

Millions To Vote Within Hours

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Wednesday, 22 April 2009 09:08 -



Millions of South Africans go to the polls in a few hours in the most hotly contested general election since the advent of black majority rule in 1994.

A total of 19,726 voting stations are scheduled to open at 7am on Wednesday for the election of members of Parliament and of the nine provincial legislatures.

Just over 23 million people are registered as potential voters, and the Independent Electoral Commission said this week it expected a massive turnout.

It has printed 55 million national and provincial ballot papers, weighing about 450 tons, for the poll.

Forty parties, ranging from the A-Party to Ximoko, are contesting the elections, 26 of them nationally.

A total of 120,000 bottles of indelible ink will be on hand to mark voters' hands once they have cast their votes.

The poll will be watched by 4900 domestic observers, 355 international observers and 358 diplomats from 61 embassies.

Key to the level of interest has been the challenge by ANC breakaway movement Cope, which was still insisting only hours before voting stations opened that it was going to win a clear majority.

Surveys have been less sanguine, with the latest Ipsos-Markinor opinion poll predicting the ANC will retain its two-thirds majority.

The SA Weather Service advised voters in parts of the Eastern Cape and in the Northern Cape to take their brollies when they go to vote. The rest of the country will enjoy reasonable weather on Wednesday.

Voters who are outside their home provinces on election day can still vote on the national ballot at any other of the polling stations nationwide.

Voting stations close at 9pm.

Source : Sapa /dbm/hdw/th/clh
Date : 22 Apr 2009 05:01