

THE GLOBE IN SOUTH AFRICA

A time of despair on the birthday of freedom

30 years after apartheid, South Africans are angry about power cuts, poor public services, corruption and economic stagnation – and the ruling ANC risks getting punished for it all at the polls

GEOFFREY YORK

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MADELENE CRONJÉ

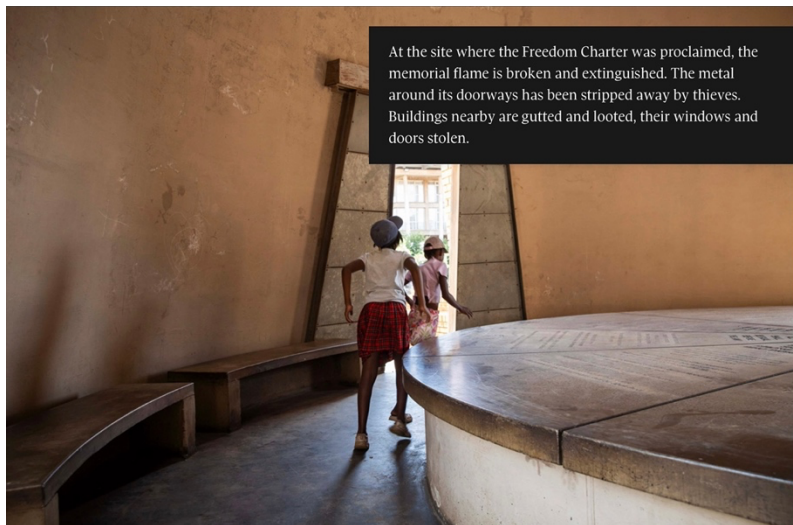
THE GLOBE AND MAIL
KLIPTOWN, SOUTH AFRICA
PUBLISHED JANUARY 27, 2024

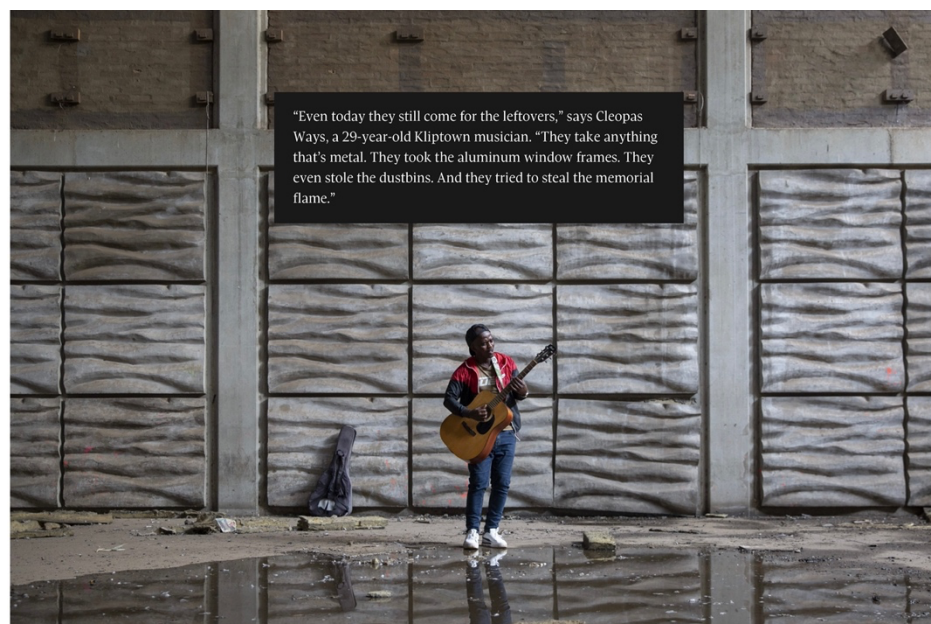
81 COMMENTS

SHARE

BOOKMARK

GIVE THIS ARTICLE





The destruction in Kliptown is symptomatic of a much larger crisis. Over the past decade, as their economy stagnates and corruption worsens, South Africans have endured a demoralizing decline of their essential services: electricity, water, roads, ports, railways, even post offices and libraries. Power cuts of up to 12 hours a day are now common. In some places, basic services – including passenger rail service – are close to collapse, a result of endemic theft of copper cables, corruption in state contracts and persistent neglect of repairs and maintenance.

In the face of the infrastructure disaster, South Africans are battling back. Some have launched court cases or new political parties. Others are turning to private electricity generation to ease the energy shortages. With a national election scheduled for the middle of this year, the ruling African National Congress will feel the anger from many voters. For the first time since taking power at the end of apartheid, the ANC is in danger of falling below a national majority. It could still retain power by forging deals with other parties, but it would be a potentially humiliating result for a party that captured as much as 70 per cent of the vote in the past – and it could intensify the pressure for long-delayed solutions to the crisis.

South Africa's first democratic election, in 1994, was an eruption of national optimism. In the historic first vote after the defeat of white-minority rule, an impressive 86 per cent of eligible voters trekked to the polls. Millions of South Africans waited patiently in massive queues at the voting stations, while the world heaped praise on the country for its relatively peaceful transition.

But the past decade, with its electricity cuts and corruption scandals, has been marked by growing political disillusionment. By 2018, the ANC was forced to dump its president, Jacob Zuma, in a scandal over insider profiteering. In the 2019 election, only 49 per cent of eligible voters bothered to cast ballots. This drop of almost 40 percentage points from 1994 is one of the sharpest declines in the democratic world.



ANC supporters wave portraits of Cyril Ramaphosa, the ANC's current leader, at a rally in Mbombela this past Jan. 13 for the anniversary of the party's founding in 1912.

PHILL MAGAKOE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

While the ANC has continued to win national elections, its margin is steadily declining. Many of its former supporters cannot bring themselves to vote for other parties, so they simply stay at home. “A lot of my friends aren’t voting,” said Jabulani Nzimande, a 33-year-old tourist guide at the Freedom Charter site. “The government only comes to us when they want us to vote for them. As soon as we’ve voted for them, they’re gone.”

As he walks around Kliptown, he sees promotional signs reading “The People Shall Govern” – the famous line from the Freedom Charter. But he says: “Some people see that as only a saying.”

Two decades ago, a survey by polling agency Afrobarometer had found that two-thirds of South Africans believed the country was headed in the right direction. But that number has plunged to a small minority in recent years. By last year, 70 per cent of South Africans said they were dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country. More than 80 per cent of South Africans said corruption was increasing, while 87 per cent said the government was doing a poor job of providing electricity.

Most of the country’s chronic issues can be witnessed in Kliptown, where the decaying infrastructure is visible to any visitor. Its railway station has been looted and gutted, and it remains closed today – just one of dozens of destroyed train stations across the country. Many homes near the Freedom Charter memorial have no indoor plumbing and rely on illegal electricity hookups and outdoor toilets.

Souvenir vendors in Kliptown stand for hours in the sun, hoping for tourists who rarely arrive these days. The square had once touted itself as “South Africa’s first township entertainment explosion centre,” but the jobs boom is over. The hotel had to install its own expensive power generator, and its underground parking garage is flooded and closed.

“Everything is broken,” says Cyril Cebo, a 56-year-old street hawker who sells soft drinks and candies on the edge of Kliptown’s square. “We don’t have any customers. They didn’t fix anything since the looting.”



The tower with the memorial flame looms over Kliptown's historic square, which still carries the scars of 2021's nationwide riots.



The square's dereliction has also hurt the nearby Soweto Hotel. The entrance to the parking garage is flooded and power now comes from a backup generator.

The square's dereliction has also hurt the nearby Soweto Hotel. The entrance to the parking garage is flooded and power now comes from a backup generator.

Inside the damaged Freedom Charter memorial, the charter's words were engraved on stone slabs, but the engraving is faded. The souvenir vendors, seeing the government doing little about it, pitched in to buy cleaning fluid and

steel wool to at least scrub away some of the dirt. They wanted to fix the torn metal around the doorways, but did not know how.

“For me, this place is the mother of South African democracy, and it should be respected by our government,” said Mr. Ways, the musician. “But they’re not taking it seriously. It looks dangerous and abandoned.”

The collapse of the tourist site is just a small part of Kliptown’s problems. One of the oldest townships in the Johannesburg area, its population of about 49,000 people is wedged between a railway track and a polluted river.

Some, like Mr. Ways, live in tiny shacks that are often flooded by the rising river during heavy rainfall. The musician shows the signs of wreckage inside his home and recalls how his belongings were damaged by a flood.

Years ago, he made a living by playing his guitar on the train that passed near his home, earning tips from passengers on the crowded trains. Then the service stopped and the thieves arrived at Kliptown station. They looted the doors, windows, bricks, copper cables, notice boards, and even parts of the floor. They even stole the roof. For good measure, they sawed off sections of the steel supports of the station’s pedestrian bridge and took those too.

Mr. Ways recalls a friend of his who made a living by doing stand-up comedy on the train from Kliptown. When the train service ended, he turned to crime. One day he pulled a gun on Mr. Ways, not recognizing him at first. “Oh, it’s you, my friend,” he said finally, letting him go.



Cleopas Ways stands in his house, which has water damage on the walls.

Fifteen years ago, South Africa's railways carried passengers on 620 million trips annually. Last year, the number was barely 6 per cent of that. Many stations and tracks have been abandoned. An estimated 50 to 70 kilometres of overhead copper cables are stolen from rail lines every week. Without access to trains, low-income workers spend up to 60 per cent of their income on minibus taxis.

It's not only the local trains that are in trouble. Trains have stopped running on the main line between South Africa's two biggest cities, Johannesburg and Cape Town. The state rail agency made a much-publicized effort to revive the service in December, but it could only get five trains between the two cities in a three-week period – and three of those trips had to be finished by bus because of cable theft.

Freight trains, crucial to the South African economy for transporting coal and other commodities to seaports, have similarly deteriorated from lack of maintenance and locomotive shortages. Without the trains operating, highways near borders and ports are clogged with coal trucks. Ports and container terminals, too, are congested and poorly performing, curtailing South Africa's exports.





The once-busy train station in Kliptown was abandoned years ago. Today, children play on its tracks.



Many Kliptown residents live in informal structures like these, with haphazard, unreliable and sometimes illegal access to water and power.

The decay and degradation of South Africa's infrastructure was never an inevitable result of the end of apartheid, despite what some of the country's nostalgists have claimed. In fact, for more than a decade after the first democratic election, the economy expanded steadily and South Africans enjoyed a historic increase in housing, water services and electricity. For the first time, the poorest of the poor had a chance for a dignified life.

Back in the 1990s, at the end of white-minority rule, most ordinary families were still reliant on candles or paraffin to light their homes. Today more than 90 per cent have electricity – even if it is often cut by power rationing. More than 88 per cent live in formal dwellings, rather than shacks, compared to 65 per cent at the end of apartheid, according to the latest national census, released in October. Access to piped water and indoor toilets has similarly improved.

The erosion took hold during the presidency of Mr. Zuma, who ruled from 2009 to 2018. The government became riddled with corruption – commonly referred to as “state capture” – and basic maintenance was neglected. Public investment steadily declined, despite the crumbling infrastructure.



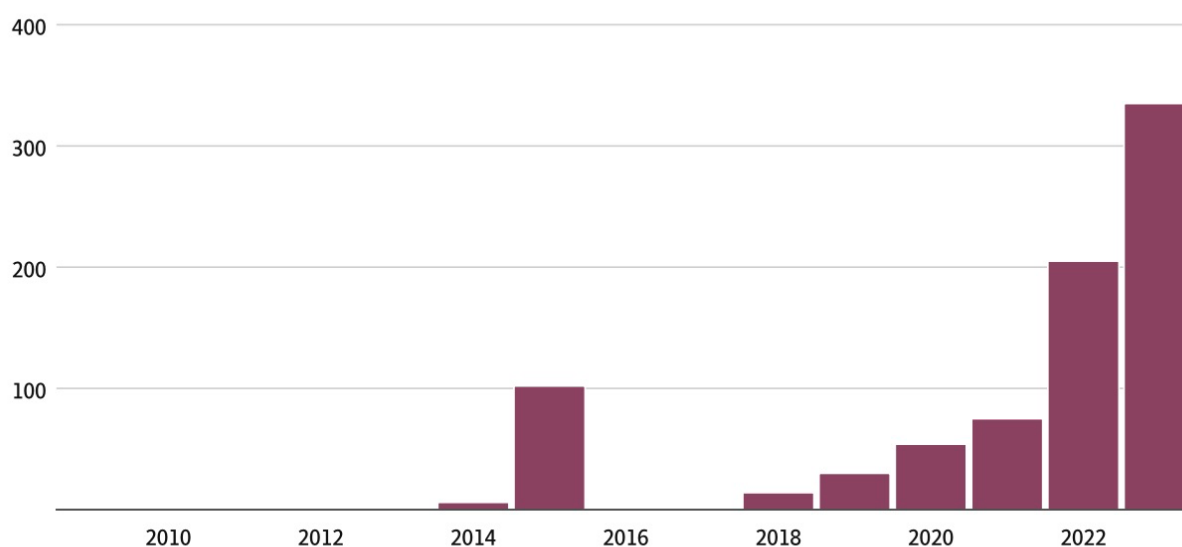
Ex-president Jacob Zuma sits at a Pietermaritzburg court in 2018, where he faced trial for fraud, money laundering and other corruption offences. ROGAN WARD/POOL PHOTO VIA AP

Mr. Zuma was eventually forced to resign, but his replacement, Cyril Ramaphosa, failed to solve the corruption epidemic. Political assassinations have become common as well-connected thugs fight for control of state tenders. Impunity is widespread: as crime rates soar, only 14 per cent of murders lead to convictions. When Mr. Zuma was briefly imprisoned for contempt of court in 2021, his supporters launched a wave of riots and looting from Durban to Kiptown.

Fifteen years of corruption and mismanagement at the state electricity monopoly, Eskom, has led to prolonged delays in crucial repairs and maintenance, forcing it into a wave of rolling blackouts. Last year, there were power cuts on 92 per cent of all days in the calendar, the highest number on record.

South Africa's precarious electricity problems worsening

Annual number of days with electricity cuts



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: LOADSHED.THEOUTLIER.CO.ZA

The power outages and the decay of freight rail are two of the biggest reasons for South Africa's economic woes. For more than a decade, South Africa's economy has grown slower than its population. This meant a decline in per-capita income and the persistence of extreme inequality between rich and poor.

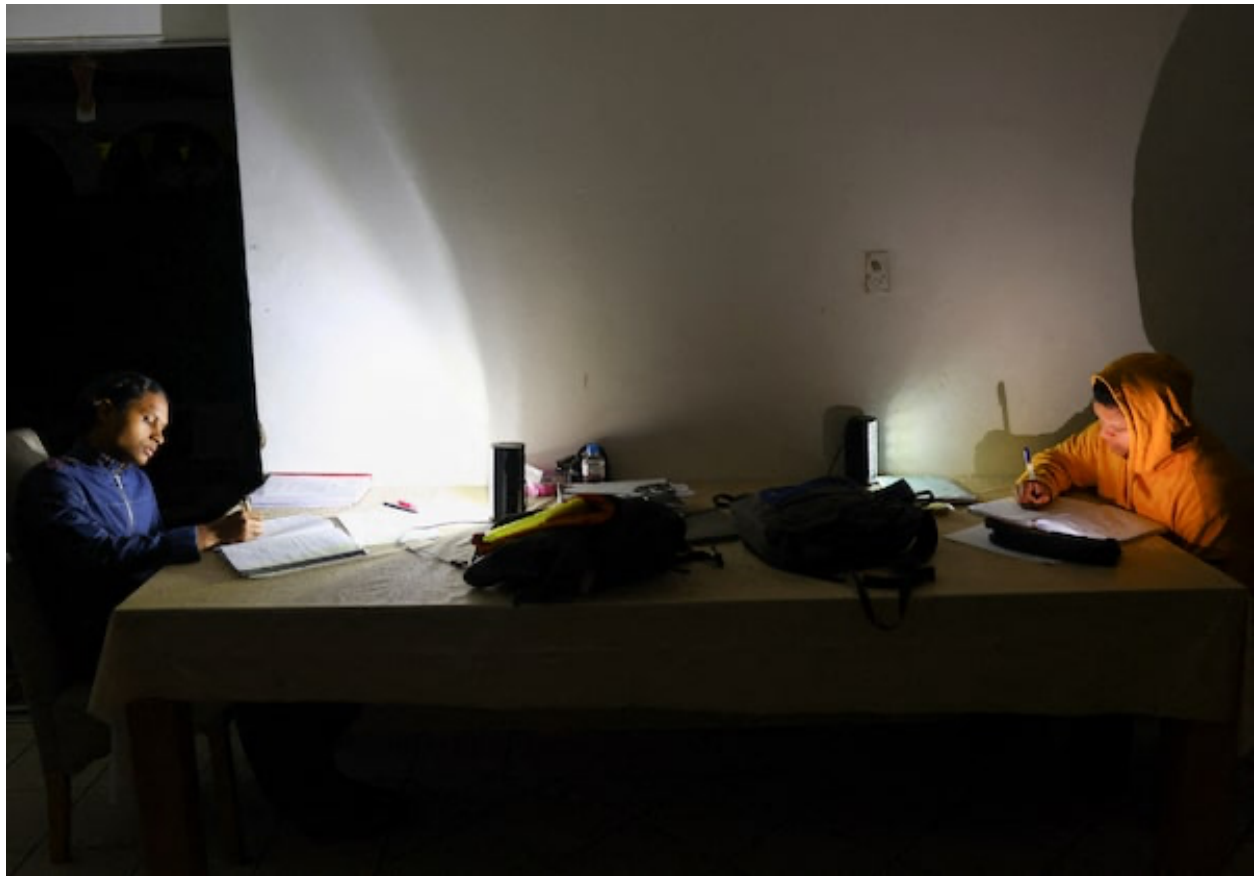
Unemployment, meanwhile, has increased from 25 per cent in 2012 to almost 32 per cent today. When those who have abandoned the job search are included, the jobless rate is 45 per cent. And for the youngest job seekers, between the ages of 15 and 24, unemployment is a staggering 58 per cent.

“South Africans are becoming poorer,” the National Planning Commission reported in a 10-year review last September. “The hollowing out of state capacity during the state capture years continues to undermine both South Africa’s competitiveness and the potential of its people.”

Another study, by a senior official in South Africa’s presidency last February, was titled: “South Africa’s Infrastructure Emergency.” In a report card, it gave a “D” grade to the country’s infrastructure.

“The hemorrhaging of technical and financial engineering skills in the country, the collapse of institutions and the dire ramifications of state capture have all conspired to degrade the quality of the infrastructure,” it said.

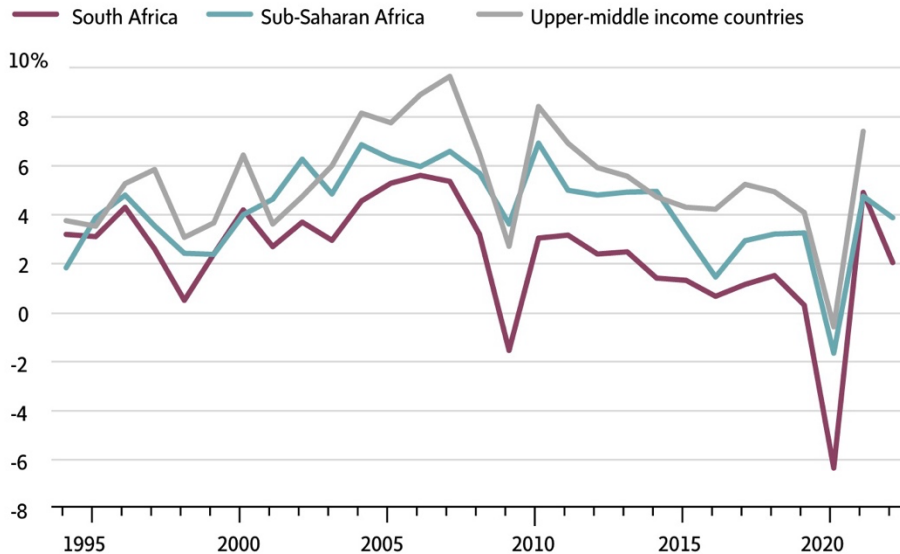
The report’s author, Kgosisentsho Ramokgopa, was promoted to the newly created post of Electricity Minister a few weeks after the report’s release. But he too has been unable to resolve the country’s energy crisis so far.



Cape Town residents Mohammad Ameen Sha and Ismail Sha study for final exams with rechargeable lanterns in October, 2022, during one of power utility Eskom's regular cuts. Lack of electricity has had a harmful impact on South Africa's economy. ESA ALEXANDER/ REUTERS

Real GDP growth – South Africa vs. peers

Per cent



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: HARVARD GROWTH LAB

Harvard University's Growth Lab, in a study published in November, cited two main causes for South Africa's slow and unequal growth: collapsing state capacity and the persistence of apartheid geography – the physical separation of townships from central business districts, which creates barriers to employment.

“Over the last 15 years, South Africa has seen a broad-based collapse across critical public goods and services,” the study said. “Urban crime is very high, and theft and sabotage undermine the functioning of many national infrastructure systems.”

The conclusions of those reports are easily verified by anyone who lives in Johannesburg. Traffic lights are routinely non-functioning, because of electricity outages and battery theft, making intersections ever more dangerous. Busy eight-lane intersections have become a deadly dance as motorists try to squeeze through the uncontrolled traffic.

Water rationing in the city is frequent, as pumping stations break down – or as aging pipes burst, which happens an average of 140 times per day. Johannesburg's central library has been closed for repairs since 2021, with no clear indication of when it will reopen.

The city's main art gallery, the biggest in Africa, is plagued by water leakages and other problems. Several of its rooms are closed, and one of its main collections has been shifted to another building for safekeeping. When its electricity is cut during the rolling blackouts, staff tell visitors to use their cellphone flashlights.



Tour guide Jabulani Nzimande sits on the stairs to the square in Kliptown, beside pillars symbolizing each of the demands of the Freedom Charter. He is skeptical of political candidates who evoke the charter's words to win votes. 'A lot of young people are not voting because they feel they're being used.'



CAPTION

It has been 30 years since the first postapartheid election that brought to power Nelson Mandela, shown greeting supporters outside Durban in April, 1994.
ALEXANDER JOE/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

6 of 8

Across the country, state dysfunction is eroding South Africa's basic governance. Departments that provide social grants and work visas are increasingly unreliable. Work permits are so hard to obtain that foreign investors are often forced to cancel or defer their projects. Postal service is haphazard, and residents can go months without mail.

As shown by the decline in voter turnout, South Africans are becoming alienated from the entire malfunctioning system. In 2003, only a fifth of South Africans said it was difficult to trust their leaders to do the right thing, but this number soared to 79 per cent last year, according to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, a research group that publishes an annual barometer of the national mood.

The country has reached "a tipping point," the institute said in December. "It is running out of resources to stem the tide of growing desperation ... Never before in the course of two decades has the barometer found such profound distrust in leadership, coupled with little confidence in the critical public institutions that form the foundation for a functional democracy."

Many of South Africa's greatest liberation heroes, who suffered years of exile or imprisonment in the battle against apartheid, have lost faith in the ANC government. One of the ANC's most respected members for decades was Mavuso Msimang, an early leader of the party's armed wing in the 1960s and later a senior civil servant in the ANC government. In December, he sent the party a scathing letter of resignation.

"For several years now, the ANC has been racked by endemic corruption, with devastating consequences on the governance of the country and the lives of poor people," he wrote in the letter. "The corruption we once decried is now part of our movement's DNA."

He listed a few of those consequences: More than four million South Africans still live in shacks; children die in dangerous pit latrines in poorly equipped public schools; raw sewage flows into rivers and beaches; and unemployment remains persistently high because businesses are discouraged from investing.

Senior ANC officials reacted first by claiming that Mr. Msimang had been bribed by a rival party. Then they begged him to stay, and he agreed to remain a member after the party apologized for the insult and promised that those implicated in corruption would be barred from parliament. But he refused to

retract his letter, declaring publicly that it remained “a call for all South Africans to accept that the country is in a profound and systemic crisis.”

Another long-time anti-apartheid activist, Raymond Suttner, has given up on the ANC. During the apartheid years, he endured torture by security forces during his 11 years in prison and house arrest for distributing ANC literature, but he always had faith that the party would work to deliver a decent life for everyone after apartheid ended. So he was dismayed to see that some of those in powerful posts – including Mr. Zuma – were diverting anti-poverty funds to benefit themselves.

“There’s a generation of people growing up who’ve only known a corrupt government and corrupt politics,” he said. “All of us are alienated.”

In the election this year, he is not even certain whether he will vote. “When I got involved in the struggle, I committed my life to the struggle. I was willing to pay a price, and I did pay a price. I didn’t expect to see some of my former comrades stealing from the funds that were intended for providing a better life for all.”





Children in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, carry containers of fresh water while other residents get their share from a truck. Municipal contractors ship in water for residents who have lived for decades without reliable water sources.



The difference is obvious between the Hammanskraal tap water, left, and filtered water available at shops. Residents often refuse to drink the local water even if it has been boiled first.



Enny Tenyeko Chabalala buys water in Hammanskraal, where she has lived for 22 years. 'This problem has been with us for a long time, and we'll end up dying of cholera,' she says.

The ANC is at the heart of South Africa's electricity and infrastructure crisis. The party is tightly linked to unions and contractors in the coal sector who have resisted any expansion of renewable energy. Its failure to tackle crime and corruption has disrupted many basic services. In one typical incident, much of Pretoria lost power for a day because thieves had toppled huge electricity pylons to steal the metal. Residents have become grimly accustomed to the constant power cuts. Some simply quip: "Hello darkness, my old friend."

The energy crisis has devastated the economy. By some estimates, it has reduced South Africa's GDP growth by two percentage points annually, pushing it below the minimum rate needed to reduce poverty. Factories are forced to spend money on backup generators: 60 per cent have generators today, compared to 20 per cent in 2007. This heavy reliance on generators is "in line with far poorer countries and countries in conflict, including Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Congo," the Harvard Growth Lab reported.

The government's latest energy plan, released in early January, acknowledged that the power shortages will continue until at least 2030 unless there are drastic improvements in the efficiency of the country's coal-fired power plants, which few experts expect.

The next crisis is likely to be water. Disruptions of water supply are increasingly common in many South African towns and cities, sometimes

leading to cholera outbreaks. One of the most notorious cases is the community of Hammanskraal, just 40 kilometres north of Pretoria, where more than 100,000 residents have been without a reliable water supply for decades, despite frequent government promises of action.

The water from Hammanskraal's taps can look clean, but it quickly turns a yellow tint with a foul odour. Most residents refuse to drink it, even if it is boiled. Instead they buy five-litre jugs from local vendors or wait for tanker trucks.

On the streets, women and children struggle to carry the large buckets of water. One resident, Lydia Thubagile, points to her neck and describes the soreness she feels from regularly carrying buckets on her head. "We are suffering over and over," she says. Asked why she doesn't drink the water from her taps, she replies: "We don't want to die."

Last May and June, some did die. A cholera outbreak in Hammanskraal killed at least 23 people. The government said it could not pinpoint the cause, but media reports blamed a politically connected businessman who failed to complete a \$21-million contract to upgrade a waste water treatment plant.

"This problem has been with us for a long time, and we'll end up dying of cholera," says Enny Tenyeko Chabalala, who has lived in Hammanskraal for 22 years. "We are always reminding our children not to drink the water, but sometimes they forget."



Enny Tenyeko Chabalala visits a water dropoff point at the municipal offices in Hammanskraal.

President Cyril Ramaphosa apologized to the community in June. “Our people have the right to clean running water and, in this case, we will admit we have failed the people of Hammanskraal,” he told a public meeting in the town.

He promised to get the problem fixed within six months, but by the end of the year there was little progress at the treatment plant. “There’s no maintenance,” said Adam Mashapa, a local councillor. “All the machines are broken.”

The office of the Public Protector, a national anti-corruption ombudsperson, reported in October that the poor water quality is an emergency. “The lack of access to clean and potable water poses a danger to the lives of affected community members,” the report said.

Stephen Monaheng, who has lived in Hammanskraal for 29 years, says the water has been bad for as long as he can remember, despite countless protests, petitions, marches and meetings. “It’s actually been deteriorating,” he said.

Then came the cholera outbreak. “I was shocked that it was killing people, but I wasn’t surprised that it was caused by the water,” he said.

In response, local governments have paid dozens of private businesses to distribute water in tanker trucks. Shops selling water from purification machines have proliferated in every neighbourhood. “Water has become a big business here,” Mr. Monaheng says.

The tanker trucks are expensive, usually unregulated and often linked secretly to government officials. “It’s a big mafia,” said Ferrial Adam, an activist at WaterCAN, a civil society group. “I get so angry when I hear that they’ve become the norm. They’re not supposed to be a long-term solution.”

The councillor, Mr. Mashapa, acknowledged that the trucks are too few to reach most streets. “We don’t have any budget,” he says. “The municipality doesn’t pay the contractors on time. It takes three or four months to pay them. And if they’re not paying you, you just stop.”

Hammanskraal might be an extreme example, but other parts of the country are heading in a similar direction. Reports by the national water department in December showed that South Africa’s water quality has deteriorated in the past decade, with 46 per cent of municipal water systems failing to meet the required standards for drinking water.



Electrical engineer Kabelo Mashabane helped a Standard Bank branch in Johannesburg power nearby traffic lights that would otherwise go out during blackouts.

In the face of these decaying structures, South Africans are doing what they always do: finding ways to fight back. While cynics call it a failed state, this is far from true. The country still has a vibrant civil society, an active business sector, a strong and independent judiciary, tireless investigative journalists, energetic opposition parties, and a national culture of pragmatism and volunteerism – all of which have helped in the search for solutions.

Opposition parties and trade unions discovered an effective way to resist the electricity cuts: they launched a court action. In two recent rulings, the courts ordered the government to provide full electricity to hospitals, health clinics, public schools and police stations.

In another move to alleviate the energy crisis, South African homeowners and businesses have simply moved ahead with their own solar projects, without waiting for government planning. In less than two years, South Africans have installed more than 4,400 megawatts of electricity capacity from rooftop solar panels – enough to make a significant dent in daytime electricity rationing. Mining companies and retailers have added a similar surge of solar generation.

Evan Lieberman, a U.S. political scientist who has studied South Africa for decades, argues that the country is more successful than many people realize. Despite huge problems, it has avoided coups and wars and has remained largely peaceful. It has become more racially integrated. And compared to the apartheid era, its people are living a better life today, with greater access to basic services.

Prof. Lieberman, in a recent scholarly book on South Africa entitled *Until We Have Won Our Liberty*, praises the country for the resilience of its democratic institutions and its political accountability. He cites the example of Mr. Zuma, the former president, who was ordered by the courts to reimburse funds to the government after a scandal over upgrades at his village home – and was later forced to resign as president after another corruption scandal. “Where else in the world does a president face such consequences while still in power?” he asks in the book.

At the grassroots level, after years of deterioration in public services, South Africa’s private sector is beginning to fill the breach. Although not a long-term solution or a replacement for effective governance, those efforts have provided a measure of relief. In some places, private companies have been fixing potholes or contributing water supplies.

In a few corners of Johannesburg, motorists recently noticed an unexpected improvement. For years, traffic had been frustratingly snarled by the failure of traffic lights whenever a rolling blackout hit. Eventually a local solution was found: businesses “adopted” their nearest streets, providing a backup power system from their own generators to ensure the traffic lights would never go out.

On the streets surrounding the Standard Bank office in a Johannesburg suburb, new power cables between the bank and the traffic lights has ended the chaos. “It’s made a big difference,” says Kabelo Mashabane, an electrical engineer at the bank who led the project.

“This is not our job, but it’s for the betterment of the country,” he said. “You can’t just sit around and do nothing.”

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-south-africa-post-apartheid-anniversary-anc/>