

## South Africa - the place of youth in a democracy of many faces

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### Abstract

*“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.” These wise words were expressed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Roosevelt 1941 cited in Palmadessa 2017). More than half South Africa’s youth are looking for employment. It is therefore important to invest more in the youth. However, South Africa remains a country of many faces. It is a country of paradoxes, incongruities and ironies; where poverty and wealth are in competition, while modernity and traditionalism walk side by side. It is recognised as ‘the most unequal country in the world in terms of the enduring legacy of apartheid (Feldman & Wallace 2021). This article, therefore, seeks to understand the place of youth in South Africa’s democratic dispensation.*

Keywords: Youth, democracy, democratic dispensation, formal employment, unequal country, protest actions

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### Introduction

During apartheid, the youth of South Africa mobilised in political organisations, created movements and developed practices in the fight against apartheid (Glaser 2018). The youth was described as ‘foot soldiers’ during the fight against apartheid because they protested, built barricades and fought street battles against the security forces of the apartheid state (Seekings 1996). They rendered some areas in the country ‘ungovernable’ through mass protest such as that seen during the Soweto student uprising of 1976, where the youth fought against the imposition of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in public schools

across the country (Lekgoathi 2018). The youth demonstrated to South Africa and the world that apartheid was unsustainable, and helped to bring the system to its knees (Lekgoathi 2018). The youth played an active role in the fight against apartheid. This article seeks to examine the place of the youth in the present democratic dispensation of South Africa.

## Background

South Africa's democratic transition in the 1990s was a magnificent political event for that decade (Masipa 2018). The transition was, for the most part, peaceful. Unfortunately, in the long-run, the economic gains and opportunities that were expected are not enjoyed by the majority of South Africans (Masipa 2018). For example, the emancipation of previously disadvantaged South Africans from political oppression, after the transition, remains constrained by rising unemployment, in particular youth unemployment (Banda, Ngirande & Hogwe 2016; Graham & Mlatsheni 2015; Sullivan 2014).

Przeworski, (1999) contend that the quality of a democratic transition may build or break a country. This means that the degree of affirmative action and reasonable accommodation that accompanies the transition from an exclusive system of government to an inclusive democracy has the ability to shape the democratic project of a country (Munck 2015; Munck & Leff 1997). It can also determine the ability of a country to consolidate the values of democracy. Masipa (2018) therefore posits that factors such as poverty, inequality and high crime rates are determinants of the quality of democracy that would be practised in any given country.

In the context of South Africa, there are improvements in the socio-economic landscape in addressing the legacy of apartheid, however, issues such as poverty are still prevalent among black South Africans (Mosoetsa & Francis 2019). Many lack access to basic necessities such as; food, shelter, and health services as a result of high unemployment (Moore 2005: 4). Youth unemployment, for example, remains the highest since 2016, sitting at 54.20% (Statistics South Africa 2021. De Lannoy, Leibbrandt and Frame (2015) attest that more than 60% of youth in South Africa live in relative income poverty. Bhorat, Leibbrandt, Maziya, Van der Berg and Woolard (2001) argue that in a situation where there is high unemployment, the incidence of employment determines how income is distributed and poverty is spread across various groups of the population. Ramphele (2017) claims the dream of the 1994 transition to democracy that imagined a thriving economy and a just and prosperous future for all South Africans is betrayed by rampant corruption.

## Is the South African democracy working for the youth?

Kotze (2004) claims that democracy in South Africa can be analysed in terms of the political stratification of the society in order to sustain its democratic dispensation, the role of the society in public participation in elections, the content of democracy, and the role of the state in relation to the society and economy. However, it should be emphasised that the advent of democracy in South Africa in April 1994, brought hope, aspirations and new opportunities to millions of previously disadvantaged South Africans who participated in the process of electoral democracy for the first time after apartheid (Chigudu 2015). The majority of them voted for the leader of their choice, who they believed had the ability to move the country towards transformation (Wittenberg & Pirouz 2013).

The constitution of South Africa laid the foundation for the establishment of the fundamental principles of democracy. However, the extent to which the values of democracy have been achieved in South Africa is highly contested. The popular constitutional clause, “South Africa belongs to all who live in it; blacks, whites, coloureds and Indians” highlighted the importance of healing the country from the historic segregation past, in order to establish a nation based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights (Nkondo 2016; Wittenberg & Pirouz 2013; Fikeni 2012). Masipa (2018) claims that South Africa’s democratic achievement is clouded by the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. This is partly because the majority of South Africans still do not have access to land as a factor of production (Akinola 2020).

Consequently, South Africans hold frequent protest actions to demonstrate their frustration and discontent in general. The protests often lead to the “scapegoating” of African migrants and the burning down of their businesses, otherwise known as Xenophobia (Thela, Tomita, Maharaj, Mhlongo & Burns 2017; Lodge & Mottiar 2016) and the destruction of public goods such as municipal buses (Monson 2015). Several instances of this have already been seen, for example, the violent attacks against African migrants that took place in 2008 that left 62 people dead, 342 migrant businesses looted and 213 burnt down (Johnson & Jacobs 2012: 330). Similar attacks occurred in 2015, 2017 and 2019 (Dube 2019; Peberdy 2017; Tshishonga 2015). Protest action remains a means by which South Africans manifest their discontent towards the leadership of the country. However, incidences of protest action are not isolated to urban or rural areas, even though protests are more frequent in townships than in other geographic spaces (Alexander & Pfaffe 2014; Du Toit 1992). The bulk of protest actions are often linked to slow leadership response toward citizens’ demands regarding issues of service delivery, employment, housing, electricity and education (Lodge & Mottiar 2016; Alexander & Pfaffe 2014). This includes

protests against crime, corruption and the presence of African migrants in the country (Moyo, Nshimbi & Gumbo 2018; Alexander & Pfaffe 2014).

The protest action in South Africa is frequent and is becoming increasingly violent (Lodge & Mottiar 2016). This has contributed to South Africa being labelled as the protest capital of the world (Lodge & Mottiar 2016). South African youth have increasingly taken centre stage in most protest actions throughout the country. This is partly because of historical reasons. For example, as far back as 16 June 1976, South African youth staged a prolonged protest action against the apartheid government, when it introduced Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in the public education system (Brown 2016). Their actions brought them to the forefront of the liberation struggle against apartheid (Brown 2016).

Mattes and Richmond (2015) claim that since the youth protest of 1976, South Africa has held “contradictory” beliefs regarding the role of youth in politics. On the one hand, many see the youth as the primary catalyst of activism and political change in the country. On the other hand, a wide range of commentators routinely experiences ‘moral panic’ regarding the apparent ‘crises of South African youth and its damaging effect on the country’s political culture’ (Mattes & Richmond 2015: 1) through growing political violence which is prominent among the youth (Du Toit & Manganyi 2016).

### **What then is the place of the youth in the current democratic dispensation?**

It is true that the foundation of South Africa’s democracy is founded on the 1996 constitution that states, ‘[...] all South Africans, irrespective of race, religion, or creed are guaranteed human dignity, equality, human rights and freedoms’ (Constitution of South Africa 1996: 30). The government of South Africa is therefore responsible for upholding, protecting, promoting and fulfilling the rights of every South African (Constitution of South Africa 1996: 6). Notwithstanding, even though the government of South Africa tries to direct a fair share of the resources of the country toward youth empowerment, the resources are not quite translated into tangible economic gains for the youth (National Youth Development Agency 2011: 8). The reason is partly because of the rise of public sector corruption in the country (Sebake 2020). The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (CPI) shows that South Africa was classified as the 23rd least corrupt nation in 1996 out of 180 countries, which was a low historic record (Gasela 2022). By 2018, South Africa was reported as the 73rd least corrupt nation out of the 180 countries, which shows that public sector corruption is on the rise (Gasela 2022).

The youth are the hardest hit by public sector corruption in South Africa because state institutions are not responsive to the needs of the youth (Ncube 2015). This continues to

place the youth in a worrying position where they are exposed to more protest actions. For example, Alexander and Pfaffe (2014) argue that South African youth frequently engage in protest action because they have much time on their hands and untapped energy in their disposition as a result of lack of employment. The youth are in a place where they waste no time in mobilising communities and mounting protest actions that often compromise significant values of democracy such as human rights (Thipanyane 2015). This is because, as Glaser (2015) argues, protest actions on service delivery for example, often turn xenophobic which involves abuse of human rights of African migrants, as their shops are sometimes looted during protest actions in some South African cities (Tshishonga 2015).

## Conclusion

South Africa's democratic dispensation is still confronted with the legacy of apartheid; poverty, inequality and high unemployment coupled with rising public sector corruption that has deprived youth of accessing various economic opportunities offered by the state. This article reflected on the place of youth in South Africa's democracy of many faces. The article has argued that for the last decades, socio-economic crises have resulted in increasing protest actions among the youth in order to demonstrate their frustration and discontent. The article has noted that although the 1994 democratic transition has made considerable progress to enhance the well-being of South Africans, the youth are still facing enormous challenges. The article, therefore, concludes that the future of South Africa's democracy depends on the promotion of the principles of democracy enshrined in the Constitution. This requires the protection of human rights and addressing the socio-economic ills confronting the country such as youth unemployment. To address youth unemployment, for example, the state must adopt and implement policies that are pro-youth empowerment and can grow the economy substantially to create jobs for the youth. This would place the youth in a less precarious position in the democratic dispensation.

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