



# The Fading Rainbow Nation | South Africa in 2022

Written by Tony Leon - commentary by Alexander Christiani, Austrian Ambassador to South Africa 1986-1990

Shakespeare's lament that "When sorrows come, they come not as single spies, but in battalions" resonates deeply in South Africa today.

Twenty-eight years ago, when I took my seat in the first sitting of South Africa's all-race democratic parliament the country was alive with excitement and possibility. Newly elected president Nelson Mandela offered hope to his formerly deeply divided and violence racked society. He, along with outgoing president FW de Klerk and fearless Archbishop Desmond Tutu -the remarkable trio of Nobel Peace Prize laureates birthed by the country – exemplified the spirit of reconciliation and democratic renewal. Perhaps no event other than the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 confirmed better the thesis of Francis Fukuyama that this indeed was 'the end of history' at the conclusion of the ravaged century and the arrival of liberal democracy in most places, even on the stony soil of South Africa.

Subsequent events in the world, as we know now, disproved the Fukuyama thesis. And in the brave new dawn of South Africa back in 1994 it was Tutu, for so long the unflinching moral voice during the dark night of apartheid, who optimistically proclaimed that democratic South Africa offered to the world a stellar example of the "Rainbow Nation" finally at peace with itself and the wider world. Indeed, under the inspiring leadership of Mandela, a new constitutional order and the prospects of economic renewal, South Africa looked set fair to assume its place, after decades of international isolation and siege economics, in the front rank of winning nations.

Fast forward to January 2022 the rainbow has almost completely faded here on the southern tip of Africa. Tutu was buried on New Year's Day, an inevitability given his great age and infirmity (he was 90 years old and battling cancer). But his end brought a deep sadness as the last hero of the transition from apartheid to democracy was dead. De Klerk had died two months before in November 2021 and Mandela in December 2013.

The country was still mourning its great loss, when the very next day, 2 January, the magnificent architectural splendour of the South African Parliament was engulfed in flames and all its chambers destroyed. Not likely to have the impact of the Reichstag Fire of 1933 for example, the destruction of the country's legislature struck many as a grim visual metaphor for the ransacking of the national infrastructure which has blighted and incapacitated South Africa. A faltering electricity system, shuttered ports and rail network and the decimation of many state institutions has become a depressing reality in a country, which still by far, is home to the most developed and diversified economy in the continent of Africa.

A great deal of the blame for the decimation of the state is, correctly, placed at the door of the immediate past president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, whose presidency (2009-2018) eroded trust in government and saw the plunder of state assets and the embedding of corruption on a truly industrial scale: it is estimated some 69bn GB Pounds was pilfered from the state – and many of its institutions crippled – during his presidency. That is the figure which the judicial commission investigating 'state capture', chaired by Justice Ray Zondo, revealed in its first of three reports -also published in early January – citing 'a scarcely believable picture of rampant corruption.'

While Zuma himself is on trial for an unrelated and earlier corruption case and was briefly imprisoned last year for contempt of the Zondo Commission, he still remains ever present in the life and fate of the country. His successor, President Cyril Ramaphosa, is still besieged by Zuma-acolytes in his own party, the African National Congress (ANC), putting at risk his own modest reform menu intended to kick start economic progress in a country once expected to emerge in the front rank of developing economies.

Indeed, one of the greatest blights in recent SA history occurred in July 2021, when mobs of looters rampaged through the Zuma heartland of Kwa Zulu Natal, killing over 300 people, and causing an estimated GBP 500m of damage to property and businesses. The proximate cause for the rampage was the court decision to imprison Zuma (he was soon released for a 'medical parole') and instigated by social media groupings aligned to him. The fact that not a single person who led the rioting has been either arrested or convicted is another indicator of the incapacitation of the state and its security and policing arms, all in varying stages of decline.

Ramaphosa, whose narrow election as party and then state president in early 2018 entered office with the wind of hope and expectation on his back. Yet while incontestably a vast improvement on Zuma, he has not managed to shake off the decline of the previous 'lost decade' as he described the Zuma era. Last year, for example, unemployment (on the back of very low growth economy aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic) hit a record high of 47.1% on its expanded definition (including those who have given up the search for work). And the reason why the July 2021 insurrection has not likely spread across the country is the provision by the state of social grants which reach 17m households, an extraordinary total in a country which only has 11m people in formal work.

But the provision of such an expansive social security network is very expensive: the national debt stands at R4 trillion (approx. GBP 200bn) and the costs of the welfare programmes annually amounts to R1 trillion (GBP 50bn). Little wonder that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned in its December 2021 country report that South Africa ‘needs to fix its debt problems, public finances and pursue growth friendly fiscal consolidation.’

2022 is unlikely to see any items on the IMF menu being pursued: Ramaphosa faces a party congress at year end when he is up for re-election and in his four years in office, despite the huge expectations that his election heralded ‘a new dawn’ he has not undone a single policy from the Zuma era or before: these include the controversial ‘cadre deployment’ agenda of placing party comrades, often unqualified, into key posts of state, and rigid implementation of affirmative action prescripts which has seen a skills flight and a decapitation of much expertise from national and local institutions.

However it is not all doom and gloom under Southern skies here: In September 2021, for the first time since the advent of democracy in SA, the mighty ANC of Mandela, was humbled in local elections recording just 46% of the national vote. The ruling party was ousted from power in all the major cities bar Durban with the strong message that the aura of liberation – with which the party was correctly associated – resonated far less strongly than more immediate voter concerns such as unemployment, crime and corruption, with which the ruling party is now also associated.

In the same IMF report which cautioned on the country’s debt and profligacy, the organisation also praised both the ‘maintenance of price stability’ (due to an invigorated and robustly independent central bank, the SA Reserve Bank) and ‘a sound and well regulated financial sector’ (both due to the Reserve Bank and the operations of many impressive private sector banks and investment houses which operate in the country).

This mixed picture as ever, confirms the wisdom of General Jan Smuts who led the country until 1948: “South Africa is a country where neither the worst nor the best ever happens.”.

## Commentary

*When I first arrived in South Africa in July 1986, I set foot in a country with breath taking beauty besieged by Apartheid ,oppression of the black population, struggling to survive under the burden of international sanctions and isolation. I will never forget my first visit to the then Minister for National Education, William F. De Klerk, by no means a liberal and by conviction part of the regime. It was an afternoon in October 1986. He said to me „Ambassador, you will be interested to hear that this morning something happened which will have a great impact on the future of our country - the General Synod of the Reformed Church of South Africa has for the first time solemnly decreed that Apartheid is a sin and can no longer be justified by the church.”*

*I remembered these prophetic words years later when De Klerk, as President of the Republic released Mandela from prison and thus initiated the peaceful transition of the country to peace and equality.*

*The good fortune had it that I became Dean of the Diplomatic Corps a year before Nelson Mandela was after 27 years of incarceration was set free on a hot Sunday on 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1990. It was a momentous day for the country and for those all over the world who, for many years had fought against Apartheid and the white regime. Only five days after his release I organized a private briefing for the – then rather small – diplomatic colleagues in the Airport Hotel in Johannesburg. Mandela appeared with his wife Winnie and in two hour closed session revealed his extraordinary personality and his peaceful and conciliatory stance. He then coined the phrase which later one became famous “I am not there to replace white domination by black domination.” After two hours the press was let in and the press briefing Mandela-Christiani was carried by international networks.*

*Years later, on 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1994 Nelson Mandela was finally sworn in as the new State President of the Republic of South Africa at the magnificent Union Buildings in Pretoria – literally the whole world was there.*

*Another most revered man, the Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, whom I personally knew well was on Mandela’s side to rebuild the country by peaceful means from Apartheid. He presided over the so called “Reconciliation Commission” which turned out to be a ingenious tool to mastermind the peaceful transition of the country from Apartheid to a new era.*

*What a giant of a man and how lucky the country was to have won him as its leader. The former leaders of the of the old regime were not put behind bars, but called to testify before the Commission and admit the monstrosity of their political behaviour – by that Tutu managed to act as a catalyst and satisfy both the white and black population.*

*After his death, the country, to the great dismay of many, started on a slippery slope. His immediate successor Thabo Mbeki could not hold a candle to his predecessor and the country started to decline in many respects. The white opposition of which Tony Leon was a shining example was literally powerless and the African National Congress (ANC) was riddled by abuse of power and corruption. The matter grew worse when Jacob Zuma became President. Many of the most talented amongst the white population left the country and the economy started to suffer. As Tony Leon has mentioned, Zuma was convicted of gross corruption and abuse of power and put into prison, although only for a short time.*

*What does the future hold in store for a country which was hope an beacon for many. I have to admit that I am not optimistic. Cyril Ramaphosa, the actual President was in my time Secretary General of the Union – I had met him on one of two occasion. He certainly is much better than his two predecessors but depends to a great deal on the cooperation of the hardliners of his own ruling party.*



*In a nutshell: I have very fond memories of a country where I spent the professionally most rewarding years in my whole career.*

***Written by***

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