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God is on the ANC's side, Zuma tells crowd

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President Jacob Zuma has upped the ante in the local government election campaign, telling supporters that they were "blessed" and warning that a vote for the opposition was a vote for the devil.

In a speech likely to infuriate Christians and opposition parties alike, Zuma told hundreds of supporters in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape that only an ANC membership card would guarantee an automatic pass to heaven.

He was addressing an impromptu rally in the town's city centre on Friday. "When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven. When you don't vote for the ANC you should know that you are choosing that man who carries a fork ... who cooks people," Zuma said.

"When you are carrying an ANC membership card, you are blessed. When you get up there, there are different cards used but when you have an ANC card, you will be let through to go to heaven," he said to wild applause.

"When (Jesus) fetches us we will find (those in the beyond) wearing black, green and gold. the holy ones belong to the ANC."

Zuma also invoked South Africa's past, suggesting that historical leaders would have supported the ruling party. "If you leave this organisation to form your own ... you will struggle until you die. The ancestors of this land ... Hintsa, Ngqika and Shaka will all turn their backs on you."

It is not the first time that Zuma's remarks have led to a political storm. He angered Christians and opposition parties during the 2009 general election campaign when he repeatedly told ANC rallies that the ruling party would rule until Jesus returned.

DA leader Helen Zille said his comments amounted to intimidation and the blackmail of voters.

"If President Zuma has been correctly quoted, his words combine blasphemy, intimidation and blackmail. It is unbelievable that the president of a constitutional democracy can threaten voters with such untruths.

"In most democracies those words would result in a president being voted out of office. I have confidence that the vast majority of South Africans will see through these threats and make informed policy choices about our country's future."

Eddie Makue, the secretary of the South African Council of Churches, said Zuma's statements were "dangerous", as they sought to alienate certain sections of society.

"We are so grateful that President Zuma is in politics and not a priest because there is no way that even any priest can provide that type of guarantee ...

"It is very dangerous when politicians use people's fate in a democracy to garner support ... these things have a strange way of coming back to haunt you," Makue said.

During his speech, Zuma also urged young people to register to vote. "To those who were too young to vote in the last elections, it's time to register. We are here to remind you ... to vote for the organisation you know and you love," he said.

Yesterday Zuma was in Duncan Village and Mdantsane, townships outside East London.