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YOUTH POWER

Move over millennials and Gen Z: the Alphas are here

The most powerful force in politics," Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, "are the battalions of time."

If this seems an endorsement of the power of the youth to make history, social scientists warn us to distinguish between "cohort" effects on the behaviour of youth – changes to the conditions in which a generation of young people are socialised – and "life-cycle" effects – the extent to which the passage of a generation to adulthood frees forces that change society.

Disentangling the two is no



YACOOB ABBA OMAR

mean challenge, and for now let us say it's a bit of both.

Since the beginning of the 20th century six somewhat US-centric generations have been identified.

The Greatest Generation, born between 1901 and 1924, was followed by The Silent Generation born between 1925

and 1945. The better-known Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, include Tony Blair, Hillary and Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, while their local equivalents include Kgalema Motlanthe, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Cyril Ramaphosa, Joël Ntshenzhe, Zweli Mkhize and Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi.

The cohort born between 1965 and 1979 was dubbed Gen X to depict "this unknown generation". Its successor, Generation Y (1980 to 1995), became more appropriately known, given their arriving at adulthood in the 2000s, as the millennials.

The use of the internet helped them consolidate their

grip on technology, and unsurprisingly includes Mark Zuckerberg, while in SA we would include the late Nkosi Johnson, Julius Malema, Ronald Lamola and leaders of the #FeesMustFall movement and some legislators, such as Nongpendulo Mkhathshwa and Faesha Hassan.

Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2009) is said to embody hope for a new world and undoing their parents' mistakes, such as climate degradation and the great financial crisis of 2008.

Prominent activist Gen Zs are Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai, while locally we have Sanele Junior Xaba, Imraan

Christian, and Zulaikha Patel.

The Alphas is the generation of 2010 to 2025, the true digital natives who are often referred to as the iGen given that the iPad was released in 2010. They are expected to be deeply transformative and their occupations will include cybersecurity specialists, drone pilots, blockchain developers, urban farmers and space tourism agents.

The Indulamithi Barometer tracks which direction a representative sample of South Africans thinks the country is moving in.

The results, released in June 2020, showed that the over 55-age cohort overwhelmingly

(86%) sees the country already in or moving towards Gwara Gwara – that is, the worst-case scenario ("Thinking through scenarios can drive a new SA social compact", May 31).

At the other end, 32% of the under 25-age group see the country moving towards NaviLe Vaik, which imagines a South Africa where the hopes of the National Development Plan are achieved by 2030, and 38% towards Gwara Gwara.

Deloitte's global Millz Mood index, released in 2020, measuring the extent to which millennials and Gen Zs are optimistic about the world, shows the SA cohort to be more positive than their global peers

at 47%, even though for millennials it had come down by five percentage points.

What accounts for this relative positivity among SA's youth?

This could be an effect of the scepticism of the over 55-year-olds that their post-1994 expectations have been met.

On the other hand, SA youth's optimism – even compared to their global peers – may be a greater recognition that the future is in their hands.

Perhaps the most important pointer is race, drawing lines between different communal experiences and expectations of democracy: the youth cohort is overwhelmingly black.

According to the Indulamithi Barometer black Africans, at 28%, are the most optimistic, followed by Indians at 25%, coloureds at 19% and whites at 8%.

The release of the 2021 Indulamithi Barometer should be watched to assess the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has had an effect on South African and especially the youth's, expectations of the future.

● Abba Omar is director of operations at the *Magangubane Institute*. Details on the *Indulamithi Barometer* can be found on the website, sasenarios2030.co.za