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South Africa: state of the nation 30 years into democracy

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Just over 30 years after South Africa's first democratic elections, public opinion is divided over how to evaluate the post-apartheid, democratic state. Characterisations range from "failed or failing state", to "mafia state" to the more optimistic "developmental state" committed to addressing historical patterns of injustice through decisive state intervention.

The characterisations vary so widely because interpretations of the state are shaped not only by a complex empirical reality but also by competing theoretical and ideological perspectives. Some parts of the state appear dysfunctional, marked by failure, corruption, or capture. Others are viewed as evolving, contested, or in need of transformation. The perspective depends on the framework of analysis applied.

Theoretical approaches reinforce these divisions. Some emphasise state failure and breakdowns. Some highlight illicit networks and patronage. Others focus on whether the state is supported by strong institutions and leadership, has the necessary operational know-how, or operates within a clear ethical matrix.

These overlapping dimensions produce divergent conclusions. To some, the proverbial glass is half empty, while to others it is half full.

The ongoing debate about the successes and failures of the South African state is the subject of a book that followed a call for papers in 2023 – The State of the South African State: Capability, Capacity and Ethics.

The book poses the question of whether South Africa's future lies in hope or despair. Contributors cover a range of themes through the lens of a range of disciplines in the social sciences. The themes include financing of the state's responsibilities, managing the energy transition, water provision, the political economy, foreign policy, the state of the security sector, traditional leadership, the role of civil society and the capacity of the public service.

Capacity, capability and ethics

In assessing the state's performance, the book addresses three interdependent components: capacity, capability and ethics.

Capacity refers to the state's institutional make-up (its tangible infrastructure).

Capability refers to the means at the society's disposal to enable the state to deliver on its mandate. It includes the operational know-how, including how effectively the state uses its resources.

Ethics refers to the behaviours displayed by those entrusted with leadership and implementation responsibilities across the state.

A state with ample capacity and high capability but lacking in ethical grounding may misuse its resources. This leads to corruption and public disillusionment. Conversely, strong ethical commitments without sufficient capacity or capability may result in well-intentioned but ineffective policies.

When ethics guide the accumulation of capacity as well as the effective, strategic use of those resources, the state is more likely to fulfil its public mandate and uphold constitutional values.

Historical evolution

The volume situates this framework within broader theoretical debates. It explains how past and present challenges (such as state capture or institutional decay) have emerged. It also charts a pathway for renewal.

The democratic South African state's formal evolution has passed through four phases:

- transition and transformation (1994-1999)
- policy orientation and compromise (mid-1990s to early 2000s)
- erosion and institutional decay (2008-2018)
- attempts at recovery and renewal (2019-July 2024)
- the government of national unity agenda (July 2024 to present).

In the immediate post-1994 era, the state transformed its capacity. It replaced apartheid-era structures with new bodies designed to uphold constitutional principles and reflect democratic values.

The guiding ethical operating system was strong. Ideals of dignity, equality, and inclusivity were central to the nation-building project. This set the stage for policies intended to redress historical injustices, even if practical know-how was still maturing.

In the second phase of state-building (after the first five years of democracy) there was a shift from the initial promise of the Reconstruction and Development Programme towards a market-oriented approach. This policy change was an attempt to manage economic realities through market mechanisms. But some policy actors saw it as a betrayal of the poor and the working class.

During this period, the ethical underbelly began to show signs of strain. As pragmatic and market-driven ideas took precedence, some of the original ethical commitments were diluted. These included broad-based development and social justice. This contributed to compromises that would later affect public trust.

In the third phase from about 2009 onwards, the state's institutional capacity suffered from high levels of mismanagement and poor oversight. The robustness of institutions was undermined by chronic neglect and corruption.

State capture and corruption impaired the state's ability to use its capacity effectively. The result was policy failures. This made it more difficult to meet social and economic challenges.

The weakening of accountability allowed unethical practices to flourish. It also undermined the very ideas that had originally set the state on a path of inclusive development.

In the phases that followed reform efforts focused on rebuilding operational capacity. There were attempts to improve administrative efficiency and strategic planning, and build compacts for social change and redress.

Measures were introduced – albeit gradually – to reinforce accountability and transparency. The aim was to renew the social compact between the state and society around inclusive growth and accountability.

After the 2024 national and provincial government elections, the African National Congress (ANC) had to form a unity government in July 2024. Since then, there has been a renewed effort to strengthen the state's capacity. The unity government's agenda places some emphasis on improving operational efficiency and strategic planning.

Hope or despair?

Despite both domestic and international pressures, including a change in administration in the US, recent unity government efforts highlight that a positive turnaround is possible, though it is far from guaranteed.

The framework set out in the book suggests that building an effective, capable and developmental depends on:

- bolstering institutional capacity
- improving the effective use of resources
- embedding strong ethical standards into all levels of state activity.

To some observers, the post-apartheid state was doomed to failure from the start, due to the negotiated settlement that brought it about. To others, the legitimacy of the state has been eroded by poor policy choices, and that's why it now faces a polycrisis.

And to others, the state has been captured and repurposed by opportunistic and self-serving forces.

Understanding the state of the South African state is contested territory. And probably will be for a long time to come.

The upcoming book was the subject of a webinar hosted by the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection, MISTRA, earlier this year: A YouTube recording of the webinar can be found here.