

The ANC, South Africa's historic ruling party, on Monday renewed its confidence in Cyril Ramaphosa to lead the movement and therefore run the country, at a congress in Johannesburg.

Ramaphosa, 70, who remains popular with the public despite a recent scandal, won 2,476 votes from African National Congress (ANC) delegates. He received the votes, compared to 1,897 for his only competitor, former health minister Zweli Mkhize, 66, who was implicated last year in a corruption scandal.

The overwhelming vote for the president paves the way for a second term if the ANC, increasingly challenged by unemployment and the energy crisis, wins the 2024 general elections.

In the long hours leading up to the vote, which continued late into the night on Sunday, uncertainty reigned. Mr. Mkhize threatened to trail the president, who had enjoyed a comfortable lead a few days earlier.

According to a source close to Zweli Mkhize, agreements had been made long ago to win votes in strategic provinces. The tactics had been worked out "long before the conference" and unveiled at the last minute "to counter the culture of intimidation" within the party.

Cyril Ramaphosa started out as the favourite, having been far ahead in the nomination of candidates last month and endorsed by the ANC, which saved him from impeachment last week in parliament.

The president himself has been embarrassed for months by a corruption scandal: He is accused of keeping bundles of dirty money at home, preferring to cover it up when intruders stole the money during a burglary in 2020.

During his speech Friday night at the opening of the party's congress, Ramaphosa was loudly interrupted by dozens of delegates, singing and banging on tables, miming a windmill with their hands to call for change.

His supporters countered with a raised index and middle finger, demanding a second term for the man Nelson Mandela had called the most gifted of his generation.

The profile of the next deputy president was also expected. The ANC elected Paul Mashatile, 61, from Johannesburg's poorest township, who has been the party's

treasurer, to the post, which traditionally serves as a launching pad for future presidents.

If Ramaphosa, who has not yet been charged, is caught up in the Phala Phala scandal — named after the property where a burglary in 2020 revealed the embarrassing wads of cash — the constitution provides for his deputy president to succeed him.

Recent polls show that “Cyril”, perceived as an affable and composed leader, remains popular with South Africans. This is much more than the party, which has been torn apart by rival factions and has been losing ground at the polls for the past decade amidst poverty, staggering inequality, crime and constant power outages that are disrupting the economy.

In the run-up to the 2024 general election, the ANC has no credible alternative to Cyril Ramaphosa, who remains its best asset, many analysts note.

Cyril Ramaphosa comes from a modest family in Soweto, a bastion of the struggle against apartheid. He made his fortune in the business world before returning to politics a decade ago.