



## **A bleak future is avoidable**

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There are many explanations that have been given for the riots and looting we have witnessed. Some of the explanations have merit and some analyses are sound. However, the most fundamental reason for why we find ourselves here has not been clearly canvassed.

I conclude a [book](#) I published in 2016 with the following lines: lastly, all South Africans should better understand the repulsive history of this beautiful but troubled country. Because we all have to co-exist, we have to find means to live together and build a better future for our children. Is a new social pact, which many argue for, impossible? What should the beneficiaries of the colonial and apartheid regimes do differently? Would South Africa ever be a fully-fledged nation?

The book referred to was an attempt to characterise South African society, inspired by the various analyses we had undertaken when we were in government. Among others, in 2006 we released a report – *Nation in the Making* – implying that our society remained fragile in many respects. Joel Netshitenzhe and I in a 2015 book out of a conference that had been co-hosted by the institutions we were both associated with at the time, say that “much work lies ahead in realising the aspirations of many South Africans who still experience the effects of unemployment, poverty and inequality”. In the 2006 report referred to earlier, we had said that “there is [was] a need, at least more effectively, to articulate an overarching vision for the country attached to which should be the detailed programmes...”

I should also mention that in the 2003 Ten Year Review Report we highlighted the challenges and opportunities for our society. We emphasised the need to improve government performance, addressing consequences of the transition from apartheid to democracy, improving the regional environment and we recommended a social compact. It had become clear that without effective partnerships across society, South African society could explode. We had also come to a conclusion that the manner in which the government was organised and its weak capacity needed attention if socio-economic transformation was to be robust. Although there have been attempts since our observations to address these issues, we have failed as society.

It is in this context that an argument is advanced that although it is a combination of factors that have resulted to the situation we find ourselves in, fundamentally it is because we have not been able to effectively address the ramifications of apartheid

colonialism. Although the blame is largely on government, other sectors of society are to blame too. The private sector has not played its part in ameliorating the hardship that the majority of South Africans face. Similarly, organised labour could have done better. All of us, especially the elite, have not played our parts.

Arguably, Covid-19 has expedited what was going to happen. The economy was in declining far before Covid-19 came to South Africa. The economy has not created jobs and the private sector refused to play its part, even when government proposed to subsidise wages. Organised labour came up with strange arguments against the youth wage subsidy programme even when evidence was given showing how other countries have dented unemployment through tax incentives and subsidies. The elite has continued drawing high and often unjustifiable salaries without any significant contribution to society. South Africa has been on a tipping point for at least ten years.

The incarceration of former president Zuma has given the overwhelming discontent in our society an opportunity to show anger. Indeed, the Zuma administration contributed to widespread unhappiness as unemployment increased uncontrollably while the wage bill and wastage in government got out of hand. It is too simplistic to attribute our problems to corruption. This does not mean that corruption is not a problem. It is also rather simplistic to attribute what we see to poverty. We know enough countries that can be classified as poorer than South Africa, besides that data suggests that poverty had been declining before the economy took a knock. Indeed, poverty is worsening because of Covid-19. At issue, as numbers demonstrate, is that income inequality has not declined, and levels of human development have not improved much since 1994.

It is important that we admit that we took eyes off the ball. This will be a good start to resolving the challenges our society faces. Without confronting the fact that the root cause of our problems in apartheid colonialism and our inability to deal with its ramifications, in future we are likely to experience what is worse than what we are seeing. The question pertaining to what each of us must do should be answered. Specifically, the question of what the beneficiaries of the colonial and apartheid regimes should do differently remains.

Our repulsive political history will continue haunting us until we face the facts. The weaknesses in the ANC, the imperfect political settlement, the mismanagement of the economy, private sector lethargy and organised labour indifference have conspired to worsen the situation that is largely a result of not addressing the unfortunate societal relations created by over three centuries of discriminatory and oppressive regimes.