

# South Africa: re-imagining the rainbow nation

## Mini review

This is a timely volume addressing the relevant topic of an elusive dream of South Africa's "rainbow nation" chosen by the late founding former President of South Africa, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who provided the metaphor as a way of understanding meanings to South Africa's emerging nation on the world stage after the fall of apartheid. The contributors in the book explore meanings and implications for this metaphor and unpack the concept of the rainbow nation metaphor from various perspectives premised on the symbolic significance of the two leaders and their role in the twentieth century South Africa. The two leaders not only suffered extreme colonial and apartheid atrocities, but also symbolically lead the struggle against the evil racist system of apartheid. Given that they were both religious people – one from Methodist and the other from Anglican persuasion – this strengthened the religious ideas associated with the rainbow symbolism in African indigenous knowledge systems and religious practices including the use and Black liberation theological interpretations of Scriptures. Within the context of liberation struggle, the rainbow metaphor resonated with the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who delivered his iconic 'I have a dream' speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, in August 1963. As editors of this volume note, Martin Luther's dream for equality between all people inspired thousands of the marginalised and oppressed people around the world who suffered under colonial oppression.

Like Dr King, Mandela, and Tutu envisioned a unified nation, where race and gender no longer defined individuals. On the contrary, it has been twenty-five years since democracy and South Africa is marred by state capture, riddled with corruption, maladministration and failing public services. Unemployment was at 29.1% in the third quarter of 2019 and youth unemployment is the largest contributor to these statistics (Stas SA, 2019). Racism remains a challenge to social cohesion. From Penny Sparrow and Steve Hofmeyr, to Dianne Kohler-Barnard; and in statements from the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) to AfriForum, we have witnessed the rise of open racism. Social and economic upheavals have also been demonstrated in various instances including the massacre in Marikana, the abuse of power and corruption within state owned enterprises, student's protests and discontent related to the #FeesMustFall movement, the debates around appropriation of land without compensation, the focus on decolonization, and the widespread scourge of gender-based violence. These are all compounded by the ever-broadening gap of inequality which perpetuate poverty and breed crime and violence. All these challenges highlighted in this book are indicative of the fact that the envisaged romance that South Africans have had with the realisation of a vibrant, successful, prosperous rainbow nation have arguably fallen short of these aspirations. In fact, and by implication through essays from the scholars in this volume, these challenges reflect everything that goes against rainbow idealism.

As I have indicated, some of the realities that have unfolded in South African governments departments and state-owned enterprises over the last twenty-five years have only recently begun to be exposed in greater detail through a variety of commissions of inquiry, and through an increase in civil society participation and student activism demanding accountability and action from law enforcement agencies. Scholars in this book draw from these debates through various lenses and approaches to address the question of whether the rainbow ideal that was originally espoused by Mandela and Tutu is

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conceivably possible, given the challenges highlighted above and the vast political and socio-economic divides that exist within South African society. Among these unpacked challenges, Scholars agree that the most difficult for the nation to come to terms with, are the recent revelations around the extensive corruption that took place under the Zuma presidency and its destructive impacts this has had on the South African economy and impact on the capacity of the state to provide services to its citizenry, function efficiently, effectively and transparently. On the global arena, South Africa – like other nations aims to achieve the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through addressing climate change and paying attention to the sustainability of the South African environment in relation to the threats of global warming, some scholars delve into area as an attempt to locate the South African situation within international dialogues. In response to this, scholars in this volume remind us that there have been growing calls for finding local solutions to local problems, where indigenous ways of doing things are increasingly finding significance again.

In this volume, the question of whether the dream of the rainbow nation still prevails, is explored through various lenses and policy shifts in the light of the current National Development Plan 2030 which provides the overall driving policy towards an ideal South Africa, where there is reduced poverty, improved access to effective and efficient government services, and investment opportunities. Providing a prelude, editors argue that two very profound events (amongst many others) brought South back from the edge of a dangerous precipice that threatened the national morale. First, they cite the South African rugby team's winning of the Rugby World Cup for the third time (being one of only two countries to have done so), and second scholars refer to Miss South Africa, Zozibini Tunzi's winning of the Miss Universe pageant to suggest that two events offered the nation a window of opportunity as citizens sought to rediscover the spirit and magic of the rainbow idea, reviving hopes for unity in diverse communities across race.

The book has seven contributions that reflect on different notions of the concept of the rainbow nation and what was expected of it and how it has influenced critical engagement regarding the socio-economic and political realities among the people of South Africa. The articles engage these realities following the birth of the rainbow nation, and critically, or analytically interpret ways in which the nation

has performed towards the realisation of the dream of a rainbow nation. These articles not only reflect on the distinctions between expectations and reality, but also the complexities of the South African political-economy. For example, Buhle Mpfu addresses the matter of migration and xenophobia in his *'Migration, Xenophobia and Resistance to Xenophobia, and Socio-economic Exclusion in the Aftermath of South African Rainbowism'*. He argues that recent statements by South African political leaders tend to draw a stark distinction between citizens and migrants, or refugees and contends that such a politics of exclusion and populist politics, is a far cry the ANC's Freedom Charter statement that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it', and the designation given to South Africa with the advent of democracy in 1994, as the rainbow people. The article maps the changing fortunes of migrants in South Africa over the last twenty-five years of democracy and notes that many migrants moved to South Africa because it presented itself as container of democracy, civil protections from ethnic division, and a land of opportunity and inclusion. As a contribution to this volume, this essay examines the different articulations of South African *Rainbowism* through interrogating the place of migrant in the various structural or economic development policies since the first democratic elections in 1994. Starting with Mandela's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), through to Mbeki's Growth, Employment and Redistribution project (GEAR) and more recently, Zuma's Radical Economic Transformation (RET),<sup>1</sup> the essay argues that opportunities and recognition of migrants remained elusive. In addition to the examination of policy shifts, the article also examines South African party-political manifestos and how they articulated their political views on migrants through discourses that blame foreign migrants for the country's poor economic performance. The article employs the notion of marginality,<sup>2</sup> and Bell hooks'<sup>3</sup> concept of 'marginality as a site of resistance' (1990), to argue that despite the constitutional provisions that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity', the socio-economic privileging of its citizens over migrants impede on the realisation of a just post-apartheid society. It then engages religion, as a lens for the conceptualization of marginality-demonstrating that migration also plays a critical role with respect to religion and social responsibility in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Through religion, it is argued, a just and inclusive socio-economic transformation in South Africa is possible – i.e. if the religious concept of justice informs public policy design, and implementation within the framework of human rights.<sup>5,6</sup>

## Conclusion and recommendations

This book examines the different articulations of South African *Rainbowism* and provides a lens for understanding current debates on 'state capture' and the realisation that these are reflections of everything that goes against rainbow idealism. I therefore highly recommend the book as a timely and resource for academics, politicians, economists, sociologists and those interested to understand the socio-economic and political dynamics within the South African context.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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