

An Evaluation of the South African Democracy on its 30th anniversary: A distribution of power and wealth perspective

Leepo Johannes Modise
University of South Africa
modislj@unisa.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7206-2698>

Abstract

The problem statement in this article is that South African democracy, often lauded as one of the best democracies in the world due to its constitution, is marred by a high rate of Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequality (PUI) – a stark contrast to the ideal of democracy as the sharing of power and economic resources. This article will delve into the reality of South Africa’s democracy, evaluating it from the distribution of power and wealth. The assumption is that a democratic country that has a high rate of PUI is a failed democracy. I will highlight the origin of democracy from the city-states to compare the South African democracy from that perspective. Secondly, I will reflect on the different methods of democracy and their challenges. Thirdly, I will reflect on the PUI levels in South Africa. Fourthly, I will reflect on the circulation of wealth amongst South Africans. The assumption is that an imbalanced distribution of wealth indicates a failed democracy. Finally, I will propose that the distribution of power through elections, imbizo, Local councils, and ward committees through participatory democracy should reflect the distribution of wealth to the people of South Africa. The Universal Income Grant (UIG) should be introduced to narrow the gap between PUIs in South Africa. To summarise, this paper advocates for a more equitable distribution of power and wealth in South Africa, with the Universal Income Grant serving as a potential solution to the country’s high PUI rates. The approach in this paper is the normative-descriptive approach within Political theology.

Keywords

wealth; democracy; success; power and distribution

Introduction

The 30th anniversary of the South African democracy is a significant milestone in the nation's history. Widely regarded as one of the best democracies in the world, primarily due to its constitution, this anniversary presents a crucial moment to evaluate the success or failure of this democracy. This is not just a historical event but a moment that holds the potential to shape the nation's future. According to Greek philosophers, democracy means power-sharing by the people who inhabit the same land. This democratic concept originates from the agricultural practice of crop-sharing after harvest. In this sense, the sharing of land resources is expected to impact power-sharing and vice versa. The evolution of democracy from the Greek city-states will be highlighted to gain a comprehensive understanding of democracy and to compare the origin of democracy with South African democracy. Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequality (PUI) in South Africa will be a measuring tool to gauge the success or failure of democracy in South Africa regarding power sharing and resources. The Freedom Charter, a cornerstone of South African democracy, proclaims that the land and resources of the land shall be shared amongst those who live in it (Freedom Charter, 1955). Different types of democracies will be discussed to evaluate where the South African people have failed to sustain authentic democracy. The assumption is that the imbalance in wealth distribution reflects failed democracy in South Africa; in this paper, I will attempt to evaluate the thirty years of democracy as a failure or success. Finally, I will propose that the distribution of power through elections, imbizo, Local councils, and ward committees via participatory democracy should reflect the distribution of wealth to the people of South Africa. The Universal Income Grant (UIG) should be introduced to bridge the gap between PUI and South Africa. The approach in this paper is the normative-descriptive approach within Political theology, which will provide a comprehensive analysis of the South African democracy.

Problem statement

The problem statement in this paper is that South African democracy is regarded as one of the best democracies in the world due to its constitution. However, there is a high rate of Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequality

(PUI) – while democracy means the sharing of power and resources. Mosoetsa (2011) indicated that South Africa's social and welfare policy framework has not achieved fundamental economic transformation, wealth redistribution or poverty eradication. State transfers merely help people to live from hand to mouth. In democratic South Africa, macroeconomic policies have yielded limited economic growth, resulting in significant job losses and rising inequality (Mosoetsa 2011). South Africa's challenge of Poverty, unemployment and inequality emanated from two angles, from the main remnant of segregation and apartheid, but further intensified by the African National Congress government's short-sighted policy measures to integrate the country in too great a hurry into neoliberal global capitalism and to create – also in a too great hurry – a new black elite by methods that is detrimental to the impoverished majority (Terreblanche 2012). Furthermore, Terreblanche (2012:101) indicates:

Social grants, paid to about 25 per cent of the population, have made the burden of poverty more bearable for millions. However, giving social grants to about 14 million people in an environment of poverty where 8 or 10 million people still need to receive income from wages, remittances, or social grants has created unforeseen problems.

The argument in the problem statement illustrates that South African democracy needs a thorough evaluation regarding the correlation between power distribution and economic (wealth) distribution.

Hermida (2012), when evaluating the Philippines' imagined modern democracy, illustrates that there is usually a direct correlation between the level of citizen participation and the level of economic development of a country – inequalities in economic power, assets and living conditions have increasingly damaged the factual minimum requirements for an equal chance to make effective use of equally distributed legal powers. The political parties cannot expect citizens to usually participate politically when citizens are weighted down by their elementary concern for survival. Political changes are inadequate if not supplemented with economic reforms (Hermida, 2012:114). The lack of economic security has generated a lack of energy for citizens to empower one political party to have the outright majority to lead the government in South Africa. Twenty-nine

years ago, Van der Walt (1995) conscientious African leaders and citizens that greed and corruption destroy democracy by citing Achebe; more than thirty years after independence, we today have:

- Poverty instead of prosperity.
- Sickness instead of health.
- Imprisonment instead of freedom.
- Indignity instead of dignity.
- Hatred instead of unity, respect, love.
- War instead of peace.
- Refugees instead of citizens.
- Technological retardation instead of development.
- Moral degeneration instead of morality.
- Corruption, bribery, nepotism instead of honesty.
- Self-seeking instead of service to the community.
- Hell instead of the utopia promised.

South Africa is the last African country to be independent. However, based on the list above, the South African government has yet to learn lessons from the countries liberated before it. Hence, Chirwa (2024), quoting Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party's spokesperson on analysis of the possibility of a coalition, still cites poverty as the determining factor for the right political parties to form an alliance with the African National Congress that will address the needs of the people by indicating:

We commit and reaffirm to engage only in the future of South Africa, which prioritises the interests of the people, especially the black majority who are poor, unemployed, homeless, and landless, against the interests of white monopoly capital and markets.

What Van der Walt (1995), Mosoetsa (2011), and Terreblanche (2012) say is confirmed in the 2024 post-election discussion for the coalition that poverty, unemployment, and inequality are real challenges in South African democracy. The research questions generated from this problem statement will be asked in the next section.

Research questions

The main question in this research is: Is South African democracy still one of the best among the world's democracies after thirty years of post-Apartheid? If not, what makes it worse than other democracies? Does political power in South African democracy correlate with the wealth – economic sharing? What ought to be the best way out of the worst democracy in South Africa that creates poverty instead of sharing wealth? The researcher wrestles with these questions throughout this paper; the first attempt to respond to these questions is to find out the origin and intention of democracy from the Greek city-states and its development throughout the ages. These research questions lead to the approach to responding to these questions to improve the lives of the people of South Africa.

The theoretical framework

The article will flow from the theoretical framework within the Political-Liberation theologies derived from Latin- America and South Africa. The critical theory will be the well-known liberation theology argument, which is the preferential option for the poor. This theory was preferred because of the challenge the South African citizens have faced for the past three years plus, and unfortunately, for the past thirty years of democracy. The evaluation of democracy from the distribution of power and wealth motivates the selection of this approach. Gutierrez (1983), Maimela (1986), Reiser (1995) and Bosch (1991) are in a chorus that the church and the state ought to take the case of the poor very seriously because God has already taken the side of the poor and oppressed and liberates the poor from slavery and oppression. Taking this deliberation from the eighties and nineties and evaluating the thirty years of democracy in South Africa, it is necessary to use this approach as the lens to see South Africa anew. Buffel (2015) states:

Poverty is rife in South Africa. It is also unique in that it contrasts with other countries where poverty knows no colour. In South Africa, it is mainly concentrated amongst blacks, without necessarily denying that there are whites who are poor. The South African situation is exacerbated by racist legislation of the past; hence, South African poverty has extreme racial dimensions.

Buffel's postulation indicates a need to implement this approach in the theological discourse to address the challenge of the church and society after thirty years of democracy on poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The origin of democracy as the quest for power and wealth distribution will be discussed in the following section.

The overview of the origin and intention of democracy

The origin of democracy is from the Greek city-states, which resulted from landownership that belonged to a particular group of people. Those who worked on the land shared the products and profit from the land. The sharing of the wealth of the land raised the question of sharing power regarding land ownership. The people felt that there was a need for the people to have the right to govern the land with the landlords as equals, as they had the right to share the country's wealth. This was the feeling of the drafters and adopters of the Freedom Charter that the country's wealth would be shared by the people who live on the land (Freedom Charter 1955). The belief that the land shall be shared by those who live on it implies that the resources that come from the land will also be shared with the inhabitants of the land.

Beck (2012:117) indicates that when Plato was born, Athens had become a very complex and sophisticated democratic society. Many institutions and customs formed part of the whole. The city was structured around cultivating the powers of the human soul in as many citizens as possible to the highest level possible. The town allows citizens to take turns ruling and being ruled in turn. It provided opportunities for creative expression and intellectual investigation. Plato believed that the city could not be governed that way. Otherwise, it will destroy itself. The system opens more space for tyranny or tyranny of the majority. Then Plato established the structure that consisted of the kings (man with six senses), the middle class and the peasants, but the share of wealth was still in the mind of the drafter of this structure that the people who worked the land needed to benefit from the land.

Different approach to democracy and their challenges

Kelly (2012:236) defines democracy as the majority rule while minorities are protected. This definition illustrates that the minority will receive the protection of the majority, which will rule socially, legally, politically, and economically. Considering what Kelly (2012) has defined as democracy, various influences exist on understanding and approaching democracy in different contexts. Brown (2012) argues that liberal and socialist political ideologies are rooted in the European Enlightenment's claim to use human reason to discover the universal essence of humanity, freedom, and justice. While the liberals found human rationality to be fully formed in everyone, the socialists found human rationality to emerge only through historical progress of social evolution – democracy in the sense-making of the liberals. Brown (2012:26) finds that globalisation tends to disseminate colonial culture; colonial conceptions of democracy are often used as models for democracy. However, political ideologies rooted in the history of a particular tradition are usually poor fits for another cultural tradition. Colonial political ideologies rooted in the colonial conceptions of an objective and universal human reason provide a weak understanding of democracy for non-colonial cultures interested in developing their traditions of democratic life and culture. In South Africa, the global market determines which government the country needs and which political parties the African National Congress should work with within the Government of National Unity at the expense of the hungry millions.

Since 1995, De Gruchy (1995:5) has warned Africans, in general, and South Africans, in particular, about the global or Western influence on the democracies of different countries. He argues that parallels to what occurred there can be found in other cultures outside Western traditions. What is essential, however, is not so much the starting point as democracy has evolved unevenly in fits and starts in various historical contexts, often with long gaps between one significant moment and the next. Furthermore, De Gruchy (1995) indicates that since the eighteenth century, the evolution of democracy has become exponential, as the present wave of democratic transformation indicates. However, the democratic transitions of our time are not to be regarded as the final stage in global democratisation. For one thing, there is no inevitability about democratic transformation, and

for another, democratisation varies considerably in character, scope, and speed from one country to another. The transition to democracy is, in fact, a permanent condition; like all living traditions, democracy is a narrative of an argument open to change, development retrieval and renewal. Kelly (2012) and De Gruchy (1995) agree that the context plays a significant role in shaping democracy in the country or countries, for example in countries that were formally colonised and are impoverished by coloniality, liberal democracy will not assist those countries to develop to the level of a first-class world despite all resources they possess. The governance by the people should match the economic transformation of that country.

Furthermore, Kelly (2012) provides four political theory paths to democracy causes and six factors that need to be considered for the success or failure of democracy. I will use this political theory and these factors to evaluate South African democracy’s success or failure.

The table below illustrates the distinct approaches according to Kelly (2012) and Mazo (2005):

Structuralists	Historical development
<p>An exploration of preconditions or prerequisites before democracy may emerge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work ethic of Protestantism. Minimal level of economic development leading to a middle class. Culture of compromise and accommodation. Higher literacy and education levels. 	<p>The pattern of historical relationships among a sequence of actors appearing in society before democracy arises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An aristocracy weakening and splitting that would lead to a bourgeois class. Arrival of broader national unity and political participation before political parties and competition appearances.

Institutionalist	Agency theory
<p>A state must be modern before it becomes democratic:</p> <p>The rule of law and civil society would precede elections.</p> <p>National unity is essential.</p> <p>Democracy emerges from institutional qualities within the state itself (Legislatures, bureaucracies and courts).</p>	<p>This theory is the role played by elites in the formation of democracy:</p> <p>The role of elites as agents of change.</p> <p>Serious polarisation among elites would eventually evolve into a bargaining period leading to democracy.</p> <p>Elites sometimes commit themselves to fair and equally applied rules of a democratic majority.</p> <p>Defeated elites accepting the rule of victorious elites.</p>

Those four approaches allow me to extend my thinking about South African democracy or democracies. They match well with my experience in South Africa as a theologian struggling to understand its democratic nature. The Structuralist and Historical development approaches fit well with the era of President Nelson Mandela as necessary preconditions or prerequisites were required to bring stability before democracy emerged. The apartheid aristocracy was supposed to be weakened so that the field could be levelled for a democratic society. The challenge that this era faced was that the level of education was uneven, and most blacks were minimally educated. At the same time, the whites were well-equipped educationally and economically. The culture of compromise and accommodation was very high in the name of national unity. The other two approaches were not that much focal points of Mandela’s era, as the focus was on nation-building towards democracy. The established democracy then needs to be maintained and strengthened; the successor of President Mandela was President Thabo Mbeki.

The era of President Mbeki was the era of economic crisis in South Africa created by the then Apartheid regime. According to the situation, Mbeki became president and chose the institutionalist approach to push the country's economic growth. The focus was on the rule of law and civil society while establishing institutional quality within the country. President Mbeki's institutional and economic focus then made him lose the support of his comrades because of the centralisation of power as a watchman of the state. The departure of President Mbeki left the African National Congress and the government in a polarised state, which led the successor to move more on the agency theory.

President Jacob Zuma entered the presidency with a legacy of elite polarization, making it very easy and transparent for elite corruption. The serious polarisation among elites has led to the recall of President Jacob Zuma and the establishment of the Zondo Commission of the alleged state capture. This era led to the dawn of President Ramaphosa, who believed that he would save the country and lead to a democratic state that would serve the people. It would eventually evolve into a bargaining period leading to democracy. The only point that President Zuma should have followed or fit perfectly into agency theory was the diplomatic refusal to accept defeat from the victorious elites and to accept their rule.

President Cyril Ramaphosa entered the government to correct the mistakes made by the former elites under President Zuma's era. Therefore, he tried what President Mandela and Mbeki had done and simultaneously fit into the three theories: structuralist, institutionalist, and agency. These approaches are seen in how he compromises the poor of the poorest at the expense of the rich (compromise and accommodating), polarising the elites in line with the moderate economic transformation and the proponents of radical economic transformation. Finally, the coalition with the Democratic Alliance, in the name of the Government of National Unity, was established as a moderate to accommodate international investors.

The hungry stomach does not understand politics or economics. Therefore, any democratic approach needs to place low-income people at the centre of its strategy. Gutiérrez (2012:174) emphasises the centrality of the poor theological discourse that Political theologians need to push for action in the political sphere: "The poor occupy a central position in the reflection

that we call the theology of liberation.” The theories that have been discussed need to change the political landscape of the people in South Africa; the level of poverty versus affluence will measure this. Hermida (2012:107) indicates that there is usually a direct correlation between citizen participation and a country’s economic development level. Furthermore, it emphasises that political reforms are insufficient if not complemented with economic reforms. Economic security empowers the citizens to mount more powerful collective actions and to put adequate pressure on elites. It thus motivates them to seek the freedom and rights that democracy brings about.

Reflection on PUI levels in South Africa as anti-democracy

The freely elected representatives of the people of South Africa have adopted the Constitution as supreme law. The social contract (Constitution) intends to:

- Heal the divisions of the past and create a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
- Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the people’s will and every citizen is equally protected by the law;
- Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of all people and
- Build a united and democratic South Africa to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

The country’s constitution is its identity; ordinary citizens’ lives need to reflect that constitution. Poverty, Unemployment, and Inequality trigger the statement above in the constitution, but even after thirty years of democracy, these issues are still mentioned. As stated in the introduction, South Africa has a wide gap between the rich and the poor and is the most unequal country globally. Habermas (1998, 261) writes that those growing inequalities in economic power, assets, and living conditions have increasingly destroyed the factual preconditions for an equal opportunity to use equally distributed powers effectively (Habermas 1998:261). Citizens need to guarantee the willingness to participate in politics in general, and

their primordial concern with survival undermines it. The impact of the poverty level on democracy and elections in South Africa will be discussed in this line.

The latest rate report shows that the poverty rate in South Africa stands at 62.6% of the population living in extreme poverty (www.statista.com/statistics/1263290/number-of-p)¹. Instead, most of the population is Christian (Forster, 2019). Therefore, the Christian voice is needed to lead advocacy campaigns and campaigns for poverty alleviation. The poverty rate in Namibia is 17.8% from 2022 to 2023² GDP report (Gross Domestic and Product) growth in Namibia. I am comparing Namibia and South Africa because the Afrikaners’ regime oppressed them. What is the difference?

The Department of Statistics, utilising R779 per month at 2011 rates as their measurement, provides the following breakdown of people of different race groups living under the poverty line:

Table 1: Breakdown of people of different race groups living under the poverty line (2011) Race	Percentage	Remarks
Asians	6.9%	Majority of Islam and Hindu
Blacks	63.2%	Majority Christians
Coloureds	37%	Majority Christians
White	0.9%	Majority Christians

1 Poverty rates in South Africa remain high, with an estimated 62.6% of the population living in poverty based on the upper-middle-income country poverty line. Approximately 55.5% of the population is living in poverty at the national upper poverty line, and 13.8 million people are experiencing food poverty. In 2015, over 30.4 million South Africans were living in poverty. The poverty rate has fluctuated over the years, with a decline from 71.8% in 2005 to 60.9% in 2010. As of 2023, around 18.2 million people in South Africa are living in extreme poverty.

2 Due to stronger GDP growth in both 2022 and 2023, poverty is estimated to have decreased but remains high at 17.8% based on the \$2.15 per day international poverty line (IPL; 2017 PPP).

Terreblance (2012, p. 108) argues that poverty and inequality in South Africa have a longstanding history when whites constituted 20 per cent of the population and received 70 per cent of the income of the country, while blacks, who comprised 70 per cent of the population, they have received 20 per cent of the income of the country a skewed situation that can be ascribed to the politico-economic system of white political dominance and racial capitalism/corporatism in place in South Africa during Apartheid era. In this system, both capitalism/corporatism and white political dominance enriched whites undeservedly and impoverished blacks undeservedly (Terreblance, 2012:108). History teaches us that the Afrikaners created their democracy to fit their circumstances after their liberation from British oppression; therefore, in their democracy, there was the distribution of power and distribution of wealth to whites only, hence the skewed situation that ascribed the politico-economic system. This is what democracy is: the distribution of power and wealth and the redress of the inequality of the past needs to be the same: wealth needs to be distributed equally as power is distributed through participation in elections and decision-making through representative democracy. It is vital to illustrate the poverty level in the provinces.

According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index, the poverty level in South Africa is as follows:

Name of Province	Households %	No of people
Eastern Cape	12.17 %	890 000
Free State	5.5%	156 000
Gauteng	4.6%	616 000
KwaZulu-Natal	7.7%	852 000
Limpopo	11.5%	667 000
Mpumalanga	7.8%	338 000
Northern Cape	8.8%	105 000
Northern-West	6.6%	247 000
Western Cape	2.7%	170 000

The total percentage of the country's poverty level is 62.7, while the unemployment rate was 32.4% in 2023, with women and youth being

affected the most. The table above shows a correlation with the 2024 provincial election results that poverty correlates with democracy; people vote with confidence for a particular political party that will rescue them from the poverty they find themselves in. The statistics above illustrate that poverty in South Africa is high, according to these numbers. The table below illustrates how people have voted to show confidence in the political party that was ruling from 1994 to 2024:

The provincial poverty level versus election results of the ruling party (African National Congress)

Name of Province	Households %	No of people	Election 2019	Election 2024
Eastern Cape	12.17 %	890 000	68.74%	62.16%
Free State	5.5%	156 000	61.14%	51.94%
Gauteng	4.6%	616 000	50.19%	46%
KwaZulu-Natal	7.7%	852 000	54.22%	16.99%
Limpopo	11.5%	667 000	75.49%	73.3%
Mpumalanga	7.8%	338 000	70.58%	51.15%
Northern Cape	8.8%	105 000	57.54%	49.34%
Northern-West	6.6%	247 000	61.87%	57.73%
Western Cape	2.7%	170 000	28.63%	19.55%

The table above illustrates a correlation between poverty and democracy; based on my observation, the provinces that have voted African National Congress in numbers are those that hosted Homelands or Bantustans and provinces where black people were concentrated. In these provinces, the basic needs of people were addressed by the ANC government: health needs, agricultural needs, infrastructures like roads, running water in their homes, sanitation, electricity, and educational facilities that were not there. The results illustrated that the poor people in these provinces still have hope in the African National Congress despite the high level of poverty that they are experiencing. The poverty level in the country has motivated the results displayed above. The lack of economic security has generated a lack of energy for citizens to empower one political party to have the outright

majority to lead the government in South Africa (Hermida, 2012:114). The questions of this study are:

- Is South African democracy still one of the best among the world's democracies after thirty years of post-Apartheid?
- If not, what makes it worse than other democracies?
- Does political power in South African democracy correlate with the wealth – economic sharing?
- What ought to be the best way out of the worst democracy in South Africa that creates poverty instead of sharing wealth?

The findings after this research will be based on these questions.

Findings

The following are the findings from this research study:

The South African democracy in the past thirty years has proven to be the best by providing basic needs to the disadvantaged people of South Africa, which scored forty per cent on its performance in this era.

That South African democracy was downward mobility instead of upward mobility; it has moved from being best from 1994–2008 and declined from 2009 to date; Poverty, unemployment and inequality are evidence of that.

The South African democracy has created a more polarised society than a united society per the constitution's prescription. "Heal the divisions of the past and create a society based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights."

The collapse of state-owned entities and the creation of black elites have created high levels of unemployment and poverty.

The 2024 election results show that the people in the former rural and semi-rural areas still have confidence in the ANC.

It was also found that there is no correlation between power and wealth; the people are voting, but the majority are poor and unemployed.

Finally, the political party that governed democracy in South Africa has failed because it has failed to bring equality and wealth to the people of

South Africa in the name of Global investors, which is the main reason for the Government of National Unity's selection of actors. The final point is evident in the newly established government of National Unity, which went back to square one in 1994; this is sufficient evidence to prove this failure.

Recommendations

The faith-based organisation will advocate and campaign for a universal basic income grant that most people in South Africa will receive. Universal basic income grants will be collected from the taxes of big corporations in South Africa and distributed to the people of South Africa. Universal Basic Income grant will boost the country's economy. Some people will improve their small businesses, and the government will have cash flow. The other source of the Universal Basic Income Grant ought to be the reduced budget for military equipment from foreign countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the country has made notable progress in freedom and education. However, the persistence of severe poverty, unemployment and inequality underscored the need for continued efforts to address the challenges. Based on the challenges that still exist from the past to the present are indications that the church and state have failed the people of South Africa, as mentioned in the arguments in this text. The preferential option for people with low incomes must be the centre of all arguments for developing the country's economy in the future. The hungry stomach does not know politics, economics, or investment. If the situation is as it is, "this nation is riding on the back of a Tiger." As the country looks to the future, it is essential to prioritize policies that promote economic empowerment for low-income people, reduce inequality, and strengthen democratic systems.

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