

REVIEW ARTICLE

South Africa at a Turning Point?

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Rethinking the South African Crisis by GILLIAN HART

Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2013. Pp. 268. \$24.95 (pbk)

What's Gone Wrong? South Africa on the Brink of Failed Statehood by ALEX

BORAINÉ

New York: New York University Press, 2014. Pp. 166. \$27 (hbk)

Are South Africans Free? by LAWRENCE HAMILTON

London: Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. 155. \$29.95 (pbk)

South Africa is at a crossroads. The state has not adequately addressed dire human development needs, often failing to provide the services it constitutionally guarantees. As a result, citizens are expressing their frustrations in a variety of ways, at times including violence. These serious challenges are most readily apparent in poverty, inequality and unemployment statistics, but also in electricity provision, billing and affordability as well as a recent spate of racially motivated attacks which highlight the tension both among South Africans and between South Africans and darker skinned foreigners. The country has, however, been on the brink before and avoided the worst-case scenario of full-scale civil war and state collapse. Far too often South Africa's past successes have been attributed to the role of one man, Nelson Mandela. While Mandela was indeed an extraordinary human being who rightly deserved the international awards and accolades as well as the deep admiration of so many, South Africa's triumphs as a society and a state are the product of both cooperative and conflicting contributions by a wide range of actors. A central question at the present juncture is how well equipped domestic actors and institutions are to address the crisis. The following pages seek to provide some insights and through the perspectives of three authors to consider causes and possible responses.

A few statistics and vignettes help to illustrate the depth of the challenges the government and the country face. South Africa's formal unemployment rate has consistently been over 20% for almost two decades. For the last five years it has been over 24%. This can be put into perspective by considering a comparison. In the fourth quarter of 2014, South Africa's unemployment rate stood at 24.3% (Statistics South Africa: statssa.go.za). At the very height of the Great Depression in the United States, a time remembered as one of incredible, often unbearable, hardship for ordinary people, unemployment reached 24.9% in 1933 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics: www.bls.gov). While the South African government's economic policies have shifted slightly over time, and are constrained by the anticipated responses of international capital, they have dramatically failed to address the problem.

Poverty and inequality have also presented daunting challenges. On the first, the state has made a small but significant impact. On the second, it has exacerbated the problem. South Africa boasts the most extensive welfare state on the continent. As of 2014, the government disbursed over 16 million grants to 10 million people. These grants have helped to reduce extreme poverty. From 2000 to 2009 the percentage of the population attempting to survive on less than \$1.25 a day has been cut roughly in half. But after a recent rebasing of the upper-bound poverty line to better account for people's basic needs, the government reported that a staggering 53.8% of the population still live in poverty (as opposed to the smaller percentage who live in extreme poverty) (Statistics South Africa: statssa.gov.za).

Inequality remains incredibly daunting. South Africa's Gini coefficient is among the highest of any country reporting data. In 2011, the government reported a figure of 0.69 (0 is perfect equality; 1 is perfect inequality); this figure already includes the redistributive impact of social grants. Inequality is a product of a lack of broad-based economic redistribution after the end of apartheid, the declining share of national income to labour and the growing share to capital, as well as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programmes that have facilitated the enrichment of a very small number of previously disadvantaged individuals. Such drastic inequality creates a drag on domestic economic growth, encourages increased divisions in society, and creates an increasingly dysfunctional democratic system as some can buy their way out and others simply cannot access institutions that are meant to serve them.

In a 2014 interview that I conducted with a principal at a farm school in rural South Africa, the principal listed the incredible resource challenges the school faced. These challenges included access to water, working toilets, money for the single telephone, and toner for the copy machine. Electricity, at first glance, did not seem to be a problem. Over the years that this principal had been in office, the school had never received a bill. When he sought to request a bill, he contacted the two distributors of electricity in South Africa (Eskom, the public electricity utility and the local municipality). In a Kafkaesque moment, each suggested the other was responsible; neither was willing to investigate the matter. The school and the small village around it therefore continue to receive electricity for free. This would be fine on one level, as they cannot afford to pay, but this is also an indication of the broader institutional crisis in managing electrical supply.

Poor consumers have been complaining for decades of grossly inaccurate bills, often for consumption at a rate that they could not achieve given their few electrical devices. This has led to citizen revolts including non-payment and reconnections of households or entire areas' electricity after the supplier has disconnected them. Municipalities who are the distributors to just over half the country's electrical consumers also do not uniformly pay Eskom, the supplier (*Daily Maverick*, 10 Feb 2015). Municipalities in dire financial straits often choose to use the funds collected for electricity to pay their employees, leaving Eskom severely indebted. Lack of funding as well as ineffective management and accountability, among other factors, have led to increasingly frequent rolling blackouts across the country. These blackouts impact everything from traffic lights to households' ability to cook and are expected to continue for at least the next few years until greater capacity to generate power is built.

Finally, racial and xenophobic crimes offer a window into outbursts of anger and hate that demonstrate fault lines in society and a dearth of effective policing but more importantly, a lack of leadership from government in navigating ongoing divisions. Racism is alive and well in South Africa as a product of the incomplete reckoning with the apartheid past. A number of attacks by whites against blacks in the Cape Town area in late 2014 demonstrated some extreme examples. In one case a white man beat a Mozambican man who was running alongside the road in a largely white suburb because he assumed that the man had committed a crime; he was late to work. In another case, again in a largely white suburb, a man beat a domestic worker walking alongside

the road because he assumed she was a prostitute. The list goes on, but in none of the cases did the attackers claim self-defence. All were cases in which the white male attacker was consciously or not, defending extreme racial privilege in spaces that were formerly and often still are white dominated spaces (Anderson 2015). When a black man knocked out a white man who had been hurling racial epithets against several people at an ATM in a shopping mall, the video went viral.

Xenophobic attacks against presumed foreigners or black South Africans seen as outsiders in a particular community have also made headlines. The broadest explosion of such incidents occurred in May 2008 leaving 62 people dead including 21 South Africans. While many civil society organisations rapidly mobilised in response to the attacks, government actions have been less than consistent. In response to a spate of attacks in and around Soweto in January 2015, government officials including the provincial Premier described the actions as ‘criminal’ rather than xenophobic. Such refusal to fully recognise the roots of violence not only puts foreigners, particularly successful shop owners working in poor neighbourhoods, at great risk but also provides a convenient scapegoat for frustrations stemming from continued poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity. The ambivalent responses of various officials including police and a number of government leaders to these attacks allows such scapegoating to continue, it also potentially reduces a bit of pressure on government as frustrated residents find someone else to blame for their misery. These xenophobic attacks are generally separate from so-called ‘service delivery’ protests which have erupted almost on a daily basis in poor townships across the country but draw on similar frustrations of disempowerment and material deprivation.

NATIONALISM, THE PARTY AND THE CONSTITUTION

The titles of each of the three books under review – mentioning crisis, a failed state and a lack of freedom – reflect a widespread view in South Africa that things have gone terribly wrong. While supporters of opposition parties generally point to the failings of the governing African National Congress (ANC), ANC insiders bemoan factionalism within their party and many blame Jacob Zuma, the president, who is the subject of frequent and scathing critiques from a wide range of party insiders and outsiders. But, to place the blame on a single individual would be to miss the point. Hart, Boraine and Hamilton (listed in order of publication date), all seasoned veterans of South African politics, each

provide a distinct framework for understanding the challenges and therefore present an extremely productive basis for discussion. They respectively consider the role that competing processes of nationalisation, the history and actions of the governing party, and the constitutional framework, play in the current crisis.

In *Rethinking the South African Crisis*, Gillian Hart focuses on the contrasting but not necessarily contradictory processes of what she labels 'de-nationalisation' and 're-nationalisation'. The first refers to the impact of economic liberalisation at the end of apartheid, which was a product of negotiations and a developing alliance between the ANC and corporate capital. The second focuses on the ANC's discursive framing of the post-apartheid nation suggesting both inclusion through the ideal of the 'Rainbow Nation' and exclusion through anti-immigration legislation as well as understandings of the 'National Democratic Revolution'. The first helps to illuminate the roots of the country's macroeconomic policy and the lack of attention to redistribution as well as the absence of an earlier and greater focus on poverty. The second explains the ways in which the ANC has attempted to maintain its credibility despite the stark material deprivation that the majority of the population and, quite significantly, the majority of its supporters experience. Hart argues that the ANC's hegemony is gradually 'unravelling' even as it has sought to increase state interventions in response to rising protest.

Hart's key contribution is a product of her attention not just to macroeconomic policy decisions and the material deprivation experienced by the majority of South Africans but also the ANC's use of ideologies of liberation and nationalism to seek to legitimate and strengthen its rule. Far too many analyses tend to focus on one without the other. Those who have tackled both, have tended to do so at the level of elite politics, failing to pair this with an analysis of interactions at the level of local government, which as Hart rightly argues is 'the key site of contradictions, confrontations and the making of political struggle in South Africa' (p. 97). While the government has expanded expenditure on social services in the face of protests since the turn of the millennium, ward councillors have become the 'frontline troops in the battle to divide and discipline the population' (p. 138). The impact has been the dramatic undermining of ideals of democracy as local state institutions presented as avenues for participation and representation are increasingly employed as structures of control and avenues for personal enrichment.

Hart draws on Fanon and Gramsci's understanding of passive revolution, to conclude her discussion, but the payoff of adding their analyses

is not fully realised. Her critique of how other analysts have understood the ANC's economic policy choices, including a few who also draw on Fanon and Gramsci, is however, illuminating. Hart demonstrates the ways in which the ANC's post-apartheid neo-liberal economic policy framework, GEAR, can be understood not in contradiction to but as a redefinition of the ANC's long term ideals of a National Democratic Revolution (NDR). This pairing of the seemingly radically opposed ideas of the communist inspired NDR and the free market GEAR demonstrates the incredible ways in which nationalism has been employed by the ANC in post-apartheid South Africa and the very thin line the party treads in trying to bring such contradictory ideals into a common legitimisation of rule.

In *What's Gone Wrong?* Alex Boraine's subtitle presents what he sees as the outcome of the ANC's attempts to maintain its dominance: *South Africa on the Brink of Failed Statehood*. His focus on the ANC, from its experiences in exile to its actions in Parliament, its engagement with the judiciary, and its interactions with civil society illuminate the various ways in which the party has sought to silence opposing views. Boraine underlines the incredible challenges that the ANC experienced in exile, not the least of which was infiltration by enemy agents, which encouraged a 'culture of suspicion, mistrust and extreme intolerance' (p. 41). This argument is not new, but important to reiterate in order to understand the ANC's construction and employment of nationalism in the post-apartheid period. Boraine also importantly draws attention to the bureaucracy of the ANC in exile, and the ways in which this encouraged poor administration and shielded leaders from charges of lack of accountability and corruption. Boraine demonstrates the ways in which the ANC's actions in government contradict the constitution by challenging the sovereignty of the constitution itself, failing to uphold principles of human rights, attempting to undermine the independence of the judiciary, and seeking to implement legislation such as the much criticised 'Secrecy Bill' which undermines the freedom of the press.

Boraine's approach is the most partisan of the three books. He argues both that 'Zuma must go' (p. 107) and that 'reform from within the ANC is impossible ... because the culture of power seems to be so ingrained' (pp. 142–3). This leads him to call for a realignment of political forces to challenge ANC rule. His argument for the urgency of this is underlined by the idea of South Africa as a failing state. While he is certainly right to point to the crises in education, health, safety and security, employment, housing, policing and more generalised corruption,

South Africa is not a failing state by international standards. The stark reality is that those state institutions that are designed to serve the people and enhance their welfare are also among the worst performing. Boraine's continued faith in the ability of Parliament to offer opportunities for opposition actors to draw attention to issues of critical national importance also challenges the idea of a failing state.

While Boraine's book was published before the new opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), won over 6% of the vote in the 2014 elections to become the third largest party in the legislature, he seems to have foreseen the growing centrality of Parliament to opposition actions and national debates. While many have decried the EFF's tactics in Parliament (as well as those of the ANC), the EFF has very effectively drawn attention to issues that the ANC has sought to sweep under the carpet. Even the much more restrained liberal Democratic Alliance (the second largest party in Parliament) has clearly taken notes and is now taking a more activist stand. As a result, the headlines after events such as the President's State of the Nation Address are increasingly not about what the president or other ANC leaders state in their formal addresses but rather what questions opposition actors raise and how they are treated when they seek to challenge the governing party.

Lawrence Hamilton takes a very different approach in *Are South Africans Free?* by challenging the very institutions in which Boraine places his greatest hopes. Hamilton's analysis is centred on the constitution's promise of justiciable human rights and the electoral system's promise of representation and the indivisibility of freedom and power. In his words: 'freedom is identified *with* and *as* power, in that it is a combination of my ability to determine what I will do and my power to do it' (p. 2). Hamilton makes a convincing case that South Africans are not free under his substantive understanding of freedom by pointing to a range of challenges that impact all South Africans from poverty to patronage to crime. While many analysts, such as Boraine, have looked to the country's progressive constitution as an antidote to challenges of representation and the intertwined socio-economic and political disempowerment of the majority, Hamilton argues that the constitution's framework is part of the problem in that it, rather than elected institutions such as parliament, is sovereign. He simultaneously critiques the lack of representativeness of Parliament due to the control that parties rather than voters have over who is to represent them.

While human rights provided the basis for the settlement that led to the formal end of apartheid, it also forms a part of a system that has undermined people's ability to fully empower themselves. Hamilton

argues: 'human rights constitute one of the components of the complex institutions that maintain domination in South Africa, they act to create the illusion of power, control and freedom where there is none or very little' (p. 38). This is a provocative argument as many analysts such as Boraine see the constitution and the human rights framework as the last defence against the excesses of the current ruling party. ANC leaders will hastily reply that it was the ANC that played a central role in writing the constitution and that the party did have the necessary two-thirds majority in the recent past which offered it the opportunity to change the constitution if it so desired. Regardless of the ANC's stance regarding the constitution, the idea that this much-heralded document is in itself limiting is an important point to consider. To the extent that South Africans assume they are protected by the constitution, or democracy more broadly, and therefore do not need to engage or feel that they can meaningfully engage their system of governance, this is certainly the case. But, South Africans have hardly been silent.

Many activists, both of a more liberal and a more radical or progressive bent, have employed the constitution to make demands, to underline the gulf between what the document promises and what people's lived experiences actually are. Social movements have also employed the constitution to support their demands. This includes not just the much-heralded Treatment Action Campaign but also Abahlali baseMjondolo and the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. For these actors, engaging the legal promises of the state was just one part in a broader campaign that included direct action in various forms. Participants in many protest actions across the country in recent years have also been quite vocal in their critique of governance and the state's actions in addressing social welfare issues and have not been pacified by formal legal promises. While Hamilton rightfully critiques idealised conceptions as to how local organisations or social movements might radically change South African politics, he does not fully consider the ways in which the instability they create could lead to a situation under which recalcitrant elites might find it in their best interest to make changes to the existing system. This is not to romanticise the power of the people in a system that in many ways disempowers them, but to look to South Africa's recent past to see the impact that they have had.

A WAY FORWARD?

In the late 1980s, South Africa was in a state of severe crisis as the apartheid state could no longer maintain control or stabilise the economy and

anti-apartheid forces lacked the power to overthrow the state. Community based protest and labour actions played a central role in creating this disruption. This led to what peace-building scholars refer to as a mutually hurting stalemate where opposing sides are locked in a conflict from which neither can secure victory and both seek an alternative way out (Zartman 2001). The important lesson here is that instability changed elites', particularly business elites' (Wood 2000), perceptions regarding the political system. While idealised accounts might suggest that popular actors can then frame the new dispensation, this is seldom the case. Once disruptions prove significant enough to provoke some form of compromise, it is political and economic elites who build the framework for that compromise. This was true even in South Africa where various negotiating fora were established with the promise of including popular actors (Zuern 2011).

The present day crisis is in many respects not as desperate as that at the end of apartheid. South Africa's constitution sets the basis for a democratic system of governance that enshrines a wide range of justiciable civil, political and socio-economic rights. As a result of this formal promise, the present day challenges are also in numerous respects harder to address. The sides are no longer as clearly drawn. The party of liberation is in government and the state has expanded social welfare. This has pulled many out of extreme poverty, but left them in poverty often without the means to move beyond this. The haves and have-nots also span racial categories, and the ANC has exploited the continuing racism and suffering in South African society to legitimate its rule as the party of liberation.

The incredible frequency of protest actions in poor communities across the country alongside increased labour militancy in some areas and the formation of a new United Front will most likely not lead to the revolutionary change its leaders envision, but they could press both economic and political elites to seriously consider some concessions. The expansion of the state's social welfare system late in Mbeki's presidency was arguably a product of such pressures. While these changes have not radically addressed the country's poverty, they provide a starting point. Eskom's very visible failure to keep the lights on may also help to focus attention on the need to improve state capacity. The ANC is increasingly aware that the continuing poverty and deprivation of the majority require focused action, and even the most effective rhetoric will only calm frustrations for so long. As disruptions in Parliament during President Zuma's State of the Nation speech illustrate, the party with almost two-thirds of the vote has significant

weaknesses, which multiple actors are desperately seeking to exploit. The question is whether this contention might lead to change in a direction that might empower larger, rather than increasingly fewer, numbers of people.

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