

“The precarity of daily existence for so many black middle-class South Africans is heightened by dependence on political connections.”

## South Africa's Precarious Black Middle Class

ROGER SOUTHALL

**T**he growth of the black middle class has been one of the most notable manifestations of social change in South Africa since the end of apartheid in 1994. Under apartheid, an ideologically driven program of white supremacy and institutionalized racial segregation, the black middle class was subject to heavy containment and control by the ruling National Party (NP) government. Today, this class has taken a prominent place in the political sphere, the economy, civil society, and the media.

**Social Mobility  
Today**

*Ninth in a series*

Entry into the middle class has become the ambition of black South Africans whose life chances were previously restricted by poverty, poor schooling, and general lack of opportunity. Becoming middle class implies access to a wide array of social goods that were long denied to the majority of ordinary people in South Africa on account of the color of their skin: white-collar employment, a regular salary, a decent education, formal housing, and the everyday material comforts which in many societies are taken for granted.

The African National Congress (ANC), the party in power since 1994, has been rewarded with the support of black South Africans who have enjoyed upward social mobility. However, the aspirations of others have been frustrated, and the party has encountered as much growing dissatisfaction among the black middle class as within the wider society. This became increasingly evident in recent years—particularly during the presidency of Jacob Zuma from May 2009 to February 2019—as the ANC found itself mired in corruption scandals and the economy stalled.

Zuma's successor as president, Cyril Ramaphosa, has embarked on a major exercise in housecleaning as he seeks to restore economic growth and reverse the tide of corruption. To the extent that he succeeds, he will retain the backing of large segments of the black middle class. However, he will also find himself treading on toes belonging to its political, bureaucratic, and business elements that had hitched their wagon to Zuma.

### RACE AND FREEDOM

White rule was founded on violence: the military suppression of South Africa's indigenous inhabitants, the importation of slaves or indentured workers from Asia (notably India), the appropriation of land as white penetration extended far beyond the original Cape Colony, and the subjection of subordinated peoples to despotic labor regimes in which they were devoid of political rights well after the abolition of slavery.

White supremacy was further secured by deliberate strategies of divide and rule. The diverse communities under white rule eventually were denominated as Africans, Indians (or “Asians”), and “Coloureds,” the latter comprising a *mélange* of descendants of the different communities that had arrived in the Cape over time. Each “racial” community established its own traditions of compliance with and resistance to white rule, shaped by culture, religion, and differences in opportunity.

Collaboration across these communal lines started gaining political salience in the 1950s, when the ANC played a leading role in forging an anti-apartheid Congress Alliance that crossed racial lines, based on an ideological commitment to “nonracialism.” This ideal found expression in the 1955 Freedom Charter, a people's manifesto calling for democracy and liberation: its preamble asserted that South Africa “belongs to all who live in it.” Subsequently, the opposition's commitment to nonracialism waxed and waned in competition

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with Africanism—whose proponents held that the struggle for freedom on the African continent could be led only by black Africans.

Starting in the early 1970s, Black Consciousness emerged: a set of beliefs that white domination could be countered only by a political movement constructed around an inclusive sense of black identity that would unite all communities subjected to racial humiliation and oppression. Black Consciousness was never incompatible with nonracialism, which came to the forefront in the 1980s as the ANC, from exile, reestablished its ideological and political hegemony over the popular struggles against apartheid.

It was a commitment to nonracialism that guided the ANC during its 1989–94 negotiations with the NP for a democratic transition and an end to apartheid. Indeed, nonracialism and its emphasis on racial equality provided the foundation for the post-apartheid constitution and for South Africa's contemporary democracy. In recent years, however, there has been a trend toward increasing assertion of particular racial identities, most notably among Africans, many of whom are middle class. Africans have increasingly begun to appropriate the term “black” for themselves.

There is never any one politically correct way of grappling with South Africa's racial diversities, but today, in official documentation and popular consciousness, “black” has come to mean “African” (though the terms are often used interchangeably). Consequently, Indians and Coloureds tend to be denominated separately. There is much irony in this, given the official commitment to moving away from the formalized racial differentiation that prevailed under apartheid. Nonetheless, when we refer to the “black middle class” today, we are referring to what in former years tended to be described as either an “African elite” or an “African middle class.”

## WESTERNIZING MISSIONS

The origins of today's black middle class can be traced to the scattered educational efforts of Christian missionaries of different nationalities and denominations, which accelerated in the early nineteenth century. Saving souls demanded the promotion of literacy and the teaching of English so that earthly sinners could read the word of God—a mission that became a commitment to spreading “civilization.” Missionaries encouraged adoption of the key elements of a Westernized lifestyle, ranging from style of dress and eating habits to housing

based on the nuclear family, and jobs as farmers, artisans, or wage laborers suited to the early industrial age, all underpinned by rigid conformity to Western norms of morality and deportment.

To ensure that this Westernizing project endured, missions formed their own communities, usually on land they owned. The education they offered was available only to a tiny minority of Africans, typically drawn from families of local chiefs or the better-off peasantry. South Africa's first census, conducted in 1911, found that only 7 percent of Africans could read or write, virtually all of whom would have been mission-educated. The mission schools, and the handful of secondary institutions they established, produced the small cohort of Africans who became a local elite of ministers, teachers, lawyers, and journalists, as well as the clerks, interpreters, and agricultural administrators who staffed the lower ranks of the colonial state's “native administration.”

The colonial state had little interest in developing this black middle class. It left African schooling to the missions and denied Africans entry to the universities. In this respect it reflected the prejudices of the white population. Educated Africans were left in no doubt about their subordinate status in the colonial hierarchy. Within their own communities, however, schooling brought both material rewards and social respect, so those who obtained an education undoubtedly constituted an African elite.

It was a tiny elite. In 1946, there were no more than 18,000 “professionals and salaried personnel” in an African population of nearly 8 million. It was also an elite that endured much frustration, for while the privileged few had been taught to aspire to Western standards of “civilization,” they were simultaneously subject to political exclusion and economic subordination. Only a handful who met certain property or educational qualifications were entitled to vote; within the professions and even in churches, they were subject to discriminatory pay levels. Such frustrations drove the black African elite and middle class to play a leadership role in the ANC, which was formed in 1912 at a gathering in Bloemfontein of African chiefs, professionals, businessmen, traders, clerks, and others.

## SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the ANC was fundamentally conservative and respectful of white authority, pursuing modest objectives and seeking incremental constitutional conces-

sions from the white state. This was to change after the NP won power in 1948 and launched its project of apartheid to counter tendencies toward racial integration. From that point on, the state erected ever greater obstacles to black urbanization and sought to reverse the flow of black Africans to the towns that had sprung up as the country industrialized. Blacks now faced an increasingly complex maze of racial restrictions.

In response, the ANC underwent a process of political radicalization. Young leaders in the generation of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo pushed aside their conservative elders. Throughout the 1950s they spearheaded mass protests and mobilization, while forging links with organizations of other subordinated racial groups through the Congress Alliance. The state responded by ratcheting up political repression. By the early 1960s, the ANC leadership had either been jailed or fled into exile, and South Africa had become a police state.

For the African middle class, the 1950s and 1960s were decades of heightened frustration. During World War II, the military conscription of white skilled workers had increased opportunities for black upward mobility in industry. Now the state was attempting to reverse the process. Worse, in 1953, with the Bantu Education Act, the state sought to take control of the mission schools and impose a new curriculum deliberately designed to maintain black subordination. Yet this was the era when elsewhere on the continent, African nationalist movements were moving into government and enjoying the fruits of independence. In 1960, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan told the South African Parliament that the country should heed the “winds of change.”

The intransigent NP government refused to consider any prospect of racial equality. However, in a bid to legitimize and stabilize its political domination, from the early 1960s it began to cloak apartheid in the language of “separate development.” Africans, it said, would not be denied their political rights, but they would be allowed to exercise those rights only within their tribal communities. To that end, the state devolved “self-government” to eight (later ten) ethnic “homelands.” Replete with chief ministers, cabinets, parliaments, and civil services, these local governments were designed to satisfy the political aspirations of the African middle class and to secure its compliance.

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Despite being a blatant exercise in divide and rule, the homeland project met with a degree of success. From the mid-1960s on, the homelands produced growing numbers of African public servants, teachers, and nurses, as well as a proto-business class promoted by official policy. Only a minority bought into the apartheid state's gospel of separate development. Most were politically pragmatic, and simply pursuing available opportunities to earn a living and establish careers, while viewing the liberation struggle from afar. But once the apartheid state began to founder and the homeland regimes found themselves facing protests in the 1980s, the political loyalties of this homeland-based middle class became increasingly available for recruitment by the ANC.

Similar dynamics were at work in urban areas. After rapid growth in the 1960s, the economy entered a long period of decline characterized by much-reduced rates of growth, falling investment, skilled-labor shortages, and the increasing mechanization of industry. Despite the govern-

ment's reluctance to admit the inevitability of a permanent presence for blacks in the cities, the demands of the economy required it to massively increase access to education. The number of black children in schools jumped from 2.7

million in 1970 to over 8 million in 1988. Universities were opened in the homelands, and to a limited extent blacks were admitted to universities that previously had been reserved for whites only.

Although still concentrated in law, teaching, medicine, and nursing, the black middle class also began to penetrate the lower levels of the corporate sector as managers. Even so, despite an easing of restrictions on blacks in urban areas, as well as the state's devolution of administrative responsibilities to black local authorities, multiple obstacles, such as lack of capital, still prevented the black middle class from entering the economic mainstream. No wonder, then, that this emergent middle class played a significant role in popular protests against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s—and that the bulk of this class came to identify its interests with those of the ANC.

## COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Numerous theoretical and methodological controversies dog efforts to define and count today's black middle class in South Africa. However,

there is no dispute that while it remains relatively small both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total South African population, which now stands at 58 million, it has experienced substantial growth as a result of the democratic transition, the removal of apartheid-era racial barriers, and the policies pursued by the ANC.

The ANC itself recently estimated that the black middle class had grown to some 6 million by 2018 (though it did not disclose how it reached that figure). One major international survey concluded that some 25 percent of blacks identified as middle class in 2013.

What matters rather more than numbers is the manner in which opportunities for upward social mobility have been reshaped and expanded under the ANC. Four mutually supporting policies stand out.

The first is known as political deployment. The ANC still used a quasi-Marxist ideological language of revolution when it assumed power after winning the 1994 elections. Its professed aim was to establish political hegemony by capturing the “commanding heights” of state and society, to which end it needed to “deploy” committed and qualified “cadres” to take positions in government, public services, and the economy.

During its early years in office, it was constrained in this project both by the terms of the transition, which initially guaranteed white public servants their jobs, and human resource limitations, namely the lack of suitably qualified and appropriately educated blacks—a legacy of apartheid. As time passed and the ANC became increasingly entrenched in power, the pace of political deployment increased across all three levels of the state—at the national level, across the nine provinces, and in the nation’s 278 municipalities. Similarly, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which account for about 15 percent of South Africa’s gross domestic product, were staffed by ANC “deployees.”

Politically, deployment was a necessity: the ANC needed to satisfy its constituency. Economically, its impact became problematic as politicized demands for jobs led to a decline of skills in state institutions. Worse, deployment brought ANC factional battles into those institutions, a tendency that was to become increasingly pronounced under Jacob Zuma’s presidency. His followers used

the ANC’s deployment committees to instigate extensive purges within the party and to place their appointees in a wide variety of state positions. This culminated in a project of “state capture,” whereby government contracts and resources were diverted into the private hands of politically connected cronies.

The second ANC policy initiative was known as employment equity. This too was politically essential. The ANC was attempting to transform a hitherto white-dominated state and economy, and its goal in the name of nonracial democracy was to make them demographically representative of South African society. A flurry of laws in the mid-1990s expanded the organizational and employment rights of all workers, a majority of whom were black.

Then, in 1998, the Employment Equity Act prohibited “unfair discrimination” on 19 grounds—notably including race, gender, and disability—and compelled employers to draw up plans for affirmative action, with numerical goals

for equitable representation and time frames for achieving them. Firms employing over 50 people now had to submit annual reports on the composition of their workforces. Compliance became a requirement for securing gov-

ernment contracts.

The overall effect has been dramatic. Over the past 25 years, the public-service sector and SOEs have indeed become more or less demographically representative. Within the private sector, while progress has been significant, especially at lower levels, the pace of change proved considerably slower. The common complaint of many employers is that there are not enough adequately educated and skilled workers available, and that the government’s demands are unrealistic and discourage investment. Meanwhile, black entrepreneurs and managers complain of de facto marginalization within the mainstream business sector.

## EMPOWERMENT DEALS

Businesses have also had to respond to the ANC’s third policy initiative, black economic empowerment (BEE). Under apartheid, the heavily protected economy fell under the sway of a small number of huge conglomerates. They welcomed the transition to democracy, which offered the prospect of a relaxation of numerous government restric-

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*For many within the black middle class, survival and class position remain precarious.*

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tions and profitable entry into the global economy. Nonetheless, although they were pleased to see the NP go, large-scale businesses still had to adjust to democracy.

The first phase of BEE aimed to forge a political settlement between business and the country's new rulers. The chosen route was to strike a series of deals whereby state institutions, private banks, and the conglomerates themselves transferred debt-funded assets, including subsidiaries and shares in major companies, to ANC luminaries and appointed them to boards, while also making commitments to boost black participation in the management hierarchy. The basic idea was that the shares would be paid for by dividends from a rising stock market while black appointees helped establish political relationships with government. But this program fell apart during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98. Since black share ownership had been funded by borrowed money, black debts mounted as share prices collapsed, and the first phase of BEE went belly-up.

A second phase followed, launched in response to the cries of those who had been burned by the market's collapse and the complaints of black business lobbies about continuing white domination of the private sector. The new phase began when the ANC government under President Thabo Mbeki adopted the recommendations issued in 2000 by a Black Economic Empowerment Commission. These called for setting guidelines, goals, and obligations that the private and public sectors would be required to meet over a ten-year period. Companies scrambled to set higher targets for black ownership, recruitment, and skills development, which were formalized in a flurry of voluntary "empowerment charters" drawn up by various business sectors.

The government later sought to consolidate these initiatives with the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2003. It established a series of Codes of Good Practice concerning equity ownership, management, and employment, to which each sector was required to conform.

Although the impact of BEE continues to be debated, complaints abound that the economy remains dominated by "white monopoly capital." These protests grew louder during the presidency of Jacob Zuma, who significantly altered the empowerment strategy promulgated by his predecessor. Under Mbeki, who served as president from 1999 to 2008, the government's strategy was to push large-scale companies yet simultaneously

collaborate with them. Although government-business relations were often fractious, there was always a shared belief in the free-market economy. But critics denounced this approach as "neoliberalism," which gave Zuma a basis for rallying support from black business groups and trade unions, and within the ANC, for a far-reaching "economic transformation."

Once in power, Zuma sidelined the unions. His administration systematically diverted state contracts, many of them hugely inflated, to politically connected business cronies (notably an immigrant family from India, the Guptas) through manipulation of the public tendering system. BEE was misused to legitimate this kind of cronyism, which came to be known in South Africa as "tenderpreneurship" and was the ruination of the major state-owned corporations. As they decended into gross dysfunction and debt, they dragged the economy down with them.

## STRATIFIED SCHOOLS

A vast expansion of educational opportunities for the mass of ordinary black South Africans, engineered by the ANC, constituted a fourth stream of policy that opened new avenues of upward social mobility into the middle class. This reform of the nation's educational system helped create the social backdrop for the drama unfolding in the government and economy.

Under apartheid, schooling was racially segregated. White schools enjoyed extensive privileges including high-quality instruction and well-appointed facilities. Black schools, meanwhile, were forced to cope with appalling teacher-to-student ratios and grossly inadequate facilities. From the moment it took power, the ANC embarked on a mission to unify the racially divided public educational system.

This policy has met with considerable success in terms of providing education for all, boosting school attendance, and overcoming racial disadvantages. In class terms, however, the picture is more complicated. To equalize resources, black schools at the bottom of the hierarchy, in African townships and the former homelands, have been more heavily funded by the state. Former white schools at the top of the pack have accordingly been forced (and encouraged) to rely more heavily on fees paid by parents—although, contradictorily, the state has declared that no child should be prevented from attending a local school because of an inability to pay.

Since white schools continue to offer better-quality education, black parents have made strenuous efforts to place their children in them—in some cases by moving from black townships to formerly segregated white residential districts. The associated costs have not prevented the schools from becoming a crucible for black upward mobility, but they do place a heavy burden on parents seeking to consolidate their families' entry into the middle class.

The dynamics of the educational system have been further complicated by the rapid expansion of private schooling, a trend that caters both to whites drifting away from public schools and to black aspirations for better options. It is clear that the former white schools and the burgeoning private educational sector offer the best guarantee for entry into the university system—which is itself highly stratified. The former white universities occupy the top places in the hierarchy.

There is enormous hunger for education among South Africa's black population. This yearning is largely instrumental: education is viewed as the route to a better life and upward mobility. The ambition for most is a white-collar job and employment security.

Yet for many, the route to employment lies through channels and opportunities fashioned by the ANC. The party has opened up the school system, the public service, and the allocation of public contracts to blacks, and the black middle class has been the primary beneficiary of its rule. For many, though, class position and even survival remain precarious.

## **POLITICIZED OPPORTUNITY**

Today's black middle class is buffeted by numerous pressures. Entry into the middle class comes with multiple costs. Many aspire to own their own homes—and mortgages, upkeep, local taxes, and private security all need to be paid for, as do the cars, school fees, and consumer items that are associated with the good life.

In addition, black middle-class South Africans are subject to what is colloquially termed the "black tax": the social obligation of those with regular incomes to support less well-off relatives in a country where many go to bed hungry. Such demands inhibit the capacity of the black middle class to save, putting its members at a relative disadvantage to whites, many of whom get an initial boost on the road to home ownership or higher

education from parents, trusts, or other accumulated capital assets.

All of this occurs in a society that is bombarded with advertising encouraging people to spend. The poverty from which so many blacks have come predisposes some to demonstrate their success through conspicuous consumption, which often leads to indebtedness.

The precarity of daily existence for so many black middle-class South Africans is heightened by dependence on political connections. Many rely on employment in the public service and are unsure of their ability to survive in the more competitive private-sector economy. Although union membership offers a reasonable degree of protection, their job security often remains subject to the whims and preferences of politicians. This accounts for their ambiguous relationship with the ANC.

The party is widely appreciated for having massively expanded opportunities for upward social mobility. Yet the politicization of opportunity has led to serious divisions within the ANC. Under Zuma, appointments to numerous state positions and the allocation of contracts at all levels of the state were dependent on political favors. Corruption allowed many in the new black middle class to flourish as never before.

Today, confronted by the need to revive an economy whose growth has slumped to less than 1 percent per year, Ramaphosa has embarked on a program of reform. Its principal target is the SOEs, which became hopelessly indebted and dysfunctional as a result of the cronyism and "state capture" condoned by Zuma. To restructure these enterprises and return them to financial health will require the dismissal and prosecution of corrupt managers, cancellation of fraudulently awarded contracts, and retrenchment of bloated staffs. It is a necessary and unavoidable program but it will come at a considerable cost to the livelihoods of a large segment of the black middle class.

Ramaphosa enjoys the support of black South Africans who long for a capable and honest state, yet his reform agenda is opposed by many inside the ANC who benefited from Zuma's kleptocracy. This is fueling noisy conflicts within the party as it enters the campaign for the May 2019 elections. How the black middle class votes—whether it opts to back Ramaphosa, restore Zumaism, or defect to the opposition—will play a major role in determining the fate of South Africa. ■