

South Africa is going through very tough times and some commentators are predicting an imminent collapse of the state. But have the critics reckoned with the determination of the people to rise above their problems?

## Is South Africa on brink of state collapse?

2022 did not start well in South Africa. The Parliament buildings in Cape Town were damaged in a suspected arson attack; the first tranche of the Zondo Commission's report into state capture was published, painting a damning picture of the ANC and the government it leads; the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the ANC survived failed attempts to undermine President Ramaphosa; and a senior member of his executive published a scathing (and insulting) attack on the Constitution and the judiciary.

Following on the back of deadly and destructive riots last July, a seemingly endless stream of corruption reports and governance failures, record-high unemployment, and a continued slide down just about every socio-economic index in the public domain, it was evident that the year ahead will present us all with many challenges.

As is to be expected, the commentary is having a field day, amplifying the negative news and predicting nothing but further pain in the year ahead. Hoping for something a bit more encouraging, I glanced at the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report 2022, but there was no comfort to be found. The 12,000 leaders in the WEF survey of risk perception ranked the following as their top five risks for South Africa:

### Ivor at Large

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1. Prolonged economic stagnation;
2. Employment and livelihood crises;
3. State collapse;
4. Failure of public infrastructure;
5. Proliferation of illicit economic activity.

Hard as it is to swallow, it has to be said that the signs have all been there for some time, but the one that caught my eye was the risk of state collapse. State collapse? If 12,000 leaders of the world's business, academic, government, and media participants in this WEF survey believe South Africa is realistically at risk of state collapse, what does that say of the political landscape at the beginning of 2022?

How we got here is the subject of several research reports, judicial commissions and the published work

of numerous analysts. This is what respected commentators believe South Africa has become, and if this is what they think, they will act accordingly. For President Ramaphosa, hoping to convene an international investment conference in March, this is not exactly welcome news.

Nearly 28 years ago, on 10 May 1994, Heads of State from around the world gathered in the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings in Pretoria to witness the swearing-in of Nelson Mandela as South Africa's first democratically elected President. The atmosphere that day was joyful and celebratory: anything seemed possible – reconciliation, rejecting our divided past and building a new nation based on human rights, equality before the

law, democracy and good governance; and being a force for good in Africa and the world.

Sometimes we forget, or many are too young to know, just how perilous the South African state was in the 1980s. Amid the violence, uncertainty, confusion and threats that characterised South Africa's politics in the 1980s, however, there was one constant – the people of South Africa.

The Apartheid government of the time, as well as the exiled ANC and fellow liberation movements, knew it very well. They were well aware that there was no military victory possible or desirable for either side; that the people of this country wanted a peaceful political solution with a legitimate, democratically elected government.

While armed groups were still beating the war-drums, the great majority of the population wanted peace, stability, reconciliation, and a democratic future they were confident was within their grasp. As it turned out, they were right. The sight of Nelson Mandela taking the Oath of Office on 10 May 1994 proved they were right.

#### People will have the last word

Is the South African state in 2022 in danger of collapse? The short answer is no. With all its faults, fractures, and weaknesses, the state is much stronger today than it was in the dark days of the 1980s. At greater risk than in 1994? Yes, but well within the capabilities of the government and civil society to correct. As always, it is the people of South Africa who will have the last word, irrespective of who seeks to destroy their hard-won freedom and democracy.

It is easy to list the litany of governance failures, most of which the ANC government readily acknowledges. It is also easy to compile credible rankings and indices for the deteriorating economic, social, and everyday lived experiences of millions of citizens. They are real. In survey after survey ordinary South Africans voice their frustrations, but the legitimacy of the state does not come into question. People want the state to perform better, not to collapse. And it is they who will determine the outcome.

South Africa is a constitutional democracy, with an independent judiciary, free press, with strong institutions of civil society, and is fundamentally stable. It might not always appear that way. It is often raucous, noisy, confusing, and never easy to govern. South Africa's 'pending collapse' has been confidently (and wrongly) predicted for decades. The people of this country have never allowed it to happen, and there is no realistic sign that they ever will in the foreseeable future.

#### Defied critics for generations

Indeed, even before South Africa was declared a Union in 1910, there were voices of doubt about it ever becoming a viable nation-state. That it subsequently grew to become the economic and industrial powerhouse of the continent defied its critics for generations. Many well-known commentators told us a racial war was inevitable, and when the peaceful transition was successfully made in 1994 they had to pronounce it "a miracle" when their predictions were shown to have been wrong.

There have always been 'gloom-and-doom' naysayers when it comes to South Africa, many from the Global North, where by their own accounts democracy has been suffering a series of embarrassing setbacks. Having lectured, hectored and wagged fingers at South Africa and other developing countries for decades on democracy, human rights, and good governance, perhaps a small dose of humility and self-reflection would do them no harm, and might improve the quality of their predictions.

From divisive politics and voting rights issues in the US, alleged illegal partying in London, to increasing nationalism and tensions in the EU, threats of war in Ukraine, to ongoing violent conflicts in several areas, the world has no shortage of problems that pose systemic challenges to global peace and security. South Africa is not one of them. ■

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Left: President Ramaphosa (c) visiting Maponya Mall on 19 July 2021 during a tour of malls in Soweto to assess the damage caused by looting. South Africa's wave of civil unrest last July caused widespread destruction across KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, and 347 deaths