Polarization in South Africa: Toward Democratic Deepening or Democratic Decay?

By ROGER SOUTHALL

Under apartheid, white oppression of the black majority was extreme, and South Africa became one of the most highly polarized countries in the world. Confronted by a counter-movement headed by the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling National Party (NP) was eventually pressured into a negotiation process that resulted in the adoption of a democratic constitution. This article outlines how democratization defused polarization, but was to be hollowed out by the ANC’s construction of a “party-state,” politicizing democratic institutions and widening social inequalities. This is stoking political tensions, which, despite societal interdependence, are provoking fears of renewed polarization along class and racial lines.

Keywords: apartheid; democratization; polarization and proto-polarization; inequality; African National Congress; party-state

Before 1994, South Africa was one the most highly polarized countries in the world. White conquest and colonialism had buttressed the domination of a white minority and continuously reproduced poverty and powerlessness among a black majority for centuries. After the National Party’s (NP) (whites only) election victory in 1948, apartheid was to deepen racial divisions and strip blacks of what rudimentary rights they had previously possessed. Yet apartheid was accompanied by capitalist development. Despite official policies to limit black urbanization, along with the ruthless suppression of black opposition, the minority regime was confronted in the 1970s by extensive popular revolt, whose principal locus was in the

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townships (segregated and undeveloped urban areas reserved for blacks). In addition, the regime was drawn into fighting (ultimately futile) wars against liberation movements in Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia. By the early 1990s, the apartheid state had been forced to the negotiating table; it had lost the anti-communist backing of western powers following the end of the Cold War; and its economy was in crisis. Even so, it remained the strongest military power on the African continent, and its opposition, headed by the African National Congress (ANC), recognized it was too strong to defeat. The outcome was a compromise between opposing elites, the essence of which was that the NP conceded to universal rights and a democratic regime, while the ANC accepted a capitalist economy (Ashman 2015; Marais 2011; Habib 2013).

The transition to democracy inaugurated an era of national reconciliation, as political polarization receded. Conflict was largely replaced by peace, underpinned by growth rates not seen since the 1960s. Developments of infrastructure, services, and welfare provided for substantial social progress and the raising of living standards for many in the black community (SAIRR 2018a). Nonetheless, given the endurance of historic inequalities along lines of race, space, class, and wealth, South Africa remains deeply divided. Whites (alongside international corporations) continue to dominate the private sector, while black communities endure astounding high levels of poverty and unemployment. Notwithstanding black upward mobility, class divisions remain stark, while the country’s spaces remain highly segmented, with the large majority of the different racial groupings (Africans 80.5 percent; whites 8.5 percent; Coloreds 8.5 percent; and Indians 2.5 percent)1 still living in areas that were racially demarcated and differentially serviced under apartheid. Politically, a highly praised constitution balanced majority against minority representation, guaranteed a host of individual freedoms, and dictated a separation of powers. However, simultaneously, apartheid’s polarized history resulted in the post-1994 political dominance of the ANC as the representative of the overwhelming mass of the black, especially African, majority population.2 In turn, this has facilitated the rise of a party-state elite bent on rapid accumulation, high levels of corruption, and a drift toward authoritarianism (Booysen 2011; Southall 2014a).

Fears are growing among observers that unless South Africa’s cleavages are addressed by dramatic transformations accompanied by rapid economic growth, the country may yet again face the prospect of conflict and decline (Habib 2013; Johnson 2015). This poses urgent questions: Can South Africa’s troubled democracy contain its past and present divisions? Or will it spiral back into a politics of polarization last seen during the latter years of apartheid—that is, a state where political actors on either side of a societal divide are unable to compromise, where conflict-management mechanisms fail, where violence replaces negotiation, and where society bifurcates into two hostile camps (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018)?

Political Polarization in South Africa before 1994

The union of South Africa in 1910 had been designed to protect the interests of the mining industry while being permissive of political domination by the Boers
(later Afrikaners), who constituted a majority of the white minority population. The interests of the mining industry (dominated by British and other foreign capital), commercial agriculture (dominated by local, notably Afrikaner, capital), and the white minority as a whole were secured by the denial of political rights to the black majority. This was backed by a massive appropriation of black land, the corralling of Africans in “native reserves,” the imposition of repressive labor practices, entrenchment of a system of migrant labor from the reserves to the mines and white farms, and severe restrictions on the rights of blacks to reside in urban areas. However, by the 1940s, the deteriorating agricultural capacity of the reserves, alongside the expansion of manufacturing, had resulted in an inexorable drift of the black population into the towns. In turn, this stimulated black political consciousness (Lodge 1983).

The NP’s victory in 1948 reversed hesitant attempts of the predecessor government to make pragmatic adjustments to the status quo, which would have recognized the permanence of black urbanization as an accompaniment of industrialization. Apartheid preached a rigid separation of the races. African political rights had already been further diminished during the 1930s. Further attacks upon the rights of all blacks followed during the 1950s and 1960s. These included new elements of divide and rule: Indians and Coloreds were to run their own affairs. Above all, the NP decreed that the African majority comprised discrete ethnic populations, each with their political homelands located in the reserves, where the regime sought to bolster despotic chieftain control. Meanwhile, the regime sought to reverse the continuing flow of blacks to urban areas by extending the migrant labor system to the secondary industry.

Prior to 1948, the ANC, formed by African middle-class elements in 1912, had restricted its role to lobbying for greater rights, only to suffer successive rebuffs. The NP’s commitment to apartheid ensured that the ANC’s hitherto conservative leadership was swept aside, and the NP’s newly repressive measures were met by an upsurge of popular protest. Enforced division of the subordinated races only encouraged cross-racial unity. Yet when a Congress Alliance of Indian, Colored, and radical white and trade union organizations led by the ANC launched massive protest campaigns during the 1950s and early 1960s, the NP responded with brutal clampdowns, culminating in a series of infamous trials of the ANC and Congress leaderships, and the banning of their organizations following the imposition of a state of emergency after the Sharpeville massacre of 1961, when police gunned down protestors at a rally organized by the minority Pan-Africanist Congress.

The Sharpeville emergency was followed by a period of repressive stability, when black political quiescence was underpinned by foreign investment (attracted by the profits available from a docile and rightless black labor force) and rapid economic growth (Giliomee 1979; Terreblanche 2003). With the leadership of the ANC either in jail or in exile, the movement lost its momentum. However, apartheid proved unable to contain the industrializing logic of the political economy. Above all, the government was unable to stem the drift of rural Africans to burgeoning townships, which expanded rapidly on the fringes of white urban areas. Although the introduction of Bantu Education in 1953 had
sought to school the African population for servitude, upward mobility of whites into higher skilled jobs opened opportunities for blacks and led to the growth of and increasing skills of the African workforce.

Such developments boosted black self-confidence. From the early 1970s, black workers confronted employers and police with militant strike activity and self-organization into trade unions. African youth became impatient with the political acquiescence of their parents' generation and rose in revolt in 1976, when schoolchildren's protests in Soweto about unequal education ignited a massive extension of popular mobilization among anti-apartheid forces throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

The regime responded with brutal violence and extensive security measures, yet simultaneously sought to defuse polarization by restructuring apartheid: first, by the incorporation of black trade unions into the industrial relations system in 1979; and second, by the introduction of a new constitution in 1983 whereby Indians and Coloreds were provided representation in parliament via the creation of separate chambers (alongside the established House for whites). Belated acceptance of black urbanization was signified by the creation of black community councils in urban areas and, in 1986, abolition of influx control, which restricted black movement. However, attempts to streamline apartheid were repudiated by the regime's opponents, prompting the formation of cross-racial unity within a United Democratic Front forged from a multiplicity of community-based civic organizations, religious groups, workers, and youth movements, which, in effect, became the surrogate of the exiled ANC.

By 1985, when diverse strands of black trade unions combined into a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), conditions were ripe for the effective re-creation of the Congress Alliance of the 1950s. The ANC's armed struggle was largely ineffective against the regime's military onslaught, but it nonetheless gained hugely in reputation among the black population, notably through what it termed armed propaganda in the mid-1980s. Its influence grew significantly during the 1980s. By the time the government had reached the conclusion that the confrontations with popular forces were becoming financially and economically unsupportable, in part because of divestment from South Africa of international companies and banks as a result of pressure from anti-apartheid campaigners globally, the ANC had largely reestablished its popular hegemony (despite the survival of significant minority political traditions).

The years of the political transition (1990–94) were turbulent. The major players, the ANC and NP, had very different conceptions of democracy, the former favoring direct, unitary, and popular forms of democracy; the latter preferring indirect, federal, and consociational forms protective of minority rights. Correspondingly, the ANC was backed by popular power, while the NP retained its grip on the state and security forces. Inevitably, there were violent battles on the streets and in rural areas. Militants clashed with the police and military, while the state and rogue elements stoked civil war between the ANC and the rival ethnic-Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party. Many thousands died violent deaths—yet ultimately these only reinforced the urgency of the negotiation process, and made the final carefully crafted agreement in 1993 more welcome.
The triumph of the postagreement 1994 election and the ANC-led coalition Government of National Unity (GNU) that followed it was that they combined majority rule with minority representation in government, symbolizing mutual accommodation by previously polarized forces. This, then, is a case of severe polarization leading to democratic reform, under the pressure of significant costs to the apartheid regime arising from international sanctions, domestic economic costs from strikes, and insurgent popular revolt. But would the democratic settlement remain viable given the massive socioeconomic inequalities and racial disparities that had been entrenched under apartheid?4

Democracy’s Depolarizing Impacts and Limitations

The settlement forging democracy was a result of a sophisticated process of constitutional engineering conducted principally by ANC and NP elites that facilitated the adoption of a Bill of Rights; a hybridization between parliamentary and presidential systems of government; a quasi-federal devolution of powers to nine new provinces; and various checks and balances, including the establishment of democracy-promoting institutions such as a public protector (an ombudsperson with extensive investigatory powers). Above all, the executive and legislative bodies were subject to the constitution, with a new Constitutional Court becoming the final arbiter of whether policies and actions were constitutional (Corder, Federico, and Orru 2014).

The negotiation process (1990–94)—although forging an elite transition more than a meaningful liberation (Bond 1990)—was crucial in defusing distrust and allowing mutually exclusive political identities to give way to a broader sense of South Africanism. Although the daily realities of racial separation remained, newly inclusive political institutions saw the spanning of previously unbridgeable cleavages between the major political actors. The achievement was capped by the joyful holding of the first democratic election, and the pursuit of national reconciliation by Nelson Mandela, the democracy’s first president. However, this elaboration of a transformative democracy was to be challenged by the political dominance of the ANC, allowing the new ruling party to erode the constraints formally imposed upon its authority by the newly adopted democratic constitution (Southall 2013).

The adoption of a party-list proportional representation (PR) system, for both national and provincial legislatures, pleased both the ANC, which was confident of winning the popular vote, as well as other parties that de facto represented political minorities. The outcome in 1994 was that the ANC’s support fell just short of a two-thirds majority, with the NP and IFP securing sufficient votes to ensure their representation in the GNU, while a myriad of smaller parties formed the opposition.5 Subsequently, after disagreements between the ANC and NP led to the latter leaving the GNU in 1996, the scene was set for the consolidation of the ANC’s electoral dominance.

The ANC increased its share of the vote during the next two general elections (1999 and 2004), its predominance largely repeated in the different provinces
(the major exception being the Western Cape, over which it lost control in 2004). Although the two subsequent elections saw a decline in the ANC’s vote (down to 62 percent in 2014), the party was by now in firm control of the state machinery. Meanwhile, opposing parties remained fragmented, with their potential for unity constrained by divisions of race, ethnicity, style, ideology, regional affiliation, and their leaders’ personal ambitions. However, with the final collapse of the NP in 2005, the ground was firmed for the steady rise of the liberal Democratic Alliance (DA), which mopped up most of the conservative constituency left behind by the NP to become the major party of opposition (Southall 2014b).

The PR electoral system allowed for maximum political inclusivity. Notably, it avoided the fateful error committed by the Zimbabwean transitional electoral arrangements that provided for the separate representation of whites as whites (Southall 2013, 107–12). In contrast, the South African system ensured that any opposition party with ambition would need to garner support across race, ethnicity, and class (Horowitz 1991). This was to prove important in drawing racial minorities into postcolonial politics. Notably, it provided for the growth of the DA, whose support was to steadily expand beyond its predominantly white and Colored support base, and whose current major objective is to make inroads into the ANC’s overwhelmingly black constituency. That it was to enjoy some success in this was indicated by the results of the 2016 local government elections when the ANC lost majorities in the three metros of Johannesburg, Tshwane (Pretoria) and Nelson Mandela Bay (Port Elizabeth), and was displaced by DA-led coalitions (underpinned by support from the Economic Freedom Fighters [EFF], a populist breakaway from the ANC). Even so, the DA and other opposition parties continue to face ANC political dominance.

From its beginning, the ANC sought to unite all Africans across class, tribe, and religion. The party embraced all those of whatever color who repudiated any form of discrimination by race. This culminated in its articulation of a creed of nonracial democracy. The apartheid-era subjection of so many activists to brutality and torture by apartheid security forces enhanced its commitment to human rights.

Nevertheless, there was another side to the ANC that disposed it to an exclusivity at odds with liberal democratic values. This flowed from two major sources. The first was the ANC’s identity as an anticolonialism movement. At times, it was prone to conflate self-determination with democracy and to claim that the ANC embodied the spirit of the nation, and that it alone represented the will of the people. As the ANC has consolidated its power, so its leadership has on occasion claimed a quasi-divine right to rule. Hence, when he was president (2009–2018), Jacob Zuma proclaimed on a number of occasions that “The ANC will rule till Jesus comes” (Southall 2017).

The second source of authoritarianism in ANC thought lay in the party’s historic alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP). In practice, post-1994, the latter has always been subordinate to the former (to the extent that its members hold joint membership and campaign as the ANC electorally). Nonetheless, together, the SACP and ANC theorize the struggle against apartheid and capitalism as a struggle in two parts: first the realization of a national
democratic revolution (NDR) and second, the defeat of capitalism and the advance to socialism.

The NDR expresses the ANC’s ideological commitment to the total overthrow of an unjust socioeconomic system alongside its demand for democracy. This has proven sufficiently ambiguous to contain the aspirations of both nationalist and communist wings of the ANC’s liberation alliance, as the NDR envisages the development of a black (or patriotic) bourgeoisie capable of challenging the domination of monopoly capitalism while simultaneously emphasizing the need for the liberation movement to ensure that the patriotic bourgeoisie remains loyal to the revolution. Yet what the NDR has also stressed has been the extension of liberation movement control over all organs of the state (the bureaucracy, the security forces, the parastatals and so on) if South Africa were to be transformed (ANC 1998).

Since 1994, the theory of the NDR has guided the ANC’s deployment of loyal party cadres to key positions across all organs of state power (albeit with the judiciary largely left untouched). This has facilitated the rise of a party-state in which the executive dominates a supposedly independent civil service and all public institutions (although hitherto independent bodies like the universities have proved relatively successful in protecting their autonomy). Furthermore, while parliament has remained far more inclusive than it was under apartheid, the ANC has used its large majorities to undermine the will and capacity of the legislature to hold the executive accountable, with list-system PR making backbenchers overwhelmingly subject to the authority of party bosses. Meanwhile, steam-rolled in parliament, opposition parties have often turned for redress to the courts, which on numerous occasions have ruled against the government. This in turn has prompted influential ANC figures to attack the judiciary as being counter-revolutionary and as thwarting the will of the people. Finally, given intraparty differences around economic policy (where calls for faster rates of transformation clash with a more cautious regard for the market), the theory of the NDR has served as an invaluable prop for attacks on opposition parties as representing unpatriotic minority interests. In sum, although the ANC formally upholds its liberal values, it is simultaneously inclined to rail against the constitution as an impediment to the true liberation of the people (Southall 2013).

Against this background, international reaction to ANC rule became increasingly negative, especially during the presidency of Jacob Zuma (April 2009–January 2018), when corruption billowed. As a result, the Democracy Index, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, in 2016 downgraded South Africa to the status of a flawed democracy, that is one with free elections and respect for basic civil liberties, but also problems of governance, an underdeveloped political culture, and low levels of public participation. While South Africa is still a long way away from being classified as authoritarian, as was its neighbor Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe, there are fears that it could well move in the direction of Zimbabwe (EIU 2016). Indeed, the latter years of the Zuma presidency were characterized by high levels of popular protest, which contained within them seeds of polarization along both class and racial lines.
Protest and Proto-Polarization in Democratic South Africa

One of the major successes of South Africa’s new democracy was its imposition of presidential term limits (not to exceed two terms of five years) and the ANC’s acceptance of the hand-over of power from one president to another. The scene was set by Mandela’s voluntary standing down from the presidency in 1999. He was succeeded by Thabo Mbeki, whose presidency confirmed the ANC’s de facto acceptance of market-led economics while simultaneously stressing the need for black upward mobility and empowerment.

The capture of state power by the ANC inaugurated significant processes of redress. Policies of equity employment (or affirmative action) drove transformation. Blacks came to predominate in state employment even at the highest levels; and white dominance and ownership in the private sector was diluted by black economic empowerment. Such policies drove visible changes in the racial and class structure. Blacks experienced strong upward movement in the labor market and significant entry into the corporate and professional spheres; workplaces became mixed with remarkably few major dramas; praiseworthy strides were taken in the provision of housing and the extension of electricity, water, and other services to black communities; and the growth of a black middle class was accompanied by black African entry into former white, Colored, and Indian schools and suburbs (Southall 2016a). Further, the government has expanded its social protection, so that today there are more than 17 million people drawing old age pensions and social grants for war veterans, disability, child care, care dependency, and child support (SAIRR 2018, 742).

Although many of these advances were promoted by his leadership, Mbeki was to be ejected from office by the ANC in September 2008 before the expiration of his term. His ouster was a reaction to his run for a third term as party leader against the candidacy of Jacob Zuma, resulting in his defeat at the ANC’s Polokwane national congress in December 2007. Despite Zuma having already been caught up in a morass of corruption allegations (which, inter alia, had led to his dismissal by Mbeki as Deputy President in 2005), Zuma had gained the backing of the left-wing of the ANC’s liberation alliance (alienated by Mbeki’s promarket policies) and many party elites (estranged by his authoritarian managerial style). Subsequently, Zuma became president after the ANC’s election victory in 2009.

The Zuma presidency brought to a head various pathologies of ANC rule that had begun to emerge in previous eras. Particularly, the party-state became a machine for material accumulation by the Zuma-aligned elements of the party elite. Merit qualifications were displaced by loyalty to the president in many public appointments, resulting in the erosion of numerous state entities’ constitutionally decreed independence (Southall 2013). Suffice it to say that under Zuma, the party-state became riven by an extensive web of patronage and corruption, resulting in the increasing inefficiency and unaccountability of the state machinery.

The most scandalous signifier of these tendencies was the phenomenon of state capture, whereby the Guptas, a family that recently emigrated from India, allied themselves to President Zuma and his faction. Together, they used Zuma’s
control over the state machinery to staff key positions with cronies and drain the public service and parastatals of resources via the corrupt allocation of tenders to their opaque web of companies. Simultaneously, they systematically dismantled numerous agencies established to ensure the state’s accountability (Pauw 2017; Public Protector 2017). Overall, as the party-state transmogrified into a vehicle for material accumulation and upward mobility by the party elite and those close to it, it undermined the integrity of government and its ability to deliver goods to ordinary citizens. Meanwhile, the investment climate deteriorated, economic growth declined, and public indebtedness increased. As a result, toward the end of the Zuma presidency, the ANC became increasingly divided and factionalized. As the availability of resources began to slow, and as corruption mounted and growth collapsed, the ANC’s popularity rapidly diminished (Southall 2016b).

As the crisis intensified, there were manifold indications of discontent with ANC rule. Community protests targeting failures of service delivery and the unaccountability of overwhelmingly ANC-led local councils had spread like wildfire from the early 2000s (Alexander 2010; Von Holdt et al. 2011), many of these involving violent encounters between protestors and the authorities. Meanwhile, because the ANC’s economic policies had failed to make a significant dent in apartheid era unemployment levels (which remained at between 25 and 40 percent of the labor force depending upon the definitions used; Mohamed 2010), and because workers were increasingly informally and precariously employed, they continued to live up to their reputation (earned from the 1970s) for militance (Bischoff 2015). When strikes broke out, such as during a major strike wave on the country’s platinum belt in 2012–13, they often involved considerable violence—against management, black legs, rival unions, security guards, or police (Chinguno 2015). The violence occurred despite the ANC having thoroughly overhauled the despotic industrial relations system it had inherited from apartheid. In turn, the police often responded by using violence of their own, the most notorious incident being their killing thirty-four protesting miners by gunfire at the Lonmin mine at Marikana on August 16, 2012, an incident that evoked memories of massacres committed by their apartheid predecessors (Marks and Bruce 2015).

Thereafter, a wave of student protests swept the system of higher education during the 2016 academic year. The protests were sparked by a student demonstration at the University of Cape Town demanding the removal of a statue of the colonial icon, Cecil Rhodes. Yet fundamentally the protests were about high fees, so they leapt rapidly from one university to another, igniting a widespread sense of grievance among black students who complained about continuing social exclusion within a still heavily white higher education system. It was therefore an easy transition from a social media driven demand that “#Rhodes must Fall!” to “#Fees must Fall!” to a more general campaign for the “decolonization” of the universities (Booysen 2016). This escalation rose to the level of arson, causing major damage on several campuses. While the use of fire earned the condemnation from across the party spectrum, its sympathizers responded—in terminology borrowed from black activists in United States—that it was expressive of an all-encompassing “black pain.” The lesson drawn by observers was that the use of
fire by the (relatively privileged) student movement was a metaphor for the broader problems of South Africa. It was the nation at large, not just the universities, that was already burning (Ismail 2016).

The student movement voiced anger among the younger black generation against continued white domination of the economy and much of the public sphere, despite the ANC’s take-over of government. Their cry was echoed by numerous black commentators, who regularly decried what they labelled postcolonial domination by a white elite. In turn, confronted by mounting economic crisis, the Zuma faction within the ANC increasingly resorted to the related narrative that the NDR was being thwarted by “white monopoly capital” and that a campaign of “radical economic transformation” was urgently needed. Complaints that the 1994 democratic settlement had entrenched white privilege gained widespread currency, as momentum developed for reform of the constitution to facilitate more rapid land reform and “indigenization.” In response, there is a strong undercurrent among whites of contempt for black rule disguised as criticism of Zuma’s regime, with this surfacing in highly publicized examples of blatant racism.

Against this background of multiple discontents, polarizing racial discourse and political dysfunction, fears grew that South Africa was destined to experience a return to the political polarization experienced during apartheid. However, whereas under late apartheid a broad alliance of popular forces, cutting across class and race, confronted a despotic white minority regime, it was by no means fully clear whether the nascent popular movement was directing its anger principally against “white monopoly capital” or the ANC.

Proto-Polarization in South Africa: Toward Democratic Decay or Democratic Deepening?

If political polarization under apartheid provided the platform for a democratic settlement, that this settlement rested upon enduring socioeconomic inequalities has ensured that while polarization has diminished, it has only been partially defused, providing a constant potential for political mobilization. This would seem to point in two directions outlined by McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018). The first is that a failure to address the concerns of key constituencies may allow for mobilization of antisystem support by disaffected political elites, threatening the established democratic order; an alternative potential direction is that incumbent political elites respond constructively to the risks of polarization by addressing social inequalities, seeking support across opposing political blocs, and thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of democracy.

The underlying causes of South Africa’s high levels of protest and violence are deeply etched in the political-economic order. The legacy of structural violence and racial division continues to run deep. Many blacks have experienced significant gains since 1994, with an emergent black middle class being a major beneficiary of democracy. Even so, it is Africans who remain at the bottom of the social
heap while, relatively, the racial minorities have prospered. Second, the economy—characterized by dismally low savings and investment levels, low growth, massive unemployment, and extensive poverty—is failing too many citizens. Pursuit of neo-liberal market-led policies have led to the opening of the hitherto heavily protected apartheid economy, a major restructuring (and flight) of capital and a decline of manufacturing. Although job losses were more or less balanced by increased opportunities created by the growth of the financial and service sectors, there has been a marked shift toward informal and precarious employment. Furthermore, young people (15–34 years), many of them dismally educated, account for 65 percent of the unemployed.

It gets worse. South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world, with its economy still overwhelmingly dominated (via control over value chains as much as ownership) by a small minority of whites (Oxfam 2017; World Bank 2018; Bosiu et al. 2017). Despite black advances, whites continue to enjoy strong relative advantage. In 2011, black Africans (80 percent of the population) owned gross private assets of 3.6 billion rands, while whites (just 9 percent) owned R10.4 billion (SAIRR 2012, 258). Overall, the gap between whites and blacks is increasing. Whereas whites’ household incomes were 4.3 times larger than black Africans in 1996, they had become 5.8 times higher by 2014 (SAIRR 2016, 316). This reflects better life chances, as whites continue to gain preferential access to good schooling and have higher rates of graduation from universities, leading to higher standards of living.

Meanwhile, with fewer people formally employed than those receiving social grants,9 the current economic trajectory is manifestly unsustainable, especially given a limited tax base (unless commodities, upon which the economy remains heavily dependent, enjoy an unexpected resurgence in prices). Simply put, the money to pay for the maintenance of South Africa’s already modest welfare state is beginning to run out (Southall 2016b). Unsurprisingly, in the view of many citizens, the ANC has become self-destructively unresponsive to the needs of ordinary people, while its growing sense of insecurity is leading to the growing volatility of its political rhetoric.

Against this background of multiple discontents, economic uncertainty, and political dysfunction, the prospects are real that discontented political elites, within as well as outside the ANC, may claim that democracy (at least as it is established under the constitution) is not working for the mass of people, and mobilize around the need for faster and more far-reaching transformation. Such a shift in direction, which would doubtless be versed in terms of a populist black nationalism, would stoke fears of increased racial tensions, investment flight, and ultimately, a similar combination of economic meltdown and political authoritarianism that followed the regime’s seizure of white farms in Zimbabwe from the early 2000s (Sachikonye 2012; Shumba 2018). In other words, South Africa seems at risk of returning to the level of political polarization experienced during the final years of apartheid—a scenario that would threaten democracy.

Against this, however, an equally strong argument can be made that South African democracy is sufficiently resilient to prevent a return to apartheid-era polarization. First, even though racial cleavages continue as a basis for political
mobilization and many black activists use a racialized discourse, whites and blacks remain locked together in what Jacob Dlamini (2016) has termed a “fatal intimacy.” Survey material suggests that South Africans of all races recognize that their identities and fate are closely bound together. One survey, conducted in 2015, reported that 54.1 percent of South Africans (59.8 percent of black Africans) felt that race relations had improved since 1994, 85.4 and 85.1 percent respectively felt that the different races need each other, and, interestingly, 62 percent and 58.3 percent felt that racial discourse was used by politicians to find excuse for their own failure (SAIRR 2016).

Meanwhile, although social cohesion is being severely tested by the increasing precariousness of employment among black workers, the latter continue to need their jobs and employers their workers. The level of inequality remains astounding, yet racial divisions are cross-cut by the growth of a black elite and middle class. Levels of intra-societal violence remain disturbingly high, yet they are as much contained within discrete communities by the still brutal spatial inheritances of apartheid as they are generalized across society. Additionally, South Africa remains a highly religious society, with religion continuing to play a significant role in diverting popular discontents away from political flashpoints.

Finally, it is particularly notable that the EFF, the populist breakaway from the ANC that has punted a radical nationalist platform around extensive nationalization of industries and expropriation of white-owned land, has gained only limited support. Simultaneously, it has opted to use institutional means of both parliament and the courts to expose and counter state-capture and other ANC corruption. Although the democratic fabric was severely eroded during the Zuma presidency, it was not destroyed. Indeed, it was because the ANC fears losing a majority at the next election (scheduled for 2019), and because, unlike in Zimbabwe, the competitive fairness of elections has been maintained, that the party opted for a change in political leadership offering the prospect of renewal.

Reform in the ANC, 2017–18

At its five-yearly National Congress in December 2017, Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, backed by anti-Zuma elements within the ANC, narrowly defeated Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Zuma’s ex-wife and strongly backed by his faction, for the party’s leadership. To be sure, Ramaphosa’s victory was severely circumscribed by the continuing strength of the Zuma faction within the party. Accordingly, he had to move very cautiously to consolidate his power. However, by early January 2018, he was strong enough to persuade a reluctant Jacob Zuma to stand down from the state presidency. Politically astute, managerially able, uncorrupt, and highly personable, Ramaphosa was widely viewed as the man to turn South Africa away from the excesses of the Zuma era and to restore it to economic growth and constitutional democracy.

Ramaphosa’s rise to the presidency was due to a combination of factors. Significant elements within the ANC, many of them veterans of the struggle, had openly deplored the corruption that had billowed under Zuma and his related undermining of the constitution. Many party activists rebelled against the
patterns of patronage within the ANC that had massively hollowed out intraparty democracy. Yet above all, party elites had taken note of the widespread demonstrations demanding that “#Zuma Must Fall,” which had drawn support from across the racial and political spectrum during 2016–17. These had spread fear within party ranks that, as indicated by its major losses in the local elections, the ANC risked losing national power to opposition party coalitions in the forthcoming 2019 general election.

Ramaphosa’s early months in power saw major changes. As of this writing in mid-2018, appointments to his first cabinet saw Zuma zealots cast aside or marginalized, competence prioritized, and treasury control over departmental spending firmly re-asserted. Major changes in personnel and direction took place in the country’s major parastatals. A judicial inquiry into state capture has been facilitated, accompanied by backing given to the relevant state agencies to prosecute individuals suspected of corruption. Charges of corruption against Zuma, dropped after he became president, were re-instated, and he faces the very real prospect of being sent to jail. The Guptas’ empire was being dismantled, looted resources were being reclaimed, and the Guptas themselves became likely to face trial. Meanwhile, Ramaphosa was spearheading major efforts to attract major flows of investment back to South Africa (Everatt 2018).

Hence, it is that the ANC is busy re-forging its bonds with its mass constituency. With Ramaphosa at its head, it is probable that it will again secure a majority (albeit reduced) in the 2019 election, not least because the DA—its major competitor—is presently struggling with internal divisions. Meanwhile, there are some encouraging signs that the ANC is turning away from the disastrous Zuma trajectory. Precipitated by the extent of civil society protest, this shift is taken by many to demonstrate the resilience of the country’s democracy.

Nonetheless, long-term prospects remain uncertain. Disappointment among the black population at the limits of the democratic settlement is mounting; community protests against perceived ANC arrogance have continued into the new era; and Ramaphosa’s renewal of the ANC has yet to see the removal of Zuma strongmen within key provinces, prompting questions of whether the party can really reform.

Much depends on whether Ramaphosa’s reformist agenda succeeds or falters. If it succeeds by achieving higher economic growth, reducing corruption, and improving service delivery by government, then political polarization may be diffused and the legitimacy of democracy enhanced. But if it fails, the prospects of deepening political polarization, resulting in Zimbabwe-style authoritarianism and political decay, will be worryingly increased.

Notes

1. Coloreds, descended from a wide variety of ethnic ancestries (African, Asian, and European), were officially defined as one of South Africa’s four official population groups under apartheid.
2. South Africa still grapples with racial terminology. Black here is used to refer to Africans, Indians, and Coloreds inclusively.
3. Soweto, with a population of some 1.3 million, was Johannesburg’s largest black township. For the Soweto Revolt, see Hirson (1979).


5. The transitional interim constitution provided the right of parties gaining 10 percent of the vote to claim proportionate representation in the GNU. This provision was dropped following the finalization of the constitution by parliament in 1996.

6. The ANC party hierarchy has the political clout to “deploy” the party’s representatives out of the legislature, to another posting or, as the ultimate sanction, to expel an MP from the party, which under the constitution would mean they would lose their seat in parliament.

7. Veteran ANC activist Kgalema Motlanthe replaced Mbeki as president until Zuma took over in 2009.

8. Employees continuing to work during a strike.

9. Total employed (nonagricultural) was 16.1 million versus 17.2 million social grant recipients in 2017 (SAIRR 2018, 246, 744).

References


