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Elite Contestation in South Africa, 2006–2018: The Making and Unmaking of a Power Elite

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This article argues that the major cause of political protests in South Africa is elite contestation in the African National Congress (ANC). Elite contestation rocketed from around 2006 to 2013 and then, strangely, stabilised until 2018. This period of stabilisation coincided with the period of Jacob Zuma's presidency associated with state capture, that is, from around 2013. We suggest that former president Zuma managed to establish an internal compact in the ANC through violence, intimidation and, primarily, patronage. Cyril Ramaphosa was unable to maintain this compact, which is why protest activity soared after 2018, reaching insurrectionary proportions in 2021 and now, with the formation of the MK Party, this compact breaks up altogether. We conclude by suggesting that as elite contestation becomes more polycentric, some of it is likely to leave the political scene altogether, mutating into organised crime.

Keywords: elite contestation; power elites; South Africa; African National Congress; state capture; Jacob Zuma; Cyril Ramaphosa

Introduction

In May 2024 the African National Congress (ANC) lost its majority in the National Assembly. Whereas in 2019 the ANC received more than 57 per cent of the national vote, in May 2024 its share fell to less than 40 per cent of ballots. Most pundits prior to the 29 May election had predicted that ANC support would fall below 50 per cent, continuing a trend of gradual and consistent decline that started in 2009.[1] Few, however, had predicted how

1 D. Everatt, 'The Long Decline of South Africa's ANC', *Journal of Democracy*, 35, 4 (2024), pp. 135–48; M.K. Justesen and C. Schulz-Herzenberg, 'The Decline of the African National Congress in South Africa's 2016 Municipal Elections', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44, 1 (2018), pp. 1133–51; C. Isike and U.O. Uzodike, 'The Decline of a Dominant Political Party: The Case and Future of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC)', *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 12, 2 (2018), pp. 22–36; I. Chipkin, 'The Decline of African Nationalism and the State of South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42, 2 (2016), pp. 215–27.

dramatic the fall would be.[2] The biggest winner was a newly formed party led by former president Jacob Zuma, the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party). It emerged as the third largest party in the National Assembly, outperforming Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and almost winning outright the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Like Bantu Holomisa's United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Congress of the People (COPE) and the EFF, MK is a breakaway party from the ANC itself. In this article we argue that the emergence of the MK Party reflects the inability of the ANC to manage and contain elite contestation within its own ranks. Following the work of Yuhua Wang, we discuss these developments as changes in the 'elite social terrain'.[3] This refers to the ways in which central elites relate to each other and connect to local social groups. We consider two configurations in particular: power elites and fragmented or plural elites. We argue that these constellations are dynamic phenomena, mutating into each other depending on the form of the social terrain. We call this dynamism elite temporality. In South Africa, the terrain of elite competition is that of the ruling party, the ANC. We draw from developments in recent work on patronage and patrimonial politics to argue that in South Africa the ability of central elites to dominate local and regional elites depends on their ability to control gatekeeping.

In Frederick Cooper's famous formulation, African governments '*sit astride* the interface between a territory and the rest of the world, collecting and distributing … customs revenue and foreign aid, permits to do business in the territory, entry and exit visas and permission to move currency in and out'.[4] With their sovereignty recognised from the outside, but with little de facto institutional power within their territories, postcolonial states fell back on colonial-era practices, where revenue was derived through the control of state resources. In more recent work, scholars have argued that the concept loses little of its purchase even in the age of liberalisation, privatisation and the use of non-governmental organisations to provide public goods.[5] Yet it is not African governments per se that sit astride 'the gate', controlling revenue and taxes and licences. In this article we shift the focus of gatekeeping from 'states' and 'governments' to elites and political parties. In South Africa the ANC – qua dominant political party – occupies this role, largely by determining which persons occupy what positions in key state and government structures. In this way, internal party dynamics shape the elite social terrain, determining not only what resources are controlled but, especially, by whom.

Power elites emerge when a small group of centrally placed politicians and officials are able to determine who is appointed to the gate, that is, when they are able to deploy people loyal to them to key positions in regional patronage systems. In contrast, elite fragmentation or elite pluralism arises when no particular group is able to dominate patronage networks. In this article, we explore changes in the elite social terrain at a national level, proposing a novel resource for describing elite competition over time. Finally, we argue that the temporality of elite competition allows us to periodise contemporary South African politics in terms of the shape or form of the elite social terrain: dispersed elite contestation from 2007/08; management and centralisation of contestation (state capture) (2012–17); and loss of control (and decline of the ANC) from 2018 onwards.

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2 In late February/March 2024, Bill Johnson and Wayne Sussman released the results of a MarkData survey that they had commissioned weeks earlier. It revealed 'radical disillusionment' with the ANC, whose support, the survey suggested, had fallen from 57 per cent to 41 per cent.

3 Y. Wang, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 25.

4 F. Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 157, emphasis added.

5 S.R. Dorman, 'Beyond the Gatekeeper State? Studying Africa's States and State Systems in the Twenty-First Century', *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, 3, 3 (2018), pp. 311–24. Alex Beresford argues that African states remain gatekeepers but do so now in alliance with transnational capital, donors and domestic elites: A. Beresford, 'Power, Patronage, and Gatekeeper Politics in South Africa', *African Affairs*, 114, 455 (2015), pp. 226–48.

Elite Competition: Defining Terms

Studies of elite contestation in South Africa frequently conflate elites with classes,[6] even though the terms have a quite different theoretical provenance.[7] More commonly, elites are defined in relation to institutional power. C. Wright Mills' classic text defined the 'power elite' as a small, cohesive group of individuals who hold dominant positions in the major institutions of society and have the power to make decisions with wide-ranging consequences.[8] On his terms, elites are interconnected and often move between roles in the corporate, military and political spheres, forming a unified power structure. In contrast to elite theory, pluralists such as Robert Dahl argued that power in democratic societies is distributed among a wide array of interest groups and organisations, rather than being concentrated in the hands of a single elite.[9] This perspective sees competition among diverse groups as a healthy and essential part of democratic governance. Although this is a debate that started in the 1950s, contemporary work on African elites still invokes its concepts.[10]

In new research on 'parliamentary elites' in Africa, Edalina Rodrigues Sanchez *et al*. find evidence of both kinds of elites, which they link to different regime types; power elites in authoritarian settings and pluralistic configurations in more open societies.[11] In Africa, they argue, 'the most common elite configuration [of power] is one in which there is a high level of political centralisation and integration' and where there is 'limited functional autonomy'.[12] In other words, African elites tend to form 'power elites' rather than resembling differentiated and pluralistic networks. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when there was a move to multipartyism and the liberalisation of the political environment, this changed in some countries. The elite social terrain is shaped by who controls gatekeeping positions, and how. Are such roles allocated centrally, through a coherent and tightly organised power elite, or are they distributed in a more haphazard manner reflecting a more decentralised and polycentric structure?

The contrast with the gatekeeping institutions in the USA and in many parts of Europe and Asia is instructive. Pierre Bourdieu's work on educational institutions and their role in demarcating the elite terrain remains pioneering.[13] In France, access to elite positions came through attendance and graduation at elite schools (*grandes écoles*), which played the role, effectively, of gatekeeping. Of especial importance in France was the role of the École Nationale d'Administration and the competition to pass the *concours administratif* (entrance exam) as a route to commanding positions in the public administration and also to the most

6 P. Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (London, Pluto Press, 2000); K. von Holdt, 'South Africa: The Transition to Violent Democracy', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, 138 (2013), pp. 589–604.

7 See Heinrich Best and John Higley's introduction to the *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites*. There was a 'chasm' between elite and class approaches, with the former emerging as an 'alternative and antidote to Marxism': H. Best and J. Higley, 'Palgrave Handbook on Political Elites: Introduction', in H. Best and J. Higley (eds), *Palgrave Handbook on Political Elites* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2.

8 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956).

9 R.A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961).

10 E. Rodrigues Sanches, A. Osei, B.M. Seabo and A. Pitcher, 'Introduction: Are Parliamentary Elites in Africa also Power Elites? Researching the Origins and Consequences of Varying Elite Configurations', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 50, 4 (2024), pp. 521–34.

11 *Ibid*.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 527.

13 P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984). Bourdieu is often cited alongside Robert Putnam: R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000), but with more emphasis on power, inequality and habitus; see A. Portes, 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1 (1998), pp. 1–24.

senior posts in business.[14] In the United States today, Ivy League universities play a similar gatekeeper role. These institutions not only provide high-quality education but also offer extensive networks, social capital and a degree certificate that is highly valued by those recruiting for elite positions. Graduates of Ivy League schools are disproportionately represented in top positions, particularly in law, finance and government.[15] In these environments a necessary precondition of entering the elite is a university certificate from an esteemed institution. We might read the attacks by the current US administration under President Donald Trump on elite American universities as an attempt to seize control of this gatekeeping function.

Current reforms in South Africa to 'professionalise' the public service will increase the already important value of educational certificates in accessing senior positions in the state (civil service and state-owned enterprises). In 2024, the Public Service Commission, a state body responsible for monitoring whether government entities are compliant with the constitutional values for public service, found, for example, that 96 per cent of senior managers in national government departments had a bachelor's degree, an advanced diploma or some kind of postgraduate certificate.[16] Nonetheless, the National School of Government does not administer a compulsory entrance examination for the public service and is not a gateway institution into senior and elite positions. Similarly, schools of government located at the various public universities, as well as other programmes, offer training to existing and candidate civil servants, and their qualifications are useful, though not decisive, in the recruitment and promotion of officials.

The institution that has preoccupied African and Africanist scholars for the longest time, in contrast, has been that of patrimonialism.[17] In new work on land reform in South Africa, for example, Farai Mtero, Nkanyiso Gumede and Katlego Ramantsima argue that in neo-patrimonial systems, resources allocated by the 'rational bureaucratic state' are redirected by local elites embedded in informal patron–client networks.[18] Typically, the presidency – or, more broadly, the executive branch of the state, often personified by the head of state – is considered the head of the patrimonial hydra.[19] Research by Alexander Beresford and

14 P. Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996).

15 R.L. Zweigenhaft and G.W. Domhoff, *Diversity in the Power Elite: Have Women and Minorities reached the Top?* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998); M.L. Stevens, *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007); S.R. Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011); G.W. Domhoff, *Who Rules America? The Triumph of the Corporate Rich*, 7th ed. (New York, McGraw-Hill Education, 2017).

16 Public Service Commission (PSC), 'Report on the Qualifications of Senior Managers in the Public Service – Updated' (Pretoria, Public Service Commission, 2024), available at https://www.psc.gov.za/documents/reports/2024/Updated_Report_on_the_Qualifications_of_SMS_members_in_the_Public_Service.pdf, retrieved 17 September 2024.

17 See D.C. Bach and M. Gazibo (eds), *Patrimonialism in Africa: Reassessing an Enduring Paradigm* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2011) and N. Cheeseman (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of African Politics* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013). Multiple chapters (for example, those by Nicolas van de Walle and Goran Hyden) reflect on neopatrimonialism as a central paradigm in African state studies. Ironically, the many critiques of neopatrimonialism (its Eurocentric assumptions, fuzziness or analytical circularity) themselves confirm its prominence: see A. Pitcher, M.H. Moran and M. Johnston, 'Rethinking Patrimonialism and Neopatrimonialism in Africa', *African Studies Review*, 52, 1 (2009), pp. 125–56; see too T. Mkandawire, 'Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa: Critical Reflections', *World Politics*, 67, 3 (2015), pp. 563–612.

18 F. Mtero, N. Gumede and K. Ramantsima, 'Elite Capture in South Africa's Land Redistribution: The Convergence of Policy Bias, Corrupt Practices and Class Dynamics', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 49, 1 (2023), p. 6.

19 M. Bratton and N. van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); G. Erdmann and U. Engel, 'Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered: Critical Review and Elaboration of an Elusive Concept', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 45, 1 (2007), pp. 95–119; Mkandawire, 'Neopatrimonialism and the Political Economy of Economic Performance in Africa'.

Hannah Dawson brings attention to another significant, and related, institutional power – the ruling political party. Gatekeeper politics, which Beresford insists is not an exotic feature of African politics but integral to modern capitalism, pivots on two related axes: 'spoils consumption' (controlling public goods for private ends) and crony capitalism (using connections to public authority to facilitate private consumption).[20] In South Africa, access to public authorities comes through the ANC.[21] Dawson, in her work in the Zandspruit informal settlement in Johannesburg, also identifies the ANC as central to what she terms 'political navigation'.[22] In her description of the protests that broke out in 2011 in Zandspruit, Dawson writes: '[t]he leaders initiated protests in an attempt to reconfigure power relations in the local ANC so as to gain positions of power and access to state resources'.[23] Later she describes the youth as brokers in a battle of 'patronage from below', where aligning oneself to the councillor created opportunities to access public resources.[24] Claire Bénit-Gbaffou also explores how local political actors, often affiliated with the ANC, act as gatekeepers, controlling access to resources and opportunities. This gatekeeping reinforces patronage systems, where loyalty to the party or specific individuals can determine access to services and employment. Such dynamics can fragment community organisations and limit broader political mobilisation.[25]

If elite contestation in the west is often about access to high-ranking universities or to schools of public administration,[26] in South Africa, like in many postcolonial states, gatekeeping happens in and through the ruling party.[27] We define elite competition, therefore, as contestation among individuals and groups for decision-making positions in the ANC that allows them to control the gate to patronage.

Research on gatekeeping and patronage politics in South Africa draws mainly from local synchronic studies. This article offers a way, in the South African context, for modelling these dynamics at a national level and over time. How does such contestation change over time and what consequences does it have on the party and more generally on South Africa's body politic? Our ambition in this article is modest. We are not able to provide a full answer to these questions. Rather, we make a methodological intervention, in the main, with a view

20 Yuen Yuen Ang offers a compelling breakdown of corruption as petty theft, grand theft, speed money and access money. Speed money and Access money are other ways of considering spoils consumption and crony capitalism: Y.Y. Ang, *China's Gilded Age: The Paradox of Economic Boom and Vast Corruption* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020).

21 Beresford, 'Power, Patronage, and Gatekeeper Politics in South Africa'.

22 H. Dawson, 'Youth Politics: Waiting and Envy in a South African Informal Settlement', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40, 4 (2014), p. 879.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 868.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 879.

25 See C. Bénit-Gbaffou, '"Up close and personal" – How Does Local Democracy Help the Poor Access the State? Stories of Accountability and Clientelism in Johannesburg', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46, 5 (2011), pp. 453–65; C. Bénit-Gbaffou and L. Piper, 'Party Politics, the Poor and the City: Reflections from the South African Case', *Geoforum*, 43, 2 2012), pp. 173–7.

26 In Michael Hartmann's *The Sociology of Elites*, his chapter on 'elite recruitment' deals with national education systems; the *grandes écoles* in France, and Eton and Oxbridge in the UK, St Grottlesex and the Ivy League in the USA, and in Japan, the Imperial University of Tokyo, the Todai: M. Hartmann, *The Sociology of Elites* (London, Routledge, 2007), pp. 61–88.

27 Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, in *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, do touch on the role of political parties in the formation and maintenance of African elites, but this is not their primary focus. Instead, their broader argument is that political power in Africa is maintained more through informal networks, patronage and personal relationships rather than through formal institutions like political parties: P. Chabal and J.-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford, James Currey, 1999). Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle (in *Democratic Experiments in Africa*), in contrast, studied how during transitions to democracy political parties became vehicles for elite control. Catherine Boone (2003), moreover, explored how political parties allowed elites to manage regional and local political players: C. Boone, *Political Topographies of the African State: Territorial Authority and Institutional Choice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).

to stimulating further research. We identify a resource that currently exists and that can shed light on these questions, but that has not been used for these purposes because scholars and analysts have not taken full account of the phenomena that it describes. We will see that data on what are sometimes called 'service delivery protests' contain important information about elite contestation and the elite social terrain.

Insurrection

With levels of unemployment in South Africa above 40 per cent of the total eligible working population (on the expanded definition), and unemployment among persons between 15 and 25 approaching 50 per cent,[28] it makes sense, intuitively, that South Africa is combustible. Indeed, there are numerous articles and essays that make just this point. Referring to the 'revolt' of July 2021,[29] Justin Visagie, Ivan Turok and Sharlene Swartz argue that '[a]t the heart of the matter, South Africa's deep-seated social inequalities and segregated living conditions provide fertile ground for popular discontent'.[30]

Social protests have been on the rise since 2004, reaching what Kate Alexander called 'insurrectionary proportions' in 2008.[31] Drawing on 'rapid-response research' conducted in five 'hot-spots', Alexander argued that protests are 'rebellion[s] of the poor'[32] driven by dissatisfaction and anger over the quality of basic services and against uncaring, self-serving and corrupt leaders. They are locally organised and place demands on people who hold or benefit from political power. Essentially, Alexander argues, 'protests reflect disappointment with the fruits of democracy'.[33]

Patrick Bond and Shauna Mottiar argue that the rash of 'service delivery protests' in South Africa reflects the distorted character of growth, associated with the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in 1996.[34] A new wave of social movements erupted in most social sectors, including health care, municipal services, land, education and even international economic relations. Protests like these represent resistance to the commodification of life and commercialisation of municipal services and to rising poverty and inequality in the country's slums.[35] Relying on media-based information that has been supplemented with observations from surveys, Doreen Atkinson agrees that the main driver of popular protests is ineffective service delivery: despite the fact that the transformation of local government in post-apartheid South Africa has been 'nothing short of remarkable', numerous towns have witnessed mass protests and even violent conflagrations related to 'municipal ineffectiveness in service

28 Statistics South Africa, 'The Official Unemployment Rate Was 32,9% in the First Quarter of 2025', media statement on Quarterly Labour Force Survey report for first quarter, 13 May 2025, available at https://www.gov.za/news/media-statements/statistics-south-africa-quarterly-labour-force-survey-qlfs-%E2%80%93-q1-2025-13-may, retrieved 7 November 2025.

29 In July 2021, South Africa experienced its most severe civil unrest since the end of apartheid, triggered by the imprisonment of former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court. Rioting began in KwaZulu-Natal, Zuma's home province, and quickly spread to Gauteng, encompassing major cities like Durban and Johannesburg. What started as protests by Zuma's supporters escalated into widespread rioting and looting, fuelled by long-standing socio-economic grievances such as poverty, unemployment and inequality, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

30 J. Visagie, I. Turok and S. Swartz, 'What Lies behind Social Unrest in South Africa, and What Might Be Done about It', The Conversation, 18 August 2021, available at https://theconversation.com/what-lies-behind-social-unrest-in-south-africa-and-what-might-be-done-about-it-166130, retrieved 31 July 2023.

31 P. Alexander, 'Rebellion of the Poor: South Africa's Service Delivery Protests – A Preliminary Analysis', *Review of African Political Economy*, 37, 123 (2010), p. 25.

32 *Ibid*.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

34 P. Bond and S. Mottiar, 'Movements, Protests and a Massacre in South Africa', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 31, 2 (2013), p. 284.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

delivery'.[36] Alexander De Juan and Eva Wegner share this view, but with a caveat: protests are a response, not to 'absolute service deprivation' but to relative inequality.[37]

An Anomaly in the Data

This brings us to a surprising trend in the data. While almost all studies have drawn conclusions from the dramatic rise in protest events between 2005 and 2011, there is almost no discussion of what happened next.

According to the South African police's Incident Registration Information System (IRIS) data, public order incidents[38] dropped between 2011 and 2012, before rising slowly until 2015, when they stabilised at a high level. The police call a 'public order' event any sporting, cultural, religious and/or music festival where the police force was deployed. Hence, the graph at Figure 1 is not simply a measure of protests. Nonetheless, the broad pattern is instructive. It makes sense from what we know from other sources that in the graph the public order incidents recorded between 2008 and 2010 are largely protests, as opposed to sporting and musical events. If that is true, then protests drop after 2010. The gradual rise from 2011 might also reflect not a renewed growth in protest activity but rather more cultural, religious and sporting activities taking place in a generally more stable environment. In other words, the graph shows that protests dropped and then plateaued after 2011 until 2018 (see Figure 1).

The data in Table 1 show a sharp rise in protest activity from 2005/06 (when incidents almost doubled from the year before), reaching 800 incidents in 2014. It then drops and stabilises at a high rate of over 700 incidents, before surging again from late 2017. In Figure 2, we see this decline in protest activity from 2014 clearly depicted.

The Institute of Security Studies (ISS) data, which start in 2013, support these broad trends, showing a moderate decline in protests between 2014 and 2017. In Figure 3, we have modelled ISS data for the main metropolitan areas in South Africa, where protest activities are concentrated. They show an unmistakeable decline in incidents across all of the largest cities up till 2019 when they rise again. The unevenness between cities reflects local dynamics and contingencies. In 2021 South Africa experienced an unprecedented political revolt related to the arrest of Zuma, concentrated in Johannesburg and in eThekwini. The latter event is not reflected in this data set.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) and the ISS do not draw on the same data to monitor protests within South Africa. ACLED mainly relies on media-based reporting, gathering data from various local, regional and international media sources, and coding protest events according to standardised global criteria. In contrast, the ISS predominantly uses official sources, notably data from the South African Police Service (SAPS), combined with local media reports and their own analytical assessments. While both sources cover similar protest events and thus partially overlap, their approaches differ: ACLED emphasises consistent global comparability and broad media coverage, while ISS provides a more localised, detailed analysis, often enriched by direct engagement with local stakeholders and security agencies.

The ACLED and ISS data taken together provide compelling reasons to believe that the broad patterns discussed here are not the result of sampling errors. Accounting for the broad stabilisation of protests from 2013/14 and the sharp rise from 2018, as well as the

36 D. Atkinson, 'Taking to the Streets: Has Developmental Local Government Failed in South Africa?', in S. Buhlungu, J. Daniel, R. Southall and J. Lutchman (eds), *State of the Nation: South Africa 2007* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2007), p. 53.

37 A. De Juan and E. Wegner, 'Social Inequality, State-Centered Grievances and Protest: Evidence from South Africa', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 63, 1 (2019), p. 51.

38 The South African Police Service defines a public order incident as a protest or demonstration, a crowd-related incident or a riot where Public Order Policing units were deployed.

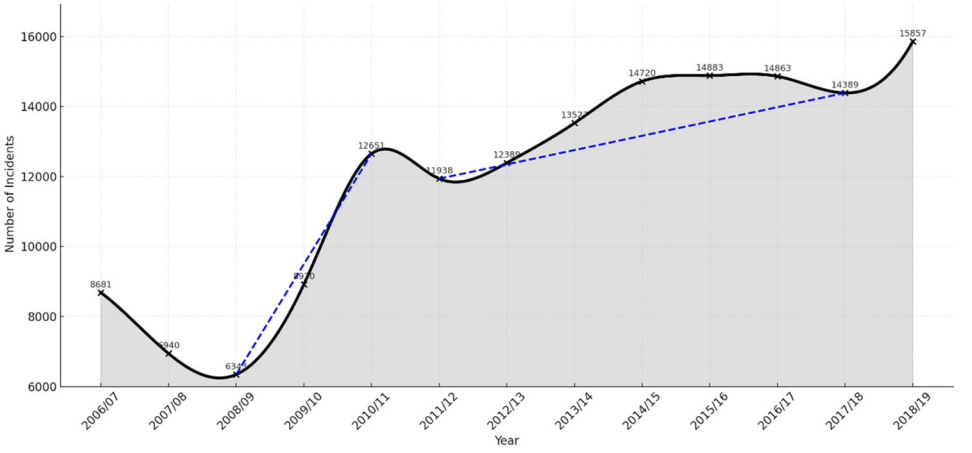

Figure 1. South African Police Service public order incidents recorded in their Incident Registration Information System (IRIS), 2006/07–2018/19. (Source: South African Police Service [SAPS], 'Annual Report 2018/2019' [Pretoria, SAPS, 2019], available at https://nationalgovernment.co.za/department_annual/296/2019-south-african-police-service-%28saps%29-annual-report.pdf, retrieved 7 November 2025. The report notes '15,957 crowd-related incidents' responded to in 2018/19, made up of 11,431 'peaceful' and 4,526 'unrest-related' incidents [p. 151].)

Table 1. Protest types in South Africa recorded over the period 1997–2021

Year	Excessive force against protesters	Mob violence	Peaceful protest	Protest with intervention
1997	20	10	20	0
1998	20	10	25	0
1999	25	15	30	0
2000	30	20	35	0
2001	30	20	35	0
2002	35	25	40	0
2003	40	30	50	5
2004	45	35	60	10
2005	60	40	100	15
2006	100	60	120	20
2007	120	80	150	30
2008	160	100	200	40
2009	220	120	300	45
2010	300	130	400	50
2011	400	140	500	55
2012	450	130	600	60
2013	500	160	700	70
2014	550	180	800	75
2015	500	150	750	70
2016	450	140	700	68
2017	500	160	1,000	72
2018	520	180	950	74
2019	540	190	900	76
2020	560	200	850	78
2021	580	210	800	80

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'Number of Demonstration Events by Country and Year (Aggregated Data) – South Africa', data set produced by the authors, available at https://acleddata.com, retrieved 31 May 2022.

fluctuations within this period, reveals the methodological limits of traditional accounts of protests and points to other determinate factors. In the section that follows we argue 1) that protests only modestly correlate with changes in service delivery performance; and 2) that the correlation with deteriorating unemployment and the general political economy is not high enough to account for the broad shape of the data. We show that service delivery and political economic factors do not explain as much as contemporary scholarship would expect them to.

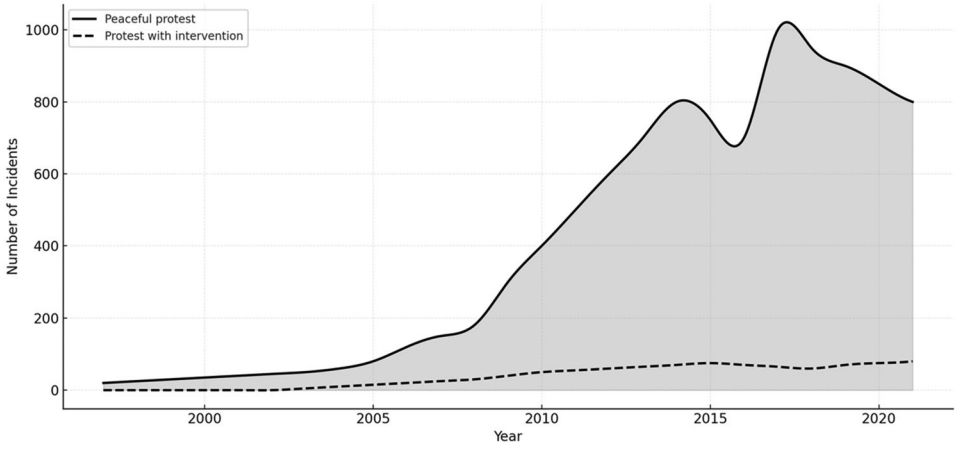

Figure 2. Peaceful protests and protests with intervention, 1997–2021. (Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED], 'Number of Demonstration Events by Country and Year (Aggregated Data) – South Africa', data set produced by the authors, available at https://acleddata.com, retrieved 31 May 2022.)

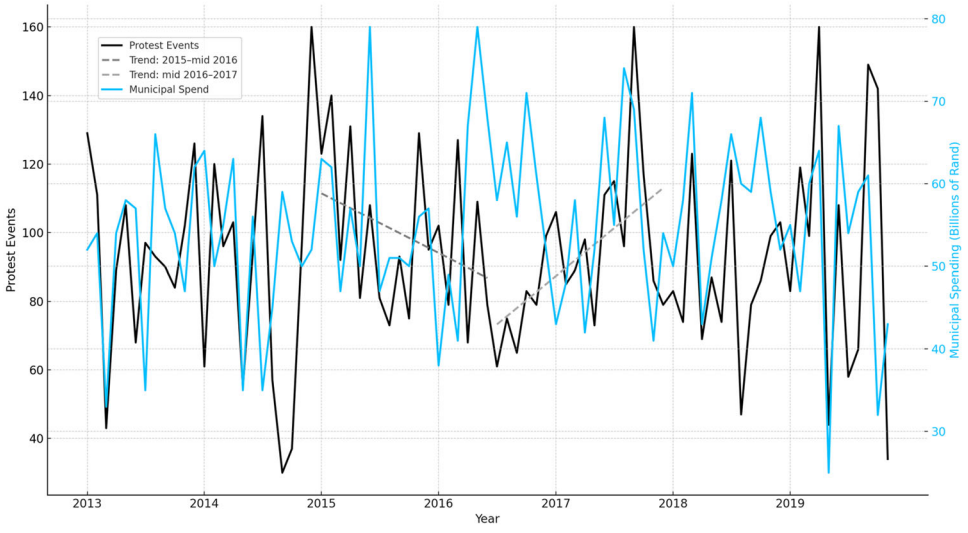

Figure 3. Service delivery trends in relation to protest events and municipal expenditure, 2013–2019. (Source: Drawn and collated by the authors from raw data available on the National Treasury Municipal Financial Data website, available at https://municipaldata.treasury.gov.za, retrieved 29 January 2026. National Treasury [South Africa], 'Service Delivery Trends in Relation to Protest Events, 2013–2019' [data set], Municipal Financial Data [Pretoria, National Treasury, 2019].)

Protests and Municipal Service Delivery

In Wang's analysis of the elite social terrain in China, he argued that there was a causality between the way that elites interacted among themselves and the performance of the state, as well as the endurance of the regime itself.[39] In particular, centralised elites, which we have discussed as power elites, were associated with high developmental results, because the

39 Y. Wang, *The Rise and Fall of Imperial China: The Social Origins of State Development* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2022), p.20.

government of the day could co-ordinate the decisions of multiple state entities across a wide region.[40] These regimes also tended to be short-lived as regional and local elites eventually asserted their autonomy and rebelled against them. On these terms, we should expect that when elites are integrated and co-ordinated through a central structure, the quantum (though not necessarily the quality) of government improves. In other words, governments are able to take decisions and manage their implementation through the administration(s). In contrast, when elites are fragmented, the implementation of government decisions runs up against acute difficulties of compliance and co-ordination.

If we are correct that from around 2013/14 the Zuma administration starts to resemble a power elite, able to co-ordinate gatekeeping across governments and administrations, then we should find evidence of improved governance. We use the term 'governance' here in a strictly technical manner, to convey an improvement in the formal capacity to allocate resources and administer processes.[41] We do not mean that the quality of the goods and services that government provided improved, especially for poor and working people. The distinction between the quantum and quality of government is an important one and we will return to it shortly.

When we modelled aggregate municipal spending nationally against protest data (Figure 3), we noticed a correlation between the decline of protest events between 2014 and the beginning of 2017 and a rise in spending by local governments. This does not tell us anything about what municipalities were spending money on, but it is suggestive of an improvement in the capacity of municipalities generally to spend money at all.

In 2014, the Auditor-General, Kimi Makwetu, announced a 'steady improvement'[42] in the audit results of municipalities. Over a five-year period, between 2010/11 and 2014/15, the number of municipalities that received clean audits increased from 13 to 54. Eighteen additional municipal companies achieved clean audit status, taking the total number of entities (local governments and municipally owned companies) with well managed financial departments to 72. Makwetu put these improvements down to several factors, including more stable administrations, local leaders prepared to mete out consequences for transgressions, and various organisational changes to improve audit outcomes.[43] These governance improvements correlate with a general rise in municipal spending in the period under consideration.

By the end of 2017, however, the Auditor-General's cautious optimism was over. Forty-five municipalities had regressed. Only 33 municipalities received a clean audit (an almost 40 per cent decline from 2014/15), and wasteful expenditure had risen by 75 per cent to more than R28 billion from the year before, itself a doubling of wasteful expenditure from when the Auditor-General's office had started reporting on the issue in 2014. Whereas a few years earlier the Auditor-General was full of praise for municipal leaders, he reported darkly that the audit environment had become more hostile.[44] Matters declined further in

40 See D. Booth and F. Golooba-Mutebi, 'Developmental Patrimonialism? The Case of Rwanda', *African Affairs*, 111, 444 (2012), pp. 379–403: the authors' arguments resonate with the way Ang shows that some kinds of corruption in China incentivise development, especially in relation to large-scale infrastructural projects: see Ang, *China's Gilded Age*.

41 See R.A.W. Rhodes, *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 1997).

42 Auditor-General South Africa, 'Consolidated General Report on the Audit Outcomes of Local Government: MFMA [Municipal Finance Management Act] 2014–15', (Pretoria, Auditor-General South Africa, 2015), available at https://www.agsa.co.za/Portals/0/MFMA%202014-15/Section%201-9%20MFMA%202014-2015/fullReportMFMA2014-15.pdf, retrieved 8 March 2025, p. 16.

43 *Ibid*.

44 Auditor-General South Africa, 'Consolidated General Report on the Local Government Audit Outcomes: MFMA [Municipal Finance Management Act] 2016–17', available at https://www.agsa.co.za/Portals/0/Reports/MFMA/201617/GR/MFMA2016-17_FullReport.pdf, retrieved 8 March 2025.

2017/18.[45] The latest report from 2024 notes that 'local government remains in a dire state'.[46] This makes sense in Wang's terms: as the power elite begins to fragment near the end of Zuma's presidency, so governance deteriorates. It deteriorates further during Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency.

It is unlikely that the period of improved governance was associated with major improvements in the quality of municipal services and/or the quality of municipal infrastructure. The South Africa Social Attitudes Survey, a nationally representative, cross-sectional survey conducted annually by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) since 2003, found, for example, that during the period when municipal spending was rising and governance was improving, there was no obvious correlation with public perceptions of government's performance. Satisfaction with municipalities' provision of water and sanitation services declined from 59 per cent in 2010 to 53 per cent in 2016.[47] Residents' satisfaction with how well municipalities were collecting refuse increased slightly, from 52 per cent overall approval in 2010 to 55 per cent in 2016. These figures varied according to race, with black South Africans recording the lowest levels of satisfaction.[48] As Tyanai Masiya *et al*. noted in 2019, 'complaints of poor service delivery abounds in municipalities' even though 'South Africans have better access to basic services such as housing, water, electricity and sanitation'.[49] There may have been a modest increase in the quantum of services, but not in their quality. In the country's state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and other parts of government during this period, increased state spending on infrastructure provided opportunities for rent-seeking, leaving companies like Eskom, the state power company, Transnet, the state logistics company, and PRASA, the state passenger rail company, with stranded assets.[50]

Martin Bekker modelled protest data in relation to a measure of inequality in the Platinum Belt of South Africa. At the municipal level, he concluded, 'the *general propensity for protest* is a function of local inequality, unemployment, and voter participation'.[51] In other words, it is likely that perceptions of unequal quality of services and infrastructure are a driver of social dissatisfaction and, potentially, of protest activity. If the quantum of services improved between 2014 and 2017 there is no evidence, however, that it was concentrated in poor and working-class areas, or that it made much difference to levels of inequality – except in Cape Town. There are very few data available on municipal

45 Auditor-General South Africa, 'Consolidated General Report on the Local Government Audit Outcomes: MFMA [Municipal Finance Management Act] 2017–18 – Section 1: Executive Summary', available at https://www.agsa.co.za/Portals/0/Reports/MFMA/2019.06.25/MFMA2017-18%20-%20Section%201%20-%20Executive%20summary.pdf, retrieved 8 March 2025.

46 Auditor-General South Africa, 'Consolidated General Report on Local Government Audit Outcomes: MFMA [Municipal Finance Management Act] 2023–24', available at https://www.agsa.co.za/Portals/0/Reports/MFMA/2023-24/FINAL%202023-24%20MFMA%20GR%2028%20May%202025.pdf?ver=ftuQJFMU1GHD0g105c-8bA%3d%3d, retrieved 8 March 2025, p. 6.

47 T. Masiya, Y.D. Davids and M.S. Manga, 'Assessing Service Delivery: Public Perception of Municipal Service Delivery in South Africa', *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management*, 14, 2 (2019), pp. 20–40.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

50 M. Sachs, 'Fiscal Dimensions of South Africa's Crisis', *Southern Centre for Inequality Studies Working Paper no. 5* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, 2020), available at https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/83798_sachs_2020_fiscal_dimensions_draft_2710.pdf, retrieved 2 June 2025.

51 M. Bekker, 'Rebellion with a Cause: An Inquiry into the Nature of South African Post-Apartheid Protest, Using Computational Social Science Methods' (PhD thesis, University of Johannesburg, 2020), p. 174, emphasis in original; see also M. Bekker, 'Language of the Unheard: Police-Recorded Protests in South Africa, 1997–2013', *Review of African Political Economy*, 49, 172 (2022), pp. 226–45.

Table 2. Comparative Gini coefficient for five metropolitan municipalities, 2001–23

Year	Johannesburg[a]	Cape Town	Nelson Mandela Bay[b]	Buffalo City[c]	Ekurhuleni[d]
2001	–	0.60[e]	–	–	–
2005	–	–	–	–	–
2006	–	–	–	0.567	–
2007	0.62	0.59[e]	–	0.567	–
2008	–	–	–	0.567	–
2009	–	–	–	0.567	–
2010	0.62	0.57[e]	–	0.566	–
2011	–	0.69[f]	–	–	–
2013	–	–	–	–	–
2015	–	0.62[g]	0.62	–	0.63
2016	–	0.62[g]	0.62	–	0.63
2017	–	0.62[g]	0.62	–	0.63
2019	0.62	0.62[g]	0.62	–	0.63
2021	–	0.63[f]	–	–	–
2022	–	–	–	–	–
2023	–	–	–	–	–

Sources: This table was compiled by the authors from multiple sources. Notes: [a]Johannesburg: City of Johannesburg, 'Joburg Demographics and Key Socio-Economic Indicators: Issue 23 – June 2020', available at https://joburg.org.za/documents_/Documents/Statistical%20Briefs/Issue%2023%20Joburg%20Demographics%20and%20Key%20Socio%20Economic%20Indicators.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026; [b]Nelson Mandela Bay: South African Cities Network (SACN), 'Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality – State of Cities Report 2021: Dashboard Indicators', 2022, p. 53, available at https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/S1-Nelson-Mandela-Bay-Metropolitan-Municipality.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026; [c]Buffalo City: Eastern Cape Socio Economic Consultative Council, 'Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality: Development Indicators, June 2012', p. 16, available at https://ecsecc.org/documentrepository/informationcentre/BCM-INDICATOR_REPORT.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026; [d]Ekurhuleni: SACN, 'State of South African Cities Report 2021', 2022, p. 33, available at https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/SoCR-V-2021-03.20_WEB.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026; [e]City of Cape Town, 'State of Cape Town Report 2016: Overview with Infographics', 2016, p. 8, available at https://resource.capetown.gov.za/documentcentre/Documents/City%20research%20reports%20and%20review/16429%20CCT%20State%20of%20Cape%20Town %20Report%202016%20-%20Summary%20Report%20V7.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026; [f]W. Smit, 'Tackling Inequality in the City – Cape Town', Social Europe, 7 June 2023, available at https://www.socialeurope.eu/tackling-inequality-in-the-city-cape-town, retrieved 28 January 2026; [g]SACN, 'City of Cape Town – State of Cities Report: Dashboard Indicators', 2022, p. 29, available at https://www.sacities.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/S1-City-of-Cape-Town.pdf, retrieved 28 January 2026.

inequality, and those that exist are recorded in Table 2.[52] The table is compiled from multiple sources, with references for each data point, though largely from reports by the South African Cities Network. We have focused on metropolitan areas where protests are most concentrated.

There is not enough information in existing sources to draw any strong conclusions, though the data suggest that across the different cities Gini coefficients are largely stable. Only in Cape Town is there evidence that municipal inequality has declined since 2000, though protest incidents were high throughout this period, spiking from 2019 and reaching the highest on record in 2020. To the extent that the data points available for other cities are indicative of a pattern, then in Johannesburg and Buffalo City inequality is static and in Nelson Mandela Bay it declined modestly. Like in Cape Town, protest activities spiked during 2017 after a lull during 2015 and 2016.

52 The majority of studies on inequality in South Africa report on national averages. See Statistics South Africa, 'Inequality Trends in South Africa: A Multidimensional Diagnostic of Inequality' (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 2019), available at https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-19/Report-03-10-192017.pdf, retrieved 2 June 2025; or A. Chatterjee, L. Czajka and A. Gethin, 'Estimating the Distribution of Household Wealth in South Africa', *SCIS Working Paper no. 2020/06* (Johannesburg, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies and World Inequality Lab, 2020), available at https://wid.world/document/estimating-the-distribution-of-household-wealth-in-south-africa-wid-world-working-paper-2020-06, retrieved 5 February 2026.

Protests as a Measure of Political Contestation in the ANC

In 2010, Richard Pithouse proposed that ANC electoral dominance meant that local politicians faced little threat at the polls. Instead, the real threat 'comes from the contestation within the movement'. 'This contestation', he continued, 'is often acute and sometimes violent and leaders of the party, at all levels, are generally far more concerned with shoring up support within the party than with managing dissent outside of it'.[53] He proposed, essentially, that political protests were expressions of intra-ANC contestation between competing elites.

The following year, a series of qualitative studies undertaken by a collaboration between the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and researchers at Wits University corroborated this hypothesis. Researchers found that 'the ANC itself, as the locus of many of these struggles and contestations, has become a profoundly unstable organisation'.[54] Violent protest thus serves chiefly to reconfigure relations within the ANC itself, resulting frequently in the reabsorption of the 'protest leadership' back into the ANC and into senior positions in municipalities or other state bodies. Local social movements or 'civil-society' groups associated with the original protest frequently fade away.[55] In her study of where protests happen, Sarah Lockwood found that the decisive factor in explaining regional variations was the role of 'protest brokers'. 'I call such intermediaries "protest brokers"', she writes, 'and where elites do not have access to such individuals I argue that they are likely to find the challenges of mobilisation difficult to overcome, significantly reducing the likelihood of protest in such communities'.[56]

Mass unemployment in South Africa, depending on the dynamics of specific sectors (platinum mining or coal mining, for example), drives inequality, with regional variations.[57] Yet these factors alone do not trigger protest activities. The 'trigger' comes from brokers, who are usually local politicians contesting for power in their contexts. Protests are hence strongly correlated to struggles for power in the ANC and for access to positions in municipalities and other state entities, which provide discretion over resources.[58] In the next section, we take this idea as an opportunity to reinterpret the data on 'service delivery' protests in terms of changes in the elite social terrain.

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53 R. Pithouse, 'Local Despotisms and the Limits of the Discourse of "Delivery" in South Africa', *Trialog*, 104, 1 (2010), p. 52.

54 K. von Holdt, M. Langa, S. Molapo, N. Mogapi, K. Ngubeni, J. Dlamini and A. Kirsten, *The Smoke that Calls: Insurgent Citizenship, Collective Violence and the Struggle for a Place in the New South Africa – Eight Case Studies of Community Protest and Xenophobic Violence* (Cape Town, Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, and Johannesburg, Society, Work and Development Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 2011), p. 7.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

56 S. Lockwood, 'Making Protest Work: Protest Brokers and the Technology of Mobilization' (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2019), p. 7.

57 Gina Weir-Smith and Simangele Dlamini record that labour absorption rates improved from 2004 to 2008 and then dropped sharply after the global financial crisis. They started to rise again from 2013 until 2018, when they declined to their lowest levels since the 1990s in 2020. In other words, labour absorption improved when protest activities increased from 2006 to 2013. According to them, labour absorption also improved during the period between 2013 and late 2017, when we suggest that there was a lull in protest incidents. See G. Weir-Smith and S. Dlamini, 'Hit the Road: Spatial Characteristics of Labor Absorption in South Africa', *The Professional Geographer*, 76, 3 (2024), pp. 331–42.

58 A. Butler, *Contemporary South Africa* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); S. Booysen, *The African National Congress and the Regeneration of Political Power: People, Party, Policy* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2011).

Data Trends and the Elite Social Terrain

We have seen that from around 2006 political protest started rising, reaching around 200 incidents in 2009. Between 2011 and 2013 there was then a dramatic spike in activity, reaching well over 530 incidents a year. On the ISS database, protest events stabilised after that and began to decline until the end of 2017. Similarly, on the ACLED table, protests settled after 2013. They shot up again at the end of 2017. Since 2018, protests have risen to unprecedented levels. In 2020, according to ACLED, they hit 1,000 events per annum.

The huge rise in protests coincides with a period of acute political turmoil in the ANC, following the firing of Jacob Zuma as deputy president in June 2005. These intraparty battles came to a head in 2007 at the ANC's 52nd National Conference, in Polokwane, when groups based in the provinces and regions that were opposed to the presidency of Thabo Mbeki revolted. Mbeki was ousted and Zuma was elected party president. In 2009, Zuma was elected state president. By 2013, he had largely established control of the organisation.[59]

Albert Hirschman's concepts of 'exit' and 'voice' offer a useful hermeneutic of what this comprised.[60] First, senior party figures, including the former Minister and Deputy Minister of Defence in Mbeki's cabinet, Mosiuoa Lekota and Mluleki George, as well as the Premier of the province of Gauteng, quit the ANC and established a new political party, COPE, in 2008. In 2009, they contested the election, winning over 1.3 million votes. On 29 February 2012, the ANC expelled its Youth League leader, Julius Malema, as well as some of his colleagues, including Floyd Shivambu. In July 2013, they established the EFF, winning over a million votes in the 2014 election and benefiting from the implosion of COPE. That is to say that many of Zuma's political opponents exited the party in the first few years of his administration. Those that remained and expressed dissatisfaction ('voice') were subject to a fierce regime of internal discipline through cabinet reshuffles. Between 2009 and the end of 2017, Zuma changed his cabinet 12 times, making a staggering 132 changes to his Executive.[61]

Cyril Ramaphosa's own conduct during this time is illustrative. He was Deputy President during the second term of Zuma's presidency from 26 May 2014. In this capacity, he was privy to key events during the state capture period and he worked with many of the people implicated in corruption. The judicial inquiry into state capture (also known as the Zondo Commission, after the chairperson of the inquiry) called on him to testify. He 'summarised the central questions posed to him by the Commission as "what I knew, when I knew, and what I did in response"'.[62] Ramaphosa defined his options in terms similar to Albert Hirschman. He explained that he could have resigned, spoken out, acquiesced and abetted, remained and kept silent, or remained and resisted.[63] He claimed that he 'chose … to remain and resist',[64] though the Commission was unconvinced. If you and your colleagues in the ANC were not complicit in state capture, asked Paul Pretorius, the lead counsel for the Commission, why were you not more vocal? Ramaphosa replied that he feared being

59 F. Chikane, *Eight Days in September: The Removal of Thabo Mbeki* (Johannesburg, Picador Africa, 2012).
60 A.O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1970).
61 G. van Onselen, 'Zuma's 11 Cabinet Reshuffles: All the Graphic Details', Business Day, 31 March 2017, available at https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2017-03-31-zumas-11-cabinet-reshuffles-all-the-graphic-details, retrieved 12 August 2024.
62 Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 'Report: Part VI. Volume 2: State Capture Established, President Ramaphosa's Evidence and the Role of the ANC and Parliamentary Oversight' (Pretoria, Government of South Africa, 2022), p. 76, available at https://www.gov.za/documents/other/judicial-commission-inquiry-state-capture-report-part-6-volume-2-22-jun-2022, retrieved 9 February 2026.
63 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
64 *Ibid.*

dismissed[65] and that 'those [in the executive] who were opposed to State Capture … "chose their battles" carefully'.[66]

Judge Zondo drew 'profound' inferences from this testimony. It 'impl[ies]', he noted, 'that State Capture involved a *political project* and not isolated, opportunistic acts of corruption. [It] also impl[ies] that that project enjoyed powerful support in the state and in the party'.[67] Somewhat sardonically, the commission concluded its appraisal of Ramaphosa's testimony by wondering if state capture 'could have been arrested sooner had more powerful figures, like President Ramaphosa, been willing to act with more urgency'.[68] Ramaphosa's testimony corroborates our central hypothesis, that Jacob Zuma had managed to contain opposition to his rule in government and in the ANC by 2014/15. Dissenting voices were either silent or they resisted silently. When people like Pravin Gordhan did raise their voices, they were removed from cabinet.

What we are seeing in these dynamics is a changing elite social terrain, from a fragmented or plural elite arrangement to the emergence of a power elite from around 2013/14. While the emergence of the power elite was not associated with repressive measures to close down formal democratic processes, there were moves against some high-profile opponents. In the regions and in municipalities the situation was much more violent. Zuma's second term of office coincided with a dramatic increase in political assassinations. The upswing was especially noticeable in KwaZulu-Natal from 2015, from an already high base line. Nationally, assassinations increased steadily through the mid 2010s, with 159 recorded cases in 2017, a 36% rise from 2016 before later declining.[69] We cannot be sure that there is a causal relation between the decline in protest activity and the rise in politically targeted killings, although the evidence is suggestive.

In testimony before the Zondo commission, the State Security Agency and the SAPS were accused of establishing armed units and deploying these militia for illegal purposes. A private militia was deployed to then President Zuma, who had operational control of it.[70] Some of the men in these private armies were allegedly sent for military training in Russia and China.[71] It is likely that some of them were behind the insurrection that convulsed KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng after the arrest of Zuma in 2021.

The consolidation of power in the ANC did not come about only through expulsions, departures and/or repression, however. It was achieved through 'state capture' as a system of

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65 *Ibid.*, pp. 83–4.
66 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
67 *Ibid.*, p. 84, original emphasis.
68 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
69 K. Thomas, 'The Rule of the Gun: Hits and Assassinations in South Africa: January 2000 to December 2017', Assassination Witness project, a collaboration between the Centre for Criminology at the University of Cape Town and the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GITOC) (Cape Town, UCT and GITOC, 2018), p. 10, available at https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-rule-of-the-gun_Assassination-Witness.pdf, retrieved 29 January 2026. In South Africa, there is a high correlation between political assassinations and taxi murders, so that the two phenomena rise and fall in tandem. In the first place, the taxi industry supplies many of the country's assassins; in the second place, local politicians are often deeply involved in the taxi industry as owners, financiers or regulators. See M. Shaw and K. Thomas, 'The Commercialization of Assassination: "Hits" and Contract Killing in South Africa, 2000–2015', *African Affairs*, 116, 465 (2017), pp. 597–620.
70 Ms K, evidence before the Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 28 January 2021: 'Commission of Inquiry into State Capture held at City of Johannesburg Old Council Chamber, 158 Civic Boulevard, Braamfontein, 28 January 2021: Day 333' (Pretoria, Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture, 2021), available at https://www.statecapture.org.za/site/files/transcript/347/Day_333_-_2021-01-28.pdf, retrieved 7 November 2025.
71 'Jacob Zuma's Failed Mercenary Ambitions: From China to Russia, the Road is Littered with Abandoned Recruits', *The Namibian*, Windhoek, 25 November 2025, available at https://www.namibian.com.na/jacob-zumas-failed-mercenary-ambitions-from-china-to-russia-the-road-is-littered-with-abandoned-recruits, retrieved 29 January 2026.

distributing cash, contracts and jobs. In particular, SOEs were repurposed away from their constitutional and/or legislative mandates in order to generate huge rents for private consumption and to sustain select politicians in their political work.[72] The Gupta brothers, for example, used their ill-gotten gains to live audaciously and to subsidise the work of the ANC during Zuma's presidency, pay for rallies, create and run a television channel that provided coverage and commentary sympathetic to Zuma's administration, set up a daily newspaper for the same purpose and disseminated further propaganda through the public relations company Bell Pottinger. During this period, large amounts of cash – much of it flowing into provincial and regional networks – helped to manage internal competition within the ruling party by consolidating control under a power elite centred around Jacob Zuma. This would go far in explaining why protest activity stabilised during the period when South Africa entered an acute economic crisis, when inequality rose and when public institutions deteriorated.

The spike in protest activity that followed the victory of Cyril Ramaphosa at the ANC's 54th conference in Soweto, Johannesburg in December 2017 signalled that the political compact that Zuma had established in the ANC was coming apart. The discipline and centralisation that he was beginning to establish with respect to gatekeeping broke down and was not restored. Cyril Ramaphosa was neither able to, nor did he want to, wield violence and corruption as a political solvent. Elite contestation intensified during Ramaphosa's administration, culminating, as we have discussed, in the split in December 2023 as former president Jacob Zuma formed the MK Party and contested the 2024 election, with damaging consequences for the ANC electorally. The EFF has also been a casualty of these developments, suffering a major blow in the May 2024 election. Gatekeeping in the party has become decentralised and unregulated, as the power elite fragmented.

Conclusion

This article has added to the literature on gatekeeping in postcolonial contexts by focusing on elite formation. Whereas in the USA and across Europe elite formation is shaped by the access of social groups to elite universities, in South Africa, like in many other African contexts, the political party – and the ANC in particular – is key to the configuration of the elite social terrain.

We have used protest data as a proxy for internal contestation in the ANC. In this way, we have been able to show that elite figurations are not fixed, but have a historicity of their own. It is not just that a power elite can coexist with elite plurality, but that these constellations themselves shift and change. We called this phenomenon elite temporality. Furthermore, we proposed that elite politics is about the control of the administration of patronage – control, that is, over gatekeeping.

We have seen that from around 2006 political protests in South Africa started rising, reaching around 200 events per year in 2009. Then, from 2011, there was a tremendous increase in incidents, reaching well over 530 in 2013. According to the data from the ISS and ACLED, as well as the police, protest events stabilised and then began to fall until the end of 2017, when they surged again. In summary, protests rose, stabilised and then rose again.

We have argued that this step-like structure of protest activity set out in Table 3 unsettles traditional accounts of protest in South Africa that construe them as driven primarily (if not exclusively) by socio-economic grievances or by worsening inequality. We have found no

72 I. Chipkin and M. Swilling, *Shadow State: The Politics of State Capture* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2018).

Table 3. Periodisation of protests in South Africa, 2006–21

Period	Protest trend	Political context
2006–13	Rising sharply	ANC elite fragmentation; rise of Zuma faction
2013–17	Stabilising/falling	Zuma consolidates power via state capture
2018–21	Surging	Ramaphosa's failure to maintain compact

Source: Generated by the authors.

significant improvements in service delivery, employment or poverty during the period when they settle. Furthermore, inequality does not decline during this period. Indeed, in objective terms, we know that material conditions deteriorated significantly in South Africa during this time. We propose, therefore, that such factors are not sufficient to explain changes in the intensity of protest action in the country. We have argued that the trigger for protest events comes from political actors contesting for positions and resources in the ANC and, via the party, for positions in the state. The Zuma power elite was able to manage access to the patrimonial gate without contenders mobilising their local constituencies.

Interpreting the broad trends in the data, we make the following observations.

- Since 1994, the ANC has largely served to contain and moderate elite contestation in the country, keeping it for the most part within the party and in the boundaries of the democratic system. From 2005, elite contestation proved increasingly difficult to manage through internal processes and it started to spill out as protests. From 2007, the contestation between different factions in the organisation proved to be uncontainable. Hence we see a dramatic rise in protest activity – the so-called 'rebellion of the poor'.
- Second, under Jacob Zuma there were significant moves to bring this internal contestation under control. Opponents either left the party or were purged. The coincidence of his term with the repurposing of SOEs and other government entities to generate rents for personal enrichment, but primarily to finance factional political activities, suggests that patronage played a key role in managing tensions. Assassinations also rose during this period, suggesting that violence and intimidation were used to keep hostilities in check.

The sharp rise in protests from the end of 2017 shows that President Ramaphosa could not sustain the internal party compact that Zuma had forged. The establishment of the MK Party in 2023, splintering from the ANC, is dramatic testament to this.

In conclusion, we surmise that, going forward, the ANC may well split again, between a more constitutionally minded tendency finding common cause with the Democratic Alliance and other constitutionally minded opposition parties; and an authoritarian, nationalist tendency collaborating or merging with the MK Party. Either way, a realignment of South African politics is under way, with two large blocs in formation.

As the ANC declines and power disperses among different political formations at different levels of the state, social contestation for gatekeeping roles will become more diffuse and, paradoxically, less easily controlled or disciplined through any single political-party apparatus. Indeed, it may well morph and shift between parties at different levels, as they are more or less prepared to tolerate such contestation in their ranks or as they more or less offer opportunities for access to positions in state and in business. Some of this activity has already shifted off the political stage into organised crime. Indeed, we should expect mafia-type networks to grow and intensify during this period of democratic consolidation.

Elite contestation will continue to shape internal party dynamics unless political parties cease being the primary route to positions in the state; if they stop functioning as political machines, in other words. This is what happened in the United States in the early 20th century, when the provisions of the Pendleton Act started to be implemented, better

insulating civil service appointments from party political control. This is what is currently on the agenda in South Africa with the amendment to the Public Service Act of 1994, which proposes to reduce executive discretion over appointments in the public service and over operational decisions in government departments. Without these powers, the president, cabinet ministers and, at provincial level, members of executive councils will not be able to deploy party officials into elite roles. If this legislation passes, together with other reforms to the system of public administration, the form of elite contestation will have to change, moving away from political parties and centring on the public administration system itself. This would mark a historical shift in the organisation of South African politics and of the state, forcing political parties to become more properly political in their role and allowing an autonomous public administration to emerge.

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