



Raphael de Kadt is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at St Augustine College of South Africa. He is a former Head of the School of Politics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with which institution he still has an honorary association. He has also been, for twenty years, Editor-in-Chief of *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*.



Judith Hudson lectured Political Science at St Augustine College. She holds a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Natal. Previously she was senior research fellow at Kings' College, London University.

South Africa's Democracy in 2014: Fragile or Robust?

South Africa's general election on 7 May this year marks the 20th anniversary of the country's hard-won embrace of democracy. It also marks twenty years of uninterrupted government, at the national level, by the African National Congress (ANC) in what has, effectively, become a 'single-party dominant' system.¹

Twenty years is enough time to assess both some of the country's achievements as a democracy, and the significant challenges that need to be addressed. It is also an opportune moment to assess possible dangers that lie ahead for the further consolidation of this democracy, and to identify the features that portend both well and perhaps also ill for its future.

Historical Background

It is important, at the outset, to remind ourselves of the circumstances under which South Africa's democracy was born. An historical perspective is important since different kinds of authoritarian regimes provide different departure points for change.

South Africa's democratic dispensation was forged through a process of 'elite-pacting' in which the old, white, predominantly Afrikaner Nationalist, ruling elite struck an accord with an emergent, predominantly – through not exclusively – black elite. The context in which this 'consociational deal' was done had both domestic and international dimensions to it.² The domestic dimensions included the increasingly evident unsustainability of Apartheid in a stagnating capitalist economy. The 1960s, it should be noted, was a decade of impressive economic growth, but the period 1973 to 1992 was one of dismal growth.

Apartheid, especially – but also the longer history of segregation and white rule – had left enduring marks on the society. These included inefficiencies in the allocation of labour and capital, an enormously unequal society defined in terms of the distribution of access to opportunities, a dismal school education system for black South Africans, and spatial distortions in the way communities and cities were structured. The state – under the circumstances of continuing urbanisation, the emergence of mass movements and mobilisation, and growing economic

inefficiencies – was under pressure, and the fantasy of ‘separate development’ – to which so many resources had been targeted – lay in ruins. Evidence shows that the dominant elite was no longer united, with ‘soft-line’ pragmatists realising that the system had to ‘give’ and become more properly inclusive and rational.³

At the same time, some ‘hard-liners’ tried to hold fast to the old, fragmenting order and split away from the National Party to support the Conservative Party and, in extreme instances, the AWB. But the National Party had achieved what perhaps had been its main objective in the game-changing 1948 elections – the creation of a reasonably well-off, privileged Afrikaner middle class. It had done its job, and was ready to make compromises. All of these factors, and the associated policy outcomes, may conveniently be construed as the Apartheid ‘legacy effect’ – an effect which still bears upon politics and policy challenges in South Africa. We will return to these.

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There were two major international factors that helped shape the outcome of the negotiating process that openly began after F.W. de Klerk’s speech to parliament on 2 February 1990.

The first was that South Africa had substantial links – economic, cultural and political – to the ‘capitalist west’, especially to its major trading partners such as the USA, the continental European capitalist democracies such as the Federal Republic of Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain. These linkages allowed the elites in these countries to place pressure on South Africa to abandon its system of ‘racial estates’ – so redolent in the context of capitalist liberal democracies of the ugly past of Fascism, National Socialism and biological racism. These linkages allowed considerable leverage to be exercised. The world of South Africa’s white middle classes became increasingly uncomfortable. Cultural, academic and sports’ boycotts took their toll. Divestment campaigns also had a significant negative effect. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have recently demonstrated – on the basis of a large, global study – linkages with the West have had a powerful bearing on the prospects of a country making a transition from authoritarian rule to democracy.⁴ In addition to the cost to the ruling elite, the opposition could draw succour from the pressure that the international Anti-Apartheid Movement placed on the regime. Its international political legitimacy became ever more difficult to sustain.

The second factor bore on the question of with whom the ruling elite were willing to negotiate and on what terms. This factor was the collapse of the Soviet imperium in central and eastern Europe and the consequent fact that the ANC and the South African Communist Party had lost not only a major source of support but were also shorn of credibility with regard to both ‘ideology’ and radical policy alternatives. The ‘Velvet Revolutions’ in the countries of east and central Europe emboldened de Klerk in his decision to unban all political parties. Communism was no longer seen as a significant threat. This meant that the elite negotiations could be more, rather than less, inclusive in that the question of whether the National Party Government should unban the Communist Party – which it did – was settled by the collapse of the Soviet-type system.

A third factor was the role of mass mobilisation, which exploited Apartheid’s dependence on black labour. This mobilisation, plus the inherent economic

irrationality of the system, further raised the costs of maintaining Apartheid after 1948.

Fourth, structural factors, related to capitalist modernisation, played a part. These included demographic trends such as strengthening the black industrial and middle classes, intensifying skills shortages and integration into a global economy and culture which intensified exposure to democratic norms and reform oriented negotiation rather than ‘revolution’. The ambient global context – a deracialising and democratising world – was inimical to the maintenance of Apartheid.⁵

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It is worth noting that, despite the oppressive, authoritarian and ultimately economic growth-damaging character of National Party rule, there were some cultural, legal and political resources embedded in South African history on which both major players could draw. These included an often surprisingly robust tradition of judicial independence, some liberal and strongly non-racist strands that ran through much of the ANC's history, and the fact that white society had never been as unified and homogenous as the results of the whites-only general election of 1977 might suggest. For all the limpness of United Party opposition politics, it should be recalled that the National Party – by virtue of the vagaries of the white electoral system – held political office from 1948 for

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Legacy effects and democratic consolidation

The growth in the number and geographical scope of electoral democracies – from around three at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries to approximately 122 today – according to Freedom House – has not been a ‘linear’, untroubled, process.

Democracies, characterised by the ‘rule of law’, accountable governments, regular ‘free and fair’ elections, multi-party systems and well-entrenched political, civil and economic liberties, have often been fragile and surprisingly easily undermined. Mussolini's rise to power, the fragility of the Weimar Republic as it fell to Hitler's machinations, the volatile, reversal-rich, history of democratisation in Latin America and the ‘retrenchment’ of democratic gains in post-Soviet Russia are reminders.

While the broad thrust of modern history has been in the direction of the extension of democratic type arrangements, there have been periods both of reversal and of stagnation. From a descriptive point of view, we can ‘periodise’ (as does Samuel Huntington) the spread of democracies into three (some would suggest four) waves. The third wave, ushered in by the ‘Carnation Revolution’ in Portugal in 1974, opened up possibilities for democratic advancement in South Africa and elsewhere.

‘Democracy’ is, of course, what political theorists term a ‘contested concept’. One study finds more than 550 adjectives used to qualify notion of democracy!⁶ Robert Dahl, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished political scientists, specified a ‘procedural minimum’ for the practical exercise of democracy: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, the right to vote, eligibility for public office,

the right of political leaders to compete for support or votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections and institutions that make government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.⁷

Consolidating a democracy that meets these 'minimal' requirements is not inevitable; the process of democratization is neither linear nor irreversible, and it is wise to be vigilant. In particular, democracy is compromised by the effects of poverty, inequality, state deficiencies and corruption. In the latter half of 1990s, precisely for these reasons, the focus in the literature on democratization shifted from 'transitions to democracy' to 'democratic consolidation'.

It should be remembered that 'consolidated' democracies are, in world historical terms, a relatively recent phenomenon. 'A democracy', argues Huntington, 'may be viewed as consolidated' if a party or group that takes power at the time of transition loses a subsequent election, relinquishes power to the subsequent election winners, and those subsequent election winners, in turn, peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election.⁸ According to this – admittedly controversial – test, South Africa's democracy is not as yet 'consolidated'.

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Does this mean that there is something wrong with South Africa's democracy? Are we in danger of becoming, in Fareed Zakaria's controversial term, an 'illiberal democracy'? Or is Huntington's test inappropriate? What if the governing party is so popular and the opposition so weak or divided that turnover does not occur? The governing party may be willing to turn over power but does not have to face this possibility. In addition, the test places a premium on governmental inefficiency, with voters expressing disenchantment via the voting booth. Chile after General Augusto Pinochet would fall in the latter 'illiberal democracy' category, although it has recently met Huntington's "two turnover" test.⁹

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Consolidating Democracy: A basic framework

Mindful of the fragility of democracy, we must ask: 'what factors render a democracy fragile, and what factors are conducive to its consolidation?'¹⁰ There is now a vast and ever more rigorous and global literature in Political Science that addresses these questions. We may divide this literature into broadly five sets of emphases. The first emphasis is on structural factors associated with societal modernization and its economic and cultural aspects. The second, and related, focuses on the critical role of education. The third focuses on inequality, the fourth on political elites, and the fifth on aspects or features of the state itself.

If one were to use this rough framework to generate a risk-profile of South Africa's still relatively new and hard-won democracy, how would it fare? On the modernisation front, South Africa has not done that badly. Economic growth – arguably the principal measure of modernisation has, since 1994, been reasonably

commendable. The macro-economy has mostly been well-managed. GDP has grown reasonably impressively. (It is important to recall that the period 1972-1992 saw virtually no growth in real per-capita GDP.) A black middle class of ever greater affluence, higher levels of education and potential political influence, has grown since the 1970s. This extension of the middle class, as the late Barrington Moore reminded us, is a pre-requisite for democracy: no bourgeoisie, no democracy.

The legacy effect of ‘Bantu Education’

The issue of education, however, remains a serious challenge and a danger to the robustness of our democracy. Put simply, perhaps the most damaging and enduringly negative legacy effect of the Apartheid period has been the, mostly appalling, South African education system – especially the vast, ill-performing public school system (though the tertiary system is still not exempt from critique).¹¹ The relevant social science literature – from Seymour Martin Lipset’s path-breaking 1959 article ‘Some Social Requisites of Democracy’ to the recent work by Glaeser *et al* – has reiterated one cardinal theme: a vibrant democracy needs an educated population.¹² An educated, economically reasonably secure, population

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makes for civic participation, critical and informed public debate and, where appropriate, fearless input into the political process. Democracies, as Edward Glaeser and his colleagues demonstrate, ‘need education’. One of the most important tasks confronting South Africans is to invest in, and effectively improve, the education system. Parts of it – such as some private and erstwhile ‘advantaged’ government schools may be good, even excellent, but the education system as a whole is not good. Beyond the benefits for democracy, a well educated population is good for economic growth, innovation and the embrace and mastery of technology – as well as underwriting state capacity. Getting to grips with the education deficit should be at the top of the agenda of any government committed to further entrenching our democracy.

The Pernicious Effects of Inequality and Unemployment¹³

Another factor that imperils South Africa’s democracy is inequality. Perhaps even more than abject poverty, very high levels of inequality are likely to engender social tension.

Interestingly, the pioneering work of Christian Houle has shown that inequality does not have a particularly close relation to the actual process of democratisation. But it does have significant implications for its sustainability. The more unequal a democracy, *ceteris paribus*, the more vulnerable it is to collapse.¹⁴ Simply put, a highly unequal society – measured by instruments such as the labour-share of GDP – is more vulnerable to regression from democracy than is a more equal society. South Africa does very badly. The high level of inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, threatens the cohesion of the social fabric. Excessive inequality, rather than abject poverty, is conducive to crime. It impacts negatively on people’s perception of the justness of the society. It splits the society not only into ‘two nations’ – the haves and the have-nots – but distances people from one another in multiple ways. It impacts negatively on equality of opportunity – not to speak of a reasonable equality of outcomes or resources. It disconnects the ‘masses’ from

the 'elite' and provides fodder for the worst kind of populist demagogues. Further, there is some evidence that too great a level of inequality is bad for long-term economic growth, especially off a relatively high base. And we know from the work of Przeworski *et al* (1999) that 'democratic lock-in' is conditioned by the level of per-capita GDP. Economic growth may not drive a country to democratise, but once a country has become a democracy, the higher the real per-capita GDP, the more likely it is to remain a democracy.¹⁵

Added to the blight of inequality is the blight of unemployment. With an unemployment rate of around 25%, South Africa remains a country of people effectively excluded from productive economic activity and from the dignity that, in general, attaches to being employed. It also constitutes a constituency vulnerable to populist politics, xenophobic demagoguery as well as personal misery and the existential insecurity associated with joblessness and, often, abject poverty. Addressing the twin defects of extreme inequality and high levels of unemployment are policy imperatives for any government that takes office in light of the outcome of the 2014 elections.

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Democracy and our 'troublesome' elites

The pivotal role of elites in securing democracy has been described in much of the international literature.

A good point of departure is Nancy Bermeo's key insight: democracies are seldom failed or let down by 'ordinary people'.¹⁷ Rather, they are let down by elites. Hitler's rise to power was not unaided by elite failure. The fate of many a Latin American democracy has not been unaffected by elite failure. Elites carry a major responsibility as custodians (and destroyers) of democracy, paradoxical as that may seem. Elites are more likely to be the enemies of democratic consolidation than 'ordinary' people.

One way to keep elites in check is to have mechanisms that render them accountable. This is where open, free and fair, competition between elites for the support of the populace, and alternation in government, come in. Holding elites accountable, term-limits, and being able to replace governments that are not to be performing well are important mechanisms for underwriting democracy. President Mandela set a commendable example when he stood down from office. A problem with South Africa's 'governing class' is that it has, perhaps, become complacent: it arguably takes a return to political office for granted. Anecdotal evidence of this is reflected in President Jacob Zuma's intimation that a single party will stay in office 'until Jesus comes'.¹⁸ This attitude can only allow for increased corruption and embedded rent-seeking behaviour.

South Africa's governing elite has, in some key respects, performed well, in some, indifferently and, in yet others, poorly. Its behaviour relates in part to the origins

of the post-1994 dispensation: the ANC was (and still is) a classic ‘catch-all’ or ‘broad church’ party – a feature characteristic of many, if not most, nationalist parties. Except that it was confined to whites, especially Afrikaans-speaking whites, the National Party was also a party of class-compromise and multi-constituency accommodation. It was for that reason that, ultimately, it fell apart. The ANC faces a similar problem and, perhaps, a similar longer-term future. Another problem lies

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in the electoral system: theoretically, as a closed-list proportional representation type system, it should issue in coalition governments. However the system, at the national level, has rendered members of parliament relatively immune to negative constituency sanction. List position depends on patronage from the apex – as it does in principle for all South African parties. The larger the party, the less say the voting populace has on the performance of individual members of parliament.

The ANC’s unbroken incumbency over twenty years has also been reinforced by its ability to claim a special status as a party of liberation and by the well-established phenomenon of voter-behaviour ‘stickiness’. That is, whatever people might say by way of complaints, when the moment comes to cast a vote they tend to revert to their previously established preference.

Another problem that has beset the elite has been the allocation of ‘spoils’, which would likely be especially marked in a party that has evolved from a liberation movement. This compromises technocratic and bureaucratic efficiency for the purpose of political reward, and has doubtless contributed to the instances of dubious tender awards and other manifestations of corruption and rent-seeking.

On the ‘plus’ side, South Africa’s consociational deal, with the ‘sunset’ provisions, has not issued in a political elite where the military, as in several Latin American cases – poses a threat to government. Some ANC groups are, perhaps, disposed to want to influence the judiciary and – by virtue of the typical ‘arrogance of power’ effect – to treat the constitution lightly. But there is little evidence of an unstable political class that is fractured to the point of precipitating a military coup.

The State System

All of this leads us to a consideration of the state system. Fukuyama has identified three crucial requirements for a country to ‘become like Denmark’ – his ‘exemplar’ of a stable, prosperous, wealthy liberal democracy that scores exceptionally highly on all the key indicators of social well-being. These three requirements are an efficient state bureaucracy, governmental accountability and the rule of law.¹⁹ The efficiency of the state bureaucratic system in South Africa is seemingly uneven. Some parts are efficient, such as Treasury and the state revenue collection system (SARS). Other parts, if ‘service delivery protests’ are an indicator, are notably less so. The ‘rule of law, by and large, is commendable – though the capacity of the criminal justice system appears to be constrained. There has been a generally strong disposition to observe and protect the Constitution, in which ‘sovereignty’ resides, and which is, by almost any measure, exemplary. The accountability of government, however, has been compromised to some extent – especially at National level – by the closed-list, Proportional Representation system which has effectively removed geographically defined constituency representation in the National legislature, and which has made legislators dependent on the political party bosses and thus, by implication, patronage.

If Fukuyama is correct, South Africa has mostly done well in terms of the 'rule of law' – though ongoing vigilance is needed. State bureaucratic capacity is, however, constrained by the serious limitations of the education system – especially with regard to the development of technical skills. The issue of accountability, however, would in our view need to be addressed by a serious attempt to revisit the electoral system.

Democracy consolidating policy challenges

Democracies of relatively 'low quality' are promoted by the effects of poverty, deep inequalities, state deficiencies and corruption. They are also underwritten by poor education. Any South African government taking office in 2014 will need to take up these challenges. Raising the economic growth rate – as the recent IMF report on South Africa has noted – is critical. Raising the economic growth rate considerably is imperative if any significant dent is to be made in unemployment. The education system – which remains expensive but of generally poor quality – stands in need of thorough-going reform and improvement. Such improvement will better contribute both to effective democratic participation and to the efficiency of the public bureaucracy. Corruption and rent-seeking needs to be contained and reduced.²⁰ Finally, the closed-list PR electoral system, by which our particular version of representative democracy is defined, needs to be re-examined.

NOTES:

- 1 The ANC-dominated government managed significant achievements in first 10 years of democracy. Unlike the situation under a number of liberation movements that became governments elsewhere, South Africa has, under this governmental stewardship, arguably made the most progress towards stable constitutional democracy. It has secured political stability and territorial conflict, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal has been significantly reduced. It introduced GEAR, and has broadly stuck to a conservative macro-economic policy described as 'necessary' but 'unpopular'. Real per capita GDP increased and the economic growth rate more than doubled, averaging 2.8% per year. Further, a new system of government, incorporating former 'Bantustans', municipalities and provinces was crafted. Broadly, this reconfiguration of the state, created an institutional framework for good governance. Particularly notable is that a degree of trust remained, throughout the process, among the majority of South Africans, most of whom are poor. (For a good, full, account see Butler, *Contemporary South Africa*, Chapter 1)
More recently, the government has provided some welfare benefits for over 15 million South Africans and has set up a massive anti-retroviral programme to address HIV/Aids.
- 2 This 'deal' was necessary as there was an 'impasse' with neither side able to fully 'beat' the other. This prompted the ANC leadership, under Mandela, to push for reconciliation in the early years of South Africa's democracy – as evident in the TRC and in various concessions such as 'sunset' clauses.
- 3 Many realised that the maintenance of economic prosperity meant that at least some substantial 'changes' were necessary. In particular, influential business leaders saw Apartheid as inconsistent with the long term security of a capitalist system increasingly dependent on skilled black labour. The country's demographic character was, in this regard, pivotal.
- 4 See Steven Levitsky & Lucan Way, 'International Linkage and Democratization', *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 16, Number 3, July 2005, pp. 20-34
- 5 See Lipton, M. (2007). *Liberals, Marxists, and Nationalists: Competing Interpretations of South African History*. Palgrave Macmillan, p.104
- 6 David Collier & Steven Levitsky (1997) 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research', *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Apr., 1997), pp. 430-451
- 7 See Robert A. Dahl (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press
- 8 Samuel Huntington (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, pp. 266/7
- 9 Linz and Stepan (1996) claim that democracy is consolidated when all significant political actors and a strong majority see it as 'the only game in town'. (See Juan J. Linz (Author) & Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*, 1996.
- 10 See Mark Mazower, *The Dark Continent* (2000, Vintage) this 'fragility' in 20th century Europe.
- 11 See Fedderke JW, de Kadt RHJ & Luiz J. 'Uneducating South Africa: the Failure to Address the 1910-1999 Legacy', *International Review of Education* 46(3/4): 257-281, 2000 and Fedderke JW, de Kadt RHJ & Luiz J. 'Capstone or Deadweight? Inefficiency, Duplication and Inequity in South Africa's Tertiary Education System, 1910-93', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* (2003) 27 (3): 377-400 for an essay of the performance of the entire system until 1994.
- 12 Edward Glaeser, Giacomo Ponzetto, Andrei Shleifer, 'Why Does Democracy Need Education?', NBER Working Paper No. 12128, April 2006; Lipset, SM 'Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1, (March, 1959), pp. 69-105.
- 13 See Servaas van der Berg, 'Poverty trends since the transition: Current poverty and income distribution in the context of South African history', Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: October 2010.
- 14 Christian Houle, 'Inequality and Democracy: Why Inequality Harms Consolidation but Does Not Affect Democratization', *World Politics*, Volume 61 / Issue 04 / October 2009, pp. 589-622
- 15 Adamn Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, José Cheibub & Fernando Limongi (1999). 'Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990'. Cambridge University Press.
- 16 See: Fedderke JW, de Kadt RHJ & Luiz J (2003). 'Capstone or Deadweight? Inefficiency, Duplication and Inequity in South Africa's Tertiary Education System, 1910-93'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 27 (3): 377-400.
- 17 See Nancy Bermeo (2003). *Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy*. Princeton University Press
- 18 Quoted in *Economist*, 5 June 2010.
- 19 See Francis Fukuyama (2001). *The Origins of Political Order*. Profile Books.
- 20 See Raphael de Kadt & Charles Simkins, 'The Political Economy of Pervasive Rent-Seeking', Thesis Eleven, June 2012.