



By: TA | AP Insight

# National dialogue in South Africa - the beginning of a solution to the crisis or a political campaign?



Conceived as a broad-based discussion in which everyone has a voice, the national dialogue should provide answers to the biggest problems such as poverty and corruption.

But caution and criticism limit the scope for success of these national talks right from the start.

South African is starting a “national dialogue” Friday that is meant to bring all sectors of society together to discuss the country’s most pressing issues and find solutions.

The talks, initiated by President Cyril Ramaphosa after calls from civil society, are expected to include most political parties, civic groups and members of the public.

Concerns have been raised over a possible \$40 million cost, while there are also questions about whether the dialogue will result in significant changes.

South Africa faces many problems more than 30 years after the end of the **apartheid** system of white minority rule, including high levels of poverty and inequality, crime, corruption and an **unemployment** rate of more than 30% — one of the world's worst.

The country is no stranger to national talks, including the multiparty negotiations for a peaceful end to apartheid in the early 1990s.

Here's what to know about the national dialogue, which begins with a two-day convention in the capital, Pretoria.

## Why South Africa is holding the talks

Since its first democratic election in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected as the country’s first Black president, South Africa made progress in de-escalating racial tensions, improving the economy and providing access to millions of its poor Black majority.

However, there are concerns that the country

has digressed over the last decade and calls for a soul-searching exercise grew louder after the long-governing African National Congress, or ANC, party **lost** its majority in the 2024 election, forcing South Africa to form a **coalition** government.

**The dialogue will be a people-led, society-wide process – Cyril Ramaphosa**

Ramaphosa announced the dialogue in June.

“The national dialogue must be a place where everyone has a voice. The dialogue will be a people-led, society-wide process to reflect on the state of our country in order for us to reimagine our future,” he said.

## The participants

South Africans from all walks of life are expected to voice their views at the dialogue, with talks expected to be held in person and virtually.

Ramaphosa has appointed an Eminent Persons Group, which is made up of religious, sports, labor and civic figures who he says reflect the great diversity of South Africa.

They include South African rugby captain Siya Kolisi, award-winning “Black Panther” actor John Kani and former Constitutional Court Judge Edwin Cameron.

**It’s unclear how long the dialogue will last, but a second convention could happen early next year**

Not everyone believes the talks will have a real impact. The Democratic Alliance, or DA, the second-biggest party in the coalition government, **withdrew** in a dispute with the ANC over the firing of one of its deputy ministers by Ramaphosa. It has also said that the talks are a waste of public money.

The MK Party, the official opposition, has said that it won't participate.

The dialogue will happen in phases and take the form of public discussions in all of South Africa's nine provinces.

It's unclear how long the dialogue will last, but a second convention could happen early next year.

"I think the message that comes through specifically for the ANC is that they should stand a little bit back and not try to control the process," Kotze said.

## Criticism of the national dialogue

Some high-profile foundations have pulled out of this week's opening convention, citing rushed timelines and logistical issues, but they have said they will participate in the rest of the program.



*The DA party and others have accused the ANC of trying to control the conversation and use it as a platform to campaign before local elections next year - Cyril Ramaphosa*

The estimated cost of the dialogue has drawn criticism, although Ramaphosa's office has said that it's not as high as the numbers being put forward.

"If you want to have a real nationwide process, then it is going to cost a lot of money. It's not something that can be avoided," University of Pretoria political analyst Dirk Kotze said.

The DA party and others have accused the ANC of trying to control the conversation and use it as a platform to campaign before local elections next year.