**A party in decline**

Even as elections in India are drawing to a close, the citizens of yet another BRICS country and emerging economy are going to the polls on May 29. The largest country in GDP (nominal) terms in Africa, South Africa has been ruled for three decades by the party that was most associated with the anti-Apartheid struggle — the African National Congress (ANC).

Identified with leaders such as Nobel prize winning Nelson Mandela, who went on to become the first President of racially-integrated South Africa, the ANC has maintained its dominance as the party of governance in the country, so much so that political observers have termed the ANC’s rule in South Africa one of a dominant party presiding over a “party-state”.

The ANC today is helmed by President Cyril Ramaphosa, a businessman with a long association with the party, who served as chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly after the first democratic elections in South Africa following the end of Apartheid in 1994. Mr. Ramaphosa emerged as ANC president after a strongly contested leadership race against Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was supported by then president and widely derided to be a corrupt leader, Jacob Zuma. After the election, Mr. Zuma resigned following pressure from the party and Mr. Ramaphosa was elected unopposed as the President of South Africa by the National Assembly in February 2018.

Mr. Ramaphosa was seen by many as someone who could bring in change after Mr. Zuma’s controversial years. But his government, elected in May 2019 after winning 57.5% of the votes in the general election, had to tackle many economic challenges — the outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, the inherited weaknesses in the economy and the many failures of state-owned enterprises.

As a party leader, he also had to confront a leadership that included heavyweights who were associated with Mr. Zuma. In July 2021, when Mr. Zuma refused to comply with a summons order from a Constitutional Court that was set up to inquire into allegations of “state capture” and “fraud” in the public sector during his tenure, he was sentenced to 15 months of imprisonment. Mr. Zuma went on to announce that he would be voting for the newly formed party, the uMkhonto we Sizwe (named after the armed organisation affiliated to the ANC during the anti-Apartheid struggle) in the 2024 elections despite being a lifelong member of the ANC.

Earlier, factional troubles in the ANC had also resulted in the formation of new parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) by former ANC Youth League leaders. The EFF, which won 10.8% of the vote in the 2019 elections, retains an ideological view that is closer to some of the radical sections of the ANC and believes in measures such as nationalisation of mines, banks and other industries and appeals to unemployed youth who are not seen as ANC supporters.

While the ANC is expected to retain its presence as the single largest party in the coming elections, its performance could be dented by concerns among South Africans about persisting poverty and rising inequality. The World Bank said in 2020 that 37.9% of the population is living at international poverty levels of $3.2 per person a day with 25% (13.8 million people) experiencing food poverty. The country’s Gini coefficient was 0.63 in its last measured value in 2014, showing widespread inequality.

Dampening enthusiasm

These concerns have already dampened voting enthusiasm among the ANC’s core Black voters. Voter turnout in South Africa among eligible voters fell from 85.53% in 1994 to 47.28% in 2019 after a steady decline election after election, according to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Dissatisfaction with the ANC’s performance has also led to disillusionment with democratic institutions itself with Afrobarometer in 2021 recording that only 40% of South Africans preferred democracy over non-democratic options.

The chief rival to the ANC in the South African party system remains the centrist Democratic Alliance, which has emphasised its opposition to what it calls the “state capture” of the ANC and its cadres and the reduction of the South African democratic system into a dominant one-party state. But it is largely seen as a party that represents the interests of the white minority and has been unable to expand its reach. Controversial views espoused by the DA’s leaders on the legacy of colonialism have only increased the suspicion among Black voters.

The core support base of the ANC, despite misgivings among its voters, remain those who have experienced racism during the Apartheid era and were aware of the ANC’s efforts during the struggle and many who still perceive the ANC as the only party capable of addressing the problems faced by the Black community in particular.

Formed in 1912 as the South African Native National Congress to press for rights of Black South Africans, it was renamed to its current appellation in 1923 and mostly functioned as an organisation devoted to getting legislation passed in favour of the community. But by the 1940s, with the influx of younger left-wing activists committed to mass mobilisation movements, trade union activity and resistance tactics, the ANC, under the leadership of Alfred Xuma, had become a major movement. In the 1950s, the ANC intensified its mass campaigns, which included strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience movements, and by 1955, it was a key signatory to the “Freedom Charter” that became vital to the anti-Apartheid struggle.

Tripartite Alliance

Other signatories included parties and organisations such as the South African Communist Party (SACP), the South African Indian Congress and trade unions. The SACP, along with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), remains aligned with the ANC as part of the Tripartite Alliance, which was forged in 1990 after the release of Nelson Mandela from prison.

Organisations aligned with the ANC such as the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK or Spear of the Nation) launched an armed struggle against Apartheid in the 1960s after the ANC itself was banned and its leadership went underground. Leaders like Mandela were arrested and remained in jail for nearly three decades. Negotiations by the Apartheid regime with the ANC to end the system and transit into multi-racial democracy began in the 1980s. After the release of Mandela and the lifting of the ban on the ANC in the early 1990s, an interim Constitution was ratified. The ANC clinched a thumping victory in the 1994 elections and Mandela became President.

Mandela’s government was widely popular and allowed for a peaceful transition of power. But with the party retaining a structure which is largely hierarchical that reverted to a culture of patronage on assuming power, degeneration set in over the years. Ineffective governance, economic woes and allegations of chronic corruption led to a sharp decline in the ANC’s popularity, especially during the Zuma regime, with the party winning 57.5% of the vote in the 2019 elections.

With Mr. Ramaphosa being seen as unable to stem the decline and relying only on incremental steps to bring change in the party, the ANC may have to rely upon other parties in South Africa’s proportional representation system to continue to stay in power.