

# Failed pledges no barrier to ANC win

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**W**andering through the fetid dirt lanes of this township, 40 miles west of Johannesburg, it would be easy to think that South Africa's ruling African National Congress will inevitably lose the country's third all-race presidential and parliamentary elections in two weeks' time.

Kids play, paddle and defecate in open sewers clogged with unspeakable detritus. Zodwa Ngomana, dressed somehow in impeccable starched white, tells the Sunday Herald on her way to church: "There are only seven water standpipes for 80,000 people in this part of town."

Ngomana lives with her husband and three children in a one-room wooden shack in Bekkersdal with a dirt floor and no electricity or running water. At least her husband has a job – as a taxi driver earning Rand800 (£66) a month.

The unemployment rate in another part of the township, known as Spookville – because it is next to a graveyard – is 90%. Spookville consists of tens of thousands of shelters made of plastic sheets and corrugated iron that are homes to squatters living in utmost poverty. "We're the kind of people world leaders and our own enriched politicians do not wish to see," said Wonder Modise, leader of the Bekkersdal Community Association. "Our only resources are ourselves, until one day God helps us."

Beyond such famous places as Soweto – the Las Vegas of the country's townships, recipient of massive publicity and internal and foreign aid – the Bekkersdal scene is repeated in thousands of unknown or little-hailed black townships across the face of South Africa.

And yet the superficially paradoxical fact is that the majority black population will return the ANC and President Thabo Mbeki to power with a majority that might possibly exceed that in the two previous elections held in 1994 and 1999.

The big question is whether the ANC can for the first time achieve a 67% majority that would give it power to change entrenched clauses of the country's constitution, widely hailed as representing, on paper at least, the most liberal constitution in the world.

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The poll marks the 10th anniversary of the election of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first black president. Before that, 90% of South Africans were denied full citizenship. At the height of apartheid, blacks were barred from good jobs, decent schools and pleasant neighbourhoods – unless they were hired to mow white men's lawns or iron underwear.

Blacks remain endlessly thankful to the ANC for delivering them from the horrors of racial injustice. "They are going to vote with their hearts for the ANC because of its identity," said Chris Landsberg, political analyst at Johannesburg's Centre for Policy Studies. "It is because the ANC brought them freedom and is the party that took on racism."

That is not to say that the people who will return the ANC to power think all is well. They are merely – at the risk of stereotyping – enormously patient and resilient, like their cousins throughout the rest of black Africa. Some 40% of ANC supporters, according to one poll, do not believe the party is fulfilling their needs, even though they will still vote for it.

At this stage many seem merely perplexed, rather than enraged, by the fact that more South Africans, about 20,000, now die each month from Aids than were killed during the two decades of political violence before liberation. And still the pandemic, with 5.5 million people HIV-positive, has yet to enter fully its second phase – the phase of death.

Njongonkulu Ndungane, a gentle man who succeeded the diminutive, publicity-loving Desmond Tutu as Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, last week delivered a lecture at the University of Fort Hare, Nelson Mandela's alma mater, setting out the ills of post-apartheid South Africa.

Addressing the fact that the country's poor – more than 25 million people who live below the official poverty line – have become poorer in the post-apartheid decade, the archbishop said: "Our government has the biggest democratic mandate of almost any in the world. Yet each year government policy has resulted in more and not less poverty, and more rather than less inequality of income and assets.

"People are not free if they do not have enough to eat, if they have to hear their children cry in vain for food. People are not free if they have to sell their bodies, in one way or another, for a small mess of potage. People are not free if they cannot read and write in a society that rewards only the literate. People are not free if they must beg on the streets, or go irredeemably into debt or steal from others.

"That is the condition of the majority of our black people today, and some from other population groups as well. The worsening poverty is our most serious problem. Excluded people will not wait forever to be included, as we know from our own liberation struggle. So we face, as did the apartheid regime, a revolt by the excluded masses."

Such a speech, if delivered by Tutu more than a decade ago, would have resonated around the world. Now many South African commentators say their country and its politics have

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become “boring”. They say that on one level that is encouraging because it suggests that South Africa has become a “normal” society.

But on another level, it is profoundly disturbing, because the country’s problems remain so extensive and complex and because at some point, as Archbishop Ndungane pointed out, the people’s patience will run out.

As well as clerics like the archbishop, many other black intellectuals question the ANC’s performance since 1994. “There is maybe a case for raising a glass or two [to democracy],” leading Johannesburg Star columnist Barney Mthombothi wrote last week. “But, if you want to be blunt about these things, apart from the fact that everybody now has a vote, very little has changed.”

He continued: “The poor – the people we talk so much about but never talk to, except during election campaigns – have come off worse when it comes to jobs, health and education. The country has lost millions of jobs in the 10 years of liberation: the main victims of retrenchments are those that can ill afford to go without a wage, no matter how little.”

The ANC is promising to create millions of jobs, as are all the opposition parties, some 37 of them. President Mbeki and his colleagues are less clear how this is to be achieved.

The West at one time feared that an ANC government might introduce a Soviet-style command economy. It has surprised everyone with its economic conservatism. Fiscal discipline has been exemplary, with the budget deficit slashed from 10% in the final years of apartheid to 2.4% last year.

Inflation has come down and trade has been liberalised, but the rewards the ANC expected in terms of international investment have not followed. Sound economic policies have not compensated, in the eyes of investors in London, Edinburgh, New York and Frankfurt, for rampant crime, high labour costs, an unskilled workforce, uncontrolled HIV-Aids and the menace of Zimbabwe’s uncontrolled economic and social collapse on South Africa’s northern border.

Whether Mbeki and the ANC, with or without a two-thirds majority, are able to get to grips with these severe problems will be the test of whether South Africa remains a “boring” and “normal” society by the time its people go to the polls for a fourth time in 2009.