

South Africa's 'Government of Neoliberal Unity' is constructed on shaky ground

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On June 30, South Africa's leader Cyril Ramaphosa announced his new Government of National Unity (GNU), including 31 ministers in his Cabinet. In the national and provincial elections that had taken place a month earlier, Ramaphosa's African National Congress (ANC) won 40% of the vote while the white-led Democratic Alliance (DA) won 22%. A variety of horse-trading scenarios were then tested. The two largest parties' centre-right forces, respectively holding 20 and 6 ministries, managed to consolidate across racial lines in spite of their very different traditions of liberalism: ANC democratic-enlightenment (in common with most anti-colonial liberation movements) and DA corporate neoliberalism. (The other five ministerial positions were spread out between parties ranging from the left-wing Pan Africanist Congress to the Freedom Front Plus of hard-core right-wingers.)

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The two core parties' elites converge on an economic policy characterised by steady privatisation and outsourcing, budget cuts, extremely high interest rates and deregulatory finance, which have held sway in most periods since the society's 1994 escape from apartheid. Since Ramaphosa came to power in 2018, attacks on labour rights has been added. The GNU deal's 60% "sufficient consensus" minimum allows DA leaders John Steenhuisen and Helen Zille to enjoy what is an effective veto on state policies decided in the Cabinet, thus probably derailing the two main progressive (albeit hollow and unfunded) promises Ramaphosa had made in May to opportunistically catch votes: a National Health Insurance program and a Basic Income Grant.

But all of this has played out in a manner that ultimately jettisoned the third and fourth parties: former president Jacob Zuma's MK Party (15%) and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF, 10%). Both had wanted Ramaphosa to resign and insisted that any GNU exclude the DA as their two negotiating conditions. This left a strong residue of grievance and a sense of the ANC anti-apartheid tradition's betrayal.

That tradition is indeed formidable, for two of the parties that the EFF had attracted into a so-called Progressive Caucus - later joined by MK - were ANC spinoffs: the Pan Africanist Congress (which split from the ANC in 1959) and United Democratic Movement (1997), which along with the Inkatha Freedom Party (whose founder left the ANC in 1975) bolted into the GNU as plum positions were dangled by Ramaphosa. The EFF split from the ANC in 2013 and MK leaders left in 2023.

Against a potential unification of African nationalists, the DA leadership and negotiating team apparently had several objectives:

- to swing state policy in an even more neoliberal, Western-gazing and low-intensity-democracy

direction;

- to gain sufficient national ministries so as to impose such policies on line departments, and likewise take provincial ministry slots (in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal — which hold 44% of the country's residents) as well as demand restructured metropolitan and municipal coalitions that include local leadership and allow a slightly different version of crony patronage to begin;
- to position DA cadres for more effective attacks on ANC elites (for example, through resumption of parliamentary investigations into various scandals) in preparation for major 2026 municipal and 2029 national electoral gains; and
- to help the ANC's centrist and openly neoliberal factions push the EFF and MK back into parliamentary irrelevance and suppress civil society resistance.

The DA can therefore be expected to emphasise its version of a so-called "Basic Minimum Program" by highlighting select parts of the [GNU deal](#):

Rapid, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, the promotion of fixed capital investment and industrialization... infrastructure development, structural reforms and transformational change, fiscal sustainability, and ... Macro-economic management must support national development goals in a sustainable manner... Building state capacity and creating a professional, merit-based, corruption-free and developmental public service. Restructuring and improving state-owned entities to meet national development goals... Strengthening law enforcement agencies to address crime, corruption and gender-based violence, as well as strengthening national security capabilities... Foreign policy based on human rights, constitutionalism, the national interest, solidarity, peaceful resolution of conflicts, to achieve the African Agenda 2063, South-South, North-South and African cooperation, multilateralism and a just, peaceful and equitable world.

These words will provide DA entry points in attempts to attract more multinational corporate investors, in part through lower taxes (for example, the Special Economic Zone level of 15%) and more parastatal privatisation and commercialisation, price hikes on crucial services (electricity and water/sanitation) and intensified austerity (except when it comes to already-generous corporate subsidies, such as the ones long enjoyed by Mercedes before it fired a quarter of its workforce this month). The DA will also stress law & order, and a stronger sub-imperial military capability.

However, given the declining standard of living, an elite transition of this sort will not stick nearly as well as Nelson Mandela's 1994-99 reign. It may be a matter of just months before the centre can no longer hold, due to a wide variety of local and especially international divisions that could shatter the core ANC-DA deal.

Five international wedge issues

Although early [rumours](#) (from *News24*) suggested that pro-Palestine foreign minister Naledi Pandor would be reappointed as foreign minister, that position went to Ronald Lamola, who has been minister of justice and who gave voluble support to South Africa's case at the International Court of Justice and International Criminal Court since January. For Palestine solidarity, *this is extremely good news*, because most alternative candidates do not have such a firm commitment to the ANC's long-standing alliance with Palestinian Authority elites.

Of interest, though, are how the new government addresses four main sites of armed conflict and the BRICS+ scene, which itself suffers worsening internecine military friction: on the Sino-Indian border, and between Iran and traditional US West Asian allies. There are also profound intra-

BRICS+ ideological, economic and practical contradictions that the DA will exploit. These five hotspots are:

1) *Gaza*: against DA objections, Pandor valiantly led the “genocide!” charge, resulting in both the empowerment of Palestine solidarity across the world, but also in Tel Aviv’s “[Hague Schmague](#)” reply and heightened bombings, plus threats from US Congressional imperialists to end South Africa’s membership in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (with its slight trade preferences). But with the limitations of international court action now evident, heightened boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) activism and Pretoria’s state commitment are vital, especially following the recent commitments to cut trade by governments in Ankara and Bogota. One very serious contradiction in South Africa is the ongoing export of thermal coal from mines an hour’s drive east of Johannesburg to the Richards Bay harbour and onwards around West Africa and Gibraltar to Israel. Already in the first half of 2024, [SA was the third largest supplier behind Colombia and Russia, and just ahead of China](#). But Colombia is apparently no longer exporting as of June 22, so that may mean traditional South African coal exporters like Glencore and Thungela (formerly AngloCoal) will help fill the gap, as an Israeli official [told](#) Ynet in early June.

2) *Vast methane gas fields offshore from northern Mozambique’s war-torn Cabo Delgado province*: [1200 SA soldiers served](#) unceremoniously, with occasional controversies, for three years as part of a regional team. They were deployed immediately after French President Emmanuel Macron visited Ramaphosa (and Paul Kagame in Kigali) in May 2021, so it is widely understood that the regional mission aimed to protect the \$20 billion in existing and planned facilities built to process a huge gas field, by TotalOil, ExxonMobil (in a joint venture with China National Petroleum Corporation) and a few other oil firms, against attacks by a local Islamic insurgency that began in 2017. Hopes were even [expressed](#) to Parliament by Pandor in September 2020 that in return for military assistance, South Africa might gain access to more fossil fuels — notwithstanding the (unmentioned) climate catastrophe whose cyclones laid waste to the area 18 months earlier (“Great opportunity also exists for SA to import natural gas from Mozambique, thus the security of Cabo Delgado is of great interest to SA...”).

3) *The eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*: 3000 SA troops (which include many from Mozambique) are now replacing United Nations peacekeepers, to be based mainly in Goma, in the vicinity of at least six million “resource curse” civilian deaths since the late 1990s, and millions more refugees. We can blame the carnage partly on predatory corporations from the West and BRICS+ — especially China and South Africa — extracting enormous amounts of natural resources, more often than not entailing child labour (and to some extent favouring SA mining houses, which operated there even during the worst warlordism and mass murder, for example [AngloGold Ashanti](#) when it was still SA-based during the early 2000s)

4) *Russia’s invasion of Ukraine*: Moscow’s move is tacitly — sometimes openly — supported by Pretoria, along with many other nationalist and “left” forces (for example the MK Party, Economic Freedom Fighters, South African Communist Party [SACP], Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU], and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa), but which is opposed by the DA and SA’s weakened liberals and — for different reasons — the anti-imperialist independent left (for example the South African Federation of Trade Unions, General Industries Workers Union of South Africa and other social critics who also oppose NATO’s eastward creep).

5) *Debilitating BRICS+ controversies*: the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa bloc began its annual talk shops in 2007. At the 2023 Johannesburg leadership summit, five new governments — Iran, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and likely Saudi Arabia — were invited to join. But contradictions scream out, with the most extreme examples being the New Delhi, Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi capitalist class actively supporting Tel Aviv’s military. The former do so through Delhi-Tel

Aviv [geopolitical and trade alliances](#) as well as via [bulldozers and bombs that kill Gazans](#) directly. In the wake of Yemen's attacks on Red Sea shipping, the latter now [reroute containers](#) sent from Asia to Israel along their own highways. Alongside Jordan, on April 13 they also [provided intelligence](#) used by the US and Israel ("with the support of Russia" [according](#) to Seymour Hersh) to defend an Israeli military base under attack by Iran, in the wake of Israel bombing that country's Syrian embassy on April 1. Moreover, along with Egypt, military leaders from Saudi Arabia and the UAE also [met](#) generals from the US Pentagon's Centcom and the Israeli Defense Forces on June 11. As Haidar Eid [wrote](#) on June 28, "Neighbouring Arab regimes have done nothing more than issue timid statements of condemnation, while mediating between oppressor and oppressed. Indeed, [Arab regimes](#) have let Palestinians down since 1948, through a combination of cowardice and hypocrisy."

Such BRICS+ hypocrisy is partly explained by the profits their companies are enjoying, for example India's Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone and the Shanghai International Port Group, which both facilitate lethal arms imports through (privatised) Haifa Port berths (although these now appear highly vulnerable to disruption by drone attacks). Meanwhile, Moscow, Pretoria and Beijing continue to allow coal shipments amounting to millions of tonnes and Brasilia hosts an Israeli Elbit arms company branch (albeit an activist-inspired pause was imposed on one recent deal). Even Ethiopia typically abstains on UN resolutions condemning Israel. Of the BRICS+ capitals, only Tehran consistently opposes the genocide. Will the DA's look-West versus the ANC's look-South perspectives come into increasing conflict, especially as Putin hosts the BRICS+ in October, or does the BRICS+ tilt towards Israel tell us that an overarching sub-imperial agenda is *actually in play*, so DA Zionists can relax?

However, it is also important to observe that new disincentives are rising thanks to Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. Russian coal was [apparently unloaded](#) from the MV Tutor ship in Israel's south-Jordanian port neighbour of Aqaba on June 9. Three days later the bulk carrier was sunk in the Red Sea (en route to India), after being hit by a small remote-controlled Houthi fishing vessel. On June 22, the Transworld Navigator coal ship was attacked twice, having in 2022 [traversed](#) from a Russian coal export terminal to Israel. With the Houthis also claiming to have the capacity to hit long-range shipping targets in the Mediterranean, and Hezbollah easily capable of firing on the Ashdod and Hadera terminals next to the Rutenberg and Orot Rabin coal-fired power stations, no shipments to Israel can now be considered safe. (One Russian load of iron and steel was reported to have been hit by Hezbollah while in the Haifa Port on June 12, but it [turned out](#) to have been an engine room fire caused by inadequate maintenance.)

These problems of mixed BRICS+ loyalties may be exacerbated by DA leader Steenhuisen's Zionist posturing. Although now merely the new minister of agriculture, Steenhuisen had in March expressed open [support](#) for Israel's attacks on Gaza, blurting, "One side's genocide could be another side's freedom fighting." Typical of white South African liberals, he is against Russia's role in Ukraine, and the DA also opposes troop deployment in the DRC. (This contrasts to the DA's opportunistic support since 2021 for South African troops' deployment in Mozambique, given the DA's [desired](#) contracts not only for "Blood Methane" gas imports, but also for a resumption of TotalEnergies' procurement deals with white South African subcontractors.) Other foreign policy hotspots in Africa, such as the Horn (especially Sudan and South Sudan) and West Africa are also roiled by conflict. But these are considered too far afield to entail a major commitment by Pretoria.

Hence in spite of Lamola's ascent, vital struggles lie just ahead over SA's schizophrenic anti-imperialism against the US and Israel in the Middle East and against NATO expansion, alongside Pretoria's sustained (apartheid/post-apartheid) sub-imperial agenda favouring multinational extractive-industry corporates as well as most forms of Western-dominated multilateralism. For example, South African financial elites successfully [led the campaign](#) within BRICS against de-dollarisation at the Johannesburg summit last August, in spite of some rhetoric to the contrary —

and in spite of the world's desperate need for an alternative to US monetary and currency hegemony.

For Palestine activists, the most obvious site of tension is the ANC's leadership's long involvement in Glencore coal exports to Israel: Ramaphosa's Shanduka Coal was until 2014 (when he became deputy president) Glencore's main South African Black-empowerment partner. His brother-in-law Patrice Motsepe is the Swiss firm's current lead partner, dating to profitable exports [during the era of Xstrata](#) (later swallowed by Glencore) when the firm bragged, "outside of Europe, Israel was the largest purchaser of the South African operations' coal production" of 20 megatons annually. Glencore senior board member Gill Marcus was formerly Mandela's early-1990s spokesperson, but on May 24 at the firm's annual general meeting in Switzerland, she [ignored](#) a shareholder's [plea to stop fuelling Israeli genocide](#).

A vibrant review of some of these sites of struggle could be [seen on the SABC Big Debate](#) TV show on June 27 regarding Pretoria's inconsistent human-rights advocacy. Participants generally agreed that civil society will have to work far harder to get genuinely consistent state support given the incoming GNU's propensity to serve big capital. On this front, like others, we can expect an Elite Transition 2.0, in which Lamola will help Pretoria with talking left, yet simultaneously the walking right will logically speed up — unless tripped up by international-solidarity activists.

After the GNU cracks

Those who are unhappy (mainly from the left but also the populist right) are apparently stymied and increasingly appear to fall into three fractions:

- the Progressive Caucus parties outside the GNU, led by Zuma's MK and Malema's EFF, initially had 28% of MPs (though that fell to 26% as several small ones have been assimilated by Ramaphosa since mid-June). Their leaders will be grumbling in frustration at how little the period immediately ahead will serve their interests being permanently located outside this GNU, even if it means losing a share of municipal ruling coalitions in which they are junior members;
- the internal Tripartite Alliance of the ANC-SACP-COSATU forces are opposed to Ramaphosa's DA deal-making but lack a way to let off steam aside from grudgingly quitting the Alliance (a highly unlikely scenario); and
- the independent left, which will probably thrive in a milieu in which the Ramaphosa-Steenhuisen pairing fumbles in imposing austerity, service delivery cuts — for example, Johannesburg's current extreme morning-evening electricity load-reduction in Black neighbourhoods — and more intense labour battles (in the tradition that life sometimes has to get worse, before anger rises and gains are won through struggles).

In sum, as ANC neoliberal-nationalism gives way to an uncomfortable Black-white limping-zebra politics — even more neoliberal than at present, and likely a bit less "anti-imperialist" on the foreign policy front — the ruling crew requires a renewed version of talk-left, walk-right. If this deal breaks, as can be reasonably expected, a more complicated version of Ramaphosa's assimilation politics lies ahead in which the ANC ditches the DA and imposes neoliberalism through the MK and EFF as his Plan B. But that prospect is on the distant horizon.

South Africa's Government of National Unity leadership in the Cabinet, 30 June 2024

1. **Agriculture:** Minister: John Steenhuisen (DA); Deputy Minister: Rosemary Capa (ANC)
2. **Basic Education:** Minister: Siviwe Gwarube (DA); Deputy Minister: Reginah Mhaule (ANC)
3. **Communications and Digital Technologies:** Minister: Solly Malatsi (DA); Deputy Minister: Mondli Gungubele (ANC)
4. **Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs:** Minister: Velinkosi Hlabisa (IFP); Deputy Ministers: Dickson Masemola (ANC), Zolile Burns-Ncamashe (ANC)
5. **Correctional Services:** Minister: Pieter Groenewald (Freedom Front Plus); Deputy Minister: Lindiwe Ntshalintshali (ANC)
6. **Defence and Military Veterans:** Minister: Angie Motshekga (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Bantu Holomisa (UDM), Richard Mkhungo (ANC)
7. **Electricity and Energy:** Minister: Kgosisentsho Ramokgopa (ANC); Deputy Minister: Samantha Graham (DA)
8. **Employment and Labour:** Minister: Nomakhosazana Meth (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Jomo Sibiya (ANC), Phumzile Mgcina (ANC)
9. **Finance:** Minister: Enoch Godongwana (ANC); Deputy Ministers: David Maseondo (ANC), Ashor Sarupen (DA)
10. **Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment:** Minister: Dion George (DA); Deputy Ministers: Narend Singh (IFP), Bernice Swarts (ANC)
11. **Health:** Minister: Aaron Motsoaledi (ANC); Deputy Minister: Joe Phaahla (ANC)
12. **Higher Education:** Minister: Nobuhle Nkabane (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Buti Manamela (ANC), Mimmy Gondwe (DA)
13. **Home Affairs:** Minister: Leon Schreiber (DA); Deputy Minister: Njabulo Nzuza (ANC)
14. **Human Settlements:** Minister: Mmamoloko Kubayi (ANC); Deputy Minister: Tandi Mahambehlala (ANC)
15. **International Relations and Cooperation:** Minister: Ronald Lamola (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Alvin Botes (ANC), Tandi Moraka (ANC)
16. **Justice and Constitutional Development:** Minister: Thembi Nkadimeng (ANC); Deputy Minister: Andries Nel (ANC)
17. **Land Reform and Rural Development:** Minister: Mzwanele Nyhontso (PAC); Deputy Minister: Chupu Stanley Mathabatha (ANC)
18. **Mineral and Petroleum Resources:** Minister: Gwede Mantashe (ANC); Deputy Minister: Judith Nematzinga-Tshabalala (ANC)
19. **Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation:** Minister: Maropene Ramokgopa (ANC); Deputy Minister: Seiso Mohai (ANC)
20. **Police:** Minister: Senzo Mchunu (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Polly Boshielo (ANC), Cassel Mathale (ANC)
21. **Public Service and Administration:** Minister: Mzamo Buthelezi (ANC); Deputy Minister: Pinky Kekana (ANC)
22. **Public Works and Infrastructure:** Minister: Dean Macpherson (DA); Deputy Minister: Sihle Zikalala (ANC)
23. **Science, Technology and Innovation:** Minister: Blade Nzimande (ANC); Deputy Minister: Nomalungelo Gina (ANC)
24. **Small Business Development:** Minister: Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams (ANC); Deputy Minister: Jane Sithole (ANC)
25. **Social Development:** Minister: Sisisi Tolashe (ANC); Deputy Minister: Ganief Hendricks (Al Jama-ah)
26. **Sport, Arts and Culture:** Minister: Gayton McKenzie (Patriotic Alliance); Deputy Minister: Peace Mabe (ANC)
27. **Tourism:** Minister: Patricia De Lille (Good); Deputy Minister: Maggie Sotyu (ANC)
28. **Trade, Industry and Competition:** Minister: Parks Tau (ANC); Deputy Ministers: Zuko Godlimpi (ANC), Andrew Whitfield (DA)
29. **Transport:** Minister: Barbara Creecy (ANC); Deputy Minister: Mkhuleko Hlengwa (IFP)
30. **Water and Sanitation:** Minister: Pemmy Majodina (ANC); Deputy Ministers: David Mahlobo (ANC), Isaac Seitlholo (ANC)
31. **Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities:** Minister: Sindisiwe Chikunga (ANC); Deputy Minister: Mmapaseka Steve Letsike (ANC)

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