

Whites and democracy in South Africa

Before 1994 there was enormous speculation that white intransigence in South Africa would lead to a racial war. In his new book, Roger Southall finds that by the mid-1980s most whites saw the writing on the wall. Even so, he argues, the economic system which had maintained white dominance was left more or less intact.

By Roger Southall

How on earth does one write a book about a category of people defined by the social construct of race? Is it possible to say anything sensible about such a topic? The answer to both questions is with difficulty, and the knowledge that whatever answers one comes up with are likely to be highly contested, and very possibly wrong. Even worse, whatever one says, the motivations behind the answers given are likely to be misconstrued, and one is probably setting oneself up for all sorts of accusations. In fact, when I look back, starting on this project was a pretty stupid thing to do. But I have done it, and while I don't think I have got a lot wrong, I am not sure I have got all my answers right.

Why I took on this subject

I decided to tackle the subject because for so long there was enormous speculation that white intransigence in South Africa was leading to a racial war. As it turned out, the much prophesied war was exported to other countries in the southern region, with South African troops sent to fight in Angola and Namibia. Although within South Africa soldiers were sent into the townships to confront internal rebellion, and the often labelled 'peaceful transition to democracy' was rather brutal and very bumpy, it happened in a less violent way than many had expected.

As I detail in the book, by the mid-1980s most whites had seen the writing on the wall and turned their attention to coping (personally and collectively) with what they had feared for so long: black majority rule. Under De Klerk, the apartheid regime sought to ride the wave, to shape the transition in the most favourable way for white interests, but ultimately lost control of the agenda. Confronted by the superior negotiating front of the ANC and, let's not forget it, the genius of Nelson Mandela, De Klerk was forced to concede a genuinely democratic constitution. Even so, the economic system which had maintained white dominance was left more or less intact.

Twenty-five years of ANC rule

Fast forward twenty-five years. The ANC has been in power all that time, under five different presidents. Like many post colonial governments, it has been waylaid by the fruits of power. It

has become arrogant, increasingly unaccountable, and systematically corrupt. It has merged the party with the state, rendered the public service subject to its whims, and made blatant raids on the public fiscus. Under Jacob Zuma, the parastatal sector, notionally providing fundamental infrastructure for the economy (electricity, transport, water, the national airline etc.), was transformed into a feeding trough for the ANC's post-colonial bourgeoisie, with the result that most state-owned enterprises (and certainly the big ones) are hopelessly indebted and need constant bailing out by the Treasury. Local government has become a mess. Most municipalities have likewise been plundered, and most have been unable to do their job, providing access to basic services to their inhabitants.

Meanwhile, the ANC has also made a mess of running a capitalist economy, far less transforming it. Big business and the small and medium enterprise sector alike are totally hampered by a maze of regulations that have inhibited growth and service delivery. Economic growth has stalled; unemployment has rocketed to 35 per cent; poverty continues to stalk the land; black children go to bed hungry. Cyril Ramaphosa, elected to the presidency as a reform candidate, has been boxed in by competing factions within the ANC, and has shown little appetite for confronting his rivals within the party. His so-called long game has ended up as a dull draw, boring and frustrating to the crowd watching the game.

Where whites fit into the national question

So, what about whites while all this has been going on? It would have been a great help to answering this question if any of the approaches to the national question pursued by the liberation movements had given any firm guidance. But when put to the test, neither the non-racialism officially espoused by the ANC, nor Africanism (theorized by the [Pan-Africanist Congress in the 1950s](#) and latterly taken up by many elements within the ANC), gave any real answers about how whites would fit into a democracy. Both were remarkably vague, and while Desmond Tutu's rainbowism had a warm glow to it, like the idea of multiculturalism internationally, it didn't have anything to contribute to a serious discussion either.

Into this yawning void have stepped the whiteness scholars, contributing significant depth to the discussion of how the white minority has reacted to democracy, yet trailing many questions behind them in their wake. Is the behaviour of all whites shaped by their whiteness? Can they ever escape it? Is whiteness theory simply a jazzed up version of the ideas of socialization which I read about when I was an undergraduate? And are whiteness scholars themselves not influenced by their whiteness, even if quite a few of them are pretty obviously trying to prove they are not? No mistake, whiteness theory poses some very difficult questions, and I have learned a lot from its literature, but in the end, I decided it was necessary to take a more obvious and empirical route: asking whites a lot of questions and interpreting their answers, along with analysing their political behaviour.

Researching the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

An important place to start was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It is widely accepted that members of the former regime and whites generally ducked the chance to wrestle with their guilt and complicity with apartheid. Fortunately, there is a massive literature about this, and I was able to draw on it, especially the comparative thinking that used the post war German experience to look at South African whites' reactions to the TRC in the 1990s.

For better or worse, I opted to use focus groups to foment discussion about whites. These were run for me by an expert outfit, [Citizen Surveys](#), and I supplemented them by looking at year-by-year surveys of attitudes done by the [Institute of Justice and Reconciliation](#) (IJR). The answers given by respondents, as they looked back at the TRC and the issues it raised, reconciliation prospects (obviously), white complicity, comparative cases of oppression internationally, etc. were surprisingly reflective, although there was quite a lot of retrospective guilt shifted from the individual to the regime's shoulders. A very common theme was that it was the foot-soldiers of apartheid, and not the generals, who had to take the blame. Interestingly, however, while IJR surveys over the years have consistently shown whites to be more conservative and pessimistic about reconciliation issues, white attitudes are shown not to be so very different from those of other racial groups.

The focus groups also provided interesting material on how whites have reacted to and behaved under ANC rule. Unsurprisingly, there was a lot of disillusionment with the perceived failure of reconciliation and resentment about what were presented as unfair, pro black policies. There is also a lot of fear about the future, and a lot of rumination about the possibility of leaving the country. Yet at the same time, there was a widespread appreciation of whites' relative advantages, and the good things (for them) of living in South Africa. Interestingly, the overwhelming majority remained committed to staying in the country and making the best of life, with an appreciation that moving abroad would not necessarily improve their lot. In a word, most whites adopt a pragmatic attitude to living in South Africa today and seem to have left crude racial ideology behind.

Whites and party politics

This was relatively good news, but how have such attitudes worked out politically? In a word, in a very mixed way. It is a commonplace that whites have largely grouped themselves behind the Democratic Alliance (DA), and I track how the DA has shifted ground since the early 1990s. My principal focus was upon how it has dealt with race. Black political activists have long had a very ambivalent, if not outright hostile, attitude to liberalism as it has made its appearance in South Africa. So how has a self-proclaimed liberal party sought to attract black voters, something essential for it to do, if it is to confront accusations that it is merely a vehicle for white interests, and if it is to increase its support to present a serious challenge to the ANC? My argument is that it made a half-decent stab at a solution under Helen Zille as its leader, and to give it teeth,

she stepped aside to make way for Mmusi Maimane. Until 2017, the strategy worked, and there was popular support for the DA, but when it stalled in 2019, Maimane was unceremoniously booted out, blamed for having been racially divisive! Ironically, the charge was led by Helen Zille, who has seemed to regret her withdrawal, and has come back to manage the party from behind the scenes. My argument is that the DA has demonstrated its *total* inability to grapple with the issue of race.

Afrikaners and the state within a state

Meanwhile, a cottage industry has developed focusing particularly on Afrikaners' adaptation to democracy. In many ways, this has been remarkable. First things first: the far right was disarmed (literally) at the outset of democracy, and although continuing to be remarkably unpleasant, today it is largely confined to shouting from the sidelines, talking to the Republicans in the US, and posting nasties on the internet.

What is happening elsewhere is fascinating, as basically, Afrikaner activists have erected a state within a state, with the Solidarity trade union (originally developing out of the white mineworkers' union) having morphed into an Afrikaner welfare-cum-business movement working with AfriForum, a right-wing inclined legal activist group which uses human-rights talk and the South African constitution to remarkable effect. It is overwhelmingly concerned with defending whites' rights, yet necessarily has to dress these up as human rights. And then, of course, there is a small sliver of Afrikaners who have embraced democracy with enthusiasm and are trying to make it work.

Whites as citizens: representation, recognition, redistribution

The book attempts to bring all this and much else together in a chapter grappling with 'Whites as Citizens,' which examines whites and the politics of representation, recognition, and redistribution respectively. As with TRC-related issues, white political voting patterns are more conservative than those of other race groups, yet follow very similar trends, and it is Afrikaners who are principally concerned with recognition issues. Redistribution is the tricky part, as I present white politics as a politics of defence, yet I argue that the idea of 'reparation' is hugely problematic and unwieldy, and needs to be replaced by a focus on social justice. And I make a few suggestions about redistribution strategies to be implemented, but point out that rarely are the answers easy.

A relatively good news story

At the end of the day, I rather surprised myself by arguing that my book is a relatively good news story. I would never have believed this back in the bad old days. But given the sheer awfulness of the South African past, the accommodation of whites into South African democracy has gone reasonably smoothly. Don't mistake this for the argument that they are all warm and cuddly

human beings. *They are very definitely not that.* There are lots of very unpleasant, racist people among them. But the important point is that whites are no longer a serious threat to democracy.

In fact, if you want to look for the major threat to democracy, look no further than the ANC.

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