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The State of Democracy in South Africa

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In 1994, South Africa became a democracy. Since then, the country theoretically fulfills all the requirements to be a full, stable democracy. However, the country has since been evaluated to be a flawed democracy and there are continuous elevated warnings issued for the nation by the Fragile State Index (Democracy Index, 2022). The major question, then, is what are the factors that are contributing to the decline of the state of democracy in South Africa. If this question is adequately answered, it can open avenues for seeking solutions to address the problem. Further, nations facing similar problems, with similar conditions, can benefit from such answers. Not only can the research provide insight for nations facing similar problems, but South Africa also plays an important role in the global arena. The country is a member of influential global groups, including G20 and BRICS. South Africa also exerts notable regional influence and acts as a top exporter of many natural resources. Accordingly, the political environment within South Africa will impact other nations and it is therefore important to determine which factors are causing this problem within the nation. Several factors can provide an answer to this question. However, the primary factors that contribute to the declining state of democracy in South Africa are not a result of the system of government, but rather a result of the political culture in the nation.

To determine which factors are contributing to the decline of the state of democracy in South Africa, several things need to be evaluated. First, it must be proven that the state of democracy in the nation is declining. This can be done by evaluating what criteria establish whether a nation full, stable democracy or not. Thereafter, South Africa needs to be evaluated under these criteria. Then, the system of government must be evaluated and compared to nations with similar governmental systems. More specifically, South Africa's system of government will be compared to that of the United Kingdom. This provides support for the conclusion that the system of government is not a factor contributing to the declining state of democracy as the UK functions under a similar system but does not face the same problem. Then, an alternative hypothesis is established that a factor contributing to the declining state of democracy is the political culture within the nation. It is imperative to the research to establish what political culture means, what factors typically constitute it, and how it is measured. Thereafter, the factors creating the political culture in South Africa can be established. Once these factors are established specifically as they are found within South Africa, links can be drawn to connect these factors to political culture, and this specific political culture to the declining state of democracy. It is through this process that the research question will be answered.

The foundation of this research is that the state of democracy in South Africa is declining. To show that this is true, democracy must be defined, the qualities that measure the state of democracy must be established, and statistical measurement of these qualities must be provided. First, for a state to be a democracy, some conditions must be met. There must be universal suffrage which allows citizens to participate in free, fair, and recurring elections. Further, there must be more than one political party (Morlino, 2002). South African citizens who are 18 years or older are eligible to vote. Those eligible must register by completing a free process. Further, both provincial and national elections take place every five years, allowing everyone registered to vote. Elections are run by the Independent Electoral Commission and this commission ensures that elections are both free and fair. There are multiple political parties and fourteen of those parties currently occupy seats in parliament ("Election in South Africa", n.d.). Another condition that must be present in a democracy is the promotion of human rights and civil liberties. The South African Constitution contains an extensive bill of rights that establishes the rights of all people within the country. The Bill of Rights also states that it affirms democratic values

including human dignity, equality, and freedom. Additionally, the Constitution also contains Founding Provisions in Chapter 1. This provision states that the country is founded on non-racialism, non-sexism, universal adult suffrage, regular elections, and a multi-party system of democratic government (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Looking at the values and principles in the South African Constitution shows that the country was established as a democracy, and it does support the principles needed in a democracy. Similarly, examining the eligibility of voters, the timing of elections, and the current parties in parliament shows that the country does exercise the fundamental conditions of democracy, and they are not just purely a façade to the rest of the world. Accordingly, South Africa meets the conditions to be considered a democracy.

However, several reports illustrate that it is the quality of democracy in the state that is cause for concern. The Democracy Index is one such report. The index measures democracy by rating several factors, which include electoral processes, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. In this measurement, the index labeled South Africa as a flawed democracy with a score of 7.05 in 2022, dropping its ranking from the previous year. Further, political culture received the lowest score of 5.00 out of all the factors measured (Olmunger, 2023). Additionally, the Democracy Report, created by the organization Varieties of Democracy, indicated that South Africa moved down several levels since 2012. It reports that the country was a liberal democracy from 1996 to 2013, and then lowered to an electoral democracy (Democracy Report, 2023). This report assesses, and thereby measures, qualities of democracy through evaluation by experts. These experts are often residents of the countries for which they provide evaluation and thereby know their political systems well. The organization also has a team of experts that supplement the former evaluation. Coding and statistical models are used to express the ratings and limit the bias, irregularities, or errors in the data (Bastian, 2023). Another report, produced by The Fragile State Index, places the country on an elevated warning list regarding its state of democracy. Examining this information from three different organizations, which all produce different reports, shows that there is a problem with South African democracy. This allows the conclusion to be drawn that South Africa possesses the requirements to be a democracy, but the state of democracy is declining.

It has now been established that South Africa possesses the framework needed for the country to be considered a democracy. Next, the system of government that is created by this framework and ought to promote democratic values needs to be examined. Therefore, a possible explanation for the declining state of democracy in South Africa is the system of government in the nation. In order to examine if this is the case, the South African system of government can be compared to a nation with a similar system. This comparison will occur between South Africa and the United Kingdom. The UK is a parliamentary system, just as South Africa is. Further, the prime minister of the UK and the South African president fill similar roles. However, the president has more power in some situations. Yet because of the checks and balances in both nations, this is not significant enough to create instability within the democracy. Accordingly, the countries have similar systems of government. Now, it must be determined if the UK is facing the same state of democracy as South Africa. To do so, the UK must be evaluated by the same three measurements that were used to establish South Africa's state of democracy. The first report is from The Fragile State Index. This index ranks the UK as 148th out of 179 countries. The closer the country is to 179, the better the state of democracy. South Africa received a ranking of 78. Additionally, the UK is labeled as more stable under the same report, while South Africa is under an elevated warning (Fragile State Index, 2023). Further, the United Kingdom

received an overall score of 8.54 on the Democracy Index, which classifies it as a full democracy. South Africa did not meet the score requirement to be labeled as such and is instead labeled as a flawed democracy (Democracy Index, 2022). Lastly, the Varieties of Democracy organization states that the UK is a liberal democracy, and it has not been lowered to a different classification since 2012. In the same report, South Africa was a liberal democracy but lowered to an electoral democracy since then (Democracy Report, 2023). The same three reports that indicated the state of democracy in South Africa is declining illustrates that the UK does not have the same problem. So, the two have similar systems of government, but they are not facing the same challenges with democracy. It follows that the declining state of democracy in South Africa is not a result of the system of government. Rather, an alternative hypothesis is that the state of democracy is a result of the political culture within the nation.

Political culture is a notoriously difficult concept in political science. So, it must first be defined and described before it can be applied to South Africa. Political culture is the shared values, beliefs, and norms that create the expected relationship between the government and its people. Assumptions about the political world are the fundamentals that form political culture. If an individual acts following such assumptions, they are seen as a legitimate political actor. To an extent then, the political culture of a particular group defines what decisions and actions this group believes are permissible. Further, political culture can be described as the mindset of citizens within a particular nation or culture (Elkins and Simeon, 1979). Frequently, surveys are used to measure and understand political culture within a nation. Thus, survey data will be used in examining the political culture within South Africa. The survey that will be used is conducted by Afrobarometer, a non-partisan research network that has conducted multiple rounds of surveys throughout 39 countries in Africa. The research team conducted 1,600 interviews in South Africa in 2021 to understand people's perceptions of corruption. First, understand that corruption is a result of political culture. If either citizens or government officials perceive corruption as a permissible action, then that constitutes a portion of the political culture of that individual or group. The survey found that nearly two-thirds of South Africans believed corruption increased from 2020 to 2021 (Govindasamy and Patel, 2021). Further, 76% believed that the government was performing “very badly” in the fight against corruption. The survey also found that at least half of the citizens see institutions of the state as corrupt. This survey data indicates that South African citizens believe that corruption is occurring, and the government is part of the corruption.

As mentioned before, corruption is a product of political culture. This product of political culture contributes to the declining state of democracy in South Africa. If citizens believe that their government is corrupt, they can lose faith in the electoral process. This can account for the reduction in voter participation in recent elections. Voting is a cornerstone of any democracy, so the lack of voter participation can contribute to the declining state of democracy. Further, corruption leads to certain undesirable effects, such as a reduction in government revenue. This reduction will limit the government's ability to fund services for its citizens, which can create further distrust of the government. Additionally, this can create economic inequalities. South Africa has some of the highest economic inequality levels in the world (“Six Charts Explain South Africa's Inequality, 2020). This economic inequality can also be seen in poverty and unemployment rates. However, a democracy must promote human rights, one of which is an adequate standard of living. Nearly 51% of the population lives in poverty and 25% of the population lives in food poverty (“Poverty and Inequality Platform”, 2020). That is a large portion of the population that does not have an adequate standard of living, which a democratic

government is supposed to promote. Accordingly, corruption leads to distrust in the government, lower voter participation, reduced governmental spending on services, and economic inequality. It follows that this product of political culture weakens the state of democracy in South Africa.

This research shows that the primary factors that contribute to the declining state of democracy in South Africa are not a result of the system of government, but rather a result of the political culture in the nation. This was illustrated as the South African system of government was compared to the system of the UK, which is similar. The UK is not facing the same problem, so it is not the result of the system of government. However, corruption is a product of political culture and many issues stem from that, including a reduction in voter participation, economic inequality, and poverty. These issues can all be connected to the declining state of democracy in South Africa. In saying this, the research does not claim political culture is the sole cause of the declining state of democracy in South Africa. Rather, it shows that political culture is a major contributor. Future research should examine other contributing factors. After that, research can be done to determine how these factors, and the state of democracy, can be addressed.

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