

## Understanding South Africa's brand of democracy

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### Introduction

On 27 and 28 April 1994, South Africans took to the voting stations. Many voters had high hopes to finally experience the African National Congress' (ANC) promise of 'A better life for all'. This overarching slogan outlines the goals of the ANC which sought to improve citizens' quality of life, create jobs, increase incomes and end rural poverty. Unfortunately, the truth is that the government has yet to fulfil these promises to many South Africans to ensure the overall success of the democratic project.

To explore the question of whether democracy is the problem or the answer, the article will start by assessing South Africa's (SA) democracy as it pertains to regular, free and fair elections. The second section will address the impact of corruption on democracy. Lastly, the article will offer an assessment of SA's democracy as it relates to socio-economic issues.

### Understanding democracy

Liberal democracy is a system of government premised on a blend of limited government intervention and popular rule, or rule by the majority. This article uses Heywood's (2014) definition to determine the impact of democracy on South Africa. Heywood (2014) identifies three features of liberal democracy. First, democracy is underpinned by regular and competitive elections based on universal adult suffrage. This means that the right to rule is gained from free and fair voting processes. Second, power is controlled by constraints on government imposed by a constitution, institutional checks and balances, and the protection of individual rights. Third, a democratic civil society is active and robust. Therefore, democracy is not only about a democratic government, but also about a democratic society.

## Regular, free and fair elections

A key component of democracy is the political participation of society. This section focuses on the voting behaviour of society to understand how citizens interact with the state. As such, South Africa's national elections from 1994-present will be used in this analysis.

Alence and Pitcher (2019) note that voters are doubtful of the efficacy of South Africa's democracy due to the ease with which the ANC wins elections. To illustrate the loss of trust of voters in the election process, and the governing party, consider the national elections on 8 May 2019. The most recent national government elections marked the first time in South Africa's democratic history that the ANC obtained a vote share under 60%, decreasing from 63% in 1999 to 58% in 2019 (Moosa 2020: 8). Moreover, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) earned 11% of the vote, and the Democratic Alliance (DA) managed 21% of the vote share. One of the main reasons behind these results was the decline in voter participation. According to Alence and Pitcher (2019: 17), voter turnout amounted to 47%, a major reduction from the 89% achieved in the 1994 election. This means that less than two-thirds of the 27.8 million registered voters cast their ballots. Even though fewer people turned out to vote, the ANC still won 58% of the vote, and 230 seats in the country's 400-seat National Assembly.

Since 1994, the ANC has won the majority of the votes. At the same time, the party's performance in 2019 marked its lowest number of votes in its national election history. People do not believe that casting their votes in the national election is an effective way to influence the political process. This does not mean that people are voting for other parties instead of the ANC. Rather, Moosa's (2020: 5) findings show that people are just not voting altogether because citizens do not believe that they can effect change in governance at the national level. Thus, the ANC's dominance is a feature of South Africa's brand of democracy.

One reason that explains why the electorate and general public choose not to vote links directly to the matter of corruption. Corruption causes citizens to withdraw from public life and active citizenship because they feel that they have lost their ability to affect change. The next section discusses corruption as it relates to democratic principles of transparency and the ability to implement checks and balances on the abuse of power.

## The impact of corruption

The corrupt activities that took place during Jacob Zuma's tenure as the President of South Africa marked a time when the country's democracy was grossly undermined. Corruption links to the democratic principle of controlling and preventing the abuse of power. This section will define corruption, and then give insights into South Africa's cases of corruption through state capture.

Corruption can be defined as the act of the abuse of power for private gain (April & Mangwanda 2014:113). South Africa's experience of state capture was brought about by the collusion of high-level politicians, public officials and private business individuals who worked together to siphon off public resources for private gain. As such, Gumede (2019) states that democratic institutions such as state-owned enterprises and public agencies are manipulated in the process, and trusted professions such as auditors and medical professionals are corrupted. President Jacob Zuma was known for reshuffling his cabinet, an exercise which cost the country dearly. For example, in December 2015 former Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene was fired by the Zuma administration (Gumede 2019) costing the economy approximately R500bn and 148 000 jobs.

In 2014, former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela issued a report which found that former President Zuma had spent over R246 million of state resources for improvements at his Nkandla home (Whittles 2016). Her proposal for remedial action included, but was not limited to, calling for the President to appoint a Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture. This exemplified purposive action to combat corruption by exposing officials and activities that undermine democracy.

Under President Zuma's administration, a public entity and major electricity supplier, Eskom, was also involved in several corruption scandals. Eskom's state capture scandals involved contracts for coal supply and power plant construction and bypassing procurement procedures. The lack of funds has meant that the country has not built enough power stations required to meet South Africa's electricity demands nor has it maintained the existing infrastructure. The findings of the inquiry link Jacob Zuma and the Gupta family to irregular contracts within the power utility worth R14.7 billion (BusinessTech 2022). The recommendations of the inquiry include filing criminal charges against Brian Molefe and Matshele Koko, former Eskom Chief Executive officers; Anoj Singh, who was Chief Financial Officer; and members of the 2014 Eskom board. South Africa has become all-too-familiar with the idea of rolling blackouts known as 'load-shedding' which has been happening for over a decade. Load-shedding weakens economic growth and development and deters foreign investment into the country. In response to the

findings and recommendations by the inquiry, Eskom has set up a team to deal with those implicated and to redirect monies to the entity (eNCA 2022).

Corruption undermines the delivery of public services and diminishes public funds for public services, such as health care, education and crime prevention. The next section discusses democracy as it relates to the prospect of better economic and political opportunities.

## **Socio-economic opportunities**

The first national democratic elections in 1994 symbolised new, more, and better social, economic and political opportunities for the people of the country. This was especially the case for the population that formed the marginalised, non-white community in apartheid-governed South Africa.

Democratic South Africa inherited the legacies of apartheid which can still be experienced today as poverty, inequality and unemployment. Basic needs of citizens such as access to water, adequate sanitation and electricity, education and health care have yet to be met and are exacerbated by corruption. April and Mangwanda (2014) use the country's education system to measure the state of democracy in South Africa. According to April and Mangwanda (2014: 111), 20% of total state expenditure goes to education. However, despite this investment, democratic South Africa's education system continues to grapple with imbalances in education, a major threat to democracy. For example, many children leave school without having acquired the ability to read and write. For some students, this is made worse by the fact that they also come from families that have little or no education. Consequently, this cycle repeats itself for generations, resulting in little to no development as it pertains to the promises of democracy to deliver a better life. Under post-apartheid South Africa, vicious cycles of poverty have reproduced themselves and have, in many cases, excluded the most vulnerable South Africans from fulfilling their economic potential.

The Gini coefficient measures inequality and the distribution of income among citizens. It consists of two main elements (from 0-1) that determine how equal a society is. While a reading of 1 indicates perfect inequality, a reading of 0 indicates perfect equality. Masipa (2018: 5) states that since the establishment of democracy in South Africa, the gap has widened. For instance, in 1995, the Gini coefficient sat at 0.58 in comparison to 0.77 in 2016 and education is a focal point of this. According to Alence and Pitcher (2019: 11-12), South Africa has also experienced a reduction in race-based income inequality due to more young black people having access to quality education, and increased access to

higher-income job opportunities compared to those available during apartheid. In 2014, the middle class of young adults was made of 50% black, 21% coloured and Indian or Asian and 28% white people (Alence & Pitcher 2019). Thus, the middle class is becoming more diverse according to race, and socio-economic opportunities are somewhat more accessible.

Although the fruits of democracy are being enjoyed by some, the 'triple legacy' of unemployment, poverty and inequality requires urgent attention to address the problem of inclusivity in economic participation.

## Conclusion

In closing, the essay makes three main points: first, South Africa's most recent national election signified a distrust in the state of the country's democracy. It was largely exemplified by voters not turning out to cast their ballots. Second, the abuse of state resources for private gain hinders the overall progress of the country. As such, officials implicated in such matters must be brought to book in accordance with the democratic institutions, such as the Public Protector's Office, to hold them accountable to their voters. Thirdly, the legacies of apartheid can still be felt today. However, improvements have been brought about particularly due to the better educational and work opportunities that were previously not available to all races.

Thus, democracy is an ideal that can be accomplished over time through active participation by a democratic government and a democratic society. This means that there is hope.

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