by some as more of a symbolic gesture than a true, deliberate and organised statement of intent made by an engaged citizenry.

From an electoral perspective, this report explores some of the reasons behind the notion of a “hollowing out” democracy and the extent to which this process has taken hold of South Africa’s democratic system. In doing so, the report covers a wide range of topics and emergent issues pertinent to the 2019 national and provincial elections based on positions presented by various speakers at EISA’s post-election review conference, which was held in Johannesburg on 8 and 9 July 2019. Speakers at the conference included senior electoral officials, political and social scientists and researchers, academics, representatives of civil society and the legal profession, and public intellectuals, who shared their views on the elections in relation to their areas of expertise.

This report is also informed by EISA’s weekly election reports, which were compiled by a team of young graduate researchers over a period of seven weeks (five weeks prior to and including the election, and two weeks after the election). The combination of these reports into a single working document served as a draft discussion paper for speakers at the conference, whose topics were determined by the various sections and subsections of the draft. This report is organised into five sections, beginning with the manner in which the 2019 national and provincial elections were framed, then looking specifically at the political parties that contested the elections and, thereafter, the social issues these parties chose to either commit to or omit from their manifestos and campaigns.

Taking into consideration the issues emerging from these three sections, the fourth section deals specifically with voting day and how it played out across the country operationally and logistically, but also in terms of how external observers assessed the event and the results, especially with regards to expectations versus outcomes. Results and trends are discussed in the final section, which includes a socioeconomic interpretation of the winners and losers, as well as an analysis of how the media covered the elections.

If read in the context of South Africa’s electoral system, and the history, politics and economics that inform and to a large extent drive it, this report could serve as a valuable point of departure for a critical study into South Africa’s unique social, political and economic position in Africa and the world. As such, this report provides a general, but nevertheless holistic, assessment of how power, in whatever form or guise it assumes, intersects and interacts with a process considered to be the cornerstone of any robust democracy.
SECTION 1:
Framing the 2019 national and provincial elections
South Africa’s sixth democratic national and provincial elections took place as the country marked 25 years of democracy. Although this milestone was celebrated with optimism on the back of a recent change in the leadership of the ruling party, it was also met with scepticism driven by the many persistent challenges the country faces in terms of underwhelming economic growth, slow socioeconomic development and deepening inequality. In the global context, the 2019 elections were held amid a widespread rise of conservative politics and nationalism in traditionally liberal democracies, fuelled by economic uncertainty in a world where it is becoming increasingly evident that resources are finite.

Against the backdrop of these challenging local and global phenomena, this section locates the 2019 elections within the broader conceptual framework of South Africa’s democratic electoral process, taking into consideration proposals for legal reforms to key legislation pertaining to elections and democratic governance. To concretise an understanding of this conceptual framework, a review of recommendations made by election observer missions (EOMs) during previous elections is presented; and an assessment is provided regarding the manner in which the 2019 elections were conducted by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the constitutional body mandated to manage and oversee elections in South Africa, with specific attention given to the challenges it faced and the successes it recorded.

1.1 Democracy and the electoral process: Reforms and proposals

Election periods generally provide a relatively accurate snapshot of a democratic country’s political ecosystem. As such, during election time, we are able to gauge the health of our democracy and identify areas where deficiencies have crept in that might render the system vulnerable to threats. Key among these threats, according to Advocate Michelle le Zoudž, co-author of Lawfare: Judging Politics in South Africa (2019), is the interaction between law and politics, or as the authors surmise, the migration of politics to the courts. The underlying threat is that such interactions result in a corrosion of the democratic system, its supporting institutions and processes, including the electoral process, whereby this migration is underscored by the intent of particular powers to subvert the law to pursue an agenda or set of political objectives that are not necessarily in the public interest.

This subversion, in turn, poses a critical threat to democratic governance, as it promotes a system in which there is no true separation of powers between executive and legislature, creating a vacuum wherein parliamentary oversight is non-existent; the integrity of democratic processes are undermined by foregrounding party political battles, which are often centred on powerful individuals; and elected officials, particularly members of Parliament, are not interested in voter concerns as much as they are in furthering their own ambitions. Another threat of subversion, albeit in a somewhat different guise, is that of smaller parties challenging the credibility of election results. This raises the concern of weakened confidence in the electoral system and the IEC. A more detailed discussion of reactions to the 2019 election results is presented later in this report.

Concomitant to the threat of subversion are the lingering questions about the effectiveness of South Africa’s system of proportional representation; and proposals that a mixed system – one that includes elements of a majoritarian voting system with proportional representation – be adopted. Proponents argue a mixed system would foster meaningful connections between individuals and the party political system, and as a result create greater capacity for smaller parties in Parliament to engage appropriately in parliamentary processes.
In light of the increased number of parties that contested the 2019 elections, analysts raised concerns that this did not necessarily represent a deepening of democracy, but rather the prevalence of factionalism in party politics. This, then, points back to the possible benefits of adopting a mixed system, which would enable greater transparency in the forming of coalitions, and help build constituencies and interests in a manner that enriches open democracy. The implication is that the current electoral system only goes as far as promoting the idea of a multiparty democracy without engaging with the core of its ability to effect real change. A compelling argument for the electoral system to remain as is will be discussed later in this report.

Regardless of the type of electoral system in place, the manner in which political parties are funded always comes into sharp focus during elections. From a legal perspective, provisions of the Political Party Funding Act (2018) came under the spotlight during the 2019 elections. Because the Act was signed into law less than six months before voting day, it was not enforced. As per the Act, political parties must reveal their private funding annually; and certain donations made directly to parties, including those from foreign governments or agencies, will be prohibited.

Although the Act has been widely accepted, critics argue that it does not prohibit some crucial forms of donations unique to successful campaigning in South Africa. Another criticism is that, in establishing the Multiparty Democracy Fund, the Act focuses heavily on the funding being managed through official channels, specifically the IEC, which implicates the IEC as a player rather than an independent facilitator, thereby delimiting the IEC’s capacity to enforce credible mechanisms for accountability.

Ultimately, any political ecosystem, whether deliberately or inadvertently, is crafted by all stakeholders, including those who are seen as non-participants. Because the nature of power is such that it will always seek to subvert constraints, there is an increasing need for South Africans to embark on a project to craft an ecosystem that channels power more evenly and effectively, with all citizens as equal beneficiaries.

1.2 A review of previous EOM recommendations for South African elections
EOM recommendations serve as a valuable resource from which to draw when crafting a viable, inclusive and citizen-based political ecosystem. As such, the main value derived from inviting EOMs during elections lies in the reports they produce, which contain their recommendations for improvement. In turn, independent observers seek to contribute to the integrity of electoral processes through their physical presence at important electoral activities and their independent assessments of electoral processes. These assessments are based on international standards and obligations, and highlight good practice based on comparative perspectives.

The following tables detail EOM recommendations for the three elections (2004, 2009 and 2014) leading up to the 2019 national and provincial elections. These elections were selected to locate the 2019 elections within South Africa’s contemporary political landscape – once notions of “Madiba magic” and a “rainbow nation” had faded somewhat and a true jostling for power, particularly within the ANC, had taken root. From 2004, we saw a Thabo Mbeki ANC and state presidency that, although characterised by economic growth, brought with it controversies with far-reaching implications and a sense of disconnect between the presidency and South African citizens.

Leading into 2009, this disconnect was expressed explicitly by Jacob Zuma’s populism and rise in the ANC to become its president in late 2007, and the party’s subsequent recalling of Mbeki as state president.
in 2008, with Zuma’s ultimate ascendency to the office of the president after the 2009 elections. As Zuma’s influence was established in the state, his power manifested and became noticeable in how state entities and institutions began running, with evidence of “state capture” and widespread corruption becoming apparent soon after his re-election in 2014.

Since 2014, and leading up to the 2019 elections, growing discontent with Zuma’s perceived lack of integrity was expressed, once again at the ANC’s elective conference, and he was succeeded by Cyril Ramaphosa as ANC president in late 2017. Like Mbeki, Zuma was recalled from the office of the president in early 2018 and replaced by Ramaphosa, who was ultimately given a vote of confidence by means of his party having won the 2019 elections. It is within this political context, dominated by internal ANC politics, that elections leading up to the 2019 elections took place, and it is within this context that EOMs made their recommendations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>EOM reports and statements considered</th>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>EOM reports and statements considered</th>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>AU Commonwealth ECF-SADC Gender Equality Commission SADC-PF SADC ZESN</td>
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### EOM recommendations – 2004 elections

**EISA**
- The positioning of the booths to be prescribed to consistently guarantee the secrecy of the poll
- Ballot papers to be made more easily distinguishable from one another
- Make the use of separate ballot boxes for different categories of elections mandatory
- Civil society organisations should strive to enhance their capacity to observe electoral processes to sustain their credibility. In this regard, the mission calls upon civil society organisations in South Africa to make an effort to step up their election monitoring role

**AU**
- Strengthen provincial structures to operate at the municipal level
- Use separate colour-coded ballot boxes for different categories of elections
- Consider an appropriate minimum threshold number of voters per voting station
### EOM recommendations – 2009 elections

<table>
<thead>
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<th>EOM</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Procedural</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| EISA      |       | Reconsider provisions that allow parties to set up their presence outside polling stations on election day to minimise undue influence of all voters | • Either reconsider the provision for voters to vote at any station or step up procurement and distribution of materials to address shortages experienced on election day  
• Introduce translucent ballot boxes  
• Use separate ballot boxes for different categories of elections |
| ECF-SADC  |       |                                                 | • Make ballot papers and ballot boxes easily distinguishable  
• Consistency and standard practice in all voting stations, e.g. use of two ballot boxes  
• Take steps to address shortages caused by voters who vote at any polling station |

### EOM recommendations – 2009 elections (continued)

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<th>EOM</th>
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<th>Others</th>
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| EUEEM*    |       | • Introduce legal provisions regulating campaign spending and requiring disclosure of domestic and foreign private contributions to political parties  
• Establish requirements for out-of-country voter registration and introduction of postal voting in addition to new overseas voting procedures  
• Reconsider legal provisions allowing parties to be present outside polling stations displaying party regalia | • Consider increasing the number of polling stations  
• Make ballot papers more distinguishable, use separate and translucent ballot boxes  
• Consider reducing voting hours to make counting more convenient  
• Improved training of staff on counting procedures  
• Independent Communications Authority of South Africa to proactively monitor media reporting on elections  
• CSOs should receive more support from the international community to mobilise election campaign monitors and election observers. Domestic observer groups’ representatives should have access to the different stages of the electoral process |

### EOM recommendations – 2014 elections

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<th>EOM</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Procedural</th>
<th>Others</th>
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| Commonwealth Observer Group (COG) |       | • Strengthen legal framework to regulate use of state resources and expenditure on political advertising  
• Reconsider guidelines on party presence outside polling stations to minimise the risk of voter intimidation and violence | • Clearly mark and possibly colour-code ballot boxes  
• Improve voter education initiatives  
• Make provisions to end voter registration in good time ahead of election day |
| EISA                               |       | • Use colour-coded ballot boxes for different categories of elections  
• Improve training of staff on counting procedures  
• Increase the number of polling stations to cater for growing number of voters |   |

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Although comprehensive recommendations are yet to be compiled by EOMs for the 2019 elections, some of the issues that have been raised include: the timing and operationalisation of the Political Party Funding Act (2018), and possible amendments to the Act to address possible abuse of state resources; the need to address ongoing operational challenges related to where voters are allowed to vote; inconsistencies in the use of dedicated ballot boxes for different categories of elections; under-resourced and under-capacitated citizen observers; and the training of electoral officials on counting procedures. These issues, some of them persistent, highlight a need for certain changes in the way elections are conducted in South Africa.

The following discussion provides a detailed breakdown of how the elections were managed by the IEC, and provides an in-depth look at how these issues may have affected the 2019 elections and political ecosystem, and, in turn, contributed to how the elections were framed.

1.3 The management of the 2019 elections: Challenges and successes

Specific challenges and issues that have consistently emerged during elections, as highlighted in the previous discussion, do not exist in a vacuum and do not come into being by happenstance. Instead, they can be seen as representative of the broader challenges and issues that exist in South Africa, especially in terms of socioeconomic development. As such, elections, and the issues that emerge from them, serve as a prism for critique, not only of the electoral system, but of the manner in which social systems interact to determine various social, political and economic trajectories.

That there has been an increase over the years, from election to election, in the number of voting stations in South Africa. Reports of them running with greater efficiency to serve more voters is a notable success in the IEC’s management of elections. Other successes over the past two elections (the 2016 local and municipal elections, and the 2019 national and provincial elections) include an increase in access to voting stations, at 97% for both elections with travel time to voting stations less than 60 minutes, according to IEC figures; a 97% overall perception that votes are secret; and a 92% level of trust and confidence in the IEC to manage elections.

However, with regards to perceptions of the freeness and fairness of elections, the 2019 elections brought with them a degree of scepticism, with a perception rating of 94% compared to 97% in the 2014 national and provincial elections. This perception speaks directly to the manner in which the political ecosystem has changed since 2014, where there has been increased mistrust in politicians, specifically, and the systems of governance they uphold and represent. Coupled with this is the material difference South Africans have noticed in their standard of living within a slow economy and depressed national fiscus, which generates even greater mistrust in light of allegations and revelations of corruption, and the mismanagement of public funds.

The decrease in voter turnout, among both general and special voters, has been a major concern and a salient issue that emerged from the 2019 elections. Critics argue that the IEC, as the election management body, could have done more to raise awareness about the importance of voting, especially among young people, prior to the elections. The IEC itself noted a decrease in the perceived effectiveness of voter education, from 93% in the 2016 local and municipal elections and 90% in the 2014 national and provincial elections, to 88% in 2019.

Other challenges, some of which have also been highlighted by EOMs and will be discussed in greater
detail later in this report, include: an increase in the number of immaterial objections; an increase in the usage of section 24A (VEC4) forms, which inadvertently enabled some voters to “shop around” for polling stations with shorter queues; outdated technology to record voting; an incomplete voters’ roll; and the competency of electoral officials in dealing with their assigned roles and responsibilities.

The following section deals specifically with the political parties that contested the 2019 elections. It relates specifically to how perceptions of mistrust lead to the proliferation of small political parties with divergent interests, and how shifts in the stances of established political parties shape this mistrust.
Perceived effectiveness of voter education

- NPE 2014: 90%
- LGE 2016: 93%
- NPE 2019: 88%

Perceived...
SECTION 2:

Political parties – the voter’s choice
A salient feature of the 2019 elections was the proliferation of parties that contested both nationally and provincially. As briefly discussed in the previous section, this calls into question whether an increase in political parties truly deepens democracy or merely scratches the surface of what is required for a democracy to function. Analysis of the 2019 election results points to an almost directionless proliferation, whereby political parties were formed seemingly for sake of either putting to chance their likelihood of being represented in Parliament, as proxies, or in line with public sentiment and frustrations with the status quo of South African politics and governance. Although established parties regained most of their seats in Parliament, there has been a noticeable shift in their stances on critical issues pertaining to South Africa’s growth and development trajectory.

In this section, a critical analysis of the parties that contested the 2019 elections is provided, with specific reference to how the dynamics of established parties, externally and internally, somewhat give way to conceptions of a “hollowing out” of democracy. Parties, in keeping with global trends, displayed a noticeable shift to the right of the political spectrum by playing into prevailing exclusionary discourses to attract votes. This, in turn, opened a window, albeit muddied in certain cases, on the inner workings of parties, especially in terms of how their external positions were informed by internal ambitions for personal advantage.

As such, the question arises about whether South Africans are, in essence, being misled by powerful individuals who are themselves products of power-seeking systems. The issue, then, regarding the so-called voter’s choice, given the proliferation of political parties that contested in the 2019 elections, becomes whether this choice is merely an illusion that hinders the exercise of true choice. The argument here is that such vast choice, in the absence of direction, acts as an agent to subvert meaningful choice.

2.1 Trouble in the centre
The fading of “Madiba magic”, along with critical questions around the term “rainbow nation”, especially considering South Africa’s high inequality, has by and large led to a sense of despondency among South Africans, particularly after 25 years of democracy. This, in conjunction with slow economic growth and unsatisfactory socioeconomic development driven largely by state-wide corruption and mismanagement, has created a crisis in the legitimacy of the country’s political system. The main reason for this crisis is arguably a lack of accountability displayed by those who have been entrusted to uphold and promote South Africa’s democracy.

In real terms, this was reflected in the 2019 elections by an increase in what have been deemed “floating voters”, specifically in urban areas. This increase implies that political parties, especially the ANC and DA as typically “centrist” parties, did not adapt appropriately to the despondent mind-sets of voters. This led to voters being inclined to meander along the political spectrum in search of relevance and meaning in other parties, specifically those that took harder lines in their campaign messaging. These messages are considered hard line as they took on right-leaning tones, creating a sense of “us-and-them”, absolutist politics. For example, much of the campaign messaging of the EFF, a relatively new party considered one of the biggest winners in the 2019 elections, focused on the word “our” (as in, “Our land” and, “Our jobs”) to speak to despondent, mainly black and poor, voters. Similarly, the Freedom Front Plus, another small party considered a winner, reinforced its conservative stance with the slogan, “Hit back”.

However, as poor voters are captured by conservative rhetoric, an analysis of voting trends in the 2019 elections suggests that the vast majority of poor people are disengaging from the political process. Poor
people, in their vulnerability, could be considered the main representatives of despondency in the system and the beneficiaries of a “hollow” democracy. In addition, what has widely been considered “voter apathy” owing to the sharp decrease in voter turnout could be interpreted rather as a statement of despondency. With this interpretation in mind, this “statement of despondency” takes the form of a vast number of unemployed youth indicating that their abstention is actually a vote of no confidence in all political parties, their representatives and the system in general.

The large-scale vote of no confidence could, in turn, be viewed as an acute awareness of internal strife within the established parties, with the ANC emerging from a leadership battle and subsequent power vacuum created by Zuma’s departure as party president; and the DA embroiled in what is, in essence, a war along racial lines, causing the party to lose its liberal appeal. During this, the EFF engaged in what was described earlier in this report as “lawfare” – using the legal system only until it ceases to be useful in serving its own interests. What this indicates is that voters are either “floating” or choosing to abstain in the knowledge that the only thing at stake for parties is power, regardless of the political rhetoric used to cloak it.

The proliferation of political parties in South Africa is, therefore, not so much a measure of multiparty democracy as a display of a broken politics that uses “othering” as a means to secure power. This is a global phenomenon, as witnessed in countries such as Russia, Brazil, China, the United States, the United Kingdom and France, among others, which entails attempts to subvert the rule of law to allow immunity to take hold. It can be argued, then, that the trouble in what was the centre of politics in South Africa is directly related to a wholesale, global shift to the right, regardless of ideology.

Concurrently, and in keeping with revelations of “state capture”, this shift to the right could be seen as the force that drives the throttling and neglect of critical institutions that promote democracy by collecting and disseminating statistics, conducting social and economic research, and providing impartial analysis in accordance with the ethos of the Constitution. As such, calls for the amendment of the electoral system fall short in addressing what is festering at the core of South Africa’s “hollowing out” democracy, which is symptomatic of a broken politics. As such, the electoral system cannot squarely be foregrounded as the problem; rather, greater focus should be placed on accountability, and the mechanisms that ensure it, within the electoral system and beyond.

This, of course, requires a powerful remobilisation of civil society to effect broad social mobilisation around accountability. It is only once this is achieved that the creation of a strong and meaningful opposition to any prevailing power can take place. This would serve as a vital lens through which to identify elements of power intent on subverting the rule of law and “hollowing out” democracy. Once this becomes clear, it also becomes clear that amending legislation that governs the IEC, which might entail amending the electoral system, will ultimately open spaces and opportunities to challenge the Constitution.

In light of this, the following discussion briefly explores how internal party personality politics are influenced by much broader systems of established and entrenched power, which have historically proved to be oppressive. If this is the case, elections within a “hollowing out” democracy become more a symbolic gesture of liberation than a meaningful exercise in equitably distributing power.

2.2 Colonised minds, broken politics

In responding to calls for mobilisation around the common goal of accountability, the awareness of
certain realities is necessary. Firstly, it is important to understand and thoroughly engage with the process of decolonisation at the experiential level. The despondency and frustrations evident in South African society today, particularly at its margins, did not suddenly occur with the fall of apartheid. Rather, if located in the broader historical context, this despondency, or the expression of it, is a product of centuries of oppression. It would, therefore, be foolish to assume that post-apartheid frustrations are necessarily directly related to a perceived failure of democracy.

This process of decolonisation, on which citizen mobilisation hinges, involves engaged thought and awareness of, and experience in, liberating the African mind, body, space and time. Although seemingly overtly philosophical in nature, from a historical perspective, this concept has direct bearing on “the struggle” and how it has largely influenced what is now considered South Africa’s broken politics. As the struggle movement garnered a vision to create a state antithesis to that of apartheid, once this was more or less achieved, it only became natural to question whether this was the pinnacle of decolonisation.

More searing questions have arisen as it became clear that the struggle against apartheid was not the pinnacle of decolonisation. These questions have been expressed over the past two decades through various forms of frustrations, whether through the rise of factionalism within the ANC, widespread citizen despondency, or full-scale public violence. This has led to the question of whether elections, particularly in 2019, have the power to cure such a deep-rooted sense of capture and bondage.

The hope for change leading up to the 2019 elections was, therefore, naive in the sense that what has already been established in this report as South Africa’s narrow “electionism” was the very basis of informing exaggerations about the efficacy of elections to deliver change within a “hollowing out” democracy. In this regard, although the IEC has been scapegoated by certain disgruntled stakeholders as the reason for South Africa’s broken politics, the election management body still delivers excellent elections, procedurally, as is the general sense created by assessing the EOM reports presented earlier in this report.

But beyond procedurally free and fair elections, and in conceiving a substantial decolonisation project, there is a need to see specific powerful personalities in South African politics, such as Zuma and Ramaphosa, as products of decline rather than the cause of it. Circumstances leading to revelations of “state capture” during the Zuma era were curated in a particular way according to a particular agenda, creating an echo chamber of sorts wherein the public only saw what was shown to them within a narrow prism. Hence, the overarching question around state capture should centre more on systemic inequality with an understanding that all states are captured, and that the permitted level of such capture is determined by who is doing the capturing. It is, therefore, of great importance in the decolonisation project to look beyond personality politics and understand power in terms of actors within a global political economy, which includes big banks, ratings agencies, influential media organisations and investors.

In reflecting on the opportunism on display leading up to the 2019 elections, the following section briefly reports on how parties used South Africa’s broken politics to their advantage in their campaigns and election manifestos, particularly the so-called big three parties (ANC, DA, EFF), as well as how smaller parties attempted to inject new narratives into the prevailing discourse.
SECTION 3:
Party campaigns
Looking specifically at how parties campaigned leading up to the 2019 elections enables a degree of grounding for the discussion in the previous section. Although some discourse analysis has already been presented in this report as to how parties constructed and framed their campaign messages, this section provides a brief yet broad overview of the campaign messages of the big three parties, how smaller parties campaigned, and the political party funding landscape.

3.1 The big three

The 2016 local and municipal elections saw an unprecedented groundswell of support for opposition parties and the rise of coalition politics within key metropolitan municipalities. As such, the 2019 elections brought with them great expectations for change at the national and provincial level. However, as previous discussions in this report have indicated, this was not the case, leading to questions around whether political parties, especially the ANC, DA and EFF as the three largest parties, managed to relate to voters in their campaigns and through the issues they chose to highlight in their election manifestos.

For the 2019 elections, the ANC campaigned around the core message, “Let’s grow South Africa together”. The party’s manifesto centred on “…transforming the economy to serve all people; improving access to education and health care; stepping up the fight against corruption throughout society; and safeguarding, rebuilding and renewing a capable and developmental state”. With much baby-kissing, “dad jokes” and other supposed charm tactics, Ramaphosa campaigned across the country. As he did so, he chose to publicise his first-hand experience with South Africa’s inefficient public transport system when he travelled with ordinary commuters; expressed shock at the severity of load-shedding; and promised the residents of Alexandra in northern Johannesburg better housing, among other things.

Historically, the ANC’s strongest campaigning tool has been its ability to carry out large-scale, nationwide door-to-door campaigns. However, during the period leading up to the 2019 elections, the party’s mass campaigning strategy involved hosting rallies, which were not as well attended as they had been in the past. Political journalists also observed a distinct toning down of the ANC’s spending on election campaign drives – gala dinners that previously held much glitz had lost some of their lustre in 2019.

“One South Africa for all” was the DA’s core campaign message, as the party focused its campaign discourse on the idea that it had the capacity to deliver services and govern more effectively than the ANC. The DA highlighted crime, corruption and unemployment as issues that the ANC has failed to alleviate, and that predominantly contribute to inequality. Similar to the ANC, the DA campaigned intensively through rallies, a relatively new strategy for the party; and canvassed support through YouTube clips that aimed to discredit the ANC, prerecorded phone calls from the party’s leader to potential voters, controversial billboards, and multilingual street posters to align with their promise of a unified South Africa.

Outside of using tragedies such as the Life Healthcare Esidimeni scandal to campaign, the prerecorded phone calls generated much concern among South Africans about how the party retrieved their personal information. The major criticism of the DA’s campaign strategy, as highlighted previously in this report, was that with messages such as, “Secure our borders”, the party could be seen as having taken a step to the right – towards a conservative, rather than its traditionally liberal, politics. In general, though, the DA once again based its campaigns on the ANC’s inadequacies, which, in the absence of the controversial and scandal-ridden Zuma at the helm, rang hollow.
Unlike the ANC and the DA, the EFF focused its campaigning in provinces where it performed the best in the 2014 national elections and 2016 local elections (Gauteng, North West and Limpopo). The burgeoning party also used social media more effectively than its competitors to garner support from young people. As discussed earlier, the EFF’s deliberately exclusionary core campaign message, “Our land and jobs now”, was directed at South Africans disillusioned by how the ANC has governed the country since 1994. In general, the EFF’s messaging focused on the emancipation of historically disadvantaged and marginalised people through economic freedom. This message was packaged around the party’s charismatic leader, Julius Malema, as a “speaker of truth to power”.

However, what the party might have learnt from its 2019 campaign is that support on social media such as Twitter and Facebook does not necessarily translate into support at the polls. The immediacy and relative ahistoric transience of social media allows only for flash opinions to be expressed without the real social burden of having to act on them. In addition, until the party engages with proven methods of quantifying and mobilising its strong social media support base, it cannot rely on followers or the number of views, retweets or mentions it garners as an indication of support. As such, it cannot rely on its social media profile to inform its core campaign messages.

The low voter turnout in itself seems to be a clear indication that the big three parties did not display sufficient substance in their campaigning or election manifestos to attract South Africans to the polls. Although this might be seen as an oversimplification in light of previous discussions in this report, it could be argued that weak or irrelevant campaigning speaks directly to the sense of a “hollowed out” democracy, where large political parties, in their quest for power rather than citizen engagement, struggle to strike a genuine chord with those whose interests they purport to further. The waning relevance of large political parties gives way to the formation of smaller parties, which, as previously discussed, provides voters with the illusion of choice. The following discussion briefly explores how smaller parties positioned themselves, perhaps only in relation to the larger parties’ inadequacies.

3.2 Small parties, big talk?
Although many of the issues highlighted by smaller political parties, especially the 11 parties that won seats in Parliament other than the big three, were not new, these parties might have brought certain issues to the fore that were overlooked or perhaps deliberately ignored in mainstream campaign narratives. The dominant issue highlighted in all these parties’ manifestos was the need to combat corruption with good governance, accountability and strengthened institutional policies. Unemployment was the second most highlighted issue, although many parties did not have plans for how they intended to alleviate it. In light of South Africa’s low levels of literacy, its high rate of youth unemployment and low overall productivity, quality education was also focal point in some smaller parties’ narratives.

Similar to the top three parties, smaller parties were divided on the issue of land expropriation, with some promoting it to an extent and others rejecting it entirely. The notion of addressing apartheid-era spatial planning was also attached to the land debate as a crucial step in nation-building and equality, while the high incidence of crime in South Africa made safety and security an obvious issue for smaller political parties to highlight.

For the first time, the issue of immigration, mainly in terms of migrants from the rest of Africa, entered the election campaigning discourse as a concern for many parties. This implied a transgression from the notion of a “rainbow nation” that embraces multiculturalism, and, as previously discussed, served
to affirm a sense of despondency among South Africans while conforming to rightist, “us-and-them” discourse. Improving the state of health care services, the public transport system and the use of sustainable resources to generate energy were also among the issues that some smaller parties touched on, but, in essence, failed to elaborate action plans for execution.

### 3.3 Campaign funding

As is commonly known, in capitalist democracies, the wealthiest political parties more often than not end up the victors in any election. Campaigning for votes, broadening spheres of influence and gaining compliance, in real terms, costs money. In South Africa, much debate has centred on political party funding, specifically the need for parties to be legally bound to disclose their sources of funding so as to ensure transparency, fairness and accountability. This debate arose specifically in light of the “hollowing out” process, when scandals such as Oilgate, the Arms Deal and, more recently, revelations of state capture surfaced as evidence that power, through the channelling of funds, was driven to subvert the rule of law for private gain.

The Political Party Funding Act (2018) was signed into law in late 2018 as a legal means to ensure accountability regarding political party funding. As discussed earlier in this report, the Act compels political parties to reveal their private funding annually, and prohibits certain donations made directly to parties, including those from foreign governments or agencies. In addition, the Act established the Multiparty Democracy Fund, to be administered by the IEC, into which all donors are required to disburse funds to their respective political party beneficiaries. The most evident concern at the time of the Act’s signing into law was that systems would not be in place in time to monitor and regulate how parties were funded in the 2019 elections, leading to the IEC officially postponing implementation of the Act in April 2019.

In postponing, the commission’s senior strategic operations manager noted that it needed more time to process public submissions (verbal and written), which were concluded only in March 2019. These submissions are considered key to developing a sound regulation policy. Additionally, the IEC is still in the process of appointing a department head to lead the process of monitoring and regulating party funding. Nevertheless, the IEC has begun preparing a system to allow political parties and donors to make electronic declarations online. Considering these ongoing developments, the IEC is likely to be prepared to fully implement the Act only for the next election.

Although the Act has been generally supported, concerns have arisen about whether parties are likely to find loopholes in the legislation, especially with regards to donations, as well as the need for regulations on how parties spend their money to avoid possible vote-buying. Another key concern is the IEC’s management of the fund, which some argue places it in a precarious participatory, rather than oversight, role. However, regardless of the possible challenges that might emerge once the Act is implemented, the true extent of its non-application in the 2019 elections is yet to be seen.

The lack of transparency with regards to party funding in South Africa’s democratic elections to date serves only to further intensify suspicions of a “hollowing out” of democracy, which inadvertently informs the interpretation of election results. The following section provides a framework for interpreting the 2019 election results, prior to a dedicated discussion on them, in terms of issues that arose on election day and whether or not they affected the outcome.
SECTION 4:

Voting day, findings and voter turnout
Much has already been said and written in the public domain about the 2019 elections as a gauge of the state of politics and citizen engagement in South Africa. The resounding consensus on both fronts seems to be that what the 2019 elections revealed was a broken politics within a despondent public culture. However, although this position holds some truth, especially from a purely observational standpoint, it cannot be taken as absolute. Election day and the period leading up to it can be seen only as events in a much broader political and socioeconomic continuum. In attempting to understand this continuum, this section takes a closer look at some of the issues leading up to and including the 2019 elections, taking into consideration that election outcomes are not the result of any action, or non-action, taken within a vacuum.

4.1 Locating election day in a continuum

On the surface, it is widely accepted that South Africa’s democratic elections thus far have been free and fair, and have taken place in a peaceful manner without much violence or unrest. On election days for the past 25 years, the IEC has consistently reported with confidence that elections ran smoothly and with minimal incidents of any material consequence. However, beyond the official line, which in any case takes only election days and “periods” into account, there exists a persistent level of politically linked violence in South Africa, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. As such, it can be argued that most of the things that problematise voting and elections happen long before election days and the relatively short periods leading up to them.

In KwaZulu-Natal, elections are historically associated with danger. No less than 45 politically linked killings have taken place in the province since 2016. In addition, voting in the 2019 elections was simply unable to take place in some wards in the province because physical barriers were put in place to restrict access to voting stations. What was not widely reported on was that 30 000 soldiers were deployed in KwaZulu-Natal during the 2019 election period in an attempt to normalise an abnormal situation in the province. This brief snapshot of elections in just one of South Africa’s nine provinces indicates that the IEC’s official line, although considered credible, might not be representative of certain realities surrounding politics and elections in South Africa.

Also, in spite of the IEC’s assurance of peaceful and free and fair elections, certain incidents that took place on election day in 2019 have raised concerns to the contrary. Above all, stations running out of section 24A (VEC4) forms and ballot papers, as well as the issue of the easily removable marking ink, created the potential for people to vote more than once. Some stations opened late, and in some cases not at all. Seventeen of the 22 924 voting stations across South Africa had not yet opened by the time they were supposed to, 14 of which were in KwaZulu-Natal. By the evening of 8 May, five voting stations had still not opened: three in KwaZulu-Natal’s Inkosi Langalibalele municipality in uThukela; and two in Eastern Cape – one in Buffalo City and one in Ntabankulu.

In Ermelo, Mpumalanga, and Benoni, Gauteng, there were also issues of IEC officials mishandling ballot boxes. According to IEC election protocol, ballot boxes should be closed with a tamper-proof security seal once they are filled with ballot sheets and transferred in the specified way in which election officials were trained. However, in these incidents, two officials were caught contravening regulations pertaining to the handling of ballot boxes. There were also events, beyond the IEC’s control, that compromised the voting process in some areas. These included floods in KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape, and heavy winds in Port Elizabeth that damaged tents at some voting stations.
Such irregularities with the electoral process, whether intentional or unintentional, can have far-reaching implications for democracy in South Africa. In response, on the day after the elections, 35 independent political parties insisted the elections were not free and fair, calling for a proper and independent investigation. Although these calls could be seen as an attempt to subvert the rule of law and undermine the democratic process for narrow gains, as discussed earlier in this report, the fact that they were made adds a layer of scepticism around elections and reinforces notions of a democracy being “hollowed out”.

4.2 Findings from the 2019 EISA election observer mission

As discussed previously in this report, the most value derived from the presence of EOMs during elections lies in their reports, which include key observations, findings and recommendations. Due to its headquarters being in Johannesburg, South Africa, EISA is seen to have a “home ground advantage” in terms of its ability to deploy adequate resources rapidly to conduct comprehensive observer missions in the country. For the 2019 elections, EISA observers began visiting 295 voting stations across South Africa from the beginning of May.

The mission found that the elections were mostly peaceful, with only one voting station – at Rolpaan, Northern Cape – affected by protests. The mission also found that election operations were generally well handled and ran smoothly. Most voting stations opened more or less on time, and those that did not were either poorly prepared or received their election materials late. There was a satisfactory amount of election material at most stations, with the exception of a few stations in Port Elizabeth, which ran out of section 24A (VEC4) forms. At the 9pm closing time, voters who were still in queues were allowed to vote.

The mission observed that the counting of votes was carried out well, with only a few discrepancies. But counting took longer than expected owing to an increase in the number of voters at some stations and the merging of some substations. At a voting station in Dihlabeng, Free State, the mission observed a lack of compliance with counting procedures: there was no reconciliation of ballots, essential election materials were not sealed and packed properly, and the presiding officer had to be reminded by party agents to count special votes.

In spite of EISA’s EOM having observed a more or less smooth election and general compliance by the IEC with election protocol, it highlighted the need to revitalise citizen observer efforts. This comes into sharp focus when considering the need for civil society and citizens to mobilise around the common goal of greater accountability. In addition, the EISA EOM expressed some concern about whether the IEC would be able to continue holding smooth elections in their current form. The mission highlighted the following factors that the IEC might need to rethink: the continuity of leadership within the commission; the incomplete voters’ role, which was brought to light by the Tlokwe municipality Constitutional Court case; and manual vote-counting processes.

Although these factors might somewhat be diminished by what has officially been deemed a free and fair election, they should not be dismissed as minor, especially with regards to the sustainability of democracy in South Africa. As such, long-term thinking around whether a “hollowing out” of democracy in South Africa could be rescued should involve steps to respond to recommendations made by EOMs such as EISA, as well as how they could assist in the drive for accountability. The following discussion deals with voter turnout in the 2019 elections, specifically in terms of possible reasons for the sharp decrease in voters, in the context of a perception that the electoral system, in its current form, is struggling to remain relevant amid despondency.
4.3 Voter turnout
As has already been mentioned in this report, the period leading up to the 2019 national and provincial elections was charged with a certain level of optimism, with many anticipating the elections to be a watershed moment in South Africa’s democratic trajectory. However, as has also been discussed, this moment did not actualise, many reasons for which are still emerging in the months after the election. This discussion presents a critical analysis of some of these reasons, with specific consideration given to how South Africa’s broader socioeconomic circumstances, as well as global economic and political trends, influenced voter behaviour.

Of the 36 million South Africans eligible to vote in the 2019 national and provincial elections, 9.2 million did not register; and of those who did register (26.7 million), only 17.6 million turned out at polling stations on 8 May, representing a 7.5% decrease compared to the 2014 elections. The diminished number of registered voters, coupled with the low turnout, meant that 18.5 million eligible South Africans did not vote. Several factors have been linked to this sharp decrease, for instance, increased service delivery protests in metropolitan areas and townships leading up to the elections, and student protests across the country since 2015. As previously mentioned, scandals involving alleged corruption, maladministration and the mismanagement of public funds at state-owned enterprises and government departments also contributed to a sense of despondency among South Africans.

In the years leading up to the elections, a large number of the voting population expressed their frustrations on social media and through organised events such as marches that called for the removal of former president Zuma from office. It was assumed that these factors, which highlighted the many reasons for change, might have driven South Africans in unprecedented numbers to the polls. However, as the figures above indicate, this was not the case. In picking up from previous discussions in section 1 of this report, a major reason for the poor voter turnout in 2019 could be attributed to South Africa’s consistently declining GDP. This implies that, in real terms, South Africans are feeling the impact of getting poorer and, as such, are opting to express their discontent by disengaging from politics and the electoral system.

The impact of poorly performing GDP is also greatly enhanced by a sense of a lack of accountability, especially in light of public funds being mismanaged; endemic, and possibly systemic, state-wide corruption; and revelations of “state capture”. Global trends such as downturns in the world’s leading economies have led to a shift towards right-wing politics in traditionally liberal-democratic countries, as discontent is seen to be directly related to the rise of populism. That South Africa is not immune to these global trends was clearly highlighted by the 2019 elections, where parties, including those that were traditionally liberal and centrist, turned to populism to speak to the discontent of their desired constituents.

Another factor in support of this view is that as discontent spreads and manifests, citizens display less concern with national and provincial politics as they do with local and municipal politics and governance, as this is seemingly directly related to their interests and immediate living conditions. This could explain the high voter turnout in the 2016 local and municipal elections compared to the low voter turnout in the 2019 national and provincial elections. As discontented people turn their focus towards more local issues, incidents of xenophobia and racism increase, fuelled by a nationalist interpretation of patriotism and protecting what is “ours” in the face of widespread poverty and discontent.
At the national level, the elections in this sense could be seen as somewhat of a racial census, where South Africans are still opting to vote according to previously demarcated conceptions of commonality. This could explain the DA’s loss of some of its traditional white voters to the conservative Freedom Front Plus, as well as the party ceasing to be a political home for white middle class professionals owing to it compromising its liberal values in favour of populism.

However, perhaps in spite of global trends towards increasing populism relative to rising discontent, questions remain about the South African electoral system’s relevance to young people. A major challenge in advancing the project of mobilising civil society and citizens around the common goal of accountability would include finding ways to engage South Africa’s vast youth population to devise a means for crafting the most suitable political ecosystem, whereby the youth, as the future of democracy, contribute to undoing its “hollowing out” in the present. With this in mind, the following section deals specifically with the 2019 election results, drawing from them specific trends that might be useful towards understanding how citizens, especially young people, might be engaged.
SECTION 5:
2019 Election results and trends
In concluding this report, this section contextualises the discussions in previous sections with specific reference to the results of the 2019 elections. Also taken into consideration in this section are aspects such as polarisation, rhetoric and tension during the elections; an analysis of the media’s coverage of the elections; a brief discussion around access to information in the context of the elections; and a critical socioeconomic analysis of the winners and losers.

The ANC recorded its worst performance in elections since 1994, seeing decreases of its share of voters in all provinces. By winning 57.5% of the national vote, compared to 62.15% in the 2014 elections, the party’s representation in Parliament decreased from 249 seats to 230 seats. Provincially, the ANC secured an outright majority in eight provinces, though only barely retaining its majority in Gauteng with 50.19% of the vote.

The DA also did not perform as well as it had hoped, winning 20.77% of the national vote, thus losing five seats in Parliament (from 89 seats in 2014 to 84 seats in 2019). The formation of GOOD under the leadership of former DA member Patricia de Lille, following a messy split from the DA, resulted in a decrease in particularly coloured voters for the DA. And, as previously discussed, the DA lost many of its white voters to the Freedom Front Plus as a result of having broadened its policy scope and failing to convince this constituency that it would continue to serve their interests. Moreover, the political context of the elections created new threats for the party in terms of nationalism on the left and right.

Of the big three, the EFF was the only party that recorded growth in every province it contested. By winning 10.79% of the national vote, it increased its voter share by 4% since the 2014 elections. The party’s growth nationally and provincially is impressive for a relatively young party, as it has now become the official opposition in three provinces – Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West. The EFF’s growth in KwaZulu-Natal (from 1.9% in 2014 to 9.71% in 2019) is significant given that the province has historically been socially conservative and difficult for new or smaller parties to penetrate.

The IFP and Freedom Front Plus also recorded significant gains in 2019. The IFP is now the fourth-largest party in the National Assembly, having received 3.38% of the national vote, and replacing the DA as the official opposition in KwaZulu-Natal with 16.34% of the vote. The Freedom Front Plus also made substantial gains in 2019, having received 2.38% of the national vote. Much of the party’s success has been attributed to the DA’s losses, particularly in the northern interior provinces.

As discussed earlier in this report, these results, especially the gains made by smaller parties such as the EFF and Freedom Front Plus, could be attributed to the rise of populist rhetoric amid citizen despondency in a “hollowing out” of democracy. The losses recorded by typically centrist parties, especially the DA, could be attributed to these parties having also adopted populist rhetoric, but failing in doing so to retain their traditional constituents or attract new voters.

5.1 Polarisation, rhetoric and tension

In light of previous discussions in this report that highlight South Africa’s persistent socioeconomic tensions as a result of deepening inequality, increasing poverty and large-scale unemployment, this section takes a brief look at how polarisation and rhetoric in politics played into these tensions leading up to the 2019 elections. As noted in previous sections, although a premium was placed on the 2019 elections to deliver change, they took place with little incident and were not as widely participated in by citizens as anticipated. The question, then, arises as to why these elections were relatively uneventful.
despite polarised rhetoric within and between parties fuelling political uncertainty and bringing other sociopolitical factors to the surface.

Individual political personalities featured strongly in the 2019 elections. Within the ANC, Ramaphosa was found to be more popular than his party, with a personal approval rating consistently higher than that of the ANC leading up to the elections. However, running concurrently with Ramaphosa’s popularity was Zuma’s looming presence – at times, it was reported that Zuma’s attendance at ANC election rallies was more celebrated than Ramaphosa’s. Given the party’s recent leadership battles and the two leaders’ somewhat divergent styles of rhetoric, it would appear that part of the ANC’s diminished victory in the 2019 elections could be attributed to an identity crisis.

The EFF’s support was buoyed by Malema, its charismatic leader. As discussed earlier, in furthering the party’s populist agenda, Malema’s rhetoric was focused on notions of “us and them”, “ours and theirs” in an attempt to locate himself and his party as sympathetic to despondent citizens. However, in employing this rhetoric, Malema not only displayed that the EFF was almost incapable of transcending his personality to stand as a party with its own identity, he inadvertently aligned himself with the Freedom Front Plus’s style of exclusionary rhetoric, which involved promoting an agenda to “hit back” essentially at centrist and/or liberal politics and governance.

Conversely, as the DA hoped to make inroads as an opposition to the ruling ANC, it did itself a disservice by diluting its liberal identity in favour of a populist stance not too dissimilar from that of the EFF and Freedom Front Plus. The residual implication of this dilution in the DA’s rhetoric, as well as the ANC’s identity crisis, had the net effect of hindering strong, centrist competition, which created a power balance that shifted significantly to the right. As such, the rhetoric employed by various political parties and actors, whether resulting in gain or loss, was by and large a product of a political ecosystem in which there is a constant threat of subversion, whether it be in the form of right-wing politics or the representation of strong political personalities.

5.2 Media coverage
Regardless of style and intent, political rhetoric is regarded as such only if there is an audience, and the media serves as a key component in providing eyes and ears for politicians and their parties. However, in a fast-changing, globalised world, definitions of the media as a social institution are rapidly in flux, especially when considering the proliferation of new forms of media on an increasing number of platforms, containing varying levels of quality and layers of accessibility. With this in mind, it becomes vital to understand the media’s coverage of the 2019 elections while considering the broader social context in which it operates.

Along with media coverage comes the question of access to information, which is increasingly pertinent in the context of a political ecosystem that is constantly under the threat of subversion. Although South Africa’s legal framework includes legislation pertaining to the right of access to information, particularly in terms of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (2000), political parties are still finding loopholes to withhold certain crucial information, specifically in terms of their internal processes and funding. In addition, issues have been raised regarding certain information that, although technically released publicly, is not easily accessible. Issues around the use of state resources to disseminate information and protect data also emerged, especially with regards to political parties gaining access to citizens’ private information for campaigning purposes.
As discussed earlier in this report, growing discontent and widespread despondency among South Africans resulted in an unprecedented number of political parties contesting the elections nationally and provincially. However, as the media aims for a balance in views and fair representation of all political parties, an observation of media coverage reflected a correlation between coverage and number of votes won – the parties that received more votes received more media coverage. Another notable observation was that overall media coverage of the elections focused more on the voices of political parties than citizens, and that party politics was the central theme in most stories.

The following infographics, supplied by Media Monitoring Africa, an independent media monitoring organisation that promotes ethical and fair journalism in support of human rights, provides detailed breakdowns of how the media covered the 2019 elections.

1. **WHAT WERE THE STORIES ABOUT?**

   - Party Politics (14%)
   - Party Campaigning (10%)
   - National Politics (9%)
   - Service Delivery (6%)
   - Election Logistics (6%)

2. **WHOSE VOICES DO WE HEAR?**

   - Political Parties (45%)
   - Citizens (14%)
   - Presidency (6%)
   - National Government (6%)
   - Justice System (5%)

   Please note this graph only represents the top 5 most accessed groups and accounts for 76% of group sources.
5.3 Winners and losers

As worrying notions of South Africa’s “hollowing out” democracy within a broken politics have developed in this report, it becomes necessary to provide a point of departure for further discussion, reflection and study. This report has highlighted that although there were many reasons for the 2019 elections to somehow deliver change in South Africa, this was not the case. The elections did not make an immediate, material difference to the lives of despondent South Africans. However, in analysing the outcomes of the elections and noting some of the emerging trends, a deeper understanding has been gained as to the state of South Africa’s democracy relative to its stage of development.

Political, election and voting trends in South Africa may be interpreted as in keeping with global trends, whereby economic uncertainty and stifled productivity is characterised by a rise in populism and right-wing politics, as well as a decrease in citizen participation. That voter participation of 60% or more is considered good in certain developed democracies in the West speaks somewhat to South Africa experiencing a level of maturity in its democracy. This comparison might also explain the links between discontent and the rise of populism, and between poverty and disengagement. However, this comparison is limited when considering South Africa’s unique socioeconomic condition, which is incomparable with those prevalent in the West.

As such, a deeper understanding firstly of South Africa’s unique situation, post apartheid, in a globalised world, might provide clarity towards conceiving a decolonisation project that begins with mobilising civil society and citizens around the common goal of real accountability. Secondly, understanding exactly who the winners and losers are from a socioeconomic and developmental perspective after events such as elections might provide an effective point of departure for studies that will ultimately shape South Africa’s democratic trajectory.

Hence, what the data pertaining to the results of the 2019 elections suggests is that the real winners were hard-line parties such as the EFF and Freedom Front Plus. These parties were able to manoeuvre effectively and create opportunities to score gains at the expense of the larger, more traditionally centrist
parties, which struggled for coherence and relevance – from leadership and positioning to rhetoric and the issues to which they committed. What the data also suggests is that South African society was the biggest loser in the 2019 elections, especially when considering how the elections highlighted a distinct despondency among citizens. This speaks to a sense that democracy, and the institutions that have been established to uphold it in South Africa, are in the process of being “hollowed out”.

This “hollowing out” of democracy, with South African society as its most affected victim, is driven by power that has grown unaccountable. This lack of accountability has become increasingly evident in how power aims to subvert the rule of law in an absolute pursuit of its own interests, which largely transcend politics. In essence, what society’s loss means is a large-scale loss of trust, not only in political parties but in public institutions and authority, and the processes that compose them, leading to citizens opting out of participation in the political system en masse.

What intensifies this loss is that power uses expressions of despondency, such as service delivery protests that often turn violent, as political currency. This has led to what is dubbed a “politics of protest”, which leaves destabilisation and destruction in its wake. The tendency of such purposeless power is not to commit to progressive policy, accountability, justice and fair representation, but rather to engage in primordial identity politics towards furthering disparate ideologies that fundamentally contradict any attempted project of decolonisation.

Given the sobering contents of this report, the question arises as to what South Africans expected from the 2019 elections. Although there might have been some optimism in certain quarters, the sense for many years leading to this point has been that change can and may occur only once a thorough rethinking of each individual’s role in democracy is conducted. This requires broad thinking and at times introspection about what South Africa’s democratic project aims to achieve and how, in light of what we have learnt from experience over the past 25 years, the “hollowing out” that has taken place thus far could be reversed.


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