

SOUTH AFRICA'S THIRD TRANSITION

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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2026.2626233>

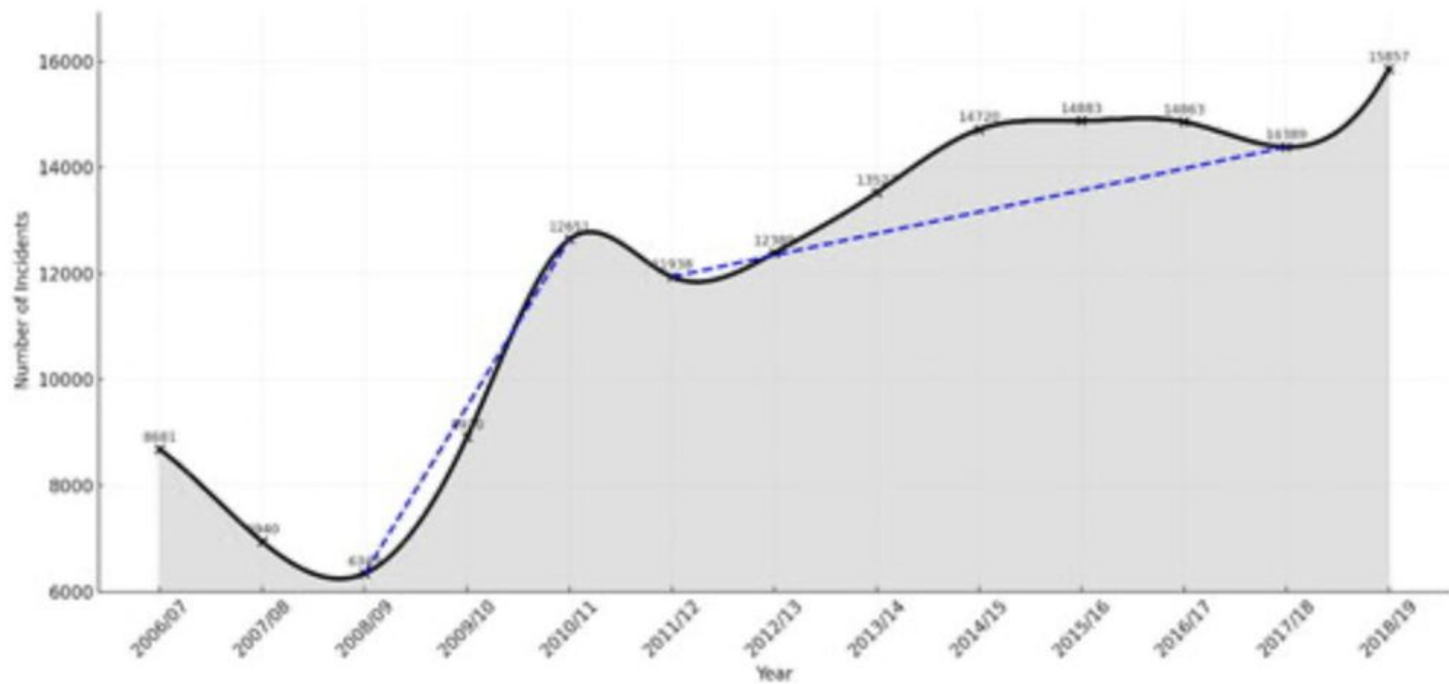
Chipkin, I. (2026). South Africa's Third Transition: Democracy, Constitutionalism, Rationalisation, Working Paper, New South Institute, pp. 1-11. <https://nsi.org.za/publications/ivor-chipkin-south-africa-third-transition-nsi-working-paper/>

elites are defined in relation to institutional power – describe the “elite social terrain”

- **Power elite** – small, cohesive group of individuals who hold dominant positions in the major institutions of society and have the power to make decisions with wide-ranging consequences
- **Pluralism** – situation where power in democratic societies is distributed among a wide array of interest groups and organisations, rather than being concentrated in the hands of a single elite

Routes to elite positions?

- **Educational institutions** – trajectory in Europe, the US and more and more in Asia. (Bourdieu – grands ecoles, Stevens/ Domhoff/ Khan – Ivy League Universities)
- **South Africa? political parties** function as **gatekeepers** to resources and positions in the 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 provision for the employment of persons additional to the fixed establishment; and
- (b) the **recruitment, appointment, performance management, transfer, dismissal** and other career incidents of employees of that department, including any other matter which relates to such employees in their individual capacities (emphasis added).

THE PUBLIC SERVICE AMENDMENT ACT, 2025: WHAT THE LAW DOES

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, human resources, and operational decisions.

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 (Directors-General).

Ministers confined to their proper function: setting policy and overseeing its implementation.

THREE KEY PROVISIONS

1

Administrative powers to officials

Directors-General and Heads of Department gain sole authority over appointments, HR decisions, and departmental operations — insulating them from ministerial interference.

2

Politicians confined to policy

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

3

Foundation for merit-based appointments

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

Changing the elite social terrain?

Redirecting elite competition:

- strengthening multiparty democracy?
 - elite schools/ universities?
 - – organised crime?