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Review Article

A Backward Look into South Africa's Future

Ivor Sarakinsky

Richard W. Johnson (2015), *How Long Will South Africa Survive? The Looming Crisis*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, ISBN 9781868426348, 266 pp.

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Johnson begins his narrative by outlining the claims he made in an earlier text, published in 1977 and entitled *How Long Will South Africa Survive?*, where he analysed and predicted the collapse of Apartheid. His latest effort echoes the earlier work's title and its type of analysis, along with focusing likewise on the collapse of the government of South Africa. This time, though, it is the rule of the African National Congress (ANC) that finds itself at the centre of Johnson's critique. After outlining his earlier argument, Johnson claims credit for predicting the time frame for the collapse of the National Party (NP) government and the ending of Apartheid. This claim is important because it serves to reinforce his later arguments predicting the collapse of South Africa under ANC rule. Johnson implies that he got it right before and, on the basis of that prediction, he ought to be believed that his next prediction will also be proven right. At one level, this is a spurious type of inductive argument. At another level, his analysis of the NP and the decision to end Apartheid is so wrong that it cannot form the foundation for any speculation about South Africa's future. It was not simply the fiscal crisis of the NP government that enabled the United States of America and the United

Kingdom to squeeze President De Klerk into making his momentous speech in Parliament on 2 February 1990. This one-dimensional account presents structural parameters, essentially the economy, as the causal variable. However, more sophisticated analysis examines conjunctural, situation-specific factors as the key explanatory variables (see, for example, Waldmeir 1997, De Klerk 1991).

In this case, prior policy processes led by officials in the Department of Constitutional Development and Planning and deep within the NP government called for negotiations as early as 1988, where leadership, personalities, and advisors contributed to the policy recommendation (Cloete 1991: 43). It could even be argued that the collapse of communism in 1989 was a significantly more important causal factor than the fiscal crisis of the mid-1980s, because it provided a window of opportunity to engage the ANC and other opposition movements without them having access to Soviet resources. The NP might have taken a different path if other leaders had been in office, ones who interpreted economic, political, and diplomatic pressures differently and were advised by actors with different views. Structural analysis, as presented by Johnson, is insufficient. Instead, a proper analysis requires a careful examination of why a particular path was chosen bearing in mind that events could have taken a different course. Johnson's earlier text is flawed at the level of the micro-analysis of decision-making leading up to the demise of Apartheid. At best he is right for the wrong reasons, even though the NP realised a decade earlier than his prediction that Apartheid had to end and that negotiations with the opposition parties were necessary. But we must also remember that many analysts had been declaring the Apartheid system in crisis for 40 years prior to its actual demise (O'Meara 1996). Saying the same thing repeatedly over an extended period of time increases the chances of being right, with the proviso that a correlation between a prediction and an outcome does not necessarily prove the veracity of the analysis that informed the prediction.

Again, Johnson builds upon and updates his previous analysis of ANC rule that examined the Mandela and Mbeki administrations (Johnson 2009). However, in the bulk of his latest text, Johnson presents a one-dimensional, Armageddon-informed vision of ANC government collapse. There are numerous dimensions to this jaundiced vision, all presented in cherry-picked detail. The first chapter, "Then and Now," summarises Johnson's earlier text (1977: 287–327) on the predicted collapse of Apartheid, which provided an analysis of the combination of political and economic pressures on the Apartheid government. The second chapter, titled "Kwa-Zulu Natal, the World of Jacob Zuma," sets

out the context for the rise of powerful networks in the ANC that, for Johnson, in some way constitute Zuma's powerbase. This chapter presents Ethekwini Municipality as a worse incarnation of the infamous Tammany Hall in New York where the Irish ran the city like a fiefdom. Fortunately, Ethekwini Municipality is not as bad as Johnson makes it out to be. Nonetheless, unlike New York, there is no hope according to Johnson of ever cleaning up Ethekwini, as it is controlled by the ANC. Chapter 3, "The ANC Under Zuma," discusses how Zuma consolidated his power in the ANC after the Polokwane defeat of Thabo Mbeki. The following chapter, "Mangaung and After," describes the dynamics of Zuma's victory over Kgalema Motlanthe in the contest for ANC president. This is the most disturbing part of the text: it demonstrates Johnson's racism and crude tribal understanding of South African society and politics. Johnson (2015: 86) fails to explain why Xhosa ANC branches in the Eastern Cape voted 392 to 211 in favour of the Zulu Zuma rather than the Sotho Motlanthe. But this empirical demonstration of the complexity of interests, identity, and political affiliation does not faze Johnson. Instead of reflecting upon this important and hard fact in some detail as a counter-example to his tribalist world view, he superficially brushes it aside. A methodological opportunity to test and evaluate his assertions is, unfortunately, lost.

All of this is followed by a chapter entitled "The New Class Structure," where Johnson discusses the lowering of educational standards at schools and universities, coupled with the undeserved appointment of Blacks, as the means to middle-class consumerism. Associating the Black middle class with theft and the growth of the public sector, he argues that this class has expanded as a consumer rather than a producer of value. Chapter 6, "Culture Wars," repeats some of the themes set out in the previous chapter and discusses how the media and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) disseminate information to the South African public. The ANC has infiltrated the media to prevent criticism, according to Johnson, who mentions Iqbal Surve's acquisition of the Independent Group as a case in point. It is in this chapter that Johnson attempts to camouflage his racism by stating, as a question, "Blacks Can't Govern?" With all that has gone before and with what comes after, it is a transparently rhetorical question.

The following chapter, "The State's Repression of Economic Activity," attempts to explain economic decline solely as the outcome of misguided policies in the mining, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors. This is coupled to the inflexibility of the labour market brought about by trade-union influence in the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance. Johnson ech-

oes the *Business Day* editor in blaming most of these ills on two ministers, Rob Davis and Ebrahim Patel. The irony of the latter being the political head of the Competition Commission and Tribunal is lost on Johnson. But it is also possible that Johnson does not even know of this fact. Moreover, Johnson fails to analyse South African economic performance in relation to the European Union, the country's largest trading partner: when the European economy is strong, exports from South Africa rise. As Europe is still recovering from the 2008 recession and with the uncertainty caused by Greece's default on loans, the instability there is a factor that affects South Africa's performance. Despite this, Johnson's attack on Minister Davis and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has to be questioned in light of the ZAR 5 billion trade surplus recently recorded by the export of motor vehicles. This was achieved through the incentive scheme managed by the Department of Trade and Industry and the recovery of the vehicle manufacturing sector following intense strike activity.

The next chapter, "The View of the IMF," is an important part of Johnson's scenario of ANC government collapse. Despite the politics of the Tripartite Alliance being anti-American and anti-British, the ANC may have to go to the IMF for loans to bail it out of its balance of payments and tax-collection challenges. Of course, these challenges are all caused by incompetence, looting, and corruption. The thesis is that the crunch is coming and the IMF and its loan conditionalities will mark the end of the ANC government in its current form. In order to receive bailout loans, like in Greece, South Africa would have to agree to curtail state spending and reconsider its approach to fiscal policy. Johnson, however, forgets that the ANC agreed to pay off the debt incurred by the NP after it came to power in 1994 with little turbulence in the Tripartite Alliance. Johnson presents scenarios on the political implications of this thesis in the last chapter. Nonetheless, the discussion of the fiscal challenges facing South Africa is on the superficial side. Instead of relying on speculation around rating agencies and their grading decisions, Johnson ought to have accessed the primary data from the South African Revenue Service (SARS) and the Reserve Bank to see whether his view is informed by fact. South Africa is a million miles away from a Greece default scenario, and the rating agencies have noted this with no further downgrades proposed. South Africa's tax base is squeezed sufficiently to allay fears of a major default in payments, and the real pressure is for cutbacks in state spending, especially given the size of the public service. The recent less-than-expected wage increase for public servants is an important sign that the ANC government is fully aware of the fiscal

challenges facing the country and is moving to address them. In terms of more efficient state procurement, Johnson has nothing to say about the establishment of a chief procurement officer in the National Treasury, which is already having a positive impact in limiting the abuse of tender processes.

The last two chapters are particularly weak. The “BRICS Alternative” is a rambling account of the gold price and international gold trade. The relevant point about South Africa pursuing bailout loans from BRICS, rather than the IMF, could have been made in two or three pages. But Johnson fails to discuss South Africa pursuing BRICS membership as a foreign policy objective of fostering markets outside of the EU. Diversifying South Africa's trade base is prudent, yet Johnson has little to say about this and its long-term possible benefits. Thus, when the EU is weak, exports might be achieved through trade with another bloc with combined higher growth rates than the EU. The final chapter and conclusion, “The Impossibility of Autarchy,” is poorly edited and appears hastily written. It presents two scenarios: The first is the ANC accepting an IMF bailout to cover its poor governance and profligacy, with the ANC forming governing alliances with other parties that have made inroads into the ANC's electoral base. The second is the majority of the ANC rejecting a bailout from the IMF, leading to the ANC's adoption of more radical policy options in order to hold on to power. To Johnson's credit, he does explicitly reject the possibility of a Zimbabwe/Mugabe-type option in South Africa. However, the possibility that the ANC might be dealing with the country's important fiscal challenges is not even considered by Johnson. Neither does Johnson even attempt to present a post-Zuma scenario for the ANC when Zuma exits at the end of his two terms as ANC and South African president. For Johnson to state (2015: 89) that Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa will not succeed Zuma because he is a Venda in ethnic origin is particularly unconvincing. There is nothing certain about Ramaphosa or any of the other contenders taking over the leadership of the ANC in 2017, but tribal origin is certainly not going to be the determining factor.

In all of the chapters in Johnson's text, serious and important issues are raised, but hyperbole and partiality hinder their credibility and analytical status. Instead of colonialist tribalism, the real issues of leadership in the ANC require careful analysis. Leadership is about vision, for a country and its constituent parts. Mbeki and Zuma could never match Madiba in this regard, but there is currently in South Africa an aspirational deficit, and invoking the National Development Plan (NDP) does not fill this gap. Leaders inspire confidence through deeds and words, and there is a marked difference between current and past ANC leaders.

While the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) is in disarray, an important space has opened up for the ANC, as the elected party in government, to pursue its mandate more decisively. This positive development corresponds with the weakening of COSATU due to factional battles and expulsions. This is a double-edged sword: the balance of power is moving towards management after 20 years of being in favour of labour. However, this might lead to more radical and exaggerated actions of unions as they try to lever concessions. Nonetheless, the opportunity exists for skilful labour-relations practitioners to find solutions to these challenges. The public sector unions accepting a much lower increase than demanded is a case in point.

The increased size of the executive is another serious matter that requires attention. The proliferation of ministries is unsustainable in terms of cost and administrative effectiveness. However, Johnson has nothing to say about this beyond the misleading epithet of the “criminalisation of the state.” So, while Johnson identifies some of the challenges facing contemporary South African governance, his account of them is flawed. Beyond corruption and bureaucratic effectiveness, an expanded executive increases the coordination challenges of government. More and more departments are created to pursue narrow objectives. However, and paradoxically, these objectives cannot be realised without the concomitant cooperation of other departments mandated to deal with issues related to these main areas of action (Dormady 2012: 749). Indeed, the NDP frequently discusses the need for interdepartmental coordination without considering how complex and fraught such coordination actually is. This coordination complexity is part of an explanation of government ineffectiveness that is ignored by Johnson. Moreover, it is a challenge facing many developed countries as well as one carefully analysed by the Canadian school of public governance (Pacquet and Wilson 2011).

It is curious why a book such as this is able to attract so much credibility in such a short time. The title is certainly provocative, but it is the book’s content that has to be the explanation. Like a modern-day Nostradamus, Johnson attracts believers by spinning out a narrative of doom. But it is not enough to say that readers are like newspaper consumers, who are (according to editors) attracted to bad news. There has to be something more to this mystery. Perhaps it is this: an author, with good academic credentials, articulates a narrative of current affairs in South Africa that shares the same prejudices and anxieties with a particular group of South Africans. Instead of a rational, evidence-based rela-

tionship between author and reader, we have a deep psychological process of interpellation (Althusser 1971: 170–177), where the reader's prejudices are reinforced by an author under the influence of the same prejudices. Both think they are rational in their interpretation and telling of the narrative. Yet, what binds them together is a double hermeneutic (Giddens 2007: 284) of ideology. Johnson's text is perhaps one of the most ideological texts yet written on the current South African condition.

This goes some way to explaining how such a flawed and erroneous narrative can capture an audience of normally rational decision makers. If we say that a president of country X was elected with 99.9 per cent of the votes, this, intuitively, provokes scepticism as to the veracity of the result. Questions, rightly, will be asked about voter registration, election management, and vote-counting. In fact, Johnson (2015: 87) uses this technique of argument to cast doubt on Zuma winning outright every one of the 857 KZN branch votes, stating that this is unlikely and impossible. In the same vein, Johnson's narrative is 99.9 per cent negative about South Africa's prospects under ANC rule, yet there is no scepticism amongst readers, many of whom take this point of view as gospel. Mutually reinforcing prejudice has dulled the critical analysis of what is happening in South Africa. Be that as it may, this same monologue of disillusionment and negativity is also methodologically flawed.

The sources for the narrative are predominantly culled from newspapers and occasional discussions with unnamed respondents. Even the IMF report on South Africa is informed by newspaper articles on related themes. Newspapers are not reliable sources for telling a tale of such import. This is especially the case when the bulk of the newspaper sources cited are those covering the financial sector. So, the double hermeneutic becomes a little less virtuous – newspapers shape perceptions with editorials and content selection, which shape the perceptions of businesspeople readers, who get the same, rehashed story presented to them in this book. Where are the interviews conducted with actors at all levels of government, elected and appointed officials? Nowhere to be found! Who needs to do interviews when one can quote newspapers and conduct comfortable desktop research? Where are the discussion documents emanating from key policymaking fora in government, and where is the analysis of the decision makers to provide evidence for the claims about communist "capture" and "gatekeeping" the author makes throughout the text? Johnson provides no such references. The reason for this omission is that this is an outsider's opinion of a government, and Johnson does not feel it necessary to gather first-hand information about govern-

mental processes. As an outsider, Johnson presents a one-dimensional dialectic of negativity where the race to the bottom is nearly over.

While there is no shortage of negative news emanating from South Africa's public governance system, it cannot be absolutely all negative. At another methodological level, there is no attempt by Johnson to test any of his assertions by presenting them as hypotheses while attempting to falsify them with counter-factual information (Popper 1980: 149). In other words, the information presented is cherry-picked to verify an Armageddon prejudice, and there is no critical engagement with such information, which is a *sine qua non* of conventional academic practice. Notable oversights in Johnson's narrative that deserve careful analysis include the findings of the Competition Commission against private-sector actors for collusion and price-fixing in the bread, cement, and construction sectors. Overcharging government for infrastructure, including World Cup stadia, is not a serious matter, seemingly, for Johnson. Perhaps he does not approve of a competitive market economy for South Africa? Similarly, there is no discussion of tax avoidance by some private-sector actors through the practice of profit-shifting, which is an area under investigation by the Davis Committee examining South Africa's taxation system. So, the private sector can do no wrong and the ANC government can do no right. Johnson's either/or, manichean universe cannot be a true reflection of reality.

While Johnson bemoans the decline of education in South Africa, he does not mention the Square Kilometer Array radio telescope project that Australia lost to South Africa through a competitive international process. Not only have there already been massive positive impacts on education emanating from this long-term scientific endeavour, immense economic opportunities have likewise begun to materialise. No mention of this is made in Johnson's text, as it does not fit the narrative of decline and Blacks being unable to govern. Another good story, completely overlooked by Johnson, is the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement process designed by National Treasury and the Department of Energy. Significant foreign investment has flowed in through the 79 approved projects, amounting to ZAR 193 billion (Joemat-Pettersson 2015). The savings and value added to the economy through this form of electricity generation is currently estimated at around ZAR 800 million and will increase over the next 20 years (Bischof-Niemz 2015). This positive development, with long-term prospects, gets not a single mention. Of course not! How can one say anything good about the government when it is repeatedly stated that Blacks cannot govern, not only in South Africa, but on the whole African continent? Yet it is worse than that,

because in Johnson's view South Africa is, as an ineluctable law of nature, following the rest of Africa, lemming-like, into social, economic, and political oblivion.

This prejudice and racism is easily challenged, but there is no mention of the poor fiscal management and decline of European countries such as Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain. Greece's current crisis is much more serious than South Africa's, yet Johnson does not pen a word about European countries being possibly governed worse than Black African ones. In this regard, it is disturbing that Johnson has not engaged with the governance indicators developed by both the World Bank and the Ibrahim Foundation. The former measures world governance while the latter focuses on African countries. These annual assessments have created a valuable governance database going back a decade. While there are numerous challenges in measuring governance, these assessments show that in many African countries, governance has improved over time and, in some cases, the improvement is significant. They also show decline and stasis in other countries. The African governance picture is complex, but this evidence should not get in the way of a jaundiced narrative. Painting Africa with a single pessimistic brushstroke without reflecting on the existing data is not just shoddy research – it also suggests prejudice. But then again, these evidence-based and respected governance measures and country ratings must be precluded from entering Johnson's narrative because they do not fit into as much as challenge his perception of Africa and Africans.

It will serve no purpose to question and evaluate all of the errors and assertions made in this narrative, which is an archetypal Afro-pessimist polemic. However, there is one claim that deserves a retort. Johnson (2015: 89) refers to "over-determined" as a Marxist concept. In his zeal to paint everything bad about South Africa as the fault of Blacks and leftists, Johnson forgets that "over-determination" is a psychoanalytic concept developed by Sigmund Freud in his analysis of dreams (Freud 1983: 618). Freud showed how a dream, or symptom, is the product of multiple causal variables and processes, but never of a single, isolated one. While "over-determination" was brought into Marxist discourse by Althusser and his collaborators (Althusser and Balibar 1983: 106), Johnson ought to take heed of its principle of multi-dimensionality in describing and analysing social, economic, and political phenomena. Johnson's South African and African nightmare may well be over-determined (in a Freudian sense).

The overall point that Johnson wants to make is that the current South African condition is irredeemable and there is no one in the ANC

that can do anything to correct mistakes and revise policies. Johnson's economic determinism would make Karl Marx proud, but it is at the expense of analysing the specificity of political dynamics. Thus, the text comes full circle and repeats a mode of argument made in Johnson's earlier writings summarised in the foundational first chapter. As noted above, Johnson got the prediction and mechanism wrong for the ending of Apartheid. There is no reason to believe that he has credible predictive powers to see into South Africa's immediate and medium-term future. Moreover, the selective and one-dimensional nature of the data and information used certainly compromises his prophesied forthcoming fiscal crisis that will force a shift away from the ANC. The complexity of South African politics and governance means that there is no simplistic approach to scenario-making and soothsaying. Instead, trend identification and forecasting where South Africa is really heading lies in the detailed micro-dynamic analysis of the state, the ANC, the government, the electoral system, and the Constitution, in addition to the rule of law. Only then will it be possible to make informed predictions. But to do this requires conducting hard research, leveraging a network of respondents, carefully evaluating data and information, and then presenting a considered and deliberative account. This is something that an outsider, especially an armchair outsider, is unable and unwilling to do. For this and all the other reasons noted above, Johnson's text is nothing more than a polemic – and a poor one at that. The ANC has been around for over a century, and in that time it may have developed the capacity to reinvent itself in response to serious political and economic crises. Rumours of its death may once again prove, with apologies to Mark Twain, “greatly exaggerated.”

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