



TEN YEARS AFTER APARTHEID, SOUTH AFRICAN VOTERS FACE JOBS, AIDS ISSUES

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Ten years after the end of apartheid, South Africans assess the state of their nation as they head to the polls for national elections.

On Thursday, South Africans will head to the polls to vote in the country's third democratic election since its independence ten years ago. The African National Congress, or ANC, South Africa's ruling party, is expected to remain in power.

The election coincides with nationwide celebrations of the tenth anniversary of the end of apartheid -- the policy of racial segregation enforced by South Africa's white minority government from 1948-1994.

South Africa since apartheid

For South Africa, a decade of self-rule has brought innumerable changes to the country, including a complete overhaul of government services, a democratic constitution grounded in human rights, and free press including newspapers, radio and television stations.

But the legacy of apartheid has not yet been obliterated in a country where half the population still lives below poverty level and where wealth remains divided along color lines.

The last ten years have brought vast improvements in housing, water and electricity, as well as political stability and international support, but South Africa is still, as Mbeki observed, a country of "two nations" -- one mostly white and rich, and one mostly black and poor. In addition, South Africa faces massive unemployment, rising crime, and -- especially devastating -- one of the highest rates of HIV in the world.

On Sunday, Mbeki told voters that his party would fight to overcome the problems plaguing the country.

"These are today's enemies that we must defeat in the same way we defeated apartheid," Mbeki said, according to South Africa's Sunday Times.

Mbeki has pledged to continue the work begun by South Africa's first president, Nelson Mandela, focusing on the rebuilding of the economy and infrastructure through existing policies and programs that encourage businesses, provide job training and empower the population.

“The task we will all face during the decade ahead will be to ensure the vigorous implementation of these policies, to create the winning people-centered society of which Nelson Mandela spoke,” Mbeki said in his State of the Nation address in February.

The opposition

But critics like Tony Leon, who heads the Democratic Alliance, the main opposition party in the South African Parliament, says that the ANC has done too little to help the South African people improve their situation.

Promising to create a million jobs and reduce crime, Leon, who is white, has set a goal of winning 30 percent of seats in the National Assembly for the DA, which has joined forces with the Inkatha Freedom Party, another opposition group, to woo voters away from the ANC.

Leon will most likely earn the majority of white voters’ support, but since whites only make up 13 percent of South Africa’s population, the real task for the DA is to win over the support of black voters.

Will they succeed?

The ANC, the party of former president and Nobel Prize recipient Nelson Mandela and current president Thabo Mbeki, is by far the most popular of the nearly 150 registered political parties in South Africa, where individual voters cast their ballots for parties rather than individual candidates.

Nearly two-thirds of South Africa’s 27 million registered voters are expected to stay in the ANC fold. The party may even increase its support base in rural areas like KwaZulu-Natal, thanks partly to the improvement of services in the region since the ANC took power, and partly to the decline of political violence, which allowed ANC to get its message to voters there for the first time.

Of particular concern is the response to the devastating toll HIV and AIDS is taking on the country. Mbeki raised a storm of international controversy several years ago by publicly expressing doubt about whether HIV causes AIDS (it does).

Antiretroviral medications are still widely unavailable to the 20 percent of the adult population that is HIV-positive, despite an ambitious government plan rolled out in February.

Estimates for the next ten years put the death toll from AIDS-related diseases in South Africa as high as 6 million.

By Amy Brill, Online NewsHour

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