



| Brief |

Competitive South African Elections Bring Physical and Cyber Risks

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Cybersecurity, Geopolitical

May 22, 2024

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 5:00 AM (EDT) on May 22, 2024**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

Brief

Executive Summary

Post-independence South Africa is set to have its most competitive elections ever on May 29, 2024. The African National Congress (ANC) Party, which has governed South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994, is highly likely to lose its majority for the first time. Without a majority, the ANC will need to form a coalition to continue leading the government, which has made this campaign season especially contentious. Political parties hoping for the opportunity to make it into the government are likely escalating their campaign rhetoric online and threatening violence. After 30 years of controlling the government virtually unchallenged, the ANC will have difficulty forming a coalition with any of the main opposition parties and is campaigning similarly to maintain as large a share of the vote as possible.

Background and Elections Issues

ANC Decline

High rates of unemployment, crime, worsening power outages, and credible accusations of corruption have slowly deteriorated the electoral advantage the ANC has had since the end of apartheid.

- South Africa has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world at 32.4 percent in 2023. The country's economic growth has slowed to 0.8 percent

annually,¹ and nearly 33 percent of South Africans rely on social support from the government due to difficult economic conditions.²

- Voters routinely rank crime among their top concerns. A major act of terrorism occurring during the South African elections is unlikely. However, crime rates in South Africa are among the highest in the world. There is a high proliferation of weapons throughout South Africa, which facilitate violence.

A primary trigger for the ANC's drop in support has been the deteriorating performance of previously reliable services, best personified by the state-owned utility company Eskom. Eskom frequently conducts "load-shedding," or scheduled power cuts, that affect access to electricity nationwide.

- Load-shedding has left businesses, residents, and essential services vulnerable to power outages that can last up to 10 hours per day and reportedly cost the economy USD 5 billion in lost productivity in 2023.³
- The need for load-shedding is closely linked to the cause of political corruption within the ANC Party under the leadership of former President Jacob Zuma. However, other economic sectors (such as transportation, health, and security) have all deteriorated in recent years. Many voters blame the corrupt and aging ANC leadership for the decline in South Africa's economy.

As a result, offshoots of the ANC have emerged led by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which targets younger black voters for whom the ANC has not delivered on its promises for a more equal society since the end of apartheid.⁴

- Another opposition party, the uMKPhonto we Sizwe (MKP) Party, is a newly created party made up of former ANC officials led by Jacob Zuma.⁵ Zuma was pushed out in a belated ANC anti-corruption drive in 2018 but has used his considerable

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¹ [hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-social-safety-net-crossroads-anc-support-wanes-2024-05-09/](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-african-social-safety-net-crossroads-anc-support-wanes-2024-05-09/)

² [hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/africa/key-issues-south-african-voters-wide-open-2024-election-2024-05-13/](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/key-issues-south-african-voters-wide-open-2024-election-2024-05-13/)

³ [hXXps://www.ft.com/content/fea0eebc-2abb-47d9-948a-72f109b57e5c](https://www.ft.com/content/fea0eebc-2abb-47d9-948a-72f109b57e5c)

⁴ [hXXps://effonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/A5-EFF-2024-Manifesto-full-version.pdf](https://effonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/A5-EFF-2024-Manifesto-full-version.pdf)

⁵ [hXXps://www.reuters.com/world/africa/what-you-need-know-about-south-africas-2024-election-2024-05-06/](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/what-you-need-know-about-south-africas-2024-election-2024-05-06/)

political power to stifle investigations and weaken anti-corruption reforms within the ANC.⁶

- The ANC's governing issues have also boosted the electoral chances of the largest opposition party: the Democratic Alliance (DA), the historically white party. In recent years, the DA has gained a reputation for effective governance in Cape Town, and many voters now view them as a reliable alternative to the ANC.

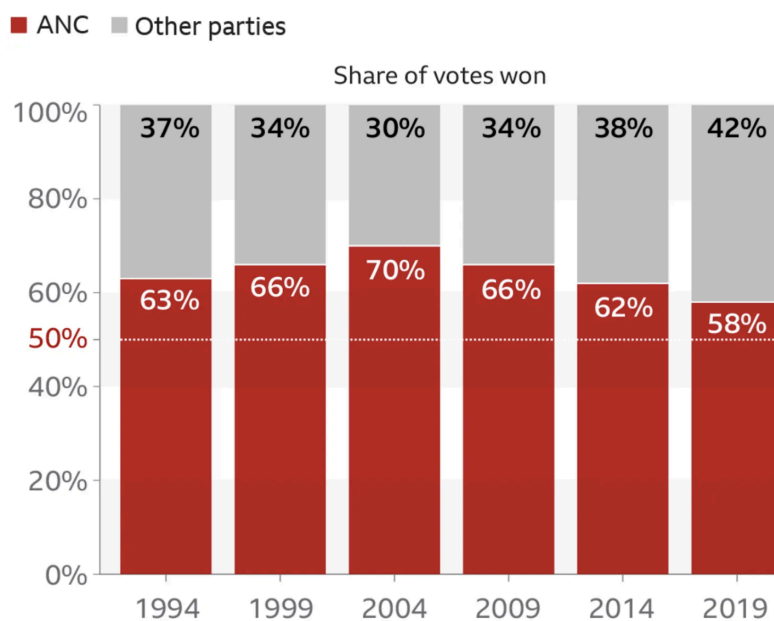
Alternatives

If the ANC loses its majority, it will likely have to cede political influence by forming a coalition with other parties. Approximately 70 political parties with varying platforms will be competing in the upcoming election. While South Africa does not have a major challenger in the election that could also obtain a majority, the DA garnered 20 percent of the vote in the 2019 elections and is expected to be the second biggest party during this election as well. One survey indicated that the DA may obtain an 18.6 percent share of the vote.⁷

- A coalition between the ANC and the center-right DA is highly likely the preferred coalition for international investors, as is the wing of the ANC aligned with current South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, because the DA is broadly aligned with ANC economic principles and would likely help the government stay on track when it comes to fixing dilapidated services and rooting out corruption.
- However, the DA is the historically white opposition party, and many voters closely associate it with apartheid—despite efforts to include more black members in recent years. The opposition to such an alliance could lead to social unrest, especially since it would signal to allies of Zuma that the ANC's anti-corruption practices would continue.

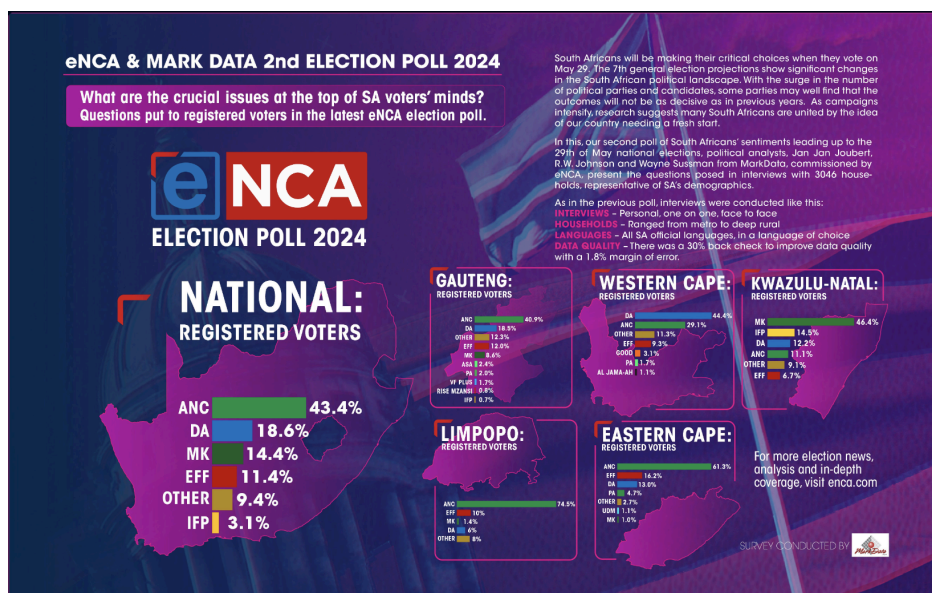
⁶[hXXps://www.dailymaverick\[.\]co\[.\]za/article/2019-11-27-rogue-president-rogue-state-zuma-personally-halted-investigations-into-guptas-and-arthur-fraser/](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-11-27-rogue-president-rogue-state-zuma-personally-halted-investigations-into-guptas-and-arthur-fraser/)

⁷[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2024-05-20/new-south-african-poll-indicates-strong-showing-by-zuma-s-party](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-20/new-south-african-poll-indicates-strong-showing-by-zuma-s-party)



ANC's declining popularity in national elections

Source: [hXXps://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cll12p73j5lo](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cll12p73j5lo)



Polls Projecting South Africa's 2024 Election Results

Source: [hXXps://www.enca.com/news/enca-and-markdata-2nd-election-poll-2024](https://www.enca.com/news/enca-and-markdata-2nd-election-poll-2024)

The close ties between the ANC and EFF make them likely coalition partners. However, the Marxist EFF party would likely demand economic concessions (like land seizures from the white minority) that are highly likely to harm foreign investor sentiment in South Africa.⁸

- The EFF also supports the nationalization of several industries, such as mining and banking; the redistribution of resources to poorer communities; and social safety net programs, like free healthcare for citizens.⁹ A partnership between the EFF and the ANC could result in the implementation of policies that could greatly impact the economic environment in South Africa.

Despite Zuma being barred from running in the elections, a coalition between the ANC and Zuma's MKP party would also likely be equally unpalatable for foreign investors, as it would signal an end to ANC-related corruption investigations. Such a coalition could potentially coincide with further reduced performance across state utilities like rail and energy, from which Zuma's ANC reportedly looted USD 27 billion.¹⁰

- Despite being credibly linked to corruption, Zuma maintains strong pockets of support. Polls suggest his party could obtain around 14.4 percent of the vote—possibly from former ANC and EFF voters and the majority in his home province of Kwazulu-Natal.¹¹ Furthermore, Zuma has strong backers within the ANC and a recent history of orchestrating widespread acts of violence. The ANC may view agreeing to a coalition with MKP as key to preventing violent unrest.

Choosing with whom to form a coalition will be an extremely difficult task for Ramaphosa, who still remains the likely winner of the next election. A coalition between the ANC and DA will likely spur further allegations from the EFF that the ANC is not serious about inequality. Jacob Zuma will also likely call on his supporters to challenge the results of the elections, which could lead to violence. On the other hand, a coalition with the EFF will likely lead to a deteriorating economic situation; one with the MKP will further demoralize large swathes of voters who previously associated the ANC with fighting for independence—not with corruption, economic mismanagement, and rampant crime.

⁸ [hXXps://effonline\[.\]org/](https://effonline.org/)

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[hXXps://apnews\[.\]com/article/south-africa-election-opposition-eff-malema-ef4d87176b5b53e5768eac02fc9b0129](https://apnews.com/article/south-africa-election-opposition-eff-malema-ef4d87176b5b53e5768eac02fc9b0129)

¹⁰ [hXXps://uk.news.yahoo\[.\]com/south-africas-top-court-rules-085500926.html](https://uk.news.yahoo.com/south-africas-top-court-rules-085500926.html)

¹¹ [hXXps://www.enca\[.\]com/news/enca-and-markdata-2nd-election-poll-2024](https://www.enca.com/news/enca-and-markdata-2nd-election-poll-2024)

| Election Interference

As the ANC's hold on power has weakened, it has increasingly turned to deceptive electoral practices such as party-backed disinformation campaigns, threats of violence, and accusations of political corruption—especially during the latter years of the Zuma administration. Jacob Zuma (also a former ANC intelligence chief with a lengthy record of illegally targeting political opponents) has been heavily implicated in the most malign ANC-backed election engineering and has adopted similar tactics since his exile from the ANC.¹²

- For example, during the 2016 local elections the ANC reportedly operated a "black ops room" dedicated to spreading disinformation. Allegedly, the ANC invested R50 million (USD 2,701,378) in this operation, which involved disseminating fake posters under the guise of opposition parties, distributing fabricated news sheets door-to-door, and orchestrating planted callers on radio talk shows.¹³
- While this was two years before Zuma was forced from office, he had been heavily implicated in corruption a few years prior. In 2009, just as Zuma took over the presidency, he had nearly 800 corruption charges dropped after secretly wiretapping politicians and journalists. While in office, Zuma also accused his political opponents of being puppets of foreign governments.¹⁴

Violent demonstrations also occurred in July 2021 in response to Zuma's arrest. The protests broke out in the KwaZulu-Natal province and spread to the province of Gauteng, resulting in the deaths of at least 354 people. Clashes between police officers and protesters, blockades, fires in the streets, and widespread looting occurred during the demonstrations. The riots led to more than 1,200 arrests, and then-President Cyril Ramaphosa called them the worst riots since the end of apartheid in the 1990s.¹⁵

¹² [hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/article/idUSKCN0XVIQO/](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0XVIQO/)

¹³

[hXXps://theconversation\[.\]com/south-africa-gets-help-tracking-down-social-media-predators-ahead-of-poll-112622](https://theconversation[.]com/south-africa-gets-help-tracking-down-social-media-predators-ahead-of-poll-112622)

¹⁴ [hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/article/idUSKCN0XVIQO/](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN0XVIQO/)

¹⁵

[hXXps://www.voaafrica\[.\]com/a/jacob-zuma-barred-from-contesting-in-south-africa-s-elections-supporters-prot est-/7619109.html](https://www.voaafrica[.]com/a/jacob-zuma-barred-from-contesting-in-south-africa-s-elections-supporters-prot est-/7619109.html)

- The perpetrators of the violent demonstrations remain unclear; however, critics of Zuma have alleged that Zuma, his supporters, and individuals closely associated with him instigated and fueled the violent demonstrations.¹⁶ A man was arrested for encouraging individuals to loot a mall in Pietermaritzburg and instigating violence, but the official cause of the unrest remains unknown.¹⁷
- The ANC also recently launched a disciplinary hearing against Zuma but postponed it due to security concerns, as Zuma has called for political demonstrations in the past.¹⁸ The risk of demonstrations is also likely to escalate leading up to the election due to the heightened tensions between political parties. Protests also have the potential to disrupt access to voting services.

On May 20, 2024, a court banned Zuma from participating in the 2024 election, which significantly increases the likelihood his MKP supporters will instigate acts of violence related to the elections.¹⁹ Before the most recent court decision, MKP party members said there would be a “civil war” if their candidates were not allowed to stand.²⁰

Post-Zuma, the ANC is still being accused of deceptive campaigning, although most of the party’s campaign tactics appear legal.

- In the lead-up to this vote, South Africa has experienced its longest run of uninterrupted electricity in years. The ANC has attributed this to its successful efforts to rout out corruption at Eskom and ANC investments in renewable energy. However, critics suggest that, under ANC leadership, Eskom has been buying diesel to keep generators running and that power outages will return following the elections.²¹ Consistent power benefits the ANC because it will likely increase voter turnout, whereas prolonged outages just before the elections will likely result in low turnout. It may also influence voters who blame the ANC for the issues.
- In another move anticipated to boost the popularity of the ANC ahead of elections, President Ramaphosa signed a controversial bill into law on May 15 that

¹⁶ <https://apnews.com/article/africa-business-biden-cabinet-south-africa-2d0aaef63102a661c8e54d3bdf926566>

¹⁷ <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/south-africa-convicts-man-for-inciting-deadly-2021-riots-/7377687.html>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57818215>

²⁰ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-03-05-iec-must-act-urgently-against-threats-of-electoral-violence-in-sa/>

²¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-03/the-lights-are-on-in-south-africa-and-many-people-are-suspicious>

provides universal health care coverage to all South African citizens.²² The law, named the National Health Insurance Act, is controversial due to strained medical services throughout the country.²³ The opposition Democratic Alliance Party announced that it would challenge the law in court, and others have accused President Ramaphosa of attempting to garner support for the ruling party ahead of the 2024 elections. However, government officials allege the National Health Insurance Act will give citizens better medical access.²⁴

Other parties have been accused of using similarly deceptive campaigning tactics.

- During the current electoral cycle, the EFF filed an electoral fraud case against leaders of the Democratic Alliance for allegedly directing councilors to use identifying numbers in a vote. The EFF claimed this violated the law and filed the case at Pretoria Central Police Station.²⁵

Foreign Interference and Disinformation Campaigns

ZeroFox assesses that the greatest cyber risk to South Africa's elections comes from disinformation campaigns designed to influence voters to support a particular party. Disinformation campaigns to manipulate public opinion may undermine the integrity of the electoral process in South Africa.

- The 45-million-strong internet user base in South Africa is a conspicuous target for cyber-based influence campaigns.²⁶ The contentious elections cycle might also influence threat actors to use disinformation as a tool to influence votes, which is common across Africa.²⁷

²²[hXXps://www\[.\]aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2024/5/15/south-africas-ramaphosa-signs-health-bill-weeks-before-election](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/15/south-africas-ramaphosa-signs-health-bill-weeks-before-election)

²³[hXXps://www\[.\]reuters\[.\]com/world/africa/south-africas-president-approves-major-health-reform-law-2024-05-15/](https://www[.]reuters[.]com/world/africa/south-africas-president-approves-major-health-reform-law-2024-05-15/)

²⁴ [hXXps://www.africanews\[.\]com/2024/05/15/south-african-president-signs-controversial-health-law/](https://www.africanews[.]com/2024/05/15/south-african-president-signs-controversial-health-law/)

²⁵[hXXps://www.news24\[.\]com/news24/politics/political-parties/eff-opens-electoral-fraud-case-against-da-tshwane-leaders-for-using-numbers-in-vote-for-speaker-20230316](https://www.news24[.]com/news24/politics/political-parties/eff-opens-electoral-fraud-case-against-da-tshwane-leaders-for-using-numbers-in-vote-for-speaker-20230316)

²⁶ [hXXps://www.statista\[.\]com/statistics/462958/internet-users-south-africa/](https://www.statista[.]com/statistics/462958/internet-users-south-africa/)

²⁷[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/africa/south-africas-anc-likely-lose-parliamentary-majority-may-vote-survey-shows-2024-03-11/](https://www.reuters[.]com/world/africa/south-africas-anc-likely-lose-parliamentary-majority-may-vote-survey-shows-2024-03-11/)

The risk is such that prominent platforms such as Google and Meta have announced steps to counter apparent disinformation campaigns relating to the elections.²⁸

Nevertheless, political parties participating in the election are likely to utilize disinformation campaigns to support their political aims.

- In the lead up to the 2019 elections, around 185,000 fake Twitter (now X) posts were generated by over 100 fake X accounts. The posts were reportedly paid for by the influential India-origin Gupta family of South Africa at the behest of outgoing President Jacob Zuma. One notable campaign involved the hashtag #Jonasisaliar, which was aimed at discrediting Deputy Finance Minister Mcebisi Jonas from the ANC party.²⁹ At the time, the Guptas and Zuma were heavily implicated in a years-long corruption scandal involving Eskom and the targeting of Jonas is an example of Zuma's efforts to disrupt anti-corruption investigations.

More recently, on March 9, 2024, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, the daughter of former President Zuma, shared a deepfake video of former U.S. president Donald Trump on X. In the post, Trump urged the South African people to vote for the MKP Party in the 2024 elections.³⁰ The video was reportedly shared after Sambudla visited Russia.³¹

- The video was heavily promoted by X users normally dedicated to posting support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Other pro-Russian social media users have also been heavily backing Zuma and his MKP party since its creation just months ahead of the elections. Some of the more prominent pro-Russian accounts have hundreds of thousands of followers, helping the content (such as the deepfake of former President Trump endorsing Zuma) reach millions of viewers.
- The accounts used #IStandWithPutin & #IStandWithRussia began proliferating after the start of Russia's war in Ukraine and was spread by users supposedly located in South Africa. Pro-Russian and pro-Zuma activity on these accounts began increasing after the creation of Zuma's MKP party.³²
- Russia and the ANC have historic ties that exist to this day. Russia was a key backer of the ANC during apartheid, and former President Zuma maintained close

²⁸ [hXXps://www.itweb\[.\]co\[.\]za/article/google-pledges-to-support-integrity-of-sa-elections/5yONPvErYb7XWrb](https://www.itweb[.]co[.]za/article/google-pledges-to-support-integrity-of-sa-elections/5yONPvErYb7XWrb)

²⁹ [hXXps://www.ids\[.\]ac\[.\]uk/news/african-elections-under-rising-threat-from-online-disinformation/](https://www.ids[.]ac[.]uk/news/african-elections-under-rising-threat-from-online-disinformation/)

³⁰ [hXXps://futures.issafrica\[.\]org/blog/2024/Disinformation-governance-and-the-South-African-election](https://futures.issafrica[.]org/blog/2024/Disinformation-governance-and-the-South-African-election)

³¹ [hXXps://www.info-res\[.\]org/post/the-istandwithputin-istandwithrussia-campaign-in-south-africa](https://www.info-res[.]org/post/the-istandwithputin-istandwithrussia-campaign-in-south-africa)

³² *Ibid.*

ties with Russia during his administration. Under Ramaphosa, the ANC has chosen to remain neutral regarding Russia's war in Ukraine. If Zuma's party performs well, it may ensure that the ANC remains neutral or adopts positions that are more favorable to Russia going forward.



Deepfake video shared by Jacob Zuma's daughter

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

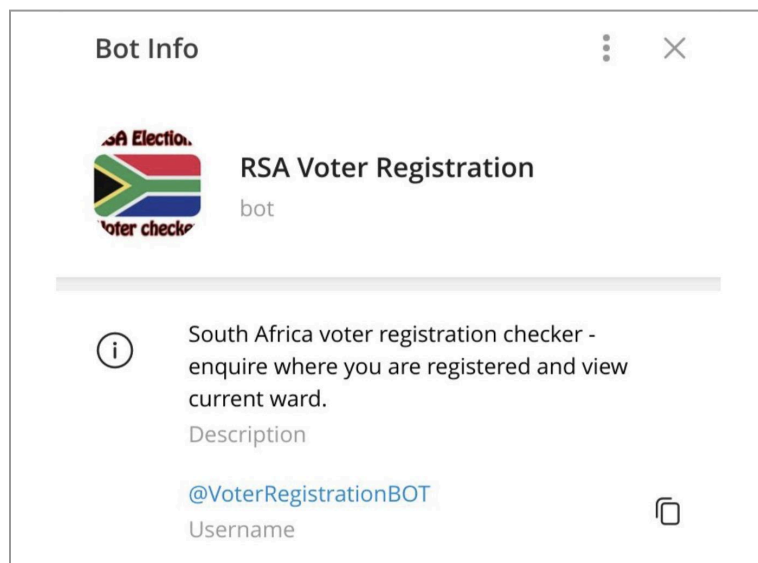
Cybercrime Designed to Coincide with the Elections

While the use of paper ballots to vote in South Africa reduces the size of the cyber attack surface, indirect forms of cyber-related threats are likely to affect the elections. ZeroFox has identified suspected attempts at collecting personal data—including politically sensitive information of South African voters. Data collected via such approaches could be used for targeted campaigning and influence campaigns.

- ZeroFox observed a suspicious Telegram channel likely intended to collect personally identifiable information (PII) from South African citizens. A Telegram bot “RSA Voter Registration” purports to check if a user is registered for the elections and determine registration details.³³ However, it is likely that it actually captures IP

³³ [hXXps://t\[.\]me/VoterRegistrationBOT](https://t.me/VoterRegistrationBOT)

addresses, device user agents, and phone numbers of Telegram users who use the bot to verify their electoral status.



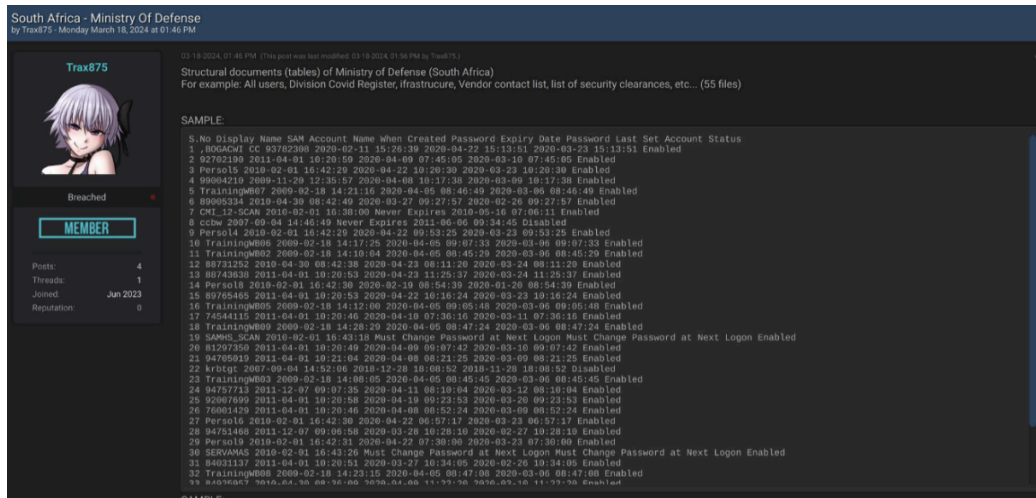
Suspicious Telegram bot

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

State-sponsored hackers or amateur hacker groups may target the election process with the aim of reputational damage and voter manipulation. Election-related databases or networks of government departments are attractive targets.

- On January 9, 2023, ZeroFox analysts observed well-regarded and established threat actor “g0d” claiming to have leaked a database associated with O.R. Tambo District Municipality of South Africa on the predominantly English-language dark web forum BreachForums. The leaked information allegedly included personal information, usernames, and passwords.³⁴
- On March 18, 2024, English-speaking threat actor “Trax875” shared structural documents of the South African Ministry of Defense on BreachForums. The data set allegedly contains tables with sensitive security clearance records of South African military officials and a folder with the CMIS Division Covid Register. Malicious actors can leverage such information for illicit election activities.

³⁴ https://cloud.zerofox.com/intelligence/advanced_dark_web/51786



Leaked data of the South African Ministry of Defense shared on BreachForums

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

Even though there is no indication that the upcoming South African elections are the motivation behind these breaches, threat actors are likely to conduct such attacks to disrupt security planning for voter terminals during the elections. These attacks may have security implications for key political candidates as well.

Conclusion

Economic difficulties, corruption, frequent power outages, and high crime rates all have the potential to unseat the ANC Party from maintaining its 30-year majority in the National Assembly.³⁵ The likely loss of influence for the ANC and its former founding members has led to heightened physical and cybersecurity risks during the election campaign season. The outcome of the election not only poses physical threats in South Africa over grievances related to the election but may also precipitate major policy changes in South Africa. Disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks targeting government departments, and data breaches also have the potential to compromise elections.

³⁵ [hXXps://www.ft\[.\]com/content/fea0eebc-2abb-47d9-948a-72f109b57e5c](https://www.ft.com/content/fea0eebc-2abb-47d9-948a-72f109b57e5c)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%