

SOUTH AFRICA'S THIRD TRANSITION

South Africa's Third Transition: Elite Contestation and the Party-State

Chipkin, I. & Vidojević, J. (2025). Elite Contestation in South Africa, 2006–2018: The Making and Unmaking of a Power Elite. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 51(5), 643–660.

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The Elite Social Terrain

Power elite

A small, cohesive group holding dominant positions in major institutions of society — with the power to make decisions of wide-ranging consequence. Institutional position, not personal wealth, confers elite status.

Pluralism

Power in democratic societies is distributed among a wide array of interest groups and organisations, rather than concentrated in a single elite. Pluralism is the democratic ideal — power elite theory describes what often happens instead.

Routes to elite positions

Europe, US & Asia

Educational institutions

Elite universities act as the gateway to senior positions. Bourdieu's grandes écoles, Domhoff, Stevens and Khan on the Ivy League.

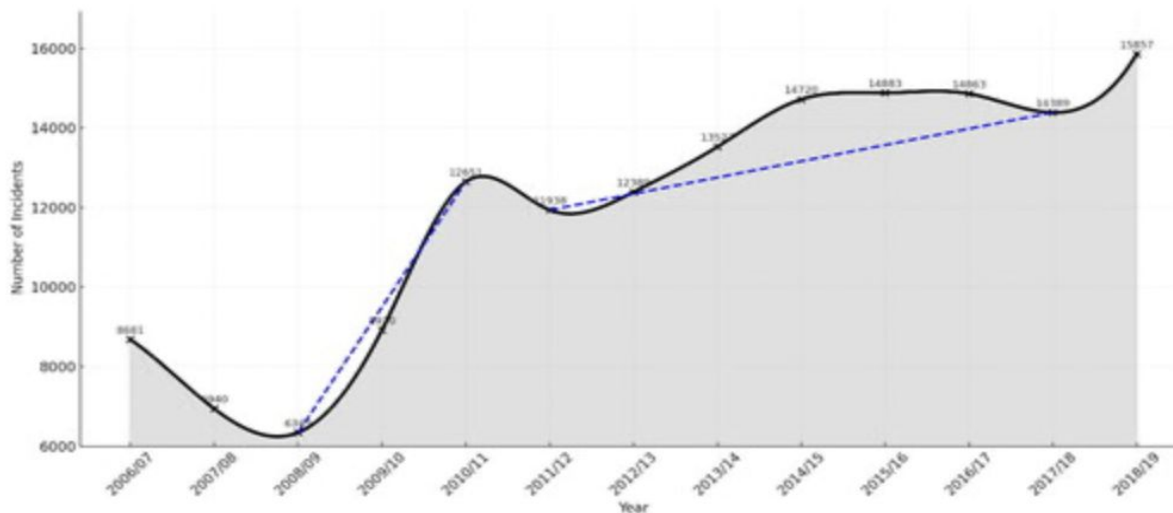
South Africa

Political party membership

Political parties — above all the ANC — function as “gatekeepers” to resources and positions in the state.

Elite contestation in data: incidents, 2006–2019

Number of reported incidents tracks the rise and plateau of elite conflict during the Zuma era and its aftermath



- **2008/09 — nadir**
 Polokwane fallout.
 Elite realignment begins.

- **2010/11 — peak**
 Zuma consolidation.
 Patronage networks peak.

- **2018/19 — new high**
 Post-Ramaphosa.
 Changing elite social terrain

The legal foundation of the party-state

Public Service Act, 1994 — Section 3(7)

"An executive authority has all those powers and duties necessary for—

(a) the internal organisation of the department concerned, including its organisational structure and establishment, the transfer of functions within that department, human resources planning, the creation and abolition of posts...; and

(b) the recruitment, appointment, performance management, transfer, dismissal and other career incidents of employees of that department..."

Public Service Amendment Act, 2025

The most significant structural reform to South Africa's system of government since 1994

The structural shift

Before · Public Service Act 1994

Ministers and MECs held direct powers over departmental appointments, HR decisions, and operations. Political loyalty to the minister determined who was hired and how departments were run.



After · Public Service Amendment Act 2025

Appointment and operational powers transferred to heads of departments. Ministers confined to their proper function: setting policy and overseeing its implementation.

Three key provisions

1

Administrative powers to officials

Directors-General gain sole authority over appointments, HR, and operations — insulated from ministerial interference.

2

Politicians confined to policy

Ministers set and oversee policy; they no longer control who implements it. The political-administrative boundary is now enshrined in law.

3

Foundation for merit-based recruitment

By removing political appointment powers, the Act creates the legal precondition for competitive, merit-based recruitment into senior management.

Changing the elite social terrain?

If political parties no longer monopolise access to state power, what are the routes into elite positions?

Strengthening multiparty democracy

The PSAA removes the structural incentive to control a single party as a route to state resources. If administrative positions are filled by merit, electoral competition and policy platforms become the primary arena for political elites.

Elite schools & universities

A merit-based public service requires educational credentials and demonstrable competence. If the university — rather than the party — becomes the gateway to senior state roles, South Africa may converge toward the European and Asian pattern of elite formation.

Organised crime & illicit networks

Weakening the party-state does not automatically produce constitutional governance. Where legitimate routes to elite status are blocked or contested, resources may flow toward illicit networks — particularly where state enforcement capacity is itself compromised.
