



## A South African case study for international dialogue and solidarity for justice and lasting peace

Christo van der Rheede

I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society.... It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

Nelson Mandela

### Lessons drawn from the Roman Empire

From its founding in 625 BC to its fall in AD 476, the Roman Empire grew militaristically and economically with expansion of territorial boundaries through military might. Trade and the production of goods created some of the wealthiest elite. The sale of oil lamps as a source of light was also a very popular trading item. The empire was characterised by decades of peace and prosperity during this era of expansion. The mightier and bigger it grew, it started to experience increasing levels of internal division, corruption, civil conflict and plagues. These weaknesses were exploited by its enemies and invasions by Germanic and other tribes led eventually to its demise.

Rome at its height was the biggest city in the western ancient world with a population of a million people. It was both glamorous and gruesome. A place where phenomenal extravagance was on display alongside the rotting bodies of crucified criminals. Whilst the wealthy loafed on ivory couches at dinner, the streets outside were filled with offal and excrement.<sup>1</sup>

It boasted magnificent public buildings, baths, temples, and houses for the rich. But also consisted of festering slums made up of overpopulated apartment blocks. The river Tiber that runs through Rome, was used to bring in goods from the Roman world. The river was, however, filled with sewage that was chucked into the river day and night. It was also filled with bloated bodies of dead animals and the victims of execution and murder.

The Roman Government was dependent on the army to enforce its laws. Its swarming cosmopolitan population epitomized the inequality prevalent during that era. The royal family and the wealthy lived in sprawling villas. These colossal ruins are still visible today. The

poorest were the slaves who were taken captive during Rome's wars. Freed slaves, however, could start their own businesses and rise to high office. Some slaves saved up enough money to buy their own freedom and do well.

The Romans were innovative people. They built aqueducts that channeled a constant flow of fresh water throughout the city. They also built nearly 85 000 kilometers of roads linking the capital to their far-flung empire. And developed a coinage system, consisting of a silver denarius coin and silver sestertius coin. The latter was worth a quarter of a denarius. Its most important use was to pay soldiers, buy supplies and to honor contracts. Warfare and the army played the first and permanent long-term role in monetizing the Roman world.

All these achievements fuelled an overbearing sense of self amongst the Romans. Their outlook on life and attitude towards others was embedded in a mindset of superiority and entitlement. Hubris got the better of the Roman society and was fuelled by fake stories or as it is known today 'fake news'. The Romans lived in a curious world characterized by a culture of entitlement and pompousness. At the same time, they were troubled that the standards that made them great were being destroyed by their self-centered lifestyle.

During the reign of Julius Ceaser, a culture of dishonest behavior, bribery and pursuing quick profit became even more deeply entrenched. Political corruption and competition were at its height and ambition at its most ruthless. Rome had become used to factions and feuding, often turning into violence.

Cicero, a Roman statesman, writer and orator was outraged at the large sums of money used to bribe voters who were entitled to vote in their magistrates. The magistrates in turn were presided over by an elected assembly of elders known as the Senate. Voting day was a big event and Romans eagerly participated in elections. Discussing politics was a favorite daily activity for many ordinary Romans. They did not have real power and were mere voting fodder for the elite. Exercising their vote, however, gave them a false sense of political eligibility and worthiness.

For the political elite or upper class, being elected to positions of power was crucial to a successful career of influence and wealth. It was not uncommon for political office bearers to systematically bribe their way into high office.

Under the Republic, the Senate was controlled by a self-serving and wealthy elite. The demise of the Roman empire came about as a result of the phenomenal wealth Rome enjoyed. The latter destroyed the very moral fire that resulted in the Romans being so successful in the first place. Consumed with a sense of self-importance and entitlement, the once glorious empire gradually lost its glamour and came to an end after a series of catastrophic events and civil wars during the 40s and 30s BC.

The rise and fall of the Roman Empire are a story of a political economy beset with an overbearing sense of self, entitlement, political intrigue, corruption, instability, economic

decline, military conflicts and social upheaval. Interestingly, some historians also ascribe the fall of the Roman Empire to climate change.

The political economy of the Roman Empire existed more than 2000 years ago. It is very different to our current South African political economy. However, it is also a story that feeds the imagination in terms of the political and economic risks that South Africa currently faces and what can happen if our country continues on a trajectory characterised by sleaze politics that eventually resulted in the demise of the Roman Empire.

### **Lessons drawn from the British Empire**

The term 'sleaze' came into use in British politics in the 1990's. It refers to immoral, repulsive and corrupt behavior, particularly in a political context.

In an article published in the Conversation by Ian Cawood, Associate Professor at the University of Stirling in 2021, he elaborated on how *'at the beginning of the 19th century, aristocratic networks connected to the monarchy and the Tory party had effectively "captured" the institutions of the state and exploited them for their own advantage'*.

According to him, Britain was almost ruined by people in official positions without duties, pilfering of public funds, nepotism, rampant over-staffing and failure to pursue the public good. It led to social and political upheaval and failed to resolve social inequalities. It prompted British intellectuals, evangelical reformers, thinkers, philosophers, journalists and public servants at the time to expose and denounce the looting and immoral behavior of the elite in their publications, newspapers and on public platforms.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Mandela legacy compromised by sleaze politics**

Sleaze politics in the South Africa context manifested in various ways. At the heart of our version of sleaze politics is embedded corruption in all of its pervasive forms and prevalent at all levels of the public sector. The same applies to the private sector in many instances.

According to the Progress Report on Implementation of President Ramaphosa's Response to the Judicial State Capture Commission, released in November 2023, over 300 witnesses in 429 days of public hearings were interrogated between 2018 and 2022 to lay bare the intricacies of state capture. The report states that the commission found clear evidence of state capture and abuse of power implicating 1 438 individuals and entities.

It concluded that this was a deliberate effort to exploit or weaken key state institutions and public entities. Including law enforcement institutions and the intelligence services. The report affirms that corruption is a crime against the South African people because it robs South African citizens of resources that should have been used to improve their lives, especially of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.<sup>3</sup>

The commission found that an estimated R57 billion of state money had been pilfered by state capture. It made 27 recommendations to recover funds. The NPA has frozen R14.18 billion in assets in state capture related cases. R5.4 billion has to date been recovered and returned to the state. SARS also acted against people named in the commission's report and collected R4.8 billion in unpaid taxes in the 2022/2023 financial year because of evidence presented at the Commission. The report highlights the following cases and provides an update on investigations.

In the Transnet corruption case, R400 million was stolen. 18 people including a former Transnet CEO and other former Transnet executives are charged with contravention of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA), fraud, corruption and money laundering in connection with Transnet's procurement of 1 064 locomotives in 2015 worth over R54 billion

In the Bosasa case, a total number of six people are on trial including a former COO of Bosasa, a former member of parliament and chairperson of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, a former commissioner of correctional services, a former CFO of correctional services and former CFO of Bosasa.

In the Estina case, of the 15 accused in this case, include a former Minister of Mineral Resources. The charges include fraud, money laundering, corruption and alleged misappropriation of funds from the Free State Department of Agriculture, which were intended for the establishment of a dairy farm project in Vrede.

The Free State Department of Human Settlements Asbestos case involves 17 accused, 13 individuals, including former premier of the Free State, a businessman and 4 companies. The charges include fraud, theft, corruption and money laundering in relation to the alleged illegal awarding of a R255 million rand tender to remove asbestos roofs of 30 000 households across the province in 2014.

In the Free State Housing project case, a former Free State human settlements head of department was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for corruption and five years for contravention of the Public Finance Management Act in November 2021 — wholly suspended after the head of department pleaded guilty. He was also found guilty of failing to prevent the unauthorised, wasteful and irregular expenditure of at least R500 million related to the building of RDP houses in the province in 2010.

The report is a shocking reminder of what can happen if sleaze politics is allowed to run rampant. The ideal of a constitutional democracy founded on the principles of accountability, responsiveness and openness was seriously compromised and remains so up to today. It was certainly not the path that South Africans chose to embark upon when millions went to the polls to usher in a new era of one, sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values: Human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms. Non-racialism and non-sexism. Supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law. Universal adult suffrage, a national common voter's roll, regular elections and a multi-

party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.

Not only did state capture reversed the progress our country has made to embed our constitutional democracy and enshrine key democratic values and principles, but it also reversed the gains we've made to improve the lives of millions through better housing, schooling, public health care and economic opportunities. It in fact made a mockery of the struggle against Apartheid.

### **Lesson drawn from the FW de Klerk legacy**

Our path from an Apartheid state to a Constitutional Democracy was fraught with many challenges. In 1985, when President PW Botha made his infamous "Rubicon" speech, our townships were ablaze, there was a state of emergency and a war in Angola. Expectations were great, but Botha went off script and unlike Julius Cesar stopped short of crossing the proverbial Rubicon. Nothing came from the expectation of abolishing Apartheid and introducing major reforms. The consequences were grave. The rand collapsed, foreign banks declined to extend loans and sanctions were tightened. Inflation, which had dogged South Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s, rocketed. Interest rates peaked at around 25%. The costs of servicing national debt rose to crippling levels.

Business leaders such as Anton Rupert sent a private letter to the President PW Botha about the need for urgent reforms. He lambasted the President and wrote that Apartheid is seen by many as an offence against humanity. He described it as the neo-Nazism of a 'Herrenvolk'. He made an impassioned appeal to Botha to denounce Apartheid outright. In an emotional appeal, Rupert described Apartheid as a system that *"...crucifies us, it destroys our language, it humiliates a once heroic nation to be the lepers of the world. Remove the burden of the curse of a transgression against humanity from the lives of our children and their children..."*.

It was President De Klerk who five years later, paved the way in 1990 to establish a new dispensation and to negotiate a new constitution. He unbanned the ANC, SACP and others, announced the imminent release of the late President Mandela and laid the basis for a new, democratic constitution. During the speech, Conservative Party MPs walked out shouting that he was a traitor. And that his announcement would destroy the Afrikaner 'volk'.

### **The Mandela and De Klerk legacy lays the foundation for freedom, peace, progress and prosperity**

Despite the noises from extremists, ending Apartheid gave South Africa a chance to come together as a nation and built a peaceful and prosperous future together. The establishment of our constitutional democracy laid a solid basis for peace, progress and prosperity. Our Constitution as the supreme law of our country affirms the notion of an open and democratic society, underpinned by a set of higher, fundamental values based on human dignity, equality and freedom.

Those who advocate for the scrapping of our Constitution must understand that it is the same Constitution that provides a solid premise upon which a broad-based system of restorative and corrective social justice is to be built. It also serves as *'a historic bridge between the past of a deeply divided society characterised by strife, conflict, untold suffering and injustice, and a future founded on the recognition of human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence and development opportunities for all South Africans, irrespective of colour, race, class, belief or sex'*.<sup>4</sup>

This opened the door for tremendous economic growth. In the 1990s, the newly elected democratic government, under the leadership of President Nelson Mandela and his Finance Minister, Trevor Manuel introduced a series of reforms that supported the longest period of uninterrupted growth in South Africa's history.

The three main building blocks of these reforms were a floating exchange rate, which freed the country from costly and unsuccessful exchange rate interventions, inflation targeting, which led to lower interest rates and more stable prices, and perhaps most importantly, fiscal constraints. It was especially during the Mbeki era in which South Africa experienced economic growth of 3,5 percent. Our debt to GDP ratio was at its lowest ever. South Africa experienced 36 consecutive quarters of positive economic growth during this period.

Together, these reforms helped steer the country through the emerging market crises of 1998 and 2001. But because it involved discipline and caution, they were not very popular. As a result, the reign of Thabo Mbeki and Trevor Manuel unfortunately came abruptly to an end when he was replaced by President Jacob Zuma at the 52nd National Conference of the African National Congress (ANC) held in Polokwane, Limpopo, from 16 to 20 December 2007.

### **Deviating from the SA Constitution puts South Africa on a disastrous trajectory**

A more populist direction was pursued by the ANC and as a result state spending started to increase dramatically, whilst government revenue started to dwindle because of a stagnating economy. Whilst the lips of austerity remained pursed under the leadership of President Thabo Mbeki, it quickly turned into a monster with jaws wide opened to capture the state through corruption, mismanagement and political patronage.

As in the case of the Roman, British and Apartheid 'empires', the decline in statecraft, economic growth, employment creation, social stability and cohesion, accountable and ethical political leadership and law and order under the ANC regime, gained rapid momentum.

The election of President Ramaphosa into office in 2018 promised to herald a new dawn. The decline, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, continued. President Ramaphosa stance on corruption was seriously compromised by the Phala- Phala scandal.

Today South Africa faces huge challenges. Our hope pinned on President Ramaphosa to lead South Africa out of this dark abyss of state failure, poor service delivery, high

unemployment, corruption, lack of law and order, lack of accountability, political thuggery and populism, over time turned into despair.

South Africa also faces serious fiscal trouble. State expenditure surpasses state income. Prioritising social expenditure over economic expenditure has resulted in state owned enterprises no longer being able to deliver public services and maintain power plants, rail networks, harbours, roads, water infrastructure. South Africa's economy has been rapidly hollowing out.

According to the latest report by the World Bank, South Africa remains a dual economy with one of the highest and most persistent inequality rates in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 0.67 in 2018. In addition, our GDP per capita, which gauge the prosperity of our nation based on economic growth for 2023 was calculated at -0,3%. It's an indication that we are experiencing a steady erosion of living standards.<sup>5</sup>

### **Formation of GNU rekindles hope for the future of South Africa**

Where to from here?

The national elections of 2024 brought about the establishment of a government of national unity (GNU). Political parties belonging to the GNU constitute 72% of parliamentary seats. SA's cabinet is comparatively large. Germany's cabinet sits at 17 ministers. Botswana at 21. Italy at 27. South Africa at 34. India at 72. Despite concerns about the size of the South African new GNU, it rekindled hope for the future of South Africa. A Statement of Intent inspired by the legacy of Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, laid a firm basis for a government that are now committed to fix South Africa through dialogue, co-operation, solidarity for justice and lasting peace.

All parties to the GNU also commit themselves to uphold the following fundamental principles:

- Respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights in its entirety, a united South Africa and the rule of law.
- Non-racialism and non-sexism.
- Social justice, redress and equity, and the alleviation of poverty.
- Human dignity and the progressive realisation of socio-economic rights.
- Nation-building, social cohesion and unity in diversity.
- Peace, stability and safe communities, especially for women and children.
- Accountability, transparency and community participation in government.
- Evidence-based policy and decision-making.
- A professional, merit-based, non-partisan, developmental public service that puts people first.
- Integrity, good governance and accountable leadership.

The key question though remains how the GNU will manage the diverse ideological stances by cabinet members of different parties and address the current challenges that South Africa face. New ministers and deputy ministers can bring about positive change. However, the path ahead remains a politically challenging one and is critical depended on productive conflict resolution mechanisms to resolve disputes between GNU members in order positively affect government's ability to deliver on socio economic challenges. Dialogue and rallying behind a shared vision is critical.

Hence, South Africa can no longer afford factionalism, corruption, low economic growth, high unemployment and all the social ills that arise from it. Failing to focus on the task at hand of turning around the fortunes of the country will set us on a path of demise, similar to that of the Roman empire. Sleaze and factional politics must make way for clean politics that put the interests of all South Africans first.

Cicero's commitment to reason, his contempt for corruption and fiefdoms, his lifelong battle against arbitrary authority and his desire to advance and protect the public welfare through constitutional reform and renewal, should inspire all of us to play our part to take our country forward. It cannot be the responsibility of our political leaders only. As the public we must take co-responsibility for our democratic future. Continuing to abscond our responsibility is a mistake, which we can ill-afford to repeat. The next five years of GNU rule will be make or break for South Africa.

The demise of the Roman Empire 2000 years ago and what happened in Great Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century serve as a frightening reminder of what can happen if we fail to hold our political elite to account. Cicero reminds us that *'to err is inherent in every man, but to persist in error takes a fool'*. A powerful and thought-provoking statement.

FW de Klerk knew that Apartheid was a costly mistake that if not rectified, it would have turned South Africa into a bloodbath. Mandela knew that the only way to bring about a democratic society in which freedom and peace reign, would be to engage in dialogue. Together FW de Klerk and Mandela laid a firm foundation for a constitutional democracy based on human rights that are part of the core moral code common to all democratic societies. Human rights are inviolable, inalienable, universal claims necessary to grant every human being a decent life.

Based on this shared vision, the GNU must now focus on rectifying the mistakes made in the past thirty years of our democratic dispensation. It must learn from our great leaders who put their own interests aside and focused on what would be in the best interests of not only South Africa, but also Africa and the world.

For that we salute Mandela and De Klerk. Their legacy serves to inspire all political leaders throughout the world to bring about peace, justice, progress and prosperity for all.



## About the Author

Christo van der Rheede is a former teacher and served previously as a school principal and CEO of various Non-Profit Companies in South Africa. He has vast experience in the following spheres of training and policy development: Basic Education, Small Business Development and Agricultural Development. He holds a Higher Diploma in Education, BA Degree (UWC), Senior Management Development Programme (USB), BA Hons in Public and Development Management (US) and a Master of Public Administration (US).

He was appointed as Deputy Executive Director of Agri SA in 2015 and was responsible for Agri SA's agricultural transformation programme, national drought relief programme, Agri-Phakisa programme, Agri-BEE programme, and other agri-development programmes. He was intimately involved in the compilation of the Agricultural Agro-processing Master Plan, specifically serving on the human capital task team. In October 2020 he was appointed as Executive Director of Agri SA. He currently serves on the Board of the AgriSETA and Human Resources Development Council and interact regularly with Parliament, the Presidency, Cabinet Ministers, Government Departments, State-owned Enterprises, Corporate Sector and various agricultural stakeholders on a range of legislative, policy and development matters aimed at ensuring food security for all our citizens.

Christo van der Rheede currently serves as the CEO of the FW de Klerk Foundation

---

<sup>1</sup> De La Bédoyère, Guy. 2024. *Populus, living and dying in the wealth, smoke and din of ancient Rome*. Abacus Books

<sup>2</sup> Cawood, Ian. 2021. <https://theconversation.com/a-history-of-british-political-sleaze-and-why-we-should-worry-about-the-johnson-government-160304>

---

<sup>3</sup> Zondo,

[https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/State\\_Capture\\_Progress\\_Report\\_November\\_2023.pdf](https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/State_Capture_Progress_Report_November_2023.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 1 of postscript 'National Unity and Reconciliation', interim 1993 Constitution (postamble).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>