

Has South Africa really been better governed after becoming a democracy?

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South Africa is a relatively famous country in Africa and has always been regarded as one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. It is a country worth exploring, especially its interesting history of government and regime transitions. It is also known as the “Rainbow Nation” because of Nelson Mandela, the spiritual leader of South Africans. Mandela made a great contribution to reconciling racial tensions between blacks and whites in South Africa. When Mandela became president in 1994 (Loxton, 2022, p.31), South Africa's path to democracy began. However, has South Africa really been better governed since this country became democratic? Around this topic, different scholars have different opinions. This essay will focus on the puzzle that why South Africa has not been absolutely better governed after abandoning the apartheid regime. Due to the single election result, the unconsolidated democratic political system, corruption, and other factors, even though South Africa has become a democratic country, it has not been better governed. In the following paragraphs, how these factors contributed to South Africa's current predicament will be examined in detail.

Firstly, the single election result makes the South African elections lose the original meaning of a democratic election. In order to understand it, a brief background on South Africa is needed here. South Africa is made up of 80% blacks, 10% whites, and 10% “coloured” (Loxton, 2022, p.20). During the period when Afrikaners were in power, they adopted the apartheid regime, which treated black South Africans terribly. There was no democracy in South Africa until 1994, when the African National Congress (ANC), which represents black South Africans, and the National Party, which represents Afrikaners, reached an agreement (p. 31). From this

history, it is not difficult to find that racial division is a historical issue in South Africa mainly caused by its previous apartheid regime. In the more than 20 years of democracy in South Africa, the ANC has won every election because that black South Africans would always vote for parties that represent the interests of blacks, while Afrikaners would always vote for parties that represent the interests of Afrikaners. Since black South Africans are the majority of South Africa's population, there was only one result in this country's elections, and that was for the ANC to win. Such elections meet the procedural minimum definition of democracy, such as the criteria of "free and fair elections" (Dahl, 1971, p. 4), but they are flawed. As Huntington (1991) argues that "it is assumed not only that political parties and coalitions will freely and equally compete for power but also that they are likely to alternate in power" (p. 27). Democracy in South Africa has not passed the two-turnover test and its government has never changed, which is problematic. Here are several questions to think about. Is the ANC really the best choice for South Africa? Have most South Africans really had a better life? Will there be other parties that can compete fiercely with the ANC in the future? Since most South Africans vote along racial lines, are not these elections still somewhat "apartheid"? Importantly, the South African government in recent years is still struggling for good governance. Schmitter and Karl (1991) state that "Unfortunately, "all good things do not necessarily go together"... democracies are not necessarily more efficient..." (p. 85-86). It indicates that being democratic is one thing and making the country better governed is another. This is confirmed in South Africa. South Africa's economic inequality and its international standing are not improving or are even worse than in the past, which this essay will discuss in the next paragraph. Nevertheless, there are some counter perspectives to note. For example, since "democracy as a universal value" has "intrinsic value for

human life” and “instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable” (Sen, 1999, p. 5-6), South Africa is better off as a democracy. Moreover, citizens are now free to vote for whichever party they like, which definitely empowers them. Thus, it is good that South Africa has become a democracy, but due to the singularity of election results, the significance of the democratic election has not been truly brought into play in this country. Therefore, it has not really made South Africa a lot better so far.

Secondly, the unconsolidated democratic political system has caused South Africa's post-democratic society to fall short of Mandela's ideal. Mandela wanted to create a “rainbow nation” of racial harmony and economic prosperity. Unfortunately, after nearly 30 years of democratization, South Africa seems to be moving further away from this idea. South Africa is still the most economically unequal country in the world. It also has one of the highest percentages of people reaching the national poverty line (The World Bank, n.d.). Furthermore, among the five BRICS countries, South Africa has developed relatively poorly in recent years, and its international status has also declined. What are the causes then? The answer is complicated. Since one of the agreements in the political pact is to remain the “economic status quo” (Loxton, 2022, p. 31), it is really difficult to make black South Africans’ assets per capita as same as Afrikaners. Afrikaners are also generally more educated, so they are more likely to own more skills and have more ability to create wealth. Nevertheless, the black South Africans do rebel against these unfairnesses. It reflects in recent elections that political parties promise to speed up land redistribution. However, this is not a good signal for the consolidation of democracy. Linz and Alfred (1996) argue that “potentially difficult democratic outcomes may be achievable only if some preemptive policies...implemented by political leaders. If the opportunity...is lost, a dynamic of societal conflict will intensify until democratic consolidation becomes...eventually impossible (p.

28). It indicates that democratic consolidation requires a preemptive attack on social problems before they begin to emerge on the surface and intensify, which in this case, is the conflicts of inequal capital per capita. Moreover, democratic consolidation means that “democracy becomes...deeply internalized” by citizens (p. 16). In South Africa, it has not been achieved. “Disloyal opposition” (Loxton, 2022, p. 9) is kind of strong here where more than 50% of South Africans think that if the military rules the country, it would be good (Economist Intelligence Unit, n.d.). Different countries operate democracy in different ways, and it is expected for scholars to “separate the quality of democracy from the quality of society” (Linz and Alfred, 1996, p. 31). Thus, to conclude, for South Africa, the quality of democracy is worrying as it has not been consolidated well, which contributes to the further decline in the quality of the society and people’s lives. Democracy needs to be “the only game in town” (p. 15).

Finally, corruption impedes South Africa from being better governed under democratization. Corruption is bad for any regime and any government. The ANC's corruption problem, however, seems particularly serious. For example, South Africa’s former President Jacob Zuma has been accused of corruption several times (Bruce, 2014). If even the president of a country is suspected of corruption, the corruption problem in that country will be difficult to solve. Corruption can damage the image of the national leader and the government. In serious cases, it may even cause the ruling party to lose popular support and lose the election. That can be why support for the ANC has been falling. Corruption also harms the rights and interests of the people, which is inconsistent with the concept of democracy. In addition, corruption can disrupt the country's economic and social order. If the black South Africans who have gained leadership are in league with corruption, how can a "rainbow nation" be created then? Corruption makes the social polarisation of South Africans more pronounced by making the powerful even richer and the poor further exploited. Of

course, almost every country has corruption problems. It cannot be concluded that the current South African political system is not as good as before just because of corruption problems. However, it should be noted that since the corruption problem in South Africa is relatively serious, the flawed democratic society of South Africa needs to alleviate this issue to make society stable. An extremely corrupt party cannot govern the country better.

In conclusion, whether South Africa has been better governed after becoming a democracy is questionable. The main factors are the single election result, unconsolidated democracy, and corruption. These and other factors that are not discussed in this essay contribute to the instability of South African society, the decline of economic development, and the persistence of ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, some arguments indicate South Africa has changed for the better such as that apartheid has been abolished and black South Africans have more rights, more freedoms, and are more educated now. However, its existing domestic problems cannot be ignored. Democracy is not just establishing elections. Will South Africa's democratic regime collapse in the future? It seems impossible at the moment, but politics is never sure.

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