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Post-Mandela's South Africa: A Legacy Betrayed?

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Abstract

The transition of South Africa from a structurally institutionalized racial autocratic Apartheid system to a constitutional democracy in 1994 stands as one of the defining triumphs of late twentieth-century diplomacy. Under the ethical stewardship of Nelson Mandela, the "Rainbow Nation" was conceptualized as a vanguard of human rights, Pan-African solidarity, and socio-economic transformation. Three decades succeeding this democratic dawn, this academic paper evaluates the sociopolitical and economic trajectory of post-apartheid South Africa, analyzing whether the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has compromised the egalitarian vision of its founding father. The study explores how systemic corruption, economic stagnation, and governance failures have fractured Mandela's non-racial, inclusive ideal. The strategic fragmentation of national identity, marked by the political manipulation of tribal loyalties and Zulu nationalism, particularly visible in the rise of the uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party and internal ANC factionalism. The escalation of violent anti-foreigner sentiment and vigilante movements, often fueled by populist political rhetoric that scapegoats African and Asian migrants for systemic socio-economic failures. The failure of post-apartheid economic frameworks to dismantle extreme wealth disparities, resulting in severe youth unemployment and crumbling state infrastructure. The study concludes that South Africa's current crises represent a profound betrayal of Mandela's legacy. This betrayal is manifested not only in economic inequality but in the erosion of the social fabric. By resorting to ethnic mobilization and xenophobic scapegoating, contemporary political actors have replaced Mandela's vision of universal human dignity with divisive identity politics to mask governance failures.

Keywords: Post-Apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela's Legacy, State Capture, Xenophobia, Ethnic Politics

Introduction

The history of South Africa is a profound narrative of cultural convergence, colonial conquest, racial segregation, institutionalized oppression, and ultimate liberation. Populated by the indigenous

San and Khoekhoe peoples for millennia, the trajectory of the region shifted permanently in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company established a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope. From the early contact, European settlement expanded with the Dutch, German, and French Huguenot settlers gradually coalesced into a distinct cultural identity known as Boers or Afrikaners. The discovery of diamonds in Kimberley (1867) and gold on the Witwatersrand (1886) ignited aggressive British imperialism. The desire to control these immense mineral riches culminated in the brutal Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) (Volpi, 2023). Following the British victory, the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 as a self-governing dominion. This new political union consolidated white minority rule at the explicit expense of the Black majority.

In 1948, the Afrikaner-dominated National Party came to power and institutionalized apartheid a highly formalized system of racial segregation and white supremacy.

Resistance to this tyranny was fierce and unrelenting. Led by liberation movements like the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), South Africans organized decades of strikes, defiance campaigns, and armed resistance. Key leaders, including Nelson Mandela, were jailed, while others were exiled or killed.

The year 1990 marked a turning point in the history of South Africa. After decades of the apartheid regime, President F.W. de Klerk unbanned liberation movements and released Nelson Mandela from prison. In April 1994, South Africa held its first fully democratic, non-racial election, with Nelson Mandela elected as the first president of a multi-racial South Africa, ushering in the era of the "Rainbow Nation."

When Nelson Mandela assumed the presidency of South Africa on May 10, 1994, his inaugural address offered a secular covenant to a historically fractured society: *"Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another."* (Mandela, 1994). This vision was deeply intertwined with the indigenous African philosophy of *Ubuntu* the ontological assertion that human existence is fundamentally interdependent and an unwavering commitment to Pan-African exceptionalism. The South African transition was celebrated globally as a masterclass in negotiated democratization, substituting a potentially catastrophic racial war with a progressive, rights-based constitutional framework (Tereblanche, 2002).

Emerging from the crucible of three centuries of colonial subjugation and forty-six years of institutionalized apartheid system of racial segregation, the nascent democratic state was heralded as a geopolitical miracle. Mandela's inaugural address established a secular covenant for a deeply fractured populace, declaring that the country would henceforth become a "Rainbow Nation" anchored by human dignity, non-racialism, and a progressive, rights-based legal framework. The South African transition was celebrated not merely as the defeat of a repressive racial autocracy, but as the dawn of an exemplary global model for peaceful conflict resolution and democratic transformation.

Three decades later, the structural optimism that defined the 1994 transition has largely decayed into a profound, multifaceted institutional and social crisis. Indeed, post- Mandela's South African political polarization amounts to obliteration of noble ideals of a multi-racial South Africa, a "Rainbow Nation" anchored on human dignity, non-racialism, and a progressive, rights-based legal framework. which Nelson Mandela and other great leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) lived, fought and died for. The fracturing of Mandela's dream through two distinct yet structurally interrelated phenomena: the persistent undercurrents of intra-community and the explosive,

recurring waves of xenophobic violence directed against fellow African nationals, undermined the moral and Pan-African foundations of Mandela's legacy. In post-Mandela's South Africa, the legacy has been deeply compromised, leaving the country to stand not as a realized beacon of liberation, but as a tragic constitutional monument to a historical opportunity squandered (Seekings and Nuttall, 2015). With the rise of militant ethno-tribal vigilantism, localized political assassinations, and the systematic scapegoating of foreign migrants by populist political elites in post-Mandela's South Africa, the moral and Pan-African foundations of the Mandela era have indeed experienced a profound betrayal.

The soaring promises of the liberation struggle guaranteeing universal access to economic dignity, qualitative education, security, and healthcare have been systematically undermined by a predatory political culture. This decay culminated in the era of "State Capture," a process of systemic institutional plunder that hollowed out state-owned enterprises, crippled key regulatory bodies, and paralyzed vital public infrastructure (Von Holdt, 2013).

The Challenge of Leadership in Post-Apartheid South Africa

The transition of South Africa from the institutionalized violence of apartheid to a multi-racial democracy in 1994 remains one of the modern world's most celebrated political triumphs. It was a transition anchored by transcendent moral authority most notably exemplified by Nelson Mandela. However, the subsequent decades have exposed a stark, painful dichotomy: while the country successfully established a highly progressive constitution, its political leadership has consistently stumbled when translating constitutional ideals into material realities, an unprecedented betrayal of the cherished ideals Mandela lived and fought for during his lifetime. In post-apartheid South Africa, the challenge of leadership is not merely administrative; it is existential. A fundamental hurdle in post-apartheid governance has been the complex transition from a liberation movement to a modern governing party. For over three decades, the African National Congress (ANC) has ruled South Africa, deeply reliant on its historic legitimacy as the vanquisher of white minority rule. Liberation ethics foster deep internal networks of loyalty. In a governance context, this has frequently manifested as "cadre deployment" the practice of prioritizing political allegiance over professional competence when filling state institutions (Misago, 2019). Early leaders like Mandela and Walter Sisulu set an exacting standard of self-sacrifice. Over time, this revolutionary discipline mutated. As opined by Crash and Ramachandran (2015), a younger generation of politicians has increasingly viewed access to state machinery as a mechanism for personal enrichment and class mobility, creating a deep ideological rift within the ruling elite. South African leadership operates within the crucible of what economists term the "triple challenge": extreme unemployment, deep poverty, and staggering inequality. Leaders have perpetually swung between neoliberal macroeconomic policies designed to attract foreign investment and populist demands for aggressive state-led redistribution. This policy oscillation has historically paralyzed decisive economic planning.

With a national unemployment rate consistently hovering near or above 30% and youth unemployment exceeding 50% South African leadership has failed to dismantle the spatial and educational barriers inherited from apartheid. The result is a highly volatile social environment marked by frequent service delivery protests and periodic bursts of xenophobic violence. The most severe crisis of leadership in the post-apartheid era emerged during the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009–2018), characterized by the phenomenon known as "State Capture." This was not routine corruption; it was a systematic, criminal project to repurpose organs of the state to serve private

commercial interests most notably those of the corporate Gupta family (Mckenzie, 2023). Critical institutions including the national prosecuting authority, the tax collector, and vital state-owned enterprises like Eskom (the power utility) and Transnet (freight rail) were systematically stripped of ethical leadership and technical expertise. The legacy of this era remains highly visible today. Subsequent leadership has been forced into constant crisis management, grappling with a crippled electricity grid and deteriorating logistics networks that directly stifle macroeconomic growth.

For the first thirty years of democracy, South African leadership was largely synonymous with the centralized will of the ANC. However, the historic national elections in May 2024 fundamentally altered this dynamic, signaling a definitive shift into a post-liberation, multi-polar political landscape. Stripped of its absolute majority, the ANC was forced to form a broad coalition government the Government of National Unity (GNU) comprising historic ideological rivals like the Democratic Alliance (DA). Modern South African leaders can no longer govern by decree or rely solely on liberation nostalgia. They must master the delicate art of coalition building, legislative compromise, and ideological pragmatism to maintain stability. The core test is whether this new model of distributed leadership can deliver efficient governance or if it will degenerate into chronic bureaucratic gridlock. The trajectory of post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates that the skills required to dismantle an oppressive regime are fundamentally different from those required to build an equitable, thriving democracy. The initial phase of leadership successfully forged a unified nation from the ashes of racial segregation; however, the subsequent phase has struggled under the weight of entitlement, economic inertia, and compromised ethics.

The African National Congress (ANC): A House Divided

The African National Congress (ANC) is Africa's oldest liberation movement and has been the dominant political force in South Africa since the dawn of democracy in 1994. For decades, it operated as a disciplined, monolithic entity capable of marshaling millions of votes through its historic moral authority. However, three decades into governance, the party of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu has fundamentally fractured. Today, the ANC is a house deeply divided against itself. The internal cohesion that once allowed it to defeat apartheid has been replaced by bitter factionalism, ideological incoherence, and a desperate struggle for survival. This internal warfare is no longer confined to party conferences; it has spilled into the open, crippling state governance and culminating in the historic loss of the party's absolute national majority in the 2024 elections.

At the heart of the ANC's division is a profound identity crisis regarding how to handle South Africa's stagnant economy and extreme inequality. The party has split into two main ideological and political camps. On one side is a faction known as "the centrists" led by President Cyril Ramaphosa. This faction champions constitutional supremacy, market-friendly economic policies, and institutional anti-corruption reforms. They view the stabilization of state institutions and the attraction of foreign investment as the only viable path to growth. On the other hand, the populist, left-leaning faction led by Nkosentsha Shezi, argues that the ANC has sold out its revolutionary goals. They advocate for aggressive state intervention, including land expropriation without compensation and the nationalization of the South African Reserve Bank. While prominent leaders like former President Jacob Zuma and former Secretary-General Ace Magashule were systematically purged or left the party, the populist sentiment remains deeply embedded among many rank-and-file members of the African National Congress (ANC) (Buthelezi, 2024).

The glue that historically held the ANC's disparate factions together was access to state power and state resources. As the party's ideological vision blurred, political office became a mechanism for personal enrichment and class mobility. This shift transformed internal party contests from debates over policy into fierce turf wars over patronage networks. To combat rampant corruption, the party introduced the controversial "Step-Aside" rule, which mandates that any ANC official charged with corruption or serious crimes must step down from party and government duties (Bond, 2014). While designed to restore public trust, the rule deeply divided the house. Ousted figures and their supporters vehemently claimed the rule was being selectively weaponized by the dominant faction to politically execute rivals, deepening internal paranoia and distrust. The direct consequence of this chronic internal division manifested strongly in national and provincial elections losses suffered by the ANC in post-Mandela's era. Stripped of its unified message and hobbled by the departure of Jacob Zuma into the newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party, the ANC's support collapsed to an unprecedented 40% in the 2024 General election (Maseko, 2025}. The decision by the ANC leadership to form the Government of National Unity (GNU) with the DA and other smaller parties, further polarized the party. While this move stabilized the national government, it created a permanent fault line within the ANC. Left-wing factions within the party and its traditional alliance partners the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) openly view the GNU as an unholy alliance that betrays the working-class roots of the liberation movement.

The dramatic rise of the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party) has fundamentally reshaped South Africa's post-apartheid political landscape. At the core of its explosive growth lies a potent, controversial blend of ethnic mobilization, populist frustration, and liberation nostalgia. Understanding the intersection of tribal politics and the emergence of the MK Party requires examining how ethnic identity has been leveraged against the failures of the modern democratic state. When former President Jacob Zuma launched and backed the MK Party in late 2023, it naturally activated deep-seated ethnic and regional dynamics. Zuma has historically positioned himself as a traditionalist grounded in Zulu culture. This cultural authenticity contrasts sharply with the perception of his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, whom critics label a westernized, corporate leader. The MK Party initially achieved its most staggering success in KZN. By implicitly portraying Zuma's historical legal battles and ousting from the presidency as a collective marginalization of the Zulu people, the party tapped into a powerful undercurrent of regional grievance (Meyiwa, 2025).

The MK Party's manifesto directly targets conservative, traditionalist values. It explicitly advocates for shifting more constitutional power to aristocratic traditional leaders and traditional courts, which appeals directly to rural communities that feel isolated by South Africa's highly progressive legal system. While critics initially dismissed the MK Party as a narrow, Zulu-nationalist project, its evolution has proven it to be a broader national challenge. Political analysts note that the party successfully expanded beyond KZN because it fused ethnic pride with radical economic populism. By adopting the name and iconography of the ANC's defunct apartheid-era military wing (*uMkhonto weSizwe* "Spear of the Nation"), the party did something psychologically potent. It told disillusioned Black South Africans that the *current* ANC had abandoned the revolution, and that the MK Party was the true home of unfinished Black liberation. The party's platform resonates with urban and rural poor across multiple demographic lines. Pledging to expropriate all land without compensation and replace constitutional supremacy with absolute parliamentary majority rule appeals heavily to those left behind by thirty years of democratic economic stagnation.

Tribal and identity politics rarely succeed in a vacuum; they feed on material failure. The MK Party's rapid rise was fueled by the same "triple challenge" (unemployment, poverty, inequality) that has dogged post-apartheid leadership. Zuma's campaign capitalized masterfully on the ongoing water crises, municipal collapses, and the historical trauma of Eskom's rolling blackouts (loadshedding). For many voters, ethnic solidarity became a safer, more reliable social safety net than a failing, bureaucratic state. The MK Party has systematically hollowed out other populist forces, drawing a steady stream of defectors from the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and disaffected, anti-Ramaphosa factions within the ANC. The MK Party remains actively hostile to the current ANC-led Government of National Unity (GNU). The rise of the MK Party demonstrates that in the face of persistent economic exclusion, identity and traditionalism remain highly effective tools for political mobilization. By transforming a regional ethnic sentiment into a national populist crusade, the party has challenged the constitutional foundations of post-apartheid South Africa, changing the country's politics from a story of single-party dominance by the ANC to a volatile, unpredictable multi-polar struggle (Buthelezi, 2024).

As the ANC navigates its fractured existence, its local branches have become hotbeds of instability, frequently characterized by political assassinations over council nominations, municipal mismanagement, and public protests (Volpi, 2025). The contemporary African National Congress perfectly illustrates the classic political tragedy of a liberation movement unable to transition into a cohesive governing party. The unifying bond of fighting apartheid has dissolved, exposing a chaotic collection of competing business interests, regional tribal alignments, and ideological extremes. The ANC can no longer rely on the nostalgia of the past to mask its internal civil war. As long as its leaders remain preoccupied with fighting one another for control of a shrinking political empire, they cannot effectively govern a nation in desperate need of decisive leadership. For the ANC, the division is no longer a temporary crisis; it is a structural reality that will either force a painful reinvention or cement its decline as a fractured relic of history.

The Rise of Ethnic Politics, Xenophobia and Scapegoating in Post-Mandela South Africa

Following the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency in 1999, South Africa's political landscape shifted from his foundational ideal of a non-racial "Rainbow Nation" to a new infamous era of ethnic-based politics. While the country's progressive constitution purposefully avoids recognizing ethnic quotas, ethnic politics has quietly evolved from an undercurrent into a primary driver of political mobilization, factionalism, and electoral outcomes. A critical evaluation of ethnic politics in post-Mandela South Africa reveals a complex interplay between political opportunism, deep socio-economic anxieties, and a fracturing liberation movement. In the immediate post-apartheid era, scholars frequently classified South African elections as a mere "racial or ethnic census," assuming Black South Africans would vote exclusively for the African National Congress (ANC), whites and minority groups for the Democratic Alliance (DA), and Zulus for the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (Seekings and Nuttall, 2015).

Post-Mandela voting behaviour has proven far more fluid. As urban areas expanded and a Black middle class emerged, class, generational divides, and government performance began to eclipse ethnic loyalty. However, ethnic identities have not disappeared; instead, they are selectively weaponized by political elites when centralized patronage networks fail. Under Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, the ANC strictly maintained its historical, pan-African ethos, intentionally suppressing tribalism. This changed significantly during the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009–2018). Facing mounting corruption allegations, Zuma relied heavily on ethnic mobilization,

utilizing the phrase "*100% Zulu Boy*" to position institutional investigations against him as ethnic victimization. This consolidated a powerful political bloc in KwaZulu-Natal, a dominant homeland of the Zulu ethnic group in South Africa (Buthelezi, 2024)).

When Cyril Ramaphosa from the Venda tribe. assumed power, the internal opposition frequently weaponized ethnic undertones, accusing the new leadership of marginalizing Zulu influence within the ruling party structure. The national and provincial elections of 2024, marked a massive structural shift in South African politics, showcasing the raw power of re-politicized ethnicity. For the first time since 1994, the ANC lost its absolute parliamentary majority. Jacob Zuma's newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) Party staged a massive political coup by sweeping the KZN province and capturing nearly 15% of the national vote. Academic assessments confirm that the MK Party's rapid rise was heavily driven by ethnic and provincial identities rather than pure policy platforms. Zuma masterfully blended traditionalist Zulu nationalism with anti-constitutionalist populist rhetoric, demonstrating that ethnic solidarity remains a potent refuge when public trust in democratic infrastructure erodes.

Post-Mandela South Africa has seen distinct shifts in how racial and ethnic minorities navigate the political landscape. The Democratic Alliance (DA) has successfully absorbed the minority vote but historically struggled to shed its perception as a "white-interests" party among the broader Black electorate. In provinces like the Western Cape and parts of Gauteng, Coloured and Indian communities frequently report feeling "not white enough during apartheid, and not Black enough after apartheid." This alienation has birthed localized, ethnically exclusive populist parties like the *Patriotic Alliance (PA)*, which explicitly campaigns on coloured identity and anti-immigrant sentiment (Mapanje, 2025). The post-Mandela state has consistently struggled to reconcile a modern constitutional democracy with the immense social power of traditional leaders (chiefs and kings). Parties like the ANC and IFP routinely court the Zulu monarchy and the *Ingonyama Trust* which controls nearly a third of the land in KZN offering extensive financial allowances and legal autonomy. This compromise effectively locks rural citizens into a dual system: they are modern democratic citizens by law, but remain traditional subjects in practice, heavily dependent on chiefs for land allocation and local justice (Buthelezi, 2025).

Critically, the most volatile expression of identity politics in modern South Africa is no longer inter-ethnic (e.g., Xhosa vs. Zulu), but rather a broader, dangerous form of Faced with systemic failures in service delivery, extreme unemployment, and inequality, populist politicians find it easier to mobilize voters against a shared external group. Parties across the spectrum increasingly employ xenophobic rhetoric to distract from governance failures, turning "South African identity" into an exclusionary weapon (Taylor and Francis).

Ethnic politics in post-Mandela South Africa is not an inevitable return to primordial tribalism, but a direct consequence of unfulfilled socio-economic liberation. When the democratic state fails to deliver jobs, safety, and basic public services, the idealized "Rainbow Nation" breaks down.

In the absence of a functional social contract, citizens naturally retreat into the older, more reliable safety nets of ethnic, regional, and cultural solidarity. With South Africa currently governed by a complex Government of National Unity (GNU), managing these fragile ethnic and regional fractures will dictate whether the country moves toward a mature, multi-party democracy or splits further into volatile identity-driven enclaves.

Nelson Mandela: A legacy Betrayed

Nelson Mandela stands as the global avatar of reconciliation, a leader who successfully steered South Africa from the precipice of a racial civil war into the light of a constitutional democracy. His legacy is defined by a commitment to non-racialism, the preservation of democratic institutions, and a vision of a "Rainbow Nation" where all citizens share in its vast wealth (Mandela, 1995). Yet, thirty-three years after the dawn of democracy, a profound and bitter narrative has taken root across South Africa: the idea of a legacy betrayed.

It is pertinent to stress that this betrayal is not a sudden rejection of Mandela's moral stature. Instead, it is a structural and systemic erosion of the promises he embodied. The contemporary South African reality marked by rampant political corruption, catastrophic economic exclusion, and a resurgence of identity politics stands in direct, painful contradiction to Mandela's life work. The most visceral betrayal of Mandela's legacy lies in the moral decay of the ruling party he once led, the African National Congress (ANC). Mandela's political life was defined by absolute self-sacrifice, famously declaring at the Rivonia Trial that a free society was an ideal for which he was "prepared to die", (Mandela, 1995). In the decades following his presidency, this culture of service was systematically replaced by an era of self-enrichment. The phenomenon of "State Capture" during the 2010s represented a criminal restructuring of the state to benefit a corrupt elite. Vital public institutions, state-owned enterprises like the power utility Eskom, and law enforcement agencies were hollowed out for private gain. Where Mandela built institutions to protect the vulnerable, subsequent leaders weaponized those institutions to protect themselves, trading the moral authority of the liberation struggle for the spoils of political office.

While Mandela successfully negotiated the transition to political democracy, the economic architecture of apartheid remained largely intact. To avert a scorched-earth flight of white capital in 1994, Mandela's administration adopted market-friendly, neoliberal economic frameworks. While textually pragmatic at the time, the long-term failure to aggressively restructure the economy has left South Africa as the most unequal society on earth (World Bank, 2022). For the majority of Black South Africans, the political freedom Mandela won has not translated into material dignity. Millions still live in under-serviced townships, public education is broken, and youth unemployment sits at a staggering crisis level. As posited by De Beers (2022) the betrayal felt by ordinary citizens is the realization that the democratic vote cannot buy bread, land, or economic security in post-Apartheid South Africa. Mandela's foundational ideal was non-racialism, the belief that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and white. He actively worked to assuage the fears of the white minority while elevating the aspirations of the Black majority. Today, that ideal of the "Rainbow Nation" is widely dismissed by a disillusioned younger generation as a myth that prioritized white comfort over Black justice. This frustration has fueled the rise of radical populist parties, such as the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). These political forces openly attack the constitutional framework Mandela helped build, advocating for racial polarization, ethnic chauvinism, and the dismantling of judicial supremacy. The resurgence of tribal politics is a direct symptom of a society that feels abandoned by Mandela's inclusive vision (Misago, 2019).

Perhaps the most egregious departure from Nelson Mandela's moral paradigm is the institutional and popular rise of virulent xenophobia. During the liberation struggle, independent African nations such as Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria bore immense economic, military, and human costs to host the ANC in exile and support the anti-apartheid movement. Mandela frequently expressed eternal gratitude to the continent, envisioning a democratic South Africa that would serve as a benevolent partner in the Renaissance of Africa. However, in 1998, 2008, 2015, and

periodically throughout the late 2010s and 2020s, South African townships erupted in systematic, horrific campaigns of violence targeted explicitly at African and Asian migrants. Foreign-owned shops were looted, individuals were set alight in broad daylight, and thousands were forcibly displaced (Banjo, 2025). This structural animosity is driven by several socio-political dynamics. The primary driver of popular xenophobia is the zero-sum perception of resource allocation. In townships characterized by severe infrastructural deficits, foreign nationals from Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Somalia are perceived as direct competitors for scarce public resources, including housing, healthcare services, and informal trading spaces. Populist narratives accuse migrants of depressing wages in the informal sector and driving indigenous South Africans out of micro-enterprise (Isana and Ademeso, 2025). Alarmingly, xenophobia has been mainstreamed by political elites seeking to deflect accountability for their governance failures. Rather than attributing service delivery collapses and unemployment to systemic corruption and state decay, prominent politicians and government officials have routinely deployed inflammatory rhetoric. The rise of political organizations like *ActionSA* and populist movements such as *Operation Dudula* explicitly campaign on anti-immigrant platforms. By institutionalizing the scapegoating of foreign nationals, the political class has legitimized horizontal violence, transforming the African migrant into a lightning rod for structural frustrations (Harris, 2002).

The psychological mechanics of xenophobia in South Africa reveal a profound identity crisis. Decades of apartheid isolation artificially severed South Africans from the broader continent, engendering a form of "South African exceptionalism." When African migrants are colloquially labeled as *Amakwerekwere* (a derogatory term implying alterity and inferiority), it demonstrates a complete unraveling of the Pan-African solidarity that Mandela championed. The very nation that relied on continental brotherhood to achieve its liberation has actively constructed a hostile environment for its historic benefactors. It would be analytically incomplete to suggest that South Africa has transformed entirely into a failed state. The constitutional architecture bequeathed by the Mandela era possesses remarkable resilience (Volpi, 2025).

Yet, an elite-level analysis of institutional stability ignores the deep-seated decay of the state's foundational legitimacy at the grassroots level. A progressive constitution cannot feed a starving populace, nor can a highly articulate judgment from the Constitutional Court protect a foreign shopkeeper from a petrol bomb (Isana and Afaha, 2026). The disconnect between elite institutional functionality and the visceral insecurity of everyday life for the subaltern majority points to an existential crisis of the state. The democratic guardrails are holding the macro-structure together, but they are failing to mitigate the profound social pathologies eating away at the base of society. To say that Nelson Mandela's legacy has been betrayed is not to diminish his historic achievements. It is an acknowledgment that his successors treated his triumph as a final destination rather than a foundation. The democratic institutions he installed have survived, but they are buckling under the weight of governance failures. Mandela did not leave behind a perfect nation; he left behind a framework for a just society. The tragedy of contemporary South Africa is that its political class used his name as a shield to hide their incompetence and greed. For the legacy of Mandela to be redeemed, South Africa must move past liberation nostalgia and embark on an uncompromising era of ethical governance, aggressive economic inclusion, and public accountability. Only by completing the economic revolution can the democratic promise of 1994 be truly fulfilled.

Conclusion:

Nelson Mandela's South Africa was predicated on an idealistic yet necessary mythos: that the moral rectitude of reconciliation could bypass the volatile dynamics of material deprivation. The contemporary reality of South Africa defined by fratricidal intra-community friction, systemic institutional decay, and the horrific betrayal of pan-Africanism via xenophobic pogroms suggests that this mythos has fundamentally collapsed. The "Rainbow Nation" has fractured under the weight of unrectified economic apartheid and predatory governance. Mandela's legacy has been systematically compromised by a successor political class that chose the accumulation of capital over the structural emancipation of the people.

The contemporary socio-political landscape of South Africa serves as a sobering indictment of the limits of purely political transitions. The democratic breakthrough of 1994, spearheaded by the moral leadership of Nelson Mandela, achieved a vital historical objective: the systematic and legal dismantling of institutionalized racial apartheid system. However, by treating political reconciliation as a substitute for radical socio-economic restructuring, the post-apartheid state committed a profound structural error. The preservation of the spatial, corporate, and landed architectures of minority rule under the auspices of market-friendly macroeconomic frameworks ensured that the material baseline of the Black majority remained fundamentally unchanged. Three decades later, the soaring idealism of the "Rainbow Nation" has collapsed under the immense weight of absolute relative deprivation, systemic institutional "State Capture," and a catastrophic unemployment crisis. Crucially, this academic investigation demonstrates that the unfulfilled promises of the liberation struggle have not merely stagnated; they have mutated into severe social pathologies that threaten the foundational survival of the state. The structural violence historically weaponized by the apartheid regime has been internalized, democratized, and redirected horizontally. This fracturing of social cohesion is viscerally expressed through violent intracommunity friction manifested as extrajudicial vigilantism, rampant interpersonal violence, and lethal political factionalism and through the rise of virulent xenophobic pogroms against African and Asian migrants. The tragic irony that a nation liberated through international solidarity now violently turns on its continental benefactors represents the absolute nadir of the post-apartheid project. By manipulating these material anxieties, populist movements and predatory political elites have institutionalized the scapegoating of the foreign "Other," effectively dismantling the indigenous ontology of *Ubuntu* and the Pan-African exceptionalism championed by Mandela. Ultimately, while South Africa's macro-level democratic guardrails such as an independent judiciary, a resilient press, and peaceful electoral transitions remain intact, they exist largely as an elite structure disconnected from the daily survival of the subaltern majority. A progressive constitution cannot protect a foreign national from a localized riot, nor can it feed an impoverished township. Nelson Mandela's dream has not failed on its own philosophical merits; rather, it has been systematically broken by a successor political class that traded egalitarian transformation for elite capital accumulation. The Mandelan legacy is profoundly compromised, standing today as a fractured constitutional monument to a historic opportunity squandered. For South Africa to rescue this dream from absolute ruin, it must move beyond sentimental nostalgia and execute aggressive, market-inclusive structural reforms that dismantle the underlying economic apartheid. Until the state aligns its progressive legal framework with material dignity for all its residents, its democracy will remain deeply volatile, and the vision of a unified, egalitarian society will remain an unfinished, broken project.

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Authors' contributions

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