



Human Security and Democracy in South Africa

Olivia Kearney

South Africa has faced a long and rocky political journey resulting in the institution of a democratic government. Yet despite a reoriented state, the country continues to be plagued by corrupt and fraudulent regimes.

For many countries with weak governance, the coronavirus pandemic has not only created new problems, but aggravated existing fissures. The pandemic has further exposed South Africa's failing healthcare system, highlighted its endemic political corruption and brought renewed attention to high crime rates and police brutality. As the country struggles to maintain the basic rights and human security of its citizens, the future of South African democracy is in trouble.

The UN's 1994 Human Development Report categorised the two main components of human security as the 'freedom from want' and the 'freedom from fear'. Democracy and human security have a close relationship – worsening human security can undermine democratic institutions, while strengthening democracy can help to improve human security. By failing to promote the economic, personal and health security of its citizens, South Africa's democracy is weakened. What has happened to the human security for all that the end of apartheid promised, and how can South Africa renew its democratic foundations?

Political Security

Political security is the ability to live in a society that honours an individual's basic human rights. In the case of South Africa, this security has diminished through the gradual decline in the quality of its democracy, with clear backsliding in democratic values. The undermining of political security is evident in the issues of corruption and dwindling respect for the rule of law, pushing aside

the values once promised through the country's reformed constitution. This constitution declares South Africa to be a democratic state, 'based on principles of human rights, constitutional supremacy, the rule of law and universal adult suffrage'. Promises held within the 1996 constitution that were designed to serve a public good were instead repurposed for the betterment of a powerful elite. Corruption and state capture continue to serve as an impediment to economic growth. While current president Cyril Ramaphosa has avoided blatant scandal on this front, the shadow of his predecessor, Jacob Zuma, remains a symmetrical force against his work, creating a barrier to any attempted progress. Reports continue to highlight the government's inability to protect basic human rights, curb police brutality, reduce economic inequality, raise health standards and protect general livelihoods. With South Africa's continued inability to maintain the rule of law, its once idealised notion of democracy remains tainted.

Economic Security

The main threats to economic security are persistent poverty and unemployment. Unemployment in South Africa rose to 32.5% at the end of 2020 and the country also has the world's most unequal distribution of wealth. In comparison to other African states, South Africa has a strong economy, but its GDP per capita has fallen since 2011. It continues to face struggles such as severe disparities between the average incomes of black

and white people and a rampant illicit economy.

Maintaining livelihoods has become even harder during the coronavirus pandemic, with many forced to rely on government subsidies.

No matter which party is elected next, a much wider and deeper cleaning of South African institutions is needed

Yet state assistance has failed to live up to its promise. There have been accusations that relief funds have disappeared amid widespread corruption, while bureaucratic red tape has often prevented people from accessing these funds. This failure to protect people from further economic insecurity seriously damages the state's legitimacy.

Personal Security

Personal security covers physical safety from domestic and foreign threats as well as freedom from fear. After coronavirus restrictions were implemented, South Africa saw an increase in police brutality with instances of officers being encouraged to use force in order to impose lockdown measures. Police officers were also implicated in the illegal sale of alcohol, taking advantage of the government's temporary ban. Domestic violence rates also saw an



[uptick](#) as many individuals were forced to quarantine with their abusers. On a domestic level, South Africa has long struggled with [violent crimes](#) including residential and business robberies, and carjackings, with the past 10 years [seeing](#) a 34% increase in the murder rate. As violent incidents [increase](#), there are serious impacts on citizens' trust in the government to work in the national interest, as faith in the rule of law continues to be eroded.

Other factors involved in personal security, such as terrorism, paint a different picture. Threats of Islamist terrorism remain low, as South Africa mainly serves as a [logistical base](#) or safe haven. However, there is a perpetual threat from [white supremacist militancy](#), such as the [Crusaders](#) who promote insurgent actions. With the state's inability to maintain economic, political and personal security, white supremacists have found cracks in which to thrive, further accelerating democratic decline. Neighbouring Mozambique continues to face [an insurgency](#) led by local Al-Shabaab militia, who have been ramping up attacks across the region. Southern African Development Community officials have expressed the [need](#) to provide support to contain the insurgency within Mozambican borders. However, the Islamic State previously published a [warning](#) against South Africa should it become involved in Cabo Delgado, with retaliatory attacks against Kenya [illustrating the need](#) to contain the insurgency to Mozambique.

Health Security

[Health security](#) covers the ability to be free from disease, substandard foods and malnutrition, and access to basic health care. A lack of sufficient income still affects a considerable portion of the general population, impacting the [quality and quantity](#) of food that can be accessed and exacerbating [malnutrition](#). Access has only worsened during the coronavirus pandemic, and many people have been forced to queue for food parcels, with [long lines](#) increasing their risk of exposure to the virus. Many of these effects continue to be [disproportionately](#) felt by those inhabiting townships. South Africa has already faced a tough battle against HIV, with [poor governance and healthcare systems](#) serving as strong contributing factors. While access to general treatment for HIV has steadily improved, it is the [standard](#) of care available in the public sector that remains a point of concern. South Africa has fallen short in delivering health security, placing a majority of that burden on an already impoverished part of the population.

Democratic Decline

The state of democracy has [worsened](#) in South Africa during the pandemic, but it was already in a shaky position to begin with. As poor human security and diminished fundamental freedoms affect different areas of South Africa, the effects bleed into a struggle felt by the country as a whole. The notion of democracy in South Africa was once

thought of as a saving grace, to help deliver the country from the hardships of apartheid and to revitalise the ebbing standards of basic human rights. But as it currently stands, South African democracy has not been able to fulfil this promise. The country is at a breaking point fuelled by inefficient governance, corruption and popular frustration.

The public's lack of [trust](#) in the government has led to a situation in which any response taken by the authorities would be seen as inadequate. The chosen path of [draconian](#) lockdown measures was seen as completely disregarding the livelihoods of the population as many businesses were forced to shut down. Had the government prioritised the economy over health, there surely would have been cries of corruption and disbelief that a democracy would favour the economy over the health of its people. This shows a worrying reality in which citizens can only see flaws in the government's actions.

After 24 years, the grace period for change and adaptation in South Africa has long expired

South Africa's democratic backsliding has seen its governing institutions made weaker and weaker by its politicians, eroding a stable democratic system. The [2017 State Capture Report](#) describes the current state as a blending of 'constitutional and

shadow forms', which will be incapable of driving genuine development. The inability of the state to correct a deeply rooted culture of corruption and deep-seated public distrust has created an impasse where any attempts to drive progress and effect meaningful change are viewed in a negative light.

What Does This Mean for Democracy in South Africa?

A weak country is one that can too easily have its vulnerabilities taken advantage of. The scars of apartheid are still apparent and race relations remain an ongoing challenge, with socioeconomic inequalities distributed along racial lines. Poorly executed and ill-intentioned policies to enrich the political elite in the name of transformation continue to erode South Africa's social fabric,

pitting the masses against those still hanging on to their existing economic freedoms and privileges. It is within this context that extremist elements are being strengthened. The sheer lack of social cohesion and the continued human insecurity during South Africa's lockdown period shows that the current state of affairs is unsustainable, with the potential for violent protests and increased crime.

South Africa is and will continue to be an extremely fragile state. The country once rose up in the desire to pursue better infrastructure and governance. While significant social, political and economic changes like these do not happen overnight, 24 years later the grace period for change and adaptation has long expired. With the general election approaching in 2024, the country must decide whether to

allow the African National Congress to continue its reign, or to open the doors to another party, such as the Democratic Alliance. South Africa's problems cannot be fixed simply by replacing the head of an institution, as the existing issues are deeply embedded. No matter which party is elected next, a much wider and deeper cleaning of South African institutions is needed.

Olivia Kearney is the Community Building Officer for Project CRAFT (Collaboration, Research and Analysis Against Financing of Terrorism), funded by the EU.

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