CAPE TOWN, South Africa — After 30 years of dominating South African ***politics***, [*the ruling African National Congress*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-elections-anc-manifesto-jobs-646a45300a06f720fae842f5c1cad56b) will face its [*toughest election this month*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-national-election-explainer-anc-9b86f08a344e55ef635adb7a9349bf6d) as most opinion polls predict it will lose its parliamentary majority for the first time.

Once admired under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and regarded as a beacon of hope by the Black majority following the fall of apartheid in 1994, the ANC’s reputation has been battered by [*record levels of unemployment*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-unemployment-jobs-economy-un-ab41fc68f3641819cd0d5557e63b17a6), widespread poverty, the [*collapse of some government services*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-johannesburg-water-crisis-weather-fa8c921c6a063a31aec37e05864d61fb) and more than a decade of corruption scandals, leaving voters disillusioned.

President Cyril Ramaphosa hopes the May 29 ballot will lead to his reelection. But if the ANC does lose its majority, it will force it into a coalition to form a government — also a first for the country and something that may complicate policymaking in [*Africa's most advanced economy.*](https://apnews.com/hub/south-africa)

South Africans don’t elect their president directly, but instead vote for parties that get assigned seats in Parliament according to their share of the ballot. Lawmakers then choose the head of state.

As South Africa braces itself for the possibility of its most important change [*since the end of apartheid*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-apartheid-freedom-democracy-election-d9269650c2d2c813e9794fda145ef22d), here are the main parties and players in the election:

**A PRESIDENT UNDER PRESSURE**

Ramaphosa was a senior figure in the ANC in the early 1990s and was once seen as a protege of Mandela. He left ***politics*** to become a successful businessman before returning as deputy president of South Africa in 2014. He became president in 2018 after Jacob Zuma resigned under a cloud of corruption allegations.

Ramaphosa has tried to [*rebuild the reputation of the ANC*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-ramaphosa-speech-parliament-b138bd6880b9651b696573ce0e53b853) by cracking down on government graft. However, unemployment has risen to 32% during his presidency — the highest in the world — while he has struggled to curb poverty. An electricity crisis has led to [*power outages across the country*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-electricity-blackouts-power-station-b50a3a6ac582859daeade46a529d9a4e) of 62 million due to failures at the state-run electricity supplier. It badly damaged the economy and Ramaphosa's reputation as someone who could fix South Africa's problems, even if the blackouts are viewed as a result of mismanagement during the Zuma administration.

The ANC is still expected to win the largest share of votes, but if it receives less than 50% as predicted, it will need the help of coalition partners to reelect the 71-year-old Ramaphosa.

**THE MAIN OPPOSITION LEADER**

John Steenhuisen is the leader of the main opposition party, [*the Democratic Alliance.*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-elections-anc-democratic-alliance-3df5ca5aaf213349b8e929bc4408c69c) The centrist DA has promised to “rescue” South Africa from what it says is the corruption and mismanagement of the ANC but has never come close to winning a national election. The DA won 22% in the last general election in 2019 to the ANC's 62%.

The DA entered a [*preelection agreement with smaller opposition parties*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-opposition-coalition-agreement-ec5b9cc1db3aa476daf7a88455f0a9e4), hoping their combined vote might clinch a majority and remove the ANC. But they would all have to increase their share significantly and it's seen as unlikely.

Steenhuisen, 48, is the only white leader among South Africa's main political parties. In a country where race is still at the forefront of the national consciousness, that has led to detractors saying the DA represents the interests of the white minority more than the 80% of South Africans who are Black.

**A FIREBRAND MARXIST**

[*The Economic Freedom Fighters*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-election-opposition-eff-malema-ef4d87176b5b53e5768eac02fc9b0129) has risen rapidly to become South Africa's third biggest party in Parliament since it was formed in 2013 by Julius Malema, a former ANC youth leader who was expelled from the ruling party. His fiery, far-left rhetoric has made the 43-year-old [*South Africa's most contentious politician*](https://apnews.com/article/africa-c2b1ae2e673a3327c898143a59ba6b5c) but his message that the ANC has failed poor, Black South Africans has gained traction, especially with unemployed and disaffected young people.

The EFF has called for the nationalization of mines and the redistribution of land to poor Blacks. The party, which follows a Marxist ideology, says an economic inequality based on race [*persists decades after apartheid*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-apartheid-freedom-democracy-election-d9269650c2d2c813e9794fda145ef22d), with whites generally rich and Blacks still poor.

Malema and other EFF lawmakers have regularly interrupted speeches by opponents in Parliament and been involved in scuffles with security guards in the chamber, bringing [*a militant brand of* ***politics***](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-parliament-opposition-ramaphosa-election-court-d324d0f3e73b529ef49af42aa497e860) to the heart of South Africa's democracy. The EFF is a possible coalition partner for the ANC, although neither party has said if there is any agreement.

**ZUMA RETURNS**

[*Former President Zuma*](https://apnews.com/hub/jacob-zuma) added a new dimension when he announced in December that he was turning his back on the ANC he once led and [*returning to* ***politics*** *with a new party.*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-jacob-zuma-election-anc-party-5f2260db0b0cf4143387ea13ba8045ba)

Zuma's MK Party is not expected to challenge the top three, but it is expected to further erode the ANC's vote just as the ruling party faces its sternest election test. The 81-year-old former leader still commands support, especially in his home KwaZulu-Natal province.

His reemergence also raised security concerns for the election after his conviction for contempt of court and prison sentence in 2021 sparked a week of rioting and looting that led to the deaths of more than 350 people in [*the worst violence in South Africa*](https://apnews.com/article/africa-business-biden-cabinet-south-africa-2d0aaef63102a661c8e54d3bdf926566) since the troublesome last days of apartheid.

Zuma is involved in a court battle over whether his criminal conviction prevents him from standing as a candidate for Parliament. There are concerns over unrest if he is disqualified. Even if he isn't, his [*new reputation as an agitator*](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-jacob-zuma-elections-explainer-f8dba9147e91f643980c68585b017309) is likely to increase tensions around a pivotal election.