In April 1994, South Africa held its first non-racial election. The African National Congress (ANC) won the election, gaining 63 per cent of both votes and seats. The following month, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the president of South Africa. The ANC subsequently developed into the ruling party of post-apartheid South Africa. Its majority in the National Assembly increased to 66 per cent in the 1999 election, and again to 70 per cent in the 2004 election, only falling slightly in 2009 to 65 per cent. This has been a remarkable achievement for a political movement that had been banned until 1990, and whose leadership had mostly been either in prison or in exile since the early 1960s.

Significance: What accounts for the ANC’s predominant position in South African politics? The key explanation is the leading role the party played in the campaign against extreme Afrikaner nationalism and in helping to promote resistance to the policies of apartheid. In describing itself as a ‘liberation movement’, rather than a conventional political party, the ANC continues to portray itself as the leader of South Africa’s ‘national democratic revolution’. This position has been bolstered by two factors. First, the ANC responds to and accommodates a broad diversity of interests and voices. Of particular significance in this respect have been the ‘tripartite’ alliance the ANC forged with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the ANC’s willingness in 1994 to form not a single-party government but a government of national unity, including the (New) National Party (which had abandoned its support for apartheid) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (historically, the voice of Zulu nationalism). Second, the ANC has placed a heavy stress on national reconciliation, seeking to forge a single South African identity and sense of purpose amongst a diverse and splintered population. Made possible by the ANC’s long-standing commitment to non-racialism, this was reflected in the establishment in 1995 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which sought to heal the wounds of the apartheid era by exposing the crimes and injustices committed by all sides of the struggle, rather than by handing down punishments.

However, the ANC faces at least three major challenges. First, the party’s ability to define itself in terms of the struggle for liberation is certain to decline over time. Not only is the proportion of the ANC’s membership (and, in due course, leadership, which has direct experience of anti-apartheid activism) steadily diminishing; in people’s wider perceptions, the ANC is certain to be viewed progressively more as a vehicle for government than as a vehicle for liberation. Second, and in common with other dominant parties, the ANC has been afflicted by factionalism and, at times, tumultuous internal conflicts. The most dramatic of these was between supporters of Thabo Mbeki, who became South Africa’s second post-apartheid president, serving from 1999 to 2008, and supporters of Jacob Zuma, who defeated Mbeki in 2007 in the contest for the presidency of the ANC and went on to become the president of South Africa in 2009. Third, even though post-apartheid South Africa has clearly embraced liberal-democratic principles and structures, the ANC’s dominance has fostered developments more commonly associated with one-party states. In particular, the ANC’s apparent electoral invulnerability has blurred the distinction between the party and the state, creating scope for corruption. The most high profile corruption scandal in post-apartheid South Africa emerged in 2005 and led to the conviction of Jacob Zuma’s financial advisor, Schabir Shaik, over his role in a 1999 arms deal. Zuma himself was dismissed as deputy president by President Mbeki and was subsequently charged with corruption, although these developments did nothing to diminish Zuma’s power base within the ANC, or to damage his subsequent career.