



## on my mind by Sanisha Packirisamy

# THE SHADOW OVER THE BALLOT BOX

South Africa's elections will take place against the backdrop of geopolitical upheaval. While domestic issues will be top of mind, it's important not to forget the global context

**I**n 2024 a record number of elections are scheduled to take place across countries representing more than half the world's population. This series of elections will unfold against a global backdrop marked by democratic regression and swirling geopolitical currents.

US think-tank The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes that among the myriad elections, some are in nations where autocracy is firmly established and incumbents have a stranglehold over the process, for example Russia. Conversely, there are elections in countries witnessing significant challenges in their democratic journey. The outcomes in these regions could either reinforce this trend, as seen in recent Indian polls, or inject fresh political vigour into constrained systems, as exemplified by the February elections in Pakistan.

A significant number of elections are set to unfold in political environments known for their stable democratic foundations, such as Austria and Finland, while upcoming elections in countries that have faced coups or internal conflicts, such as South Sudan, hold the potential to pave the way for incremental democratic advancements.

On a different note, there are elections happening in regions grappling with challenges to democracy that range from the emergence of illiberal politics to economic hardships and governance issues. These elections encompass those in the UK, the US, the European parliament and South Africa, where notable shifts are reshaping the democratic terrain.

Many of these electoral contests are unfolding against a backdrop of heightened global complexities that pose risks to a nation's stability on the world stage. These challenges include:

**International conflicts:** Ongoing tensions can breed uncertainty and instability, affecting trade, investment and foreign policies. Elections during such times can become platforms for political leaders to

exploit anxieties, potentially giving rise to the adoption of more isolationist policies.

In South Africa's case, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Israel-Palestine war have divided South African politicians. South Africa's position on Russia strained the country's relationship with key strategic partners, while support for Israel and Palestine is split along racial lines.

**Foreign policy agendas:** Geopolitical dynamics influence policy agendas, leading elected officials to prioritise foreign policy initiatives or adjust domestic policies based on international developments, voter expectations or strategic considerations.

While local living conditions appear to dominate voter concerns in South Africa, political authorities' ability to navigate complex international relations and represent the country effectively on the global stage is of importance to its influence, reputation and economic opportunities internationally.

**Economic volatility:** Elections held amid economic hardship may prompt voters to seek change, potentially resulting in the rise of populist leaders who offer simplistic solutions without considering the broader economic repercussions.

In South Africa, a perceived reversal in democratic gains could narrow voting patterns between local and national level. Former statistician-general at Stats SA Pali Lehohla has characterised the first 15 years of the country's democracy as the "fat years", during which there was "observable and definitive progress in the delivery of services and living conditions". This was followed by 15 "lean years", typified by a "regressive economic downturn ... and institutionalised corruption".

### A focus on performance

Research by the graduate department of political science at the University of Toronto notes that the choices of South

African voters are substantially influenced by their experiences with government service delivery. Weakening perceptions of service delivery may consequently raise the probability of a change in voter patterns, particularly among younger voters.

As transactional relationships with the governing party displace sentiments of political allegiance, the South African electoral climate will become increasingly opportune for voters to consider the genuine potential of granting opposition parties positions of authority. South Africa's Inclusive Society Institute observes that coalition governments emerge as both an outcome of and a prerequisite for inclusive political frameworks and institutions. This enables parties with limited mutual trust to engage in essential compromises, facilitating the progress of robust coalitions.

With the world facing the most serious geopolitical risks since the Cold War, electoral consequences will be felt across the global economy. Political uncertainty will make it harder for companies to make confident decisions about the future, while market volatility will make it a turbulent time for investors. Moreover, a strained fiscal purse challenges the government's ability to execute policies that uplift society. Even so, South Africa has avenues to reduce domestic political uncertainties, including by strengthening democratic institutions, promoting international cooperation and investing in transparency and accountability.

Voters' party preferences are heavily influenced by their perceptions of the government's performance across socio-economic measures, the effectiveness of leaders and institutions, and anticorruption efforts. As such, the legitimacy of South Africa's constitutional democracy hinges on its alignment with citizens' social realities. Politicians' commitment to inclusive governance and effective service delivery and the extent to which they address key voter concerns will be crucial in

shaping the outcomes of the upcoming elections and sustaining the integrity of our democratic system. ✕

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