



Unity for whom? Theological reflections on South Africa's 2024 Government of National Unity

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Abstract

Three decades into South Africa's democracy, the 2024 elections precipitated a significant political shift, solidifying coalition governance and prompting the re-emergence of a Government of National Unity (GNU). This article analyses the GNU's potential and challenges within this evolving political landscape, specifically examining the intersection of theology and governance. Drawing upon economic and social justice, unity, social cohesion, partnership, and ethical governance themes, the article explores how theological insights can shape political discourse and leadership. It posits that the church holds a crucial prophetic role in advocating for transformation, stewardship, and ethical governance, ultimately striving for a more just, equitable, and unified society. By integrating theological perspectives into the analysis of coalition politics and governance, this article provides a nuanced understanding of its implications for South African society.

Keywords

Coalition politics and governance; Government of National Unity; South Africa; democracy; theology; political theory; social justice; economic inequality; common good; unity; Kairos; transformation; ethical governance; equitable and just society

1. Introduction

The establishment of South Africa's 2024 Government of National Unity (GNU)¹ signifies a watershed moment in the country's post-apartheid journey (Mbalula & Zille 2024:5). This political shift results from the ruling African National Congress (ANC) losing its parliamentary majority in the 2024 elections – a consequence shaped by a confluence of factors. The election significantly tested the ANC-led government's capacity to consolidate democracy by addressing poverty, inequality, and crime (Masipa 2018:1). Despite its historical legacy as a liberation movement, three decades after apartheid's dismantling, persistent political, social, and economic disparities and racism (United Nations 2024:1–8) remained. According to Ofusori (2024b:1–2), the ruling ANC party's poor handling of corruption, economic mismanagement, and service delivery has resulted in widespread disillusionment, a rise in competitive opposition parties, and decreased political engagement among South African youth, particularly, signalling a potential shift towards a more fragmented and uncertain political landscape.

The ANC's loss of its parliamentary majority in the 2024 elections, a development deemed by former Gauteng Premier David Makhura as a "strategic setback" for South Africa's transformative agenda (Mzangwe 2024:3), signifies a profound shift in the nation's political landscape. This electoral defeat, driven by waning public trust in the wake of governance failures and amplified by the rise of new political actors and voices, as noted by Ofusori (2024b:1), necessitates a fundamental reassessment of the country's trajectory. The emergence of the GNU represents not merely a change in governance but a critical juncture for South Africa to redefine its commitment to democratic principles and social equity.

This article invokes the 1985 Kairos Document (Goba 1987:313–320), drawing upon relevant branches of theology and related disciplines to examine South Africa's socio-political landscape. It offers a moral and

1 A Government of National Unity (GNU) is a coalition formed during crises to promote unity and stability. South Africa's 2024 GNU, comprising the ANC, DA, IFP, GOOD, PA, and other smaller political parties, controls 273 National Assembly seats (68%). Their shared goals include upholding the Constitution, promoting non-racialism, ensuring social justice, and maintaining peace, focusing on economic growth, job creation, land reform, and quality basic services.

ethical critique of power dynamics and advocates for genuine socio-economic redress, particularly after thirty years of incomplete democratic progress. The article highlights the church's prophetic role in championing dialogue, partnership, the common good, justice, and unity as central to national priorities within the evolving political landscape. These theological insights, complemented by theories of governance and representation, illuminate a path toward an African democracy that prioritizes the well-being of all citizens.

2. Three decades of democracy: The road to the 2024 GNU

2.1 Reflecting on three decades of democracy

The dismantling of apartheid in 1994, hailed globally as a testament to human resilience and political pragmatism, heralded a new era characterized by freedom, equality, and reconciliation. As South Africa embarked on the process of reconstitution, a fundamental imperative emerged: to consolidate the democracy beyond winning elections, structuring constitutional mandates, government agency, and national institutions in a manner that ingrained and safeguarded core democratic principles across all facets of public life (Kotze 2018:1–8). These principles, meticulously outlined by (Masipa 2018:2), encompass public participation, equality, tolerance, accountability, transparency, regular free and fair elections, acceptance of election outcomes, economic empowerment, prevention of power abuse, protection of human rights, a robust multiparty system, and unwavering commitment to the rule of law.

Over the past three decades, the South African government has made significant strides in addressing the "triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality" inherited at the dawn of democracy (Masipa 2018:1). These achievements, as highlighted by Lieberman (2022:4–5), include ensuring fundamental rights and liberties, amplifying marginalized voices, establishing robust accountability mechanisms, and delivering tangible improvements in the quality of life for many citizens. Key advancements encompass poverty reduction, expanded access to education, healthcare, and basic services (Smart 2024:1–5), as well as the development of a strong legal framework to protect human rights and promote civic engagement (Ofusori 2024b:5–11). Furthermore, the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission, while imperfect, provided a crucial platform for acknowledging past atrocities and fostering healing (Pityana 2018:195–197). These advancements are further evidenced by improved infrastructure, an expanded middle class, enhanced social mobility, and greater access to essential services such as healthcare, electricity, education, water, and housing (Mosala, Venter & Bain 2017:329–335).

However, complex factors continue to impede the resolution of several inherited issues. Economic disparities still mirror apartheid-era inequalities in wealth distribution, education access, and employment opportunities (Masipa 2018:3). The United Nations (2024:8–10) highlights persistent issues in South Africa, including unequal education, pay gaps, segregated communities, and economic disparities. High youth unemployment, exacerbated by skills mismatches and slow economic growth, persists. Despite a substantial increase in South Africa's health budget, the public health system still faces inequalities. Slow efforts to address the fragmented system inherited by the democratic government, along with controversies surrounding the National Health Insurance (NHI) proposal, contribute to these challenges (Smart 2024). Additionally, crime and gender-based violence remain serious concerns (Ofusori 2024b:3). Amidst these challenges, the formation of the 2024 GNU provides an opportunity for deeper engagement on critical priorities, including addressing service delivery backlogs, advancing socio-economic development, and creating a more equitable future (Kotzé 2024:1).

2.2 The Genesis of the 2024 GNU

The 2024 South African elections proved to be among the most consequential since the dawn of democracy, marking a seismic shift in the country's political landscape and ending the ANC's decades-long dominance (ed. Chang 2006:1). This historic election was driven by widespread disillusionment with persistent corruption scandals, economic challenges, and a perceived lack of responsiveness to the needs of ordinary citizens (Kotze 2024:2). The ANC's internal factionalism, particularly the rise of a radical economic transformation faction dissatisfied with the pace of economic change, further weakened its position (Rudin 2024a:6).

The emergence of new political players, such as the Umkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK)² led by former South African and ANC president, Jacob Zuma, alongside others influenced by Marxist traditions, reshaped the political landscape (Southall 2024:1–3). These new formations capitalized on the growing dissatisfaction with economic inequality and the continued exclusion of the Black majority from significant economic opportunities (Habib 2019:277). Their radical agendas, influenced by radical ideologies rooted in Marxist traditions (including figures like Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, and Gramsci), calling for transformative changes and challenging established norms, resonated with a populace yearning for substantial socio-economic reform (Habib 2022:276).

As a result, no single party secured a majority in the elections, leading to a hung parliament. This unprecedented outcome necessitated the formation of a GNU in 2024, marking a new chapter in South African politics where diverse political ideologies are forced to collaborate in governance (Williams 2024:4–7). The GNU must address the deep-seated issues of inequality and economic exclusion while navigating the complex dynamics of coalition governance.

2.3 Lessons from the past: Precedence and critical lessons

South Africa's 2024 GNU is not the nation's first experience of coalition governance at a national level. The legacy of the 1994 GNU, forged in the crucible of apartheid's demise, offers a crucial point of reference (Federico & Fusaro 2006:9). The historic coalition, comprising the ANC, National Party,³ and Inkatha Freedom Party⁴, played a pivotal role in steering South Africa toward a peaceful transition. Their accomplishments during the 1994 GNU included drafting a widely praised Constitution, establishing key democratic institutions, and initiating crucial social and economic

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- 2 Umkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK Party): a political party in South Africa named after the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation). Formed in 2023 by former ANC members, it advocates for radical economic transformation, land reform, and the nationalization of key industries to address socio-economic inequalities and the legacy of apartheid.
 - 3 National Party: The party that instituted apartheid in South Africa and later participated in the 1994 GNU.
 - 4 Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP): A political party in South Africa, primarily representing Zulu interests, which participated in the 1994 GNU.

reforms (Booyesen 2011:3–8). Alden and Anseeuw (2009:14) argue that the compromises made during South Africa's transition to democracy, particularly those reflected in its mixed economy and corporatist institutions, ultimately moderated the transformative potential of the liberation movement. This moderation, coupled with the marginalization of robust social democratic agendas, resulted in a complex political landscape where class compromise was not the singular focus of the negotiated settlement (Seekings & Nattrass 2016:20).

These historical compromises, therefore, have contributed to the persistence of inequality and the slow pace of land reform, ultimately fuelling contemporary tensions and ideological contests. Booyesen (2021:272) notes that coalitions, as seen with the 1994 GNU and subsequent ones, are often delicate, unstable, and disruptive. She goes on to say that we must expect this phenomenon, already present in many South African municipalities and a few provinces, to become a more common feature in South Africa's future.

2.4 “Unfinished activism” and socio-economic challenges

The transition processes of the early 1990s in South Africa, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), have been criticized for their limited scope and impact (Friedman 2018:2–5). The TRC aimed to address gross human rights violations through reconciliation rather than punishment, but it failed to tackle broader systemic issues such as land ownership, education, and economic exploitation (Mosala et al. 2017:328). This limited approach left many victims without adequate reparations and did not address the collective loss of dignity, and opportunities experienced by the oppressed. Similarly, CODESA focused on restoring political rights and establishing democratic institutions but did not address economic power imbalances or land ownership injustices (Booyesen 2018:1–5).

Prominent economist Terreblanche (2002, 2012) highlights the systemic exploitation and inequality entrenched in South Africa's economy both before and after apartheid. Terreblanche (2002:96) criticizes the ANC's adoption of neoliberal economic policies, which he argues have failed to effectively address entrenched inequalities. Having witnessed the negotiations first-hand, Terreblanche (2012:4–6) bemoans several critical

missed opportunities and decisions that could have helped transform post-apartheid society and alleviate poverty, emphasizing the need for redistributive justice and comprehensive socioeconomic reforms. He further argued that the elite's rejection of redistributive justice galvanized his resolve to write about inequality and economic transformation (Terreblanche 2012). The limited socioeconomic transformation achieved through the 1994 GNU and subsequent democratic government underscores a form of 'suspended and deferred revolution' (Habib 2013) or "unfinished activism" that Davis (2016) refers to, highlighting the ongoing struggles for true economic and social equity.

2.5 Forging the future: Critical lessons for future coalition governance

Despite the obvious challenges, the 1994 GNU remain a significant chapter in South African history, demonstrating the potential for political rivals to work together in the national interest. The lessons learned from this experience, both positive and negative, hold valuable insights for the 2024 GNU or any future coalition politics and governance. These insights include the importance of:

- **Clear power-sharing mechanisms:** A well-defined framework for decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability is crucial to prevent gridlock and mistrust among participating parties (Booyesen 2021:275)
- **Genuine commitment to compromise:** A GNU cannot succeed if parties prioritize narrow political interests over the collective good. A willingness to negotiate and find common ground is essential (Rudin 2024b:10–12).
- **Addressing root causes of conflict:** A GNU should not merely paper over deep-seated divisions but should actively address the underlying issues that led to its formation. This may involve tackling issues such as inequality, injustice, and historical grievances (Southall 2024:4–9).
- **Maintaining public trust and transparency:** Open communication, accountability mechanisms, and a commitment to inclusivity are essential to maintain public support and legitimacy for a GNU (Gumede 2024:7–8)

3. Unity for Whom? Purifying intentions for South Africa's GNU

As South Africa navigates the complexities of coalition governance through the 2024 GNU a critical question arises: *Unity for whom?* It is important to explore whether the unity fostered by the GNU genuinely serves the diverse populace of South Africa or primarily the survival and interests of the political parties involved. The ideological contests within the GNU not only reflect the varied political landscape but also challenge the coalition to transcend narrow party agendas to address the needs and aspirations of all South Africans. To pick up on Booyesen (2021, para. 4) argument,

Coalition politics and governance in South Africa epitomise instability. Vacillating and opportunistic party interests prevail over accountable, constructive and developmental government. Coalition governments have not been responsible for creating the country's dismally performing, unaccountable local governments, yet coalitions have often exacerbated the poor showings.

The post-2024 political climate and formation of a 2024 GNU represents a delicate balancing act, not only among the coalition parties but also concerning external forces. It is crucial to examine the political ideologies and their implications for coalition governance to uncover whether the GNU can fulfil its promise of unity and equitable progress.

3.1 Coalition politics and ideological contests

While an exhaustive discussion on the ideological differences of South Africa's key political parties is beyond the scope of this article, it is essential to acknowledge that the clash and contest of political and economic ideologies pose significant challenges to cohesive and coalition governance (Coetzee 2024). These ideological differences must be acknowledged, navigated, and transcended to meet the pressing needs of the South African populace.

Within the GNU, the African National Congress (ANC) will grapple with its historical commitment to African nationalism, the national democratic revolution (NDR (along with its Tripartite Alliance) and social democracy, while the Democratic Alliance (DA) champions liberal economic and governance policies (Southall 2024:1–3). The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)

focuses on regional development and market-oriented strategies (Southall 2024), while the centrist, multi-ethnic Patriotic Alliance (PA) facilitates dialogue but faces challenges due to its regional dominance (Bregman 2024:1–4).

The real tension, however, extends beyond the parties who are signatories of GNU. The MK Party, new as a political party and suddenly becoming the official opposition, with its non-imperialist, socialist, nationalist, and left-wing ideologies, pushing for radical economic transformation and nationalization (Haffajee 2024:6). As the largest breakaway faction from the ANC, the MK Party seeks to galvanize its identity and expose the ANC's faults while refining its ideologies. Simultaneously, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), as a critical runner-up to the opposition, demand land expropriation without compensation and other transformative policies (Southall 2024:11).

The implied ideological contestation, characterized by a tension between narrow partisan interests and broader national goals erodes public trust and exacerbates societal divisions. To mitigate these risks, Booysen (2018:6–9) advocates for a paradigm shift in coalition governance, urging political actors to prioritize national interests over partisan agendas. Drawing on principles of consociational and deliberative democracy, she emphasizes the importance of dialogue, compromise, and consensus-building, particularly when considering potentially disruptive policy proposals. Furthermore, echoing scholars like Tsebelis (2002) two-party or multiparty, and so on. But such distinctions often fail to provide useful insights. For example, how are we to compare the United States, a presidential bicameral regime with two weak parties, to Denmark, a parliamentary unicameral regime with many strong parties? *Veto Players* advances an important, new understanding of how governments are structured. The real distinctions between political systems, contends George Tsebelis, are to be found in the extent to which they afford political actors veto power over policy choices. Drawing richly on game theory, he develops a scheme by which governments can thus be classified. He shows why an increase in the number of "veto players", or an increase in their ideological distance from each other, increases policy stability, impeding significant departures from the status quo. Policy stability affects a series of other key characteristics of polities, argues the author. For example, it leads to high judicial and

bureaucratic independence, as well as high government instability (in parliamentary systems, Booysen (2021:12–14) underscores the need for robust legislative frameworks to ensure stability and accountability within coalition governments, paving the way for a more just and equitable future for all South Africans.

4. A New “Kairos” moment beyond coalition for expediency politics

South Africa stands at a pivotal juncture, ripe for an evolved conversation about the nature of democracy, the unfinished dialogue about social and economic inequality, and the nation's future. The formation of the GNU presents an opportunity akin to a Kairos moment – a critical time for action and reflection, reminiscent of the transformative potential identified in the Kairos Document of 1985. This document challenged the South African church's response to apartheid, emphasizing accountability, justice, and ethical governance (Kairos Document 1985).

While there is a lingering suspicion that the GNU might devolve into a mere coalition of convenience, this moment presents an opportunity for South Africa to renew its commitment to justice, unity, and ethical governance (Dlamini 2024:4–5). The Kairos Document, born out of the struggle against apartheid, called for prophetic theology, contextual analysis, active participation in the struggle for justice, solidarity with the oppressed, and ethical governance (Goba 1987). These principles, though conceived in a different era, remain profoundly relevant as South Africa navigates its current political transition. The 1994 GNU and CODESA, which brought together the ANC, National Party, and Inkatha Freedom Party, was crucial in drafting a widely praised Constitution and establishing key democratic institutions (Terreblanche 2012). However, these engagement chapters also faced significant challenges, lack of foresight and shortcomings, particularly in advancing socioeconomic transformation and addressing persistent inequality (Seekings & Natrass 2016:22).

Mindful of the diverse themes above and drawing on the lessons of 1994 and the principles of the Kairos Document (Ramalho 2020; Solomons 2020), the 2024 GNU should at the least focus on the following:

- **Accountability:** Ethical governance demands transparency and public scrutiny. The GNU must implement robust accountability measures to combat corruption and ensure that government actions truly serve the public interest.
- **Economic justice:** Addressing economic disparities is essential. Policies should focus on job creation, fair wages, and social safety nets to bridge the widening gap between the wealthy and the impoverished.
- **Social cohesion:** Promoting unity requires tackling deep-seated issues like racism, xenophobia, and gender-based violence. Efforts should be concentrated on fostering reconciliation and inclusivity within society.
- **Active citizenship:** Encouraging citizens to actively participate in political processes and hold their leaders accountable is vital for a thriving democracy. Strengthening platforms for civic engagement is crucial.

4.1 Toward a theological reflection on coalition politics and governance

The church, as a prophetic body, bears the responsibility of acting as an active citizen, ensuring that the government purifies its means and policies for the betterment of society. If the church, alongside other stakeholders such as academics, economists, and social activists, fails to engage critically, there is a risk of perpetuating economic currents that cater only to the interests of market forces anchored outside the country and continent.

By embracing the principles of the Kairos Document for a new season, the Church can contribute to the new chapter of coalition politics and governance and perhaps steer South Africa towards a more just and equitable future, characterized by accountability, justice, and the active participation of all citizens. As Mohale (2024, para. 4) critically notes, “There has been no concerted attempt to re-engineer our society to one with a shared national psyche of common purpose and greater good – nation-building and social cohesion.” The true test for the new era of South African politics and governance is whether it will rise to the occasion, fulfilling its promise of unity and equitable progress, or whether it will succumb to the

same patterns of compromise that have historically favoured the powerful over the marginalized.

This challenge opens the door to a deeper exploration of the theological issues underpinning South Africa's political, economic, and social landscape, and the vital role of the church in advocating for a just and Rudin (2024c, para. 65) critiques, without an authentic transformation that addresses these deep-rooted issues, any reform risks being mere "plastic surgery to give capitalism an acceptable face – a human face." The challenge now is to move beyond superficial adjustments to deliver true social cohesion and equitable structures in South Africa.

5. Theological principles for evolving public discourse for the common good

This pursuit of the common good, to borrow from Connolly's (2013:195) vision requires a concerted effort from all sectors of society – "international organizations, states, corporations, banks, labour unions, churches, consumers, citizens, and universities" – to dismantle oppressive systems, combat climate change, reduce inequality, and revitalize democratic processes. As Connolly (2013:195) suggests, that embracing the "fragility of things" and engaging in "positive modes of creative action" can foster a broader commitment to the planet and its inhabitants. The GNU, therefore, has a profound responsibility to move beyond political expediency and embrace a transformative agenda rooted in justice, equity, and the well-being of all South Africans.^{5.1} Historical memory and redress

A just and enduring reconciliation in South Africa demands an unwavering engagement with historical memory. As articulated in the *Kairos Document*, neglecting past injustices renders any attempt at reconciliation hollow. Theological principles of remembrance, rooted in biblical narratives, underscore the imperative to acknowledge past suffering and wrongdoing (Volf 2006; Volf 2016). Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's work on trauma and forgiveness further emphasizes the need for a collective memory that acknowledges both past wounds and the ongoing need for redress (Gobodo-Madikizela & Merwe 2009; Gobodo-Madikizela 2016). Within the context of South Africa's coalition governance, this necessitates confronting the legacies of apartheid and persistent socio-economic disparities without

impunity (Doxtader & Villa-Vicencio 2003). The GNU's commitment to historical memory must manifest in policies that address past injustices through restitution and equitable development.

5.2 Truth-telling and forgiveness

Reconciliation cannot occur without truth-telling, a principle deeply rooted in the Christian understanding of confession and forgiveness. As (Tutu 2012:10) highlights, "there can be no future without forgiveness," but forgiveness must be preceded by an honest and transparent recounting of past wrongs. For the GNU, this means fostering a political culture where truth is upheld, and the painful realities of the past are openly acknowledged. By doing so, the GNU can build a foundation for genuine reconciliation and long-lasting peace.

6. Upholding human dignity and equality

The theological understanding of *Imago Dei* – that every human being is created in the image of God – demands a radical commitment to upholding human dignity and equality. This concept is foundational to Christian ethics and insists that all people, regardless of race, class, or social status, are inherently valuable and deserving of respect and justice. Megan Shore (2016) elucidates this idea and emphasizes that the church's advocacy for human rights is not only about protecting individual freedoms but also about affirming the divine worth of every person.

6.1 Human rights and socio-economic rights

The pursuit of human dignity must include a robust defence of human rights, particularly socio-economic rights. The *Kairos Document* calls for the church to oppose economic systems that degrade human dignity by perpetuating poverty and inequality. John Dugard's work on international law underscores the importance of socio-economic rights as fundamental to achieving justice and human dignity (Dugard 2015). In coalition politics and negotiation, it is to prioritize policies that ensure access to basic needs – such as housing, healthcare, and education – ensuring that these rights are protected and upheld for all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable.

6.2 Equality and non-discrimination

The principle of equality is deeply embedded in Christian theology, which teaches that all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). This theological conviction demands that the GNU work to eliminate all forms of discrimination and inequality in society. The church, in turn, must advocate for policies that protect the rights of marginalized groups, ensuring that every individual is treated with dignity and respect. By doing so, the GNU can help to build a society that truly reflects the biblical vision of equality and justice.

7. Promoting the common good and social cohesion

The common good, a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching and Christian traditions, demands an unwavering commitment to creating social conditions that enable all individuals and communities to flourish (ed. Kidwell 2015). This principle, deeply embedded in the *Kairos Document*, calls for unity against systemic oppression as an essential expression of the common good. As Kidwell (2015) and (de Gruchy 2005) argue, that the church's mission involves fostering social cohesion by promoting justice and reconciliation within divided societies. In this regard, theologians like Forster (2019) highlight the imperative for genuine dialogue between theology and the public space about the socio-economic challenges of society. They stress the need for innovative frameworks that bridge the gap between these disciplines and public interfaces to address the ethical challenges of ensuring human dignity, progress and a sustainable planet (Deneulin & Sedmak 2023). A visible and accountable form of public collaboration is crucial for advancing a shared public vision that not only critiques existing socio-economic structures but also actively seeks to transform them in pursuit of a more just and moral society.

7.1 Inclusivity and participation

True social cohesion can only be achieved through inclusive governance that actively involves all sectors of society. The principle of inclusivity is deeply rooted in the Christian understanding of the body of Christ, where every member has a role to play. Steven Shakespeare's work on radical orthodoxy emphasizes that inclusivity is not just about representation but

about creating spaces where every voice is heard and valued (Shakespeare 2007).

For the GNU, this means creating policies and structures that reflect the diversity of South Africa’s population, ensuring that all communities, particularly those historically marginalized, are included in the decision-making process. This approach to governance not only strengthens democracy but also builds a more cohesive and unified society (De Gruchy, 2005).

7.2 Social harmony and national unity

The concept of social harmony is integral to the Christian vision of *Shalom* – a peace that encompasses the well-being of the whole community (Sacks 2020). This requires that the GNU actively work to bridge social divides, fostering a sense of national unity that transcends ethnic, racial, and economic differences. The church can play a crucial role in promoting this vision by advocating for policies that promote social justice and equity, thereby contributing to the common good (de Gruchy 2005).

8. Advocating for economic justice

The GNU’s commitment to economic justice must be grounded in a framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of faith, economics, and the common good. This approach, often termed “public theology,” (Johnson-DeBaufre, Keller & Ortega-Aponte 2015:5–8) emphasizes the role of ethical considerations in shaping economic policies. By exploring the political, economic and spiritual ramifications of holding the world’s resources as “common goods”, Johnson-DeBaufre et al. (2015:20–21) further underscores this by highlighting the shared resources and systems essential for human flourishing. Similarly, establishing the principles of an indivisible relationality in the values of “commonwealth and covenant”, Pally (2016:15–18) advocates for a holistic vision that integrates individual flourishing with the well-being of the entire community.

Drawing upon these principles, the GNU should prioritize the following:

- **Redistributive policies:** Implement policies like land reform, equitable access to education, and fair wages to address economic inequalities and provide opportunities for advancement. These

policies should be considered moral imperatives, reflecting the biblical call to justice and the common good.

- **Ethical stewardship of resources:** Ensure that natural resources are used responsibly and sustainably, benefiting all citizens, particularly the poor and marginalized. This aligns with the theological concept of creation care, recognizing the interconnectedness of economic activity, social justice, and environmental responsibility.
- **Economic inclusion:** Promote equal opportunity for employment, credit, and economic participation, regardless of background or identity. This includes addressing wage gaps based on gender and race, ensuring access to financial services for all socioeconomic levels, and empowering individuals through education, training, and career development.

By embracing these principles, the GNU can work towards a South Africa where economic justice prevails, and prosperity is shared by all.

8.1 The Church's role in healing and reconciliation

The church, as a moral voice, an advocate for economic justice, echoing the call in “Dethroning Mammon” (Welby 2016:9) for ethical finance and economics. By supporting initiatives that address historical grievances and promote reconciliation, as outlined in (Katongole & Rice 2009), the church can contribute to a just and harmonious society where peace is a lived reality. Peace requires an ongoing commitment to conflict resolution and reconciliation.

The church, with its emphasis on forgiveness, healing, and restoration, can play a crucial role. By creating “spaces of lament and possibility” (Katongole & Rice 2009:77), the church can facilitate dialogue, promote understanding, and encourage forgiveness. Katongole and Rice propose crucial principles and practices of shalom, truth and reconciliation, lament and healing, memory and forgiveness, hopeful patience, prophetic witness, restorative justice, hospitality, and reconciliation toward flourishing, which they detail in their insightful book, *Reconciling All Things* (Katongole & Rice 2009:147–152).

The GNU, in partnership with faith-based organizations like the church, can support these efforts by promoting dialogue, providing resources for reconciliation initiatives, and modelling these values.

It is also important to explore the imperative for ethical leadership within the South African context, drawing upon theological insights and the call for social responsibility. The need for ethical leadership in South Africa is not merely an abstract ideal but a pressing necessity. Leaders across all sectors must embody a profound sense of moral grounding to guide the nation toward healing and a more just future. This section explores how theological insights can inform the cultivation of ethical leadership, particularly in “writing better scripts” (Williams 2015:118) for how South Africans relate to one another and envision their shared future.

Drawing upon a rich tapestry of theological voices – including Hauerwas and Willimon (1989), Bonhoeffer (1995), and Williams (2015) – we can discern principles for ethical leadership that resonate deeply with the South African experience. For South African leaders, this means confronting the ongoing realities of racism, poverty, and corruption, even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular. Hauerwas and Willimon (1989:11), in *Resident Aliens*, challenge the church to be a counter-cultural community, a “colony of heaven” that embodies a unique way of being in the world. This vision, rooted in a distinctive Christian ethic, has profound implications for leadership. They argue that “Christian ethics, as a cultivation of those virtues needed to keep us on the journey, are the ethics of revolution” (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:62). This “revolution,” however, is not one of violence but of transformed hearts and minds, leading to a more just and equitable society. Ethical leaders, inspired by their faith, can challenge the status quo, resist the allure of power, and model a different script for human interaction – one marked by compassion, justice, and service (Williams 2015:118).

Correspondingly, Rowan Williams (2015:83) emphasizes the importance of faith in shaping public discourse and ethical leadership. He argues that a “clearer awareness of the Christian heritage” can illuminate the foundations of human dignity and contribute to a more just and compassionate society. This awareness, grounded in a commitment to civil discourse and acceptance of negotiated outcomes, can inspire leaders to engage critically

with public discourse, uphold the dignity of all people, and work tirelessly to “write better scripts” for how we live together. He further links this ethical imperative to a broader vision of social responsibility rooted in the concept of covenant. He envisions a society where “no-one’s interest is written out of the social script,” prioritizing the well-being of all, especially the vulnerable, and embracing a long-term perspective that transcends short-term political gains (Williams 2015:118).

8.2 Principles for ethical leadership in action

From these theological threads, we can discern key principles for ethical leadership in the South African context:

- **Accountability and transparency:** Leaders must be held accountable for their actions and decisions, operating with openness and honesty. This transparency builds trust and fosters a culture of integrity.
- **Servant leadership:** Following the example of Jesus, ethical leaders prioritize the needs of others and seek to empower those they serve. They lead not by wielding power but by sharing it.
- **Courage and integrity:** Ethical leaders must be willing to stand up for what is right, even in the face of opposition or pressure. They understand that true leadership requires moral courage.
- **Compassion and social justice:** Drawing upon the wellspring of faith, ethical leaders must demonstrate compassion for the marginalized and work tirelessly to dismantle systems of injustice. They recognize that “writing better scripts” for humanity requires a commitment to social justice.

The journey toward a more just and equitable South Africa demands courageous and ethical leadership. By embracing the principles outlined above, leaders across all sectors can help to write a new script – one that reflects the highest aspirations of the human spirit and paves the way for a brighter future.

9. The Church's inexcusable prophetic imperative: Critical solidarity beyond partisanship

Navigating the complex terrain between engagement and entanglement, the church must embrace its prophetic role without succumbing to the snares of partisan politics. While concerns about an “unholy matrimony” between faith and political power are valid (Magasu, Jive & Reuben 2021:307), particularly given historical and contemporary examples of the church’s misuse for partisan agendas or ethnic endorsement (Mitchell 2005:111–112), silencing the prophetic voice entirely risks leaving injustice unchecked and the marginalized unheard.

The church must never allow itself to be covered by political pressure, diffused by partisan loyalties, or swallowed by prevailing ideological currents. To do so would be to abandon its divine calling to be the “conscience of the government and ultimately of society” (Baron & Maponya 2020:8). As Pope Francis powerfully articulates, the church is called to a “politics rooted in the people,” a “politics *with* the people,” a force for justice that refuses to be silenced or co-opted (Vatican News 2021:1, 4–5). This vision necessitates a prophetic stance, one that speaks truth to power, challenges structures of sin, and stands in unwavering solidarity with the oppressed. This delicate balance, characterized by critical solidarity and a refusal to be co-opted by any political party, allows the church to fulfil its divine mandate as a transformative force for good in the world, actively participating in God’s mission of “reconciliation and healing” (Baron & Maponya 2020:8).

9.1 The Church’s engagement

The church’s engagement with the GNU necessitates navigating the complex terrain between “critical solidarity” and “critical engagement,” particularly as articulated by Klaasen and Solomons (2019:10). While the former emphasizes finding common ground and offering support when government actions align with the needs of the marginalized, the latter prioritizes a more consistently oppositional stance, challenging systemic injustices regardless of specific policies. As Kumalo (2014) notes, that finding the balance between these approaches is crucial. The church offers solidarity when the government aligns with the needs of the marginalized but must shift to critique when policies deviate from this commitment (Kumalo 2014:643). By maintaining this non-partisan, prophetic voice, the

church can hold the GNU accountable to the common good, fostering a more just and equitable society that transcends narrow political interests.

The church's prophetic witness, rooted in advocating for human dignity and challenging injustice (Bentley 2013:6), necessitates both critique and constructive action towards the common good and equitable society. Reverend Pumla Nzimande (2023:4-7), the current Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, emphasizes the church's need for "prophetic agency and urgency", remaining deeply conscious of its identity and role in continuing the legacy of historical liberation movements. This echoes Anthony Hunt's (2018:2-6) assertion that prophetic witness, exemplified by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., is rooted in a fourfold commitment: a deep sense of God's *call*, convictions about human dignity and social justice (*conviction*), courageous action (*courage*), and unwavering commitment to promoting racial equality and peace with justice (*commitment*). Furthermore, the church is uniquely positioned to foster counter-narratives that challenge dominant economic paradigms and envision alternative pathways to flourishing grounded in economic justice, social holiness and human dignity (Forster 2008:414-416).

Conclusion

The 2024 GNU represents a Kairos moment for South Africa, demanding a renewed commitment to justice, unity, and ethical governance. This article has explored theological and ethical imperatives, grounded in the Christian tradition, and articulated in documents like the *Kairos Document*, which should guide the coalition politics and governance landscape in South Africa (and elsewhere) in pursuit of a just and equitable society. These principles, including justice and reconciliation, human dignity, the common good, economic justice, peace, and ethical leadership, necessitate concrete action from both the government and civil society.

The church holds a particularly crucial prophetic role, serving as a prophetic voice that advocates for the marginalized, holds leadership accountable, and guides public discourse towards the common good. The church's challenge lies in maintaining critical solidarity with the oppressed without

succumbing to partisan politics. The 2024 GNU presents not just a political necessity but a moral and theological imperative. By embracing this Kairos moment, guided by ethical and theological principles, and driven by the active engagement of the church and its prophetic witness, South Africa can move closer to realizing a future characterized by justice, peace, and the common good for all its citizens.

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