

Martin Amberger: The Situation of the Coloureds in South Africa

In 1950, South Africa's population was divided by law. From then on, the country's apartheid government mainly recognised three groups – Europeans (whites), indigenous people (blacks or Africans), and coloureds. Individuals who were neither white nor black were regarded as coloured. As they were seen as a residual group, they never enjoyed a good reputation. Every area of life was separated, and sexual relations and marriages beyond the defined limits were taboo. Moreover, the coloureds lost the right to vote in 1956.

Today, the number of coloured South Africans amounts to 4.2 million, i.e. 8.9 percent of the country's total population. The share of blacks and whites is 79.5 and 9.2 percent, respectively. About their current situation, many coloureds say that during apartheid they had not been white enough, whereas now they are not black enough. In fact, they are still disadvantaged, suffering from the widespread prejudices against them. The socio-economic and political situation of this group is worth a closer look.

In South Africa, the impact of the apartheid policy may still be felt today. As shown by the Afrobarometer of February 2006, the group of the coloureds rates its current economic situation markedly worse than other groups. What all population groups see as the country's greatest and most pressing problem is unemployment. Statistics show that unemployment has increased most among the coloureds since the end of the nineties. While in 1998, the unemployment rate was 15.8 percent, it rose to 22.4 percent in 2005. Among the black population, on the other hand, unemployment decreased from 32 to 31.5 percent. Those who are most affected by it among the coloured population are people with a low level of education and unskilled workers.

When it comes to income, the coloureds also do badly. Among all non-white groups, their per-capita income grew at the lowest rate. Throughout South Africa, the number of people living in poverty has grown, the coloureds making up the second biggest group nationwide after the blacks – and the trend points upward.

After 1994, the government initiated several programmes to fight inequality. However, the coloureds did not benefit from them. Thus, the proportion of people from this group in leading positions has not increased to any extent worth mentioning between 1995 and 2001.

There are also problems in the area of education. Even though schools are now open to all segments of the population, many formerly white education institutions are still unaffordable to non-whites. The proportion of people aged over 20 who do not have any school-leaving degree has decreased but still ranks second. Between 1996 and 2001, the proportion of coloureds with a higher level of education grew markedly less than that of other groups. Thus, at 23.9 percent, the coloureds have the second highest illiteracy rate nationwide after the blacks. In 2003, they accounted for only six percent of South Africa's university and polytechnic graduates. Whereas Indians and blacks were able to expand their share, this does not apply to whites and coloureds.

What is alarming is the immense crime rate among the coloureds, which is highest in the Western Cape Province, a region mostly inhabited by this population group. In the residential areas of the coloureds, burglary and theft rates are markedly higher than elsewhere, and coloured people are twice as likely to die a violent death as blacks.

Alcohol is a problem *sui generis*. Due to the growing consumption of alcohol and drugs, drug-related crime among the coloureds has soared. In this context, the fact that, during the apartheid era, workers in the wine industry were preferably paid in alcohol to make them obedient and dependent on their 'masters' has a fatal effect: Given the large number of coloureds among the population in the traditional wine-growing region of Western Cape, this and the Northern Cape region show the highest rate of foetal alcohol syndrome in the country and the world. Alcohol abuse is an immense evil not only in those provinces of the country that are inhabited mostly by coloureds but also among the coloured population of South Africa as a whole.

However, socio-economic factors are not the only reason for the high crime rate among coloured people. In general, the coloureds are more destitute and are more likely to live in the cities. What is more, we find that the population in their residential areas remains highly constant, leading to a higher potential for violence. Furthermore, many coloureds tend to form gangs.

In this context, it is also worthwhile to take a look at the political implications of the coloured people's problems. While the ANC has won all elections on the national plane since 1994, it did not win in the Western Cape Province where, in that year, only 24.6 percent of the coloureds voted for the ANC, whereas 68.7 percent voted for the former apartheid party, the NP. Even analysts are surprised by the fact that such a high number of coloureds voted for their former tormentors. However, the situation changed in 1999: The NP lost many coloured voters to the DP (later DA) and, after 2004, to the newly constituted ID. On the other hand, the ANC won new coloured voters. Yet many coloureds are deeply suspicious of the parties both of the government and the opposition. As a consequence, many began to shun the ballot in 2004.

Studies document that in 1994 and 1999, wealthier coloureds preferably voted for the ANC, whereas the poorer and the unemployed tended to give their votes to the NP/NNP and CP/DA. There are several reasons for this inconsistent voting behaviour. On the one hand, due to the cooperation between the NNP and the ANC, many coloureds no longer knew what the NNP actually stood for. On the other, the NNP had become untrustworthy, for in earlier elections it had fought the same ANC with which it now formed a coalition.

To be sure, numerous educated and qualified coloured workers were able to benefit from the change in South Africa. However, this does not hold true for coloured people with a low level of education. Forced competition with the blacks turned many of them into losers, and the number of unemployed coloureds rose. Only a minority of poorer coloureds experienced an improvement in their standard of living. The latter may also be explained by the fact that during apartheid, coloureds were favoured over blacks, and that now, after the government endeavoured to make blacks equal, numerous coloureds feel discriminated by the country's leadership.

It is to be expected that the migration of blacks to the Western Cape Province will continue. Consequently, it is likely that the ANC will gain strength for that reason alone, even though the party has by now reached other groups of voters as well. What is more, the fact that the coloured party leader of this province has recently been replaced by a black person, and that a former adviser of the black mayor of Cape Town spread negative remarks about the coloureds has further deepened the distrust towards the ANC among the coloured population. After all, as numerous coloureds generally distrust the government and the opposition, and as it is to be

expected that, as a result of this, the number of coloured non-voters will increase, it is highly unlikely that the general situation of this South African group will improve.

Disillusionment and resignation are spreading especially in the huge coloured townships around Cape Town. For most of the people there, life has not noticeably improved since the fall of apartheid. The finding pronounced by the 'Theron Commission' in 1976, that at least 30 percent of the coloured lower class in South Africa would not be able to find a permanent job, has not lost any of its substance even thirty years later.