



Soul-Searching in South Africa

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By [Tracy Moran](#)

***Why you should care:** Because just 20 years after Mandela claimed victory, South Africans are grappling with inequalities and disillusionment.*

South Africans head to the polls today — six months after Nelson Mandela’s death — to vote in the fifth election since the end of apartheid two decades ago. In April 1994, masses slept outside polling stations overnight to take part in the historical national vote — the first time all races were allowed to participate — and they have rewarded Mandela’s ruling African National Congress (ANC) with victories on every election day since.

Mandla Mandela — traditional chief of Mvezo and Mandela’s grandson — told OZY’s Constance C.R. White that “the ANC will never have to form a coalition to govern,” noting that the masses will vote in their favor as a tribute to the freedom struggle [see a video excerpt of the interview below]. A coalition government would result should no single party get enough parliamentary seats to rule outright, thus forcing the leading party to work alongside other parties to govern.

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“We certainly expect we will go out in our millions to defend this democracy, in honor of my grandfather, and in honor of the fallen heroes and heroines,” he said.

He’s right, at least for this election, that his iconic grandfather’s legacy will propel the ANC to victory. Experts predict an ANC win with 64 percent of the vote. But many also believe it will be the party’s last easy ride to victory.

Chief Mandla Mandela poses with an image of his grandfather.

Much progress has been made in South Africa, and the nation has a great many reasons to be proud. Unlike elsewhere on the continent, it has steered clear of political coups, undergoing peaceful transitions of leadership — a testament to its strength as a democracy.

Some say [this leader of the shack dwellers is the “next Mandela.”](#)

Blacks, generally speaking, are better off than they were in 1994, and a formidable black middle class has emerged. The percentage of families living in shacks has [fallen by 2 percent](#), and the government has built more than 2.5 million homes. The percentages of families with access to drinkable water and electricity have soared to 96 and 87 percent, respectively.

But deep inequalities persist. National unemployment is higher than it was in 1994, at 25 percent; and for those under the age of 35, the rate is a startling [70 percent](#). The percentage of unemployed blacks or blacks who have given up looking for work is [estimated to be 43 percent](#), and as of 2011, employed whites earned four times more than employed blacks. South Africa’s GDP has grown at an average rate of just 3.3 percent a year to [Africa’s](#) 4.8 percent, and its economy grew at just 1.9 percent in 2013, putting it among the bottom 10 of the sub-Saharan economies. In real terms, this means a whopping one-third of the population still lives on less than \$2 a day. [Service delivery protests](#) are at an all-time high, erupting nearly every day, and the CATO Institute just ranked South Africa as [eighth in the world’s](#) most miserable places to live.

While President Jacob Zuma’s government claims to be opening a school every week, a recent survey ranked South Africa’s education 146 out of 148 countries, and primary education in the country ranks in the [bottom 10 percent](#) worldwide.

James Hamill, lecturer of politics at the University of Leicester, summed up the nation’s plight by pointing to the “entrenchment of severe inequality and poverty, weak service delivery, protests, state corruption and colossal unemployment.”

But voters are being told to be patient and to remember the long fight. “We have started addressing the challenges that have been facing our people,” Mandla Mandela said, acknowledging the economic woes that continue to plague so many. “These things will not be fully realized in 20 years.”

Members of the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) march through Durban on March 19, 2014, to highlight youth unemployment in the country.

Acknowledging the disillusionment, Mandla Mandela notes that he joined parliament with the ANC to “ensure that we hold our government accountable for the goals that it sets ... in ensuring we better the lives of our people.” He has said he does not intend to run for president himself, but is happy doing what he can to serve the people of his nation.

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Many will do exactly as he predicted and vote ANC, but it won't be with the enthusiasm of 1994. In fact, a huge percentage of youths feel left behind and so disenfranchised by the political system that only a third of the nation's 2 million 18- and 19-year-olds — the first of the post-apartheid generation who are eligible to vote — have registered to do so (compared to the [80.8 percent of eligible](#) voters who have registered nationwide).

And if responses to the scandal-plagued Zuma — who was heckled at Mandela's memorial service and lost half his audience in a final [Soweto election rally on Sunday](#) — are a barometer, many black South Africans are fed up with the ANC's choice of leadership.

Like many other African leaders, allegations of corruption have dogged Zuma, from state fund usage for personal home improvements to the police response to the Marikana protest that left 34 miners dead.

It's clear that the ANC has reached a crossroads, where its leadership is failing to inspire the way Mandela once did, and its supporters — while grateful for the gains made — have grown tired of waiting for delivery on promises of greater freedom and economic reform. As a result, ANC political opponents have been gaining steam.

“If you commit yourself to leading our people, the people will decide your fate,” Mandla Mandela fondly recalls his grandfather saying.

This, rather than playing on goodwill and history, is a fantastic reminder to the electorate of what South Africa is: a young democracy reliant upon its people to guide its future.