Event report:

On May 14, the Africa Study Group hosted a discussion on the results of the 2019 South African national elections with Prof. Shireen Hassim, Canada 150 Research Chair in Gender and African Politics at Carleton University, and Prof. David Hornsby, Associate Vice-President (Teaching and Learning) and Professor of International Affairs at the Norman Patterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University. Both of ASG’s guests brought insider knowledge of South African politics having each been based at the University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg) prior to moving to Carleton in 2018.

In a joint presentation, Hassim and Hornsby outlined four key observations that the election results provided.

First, there were the continuing dilemmas faced by President Cyril Ramaphosa and his party, the African National Congress (ANC), despite the success of winning another election after years of tumultuous rule under the Zuma administration. Indeed, the victory could not conceal some continuing trends for the ANC, including the party’s ongoing loss of support in urban areas, especially with respect to the youth vote. For the black middle class, the ANC retained a tenuous hold. Other dilemmas, such as addressing the well-being of the working class and the long-promised question of redistribution, persisted.

The second observation concerned the emergence of radical politics in South Africa. Hassim and Hornsby argued that the left ha been unable to articulate a viable alternative plan for the country. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) -- the self-styled “radical and militant economic emancipation movement” – fared well in the elections (3rd place), especially in larger urban conurbations like Johannesburg. Still, its disruptive antics in parliament, along with a less inclusive vision of the country, did not yet make it the constructive opposition the country needs.

Third, the elections represented a “flat lining” of the official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA). The party had done well in the 2016 municipal elections, taking several of South Africa’s largest cities, including Johannesburg and Tshwane (Pretoria). Yet the results of the national elections saw marginal expansion of the party’s vote share, despite years of controversial rule by the ANC under Jacob Zuma. Hornsby and Hassim explained that the DA remained limited in its appeal, still deemed by some as a “white” party; notwithstanding its black leader Musi Maimani, much of the DA’s senior leadership is indeed white.

Finally, the Carleton academics provided some observations on the overall state of play. Politics under Ramaphosa were moving away from “hate and rage” but, Hassim stressed, the legitimate causes of hate and rage should not be papered over.

Ultimately, South African politics would continue to be about governance and the economy. Ramaphosa’s message of hope has created an air of expectation. Various sectors of society and even business support him. His success will be based on how much he can clean up from Jacob Zuma’s legacy – “a real clean-up” is essential.