

Disinformation and Electoral Integrity in South Africa's 2024 Polls: State of Play and Future Directions

May 2024





14,000
Candidates

vying for seats as part of the **400** members of the National Assembly and at least **445** members of Provincial Legislatures in the **nine** provinces.



60.7 million
Population



27.6 million
Registered voters

44.75%
Men



55.25%
Women

70



political parties
registered to participate

South Africa will hold its seventh general elections on Wednesday, May 29, 2024 with over 14,000 candidates vying for seats as part of the 400 members of the National Assembly and at least 445 members of Provincial Legislatures in the nine provinces. The *election* will pit the ruling African National Congress (ANC) against its main rivals, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), even as newer parties such as uMkhonto weSizwe join the fray.

The country of 60.7 million people has 27.6 million registered voters, of whom 44.75% are men and 55.25% are women. There are 23,303 voting stations, and 90 million ballots have been prepared for the election. There are 70 political parties registered to participate, and independent candidates will, for the first time, contest for positions following *amendments* to the country's elections law in 2023.

South Africa has been renowned for its strong and independent judiciary, free press, vibrant democracy, and generally free and fair elections over the years. According to the *Freedom on the Net 2022* and *Freedom in the World 2023*, the country is rated as Free. However, the *Democracy Index 2023* rates the country as a flawed democracy. Further, in the 2024 *World Press Freedom Index*, the country dropped from 25th position in 2023 to 38th out of 180 countries. This was attributed to increased *attacks* against journalists, especially by politicians, ahead of the elections.

Technology and the internet have had an important role in the election period, given the significant growth in the level of access to and use of the internet and social media in South Africa. As of 2024, the country had 45.3 million internet users, representing an internet penetration rate of 74%, up from 26.4 million (49%) recorded in 2014 and higher than the global average of 66.2%. Of these, 26 million (42.8% of the population) are *social media users*. The popular platforms are WhatsApp (26 million), Facebook (26 million), YouTube (25.10 million), TikTok (17.46 million), LinkedIn (12 million), Instagram (6.95 million), Facebook Messenger (6.15 million), Snapchat (5.71 million) and X (4.1 million).

Also, there are 118.6 million mobile connections, equivalent to a mobile penetration rate of 195%. This high penetration has been aided by robust digital infrastructure, increased access to broadband internet, and prioritisation of universal internet access.

Most people in the country are digitally literate, with the average internet user spending over *nine hours* a day online. Generally, the government does not block, filter, or censor internet content, but service providers are required by law to respond promptly to take-down notices regarding illegal content.

Political parties have leveraged online platforms for political advertising and have since January 1 spent ZAR 4.94 million (USD 269,961) on *Google Ads*, with the DA and FF Plus spending 79.8% of this amount. Despite this progress, a digital divide still exists as 25% of the population is not connected to the internet. According to a recent study, 36% of households own a smartphone and a computer, 36% own either device, while 24% only own a phone, and 4% neither own a smartphone nor a computer. Also, the high internet access cost and sustained power cuts (load shedding) have continued to *limit* meaningful access to the internet.

Key Digital Threats to Note

Ahead of the election, misinformation, disinformation and threats to privacy rights have been noted. These capitalise on the issues at stake in the election, such as poverty and economic inequality, unemployment, violent crime, corruption, service delivery failures, difficult race relations, and xenophobia (see box) to polarise and shape public opinion. There has been a proliferation of propaganda and doctored news stories, deployment of *coordinated trolls, troops and bots* of online influencers as part of smear campaigns, and weaponisation of disinformation campaigns for political purposes, which many *warn* could undermine the integrity of the elections.

Some of the misleading information has targeted prominent personalities such as politicians and musicians. For example, a ‘deepfake’ *video* published on TikTok and X in March 2024, depicted former United States (US) president Donald Trump endorsing the new uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party. The 30-second video was debunked by *AFP*, which found that the clip was an altered 2017 NBC interview with Trump. *Similarly*, another misleading AI-generated video was shared on *Facebook* and *X* on March 8, depicting US President Joe Biden warning of sanctions against South Africa if the ANC won the election.

Moreover, a manipulated *video* of a 2009 interview with US rapper, Eminem, was circulated widely on Instagram, X, TikTok and YouTube showing the rapper endorsing EFF but was also found to be *doctored*. Again, on March 24, manipulated *videos* on Facebook and TikTok portrayed South African singer Lira (Lerato Molapo) endorsing the MK party, leading the singer to publicly distance herself from the claims.

During the same month, an *altered* image of former President Jacob Zuma was posted on X, depicting him in prison uniform in a South African prison, claiming that he had been sentenced to an undisclosed jail term for contempt of court. Similarly, on May 2, a *manipulated poster* of a story from The Star newspaper was circulated on Facebook, claiming the ANC would appeal with Zuma not to deregister them, despite the fact that Zuma has no such powers. The newspaper alerted its audience about the false post on its social media account. In May, the DA was *criticised* for stoking tensions with its campaign advert showing a burning South African flag, which it claimed was a symbolic depiction of what could befall the country if the ANC remained in power after the elections.

Some posts have highlighted racial and xenophobic undertones. For example, on January 19, a *viral video* from Brazil of two men assaulting another man was disseminated on social media with the claim that the victim was a white farmer and his assailants were linked to the EFF. Another *video* that went viral on Facebook and WhatsApp in April made a false claim that Mozambican migrants were being issued with ID cards by state agents to vote in Gauteng province. A *similar claim* was made in December 2023 on social media with misleading images alleging that the EFF was manufacturing ID cards so that Zimbabwean and Nigerian migrants could vote.





On May 1, there were *posts and images* on X claiming that members of the Cape Independence Party were detaining black people for “walking after hours”. Many believed the claims and applauded the party, yet the images related to arrests and detentions during a taxi strike in August 2023. Moreover, on May 16, a manipulated *video* posted on X purporting to portray a xenophobic attack by a South African mob lynching Nigerians was *determined* to be from an incident in April 2023 in Haiti where a crowd were lynching suspected gang members.

Moreover, there have been misleading posts about the elections. One such *post* on May 25 on Facebook, claimed that voters must bring their black ballpoint pens to voting stations as they will only be given pencils to vote, and their marks would be erased upon voting. The IEC rejected this claim as untrue. Another *post* on the platform on May 22, bearing a doctored image of an official letter, claimed that one of the country’s largest trade unions, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), had mandated its members to vote for the Umkhonto weSizwe party. NUMSA issued a statement dispelling the claim. Another series of decade-old *rumours* circulated online were based on false claims that if a voter did not go to vote or cast their ballot, their vote would automatically go to the ANC, the ruling party. The IEC had previously *debunked* a similar rumour in May 2019.

In addition, there have been attempts to impersonate key election officials on social media. On January 9, it was reported that the *IEC Chairperson, Mosotho Moepya*, had been a victim of an imposter on WhatsApp. The imposter had on two separate incidents conversed with unsuspecting officials of political parties purporting to arrange to influence the election. Likewise, on May 19, 2024, the IEC revealed that two WhatsApp accounts were *impersonating the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO)*, Mr Sy Mamabolo. These included a WhatsApp account bearing the profile image of the CEO, and another by someone named “Moloi (IEC IT SPECIALIST)” who claimed to represent the CEO and offered to influence the outcome of the elections. Similar *incidents* occurred in October 2022 and in February 2023.

The IEC condemned the incidents, pointing out that such acts could damage its reputation and undermine its preparations for the election. While the incidents were reported to the South African Police Service (SAPS), the outcome of the investigations is not known.

Concerns around user privacy and data breaches have also been noted. On March 11, 2024, the Information Regulator announced that it had received two notifications from the IEC regarding a security compromise leading to the unlawful release of candidate lists for the ANC and the MK party for the 2024 elections. It was not disclosed whether the breach was a result of hacking or an unauthorised disclosure. On April 20, a Facebook page purported to *advertise* employment opportunities at the IEC, claiming that “no education” was required for the positions, yet the IEC had no such listings. Given the level of unemployment in the country, the personal data of the unsuspecting public could have been compromised.

Spotlight on Issues at Stake in the Election

- **Poverty and economic inequality:** South Africa is the *most unequal* country in the world, with inequality *manifested* through skewed income distribution, unequal access to land and opportunities, and regional disparities. The top 10% of the population holds 80.6% of financial assets while the national poverty rate is nearly 20%, which is twice the average for countries with similar income levels.
- **Unemployment:** The high levels of *unemployment*, which peaked at 32.9% in 2024, is a critical issue, with almost half (45.5%) of the young people without jobs. According to Stats SA, the unemployment rate among young females was estimated at 49.4% in 2024.
- **Violent Crime:** The country has the *highest crime index* (75.4) in Africa and is ranked as the fifth most dangerous country globally. The per capita murder rate was *45 per 100,000* in 2023, and reports show that someone is raped or sexually abused every *25 seconds*.
- **Corruption:** South Africa ranked *83 out of 180* countries in the Corruption Perception Index. Despite a robust anti-corruption framework, implementation is weak, thus entrenching a culture of graft as evident in the rampant *corruption scandals* among the *political* and business community.
- **Gaps in service delivery:** The country has faced an energy crisis, water shortages, lack of proper housing and limited access to *healthcare* and *education* for rural and poor communities, with at least 16 million South Africans relying on welfare grants for *survival*.
- **Difficult race relations:** The legacy of *racism* remains deeply embedded as part of the South African experience. Race is a *central issue* and is often used by politicians as a '*wedge*' issue to mobilise support.
- **Xenophobia:** *Locals blame* foreigners for taking away employment and housing opportunities, the increase of drug abuse, and the breakdown of the economy. *Xenophobic violence* by vigilante groups, e.g., *Operation Dudula*, discrimination, anti-immigrant rhetoric, *hate speech* and anti-immigrant sentiments on *social media* are used to demonise foreigners ahead of the election.

Ongoing Actions by Regulators and Stakeholders

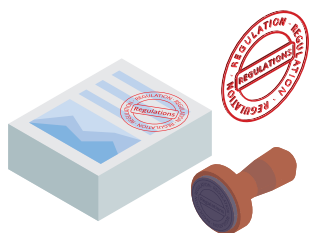
Ahead of the elections, various stakeholders and groups have been taking action to address the potential threats to election and information integrity.

The IEC adopted the *Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa*, adopted by the Association of African Electoral Authorities in November 2023. The principles and guidelines aim to enhance the capacity of stakeholders to harness the power of social media while tackling their adverse effects such as misinformation and disinformation. The IEC also developed an election code of conduct which has been signed by political parties and candidates. The IEC has also leveraged Information and Communication Technologies and developed various portals for *election results, political party statistics, voter registration, voter information, voter education, and e-learning*. It also has a *voter mobile application*, a mobile helpline, and a presence on major social media platforms (*Facebook, Instagram, X and YouTube*) in its efforts to provide access to information and education on elections.

Moreover, the *Real411* portal developed by Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) in collaboration with stakeholders has facilitated the reporting and showed *trends* in harmful content on social media, such as misinformation and disinformation. Also, fact-checking organisations such as *Africa Check* and *AFP* have played an important role in debunking myths and fact-checking misleading claims by politicians and political parties in their manifestos ahead of the election.

Meanwhile, platforms such as *Google, Meta, and TikTok* have announced various measures to promote election integrity, including working with fact-checkers, conducting content moderation and labelling, media information literacy, transparency on political advertising and directing users to reliable and trustworthy information.

On May 14, South Africa's Information Regulator published a *guidance note* on how political parties and candidates could use the personal information of voters ahead of the elections. The note outlines the conditions for the lawful processing of personal data, the manner of obtaining consent and the obligations of political parties and candidates when seeking political donations, conducting direct marketing, sending unsolicited communication, and mitigating misinformation and disinformation.



Conclusions

From the foregoing, it is clear that the fault lines that have fragmented the unity of the Rainbow Nation are being manipulated in ways that threaten its democracy. As the internet, social media and technology adoption increase, attacks on information and election integrity could intensify if no action is taken continuously. Therefore, we make the following recommendations:

- We call upon all stakeholders including civil society, the IEC, social media platforms, media, fact-checking organisations, political actors, election observers, and law enforcement to be vigilant before, during and after the elections.
- We call upon stakeholders to collaborate in monitoring digital threats to election and information integrity and implement robust responses to combat them whilst protecting digital rights.
- We call upon civil society and election observers to document the actions of and hold the government, IEC, social media platforms and other actors accountable for their responses.
- We call upon the IEC, political parties, candidates and social media platforms to adhere to the Principles and Guidelines for the Use of Digital and Social Media in Elections in Africa.



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