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POLICY PAPER

JACOB ZUMA'S VISIT TO MOROCCO REVEALS SHIFTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN DEBATE ON THE MOROCCAN SAHARA

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This Policy Paper analyzes Jacob Zuma's July 2025 visit to Morocco as a revealing episode in the reconfiguration of South African foreign policy. Far from being mere protocol issue, the event activated multiple registers of mobilization anti-apartheid legacy, territorial integrity, and diplomatic coherence while shifting a dossier long confined to elites into the public sphere. Drawing on a corpus of 2,200 posts on X, and 20 South African press articles, the study shows that the controversy generated limited yet significant visibility, structured around two peaks of attention (images from Rabat and the South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation reaction). This dynamic was driven by a small number of power users and media gatekeepers, reinforcing polarization between a hostile camp and a favorable or non-hostile camp led by the MK Party and supported by pivotal actors such as Build One South Africa (BOSA). The main contribution lies in the framing shift: from an interpretation in terms of 'decolonization' to a domestic reformulation in terms of national unity and anti-secessionism. This shift does not amount to an immediate doctrinal reversal, but it reduces the political cost of non-hostile signals and pluralizes arenas of legitimation, suggesting a second-order change in South Africa's foreign policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco in July 2025 was a singular episode in recent South African politics: neither a diplomatic crisis nor mere protocol anecdote, but a moment when domestic politics, history, and foreign policy crystallized around a highly visible act and an issue that, once consensual, has now become the focus of national debate. The visit was revealing of the tensions that shape the relationship of South African parties to international affairs, and more broadly, their ability to highlight such issues as instruments of political competition.

At first glance, the controversy could appear to be merely procedural: a former president, now the head of an opposition party, posing with a national symbol in a country with which Pretoria maintains distant relations. Yet the dynamics that unfolded in the public sphere indicate that the stakes went far deeper. Zuma's visit activated multiple discursive registers—loyalty or betrayal of the government policies, affirmation of popular sovereignty against the government's, all of which resonate powerfully in the post-electoral South African context.

This case is interesting because of its dual nature: an event exogenous to the national political cycle, the effects of which nonetheless unfolded almost entirely through domestic filters, partisan alignments, media hierarchies, and the strategic use of social networks. The analysis that follows draws on a combined corpus (approximately 2,200 X posts, 20 articles from the South African press, chronological tracking of engagements with posts) collected via the X API, and qualitative analysis (dominant themes, vocabulary, framing, and the role of 'gatekeepers'¹). This dual perspective makes it possible to assess the actual scope of the debate, to break down its mechanisms, and to shed light on what it reveals about the current state of South African public discussion on issues linked to Moroccan territorial integrity.

Three axes guide the analysis: the quantitative mapping of the debate (scale, temporality, actors), the anatomy of its content (themes, tones, rhetorical devices), and an examination of whether this mobilization was polarized, opportunistic, or conjunctural. We do not seek to interpret Zuma's visit as a diplomatic turning point, but rather to capture its indicative value: that of a large-scale test of how an international issue can penetrate and even briefly structure the South African political debate.

I. MAPPING THE DEBATE ON ZUMA'S VISIT TO MOROCCO: WHAT DO SCALE, RHYTHMS, AND ACTORS REVEAL?

1. Brief yet Meaningful Visibility

Between July 15 and August 10, 2025, the debate sparked by Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco generated roughly 2,200 posts on X/Twitter and 20 articles in the South African media, spanning nationally influential outlets (IOL, Mail & Guardian, News24), and high-audience broadcasters (SABC News, eNCA, Newzroom Afrika). Although limited in duration, this visibility was concentrated in

1. Actors or bodies that filter how an issue enters the public sphere by selecting, ranking, or blocking information and proposals.

two distinct peaks of activity: the first (July 17–18), triggered by the circulation of images of Zuma holding the South African flag in Rabat; the second (August 6), catalyzed by the official response of South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO).

This dynamic corresponds to what Dayan and Katz (1992) described as “media events”: temporary elevation of a political object, driven by a striking visual cue, that disrupts the normal flow of news. In South Africa, such sequences are particularly pronounced when they combine a polarizing political figure (Zuma) with a national symbol carrying historical weight (the flag), thereby producing strong emotional responses (Wasserman et al, 2018).

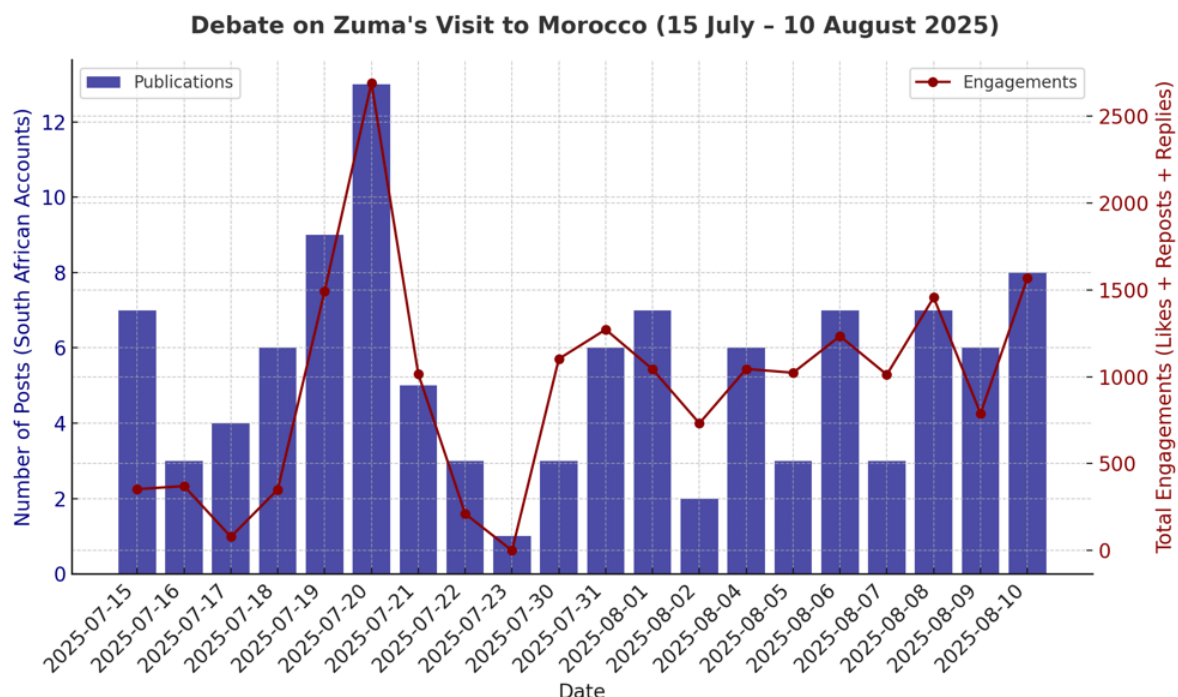
In terms of volume of comment and coverage, the issue remained below the threshold of major domestic controversies, such as debates on land reform or outbreaks of xenophobic violence, yet it clearly exceeded the average levels typically observed around foreign policy questions. This echoes Landsberg's (2010) observation of South Africa's “niche diplomacy”: in a political system in which foreign policy is often perceived as an elite prerogative, only exceptional triggers capture wider public attention.

This is precisely where the case holds significance for Morocco: an issue that for two decades had been confined almost exclusively to a discreet consensus within the ruling party and its diplomatic circles became, for a brief moment, publicly discussed, polarized, and appropriated across a broader partisan spectrum. The episode temporarily disrupted the government's discursive monopoly on the Sahara question, exposing national opinion to divergences previously restricted to elite arenas.

The temporal structure of this mobilization also reveals an “attention spiral” effect (Vasterman, 2005): the initial event (images from Rabat) produced a surge of attention, which quickly subsided in the absence of further stimuli, before being reignited by an official intervention that catalyzed a second discursive cycle. These two sequences demonstrate how the media and political agendas fed into one another, though they failed to sustain the issue's visibility beyond the period of observation.

Thus, rather than signaling a lasting shift in South Africa's political agenda, the reactions to Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco are best understood as a real-time test of the ability of an international issue to penetrate and even briefly structure national public debate. Its analytical value lies precisely in this dimension: a short-lived, yet significant, phenomenon that highlights how discursive repertoires rooted in the anti-apartheid struggle and national symbols can be reactivated, instrumentalized, and reconfigured within the dynamics of domestic political competition.

Evolution of posts and engagements surrounding J. Zuma's visit to Morocco



Source: Author

Jacob Zuma's visit to Rabat highlighted the partisan aspect of South Africa's positioning.

Pretoria's recognition of the so-called 'sadr' in 2004, enacted under Thabo Mbeki and accompanied by a letter to His Majesty King Mohammed VI, marked a lasting turning point in South African foreign policy. Before that date, the question of the Moroccan Sahara remained marginal in ANC discourse, which was primarily focused on the anti-apartheid struggle and regional alliances. From the moment of recognition, however, the Sahara became a structuring line in the ANC's international narrative and that of some of its elites, gradually assimilated into the ideology of the 'African Renaissance', which elevated self-determination as a guiding principle. In a context of ANC hegemony, this partisan orientation was transposed into the official position of the state, reflecting the organic continuity between party and diplomatic apparatus. The sequence opened by Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco—announcing his support for the Moroccan identity of the Sahara—precisely underscores this gap: South Africa's stance on the Sahara reflects, first and foremost, a partisan choice of the ANC elevated to the level of state policy, rather than a national consensus.

2. The Centers of Dissemination and Their Relays:

Analysis of the diffusion clusters surrounding Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco shows that the debate, though quantitatively limited (149 South African posts identified), was structured by a small set of actors who occupied central positions in the circulation of information. The data indicate that six accounts—Newzroom Afrika (@Newzroom405), SABC News (@SABCNews), Carl Niehaus (@

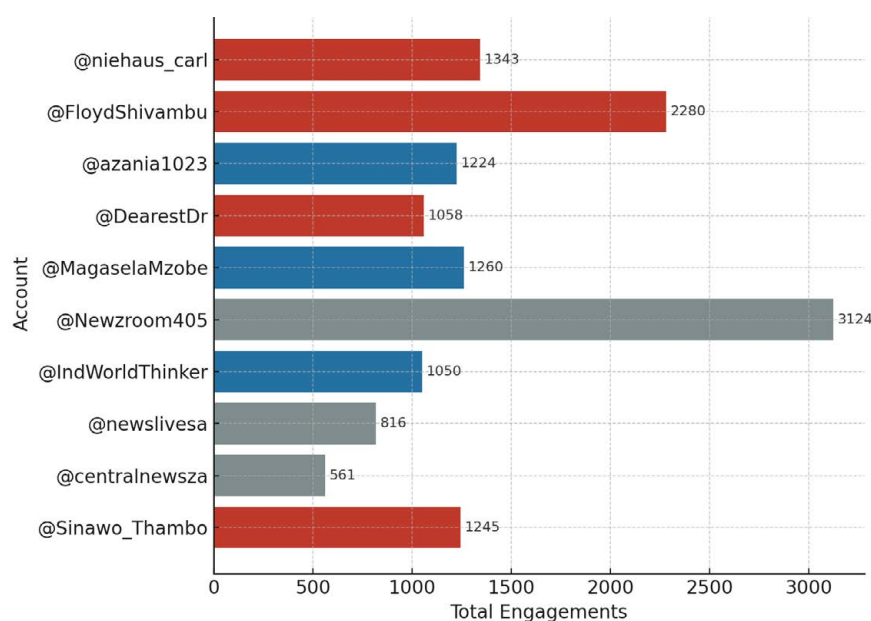
niehaus_carl), Floyd Shivambu (@FloydShivambu), Magasela Mzobe (@MagaselaMzobe), and the pro-MK Party influencer @XFactor079—accounted for a disproportionate share of total engagement, with some exceeding 3,000 cumulative interactions.

This configuration corresponds to what the social media literature describes as a phenomenon of “super-emitters” (power users²), with a handful of emission nodes triggering most of the reposts (Jungherr, 2014). For example, the video post by Central News announcing Zuma’s support for Morocco’s autonomy plan for the Sahara was cited or reposted 268 times by South African accounts, while a similar sequence broadcast by eNCA generated 204 reposts, often accompanied by critical or defensive comments, depending on the partisan alignment of the sender.

The distribution of relays reveals a sharp partisan divide. Political figures including Niehaus and Shivambu employed formulations accusing Zuma of “betraying the anti-apartheid legacy”, thereby amplifying a negative interpretation of the event. In contrast, accounts affiliated with the MK Party, such as @MagaselaMzobe and @XFactor079, mobilized the rhetoric of territorial integrity and the right of any citizen to represent the country abroad, recasting support for Morocco’s position as an act of defiance against the South African government.

The involvement of certain media outlets also served as a catalyst. While Newzroom Afrika and SABC News largely adopted a factual tone, their coverage provided the raw material for partisan reinterpretations. This marks an important rupture: an issue long confined to the diplomatic elites of the African National Congress (ANC) was brought into the public arena and contested along partisan lines, breaking the silent consensus that had previously prevailed on the Sahara question. Even if limited in scale, this momentary politicization demonstrates that South African foreign policy can, under certain conditions, become subject to partisan confrontation.

Top 10 South African accounts ranked by engagement in the debate surrounding J. Zuma’s visit to Morocco



Source: Author

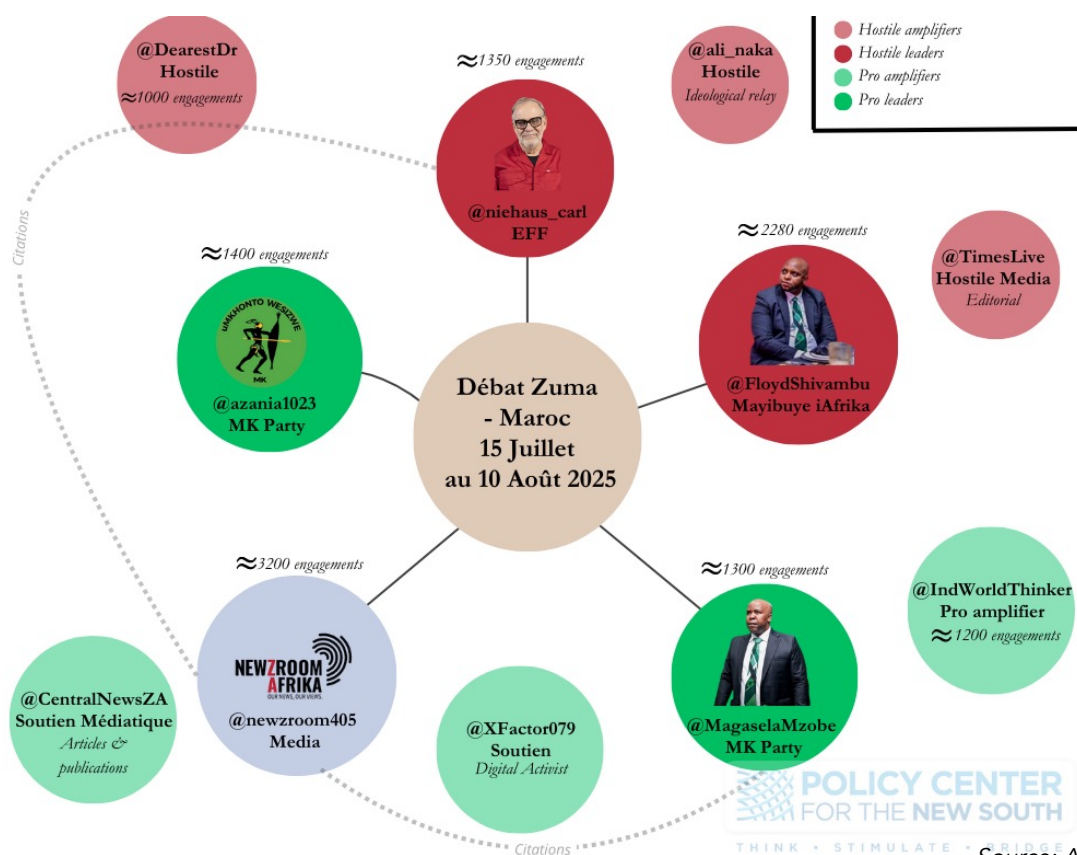
2. By ‘power users’, we refer to the small minority of hyperactive users whose intensity of posting and positionality grant them a disproportionate weight in the production and dissemination of content.

Identification of the main emitters and their relative weights in the debate reveals a highly asymmetrical distribution of voices. The concentration of engagement around a handful of accounts—particularly those linked to current or former Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) figures and pro-MK Party commentators—illustrates a classic pattern in digitally mediated political controversies: a small number of actors with strong mobilization capacity (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) shape the agenda and polarize the conversation. In this case, opinion leaders associated with the EFF and MK Party positioned themselves as producers of original content, combining political rhetoric with references to sovereignty-related themes, while the media, although present among the top active accounts, acted more as catalysts than as normative prescribers.

The contrast between partisan and media actors is crucial: the former adopt accusatory or defensive framings, clearly aligned with their institutional positioning, while the latter mostly remain confined to an informative role, indirectly feeding virality through subsequent uptake by activist accounts. This pattern confirms that, far from being a horizontal space of discussion, the debate on X follows a logic of hierarchical intermediation, with visibility concentrated in the hands of ‘gatekeepers’, which have pre-existing audiences and established political or media capital.

This configuration calls for further examination: beyond the raw measurement of volumes of posts, it is essential to understand the functional role of each actor within the architecture of the controversy. The role map below distinguishes agenda-setters from amplifiers and secondary relays, allowing us to assess how these categories interact to build—or, conversely, fragment—the discursive space surrounding Jacob Zuma’s visit to Morocco.

Network map of issue entrepreneurs on social media after Jacob Zuma’s visit to Morocco



Source: Author

The mapping of the influence network on the issue under study highlights a classic pattern of polarization in South African political controversies: two structured poles, each with central actors capable of setting the agenda and shaping interpretive frames. The first pole is embodied by figures from the radical left, including Carl Niehaus and Floyd Shivambu, who mobilize a rhetorical repertoire rooted in liberation nationalism and so-called 'anti-imperialist' discourse. The second pole, supportive of Morocco's position, coalesces around Magasela Mzobe and pro-MK Party actors, framing their defense of their party leadership's stance within the same logic of anticolonial struggle³, African sovereignty, and pan-African solidarity.

Media actors appear as gatekeepers endowed with a dual function: ensuring the dissemination of content while providing frameworks that structure public debate. Their role thus extends beyond information provision, actively contributing to the competition of narratives and shaping collective perceptions of the stakes involved.

A notable feature lies in the controversy's capacity to shift the Moroccan Sahara question from an elite, institutional register into a broader discussion space that includes partisan groups, activist networks, and mainstream media. This shift illustrates how an international issue, historically stabilized within official discourse, can become the object of contentious public debate once it intersects with a fragmented domestic political context and the reconfiguration of alliances.

Thus, the analytical grid for this debate cannot be reduced to a mere episode of political tension; it serves as a laboratory for observing discursive circulations among political, media, and activist actors, exposing the conditions under which an international issue can be appropriated, reinterpreted, and integrated into domestic political struggles—transforming the Moroccan Sahara from a 'national' issue for Morocco into a partisan 'cause' within South Africa.

Having identified the general morphology of the interaction network and the functional distribution of actors, we now examine how the main South African political formations and their leading figures positioned themselves in relation to Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco. An analysis of the respective roles of the ANC, the EFF, the MK Party, and the Democratic Alliance (DA) makes it possible to understand the current polarization around this dossier and how each camp articulates its ideological references, diplomatic alignments, and internal strategic priorities.

The data reveal that the positions of these parties on the issue cannot be explained simply as a reflex of foreign policy. Rather, they are embedded in distinct political trajectories shaped by ideological legacies, internal power relations, and divergent visions of South Africa's place in the world.

3. The MK Party describes its position as "progressive" and as part of the continuation of the anti-apartheid struggle, while adopting most of the 'hostile' arguments used by other parties—in this case, in favor of defending the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Morocco (See II.1).

Non-organic amplification signals

Exploratory observation of traffic on X during the debate following Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco suggests signals consistent with semi- or fully-automated amplification mechanisms benefiting certain leaders. The phenomenon appeared particularly salient around some far-left leaders' accounts. The indicators point to unusual synchrony in relays (bursts of retweets and likes within seconds), pronounced textual redundancy, micro-clusters of diffusion in a 'compact star'⁴ formation around pivot accounts with low reciprocity and often recent creation dates, a range of posting tools, and a strong monolithic focus (centered on the 'leader').

3. Reactions in South Africa to Jacob Zuma's Visit and His Stance on the Moroccan Sahara, by Political Configuration

Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco and his endorsement of the autonomy plan for the Moroccan Sahara sharpened the fault lines running through South Africa's political landscape. Zuma's position, breaking with Pretoria's official doctrine, triggered a wave of reactions that went far beyond mere controversy: they exposed how parties and influential political figures mobilize their narratives, alliances, and constituencies around an issue the ANC considers highly symbolic.

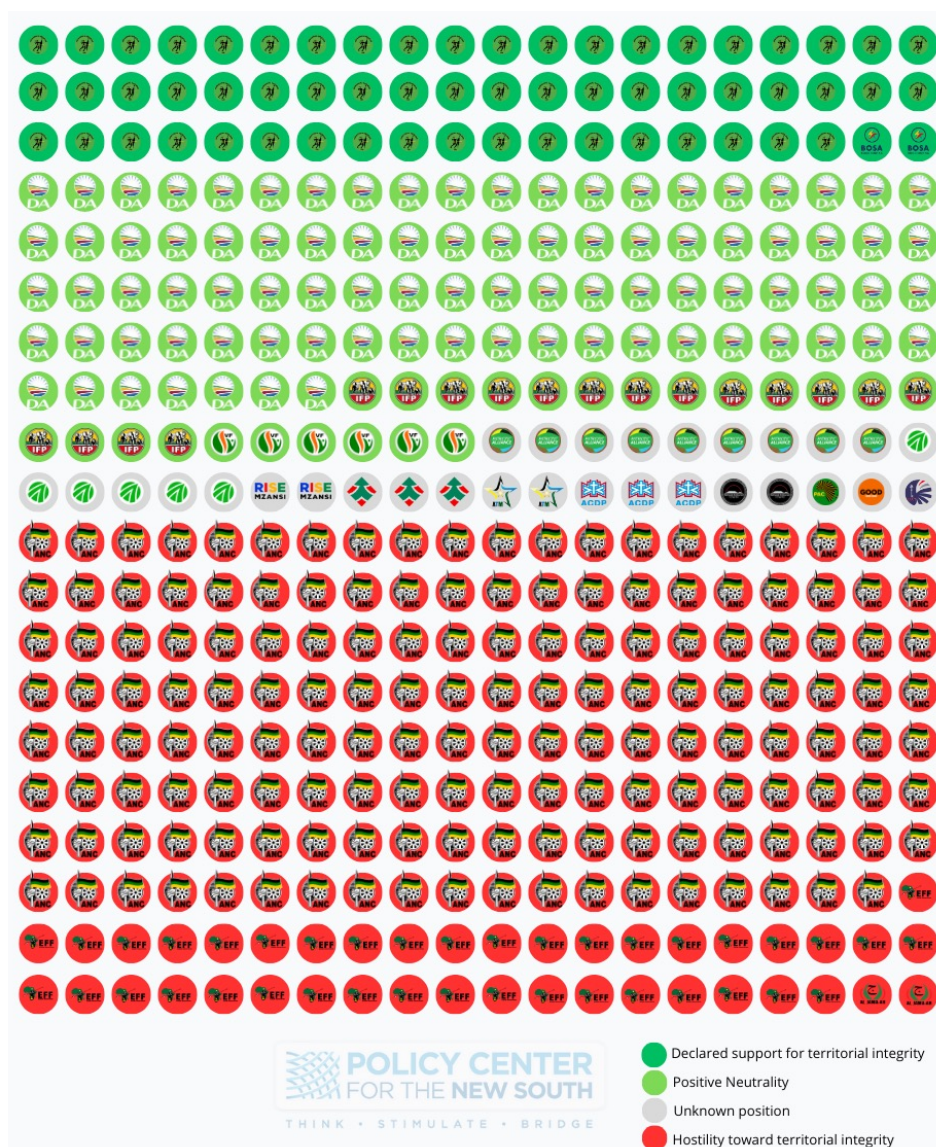
In this context, understanding the debate requires it to be analyzed through two complementary lenses:

1. **The institutional and political weight** of parliamentary formations (ANC, EFF, MK Party, DA) in defining and legitimizing positions.
2. **The catalytic role of personalities**, whether charismatic leaders or influential cadres—capable of shaping the media agenda and polarizing public opinion.

The data compiled on public positions between 2020 and 2025 allow us to move beyond the anecdotal and to measure the actual distribution of support and opposition. This empirical mapping sheds light not only on partisan power relations, but also on the dynamics of political competition around the Sahara question, particularly within the South African Parliament.

4. By 'compact star', we refer to a small star-shaped interaction pattern: a central account rapidly receives a burst of retweets or replies from numerous satellite accounts that interact little, if at all, with each other. In other words, nearly all arrows converge toward the same center. This pattern suggests coordinated amplification, though it does not constitute evidence of automation.

Mapping Positions on the Moroccan Sahara Within the South African Parliament



Source: Author

Between 2014 and 2024, the ANC shifted from a hegemonic party to a pole commanding only a relative majority (around 40%). This structural erosion reduced its capacity to impose foreign policy consensus, and forced it, within the framework of the government of national unity, to negotiate with partners with far from common external preferences. As a result, the hostile bloc (ANC, EFF, and Al Jamaah) still holds the largest number of seats, but is no longer in a position to unilaterally lock-in parliamentary outcomes.

By contrast, the DA has displayed remarkable electoral stability (around 21%–22% in 2014, 2019, and 2024), making it a pivotal actor in the post-2024 arena. Its stance—described here as ‘positive neutrality’—combined with earlier political-diplomatic overtures toward Rabat (including public meetings in 2023), grants it an agenda-setting capacity without over-mobilizing its electorate. In a fragmented parliament, organizational stability becomes decisive: in line with Tsebelis’s (2002) veto player logic, the DA more easily converts its seats into effective influence, than parties experiencing decline.

The EFF has followed a bell-shaped trajectory: growth between 2014 and 2019, but a marked decline in 2024. This has curtailed its institutional leverage while maintaining a strong framing capacity in the public sphere, particularly at the rhetorical level. In this configuration, the EFF strengthens the hostile bloc but lacks the capacity, on its own, to transform government policy into binding parliamentary action.

Within this framework, the MK Party created an inflection point: a sudden breakthrough (anchored strongly in KwaZulu-Natal) with 58 seats won outright. This robust territorial base allows it to “act as an issue entrepreneur” (Meguid, 2005): by explicitly endorsing Moroccan sovereignty and capitalizing on Jacob Zuma’s visit, it politicizes a question long confined to discreet elite consensus. Visually, it forms the core of the support pole, capable of shifting the ‘window of the sayable’ without necessarily converting official doctrine. Moreover, the MK benefits from a parliamentary platform as it now constitutes the official opposition.

Mid-sized parties (Inkhata Freedom Party⁵, VF+⁶)—here categorized as ‘positive neutrality’—have made modest gains over the past decade and contribute to a non-hostile balance that nearly matches the hostile bloc. Their logic remains pragmatic and relatively muted on foreign policy matters: they reinforce a ‘non-hostile’ coalition without initiating a reversal. Finally, the rise of the ‘unknown position’ segment, reflecting either niche-oriented agendas or emerging parties still under construction, is a gray zone: these seats carry little ideological weight but can tip the balance in legislative negotiations.

The combined reading of ten-year trajectories and positional mapping suggests: (1) polarization without hegemony; (2) the rise of a support pole led by a new entrant (MK) and framed by stable actors (DA, IFP, VF+); and (3) a sufficiently large indeterminate zone, meaning that South Africa’s stance on the Moroccan Sahara is now subject to negotiation within the parliamentary arena rather than being merely declared. In this context, the electoral trajectory of the ‘hostile pole’ shows an erosion that weakens its parliamentary position, while the framing favorable to Rabat—driven by the MK and tolerated by stable pivot actors such as the DA—could, over time, break the hostile status quo.

To complete the partisan reading, it is necessary to shift the focus to the level of individual actors. In controversies of this kind concerning foreign policy, positions do not spread mechanically from party structures; they are placed on the agenda, framed, and sanctioned by a handful of figures capable of altering the costs of alignment (Entman, 1993). In other words, the configuration observed does not simply involve opposed blocs (ANC/EFF/MK/DA); it revolves around an ‘entrepreneurial’ pole seeking to impose a discursive framing supportive of the Kingdom’s territorial integrity, a normative pole reaffirming and defending the official South African line, and a discreet validation pole signaling coalition options without open confrontation.

Reading the debate through these roles, rather than through rigid blocs, makes it possible to identify who transforms an individual stance into a credible collective signal, who raises its reputational cost, and who creates potential bridges between camps (Tsebelis, 2002).

5. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), founded in 1975 by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, is a South African political party rooted in Zulu nationalism. It played a controversial role during the anti-apartheid struggle, clashing with the ANC, and remains regionally influential in KwaZulu-Natal.

6. The Freedom Front Plus (VF+), established in 1994 as the successor of the Freedom Front, is a South African right-wing party advocating Afrikaner minority rights, cultural self-determination, and conservative policies.

What follows is a move beyond the mere topography of positions toward the realm of justifications: identifying, for each pole, the argumentative repertoires actually mobilized, the way in which they are articulated (sovereignty and territorial integrity, solidarities, diplomatic coherence, economic interests), and their ripple effects on differentiated domestic audiences and elite intermediaries. The challenge is to shift from declarative alignments to performative discursive registers, where the real costs of adherence are determined, spokespersons' credibility is tested, and, ultimately, the window of acceptability is either widened or narrowed within South African public opinion around the question of the Kingdom's territorial integrity.

II. FRAMING, DISCURSIVE COALITIONS, AND PATHWAYS OF INFORMATION

1. Mobilizing Historical Vocabulary for a New Framing

Over the observed period (July 15 to August 10, 2025), South African reactions did not emerge randomly. Rather, they crystallized around a limited set of stabilized discursive registers that structured both access to public attention and the subsequent struggle for interpretation.

During the first stage, what can be described as a 'symbolic trigger' was observed: the use of the South African flag and the issue of Zuma's 'mandate' acted as low-cost cognitive signals, easily relayed by media hubs. These functioned as 'focal points', enabling criticism of the visit without reopening the substantive policy debate. This protocol-based framing explains the first peak of attention, as it moralized the episode and set the entry point for public discussion.

In the second stage, discourse shifted toward the question of foreign policy coherence. The protocol lens was transformed into a doctrinal test: on one side, there was a reaffirmation of Pretoria's official line on the issue; on the other, the argument for a pluralization of international signaling in a multiparty era, when opposition actors (or new entrants) have also sought to send signals in foreign policy terms. In Kingdon's (1995) terms, the window of attention opened by the symbolic incident allowed "issue entrepreneurs" to advance competing solutions within the political field.

In the third stage, the camp supportive of Rabat succeeded in anchoring its discourse within a domestic repertoire—territorial integrity and anti-secessionism—by reframing the controversy: shifting from a narrative of external 'decolonization' to one of national unity, deeply embedded in South Africa's internal discourse and post-apartheid political lexicon.

This shift lowers the cognitive threshold for less-politicized audiences, and initiates an issue-ownership dynamic (Petrocik, 1996). In the language of norms, it resembles the beginnings of a "cascade effect" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998): the pro-integrity stance gains legitimacy by tapping into already salient domestic norms.

By contrast, the register of personal disqualification—labels such as 'sellout' or 'dollar diplomacy'—maximizes partisan expression but has limited persuasive effect: it reinforces existing coalitions rather than shifting preferences (Zaller, 1992). Useful for mobilizing already aligned constituencies, it carries less weight than institutional framings over the medium term.

Finally, utilitarian framings (sectoral cooperation, training, investment) remain peripheral during the polemical phase but serve as second-order resources: by re-depoliticizing the issue around concrete benefits, they broaden the coalition of acceptance and stabilize preferences in favor of a paradigm shift (Baum and Potter, 2008).

The sequence thus follows a two-level logic: symbolic ignition, followed by framing competition. The former determines access to the public sphere; the latter shapes the direction and durability of the debate.

In this competition of frames, the MK Party stood out through a process of ‘strategic translation’ of the opposing repertoire. Rather than confronting head-on the lexicon of decolonization used by figures close to the ANC and the EFF, it reformulated it to emphasize the rejection of postcolonial borders and the territorial integrity of the Moroccan Sahara. In framing terms, this corresponds to both “*frame bridging*”⁷ and “*frame conversion*”⁸ (Snow and Benford, 2000): the signifiers of anti-colonial struggle (‘revolutionary agenda’, ‘liberation of peoples’) are reconnected to an anti-balkanization, anti-secession diagnosis, in which ‘unity under one flag’ becomes the progressive outcome, as understood in South African political discourse.

This movement resembles a process of norm localization (Acharya, 2004): references to anti-Bantustan⁹ rhetoric and to South African separatist experiences (Western Cape, Orania) domesticate an external issue, making it compatible with established normative expectations.

Historically, opponents of Morocco’s territorial integrity have attempted to equate the Kingdom’s autonomy plan with South Africa’s ‘Bantustans’, depicting it as an artificial construction designed to conceal dispossession. By mobilizing the memory of apartheid, this analogy sought to delegitimize Morocco’s initiative by categorizing it among pseudo-entities rooted in socio-cultural segregation. The position expressed by the MK movement, however, introduces a major shift. By underlining that separatist claims rest on community, cultural, or ethnic differentiation aimed at detaching part of the population from its national framework, MK reframes the debate: it is not Morocco’s autonomy plan that resembles Bantustans, but rather the separatist logic of fragmentation itself, which reproduces the apartheid regime’s strategy of dividing societies into racially, tribally, or ethnically defined ‘homelands’.

Three lexical pivots crystallize this reframing: Bantustan as a normative counter-model that redefines the debate in identity terms; homelands as the symbol of artificial entities designed to weaken sovereignty and fracture the state; and territorial integrity as Morocco’s normative anchor, aligned with international law and resonating with South Africa’s own constitutional commitment to a multicultural and non-racial society.

The political effect is twofold. In the short term, this framing partially shifts the issue from the pair ‘decolonization/solidarity’ toward ‘sovereignty/unity’, thereby altering the cost architecture

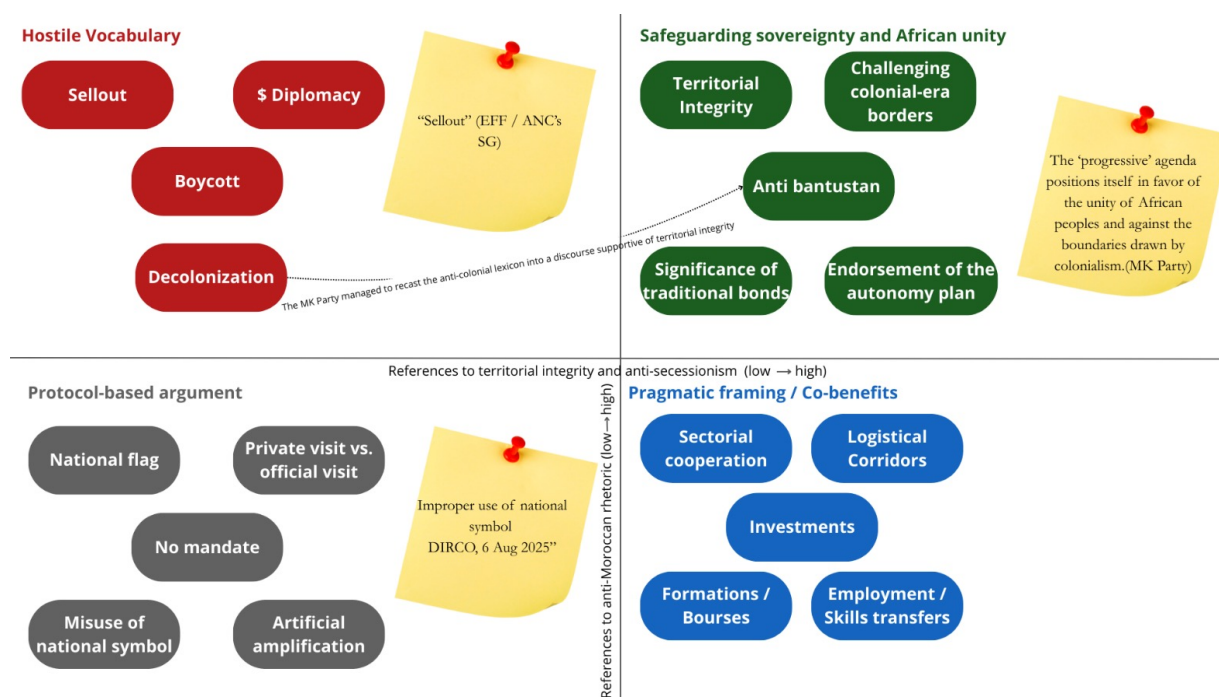
7. In Snow and Benford’s (2000) sense, “frame bridging” refers to the linking of two or more interpretive frames that are ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected, to articulate related causes across movements, often through networks, media, or coalitions.

8. A radical transformation of framing through which existing meanings and values are replaced by a new interpretive framework, leading audiences to adopt a different universe of meaning.

9. A Bantustan is a ‘homeland’ created by the apartheid regime to confine Black populations within ethnically defined entities, granted nominal autonomy or independence (e.g. Transkei, Bophuthatswana), lacking international recognition, and designed to strip South Africans of their citizenship while maintaining political and territorial segregation.

of alignment for moderate or intermediary actors. In the medium term, it establishes a discursive bridge between a pole of explicit support and an arc of positive neutrality, lowering the cost of assembling ad-hoc parliamentary majorities around non-contentious signals (sectoral cooperation, training, investment). In other words, the success of the framing advanced by the MK Party does not lie in reducing antagonism, but in narrowing the distance between domestic norms and the pro-Moroccan position—an essential condition for transforming a polemical episode into a sustainable policy option.

Mapping Lexical Registers Related to the Debate Over Jacob Zuma's Visit to Morocco



Source: Author

2. Elite Cues and Relay Networks: Who Sets the Tone?

In this sequence, public opinion does not aggregate from an undifferentiated background noise; it is structured around elite cues issued by a handful of actors who are capable of imposing a frame and setting the alignment costs for others. Concretely, three categories of sender organize the circulation of interpretations: (1) **initiators**, who define the problem and introduce a lexicon; (2) **institutional validators**, who confer or withdraw public legitimacy from stances; and (3) **media and partisan amplifiers**, who transform a signal into measurable attention.

The **initiators** here are the MK Party and its spokespeople (Jacob Zuma, Magasela Mzobe). Their contribution is not merely declarative but semantic. By linking the Moroccan Sahara to domestic categories of territorial integrity, anti-secessionism, and the rejection of Bantustans, they reduce the cognitive distance and shift the controversy from the 'protocol' register favored by the ANC and its allies, to a grammar rooted in domestic political contestation. This framing effort corresponds to what the literature describes as the "translation" of international issues into salient national repertoires (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). It is this process that allows the pro-integrity camp to propose a lower entry cost for non-activist actors: one can support Morocco's unity without

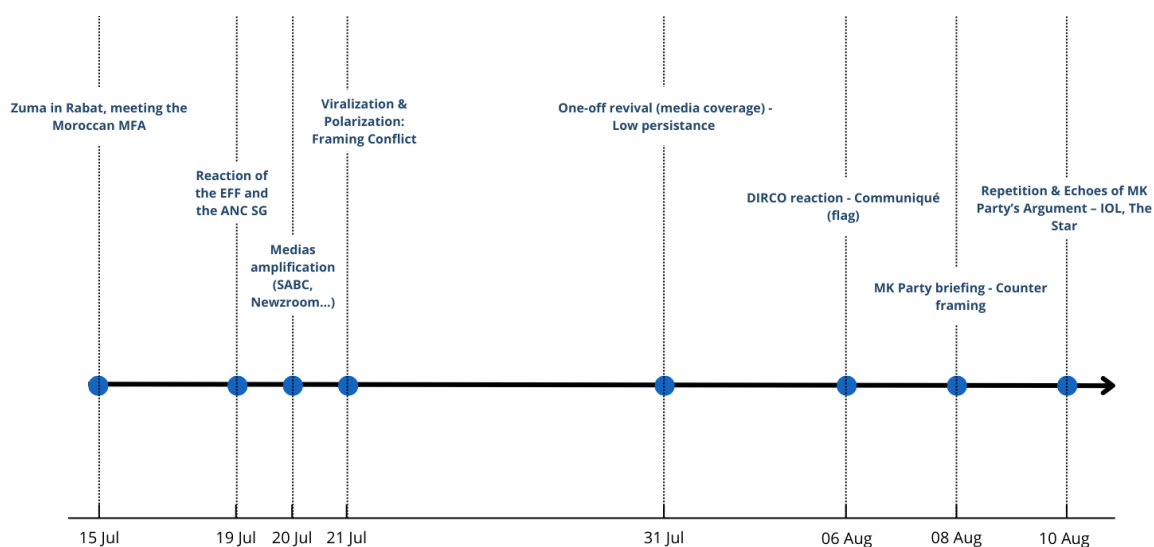
abandoning familiar South African political reference points.

Validators take two forms. On the one hand, government reaffirmation (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, ANC officials) performs a form of negative validation: it sanctions certain symbolic uses—in this case, the South African flag—and reasserts the official line. On the other hand, pivotal parliamentary actors, who may not fully adopt the MK Party's framing, nonetheless position themselves in opposition to the ideology advanced by the ANC and the EFF, and could signal partial compatibility with the lexicon of unity and bilateral partnership. In terms of veto player theory, these actors—such as the DA—do not necessarily open the door to immediate policy change. Rather, they lower the political costs of a future revision by normalizing a competing frame. Their role is decisive: they do not create the signal, but they provide it with institutional weight.

Amplifiers ensure agenda-setting and the hierarchy of attention. Media outlets (leading TV channels and major newspapers) practice classic indexing: they prioritize controversies in which visible elites engage in explicit confrontation (Bennett, 1990). Around the two attention windows identified, circulation follows a two-step flow: elite content → media relays → partisan/civic networks, in which keywords ('flag', 'mandate', 'sellout'/'integrity', 'anti-secession') are picked up, simplified, and reproduced widely. The result is not mechanical adherence but informed polarization: each camp speaks a language coherent with its audience (Petrocik, 1996), while hesitant segments receive clear positional cues.

Taken together, these three roles form a relay chain that explains the observed dynamic: an initiating signal that redefines the object (from protocol to domestic politics), a validation, and an amplification that brings to the forefront the frame dominating the news arena. In the case of the Moroccan Sahara, the issue is therefore less about the frequency of mentions, than about the ability to connect interpretation to pre-existing national norms (integrity, stability, coherence of positions), and to secure, even tacitly, cross-validations. It is this mechanism—more than ad-personam invective—that produces lasting effects on public perception and on the scope of maneuver within Parliament.

Jacob Zuma's Visit to Morocco: Milestones and Chains of Repercussion



Source: Author

3. From Controversy to Boundary Adjustment: How the Zuma–Morocco Episode Shifts the Frontiers of South Africa's Foreign Policy

The episode triggered by Jacob Zuma's visit to Rabat cannot be reduced to a mere protocol anomaly, as South African Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) officials sought to frame it. Rather, it reveals a shift in the locus of legitimation of South Africa's position on the Moroccan Sahara: from a register historically dominated by the executive and the ANC's partisan apparatus, to a competitive marketplace of framings in which parties and opinion leaders contend (Booyesen, 2011). Two mechanisms highlighted by our data structure this shift:

1. Successful *venue shopping* (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993): the MK Party moved the debate from the normative arena of 'decolonization' to a domestic arena of 'territorial integrity/anti-secessionism', more directly connected to internal concerns over 'order/national unity'.
2. A *two-level game* (Putnam, 1988): international signaling (support for the autonomy plan) was calibrated to generate domestic gains (partisan differentiation, agenda capture), while forcing rival parties to reposition themselves.

Empirically, the 'polarization without hegemony' observed in Part I combines here with a redistribution of discursive capacity: the ANC and the EFF maintain a hostile register, but their framing power declines in parallel with their ten-year electoral trajectory. Symmetrically, the MK Party and other electorally stable actors consolidate an alternative semantic field—'sovereignty', 'unity', 'rejection of Bantustans'—that lowers alignment costs for non-expert audiences. This lexical shift is not cosmetic: it alters the reputational cost of publicly supporting the autonomy plan, and normalizes divergence from the official doctrine.

At the core of this dynamic lies the work of issue entrepreneurs: in this case, Zuma and Mzobe 'plugged' Morocco's pro-territorial integrity cause into pre-existing domestic norms (anti-secession, post-apartheid memory), initiating a cascade effect—not a mass conversion, but a gradual normalization of this position within South Africa's public debate.

This shift does not eliminate the "*veto players*" (Tsebelis, 2002): the presidency, DIRCO, and hostile blocs still retain normative lock-in capacity. Yet the arena has become pluralized: debate is no longer determined solely by state declarations, but negotiated through the aggregation of partisan signals, media relays, and electoral opportunity costs. The indeterminate zone we identify—composed of parties without consolidated public positions and legislators of 'positive neutrality'—emerges as the true battleground. It grants disproportionate weight to actors able to orchestrate resonance and translate an international framing into domestic political language.

CONCLUSION

The debate following Jacob Zuma's visit to Morocco was less a turning point than a revelation. Within a matter of weeks, a limited episode—a visit and a symbol—exposed the pluralization of framing authorities in South Africa's foreign policy: the executive (DIRCO) retains the normative voice, but no longer monopolizes the public definition of the Moroccan Sahara dossier.

First, Zuma's speech in Morocco acted as a focal point with low cognitive cost, bringing the issue onto the agenda. Second, issue entrepreneurs (MK Party opinion leaders) translated the argument into a domestic context: national unity, anti-secession, rejection of a 'Bantustan' in southern Morocco. This reframing reduced cognitive distance for non-expert audiences and shifted issue ownership from the lexicon of 'decolonization' to that of 'sovereignty' and 'unity'.

Empirically, our data point to polarization without hegemony. The hostile bloc (ANC, EFF, and others) still holds numerical dominance in parliament, yet its locking power has eroded in parallel with its declining electoral trajectory over the past decade. In contrast, a non-hostile arc—ranging from explicit support (MK) to positive neutrality—has consolidated to a degree that, without requiring a frontal doctrinal revision, it can assemble ad-hoc majorities around low-conflict items (sectoral cooperation, training, parliamentary exchanges). Indeed, the political cost of a pro-Moroccan signal decreases when the framing is anchored in already salient national norms.

The media have played a decisive role: by normalizing the coexistence of competing frames when visible elites take opposing stances, they have lowered the alignment costs for moderate actors. Three main lessons emerge:

1. **Decision-making is no longer confined to government statements;** it is negotiated within a competitive marketplace of framings, in which the value of a signal depends on its connection to legitimate domestic norms and its validation—explicit or tacit—by pivotal actors.
2. **Parliament has become the main arena of arbitration:** the post-2024 arithmetic in South Africa enables 'non-hostile' coalitions to advance working instruments (hearings, friendship groups, sectoral agendas) without immediately challenging the doctrinal baseline.
3. **Morocco's pro-territorial integrity argument has gained public respectability** within South African opinion by successfully converting the local historical referential.

The next stage will depend less on the frequency of controversies and more on the ability to embed pragmatic solutions (cooperation initiatives, parliamentary formats, targeted partnerships) within a domestic grammar of 'cooperation and unity' that now resonates beyond militant constituencies.

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