

Will South Africa Fall?

by Theodore Dalrymple



In few countries does the recent past weigh more heavily than in South Africa. It was not to be expected that when the peaceful handover of power from the apartheid regime to the African National Congress occurred, all would go smoothly.

The peaceful handover was made possible by the downfall of the Soviet Union. There was no longer any possibility of the new regime receiving immense subsidies from that source in return for political and strategic support. The doctrines of the South African Communist Party, which had infiltrated and powerfully supported the ANC, and which was one of the most Stalinist and doctrinaire of all the communist parties in the non-communist world, suddenly became an anachronism, an irrelevance, almost an embarrassment and an absurdity. The ANC would from now on concentrate on capitalist kleptocracy rather than on socialist kleptocracy. It soon found out what should have been obvious from the first: that there was more to steal in the former than there would ever have been in the latter.

Nelson Mandela shed his distant communist and terrorist past

and, though his undoubted personal dignity, became father to the nation. When the South African rugby team, the Springboks, won the rugby world championship, he donned the Springbok rugby shirt (at the time, rugby was an almost all-white sport) to show his enthusiasm: no gesture could have reconciled the white population more to the new dispensation.

But gestures, while important, go only so far and warm and fuzzy feelings do not last very long, nor do they by themselves ameliorate harsh physical and economic realities.

South Africa had a long history of redistributionism and positive discrimination. Indeed, it might be possible to see apartheid itself as a redistributionist project: not principally between black and white, but between the English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking white populations. Within living memory, the term *race relations* in South Africa meant not relations between blacks and whites, but those between Anglos and Afrikaners. So firmly was white rule entrenched, the blacks were nugatory and of no account where power politics were concerned, and it was beyond any white South African's imagination that they, or some part of them, would one day take over.

The (Afrikaner) Nationalist government which took over in 1948 was determined to redress the economic, social, and cultural balance between Anglo and Afrikaner. The former held the economic power, the latter were numerically stronger. The former saw the latter as ignorant, crude, and rather stupid peasants; the latter regarded the former as not being fully committed to the country, calling them *salt-penises* because they had one foot in South Africa and one in England. (For the purposes of the dichotomy between Anglo and Afrikaner, the very important and successful Jewish population, almost entirely of emigrants from Lithuania, counted as Anglo.)

The Afrikaner policy of positive discrimination was successful: it raised the status and economic power of

Afrikanerdom. The Afrikaner nationalists understood that the liberalism of the Anglos was only relative and even hypocritical. The Anglos were prepared to extend a little more leeway to blacks, and especially to the *coloureds*, as people of mixed race, Malays and Indians were called, and to allow them some political representation, but at heart they were white supremacists just like the Afrikaners, and would not revolt to produce a fundamental change. The conflict between the Anglos and the Afrikaners ceased to be about anything fundamental.

Like many who have been in power for a long time, the Afrikaner nationalists overestimated the solidity of their position. When in 1975, after 27 years in power, they attempted to impose Afrikaans as a language of instruction in black schools, there was an unprecedented uprising which, though it was put down, shook their confidence by showing what black contestation could do. The sheer weight of demography made the previously unthinkable not only thinkable but likely, even inevitable.

When the Afrikaner nationalists ceded power to the African nationalists, the new government was faced with a dilemma. It could, in theory, have opted merely to sweep away the unjust laws that obstructed African advancement and left it at that, allowing for a natural progression of the African population that was now legally able to compete and rise by its own unaided efforts. Or it could opt for the model of positive discrimination that the Afrikaner nationalists had used.

Not surprisingly, it opted for the latter, though only after some delay. The hopes and expectations of the population had been aroused. Understandably, it wanted immediate and considerable amelioration of its condition. It would have been to expect what is not in human nature to expect the population to accept a gradual spontaneous ascent that might take decades to achieve, leading ultimately to parity, or what is now often called *equity*: if it were achieved at all, that is. The cards

had been so long and so heavily stacked against the black population that it was natural that they should want more than mere legal equality, and positive discrimination was the obvious way to achieve it.

The possibility of external subventions to compensate for grossly uneconomic policies had been removed. But what had worked for a small minority population could not possibly work for a population that was an overwhelming, and increasing, majority. Moreover, the Afrikaner nationalists had ensured that their positive discrimination encompassed a drive towards a high educational level and technical competence, possible with relatively small numbers. The problem for the African nationalists was infinitely more difficult.

They knew that they could not kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, which severely limited the scope of redistribution. Outright confiscation (a policy once advocated by the ANC in its communist-influenced days) would therefore be inadvisable. Any redistribution would have to be limited and selective.

The ANC government has now been in power three quarters as long as the Afrikaner nationalist government before it and can no longer rely on any gratitude for having liberated the country from apartheid. It has become a government like any other, and not a particularly good one (though again, it has to be remembered that there are worse)

Again, it was only natural that those who had contributed most, politically, to the liberation of the country from apartheid should consider themselves most entitled to the spoils, less total than might once have been hoped for. But every person thus entitled to an important share had also a clientele of relatives, associates, and tribe, who had to be satisfied. One didn't have to take only for oneself: one had to take on behalf of others.

Since redistribution had its limits, this meant that there was little left over for the great mass of the population. In some ways, its situation did not improve, it deteriorated. Crime, for example, impunity for which BLM seems to consider a benefit received rather than yet another impediment to a good life, increased; in 2021 there were 16,000 murders in South Africa, and 99,000 car hijackings. While a majority of South Africans still feel safe walking in their neighbourhoods by day, only 40% still do by night. The electricity and water supply has become ever more insecure and wasn't perfect to begin with. A third of the population is unemployed.

More than half the population wasn't born when apartheid ended, and not more than a third would have any real recollection of what apartheid was like (and of that third, a fifth would be white). While hopes and expectations remain, memories either fade or are non-existent. The ANC government has now been in power three quarters as long as the Afrikaner nationalist government before it and can no longer rely on any gratitude for having liberated the country from apartheid. It has become a government like any other, and not a particularly good one (though again, it has to be remembered that there are worse). And the spectacle of legalized, or tolerated, wholesale looting by a political class gives to retail looters a moral justification that they might otherwise have lacked.

In addition, the imprisonment of the former president, Jacob Zuma, for contempt of court, having failed to give evidence to a judicial enquiry into corruption in which he was implicated (to say the least), was easily felt to be or presented as an ethnic injustice. Why Zuma? Because he is a Zulu, not a Venda (as is the present president) or a Xhosa (as was Mandela). Many people in KwaZulu Natal saw him not as a looter of the country with the most doubtful record of personal conduct to boot, but as a victim himself. Ethnic tensions are never far beneath the surface in such situations.

The government was reluctant to use force to put down the

rioting for fear of appearing like its Afrikaner predecessor. A South African correspondent told me that there was rioting, looting, and arson nearby without the presence of a single policeman or any effort to stop it. As is usually the way, it was not only the most necessitous who looted, and they did not loot only items of primary necessity. The burnt-out stores reminded me of the days when Afrikaner police would say of African rioters that they were only 'fouling their own nest,' and therefore were best left to it.

The memory of apartheid is strong enough to inhibit the government in its use of force, but not strong enough to excuse it in the eyes of much of the population. The long-term auguries are not good—but then, they never were.

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