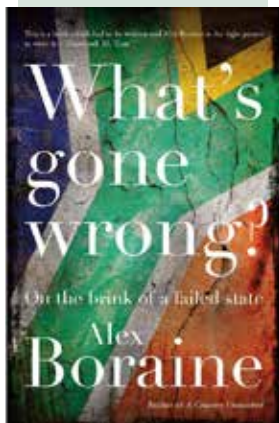


## BOOK REVIEW

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**WHAT'S GONE WRONG?  
ON THE BRINK OF A  
FAILED STATE** by Alex  
Boraine  
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# *What's gone wrong? On the brink of a failed state*<sup>1</sup> by Alex Boraine

*On 7 May, 2014 South African voters overwhelmingly endorsed a political party that, according to Alex Boraine, is now hopelessly mismanaging and damaging South Africa. His argument is forthright and unambiguous: notwithstanding great changes and improvements since 1994, and despite a progressive and internationally acclaimed constitution, the ANC has undermined the country at almost every level.*

The arms deal and HIV/AIDS policies of the early administrations, and a culture of entitlement, maladministration and mismanagement, cadre deployment, obscene greed and alarming corruption have come to define the new South Africa and are part of a destructive impulse that has been amplified under the presidency of Jacob Zuma, a politician bent on his own survival. Boraine had hoped ANC behaviour in power was a passing phase, but now believes it is 'symptomatic of the ANC over the last 50 years'. If not checked, writes Boraine, a 'failing state' could become a 'failed state'.<sup>2</sup> Its dismal signs are apparent in all aspects of society.

This is a savage critique from a man with a great anti-apartheid track record. Highly regarded as a Progressive Party member of parliament from 1974 to 1986, a co-founder with Frederik van Zyl Slabbert of IDASA (Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa), and an architect of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on which he served as its Deputy Chairman, Boraine's voice has to be taken seriously. Prior to the unbanning of the ANC, he met with many of its leaders in exile, maintained contacts subsequent to their return, and knew at first hand the high quality of United Democratic Front leadership in South Africa in the 1980s. In 1994 he confidently voted for the ANC, anticipating democratic and moral governance. So what went wrong?

The thrust of Boraine's argument is that the ANC has transplanted a culture of secrecy honed in exile into the new South Africa. All the negative features displayed today, he writes, were apparent during the exile years: a stifling bureaucracy, poor administration, incorrect choices, deployment, political incoherence, and the high life enjoyed by the top leadership.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the ANC remains Stalinist in inclination, driven by the seizure of power. Put simply, it is concerned more with the Party -which it conflates with the State - than with good governance. This is apparent in its code of conduct: members in parliament owe allegiance to the ANC rather than to the Constitution. The National Working Committee of the Party sets the agenda for ANC parliamentarians and liaises with the chief whip. In effect, Luthuli House runs the country. We saw this, for example, in the unconstitutional

removal of Mbeki and again in the Party's handling of Nkandlagate. Opposition is disregarded in a lame duck parliament. 'Democracy, according to Zuma, means the dominance of the majority rather than the protection of minorities'.<sup>4</sup>

Is it any wonder that our institutions are challenged? The judiciary in particular, argues Boraine, is a source of concern. While acknowledging the need for transformation, he questions the ability of the government to cope with the tension between merit and representivity. The appointment of judges is especially disturbing, as are criticisms of the court from the ANC which from time to time sees itself as being 'outranked'.<sup>5</sup> Boraine is indeed fearful that those chosen for the court may at some point be reluctant to take a stand against the ANC. Zuma simply does not appreciate the supremacy of the Constitution.

Transparency is today threatened by the Secrecy Bill, and recommendations made by the 'Van Zyl Slabbert Electoral Task Team' which sought to enhance accountability lie on the shelf gathering dust. Black Economic Empowerment too has been a disaster, although here Boraine indicts big business as well. The real crisis, however, is endemic corruption, its spread helped by a dysfunctional criminal justice system to which access is uneven. If South Africa is serious about corruption, asserts Boraine, Zuma has to go. He is the 'elephant in the room'. Many South Africans would breathe a sigh of relief with his departure, writes Boraine. 'Everywhere we look we see the dismal signs of that failing state in education, health, safety and security, the high rate of unemployment, the lack of housing and basic facilities for millions of people, the tragedy of Marikana, which saw 34 people being killed by the police, inefficiency, mismanagement, jobs for pals, and corruption in the public service and at every level of government'.<sup>6</sup>

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Yet Boraine is not entirely without hope. He gives the ANC credit for having initiated and conducted inquiries into at least some of the excesses in exile, and notes that Mbeki did apologize to the TRC 'for the indiscipline, poor treatment and executions' that occurred, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Civil society also gives Boraine a modicum of optimism, although NGO's too are under financial and state assault. Faith communities, the judiciary and opposition parties now have a huge role to play. But it is precisely these groups, according to Boraine, that are being undermined and challenged. In the final analysis, a realignment of politics will be necessary to save South Africa. But is the ANC willing to give up power? Here Boraine is unsure and tellingly reminds us of the words of the Burmese leader San Suu Kyi: 'It is not power that corrupts, but fear; fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it'.

Boraine's arguments are as cogent as they are disturbing. A few months into Zuma's second term the situation remains unchanged. The President is rudderless and intent on survival. However, to talk of South Africa being on the brink of a failed state is going too far. Failed states do not hold free and fair elections, nor do they maintain a thriving business sector and allow a Public Protector to challenge its highest authorities. Nevertheless, the problems are grave and the warning lights bright.

Boraine was perhaps naïve to anticipate a democratic nirvana after three hundred years of colonialism, segregation and apartheid. The backlogs are enormous, racial inequalities horrendous, unemployment endemic, and poverty massive.

The ANC has an unenviable task. In effect, it manages a coalition, tasked with reconciling increasingly contradictory interests. Upholding constitutional values in a society as complex as South Africa is fraught. To be sure, the Harvard scholar, Barrington Moore famously made the case over four decades ago that there can be no democracy without a bourgeoisie.<sup>7</sup> South Africa's tiny middle class – black and white – is navigating a sea of poverty and inequality. To be fair, the task the ANC faces deserves some empathy. This alone, however, will not prevent South Africa falling over the edge.

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NOTES

- 1 Alex Boraine, *What's gone wrong? On the brink of a failed state*. Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2014.
- 2 Boraine (2014:42)
- 3 See Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: the ANC in Exile, 1960-1990*, Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2012.
- 4 Boraine (2014:57)
- 5 Boraine (2014:88)
- 6 Boraine (2014: 114)
- 7 See Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the making of the Modern World*, Harmondsworth, Penguin University Books, 1973.