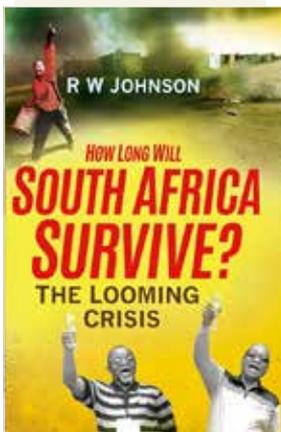


## BOOK REVIEW

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**HOW LONG WILL SOUTH AFRICA SURVIVE? THE LOOMING CRISIS**  
by RW Johnson  
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# A Latter Day Cassandra? A Review of R.W. Johnson *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*

*In a moment of despondency about the United States of America, Walter Lippmann, the great American journalist wrote that 'there is no greater necessity for men who live in communities than that they be governed, self-governed if possible, well-governed if they are fortunate, but in any event, governed.'* Lippmann's 'Hobbesian wisdom', quoted by Samuel Huntington in the opening pages of his pioneering study, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, helps to frame the remit of that now classic work. It is also a leitmotiv of the book under review.

R.W. Johnson, in this provocative new book, claims that South Africa is no longer governed – at least in any reasonably meaningful sense of that term – and, certainly, is not well governed. Further, he asserts that the consequences of the ills of the South African polity entail a looming, major, economic crisis likely to culminate in the need for a bailout by the IMF. Such a bailout would bring with it inevitable hardships and austerity which, though necessary, would afflict most harshly the worst-off members of the society. It would also have significant political implications

The source of South Africa's woes, as Johnson sees it, lies in the structure and history of the ANC as both a party of 'government' and as an organization with a distinctive history as a *soi disant* 'liberation movement'. In essence, the ANC – on his account – is not, and never really has been, properly equipped to serve as a party of government in a modern, constitutional, liberal democracy. He goes so far as to say that 'South Africa can either choose to have an ANC government or it can have a modern industrial economy. It cannot have both'.

Johnson's principal claim is that the ANC is a system of patronage and, as an organization and national party of government, is riddled with corruption, rent-seeking and, inevitably, squabbles over the distribution of patronage. The patrimonial nature of the ANC has also shifted in the past decade, with two major sociological factors playing an important role. The first has been the increasing salience of ethnicity, with the ANC becoming ever more rooted in KwaZulu-Natal through its absorption of much of the Inkatha Freedom Party's peri-urban and rural support base. The second, and related, factor is that since the highpoint of its post-apartheid electoral successes, its purchase on its erstwhile electoral support base in major metropolitan areas such as Pretoria, Johannesburg and Port Elizabeth has weakened. Indeed, the ANC has – under the leadership of President Jacob Zuma – become

ever more beholden to traditional rural constituencies and to their leaders, and to its Zulu ethnic support. Paradoxically, the ANC – hailed so often as a progressive, modernizing party – has, he argues, become increasingly ‘traditionalist’ in character and, under Jacob Zuma has granted ever greater muscle to traditional ‘tribal chiefs’. In other words, it is not a party, in terms of political support and political purpose, equipped to preside over the desperately needed rapid growth of the South African economy.

Johnson alerts his readers to a number of key issues in the evolving pathology of South Africa’s political economy. I shall, for reasons of space, refer briefly to only five that strike me as crucial. The first is the ‘criminalization of the state’ and the corresponding degradation of state capacity. The second is the pervasiveness of rent seeking. The third is the role of ethnicity, ‘discursively suppressed’ for so long, and now reasserting itself. The fourth is the extent to which the entrenched interests of organized labour have distorted the workings of the capitalist market economy. The fifth is the growing disconnect from ‘the West’, and the embrace of an arguably illusory preference for the countries of the BRICS grouping and, by extension, of regimes that are not notable for their commitment to broadly liberal democratic modes of political organization or to the rule of law.

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It is now well established in the political economy literature that state capacity is crucial to both economic prosperity and, though perhaps more complexly, to political well-being. As Francis Fukuyama in his magisterial *Origins of Political Order* pointed out, to ‘become Denmark’ (a metaphor for both economic prosperity and social and political well-being) three basic institutional pillars are needed: an efficient, bureaucratically professional, state, the rule of law and governmental accountability. Each of these pillars seems increasingly wobbly in South Africa. Further, and more recently, Vladimir Popov, in an impressive exercise in comparative political economy, argues that state capacity may be a ‘forcing variable’ in determining the relative economic fortunes of countries.<sup>i</sup>

Certainly, as Johnson argues, a ‘criminalized’, patronage-riddled, and thus inefficient and non-meritocratic state does not augur well for South Africa’s future. Worrying, to this reviewer, have been recent efforts by the ANC in government to weaken the powers of the independent arms of the state, such as the judiciary, to hold the executive arm of the state to account. It is disconcerting when the Minister of Police acts in a manner seemingly disregardful, if not contemptuous, of High Court and Constitutional Court judgements and rulings and it does not bode well for a democracy when the Minister of Higher Education publicly reprimands and criticizes members of the judiciary.

Johnson provides a number of examples of alleged corruption and patronage and refers to pervasive rent-seeking behaviour. Corruption, of course, is not the same as rent-seeking. However, despite the claims of some ‘denialists’ that rent-seeking and corruption can be ‘good’. This is not a persuasive argument.<sup>ii</sup> Johnson’s account of ‘the new class structure’ and of the bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ is both compelling and disturbing, albeit that the phenomenon is not unique to South Africa and, in a way, was predictable.

Johnson may be largely correct to draw attention to the ‘intra-Nguni’ rivalry – especially between Xhosa-speaking and Zulu-speaking members – for dominance within the ANC. He is certainly correct, in light both of voting patterns at Mangaung and the voting patterns discernable in the 2011 Local Government Elections (LGEs) and the General Elections of 2009 and 2014, to note the increasingly important role of KwaZulu-Natal in defining ANC policy. He is also correct to identify the role of traditional leaders in shaping the overall balance of power within the ANC. <sup>iii</sup>

Many economists would agree that distortions in the South African labour market have impeded both economic growth and the alleviation of poverty. The creation of a ‘labour aristocracy’, whose members are beneficiaries of the crucial political support their unions provide to ANC, has made it more difficult, through labour market inflexibility, to generate employment for the destitute and thoroughly impecunious. Thus, South Africa’s Gini coefficient remains persistently and unconscionably high. Further, such extreme inequality – as global data-based research by Christian Houle has shown – augurs ill for the consolidation and entrenchment of democracy.<sup>iv</sup> Johnson is right to alert us to this, and to show how it articulates with the broad support-base (and reward) structure of the ANC

*Johnson’s account of South Africa’s embeddedness in the global political economy is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, not least in light of the ‘parochialism’ that he correctly identifies as a feature of South African life.*

Johnson’s account of South Africa’s embeddedness in the global political economy is perhaps the greatest strength of the book, not least in light of the ‘parochialism’ that he correctly identifies as a feature of South African life. A major study by Levitsky and Way has demonstrated that the extent of linkage with, and potential leverage by, the western democracies has been historically crucial to the persistence, or collapse, of authoritarian regimes.<sup>v</sup> In other words, intense linkage to the West is good for democracy. Johnson sounds a warning bell on this score, in that he identifies a South African shift, in international relations, away from the West and towards the so-called ‘countries of the global South’. One manifestation of this has been South Africa’s minor-part membership of the BRICS grouping with, of course, China and to a lesser extent Russia and India as ‘major’ players. The significance of this in terms of Johnson’s larger picture is that, since South Africa seems inevitably headed in the direction of an economic crisis and need for a bailout, a possible first port of call for a loan would be the BRICS grouping. He is doubtful that this would issue in an effective financial rescue deal, and thinks that the more likely outcome would be a politically vexed approach to the IMF, which naturally would be resisted by protectionist and ‘leftist’ elements in South Africa.

Johnson proceeds to offer possible scenarios in light of his projected or ‘looming’ crisis. One is the ‘Mugabe option’ which – and here he offers some comfort – is unlikely in South Africa. The country is too urbanized and industrialized – and too fully integrated into the global economy – for this to be plausible. Autarchy is not an option. More likely is a dissolution of the present regime – in other words a change of regime or government. Here, naturally, he enters a realm of uncertain speculation, but offers a number of possible scenarios – ranging from the dissolution of South as the geo-political entity that was constituted by Union in 1910 to various possible alliances and political re-alignments. I leave it to the readers of this review to read the book and reflect on these.

If one were to criticize aspects of Johnson's book, it would be to say that – while the author is a master 'story-teller' – he sometimes allows personal animus to weaken an otherwise persuasive case. There is a 'register' of people whom he seemingly dislikes, at whom he seemingly sneers, and to whom he either attributes a greater capacity to shape things than is, perhaps, the case – or whose positive contributions he fails to note. Sadly, these displays of *ad hominem animus*, sometimes of dubious relevance to his larger case, detract from the force of an otherwise powerful critique of the ANC and a shrewd essay of South Africa's political and economic problems. Johnson is at his best when he focuses on the structural features of South Africa's political economy, not least its embeddedness in the global political economy, which he analyses superbly. He is at his least compelling when driven by animus.

*Another instance of a legacy effect which has likely rendered poverty eradication more intractable and job creation harder, is – in light of recent research done by Dr David Fowkes at the Reserve Bank – the result of impeded urbanization through influx control and the homelands policy.*

A more important flaw in an otherwise arresting exercise in analysis and daring 'prophecy' is his failure to sufficiently acknowledge the lingering impact of Apartheid's 'legacy effects'. These are still to be felt – devastatingly – in the education system, especially in the poorer black education system, both at school and tertiary levels.<sup>vi</sup> Of course 'mobilizing the relevant counterfactual' is never easy with regard to historical trajectories, but my sense is that even a government of angels would have been hard-pressed to put the system reasonably right within 20 years. This is not, of course, to excuse the poor performance of government since 1994, nor to pardon the South African Democratic

Teachers' Union (SADTU) for its largely negative role (a force that even good government would have had difficulty dealing with), but to place things in better perspective. Another instance of a legacy effect which has likely rendered poverty eradication more intractable and job creation harder, is – in light of recent research done by Dr David Fowkes at the Reserve Bank – the result of impeded urbanization through influx control and the homelands policy. Indeed, Fowkes goes as far as to suggest that the so-called 'Lula miracle' in reducing poverty in Brazil was not so much a result of specific Lula policies, but a long-term outcome of rapid, relatively unimpeded urbanization.<sup>vii</sup>

I share many of Johnson's critical essays. I do, however, think that a less 'monochromatic' account of South Africa might help to get Cassandra Johnson's prophetic warnings more keenly heeded, not so much among his friends (who will likely largely agree) but among his critics. It would be good if R.W. Johnson – despite his protestations that he is not a 'Cassandra' – could, through fewer *ad hominem* attacks, be transfigured into Cassandra's brother, Helenus, whose prophesies were indeed heeded. One should note, though that, despite his gloomy appraisal, R.W. Johnson remains 'optimistic'. I suspect that beneath the surface of his book (in which he fails to say much about what does actually work well, and has been done well in South Africa – such as mostly sound macro-economic management) lurks a view that he once expressed in a Politicsweb comment: South Africa is a pragmatic society.

In conclusion, this is a book every South African should read and take heed of – even if they disagree with the author's analyses, projections and dislike his sometimes overly polemical and acerbic style. R.W. Johnson has, despite my criticisms, a special talent for getting many of the 'Big Things' right. South Africa not only needs to be

governed but, in light of the international context in which it is located, exceptionally well governed.

\*The title of Johnson's book is borrowed from his famous and perceptive 1977 book, 'How Long Will South Africa Survive', he correctly anticipated the ability of the Apartheid regime to hold on to power until sometime in the 1990's.

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