

Beyond Liberation Hegemony: Electoral Realignments and the Prospects for Democratic Consolidation in Southern Africa

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the electoral decline of former liberation movements in Southern Africa and the implications for democratic consolidation. Focusing on South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Namibia's South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), the Zimbabwe African People's Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), it employs a comparative qualitative design to analyse electoral data, party manifestos, parliamentary debates and media reports. Findings reveal three key issues. First, liberation legitimacy as a political resource is steadily eroding, undermined by corruption, socio-economic crises and generational shifts that weaken historical loyalties. Second, trajectories diverge: South Africa and Namibia point to potential democratic renewal through pluralism and coalition governance, while Zimbabwe and Mozambique illustrate how liberation decline can entrench authoritarian resilience through coercion and institutional capture. Third, the implications for democratic consolidation are contingent, rather than uniform. Institutional strength and the coherence of the opposition shape whether electoral realignments generate pluralism or reinforce authoritarianism. The analysis demonstrates that the decline of liberation hegemony is neither linear nor uniformly democratising. Instead, it opens contested political pathways that reveal the conditions under which the decline of the dominant party strengthens or undermines democratic consolidation in post-liberation states.

Keywords: Liberation movements; electoral realignment; democratic consolidation; Southern Africa; authoritarian resilience; political pluralism

1. Introduction

The post-independence political landscape in Southern Africa has been strongly shaped by the long-term legacy of liberation movements, which, upon attaining state power, often transformed into dominant political parties. This phenomenon, "liberation hegemony", has been characterised by prolonged single-party dominance, often fortified by historical legitimacy derived from the struggle against colonialism (Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Namibia) and apartheid (South Africa) (Melber 2009). However, recent decades have witnessed emerging, yet significant electoral realignments across the region, signalling a potential erosion of this hegemony and prompting critical questions about the future of democratic consolidation. Understanding these electoral shifts is vital, as the trajectory of Southern African democracies hinges on the ability of political systems to adapt to changing citizen demands and institutionalise competitive, fair electoral processes beyond the shadow of historical grievances and loyalties.

The basis of this inquiry is that the prolonged dominance of former liberation movements, while initially serving as a stabilising force in emerging democracies, has also presented significant challenges to the deepening of democratic institutions. Such challenges include the blurring of party-state lines, limited accountability and restricted political contestation. However, recent electoral outcomes in countries like Zimbabwe, South Africa and Mozambique suggest a growing voter discontent and a willingness to challenge established powers, leading to more competitive electoral environments and in some cases, shifts in governmental control (Troco 2019; Siachiwena and Saunders 2021; Ochieng et al. 2025). These realignments are not merely episodic electoral fluctuations, they appear to be symptomatic of deeper structural changes within Southern African societies, encompassing evolving political, socio-economic and generational dynamics.

This paper is guided by a central research question: How do electoral realignments following the decline of former liberation movements shape the prospects for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa? To address this principal question systematically, three sub-questions will be investigated. First, the factors that explain the erosion of electoral dominance among liberation movements in Southern Africa are examined, specifically the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Zimbabwe African People's Union- Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in Zimbabwe, the South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique



(FRELIMO). The political, socio-economic and generational forces at play are also analysed. Politically, the longevity of these movements in power has often led to accusations of corruption, state capture and a growing disconnect between the ruling elite and the citizenry. The initial broad-based national liberation agenda has, in many instances, been usurped by factional interests and struggles for internal power, further alienating segments of the electorate.

Socio-economic factors are equally critical; despite initial promises of equitable development, many Southern African nations still struggle with persistent high levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty. These unmet expectations, particularly among the youth, fuel disillusionment with the incumbent liberation parties, who are increasingly perceived as failing to deliver on post-liberation dividends. Moreover, generational shifts play a pivotal role. A significant portion of the electorate in Southern Africa today consists of “born-frees”, individuals with no direct memory of the liberation struggle, whose political loyalties are less bound by historical narratives and more by contemporary issues of governance, economic opportunity and service delivery. This demographic change fundamentally alters the electoral calculus, compelling parties to compete on policy platforms rather than historical legitimacy alone.

Secondly, the paper investigates how opposition parties, social movements, and new political actors have capitalised on these electoral realignments to challenge liberation hegemony. The decline of liberation movements has created a political vacuum and an opportunity structure for alternative political forces. This sub-question explores the strategies employed by opposition parties, ranging from coalition-building to issue-based campaigns that resonate with disaffected voters. It also scrutinises the role of civil society organisations and social movements in mobilising public opinion, advocating for democratic reforms and holding liberation parties accountable. The emergence of entirely new political actors, often youth-led or focused on specific grievances, signifies a political environment where traditional allegiances are weakening, and innovative approaches to political mobilisation are gaining traction.

Finally, the paper explores the implications of these shifts for party system stability, governance and the broader trajectory of democratic consolidation across the four selected countries. Electoral realignments, while indicative of democratic vibrancy, can also introduce instability. This sub-question analyses how the erosion of a dominant party system affects the fragmentation and coherence of opposition forces, potentially leading to volatile coalition politics or electoral impasses. Also, the impact on governance is assessed, considering how increased political competition might raise greater accountability, transparency and policy responsiveness, or conversely, lead to political paralysis and gridlock. At the end of the day, the central problem is the trajectory of democratic consolidation. Do these realignments represent a genuine deepening of democracy, characterised by robust institutions, stronger rule of law and greater citizen participation, or do they risk descending into political uncertainty and democratic backsliding?

The paper employed a comparative qualitative analysis, utilising a four-country design to investigate the electoral realignments and their implications for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa. This approach was particularly suited for in-depth exploration of political processes within a limited number of cases, allowing for an appreciation of causal mechanisms and contextual variations. The case selection rationale is guided by the shared characteristic that all selected countries are led by former liberation movements, providing a consistent baseline for comparison. The selected countries are South Africa, Namibia, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The selection of four countries provides a manageable scope for in-depth analysis and offered sufficient variation for meaningful comparison. This enabled a focused examination of how the erosion of their electoral dominance plays out under different political and socio-economic conditions. The comparative element involved systematically analysing similarities and differences across these cases to identify common patterns and unique trajectories. Additionally, electoral data, party manifestos, parliamentary records, media reports and other archival sources were analysed to triangulate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the political landscape.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Liberation movements and post-independence dominance*

Post-independence politics in Southern Africa has been shaped by the enduring legacy of liberation movements, which often leveraged their historical role as “liberation dividends” to secure political legitimacy and electoral dominance. This dividend functioned as a form of political capital, granting these movements a unique advantage in the initial decades of independence (Melber 2018; Tsholo 2021). The ANC in South Africa, ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe, SWAPO in Namibia and FRELIMO in Mozambique exemplify this phenomenon. These parties were not merely political organisations, they were deeply entwined with the nation-building process, having led the struggle against colonial rule and apartheid.

The historical centrality of these movements in achieving independence provided them with an almost unchallengeable moral authority and a narrative of national heroism that resonated deeply with the populace, as noted with the landslide victories they secured at independence (ZANU-PF (1980): 57 per cent; ANC (1994) 62.65 per cent; SWAPO (1989) 57.3 per cent; FRELIMO (1977): 100 per cent (one-party), later 44.3 per cent in 1994 multiparty) (Wood 1993; Saunders, 2011; Plaut 2014). Their early governance was often characterised by extensive state control, patronage networks and the integration of party structures into state institutions, further entrenching their power. This period saw the establishment of dominant party systems, where the liberation movement consistently won majorities, often stifling effective opposition and concentrating power within their ranks. The legitimacy derived from their liberation struggle superseded conventional democratic accountability for a considerable period.

2.2. Electoral decline and realignment

The sustained dominance of liberation movements, however, has not been absolute, and recent decades have witnessed a discernible trend of electoral decline and subsequent realignment across Southern Africa. This erosion of electoral support is not unique to the region and finds parallels in comparative studies of dominant party systems in other parts of the world, such as Latin America and Asia (Southall 2019; Carty 2022). In these contexts, various factors, including economic crises, corruption and a failure to adapt to changing societal demands, have contributed to the weakening of previously unassailable parties.

The realignment theory offers a valuable framework for understanding these shifts, advancing that fundamental changes in voter preferences and party loyalties lead to significant alterations in the electoral landscape. A key driver of this realignment in Southern Africa is generational turnover. Younger voters, who did not experience the liberation struggle directly, are less swayed by the historical liberation dividend and are more inclined to prioritise contemporary issues, such as service delivery, economic opportunities and government accountability (Van der Brug and Franklin 2017). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Southern Africa, where recent presidential transitions have prompted discussions about new generational politics, potentially bringing economic reform and democratic possibilities, though liberation movements may remain constrained by patronage and corruption (Southall 2018). The realignment framework proves valuable for understanding these shifts, as critical realignments represent important subnational electoral phenomena that vary considerably in form and can endure for decades (Nardulli 1995).

In South Africa specifically, the emergence of “born-free” generations has significantly impacted electoral outcomes, changing aggregate turnout patterns at the macro level, while exhibiting distinct attitudinal differences at the micro level (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019). However, contrary to expectations, post-apartheid generations show less commitment to democracy than older cohorts (Matthes 2012), illustrating how dealignment over time can coexist with realignment across generations (Van der Brug and Rekker 2020). This shift towards issue-based politics contrasts with the historical reliance on nationalist narratives and collective memory that characterised previous generations. Consequently, voter volatility has increased, as citizens are more willing to switch their allegiance to parties that they perceive as better addressing their immediate concerns, rather than remaining loyal to historical entities. The declining electoral performance of these long-ruling parties indicates a move away from hegemonic control towards a more competitive and potentially pluralistic political environment.

2.3. Democratic consolidation in Africa

The implications of the decline of liberation movements for democratic consolidation in Southern Africa are a subject of ongoing debate among scholars. One perspective argues that the erosion of liberation hegemony is a necessary step towards greater pluralism and a more robust democratic system (Melber 2002; Butler 2009; Southall 2019). As dominant parties lose their grip on power, space opens for opposition parties to compete more effectively, leading to increased political contestation, improved accountability and in due course, a more consolidated democracy. This view suggests that the breaking of a long-standing one-party dominant system can usher in a period of more genuine multi-party democracy where power can genuinely alternate.

However, a competing view cautions against an overly optimistic interpretation, highlighting the potential risks of instability associated with the decline of historically dominant parties. This perspective suggests that while the weakening of liberation movements may create opportunities for greater pluralism, it can also lead to fragmentation of the party system, political uncertainty and even social unrest (Dorman 2006; Melber 2011; Bayer 2017;). Some scholars, such as Butler and Southall (2015), have characterised many African cases as “unfinished transitions”, implying that while formal democratic institutions may exist, the underlying processes of consolidation, such as the rule of law, robust civil society and accountable governance, remain fragile. The challenge has been managing the transition from dominant party rule to a more competitive system without succumbing to political decay or authoritarian reversals.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for analysing electoral realignments and democratic consolidation in Southern Africa integrates several key concepts: Post-liberation politics; party system institutionalisation; democratic consolidation and generational politics. These theoretical lenses collectively provide a framework for understanding the issues at play.

Post-liberation politics theorises that the legacies of liberation struggles, act as both assets and liabilities for incumbent parties. Initially, the historical role in achieving independence endows these movements with significant political capital, legitimacy and a strong sense of national identity, which serves as a powerful electoral asset (Gumede 2017). However, over time, these very legacies can transform into liabilities, particularly as the initial “liberation dividend” diminishes. This occurs when the narratives of past glory fail to address contemporary grievances, such as corruption, economic inequality, and inadequate service delivery (Cawood and Fisher 2022). The inability to adapt to evolving societal demands, coupled with internal factionalism and authoritarian tendencies often cultivated during the struggle can alienate new generations of voters and ultimately undermine their legitimacy.

Party system institutionalisation refers to the degree to which party systems are stable, predictable and accepted by political actors and the electorate (Kuenzi and Lambright 2001). In many Southern African states, the party systems have historically been characterised by weak institutionalisation, primarily due to the overwhelming dominance of liberation movements. This weak institutionalisation can manifest as high party volatility, frequent defections and a lack of clear programmatic differentiation between parties (Lindberg 2007). The erosion of liberation movement dominance, while potentially opening up political space, can also exacerbate this weak institutionalisation, leading to further volatility and unpredictability. A highly institutionalised party system, conversely, is typically associated with stable electoral competition, predictable government formation and a robust democratic process (Randall and Svåsand 2002). The decline of hegemonic parties without the simultaneous strengthening of party system institutions can, therefore, lead to a fragile democratic landscape rather than a consolidated one.

Democratic consolidation, in this context, refers to the process by which democracy becomes the “only game in town”, where all significant political actors accept democratic rules and institutions as the legitimate framework for political competition. The decline of dominant parties, in this case former liberation movements, presents a dual pathway for democratic consolidation. On one hand, it can serve as a pathway to pluralism, increasing greater competition, accountability and responsiveness, which are crucial for consolidating democracy (Cooper 2017). This scenario envisions a shift from a *de facto* one-party state to a vibrant multi-party system where citizens have genuine choices and governments are regularly held to account. On the other hand, the decline can lead to political instability, fragmentation and even democratic backsliding (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Mbandlwa 2023). This risk is heightened if the incumbent liberation movements resist electoral defeat through undemocratic means, or if the emerging opposition is too fragmented or weak to provide a credible alternative. The outcome hinges on the capacity of institutions and political actors to manage the transition peacefully and constructively.

Generational politics emphasises the role of differing political attitudes and priorities across age cohorts. Younger voters, who form an increasing proportion of the electorate in Southern Africa, often have distinct political experiences and expectations compared to older generations (Resnick and Casale 2014; Schulz-Hezenberg 2019; Tsandzana 2022; Masunda 2024). Unlike their predecessors, younger voters did not directly participate in or vividly recall the liberation struggles and thus, are less inclined to be bound by historical loyalties or the “liberation dividend”. Instead, their political engagement is frequently driven by present-day concerns, such as the demand for tangible service delivery, economic opportunities and accountability from their leaders. This generational shift in political values and priorities contributes significantly to the erosion of traditional support bases for liberation movements and fuels electoral realignments, forcing parties to adapt or face further decline.

4. Findings

This section presents a comparative analysis of four nations, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia and Mozambique, illustrating how varying patterns of erosion in liberation hegemony, driven by distinct political, socio-economic, and generational factors, have produced diverse implications for party system stability, governance and democratic prospects.

Table 1: Vote shares over time for the ANC, ZANU-PF, SWAPO and FRELIMO

Liberation Movement	Founding or Early Election Year (Independence or First Major Post-Independence Election)	Vote Share in Founding / Early Election (%)	Most Recent Election Year	Vote Share in Most Recent Election (%)
ANC (South Africa)	1994	62.65 %	2024	40.18 %
ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe)	1980	57.0 %	2023	56.18 %
SWAPO (Namibia)	1989	57.33 %	2024	53.37 %
FRELIMO (Mozambique)	1977 (one-party system)	100 % (no opposition)	2024	70-75 % regionally in some contested areas; national figures (data less precise)

Source: *Electoral management bodies for the respective countries*

4.1. Zimbabwe (ZANU-PF)

ZANU-PF exemplifies a liberation movement that has largely maintained its electoral dominance through a combination of coercive and manipulative strategies. The pattern of ZANU-PF's sustained rule is characterised by the strategic manipulation of state resources, widespread voter intimidation and the entrenchment of patronage networks, particularly within rural constituencies. In the urban areas, ZANU PF has, since 2000 to date, continually lost local government and parliamentary elections. Despite frequent economic crises and highly contested elections, ZANU-PF has consistently leveraged these mechanisms to secure disputed victories.

ZANU-PF's enduring power in Zimbabwe stems from multiple interconnected mechanisms that have created a resilient authoritarian system. The party's dominance is anchored by a militarised electoral authoritarianism, where the military serves as the primary guarantor of regime survival through an executive-military alliance that deploys violence and coercive measures to maintain control (Bratton and Masunungure 2008; Masunungure 2011; Moyo and Ncube 2015; Maringira 2024). The executive-military alliance has created a competitive authoritarian regime that uses violence and intimidation to maintain power regardless of electoral outcomes (Moyo and Ncube 2015). Even during COVID-19, the government exploited health measures to further consolidate authoritarian rule (Yingi and Hlungwani 2024). This system is reinforced by systematic corruption and the strategic distribution of state resources, with the ZANU-PF maintaining extensive patronage networks and abusing public resources to secure electoral advantages (Bratton and Masunungure 2008; Ndakiripa 2020). The party's liberation credentials provide ideological justification for perpetual rule, supported by strong organisational cohesion forged through violent struggle (Levitsky and Way 2012; Mangonera 2014). However, some scholars identify potential vulnerabilities, including declining elite cohesion and the emergence of independent candidates from within the ZANU-PF itself (Sithole and Makumbe 1997).

The implications of this pattern for democratic consolidation are intensely negative. Entrenched authoritarian practices actively hinder the democratic process, manifesting in restricted civil liberties, limited media access for opposition voices, and documented instances of violent suppression against political dissent. This environment undermines the foundational principles of free and fair elections, the rule of law and institutional checks and balances, thereby delaying or preventing genuine democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe. Research demonstrates that a network of political elites has systematically worked to prevent democratic consolidation through deliberate disregard of constitutionalism, politicisation of state institutions and protection of politically connected persons (Bvekerwa et al. 2025). Elections have been consistently marred by violence, intimidation and killings, creating an environment incompatible with democratic governance (Zinyama 2012). The ruling party has enacted restrictive legislation that curtails civil liberties and limits participatory spaces, often reincarnating colonial-era laws to suppress opposition (Mapuva and Muyengwa 2017). Civic space is now legally constricted with the enactment of the Maintenance of Peace and order Act (MOPA), Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Bill, with the latter imposing onerous registration requirements and grants authorities' powers to suspend or deregister civil society organisations, thereby, undermining their fundamental rights and operational capacity. Media freedom remains severely constrained, contributing to a narrowing democratic culture (Tsarwe 2020).

4.2. *South Africa (ANC)*

The ANC in South Africa presents a contrasting pattern, moving from a position of undeniable liberation hegemony in the immediate post-apartheid era to facing historic electoral declines, particularly evident in the 2024 elections. This shift reflects a gradual and significant realignment in political preferences, signalling an erosion of trust that has accumulated over years.

Research on South Africa's electoral politics reveals a pattern of declining ANC support driven by multiple interconnected factors. Corruption scandals and poor governance have severely eroded public trust in government institutions, creating a direct relationship between declining electoral fortunes and institutional trust deficits (Rapanyane 2021; Tsheola and Sebola 2023). Service delivery failures at local levels significantly influence voter behaviour, with the ANC experiencing losses due to perceived inadequate performance (De Kadt and Lieberman 2017; Justesen and Schulz-Herzenberg 2018). High unemployment rates compound public grievances, particularly affecting younger demographics (Cilliers and Aucoin 2016; Rapanyane 2021). Generational shifts are evident as "born-free" voters demonstrate weaker partisan attachments and evaluate parties based on contemporary performance rather than historical legacy (Engel 2014; Braun 2024). This has resulted in "thin loyalty" among ANC supporters who continue voting, despite dissatisfaction (Braun 2024), while voting decisions increasingly vary by demographics and performance evaluations (Paret 2018).

Factionalism has also largely impacted the ANC's electoral performance and organisational integrity. Disputes within the ANC led to party splits, most notably the formation of political parties The Congress of People (COPE) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which emerged from internal ANC conflicts (Sarakinsky and Fakir 2015). At the local level, factionalism has often involved both party elites and ordinary members competing for resources in constrained socio-economic conditions (Mukwedeya 2015). Factional conflicts have intensified, characterised by fraud, violence and increased court interventions that undermine candidate selection processes (Cooper 2015). These challenges have escalated gatekeeper politics, patronage networks and bitter factional struggles that compromise the party's organisational integrity and electoral mandate delivery (Beresford 2015). The emergence of the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party, formed by former ANC president Jacob Zuma, saw the new party severely dent the performance of the ANC in the 2024 elections, with the ANC, for the first time since 1994, attaining 40.2 per cent of the vote and forced into a coalition government.

This ANC decline has altered South Africa's politics, ending three decades of dominant-party governance and necessitating coalition arrangements (Everatt 2024; Noutchie 2025). The formation of coalitions, particularly evident in municipalities since 2016, reflects both opportunities and challenges for democratic governance (Thwala 2023; Gumede et al. 2025). In some cases, coalition governments have offered benefits including democratic consolidation, enhanced pluralism and expanded resource bases for governing parties (Gumede et al. 2025). On the other hand, they also present significant risks of instability, policy fragmentation and governance paralysis due to ideological divergences and the absence of formal coalition protocols (Labuschagne 2018; Noutchie 2025). The ANC's transformation from a dominant party to coalition partner marks a critical juncture that could either strengthen democratic institutions through increased accountability or undermine effective governance through political fragmentation (Southall 2014; Everatt 2024).

4.3. *Namibia (SWAPO)*

In Namibia, SWAPO exhibits a pattern of gradual decline in support, notably marked by the loss of its two-thirds parliamentary majority following the 2020 elections. This represents a shift from its historical dominance and indicates an emerging fragility in its once unassailable position.

Since independence, SWAPO has effectively operated as a *de facto* one-party state, with limited citizen participation leading to political apathy (Bertelsmann-Scott 2000; Melber 2015). The party's transformation from liberation movement to governing party has been marked by authoritarian tendencies and predatory behaviour, disappointing supporters who expected genuine democratic transformation (Southall 2013). Historical tensions within SWAPO, including the suppression of internal dissent in the 1970s, foreshadowed later democratic deficits (Leys and Saul 1994). Most significantly, the 2019 elections marked a turning point, with SWAPO recording its first loss in voter support since independence, suggesting shifting political ground and potential changes in Namibia's democratic landscape (Melber 2020). Despite constitutional guarantees, Namibia remains among the world's most unequal societies, with limited improvements in wellbeing for the majority population (Melber 2015). The decline of SWAPO is attributable to several key drivers. High-profile corruption scandals, such as the infamous "Fishrot" bribery case, have severely damaged the standing and credibility of SWAPO's leadership in the eyes of the electorate. A younger electorate, increasingly disconnected from the historical narrative of SWAPO's liberation struggle, feels alienated from the party, seeking solutions to contemporary challenges rather than revering past achievements. Persistent economic stagnation,

characterised by rising unemployment and pervasive inequality, further fuels this discontent and contributes to the erosion of SWAPO's popular support.

The implications of these shifts are largely positive for democratic development, as they open up space for a more competitive democratic framework to emerge. The reduction of SWAPO's dominant majority encourages greater parliamentary scrutiny and potentially more vibrant political contestation. Nevertheless, this transition also carries the inherent risk of increased political fractiousness and challenges to political cohesion, as a more fragmented political landscape may struggle to build consensus and implement stable governance.

4.4. Mozambique (FRELIMO)

FRELIMO, in Mozambique, maintains formal dominance, yet its legitimacy has been significantly eroded by scandals such as the hidden debt crisis and the ongoing insurgent conflict in the northern regions. This suggests a pattern where outward control masks internal fragilities and growing public distrust.

FRELIMO's continued dominance in Mozambique stems from systematic control over electoral institutions and authoritarian practices that have persisted since the 1990s democratisation. The party has intimidated opposition parties through its control of electoral governance institutions, creating skewed incentive structures that compromise democratic competition (Nuvunga and Salih 2013). This dominance has been facilitated by a weak and fragmented opposition, with RENAMO (a Mozambique political party) experiencing significant vote losses since 2004 and struggling to adapt from a rebellion movement to an effective political party (Azevedo-Harman 2014; Nuvunga 2014). FRELIMO employs various authoritarian strategies including electoral manipulation, suppression of dissent, media control and election-related violence to maintain power (Pitcher 2020; Weston et al. 2025). Despite allegations of electoral fraud and governance failures, including inability to address insurgencies and debt transparency issues, these challenges have not translated into significant electoral shifts (Manning 2010; Monjane and Pitcher 2022). In 2024, following the presidential elections in Mozambique, youthful mass protests against the alleged electoral fraud perpetrated by the ruling party FRELIMO erupted. This resulted in Mozambique's transformation from a vibrant two-party system to a dominant-party system characterised by declining democratic institutions. Furthermore, the opposition coalitions remain weak and largely ineffective in consolidating power or presenting a unified, credible alternative to FRELIMO's rule.

The implications for democratic consolidation in Mozambique are that it remains inhibited. FRELIMO has adapted to emerging opposition by reinforcing authoritarian measures, rather than embracing democratic reforms. This limits electoral realignment, as the political machinery heavily favours FRELIMO's control, making it exceedingly difficult for opposition parties to challenge its hegemony effectively. Consequently, the trajectory toward genuine democratic consolidation remains stalled, characterised by superficial electoral processes, rather than substantive democratic deepening.

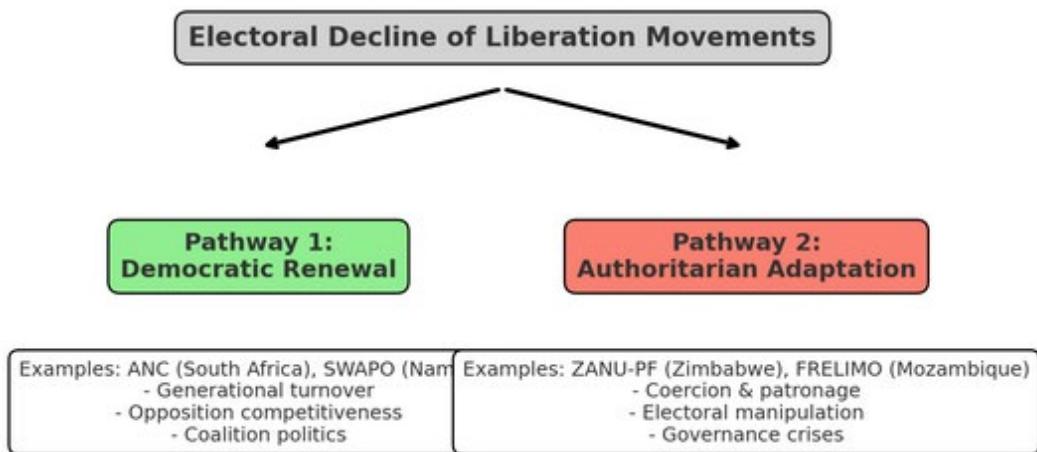
Table 2. Cross-case comparative analysis

Liberation Party	Pattern of Decline	Key Determinants	Implications for Democratic Consolidation
ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe)	Maintains dominance through repression, patronage and manipulation; legitimacy crisis persists.	Authoritarian resilience, rural clientelism, corruption, unresolved liberation narrative, youth disengagement.	Weakens democracy; entrenches authoritarianism and sustains electoral authoritarian rule.
ANC (South Africa)	Sharp electoral decline, lost outright majority in 2024; liberation dividend eroded.	Corruption scandals, unemployment, service delivery collapse, inequality, generational turnover.	Opens space for pluralism and coalition politics; risks instability and fragmented governance.
SWAPO (Namibia)	Gradual erosion since 2019; lost two-thirds majority in 2020.	Corruption scandals (Fishrot), economic stagnation, generational shifts, urban voter discontent.	Encourages competitiveness and pluralism; risks fragmentation and incoherent opposition.
FRELIMO (Mozambique)	Formal dominance declining, but legitimacy undermined by hidden debt scandal and insurgency.	Debt scandal, governance failures, authoritarian adaptation, violent conflict.	Stalls democratic consolidation; authoritarian adaptation blocks reform.

5. Discussion

The decline of former liberation movements across Southern Africa presents a multidimensional scenario for democratic consolidation, marked by contradictory routes ranging from democratic deepening to authoritarian resilience. This phenomenon is not monolithic; rather, it is shaped by a confluence of political, socio-economic and generational factors, which, in turn, influence the capacity of opposition forces and the stability of party systems.

Figure 1. Two pathways of liberation movement decline in Southern Africa



In cases like the ANC in South Africa and SWAPO in Namibia, the erosion of electoral dominance has led to a democratic opening, raising greater political competition and potential for democratic deepening. This process is characterised by a gradual, but discernible shift in voter loyalties and an increase in the political efficacy of opposition parties. In contrast, the ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe and FRELIMO in Mozambique have demonstrated authoritarian resilience, despite declining popular support. This resilience often involves leveraging state resources, employing coercive tactics and manipulating electoral processes to maintain power, thereby leading to democratic stagnation or even backsliding.

Several explanatory factors contribute to these varying patterns. Common to the decline of many former liberation movements are issues such as widespread corruption, which erodes public trust and legitimacy, and significant generational changes, where younger voters do not share the same historical allegiance to the liberation struggle as their predecessors (Southall 2011; Melber 2014). However, divergent factors also play a notable role. The degree to which former liberation movements resort to coercion and the strength and unity of opposition movements are key determinants of whether electoral realignments lead to democratic progress or authoritarian entrenchment. In Zimbabwe, for example, the state's capacity for repression and the fragmentation of opposition forces have historically hindered democratic transitions despite significant discontent with ZANU-PF (Hove 2019). Conversely, the relative institutional strength and established democratic norms in South Africa have provided avenues for opposition parties to gain ground, even if they have not yet fully dislodged the ANC from power (Southall 2016).

The implications for democratic consolidation are regionally varied. In countries like South Africa and Namibia where democratic openings have occurred; there is evidence of democratic deepening. This involves increased electoral competition and the strengthening of democratic institutions, greater accountability and enhanced civic participation. The ANC's declining vote share, for example, has forced it to engage more substantively with coalition politics and public demands, raising a more dynamic democratic environment (Booysen 2014; Lodge 2020). This process, while challenging, suggests that the decline of FLM hegemony can indeed lead to democratic renewal.

However, the experience of Zimbabwe and Mozambique highlights a dimmer side, characterised by democratic stagnation or backsliding. Here, the former liberation movements have often responded to declining support by tightening their grip on power, undermining democratic institutions and limiting political freedoms (Dorman 2006; Gumede 2017). This authoritarian resilience suggests that the legacy of liberation, once a source of legitimacy, can also be instrumentalised to justify exclusionary and undemocratic practices. In these contexts, electoral realignments do not necessarily translate into a democratic dividend, but rather into intensified struggles between incumbent authoritarian forces and emerging democratic aspirations.

For the Southern African region, the legacy of liberation no longer guarantees perpetual electoral dominance. The political outcomes following the decline of former liberation movements are increasingly shaped by the interaction of institutional strength and opposition

capacity. Strong democratic institutions, an independent judiciary and a vibrant civil society can help channel electoral realignments towards democratic deepening. Conversely, weak institutions and a fragmented opposition create fertile ground for authoritarian entrenchment.

The theoretical insights derived from the noted political shifts suggest that the liberation legacy functions as both a source of dominance and a vulnerability. Initially, the historical narrative of national liberation provides immense political capital, nurturing a sense of unity and moral authority that can sustain electoral victories for decades. However, this same legacy can become a vulnerability when former liberation movements fail to address contemporary challenges such as corruption, economic inequality and governance deficits. As generations shift and historical memory fades, the liberation narrative loses its potency, creating space for new political actors and ideologies.

This brings forth a pertinent normative question: Does liberation decline equate to democratic renewal or democratic crisis? The evidence suggests that it can be both. Where institutions are robust and civil society is strong, the decline of former liberation movements can catalyse democratic renewal by encouraging greater competition and accountability. However, in contexts where institutions are fragile and political culture remains susceptible to authoritarian tendencies, the decline can precipitate a democratic crisis, as incumbents resort to undemocratic means to retain power.

These shifts also carry significant implications for regional politics within the Southern African Development Community and the African Union. The varying democratic trajectories among member states create tensions within regional bodies that are ostensibly committed to democratic principles (this was seen with the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe). The divergent experiences of democratic deepening in some nations and authoritarian resilience in others (Zimbabwe and Zambia, for instance) challenge the notion of a cohesive regional approach to democracy and governance. Furthermore, the internal political stability of Southern African nations directly impacts regional security, economic integration and the overall credibility of regional organisations on the global stage. For instance, prolonged political crises or democratic backsliding in a key member state can destabilise neighbouring countries through refugee flows, economic disruption and security threats.

6. Conclusion

The current study demonstrates that the decline of former liberation movements in Southern Africa is an undeniable reality, yet, its consequences for democratic consolidation are highly varied across the region. This research has delineated a spectrum of paths, from democratic opening in contexts such as South Africa and Namibia, characterised by increased political competition and accountability, to persistent authoritarian resilience in countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique, where former liberation movements maintain power through coercive tactics and institutional manipulation. This divergence is primarily attributable to a combination of common explanatory factors, including corruption and generational shifts in political allegiance, and divergent factors such as the varying strength of opposition parties and the degree of state coercion employed by incumbent regimes.

This study extends existing theories on dominant party decline and democratic consolidation by applying them specifically to post-liberation contexts in Southern Africa. While previous literature has explored party system institutionalisation and its importance for democratic functioning, this research highlights how the unique historical legitimacy of former liberation movements can both entrench their dominance and over time, expose vulnerabilities to contemporary socio-economic grievances and changing demographic pressures. The findings highlight that a liberation legacy, while initially a powerful unifying force, does not guarantee indefinite electoral hegemony and can, in fact, become a source of contention as new political actors emerge and societal priorities evolve.

Future research should prioritise several interconnected areas to deepen the understanding of Southern Africa's evolving political landscape. Firstly, further investigation into coalition politics, particularly at the municipal and national levels, is key, as the declining dominance of former liberation movements increasingly necessitates power-sharing arrangements. Secondly, youth realignment warrants further investigation, examining how generational political attitudes and voter behaviour diverge from older cohorts and their implications for long-term party support. Such generational shifts can be pivotal in Southern African contexts. Thirdly, understanding the strategies of authoritarian adaptation employed by resilient former liberation movements is essential to predict and counter democratic backsliding.

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