CAPE TOWN, South Africa — Former [*South African President Jacob Zuma*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-zuma-elections-mk-manifesto-5049f66bc818f680769d8f70a3980640) was disqualified Monday from running for a Parliament seat in next week's national election because of a previous criminal conviction. The decision by the country's highest court is certain to raise political tensions ahead of [*a pivotal vote*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-elections-voter-guide-6876f39a9c14a61c8f94f123cb66d4ce) in Africa's most advanced economy, as Zuma leads a new political party challenging former allies.

The Constitutional Court said a section of the constitution disqualifying people from standing for Parliament if they've been sentenced to more than 12 months in prison without the option of a fine does apply to [*the 82-year-old former leader*](https://apnews.com/hub/jacob-zuma). Zuma was [*sentenced to 15 months in prison*](https://apnews.com/article/africa-south-africa-courts-ca4b08b93ab679ec2304da47625800bd) in 2021 by the court for contempt for refusing to testify at a judicial inquiry into government corruption.

[*Zuma*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-zuma-elections-44bd1c2ad25b168c20bc0a4a5e14ffa5) cannot serve as a lawmaker until five years after that sentence is completed, the court said in a ruling nine days ahead of the May 29 election.

Zuma once led South Africa's ruling African National Congress party but was forced out as its leader in 2017 and resigned as president in 2018 under a cloud of corruption allegations.

He returned to ***politics*** late last year with a new party and [*renewed his fierce criticism of the ANC*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-jacob-zuma-election-anc-party-5f2260db0b0cf4143387ea13ba8045ba) and current [*President Cyril Ramaphosa*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-election-ramaphosa-anc-parties-44187959a44ddaddadd0ad4b23bebd83), who replaced him as both party leader and president.

Zuma's new party said in a statement that “this unsurprising decision, while disappointing, has not disheartened us.” The party criticized the court and the panel of judges that issued the ruling.

Next week's election could be South Africa's most important in 30 years, with [*the beleaguered ANC*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-ramaphosa-speech-parliament-b138bd6880b9651b696573ce0e53b853) facing the biggest challenge to its long rule since the end of [*the apartheid system of white minority rule*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-apartheid-freedom-democracy-election-d9269650c2d2c813e9794fda145ef22d) in 1994.

The ANC is struggling to hold onto its parliamentary majority, and the election might force it into a national coalition government. That would be the country's biggest political shift since apartheid was dismantled with the first all-race elections.

The court ruling doesn't prevent Zuma’s party, called uMkhonto weSizwe (Spear of the Nation), or the MK Party, from contesting the election.

Zuma appears on the party's election posters and is the face of its campaign. South Africa's independent electoral commission that governs elections said Zuma's image could remain on the party's election regalia, but his name would be removed from its list of proposed candidates.

South Africans don't vote directly for their president, but rather for parties. Those parties get seats in Parliament according to their share of the vote. The president is elected by lawmakers, meaning the party that holds the majority chooses the president. That has always been the ANC since 1994, but if it receives less than 50% of the vote this time, it will need a coalition to form a government and reelect Ramaphosa for a second and final term.

Zuma's MK Party could erode more of the ANC's vote and make it harder for the ruling party to retain its majority.

Zuma still enjoys significant support, and the court's ruling increases the political temperature after some MK Party officials had suggested they would reject any decision stopping Zuma from being a candidate.

Ramaphosa told Radio 702 he didn't think the decision would cause unrest but added: "Should there be any threat of violence, our security forces are ready.”

South Africa has had credible, peaceful elections since it became a democracy in 1994.

Zuma was initially disqualified from running for Parliament by the electoral commission. He successfully challenged that decision at the Electoral Court. Monday's ruling overturned that and confirmed his disqualification.

Zuma was South Africa's leader for nearly a decade from 2009-2018, but stepped down under internal pressure from the ANC as allegations emerged of widespread government graft. He was later called to testify at a judge-led inquiry into those graft allegations, but refused. That led to his sentence for contempt.

That sentence reinforced Zuma's lingering influence in parts of South Africa when it sparked [*a week of looting and rioting in two provinces*](https://apnews.com/article/africa-business-biden-cabinet-south-africa-2d0aaef63102a661c8e54d3bdf926566) that led to the deaths of more than 350 people, some of the country's worst violence since the last days of apartheid. Zuma was released on medical parole after serving two months of the 15-month sentence.

Zuma has also been charged with corruption [*in a separate case*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-zuma-corruption-trial-election-57a18e09aab05a1e5beb1890e61ca1c4) that deals with [*allegations against him*](https://apnews.com/article/africa-south-africa-business-trials-15980dee75ff1e4ea32358352bcd0b50) from a time before he was president. He is expected to go on trial next April on those charges and has pleaded not guilty.