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**In May of 2019 the ANC will undoubtedly win the general elections in South Africa, but in the run-up to these elections it is evident that the politics of race and identity will take centre stage and act as a cover to do nothing to effectively transform the enormous inequalities that will continue to exist in South Africa. South Africa's BRICS partnership seems now stronger than ever as the 'Rainbow Nation' shares the 'my country first' credo supported by the politics of authoritarian leadership.**

There was a time, after the first democratic elections in South Africa had voted Nelson Mandela into his presidency in April 1994, when people around the world spoke of 'The New South Africa' <sup>[1]</sup>. They were hopeful times when South Africa did not erupt into the anticipated and feared civil war, when work towards redistributive socio-economic justice and equality-for-all through its Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP) <sup>[2]</sup> started. President Mandela presented himself and South Africa to the world as a political example and icon of reconciliation <sup>[3]</sup>, embracing and trying to live up to Desmond Tutu's concept of the Rainbow Nation <sup>[4]</sup>. Whereas in 1994 the ideals of the 'Rainbow Nation' seemed to be within reach, during the years of Jacob Zuma's presidency these ideals were slowly but steadily eroded.

## Apartheid lives on

South Africa's third president Jacob Zuma appeared to foreshadow Donald Trump in his attitude to the rule of law, his complete disregard for decorum and his racist, tribalist and male chauvinist sentiments. The genie that was unleashed by Zuma, in which once again it became the accepted norm in South Africa to discuss and describe all issues in terms of race or tribe, has effectively resurrected the mind-set of apartheid ideologues. It enabled the ideas of the ignoble son of Amsterdam and architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, to continue to determine and define public debate and the contours within which political discourse is conducted in South Africa. Ironically, twenty-five years after the ending of the apartheid state and the arrival of democratic freedom, a new generation of politicians seems more than prepared to unleash the terms, identities and categories of the past. Othering, in culturally essentialised terms is allowed again and the spirit of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* seems to be back in town: 'from the oppression of such freedom [democracy] who would not welcome the liberation of confinement [essentialising]?' [5]

### *The chances that the elections will lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth in the country are slim at best*

In the face of South Africa's inclusive constitution, King Goodwill Zwelathini wishes once again to restrict access to the land on the basis of race and ethnic identity. [6] In this the Zulu king is prepared to enter into an alliance with Afriforum, the organisation that consciously espouses a particular white Afrikaner (farmer) identity and seeks alliances with other minorities in, and even beyond, contemporary South Africa. [7] In direct opposition to Afriforum and equally racially militant is Julius Malema's party, Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an ANC split-off Marxist-Leninist party that has an explicitly militarist approach to politics. [8] In short, it seems as if the centre-ground has been abandoned in the interests of extreme positions on the outer fringes of the political spectrum in which race and ethnic identity have once again been allowed to come to the fore in South Africa.

In May of 2019 the ANC will undoubtedly win the general elections in South Africa, but in the run-up to these elections it is evident that the politics of race and identity will take centre stage and act as a cover to do nothing to effectively transform the enormous inequalities that will continue to exist in South Africa. The chances that the elections will lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth in the country are slim at best. With this, South Africa seems to set and follow the example of the 'New Ordinary' in the broader geo-political arena of this era. The US presidency is obsessed with being serious about 'America First' [9], whilst Europe holds its breath if the European Union can hold it

together against all nationalist sentiments growing all over Europe<sup>[10]</sup>.



A cultural performance at the 10th BRICS Summit. © Flickr / GovernmentZA

In all this nationalist and masculine rhetoric from around the world, there is not much room, if any, for political perspectives that draw attention to the plights of the weak, the down-trodden, the poor, the marginalised, the 'losers' in this global competition, rhetorically red in tooth and claw. It is this 'winning' that is written about in the history books as public memories, as Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe famously referred to an old African proverb<sup>[11]</sup>: 'Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter'.

### **'Economy First' for South Africa**

Although it may seem quite a shift from where South-Africa came from in 1994, in the current context of BRICS it can be easily interpreted as 'The New Ordinary'. In the BRICS and global context of 'glorified hunters', South Africa followed suit under Mbeki and Zuma with no place for 'RDP', 'reconciliation' or 'forgiveness'. When South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa opened the BRICS *Business Forum* in Johannesburg on 25 July 2018 he still perfunctory spun Nelson Mandela's legacy for democracy, peace, solidarity, international cooperation and respect,<sup>[12]</sup> but his main message to the other BRICS partners was that he sees BRICS<sup>[13]</sup> as primarily a clear

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avenue to South Africa's economic future . No matter that Mandela's iconic symbol of freedom, with his right fist firm above his head, was the logo of the summit, it was Ramaphosa using man talk all along, promoting bare business and investment interests above anything else: 'We look to you, our distinguished business community, to be at the centre of our collective efforts to forge a new economic path' and '(w)e look to you to be ready to realise the vast potential that exists for investment and trade'<sup>[15]</sup>.

## *South Africa shares with China and the other BRICS members the politics of strong leadership and narrow ties between economic and political stakeholders*

As the major BRICS achievement after ten years of collaboration Ramaphosa highlighted the New Development Bank as a leading instrument in realizing the Forum's trade agenda. In line with this several months later in October at the Investment Conference he further presented South Africa as the gateway and leader of the African Continental Free Trade Area<sup>[16]</sup> in-the-making. Itself invited to join BRICS in 2010, South Africa now proposed to strengthen the group of emerging economies by offering the whole of the African continent in its slipstream.<sup>[17]</sup>

Not all BRICS countries are likely to shift their economic focus to (South) Africa, but for China (the only really growing partner in investments in the region) this is certainly a beckoning perspective, although perhaps no further encouragement was needed to continue its already massive investment in the continent. While at its start the BRICS partnership was generally considered to be a paper tiger, expert opinions have changed over time, and by some it is now even aspiring to become one of the world's powerhouses.<sup>[18]</sup> While it was believed that particularly the political systems of the five countries would be too diverse to allow effective cooperation, such differences have faded in the authoritarian 'New Ordinary' as South Africa shares with China and the other BRICS members the politics of strong leadership and narrow ties between economic and political stakeholders.

## *BRICS seems to provide a stable platform and unity against the destabilising and isolationist chaos that Donald Trump's administration pours over the world*

In South Africa state capture has been the major characteristic of its political economy under the

Zuma presidency<sup>[19]</sup>; in Russia the links between state and parastatal enterprises, and informal super-mafia tycoons is similarly shrouded in mystery under Vladimir Putin<sup>[20]</sup>. The Chinese leaders, most recently China's 'new emperor' Xi Jinping who presented Putin with China's 'Friendship Medal' in June 2018, hold a firm grip on the economy. A similar tendency is seen in India, now under prime minister Narendra Modi<sup>[21]</sup> and Hindu-nationalist president Ram Nath Kovind.<sup>[22]</sup> Finally, Brazil, with the recently elected populist Jair Bolsonaro<sup>[23]</sup>, has a very closed and nationally oriented economy that is likely to be neo-liberally restructured by banker and Minister of Finance Paulo Guedes.<sup>[24]</sup>



BRICS leader's family photo in South Africa, 2018 at the 10th BRICS summit. © Flickr / GovernmentZA

The over-all picture is that of 'economy first', supported by a strong, even elitist political leadership. Although he dedicates lip service to social justice themes every now and then, Ramaphosa, himself one of South Africa's major entrepreneurs in the mining sector<sup>[25]</sup>, looks more at ease among his economic and political peers than in meetings where social justice, redress, and in general, nation-

building is at stake. In that sense his talk at the annual Desmond Tutu Peace lecture <sup>[26]</sup> early October at Cape Town' Artscape Theatre was perhaps a mere, but meaningful symbolic interlude between his BRICS and Investment Conference speeches in Johannesburg's business center Sandton. In his Tutu lecture he stated that '(w)e have a shared interest in significantly and urgently reducing inequality and discrimination in all forms and manifestations' and 'the need to reduce the massive disparity in income and opportunity in South Africa, particularly between black and white, but also between women and men'. But true to his BRICS position, his first and foremost interest is the economy: '(w)e have a shared interest in the fundamental transformation of our economy and our society' <sup>[27]</sup>; economy first.

### **A coalition of winners**

The irony of the history of BRICS at this point in time is that it is now actually stronger than it ever was before because all the heads of state seem to share this global nationalist paradigm of 'winners' with 'my country first' as its credo, which has drawn them paradoxically together in unprecedented ways. Now BRICS seems to provide a stable platform and unity against the destabilising and isolationist chaos that Donald Trump's administration pours over the world <sup>[28]</sup>. With 'no time for losers', South Africa and BRICS are more serious with one another than ever before.

For the time being bad news for those hoping for, and aspiring to, a global order that is based on equity, equality and social justice <sup>[29]</sup>. For those who do not share these moral sentiments, South Africa and BRICS are meant for each other these days. The question of land, race and broader identity politics will probably all be used in the upcoming elections in South Africa in May 2019, but all for the sole purpose and cover to safeguard the interests of (the coalition of) winners.



Union House Pretoria seat of Government © Flickr / Dirk Hofmann

With regard to the various domestic issues that are at play in the individual BRICS countries, it is interesting to note that the domestic political agendas and the shared BRICS agenda seem to be treated in isolation from each other; domestic affairs and BRICS strategies do not seem aligned, and hardly mutually reinforcing. This may explain why there is ‘international scepticism’ about the prospects of BRICS as a major player in the global economy<sup>[30]</sup>. A more cynical take on this would be that the BRICS partners need each other as ‘fellow emerging markets’ in the global economic power play, but that they do not want any of their BRICs partners to be witnesses to the manner in which they deal with domestic challenges, At least that is how BRICS is treated in South Africa’s foreign strategy.

So far we have presented a rather grim picture of South Africa as an emerging stagnant political economy<sup>[31]</sup> that seems to conform smoothly to the conspiracy of the authoritarians, who combine a political and economic, elitist and isolationist attitude with neglecting the needs of large sections of their citizens. The ideals of Mandela and Tutu’s rainbow nation seem to have faded away in favor of more ‘realistic’ targets. Economic, political and social rifts have not been bridged, and essentialist identity politics, focused on differences rather than commonalities, has (re)surfaced. In that sense,

South Africa is ever more likely to become a normal, or ‘ordinary’ country, as political analyst Neville Alexander already warned in 2002<sup>[32]</sup>. Unless, as the same Alexander maintains, the country – and particularly its leaders – is ready to acknowledge its fundamental multi-sourced but shared roots. South Africa deserves a revival of Alexander’s powerful Gariep metaphor. To him the majestic Gariep (Orange) river and its many tributaries represent the diverse ethnic basin that feeds South Africa’s populace.

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## VORIGE ITEM

China on a collision course with the West