

South Africa: The Fighters

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Are the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) of Julius Malema primed for the greatest gains in South Africa's May 8th national and provincial elections?

The South African national and provincial elections taking place on 8 May 2019, are set to be the most contentious in the country's 25 years of democracy. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) under President Cyril Ramaphosa seeks to reverse the decline in public confidence and popularity that they saw amid the corruption and state capture that marked the presidency of Jacob Zuma before he stepped down in February 2018. Many new parties aim to exploit the rift between the ANC and some voters, with 48 parties competing in the elections compared to 29 in 2014. This includes new parties seeking to attract disaffected voters from the ANC's important base in black townships. While some such as [Black Land First](#) appear to lack sufficient political structures to marshal a significant number of votes across the country, the [Socialist Revolutionary Worker's Party](#), started by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, [looks to make an impact](#) with its foundation of 370,000 union members and additional support from [some in the two-year-old South African Federation of Trade Unions](#) (that broke away from the ANC-aligned COSATU) and community organizations aligned with the United Front (an umbrella front of left social movements). Still, the SRWC is unlikely to win more than a handful of seats in the national and provincial legislatures.

Instead, the party primed for the greatest gains this election is the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) led by its Commander-in-Chief (CIC) Julius Malema, which is contesting its third set of elections after recording 6.4% in the 2014 National elections and 8.3% in the 2016 Municipal elections. It will almost assuredly surpass these results and is likely to reach double digits and play a 'kingmaker' role in Gauteng where no party is expected to win an outright majority, as well as in the North West, Northern Cape, and Western Cape provinces where hung legislatures are a distinct possibility.

Polls indicate the EFF will equal the 11.4% vote share it received in Gauteng in 2016, while recent by-elections in North West and Limpopo suggest that they may be able to increase their tally in strongholds in those provinces where they received 15.5% and 16.7% respectively. While municipal and by-election results are not necessarily accurate predictors of voting intentions for the upcoming national elections, they are an indication of the momentum and visibility of the party in certain areas of those provinces.

At the national level, the party's ability to reach the 10-12% range may hinge on its ability to grow in KwaZulu-Natal, where one fifth of the country's voting population resides. After the party received a paltry 3.5% of the vote in 2016, they have invested in building stronger branch, regional, and provincial structures which were severely lacking during that election campaign. These organizational structures are essential to providing transportation and other resources at the grassroots level to register voters and bring them to the polls on election day. Adding to their impressive victories [in Student Representative Council elections](#) at universities across the country, they have also rapidly increased their presence in the province by controlling the SRCs at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), University of Zululand, Mangosuthu University of

Technology, the UKZN Westville campus, and the Inanda campus of Elangeni College. These victories would have been inconceivable in 2016 and bolstered the numbers of the EFF supporters attending rallies in Durban during the current election campaign. These included Malema's visits to Umlazi and KwaMashu townships in Durban as well as a well-attended speech by Malema at DUT, which had been a stronghold of the ANC-aligned student organization SASCO. The poor showing of the EFF in KZN in 2016 leaves significant room for growth, and the party has performed well in by-elections in 2019 where it saw significant growth in specific wards such as eThekweni ward 91 where they jumped from 1.6% to 18.4% and Newcastle ward 22 where their votes grew from 12.6% to 20.7%. These may be exceptional cases, but a reasonable province-wide increase to 7.0% for the party could give them 5 additional seats in the national legislature and help push them above 10% of the national vote.

This strengthened position in the national and provincial legislatures would come despite the EFF having its share of controversies over the past year, when an [investigation found that the EFF benefitted to the tune of R1.8 million](#) from the VBS Mutual Bank heist, with an additional R430,000 being diverted to a luxury property where Malema himself had stayed. [Two former EFF MPs have also accused Malema of misusing party resources](#), with one accusing [him of spending the R427,000 in monthly levies](#) taken from MPs and MPLs to throw parties for senior members, while deployed party members were forced to use their own resources for food and travel expenses to cover party duties. Nonetheless, the party has doubled down on portraying Malema as a man of the people, with election signs and billboards bearing his face and proclaiming him a "Son of the Soil."

Malema's aggressive focus on black voters and [criticism of the privileges of other racial groups](#) (and ANC politicians such as Pravin Gordhan and Treasury Deputy Director Ishmael Monmoniat) has led to accusations of hate speech towards whites and Indians, although at other times he has said that Indians would be considered "black" if they allied with the cause of the party. There have also been instances of physical violence by high-ranking party members captured on video, with EFF Deputy President [Floyd Shivambu assaulting a reporter](#) and KZN's leading MP [Marshall Dlamini slapping a plain-clothes police officer](#) after the 2019 State of the Nation Address. These instances of "bad manners" appear to be part and parcel of the EFF's populist posturing, leading some commentators and rival politicians to [accuse the EFF of being a fascist political party](#).

These controversies have alienated many voters but have not dampened the enthusiasm for the EFF among its base of black township voters. This depiction of the party as one of "political thugs" is at odds with another popular narrative of the party as one led by politicians that have demonstrated the importance of education, with National Spokesperson [Mbuyuseni Ndlozi](#) receiving a PhD and Malema pursuing a Master's degree. The EFF has also been the most vocal party condemning xenophobic violence in South Africa (consistent with its Pan-Africanist ideology), [criticizing the March 2019 attacks on foreign nationals](#) in Durban and leading Malema to proclaim that "Africa is a country." These divergent narratives have polarized public opinion of the EFF. Coming into the 2019 elections [the EFF has the second-most favorable views](#) among South Africa at 34.6%, behind the ANC at 59.9% but ahead of the official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) at 28.0%. Showing the divisiveness of the EFF, the party still had the greatest negative views among the population at 38.6%.

The ceiling for the EFF's support in 2019 and future elections will be defined by its ability to draw voters from outside its base of young male urban voters. The EFF has been able to capture the youth with a greater sense of identity it provides, but this is an electoral liability due to the low numbers of [young people registering to vote](#). The party has worked hard to expand its appeal across age groups, but it is hamstrung by the tendency of older black voters (and recipients of government benefits) to remain loyal to the ruling ANC and its liberation credentials. It has shown some ability to [draw rural voters](#) in the mining belt in North West and Limpopo provinces, where its

programmatic support of mineworkers has given it some traction. Further development of branch and regional structures in these regions will continue to benefit the party's ability to maintain a visible presence in these and other rural areas across the other provinces.

On issues of gender [the EFF has shown many contradictions in the way it integrates women](#) into the party. [Malema himself has admitted](#) that his party had trouble attracting female voters, although he appeared to blame them by saying his party was "trying to learn as to what is the problem with the female voter when it comes to the EFF." [Malema also claimed that women do have power in the upper structures of the party](#), citing Gauteng Chairperson Mandisa Mashego and Deputy Secretary General Hlengiwe Mkhali. Rhetorically the party has been attuned to the particular struggles of women in South Africa, exemplified by the [EFF Women's March](#) against gender-based violence in April 2019 where it showed its ability to attract thousands of female EFF activists. Women have also been at the forefront of political organizing for the party, especially in ward and student branches, with the [Wonderkop branch of the party](#) showing the potential for women to play a leading role in driving the EFF's electoral fortunes. Young women have put in the leg-work to spread the messages of the party during rallies and door-to-door campaigning, where they frequently outnumber their male counterparts. In terms of policy, the party has adopted a "zebra approach" to the party's structures and parliamentary lists to ensure that women have equal representation. Nonetheless, there have [been accusations from within the party](#) that a toxic masculinity permeates the organization, and many female members have complained that men monopolize much of the space of the party, and that accusations of sexual violence against some male leaders has not impeded their ability to hold leadership positions within the party.

Almost 6 years after its formation, the EFF is still a party of contradictions. It has involved itself in incidents of violence yet has stood against xenophobic attacks, promoted gender parity and activism but silenced some women within the organization, and fought against ANC corruption amidst its own scandals. These contradictions are embodied in the leadership of Julius Malema, who has attempted to transform his public persona from an aggressively masculine political agitator with a lavish lifestyle to an educated 'man of the people' seeking to promote gender-equity and lead the fight against government corruption. In a party where power is heavily centralized in his leadership the genuineness of his personal transformation will help to determine the role the EFF will play in South African politics after the May 8th elections, in which its representation and bargaining power is set to increase across the National and Provincial legislatures.

Michael J Braun

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