

in Ancient Greece, have lost force. It is worth noting that the year 2034 will mark 40 years of democratic experience in South Africa. A politician who was 30 years old in 2014 will be 50 years old in 2034. There will therefore hardly be a politician in 2034 who would have participated in the liberation struggle. Anyone making reference to the liberation struggle would essentially be referring to what departed people had done. Reference to the struggle will sound like dead history, buried in textbooks, with little practical relevance to the problems of the living.

The 'God help us' scenario

Society in the next 20 years is likely to reflect a magnified picture of the macro-social trends that already characterise South Africa today. It is a society defined by acute economic inequality, where whites are better off compared to blacks, but where this reality is eclipsed by a socially visible black middle class that enjoys the same economic privileges enjoyed by their white counterparts.

The social and economic linkages between whites and the black elite will further eclipse race as a dividing social line. The social outcomes of 40 years of racial mingling among whites and members of the black elite will have produced more inter-racial marital partnerships. It will no longer be a curiosity to encounter mixed couples in the shopping malls of tomorrow. But this will still be confined to the middle class or more affluent sections of society. The future prospects of deepening social relations between poor white and black people are slim. The socio-spatial gulf that separates these poor people is reproduced by lack of money. Unlike well-off black people, poor blacks do not enjoy the freedom of social mobility.

The divide between the haves and the have-nots will still be mediated by the old apartheid spatial planning that has locked up millions of poor blacks in townships. Prime suburbs will still be the exclusive

preserve of a rich, racially diluted minority, although informal settlements of the poor are likely to encroach more and more into urban spaces, much to the discomfort of the elite – black and white. The phenomenon of high-wall security residential estates will be more visible in all our towns and cities. City dwellers will continue to migrate from traditional stand-alone houses into gated 24-hour security estates. As Terry Eagleton correctly observes: ‘It is not hard to imagine affluent communities of the future protected by watchtowers, searchlights and machine guns, while the poor scavenge for food in the wastelands beyond.’⁴ In South Africa, this is already happening. What we do not know is how fast the trend will develop. We also do not know how long it will take before the poor go on a rampage, breaking and looting the mansions of rich people in the suburbs for food.

The private sector will be the most preferred supplier of social services such as education, health care, security, and so on. Even among the poor, private institutions will likely mushroom to provide traditionally public services. The state might even be weaker, driven by a predatory elite, using the state essentially as an instrument of private accumulation. In such a scenario, politicians will not be trusted by the people, but politicians will not stop claiming to be tribunes of the people. In such a scenario, a great deal of cynicism will attach to politics. There will be a rise of messianic politics – a politics characterised by weak public institutions, dominated by theatrical individuals who pretend to be the hope of the people. ‘I am the only hope for South Africa,’ the messiahs of tomorrow will claim.

Public institutions will be so delegitimised that citizens will have no faith in them. Corruption will be so rampant and entrenched that public noise against it will inspire no hope. People will know that everyone in government is corrupt: from the president to the municipal official. The small guy will from time to time be punished in order for him to serve as an example that government is ‘committed’ to fighting corruption, but the big guys will not go to jail. Only the politicians who are on

the wrong side of factional politics will be tormented by security agencies. The case of Julius Malema and Jacob Zuma is likely to serve as a future template. Those in power will pursue their political enemies, but the public will know that the cat is as dirty as the mouse.

A society like this will be sustained by a dysfunctional public education system, driven by politicians who pay lip service to quality education. This will be made possible by the availability of an alternative, private education for the children of the elite. The elite will still make moralistic noises about the importance of public education, but their children will go to good schools in town. There will be a growing number of teachers in township and rural schools who send their children to schools in town, a clear sign that the teachers have little confidence in the quality of the teaching they deliver.

Driven by a quick-fix mentality and over-zealousness to produce glossy results, politicians will dupe the public by doctoring improvements in matric results, but the results will be based on ridiculously low standards. The national tragedy, though, will be that while the children of the elite will be insulated from this mediocre public education, private education will not be able to meet the demands of a skills-hungry and modernisation-needy economy. This situation will feed and reproduce inequality.

Most of the goods consumed by South Africans will be imports from China, South Korea, India and other parts of the world. Yet South African politicians will not stop mouthing slogans of national greatness, while international observers laugh at us. International reliance on mineral resources from South Africa will diminish, owing to investor distrust of the ability of the South African government to maintain order and economic stability. The rand will resemble a yo-yo, swinging up and down whenever investors feel restless. Increasingly, wealthier South Africans will open private offshore bank accounts, hoping to protect their money from perennial domestic uncertainty. Investment anxiety will be the order of the day. Capital flight is a real possibility.

In this scenario, the poor will not lie dormant; they will from time to time wage violent protests. When such protests erupt, politicians will not have the courage to go to address rampaging mobs because they will have lost touch with the masses. The situation will be left to security forces, who will have to kill a few or many protesters each time there is a confrontation. Nobody will call for the institution of a commission of inquiry after such skirmishes, as the general image of commissions of inquiry will have been sullied by the inaction of politicians following their recommendations. Or commissions of inquiry will be perceived as instruments used by politicians to shield themselves from culpability.

This scenario is nasty and undesirable, but current trends point in this direction. The scenario will be possible if the political environment continues to be dominated by the ANC, with no prospects of political change. If the ANC governs until 2034 and beyond, the hope for political change will be dashed by the arrogance of a party that would have been in power for more than 40 years. By then anyone who suggests that change is possible would look like a madman. Opportunistic citizens who view politics as a gateway to economic success will join the ANC, knowing that they are guaranteed rewarding positions in the state. People will be dissuaded from opposition politics, since the past 40 years would have proven opposition politics futile. There would be fewer opposition parties, and probably one main opposition party such as the DA. Opposition politics would be the domain of a few self-appointed angels, making noise in a political environment where kleptocrats reign supreme.

Under such circumstances, the ANC is likely to become a mafia organisation, controlled by cliques, factions, gangs and tribal entrepreneurs. Cadres will be at large at dusk, clad in balaclavas, and will be feigning seriousness in a branch or NEC meeting during the day. Well-meaning leaders of the ANC will be among the most frustrated in society, feeling helpless within a party that has been hijacked by swindlers.

But these 'well-meaning' leaders will be scared to leave the party, fearing hunger outside the patronage network of the ANC.

'It is cold out there,' concerned leaders will be warned by those who once attempted unsuccessfully to break out of the ANC, such as the Congress of the People (COPE) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). The failed experiments of the past 40 years – such as Agang SA – would also be a big demotivation for political experimentalism.

We call this a 'God help us' scenario. Many would pray that we never get there. But it is not impossible.

Towards the ideal

A different scenario is also possible. The ideal society would in many ways reflect a trajectory different from the 'God help us' scenario, but it would not be its direct opposite. Neither would it be a perfect scenario. We do not believe that South Africa will one day be a 'perfect' society. Indeed, we do not know of a perfect society in the world. But South Africa can be steered away from hopelessness. The country can be better.

Society is a complex, formless organism. It does not move in leaps and bounds. Mao Zedong had a warped conception of society. He thought it could be caused to make a Great Leap Forward. This was idealism at its worst, and it was bound to fail. It is true that Mao's successors, particularly Deng Xiaoping, have improved socio-economic conditions in China, but it has been a slow, steady process, not a Great Leap Forward.

South Africa's road to an ideal society would be similar. It would take incremental actions, over a period of time, to make this country better. We won't wake up one day to a better country today that was a mess yesterday.

As we will observe below, the success of modern societies largely mirrors the effectiveness of their public education systems. It is