



**An elusive South African nation: The national question revisited**  
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As South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy, it is perhaps an opportune time to revisit the '*national question*' again – by a '*national question*', simplistically, it is implied that there is appropriate balance of power and influence among all population and or ethnic groups in a nation state. Ivor Chipkin, in his 2007 book, provocatively asks whether South Africans exist. The Mapungubwe Institute also deals with pertinent issues in its recent report on '*nation formation and social cohesion*'.

Chipkin concluded that “if South Africans were not a nation, they were, nonetheless, already some kind of people. The issue therefore: Who was [is] eligible for citizenship and who was [is] not. At stake were [are] the limits of the political community”. It might very well be that Chipkin inevitably reaches this conclusion because his definition of a '*nation*', decidedly and conveniently, ignores the importance of cultural arte-facts in a make-up of any '*nation*'. Chipkin defines a nation as “a political community whose form is given in relation to the pursuit of democracy and freedom”.

Joseph Renan, writing in the context of a '*French nation*' argued that, “the essence of a nation is that individuals have many things in common, and as well as all forgot [forget] many things”. And, Eric Hobsbawn, discussing the French Revolution, argues that France “provided the first great example, of the concept and the vocabulary of nationalism”. Also, Benedict Anderson, who has put the theorisation about notions of nation, nationalism and national identity back on the agenda, defines a nation as “an imagined political community– and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship”. Language, culture and similar factors are critical in the imagination of a political community as complementary efforts in nation building. Indeed, culture evolves. Language, arguably, as an aspect of culture and as a defining vector in power relations cannot be overlooked in any narrative aimed at imagining a '*nation*'.

Given what Renan, Hobsbawn and Anderson say, it would make sense to think of a nation as involving both arte-facts and mental-facts. Therefore, it's problematic to think of a '*nation*' as

simply a people pursuing democracy and freedom, especially in the context of South Africa and its political history. It is also important to acknowledge that ‘nations’ may have existed long ago, particularly in the African continent, before ‘print-capitalism’ to use Anderson’s nomenclature. I also want to argue that most literature, especially by so-called leading scholars, on nationalism is problematic in ignoring the African experience: could it be that Shaka kaSenzangakhona, for example, was a nationalist in pursuit of an ‘African nation’, as Hebert Vilakazi has argued. Also, we must not deceive ourselves into conflating citizenship and belonging to meaning an existence of a ‘nation’.

Putting aside the important genealogy and historiography, I think South Africa has to reflect deeply on whether there is a ‘nation’ emerging or aspects of a ‘nation’ identifiable, as we celebrate 20 years of democracy. Nation building, not state-building, can be viewed as the strengthening of unity, coherence, functionality, and pride in a nation state. For post-apartheid South Africa, it would be more meaningful to see a nation as a community that shares a lot in common, respects its repulsive political history—through proactive systematic restitutionary, reconciliatory and restructuring measure—and equitable sharing of resources. As it stands, ‘democracy’, especially liberal democracy, is not enough!

The current order perpetuates injustices of the past. Thus, the nation building project appears to be falling apart in South Africa. It is debatable whether South Africans share a lot in common as those critical aspects of nation-building such as commonality of values, culture, language, shared psychological and emotional affinity are conspicuously missing among the various groups that currently inhabit the country, distilling from Joseph Stalin’s conception of a ‘nation’. Our repulsive political history and the ramifications of apartheid colonialism make it difficult to build a ‘South African nation’. Wealth and resources are predominantly owned by whites while the majority of Africans bear the brunt of innumerable socio-economic hardships. This is not an argument against non-racialism and by no means implying that whites do not belong in South Africa.

Inkosi Albert Luthuli, in one of his memorable essays written in the early 1960s—entitled *Whose is South Africa?*—argues that “the Act of [South African] Union [of 1910] virtually handed the whole of South Africa over to a minority of whites, lock, stock and barrel... from 1910 to now, the whites have carried out systematic and relentless mopping-up operations. Today their ownership is as complete as it ever will be”. As Inkosi put in, about 50 years ago, ownership by whites is as complete as it ever would be—white privilege remains very pronounced.

Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes that “South Africa is a typical example where a movement of black people that started with a liberatory agenda was by the mid-1950s gravitating toward an emancipatory project having been hijacked by both white and black liberals”. It is therefore not an exaggeration or hyperbole to argue that South Africa appears to be drifting further away from being a ‘nation’. The successive post-apartheid administrations seem to have mainly been preoccupied with state-building, not nation building, although some attempts at imagining a new ‘nation’ have been pursued. The challenge with nation building and or social cohesion initiatives so far is that they appear to overlook the historical injustice of apartheid colonialism as the fundamental constraint to the making of a post-apartheid South African ‘nation’. The idea of a post-apartheid South African ‘nation’ remains elusive, to say the least, especially given that the current government does not seem to have its act together.

I will not be surprised if Darly Glaser and other like-minded scholars (and politicians sharing similar views) would view my take as “racial-nationalistic excesses”. As Glaser argues, in his 2011 article, “whites should be educated about past iniquities and encouraged to see that the better-off among them (even those born post-apartheid) have incurred obligations to the country’s black poor as a result of these”. Whites would do South Africa and themselves good to heed the advice of Sampie Terreblanche and take the initiative, not to be taught, but to acknowledge their historical role in the destruction of African civilisations and nation building.

It seems highly unlikely that we can have the celebrated French revolution. I however wonder if a South African specific cultural revolution is farfetched. We cannot change the political transition we embraced, which might have been ideal under the then circumstances. We can change our destiny though. We all, as the Constitution says, belong here and we ignore the national question in our peril, including the unthinkable consequences for the white establishment too. The new political settlement, or the proposed social pact, has to address the fundamental question of the making of a new South African ‘nation’. Benedict Anderson tells us that it is feasible to imagine, and therefore construct, a ‘nation’. Put differently, is a ‘common political citizenship’ that Mahmood Mamdani makes reference to—in the case of Nyerere’s Tanzania—farfetched in South Africa?

Well, the ANC – in its 1997 Discussion Document subtitled ‘The National Question in South Africa’ – makes a startling self-defeatist, if not convenient, claim that “the national question can never be fully resolved”! Contrary to the ANC’s self-fulfilling prophecy, I strongly feel that, with visionary political leadership that is committed to positive social change as well as conscious and articulate citizens; the national question can be resolved. If the reality of the

consequences of past injustices is duly and comprehensively acknowledged by the perpetrators, a deliberate elaborate agenda for the construction of a South African nation could be formulated and implemented.

Beyond the simplicity of acquiescence to the Constitution as a numinous path to nation-building and a stable South Africa, the path to sustainable development lies in the agenda of building a nation, where the uniqueness of the various nationalities and ethnicities in terms of historical realities of ownership of land and its appurtenances for example, cultural specificities, arte-facts and mental-facts, access to justice and opportunities, mutual respect and so on and so forth are taken seriously. An agenda for a nation building in South Africa will also require institutional frameworks and political processes that are geared toward the promotion of social cohesion, inclusion and socio-economic and political integration of all inhabitants of this beautiful country.