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The Fading Rainbow Nation – South Africa in 2022



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Shakespeare’s lament that “When sorrows come, they come not as single spies, but in battalions” resonates deeply in South Africa today.

Twenty-eight years ago, when I took my seat in the first sitting of South Africa’s all-race democratic parliament the country was alive with excitement and possibility. Newly elected president Nelson Mandela offered hope to his formerly deeply divided and violence racked society. He, along with outgoing president FW de Klerk and fearless Archbishop Desmond Tutu - the remarkable trio of Nobel Peace Prize laureates birthed by the country – exemplified the spirit of reconciliation and democratic renewal. Perhaps no event other than the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 confirmed better the thesis of Francis Fukuyama that this indeed was ‘the end of history’ at the conclusion of the ravaged century and the arrival of liberal democracy in most places, even on the stony soil of South Africa.

Subsequent events in the world, as we know now, disproved the Fukuyama thesis. And in the brave new dawn of South Africa back in 1994 it was Tutu, for so long the unflinching moral voice during the dark night of apartheid, who optimistically proclaimed that democratic South Africa offered to the world a stellar example of the “Rainbow Nation” finally at peace with itself and the wider world. Indeed, under the inspiring leadership of Mandela, a new constitutional order and the prospects of economic renewal, South Africa looked set fair to assume its place, after decades of international isolation and siege economics, in the front rank of winning nations.

Fast forward to January 2022 the rainbow has almost completely faded here on the southern tip of Africa. Tutu was buried on New Year’s Day, an inevitability given his great age and infirmity (he was 90 years old and battling cancer). But his end brought a deep sadness as the last hero of the transition from apartheid to democracy was dead. De Klerk had died two months before in November 2021 and Mandela in December 2013.

The country was still mourning its great loss, when the very next day, 2 January, the magnificent architectural splendour of the South African Parliament was engulfed in flames and all its chambers destroyed. Not likely to have the impact of the Reichstag Fire of 1933 for example, the destruction of the country’s legislature struck many as a grim visual metaphor for the ransacking of the national infrastructure which has blighted and incapacitated South Africa. A faltering

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electricity system, shuttered ports and rail network and the decimation of many state institutions has become a depressing reality in a country, which still by far, is home to the most developed and diversified economy in the continent of Africa.

A great deal of the blame for the decimation of the state is, correctly, placed at the door of the immediate past president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, whose presidency (2009-2018) eroded trust in government and saw the plunder of state assets and the embedding of corruption on a truly industrial scale: it is estimated some 69bn GB Pounds was pilfered from the state – and many of its institutions crippled – during his presidency. That is the figure which the judicial commission investigating ‘state capture’, chaired by Justice Ray Zondo, revealed in its first of three reports - also published in early January – citing ‘a scarcely believable picture of rampant corruption.’

While Zuma himself is on trial for an unrelated and earlier corruption case and was briefly imprisoned last year for contempt of the Zondo Commission, he still remains ever present in the life and fate of the country. His successor, President Cyril Ramaphosa, is still besieged by Zuma-acolytes in his own party, the African National Congress (ANC), putting at risk his own modest reform menu intended to kick start economic progress in a country once expected to emerge in the front rank of developing economies.

Indeed, one of the greatest blights in recent SA history occurred in July 2021, when mobs of looters rampaged through the Zuma heartland of Kwa Zulu Natal, killing over 300 people, and causing an estimated GBP 500m of damage to property and businesses. The proximate cause for the rampage was the court decision to imprison Zuma (he was soon released for a ‘medical parole’) and instigated by social media groupings aligned to him. The fact that not a single person who led the rioting has been either arrested or convicted is another indicator of the incapacitation of the state and its security and policing arms, all in varying stages of decline.

Ramaphosa, whose narrow election as party and then state president in early 2018 entered office with the wind of hope and expectation on his back. Yet while incontestably a vast improvement on Zuma, he has not managed to shake off the decline of the previous ‘lost decade’ as he described the Zuma era. Last year, for example, unemployment (on the back of very low growth economy aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic) hit a record high of 47.1% on its expanded definition (including those who have given up the search for work). And the reason why the July 2021 insurrection has not likely spread across the country is the provision by the state of social grants which reach 17m households, an extraordinary total in a country which only has 11m people in formal work.

But the provision of such an expansive social security network is very expensive: the national debt stands at R4 trillion (approx. GBP 200bn) and the costs of the welfare programmes annually amounts to R1trillion (GBP 50bn). Little wonder that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned in its December 2021 country report that South Africa ‘needs to fix its debt problems, public finances and pursue growth friendly fiscal consolidation.’

2022 is unlikely to see any items on the IMF menu being pursued: Ramaphosa faces a party congress at year end when he is up for re-election and in his four years in office, despite the huge expectations that his election heralded ‘a new dawn’ he has not undone a single policy from the

Zuma era or before: these include the controversial 'cadre deployment' agenda of placing party comrades, often unqualified, into key posts of state, and rigid implementation of affirmative action prescripts which has seen a skills flight and a decapitation of much expertise from national and local institutions.

However it is not all doom and gloom under Southern skies here: In September 2021, for the first time since the advent of democracy in SA, the mighty ANC of Mandela, was humbled in local elections recording just 46% of the national vote. The ruling party was ousted from power in all the major cities bar Durban with the strong message that the aura of liberation – with which the party was correctly associated – resonated far less strongly than more immediate voter concerns such as unemployment, crime and corruption, with which the ruling party is now also associated.

In the same IMF report which cautioned on the country's debt and profligacy, the organisation also praised both the 'maintenance of price stability' (due to an invigorated and robustly independent central bank, the SA Reserve Bank) and 'a sound and well regulated financial sector' (both due to the Reserve Bank and the operations of many impressive private sector banks and investment houses which operate in the country).

This mixed picture as ever, confirms the wisdom of General Jan Smuts who led the country until 1948: "South Africa is a country where neither the worst nor the best ever happens."

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