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# South Africa's Democracy in a Global Context

*22 years after the birth of democracy South Africa, indeed, sits at a 'crossroad'. The African National Congress (ANC) continues to enjoy – despite a swing away from it and the loss of majorities and even pluralities in key large metros the recent Local Government Elections – electoral domination in a political landscape defined by many as a 'dominant party' system<sup>1</sup>. Yet developments in recent years have increasingly placed question marks around political leadership, good governance and the 'blurring' of state and party lines. Added to this is the pressure exerted by an ever changing domestic and international environment. How South Africa responds to these, and other, challenges are crucial if democracy is to remain 'the only game in town'. This article attempts to explore the strength of South Africa's democracy in a changing global context and its future trajectory is critically assayed.*

## A Prelude to 21st Century South Africa

The 27th of April 1994 marked the formal end of the apartheid dispensation and ushered in a non-racial and democratic South Africa following centuries of colonialism, exploitation and racial oppression as well – in the twentieth Century – as industrialization and urbanization. Despite the public euphoria and international awe which accompanied this transition, the move towards democracy did not occur in isolation. Globally the world was riding a 'wave of democratization' which in the 1980s and early 1990s saw, as Larry Diamond eloquently put it, 'freedom take its biggest jump'<sup>2</sup>. On the cusp of the new millennium the number of authoritarian states the world over decreased significantly in comparison to the early years of the 1970s<sup>3</sup>. This was due to the gradual disappearance of alternative regime types as the adoption of democratic systems became more attractive, with Western-style democracies ascendant both economically and politically<sup>4</sup>. South Africa's transition to democracy can, at least in part, be accredited to the considerable links it had with the 'industrialised west' and the growing pressures which accompanied it<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, this period in history also reflected the 'triumph' of free market ideals in which both powerful and emerging states, tended to pursue their own economic interests in an increasingly 'globalized' system of trade<sup>6</sup>. The 'new' South Africa found itself in a specially challenging position, having to rectify decades of social injustices and their attendant legacies, while at the same time needing to establish its global footprint. Despite this daunting task the new democratic government, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, quickly sought to reform all areas of social, political and economic life. In the years to follow unemployment was on a steady decline, inroads were being made into the debt-to-GDP ratio and the country re-affirmed its position as a regional 'powerhouse'. This early narrative of success defied many a sceptic and remains a remarkable achievement for a country which, at least arguably, stood at the precipice of a civil war.

## Economic growth in Africa

The African continent as a whole has been on a rather steady, if somewhat geographically uneven and varied, upward growth path for some time. In the period between 2000 and 2012 the African economy, it has been claimed, grew 3.5 times<sup>7</sup>. Regional economic growth in Sub-Saharan Africa over the same period was even stronger with growth at over 4% by the year 2015<sup>8</sup>. This achievement is ever more remarkable considering how modestly the global economy has performed in recent years. The impressive growth in Africa has occurred against the backdrop of a troublesome world economy still feeling the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008 and having to adjust to lower commodity prices – notably oil and coal. Growth on the continent is expected to slow down this year<sup>9</sup> yet it still remains higher than the global average forecast.

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While Africa has seen impressive growth – in terms of real GDP and Foreign Direct Invest (FDI) – it is important to note that this growth is not evenly distributed across the continent, and comes off a largely low base. Income inequality in a number of Sub-Saharan countries remains troublingly high while three of the four largest economies in Africa (Nigeria, South Africa and Angola) all seem set to slowdown in the coming years<sup>10</sup>. South Africa in particular is confronted by numerous challenges. These include an unfavourable economic climate, instability within the mining sector, highly volatile labour relations, inadequate human capital formation and, worryingly, increased downside political risk. All of these challenges could adversely affect future investor perceptions.

## Positioning South Africa

Despite deep structural socioeconomic divisions, South Africa remains a 'middle income' country<sup>11</sup>. Years of macroeconomic prudence – most notably under the Mbeki administration – saw the economy grow at a steady, if not entirely spectacular, rate. In 1999 unemployment stood at 30% and fell to 22.8% by 2008<sup>12</sup> while a reasonably robust GDP growth rate was achieved during the same period, peaking at over 4% per annum in the years 2004-07<sup>13</sup>. The country's economic development remained encouraging for over a decade, despite its having to compete and engage with more advanced and developed economies. However, recent headwinds have brought a cloud of uncertainty over the South African

economy as the country struggles to maintain a reasonable measure of internal harmony while navigating a troublesome global market.

The ANC's now arguably waning electoral domination is somewhat akin to the opposite sides of the same coin. On the one hand its retention of power has brought a fair measure of political stability as well as reasonable policy continuity. On the other hand it has led to growing levels of rent-seeking<sup>14</sup>, corruption, nepotism and maladministration in the civil service all of which impact negatively on its global competitiveness and investor confidence. In addition South Africa has experienced persistent, and growing, levels of social unrest. Student activism

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– both of the radical and moderate kind – is on the rise<sup>15</sup>, race relations remain somewhat tense while labour relations continue to be problematic. One could argue that this trend points to a lack of internal harmony within the country which adversely affects economic growth. Paul Dorrian (2005) notes that internal harmony is key to creating an enabling environment in order to achieve growth. This enabling environment leads to higher levels of productivity as well as ensuring 'the retention of the country's most precious asset, its human capital'<sup>16</sup>.

The state of South Africa's human capital has for a long time, remained precarious. Most South Africans moving abroad fall in the age category 24 to 40 years of age<sup>17</sup>. The *Centre for Development and Enterprise*

notes that between 1989 and 2003 South Africa has lost more than 500 000 formally qualified citizens<sup>18</sup>. This is a source of concern as individuals in this age category form a significant part of the working age population and may be considered to be the back-bone of the economically active citizenry. There is no single, overarching, reason for emigration. Rather one can highlight a number of socioeconomic and political factors. These include: better job prospects abroad, economic instability, corruption and persistently high levels of crime. In addition there is also concern about the, at times, arguably inapposite implementation of affirmative action<sup>19</sup>. Together these factors adversely affect South Africa's growth prospects as the country loses a number of its most talented and educated individuals, many of whom possess scarce skills the country needs.

To curb this trend citizens, particularly the youth, need to feel included in the socio-economic system. To this end one cannot underestimate the apartheid legacy affect, particularly on basic and formal education. Decades of inferior education have yet to be eradicated as the country continues to grapple with a vastly uneven school and university system, the latter under severe financial pressure. This is one of South Africa's most urgent priorities and challenges as education remains a salient factor in upward mobility and life chances. Yet the education system continues to be plagued by teacher absenteeism, non-delivery of formal textbooks and pervasive strike action. To overcome these challenges one needs to see improved political leadership and good governance. This will lead to an environment more conducive to political stability, reduce corruption and ensure greater respect for rule of law. In the long term this will help underwrite higher levels of productivity and, most importantly, help retain the country's most important assets, its citizens.

## Constitutional democracy: South Africa and beyond

Research in political science has highlighted how the survival of democracy and levels of development are inextricably linked. Adam Przeworski *et al* note that no democracy, once established, with a per capita income above around \$6,000 in 1990 US\$ terms ever collapsed<sup>20</sup>. Historically it is also important to note that no democratic state has ever waged war against another democratic state. These regimes tend to remain resilient in times of war and political and economic crisis. The wealthier a country is the more likely it is that democracy will remain 'the only game in town'<sup>21</sup>.

When assessing South Africa's prospects for consolidating its democracy, its level of development remains an important factor. A recent survey conducted by *Afrobarometer* has highlighted concerns over the strength of South Africa's democracy. Ordinary citizens are growing increasingly dissatisfied with political leadership and government performance and this has negatively affected perceptions of democracy<sup>22</sup>. Perceptions of democracy amongst all race groups in South Africa remains below 70% with Black South Africans rating 'democracy as preferable to all other forms of government' the highest at 67%. More worrying is that when citizens were asked to rate their 'satisfaction with democracy', White, Coloured and Indian South Africans all scored under 40% while Black South Africans scored just over 50%<sup>23</sup>. These findings are reinforced by *The Democracy Ranking Association* in which South Africa's global democracy ranking for 2015 fell by 2 basis points<sup>24</sup>. In regard to this dissatisfaction one might draw attention to recent events which bring issues of governance, accountability and respect for rule of law to the fore.

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This was notably on display in the high profile instances of both Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's visit to South Africa<sup>25</sup> as well as the forced resignation of former head of the Hawks Anwa Dramat<sup>26</sup>. A few days after al-Bashir's arrival in South Africa the Pretoria High Court issued a court order to have him detained and handed over to the International Criminal Court. The South African authorities had to comply with the court order. However; before al-Bashir could be detained it was alleged that he had already left the republic. The entire scenario raised questions surrounding the rule of law, most notably the respect for judicial decisions. The South African government later issued a statement in which it questioned the credibility of the ICC<sup>27</sup>. Added to this was the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) ruling which dismissed a government appeal in the case in which the SCA declared that the decision not to arrest al-Bashir 'was inconsistent with South African law'<sup>28</sup>. The decision not to comply with the court decision has both international and domestic ramifications. Internationally, South Africa violated its obligation as being party to the Rome Statute, and thus subject to international law. Domestically, by not complying with the Constitution a dangerous precedent could be set regarding the enactment of judicial decisions.

In the case of Dramat, his resignation following allegations brought against him also raised important questions pertaining to accountability and openness. As a



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senior public servant in charge of an independent directorate, the actions taken by the Independent Police Investigative Directorate against Dramat remains unresolved in which its transparency, in handling the case, remains unclear. These issues and numerous others – not least the Constitutional Court's findings and order in respect of the Public Prosecutor's determinations in the Nkandla affair – have raised important questions surrounding good governance and the rule of law. More specifically it goes to the heart of the tension between the 'normative' and 'prerogative' state in South Africa<sup>29</sup>. The path its leaders choose to take at the current 'crossroad' will have significant implications for the durability and character of its constitutional democracy. If one adds

this to the challenges experienced in the socioeconomic environment adverted to previously, it remains debatable whether South Africa will fully consolidate its democracy. To the extent that a robustly competitive multi-party system – which, given the nature of South Africa's electoral system should tend towards coalition governments – is a crucial element of such a democracy, the outcome of the recent Local Government Elections in the larger Metros is a source of encouragement. However, in contrast to this – in light of Christian Houle's pioneering work – is the fact that levels of inequality remain disturbingly high. And while high levels of inequality might have little bearing on the transition to democracy, they are inimical to its consolidation.

While South Africa's democracy remains somewhat fragile, it is not at odds with global perceptions and trends. The quality and strength of democracy in the 'West' has at best remained the same, and in some cases retreated rather than improved.

*The Democracy Ranking Association* notes that amongst the top 5 ranked states in the world there was no real loss or gain while in some cases (most notably in Canada and the United States of America) one saw a slight decrease in the quality of democracy<sup>30</sup>. Of particular importance for global democracy is the slim majority preference of Britain voters to exit the European Union (EU), a choice popularly referred to as *'Brexit'*<sup>31</sup>. The long standing EU arrangement can be traced as far back as the 1950s which sought to bring stability and unity to Europe, in an essentially 'functionalist' mode, following two devastating world wars. A decision to leave this trading bloc by a major economic polity points to a worrying and arguably increasing global trend towards protectionism and isolation rather than integration and solidarity. It might also have wider global repercussions in which South Africa could be particularly hard hit<sup>32</sup>. In addition to *'Brexit'* the strength of democracy globally faces a number of other challenges. Most notable are: the continued uncertainty in the global economy, the migration crisis in Europe and the related rise of populist movements (across continental Europe and North-America) and radical political forces hostile to the post-Second World War international institutional framework, most notably, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Thus the allure of democracy as a global phenomenon could well slowdown in the years to come. One should always be mindful of the fact that, just as the fortunes of the South African economy have – with some variances – tended to track the fortunes of the global economy, so its political culture has also been influenced by the shifting winds of global political sentiment. The country's transition to democracy enjoyed the tailwinds of the 'Velvet Revolutions' in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the 'linkage and leverage' effects of its longstanding and deep connections with the more advanced economies of the West. The rise of reactionary, anti-globalisation populist movements – such as Donald Trump's Republican Party's campaign core in the USA – might impact upon the political culture template in South Africa. Added to this has been the resuscitation of a seemingly expansionist, authoritarian Russian 'Nationalism under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, and the seeming stickiness of authoritarian rule in China – both members of BRICS, which South Africa has embraced as a network of 'development' partners. On the 'upside', South Africa – on geopolitical terms – is currently relatively immune to the refugee crisis that the Syrian civil war (a long term consequence of the ham-handed, principally Anglo-American, invasion of 2003) has unleashed upon Europe, and which has fed the rise of xenophobic populist forces in both Europe and the USA.

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## Moving forward

Through this essay, it becomes clear that while South Africa has achieved a great deal in a fairly short space of time it cannot afford to continue to slow down economically or become politically more complacent. This is particularly true when dealing with the country's fundamental challenges – inequality, poverty, unemployment and human capital formation. In order to make the necessary inroads there needs to be a substantially better quality of political leadership, efficient and technocratic management of the public sector, good, transparent, governance and a respect for the rule of law. This all should better help guard against a drift towards ever greater kleptocracy, and in which nepotism, corruption and rent-seeking in state institutions are curbed. In addition one needs to see a re-embrace of constitutionalism in which respect for the rule of law, procedural justice and formal institutions are upheld by

both government officials and civil society. This will lead to the strengthening of political legitimacy in which 'faith in the democratic system' is restored. By doing this South Africa gives itself a chance to sport an effective state apparatus which is backed up by a highly motivated and skilled workforce capable of competing on a global scale. This will go a long way to ensure that South Africa's democracy both thrives and ultimately survives. Finally, South Africans need to be mindful of the fact that their country is locked into a network of relations with its southern African neighbours. Facilitating the development and underpinning of democracy and prosperity among its neighbours should help insulate the country from external factors such as regional wars and conflicts and their attendant pathologies such as the mass influx of refugees.

## NOTE

- 1 A dominant party system occurs when a particular political organization successfully wins a number of consecutive elections in which its defeat at the 'ballot box' is unlikely to occur for the foreseeable future.
- 2 Diamond, L. 1996. 'Is The Third Wave Over?', *Journal of Democracy*, P27.
- 3 The third wave of democracy was ushered in by the 'Carnation Revolution' in Portugal in 1974.
- 4 See Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way, 'International Linkage and Democratization', *Journal of Democracy*, 16(3): P20-34.
- 5 Note that South Africa's connection with the 'West' has always been precarious. It remains debatable whether economic sanctions and pressures exerted on the apartheid government by the 'West' were enough to force political reform. Rather South Africa's transition to democracy did not occur in a 'vacuum' in which, apart from the 'West', other African, Asian and non-democratic states – in the form of Cuba and the Soviet Union – played an important role in bringing the respective parties to the negotiation table. Ultimately however, the real impetus for change came from stakeholders and citizens, both elites and masses, within the country.
- 6 Dorrian, P. 2005. *The Making of South Africa Inc.* Zebra Press.
- 7 This is in terms of real GDP which stood at 598.8 US\$ Bn. in 2000 and increased to 2026.8 US\$ Bn. in 2012. See EY, 2013 annual report entitled "SA's position in the context of the African growth story".
- 8 See IMF, 2015. *Regional Economic Outlook. "Sub-Saharan Africa: Navigating Headwinds"*.
- 9 The IMF in its *Regional Economic Outlook for October 2015* cut Africa's expected growth from 4.5% to 3.75% for 2016. This was due to continuing low commodity prices, industrial slowdown in China and persistent strain placed on the global economy by geopolitical factors.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 This according to the World Bank Indicators of 2014.
- 12 See Strydom, M. "Did you know Thabo Mbeki presided over SA's highest economic growth rate in the past 35 years?"
- 13 See South African Reserve Bank Annual Economic Report 2007.
- 14 See Simkins, C and de Kadt, R. 2012. 'The Political Economy of Pervasive Rent-Seeking', Thesis Eleven.
- 15 These include the recent events surrounding both the "RhodesMustFall" movement and the nationwide "FeesMustFall" campaign which affected state institutions across the country in 2015.
- 16 See Dorrian, P. 2005. *The Making of South Africa Inc.* Zebra Press. P101.
- 17 See South African Institute for Race Relations. 2009. *Skills flights retards growth and investment.*
- 18 See CDE. 2010. "Skills, Growth and Borders: Managing migration in South Africa's national interest". Available at: <http://www.cde.org.za/skills-growth-and-borders-managing-migration-in-south-africa-s-national-interest/>
- 19 Affirmative action is the policy of favouring individuals who suffered from past discrimination. This policy is important as it aims to provide equity and redress within society. However its implementation at times has seen only those well connected benefiting while the majority of those previously disadvantaged are yet to sufficiently benefit.
- 20 See Przeworski, A et al. 2000. *Democracy and Development.* Cambridge University Press.
- 21 For criteria on consolidating democracy see Linz, J and Stepan, A. 1996. *Towards Consolidated Democracies.* *Journal of Democracy* .7(2): P14-33.
- 22 See *The Conversation*. 2016. "South Africans are demanding more of their leaders, and democracy" available at: <https://theconversation.com/south-africans-are-demanding-more-of-their-leaders-and-democracy-54755>
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See Global Democracy Ranking. 2015. Available at: <http://democracyranking.org/wordpress/>
- 25 Al-Bashir visited South Africa in June of 2015 to attend an African Union summit in Johannesburg. Al-Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes committed in Darfur. South Africa, as a signatory to the Rome Statute, had to detain Al-Bashir as part of their legal obligation of being signatory members.
- 26 Dramat resigned from the Hawks following allegations of his involvement in the unlawful rendition of Zimbabwean nationals to the Zimbabwean police service in 2015.
- 27 See eNCA. 2015. "ANC on Bashir: 'ICC is no longer useful'".
- 28 See Mail and Guardian. 2016. 'Supreme Court dismisses al-Bashir appeal' available at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2016-03-15-supreme-court-dismisses-al-bashir-appeal>
- 29 See Simkins, C. 'The normative and prerogative state' Available at: <http://hsf.org.za/resource-centre/hsf-briefs/the-normative-and-prerogative-state>
- 30 See Global Democracy Ranking 2015. Available at: <http://democracyranking.org/wordpress/>
- 31 At the time of writing the EU referendum by Britain was undecided as the polls indicate the vote will be a closely contested affair right up until the June 23rd deadline.
- 32 See Fin24. 2016. 'How Brexit will impact South Africa' available at: <http://www.fin24.com/Opinion/how-brexit-will-impact-south-africa-20160620>

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See on China Stein Ringen's recent 'The Perfect Dictatorship'. Ringen, S. 2016. *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century*, Jong Kong, Hong Kong University Press. Note that this is less optimistic about China's prospects for moving in a 'liberal democratic' direction than some other assessments.

On Russia, see among a very vast literature, William Zimmerman's 'Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin'. 2016, Zimmerman, W. *Ruling Russia: Authoritarianism from the Revolution to Putin*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.