National Characteristics of South Africa: A Fractious and Frustrated Mood

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Key Points

- The national mood in South Africa is increasingly one of frustration. Many of those born after the end of the apartheid era are angry at the continuing socio-economic disparities from that time and are now turning their backs on the legacy of Nelson Mandela and the notion of the “Rainbow Nation”.

- Despite undeniable progress, there is a sense that many in the ruling ANC now only govern for themselves. Corruption scandals, cronyism and nepotism, infighting, poor service delivery and high unemployment all reinforce that perception.

- Although the two main opposition parties both have young charismatic leaders who may be able to further loosen the ANC’s grip on power, the lack of a contemporary Mandela figure among all the political parties contributes to a sense of the country losing its way.

- South Africa experiences significant internal migration and the provinces that can offer greater employment opportunities are gaining population at the expense of their poorer, rural counterparts.

- The economy continues to face a number of pressures, sometimes government-imposed, which may render growth forecasts overly optimistic.
Summary

Twenty-one years after the dawn of non-racial democracy, South Africa finds itself in an uncomfortable place. The national mood is increasingly fractious and frustrated as the country is caught between residual hope from 1994 and the reality of corruption, poor governance, failing services, continuing disparities of wealth and income underpinned by a once-powerhouse economy that now just limps along and crime rates that are once again rising at an inverse rate to the level of confidence in the police service.

In between that residual optimism and plentiful pessimism, undeniable progress has been made: multi-party democracy is embedded; the Constitution and the rule of law are (for the most part) upheld; there is a growing black middle class; the media and the judiciary are free and robust; artists are not afraid to risk the wrath of the president by painting unflattering depictions of him and, despite a bleak outlook, the economy remains the second-largest in Africa.

Such achievements notwithstanding, as the euphoria of the Mandela years fades further into the past, South Africa remains riven by divisions of class and race. At the same time, the liberation credentials of the ruling African National Congress no longer carry the cachet that they once did and the patience of the ANC’s traditional constituency is demonstrably wearing thin. The ‘triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment’, as described by Deputy Minister of International Relations and Co-operation, Luwellyn Landers, continue unabated and remain the greatest challenges confronting the new South Africa in its third decade. As 2015 draws to a close, not only is the dream of the Rainbow Nation elusive to the point of impossibility for large numbers of South Africans, many – particularly in the younger generation – are now turning their backs on it.

Analysis

As a result of longstanding inequalities that continue into the modern era, history permeates virtually all facets of South African life and affects demography, politics and economic and social indicators. This paper examines key aspects of those topics to assess how South Africa has come to be where it is today and what that may hold for the future.

Population

According to the 2015 Mid-Year Population Estimates published by Statistics South Africa, the estimated population of the Republic of South Africa is 54.9 million, the fifth-largest in Africa and the 25th-largest in the world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>21 063 500</td>
<td>80.6</td>
<td>22 574 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>2 334 800</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>2 456 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian/Asian</td>
<td>688 100</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>673 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>2 201 900</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2 332 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26 878 300</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>28 078 700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics South Africa
At the provincial population level, of the nine provinces, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal continue to dominate. Gauteng, the economic and financial powerhouse of South Africa, is home to 13.2 million people (almost one-quarter of the total population), while over 10.9 million people, or 19.9 per cent of all South Africans, live in KwaZulu-Natal. Western Cape is home to 6.2 million people, or 11.3 per cent of the South African population, while, at the other end of the spectrum, Northern Cape – the largest province by area - is also the emptiest. At 1.19 million people, or 2.2 per cent of the total population, it has the smallest population.

The country’s largest metropolitan areas are Johannesburg (population 4.4 million); Cape Town (3.7 million); Durban (3.4 million); Ekurhuleni/East Rand (3.1 million); Pretoria (2.9 million); and Port Elizabeth/Nelson Mandela Bay (1.1 million).

Significant internal migration occurs in South Africa as people continue to move to urban and mining areas in search of job opportunities and, it might be argued, in the case of Western Cape, also for better governance. Largely rural provinces will continue to suffer population loss and hold fewer opportunities for their residents.

Statistics South Africa observes that, in the period 2011-16, just over 243,000 people will have left Eastern Cape and some 303,000 will leave Limpopo. The two provinces can expect net population losses of over 53,100 and 47,300 respectively. Over that same period, 1.17 million and 350,500 people will be expected to have moved to Gauteng and Western Cape, respectively. Taking into account departures, the latter two provinces will still record net population gains of approximately 543,100 and 157,000 persons each. North-West Province and Mpumalanga, which both have significant mining sectors, are also attracting internal migrants, although their population gains may be expected to slow if commodities prices do not improve.

Already, population growth in Gauteng, the most densely-populated and smallest province, at just over 16,500km², or a mere 1.4 per cent of the country’s total land area, is such that the Johannesburg-Midrand-Centurion-Pretoria corridor is now a single conurbation. That growth would appear unlikely to slow, leading to the point where Gauteng becomes a fully urban province.

South Africa has a youthful population, of which almost 40 per cent is aged 19 years or younger. At 25.7 years, the South African median age is slightly above the world median of 29.6 years and considerably younger than the Australian median of 37.5 years.¹

If educational standards can be improved, higher education made more accessible to people from lower socio-economic groups and youth unemployment reduced, South Africa would be well-placed to enjoy the benefits of a demographic dividend. In the absence of those measures, however, the country will come to find itself sitting on a powder keg of impoverished and poorly-educated young people with little in the way of a future and no

stake in society. At that point, the anger currently being displayed by the students marching in the #FeesMustFall protests will seem mild in comparison.

**The Political Scene**

The list is lengthy of people since Dutch East India Company commander Jan van Riebeeck landed at the site of the future city of Cape Town in 1652 and whose influence on South Africa has been less than positive or, at the very least, ambivalent. In the 1990s, however, the country was fortunate to have had two leaders whose ability to negotiate and reconcile undoubtedly enabled the transition to majority rule to proceed as smoothly and successfully as it did. The ability of then-State President F.W. de Klerk to compromise and of African National Congress president Nelson Mandela to forgive, avoided much unrest and instability and ushered in the optimism of the Rainbow Nation.

Also instrumental in the negotiations for black majority rule and quelling fears in the business community of wholesale nationalisations, then-ANC deputy president and later second president of democratic South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, played a vital role in keeping the South African economy afloat. An erudite man, the technocratic Mbeki’s public persona often came across as prickly and aloof, particularly in comparison to the warmth and inclusivity displayed by Mandela. Mbeki’s presidency ended with his resignation after a bitter public falling out with Jacob Zuma over control of the ANC and was marred by electricity shortages, xenophobic attacks on foreigners, accusations that his “quiet diplomacy” was too soft in dealing with the actions of the Mugabe Government in Zimbabwe and controversial opinions on violent crime levels and the link between HIV and AIDS.

If the Mbeki Presidency marked the beginning of the retreat from the high-water mark of the Mandela years, arguably, matters have further deteriorated under the leadership of his successor and current president, Jacob Zuma.

Under Zuma, elements of recent history have repeated: electricity shortages have again become a way of life, crime rates remain high and, once again, there was a bitter falling out between the president and his rival; this time, former ANC Youth League president, Julius Malema. Added to those troubles, the economy – hit by reduced demand from China for commodities and an annual cycle of wage claims and industrial action – now records only anaemic growth, corruption, cronyism and nepotism have increased, the president remains unapologetic for the multi-million rand taxpayer-funded upgrades to his rural homestead at Nkandla and the delivery of basic services has been marked by a number of high-profile failures. At the same time, South Africa has become more inward-looking and foreign policy in general does not command the same level of government attention from Zuma as it did under Mbeki. Negative incidents and a growing disenchantment with Zuma and the ANC, such as the current #FeesMustFall student protests, frequently overshadow any good news. Average life expectancy, for instance, has increased by nine years over the decade to 2014, while infant mortality declined significantly over the same period.

Leading contenders for the post of ANC President – and, in all probability the next President of South Africa – when Zuma steps down from the party leadership in 2017, are South African Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa (who also played a major role in the transition to
full democracy), Chair of the African Union Commission Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (Zuma’s ex-wife), Speaker of the National Assembly Baleka Mbete and ANC Treasurer-General and former premier of KwaZulu-Natal Province, Zwel Mkhize.

The leaders of the two main opposition parties, Mmusi Maimane of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Julius Malema of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are untested but do offer a contrast to President Zuma. At only 35 years of age and the first black national leader of the DA, the high-achieving Mr Maimane not only represents a racial but a generational change in the party. It is a change that the broadly centrist DA is hoping will deliver several high-profile city and provincial governments to it at the next municipal and provincial elections in 2016 and 2019, respectively.

Mr Malema, on the other hand, is every bit the populist and espouses causes such as mine and bank nationalisations and land expropriation for redistribution without compensation, that particularly resonate with working class and unemployed young black male voters. Malema and the other EFF MPs regularly disrupt proceedings in Parliament to pursue President Zuma for such infractions as his Nkandla homestead upgrades. Since being evicted from the ANC Youth League to found the EFF in 2013, at the 2014 general election he led the party to second place behind the ANC in the North-West and Limpopo provincial assemblies and to third place in the National Assembly, the National Council of Provinces and five other provincial parliaments. The success of the EFF, together with its embrace of hard-left policy, Malema’s firebrand oratory and its disruptions of parliamentary proceedings concern many voters worried that the EFF would seek to replicate many of the failed economic, social and land redistribution policies of the Mugabe Government.

While Maimane and Malema are effectively unknown quantities, the odds of another South African leader achieving a legacy that equals or surpasses Mandela’s are not high – something that contributes in no small way to the sense of unease that currently characterises South Africa. Whichever party succeeds Zuma will want, and need, to differentiate itself from its predecessor by presiding over a country that offers its citizens a growing economy, better public services, less corruption and crime, fewer inequalities and more opportunities.

**State of the Economy**

That the South African economy is not what it was is well-known, but it is still the second-largest in Africa. From the average 4.5 per cent year-on-year growth enjoyed for much of the Mbeki years, the economy today enjoys only weak growth: the 2015 forecast is 2.0 per cent, but Gross Domestic Product actually contracted by 1.3% in the second quarter of 2015, in the wake of energy shortages that have afflicted the manufacturing sector, high wage demands and labour unrest, low domestic demand with poor business and consumer confidence amid uncertainty as to government policy and influence of the Economic Freedom Fighters, a depreciated rand (although this could also aid manufacturing exports) and reduced demand for South African commodities in the wake of the economic slowdown in China. The Middle Kingdom is South Africa’s biggest trading partner, accounting for 20 per cent of its foreign trade. The main South African exports to China are almost all basic
commodities – iron ore, steel, manganese, chrome ore, gold, copper and aluminium – plus motor vehicle parts (exports of which have bucked the downwards trend).

In the 2015 Budget, the National Treasury is forecasting GDP growth of 2.4 per cent in 2016 and 3.0 per cent for 2017. At the macroeconomic level, the government is focussing on maintaining stability but, in the absence of measures to address issues such as those outlined above, those forecasts may turn out to be overly optimistic. Certainly, unemployment remains stubbornly high at 26.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2015, as does youth unemployment at 36.9 per cent and among the highest in the world.²

A New Generation Protests

Demonstrations are nothing new in South Africa, but until 2015, were usually mounted by striking mine workers. In contrast, the student protests that broke out this year, first “Rhodes Must Fall” and then #FeesMustFall, are symptomatic of the disenchantment among large numbers of middle class black youth with the rate of transformation in South African society even after 21 years of ANC government. A large proportion of the post-1994 “born free” generation see many of the injustices of the apartheid era continuing in slightly different forms. The cost of higher education, for instance, can be prohibitively expensive and a significant barrier to poverty reduction and socio-economic advancement. From the students’ perspective, the apparent “Eurocentrism” of university curricula and a lack of African perspectives and faculty staff confirm the lack of change. In the townships, meanwhile, the large numbers of residents still living in shacks with no access to electricity, sanitation or running water provide a receptive audience for the EFF. Many schools still have no potable water or plumbed toilet facilities, particularly in poorer provinces.

Despite the emergence of a growing black middle class, South Africa in many ways remains two countries: one is a wealthy, developed country with first-world living standards and the other, a developing country with attendant levels of wealth, infrastructure and opportunities. Which country one lives in continues to depend to a very large extent on one’s wealth and, in South Africa, that still is still usually (but not invariably) determined by race. For those who live in the developing world version of South Africa, the ‘triple challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment’ continue to be ever-present, as does the potential for anti-government protest.

Conclusion

Despite the undeniable progress made over the last two decades, and of which South Africans can rightly be very proud, the country remains divided. It is also a country that consistently – to use the hackneyed expression – punches below its weight.

The ANC continues in its attempts to strike a fair balance between South Africa’s painful history and the Mandela vision of a unified, inclusive Rainbow Nation, but scandals and service delivery failures have taken a toll on its legitimacy at the exact time that the

country’s frustrated and previously disengaged youth are turning their backs on the status quo. Despite the many challenges that it faces, South Africa is a country of immense promise but the national mood is no longer one of optimism. Uncertainty, disillusionment and frustration are increasingly taking its place.

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