



South Africa's future becomes more bleak

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It was always going to be hard to advance wellbeing in South Africa. It has become harder. For many African countries, ensuring that human development expands has been a challenge. This important point is generally overlooked in many analyses, voices and proposals regarding what could be done. No amount of rhetoric and dreaming as well as marches would take the South African society forward. Similarly, there is a lot of practical work that needs to be undertaken in all African countries if we are to see substantial progress in the lives of Africans. In the meantime, the mobilisation work towards the United African States should intensify.

Coming back to South Africa, it would seem that we have not fully understood what is going on. The sporadic, increasingly frequent and intense public protests are justified. There are many factors that account for despair, anger and resentment that many community members are displaying – this is not to justify criminality by some South Africans as we have witnessed again and again during public protests and the frequent attacks on Africans from other African countries.

South Africa is facing many challenges and things have been getting worse. In the democratic dispensation, the country has suffered largely as a result of poor policies, weak implementation and lack of thought leadership. The leadership that is progressive, systematically thinks through and understands what needs to be done, has been missing for a while. As explained previously, thought leadership – far from and more critical than other forms of leadership – is leadership that is based on progressive ideologies, beliefs and orientations that can advance inclusive development.

As part of the reasons South Africa has not advanced much is that economic policy has been unclear since the mid-2000s. In addition, the character of the southern African economy remains unchanged – it still has colonial & apartheid features – and its structure has not been transformed since 1994. It is not surprising that the South African economy performs below par, also as a result of poor management of public finances particularly from the late 2000s. And attempts at a comprehensive social policy were not taken forward by the Zuma administration.

Economic marginalisation, inequalities, poverty and general economic strife tantamount to social strife – protests, looting, drugs, gender-based violence, femicide and other forms of violent crimes. The country's health profile is also deteriorating, with challenges pertaining to healthcare, access to safe drinking water etc. The government and government institutions are not respecting the principle of meritocracy and promotions are not based on rigorous performance assessments. There is also a challenge that some Ministers are unable to rise to the occasion, for the kinds of issues that the society is grappling with.

Implementation challenges and attendant lack of accountability and absence of consequence management aside. It was always going to be hard to manage the South African society. The ramifications of apartheid colonialism remain pronounced and there are continuities of colonialism in the South African post-colony where power in the hands of Africans is without hegemony. That is why state-capital relations – not state capture – have been favouring the private sector more than the pursuit of social and economic transformation. The behaviour of global capital (including South Africa/domestic capital) also constraints socio-economic transformation because the private sector is generally not interested in the wellbeing of societies. It is also important to be alive to the reality that the skewed global distribution of power/influence limits what countries like South Africa can do.

The hardship for many South Africans has been worsening and it is worse for those who are not in employment. Drugs and substance abuses have been ravaging communities. Part of a big problem is that the middle class and the elite are often not affected. The frequent and often ugly public protests confirm how bad things have become. Violence and violent crimes are a historical consequence of the apartheid system – apartheid was a very violent system and also resulted to many people not valuing life. We have not sufficiently confronted this historical challenge and law enforcement has deteriorated overtime. Impunity breeds more lawlessness.

There is an unfortunate non-debate that is taking place whether South Africans are xenophobic – or Afrophobic – or not. The more important debate is not sufficiently taking place: why is it that the majority of South Africans seem so angry? Of course there are criminal elements that are taking advantage of the situation. It is important that we analyse issues deeply before reaching easy conclusions. It would seem that the anger of communities is justified. We need serious sociologists to unpack what is going on.

As we try to take South Africa forward, it would be important that the revised National Development Plan takes into account factors that have derailed South Africa from becoming a developmental state, including the issue of leadership. Leadership is paramount, also in leading the envisaged social compact. For now, we need a clear economic policy that is robust – and a clear vision for South Africa. It is in this context that the Treasury's economic policy discussion document is a step in the right direction, although it is flawed at many levels as many have opined. One fundamental issue that an economic policy for South Africa should confront at this juncture is whether South Africa is at a point for another structural adjustment programme. An economic policy at this stage must pay particular attention to Africa at least in the context of a free trade area that is gaining momentum.

Other issues are obvious. South Africa will not be able address many challenges without a comprehensive social policy (that works in tandem with economic policy) and other critical policy issues (e.g. the land question) should be speedily resolved. For now, we – individually and collectively – all need to act to making South Africa a better place. Government should action many suggestions that have been made: law & order need to be resuscitated and the state of emergency considered.