

Allure of voting wearing thin for South Africans

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tating AIDS epidemic, appear to be wearing away the sheen on its young democracy.

"Standing on the sidelines, failing to go to the polls, is a neglect of the democratic duty," Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first black president, warned an overflowing ANC election rally.

"And in our case in South Africa, it can be read to signal disregard for the hard and painful struggles that went into bringing about democracy."

In an unusual door-to-door campaign from squalid shacks to comfortable middle-class living rooms, Mandela's successor accentuated the ANC's achievements and asked supporters to be patient.

The government has built 1.6 million houses, brought clean water to 9 million more people and now delivers electricity to 70 percent of homes. The former socialist party has revived an ailing economy and lifted the coun-

try from diplomatic isolation to take a leading role in African affairs.

Above all, the ANC has presided over a peaceful transition to majority rule hailed as a miracle.

"We have always known that our country's blemishes, produced by more than three centuries of colonialism and apartheid, could not be removed in one decade," Mbeki said in his recent state of the nation address.

Lunga Makoe, a 25-year-old security guard, was a child under apartheid but still remembers its horrors.

"My older brothers were shot with rubber bullets and beaten by police," he said. "This is why we must all vote. We can never live like that again."

Opponents led by the Democratic Alliance, expected to finish a distant second, accuse Mbeki and the ANC of mishandling the AIDS crisis, neglecting to crack down on corruption and crime, and failing to create jobs in the new "rainbow nation."

While a new black elite is changing the face of South African suburbs and boardrooms, life has changed little for millions still trapped in crowded townships and isolated villages.

Unemployment of more than 30 percent has hit poor-

ly educated blacks hard, and the gap between rich and poor is increasing. An estimated 5.3 million South Africans are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS - more than in any other country.

"Rainbow nation' is a nice

phrase, but there is no black or brown in a rainbow," grumbled Trevor Trout, 47, an unemployed father of four living in a cramped home in Cape Town.

More than 20 million of the South Africa's 45 million people have registered to vote


for a 400-member National Assembly, which will then choose a president. Nine provincial assemblies also will be elected and they, in turn, will select delegates to the 90-member National Council of Provinces, parliament's second chamber.

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