

No, Mr Trump, whites are not a persecuted minority in South Africa

AfriForum, a right wing Afrikaner group, has recently visited Washington and told President Donald Trump that it wants to Make South Africa Great Again. Trump has turned a listening ear to their message that South African whites have become a persecuted minority. As a result, relations between the US and South Africa have plummeted to a new low. Yet AfriForum's message that whites are persecuted as whites is downright wrong.

South African Democracy

Under apartheid, South Africa was a land under white minority rule, but in 1994, it transitioned into a non racial democracy. Alas, much has gone wrong since the days of Nelson Mandela, the economy has been poorly managed, unemployment is sky high, crime is rampant and there is massive inequality. Nonetheless, South Africa has remained a democracy, and has now experienced seven fully democratic general elections, with the last one having seen the ruling African National Congress lose its majority in parliament and, as a result, having had to form a coalition government.

What is so remarkable, contrary to AfriForum's laments, is how much whites have prospered under democracy. White South Africans remain a largely privileged group. Notwithstanding much upward black mobility since 1994, whites are generally richer, better educated, better housed, physically safer and enjoy better access to health care than their fellow citizens who are black.

How Whites Have Adapted

My research focuses on how and why South Africa's white minority has accommodated democracy. Many of them may not like it, many whites can be termed 'reluctant democrats' yet, remarkably, given many prophecies in the past that South Africa was destined to plunge into racial war, whites have responded pragmatically to the new reality. While many have grumbles and complaints, the overwhelming majority of whites continue to regard South Africa as their home and are determined to stay in the land of their birth.

Whites have reacted to democracy in a variety of ways. Initially, some sought to oppose it militarily by forming militia groups dedicated to armed resistance, but they were soon put in their place by an army and police force which obeyed the commands of a newly elected democratic government. Others, while collaborating happily enough with black South Africans in the workplace, opt to withdraw into a white world in suburbia as much as they can, their homes often sealed off by wealth from the hurly burly of everyday life in gated communities. Yet in

contrast, many whites, prominent Afrikaners among them, have responded more positively and have enthusiastically embraced the rules of the new democracy as politicians, professionals, journalists, and civil society activists.

Interestingly, too, there has been a fourth response, illustrated by the actions of AfriForum itself, whereby some organizations, sometimes, but not always, representative of Afrikaner interests, have chosen to defend white interests by using their rights guaranteed under the constitution to engage government politically and by challenging it in the courts. Indeed, whites have proved to be among South Africa's most eager voters over successive elections, and their interests (albeit as citizens, and not as whites specifically) are defended vigorously by the country's largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance.

Becoming a Non-Racial Democracy

Whites' major complaint is about the democratic government's implementation of Black Economic Empowerment and equity employment, policies of affirmative action which are designed to promote black upward social mobility. Originally put in place to address continuing racial imbalances of income, wealth, and privilege, there is a strong case to be made that these have now become transformed into systems of government patronage and rent seeking and should be either abolished or significantly amended. However, to argue, as AfriForum does, that these practices are racially discriminatory may speak to the Trump administration's attack on Diversity and Inclusion, but it misses the point, that today, South African governments have a mandate and duty to correct the wrongs of the past from which whites have long benefited.

There is much progress to be made before South Africa fully realizes its aspiration to become a non-racial democracy. Yet much progress has been made, and whites have adjusted remarkably peacefully and pragmatically to the rules of the new game.

Even AfriForum now has to deny accusations that it wants to drag South Africa back to apartheid!