

South Africa – Twenty years into democracy: the march to the 2014 elections

K.J. Maphunye, E. Kibuka-Sebitosi and A.L. Moagi

Reviewed by

Ndwakhulu Tshishonga

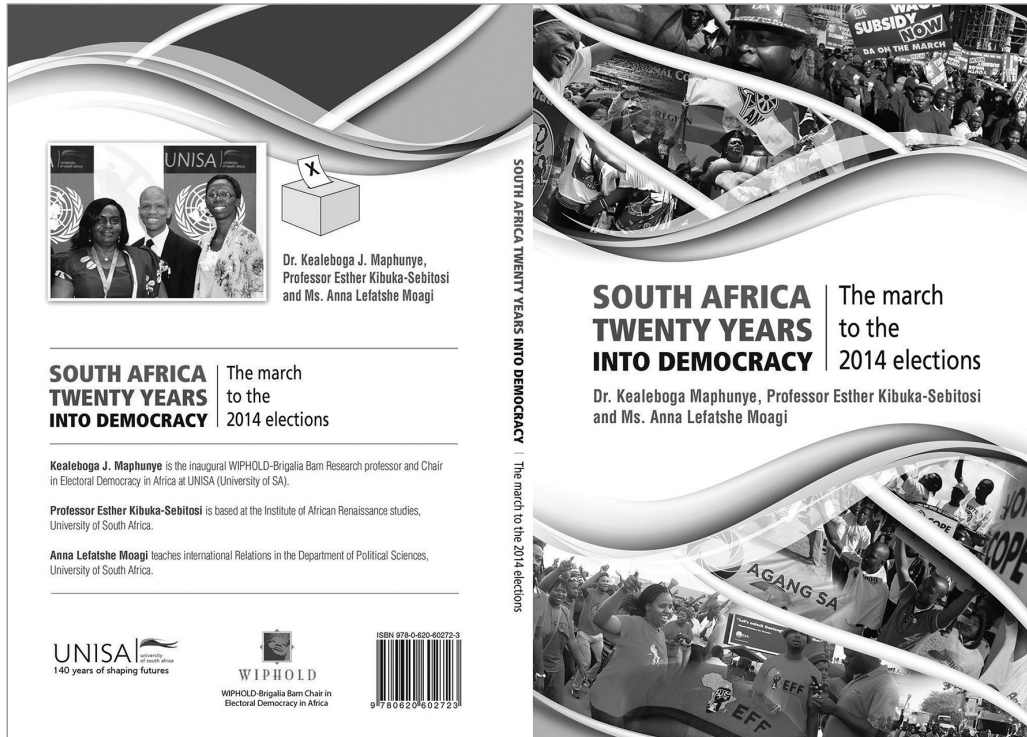
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal

tshishonga@ukzn.ac.za

‘South Africa – twenty years into democracy’ is a fascinating book that traces the country’s election history, particularly the 2014 National Elections. The book looks at what motivates people to vote for a particular political party. It touched on many aspects of the socio-economic challenges faced by the country, which are catalysts for voting for a particular party. Considering the exclusionary nature of the apartheid regime, the authors interrogated why electoral democracy matters for South Africans in the context of democratising elections and deracialisation. It draws lessons and experiences from other countries such as Kenya and Zimbabwe, who claim to be democratic, yet their recent past elections were fraught with fraud and vote rigging. The book points at how electoral democracy in South Africa is at its best compared to other democratic African states.

The book is partitioned into 8 chapters, which are interwoven to demonstrate the importance of consolidating democracy through holding elections as part of South Africa’s ongoing democratisation processes. The introductory chapter sets the tone as it focuses on issues central to citizens’ choice for political parties such as the skyrocketing rates of unemployment, issues with regard to service delivery, mechanisms to uproot corruption, the land question as well as economic freedom.

Chapters 2 and 3 look at elections and the role it plays in the entrenchment of a democratic culture, where public participation and electoral bodies such as the IEC play a pivotal role in determining the quality of electoral democracy. Imperative to the pre-election and the election period, is the cultural socialisation of citizens to embrace elections as their democratic right, to inaugurate the incumbent government and hold elected representatives accountable. Unfortunately, South



African elections, similar to other African counties, are enmeshed by a violent culture during campaigns for votes and certain parties use also ethnicity as part of their campaigning message.

Chapters 4, 5 and 7 position youth and women as important role players in society and these groupings are also the most affected by inhumane and irresponsible policies adopted by political parties. The authors argue that youth should not only be visible during the electoral campaigns, but should also be part of developing policies aimed at transforming their lives through their participation. In addition, the authors warn against victimising of young people by perpetuating generalisations such as the youth is ‘ apathetic’ or ‘troublesome’; that the ‘youth are the future’; and even reference to the ‘born frees’, as these statements underlie exclusionary and delaying tactics to radically confront challenges facing young people in South Africa. Chapter 7, in particular, is dedicated to gender equity in an electoral democracy. It also highlights the role and contributions made by women in politics. The authors bemoan the fact that, despite the gallant contributions made by women in the struggle for political liberation in South Africa and beyond, women are still entangled in poverty and gender inequalities, aggravated by their exclusion and marginalisation in the appointment of leadership roles and nomination as candidates for public office,

etcetera. This is evident in the number of parliamentary seats allocated to women, compared to their male counterparts (see pages 98 & 99).

Chapter 6 locates the paradox of ‘service delivery’ protests and social action in the context of consolidating a healthy democracy and as a threat to electoral democracy. Thus, protests or social discontent is discussed as a ‘democratic right’ that is constitutionally legislated, on the one hand, while on the other hand, this ‘social discontent’ is also a manifestation of deeper tensions in society, which should be addressed.

What is more interesting about this book is that it is timely, as it looks at the twenty years of democracy from a holistic perspective. The authors have integrated aspects of the South African society, culture and ethnicity in their analysis of the run-up of the 2014 National Elections. The authors touch on societal challenges such as globalisation, the recession, the uncertain international position of the country, unfair trade agreements and choices of international partnerships, which often times impact negatively on society as a whole. The authors, however, add that the last twenty years of democracy have improved the living standards of many South Africans. Importantly, the book is accessible in terms of language and style and the fact that it has illustrative graphs, pictures and data figures makes it more accessible for any lay person.

The embedded shortfalls of this book is that while the title is on ‘South Africa – twenty years into democracy’ its emphasis is on youth-related issues, which can be confusing to the reader. It makes one wonder whether the authors prioritised youth deliberately and decided to omit ‘people with disabilities’, for example, as a potential voting group. Some of the chapters are too short (e.g. chapter 4 and 6) to advance both empirical and scholarly debates in this regard. The book could have benefitted the reader by balancing the theoretic desk top research with more empirical data. For example, little empirical data is reflected in chapter 5, where the authors quoted verbatim from the interviewed respondents to strengthen their arguments. Despite these shortcomings, the authors have managed to navigate through the importance of electoral democracy; including its embedded complexities. The book is further enhanced by the authors’ professionalism and expertise in their respective fields as well as their academic rigour. I therefore recommend this book to all scholars and students in the fields of Political Science and Public Administration, Development Studies, Sociology, etcetera, in particular, and ordinary South Africans in general.