

South Africa's polls unlikely to result in widespread public violence

Even so, police and other state security agencies must be ready to proactively prevent and contain disruption.

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South Africa's 29 May national and provincial elections will be the hardest fought since the birth of the country's democracy in 1994. Surveys show the ruling African National Congress (ANC) losing its outright national majority and control of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces. Several new political parties are actively campaigning, and there are legitimate concerns about outbreaks of violence during or after the elections.

The largest recent outbreak of mass violence in South Africa was triggered by former president Jacob Zuma's supporters in response to his July 2021 incarceration. The rioting and looting left over 300 people dead and thousands jobless, wiping R50 billion from the economy.

So when members of the new uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, whose most prominent campaigner is Zuma, openly threaten mass violence if they don't get their way, there's reason to worry. But could violence on the scale of that experienced in July 2021 recur?

Initially, Zuma was prohibited by the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) from standing in the polls. The constitution bars anyone from becoming a Member of the National Assembly for five years after receiving a sentence of over 12 months imprisonment

without the option of a fine. Zuma was sentenced to 15 months in jail in June 2021 for refusing to testify before the Zondo inquiry into corruption. This week, MK successfully [appealed](#) the IEC decision, enabling Zuma to stand.

Continued concerns of election violence are based on MK party members' statements. In a widely [publicised](#) incident, members threatened violence if MK didn't get a two-thirds majority. The party's views that the IEC has manipulated elections are also concerning. However, MK leaders have [distanced](#) themselves from these statements.

Unlike in July 2021, the state seems to be taking threats of violence more seriously. On 2 March, senior MK party member, Zuma loyalist and alleged financier Visvin Reddy said, 'There will be anarchy ... riots like you have never seen ... if ... MK is not on the ballot.' He was summoned to [appear](#) in court the following morning on charges of inciting public violence, and the matter was referred to the Regional Court because of its seriousness.

Many other acts of intimidation and conflict haven't received media coverage. Tensions have been [brewing](#) between ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party supporters, who have a history as rivals in KwaZulu-Natal. In early March, members of the ANC and Economic Freedom Fighters came to [blows](#) during an Ekurhuleni council meeting in Gauteng.

While these incidents are worrying, elections-related disruptions are fairly common in South Africa.

The Institute for Security Studies' Protest and Public Violence [Monitor](#) typically picks up a small number of protests during campaigning and on voting day by disgruntled communities, usually regarding service delivery failures. So far, these haven't affected free and fair polls in line with IEC regulations, and election results have generally been accepted by all contesting parties, citizens and observer missions. Political parties are expected to abide by a code of [conduct](#) and face serious sanctions if they don't.

Given that the results of these polls are likely to be close, the post-election period is also of concern. Some parties or their supporters may take to the streets if the outcome isn't in their favour. There may be a heightened risk of public protests in the two weeks between the announcement of the results and the constitutional requirement that the National Assembly elects a president and provincial legislators elect premiers.

If there are no outright winners nationally or in some provinces, formal governing coalitions will be negotiated. During this period, there may be demonstrations of support for political parties to strengthen their positions. For those excluded from the deal-making, public disruptions may be used by some parties to try to force a compromise.

Despite all this, it's unlikely that the country will experience the level of widespread violence seen in July 2021. Those riots were a wake-up call for law enforcement, businesses

and communities. Police and private security have since improved communication and coordination, and seemingly better state and private intelligence-gathering systems should prevent large-scale violence. In March, the Presidency [emphasised](#) that law enforcement agencies were preparing for all scenarios to ensure free and fair elections.

Civil society efforts to monitor the elections have increased, such as the election watch initiative by Defend Our Democracy, which mobilises citizen observers across the country. Many communities and businesses in hotspot areas have also adopted additional security measures and strengthened communications. Local and national business forums have developed plans to safeguard operations from disruptions.

Those who perpetrated the July 2021 riots and violence will probably be reluctant to join large-scale disruptions again. Many affected areas have yet to recover economically and psychologically, and their residents will likely resist attempts at mobilisation.

Nevertheless, threats of violence and interference in the elections cannot be ignored, as they can quickly escalate if proactive measures aren't taken. Threats were made openly in the week before the July 2021 violence. The criminal networks responsible are probably still at play, as many of the planners and instigators remain free, and are loyal to Zuma.

By the end of 2023, only one [conviction](#) had been secured for instigating the rioting and looting, although 65 people were arrested for offences ranging from terrorism to incitement of public violence.

State security agencies must be ready to proactively prevent and contain disruption. The action taken against MK's Visvin Reddy is an encouraging start. If violence does occur, the president should stress that unlike in 2021, security and law enforcement heads will be held accountable for failures to ensure free and fair elections.

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