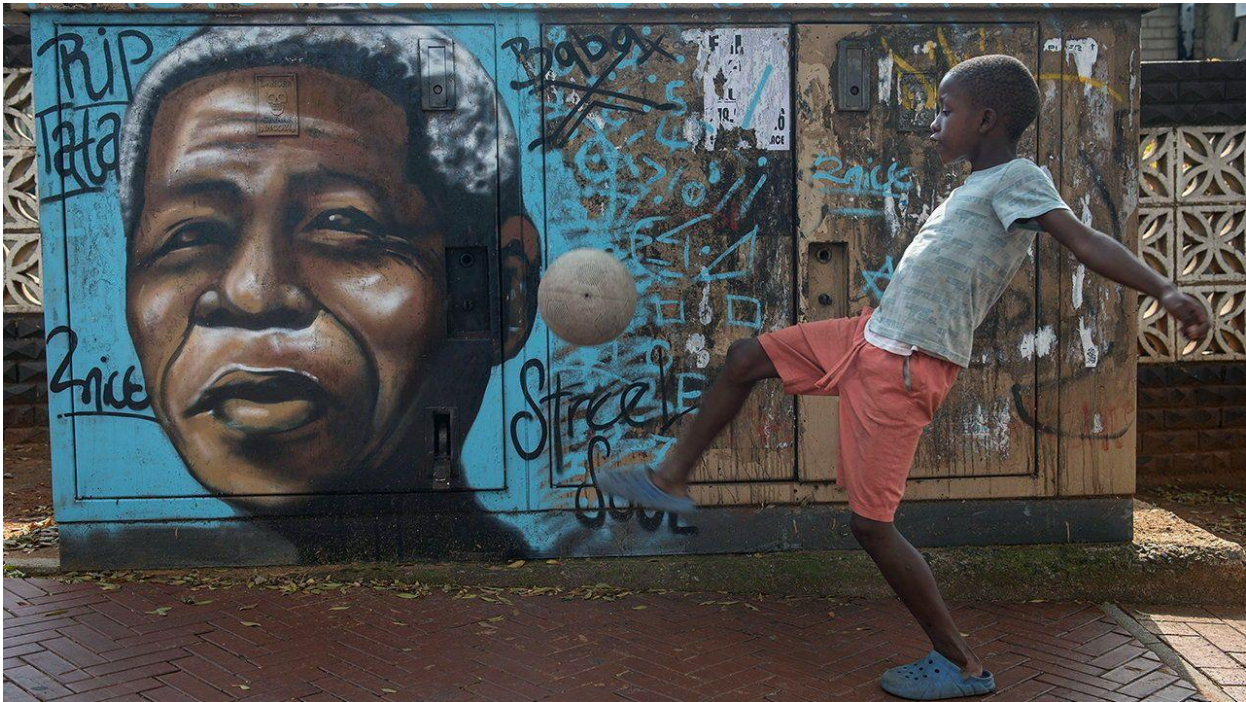


Why South Africans are fed up after 30 years of democracy

After a bright start the ANC has proved incapable of governing for the whole country



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Almost 30 years ago, on May 10th 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first black president. A fortnight earlier he and millions of other black South Africans had voted for the first time in their lives. Internationally, the joyous scenes were seen as further proof, following the fall of the Soviet Union, that the world was moving in a democratic direction after a dark 20th century.

As South Africa prepares for its seventh multiracial general election on May 29th, it can be proud. That vote will be free and fair. The liberal institutions established under Mandela are bulwarks against abuses of power. Millions of black South Africans have marched from apartheid into the middle class.

Yet after three decades of freedom, most South Africans say they are dissatisfied with democracy and would ditch elected governments if an autocrat could do a better job. There is

more socialising across racial boundaries, but the share of South Africans saying race relations have improved since 1994 has fallen sharply since 2010.

The reason is simple. After steady progress in the first 15 years, most South Africans—and therefore, since they are 81% of the population, most black citizens—no longer see their lives getting better. On average, incomes have stagnated since 2008, unemployment has risen from around 20% to more than 30%, and power and water cuts have become more frequent. Corruption has seeped into every layer of the state. Only 15% of 257 municipalities get clean audits from the relevant watchdog. It is hard to be thankful for democratic freedoms when you are jobless and living in your grandmother's house.

Understanding why South Africa's dream has clouded is crucial if Africa's largest economy is to find its way. Alas, a fatalistic explanation has taken root among academics, commentators and left-wing politicians. This view holds that the deal struck in the early 1990s to end apartheid was a sham: it won black people political rights, but not economic freedom. Mandela, in other words, was a sell-out who ushered in a "new apartheid" in which a black elite was co-opted by whites.

There are many reasons why this is wrong. First, it gives too little credit to Mandela's courage and canniness. He was a skilful politician who stuck to his red lines, winning majority rule while avoiding civil war. Anyone who spends 27 years in prison for his cause is an unusual sort of sell-out.

It also ignores the good the African National Congress (anc) did with its newly won power. Under Trevor Manuel, the finance minister from 1996 to 2009, sensible macroeconomic policies underpinned steady annual gdp growth averaging 3.3%, more than double the rate of the next 14 years. Using the proceeds, anc-led governments replaced millions of shacks and mud huts with decent homes that have water and electric lights. Welfare benefits made poverty less grinding.

Another reason is that fatalism allows the anc to shirk responsibility for its worst decisions. Corruption, glossed over by Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, his successor, exploded under Jacob

Zuma, president from 2009 to 2018. Cadre deployment, whereby civil servants are appointed on the basis of fealty to the anc, not merit, has eviscerated bureaucratic capacity. In another case of ideological folly, the anc has increasingly pursued policies that focus on the redistribution of wealth in ways that actually hinder its creation. These include so-called “black economic empowerment” policies and boosting the bargaining power of unions. The anc’s own policies are the reason why South Africa is still a society where perhaps a quarter of people live well and the rest are desperately poor.

The danger over the next 30 years is that politics becomes ever more zero-sum. Populist parties are race-baiting and exploiting poverty. But there is also a resilience to South African politics, forged in the fight for liberty. Apartheid left a wariness of racially or tribally charged politics. The transition helped entrench consensus and pragmatism. Elections have brought some accountability: the anc now has a majority in only two of the eight largest urban areas. Democracy may have been a disappointment so far. But, in 2024 as in 1994, it offers the potential for renewal. That is Mandela’s enduring gift. ■

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