

# The Journal of Social Encounters

---

Volume 7  
Issue 2 *Exploring the Various Dimensions and  
Manifestations of Solidarity*

Article 19

---

2023

## Review of Precarious Power: Compliance and discontent under Ramaphosa's ANC

Gary Prevost

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University, [Gprevost@csbsju.edu](mailto:Gprevost@csbsju.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters)



Part of the [African History Commons](#), [African Studies Commons](#), [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Prevost, Gary (2023) "Review of Precarious Power: Compliance and discontent under Ramaphosa's ANC," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, 247-248.

Available at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social\\_encounters/vol7/iss2/19](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss2/19)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

***Precarious Power: Compliance and discontent under Ramaphosa's ANC.* Susan Booysen, 2021, Johannesburg: Wits University Press, paper, 328 pages, ISBN: 78-1776146451**

Gary Prevost  
Research Associate and Honorary Professor  
Nelson Mandela University

Susan Booysen, one of South Africa's most respected political scientists, has made another important contribution to our understanding of contemporary South African politics with her new book, *Precarious Power: Compliance and discontent in Ramaphosa's ANC* (Wits University Press, 2021). This work is the third in a trilogy of books focused on the African National Congress (ANC), South Africa's long standing ruling party. No other political scientist has given us more insight into the political policies and internal politics of the ANC than Susan Booysen.

This volume covers the period from 2015 to 2020 including the fall of Jacob Zuma from the presidency and the first three years of Cyril Ramaphosa's presidency. The primary focus of the book is how Ramaphosa has managed to keep the ANC afloat following the disastrous administration of Jacob Zuma (2009-2018) when the government and the ANC became deeply tainted by a series of scandals that saw widespread enrichment by some ANC members and the capture of key state institutions by outside actors embodied in the Gupta brothers from India. The book does a good job of summarizing the sordid acts of the Zuma period that have been well documented by others, but the author's focus is on Ramaphosa and how he built a base of support within the ANC in the lead-up to the party elective conference in December 2017 through the period of the COVID crisis in 2020. Ramaphosa won the presidency of the party by the narrowest of margins at that party conference over Zuma's hand-picked choice, Nkosazama Dlamini-Zuma to become the presumed presidential nominee of the party for the 2019 elections. However, Ramaphosa realized that the party's electoral success would be severely compromised if Zuma were allowed to serve out his term. Ramaphosa used his position as president of the party to engineer Zuma's forced resignation in February 2018 even gaining support from former Zuma allies and to launch a robust anti-corruption campaign.

Though the ANC lost several percentage points in the 2019 national elections compared to 2014, the 58% support was a clear outright majority and maintained a nearly 40% lead over its closest rivals. Booysen details how Ramaphosa's personal support surpassed that of the ANC party and was key to the ANC victory. The victory was impressive on the surface but the author argues that it was a hollow victory because the ANC total votes continued to decline especially among younger voters and the margin of victory was assisted by the weakness of the opposition parties. Even more important than the above factors, she describes how the continuing factionalism within the ANC and the damage done to many state institutions by the Zuma period severely challenged the current president's ability to carry out a public policy agenda that fundamentally addressed the country's serious socio-economic challenges.

However, Booysen credits the current administration with attempts to meet South Africa's challenges in several key areas including land, health care, and unemployment but concludes that most of those efforts were falling short of their targets because:

State capture and corrupted governance went far in explaining why resources had not reached their targets preventing policies policy targets from being realized. Much of the public funds had been siphoned off by politicians often preoccupied with scoring their own personal enrichment by state tender deals. Policies not undermined by these factors were damaged by the global recessions of 2008 and 2020 and South Africa's neo-colonial legacies.

Another key theme of the book is the role that protest politics play in the South African political system, especially the manner by which the ANC governs. In a practice that goes back many years citizens, ranging from township residents to university students use direct action to their demands confident that their actions will not have legal repercussions and that their demands will be at least partially met. Those carrying out the actions are often ANC voters claiming goods from the government that they believe have been previously promised. This is especially true when township residents occupy land and build informal settlements. ANC officials often agree to these demands as a way of demonstrating to voters that they hear their concerns. These ANC actions in response to street demonstrations demonstrate what Booysen calls the ruling party's need to be 'its existential need to be Left'. That need is more present than ever as the ANC faces its most sustained challenge from the Left in the form of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and their leader Julius Malema, former head of the ANC Youth league. As a result, the ANC, if not Ramaphosa himself, must embrace progressive positions on issues such as land and national health insurance even if the government's ability to deliver on them is limited at least in part because of the resources squandered during the Zuma era. However, on the downside, these government actions in reaction to street demonstrations leads to a societal sense of lawlessness and social disorder.

Her conclusion, embodied in the title of the book, is that the hold of the ANC on monopoly political power at the national level is indeed precarious and has the definite potential to come to an end as early the 2024 national elections. After the book was published the ANC fell below 50% of the vote in the low turnout 2021 local elections. As of this writing, South Africa's electricity crisis is deepening with consequences for the economy and crime. In that context Ramaphosa paradoxically strengthened his personal hold on the ANC at the 2022 elective conference but it not clear that any ANC leader can lead the party to an outright victory, heading South Africa's political system into uncharted waters.