

# For Us to Embrace and to Cherish: South Africa's Three Decades of Democratic Rule

By Professor Puleng LenkaBula



For the past 29 years, South Africa and its international friends and supporters have been marking Freedom Day on every 27th of April not only to remember and honour the many heroes and heroines who sacrificed so much to ensure that we attain this freedom – many with their very lives – but to also acknowledge and celebrate the gains made since the first democratic elections and the first democratic government in 1994.

Beyond its illuminating and captivating beauty, the advertisement of South Africa's unfolding 30 Years of Democracy celebrations, beamed on what is arguably the world's biggest and most sought-after marketing canvass, the humongous NASDAQ billboard on Times Square, New York, brings into sharp focus the significance of this moment for South Africa and, by extension, friends and supporters of our young and fledgling democracy across the globe.

The dazzling advertisement is a stark reminder that South Africa's freedom is not celebrated only by its citizens. It is also a cause for celebration by those who fought side by side with the oppressed masses of our people, using the international Anti-Apartheid Movement as a terrain of the struggle. Our eventual freedom was as much a victory for them as it was for us.

Equally, the advertisement is a signal to other oppressed peoples elsewhere on the globe that, with enough persistence, resilience as well as international awareness and support, they can also overcome their circumstances.

This year, as we celebrate 30 years since that historic/herstoric period when millions of our compatriots cast their votes for the first time, leading to the installation of Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected president of the new Republic of South Africa, we do so in the full acknowledgement that the South Africa of 2024 is completely different and, in many instances, better than the country we reclaimed from the Apartheid regime in 1994.

Granted, many people rightly opine that there are still so many of our people who have not yet been touched by the winds of change sweeping through the country since the advent of new democratic dispensation. This critique notwithstanding, none can dispute the fact that a lot more has changed for the better for millions of South Africans who, hitherto, lived under atrocious socio-economic conditions pre-1994.

In fact, the post-Apartheid government inherited one of the most unequal societies in the world, characterised by deep-seated marginalisation and discrimination based on race and gender.

The Census 2022 statistics, officially released a mere six months ago, demonstrate beyond question that South Africa, with a population that has grown from just over 40 million in 1996 to approximately 62 million at the last count in 2022, is doing far better than before democracy.

Of course, we are all ad idem that whilst a lot of progress has been made in the various spheres of life, especially in priority areas such as education, health, sanitation, electricity and housing, a lot more can and should still be done. Realistically though, to completely reverse over 370 years of white discrimination (cf the colonial and apartheid eras) cannot happen in three decades.

We can however take solace in the knowledge that the democratic government has, in the last thirty years, taken deliberate steps to push back the frontiers of poverty and inequality as well as build a better and prosperous country.

In 1994, the primacy of education as a national asset and a resource for the transformations of society has been projected. Unlike prior to 1994 when access to higher education remained just a pipe dream for many Black South Africans from the margins, today those aspiring to further their studies can do so with less hassle than before, especially at public institutions of higher learning. In 2024 alone, over a million students admitted in the public university system are funded by NSFAS. In an annum, approximately 175 597 of these students study through the University of South Africa.

The number of persons completing a post-school education increased from 7,1 per cent in 1996 to 12,2 per cent in 2022, according to the Census 2022. Although the increase may seem paltry, it provides a good basis from which to work towards a better performance in this category. We are obliged to keep pushing until we realise three of the key aspects of the National Development Plan's vision on education, viz:

- providing higher education and training that enable people to reach their full potential;
- ensuring an expanding higher education sector that is able to contribute towards rising incomes, higher productivity and a move towards a more knowledge-intensive economy; and
- ensuring a wider system of innovation that links key public institutions with areas of the economy consistent with our economic priorities.

The census data also shows that 82,4 per cent of the population has access to piped water inside their dwellings or their yards, a significant rise from the 60,8 percent recorded in the 1996 census.

In 1996, the proportion of households using electricity as their main source of energy for lighting was 58,1 per cent. Today, it stands at a staggering 94,7 per cent, with the use of paraffin and candles as sources of energy decreasing significantly. Those who use electricity for cooking now stand at 64,9 per cent as opposed to 47,4 per cent in 1996.

Access to internet, a critical necessity mostly in business and education, has been on an upward trend since 2011, with households without internet access decreasing from 64,8 per cent to 21,1 in 2022.

The census also shows an upward trend in households residing in formal dwellings such as formal houses with brick or concrete structures, flats, apartments, and cluster houses. The figure increased from 65,1 per cent in 1996 to 88,5 per cent in 2022.

These examples are but some of the major gains of the democratic dispensation and a clear illustration that, despite the many challenges that still remain, South Africa has not remained the same in the last thirty years. Instead, it is moving forward steadily.

We thus need to acknowledge the role played by the African National Congress, the party entrusted with governing the country in the last thirty years, for these gains. Its leadership and stewardship during the transition has been phenomenal. We equally cannot ignore the contributions made by the various opposition parties as well as labour, civil and religious bodies in the co-construction of the new South Africa.

As we pause to celebrate this momentous 30 years of freedom, let us use it to also recommit ourselves – as a collective of government and civil society – to work better and faster so that many more of our compatriots can also taste the fruits of this freedom in their lifetime.

Perhaps one of the big achievements under our young democracy, if not the biggest, is the freedom accorded to all citizens to exercise the rights enshrined in the bill of rights of our constitution. Today any citizen or group of citizens can exercise any political, religious or association rights freely and without any fear of censure or reprisal from the state. In many countries on the continent and around the world, such unfettered freedom is a pipe dream. We often take this for granted.

It therefore behoves all of us, as we embark on the many individual and collective activities to celebrate Freedom Day and 30 Years of Democracy, to remember that ours is indeed a dispensation not to take lightly. If anything, it is something to cherish and protect.

Happy 30th Anniversary, South Africa!

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