

**STATE OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN STATE:
CAPABILITY, CAPACITY AND ETHICS
Prelaunch Webinar
Joel Netshitenzhe
27 February 2025**

SETTING THE SCENE

The state of the South African state is among research areas to which MISTRA has paid focussed attention in the past 15 years. In 2013, we published *Essays on the evolution of the post-apartheid state: Legacies, reforms and prospects*.

Since then, most of the thirty-two books that we have published – be they on pedagogy of mathematics, low-carbon transition, the global hydrogen economy, epidemics, the structure of the economy and, more recently, on coalitions, innovation and migration – all reference the role and capacity of the state.

This is because the state is the most concentrated expression of power in any society. It defines the character of social relations as a law-maker and enforcer, a regulator, an owner of massive assets, an investor, a consumer...and much much more.

This applies more so in a transforming society such as ours.

It is in this context that MISTRA sought, once more, to interrogate the state of the South African state, against the backdrop of three decades of democratic experience.

The earlier publication dealt with conceptual debates about the definition of the state, how it relates to social classes, and the elusive question about identifying the ruling class in the context of national liberation and the aspiration to build a developmental state.

Many of these debates can never really be settled. And so, the current manuscript examines issues such as the existence or otherwise of a vision, popular legitimacy, organisational capacity and technical acumen.

To frame the issues, an attempt is made to examine the organisational underpinnings of development planning, as well as efforts to build an effective centre of government and set up a pilot agency.

Nothing illustrates the absence of effective integration and the gap between strategic planning and resource allocation, than the events of last Wednesday. Poor alignment in terms of technocratic logic, political savviness and emotional intelligence were laid bare for all to see.

Interestingly, one of the earlier chapters in this manuscript deals with the issues which are currently in contention: how the state acquires and spends resources. Questions are also posed about embedded autonomy – and the meanings and forms of state capture.

The diffusion of power among various agencies of the state is also a matter of interest – from a spatial context across the spheres in the form of subsidiarity and asymmetry; the role of the

judiciary; the aspirations of traditional leadership; and the broad understanding of security beyond the role of the state as the legitimate bearer of arms.

Given the degradation of state capacity over the past decade, there is also a need to look closely at the state delivery machinery, beyond the necessary focus on ethics and punishing lawbreakers.

Further, if people-centred and people-driven development is to find concrete expression, the state of civil society cannot be divorced from the state of the state.

This issue also arises in the context of the complex global environment within which South Africa has to operate.

The state must take into account changes in global production chains and trade, and growing nationalism across the globe – trends that have been developing over time.

And things seem to have taken a turn for the worse with the new United States administration, which in many respects suggests not only crude selfish interest, but also the promotion of white supremacist ideology. South Africa may feel especially targeted. But many more victims across the globe are feeling the flailing hand of US right-wing populism: including state employees in the US itself, the global business community, centrist parties in Europe, and the people of Palestine. Some have even suggested that MAGA in the South African context has in fact become Make Apartheid Great Again!

How the South African state navigates this global environment is a matter of statecraft, diplomacy, and economic strategy. At one level, the state and the private sector have to develop appropriate responses; at another level, it is necessary to build a wide array of alliances across the globe, including civil society.

The manuscript on the State of the South African state seeks to elucidate these complex matters; and we hope today's discussion will help enrich that discourse and further engagements going forward.

END