

Summary

The upcoming South African elections on May 29 are poised for intense competition, potentially shifting the political landscape as the African National Congress (ANC) faces a challenge to its long-held majority rule, partly due to Jacob Zuma's influence and the rise of uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK). Uncertainty surrounding Zuma's candidacy has fueled tensions, with MK leaders warning of violence. While clashes have occurred in KwaZulu-Natal, widespread violence seems unlikely. Nonetheless, the nation braces for a period of political volatility.

Recent events and developments

The South African general elections on May 29 are looming, and with it, historical developments and potential social unrest. Since the fall of apartheid in 1994, the ANC consistently won elections with a clear majority above 50%. The party's hold on power, however, is deteriorating as according to Ipsos polls, the voter support for the party has decreased to 40.2%, being the lowest in history. The party may lose its historic majority due to a weak economy, an energy crisis, and high crime rates. The ANC also lost part of its voter base due to the departure of Jacob Zuma to create his own party, uMkhonto we Sizwe, which created additional tension and animosity. Zuma was prohibited from running for parliament by the electoral commission due to this criminal record. Although the decision has recently been overturned, it did spark threats of violence and disruption of elections by MK leaders in case Zuma cannot run. The decision to overturn the verdict is still being challenged in the Constitutional Court. Furthermore, incidents related to political violence have been reported among supporters of several parties, primarily in the KwaZulu-Natal province as it is considered a key battleground for the election. On February 7, gunmen killed an Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) councilor in Nongoma municipality. On March 2, gunmen killed an MK organizer in Durban. On March 16, ANC and IFP supporters clashed in KwNongoma, resulting in the injury of 16. However, April and May went by without political violence, although MK protests in Durban have occurred.

Impact assessment

As the elections draw nearer, the potential for heightened social unrest looms. While the MK party had initially threatened violence and electoral disruption, the situation saw a de-escalation following the Electoral Court's decision to overturn the prohibition on Jacob Zuma's parliamentary candidacy. Nevertheless, this verdict remains subject to contestation in the Constitutional Court, carrying the possibility of reversal. Such an outcome could rekindle tensions within the MK party, potentially sparking further threats of violence or acts of civil disobedience, including protests and riots. The backdrop of political violence and societal turmoil stemming from judicial rulings impacting Jacob Zuma is significant. In 2021, widespread riots erupted initially in KwaZulu-Natal and subsequently in Gauteng, triggered by Zuma's imprisonment for contempt of court, lasting 15 months. The toll was grave, with an estimated 354 fatalities, thousands injured, and the economy sustaining \$3.2 billion in damages. Currently, the KwaZulu-Natal province remains a hotbed of political rivalry and electoral unrest as it is a stronghold of the MK party. It is therefore likely that any larger protests or riots in the run-up to or resulting from the general elections will occur Durban or other larger cities in the province. Other protests and clashes between supporters of various parties such as the IFP and ANC may also take place. Large-scale violence in Pretoria, however, is unlikely. The scale and severity of the 2021 riots are unlikely to repeat as state and private actors have improved their procedures to prevent large-scale violence.

Advice from Forth Global

- Ensure that all employees travelling to South Africa receive a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Employees should avoid all protests and other public gatherings.
- Employees should refrain from sharing their opinions on the political situation in South Africa.
- Closely monitor the local and international media for updates on the political situation and potential protests, with an emphasis on the KwaZulu-Natal province.

Customized advice

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