

OPINION

South Africa what now?

The past week might, in time, be viewed as a watershed moment for South Africa, states *Gerald Garner*. Here he unpacks the context, recounts the events and speculates about the future.

- **Gerald is an avid reader and teacher of history, and author of several books about Johannesburg. Here he provides opinion on, and analyses of, the astonishing week that was 11-17 July 2021.**
- **This article contains many assumptions and impressions of events and their consequences that cannot necessarily be substantiated as the events are still unfolding.**
- **Gerald is known for historic storytelling as part of his JoburgPlaces tours venture and co-operator of Charlie & Gerald's Town Treasure – a restaurant and bar in downtown Johannesburg.**

Sunday 11 to Saturday 17 July 2021 lasted longer than a year. Or that is how it felt. From minute to minute, hour to hour and day to day, the situation in Johannesburg and South Africa continued to change and evolve. The only certainty was uncertainty.

On Wednesday afternoon, 14 July, Charlie and I found ourselves sitting perplexed and confused, feeling nothing but dread. We were sipping takeaway coffee along the immaculate, pedestrianised Main Street in Johannesburg's Marshalltown. While we basked in the sunny, but chilly, highveld winter's afternoon, the city went eerily quiet.

The few people who did venture out, walked, and talked in hushed tones, as if afraid to voice any opinion aloud. At the Capitec bank, a queue of people lined up to draw cash. Normally, people would be chatting loudly and laughing abundantly. But not on Wednesday. People looked scared and defeated.

It was as if the air had been sucked out of the city and we found ourselves in a vacuum. I had only experienced such a hushed moment once before. It was in 1993 when the anti-apartheid struggle hero, Chris Hani was assassinated. South Africa was on the edge of civil war. After years in which a 'third force' spread violence and bloodshed all over the country, the prospect of free and fair elections a year later and of a new democratic dispensation, seemed to have slipped away.

It became clear on that day that certain political groupings had no interest in a compromise, preferring a violent revolution instead. What remained unclear (even till today to some extent) was who were behind the dreadful assassination. The work of a wing within the anti-apartheid movement who did not want to compromise on their radical ideas? Or a right-wing cabal who wanted to return to apartheid? Or perhaps the joint initiative of enemies, united on spreading panic, fear and instigating a bloodbath to benefit their own interests at the expense of everyone else?

Wednesday 14 July 2021 felt exactly like the day Chris Hani died. The realisation that South Africa was, once again, on the precipice of a violent revolution or a bloody civil war, was terrifying. As we sat there and discussed the devastating scenes witnessed since Sunday, it dawned on us that what started off as rioting and the violent looting of shops, had become something much more sinister.

While Joburg's inner-city had returned to a level of calm by then, Durban and the entire KwaZulu-Natal province were burning. Inexplicable events were taking place. It appeared to me that we could truly be experiencing an attempted coup. A carefully planned, plot to destabilise the country, to overthrow the government and to install some alternative form of economy and state.

It was clear that whoever were fuelling the unrest, had an endgame in mind and that strategic planning was at play. The plotters had done their homework and was rolling out a revolution counter-revolution or insurgency of sorts with remarkable efficiency.

Earlier on Wednesday morning, we had already met with our staff and discussed what was happening around us. We talked about Durban being under attack. I mentioned how it first started at shopping malls, but by then had spread to distribution warehouses and even strategic infrastructure such as the port: the busiest hub for importing and exporting of products and resources in South Africa.

The main highway from Durban to Johannesburg had been closed for several days already. Residents of that city were trapped in their suburbs while looting gained terrifying momentum. Not only in the city but also in the rural towns and hinterland of KwaZulu-Natal.

Most worrying was the incredibly weak response from the police, as well as from the national and provincial governments. They seemed unwilling to quell the looting and to stop the damage to infrastructure. We realised how our own city's economy depended on Durban for incoming goods and fuel - transported or piped all the way from the coast to Johannesburg. We worried that supplies could be cut and that we too, could find ourselves in a situation where food and essentials run out. Or that shortages could lead to skyrocketing prices.

We worried not only about our restaurant, but also about surviving, while we might be forced to hide in our homes. We decided to buy as much stock as we could and to cook as many restaurant meals as possible. These we would freeze with the hope of delivering to clients later, or to live from the supplies if a coup were carried out successfully. We realised the danger that would come with living in a state of emergency or under martial law with a military ruler seizing power.

Even while writing on Sunday 18 July, the road ahead remained uncertain. A lot had transpired since Wednesday and the feeling of overall dread had been replaced by some euphoria as masses of South Africans refused to accept defeat. A strange sense of hope abounded. A feisty notion of 'power to the people' reigned supreme.

Thoughts and observations

I have a million thoughts and observations about the historic week. Only a week earlier, we could not had foreseen what we would experience. Even though the warning signs were there for everyone to see, we could not imagine that the situation would deteriorate so rapidly. Just like Covid took over our lives in March 2020, unexpectedly, the perplexing events of July 2021, removed any sense of security.

A week later, with the advantage of hindsight, we can begin to analyse what we experienced. We can identify trends and question the validity of terms such as 'insurrection', 'counter-revolution' and 'coup'. We cannot yet form a complete opinion as much still need to transpire. Time is needed, more 'cards' must be played and the reactions of government, politicians and every South African need to become clear first.

However, from my knowledge of history and my, biased observations of current events, I can already notice some trends. I can apply lessons from the past to make sense of the current. What follows, therefore, is my personal recollection of what I experienced, mixed with opinions and speculations of what happened – and how this could affect the future of all South Africa.

This is not a researched unpacking of the unparalleled historic events, but simply a first attempt to make some sense of it all. I am sure over time, some of my opinions might shift as more information will become available, making it feasible to provide a more objective and informed opinion.

Context and background

For context it is important to mention that prior to all of this, South Africa experienced more than a decade of poor governance and a struggling economy. Looting of the state coffers became commonplace, to the extent that a commission was appointed to investigate the attempt, by a faction of the ruling ANC, to capture the South African economy. This capture it seemed was for the benefit of only a few, while the vast majority were left out in the cold. Not dissimilar to the economic systems of colonial times and the apartheid era when the majority was kept poor with only some (mostly determined by race) tasting wealth then.

South Africa became a democracy in 1994, and a bold vision for an inclusive society with a better future for all, followed. Instead of for a small elite of a certain race group only, South Africa would build a thriving society for every citizen. Much was indeed achieved in this regard since then, especially during the government of Thabo Mbeki when South Africa reached decent economic growth. Yet the spectre of poverty remained omnipresent.

By 2010 South Africa hosted the FIFA Soccer World Cup. This event was perceived as the crowning glory of two decades of infrastructure roll-out and economic growth. It was a moment of euphoria and pride. The generation who came of age during the democratic transition of the 1990s, finally tasted the fruits of their labour. The rainbow nation took pride of place in the world.

Yet by 2010, the economy was already heading for trouble. Jacob Zuma was already the president, and the great project of state capture was already underway. Corruption became commonplace in every level of government and every form of public service. Frustration mounted, especially among the youth who simply could not find a way to be absorbed into the economy.

Many politicians attempted to turn this into a racial issue, accusing the white population of still enjoying the economic advantage they gained under apartheid, while the black population had no prospect for improvement. Yet an ever-growing wealthy, mostly black elite emerged during this time too, joining the established white elite in living an incredible high-society life, unparalleled in most parts of the world. Their quality of life only curtailed by the constant threat of crime.

A diverse, industrial economy

It is crucial to understand that South Africa is Africa's most diverse industrial economy. Industrialisation came to this part of Africa unexpectedly and rapidly in the late 1800s when vast amounts of gold (and later many other mineral resources) were discovered. A devastating war resulted. Fought about gold and control of the economy (Anglo-Boer/South African War of 1899-1902).

South Africa's great industrialisation later gained momentum under the British-aligned Union of South Africa and eventually under the Apartheid Republic too. Of course, this unleashed an ongoing tussle for control of what could become a most lucrative economy.

The impact of the industrial revolution on the world from 1870 onwards is well documented. The emergence of new imperial powers in the early 1900s, all the way to the Cold War and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union are told in many history textbooks. Expansion was driven by the need for access to resources and influence on new markets to offset the manufactured products. Many countries and regions got plundered by the ever-expanding industrial economies of the world.

The self-interests of giant corporations and governments in the industrialised world cannot be ignored. The examples are endless from Britain, France, Japan and the USA expanding into East Asia in the early 20th century, to the Soviet Union controlling Eastern Europe for its own economic benefit after the 2nd World War.

South Africa was to some extent always caught between the powers at play in the industrialising world. The containment of communism versus the expansion thereof, played a significant role in the upholding of the capitalist, free-market apartheid state versus the liberation struggle for a perceived communist-aligned dispensation then proposed by the ANC.

South Africa's liberation from apartheid was finally achieved at the same time as the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. A political compromise resulted in a new constitution and a new vision for the economy. The plan was to adopt a capitalist,

free-market society with social checks and balances, while transforming the economy to benefit everyone.

Opposing views

However, significant powers were at play with crucial interests in South Africa's industrial economy. Often, these powers (from foreign governments and corporations to local political groupings) had opposing views of how the economy should be steered and who should benefit most. Within the ruling party some were in favour of maintaining long-established international relations and economic links, while others argued for a major departure from the past. Once such example was the much flaunted nuclear-energy deal with Russia of which former president Jacob Zuma was a major proponent.

Added to the mix was government's approach to economic transformation, relying on race-based determination of who should benefit through tender and supply opportunities. This did not only apply in terms of dishing out opportunities to the private sector, but also to who got a say within government itself. The ANC's policy of cadre deployment entailed strategic placing of only those loyal to the party in key public service positions. The result was a constant tussle within the governing party between those with opposing views regarding the economy.

Increasingly so, a significant grouping within the ANC proposed that government projects should benefit a new black elite as a priority. Self-interest became the real determining factor. Of course, this was mostly met with outcries about corruption - not only from opposition parties and civil society, but also from many within the ANC who had a different view of how the country should function.

While the governing ANC, and all opposition parties too, wasted most of their energy on the ongoing tussle, little was achieved in creating a new vision for the future or a thriving economy that could genuinely benefit society at large. Increasingly, an ever-growing poor class became frustrated and despondent. Especially so as youth unemployment reached shocking levels. A new generation of South Africans had no hope of participating in the economy and the risk of revolution was repeatedly voiced within politics.

In most democratic countries, a political party with such opposing internal views, would have split a long time ago. But in South Africa the ANC clung to power for over a decade despite the conflict. While Jacob Zuma pushed his faction's agenda, opponents remained quiet, fearful of causing a split which could ultimately result in both factions losing power. Unity was preached. The fear of returning to apartheid bandied around as the excuse for unity above anything else.

As the internal struggle within the ANC continued to flare endlessly, the effectiveness of the state was eroded. Increasingly so, funds were misspent with insufficient focus on providing basic infrastructure and a better quality of life for the country's citizens. Observers warned that the frustrated youth could eventually rise and demand change.

The threat of a potential revolution became the ultimate ball at play within the ANC's struggle for direction. Constitutionality and a free-market economy focused on economic growth, but underpinned by a strong socialist basis on the one hand, or a strong-armed government system that forced change and determined the road ahead as the alternative.

Calculated bet: a manufactured revolution

Things came to a head once former President Jacob Zuma was jailed a week ago for contempt of court, refusing to participate in the Statue Capture enquiry or to heed an order of the Constitutional Court. It seemed that Zuma and his supporters were fast losing control and that it would become viable for President Cyril Ramaphosa to finally take charge.

Those side-lined through commissions of enquiry, constitutional processes, and the application of the law, grew increasingly frustrated. And so, they took a calculated bet: attempt to overthrow the state to implement their version of how South Africa should be governed.

June 2021 was the most opportune time to execute such a plot: a year-and-a-half of Covid-related lockdowns had already decimated the economy. In addition, Jacob Zuma could now be rendered as a martyr, jailed unfairly. At the same time, the youth remained poor and frustrated. Exploit all three and it would be easy to spark unrest, spread panic and force the radical change, they instigators needed.

The plot strategy

It seems as if a carefully orchestrated plot was implemented - and almost succeeded. But why did it apparently fail, so far? And how would this impact the future? To find the answers, I must first speculate about the strategy employed. It is important to acknowledge, though, that the kingpins of the apparent insurgency are not yet confirmed. It is unclear which economic interests are behind the counter-revolution. At this moment it is mere speculation but with obvious trends hinting at the powers at play.

Unrest already started in KwaZulu-Natal and its biggest city - Durban - before Jacob Zuma was arrested. Protesters broke lockdown regulations openly and questioned the validity of the Constitution or the integrity of those who opposed Zuma, boldly. Once Zuma was jailed, they had their first political reason for stoking protest and sparking an uprising.

KwaZulu-Natal was the perfect place to implement the plot. The province had a vast, rural, poor population and a small elite (mostly black) who had benefited significantly from cronyism and the provincial government's tender system. Only Durban had a significant middleclass in this province, but it was not sufficiently racially diverse (mostly white and Indian) to negate the simmering frustrations among the population. While the black elite was massively wealthy, most black people were poor and disregarded.

Any astute strategist would be able to identify how easy it would be to exploit the gap between rich and poor, that also mirrored racial divisions, to create unrest in that province. Use the black poor to gain the outcome the black elite requires, could have been the plan. The elite was desperate to maintain connections to a government that would continue to provide endless opportunities for enrichment. However, those stoking the uprising must possibly were motivated by far greater influences and interests too – those wanting a stake in the industrialised economy.

The plot's first step, it seemed, entailed sending the poor to loot shopping malls and retail outlets. This would result in panic and fear and require a clampdown by private security guards, the police and possibly even the defence force. The goal could have been to focus the attention of security personnel on the malls. While the malls were overwhelmed, the plotters would then send the richer provincial elite to loot warehouses further afield. They would arrive by luxury 4x4s and bakkies and cart away the loot without resistance. Once security forces were spread, armed groups would sabotage strategic infrastructure within the province – such as the harbour and major transport routes. Eventually, they hoped, this would bring the government to its knees and provide the opportunity to complete a successful coup. If not nationally, at least within KZN but with dire consequences for the rest of the country.

The plot possibly went much further. The instigators may have hoped that the president would over-react and send in the security forces to brutally quell the violence. With the police and military pouring into KZN, the ensuing bloodbath would be blamed on Ramaphosa as proof that he was Mr Marikana. This would have been sufficient reason to force Ramaphosa to step down and for the opposing faction of the ANC to take control.

Even more far-fetched, but not at all impossible, could be that the plotters hoped to divert most of the military and police force to KZN, leaving the key, strategic military infrastructure, in Pretoria and Cape Town, without sufficient defence. In this way a military coup could easily be completed.

What is also possible, is that the marches and looting staged in the Johannesburg's inner-city on Sunday 11 June, were merely a strategic distraction. Most of South Africa's media, based in Johannesburg would focus on the violence there. So would the police and eventually the military. In the meantime, it would leave Durban in a vacuum where looting continued without retaliation by the police or military and with little media coverage too.

This theory is plausible, considering how the looting in Joburg started with a force of looters originating from the apartheid-era migrant hostels in the east of town. They marched into the city to spread mayhem and fear. It was not the people living in the inner-city who looted, but a force sent in with strict instructions of what to do. It was the same modus-operandi used in 2019 during a spree of xenophobic violence. Who paid and arranged this 'looting army' to instigate anarchy?

A weak response

By Monday, news spread of the scale of looting that had reached the townships around Johannesburg too. By then, the entire KwaZulu-Natal, was under attack, it seemed. The situation was out of control. The response of the police forces seemed inadequate. They stood aside and let the looting continue unabated in many instances.

In Durban, suburbanites formed security committees and unofficial, almost vigilante groupings defended their properties and infrastructure. Soon word spread of racial targeting. Was a full-scale race war ensuing? While no race-motivated killing of an innocent person could ever be condoned, the stoking of racial hatred seemed to be co-ordinated. Especially on social media where horrific video footage was shared. Almost as if planted to prove a point.

Ramaphosa responded with a disappointingly weak speech on Sunday 11 July. He focused on the Covid pandemic and lockdown regulations. The looting and violence of the day were merely mentioned at the end. It felt like he had no idea of the fear and anarchy people on the ground experienced. Added to that he mentioned the possibility of a tribalist agenda behind the looting. Did he try to pour fuel on the fire? Was he in on the plot to force change by spreading mayhem?

By Monday night, Ramaphosa gave yet another speech while the violence and looting continued unabated, especially in KZN. He repeated the threat of ethnic or tribal motives behind the violence. Only by Tuesday, did he announce that the Defense Force would be deployed. But with merely 2500 troops, split between Gauteng and KZN.

The lack-luster police response and the small military deployment hinted that Ramaphosa was completely out of touch with reality. Or was he merely pretending to react, while he had no real interest in calming the situation? Was he and his faction, or the entire ANC government for that matter, busy with a plot to force change in the country?

Even more worrying was a scenario in which many within the police force and army had already defected to an opposing side. Loyal to the coup leader who would emerge as the new President once the plot had succeeded. Was Ramaphosa therefore able to only assemble 2500 loyal troops?

It was with all these scenarios and plots in my head that I contemplated what was ahead for our country while drinking coffee with Charlie on Wednesday afternoon. The sense of fear, dread and hopelessness was overwhelming.

The people respond

But something changed during Wednesday afternoon. And significantly so on Thursday. It was as if the people of South Africa said 'enough'. The shock and horror with which so many viewed what was happening, following every post on Facebook, Twitter, radio, and TV, was simply overwhelming. But increasingly, South Africans realised the devastating impact of this situation would have on their own lives.

How would they benefit once the looting and burning were over? They began to understand that they could have been used by those who wanted to exploit the deep structural problems in our society and economy, only for their own benefit. The plotters would not worry about the impact on the masses or the poor, shot dead in the ensuing bloodbath. They would not care about those who had to live without access to food, fuel, and anything else. Slowly the word started spreading that this was an attempted coup or a major insurrection with evil intentions.

What do I think brought about this change in attitude? The coup plotters simply, completely underestimated the size, extent, and diversity of the middleclass of Johannesburg and Gauteng Province. It did not take long for the community of Soweto to start protecting the remaining mall in that part of the city.

In Durban neighbourhoods, community patrols defended their suburbs, homes, and shops from looters. In Johannesburg and Pretoria, the taxi association assumed the role of the police and military and protected malls and infrastructure. The coup plotters did not foresee this reaction from the people. They expected the masses to rise-up and join the mayhem. And to get a harsh reaction of the police and the military. They expected to create a bloodbath.

But the middleclass of Gauteng wanted nothing of that. They wanted to carry on with their lives. They wanted to recover from the Covid pandemic and achieve the successes they dreamed of. They wanted to send their children to school and live the life that South Africa promised all along.

Could it be that the president relied on his immense stature as a businessman and a trade unionist to negotiate with the taxi associations behind the scenes? Did he convince them that they had too much to lose? That their own middleclass lives would be under threat if the looting and unrest continued? Or did 27 years of democratic dispensation, in Gauteng at least, produce a sufficiently sizable and racially diverse middleclass that genuinely had too much to lose? Could it be the partial success of the South African economy and transformation since 1994 that saved us from this radical and violent insurrection?

It certainly was the vast middleclass of Johannesburg and later also the smaller middleclass of Durban that spearheaded the defence. They poured into the streets and the malls and started fixing and cleaning the mess. Anyone who had a stake in the economy and a prospect of a better future decided that enough was enough. They would not be intimidated. They would clean up and try again. It was too much for them to contemplate a country destroyed.

This is more or less what I believe happened. I believe that this crisis could be a catalyst that would put South Africa on a new trajectory. People of all races, all income groups and all communities are coming together to provide assistance, supplies, clean ups and to help return calm. All South Africans have been left somewhat traumatized and shocked. We came so close to complete collapse, but our resilience is what has saved us.

We cannot lower our guard though. The lesson is that South Africans must work much harder – and with many more practical plans - to grow a vast middleclass all over the country – in all cities and rural areas. The risk remains that an ever-growing young population could be left hopeless, without a change to participate in the economy. And this would leave the perfect gap for a tyrant, dictator, or fascist to take control. Under the guise of a 'Make South Africa Great Again' campaign they could unleash their devastation.

We need massive change in South Africa, and we do not dare to rely on politicians for this change any longer. It is civil society that must take charge – as has been the case in recent days.

While we await with abated breath to see what unfolds next, and while Ramaphosa could indeed become the hero who did not overreact and who averted a military coup by holding the police back to avoid a bloodbath, he must know that civil society will not accept that both factions of his party continue in government.

Now is the time for each and every economically active citizen to step up and to become part of the effort to build a large and diverse middleclass. It is no longer up to government. It is only up to us.

Three things stand out for me that gives me hope during this drama:

1. President Cyril Ramaphosa played his cards and showed us where he stood. He stayed calm amidst the turmoil. He may have given two lacklustre speeches at the beginning of the week while buying time, but he appears to have grasped the severity of the situation. He made sure that the police and military did not overreact and did not add fuel to the fire. He did eventually increase the deployment of the military to 25 000 but under strict control.
2. He resisted the call to institute a State of Emergency. He showed his commitment to a constitutional democracy in which the rights of citizens are protected. He has been unwilling to sacrifice peoples' rights in a situation where the military and police could act by brute force and without consequence.
3. The middleclass of South Africa has shown that they want to live in a successful country and that they are not willing to give up their freedoms and rights. I also believe we as a nation today understand how crucial it is to expand the middleclass exponentially.

In a follow-up article, I will focus on concrete steps we could take as a nation to build a large and diverse middleclass. It is essential to learn from the past. Gorbachev, for one, found himself in 1991 in a situation where he had to disband the USSR. His attempts at Openness (Glassnost) and Restructuring (Perestroika) came too late and failed to save one of the world's largest powers from collapse. The mistake the USSR made was to overspend on the military, intelligence, and the nuclear arms race while neglecting the provision of basic infrastructure and services such as healthcare to its citizens. Eventually the people had enough. In South Africa we need to halt the growth of a tiny wealthy elite and a massive poor underclass. South Africa could still head there, but I believe the people of this country want a better future.

And so it is. Amandla! Awetju! Power to the People. Here is to the rise of a large, stable and diverse middleclass with a successful economy and an acceptable quality of life available to everyone.

- Gerald Garner, Sunday 18 July 2021.