

The future of the youth under seige, implications of the democratic and economic trajectories of post-apartheid South Africa

Abstract

Since its independence in 1994 to date, South Africa has remained the economic powerhouse in Africa. Though unannounced it flexes its “hegemony” disguised in its well decorated tools of diplomacy in this part of the hemisphere and its influence and impact on a global scale is visible in its global pacts such as the BRICKS. Its majestic world class infrastructure is a clear distinction of its economic success stories which demarcates it from the rest of the continent. Despite these giant steps towards being a vanguard of Excellency in Africa, the forenamed state is swamped with perilous conundrums such that majority of its population has remained very poor and the gap between the rich and poor continues to widen astronomically. Consequently, crime rate has reached unprecedented levels compared with most African states which are not at war; youth and women unemployment is rampant. Unequal distribution of resources between various races in the rainbow nation is a major problem, threatening to possibly reverse the remarkable level of democracy which is largely enjoyed in this nation.

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Context of the research

South Africa demonstrates the triumphs [and of late, the challenges] of democratic transformation in the postcolonial era in Africa. The Southern African state achieved majority rule in 1994 after decades of apartheid. South Africa, also termed the ‘rainbow nation’ due to its diversity, has been a leading model of democracy in Africa, a principle which [has/ is] largely struggling to sink its roots in the continent. The country is a superlative and shining beacon of development in African, its state of the art infrastructure is a reflection of the dormant potential that most resource rich African states possess. In essence, good governance and proper implementation of sound policies, is the panacea to African development, without which Africa will remain “a dark continent”. Resultantly, there has been a remarkable level of correlation between democracy and development in the forenamed African state, which is also reflected by its stable and strong economy. However, despite this remarkable level of progress; South Africa [just like vast other African countries] is besieged by various problems that are creating challenges for the youth, women and in more general terms, the economic security of its citizenry. Although the South African economy is still stronger than most African economies, lately economic indicators from various world scales such as the World Bank (2019) has indicated that its economy is slipping. Former head of the African Union, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was also an anti-apartheid activist once stated that South Africa is plagued by three main problems; poverty, unemployment and inequality. These problems coupled with political misfeasance which has been on the rise lately, threaten to derail or even reverse the progress that the country has made in its 25 years of existence. Unemployment rate is high, especially amongst the youths, which can also be attributed as one of the causes fueling crime rates and drug abuse. There is therefore an urgent need for an aggregated, pro-active and action oriented approach from various stake holders in South Africa to address these challenges from the root problem.

Chinelo¹ defines methodology as the systematic and theoretical analysis of the methods applied to a field of study. It therefore deals with the analysis of the body of methods and various principles associated with a branch of knowledge. Methodology is holistic in nature as it encompasses all the other concepts such as paradigm, sampling procedure and data collection methods among other things. This research which is qualitative in nature, heavily relied on documentary search, that is, obtaining information from already written and published documents. These documents acted as the bedrock of this study as it laid foundation and created comprehensive understanding of phenomenology understudy. These documents provided the much needed verified statistical information, on prospects and challenges faced in South Africa in general. These findings were then used to make a critical analysis of the impact of political, economic and social dynamics on the livelihoods and economic security of the youths in South Africa. Documents such as Journals, research articles, government publications and Newspapers were used to inform this research. Information from various sources were compared to try and limit the margin of bias as some scholars may deliberately misrepresent facts to pursue personal interest. Paradigmatically, this research is largely constructivist in nature, as it seeks to holistically understand and create meaning from the social world with regards to livelihoods of people in the rainbow nation and how this has significance to the youths.

Threats to democracy

Although not perfect, South Africa has since independence taken giant strides towards democratization and unlike most African states has managed to uphold democratic principles in its political affairs. However, like most African states that have failed to wean themselves from the clutches of liberation movements, South Africa remains under the African National Congress (ANC) which has in recent years ignited concerns whether the ANC will still manage to

respect democracy in the face of growing opposition. Most political parties born out of the liberation struggle in Africa started out as people oriented but as the opposition grew, they became preoccupied with survivalist notion in the end abandoning democratic principles. The Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) in Zimbabwe which has been in power since independence in 1980 has time and time again vowed that it will remain in power for eternity. With the emergence of a strong opposition, the Movement for Democratic Change, (MDC) in 1999, ZANU PF faced its first real competition in the 2000 parliamentary elections when the MDC won 57 seats against ZANU PF's 62 seats. Since then, ZANU PF has adopted a 'by any means necessary' approach to stay in power and eliminate the opposition which has resulted in democracy being the biggest loser. As such, one may be excused for drawing such inferences for the ANC in South Africa, a real test to democracy is yet to come due to the absence of a strong opposition that can challenge the ruling party in the same manner the MDC has been a thorn in the flesh of ZANU PF for 20 years. The recently held general election was affected by a low voter turnout, especially amongst the youths which has raised concerns over the path the country is taking. At 65.9%, the voter turnout for South Africa's 2019 national elections was the lowest ever in the country's democratic history.² The growing apathy reflects on the level of discontent, and could soon have another meaning for the ANC. According to Mashishi and Ngcuka,³ most youths complained about the lack of jobs, high crime rates, corruption and poor public services - issues the governing African National Congress (ANC), which has been in power since 1994, has promised to address, citing this as a possible reasons behind voter apathy.

When the ANC took office in 1994 it pledged to tackle historic injustices, chief among them the issue of land and property rights for the black majority but to date, the spotty efficacy of the ANC's land-restitution efforts has seen barely a quarter of such land restored to black farmers, according to the farmers' organization AgriSA.⁴ According to a 2017 land audit by the South African government, 72 percent of the country's arable land remains in the hands of whites, who account for fewer than 10 percent of the total population. The land issue which is the major cause of the economic disparities in South Africa has been a sticky one for the ANC which has so far failed to come up with a plan on solving the land question. On the other hand, the opposition Economic Freedom Fighters party (EFF) has called for a 'Zimbabwe style' of land reform which entails taking the land forcibly from the hands of the white minority. Despite the disastrous consequences this route had for Zimbabwe, hordes of black South Africans are in support of this path as they have endured decades of unfulfilled promises by the ANC despite the growing socio-economic disparities in the country which makes the land issue a major threat to the country's democracy.

Economic disparities along racial lines

The distribution of wealth in South Africa is uneven, making the gap between the rich and the poor one of the highest in the world which in turn threatens democratic values. Life continues to be bleak for most indigenous South Africans as a few elite individuals, most of them white and of foreign descent, own the means of production. Life for the majority was difficult during the apartheid era due to the unequal distribution of wealth and this unfortunately remains the case 25 years after independence. South Africa has thus far struggled to bridge the socio-economic gap that stands between the rich minority and the poor vast majority in the country. The gap between the rich

and the poor in South Africa is massive with the top 1 percent of the population owning 70.9 percent of the nation's wealth and the bottom 60 percent of South Africans collectively control only 7 percent of the country's assets.⁵ This is especially disheartening considering that the population of South Africa stands at 57 million and black, indigenous South Africans make up 81% of the population. The economic security of the black people has remained weak and gloomy which has spelled out poverty for millions. The former US President Roosevelt During the World War II, according to sunstein⁶ lampooned that, We cannot be content, no matter how high that general standard of living may be, if some fraction of our peopl -- whether it be one-third or one-fifth or one-tenth -- is ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed, and insecure. But, he added, over time, we have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.

Mirroring from these sentiments, South Africa has a mountain to climb to in terms of achieving economic emancipation and equality on its citizenry despite colour or creed. The statistics not only reflects on the trajectories of widening inequality but also reflects government's failure to creating lasting solutions to reduce or curb extreme poverty in South Africa. Challenges emanating from racial divisions heavily weighs down national development which consequently affects economic security of everyone both blacks and whites with the poor being the worst affected group.

Racial disparities are still predominant in South Africa's labor market, an enduring legacy of apartheid. Recently, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) threatened to shut down port operations countrywide due to the unequal salary structure of races groups.⁷ Black workers complained that they were paid less than their white counterparts despite having the same qualification and even more experience. Black staffers were being paid lower wages than their white counterparts and the state-owned company had failed to address the anomaly despite acknowledging its existence. To this end, racism has remained a critical problem in South Africa and the government has failed to comprehensively deal with problem in the last two decades. The government should therefore strive to be fair and sincere in its efforts to enforce equality between different races that make up the rainbow nation, otherwise they will create more tension which will further widen the already divided society and consequently will act as a cancer that will chew out democratic gains as well.

Unemployment amongst the youths and its consequences

The youth, those aged between the ages of 15 to 34 years old make up 20.6 million people which accounts for 35,7% of the total population, (Evans, News24, 23 July 2018). While the official unemployment rate in South Africa is at 27, 6%, unemployment amongst the youth is at 55, 2%.⁸ For a country with a huge economy like South Africa, this figure is shockingly high as the youths are expected to be at the forefront of the business world in the 21st century. (UCT) 2018 posits that, Unemployment is especially high for young people living in the former homeland and rural areas, with youth unemployment rates of above 70% in Ntambanana, Hlabisa, and Indaka in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as Ngqushwa, Nkonkobe and Ngquza Hill in Eastern Cape. In contrast, unemployment is relatively lower – at less than 50% – for young people living in urban areas like Mogale City and City of Johannesburg in Gauteng.

Both urban and rural unemployment among the youths have remained very high, though from the above statics the situation seems to be worse in the countryside. Hence as argued from the onset the youth have continually taken the bitter end of the stick and the womenfolk is no exception. Despite the fact that the situation has been like this for years now, nothing serious has been done to avert the situation. World Bank notes that, “The labor market is characterized by several challenges. These include, among others, first, high level of unemployment which reached 25.1 percent of the workforce in 2015 and 27.7 percent in the third quarter of 2017 associated with slow job creation as economic growth slowed in recent years.” The elasticity of the industrial capacity to take up more people graduating every year from high schools and universities is becoming limited, as the economy has failed to expand further but rather is shrinking. A 2016 World Bank Report reveals that between 2011 and 2015, at least three million more South Africans slipped into poverty during this period, with the poverty rate increasing from 36 percent to 40 percent. Not only did poverty rates rise, the level of poverty became deeper and more unequal as the black majority tends to suffer most.

The consequence of such rampant marginalization has also contributed to youth criminal activities. South Africa is ranked number four in the world in terms of crime rate which makes South Africa one of the most dangerous countries in the world. As the old saying goes, an idle mind is the workshop of devil, the youth end partaking in criminal activities to make ends meet or at times just for fun, because they have nothing to keep them busy. According to Stats SA,^{9,10} “1, 2 million South African households having experienced 1, 5 million crime incidents in 2016/17, male-headed households (7, 5%) were more likely to be victims than female-headed households (6, 6%). Households headed by coloured (8, 9%) individuals were the most likely to be victimised, while households headed by black Africans (6, 9%) were the least likely”. Moreover, murder cases are so high in South Africa which further complicates the situation. Sicetsha¹¹ points out that “South Africa has seen a 1 320 increase in murders, from 19 016 in 2016/2017 to 20 336 in 2017/2018. An average of 57 people are killed a day in the country, 46 of which are men, eight women and two children.” This serves to demonstrate how dangerous South Africa is and as the unemployment rate is slowly increasing and the economy is showing signs of decline, the problem could even get worse and more difficult to control if sterner measures are not taken to address such issues. These criminal activities are a result of so many factors, and cannot be solely blamed on unemployment. South Africa is overburdened with high volumes of illegal migrants, some of which may also be criminal syndicates. More so, drug abuse is prevalent and even more fashionable. Young children grow up witnessing drug use all over in their everyday life making them think that this kind of lifestyle is normal and even portrayed as ‘cool’. This kind of socialisation ends up determining their behavior which in turn means the drug problem continues and grows with every generation.¹²

The South African government has acknowledged these problems bedeviling the country’s youths and has tried to enact policies such as the National Youth Policy to remedy the situation. UCT (2018) provides that, “While progress has been made in several areas of youth well-being, outcomes in crucial domains such as educational attainment, employment, and health remains low. The current National Youth Policy (NYP) recognizes this reality and places these three domains (economic inclusion and participation; education, skills, and training; health and well-being) central in its approach.” Despite the existence of the policy it is disheartening to note that since its development,

the policy remains without an implementation plan. The exclusion of marginalised groups such as the youth and women in virtually all important activities of national development are deep seated in South Africa and threaten to destabilise the country’s political and economic foundations if they are not dealt with expeditiously.

Suggestions

There is need for government led initiatives in collaboration with political parties and civil society to put heads together and create proactive policy designed to mitigate the growing inequality which also should be people centric and involving the society. Without this unity and social coercion South African economy will continue to decline and employment opportunities will continue to shrink as well. Hence there is serious need for dialogue, national healing and reconciliation to mitigate problems arising from racial issues, which is one key areas the Black and White Youth Movement in Africa seeks to tackle

In order to try and deal with the widespread drug problem, awareness campaigns should be conducted more frequently or even added as a general subject in primary schools to help concertize and re-orient the mindset of the younger generation. Pupils must be clearly taught on the importance of education and the down side of drugs so that they do not fall prey victims of peer pressure but they have to make informed decisions. Educating kids from a tender age on issues of violence, crime and drug abuse may help reduce these kind of activities in the future. Thus governments, schools and civil society should pool their resources together and strategically formulate mechanisms and strategies to conduct such awareness campaigns in primary schools because the vast majority of students in primary schools would still be innocent and not have been so exposed to such activities as their seniors in high school. Hence this approach tries to affect and impact society, especially the future generations starting mainly from the “pure” those who haven’t been there as yet to limit their likelihood of ever getting there in the future, this could help reduce the figure of such activities in the near future than they are now.

The government should try to create more job opportunities to ensure the bulk of its population are actively involved in some form of economic activities to reduce desperation which might help combat crime rate.¹³

There is need for quick implementation of projects and policies aimed at improving the circumstances of the marginalised. Solutions to address pressing economic, political and social challenges affecting the youth and women has remained a lip services since the current generation of leadership (old leaders) does not have interests or a stake in such issues which do not directly affect them. It is in recent times that a few African countries are embracing youthful leaders, otherwise in most countries, governance is the mandate of the elderly who are largely detached from social trends and realities of the times, a pitfall which also needs to be addressed in South Africa and Africa as a whole by giving the youth more control and decision making positions. Hence, society driven initiatives driven by the young and energetic of course with the advice of the elders in the society can bring better results for the forenamed South African problems [which can prove to be a solution applicable to many other African countries faced with the same problem as well]. This would entail creating avenues for youth participation in national politics, economics and their involvement in addressing pressing societal problems at hand.

On voter apathy amongst the youths, political stakeholders in South Africa should embark on educational programmes to raise awareness on the importance of voting. All over the world, millions of lives were lost in the fight to gain universal suffrage and South Africa is no exception. The youths should be made aware that apathy does not solve their problems. If anything, it makes them worse. They must be empowered to realize the power of the vote and use it as a way of exercising their rights.

Conclusion

In 1994 apartheid ended but South Africa remained divided along racial lines which is also manifest in the distribution of wealth to date. Since then, 25 years after attaining independence, no real change has been achieved making the country the most imbalanced country in the world in terms of distribution of wealth. The youth and women in South Africa are greatly marginalized from important economic, social and political activities, with much role in the hands of the older generation which has resulted in hopelessness that has driven most youths to unorthodox activities that are detrimental to society as whole. South Africa has thus far managed to maintain a stable political and economic environment but if the problems swarming the country are not resolved soon, they threaten to destroy not only the moral fabric, but also the commendable progress the state has made thus far. There is need to create more job opportunities for youth and give them greater roles and participation in the socio-economic and political arena so that they get the sense of belonging to the system and therefore would strive to make South Africa a better place than it is today.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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