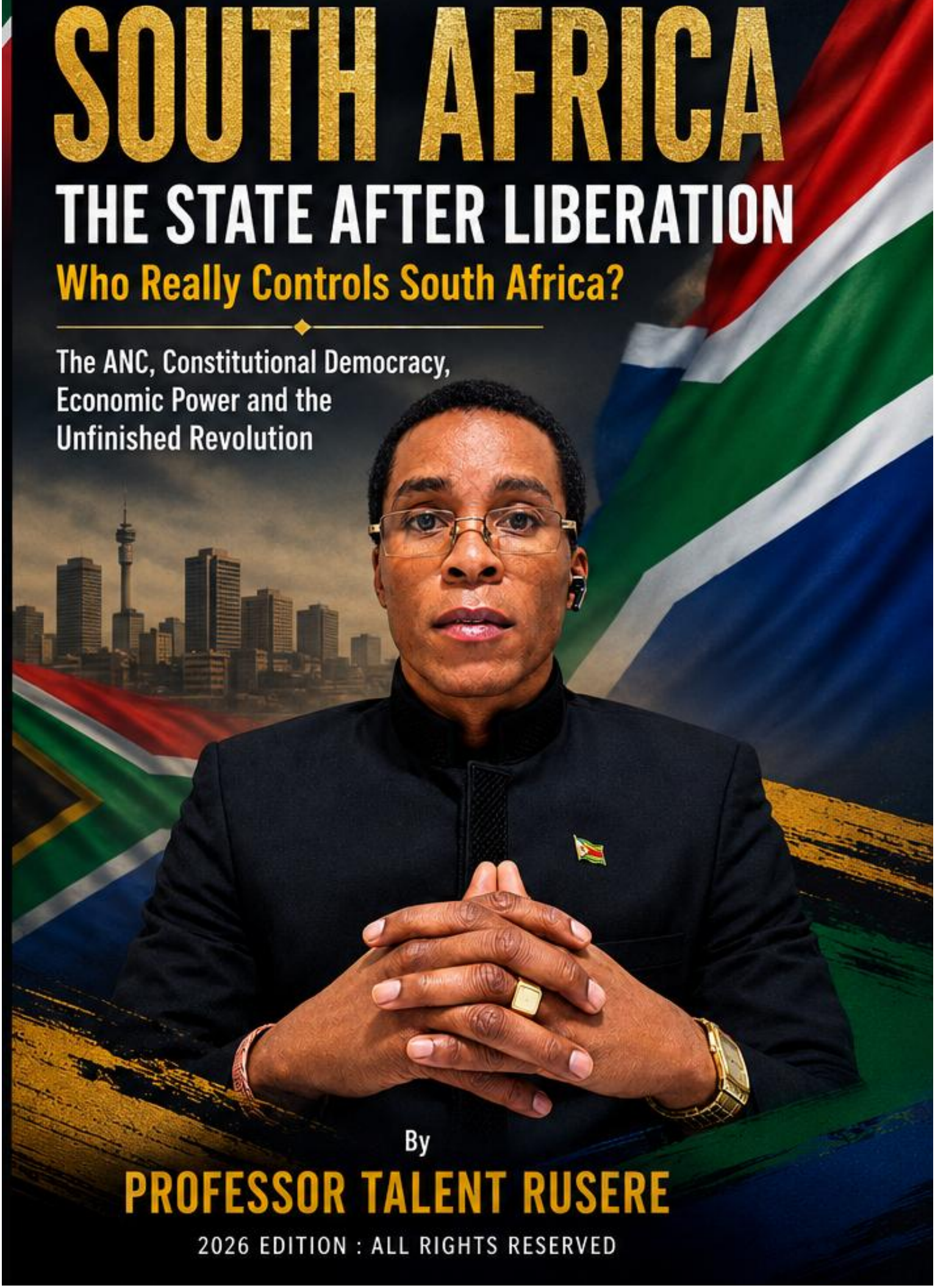
SOUTH AFRICA

THE STATE AFTER LIBERATION

Who Really Controls South Africa?

The ANC, Constitutional Democracy,
Economic Power and the
Unfinished Revolution



By

PROFESSOR TALENT RUSERE

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ABSTRACT

This book examines the post-apartheid South African state through the central question: who really controls South Africa? It distinguishes political authority from economic power and investigates the relationship between the African National Congress (ANC), constitutional democracy, capital, land, finance, organised labour, the judiciary, media, civil society and international economic forces. Its central argument is that the democratic transition of 1994 constituted a profound political and constitutional transformation, but did not automatically transfer every form of economic and structural power to the democratic majority. The book therefore rejects both the claim that the ANC controls every sphere of South African life simply because it has governed, and the opposite claim that elected government is powerless before capital. Instead, it presents South Africa as a complex field in which political, economic, institutional and social forms of power interact. The analysis traces where the liberation project achieved decisive victories, where compromises became necessary or consequential, and where inherited patterns of ownership, wealth and productive control proved resistant to democratic transformation. It further situates the South African experience within a Pan-African question: whether political independence can mature into meaningful economic sovereignty. The book concludes that South Africa should be understood not as a failed liberation, but as an unfinished liberation whose constitutional achievements provide the institutional foundation for a deeper democratic and economic transformation. Its ultimate concern is whether ordinary citizens can acquire meaningful influence over the material conditions that shape their lives, while preserving constitutional democracy, human rights, accountability and national sovereignty.

FOREWORD

I wrote this book because the history of South Africa after 1994 deserves to be examined beyond celebration, disappointment or partisan accusation. The democratic transition was one of the great political achievements of the modern era. It dismantled apartheid's formal political order, established universal citizenship and created a constitutional democracy founded upon rights, accountability and popular participation. Yet the passage from political liberation to substantive socioeconomic emancipation has remained unfinished. I wanted to investigate that contradiction seriously: how could a country experience such a profound democratic transformation while inherited inequalities of wealth, land, ownership, employment and economic opportunity remained so powerful? My purpose is not to diminish the sacrifices of the liberation generation, nor to reduce the ANC's historical role to either heroism or betrayal. It is to ask harder questions about power. Who makes the decisions that shape South Africa? Who owns productive assets? Who controls capital and access to finance? How do government, corporations, workers, courts, communities, media and international forces influence one another? Where did the liberation project succeed, where did it compromise, and where did structural economic power remain outside direct democratic control? These questions matter not only to South Africans but to Africa as a whole. Across the continent, political independence has often been achieved without complete economic sovereignty. South Africa therefore provides a particularly important case through which to examine the wider Pan-African struggle to connect political freedom with economic self-determination. I have written this book as an intervention in that conversation: rigorous enough for academic reflection, accessible enough for public debate, and deliberately willing to challenge comfortable assumptions on all sides. I hope readers will

engage critically with its arguments, test its conclusions against evidence, and contribute to the unfinished work of building a democratic South Africa in which political citizenship is matched by economic citizenship and African sovereignty is measured by real capacity rather than symbolism alone.

INTRODUCTION

The end of apartheid in 1994 transformed the political foundations of South Africa, but it did not erase the historical structures through which wealth, property, capital, labour, knowledge and opportunity had been accumulated. The central proposition of this book is therefore that political sovereignty and economic sovereignty are related but distinct. Citizens may elect governments, parliaments may legislate and presidents may exercise executive authority, while private and institutional actors continue to exercise substantial influence over investment, production, finance, ownership and markets. The question of who controls South Africa must consequently be approached as an investigation of multiple centres of power rather than as a search for a single ruler. The ANC acquired governmental authority through democratic elections and achieved historic victories in dismantling apartheid's legal and political architecture. The Constitution established a new conception of citizenship, equality and rights, while public programmes expanded access to housing, electricity, water, education, healthcare and social protection. These achievements are fundamental and cannot responsibly be dismissed. At the same time, the democratic state inherited a highly concentrated economic structure shaped by colonialism, racial capitalism and apartheid. Ownership, wealth and productive power could not be redistributed merely by changing the government. The negotiated transition therefore produced both rupture and continuity: political power was democratised rapidly, while economic transformation proceeded unevenly within a constitutional capitalist framework. This book investigates that tension across the institutions and relationships that constitute contemporary South African power. It examines the ANC as a liberation movement transformed by government; the economic structure of post-apartheid South Africa; land and ownership; the relationship between political and economic power; the judiciary; media and information; xenophobia and social crisis; electoral competition and coalition politics; foreign capital and sovereignty; the historical question of whether the revolution was abandoned or transformed; the architecture of power itself; and the Pan-African meaning of South African sovereignty. The analysis is deliberately neither celebratory nor nihilistic. It seeks to distinguish evidence from rhetoric and structural explanation from political accusation. A corporation can possess economic influence without secretly governing the state; a government can possess enormous regulatory authority without owning the economy; courts can constrain executive action without becoming political enemies; and liberation parties can retain historical legitimacy without possessing permanent ownership of the state. These distinctions are necessary if the post-apartheid experience is to be understood with intellectual seriousness. The broader argument is that democracy must not be reduced to periodic elections. A durable democratic project requires institutions capable of converting political citizenship into substantive opportunity, economic participation and accountable sovereignty. The South African experience therefore raises a question of continental significance: how can African societies deepen political democracy while building the productive, financial, technological and institutional capacities required for economic self-determination? The answer will not come from romanticising the past or abandoning constitutionalism. It will come from extending democracy into the economic sphere while strengthening the institutions that protect rights, accountability and public participation. This book is an attempt to contribute to that unfinished argument.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 1
FOREWORD 3
INTRODUCTION 4
TABLE OF CONTENTS 5
South Africa 7
THE STATE AFTER LIBERATION 2
Who Really Controls South Africa? 2
The ANC, Constitutional Democracy, Economic Power and the Unfinished Revolution 2
By Professor Talent Rusere 2
2026 Edition : All Rights Reserved 2
THE LIBERATION THAT CHANGED GOVERNMENT 8
CHAPTER ONE 8
FROM APARTHEID STATE TO DEMOCRATIC STATE 8
CHAPTER TWO 22
THE ANC AND THE PARADOX OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT 23
Was the ANC transformed by government, or did government transform the ANC? 23
PART II — THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA 54
CHAPTER THREE 54
THE POLITICAL STATE WITHOUT FULL ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY 54
Who Owns South Africa? 54
Chapter Four 80
The Privatisation of Power 80
CHAPTER FIVE 106
WHITE WEALTH, BLACK POVERTY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF ECONOMIC APARTHEID 106
PART III — LAND, CAPITAL AND THE UNFINISHED LIBERATION 118
Chapter Six 119
The Land Question: Who Owns South Africa? 119
Chapter Seven 134
The Black Majority and the Ownership Question 134
Chapter Eight 148

Can the ANC Control the State? 148
Chapter Nine 168
The Judiciary: Protector of Democracy or Constraint on Revolutionary Transformation? 168
CHAPTER TEN 185
WHO CONTROLS THE SOUTH AFRICAN NARRATIVE? 185
CHAPTER ELEVEN 202
INFORMATION WARFARE AND THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY 202
Chapter Twelve 210
Xenophobia: Social Crisis or Political Instrument? 210
Chapter Thirteen 222
Can Economic Power Produce Political Destabilisation? 222
Chapter Fourteen 233
From Liberation Movement to Electoral Competition 233
Chapter Fifteen 243
The Coalition State and the End of Political Monopoly 243
THE GLOBAL DIMENSION 255
Chapter Sixteen 255
South Africa Between Africa and the West 255
Chapter Seventeen 266
Foreign Capital and the Sovereignty Question 266
Chapter Eighteen—THE FAILURE OR TRANSFORMATION OF THE REVOLUTION 277
Did the ANC Abandon the Revolution? 277
Chapter Nineteen 290
The Capture of the Liberation Movement 290
WHO REALLY CONTROLS SOUTH AFRICA? 301
Chapter Twenty 301
Mapping the Architecture of Power 301
A NEW PAN-AFRICAN INTERPRETATION 309
Chapter Twenty-One 309
SOUTH AFRICA AND THE MEANING OF AFRICAN SOVEREIGNTY 309
Chapter Twenty-Two 317
The ANC, South Africa and the African Revolution 317
THE SECOND LIBERATION QUESTION 328
Chapter Twenty-Three 328

From Political Liberation to Economic Liberation 328
Chapter Twenty-Four 339
Reconstructing a Sovereign South African State 340
Chapter Twenty-Five 348
The Future of South Africa's Revolution 348
CONCLUSION 356
Who Owns the Future? 356

THE LIBERATION THAT CHANGED GOVERNMENT

CHAPTER ONE

FROM APARTHEID STATE TO DEMOCRATIC STATE

The transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa in 1994 is often narrated as one of the twentieth century's greatest political victories, and rightly so, but the conventional celebration of that transition can obscure a more difficult intellectual question: **what exactly changed when political sovereignty passed from an apartheid government to a democratically elected government?** The answer cannot be reduced to the replacement of white minority rule with majority rule, because the state inherited by the African National Congress was not an empty institutional vessel waiting to be filled with revolutionary policy. It was a highly developed political, legal, administrative, financial, military and economic architecture constructed over generations to organise South African society according to racial hierarchy. The ANC therefore inherited not merely government offices but a state whose institutions had been designed to protect particular patterns of property ownership, capital accumulation, spatial segregation and economic privilege. The profound historical achievement of 1994 was that the people who had been excluded from political citizenship acquired the vote and the constitutional authority to determine government. Yet the deeper question is whether the democratisation of political authority simultaneously democratised the underlying distribution of economic power. This distinction is essential because a society can undergo an extraordinary democratic transformation at the level of government while retaining substantial continuities in the organisation of wealth, ownership and productive power.

The apartheid state had deep roots in colonial conquest, land dispossession, racial labour regulation and the institutionalisation of white supremacy. Apartheid did not suddenly create racial capitalism in 1948; rather, the National Party consolidated and intensified structures that had developed through earlier colonial and Union-era legislation. The state regulated where people could live, where they could work, what political rights they possessed, how land could be acquired, and how labour could be mobilised. The African majority was incorporated into the economy primarily as a subordinated labour force while being denied equal political citizenship and meaningful control over productive assets. The architecture of apartheid therefore operated simultaneously as a political system and an economic system. Its laws were not simply instruments of racial discrimination in the abstract; they helped organise access to land, employment, housing, education, finance and markets. The result was a society in which political domination and economic privilege reinforced one another. Understanding this historical architecture is indispensable to understanding the limitations and possibilities of the post-1994 order, because the ANC did not inherit a neutral economy. It inherited an economy whose ownership patterns had been shaped by decades of state intervention, racial exclusion and concentrated private capital.

The apartheid economy was therefore more complex than the simplistic image of a government controlled by whites while everything else remained separate. The state, large corporations, mining houses, financial institutions, agricultural interests and industrial enterprises existed within a mutually reinforcing system of accumulation. South Africa developed a sophisticated industrial economy, but the distribution of its benefits was profoundly unequal. Mining became central to the country's economic development, while finance and industrial capital became increasingly sophisticated and concentrated. The migrant labour system connected rural African communities to mines and urban industries while maintaining a racial division between economic necessity and political belonging. The African worker was essential to production but excluded from equal citizenship. This contradiction became one of the central structural features of South African political economy. The country could not function without African labour, yet its political and economic institutions were designed to prevent that majority from exercising equivalent power over the system that depended upon it. The historical significance of 1994 therefore lies partly in the destruction of this contradiction at the level of citizenship, but also in the fact that its economic consequences could not be erased by constitutional change alone.

The ANC's revolutionary history emerged from precisely this contradiction between the political exclusion of the majority and its indispensable role in the life of the country. Founded in 1912, the organisation developed through several historical phases, moving from constitutional petitioning and African political representation toward increasingly mass-based resistance and eventually revolutionary mobilisation. The Defiance Campaign, the Freedom Charter, the Congress Alliance, the armed struggle associated with Umkhonto we Sizwe, the underground movement, international solidarity and the mobilisation of workers and communities all contributed to a political tradition that increasingly challenged the legitimacy of apartheid itself. The ANC's historical significance cannot therefore be understood merely through the personalities of its most famous leaders. It represented a broader political project involving workers, intellectuals, students, women, religious organisations, trade unions, civic movements and international allies. Its revolutionary tradition rested on the proposition that South Africa could not become a legitimate nation while the majority remained politically subordinated. Political emancipation was consequently conceived as a collective transformation of the country's social order rather than merely an electoral transfer of office.

The Freedom Charter occupies an especially important position within this intellectual history because it articulated a vision of South Africa in which political freedom and economic transformation were interconnected. Its famous conception of a democratic South Africa challenged racial ownership of national resources and rejected the idea that political equality could coexist permanently with economic domination. The Charter tradition contributed to the ANC's historical identity as a liberation movement whose objectives extended beyond winning elections. It represented an argument about sovereignty: that the people should become the authors of their own political and economic destiny. Yet the precise meaning of that revolutionary vision was always contested. Different constituencies within the liberation movement interpreted nationalisation, redistribution, workers' rights, private property, state ownership and economic democracy differently. The ANC was never an intellectually uniform organisation. Its historical strength partly came from its ability to unite diverse political traditions around opposition to apartheid, but that broad coalition also contained unresolved disagreements about what a post-apartheid economy should look like.

The revolutionary question therefore existed long before 1994: if apartheid was defeated, what would replace it? Would South Africa simply become a liberal democracy with a market economy, or would political liberation be accompanied by a fundamental restructuring of ownership and wealth? Would the state become the principal instrument of economic redistribution? Would strategic industries be nationalised? Would land be redistributed at a scale sufficient to transform rural power? Would workers acquire greater control over productive assets? Would the financial system be reorganised? Would corporations that had accumulated enormous wealth within apartheid's institutional environment be subjected to a new social contract? These questions were not peripheral. They went to the heart of what liberation meant. The transition ultimately produced a constitutional democracy that radically transformed political authority while retaining significant elements of a market-oriented economic order. This was not necessarily an accidental contradiction. It emerged from negotiations, economic realities, international pressures, internal political debates and the strategic choices made by the liberation movement itself.

The negotiated transition must therefore be understood as both a historic achievement and a political compromise. Negotiations between the apartheid government, the ANC and other political forces created the conditions for a peaceful transition from authoritarian minority rule to democratic constitutional government. The 1994 election represented a decisive rupture in political history: universal adult suffrage became the basis of national legitimacy, and Nelson Mandela became the first democratically elected president of the new South Africa. The symbolic significance of that moment was enormous. Millions of people who had been systematically denied political rights entered the political system as equal citizens. Yet negotiated transitions by their very nature involve compromises. Neither side entered negotiations with unlimited power. The apartheid state still possessed institutional authority, while the liberation movement possessed enormous popular legitimacy but faced economic, military and geopolitical constraints. The transition therefore represented not the unconditional surrender of one social order to another but the construction of a new political settlement from competing forces.

The constitutional settlement that emerged from this process was revolutionary in one dimension and conservative in another. It was revolutionary because it abolished legally institutionalised racial citizenship, established universal political equality, entrenched fundamental rights and created a constitutional order based upon democratic legitimacy. It was conservative in the sense that the economic foundations of private property and market exchange were not abolished. The Constitution created mechanisms for transformation, including provisions concerning land reform, equality and socio-economic rights, but it did not establish a system of comprehensive public ownership. This distinction matters because political sovereignty and economic sovereignty are not synonymous. A government may possess the authority to legislate, tax, regulate and spend while private actors continue to possess substantial control over capital, productive assets and investment decisions. The democratic state can therefore be politically sovereign while remaining economically constrained by structures that it did not create and does not fully control.

This is the first major analytical distinction of this book: **the state and the economy are related but they are not the same institution, and control over government does not automatically constitute control over society's productive resources.** Political power concerns the ability to make binding public decisions through institutions such as parliament, the executive, courts and public administration. Economic power concerns the ability to influence investment, employment, ownership, production, finance, land, technology, markets and the distribution of wealth. These forms of power overlap constantly, but they operate through different mechanisms. A government

can determine taxation policy without directly owning the companies that pay taxes. It can regulate banks without owning the financial system. It can legislate labour rights without controlling every employment decision. It can redistribute public revenue without controlling the private accumulation of wealth. Consequently, the arrival of a democratic government cannot by itself be interpreted as the complete transfer of national power from one social class to another.

The ANC entered government with enormous political legitimacy, but legitimacy itself is a form of power that must be distinguished from institutional and economic control. The liberation movement possessed the authority of history. Its leaders had suffered imprisonment, exile, underground activity, political repression and international isolation. Its cadres had participated in a struggle whose moral legitimacy had become recognised across much of the world. When the ANC won the 1994 election, it therefore acquired something far greater than an ordinary electoral mandate. It inherited the symbolic authority of liberation. Yet symbolic authority can decline if material conditions fail to correspond with political expectations. The post-apartheid government was consequently confronted with a monumental task: it had to convert the moral legitimacy of liberation into tangible improvements in the lives of the majority while maintaining economic stability, institutional continuity and national cohesion.

The transformation of the ANC from liberation movement into governing party was one of the most consequential political transformations in modern African history. A liberation movement is oriented toward defeating an existing political order; a governing party must administer the state that emerges after that order has been defeated. These are fundamentally different political functions. Resistance rewards mobilisation, moral clarity and opposition. Government requires budgeting, administration, legislation, economic management, compromise and institutional discipline. The guerrilla, activist or revolutionary politician can define politics in terms of struggle against an enemy, whereas the governing politician must make decisions that produce winners and losers within the society he or she governs. The transition therefore forced the ANC to change its organisational psychology. It had to move from liberation rhetoric toward policy implementation, from movement politics toward statecraft, and from opposition to responsibility.

This transformation created an unavoidable tension between the ANC's historical identity and the requirements of governing a complex capitalist economy. The liberation movement had mobilised people around expectations of justice, equality and social transformation, while the state inherited an economy requiring investment, fiscal stability, skilled administration and international confidence. The ANC therefore confronted a fundamental dilemma: how could it transform the economic structure without destabilising the productive system upon which employment, taxation and national development depended? Radical transformation promised deeper redistribution but potentially carried economic risks; gradual transformation promised stability but risked reproducing inherited inequalities. The problem was not simply ideological. It was practical, institutional and historical. Every governing party must balance competing objectives, but the ANC carried an additional burden because millions of citizens understood democracy not merely as the right to vote but as the political instrument through which historical injustice would finally be materially corrected.

The early democratic government therefore pursued a combination of political reform, social policy, public housing, infrastructure development, education expansion, healthcare reform, affirmative action, land reform and other measures designed to dismantle apartheid's institutional legacy. The state expanded access to services and created a broader social citizenship than had existed under

apartheid. Millions of South Africans experienced important improvements in access to electricity, water, housing, social grants, education and political rights over subsequent decades. These achievements should not be minimised. A serious intellectual investigation must resist the temptation to construct a narrative in which post-apartheid South Africa accomplished nothing. It accomplished a great deal. The political system was transformed fundamentally, constitutional rights were entrenched, racial legal discrimination was abolished, and a new conception of citizenship was established. The central argument of this book is therefore not that liberation failed, but that liberation produced an incomplete transformation whose achievements and compromises must be examined simultaneously.

The deeper question is what kind of liberation was achieved. If liberation is defined as the destruction of apartheid political rule, then the ANC succeeded historically and decisively. If liberation is defined as the creation of equal citizenship under a democratic constitution, the achievement is also substantial. If liberation is defined as the elimination of racialised economic inequality and the transfer of decisive productive power to the majority, however, the historical record becomes far more complicated. The distinction between these meanings is crucial because political movements often become victims of their own symbolic success. Once a liberation movement controls government, it can begin to speak as though the liberation struggle itself has been completed. Yet the conditions that produced the struggle may survive in altered forms. Racial domination may disappear from law while inequality persists through property, wealth, geography, education, finance and inherited advantage. Political liberation can therefore coexist with structural economic inequality.

The apartheid state deliberately separated political citizenship from economic dependency. Black South Africans could be economically indispensable while politically marginalised. The post-apartheid order reversed the political relationship but could not immediately reverse the economic one. The majority became citizens with voting rights, constitutional protections and political representation, while patterns of ownership accumulated over generations remained comparatively difficult to transform. This created one of the defining contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa: **the political majority did not automatically become the economic majority.** Millions of citizens gained the power to elect governments but remained dependent on institutions and markets over which they possessed limited direct control. The democratic state therefore became the arena through which economic redistribution could be pursued, but it did not itself become the owner of the majority of economic assets.

This contradiction is often misunderstood because democratic elections create the appearance of comprehensive sovereignty. Citizens vote, governments change, presidents make speeches, parliaments pass laws, and ministers announce policies. Yet behind these visible institutions exists a deeper architecture of economic power. Investment decisions are made by companies and financial institutions. Capital moves across borders. Property ownership remains distributed unevenly. Corporate boards make strategic decisions that can affect employment and production. International markets influence commodity prices, exchange rates and investment flows. Credit conditions affect households and businesses. Technological capabilities can be concentrated in private firms. Consequently, the democratic state operates within an economic environment in which its decisions interact continuously with actors whose authority does not originate from elections.

This does not mean that corporations or wealthy individuals secretly govern South Africa in place of elected institutions. Such a claim would be analytically simplistic. Rather, it means that power is

dispersed across multiple centres. Government possesses coercive and legislative authority, capital possesses economic resources, organised labour possesses collective bargaining capacity, civil society possesses mobilisation and moral influence, the courts possess constitutional authority, and international markets impose external constraints. The question is therefore not simply **who rules South Africa?** but **through what institutions, resources and relationships is power exercised?** This broader conception of power allows us to investigate the state without reducing politics to the actions of presidents and political parties. It also allows us to examine the economic system without pretending that the state is powerless.

The ANC's revolutionary project consequently succeeded most clearly where the state possessed direct institutional authority. It succeeded in abolishing apartheid legislation, establishing universal political citizenship, constructing a constitutional democracy, transforming public institutions and opening the political system to the majority. It also created substantial redistributive programmes through public expenditure and social policy. Yet the project encountered greater difficulty where transformation required changing entrenched patterns of ownership, capital concentration and wealth accumulation. This distinction between **governmental control and structural control** is central to understanding the post-apartheid experience. A government can change the rules without necessarily changing every distribution of power produced under the old rules. It can reform the system while leaving some of its underlying economic relationships intact.

The negotiated settlement therefore deserves neither romanticisation nor condemnation. To romanticise it is to ignore the compromises that limited the speed and depth of economic transformation. To condemn it as a simple betrayal is to underestimate the complexity of the historical circumstances in which the transition occurred. The ANC did not negotiate from a position of unlimited strength, nor did the apartheid establishment possess unlimited power. The settlement was the product of a balance between popular mobilisation, international pressure, political legitimacy, economic interdependence and the fear of national catastrophe. The negotiators were attempting to prevent civil war while establishing democracy. They were attempting to reassure economic actors while creating a new political order. They were attempting to protect national unity while dismantling racial rule. The extraordinary difficulty of these objectives should form part of any serious assessment.

Yet compromise has consequences. Every political settlement establishes possibilities and limits. The post-apartheid settlement gave the democratic government enormous political authority but did not provide it with unlimited economic freedom. It established constitutional mechanisms for transformation but protected property and legal continuity strongly enough to make revolutionary restructuring considerably more complex. This was not necessarily an illegitimate outcome; constitutional democracies require legal stability. But from a revolutionary perspective it raised a difficult question: if the majority gained political sovereignty while inherited economic structures remained substantially intact, had the liberation movement transformed the system or merely changed who administered it? The intellectually honest answer is that it did both. It transformed the political system profoundly while changing the economic system more unevenly.

The concept of **political liberation** must therefore be treated carefully. Political liberation means more than acquiring the right to vote. It involves the destruction of a political order in which one racial group possesses institutionalised supremacy over another. It means equal citizenship, political participation, freedom of association, constitutional protection and the ability to remove governments through elections. South Africa achieved these conditions to a remarkable degree in

1994. But political liberation can become incomplete when citizenship does not translate into meaningful substantive equality. A citizen may possess equal legal rights while lacking the economic resources necessary to exercise those rights effectively. Formal equality and material equality are therefore distinct. The democratic state can guarantee the first while struggling to achieve the second.

The constitutional order attempted to bridge this divide by recognising not only civil and political rights but also socio-economic rights. This was a significant innovation in democratic constitutionalism. The state assumed responsibilities concerning housing, healthcare, food, water, social security and education, subject to constitutional qualifications and available resources. The post-apartheid Constitution therefore embodied a transformative aspiration. It did not merely seek to prevent government from abusing citizens; it also envisioned a state capable of addressing the consequences of historical injustice. This created a tension between constitutional ambition and administrative capacity. Rights require institutions capable of implementing them. Redistribution requires fiscal resources. Transformation requires competent public administration. The promise of constitutional democracy therefore depends not only on legal principles but on the practical capacity of the state.

The transformation of the state itself became one of the central projects of the ANC government. The public service had to be reoriented from serving apartheid toward serving democratic citizenship. Institutions had to become more representative. The judiciary, legislature, police, military and civil service had to operate within the new constitutional framework. Racial barriers had to be dismantled. New institutions had to be established to protect constitutional rights. These processes represented a profound institutional revolution. Yet institutional transformation could not be achieved without retaining considerable administrative continuity. A modern state cannot simply destroy its bureaucracy and construct another overnight. Hospitals must continue operating, taxes must be collected, courts must function, electricity must be supplied and borders must be administered. The ANC therefore had to govern through institutions that were simultaneously being transformed.

This produced another contradiction: **the liberation movement had to use parts of the state it had historically opposed in order to transform the state it had inherited.** The same bureaucracy that had administered apartheid became part of the machinery of democratic government. The same legal system that had once enforced racial legislation now had to enforce constitutional rights. The same economic infrastructure built under an unjust order became necessary for national development. Transformation consequently required both rupture and continuity. The challenge was determining which institutions should be dismantled, which should be reformed and which should simply be repurposed. This is one reason why transitions from authoritarian systems are rarely as complete as revolutionary rhetoric initially suggests.

The ANC's entry into government also changed the internal nature of accountability. During the liberation struggle, the organisation was accountable primarily to its movement structures, political constituency and historical mission. Once it controlled the state, it became accountable to the entire constitutional order. Ministers had to answer to parliament. Officials had to obey administrative law. Policies had to survive judicial scrutiny. Public resources had to be allocated according to legal procedures. Government decisions could be challenged by citizens and organisations. This institutionalisation of power was a necessary component of democracy, but it also altered the relationship between the party and the state. The ANC was no longer simply an organisation

fighting for power; it was an organisation exercising power through institutions that were supposed to remain constitutionally distinct from the party.

The separation between party and state became one of the most important tests of South Africa's democratic consolidation. A liberation movement naturally possesses strong historical legitimacy and may therefore regard itself as the embodiment of the people. But constitutional democracy requires that no political party become identical with the state. The state belongs to citizens, not to the party that happens to govern. This distinction becomes especially important when a liberation party remains electorally dominant for a long period. The risk is not necessarily dictatorship; it may instead be institutional complacency, weakened accountability or the gradual assumption that historical legitimacy provides permanent political entitlement. Democracy requires the possibility that even a liberation movement can lose elections.

The ANC's long period of electoral dominance created both stability and vulnerability. Stability allowed the government to pursue long-term policies and gave institutions continuity. Vulnerability arose because political dominance can reduce the intensity of democratic competition within governing structures. Internal party competition can become more important than public electoral competition, particularly when party nomination processes determine access to public office. The result is a complex relationship between political power and organisational power. The question becomes whether citizens exercise power primarily through elections, or whether important decisions are increasingly shaped within party structures before citizens encounter them at the ballot box. This does not mean that South African democracy ceased to function. Rather, it demonstrates that democratic power exists at several levels, and that the relationship between the party and the state deserves constant scrutiny.

The movement-to-party transformation also created a fundamental shift in political incentives. A liberation movement can promise transformation because it is not yet responsible for administering the consequences. A governing party must translate promises into budgets, regulations and institutions. Every policy therefore encounters scarcity. Every expenditure has an opportunity cost. Every reform creates resistance from those who benefit from the existing arrangement. Every redistribution generates political contestation. Governing consequently exposes the gap between revolutionary aspiration and administrative reality. This gap does not automatically indicate betrayal. Sometimes it reflects genuine constraints. Sometimes it reflects poor leadership. Sometimes it reflects ideological compromise. Sometimes it reflects corruption or patronage. A serious analysis must distinguish among these explanations rather than attributing every failure to a single cause.

The economic dimension of the transition is particularly important because South Africa entered democracy with a highly concentrated ownership structure and substantial integration into global capitalism. The new government had to attract investment, maintain employment, manage public finances and prevent capital flight while simultaneously pursuing redistribution. This created what can be described as a **political economy of constrained transformation**. The state possessed the democratic legitimacy to pursue reform but operated within a system in which economic actors could respond to policy through investment decisions, capital allocation and market behaviour. The government could legislate, but legislation had economic consequences. It could tax, but taxation affected investment incentives. It could nationalise, but nationalisation raised questions of compensation, management and international confidence. It could regulate, but excessive regulation

could have unintended consequences. Transformation therefore required not simply political will but economic strategy.

The emergence of Black Economic Empowerment represented one attempt to alter ownership and participation without dismantling the entire market system. It sought to expand black participation in corporate ownership, management, employment and procurement. Over time, however, empowerment policies generated debates about who benefited, whether ownership was sufficiently broad-based, and whether elite accumulation could occur without transforming mass economic inequality. This tension reflects a broader challenge in post-colonial political economy: the transition from racial exclusion to inclusion can sometimes produce a new class of beneficiaries without fundamentally transforming the structure of wealth. Political representation may become more diverse while economic concentration remains high. The emergence of a black capitalist class is therefore not inherently evidence of failure, but neither is it equivalent to mass economic emancipation.

The same analytical distinction applies to land reform. Land is not simply another economic asset in South Africa because its ownership is inseparable from the history of conquest, dispossession and apartheid. Democratic South Africa inherited a profound land question. Reform therefore had both economic and symbolic dimensions. Redistribution could provide livelihoods and address historical injustice, but land policy also had to confront productivity, tenure security, financing, agricultural markets and administrative capacity. The difficulty of resolving these questions illustrates a broader truth: structural transformation requires institutions capable of implementing complex reforms over decades. Political declarations alone cannot reconstruct economic relationships.

The persistence of spatial inequality further demonstrates the limits of political transformation without comprehensive economic restructuring. Apartheid physically organised society into racialised spaces, separating affluent economic centres from townships, informal settlements and rural areas. Democracy could abolish the legal framework of racial segregation, but it could not instantly rebuild cities. Transport networks, property markets, schools, industrial zones and patterns of employment carried historical inertia. The geography of apartheid therefore survived in modified form. South Africans could become legally equal citizens while continuing to live in environments shaped by the spatial logic of racial capitalism. The physical landscape itself became evidence that political transformation does not automatically erase historical structure.

The same is true of education. Apartheid created dramatically unequal educational systems, and democratic government invested heavily in expanding access and changing policy. Yet inherited disparities in school infrastructure, household income, teacher capacity and community resources could not be eliminated overnight. Education therefore illustrates how structural inequality reproduces itself through institutions long after discriminatory laws have disappeared. A democratic state can abolish legal exclusion while inherited social conditions continue to shape life chances. This is why the post-apartheid question cannot be reduced to whether discrimination is formally prohibited. The deeper question is whether historical inequality reproduces itself through apparently neutral institutions.

Employment reveals another dimension of the problem. Political democracy gave workers constitutional and labour rights that were unavailable under apartheid, while trade unions became important actors within the democratic order. Yet unemployment, inequality and precarious work remained major challenges. The existence of labour rights does not guarantee full employment. A

government can protect workers while lacking direct control over the number of jobs created by private investment. This again demonstrates the distinction between political authority and economic power. The state can establish the legal framework within which employment occurs, but productive investment depends upon a combination of public policy, private capital, consumer demand, technological change and global economic conditions.

The financial system presents perhaps the clearest example of structural power outside direct democratic control. South Africa developed sophisticated banking and capital markets before democracy, and these institutions remained central to the post-apartheid economy. Democratic government could regulate them, tax them and influence them through monetary and fiscal policy, but it did not simply inherit direct ownership over the financial system. Financial power matters because access to capital determines which businesses expand, which households can purchase assets, which entrepreneurs can invest and which sectors receive funding. Whoever controls the allocation of capital possesses a form of structural power that may not be visible during elections. Economic democracy therefore requires examining not only who owns companies but also who determines access to finance.

The mining industry provides another crucial lens through which to understand continuity and change. South Africa's mineral wealth was central to the construction of its modern economy and to the emergence of powerful corporate interests. Democratic governments could alter mining legislation, taxation, labour regulation and ownership requirements, but mineral extraction remained dependent upon large-scale capital, technological expertise and international markets. This illustrates a recurring dilemma: natural resources may legally belong to the nation in a broad constitutional or statutory sense while their extraction remains organised through corporate structures. The democratic state therefore possesses regulatory sovereignty, but the operational control of productive assets can remain distributed among private and multinational actors.

It is therefore necessary to reject two equally misleading interpretations of post-apartheid power. The first claims that the ANC completely controls South Africa because it controls government. The second claims that the ANC controls nothing because capital controls everything. Both are inadequate. The state possesses enormous power: taxation, legislation, public expenditure, regulation, policing, infrastructure, procurement and constitutional authority are all significant forms of power. But economic actors also possess significant structural influence. The correct analytical position is that South Africa is governed through an **interdependent system of political, economic, institutional and social power**. The central research question is how these forms of power interact, which actors dominate particular arenas, and how democratic institutions can ensure that economic power remains accountable to the public interest.

From this perspective, the ANC's revolutionary compromise becomes more intellectually complex. A compromise is not necessarily a betrayal. Political movements compromise because politics involves competing forces and limited resources. The relevant question is whether compromises preserve the possibility of future transformation or permanently close it. The negotiated settlement preserved constitutional mechanisms through which redistribution could continue. At the same time, it established strong legal protections for property and market institutions, making radical restructuring more difficult. The historical judgement must therefore consider both dimensions. The settlement prevented catastrophic conflict and established democracy, but it also meant that economic transformation would occur incrementally within a constitutional capitalist framework rather than through a revolutionary seizure of productive power.

The concept of **structural economic power** becomes particularly useful here. Structural power refers to the capacity of an actor or institution to shape the conditions within which others must operate, even without issuing direct commands. A corporation does not need to order parliament to influence government. Its investment decisions, employment footprint and economic importance can affect policy calculations. Likewise, government does not need to own every company to exercise influence; regulation, taxation and public procurement can reshape corporate behaviour. Workers do not need to own factories to exercise power; organised labour can bargain collectively. Communities do not need formal state authority to influence decisions; protests and civic mobilisation can change political priorities. Power therefore exists through relationships, dependencies and institutional structures as much as through direct ownership.

This understanding also changes how we interpret the phrase "who owns South Africa?" Ownership is important, but ownership alone does not capture the full architecture of power. A shareholder may own an asset without managing it. A manager may control decisions without owning the majority of shares. A government may regulate an industry without owning it. A pension fund may indirectly own shares on behalf of millions of workers. A multinational corporation may make strategic decisions outside South Africa that nevertheless affect domestic employment. A global commodity market may determine the profitability of an industry without any single actor controlling the market. Consequently, the investigation of power must move beyond simplistic categories of black versus white, government versus business, or public versus private. The post-apartheid economy is a network of institutions whose relationships create different forms of influence.

The question of race nevertheless remains indispensable because economic structures do not become racially neutral simply because racial discrimination has been removed from legislation. Historical accumulation matters. Wealth is transmitted across generations. Property acquired under one legal regime becomes collateral and investment capital under another. Educational advantages reproduce occupational advantages. Networks created under apartheid can continue to influence access to opportunities. Consequently, contemporary economic inequality can reflect historical processes even where contemporary institutions operate under formally non-racial rules. This is why post-apartheid transformation cannot be evaluated solely through the racial composition of parliament or government. The racial distribution of ownership, wealth, land, managerial power and economic opportunity remains an essential measure of substantive transformation.

At the same time, a sophisticated Pan-African analysis must avoid treating South Africa as an isolated national case. South Africa's political economy is connected to the wider African continent through migration, trade, finance, investment and regional institutions. South African corporations operate across African markets. Migrant workers contribute to South African industries. Regional economies depend upon South African infrastructure and financial networks. The country's economic decisions therefore have continental consequences. This matters because the post-apartheid transformation cannot be understood exclusively as a domestic racial settlement. It is also part of the broader African struggle to convert political independence into economic sovereignty.

The Pan-African question is ultimately larger than whether black South Africans acquired political office. It asks whether African states possess meaningful control over their productive resources, financial systems, industrial strategies and development trajectories. Across the continent, formal political independence frequently coexists with dependence upon foreign capital, imported technology, commodity markets and external financing. South Africa, despite its greater industrial

sophistication, faces versions of the same structural dilemma. A state may be politically sovereign while remaining economically integrated into systems whose rules it cannot determine alone. Economic sovereignty therefore requires more than national flags, elections and constitutions. It requires productive capacity, technological capability, financial autonomy, human capital and institutions capable of directing development toward broad social objectives.

From this Pan-African perspective, the South African transition becomes both an achievement and a warning. It demonstrates that political liberation can be accomplished through negotiation, constitutionalism and mass democratic participation. But it also demonstrates that political liberation does not automatically produce economic sovereignty. The lesson is not that constitutional democracy was a mistake. Rather, it is that democracy must continuously deepen from political representation toward economic participation. The democratic project becomes vulnerable when citizens possess formal political equality but experience persistent material exclusion. The task of the post-apartheid state is therefore not simply to preserve the institutions created in 1994 but to continually ask whether those institutions are capable of addressing the structural inequalities inherited from the past.

The ANC's transformation into a governing party therefore produced a historical paradox. The organisation won political power precisely because it represented a movement seeking to transform power itself. Once it became the government, it had to operate within institutions that distributed power according to constitutional rules rather than revolutionary mobilisation. Its leaders became officeholders. Its cadres became administrators. Its political programme became public policy. Its historical legitimacy became electoral legitimacy. Its revolutionary language increasingly encountered the practical discipline of budgets, courts, markets and institutions. This was not unique to South Africa; liberation movements across Africa have faced the same transition. The difficulty lies in preserving the emancipatory purpose of the liberation movement after it becomes responsible for administering the state.

The distinction between a liberation movement and a governing party also changes the meaning of accountability. A liberation movement can claim that its legitimacy comes from history. A democratic government must demonstrate legitimacy through present performance. The sacrifices of previous generations cannot permanently substitute for effective governance. Citizens who vote for a liberation party are not surrendering their sovereignty to it; they are temporarily authorising it to exercise public power. This distinction is fundamental. The state belongs to the people, and the government is an instrument of public authority. Consequently, even a party that liberated a country must remain subject to constitutional limits, elections, public criticism, independent institutions and democratic competition.

This is where the post-apartheid experience reveals one of the central dilemmas of liberation politics. The party that embodies historical emancipation can gradually become part of the establishment. Its leaders may acquire wealth, office and institutional privilege. Its organisational networks may become intertwined with state resources. Its historical narrative may become a source of political capital. Yet the population it liberated may continue to experience unemployment, inequality and exclusion. A liberation movement can therefore face the uncomfortable possibility that its historical identity becomes increasingly disconnected from the material conditions of the people in whose name it governs. This does not mean that the liberation movement has necessarily become illegitimate; it means that liberation legitimacy must be continuously renewed through substantive democratic performance.

The post-apartheid story should therefore not be written as a simple narrative of ANC success or ANC failure. Both narratives are intellectually inadequate. The ANC succeeded in transforming political citizenship, constitutional authority and the formal architecture of the state. It contributed to building one of the world's most sophisticated constitutional democracies. It expanded social provision and created opportunities previously denied to the majority. At the same time, it did not fully transform the inherited distribution of wealth, ownership and productive power. Economic inequality remained extraordinarily high. Structural unemployment persisted. Land redistribution remained incomplete. Public institutions experienced serious governance challenges. Corruption and state capture damaged public trust and weakened state capacity. These realities do not erase the achievements of liberation, but they demonstrate the distance between political emancipation and socioeconomic transformation.

The phrase **"where the ANC compromised"** must therefore be approached with analytical discipline. Compromise occurred at several levels: constitutional, economic, institutional and strategic. Some compromises were necessary to secure peace and democratic transition. Others emerged from policy choices made after 1994. Some were responses to global economic realities. Others resulted from internal political struggles, administrative weaknesses or corruption. Still others reflected the changing class composition of the governing movement. The challenge for scholarship is to identify these different forms rather than collapsing them into a single accusation of betrayal. The history of compromise is not a moral story with only heroes and villains; it is an institutional story about choices made under constraints and the consequences those choices produced.

One of the most important consequences was the emergence of a post-apartheid political economy in which black political authority and predominantly concentrated economic ownership could coexist. This relationship produced both transformation and contradiction. The state increasingly reflected the demographic composition of the population, while major areas of private economic power remained highly concentrated. A new black middle and business class emerged, but mass inequality persisted. Public procurement and empowerment programmes created opportunities for some, while millions remained outside meaningful asset ownership. The result was not the replacement of one elite by another in a simple sense, but the creation of a more complex elite structure in which political and economic power became increasingly interconnected.

This interconnectedness raises difficult questions about patronage, state-business relations and elite formation. When political office controls access to licences, contracts, procurement and regulation, political power can become economically valuable. When private capital can finance political networks, influence policy debates or create opportunities for political elites, economic power can become politically consequential. The relationship can therefore become reciprocal. The danger is that democratic institutions become arenas for elite bargaining rather than instruments of broad public transformation. This is one reason why the question of who exercises power cannot be answered simply by identifying the president or the ruling party. Power may circulate among political elites, corporate interests, state institutions, organised labour and other actors.

The phenomenon commonly described as state capture dramatically illustrated the consequences of these relationships, particularly during the later years of Jacob Zuma's presidency. State capture demonstrated that political institutions could be manipulated through networks connecting political office, business interests and public resources. It also demonstrated that the state itself remained a major source of economic power. The problem was therefore not simply that private capital

controlled government, nor simply that politicians controlled business. Rather, the episode exposed how political and economic power could become mutually reinforcing in ways that undermine democratic accountability. The lesson is crucial for this book: the relationship between state power and economic power is dynamic, and democratic institutions must be strong enough to prevent their fusion into systems of elite extraction.

Yet state capture should not be used to explain the entire post-apartheid political economy. It was an extreme manifestation of problems that existed more broadly: weak institutions, patronage networks, corruption, inadequate accountability, party-state tensions and the politicisation of public resources. Nor should corruption be treated as the sole explanation for persistent inequality. Corruption can weaken the state's capacity to redistribute resources, but structural inequality also reflects ownership patterns, labour-market dynamics, educational disparities, spatial inequality and the inherited concentration of wealth. A deeper analysis therefore requires us to distinguish between **maladministration of the democratic state and structural features of the economy that predate democracy**. Both matter, but they are not identical.

The question of who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa must therefore be approached as an empirical investigation rather than a predetermined ideological conclusion. Government possesses real power. Parliament possesses real power. Courts possess real power. Businesses possess real power. Workers possess real power. Civil society possesses real power. International institutions and global markets exert influence. Communities exercise power through mobilisation. Media organisations shape public discourse. Political parties determine access to electoral office. The decisive issue is how these forces interact and which institutions are capable of converting economic and social power into democratic outcomes. Power is not a single possession. It is a field of relationships.

The deeper Pan-African intellectual lesson is that sovereignty must be measured not only by the identity of those who occupy political office but by the capacity of societies to determine their economic destiny. A country cannot be considered fully emancipated merely because its government is democratically elected if the majority remains structurally excluded from productive ownership and economic opportunity. Equally, economic transformation cannot be achieved sustainably by destroying constitutional democracy. The challenge is to connect political democracy with economic democracy. That requires institutions that make capital accountable, markets inclusive, public resources transparent, labour productive and protected, land accessible, education transformative and state institutions capable of implementing long-term development strategies.

The history of South Africa since 1994 should consequently be interpreted as an unfinished liberation rather than a failed liberation. The political revolution succeeded. The constitutional revolution succeeded. The social revolution produced significant but uneven gains. The economic revolution remained incomplete. The distinction is fundamental because it allows us to recognise what was achieved without pretending that the historical mission has been fully completed. The ANC changed who governed South Africa, but it could not immediately change every structure through which South African society produced and distributed wealth. The democratic state inherited economic institutions whose transformation required policies, capital, expertise, administrative capacity and political consensus. Some of those transformations occurred; others remained partial; still others generated new contradictions.

The central argument of this chapter can therefore be stated plainly: **1994 transferred political sovereignty, but it did not transfer every form of power.** The ANC won control of government, but government was only one component of the national power structure. The liberation movement dismantled the political foundations of apartheid, but inherited economic structures survived in altered form. The Constitution created a framework for transformation, but constitutional authority did not automatically produce economic ownership. The majority became politically sovereign, but economic sovereignty remained incomplete. The result was a new South Africa in which political power became substantially democratised while economic power remained more unevenly distributed. Understanding this contradiction is essential to understanding the achievements, compromises and unfinished business of the post-apartheid project.

The historical significance of South Africa's transition therefore lies not merely in the fact that Nelson Mandela entered the Union Buildings in 1994. It lies in the creation of a new relationship between state, citizen and political authority. The black majority became the sovereign political constituency of the republic. Apartheid's racial hierarchy was removed from the legal foundations of the state. The Constitution established a new conception of citizenship. Yet the economic structures inherited from the past did not disappear with the changing of the flag, the government or the presidency. They entered the democratic era and were gradually modified through legislation, markets, empowerment policies, redistribution and social programmes. The post-apartheid order was consequently neither apartheid continued unchanged nor a completely new economic system. It was a hybrid historical formation: politically transformed, constitutionally reconstructed and economically contested.

That hybrid character is the foundation upon which the rest of this book must proceed. If the central question is **who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa**, then the investigation must move beyond the ballot box and into the institutions where wealth, capital, land, finance, labour, knowledge and production are organised. It must examine the relationship between the ANC and the state, between government and business, between constitutional rights and material inequality, between political representation and economic ownership, and between national sovereignty and global economic integration. It must ask where the liberation project genuinely transformed South Africa, where it accepted necessary compromises, where it failed to deliver on its promises, and where economic structures proved resistant to democratic control. Above all, it must recognise that the unfinished struggle is not simply about who occupies government. It is about whether democracy can ultimately give ordinary citizens meaningful power over the conditions that determine their lives.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ANC AND THE PARADOX OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

Was the ANC transformed by government, or did government transform the ANC?

The central paradox of the African National Congress after 1994 is that the organisation that had spent decades seeking to capture, transform and ultimately democratise the South African state became the principal custodian of the very state whose inherited structures it had historically condemned. This was not a simple transition from oppression to liberation, because political liberation did not automatically produce economic sovereignty, institutional decolonisation or popular control over the material foundations of power. The ANC entered government carrying the enormous historical legitimacy of a liberation movement, but it simultaneously entered a constitutional order that imposed legal, institutional and economic constraints upon what a governing party could do. The movement therefore confronted a fundamental contradiction: it had been organised to overthrow apartheid, yet it now had to govern a state whose administrative machinery, property relations, financial architecture, corporate structures and legal traditions had largely developed before liberation. The question is consequently not merely whether the ANC governed successfully, but whether the transition from movement to government altered the very meaning of ANC power. Political office gave the organisation extraordinary authority over legislation, public administration and national policy, but it did not give it unrestricted command over capital, private property, investment decisions, financial markets, corporate ownership or international economic relations. The ANC could change government without immediately changing the underlying distribution of economic power. It could democratise political institutions without fully democratising the economy. It could replace apartheid rulers with elected representatives while leaving significant elements of the inherited socioeconomic architecture intact. This distinction is indispensable to understanding post-apartheid South Africa. The liberation of the state and the liberation of society were related projects, but they were never identical projects. The ANC achieved a historic transformation in political sovereignty, yet the deeper question of who controls productive assets, finance, land, technology and capital remained substantially more complicated. The paradox of revolutionary government therefore begins precisely at the point where political victory became governmental responsibility. Once the ANC became the governing party, it had to reconcile the expectations of a historically dispossessed majority with the constraints of constitutional democracy, fiscal discipline, property rights, investor confidence and global economic integration. Its transformation was therefore both institutional and ideological. Government did not merely provide the ANC with offices; it changed the incentives, responsibilities and strategic calculations of the movement itself. The former liberation organisation increasingly had to think like a state, while the state increasingly became dependent upon the political legitimacy of the organisation. That movement-state fusion created the foundations of both the ANC's achievements and its contradictions.

The ANC's historical identity was constructed through resistance, mobilisation and political struggle rather than through routine administration. It developed a political culture in which legitimacy was derived from representing the oppressed and challenging an illegitimate state. During the liberation struggle, the organisation could define its objectives in transformative language because it was not responsible for administering the daily contradictions of a modern state. It could speak simultaneously to workers, rural communities, intellectuals, business interests, churches, international solidarity networks and radical activists because opposition politics allowed different

constituencies to project their aspirations onto the liberation movement. The transition to government fundamentally altered this political environment. The ANC was no longer simply the representative of people demanding transformation; it became the institution responsible for deciding how rapidly transformation should occur, who should bear its costs, how resources should be allocated and how competing social interests should be reconciled. Every revolutionary promise now confronted a budget, a bureaucracy, a court, a central bank, an international investor, a corporate balance sheet and an increasingly demanding electorate. The movement therefore entered a terrain where moral legitimacy alone could not determine policy outcomes. It had to translate liberation principles into legislation, institutions and programmes. In doing so, it discovered that governing a complex capitalist society required compromises that resistance politics had not necessarily required. This is one of the most important conceptual shifts in the history of the ANC. A liberation movement can maintain a relatively unified language of justice because its principal task is to oppose an existing order. A governing party must distribute scarce resources among competing priorities while accepting that every decision creates winners and losers. The ANC therefore experienced the classic transformation of revolutionary organisations that become governments: the language of historical emancipation survives, but the practical grammar of governance becomes increasingly managerial. The organisation's internal culture consequently began to change. Cadres became ministers, legislators, premiers, councillors, administrators and executives of public institutions. Political loyalty acquired institutional consequences because access to public office became one of the principal routes through which political influence was exercised. The movement's organisational networks increasingly intersected with the machinery of the state. This did not mean that the ANC ceased to be a liberation movement overnight, nor does it mean that all state officials became instruments of party politics. Rather, it meant that the boundary between movement politics and state administration became one of the central constitutional and political questions of the new South Africa. The more deeply the ANC became embedded in government, the more difficult it became to preserve the organisational habits of a movement operating outside the state. Government began transforming the movement precisely because governing required different forms of discipline, expertise and institutional behaviour. The revolutionary organisation consequently became increasingly governmental in its thinking, even while continuing to describe itself through the historical vocabulary of liberation.

The movement-state relationship is therefore fundamental to understanding the post-apartheid political order. The ANC did not simply win an election in 1994; it entered government carrying the legitimacy of the liberation struggle and immediately became the dominant political force within the new constitutional system. This created an unusual relationship between party, movement and state. In a conventional democracy, a political party wins office, forms a government and remains institutionally separate from the state. In liberation societies, however, the governing movement often possesses a historical legitimacy that predates the constitutional order itself. The ANC could therefore claim that it was not merely another political party competing for office but the organisation that had historically represented the struggle for national liberation. That distinction had profound consequences. It strengthened the ANC's authority among millions of citizens, but it also created the danger that the state could gradually be interpreted as an instrument of the movement rather than as a public institution belonging equally to all citizens. The constitutional settlement attempted to prevent precisely this outcome by establishing independent institutions, separation of powers, judicial review and legally protected rights. Yet political reality could never be separated completely from the historical authority of the ANC. The party's electoral dominance meant that its internal decisions could have enormous consequences for the composition of government. The question of who led the ANC could therefore become inseparable from the

question of who occupied the presidency and controlled the executive branch. This was a source of political stability in some periods because the dominant movement provided continuity, but it also generated accountability problems when party interests and public interests appeared to diverge. The movement-state relationship thus produced both democratic consolidation and institutional vulnerability. On the one hand, the ANC helped legitimise the new constitutional order among communities historically excluded from political citizenship. On the other hand, the dominance of one organisation created incentives for patronage, factional competition and political deployment within state institutions. The problem was not simply that the ANC controlled government; winning government is the purpose of electoral politics. The deeper issue was whether a liberation movement accustomed to organisational discipline could fully internalise the principle that the state must remain institutionally distinct from the party. The answer has varied across periods, institutions and leaders. Some aspects of the state became more professional and constitutional, while others became increasingly exposed to party-political competition. The resulting system was neither a straightforward continuation of movement politics nor a completely conventional liberal democracy. It was a hybrid historical formation produced by the interaction of liberation legitimacy, constitutionalism, electoral dominance and capitalist economic structures.

The transformation from revolutionary organisation to constitutional governing party was consequently one of the most consequential developments in modern African political history. The ANC had historically justified its struggle through the language of liberation, equality, national self-determination and social transformation. After 1994, those aspirations had to be expressed through constitutional mechanisms. The Constitution became the supreme legal framework through which political authority was exercised, meaning that even an overwhelmingly dominant governing party could not legitimately govern outside constitutional boundaries. This represented a major achievement of the democratic transition. It established a legal order in which citizenship was formally equal, political rights were protected, institutions of accountability were created and the judiciary acquired authority to review executive action. Yet constitutionalism also placed limits upon the meaning of revolutionary power. A revolutionary movement could imagine transformation as the direct restructuring of society, while a constitutional government had to pursue transformation through law. That distinction mattered enormously for questions of property, land, labour, public administration and economic regulation. The ANC could not simply treat electoral victory as a mandate for unlimited political power. It had to negotiate with constitutional principles concerning legality, rights, due process and institutional independence. The revolutionary movement therefore became a constitutional actor. Its policies had to survive parliamentary scrutiny, administrative procedures, judicial review and political contestation. In one sense, this represented the institutional success of the democratic project: liberation was transformed into a system in which political power was subject to law. In another sense, however, the constitutional framework constrained the ability of the governing party to pursue some forms of rapid socioeconomic restructuring. This produced recurring tensions between those who understood constitutionalism as the achievement of liberation and those who understood it as a limitation upon liberation. Such tensions should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition between democracy and revolution. Constitutional democracy can itself be transformative, particularly when it expands political rights, prohibits discrimination and requires the state to address historical inequalities. The question is instead what kind of transformation constitutionalism permits and how effectively governments use those possibilities. The ANC therefore entered government with a revolutionary political vocabulary but operated within a constitutional architecture designed to prevent the concentration of unlimited power. This was one of the most significant institutional compromises of

the transition. The ANC obtained democratic government, but it did not obtain an unrestricted revolutionary state.

The negotiated character of the transition further explains why the ANC's political victory did not amount to a complete restructuring of South African society. Negotiation was not necessarily a betrayal of liberation; it was also a strategic mechanism through which a potentially violent political rupture was converted into a constitutional settlement. The ANC had to negotiate with a powerful state apparatus, established economic interests, political opponents and sections of organised capital. The apartheid system had not disappeared because its ruling party lost an election. Its institutions, administrative practices, economic relationships and property structures had deep historical roots. The transition therefore involved a compromise between democratic legitimacy and continuity. The new South Africa inherited substantial administrative, legal and economic structures from the old South Africa, even as it fundamentally transformed their political purpose. This duality is crucial. The democratic state was new in its constitutional legitimacy, but it was not created from an institutional vacuum. The police, bureaucracy, courts, financial institutions, infrastructure systems, corporations and property relations all possessed histories extending into the apartheid period and beyond. The ANC had to decide which structures to dismantle, which to reform and which to retain. In many instances, institutional continuity was necessary because the country could not be governed by destroying its entire administrative infrastructure. A state requires expertise, revenue systems, public servants, infrastructure and functioning institutions regardless of who governs. The problem was that continuity also meant that some inherited relationships of power survived the political transition. This is particularly significant in relation to economic power. Political democracy transferred sovereignty to the majority, but ownership of productive wealth was not automatically transferred in the same process. A democratic election could determine who governed the state; it could not by itself determine who owned corporations, controlled financial institutions or possessed accumulated capital. The negotiated transition therefore produced an important asymmetry: political power was democratised much faster than economic power. The ANC inherited the responsibility for governing a capitalist economy whose ownership structures had developed under profoundly unequal historical conditions. Its subsequent policies must therefore be evaluated within this historical contradiction. It was not governing an economy that had been liberated alongside the electorate. It was governing an economy in which political citizenship had been transformed while the distribution of assets remained deeply unequal. The negotiated settlement thus simultaneously created the foundation for democratic stability and preserved important structural constraints upon socioeconomic transformation.

The emergence of a constitutional rather than revolutionary state represented a decisive departure from the political logic of the liberation struggle. The revolutionary organisation had historically operated under conditions in which the state was regarded as an instrument of racial domination. The democratic state, by contrast, was intended to become a public institution founded upon equal citizenship. This transformation was conceptually profound. The ANC could no longer legitimately govern as though the state belonged exclusively to the liberation movement. It had to govern on behalf of citizens who supported it and citizens who opposed it. The constitutional order recognised South Africans as rights-bearing individuals rather than merely members of historical political communities. This changed the meaning of state authority. Government could no longer claim unlimited legitimacy simply because it represented the historical liberation movement. It had to justify its actions through law and constitutional principle. The judiciary, Parliament, Chapter Nine institutions, civil society and independent media became important components of the new accountability architecture. This constitutional transformation was one of the ANC's greatest

successes because it converted political liberation into institutionalised citizenship. Yet it also created tensions within the movement because constitutional institutions could frustrate or constrain the government's political preferences. Judicial review, for example, could invalidate executive decisions, while independent institutions could investigate failures of government. From the perspective of constitutional democracy, this was not an interference with popular sovereignty but a mechanism for protecting the public from arbitrary power. From the perspective of a historically dominant liberation movement, however, institutional checks could sometimes be experienced as limitations upon the electoral mandate. This tension became increasingly visible whenever political leaders portrayed courts or watchdog institutions as obstacles to transformation. The deeper lesson is that democratic legitimacy does not mean unrestricted governmental power. Elections provide authority to govern, but constitutions determine how that authority may be exercised. The ANC therefore had to learn the difficult discipline of governing within rules that it did not possess the power to suspend simply because it had won elections. The constitutional state became the institutional arena in which the revolutionary project had to redefine itself. Instead of transforming society through revolutionary command, the ANC increasingly had to transform society through legislation, public policy, institutions, courts and administrative action. This was slower and more complex than revolutionary rhetoric often implied. Yet it also created a political order in which transformation could occur without reproducing the authoritarianism of the apartheid state.

The tension between liberation ideology and constitutional limitation became especially important in debates about economic transformation. The ANC's historical programme contained strong commitments to changing the distribution of wealth and ownership, yet the constitutional order protected property rights while allowing regulation and redistribution under law. This created a sophisticated but difficult policy environment. The state possessed significant regulatory authority, but it did not possess automatic ownership of the economy. Government could tax, regulate, procure, invest, legislate and redistribute, but private economic actors retained substantial autonomy. This meant that economic transformation required a combination of political will, administrative competence and carefully designed policy. It could not simply be achieved through declarations of revolutionary intent. The central question therefore became whether the ANC would use the instruments available to the democratic state to restructure economic power or whether it would increasingly adapt itself to the existing economic order. The answer was mixed. The democratic government introduced extensive social programmes, expanded access to basic services, created affirmative action frameworks, pursued black economic empowerment and implemented major public housing and infrastructure programmes. These interventions materially changed the lives of millions of people and should not be dismissed. At the same time, structural inequality remained exceptionally deep, unemployment remained severe and ownership of major productive assets remained concentrated. This reveals an important distinction between redistribution through government expenditure and transformation of the underlying structure of ownership. The democratic state could expand social grants and public services without fundamentally altering corporate ownership. It could create opportunities for black entrepreneurs without transferring control over the commanding heights of the economy on a scale sufficient to eliminate structural inequality. It could regulate business without democratising capital itself. Consequently, the ANC's economic record cannot be understood either as total failure or as complete revolutionary success. It represented a partial transformation operating within a largely capitalist economic framework. The central intellectual question is therefore not whether the ANC abandoned transformation entirely, but which forms of transformation it prioritised and which structural relationships it left largely intact. The answer reveals a state that became more socially inclusive while remaining economically constrained. This is the paradox at the heart of the post-apartheid settlement.

The compromises of negotiated transition must therefore be examined not as isolated political bargains but as the foundation of a new political economy. The ANC faced a strategic choice between pursuing more radical economic restructuring and securing a stable democratic transition within the existing capitalist system. The choice was complicated by fears of capital flight, economic instability, international isolation and institutional breakdown. South Africa was deeply integrated into global markets, and the new government inherited an economy dependent upon domestic and international investment. The transition therefore occurred under conditions in which economic credibility became a political necessity. The ANC had to demonstrate that democratic government could maintain macroeconomic stability while addressing the consequences of apartheid. This pushed the movement toward policies that emphasised fiscal discipline, investor confidence and market stability alongside redistribution. Such policies were not necessarily imposed by a single external actor; they emerged from the interaction between inherited economic realities and the government's assessment of what was politically and economically feasible. The result was a form of pragmatic governance in which revolutionary aspirations were filtered through economic constraints. Critics interpreted this as capitulation to capital, while defenders regarded it as responsible stewardship of a fragile economy. Both perspectives capture part of the truth. The ANC did not surrender all capacity for economic intervention, but neither did it fundamentally replace the capitalist foundations of the economy. The state became an important redistributive actor while private capital retained substantial structural power. This distinction between governmental power and structural economic power is essential. A government may possess extensive formal authority while remaining dependent upon economic actors whose decisions it cannot directly command. Corporations can choose where to invest, financial institutions can determine lending conditions, skilled professionals can migrate, investors can shift capital and consumers can change purchasing patterns. Such forms of power are not equivalent to political sovereignty, but they influence the policy environment within which governments operate. The ANC therefore governed a state whose constitutional authority was greater than its direct control over the economy. The negotiated transition established this relationship rather than eliminating it. The challenge for the ANC was consequently to use democratic state power to progressively reshape structural inequalities without destabilising the economic foundations upon which the state depended.

The movement's decision to govern through constitutional democracy was also an extraordinary historical achievement. The ANC could have pursued a more centralised revolutionary model after taking office, particularly given the enormous legitimacy generated by the liberation struggle. Instead, the democratic settlement established a multiparty political system, universal suffrage and a constitutional order that formally constrained the governing majority. This choice distinguished South Africa's transition from many historical cases in which liberation movements transformed themselves into one-party states. The ANC's acceptance of electoral competition represented an important commitment to political pluralism. Opposition parties remained legal, elections were contested and citizens retained the right to challenge government. The Constitution established institutional checks that prevented the executive from exercising absolute power. These were not minor technical arrangements; they were foundational achievements of the democratic transition. They demonstrated that liberation could culminate in political democracy rather than simply replacing one dominant political elite with another. Yet the ANC's long electoral dominance created a different challenge. Because the party repeatedly won national elections, constitutional democracy coexisted with a highly concentrated political mandate. The danger was not necessarily dictatorship but complacency. A governing party that expects to remain dominant can become less responsive to public criticism, especially when internal party competition becomes more important than

competition between parties. Over time, factional struggles within the ANC could have consequences for state leadership because control over the party often influenced control over government. This produced a peculiar form of political competition in which the most consequential contest was sometimes internal rather than electoral. The constitutional system therefore had to absorb the political consequences of liberation-party dominance. Institutions such as courts, Parliament, investigative bodies, civil society and the media became particularly important because they could provide accountability beyond electoral competition. The ANC's constitutional success must therefore be measured not only by its willingness to accept elections but also by its willingness to accept institutional constraints when those institutions challenged its decisions. This is where the maturity of revolutionary government is tested. It is easy for a movement to defend democracy when it is excluded from power. It is much more demanding to defend institutional independence when those institutions scrutinise the government led by the movement itself.

The emergence of a governing establishment transformed the ANC's relationship with South African society. Before 1994, the organisation could present itself as the political embodiment of the oppressed. After 1994, it became responsible for the consequences of government performance. Service delivery failures, unemployment, crime, corruption, infrastructure deterioration and administrative weakness could no longer simply be attributed to apartheid, even though apartheid remained a fundamental historical cause of structural inequality. The ANC increasingly became the institution upon which citizens projected both their hopes and frustrations. This altered the moral geography of politics. A movement that once stood outside the state could mobilise communities against government; a governing party could no longer do so without implicating itself. The distinction between historical responsibility and contemporary responsibility became increasingly important. Apartheid created deep structural disadvantages, but after decades in government the ANC had to accept responsibility for how effectively it addressed those disadvantages. This did not erase apartheid's legacy, but it changed the analytical question. The issue became whether the post-apartheid state had developed sufficient capacity to overcome inherited inequalities. In some sectors, the answer was yes. In others, state capacity remained inadequate or deteriorated. The result was an increasingly complex relationship between liberation legitimacy and governmental performance. The ANC could continue to invoke its historical contribution, but citizens increasingly judged it according to contemporary outcomes. This was a natural consequence of democratic politics. Liberation history could explain why the ANC deserved respect; it could not indefinitely substitute for effective governance. The governing establishment therefore confronted a generational transition. Younger citizens increasingly encountered the ANC not as the organisation that liberated them directly but as the government responsible for their education, employment prospects, housing, safety and economic opportunities. This transformed the political meaning of liberation. Historical memory remained powerful, but lived experience became increasingly decisive. The ANC's movement identity could not permanently shield it from the ordinary accountability demanded of a government. The paradox was therefore complete: the more successful the ANC became in consolidating itself as the legitimate governing authority, the less persuasive it became to explain contemporary failures primarily through the language of opposition to apartheid.

The transition also created new political elites within the ANC and the state. This phenomenon should be analysed carefully because the emergence of political elites is not unique to South Africa or necessarily illegitimate. Democratic government requires leadership, expertise and institutional responsibility. The problem arises when access to political office becomes a route to private enrichment, patronage or factional power. The liberation movement had historically cultivated

cadres whose loyalty was measured through political commitment. Government introduced additional incentives because public office now carried salaries, influence, procurement authority and access to networks. The organisational culture of the movement consequently encountered the material incentives of the state. Where institutions were strong, these incentives could be controlled through law and accountability. Where institutions were weak, political competition could become entangled with access to state resources. This contributed to the emergence of patronage networks and intensified factional struggles in parts of the political system. Such developments did not define the entire ANC or the entire state, but they became sufficiently significant to alter public perceptions of the governing party. The problem was not simply corruption in the narrow legal sense; it was the transformation of political authority into a resource that could be contested for material and institutional advantage. This raised a profound question about the ethics of revolutionary government. A movement founded upon sacrifice and collective struggle had to maintain political discipline in conditions where public office could provide substantial personal opportunities. The distance between the ethics of liberation and the incentives of government could therefore become a source of institutional decay. The challenge was compounded by the absence of effective opposition competition for long periods. Where electoral competition is weak, internal party competition can become disproportionately important. Factions may therefore seek control of appointments, public institutions and state-linked resources because the stakes of internal leadership contests are extremely high. The result is a political system in which formal constitutional institutions coexist with informal networks of influence. Understanding post-apartheid power therefore requires attention not only to constitutional offices but also to the informal relationships connecting party structures, business interests, public institutions and political networks. This is where the question of who actually exercises power becomes more complicated than simply identifying the president or governing party.

The ANC's historical commitment to national liberation also produced an ambitious understanding of political transformation. The liberation struggle was never simply about replacing white rulers with black rulers; it was connected to broader aspirations for equality, dignity, social justice and national development. Yet the transition made it difficult to pursue all dimensions of this project simultaneously. Political liberation was immediate because universal suffrage could be established through constitutional reform. Socioeconomic liberation was necessarily slower because it depended upon education, employment, infrastructure, land, capital accumulation, industrial policy and institutional capacity. This temporal difference produced a recurring source of political frustration. Citizens could vote immediately, but they could not acquire wealth immediately. Political equality could be constitutionally guaranteed, but economic equality required decades of structural change. The ANC therefore inherited a democratic mandate whose expectations were much larger than the state could fulfil quickly. This gap between political emancipation and material transformation became one of the defining tensions of post-apartheid politics. Governments could build houses, extend electricity, provide grants, expand schools and improve infrastructure, but the underlying structure of ownership and employment remained difficult to transform. The state could redistribute income without necessarily redistributing productive capital. It could provide social protection while leaving millions dependent upon an economy unable to generate sufficient employment. This created what may be described as the paradox of redistributive democracy: the democratic state can significantly improve living conditions while simultaneously reproducing the structural conditions that make redistribution necessary. The ANC's challenge was therefore not merely to redistribute the fruits of the economy but to change the productive system itself. This required industrialisation, skills development, technological capacity, infrastructure and broad-based ownership. Where these structural transformations were incomplete,

political democracy could coexist with economic dependency. The resulting frustration was not necessarily evidence that democracy had failed; rather, it reflected the unfinished character of economic transformation. The liberation project had moved from a question of who votes to a much harder question of who owns, who produces, who finances, who employs and who controls the institutions through which economic decisions are made. Those questions remain at the heart of the unfinished South African revolution.

The constitutional limitations placed upon the ANC should therefore not be interpreted simply as obstacles. They also protected the revolution's democratic achievements from becoming another form of authoritarianism. South Africa's constitutional order emerged partly from the recognition that political power must be constrained precisely because governments can become abusive. The liberation movement had experienced state repression firsthand and therefore possessed strong reasons to distrust unchecked executive authority. The Constitution institutionalised principles that protected citizens against arbitrary government, including citizens who disagreed with the ANC. This was one of the great achievements of the transition. The challenge was to reconcile this rights-based order with demands for rapid transformation. Sometimes the conflict was real. A policy designed to advance redistribution could encounter property rights; a government attempting to discipline public institutions could confront administrative law; political appointments could encounter requirements of competence and legality. These tensions should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that the Constitution was designed to preserve apartheid-era interests. Nor should constitutional rights be treated as sacred barriers against all socioeconomic transformation. The more sophisticated interpretation is that constitutionalism creates a framework within which transformative government must operate. The ANC's political challenge was therefore to develop policies capable of achieving profound change without violating the legal foundations of democratic citizenship. This required policy sophistication, administrative capacity and long-term strategic planning. Where these were absent, constitutional limitations could be blamed for failures that were actually administrative or political. Where institutions were abused, constitutional protections could become essential safeguards against governmental overreach. The revolutionary project thus had to mature from a politics of mobilisation into a politics of institutional design. The success of the transition depended upon whether the ANC could understand that constitutional democracy was not the enemy of liberation but the institutional form through which liberation could be protected. The danger lay not in constitutional limitation itself but in failing to use constitutional power creatively and effectively. The Constitution provided significant instruments for transformation, but these instruments required capable institutions and sustained political commitment. The real question was therefore never simply whether the ANC was constrained by the Constitution. It was whether the ANC understood how to transform society through constitutional power without allowing constitutionalism to become an excuse for political timidity.

The economic compromises of the transition became particularly visible in the relationship between government and organised business. South Africa's private sector possessed enormous accumulated capital, technical expertise, managerial capacity and international networks. The new government could not simply ignore this reality. It needed economic growth, employment, tax revenue and investment, while business needed political stability and predictable regulation. This created a relationship of mutual dependence. Government possessed sovereign regulatory power, but business possessed economic capabilities that government could not easily reproduce. The private sector therefore became an important structural actor in the post-apartheid order. The ANC could regulate corporate activity and promote black economic empowerment, but it could not simply command the private economy as a revolutionary state might attempt to command state-owned enterprises. The

resulting political economy was characterised by negotiation, regulation and partnership rather than direct state ownership of the commanding heights. This approach produced important successes, including economic stability and integration into global markets, but it also created criticism that the liberation movement had become too accommodating toward established capital. Such criticism cannot be dismissed merely as ideological rhetoric. The question of ownership remained central because political control over government did not automatically produce control over the economy. At the same time, it would be inaccurate to claim that business possessed absolute power. Corporate actors remained subject to taxation, labour laws, competition regulation, environmental requirements, procurement rules and other forms of state authority. The appropriate analytical framework is therefore one of negotiated structural power. Government and capital exercised different forms of power, and neither could completely eliminate the other. The ANC's difficulty was that its political legitimacy encouraged expectations of deeper economic transformation than its governing strategy ultimately delivered. This created a persistent gap between revolutionary rhetoric and economic reality. The governing party could claim that transformation was underway, while critics could point to continued concentration of ownership and wealth. Both observations could be simultaneously true. South Africa experienced genuine socioeconomic change without achieving comprehensive economic decolonisation. The historical significance of the ANC therefore lies partly in this contradiction: it transformed the political system profoundly while transforming the economic system only partially.

The concept of economic power must therefore be separated from the concept of government power. Government power is formally exercised through institutions such as Parliament, the executive, provincial governments, municipalities and regulatory bodies. Economic power operates through ownership, investment, finance, production, employment, technology, property and market access. These forms of power interact but are not identical. The ANC could control the executive while private actors continued to control substantial productive resources. This explains why electoral victory did not automatically translate into economic sovereignty. Political leaders could announce ambitious transformation policies, but their implementation depended upon institutions, budgets, markets and economic actors. A government could legislate against discrimination, but it could not instantly reverse decades of unequal asset accumulation. It could promote black ownership, but new ownership still required access to capital and managerial capacity. It could support land reform, but land redistribution involved legal, financial and administrative complexities. It could expand public enterprises, but state-owned entities required competent management and sustainable financing. Consequently, the post-apartheid state possessed considerable formal power but operated within a much broader ecosystem of structural constraints. This is why the question "who rules South Africa?" cannot be answered simply by naming the governing party. The better question is "which actors possess which forms of power, through which institutions, and with what capacity to influence outcomes?" The ANC exercised electoral and governmental power. Parliament exercised legislative power. Courts exercised constitutional power. Organised business exercised economic influence. Trade unions exercised labour mobilisation power. Civil society exercised advocacy and social accountability power. International investors and institutions influenced the economic environment. Communities exercised protest and electoral power. The media influenced public discourse. These forms of power sometimes reinforced one another and sometimes collided. The post-apartheid political economy was therefore not controlled by a single actor. It was a contested field in which formal sovereignty coexisted with structural economic power. The ANC's historical mistake, where it occurred, was not necessarily that it lacked power but that it sometimes underestimated the difference between possessing government and possessing the economy. The distinction remains indispensable for evaluating the unfinished

liberation project. Political office can be won through elections; structural power requires deeper transformation of institutions, ownership and productive capacity.

The transformation of the ANC was also evident in the changing meaning of its revolutionary vocabulary. Words such as "cadre," "revolution," "national democratic revolution," "people's power" and "transformation" continued to shape internal political discourse. Yet these concepts increasingly operated within a bureaucratic and constitutional framework. A cadre could now be a government minister or civil servant rather than an underground organiser. A revolutionary programme could now be expressed through legislation, budgets and development plans. People's power could be represented through elections, participatory institutions and community organisations rather than through mass mobilisation against the state. This semantic transformation reflected a deeper political change. The ANC had not necessarily abandoned its ideological tradition; it had institutionalised parts of it. But institutionalisation can change the substance of an ideology. A revolutionary concept embedded in government may become more pragmatic because implementation requires compromise. The language of transformation can survive while policy becomes incremental. This is not unique to the ANC. Political movements frequently moderate once they acquire responsibility for governing complex societies. The crucial question is whether moderation reflects strategic adaptation or abandonment of foundational principles. In the ANC's case, the answer varies across policy areas and historical periods. Its commitment to racial equality and democratic citizenship became deeply embedded in the new constitutional order. Its social programmes represented substantial redistributive interventions. Yet the economic transformation of ownership and productive power remained incomplete. The result was an uneven revolution. Some dimensions of the liberation project were institutionalised successfully, while others remained unresolved. The ANC therefore became neither purely revolutionary nor purely conventional. It became a governing movement attempting to preserve revolutionary identity while operating through constitutional institutions and capitalist economic structures. This hybrid identity explains much of its political durability as well as its internal contradiction. The movement could claim historical legitimacy while exercising ordinary governmental power. It could present itself as an agent of transformation while defending fiscal stability. It could support private enterprise while advocating economic empowerment. It could celebrate constitutionalism while demanding accelerated transformation. The resulting political discourse was necessarily complex. Simplistic judgments that the ANC either "completed" or "betrayed" the revolution fail to capture this multidimensional reality.

The negotiated transition also produced an important psychological transformation within the movement. Liberation struggle had historically cultivated a politics of urgency because survival depended upon mobilisation and resistance. Government required patience, sequencing and institutional continuity. The movement therefore moved from a culture of immediate political confrontation toward a culture of long-term administration. This was necessary, but it also generated frustration among activists who expected the arrival of political power to produce rapid material transformation. The state could not fulfil every promise immediately because it inherited fiscal constraints, unequal infrastructure, bureaucratic weaknesses and an economy requiring continued investment. Yet the expectations of liberation were understandably enormous. For communities that had endured generations of exclusion, democratic citizenship created an expectation that political freedom would rapidly translate into economic dignity. Where this did not occur, disappointment grew. The ANC was increasingly judged against the scale of its historical promises rather than against the conditions it inherited. This created an accountability dilemma. The party could legitimately point to achievements such as expanded social services and democratic

rights, while citizens could legitimately demand deeper transformation after decades of ANC government. Both positions could be valid simultaneously. The intellectual challenge is therefore to resist both romanticisation and condemnation. The ANC's historical contribution cannot be reduced to corruption and failure, just as its legitimacy cannot be used to excuse governance failures. A rigorous assessment must identify what changed, what remained unchanged and why. The post-apartheid state expanded citizenship dramatically, but socioeconomic inequality remained profound. Public services improved in many communities, but administrative failures persisted. Black political representation became dominant, but economic ownership remained concentrated. Constitutional institutions became powerful, but political interference and institutional weakness periodically threatened their effectiveness. These contradictions are not evidence of an incoherent history; they are evidence of an incomplete transformation. The ANC's revolution moved from a struggle over political sovereignty to a struggle over institutional capacity and economic power. The latter struggle proved considerably more difficult because it required transforming relationships that could not be changed simply by changing the government.

The rise of constitutional government also changed the meaning of political legitimacy. Under apartheid, the state lacked democratic legitimacy because the majority was excluded from meaningful political participation. After 1994, legitimacy was derived from universal suffrage and constitutional governance. This meant that the ANC's historical claim to represent the people had to coexist with the principle that the people possessed political agency independent of the ANC. Citizens were not constitutionally required to remain loyal to the liberation movement. They could vote for other parties, challenge government decisions, protest, litigate and organise independently. This was a profound achievement because it converted the people from subjects of apartheid into citizens of a constitutional republic. Yet the ANC sometimes struggled with this distinction because its historical identity was built around the idea that it represented the national liberation of the people. The transition therefore required an ideological adjustment: the ANC had to recognise that the people were larger than the movement. This principle is essential to democratic consolidation. A liberation movement becomes democratically mature when it accepts that its historical contribution does not entitle it to permanent political authority. Electoral support must continually be renewed. Government must remain accountable even when the governing party believes its historical record justifies continued dominance. The constitutional order was designed to institutionalise precisely this principle. It separated the sovereignty of the people from the permanence of any particular party. The ANC's long electoral dominance could therefore never legitimately become a constitutional entitlement. The party remained powerful because voters repeatedly supported it, not because liberation history created a permanent right to govern. This distinction became increasingly important as political competition intensified. The ANC's decline in electoral support in later years demonstrated that historical legitimacy could not indefinitely substitute for performance. The movement-state relationship was therefore ultimately subject to the sovereignty of citizens. The democratic state belonged neither to the ANC nor to any other political party. It belonged constitutionally to the people. The significance of this principle cannot be overstated because it provides the normative foundation for assessing every governing party, including the ANC.

The consequences of becoming a governing establishment were particularly visible in the relationship between political power and accountability. A liberation movement derives strength from mobilisation, whereas a governing establishment derives strength from institutions. The danger arises when the institutional resources of government become instruments for sustaining political dominance. This is why party-state separation matters so profoundly in democratic systems. The ANC's political dominance created circumstances in which appointments to public

institutions could become politically consequential. The principle of cadre deployment was defended by its proponents as a means of ensuring that elected government could implement its mandate through trusted political personnel. Critics argued that excessive political deployment could weaken professional independence and create opportunities for patronage. The deeper issue is not whether political appointments are inherently illegitimate; democratic governments everywhere appoint officials. The issue is whether appointments prioritise competence, legality and institutional performance or primarily reward political loyalty. When political loyalty becomes the dominant criterion, state institutions can gradually become less capable of resisting political pressure. This creates a vicious cycle. Weak institutions increase opportunities for patronage, while patronage further weakens institutions. The consequences can extend beyond corruption into service delivery, procurement, public enterprises and law enforcement. The state then becomes formally democratic but administratively fragile. The ANC's experience demonstrates why liberation movements must undergo institutional transformation after entering government. The organisational practices appropriate to a resistance movement are not necessarily appropriate to a constitutional state. A movement may legitimately demand loyalty from its cadres; a public institution must demand professionalism from its officials. A party may discipline its members; a constitutional state must respect independent legal processes. A movement may seek unity; a democracy must tolerate disagreement. The transition therefore required not simply a transfer of personnel but a transformation of political culture. Where that transformation occurred, the democratic state strengthened. Where it did not, the boundary between party and state became vulnerable. The paradox is that the ANC's greatest political strength—its organisational cohesion and historical legitimacy—could become a source of institutional risk when transferred directly into state administration.

The emergence of a constitutional governing party also altered the meaning of revolutionary discipline. During the liberation struggle, discipline was essential because secrecy, repression and organisational survival depended upon members following strategic decisions. In government, however, excessive internal discipline could suppress legitimate criticism. Democratic institutions require disagreement because policy mistakes cannot be corrected if officials fear challenging leadership. The ANC therefore had to balance organisational unity with governmental accountability. This became especially difficult during periods of intense factional conflict. Internal party debates could determine leadership succession, cabinet appointments and policy direction, while government decisions could simultaneously influence internal party power. The boundary between political accountability and organisational loyalty became blurred. This produced situations in which officials might be more concerned with factional survival than with administrative performance. Such dynamics were particularly damaging when state institutions became arenas for political competition. The deeper lesson is that democratic government requires institutional loyalty to the Constitution and the public interest rather than personal loyalty to political leaders. Liberation movements that fail to make this transition can unintentionally reproduce hierarchical political cultures within democratic institutions. The issue is therefore larger than the ANC. It concerns the institutionalisation of liberation politics itself. How does a movement founded upon discipline, hierarchy and collective struggle become a democratic governing institution capable of tolerating internal dissent and independent institutions? South Africa's experience provides an important case study because the ANC largely accepted constitutional democracy while simultaneously maintaining a strong internal movement culture. The resulting hybrid produced both resilience and contradiction. It enabled the party to maintain cohesion across decades of government, but it also created conditions in which political deployment and factional competition could affect public administration. The success of the democratic transition therefore depended upon the gradual

transformation of movement discipline into constitutional professionalism. That transformation remained incomplete. The consequence was a state in which democratic institutions were often stronger than the political culture surrounding them.

The question of who exercises power in South Africa therefore requires attention to the institutional architecture beyond the ANC itself. Parliament exercises legislative authority, but its effectiveness depends partly upon party discipline and the strength of parliamentary oversight. The executive possesses extensive policy-making power, but its actions are constrained by law and administrative procedures. Courts possess constitutional authority, but they depend upon the independence of judges and compliance by other institutions. Municipalities exercise substantial responsibilities, but their capacity varies significantly. Provincial governments operate within a cooperative system of government, while independent institutions contribute to accountability. Organised labour can influence policy through collective action, while business influences economic outcomes through investment and production. Civil society organisations can challenge government through litigation, research and mobilisation. Media organisations influence the public agenda by exposing corruption and shaping political narratives. None of these actors possesses absolute power. South Africa is therefore better understood as a plural and contested system of power than as a state controlled by a single institution. Nevertheless, the ANC's historical dominance gave it an exceptional ability to shape the political direction of the country. Its control of national government allowed it to influence legislation, appointments, budgets and policy. But influence is not the same as total control. Structural economic relationships, institutional constraints and social mobilisation limited the government's ability to impose its preferences. This distinction is crucial for a rigorous account of post-apartheid power. If one claims that the ANC controlled everything, one cannot adequately explain why profound economic inequalities persisted despite decades of ANC government. If one claims that the ANC controlled nothing, one cannot explain the enormous transformation of political institutions and social policy. The evidence points instead to asymmetrical power. The ANC exercised dominant political authority, while economic and institutional power remained distributed across multiple actors. The post-apartheid state was therefore neither a revolutionary command economy nor a powerless government captured completely by capital. It was a negotiated political economy in which different forms of power interacted continuously. Understanding this interaction is essential to determining where the liberation project succeeded and where it remained incomplete.

One of the most important achievements of the ANC government was the destruction of formal apartheid political rule. This achievement should never be minimised because political sovereignty is the foundation upon which other forms of transformation depend. Universal suffrage transformed the political status of the black majority from subjects of racial domination into equal citizens. The Constitution established legal equality and protected rights. Parliament became representative of the entire population. The executive became accountable to elected institutions. Racial discrimination became unconstitutional. These changes represented a revolutionary transformation of the political order even if they did not eliminate socioeconomic inequality. The ANC therefore succeeded profoundly in the political dimension of its historical project. It also expanded access to public services and social protection on a scale that altered the relationship between citizens and the state. Millions gained access to housing, electricity, water, social grants and other public services that had been systematically denied or unequally distributed under apartheid. The state became significantly more inclusive. Yet political and social achievements should not be confused with complete economic transformation. The persistence of inequality does not erase the significance of democratic citizenship, just as democratic citizenship does not erase the persistence of inequality. A

rigorous historical assessment must hold both realities together. The ANC transformed the political state more thoroughly than it transformed the economic structure. This asymmetry is not necessarily proof of betrayal; it reflects the different levels of difficulty involved in political and economic restructuring. Political institutions can be redesigned through constitutional negotiation, while wealth accumulation is embedded in property, finance, skills, technology and production. Nevertheless, the persistence of economic inequality raises legitimate questions about the effectiveness of the ANC's strategies. The historical test of revolutionary government is not only whether it removes the old political order but whether it develops the productive and institutional capacity necessary to overcome the socioeconomic foundations of that order. South Africa's record is therefore one of substantial political success accompanied by incomplete economic transformation. The intellectual task is to explain this divergence rather than conceal it.

The question of land provides one of the clearest illustrations of the tension between political liberation and structural economic transformation. Land was central to the historical formation of racial inequality because colonialism and apartheid profoundly altered patterns of ownership, residence and agricultural production. Democratic government therefore inherited a land question that was both material and symbolic. Land represented property, livelihood, identity, citizenship and historical justice simultaneously. The ANC recognised the importance of land reform, but implementation proved complex. Constitutional principles, administrative capacity, financing, agricultural productivity and competing political interests all affected outcomes. The result was a reform process that remained incomplete relative to the expectations of many citizens. This illustrates a broader feature of revolutionary government: historical injustice can be politically acknowledged long before the state possesses the institutional capacity to reverse its material consequences. The same pattern appeared in other sectors. The government could recognise racial inequality and prohibit discrimination, yet transforming accumulated wealth required capital, skills and time. It could create black empowerment policies, yet ownership could remain concentrated if new entrants lacked access to finance. It could expand education, yet educational inequality could persist because historical disparities in school quality were difficult to reverse. These examples demonstrate that the post-apartheid state faced what might be called a structural inheritance problem. It inherited institutions that could be democratised more quickly than the socioeconomic relations embedded within them. The ANC's strategy often attempted to use state policy to progressively change those relations rather than destroying them outright. Whether this strategy was sufficiently radical remains a legitimate subject of debate. What is undeniable is that the political transition did not automatically resolve the material consequences of apartheid. The revolutionary government therefore faced the harder second stage of liberation: transforming the conditions under which citizens lived after formal political equality had been established. The incompleteness of this second stage became one of the central sources of contemporary political dissatisfaction. It also explains why the ANC's historical record cannot be assessed solely through the achievement of 1994. Liberation created the democratic state; it did not complete the transformation of society.

The black economic empowerment project further illustrates this contradiction. The objective of broadening economic participation was historically justified because apartheid systematically excluded black South Africans from ownership and senior economic positions. Empowerment policies therefore represented an attempt to use state regulatory and procurement power to alter the racial composition of the economy. These policies created new opportunities for black businesspeople and helped establish a growing black middle and business class. Yet their limitations also became evident. In some cases, empowerment transactions benefited a relatively narrow group rather than creating broad-based ownership. In other cases, political connections

became important in accessing opportunities. The result was a debate over whether empowerment was producing structural transformation or a politically connected elite. This debate should be approached analytically rather than ideologically. Creating black ownership in a concentrated capitalist economy is difficult because access to capital itself is unequal. Where financing mechanisms are weak, empowerment can become dependent upon established capital. New entrants may acquire shares through debt rather than through independent capital accumulation, creating financial vulnerabilities. Furthermore, ownership without productive capacity does not necessarily generate sustainable economic transformation. Broad-based transformation requires education, entrepreneurship, industrial development, technology, infrastructure and access to finance. The ANC therefore confronted a structural challenge larger than racial representation in corporate boardrooms. It had to build an economic system in which historically excluded citizens could accumulate wealth independently. Where this broader transformation was incomplete, empowerment could become vulnerable to criticism that it redistributed opportunities without sufficiently transforming the architecture of ownership. Yet the existence of these limitations does not negate the significance of the policy. It demonstrates instead that economic transformation requires more than regulatory quotas or ownership transactions. It requires the development of autonomous productive capacity among the historically excluded majority. The ANC's experience therefore reveals the difference between inclusion in an existing economic system and transformation of that system. The former can occur relatively quickly; the latter requires generational change.

The ANC's relationship with organised labour also reveals the complexity of revolutionary government. Labour unions were central to the anti-apartheid struggle and remained important political allies within the post-apartheid order. Yet governing required the ANC to balance workers' demands with the requirements of economic growth, investment and fiscal stability. This created tensions that were difficult to resolve. Workers expected democratic government to produce better wages, employment and working conditions, while business demanded competitiveness and flexibility. Government was positioned between these interests. The movement-state transition therefore transformed the political meaning of labour alliances. Organisations that had once mobilised against an oppressive state now had to negotiate with a government led by a liberation movement. This created both institutional partnership and political tension. The ANC could not simply act as an unrestricted representative of organised labour because it also had to consider broader economic consequences. Yet abandoning workers' interests would undermine a central component of its historical constituency. The resulting political economy was therefore characterised by negotiation among organised labour, government and business. This arrangement reflected South Africa's distinctive transition, but it also contributed to policy complexity. Different factions within the governing alliance could pursue competing priorities. The state sometimes sought consensus where structural conflict might have required clearer choices. At other times, labour mobilisation constrained government reforms. The important analytical point is that revolutionary government transformed the meaning of alliances. A movement can unite different groups around opposition to apartheid, but governing requires decisions about how the interests of those groups should be reconciled when resources are scarce. The ANC's post-apartheid experience therefore demonstrates that liberation coalitions are not necessarily governing coalitions in the conventional sense. Once the common enemy disappears, differences among coalition partners become more visible. The state must then arbitrate among interests that were previously united by resistance. This process contributed to the transformation of the ANC from a liberation movement into a complex governing establishment.

The emergence of a governing establishment also altered the ANC's relationship with political opposition. During the liberation struggle, opposition to the apartheid state was a moral and political necessity. After 1994, opposition became an ordinary component of democratic competition. The ANC therefore had to learn to distinguish between opposition to apartheid and opposition to the democratic government it controlled. This distinction is essential because political criticism is not inherently anti-democratic. In a constitutional democracy, opposition parties, journalists, activists and citizens have legitimate rights to challenge government. Yet liberation movements sometimes carry a psychological memory in which political opposition is associated with historical betrayal or external hostility. If that memory is transferred into government, criticism can be interpreted unfairly as an attack on the national project. The ANC's democratic maturity therefore depended upon its ability to accept that it could be criticised without the criticism being interpreted as opposition to liberation itself. This was particularly important as social movements, unions, civil society organisations and opposition parties increasingly challenged government policy. The democratic state became a space of political contestation rather than a unified instrument of liberation. This was a sign of democratic normalisation. The people were no longer mobilised primarily against the state; they were mobilised within the state and against particular policies or failures of government. The ANC's historical achievement was therefore paradoxically responsible for creating the political environment in which its own authority could be challenged. Once citizens became politically empowered, they could demand more from the government that had liberated them. The rise of community protests, litigation and electoral competition should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of democratic collapse. They can also represent the maturation of citizenship. The challenge for the ANC was to respond to such contestation institutionally rather than defensively. Where government treated protest as legitimate democratic pressure, constitutionalism strengthened. Where protest was dismissed or criminalised, the gap between movement culture and constitutional governance widened. The transformation from liberation movement to governing establishment therefore required not only governing the country but accepting the right of citizens to challenge the government.

The question of whether government transformed the ANC or the ANC transformed government therefore has no simple answer because the process operated in both directions. The ANC transformed government by democratising political institutions, expanding citizenship and reshaping public policy. Government transformed the ANC by exposing the movement to bureaucratic realities, fiscal constraints, institutional responsibilities and the pressures of political management. The interaction produced a new political organisation that could no longer be understood entirely through its liberation history. It became a state-centred organisation with deep institutional interests. This transformation was not necessarily negative. Without it, the ANC could not have administered a complex modern state. The problem emerged when organisational interests began to compete with transformative objectives. A governing party naturally seeks to retain power, but a liberation movement must also confront the question of whether retaining power remains a means to social transformation or becomes an end in itself. Once electoral survival becomes the overriding objective, governments may prefer policies that produce immediate political benefits over policies that require difficult long-term restructuring. This can encourage short-termism, patronage and avoidance of politically costly reforms. The ANC's long period of dominance made this tension particularly important. The party had an incentive to maintain broad coalitions and manage internal factions, sometimes at the expense of decisive structural transformation. Yet it would be wrong to assume that all policy moderation was motivated by electoral calculation. Some compromises were necessary because economic transformation is complex and state capacity is limited. The analytical task is therefore to distinguish strategic pragmatism from institutional self-

preservation. The ANC's history contains evidence of both. It made difficult compromises to stabilise the country, but it also developed organisational interests associated with remaining in government. The movement-state relationship therefore gradually changed the meaning of political power. Power was no longer merely the instrument through which liberation would be achieved; power itself became an institution that had to be maintained, managed and defended. This is one of the defining paradoxes of revolutionary government.

The transformation of the ANC also involved the emergence of a new conception of citizenship. Under apartheid, political identity was imposed through racial classification and exclusion. Democratic citizenship rejected this system and established formal equality. Yet citizenship after apartheid was not simply about possessing the vote. It also involved access to services, economic opportunity, dignity and recognition. The democratic state therefore became responsible for converting legal citizenship into substantive citizenship. This distinction is important because constitutional equality can coexist with socioeconomic inequality. A citizen may possess the same formal political rights as another citizen while having dramatically fewer economic opportunities. The ANC's government therefore faced the task of building substantive citizenship through social policy and economic transformation. Its achievements in social grants, housing, electricity and public services contributed significantly to this process. However, persistent unemployment and inequality limited the extent to which citizenship could become economically substantive. The state could provide social protection, but social protection could not substitute permanently for productive employment and asset ownership. The long-term objective therefore had to be economic inclusion. This required a developmental state capable of coordinating infrastructure, industrial policy, skills, finance and private investment. The ANC periodically articulated this vision, but implementation varied across periods. State capacity became the critical variable. A government can possess transformative intentions but fail if institutions cannot implement policy effectively. This is why the debate about the ANC should move beyond ideological questions toward questions of administrative capability. Did the state possess competent institutions? Were policies implemented consistently? Did public enterprises deliver effectively? Did procurement systems prevent abuse? Did municipalities possess sufficient capacity? Did industrial policy generate productive investment? These questions reveal the practical dimensions of revolutionary government. Political sovereignty establishes the possibility of transformation, but administrative capacity determines whether transformation becomes material reality. The ANC's record therefore demonstrates both the power and limitations of democratic government. It could create rights and programmes on an enormous scale, but it struggled where transformation required sustained institutional coordination and disciplined implementation.

The relationship between the ANC and the bureaucracy was consequently central to the success or failure of the democratic project. Apartheid had created a highly structured administrative state, but that bureaucracy operated within a racial order. After 1994, the challenge was to transform the bureaucracy without destroying its capacity. The ANC had to broaden racial representation, introduce democratic accountability and change administrative priorities while maintaining professional competence. This was a delicate task. Rapid political transformation could disrupt institutional memory, while excessive continuity could preserve inherited cultures. The state therefore required both transformation and professionalisation. Where these objectives were successfully combined, public administration became more representative and responsive. Where political considerations overwhelmed professional standards, institutional capacity could decline. The problem was intensified by the scale of socioeconomic expectations placed upon the state. Citizens expected government not only to govern but to transform society. This required a

bureaucracy capable of complex policy implementation. Public institutions needed engineers, economists, planners, lawyers, doctors, administrators, teachers and technical specialists. Political legitimacy alone could not substitute for professional expertise. The ANC therefore confronted a fundamental challenge: how to build a democratic state that was simultaneously representative, competent and accountable. The answer was never simply to choose between political control and bureaucratic independence. Democratic governments need political direction, but professional institutions need sufficient autonomy to implement policy effectively. The balance is difficult because bureaucracies can also become resistant to democratic priorities if insulated completely from elected authority. South Africa's experience demonstrates the importance of creating institutions where political leadership sets legitimate policy objectives while professional officials implement them within law. Where this balance weakened, state capacity suffered. The movement-state transition therefore required a new administrative culture in which loyalty to the liberation project was expressed through competent public service rather than through political allegiance alone. This remains one of the most important unfinished dimensions of the post-apartheid transformation.

The consequences of weak state capacity became especially visible in state-owned enterprises and infrastructure. The liberation movement inherited an economy in which strategic sectors had historically involved substantial state participation, but it also inherited public institutions with varying degrees of efficiency. The democratic government sought to use state institutions as instruments of development, yet some became vulnerable to political interference, governance failures and financial difficulties. The crisis of state-owned enterprises demonstrated that ownership by the state does not automatically produce public value. Public enterprises require professional governance, capital investment, technological competence and accountability. When these conditions are absent, state ownership can become a liability rather than an instrument of transformation. This is particularly important for the revolutionary project because developmental states depend upon strategic institutions capable of directing investment and building infrastructure. If public enterprises fail, the state becomes more dependent upon private capital and external suppliers. Structural economic power can therefore remain outside direct democratic control even when government formally owns significant assets. The issue is not merely whether an enterprise is publicly or privately owned; it is whether the state possesses the institutional capability to use economic assets strategically. The ANC's difficulties in this area revealed a broader contradiction. The movement wanted a developmental state capable of directing economic transformation, but the political and administrative conditions required to sustain such a state were uneven. Corruption, factionalism, procurement failures and weak management could undermine strategic objectives. This weakened the state's bargaining power with private capital. A government that cannot reliably maintain infrastructure, electricity, transport or public enterprises becomes less capable of directing the economy. Economic power then shifts toward those actors capable of providing what the state cannot reliably provide. This is one mechanism through which structural power can remain outside democratic control. The lesson is that economic sovereignty requires institutional capacity. Political control over the state is insufficient if the state lacks the capability to produce, regulate and coordinate effectively. The ANC's revolutionary project therefore encountered a problem deeper than ideology: it required a capable developmental state, and building such a state proved considerably harder than democratising political institutions.

The question of corruption must also be placed within this broader framework. Corruption is often treated as an individual moral failure, but its political significance is structural. When public procurement, appointments or state resources become instruments of factional competition,

corruption can weaken the institutional capacity required for transformation. Resources that should finance infrastructure, education or public services can be diverted into networks of private benefit. More importantly, corruption undermines trust in the state. Citizens begin to perceive government not as an instrument of public development but as a mechanism through which connected individuals obtain advantages. This damages the moral legitimacy of a liberation movement because the ethics of sacrifice become difficult to reconcile with conspicuous enrichment. The phenomenon also affects economic power. Where corruption distorts procurement and licensing, businesses with political connections can gain advantages over competitors. This can produce a form of politically mediated capitalism in which access to the state becomes economically valuable. Such a system does not mean that all business is controlled by politicians, nor that all politicians are corrupt. It means that the boundary between political influence and economic opportunity becomes blurred. This can create new elites whose power is derived from the intersection of party networks, state institutions and private capital. The emergence of such networks represents a significant transformation of the ANC itself. The liberation movement historically opposed racial and class domination, yet governing could generate new forms of elite accumulation. The challenge was therefore not merely to replace one elite with another but to construct institutions capable of preventing public power from becoming a mechanism for private accumulation. Strong procurement systems, independent auditing, judicial enforcement, transparent appointments and active civil society are essential to this objective. Where these institutions functioned, corruption could be exposed and challenged. Where they weakened, corruption could become systemic. The ANC's experience demonstrates that revolutionary legitimacy cannot immunise a government against the corrupting effects of power. Indeed, the more powerful a governing organisation becomes, the greater the importance of institutional restraints upon that power.

The rise of factionalism within the ANC can likewise be understood as a consequence of the movement-state transformation. In a liberation movement, factions can compete over strategy, ideology and leadership. In a governing party, factional competition also determines access to state resources and institutional authority. This increases the stakes of internal political struggles. Leadership contests can become contests over control of ministries, public enterprises, appointments and procurement networks. Such dynamics can undermine policy coherence because government becomes preoccupied with internal survival. The state then becomes vulnerable to what may be described as political fragmentation within a dominant party. The formal structure remains democratic, but informal competition can distort institutional priorities. This problem is not unique to South Africa, but the ANC's historical dominance made it particularly consequential. Where opposition parties are weak at the national level, the most powerful challenge to a leader may come from within the governing movement. Consequently, internal ANC politics could have national consequences. The presidency, cabinet composition and policy direction could be influenced by internal party balances. This meant that understanding South African politics required studying both the formal constitutional state and the informal organisational state of the ANC. The two were related but not identical. A president could possess constitutional authority while simultaneously needing to maintain support within the party. A minister could exercise governmental authority while being embedded in factional networks. Parliament could legislate while party caucuses influenced voting patterns. This complex interaction explains why the movement-state relationship became so central to the post-apartheid political order. The ANC was not simply an organisation controlling government; it was an organisation whose internal dynamics shaped the operation of government. The resulting system could function effectively when party cohesion and state professionalism reinforced one another, but it could become dysfunctional when factional interests penetrated public institutions. The challenge was therefore to preserve the political legitimacy of the

governing party while preventing its internal competition from weakening the constitutional state. The success or failure of this separation became one of the most important tests of post-apartheid democracy.

The emergence of the governing establishment also changed the international dimension of ANC politics. During apartheid, the ANC depended heavily upon international solidarity and framed South Africa's struggle as part of a broader global struggle against racism and colonialism. After 1994, the ANC became the government of a sovereign state and had to balance solidarity politics with national interests. South Africa needed foreign investment, trade, diplomatic relations and participation in global institutions. The government therefore could not conduct foreign policy exclusively through the moral language of liberation. It had to consider economic and strategic interests. This produced a sophisticated but sometimes contradictory foreign policy that combined human rights discourse, African solidarity, non-alignment and pragmatic economic diplomacy. The transformation from liberation movement to government therefore extended beyond domestic politics. The ANC had to convert international solidarity networks into state-to-state diplomacy. This changed the meaning of political relationships. Former liberation allies became diplomatic partners, while former adversaries became economic counterparts. The government had to operate within a global system that did not share all of the ANC's historical assumptions. This reinforced the broader transformation of the movement. A revolutionary organisation could imagine international politics in terms of liberation and solidarity; a government had to calculate interests, risks and strategic relationships. This did not eliminate ideological commitments, but it made them more complex. The same pattern appeared domestically. The ANC could not simply pursue ideal outcomes; it had to balance competing realities. The result was a governing style that often combined principle and pragmatism. Critics sometimes viewed this as inconsistency, while supporters saw it as diplomatic realism. Both interpretations reflect the tension inherent in governing after liberation. The movement had entered a world where sovereignty required managing interdependence. Economic sovereignty itself became dependent upon the ability to participate effectively in international markets while protecting national interests. Thus, the structural constraints on the ANC were not only domestic. They were embedded within the international political economy.

The international economic system further complicated the ANC's ability to pursue radical transformation. South Africa's economy was not isolated from global capital. Its financial markets, trade relationships, multinational corporations and investment flows connected domestic economic policy to international conditions. Government therefore had to consider how policies would affect investor confidence, currency stability, trade and employment. This did not mean that international markets dictated every policy decision. Governments retain significant policy space. But policy space is shaped by the consequences of decisions within an interconnected economy. A government that seeks to transform ownership, taxation or regulation must consider the economic effects and design policies accordingly. The ANC therefore confronted a structural constraint that many liberation movements experienced after independence: political sovereignty existed within an international economic order over which national governments possessed limited control. This did not make transformation impossible, but it made strategic state capacity essential. Governments that build domestic productive capacity, diversify trade, develop skills and strengthen public institutions gain greater autonomy. Governments that remain dependent upon imported technology, external capital or vulnerable infrastructure have less bargaining power. South Africa's experience illustrates both sides of this dilemma. The country possessed a sophisticated industrial and financial base, giving government significant economic capabilities. Yet the persistence of structural

unemployment, inequality and concentrated ownership demonstrated that economic sovereignty remained incomplete. The ANC's revolutionary project therefore faced an external dimension that could not be resolved through domestic political control alone. Economic transformation required developing the capacity to participate in global capitalism on more advantageous terms. This meant moving beyond the binary choice between capitalism and socialism toward questions of industrial policy, productive capacity, ownership, technological development and national bargaining power. The revolutionary state had to become economically strategic rather than merely administratively redistributive. Where this strategic transformation remained incomplete, structural economic power continued to operate beyond direct democratic control. This is one of the most important lessons of the South African experience for other African liberation movements. National independence without economic capacity leaves governments formally sovereign but materially constrained.

The ANC's transformation also affected its understanding of class politics. The liberation movement had historically incorporated diverse class interests under the broad project of national liberation. After 1994, these differences became increasingly visible. A black professional class expanded, a black business elite emerged, a larger middle class developed and millions remained economically marginalised. The ANC therefore governed a society in which the racial structure of political power had changed faster than the class structure of wealth. This produced a new contradiction. Black political representation became dominant, yet socioeconomic inequality remained enormous. The existence of black elites did not mean that racial inequality had disappeared, but it did demonstrate that race and class could no longer be analysed as identical categories. The post-apartheid political economy became more complex because racial transformation created new class formations within the black majority itself. Some citizens gained access to professional careers, business opportunities and political influence, while others remained unemployed or dependent upon social grants. The ANC therefore faced increasing pressure from within its own historical constituency. The question was no longer simply whether black people had gained political power; it was which black people were gaining economic power and whether the benefits of transformation were broadly distributed. This shifted the political debate from representation toward distribution. The liberation movement had to confront internal inequalities within the liberated majority. That was a much more difficult political task because it challenged the assumption that racial solidarity could indefinitely substitute for socioeconomic redistribution. The emergence of a black middle and business class was itself an important achievement, but it also created new expectations. Citizens could see that transformation was possible for some and ask why it remained inaccessible to many others. The ANC therefore had to move from a politics of racial inclusion toward a broader politics of economic inclusion. This required policies capable of generating mass employment, productive ownership and social mobility. Where such transformation was inadequate, political dissatisfaction grew. The historical lesson is that liberation must eventually move beyond the question of who governs to the question of how the governed participate in the production and distribution of national wealth.

The consequences of this class transformation were visible in the changing social base of the ANC. The party continued to possess deep support among working-class and rural communities, but it also became increasingly connected to professional, business and political elites. This broadened its governing coalition but complicated its ideological identity. A movement that represents workers while governing alongside business must continually negotiate contradictions. A government that seeks investment while demanding redistribution must balance economic interests. A party that promotes entrepreneurship while supporting social protection must maintain a broad coalition. Such balancing can be politically sophisticated, but it can also produce ambiguity. Different constituencies may interpret the same policy differently. Business may see regulation as excessive

while workers see it as inadequate. Middle-class citizens may demand lower taxes while poorer citizens demand expanded services. Rural communities may prioritise land while urban citizens prioritise jobs. The ANC's governing challenge therefore became one of coalition management. The broad liberation coalition had survived because apartheid provided a powerful common enemy. After liberation, the differences among constituencies became unavoidable. Government had to determine which interests should receive priority and how conflicts should be resolved. This made policy coherence increasingly important. Without a clear developmental strategy, coalition management can become reactive and short-term. The governing party may respond to each constituency separately rather than building a coherent national economic project. The ANC periodically articulated broad visions of a developmental state, but implementation was uneven. The result was a political system capable of significant redistribution but less successful at generating the structural transformation necessary to reduce dependence upon redistribution. This distinction again demonstrates the difference between managing inequality and transforming its causes. The ANC's social programmes helped mitigate poverty, but long-term transformation required economic growth that generated sufficient employment and broad-based ownership. The movement's challenge was therefore to evolve from a liberation coalition into a developmental coalition. That required not only political legitimacy but strategic economic leadership.

The question of state power also requires examination of the judiciary and constitutional institutions. The strength of the judiciary became one of the defining features of South African democracy. Courts repeatedly asserted that executive and legislative authority were subject to constitutional review. This represented a significant departure from the authoritarian legal culture of apartheid. Yet it also generated political controversy because judicial decisions could frustrate government policies. Some ANC leaders and supporters criticised courts for interfering with democratic mandates, while others defended judicial independence as essential to constitutional government. The deeper issue is whether democracy means majority rule alone or majority rule within constitutional limits. South Africa's constitutional settlement clearly adopted the latter. The people elect representatives, but representatives must govern within the Constitution. This principle protects minorities and individuals from arbitrary majoritarian power. For a liberation movement, accepting this limitation requires a significant ideological adjustment. The ANC could no longer claim that its historical legitimacy entitled it to determine the meaning of justice independently of constitutional institutions. It had to engage in legal argument and accept adverse judgments. This represented a maturation of the movement-state relationship when institutional independence was respected. Conversely, attempts to undermine courts or accountability institutions represented regression toward movement-centred governance. The constitutional state therefore became a test of whether the ANC could distinguish political authority from institutional supremacy. The party could govern, but it could not become the Constitution. This distinction remains fundamental to democratic South Africa. The strength of the constitutional order lies precisely in its capacity to constrain all political actors, including historically legitimate ones. The ANC's acceptance of this principle was one of the great achievements of the transition, even when tensions emerged. The survival of constitutional institutions through periods of political crisis demonstrates that the democratic state acquired a degree of institutional autonomy from the movement that created the transition. This is crucial evidence that the ANC did not simply capture the state. It helped create a state that could, under certain circumstances, constrain the ANC itself.

The independence of the media and civil society similarly transformed the political environment. During apartheid, censorship and repression restricted public discourse. Democratic South Africa created a far more open environment in which journalists, researchers, activists and organisations

could investigate government conduct. This altered the distribution of political power. Information itself became a form of democratic power. Investigative journalism could expose corruption, civil society could litigate against government, and academic research could challenge official narratives. The ANC therefore governed in an environment where it could not completely control the public interpretation of its actions. This was a major achievement of the constitutional order. Yet political tensions sometimes emerged when the government perceived media coverage as unfair or hostile. Such tensions are inevitable in democracies, but the response of government matters. A governing party confident in its constitutional legitimacy should tolerate criticism even when criticism is severe. The historical danger is that a liberation movement may interpret hostile scrutiny through the memory of apartheid propaganda and political warfare. But democratic media are not required to protect the governing party from criticism. Their role is to scrutinise power. The ANC's transformation into a governing establishment therefore required accepting a permanent condition of scrutiny. This was fundamentally different from the political environment of the liberation struggle. The movement could once organise against the state in secrecy; the government now had to operate in public. The state had to explain decisions, defend policies and respond to investigative findings. This increased accountability but also exposed weaknesses more visibly. Failures that might once have been hidden became national controversies. The growth of democratic media therefore contributed to the transformation of the ANC's political identity. The movement became increasingly accountable not only to its members but to journalists, courts, voters, civil society and the broader public. This expanded accountability is one of the reasons the post-apartheid state cannot simply be described as a continuation of movement rule. The movement entered a public constitutional environment that constrained its political behaviour in important ways.

The history of the ANC after 1994 therefore demonstrates that political liberation is a process rather than a single event. The election of a democratic government represented a decisive rupture with apartheid, but it did not end the struggle over the distribution of power. The first stage concerned political sovereignty: who has the right to govern? The second concerned institutional sovereignty: who controls the institutions through which government operates? The third concerns economic sovereignty: who owns and controls the productive resources of the country? The ANC achieved enormous success in the first stage and substantial but uneven success in the second. The third remains much more contested. This three-dimensional framework allows a more rigorous interpretation of post-apartheid South Africa. It avoids the false assumption that political liberation automatically produces economic liberation. It also avoids the opposite error of dismissing political democracy because economic inequality remains. The democratic state transformed the legal and political status of millions of people, and that transformation matters independently of economic outcomes. Yet the unfinished economic dimension remains central to the liberation project because political citizenship is weakened when citizens lack meaningful economic opportunities. The ANC's historical challenge was therefore to convert political sovereignty into socioeconomic power. That required a developmental state capable of building infrastructure, expanding productive capacity, supporting entrepreneurship, strengthening public institutions and negotiating effectively with capital. Where the state succeeded, it expanded substantive citizenship. Where it failed, structural inequalities persisted. The resulting South Africa is neither apartheid nor a fully transformed post-capitalist society. It is a constitutional democracy marked by profound transformation and profound continuity. The ANC stands at the centre of this contradiction because it is both the principal architect of the democratic transition and the governing institution most responsible for the successes and failures of the post-apartheid state. Its historical importance is therefore beyond dispute, but its historical responsibility is equally substantial. The organisation cannot indefinitely claim the legitimacy of liberation without accepting the accountability of government. The

revolutionary movement became the governing establishment, and governing created obligations that historical struggle alone could not satisfy.

The concept of a "revolutionary government" therefore requires careful qualification in the South African context. The ANC was revolutionary in historical origin and transformative in political purpose, but the state it governed was constitutional rather than revolutionary in institutional form. It could not legitimately suspend constitutional rights in pursuit of political objectives. It could not govern through permanent emergency. It could not abolish political opposition. It could not eliminate private property by executive declaration. It could not replace law with revolutionary decree. Its revolutionary ambitions therefore had to be translated into constitutional governance. This transformation created both opportunities and limitations. Constitutional democracy protected the liberation achievements from authoritarian reversal, but it also required slower, more negotiated forms of structural change. The ANC's task was consequently to use democratic institutions as instruments of transformation rather than treating them as obstacles. This required a conception of revolution based on institution-building, economic development and social justice rather than political rupture. The South African experience suggests that revolutionary politics after liberation must eventually become developmental politics. Once political sovereignty is achieved, the central question becomes how to build institutions capable of improving citizens' material conditions. The revolution must therefore move from mobilisation to production, from resistance to administration, and from political exclusion to economic inclusion. The ANC's greatest difficulties emerged when this transition was incomplete. Political rhetoric continued to emphasise revolutionary transformation, while administrative institutions sometimes operated through ordinary bureaucratic routines. Economic structures continued to reflect accumulated historical inequalities, while government policy attempted incremental correction. The resulting gap between rhetoric and material outcomes created political frustration. Yet this gap should not obscure the fact that the constitutional settlement itself represented a profound form of transformation. The ANC's revolutionary project did not disappear; it changed form. Its most successful legacy may ultimately lie in the creation of a constitutional order capable of institutionalising the principles of equality, citizenship and democratic accountability. Its unfinished legacy lies in the economic structures that remain insufficiently transformed. The history of revolutionary government is therefore a history of both achievement and compromise.

The most serious compromise of the ANC's post-apartheid project can perhaps be located in the incomplete transformation of structural economic power. Political power was transferred through elections, but economic power was transformed only partially. This created a fundamental asymmetry at the heart of the new South Africa. The majority became politically sovereign while substantial productive assets remained concentrated. The government could regulate the economy but could not directly command all economic decisions. Private capital continued to influence investment, production and employment. Financial institutions continued to shape access to credit. Corporate ownership remained concentrated in significant sectors. Land redistribution remained incomplete. Wealth inequality persisted. These realities do not prove that the ANC had "lost control" of the state in any simple sense. The ANC retained substantial governmental authority for decades. The more precise conclusion is that political control of the state did not equal comprehensive control over the structures that reproduce economic power. This distinction is essential because it explains why the government could be both powerful and constrained. It could legislate transformative policies while depending upon economic actors whose cooperation affected implementation. It could redistribute income while struggling to transform ownership. It could expand public services while remaining dependent upon private production for employment and

investment. The structural power of capital therefore remained an important feature of the post-apartheid political economy. But structural economic power should not be romanticised as an all-powerful force. It operated within a state capable of regulation, taxation and redistribution. The correct conclusion is that South Africa developed a negotiated balance between democratic state power and private economic power. The ANC did not completely surrender the economy to capital, but neither did it establish direct democratic control over the economy. This incomplete transformation became one of the central unresolved questions of the liberation project. It explains why political equality could coexist with extreme socioeconomic inequality. It also explains why debates over land, ownership, industrial policy, mining, finance and black economic empowerment remained politically powerful decades after the transition.

The ANC's compromise with capitalism should therefore be understood historically rather than morally alone. The movement did not enter government in a neutral economic environment. It inherited a highly unequal capitalist economy and had to govern it immediately. Economic collapse would have harmed the very citizens whose liberation it sought to protect. The government therefore had to balance transformation with stability. The difficult question is whether the balance eventually shifted too far toward stability at the expense of structural change. This is where scholarly debate becomes important. One interpretation argues that the ANC's adoption of pragmatic economic policies was necessary to preserve the democratic transition and prevent economic destabilisation. Another argues that the compromise reproduced the structural power of established capital and limited the depth of economic liberation. A rigorous analysis should acknowledge evidence supporting both interpretations. South Africa avoided the catastrophic economic disruptions that accompanied some radical transitions, and the government built an extensive system of social protection. At the same time, inequality remained extraordinarily high, unemployment persisted and ownership remained concentrated. The question is therefore not whether compromise existed; it clearly did. The question is what the compromise achieved and what it cost. It achieved political stability, macroeconomic continuity and a functioning constitutional order. Its costs included the persistence of structural inequalities and the slow pace of economic transformation. These outcomes should be evaluated together. Historical judgement becomes simplistic when it treats compromise either as betrayal or as unquestionable wisdom. Negotiation was essential to avoiding a potentially destructive rupture, but the existence of necessary compromise did not eliminate the obligation to pursue deeper transformation afterward. The post-apartheid government therefore needed a second phase of economic strategy capable of using the stability created by the transition to transform productive structures. Where this did not happen sufficiently, the compromises of 1994 became permanent features rather than transitional arrangements. This distinction is central. A compromise can be strategically necessary in one historical moment and politically damaging if it becomes a permanent settlement. The ANC's unfinished task was to ensure that the negotiated transition became a platform for deeper transformation rather than the endpoint of transformation.

The movement-state paradox also helps explain why the ANC's political language remained revolutionary long after its governing practices became increasingly institutional. Revolutionary vocabulary preserved historical continuity. It reminded members and supporters that the party's purpose extended beyond ordinary electoral competition. Yet the persistence of revolutionary language also created expectations that government could not always fulfil. Citizens were told that the national democratic revolution remained unfinished, but many experienced the state as bureaucratic, slow and compromised. The contradiction between revolutionary aspiration and administrative reality became increasingly visible. The state could announce ambitious

transformation programmes while implementation remained constrained by institutional weakness. This did not necessarily mean that the rhetoric was fraudulent. Political movements often retain long-term goals that cannot be achieved immediately. But rhetoric becomes politically dangerous when it creates expectations without corresponding institutional capacity. The ANC therefore needed to develop a more precise theory of revolutionary government. What exactly did the national democratic revolution mean once apartheid political rule had been abolished? What institutions would complete the transformation? What economic sectors required restructuring? What forms of ownership were strategically necessary? What role should the private sector play? What would broad-based economic participation look like? Without clear answers, revolutionary language risked becoming a substitute for strategy. A mature revolutionary government must therefore convert ideological commitments into measurable institutional objectives. The transformation of the ANC was incomplete partly because its political language sometimes moved faster than its institutional theory. The party knew what it opposed historically, but governing required greater precision about what it intended to build. This is perhaps one of the deepest lessons of the South African experience. Liberation movements are often excellent at imagining the destruction of an unjust order but less prepared for the technical complexity of constructing the replacement. Governing requires institutions, data, skills, financing, regulation, implementation and evaluation. The revolution therefore enters a different phase after political victory. The challenge is no longer simply mobilisation; it is construction. The ANC's historical record should be judged partly by how effectively it made this transition.

The question of whether the ANC became the state must also be answered carefully. In formal constitutional terms, it did not. South Africa remained a constitutional republic in which the state possessed institutions distinct from the governing party. Courts could rule against government, opposition parties could contest elections, citizens could challenge administrative decisions and independent institutions could investigate misconduct. These realities demonstrate that the ANC never acquired absolute institutional control. Yet politically, the party's dominance created a powerful relationship between its internal organisation and state leadership. For long periods, the ANC's electoral dominance meant that its leadership choices effectively determined national executive leadership. This created an overlap that was politically significant even when institutionally incomplete. The danger of this arrangement was that party interests could sometimes shape public administration. The opportunity was that a coherent governing movement could pursue long-term policies with continuity. The outcome depended upon the quality of institutional separation. Where party leadership respected constitutional institutions, the system functioned as a dominant-party democracy. Where party networks penetrated state institutions excessively, the system became vulnerable to patronage and institutional decay. The distinction between party dominance and party-state fusion is therefore essential. South Africa experienced the former strongly and periodically risked the latter. This nuance is important because describing the ANC as simply "the state" exaggerates its power and obscures the resilience of constitutional institutions. Conversely, pretending that party and state were completely separate ignores the political reality of a dominant liberation movement. The appropriate interpretation lies between these extremes. The ANC was the dominant political force within the democratic state, but the state retained institutional structures capable of constraining the ANC. The struggle over these boundaries became one of the central political dramas of post-apartheid South Africa. It also explains why constitutional institutions became increasingly important as the ANC's political dominance matured. The stronger the governing party became, the more necessary independent institutions were to ensure that political power remained accountable to the public.

The eventual decline in the ANC's electoral dominance can be understood within this historical framework. As citizens became more politically experienced, liberation history became only one factor influencing electoral choices. Performance, corruption, unemployment, service delivery and leadership became increasingly important. This represents the normalisation of democratic politics. A liberation movement that once derived legitimacy primarily from historical struggle eventually had to compete on contemporary performance. The electorate increasingly treated the ANC as a governing party rather than simply as the organisation of liberation. This was both a consequence and a test of democratic success. If democracy had genuinely transformed citizenship, voters had to possess the freedom to withdraw support from the liberation movement. The ANC's electoral decline therefore should not automatically be interpreted as the collapse of the liberation project. It can also be understood as evidence that the state became institutionally separate enough from the movement to allow citizens to judge government independently. Yet it also reveals the consequences of unresolved structural problems. Political legitimacy weakens when citizens believe that democratic government has failed to produce meaningful economic opportunity. The ANC therefore encountered the historical limits of liberation legitimacy. The generation that experienced apartheid directly could maintain strong emotional attachment to the movement, while younger generations increasingly asked what the ANC was doing now. This generational transition transformed the political meaning of history. Liberation became memory rather than lived experience for many citizens. The governing party therefore had to convert historical legitimacy into contemporary competence. Where it failed, electoral support declined. This development reinforces the central argument of the chapter: government transformed the ANC by forcing it to become accountable for outcomes that a liberation movement outside power could attribute to an oppressive state. Once the ANC became the state's principal governing force, every failure in public administration became partly its responsibility. The movement could no longer remain permanently outside the consequences of its own government.

The deeper tragedy of revolutionary government is therefore not necessarily that revolutionaries become corrupt or conservative, although that can happen. The deeper tragedy is that political victory can create an illusion of completed liberation while structural forms of domination remain. Once the oppressed majority gains the vote, the political system can appear transformed even when economic structures remain unequal. Citizens may therefore possess formal sovereignty without possessing equivalent material power. This is not uniquely South African; it is a recurring problem across postcolonial societies. The challenge is to transform sovereignty from a constitutional principle into productive capacity. Political independence becomes meaningful when societies can generate the resources required to sustain their development. In South Africa, the ANC inherited a state with substantial economic capabilities, but the historical concentration of wealth remained a formidable constraint. The task was therefore to democratise not only political institutions but economic opportunity. This required building a broad productive base capable of absorbing labour, supporting entrepreneurship and creating wealth across communities. Without such transformation, democracy risks becoming primarily redistributive rather than developmental. Redistribution remains important, especially in societies marked by historical injustice, but it cannot substitute indefinitely for productive transformation. The ANC's achievements in social protection therefore coexist with a deeper structural challenge. The government helped mitigate the consequences of inequality, but the causes of inequality proved more difficult to dismantle. This distinction is central to understanding why the revolutionary project remains unfinished. The state can redistribute income without changing ownership. It can regulate capital without replacing it. It can provide services without creating enough productive employment. It can expand political representation without democratising economic decision-making. These contradictions define the post-apartheid

order. The ANC's historical significance lies precisely in its role as the movement that changed political sovereignty while confronting the far more difficult task of changing structural power. Its greatest successes and failures must therefore be measured against this distinction.

A rigorous assessment must also recognise that structural economic power is not synonymous with racial power, even though South Africa's economic inequalities were profoundly shaped by racial history. The post-apartheid economy became more racially diverse, with significant black participation in business, professional sectors and ownership. Yet historical concentration remained powerful. This means that the transformation of racial representation did not automatically transform the underlying mechanisms of capital accumulation. New entrants could enter existing structures without fundamentally altering how those structures operated. A black executive leading a corporation does not necessarily change the ownership model of the corporation. A black entrepreneur participating in procurement does not necessarily transform the industrial structure. A black middle class can grow while mass unemployment remains. These distinctions are crucial because they prevent the analysis from becoming trapped in symbolism. Transformation must be measured not only by who occupies positions but by how institutions distribute resources and opportunities. The ANC's emphasis on representation was historically understandable because apartheid had excluded black citizens from political and economic institutions. But representation alone could not complete the liberation project. The deeper objective was to create an economy in which historical exclusion no longer determined life chances. That requires broad-based asset ownership, quality education, employment, technological capability and access to finance. Where these remain unequal, structural power remains unequal even when political representation changes dramatically. The ANC therefore faced the challenge of moving from representational transformation to structural transformation. The former was more visible and politically measurable; the latter was slower and more difficult. This distinction explains why South Africa could appear profoundly transformed politically while remaining profoundly unequal economically. It also explains why debates over the ANC's record remain so contested. Different observers measure liberation using different indicators. Those who prioritise constitutional democracy can point to extraordinary success. Those who prioritise economic ownership can point to incomplete transformation. Both perspectives identify genuine dimensions of the same historical process.

The ANC's greatest constitutional achievement may therefore have been to transform the state without destroying state continuity. This is an underappreciated dimension of the transition. South Africa avoided the institutional collapse that can accompany revolutionary regime change. The public administration continued functioning, the economy remained operational, elections were institutionalised and constitutional institutions developed legitimacy. This continuity created the stability necessary for long-term transformation. Yet continuity also preserved aspects of the inherited order. The challenge was therefore not whether continuity was good or bad but which elements of continuity should have been retained and which should have been fundamentally transformed. Professional administrative systems needed preservation and democratisation. Racial hierarchies needed dismantling. Economic ownership required transformation. Institutional memory needed to be maintained while discriminatory practices were removed. This was an exceptionally complex balancing act. The ANC's success in maintaining state continuity helped prevent chaos, but its incomplete restructuring of some institutions allowed inherited inequalities to persist. The same principle applied to the economy. Continuity protected production and investment, but it also protected accumulated ownership patterns. The transition therefore involved what might be called selective transformation. Some structures were replaced, others reformed, and others preserved. The historical question is whether the selection was strategically appropriate. In political institutions, the

transformation was profound. In social policy, it was extensive. In economic ownership, it was much more limited. In state capacity, it was uneven. In institutional culture, it varied considerably. This unevenness is the defining characteristic of the post-apartheid settlement. It was neither complete rupture nor simple continuity. It was a negotiated reconstruction of the state within an inherited society. The ANC's role in this reconstruction was decisive, but it was not omnipotent. Its choices were shaped by the Constitution, economic structures, social forces and international realities. Understanding these constraints does not absolve the movement of responsibility; rather, it clarifies the conditions within which responsibility must be evaluated.

The movement-state relationship also reveals why liberation history can become politically dangerous when treated as permanent authority. Historical legitimacy is indispensable because it explains why a movement deserves recognition, but it cannot replace contemporary accountability. The ANC's contribution to ending apartheid is one of the foundational achievements of South African democracy. Yet that achievement cannot provide an unlimited political mandate. A democratic state must continually renew legitimacy through institutions and public consent. This principle protects both democracy and the liberation movement itself. If the ANC were permanently defined only by its historical greatness, it would become impossible to evaluate its contemporary failures honestly. Conversely, if its entire historical contribution were dismissed because of later failures, the history of liberation would be distorted. A mature political culture must therefore hold historical achievement and contemporary accountability together. The ANC can be both the organisation that liberated South Africa politically and a governing party that made serious mistakes. It can have transformed millions of lives and still have failed to transform economic structures sufficiently. It can defend constitutional democracy and still have experienced periods of institutional weakness. It can represent genuine national interests and still develop factional networks that undermine public institutions. Historical complexity is not political betrayal; it is the foundation of serious scholarship. The purpose of examining the ANC critically is not to deny its liberation role but to understand the mechanisms through which liberation can become government and government can become establishment. The movement-state transformation is therefore a universal lesson in political power. Organisations created to challenge domination can themselves become centres of power. Once they do, they must be judged not only by their historical intentions but by the institutions they create, the resources they distribute and the inequalities they reproduce or dismantle. The ANC's experience offers one of the most important contemporary African examples of this dilemma. It demonstrates that liberation is not complete when a liberation movement wins office. Liberation becomes complete only when political, institutional and economic power are progressively democratised.

The central question of this chapter can therefore be answered dialectically: the ANC transformed the government, and government transformed the ANC. The organisation transformed the political state by abolishing apartheid rule, establishing universal suffrage, supporting constitutional democracy and expanding social citizenship. At the same time, the responsibilities of government transformed the organisation by introducing fiscal constraints, administrative obligations, institutional compromises, elite formation and pressures from organised capital. The result was a governing party that remained revolutionary in historical identity but increasingly constitutional in institutional practice. Its revolutionary project succeeded most decisively where political sovereignty was concerned. It achieved substantial progress in social redistribution and racial inclusion. It created institutions that fundamentally altered the legal status of citizenship. Yet its project was less successful in transforming structural economic ownership and productive power. The compromises of negotiated transition helped secure peace and democratic stability but also

preserved significant elements of the inherited political economy. The constitutional state protected democratic rights but limited the possibility of exercising unlimited revolutionary power. The governing establishment expanded the ANC's capacity to implement policy but also created incentives for patronage, factionalism and institutional capture. The movement therefore gained governmental power while discovering that government itself was a form of power with its own logic. This is the paradox. The ANC entered government to transform the state, but the state simultaneously transformed the ANC into an institution concerned with administration, survival and control. The revolutionary organisation became part of the establishment it had historically sought to replace. Yet this should not be understood as a simple moral fall. Establishment status is an inevitable risk of successful political liberation. The real test is whether a governing movement can remain institutionally committed to the principles that justified its liberation struggle. The ANC's record shows both moments of remarkable achievement and moments of profound compromise. Its history therefore demands neither unconditional celebration nor total condemnation. It demands analysis.

Ultimately, the most important lesson of the ANC's transformation is that political power is only one layer of power. The liberation of political authority changed who could vote, who could legislate and who could form government. But the deeper structures of economic power required different strategies. Ownership, finance, land, technology, industrial capacity and productive employment do not change automatically when governments change. This is why the post-apartheid South African experience remains unfinished. The ANC succeeded in changing the political architecture of the country, but it inherited and partially reproduced an economic architecture whose transformation proved considerably more difficult. The Constitution established a framework for pursuing socioeconomic change, but constitutional power had to be matched by institutional capacity. Government possessed important regulatory and redistributive instruments, but private economic actors retained substantial structural influence. The democratic state could therefore exercise sovereignty without exercising comprehensive economic control. This does not invalidate democracy; it reveals its limitations when political democracy is not accompanied by sufficient economic transformation. The unfinished task is therefore to connect citizenship to productive power. A truly emancipated citizen should not merely possess the right to vote but should possess meaningful access to education, employment, land, capital, technology, infrastructure and economic opportunity. This is the point at which the ANC's revolutionary project encounters its deepest unfinished question. Did political liberation create the conditions necessary for economic liberation? To a significant extent, yes. Did it complete economic liberation? Clearly not. The answer is neither triumphalist nor nihilistic. It is historical. The ANC transformed South Africa profoundly, but the transformation was uneven. It dismantled the political machinery of apartheid more successfully than it dismantled the structural economic inequalities created by apartheid and colonialism. It built a constitutional democracy rather than a revolutionary state. It became a governing establishment rather than remaining a pure movement. And in doing so, it created a new political order whose central contradiction remains unresolved: the people possess democratic sovereignty, but the distribution of economic power remains substantially unequal. That contradiction is the bridge between the historical liberation of 1994 and the continuing struggle over who actually exercises power in South Africa.

PART II — THE ECONOMIC STRUCTURE OF POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

CHAPTER THREE

THE POLITICAL STATE WITHOUT FULL ECONOMIC SOVEREIGNTY

Who Owns South Africa?

The central question of post-apartheid South Africa cannot be answered merely by asking who occupies the Union Buildings, who controls Parliament, or which political party commands a majority of seats in government. Political sovereignty and economic sovereignty are related, but they are not identical forms of power. The democratic state acquired immense constitutional authority in 1994, but the productive structure over which that authority operated was not created anew by the democratic revolution. The ANC inherited an economy whose ownership, financial

architecture, corporate institutions, landholding patterns, industrial networks and accumulated capital had been shaped over generations of colonialism and apartheid. The democratic transition therefore transferred political authority much faster than it transformed the underlying distribution of productive wealth. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the paradox of liberation in South Africa. A people may acquire the vote without immediately acquiring the factories, mines, banks, farms, logistics networks, intellectual property, technological platforms and financial institutions that determine how wealth is produced. The state can legislate against discrimination while private corporations continue to decide where capital is invested. Government can change ministers while shareholders, pension funds, banks and investment managers continue to influence the allocation of capital. The ANC consequently inherited not simply a state but an entire political economy whose deepest structures possessed their own institutional momentum. The democratic government could regulate those structures, tax them, negotiate with them and sometimes partner with them, but it did not automatically own them. This is why the question “Who owns South Africa?” must be distinguished from the simpler question “Who governs South Africa?” The first question takes us into the political economy of liberation, where formal political power encounters accumulated economic power. The second concerns constitutional government, elections and public administration. South Africa's post-1994 experience demonstrates that winning government is not equivalent to reorganising the ownership of society. The Competition Commission's work on economic concentration has repeatedly demonstrated that concentration remains a major structural feature of the South African economy, making ownership and market power central questions rather than peripheral ideological concerns.

The most important conceptual error in discussions of South African transformation is therefore to equate state authority with national ownership. A government owns what the state legally owns, but a nation possesses a much broader economic inheritance than the balance sheet of government departments and state-owned enterprises. National ownership, in a democratic and developmental sense, concerns the capacity of citizens collectively to influence, benefit from and exercise meaningful control over strategic productive resources. A country may have publicly owned electricity utilities, railways, ports, development banks and mineral companies while most commercial production remains privately controlled. Conversely, a country may have a large private sector while imposing such strong democratic regulation that private ownership operates within a clearly defined national developmental framework. Ownership therefore exists on a spectrum involving legal title, voting rights, managerial control, access to finance, technological control, market power and the capacity to determine investment. This wider understanding is essential because South Africa's economic transformation cannot be measured simply by counting state-owned companies. The democratic state inherited a sophisticated private capitalist economy and chose, for a variety of political and economic reasons, not to dismantle it. That choice was neither automatically a betrayal nor automatically a success. It represented a strategic compromise whose consequences must be examined honestly. The Reconstruction and Development Programme contained ambitions for redistribution and structural transformation, but the post-apartheid state increasingly operated through a mixed economy in which markets remained central. Black Economic Empowerment subsequently attempted to alter ownership, management and participation without abolishing private capital. The official B-BBEE framework explicitly sought to increase black ownership and control of enterprises and productive assets, demonstrating that government itself recognised that political emancipation was incomplete without economic transformation. Yet the existence of empowerment legislation does not by itself prove that economic sovereignty has been achieved. The decisive question is whether the transformation of ownership has been

sufficiently deep, broad and productive to alter the underlying architecture of economic power. That question remains open.

The ANC's historic achievement was extraordinary because it transformed the political meaning of citizenship in a society deliberately constructed around racial domination. Universal democratic citizenship destroyed the legal foundations of apartheid and placed political sovereignty in the hands of the majority. The Constitution established equal citizenship, enforceable rights and institutions designed to prevent the return of racial authoritarianism. The democratic government expanded access to housing, electricity, water, social grants, education and public services on a scale that should not be dismissed by any serious historical analysis. Millions of South Africans previously excluded from formal political power became voters, public officials, professionals, entrepreneurs, ministers and members of a democratic public. The liberation movement therefore did not fail simply because economic inequality survived. It changed the political structure of the country profoundly. The problem lies elsewhere. Political liberation was not accompanied by an equivalent redistribution of accumulated economic power. The majority entered the political nation while remaining disproportionately located at the lower end of the economic order. The paradox is that democratic government could be simultaneously transformative and constrained. It could abolish apartheid legislation while inheriting apartheid's economic geography. It could establish equal legal rights while inheriting unequal ownership. It could build democratic institutions while operating within a financial system whose capital was largely accumulated before democracy. It could create black professionals and entrepreneurs without immediately creating a mass black industrial ownership class. It could expand welfare provision without fundamentally transforming the concentration of productive assets. This is the central contradiction that this chapter investigates. The ANC should neither be romanticised as an all-powerful revolutionary government nor reduced to an incompetent administrator. Its historical position was more complicated. It possessed enormous political legitimacy but confronted powerful economic institutions that were not under direct democratic ownership. The central question therefore becomes how much power a government can exercise when it governs an economy whose commanding resources remain substantially outside direct state ownership.

The architecture of private capital survived 1994 partly because the democratic transition was negotiated rather than conducted through revolutionary expropriation. This distinction is essential. South Africa did not experience a classical socialist revolution in which private property was systematically abolished and productive assets transferred wholesale to the state. Nor did it experience a complete economic rupture in which the ownership structures of the old order were dismantled before the new political order was established. Instead, the democratic settlement preserved significant continuity in property relations while transforming the legal and political framework within which those relations operated. That continuity produced stability, investment confidence and institutional continuity, but it also preserved historical concentrations of wealth. The ANC faced an economy integrated into international finance, dependent on sophisticated capital markets and connected to multinational corporations. A sudden attempt to nationalise large sectors could have triggered capital flight, financial instability, investment withdrawal and international retaliation. The leadership therefore confronted a difficult strategic choice between revolutionary economic rupture and negotiated transformation. The decision to preserve a mixed economy created room for gradual reform but also gave existing capital substantial bargaining power. The compromise should therefore be understood historically rather than morally simplified. It was a product of the balance of forces at the transition. The democratic state had political legitimacy but private capital possessed accumulated wealth, technical expertise, international networks and

investment capacity. The result was an asymmetrical settlement in which government became politically dominant while capital remained economically influential. That asymmetry would shape every subsequent debate over land reform, mining, banking, industrial policy, privatisation and nationalisation. The ANC could threaten reform, regulate capital and demand transformation, but it also depended upon the continued functioning of the private economy. The revolutionary movement thus entered government and immediately discovered that governing capitalism is different from overthrowing it. This became one of the defining dilemmas of post-apartheid political economy.

The relationship between government and capital should consequently not be described as a simple contest between two independent camps. The South African state and private capital have frequently been mutually dependent. Government requires corporations to invest, produce, employ, pay taxes and provide goods and services. Corporations require government for infrastructure, licences, property rights, public contracts, monetary stability, security, trade policy and legal enforcement. The relationship therefore resembles a continuous negotiation over the terms under which economic power is exercised. The state possesses coercive and regulatory authority, while capital possesses investment and production capacity. Neither side is completely sovereign over the other. Yet dependence is not always symmetrical. A government facing unemployment and slow growth may become highly sensitive to investor confidence because investment decisions directly affect jobs, tax revenue and economic growth. Corporations can postpone investment, relocate capital, alter expansion plans or seek opportunities elsewhere. The state cannot easily command private investment merely by issuing political declarations. This is one of the practical limits of democratic economic sovereignty. The government can order a public institution to build a road, but it cannot simply command a privately owned corporation to build a factory without considering profitability, financing and market conditions. The resulting bargaining relationship creates what may be called structural power: the capacity to influence government choices not necessarily through direct political control but through the consequences associated with private investment decisions. This does not mean corporations secretly govern South Africa. Such a claim would be analytically excessive. It means that economic actors possess forms of influence arising from their position within the economy. The task of democratic government is therefore to prevent economic dependence from becoming political capture. The difficulty is that the boundary between legitimate consultation and undue influence can be difficult to identify. A developmental state must engage business without becoming subordinate to business. It must attract investment without allowing investors to dictate national priorities. It must regulate markets while preserving productive capacity. That delicate balance lies at the heart of South Africa's unresolved economic sovereignty.

Economic concentration provides another window into the distribution of power. A competitive economy theoretically allows new enterprises to enter markets, challenge established firms and distribute economic opportunity more widely. A concentrated economy does the opposite: established firms can possess advantages that make entry difficult, giving incumbent companies disproportionate influence over prices, supply chains, distribution and investment. The South African Competition Commission has explicitly investigated concentration and participation across the economy, and its research has found extensive concentration across markets. Earlier Commission reporting described more than 70 percent of assessed markets as concentrated, while its later concentration work continued to examine entrenched incumbency and barriers to entry. This matters politically because concentration is not merely a technical competition issue. It is a question of who has the capacity to make consequential economic decisions. When a small number of firms dominate a sector, the decisions of those firms can affect millions of consumers and thousands of smaller enterprises. The power to determine distribution channels can become the

power to determine which producers survive. The power to control financial access can become the power to determine who can expand. The power to control technology can become the power to determine who participates in future industries. The power to control logistics can become the power to determine whether entire regions can reach markets. Economic concentration therefore creates a form of private governance. It does not replace the democratic state, but it operates alongside it. This is why national sovereignty cannot be reduced to the possession of a national flag, Parliament and constitutional institutions. Sovereignty also requires the capacity to prevent private concentrations of economic power from becoming so dominant that democratic choices become economically ineffective. A government that cannot meaningfully alter concentrated market structures may possess legal sovereignty while experiencing constrained economic sovereignty.

The financial system intensifies this problem because modern capitalism is governed not only through factories and mines but through credit, investment, interest rates, pension funds, asset management and financial expectations. South Africa possesses one of the most sophisticated financial systems on the African continent, and that sophistication is simultaneously an asset and a constraint. It allows the country to mobilise capital, support businesses, finance households and connect domestic companies to international markets. Yet it also means that economic policy is constantly interpreted through financial markets. Government borrowing costs are influenced by investor perceptions, inflation expectations, credit conditions and global risk appetite. Monetary policy affects households and businesses through interest rates, while exchange-rate movements influence imports, exports and the cost of foreign-denominated obligations. The South African Reserve Bank's constitutional mandate and institutional independence reinforce the principle that monetary policy should be insulated from short-term political pressure. From one perspective, this institutional independence protects the economy from political manipulation. From another perspective, it demonstrates that electoral majorities do not exercise unlimited control over all instruments of economic policy. Democratic government operates through institutions deliberately designed to impose constraints on political power. This is not necessarily undemocratic; constitutional democracy often requires limits on government. But it does complicate the meaning of sovereignty. If elected governments cannot simply command monetary policy, control interest rates for political purposes or disregard financial consequences, then economic governance is necessarily shared among multiple institutions. The real issue is whether those institutions ultimately serve a broad national developmental strategy. Financial stability is necessary for sovereignty because economic collapse weakens democratic capacity. But financial stability cannot become an excuse for permanent economic conservatism. The challenge is to construct financial institutions capable of supporting transformation rather than merely preserving existing wealth.

The Johannesburg Stock Exchange illustrates another dimension of this contradiction. Listed corporations are legally private entities, yet they can possess enormous national significance because their investment decisions influence employment, exports, infrastructure, technology and tax revenue. Ownership of listed companies is itself often dispersed across institutional investors, pension funds, asset managers and international investors. This means that asking who owns a major corporation may produce a more complicated answer than identifying a single wealthy individual. Ownership may be mediated through investment institutions whose beneficiaries include millions of pension contributors. Such structures complicate simplistic claims that the economy is controlled by one racial or corporate bloc. Nevertheless, the existence of dispersed institutional ownership does not automatically democratise economic power. Ordinary pension contributors may have beneficial interests in financial assets without possessing meaningful influence over corporate strategy. The legal owners of shares exercise voting rights through institutional structures, while

individual beneficiaries often remain distant from strategic decisions. This creates an important distinction between economic participation and economic control. A worker may own a pension fund interest while having no direct influence over the company's investment priorities. A citizen may indirectly own shares while lacking the information or institutional mechanisms necessary to determine how those shares are voted. Economic democracy therefore requires more than financial inclusion. It requires meaningful mechanisms through which workers, communities and citizens can influence the strategic allocation of capital. South Africa's debate over worker share ownership reflects recognition of this problem. The government itself has argued that worker ownership can broaden ownership and, over time, strengthen economic control. The question is whether such mechanisms can become sufficiently extensive to change the architecture of power rather than merely adding limited participation around the edges.

Foreign capital introduces an additional layer to the sovereignty question. South Africa is not an isolated national economy and cannot realistically be expected to become one. Foreign investment can provide technology, capital, expertise, access to international markets and industrial integration. It can support manufacturing, mining, renewable energy, telecommunications and infrastructure. The country therefore has legitimate reasons to attract international investors. Yet foreign ownership also means that some strategic assets may ultimately be governed by decisions made partly outside South Africa. This does not automatically constitute foreign domination. International investment is often mutually beneficial and can be subject to national law. But sovereignty requires understanding the conditions under which foreign capital operates. The South African Reserve Bank reported that the market value of foreign liabilities reached approximately R8.325 trillion at the end of December 2025, including direct and portfolio investment liabilities. This figure does not mean that foreigners “own South Africa” in any simple sense, because financial liabilities include different types of claims and ownership structures. It does, however, demonstrate the scale at which South Africa is integrated into international capital. The country therefore operates within a global financial system where domestic policy interacts continuously with foreign investment decisions. International capital can deepen domestic investment but can also increase vulnerability to external shocks. When global investors become risk-averse, emerging markets can experience capital outflows, currency pressures and higher financing costs. South African sovereignty therefore exists within global capitalism rather than outside it. The objective cannot be to eliminate international capital but to ensure that foreign investment contributes to domestic productive capacity, technological development and broad-based prosperity.

Foreign direct investment must therefore be distinguished from foreign financial ownership more generally. Direct investment involves a longer-term relationship with productive assets and enterprises, while portfolio investment can move more rapidly across markets. The distinction matters because not all foreign capital contributes equally to economic sovereignty. A foreign investor establishing a new manufacturing plant, transferring technology and developing local suppliers can strengthen productive capacity. An investor purchasing financial assets for short-term returns may contribute liquidity without producing the same developmental effects. UN Trade and Development has repeatedly warned that headline FDI figures can conceal substantial differences between financial flows and productive investment. Its recent assessments have emphasised that global investment growth can be driven by financial-centre flows while underlying productive investment remains fragile. South Africa therefore needs a qualitative approach to foreign investment rather than simply celebrating every inflow as evidence of development. The key question should be what the investment does inside the domestic economy. Does it create productive capacity? Does it deepen local supply chains? Does it transfer technology? Does it train

South African workers? Does it increase exports? Does it develop black industrial enterprises? Does it retain value within the country? Does it support strategic autonomy? These questions turn foreign investment from a numerical target into a developmental instrument. A sovereign economic strategy must distinguish between capital that strengthens national productive capabilities and capital that merely changes the ownership of existing assets. The distinction is particularly important in an economy where historical ownership remains concentrated. If foreign investment simply purchases existing corporations, South Africa may receive capital without substantially broadening productive ownership. If foreign investment creates new industries, the outcome can be different. The issue is therefore not whether foreign capital is good or bad but whether national policy determines its developmental terms.

The mining sector reveals the complexity of economic sovereignty with particular clarity. South Africa's mineral wealth was central to the formation of its industrial economy and remains strategically important for exports, energy transition and industrialisation. Yet mineral resources can exist under national sovereignty while mining companies remain privately owned. The democratic state can impose licensing requirements, royalties, environmental standards, labour regulations and transformation obligations without directly owning every mine. This is an important distinction between resource sovereignty and corporate ownership. The state can claim custodianship over mineral resources while allowing private companies to extract them under regulated conditions. The challenge is whether the fiscal, industrial and developmental benefits of extraction are sufficient to justify the private control of productive operations. A mine can generate employment and taxes while profits accrue partly to shareholders. It can also create supply chains and regional development. But extraction can remain disconnected from domestic industrialisation if minerals are exported without sufficient beneficiation. The deeper Pan-African question is therefore not merely who owns the mine but who controls the entire value chain. If South Africa exports raw or semi-processed resources and imports high-value manufactured products containing those resources, resource sovereignty remains incomplete. Economic sovereignty requires moving from extraction to processing, manufacturing, technology and value addition. This principle extends beyond mining to agriculture, energy and critical minerals. The question is whether the country can use its natural resource endowment to create broad-based productive capabilities. Nationalisation may change the legal owner of a mine without automatically creating those capabilities. Conversely, strong regulation, taxation, beneficiation requirements and industrial policy can sometimes achieve developmental objectives without full public ownership. The choice must therefore be judged by outcomes rather than slogans.

The nationalisation debate nevertheless emerged because many South Africans correctly understood that political liberation had not automatically transformed economic ownership. Nationalisation became attractive because it appeared to offer a direct route from public sovereignty to public ownership. If mines, banks or strategic corporations were placed under state ownership, the argument went, the wealth generated by those assets could be redirected toward national development. This argument possesses historical legitimacy because many liberation movements across the world regarded control over productive assets as essential to genuine independence. However, nationalisation also carries serious economic and institutional questions. Who manages the nationalised enterprise? How is investment financed? How is corruption prevented? What happens when state enterprises operate inefficiently? How are technological capabilities developed? How does government prevent political patronage from replacing commercial competence? How are minority shareholders compensated where applicable? How does the state avoid converting commercial enterprises into permanent fiscal burdens? These questions do not invalidate

nationalisation, but they demonstrate that ownership is only one component of economic sovereignty. A state-owned enterprise can be nationally owned but badly governed. A privately owned enterprise can be heavily regulated and contribute substantially to national development. The most serious analysis must therefore move beyond the binary opposition between state ownership and private ownership. The real issue is the configuration of ownership, accountability, management, regulation, financing and developmental purpose. South Africa's experience with state-owned enterprises illustrates why public ownership requires institutional capability. Public ownership without effective governance can reproduce dependency in another form. The solution is not to abandon public ownership but to make it accountable, competent and strategically integrated into national development.

The experience of state-owned enterprises also demonstrates why government ownership cannot automatically be equated with democratic ownership. When an enterprise belongs to the state, citizens are theoretically its ultimate beneficiaries. Yet citizens may have little practical influence over its management. Ministers appoint boards, boards appoint executives, executives manage operations and citizens encounter the institution mainly as consumers or taxpayers. This produces a chain of representation that can become highly bureaucratic. Public ownership can therefore become state-centred rather than people-centred. A genuinely democratic economic model would require stronger mechanisms of parliamentary accountability, worker participation, community oversight and transparent performance measurement. The strategic question is not merely whether an enterprise is publicly owned but whether its public ownership produces public value. Eskom, Transnet and other public institutions became central to national debates precisely because their performance affected the productive capacity of the entire economy. Electricity, railways and ports are not ordinary commercial services. They form the infrastructure upon which private production depends. When public infrastructure fails, private corporations also suffer, but the burden ultimately falls upon society through lost growth, employment and revenue. This creates an unusual relationship between public and private power. The state owns certain strategic infrastructures while private companies depend upon them. Government therefore remains indispensable to capitalism even when capitalism is privately owned. At the same time, weak state capacity can increase the bargaining power of private actors because businesses may seek alternative logistics, energy or financial arrangements. The result is a complicated redistribution of power. The state may own infrastructure but lose influence if its infrastructure becomes unreliable. Economic sovereignty therefore depends not only on formal ownership but on institutional competence.

The private sector's power is also expressed through control of supply chains. A small producer may technically possess ownership of a farm, factory or shop but remain economically dependent on larger distributors, financiers and retailers. Ownership at the enterprise level does not necessarily translate into bargaining power within the value chain. This is particularly important for small black-owned businesses attempting to enter markets dominated by established firms. A business may receive empowerment certification yet struggle to obtain affordable credit, secure shelf space, access procurement networks or compete with established distribution systems. Economic transformation therefore cannot be measured only through the number of black-owned companies. It must examine whether those companies possess durable productive capacity. The official Black Industrialists Scheme recognises this distinction by focusing on black-owned, managed and controlled enterprises that create and own value-adding industrial capacity. This is a more substantive conception of empowerment than symbolic participation. It recognises that a genuine industrialist must control productive capacity rather than simply hold an equity stake. The challenge is scale. South Africa requires a sufficiently large black industrial class capable of producing goods,

owning technology, employing workers and competing internationally. Without this, empowerment risks becoming concentrated among a small group of politically connected or financially sophisticated beneficiaries. The objective of economic transformation should therefore be mass productive ownership rather than the creation of a narrow black capitalist elite. A Pan-African political economy must ask whether economic transformation changes the life chances of the majority or merely changes the racial composition of a small ownership class. That distinction is fundamental.

The emergence of a black capitalist class after 1994 was neither inherently illegitimate nor historically unexpected. A democratic economy requires the development of black entrepreneurs, investors, industrialists and professionals. Apartheid systematically restricted black participation in many areas of capital accumulation, and correcting that exclusion necessarily required the emergence of new black ownership. Black Economic Empowerment was therefore not simply a political favour; it was an attempt to correct historically constructed economic exclusion. The problem emerged when empowerment transactions became overly dependent on financial engineering, debt structures or access to political networks. In some cases, black ownership could become fragile because acquisition finance created liabilities that had to be serviced from future corporate dividends. In other cases, the benefits of transformation could become concentrated among a small number of politically connected individuals. These problems should not be used to discredit the principle of black economic ownership itself. Rather, they demonstrate that ownership transformation must be designed around productive sustainability. A black shareholder who owns an asset temporarily but loses it under financial pressure has not achieved durable economic sovereignty. A black entrepreneur dependent upon government contracts without competitive capability remains vulnerable to political change. A black industrialist who controls technology, production, workers and markets possesses a more substantial form of sovereignty. The state therefore needs to create conditions under which black capital can reproduce itself independently. This includes access to finance, industrial infrastructure, skills, technology, export markets and reliable procurement. Empowerment should ultimately become less dependent upon political patronage and more dependent upon productive capability. The objective is not simply to transfer shares but to create institutions capable of sustaining ownership across generations. In this respect, South Africa's economic transformation remains incomplete.

Land represents an even deeper contradiction because it connects property, production, historical justice and national identity. The apartheid state used law to restructure land ownership and spatial settlement in favour of white minority interests. Democratic South Africa therefore inherited a land question that cannot be reduced to agricultural productivity alone. Land is simultaneously an economic asset, a political symbol and a foundation of social citizenship. Yet land reform has to navigate constitutional property rights, agricultural production, food security, financing and historical restitution. The result is a difficult balance between correcting dispossession and maintaining productive capacity. Economic sovereignty requires that land reform produce more than symbolic redistribution. Beneficiaries must possess access to finance, infrastructure, markets, technology and agricultural knowledge. Otherwise transferred land can become economically vulnerable. At the same time, defending existing property arrangements without meaningful transformation perpetuates historical inequalities. The democratic state therefore confronts a structural dilemma in which legal certainty and historical justice must be reconciled rather than treated as mutually exclusive. The larger lesson is that ownership transformation requires institutions capable of converting assets into productive power. A title deed alone does not create economic sovereignty. Ownership must be accompanied by productive capability, credit,

infrastructure and market access. The same principle applies to housing, small businesses, mineral resources and industrial enterprises. The question is always whether the new owner possesses the means to exercise meaningful economic control. Without those means, formal ownership can become symbolic. With them, ownership can become transformative. South Africa's unfinished land question therefore illustrates the broader incompleteness of post-apartheid economic sovereignty.

The financial markets further complicate the meaning of national control because capital can move across borders faster than political institutions can respond. A democratic government operates within a world of floating exchange rates, global interest rates, sovereign credit assessments, international investment funds and multinational corporations. The rand responds not only to domestic political events but also to global monetary policy, commodity prices and investor sentiment. A government may therefore announce a policy while financial markets simultaneously price the expected consequences of that policy. This does not mean markets possess absolute power. Governments retain taxation, regulation, expenditure and legislative authority. But the existence of market responses constrains the range of feasible policy choices. When investors perceive excessive fiscal risk, borrowing costs can rise. When confidence deteriorates, capital can leave. When the currency weakens, imported goods become more expensive. The state consequently faces an external economic discipline that did not disappear with political independence. The issue becomes whether this discipline is accepted passively or managed strategically. Economic sovereignty should not mean ignoring markets. It should mean developing sufficient domestic productive capacity to reduce excessive dependence upon external capital. A country that exports more, saves more domestically, develops deep local capital markets and produces strategic goods has greater policy autonomy. A country that depends heavily on imported technology, foreign financing and external markets has less room for manoeuvre. South Africa's challenge is therefore not to escape global capitalism but to negotiate with it from a position of greater productive strength. Sovereignty is strengthened when dependency is reduced. Dependency is reduced when domestic capabilities expand. This is the economic foundation of political independence.

Government procurement is another instrument through which the state can influence ownership without directly owning every productive asset. Because the state purchases enormous quantities of goods and services, procurement can create markets for emerging enterprises. Properly designed, public procurement can become an industrial policy tool that supports local production, black-owned businesses and technological development. Poorly designed procurement can instead become a source of corruption, inflated prices and political patronage. The distinction between transformative procurement and predatory procurement is therefore essential. The democratic state has enormous purchasing power, but using that power effectively requires professional institutions, transparent tendering, long-term planning and strong accountability. If procurement becomes captured by politically connected intermediaries, the state may redistribute wealth without building productive capacity. If procurement is used strategically, it can create demand for local manufacturers and support the emergence of competitive enterprises. The objective should therefore be to transform procurement from a transactional process into an economic development instrument. Government contracts should ideally help firms acquire technology, skills, scale and export capability. The state should not become the permanent market for enterprises that cannot compete independently. Rather, it should use its purchasing power to help firms reach a stage at which they can compete domestically and internationally. This is particularly important for black industrialisation. Without large anchor markets, emerging producers struggle to achieve scale. Government can help create those markets while demanding quality, efficiency and accountability.

In this way, public authority can shape private economic activity without nationalising the entire economy.

The question of corporate-government relations must also include lobbying, consultation and policy influence. Modern governments cannot formulate sophisticated economic policies without consulting corporations, labour organisations, professional associations, communities and experts. Business possesses information about markets, investment costs and technological conditions that government may not possess internally. Consultation is therefore legitimate and often necessary. The danger arises when consultation becomes asymmetrical, with large corporations possessing far greater resources to influence policy than ordinary citizens or small enterprises. A corporation can employ economists, lawyers, consultants and public-relations specialists, while an informal trader may have no comparable institutional capacity. Democratic equality therefore does not automatically translate into equality of influence. This creates a potential gap between political citizenship and economic citizenship. Citizens possess one vote each, but economic actors possess very different capacities to shape policy debates. A wealthy corporation can sustain engagement with government for years, while a poor community may mobilise only during a crisis. The state must therefore design institutions that compensate for these inequalities. Parliamentary hearings, competition authorities, public consultations, labour institutions and civil society oversight can help create more balanced policy processes. Economic democracy requires institutional pluralism. Government should not listen only to those who possess capital. It should hear workers, consumers, small businesses, rural communities and historically excluded groups. The legitimacy of economic policy depends partly on whether those affected by decisions have meaningful opportunities to participate. Otherwise, formal democracy can coexist with a highly unequal policy environment.

The ANC's governing experience demonstrates that political parties can become trapped by the institutional demands of the state. As a liberation movement, the ANC developed a political language centred on mass mobilisation, national liberation and social transformation. As a governing party, it inherited responsibility for maintaining financial stability, attracting investment, managing public institutions and delivering services. These responsibilities created pressures that did not exist in the same form during liberation struggle. The movement had to become a state manager. This transition inevitably transformed its priorities. Revolutionary rhetoric could continue, but government required budgets, regulations, credit ratings, procurement systems and investor confidence. The result was not necessarily the abandonment of revolutionary ideals, but the institutional domestication of revolutionary politics. The ANC's challenge was to transform capitalism while simultaneously ensuring that capitalism continued to function. That contradiction generated repeated tensions between radical economic demands and cautious macroeconomic management. It also created space for internal political factions to accuse one another of either excessive radicalism or excessive accommodation. The deeper structural issue, however, cannot be explained solely by factional politics. Any government confronting a complex capitalist economy would face similar contradictions. The decisive question is whether the governing party developed institutions capable of using state power to progressively alter the structure of capital. Where it succeeded, transformation could occur. Where it failed, the state became primarily a regulator and redistributor rather than a transformative economic architect. This distinction is central to evaluating the ANC's historical record.

The ANC's compromise with private capital therefore needs to be interpreted neither as total surrender nor as complete revolutionary success. It represented a negotiated coexistence between political democracy and economic capitalism. The compromise protected the country from

potentially catastrophic economic disruption, but it also limited the speed with which ownership could be transformed. The political leadership accepted that economic transformation would have to occur within a functioning market economy. B-BBEE, affirmative procurement, land reform, social policy and industrial programmes became instruments for changing the distribution of economic opportunity without abolishing private property. This was an attempt to construct a specifically South African path rather than reproduce either apartheid capitalism or Soviet-style state socialism. The achievement was significant because South Africa avoided the complete collapse of private productive capacity. But the limitation was equally significant because structural concentration survived. The democratic state often possessed more capacity to redistribute income than to redistribute capital. Social grants, public employment, infrastructure and services could improve living standards without fundamentally altering who owns the most productive assets. Redistribution and transformation are therefore not identical. A government can redistribute some economic benefits while leaving ownership structures largely intact. This distinction explains why South Africa can simultaneously be described as a democratic success and an economically unequal society. The political revolution changed the distribution of political rights far more profoundly than it changed the distribution of accumulated wealth. That is the central paradox of the post-apartheid settlement.

The concept of economic sovereignty must therefore be expanded beyond nationalisation. Economic sovereignty means the capacity of a society to determine its developmental priorities, control critical productive capabilities, mobilise domestic resources and prevent external or private actors from exercising disproportionate control over national choices. It does not require the state to own everything. Indeed, attempting to own everything may weaken sovereignty if the state lacks the managerial capacity to operate complex enterprises. What matters is strategic control. A country should possess sufficient domestic capability in energy, food, finance, infrastructure, technology, minerals and industrial production to withstand external pressure. Strategic sovereignty can coexist with private ownership if regulation, competition and national development policy are sufficiently strong. The issue becomes whether the state can discipline capital when necessary. If corporations know that government can impose credible competition rules, enforce labour standards, tax fairly, require transformation and protect consumers, private ownership remains compatible with democratic sovereignty. If corporations become so concentrated that government fears regulating them because of possible investment withdrawal, sovereignty becomes weaker. Economic sovereignty is therefore partly a function of bargaining power. The stronger the productive and institutional capabilities of the state, the greater its bargaining power with capital. The stronger domestic enterprises and financial institutions become, the less dependent the country is on external investors. Sovereignty is consequently constructed through capability rather than declared through political language.

The notion of a developmental state offers one possible solution to this problem. A developmental state does not simply regulate markets or distribute welfare. It actively shapes the direction of economic transformation. It identifies strategic industries, coordinates investment, builds infrastructure, develops skills and uses public institutions to support productive capacity. The East Asian experience has often been cited because states such as South Korea and Taiwan used powerful public institutions to guide industrialisation while maintaining significant private ownership. Their lesson is not that South Africa should copy another country mechanically. Their deeper lesson is that private capital can be disciplined within a national developmental strategy. The state does not have to own every factory to influence what factories produce, where investment flows and what technologies are developed. South Africa has elements of a developmental state but

has struggled with institutional fragmentation, infrastructure constraints, political patronage and inconsistent policy implementation. The challenge is to convert government from a regulator of economic outcomes into an architect of productive transformation. This requires competent public administration and long-term strategic planning. It also requires insulation from both political patronage and narrow corporate interests. A developmental state cannot function when public appointments are treated as political rewards. Nor can it function when policy is written primarily around the preferences of established corporations. The state must possess its own economic intelligence and technical capacity. Without that capacity, government becomes dependent upon the very private actors it seeks to regulate. Economic sovereignty therefore requires a capable state.

The problem of capacity is particularly important because South Africa possesses considerable formal institutional strength. It has sophisticated courts, a central bank, tax administration, competition authorities, financial regulators, universities and professional bureaucracies. These institutions provide the country with capabilities that many developing economies lack. Yet institutional strength can coexist with serious failures in specific public entities. The challenge is therefore not to declare the state weak or strong in absolute terms. Different parts of the state possess different capacities. The South African Revenue Service, Reserve Bank and competition institutions demonstrate forms of sophisticated capability, while failures in infrastructure management demonstrate the consequences of institutional weakness. Economic sovereignty depends upon the combined effectiveness of these institutions. A government may have excellent fiscal institutions but poor electricity infrastructure. It may have strong competition law but weak industrial implementation. It may have sophisticated financial regulation but insufficient developmental finance. The political economy must therefore be understood as a system. Strength in one institution cannot fully compensate for weakness elsewhere. Strategic economic sovereignty requires coordination. Energy policy must connect with industrial policy. Transport policy must connect with export strategy. Education policy must connect with technological development. Procurement must connect with industrialisation. Financial policy must connect with productive investment. Without such coordination, government programmes remain fragmented. Fragmentation allows established economic interests to navigate individual policies while the broader transformation project loses coherence.

The relationship between state expenditure and private capital also reveals the limitations of simplistic ideological categories. Public expenditure can stimulate private accumulation through infrastructure, procurement, subsidies and social programmes. Roads create markets for private businesses. Electricity enables factories to operate. Education creates skilled labour. Public health sustains the workforce. Social grants support household consumption, which sustains retailers and producers. Therefore the state is not simply a competitor to capitalism. It is one of the conditions under which capitalism operates. The crucial question is who captures the benefits generated by public expenditure. If public infrastructure primarily enables concentrated corporations to expand while small enterprises remain excluded, public expenditure may unintentionally reinforce existing concentration. If infrastructure is designed to support dispersed productive activity, it can democratise economic opportunity. This is why the quality and distribution of public investment matter as much as its volume. Economic sovereignty is strengthened when public resources build capabilities that remain within the national economy. It is weakened when public expenditure becomes a mechanism for transferring wealth to private intermediaries without durable productive outcomes. The distinction between public investment and public consumption is therefore important. Consumption can alleviate poverty immediately, while investment can alter productive capacity over time. South Africa requires both, but a transformative strategy must ensure that social

protection does not become a substitute for industrial transformation. A democratic state cannot permanently redistribute poverty. It must expand the productive base from which prosperity is generated.

The energy sector provides perhaps the clearest demonstration of the relationship between public authority and private economic power. Electricity is an enabling infrastructure rather than an ordinary commodity. Every factory, hospital, mine, school, farm and household depends upon reliable energy. When electricity supply becomes unreliable, the entire economy suffers. Eskom's crisis therefore became more than a corporate or administrative problem. It became a question of national productive sovereignty. If the state cannot reliably provide or regulate the energy system, private businesses must seek alternative solutions. Wealthier firms can install private generation, while poorer households remain dependent on public infrastructure. This can deepen inequality because economic resilience becomes related to the ability to purchase alternatives. The energy transition further complicates the matter because South Africa must simultaneously secure electricity supply, reduce emissions, protect workers and develop new industries. The strategic opportunity lies in using the transition to create domestic manufacturing, renewable-energy capabilities, grid technology and green industrial value chains. The danger is becoming primarily a consumer of imported technology while exporting minerals needed for the global energy transition. Economic sovereignty therefore requires participation across the value chain. South Africa must ask not only whether it possesses renewable resources but whether it can manufacture components, develop technical expertise and capture intellectual property. Otherwise the energy transition may reproduce the old extractive pattern under a new technological label.

The same principle applies to telecommunications and the digital economy. Data, digital infrastructure, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and telecommunications networks increasingly constitute strategic economic assets. A country can possess political independence while depending heavily on foreign technology platforms for communication, data storage and digital services. The new frontier of sovereignty is therefore technological. Control over information infrastructure can influence economic productivity, national security and social organisation. South Africa possesses substantial technological capabilities, but global technology companies operate across borders and often possess enormous financial and intellectual-property resources. The state must therefore create policies that support domestic technological development without isolating the country from global innovation. Universities, public research institutions and private companies need to cooperate in building local capabilities. Public procurement can create markets for domestic technology firms. Intellectual-property policy can encourage innovation while avoiding excessive barriers to knowledge. Digital sovereignty does not mean refusing foreign platforms. It means possessing sufficient domestic capability to negotiate with them from a position of strength. The Pan-African implication is even larger. Individual African states may struggle to compete with global technology corporations, but regional integration could create larger markets and shared technological capabilities. Economic sovereignty in the twenty-first century therefore requires continental strategies as well as national strategies. South Africa's economic power gives it a responsibility to contribute to African technological independence rather than simply reproducing global dependency within the continent.

The question of financial sovereignty likewise extends beyond ownership of banks. A country may have domestically headquartered banks while the financial system remains deeply connected to global capital markets. South African banks possess substantial domestic capabilities and play a crucial role in financing households and businesses. Yet credit allocation itself is a form of

economic power. Banks decide which businesses receive loans, on what terms and for what purposes. Risk models can favour established companies over emerging enterprises. Collateral requirements can exclude entrepreneurs without inherited wealth. High financing costs can make industrial expansion difficult for smaller firms. Consequently, financial inclusion is not merely about access to bank accounts. It is about access to productive capital. A black entrepreneur may be formally free to establish a company but economically constrained if affordable finance is unavailable. This is where development finance institutions can play an important role. Their purpose should be to finance productive transformation where conventional commercial finance may perceive excessive risk. But development finance must itself be disciplined by rigorous governance. Poorly managed developmental lending can become another form of patronage. The objective should be to create commercially sustainable enterprises capable of repaying capital and expanding productive capacity. Financial sovereignty therefore requires a financial system capable of financing transformation. If domestic savings flow primarily into established assets rather than new productive enterprises, capital accumulation remains concentrated. The challenge is to redirect a meaningful portion of national savings toward industrial and entrepreneurial development.

Pension funds represent an especially important but often overlooked source of economic power. South Africans collectively possess enormous pools of retirement savings, meaning workers indirectly participate in ownership of financial assets. This creates a potential foundation for economic democracy. If pension capital were strategically invested in infrastructure, industrialisation, affordable housing, renewable energy and productive enterprises, workers could become major beneficiaries of national development. Yet pension funds must also protect beneficiaries' retirement security, meaning investment decisions cannot be reduced to political objectives. The challenge is to reconcile fiduciary responsibility with developmental investment. Properly structured, worker capital can support national development while generating long-term returns. Poorly structured, it can expose workers to political risk or unproductive projects. The principle of worker ownership therefore requires sophisticated financial governance rather than romantic rhetoric. Workers should not simply be told that they own the economy because their pension funds possess shares. They need transparent information about where their money is invested and how investment decisions are made. They also need institutional mechanisms to influence governance. This is one reason the expansion of worker share ownership deserves attention. The government has recognised worker ownership as an instrument for broadening economic participation and increasing control over time. The deeper opportunity is to transform workers from passive beneficiaries into informed economic citizens. Economic democracy becomes more meaningful when workers possess both ownership and voice.

The limits of economic transformation can also be observed in the relationship between wages and ownership. Labour policy can improve minimum wages, working conditions and collective bargaining without changing the ownership of enterprises. Such reforms are essential and can substantially improve workers' lives. But wages represent income from participation in production, while ownership determines who ultimately controls assets and receives residual profits. A society can therefore improve labour rights while retaining concentrated capital ownership. This is not an argument against labour reform. It is an argument for recognising that labour rights and capital ownership address different dimensions of economic power. The democratic state must protect workers while also creating pathways toward broader ownership. Employee share ownership schemes can potentially connect these dimensions. Cooperatives can create collective ownership structures. Community trusts can give local populations stakes in productive assets. Public investment funds can distribute national wealth more broadly. These mechanisms can complement

conventional private enterprise rather than replace it entirely. Their success depends upon transparency, financial literacy and strong governance. The goal should be to make ownership more widely distributed without destroying productive incentives. Economic sovereignty becomes deeper when workers and communities possess claims on the productive wealth of the country. A democracy in which citizens are politically equal but economically powerless remains structurally incomplete.

The question of foreign corporations should similarly avoid simplistic nationalism. Multinational corporations can bring technology, management skills, export networks and capital that domestic firms may not possess. Their presence can strengthen local industries when domestic linkages are developed. Yet multinational firms can also repatriate profits, source inputs internationally and make strategic decisions according to global corporate priorities. The policy challenge is therefore to maximise local developmental spillovers. Investment agreements, local-content rules, skills requirements, research partnerships and supplier-development programmes can help create these linkages. South Africa has already developed various transformation mechanisms that apply to domestic and foreign companies operating in the economy. The government has explicitly stated that empowerment laws apply to companies seeking to invest in and conduct business in South Africa, whether local or foreign. This illustrates an important principle: attracting foreign investment does not require abandoning national transformation objectives. Investment policy can instead define the conditions under which capital participates in the national economy. The state should therefore move from passive investment attraction to strategic investment negotiation. The question should not simply be “How much investment will you bring?” but “What capabilities will this investment build?” The strongest sovereign strategy is one in which foreign capital becomes integrated into domestic industrialisation rather than operating as an enclave. Investment should strengthen national productive capacity over time. Otherwise the country risks remaining dependent on external capital for sectors that should progressively develop domestic capabilities.

South Africa's trade structure also affects economic sovereignty because production is ultimately connected to external markets. Exports provide foreign exchange and support employment, while imports provide access to technologies, machinery and consumer goods. Complete economic self-sufficiency is neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. Modern economies depend upon international trade. The issue is the composition of trade. A country that exports high-value manufactured goods and imports raw materials possesses a different economic structure from one that exports raw materials and imports sophisticated manufactured products. The latter may remain trapped in a lower position within global value chains. South Africa's mineral wealth provides substantial export earnings, but long-term sovereignty requires moving deeper into processing and manufacturing. This is particularly important as demand for critical minerals rises because of global energy and technological transitions. If South Africa merely exports minerals required by foreign industries, the country may remain a supplier rather than an industrial power. If it develops processing, battery manufacturing, machinery, engineering and related technologies, the same resources can become foundations of industrial sovereignty. This is where Pan-African integration becomes strategically important. African countries collectively possess enormous mineral, agricultural and energy resources, but fragmented markets can weaken bargaining power. Regional industrial value chains could allow countries to specialise while retaining more value within Africa. South Africa, as the continent's most industrially developed economy, could play a leading role in constructing such value chains. Economic sovereignty should therefore increasingly be understood as African economic sovereignty rather than isolated national autarky.

The African Continental Free Trade Area creates a potential institutional framework for this wider conception of sovereignty. A larger African market can provide domestic firms with scale and reduce dependence on markets outside the continent. South Africa's industrial firms could expand into regional markets while neighbouring countries develop complementary production capabilities. Such integration could strengthen African bargaining power with multinational corporations and global investors. It could also reduce the vulnerability created by small national markets. However, integration will not automatically produce development. Larger markets can simply become larger markets for foreign corporations if African firms lack productive capacity. Regional integration must therefore be accompanied by industrial policy, infrastructure investment and local value addition. South Africa's own experience demonstrates that political integration without economic transformation has limits. The continent must avoid creating a free-trade regime in which African economies primarily compete to attract foreign capital while importing manufactured goods. The objective should be a continental productive system capable of manufacturing, processing and innovating. South Africa has an opportunity to become a major industrial anchor within that system. But doing so requires a national strategy that connects domestic transformation to continental development. Economic sovereignty therefore has a geographic dimension. The stronger Africa's internal productive networks become, the less vulnerable individual states become to external economic shocks. Pan-Africanism must consequently be expressed through factories, railways, power grids, financial institutions, digital infrastructure and industrial value chains, not only through political speeches.

The relationship between economic sovereignty and democracy ultimately turns on the distribution of decision-making power. Democracy is usually defined through elections, representation, rights and accountability. But citizens spend most of their lives inside economic institutions: workplaces, banks, markets, schools, farms, corporations and communities. If these institutions are governed by highly concentrated forms of private power, democratic citizenship can become incomplete in everyday life. A worker may vote for a government but possess no voice over the strategic decisions of the company where that worker spends most of the day. A consumer may have legal rights but little bargaining power against concentrated suppliers. A small farmer may possess land but depend upon a handful of buyers. A small entrepreneur may be formally free to compete but face dominant distribution systems. Economic democracy therefore requires attention to these institutional relationships. The question is not whether private property should exist but how private power should be constrained and democratised. Competition policy is one instrument. Labour rights are another. Cooperative ownership is another. Public investment and development finance are others. The state can therefore deepen democracy without nationalising the entire economy. But it must recognise economic power as a political issue. When economic concentration becomes excessive, the democratic state must intervene. The Competition Commission's continuing focus on concentration demonstrates that this is not merely an ideological argument but an institutional concern.

The distinction between government and nation becomes particularly important when examining state-owned assets. Government is an administrative instrument of the state, while the nation is the broader political community. When government owns an enterprise, citizens may benefit from it, but they do not necessarily exercise direct control over it. This distinction matters because political parties can temporarily control government while the underlying state belongs constitutionally to the people. A state-owned company therefore cannot be treated as the property of the governing party. Its resources must serve the public interest rather than party interests. This is where governance becomes central. Board appointments must be professional. Financial reporting must be

transparent. Parliamentary oversight must be effective. Procurement must be competitive. Workers must have rights. Communities must have mechanisms to raise concerns. Management must be judged by performance rather than political loyalty. Without these safeguards, public ownership can become politicised ownership. Such politicisation weakens rather than strengthens sovereignty. It also gives opponents of public ownership an argument that state enterprises are inherently inefficient, when the real problem may be governance. The proper response is therefore institutional reform rather than ideological abandonment. South Africa needs public enterprises capable of performing strategic functions while remaining accountable to citizens. Public ownership should be understood as a public trust. It is not a political prize.

The same principle applies to the relationship between the ANC and the state. A liberation movement may have created the democratic state, but the state cannot permanently belong to the liberation party. Constitutional democracy requires that government institutions serve the whole population. This separation is essential for economic sovereignty because public resources must not become instruments of partisan accumulation. When party and state become excessively intertwined, economic transformation can become vulnerable to patronage. Businesses may seek political connections rather than competitive advantage. Public contracts may become rewards. State appointments may become instruments of factional influence. Such practices do not strengthen the black majority; they undermine the legitimacy of transformation. They also allow private capital to exploit political divisions. The strongest economic transformation therefore requires a professional state capable of enforcing rules impartially. The ANC's historical legitimacy gives it a special responsibility to prevent the liberation state from becoming a patronage state. The objective of liberation was not simply to replace one elite with another. It was to establish democratic citizenship and social justice. Economic sovereignty must therefore be measured by the empowerment of the broad population rather than by the enrichment of politically connected individuals. A black elite that remains dependent upon state patronage does not constitute full economic emancipation. The ultimate test is whether ordinary citizens possess greater productive capacity, ownership and bargaining power.

South Africa's experience with B-BBEE is therefore best understood as an unfinished transformation project rather than a failed concept. The policy emerged because apartheid had deliberately restricted black ownership and economic participation. Government sought to address this through ownership, management, skills, procurement and enterprise-development measures. The legislative framework has evolved over time, and government continues to describe economic transformation as a central objective. Yet the persistence of inequality demonstrates that policy instruments have not fully transformed the structure of wealth. The problem is partly one of scale and partly one of implementation. A policy may create individual ownership transactions without creating broad productive ownership. It may improve representation in corporate management without transferring strategic control. It may generate procurement opportunities without creating durable industrial capacity. It may produce empowerment scores without fundamentally changing value chains. The next phase of transformation therefore requires deeper attention to productive ownership. South Africa needs more factories owned by black entrepreneurs, more technologically capable black enterprises, more worker-owned productive assets, more community investment vehicles and more locally controlled intellectual property. These forms of ownership are more difficult to create than share transactions, but they have greater developmental significance. The transformation agenda should therefore shift from compliance to capability. Companies should not simply ask how to obtain an empowerment rating. They should ask how to contribute to a genuinely

transformed productive economy. Government should likewise measure success by changes in productive capacity rather than administrative compliance alone.

Economic concentration makes this transformation urgent because concentrated markets can reproduce inequality even when formal barriers have been removed. If established companies control distribution, finance, technology and supply chains, new entrants face structural disadvantages. A black-owned company may legally compete but encounter practical barriers that established firms do not face. This is why competition policy and transformation policy should be integrated. Breaking down concentration can create space for new black-owned firms. Transformation can broaden ownership within markets. Industrial policy can help new entrants achieve scale. Development finance can provide capital. Procurement can provide demand. Skills policy can provide human capacity. These instruments reinforce one another. Treating them separately produces fragmented results. The Competition Commission's concentration reports are therefore relevant to the wider transformation debate because market concentration affects who can enter and who can survive. The objective should not be to punish successful companies merely because they are large. Large firms can be productive and globally competitive. The objective should be to prevent size from becoming an insurmountable barrier to competition. A sovereign economy needs strong companies, but it also needs pathways for new companies to emerge. Economic dynamism requires both incumbents and challengers. Without challengers, concentration hardens into structural power.

The question of economic sovereignty must also account for inequality between regions. South Africa's economy is geographically uneven, with major concentrations of industry, finance and infrastructure in particular metropolitan areas. Rural communities can remain distant from high-value economic networks even when they possess natural resources or agricultural potential. This creates another form of economic dependence. Communities may live near mines but receive limited value from downstream processing. Rural producers may grow agricultural commodities while major profits accrue elsewhere in the value chain. Urban townships may contain entrepreneurial energy but lack infrastructure and finance. Economic sovereignty therefore requires territorial transformation. Productive capacity must be distributed more broadly across the country. Industrial parks, logistics infrastructure, digital connectivity, agricultural processing and local financial institutions can help connect historically marginalised areas to national markets. This is not merely a regional development issue. It is a question of national cohesion. A society in which productive wealth remains concentrated in a few economic centres can sustain political frustration even when formal citizenship is equal. Inclusive development therefore requires connecting people to productive systems. The state has an important role because private capital may naturally concentrate where infrastructure, markets and skills already exist. Public investment can alter these incentives. The goal should be to create new economic centres rather than simply subsidise existing ones. This is another way in which public authority can reshape private economic geography without directly owning every enterprise.

The sovereignty question becomes even more complicated when one considers intellectual property. In the modern economy, ownership of technology can be more valuable than ownership of physical machinery. Patents, software, brands, data and research capabilities can determine who captures value from production. South Africa possesses universities, research institutions and technological companies, but much high-value intellectual property globally remains concentrated in multinational corporations and advanced economies. A country may mine minerals, manufacture components and employ workers while foreign companies retain control over the most valuable

technologies. This produces a form of technological dependency. Economic sovereignty therefore requires investment in research and development, scientific education and domestic innovation. Universities must be connected more closely to industry. Public research funding must produce commercial and social applications. Intellectual property created through public money should generate public value. Young African scientists and engineers must have opportunities to build companies rather than being compelled to export their skills. The digital and green transitions create opportunities for South Africa to develop new capabilities. If these opportunities are missed, the country may once again find itself supplying raw materials to foreign industries while importing high-value technologies. That would reproduce the historical pattern in a new form. The struggle for economic sovereignty has therefore moved from land and mines into laboratories, server farms and intellectual property portfolios. The next phase of liberation must include technological emancipation.

Education is therefore not separate from economic sovereignty. A country cannot control complex productive systems without the human capabilities required to design, operate and improve them. Engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, managers, artisans, researchers and technicians are forms of national productive capital. South Africa has made substantial progress in expanding access to education, but persistent inequalities in educational quality affect the distribution of economic opportunity. A developmental state requires a skills system aligned with industrial strategy. Universities should not be treated simply as institutions that produce degrees. They should become centres of research, innovation and national problem-solving. Technical and vocational education should receive strategic attention because industrialisation requires technicians and artisans as much as academics. Businesses should participate in skills development while government coordinates national priorities. The ultimate objective is to create an economy capable of absorbing and rewarding skilled citizens. Otherwise education can become disconnected from production, leading to unemployment among graduates and skills shortages within industries. Economic sovereignty requires a productive relationship between knowledge and industry. A nation that imports expertise for every strategic project remains dependent even if it owns the physical assets. South Africa therefore needs to build the intellectual infrastructure of sovereignty alongside its physical infrastructure. Universities, public laboratories and industrial firms must become components of a national innovation system.

The role of government in this process should not be confused with command over every economic decision. A democratic developmental state should set strategic direction while allowing entrepreneurs, workers and communities to participate in implementation. The private sector can provide innovation and efficiency. Cooperatives can provide collective ownership. State enterprises can provide strategic infrastructure. Development finance can support emerging industries. Universities can provide knowledge. Civil society can provide accountability. The objective is therefore a pluralistic economic system organised around national developmental goals. This model is more sophisticated than either laissez-faire capitalism or comprehensive state socialism. It recognises that different forms of ownership can coexist while serving a common developmental purpose. The state becomes the coordinator of the economic ecosystem rather than the sole producer. Such coordination requires long-term policy certainty. Businesses need predictable rules. Workers need secure rights. Investors need confidence. Communities need participation. Government needs credible institutions. The absence of any one of these can weaken the whole system. Economic sovereignty therefore emerges from institutional coordination. It is not produced by a single law or ownership transaction. It is built over decades through consistent investment in

national capabilities. South Africa has many of the institutions required for this project. The unresolved question is whether they can be aligned around a coherent transformation strategy.

The democratic state also has to manage the tension between economic efficiency and social justice. Markets can allocate resources efficiently under certain conditions, but they do not automatically distribute wealth fairly. Historical inequalities can persist through market mechanisms even after discriminatory laws disappear. A purely market-based transformation strategy may therefore reproduce inherited advantages. At the same time, excessive state intervention can reduce efficiency and discourage investment. The challenge is to design institutions that combine dynamism with redistribution. Progressive taxation, social protection, competition policy, labour rights, development finance and industrial policy can contribute to this balance. The question is whether these instruments collectively alter the productive structure. If redistribution remains primarily fiscal while ownership remains concentrated, inequality may persist across generations. If ownership becomes broader but productivity collapses, the economy may lose the resources needed to sustain social programmes. Transformation must therefore increase both inclusion and productivity. The strongest argument for economic sovereignty is not simply that South Africans should own more. It is that South Africans should collectively possess greater capacity to produce, innovate, invest and compete. Ownership without productivity is fragile. Productivity without inclusion reproduces inequality. Sovereignty requires both.

The experience of foreign investment demonstrates why this balance is difficult. South Africa needs external capital because domestic savings and public resources alone cannot finance every infrastructure and industrial requirement. Yet dependence on external capital can constrain policy autonomy. The South African Reserve Bank's recent flow-of-funds data show that foreign capital movements remain substantial and volatile, with non-resident investment patterns shifting across shares, bonds, loans and other assets. This volatility is not evidence that foreigners control the country. It is evidence that South Africa participates in a global financial system in which international capital can move rapidly. The strategic response should therefore be resilience rather than isolation. Domestic savings must be deepened. Export capacity must be strengthened. Fiscal institutions must remain credible. Strategic reserves must be maintained. Local financial markets must support productive investment. The country must also diversify its international economic relationships. Economic sovereignty grows when no single external source of capital, technology or markets becomes indispensable. Diversification is therefore a sovereignty strategy. South Africa should engage Europe, Asia, the Americas and other African economies while strengthening domestic and continental capabilities. The objective is not economic nationalism for its own sake. It is strategic autonomy within interdependence.

The question of who actually exercises power therefore produces a layered answer. The democratic state exercises legal and political authority over the country. Parliament makes laws. Courts interpret them. Government regulates markets and collects taxes. The Reserve Bank influences monetary conditions. Public enterprises control certain strategic infrastructure. Private corporations control large portions of productive activity. Financial institutions allocate capital. Institutional investors influence corporate ownership. Foreign investors participate in domestic asset markets. Workers exercise collective bargaining power. Consumers influence markets through purchasing decisions. Communities exercise political and social pressure. None of these actors possesses complete sovereignty. Power is distributed across institutions, although it is distributed unequally. The mistake is to search for one hidden owner of South Africa when the real structure is a network of overlapping forms of power. Nevertheless, some forms of power are more structurally

consequential than others. Ownership of productive assets, control of finance, technological capability and market concentration can create enduring influence. Political office can change every few years, while capital structures can persist for generations. This difference between political time and economic time is crucial. Governments are temporary; assets can be permanent. Ministers can be replaced; ownership structures can remain. Electoral cycles can change policy priorities; corporate investment strategies can operate over decades. Economic sovereignty therefore requires institutions capable of shaping long-term capital structures rather than merely managing annual budgets.

This difference between political time and economic time explains one of the central weaknesses of post-apartheid transformation. Democratic governments operate under electoral pressures, while economic restructuring often requires decades. Politicians are expected to produce visible results within a few years, whereas industrial capacity may take ten or twenty years to develop. This creates incentives for short-term programmes, symbolic empowerment transactions and politically visible projects. Deep structural transformation is less immediately visible. Building a globally competitive manufacturing industry requires patient finance, skills development, infrastructure and technological investment. Creating a new black industrial class requires generational capital accumulation. Reforming spatial inequality requires long-term urban planning. Transforming agricultural value chains requires sustained investment. Political leadership therefore needs a longer conception of time than electoral cycles provide. National economic strategies should be protected by institutions capable of maintaining continuity across administrations. This does not mean removing economic policy from democracy. It means building broad national agreements around strategic priorities. South Africa's economic sovereignty cannot depend upon whichever faction happens to dominate a political party at a particular moment. It must rest upon durable institutions. The country needs a national developmental consensus that survives changes in government. Such a consensus should define strategic sectors, investment priorities, infrastructure goals and ownership objectives. Without continuity, private capital may become more influential because businesses can plan longer than governments.

The Pan-African dimension of South Africa's economic sovereignty is unavoidable because capital itself is increasingly transnational. South African corporations operate across the continent, while foreign companies operate across South Africa. Financial markets connect Johannesburg with London, New York, Hong Kong and other global centres. Supply chains connect African mineral producers to Asian and European manufacturers. No African country can achieve complete economic independence by isolating itself. The objective must instead be collective bargaining power. Regional integration can allow African states to negotiate investment conditions from a stronger position. Shared infrastructure can reduce costs. Regional industrialisation can create specialised value chains. African financial institutions can mobilise capital for African development. Continental technological cooperation can reduce dependence on imported expertise. South Africa's industrial capacity gives it both opportunities and responsibilities within this process. It can become an anchor for regional industrialisation or remain primarily a gateway through which global capital accesses African markets. The choice is political. A Pan-African economic strategy would encourage South African firms to build continental value chains while supporting industrial development in neighbouring countries. It would treat Africa as a productive home rather than simply an export destination. Economic sovereignty must therefore be understood as the progressive strengthening of African productive power.

The historical meaning of liberation also changes when viewed through this economic lens. Liberation from apartheid achieved the right to vote, equality before the law and constitutional citizenship. But liberation also carried expectations of dignity, land, employment, economic opportunity and control over national resources. The persistence of economic concentration therefore creates a gap between formal liberation and material emancipation. That gap does not negate the achievements of democracy. It identifies the next historical task. The danger is that disappointment with economic outcomes can lead citizens to conclude that political democracy itself has failed. Such a conclusion would be historically mistaken. Democracy created the institutional conditions within which economic transformation can be pursued. The challenge is to use those institutions more effectively. South Africa does not need less democracy to achieve economic sovereignty. It needs deeper democracy, including economic participation. Parliament must scrutinise economic policy. Communities must participate in development decisions. Workers must possess stronger ownership mechanisms. Competition authorities must remain independent. Public enterprises must be accountable. Private corporations must operate under transparent rules. This is the democratic route to economic transformation. The alternative of authoritarian economic command risks replacing one form of concentrated power with another. Liberation should therefore be understood as a continuing process rather than a single historical event. Political liberation was the foundation. Economic emancipation remains an unfinished project.

The most serious criticism of post-apartheid economic policy is therefore not that the ANC failed to nationalise everything. That would be an inadequate measure of revolutionary success. The more serious criticism is that the democratic state did not sufficiently develop the mechanisms necessary to transform concentrated economic power into broad-based productive ownership. The issue is not the existence of private capital but the persistence of structural asymmetry. The state regulates a capitalist economy whose largest productive resources are not directly controlled by democratic institutions. This creates a permanent negotiation between public authority and private power. Where government possesses strong institutions, it can discipline markets and direct investment. Where institutions are weak, private actors gain greater structural influence. Where black ownership expands productively, transformation deepens. Where empowerment becomes symbolic or politically concentrated, transformation stalls. Where public enterprises are competent, state ownership strengthens sovereignty. Where they are captured or inefficient, public ownership becomes a liability. Where foreign investment builds domestic capability, global integration strengthens sovereignty. Where it merely extracts value, dependency deepens. These distinctions provide a more rigorous framework for judging the post-apartheid economy. They move the debate beyond slogans toward institutional analysis. The central question becomes not “state or market?” but “who controls the strategic conditions under which markets operate?”

Economic sovereignty therefore requires a hierarchy of strategic priorities. Energy security must be treated as national productive infrastructure. Transport and logistics must support industrialisation. Mineral resources must feed domestic value chains. Agriculture must generate food security and agro-processing. Finance must support productive investment. Technology must generate domestic intellectual property. Public procurement must support competitive local enterprise. Education must produce the capabilities required by industrial strategy. Competition policy must prevent entrenched market power from excluding new entrants. Land reform must create productive ownership rather than merely transfer titles. Worker ownership must deepen participation in capital. Foreign investment must be negotiated according to developmental outcomes. State-owned enterprises must be governed as public trusts. These priorities are mutually reinforcing. Failure in one area can undermine progress elsewhere. A factory cannot operate without electricity. A farmer cannot reach

markets without logistics. An entrepreneur cannot expand without finance. A technology company cannot innovate without skills. A mineral producer cannot achieve national developmental impact without downstream industry. Sovereignty is therefore an ecosystem. The state must coordinate that ecosystem without suffocating private initiative. The objective is a productive economy in which citizens possess increasing control over the sources of national wealth. That is the practical meaning of economic emancipation.

The deepest lesson of South Africa's post-apartheid political economy is that sovereignty has layers. There is territorial sovereignty, constitutional sovereignty, political sovereignty, fiscal sovereignty, monetary sovereignty, technological sovereignty, productive sovereignty and social sovereignty. South Africa possesses these in varying degrees. Its constitutional sovereignty is strong. Its democratic legitimacy is substantial. Its institutional capacity is significant but uneven. Its productive economy is sophisticated but concentrated. Its financial system is advanced but globally integrated. Its natural-resource base is substantial but incompletely transformed into downstream value. Its technological capabilities are promising but uneven. Its ownership structure has changed but remains highly unequal. The country therefore cannot honestly be described either as fully economically sovereign or as economically controlled by foreign and private actors. Both statements would oversimplify reality. The more accurate description is that South Africa possesses substantial political sovereignty alongside incomplete economic sovereignty. The democratic state can make and enforce laws, but it cannot command every productive decision. It can regulate capital, but it cannot eliminate the economic consequences of capital movement. It can own strategic enterprises, but public ownership does not guarantee effective control. It can demand transformation, but transformation depends upon institutional capacity. It can attract foreign investment, but investment creates both opportunity and dependency. The national project is therefore unfinished.

Who, then, owns South Africa? The legal answer is fragmented across millions of citizens, companies, trusts, pension funds, institutional investors, public entities and international investors. The political answer is that sovereignty rests constitutionally with the people. The economic answer is more difficult. Productive ownership remains concentrated across significant sectors, while the state retains ownership of strategically important infrastructure and enterprises. Institutional investors and financial markets mediate substantial portions of corporate ownership. Foreign capital participates extensively in domestic financial and productive assets. Black ownership has expanded through B-BBEE and other transformation measures, but government itself continues to acknowledge that much more transformation is required. The result is a hybrid political economy in which no single actor owns the country in its entirety. Yet the distribution of economic power remains unequal enough to influence national choices. The decisive issue is therefore not whether private capital exists but whether private capital can be democratically subordinated to national developmental priorities. If it can, private ownership becomes compatible with sovereignty. If it cannot, concentrated private power becomes a structural limitation on democracy. This is the question that must govern the next phase of South Africa's economic debate.

The difference between government ownership and national ownership ultimately demands a new vocabulary of transformation. Government ownership means that an asset belongs to a public institution. National ownership means that the productive benefits and strategic decisions associated with that asset serve the broader national community. These concepts can overlap, but they are not identical. A poorly governed state company can belong legally to the government while producing little public value. A well-regulated private company can contribute significantly to national

development while remaining privately owned. A worker-owned enterprise can combine private property with collective economic democracy. A community trust can combine local ownership with commercial production. A pension fund can give millions of citizens indirect claims over productive assets. The future of economic transformation should therefore explore multiple ownership forms rather than becoming trapped in the state-versus-private binary. South Africa's historical conditions require experimentation. Cooperative ownership, employee ownership, public investment funds, community trusts, black industrial enterprises and strategic state participation can coexist. The objective should be to maximise productive capacity and broaden control. The more diverse and distributed ownership becomes, the less vulnerable the economy becomes to any single concentration of power. Economic sovereignty is therefore not necessarily a return to centralised state ownership. It may instead require a democratisation of ownership across society.

The relationship between corporations and government must consequently be governed by a principle of reciprocal accountability. Government must be accountable to citizens for the rules it establishes, while corporations must be accountable to society for the consequences of their economic power. Companies are not governments, but their decisions can have public consequences. When a corporation controls essential infrastructure, dominates a market or employs a large workforce, its strategic choices affect national welfare. This does not mean corporations should become political institutions. It means the state must ensure that corporate power operates within democratically determined rules. Competition law, labour law, environmental regulation, taxation and consumer protection are mechanisms through which society exercises this accountability. At the same time, government must respect property rights, contractual obligations and legitimate commercial activity. Economic sovereignty cannot become arbitrary state intervention. Predictability is itself an economic asset. The most powerful developmental states combine strong regulation with credible rules. Investors can accept demanding regulations when those regulations are transparent and stable. Businesses can plan when government policy is coherent. Workers can invest in skills when employment institutions are credible. Communities can participate when development processes are transparent. Sovereignty is therefore strengthened by institutional predictability rather than weakened by it.

The financial markets similarly require a democratic balance between independence and accountability. The independence of the Reserve Bank protects monetary policy from short-term political manipulation, but monetary institutions still operate within a constitutional order and must communicate their decisions to society. Fiscal authorities must maintain debt sustainability, but fiscal policy must also address inequality and development. Competition authorities must restrain market concentration, but they must also understand the need for firms to achieve scale. Development agencies must finance transformation, but they must protect public resources. These institutional balances are difficult precisely because economic policy involves competing objectives. There is no single instrument capable of simultaneously achieving growth, stability, employment, redistribution and transformation. Economic sovereignty therefore depends upon coordination among institutions. The democratic state must develop a coherent policy architecture in which each institution contributes to a common developmental purpose. This requires leadership capable of seeing beyond departmental boundaries. It also requires transparent measurement of outcomes. South Africa should know not only how much it spends but what ownership structures, industrial capabilities and technological assets result from that expenditure. Transformation must become measurable in terms of productive capacity. Without measurement, rhetoric can substitute for results.

The question of foreign direct investment should likewise be incorporated into this broader framework. South Africa should welcome investment that strengthens productive capacity while negotiating conditions that maximise domestic benefits. UN Trade and Development's recent work demonstrates that global investment patterns are increasingly concentrated and that headline FDI figures can obscure the weakness of underlying productive investment. This should encourage South Africa to become more selective rather than less open. The country should compete for investment that brings advanced technology, manufacturing capacity, research, export opportunities and skills. It should also seek to develop domestic firms capable of becoming investors themselves. Outward investment by South African companies can strengthen continental integration and create regional value chains. A sovereign economy should therefore be both an attractive destination for capital and an exporter of capital, technology and expertise. Dependence becomes weaker when domestic firms become multinational themselves. South Africa already possesses companies with significant continental and international operations. The strategic question is how those firms can contribute to African industrialisation rather than simply pursuing financial expansion. Capital should circulate within the continent in ways that build productive capacity. This is one of the areas where South Africa can turn economic strength into Pan-African leadership.

The limits of nationalisation therefore become clearer when economic sovereignty is defined in terms of capabilities rather than legal ownership. Nationalising a bank does not automatically create credit for small businesses. Nationalising a mine does not automatically create beneficiation. Nationalising a railway does not automatically create efficient logistics. Nationalising a power utility does not automatically create reliable electricity. Nationalising a technology company does not automatically create innovation. Ownership can provide the state with strategic leverage, but leverage is valuable only when institutions can use it effectively. The correct question is therefore what ownership structure best achieves the national objective in each strategic sector. Some sectors may justify public ownership because they involve natural monopolies or essential infrastructure. Others may benefit from regulated private competition. Some may require public-private partnerships. Others may need worker or community ownership. The answer should be sector-specific and evidence-based. Ideological uniformity is less useful than strategic flexibility. South Africa should possess the freedom to choose among ownership models according to developmental needs. That freedom itself is a form of sovereignty. A government that believes it must either privatise everything or nationalise everything has already limited its strategic choices. Economic sovereignty requires a wider policy imagination.

The final question is whether a democratic government can exercise full national sovereignty when strategic productive assets remain overwhelmingly controlled by private actors. The answer must be qualified. It can exercise substantial political sovereignty, regulatory sovereignty and fiscal authority without owning most productive assets. It can shape economic behaviour through law, taxation, competition policy, industrial strategy and public investment. But its capacity to exercise complete economic sovereignty is necessarily limited if critical productive capabilities are highly concentrated outside democratic institutions. This does not mean that private ownership is inherently incompatible with democracy. It means that democracy requires mechanisms capable of preventing private economic power from becoming politically unaccountable. The stronger those mechanisms are, the more compatible private capital becomes with national sovereignty. The weaker they are, the more economic concentration can constrain political choice. South Africa therefore stands at an important historical crossroads. The first phase of liberation established democratic political sovereignty. The next phase must deepen productive and economic sovereignty. That does not require destroying private enterprise. It requires transforming the balance

of power between capital, labour, communities and the state. It requires broadening ownership, breaking excessive concentration, strengthening public institutions, developing technology, expanding industrial capacity and using natural resources for national and continental development. It requires a state strong enough to regulate capital without becoming corrupt, and a private sector dynamic enough to invest without becoming politically dominant. The unfinished question of South Africa's liberation is therefore not simply who governs the state. It is who controls the conditions under which wealth is produced, accumulated and distributed. Until that question is answered through institutions that give the majority meaningful economic power, political sovereignty will remain substantial but economic sovereignty incomplete.

Chapter Four

The Privatisation of Power

The question of privatisation in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be reduced to the technical question of whether a particular state-owned enterprise was sold, partially sold, corporatised, outsourced, or opened to private competition. Privatisation must be understood more broadly as a transformation in the location of economic decision-making power. When strategic functions previously performed directly by the state are transferred to private corporations, financial institutions, concessionaires, contractors, or market-based systems, the formal authority of government may remain intact while its practical capacity to determine national economic outcomes may diminish. This distinction is central to understanding the political economy of post-apartheid South Africa. The democratic state inherited an economy in which ownership was already highly concentrated because apartheid had produced racialised patterns of property ownership, corporate control, finance, landholding, industrial capacity, and access to capital. The democratic transition

therefore confronted two separate but interconnected problems. It had to democratise political authority while simultaneously transforming an economic structure that had been designed to exclude the black majority from meaningful ownership. The ANC entered government with a historical mandate to address both dimensions of power. Yet political democratisation did not automatically produce economic democratisation. Indeed, one of the central paradoxes of the post-apartheid settlement is that the state acquired universal political legitimacy while much of the commanding structure of the economy remained privately concentrated. Privatisation therefore became significant not simply because of individual transactions but because of what it revealed about the relationship between political sovereignty and economic power. The deeper question is who possesses the capacity to make decisions that millions of citizens must ultimately live with. If electricity prices, telecommunications access, transport costs, mineral extraction, financial credit, logistics infrastructure, and investment decisions are determined substantially outside democratic institutions, then political citizenship may coexist with significant economic dependency. The purpose of this chapter is therefore not to condemn private enterprise as such. It is to investigate the conditions under which private economic power becomes sufficiently concentrated to influence public policy, constrain government choices, and reproduce historical inequalities. It is also to examine the mechanisms through which a democratic state can discipline private capital without destroying entrepreneurship, investment, competition, or productive efficiency. The fundamental issue is consequently not public ownership versus private ownership in simplistic terms. It is the democratic control of strategic economic power in a society attempting to overcome a deeply unequal historical inheritance.

The first conceptual distinction must therefore be between privatisation and private enterprise. A democratic society cannot reasonably treat every private company as a threat to public sovereignty. Private businesses create employment, mobilise capital, develop technologies, provide services, innovate, compete, and often perform functions more efficiently than bureaucratic institutions. African economic transformation requires productive private enterprise just as much as it requires capable public institutions. The problem emerges when private ownership becomes concentrated enough to produce structural power rather than merely entrepreneurial freedom. A small business selling goods in a competitive market possesses economic agency, but it does not necessarily possess the ability to determine national policy. A corporation controlling a strategically indispensable network, however, may exercise a fundamentally different kind of influence. It may possess bargaining power over regulators, suppliers, workers, consumers, municipalities, and even the national government. This is particularly important in sectors characterised by natural monopolies, network effects, high barriers to entry, scarce infrastructure, or substantial capital requirements. Electricity transmission, ports, railways, telecommunications networks, financial clearing systems, and mineral infrastructure can create forms of dependence that ordinary consumer markets do not. Where citizens cannot realistically choose an alternative provider, the relationship between company and citizen begins to acquire a quasi-public character. The corporation may remain legally private while performing a function with enormous public consequences. The democratic question then becomes whether legal ownership adequately captures political accountability. It does not. Ownership is only one dimension of power. Regulation, licensing, procurement, financing, infrastructure access, information, market concentration, technological control, and control over investment decisions are equally important. A government may therefore own an enterprise but exercise weak control over it, or it may regulate a privately owned enterprise effectively enough to secure public objectives. Conversely, a state may formally regulate private capital while lacking the institutional capacity to enforce its own rules. The real measure of economic sovereignty must therefore be the state's capacity to shape outcomes in the public interest.

This requires moving beyond ideological arguments that treat either state ownership or private ownership as automatically virtuous. South Africa's historical circumstances demand a more sophisticated political economy. The relevant question is whether ownership and institutional arrangements advance democratic development, social equality, productive transformation, and national sovereignty.

The apartheid economy provides the historical foundation without which contemporary privatisation cannot be understood. South Africa entered democracy with one of the most concentrated capitalist structures on the African continent. Large conglomerates controlled significant portions of mining, finance, manufacturing, energy, communications, retail, and industrial infrastructure. These concentrations were not accidental outcomes of neutral market competition. They developed within a political order that systematically restricted black participation in property ownership, skilled employment, urban residence, capital accumulation, and industrial decision-making. The economic architecture of apartheid therefore produced both racial exclusion and corporate concentration. The post-1994 government inherited this structure rather than constructing an entirely new economy from the ground up. The democratic state had limited fiscal resources, immense social obligations, and the urgent responsibility of integrating millions of previously excluded citizens into a modern economy. It also confronted global financial markets and international institutions that rewarded macroeconomic stability, investor confidence, fiscal discipline, and market-oriented reform. This environment influenced the choices made by successive governments. The transition therefore involved a complicated negotiation between political transformation and economic continuity. The state sought to expand black participation through policies such as Black Economic Empowerment, affirmative action, public procurement, social grants, infrastructure investment, and developmental programmes. Yet many of these mechanisms operated within an economic system whose underlying ownership structures remained substantially concentrated. The result was a form of transformation that could redistribute opportunities without completely restructuring the commanding heights of production. Some black entrepreneurs entered corporate ownership, but broad-based mass ownership remained limited. Some state enterprises expanded their developmental mandates, while others experienced managerial weaknesses and financial crises. Some private corporations adapted to the new constitutional order and participated in transformation initiatives, while retaining considerable structural influence. This produced an economy that was politically democratic but economically transitional. The central historical contradiction was therefore not simply that the ANC failed to transform the economy. Rather, transformation occurred unevenly across different layers of economic power. The state transformed labour law, constitutional rights, welfare provision, and political representation more profoundly than it transformed the distribution of productive assets. Privatisation must be interpreted within this uneven transformation.

The concept of economic sovereignty becomes particularly important at this point. Political sovereignty means that citizens collectively possess the constitutional authority to determine who governs and how public institutions operate. Economic sovereignty concerns the capacity of society and its institutions to determine the conditions under which resources are produced, distributed, invested, and utilised. These forms of sovereignty overlap but are not identical. A country can possess a highly developed democratic constitution while remaining deeply dependent upon foreign capital, multinational corporations, private financial markets, imported technologies, and externally controlled production networks. South Africa illustrates aspects of this contradiction. Its economy is sophisticated, diversified, industrialised, and deeply integrated into global markets. That integration provides enormous benefits, including investment, technological transfer, access to international

markets, and financial resources. Yet integration also creates vulnerabilities. When capital can move across borders more rapidly than citizens can influence economic policy, governments must negotiate with actors whose democratic accountability is indirect or nonexistent. International investors do not vote in South African elections, but their investment decisions can affect employment, currency stability, infrastructure development, and corporate expansion. Credit-rating agencies do not possess constitutional authority, yet their assessments can influence borrowing costs and fiscal policy. Multinational corporations do not constitute elected governments, yet their decisions about production locations can affect entire communities. The question is therefore not whether global capital should be rejected. South Africa cannot realistically isolate itself from the world economy. The question is how global integration can be managed without surrendering democratic capacity. Economic sovereignty should consequently be understood as strategic autonomy rather than economic isolation. It means possessing sufficient institutional, technological, financial, industrial, and regulatory capacity to negotiate with private and international capital from a position of strength. A state that cannot build infrastructure without private financing, generate electricity without private contractors, transport minerals without external logistics arrangements, or finance development without dependence upon private markets may retain legal sovereignty while possessing limited practical economic autonomy. The challenge for post-apartheid South Africa is therefore to construct institutions capable of governing markets rather than merely adapting themselves to market pressures.

Electricity provides one of the clearest examples of the relationship between public ownership and economic power. Eskom historically represented one of the most important instruments through which the South African state could influence industrial development, household welfare, and national infrastructure. Electricity was not merely a commodity. It was a foundation upon which mining, manufacturing, agriculture, telecommunications, hospitals, schools, municipalities, and households depended. The democratic state therefore inherited an institution with enormous strategic significance. Over time, however, Eskom's financial, managerial, technical, and governance difficulties weakened its ability to perform its developmental mandate effectively. The electricity crisis demonstrated that public ownership alone does not guarantee public control. A state-owned company can become operationally dysfunctional while remaining formally under state ownership. This distinction is crucial because it prevents the analysis from becoming an ideological defence of state corporations simply because they are state-owned. The real question is whether an institution is governed competently, transparently, sustainably, and in accordance with a clearly defined public mandate. The electricity crisis also created political pressure for greater private participation in generation and other parts of the energy system. Independent power producers became increasingly important in expanding generation capacity and introducing new investment. This development can be interpreted positively when it increases supply, diversifies energy sources, improves resilience, and reduces pressure on public finances. Yet it also creates a new governance challenge. If private participation expands in a strategic sector, the state must possess strong mechanisms for determining tariffs, ensuring grid access, enforcing service standards, managing procurement, and protecting vulnerable consumers. Otherwise, the public may experience a paradox in which government remains politically responsible for electricity but has diminishing direct control over the institutions producing it. The issue is therefore not whether private electricity generation is inherently undesirable. It is whether private participation occurs within a coherent national energy strategy. Strategic privatisation without strategic regulation can convert public dependence on a state monopoly into public dependence on a collection of private actors. The democratic objective should therefore be reliable, affordable, sustainable, and nationally coordinated energy rather than ownership ideology.

The telecommunications sector presents a different form of economic power because communications infrastructure increasingly determines access to citizenship itself. In the modern economy, telecommunications are not luxury services. They constitute infrastructure for education, banking, commerce, journalism, political participation, employment, public administration, and social interaction. Mobile networks and internet connectivity increasingly determine who can participate in the digital economy and who remains excluded from it. South Africa's telecommunications sector has produced significant innovation and competition, and private investment has contributed substantially to network expansion and technological development. Yet the sector also demonstrates how competition can coexist with structural concentration. Network infrastructure requires significant capital, spectrum access, technical expertise, and regulatory approval. These barriers can make entry difficult and allow established firms to acquire substantial market influence. The state therefore has an important role in ensuring that digital infrastructure does not become an instrument of exclusion. Spectrum allocation, competition policy, consumer protection, infrastructure sharing, rural connectivity, affordability, and universal service obligations are all instruments through which democratic government can shape the sector without owning every telecommunications company. The strategic question is whether the state treats telecommunications as ordinary consumer goods or as national infrastructure. If connectivity determines economic participation, then access to affordable communications becomes a developmental question. A rural citizen without reliable internet may be excluded from banking, online education, digital employment, government services, and political information. The digital divide therefore reproduces older forms of economic inequality through technologically modern mechanisms. Private ownership can coexist with public developmental objectives when regulation is strong and transparent. But when market concentration becomes excessive, the private control of communications infrastructure can translate into broader forms of social power. Democratic government must therefore maintain the capacity to regulate the digital economy in ways that protect competition while expanding universal access.

Transport and logistics reveal another dimension of privatised power because economic production depends upon the movement of goods. South Africa's railways, ports, roads, freight corridors, and logistics networks are fundamental to the country's mining, agricultural, manufacturing, retail, and export economies. The ability to move commodities from mines and farms to domestic and international markets can determine whether entire industries remain competitive. When logistics systems deteriorate, the consequences extend far beyond transportation companies. Mining production can be constrained, agricultural exports can be delayed, manufacturers can lose international contracts, and consumers can face higher prices. This means that logistics infrastructure possesses strategic characteristics similar to electricity and telecommunications. The state does not necessarily need to operate every truck, warehouse, terminal, or logistics company. However, it must maintain sufficient institutional capacity to coordinate the infrastructure upon which the national economy depends. The deterioration of public logistics capacity can generate pressure for greater private participation. Private operators may possess capital, technology, managerial expertise, and operational flexibility that public institutions lack. Such participation can therefore improve efficiency under appropriate conditions. Yet there is a danger when privatisation becomes a substitute for rebuilding state capacity. If government responds to institutional failure simply by transferring strategic functions to private actors, it may address immediate operational problems while deepening long-term dependency. The crucial issue is whether private participation supplements national capability or permanently replaces it. A developmental state should be capable of negotiating with private logistics firms because it possesses alternative institutional capacity. If the government has no credible alternative, private operators acquire bargaining power

disproportionate to their formal legal status. The challenge is consequently to combine public infrastructure ownership, competitive private participation, transparent concession arrangements, effective regulation, and long-term state capacity. Logistics sovereignty requires precisely this balance. A country that produces enormous quantities of minerals but cannot reliably transport them to international markets possesses resources without complete economic control.

Mining represents perhaps the most historically charged question in the South African political economy because mineral wealth lies at the centre of the country's colonial and apartheid development. Gold, diamonds, platinum-group metals, coal, iron ore, manganese, and other resources have generated immense wealth over generations. Yet the distribution of that wealth has been deeply unequal. Mining contributed to industrialisation while simultaneously producing racialised labour systems, migrant labour, environmental degradation, spatial inequality, and concentrated ownership. The democratic transition therefore confronted a fundamental question: who should ultimately benefit from the country's mineral endowment? The constitutional and legislative framework sought to establish that mineral resources are held for the benefit of the nation and administered through the state. This represented a significant transformation from older assumptions of private mineral entitlement. Yet the existence of public custodianship does not automatically produce broad economic ownership. Mining companies still possess substantial expertise, capital, technology, infrastructure, and market access. Government must therefore negotiate with corporate actors that can make investment decisions affecting employment, exports, tax revenues, communities, and regional development. The state can impose royalties, licensing conditions, environmental requirements, labour standards, social obligations, and transformation requirements. It can also use taxation and public investment to capture a portion of mineral rents. But regulation requires administrative competence and political consistency. Weak enforcement can allow private actors to exploit regulatory gaps. Excessive regulatory uncertainty can discourage investment and reduce productive capacity. The challenge is therefore to develop a mining regime that combines resource sovereignty with investment certainty and developmental obligations. Nationalisation is not the only mechanism through which society can exercise control over mineral wealth. Strategic taxation, public equity participation, beneficiation, local procurement, community ownership, industrial policy, environmental regulation, and sovereign investment mechanisms can all increase the developmental return from natural resources. The central question remains whether mineral wealth is converted into broad-based productive capability or continues to reproduce concentrated economic power.

The financial sector constitutes an even more subtle form of privatised power because finance controls the allocation of capital upon which virtually every other sector depends. Banks determine who receives loans, under what conditions, at what cost, and for what purposes. Institutional investors determine where substantial pools of capital are allocated. Pension funds, asset managers, insurers, and investment companies influence corporate ownership and long-term investment patterns. Financial markets therefore do not merely respond to economic activity. They help determine which economic activities are possible. In a society characterised by profound historical inequality, this function becomes politically significant. Large corporations often have superior access to finance because they possess established assets, credit histories, professional management, and collateral. Small enterprises and historically excluded entrepreneurs frequently face higher barriers. The result can be a self-reinforcing cycle in which established economic power generates easier access to capital, while new entrants remain constrained by limited financing. Economic transformation therefore requires more than changing corporate boardroom demographics. It requires changing the distribution of financial opportunity. Development finance institutions can

play an important role in this process, but they must themselves be well governed and financially sustainable. Public policy can also promote competition, responsible lending, small-business finance, industrial investment, and long-term productive capital. Yet the state must be careful not to politicise financial allocation in ways that create corruption or destroy institutional credibility. The goal should be developmental finance rather than politically connected finance. The distinction is essential. A democratic government should influence the direction of capital towards socially productive objectives while preserving professional standards and accountability. If finance becomes excessively concentrated, however, private financial institutions can acquire systemic power because government itself depends upon functioning financial markets. Economic sovereignty therefore requires a financial system capable of supporting productive transformation rather than simply rewarding established asset ownership.

The concentration of corporate power is another critical dimension of privatisation. South Africa's corporate history contains a pattern in which large conglomerates have exercised influence across multiple sectors through ownership networks, investment structures, subsidiaries, and institutional shareholding. Economic concentration can generate efficiencies, but it can also reduce competition and increase bargaining power over suppliers, workers, consumers, and government. The democratic problem is therefore not the existence of large corporations as such. Some industries require large-scale capital and integrated operations. The problem arises when corporate scale becomes a barrier to democratic economic participation. A company that controls a significant part of a market can influence prices, determine supplier conditions, shape investment decisions, and potentially affect public policy. Competition law is therefore an instrument of democratic governance, not merely a technical economic regulation. The purpose of competition policy is not simply to make markets more efficient. It is also to prevent private concentrations of power from becoming so extensive that they undermine economic pluralism. This is particularly important in a country where historical racial concentration of wealth remains unresolved. If market power is continuously inherited through existing ownership structures, then formal political equality can coexist with entrenched economic hierarchy. Transformation should therefore seek to broaden ownership without artificially eliminating productive scale. Employee ownership, community participation, cooperative enterprise, competitive procurement, support for small and medium businesses, and access to finance can help create a more plural economic structure. The democratic economy should contain multiple centres of productive power rather than a small number of dominant corporations. Economic pluralism is analogous to political pluralism. Just as democracy becomes fragile when one political organisation monopolises public authority, the economy becomes vulnerable when a small number of corporations monopolise strategic markets. Competition is therefore part of the architecture of democratic freedom.

The outsourcing of public functions presents another form of privatisation that is frequently overlooked because the state may retain formal ownership while transferring operational responsibility to private contractors. Governments routinely contract private firms for construction, information technology, maintenance, security, consulting, transport, health services, and infrastructure development. Such contracting can be entirely legitimate and sometimes highly desirable. The state does not need to possess every technical capability internally. Modern governments rely on specialised private expertise in many areas. The danger emerges when outsourcing becomes a mechanism through which the state gradually loses institutional memory and operational capacity. If government repeatedly contracts out functions that it once performed itself, it may eventually become dependent upon external suppliers even for basic administrative knowledge. This creates what might be called contractual dependency. The state remains the legal

authority but becomes practically dependent on the companies it regulates and purchases from. In extreme circumstances, public institutions may lack sufficient internal expertise to evaluate whether contractors are performing efficiently. They may also struggle to determine whether procurement prices are reasonable. This creates opportunities for inflated contracts, corruption, politically connected business networks, and waste. The phenomenon of state capture demonstrated how private economic interests can seek influence over public institutions through political relationships, procurement arrangements, and control of state resources. The lesson is not that contracting should be abolished. The lesson is that procurement is itself a site of power. Every government contract determines who receives public money, who gains market access, and who develops commercial capabilities. Procurement policy can therefore become a tool of industrial transformation or a mechanism for elite enrichment. A democratic state must maintain the technical capacity to design contracts, monitor performance, audit expenditure, enforce penalties, and terminate failing arrangements. Otherwise, privatisation through outsourcing can weaken sovereignty without appearing to do so.

Infrastructure financing further complicates the relationship between public and private power. Modern infrastructure requires enormous capital investment, and governments frequently face fiscal constraints. Public-private partnerships can therefore provide mechanisms for mobilising private capital for roads, energy projects, transport facilities, hospitals, water systems, and other infrastructure. Such arrangements can be useful when they allocate risk efficiently and provide measurable public benefits. But infrastructure contracts are rarely politically neutral. Long-term concessions can determine public costs for decades. Financing structures can create guaranteed payments to private investors regardless of whether projected demand materialises. User charges can affect the accessibility of essential services. The state must therefore evaluate infrastructure partnerships not merely according to whether they attract investment but according to the distribution of risk and reward. If private investors receive secure returns while the public absorbs most downside risks, the arrangement may amount to a privatisation of profit and a socialisation of loss. This problem is especially serious in infrastructure because citizens cannot easily avoid essential services. A person may choose not to purchase a particular consumer product, but cannot simply opt out of electricity transmission, roads, ports, water systems, or public transportation networks. The state therefore has a responsibility to negotiate contracts that preserve public interest over long periods. Transparency becomes essential because complex financial arrangements can conceal substantial future obligations. Parliamentary oversight, independent auditing, public disclosure, competitive bidding, and rigorous value-for-money analysis are necessary safeguards. Private finance should therefore be treated as an instrument rather than an ideology. The central question is whether private capital helps the state achieve developmental objectives or whether the state becomes a vehicle through which private capital secures predictable returns from public necessity. Economic sovereignty requires the ability to distinguish between these outcomes.

Land and property markets also demonstrate how economic power can remain outside direct democratic control even without conventional privatisation. South Africa's property structure was profoundly shaped by colonial conquest and apartheid legislation. Urban geography, commercial property ownership, agricultural landholding, and access to valuable locations continue to reflect historical inequalities. The democratic state can legislate around land rights, planning, taxation, housing, and development, but private property markets retain enormous influence over spatial outcomes. Property values determine where people can live, where businesses locate, and how municipalities collect revenue. Consequently, urban development can reproduce inequality even when political institutions are democratically elected. Wealthy communities can accumulate

infrastructure advantages, while poorer communities remain geographically distant from employment opportunities. The result is a spatial form of economic power. Privatisation in this context does not necessarily mean the sale of public land. It means that social development becomes mediated through private property values and private investment decisions. The state may build housing, roads, schools, and clinics, but private land markets determine much of the spatial terrain upon which these interventions occur. A transformative state therefore requires a sophisticated land and spatial policy. It must use planning, public land, infrastructure investment, taxation, housing policy, and development incentives to correct market-generated inequalities. Private property has legitimate functions in a democratic economy, but property rights cannot be understood independently from the social obligations embedded in constitutional democracy. The challenge is to protect legitimate ownership while preventing property markets from becoming instruments for permanently reproducing exclusion. Economic transformation therefore requires attention not only to who owns companies but also to who controls valuable space. Spatial inequality is ultimately an economic distribution of opportunity.

The Black Economic Empowerment project must also be evaluated within the broader question of privatised power. BEE represented an important recognition that political liberation without economic inclusion would remain incomplete. It sought to change ownership, management, procurement, skills development, and enterprise participation. It created opportunities for black South Africans to acquire stakes in corporations and participate in previously restricted economic spaces. Yet the results have been uneven. In some cases, empowerment facilitated genuine entrepreneurship and corporate transformation. In other cases, ownership deals benefited a relatively small group of politically connected individuals while leaving broader patterns of inequality intact. This criticism should not be used to dismiss empowerment itself. Rather, it demonstrates the danger of treating ownership transactions as the entire meaning of economic transformation. A democratic economy requires broad-based productive participation, not merely the transfer of shares to a narrow elite. If a few individuals become wealthy while millions remain excluded from capital ownership, the racial composition of elite wealth may change without fundamentally democratising economic power. Transformation must therefore extend into employee ownership, cooperative development, township enterprise, rural industrialisation, procurement reform, access to finance, technical education, and supply-chain participation. It must also address the ability of small businesses to survive and scale. The ultimate test of empowerment is whether it changes the productive capabilities of society. If empowerment creates new black intermediaries without creating new productive capacity, its developmental impact remains limited. The objective should not be to replace one narrow economic elite with another. It should be to build a broad property-owning and productive citizenry. This is the deeper meaning of economic democracy. Ownership should become more widely distributed, but ownership must also be connected to productive capability, accountability, and long-term investment.

The ANC's ideological trajectory is essential to understanding how the privatisation question evolved. The movement entered democratic government with a history shaped by the Freedom Charter, national liberation, mass mobilisation, and demands for social and economic transformation. The Freedom Charter's vision contained strong commitments to economic democracy and the idea that the country's resources should serve its people. Yet governing a complex modern economy required choices that could not be reduced to revolutionary declarations. The government faced capital flight risks, fiscal constraints, international pressure, declining infrastructure in some sectors, unemployment, poverty, and the demands of maintaining investor confidence. The adoption of macroeconomic strategies increasingly emphasised fiscal discipline,

monetary stability, market confidence, and private investment. These policies helped establish important forms of macroeconomic credibility, but they also narrowed the room for certain forms of state-led redistribution. The tension between political radicalism and economic pragmatism therefore became one of the defining contradictions of ANC governance. The movement did not simply abandon transformation. It pursued transformation through a mixed economy and a combination of social programmes, regulation, public ownership, affirmative policies, and market mechanisms. Yet the deeper ownership structure proved more resistant to change than political institutions. The ANC discovered that winning state power was easier than transforming the economic system inherited from apartheid. The state could legislate against discrimination relatively quickly. It could establish constitutional rights immediately. It could create social grants and expand public services. But restructuring ownership required confronting powerful economic interests and creating alternative capital institutions capable of replacing inherited concentrations. The political compromise was therefore partly structural. The ANC governed within a capitalist system that it did not fully control. This produced a continuing tension between revolutionary legitimacy and managerial government. Privatisation became one manifestation of this larger transformation of the liberation movement into a governing party.

The question of whether the ANC compromised its revolutionary project must therefore be approached historically rather than morally. Revolutionary movements frequently encounter dilemmas when they become governments. In opposition, they can define politics through transformative principles. In government, they must manage budgets, institutions, contracts, markets, infrastructure, international relations, and competing social demands. The ANC faced precisely this transformation. Its challenge was made more difficult by the inherited economic structure and the realities of global capitalism. The party could not simply order corporations to surrender productive assets without consequences for investment, employment, financial stability, and international relations. Yet the opposite extreme was equally problematic. If government accommodated existing economic power too extensively, political liberation could become disconnected from economic transformation. The resulting settlement would provide formal equality while leaving structural inequalities substantially intact. The most serious question is therefore not whether compromise occurred. Compromise was inevitable. The question is what was exchanged in the process and whether the state retained sufficient strategic capacity to pursue its developmental objectives. Political compromise can be legitimate when it preserves social stability while enabling gradual transformation. It becomes problematic when temporary concessions become permanent structural arrangements. The post-apartheid state needed time to build capacity, broaden ownership, and develop institutions. But three decades after liberation, the persistence of severe inequality indicates that time alone cannot substitute for structural strategy. The democratic state must therefore continuously reassess whether its economic arrangements are still serving the transformative purposes for which they were established. Revolutionary politics cannot remain permanently satisfied with managing inherited structures. At some point, governance must translate political legitimacy into material transformation.

The privatisation of power also requires examining the role of multinational corporations. Global corporations can bring capital, technology, expertise, international market access, and employment. South Africa's integration into global production networks has been important to its economic development. However, multinational corporations operate according to corporate strategies that may extend beyond national developmental objectives. Investment decisions are generally shaped by profitability, market conditions, risk, shareholder expectations, and global corporate structures. These objectives can coincide with national interests, but they are not identical to them. A company

may rationally close a facility that is no longer profitable even when the community depends upon its employment. It may move production to another country if costs become more attractive. It may structure supply chains internationally in ways that reduce local value addition. None of these decisions necessarily constitutes wrongdoing. They reflect the nature of private enterprise. The democratic state's responsibility is therefore to create institutional arrangements that align private incentives with national development wherever possible. Investment agreements, tax policy, local procurement, skills requirements, environmental standards, competition policy, and industrial incentives can influence corporate behaviour. The state must also negotiate from a position of knowledge. Governments need to understand corporate structures, financing arrangements, technologies, global supply chains, and investment alternatives. Without such capacity, negotiations become asymmetric. A government desperate for investment may accept conditions that appear beneficial in the short term but generate limited long-term domestic capability. Economic sovereignty therefore requires negotiating competence. The state must be able to say yes to productive investment and no to arrangements that undermine strategic national interests. This is not hostility to foreign capital. It is the normal practice of a sovereign developmental state.

The relationship between private capital and political parties presents an additional democratic challenge. Political parties require resources to operate, campaign, communicate, and organise. Business interests naturally seek influence over political decisions that affect taxation, regulation, procurement, infrastructure, labour markets, and economic policy. Political financing can therefore create channels through which private economic power enters democratic institutions. The danger is not that businesses participate in politics at all. Citizens and organisations in a democracy have legitimate political interests. The danger arises when financial contributions create unequal access or expectations of reciprocal benefits. Where public institutions control significant procurement and licensing opportunities, the incentives for political-business relationships become especially strong. This creates a potential pathway from economic concentration to political influence. The phenomenon is not unique to South Africa. It is a general problem of capitalist democracy. But it becomes particularly sensitive in societies where economic inequality is extreme. If wealth determines political access, then formal political equality may conceal substantive inequality. A wealthy corporation can employ lobbyists, lawyers, economists, consultants, public-relations specialists, and policy experts that ordinary citizens cannot afford. Democratic institutions must therefore establish strong transparency requirements around political finance, lobbying, procurement, conflicts of interest, and revolving-door employment. The objective should not be to eliminate legitimate interaction between government and business. Governments need business expertise, just as businesses need regulatory clarity. The objective is to prevent private economic resources from becoming private political sovereignty. Democracy requires that economic power remain subject to public rules. When money can purchase privileged access to decision-making, the boundary between capitalism and political capture becomes dangerously thin.

State capture exposed precisely this vulnerability. The concept became particularly powerful in South African public discourse because it demonstrated that economic interests can seek to reshape state institutions rather than merely respond to government policy. The lesson is profound for the study of privatisation. Private power does not always need to own a state institution to control its outcomes. Influence can operate through appointments, contracts, political relationships, procurement networks, information asymmetries, and institutional manipulation. The state may therefore remain formally sovereign while parts of its decision-making machinery become responsive to narrow interests. This demonstrates why the ownership question alone is insufficient. A state-owned company can be captured by private interests, while a privately owned company can

operate within a strong regulatory framework that protects the public interest. What matters is the integrity of institutions and the distribution of influence. State capture also revealed the importance of political accountability. Economic interests can become powerful when political actors have incentives to accommodate them. The resulting system can create a mutually reinforcing relationship between private wealth and public authority. Such arrangements are particularly damaging because they undermine both state capacity and public trust. Citizens begin to perceive government not as an instrument of collective development but as an arena for elite competition. The response must therefore involve institutional reform rather than merely changing individual officeholders. Transparent procurement, professional public administration, independent oversight, strong parliamentary committees, effective auditing, protected whistle-blowers, and enforceable conflict-of-interest rules are essential. The deeper objective is to ensure that private capital remains subordinate to constitutional government rather than becoming capable of purchasing institutional influence.

Municipalities illustrate how privatised power operates at the local level. Citizens encounter the state not primarily through national policy documents but through water, electricity, sanitation, roads, refuse collection, public transport, housing, and local economic development. Municipalities frequently depend upon private contractors for infrastructure and services. They may also interact with private property developers, utility companies, construction firms, financial institutions, and local businesses. This creates a dense network of public-private relationships. Where municipal administrative capacity is strong, such relationships can support development. Where capacity is weak, private actors can acquire disproportionate influence. A municipality that cannot design infrastructure projects internally may become dependent on consultants. A municipality that cannot maintain roads may rely on contractors. A municipality struggling financially may become dependent upon external financing. Each dependency creates potential bargaining asymmetries. The poorest communities are often least able to exercise countervailing power because they lack political connections and economic resources. The result can be a paradox in which citizens possess formal local democratic rights but limited influence over the economic decisions shaping their communities. Democratic decentralisation therefore requires administrative capacity, not merely elections. Local government must possess professional engineers, planners, financial managers, procurement specialists, and legal expertise. Without these capabilities, privatisation can become a transfer of decision-making power away from public institutions without a corresponding improvement in service delivery. The developmental state must therefore be built from the municipality upward, not merely from the national government downward. Economic democracy ultimately depends upon capable institutions at every level.

The labour question provides another perspective on the privatisation of power. Private corporations possess considerable influence over the organisation of work, wages, employment conditions, technological adoption, and production strategies. South Africa's labour movement played an important role in the liberation struggle and in shaping post-apartheid labour institutions. The democratic state established strong constitutional and legislative protections for workers. Yet labour markets remain characterised by high unemployment, informality, inequality, and significant differences between skilled and unskilled workers. These conditions affect bargaining power. A worker who has access to alternative employment can negotiate differently from a worker facing long-term unemployment. Private employers therefore exercise power not simply through wage-setting but through the ability to determine who receives employment opportunities. This power is intensified in communities economically dependent upon a single major employer. When a mining company, factory, logistics operator, or agricultural enterprise dominates local employment, its

decisions can influence the entire social structure of the community. The democratic state must therefore balance labour protection with economic competitiveness. Excessively rigid regulation can unintentionally discourage hiring, while inadequate protection can produce exploitation. The objective should be productive labour markets in which workers possess meaningful rights and firms possess sufficient flexibility to invest and expand. Skills development is especially important because it changes the bargaining relationship between labour and capital. A highly skilled workforce is not simply more employable. It gives society greater control over technology and production. Economic sovereignty therefore includes human-capital sovereignty. A country that owns infrastructure but lacks the technical skills to operate it remains dependent upon external expertise. Education and skills policy are consequently central instruments for reducing structural dependence.

The informal economy further exposes the limits of conventional approaches to privatisation. Millions of South Africans participate in economic life through informal trading, small-scale enterprise, street commerce, domestic work, micro-businesses, and other forms of economic activity outside large corporate structures. These citizens often possess little political influence despite making substantial contributions to local economies. The formal economy may dominate policy discussions because it generates large investments and tax revenues, but informal enterprises provide livelihoods where formal employment is unavailable. A genuinely democratic economic policy must therefore avoid treating informal workers merely as regulatory problems. Their economic activity represents entrepreneurial capacity that can be developed through access to finance, markets, infrastructure, training, storage, digital platforms, and legal recognition. The state can play a transformative role by creating pathways from informality to productive formalisation rather than simply imposing compliance costs. Private corporations can also contribute by integrating small suppliers into value chains. The objective should be to create ladders of economic advancement. If the formal corporate economy remains structurally disconnected from township and rural economies, inequality will persist regardless of overall GDP growth. The privatisation of power becomes problematic when economic systems are designed primarily around the interests of large capital while millions of citizens remain marginal participants. Economic democracy requires institutional mechanisms through which small producers can gain bargaining power. Cooperatives, producer associations, municipal markets, development finance, procurement reform, and digital platforms can contribute to this process. Broad-based entrepreneurship should therefore be treated as part of national economic infrastructure.

The question of public ownership must nevertheless be reconsidered carefully. There are strategic sectors in which public ownership may remain justified because the social value of universal access exceeds the commercial logic of profitability. Natural monopolies are an obvious example. Electricity transmission, certain water systems, major transport infrastructure, and other network industries may require public coordination because duplicating infrastructure can be inefficient. In such sectors, the state can preserve public ownership of essential infrastructure while allowing private firms to participate in competitive segments. This hybrid model avoids the false choice between total nationalisation and complete privatisation. It also recognises that different parts of the same sector may require different governance arrangements. Generation can be competitive while transmission remains strategically coordinated. Ports can involve concessions while national infrastructure standards remain publicly determined. Telecommunications networks can be privately operated while spectrum remains a public resource. Mining companies can remain private while mineral rights are administered through national law. The central principle is functional governance. Ownership should follow the strategic characteristics of the asset and the public objectives attached

to it. Where markets function competitively, private enterprise can generate efficiency and innovation. Where markets create natural monopolies or essential dependencies, stronger public control may be required. Where private investment is necessary, regulation must prevent abuse of market power. This differentiated approach is more sophisticated than blanket ideological commitments. It allows the state to preserve strategic sovereignty without unnecessarily bureaucratising competitive markets. South Africa's economic challenge is therefore to design institutions appropriate to different forms of economic activity. One governance model cannot reasonably be applied to every sector.

Regulation becomes the principal instrument through which a democratic state can govern privately owned strategic assets. Effective regulation requires more than legislation. It requires skilled regulators, reliable data, financial independence, enforcement authority, judicial support, and political independence. A regulatory body that lacks expertise may become dependent upon the companies it regulates for technical information. This creates information asymmetry. Corporations know their costs, technologies, investment strategies, and financial structures in far greater detail than most public agencies. Without adequate expertise, regulators may accept corporate claims without sufficient scrutiny. This is why regulatory capacity is itself a form of economic power. The ability to understand an industry determines the ability to govern it. South Africa therefore needs institutions capable of attracting and retaining high-level technical expertise. Regulatory appointments should be transparent and based on competence. Agencies should possess sufficient resources to investigate markets and enforce rules. Parliamentary oversight should examine whether regulators are fulfilling their mandates. Judicial review should protect both public authority and legitimate business rights. Regulation should also be predictable. Businesses require certainty to make long-term investments. Citizens require certainty that essential services will remain affordable and reliable. Good regulation therefore does not mean arbitrary state intervention. It means establishing clear rules under which private enterprise operates. The strongest democratic states are not those that control every economic decision. They are those that possess the institutional authority to ensure that economic decisions occur within a framework consistent with public objectives.

A major danger arises when regulation is weakened in the name of attracting investment. Governments frequently compete for capital by promising favourable regulatory conditions. This can create a "race to the bottom" in which states reduce labour protections, environmental requirements, taxes, or public obligations to remain attractive to investors. Such competition may generate short-term investment but undermine long-term developmental capacity. South Africa's challenge is particularly complex because it needs large amounts of investment to reduce unemployment and expand infrastructure. It therefore cannot simply ignore investor concerns. Yet investment itself varies in quality. Some investment creates productive capacity, skills, exports, technological capability, and long-term employment. Other investment is primarily speculative or focused on extracting short-term returns. Development policy should distinguish between these forms. Investment incentives should therefore be connected to measurable national objectives. Governments can reward firms that create local supply chains, train workers, invest in research, expand exports, develop underserved regions, or increase domestic value addition. This approach turns regulation into strategic economic policy. The state does not merely permit investment. It shapes the conditions under which investment contributes to national development. This is characteristic of successful developmental states internationally. They did not reject markets. They governed markets strategically. South Africa's post-apartheid challenge has been to construct such a capacity within a constitutional democracy characterised by competing interests. Economic

sovereignty therefore requires moving from passive investment attraction to strategic investment governance.

The concept of developmental procurement deserves particular attention because government is itself a major economic actor. Public procurement represents enormous purchasing power. If used strategically, it can support domestic manufacturing, small businesses, black entrepreneurs, local suppliers, skills development, and industrialisation. If poorly governed, it can become a source of corruption and patronage. The difference lies in institutional design. Procurement must be transparent, competitive, professional, and measurable. At the same time, procurement rules can legitimately incorporate developmental objectives. A government purchasing infrastructure equipment, for example, can require local production or skills transfer where economically feasible. Such requirements can help develop domestic industries rather than simply purchasing finished goods from international suppliers. However, localisation should not become an excuse for inefficiency or politically connected monopolies. Developmental procurement must be performance-based. Firms receiving preferential opportunities should demonstrate measurable outcomes. This approach transforms public expenditure into industrial policy. It also creates a mechanism through which the state can influence private economic behaviour without owning private companies. The state becomes a market-maker as well as a regulator. This is an important form of public power. If government spending is large enough, the conditions attached to that spending can shape entire supply chains. The challenge is to prevent procurement from being captured by politically connected elites. Transparent tender systems, beneficial ownership disclosure, independent audits, competitive evaluation, and strong enforcement are therefore essential. Public procurement should serve the developmental citizen, not the politically connected contractor.

The issue of beneficial ownership is equally important because corporate power can be difficult to identify through formal ownership structures. Companies may be controlled through holding companies, trusts, investment vehicles, institutional investors, cross-shareholdings, or complex corporate arrangements. The person legally registered as an owner may not always be the person exercising effective control. This matters for economic democracy because transparency about ownership determines whether society can understand who benefits from economic activity. Beneficial ownership information can also strengthen anti-corruption enforcement, competition policy, taxation, and procurement oversight. A democratic economy cannot effectively regulate concentrations of power if it cannot identify where power resides. Transparency therefore becomes an instrument of sovereignty. Citizens should be able to know which entities control strategically important assets and who ultimately benefits from public contracts or major concessions. This does not mean exposing legitimate personal information indiscriminately. It means creating appropriate transparency mechanisms for economically significant ownership and control. Corporate confidentiality has legitimate purposes, but it cannot become a shield for corruption or regulatory evasion. The state must therefore modernise its understanding of corporate power. Traditional company registers may be insufficient in an economy characterised by complex financial structures. Economic mapping should become a permanent function of government. Policymakers need to know who owns what, who finances what, and who exercises influence across sectors. Without this knowledge, economic transformation becomes partly symbolic. One cannot democratise an economic structure that one cannot accurately see.

The role of pension funds illustrates another hidden dimension of economic power. Retirement savings represent enormous pools of capital accumulated from workers over decades. These funds

are often invested in listed companies, bonds, infrastructure, property, and other assets. Consequently, workers may indirectly own significant portions of the economy through institutional investors even when individual ownership is not visible. This creates an opportunity for a more democratic form of capitalism. Pension funds can invest in infrastructure, affordable housing, renewable energy, manufacturing, and other productive assets while generating long-term returns for beneficiaries. However, investment decisions must be professionally managed and protected from political interference. Pension savings cannot become a source of reckless state financing or politically motivated investment. The appropriate model is one in which institutional investors pursue fiduciary responsibilities while considering long-term developmental opportunities within sound risk frameworks. This illustrates a broader point: economic democracy does not necessarily require every citizen to directly own shares. It can also involve collective ownership through pension systems, cooperatives, sovereign funds, community trusts, and other institutions. Such structures can broaden the distribution of capital income while preserving professional management. South Africa therefore possesses significant possibilities for transforming financial ownership without dismantling private markets. The challenge is to connect the country's enormous pools of savings to productive domestic investment. If domestic savings are invested primarily in existing asset markets without expanding productive capacity, inequality may persist. If capital is strategically deployed into new productive activities, it can help democratise economic opportunity.

Sovereign wealth and strategic public investment deserve consideration within this framework. Resource-rich countries have sometimes created sovereign funds to convert finite natural-resource wealth into long-term financial assets. South Africa's mineral economy could theoretically support mechanisms through which a greater portion of resource rents contributes to future generations. Such institutions would require exceptional governance because they can easily become vehicles for political patronage or poor investment. Yet the principle is important. Natural resources are finite public assets, and their exploitation should contribute to long-term national wealth rather than merely short-term fiscal revenue. Strategic public investment can also support industries that private investors consider too risky or too long-term. Research and development, infrastructure, advanced manufacturing, green technologies, and skills development often require patient capital. The private sector may eventually participate once markets mature, but the initial risk may require public support. This is not an argument for government replacing private enterprise. It is an argument for government creating conditions under which new productive markets can emerge. Economic sovereignty depends partly upon the ability to invest in capabilities whose returns may take decades. A purely short-term market logic can underinvest in national capabilities because individual firms cannot capture all the social benefits. The developmental state therefore has a legitimate role in strategic investment. The key safeguards are professional management, transparent objectives, independent oversight, measurable performance, and insulation from partisan patronage. Public capital should create public value rather than private political wealth.

The green transition introduces a new dimension to the question of economic sovereignty. South Africa's dependence upon coal, combined with its mineral wealth and industrial base, places the country at the intersection of energy security, climate policy, employment, and international trade. The transition toward renewable energy and low-carbon production will require massive investment. Private capital will inevitably play a significant role because the scale of investment exceeds the immediate capacity of the public sector. Yet the transition also raises questions about who owns the new energy infrastructure, who controls technological capabilities, and who captures the economic value created by the transition. If South Africa simply imports renewable technologies and relies upon foreign capital to build domestic infrastructure, it may reduce carbon emissions

while reproducing technological dependency. A genuinely developmental transition should therefore seek local manufacturing, skills development, research capacity, grid expansion, storage technologies, and domestic value chains. The state can establish policy frameworks that encourage these outcomes. Private firms can then participate within those frameworks. This demonstrates again why the central issue is not private ownership itself. The issue is the strategic environment within which private ownership operates. A private renewable-energy company can contribute significantly to national development if it creates jobs, expands capacity, supports local suppliers, and operates under effective regulation. Conversely, public ownership can fail if institutions are badly managed. Economic sovereignty therefore depends on capability rather than ideology. The energy transition should become an opportunity to build new industrial capacity rather than merely changing the source of electricity.

The mining transition associated with critical minerals presents a similar opportunity. South Africa possesses resources relevant to global industrial transformation, including minerals used in energy, manufacturing, and advanced technologies. These resources could provide leverage in negotiating a new position within global value chains. However, exporting raw materials without substantial domestic processing risks reproducing an old pattern. Colonial economic structures historically positioned African territories as suppliers of raw materials and consumers of manufactured goods. Post-apartheid economic sovereignty requires moving beyond that division of labour. Beneficiation, manufacturing, research, engineering, and technological development can create greater domestic value. Private mining companies possess important capabilities, but the state can establish incentives and requirements that encourage domestic value addition. Universities and research institutions can contribute to technological development. Development finance can support new industries. Public infrastructure can reduce production costs. The objective should be to build an ecosystem in which mineral wealth supports industrialisation. This requires long-term coordination between government and private enterprise. If policy remains fragmented, opportunities may be lost. Strategic economic planning therefore remains essential even within a market economy. A developmental state should understand global commodity trends and anticipate future industrial demand. It should identify which capabilities South Africa can realistically develop and mobilise resources accordingly. The country cannot manufacture everything, but it can choose strategically where to deepen domestic capacity. Economic sovereignty is ultimately the capacity to make such choices.

The role of state-owned enterprises must also be reconsidered without romanticism. SOEs can provide strategic capabilities that private markets may not supply adequately. They can pursue long-term infrastructure investment, universal service, countercyclical development, and national strategic objectives. Yet SOEs can also become inefficient, overstaffed, financially unsustainable, politically manipulated, and vulnerable to corruption. The solution cannot therefore be to defend every SOE regardless of performance. Nor can it be to privatise every struggling institution. Each enterprise must be evaluated according to its strategic purpose, market characteristics, public obligations, financial sustainability, and governance requirements. Where an SOE operates in a competitive market and consistently underperforms, restructuring may be necessary. Where it controls critical infrastructure, the state may need to preserve ownership while radically improving management. Where a function can be provided competitively without strategic risks, private participation may be appropriate. The key is institutional design. Public ownership should come with clear accountability for performance. Ministers should not interfere arbitrarily in operational decisions. Boards should possess appropriate expertise. Executives should be selected through transparent processes. Financial reporting should be rigorous. Parliamentary oversight should be

meaningful. Public enterprises must ultimately serve public objectives while operating with professional standards. If the state cannot govern its own assets effectively, expanding ownership will not necessarily increase economic sovereignty. Sovereignty requires competent control, not merely possession.

The experience of privatisation debates across the world provides an important comparative lesson. In many countries, governments privatised state-owned enterprises during periods of fiscal crisis, ideological change, or pressure for efficiency. Some privatisations produced greater competition and investment. Others produced private monopolies that were no more accountable than the public monopolies they replaced. The difference often depended upon the quality of regulatory institutions. Where governments privatised competitive industries while maintaining strong competition rules, consumers could benefit. Where governments sold natural monopolies without effective regulation, private firms could gain excessive market power. This comparative evidence demonstrates that ownership and competition are separate questions. A private monopoly is not necessarily more efficient or democratic than a public monopoly. The crucial objective should be contestability, accountability, service quality, and public interest. South Africa should therefore learn from international experience rather than adopting privatisation as an ideological prescription. Its own historical circumstances require particular caution because economic concentration already existed before democracy. Privatisation that increases concentration may deepen historical inequality. Privatisation that introduces competition, expands investment, and broadens ownership may produce different outcomes. Policy must therefore assess each transaction and sector individually. A blanket ideology of either nationalisation or privatisation is inadequate. Development requires institutional intelligence. The state must know where competition works, where regulation is necessary, where public ownership is strategic, and where partnerships can create value.

The constitutional order provides the legal foundation for balancing these interests. South Africa's Constitution protects property rights while simultaneously establishing a democratic state committed to equality, dignity, socioeconomic development, and transformation. This creates neither unrestricted private property nor unlimited state power. Instead, it creates a framework within which rights and public interests must be balanced. Property ownership is protected, but property exists within a constitutional society whose objectives include overcoming historical injustice. Economic regulation is therefore not inherently anti-democratic. Properly designed regulation can deepen democracy by preventing private power from undermining public rights. At the same time, government cannot simply confiscate private assets without regard to constitutional protections and legal processes. The constitutional settlement requires disciplined transformation. This is significant because it means the struggle over economic power must occur through institutions rather than arbitrary political force. The state must use legislation, taxation, competition policy, regulation, public investment, land policy, procurement, education, and industrial strategy. Citizens and companies must have access to legal remedies. Parliament must scrutinise executive decisions. Courts must remain capable of reviewing government action. Constitutional democracy therefore provides both a mechanism for transformation and a constraint upon the abuse of state power. The challenge is to use constitutional authority ambitiously rather than treating constitutionalism as an excuse for economic inertia. Democratic legality should protect both citizens from arbitrary private power and businesses from arbitrary state power. The legitimacy of transformation depends upon maintaining this balance.

Economic inequality gives the privatisation question its deepest social significance. When wealth is highly concentrated, the formal freedom to participate in markets does not produce equal economic

opportunity. A poor citizen may technically be free to become a business owner, but without capital, education, networks, collateral, infrastructure, or market access, that freedom is severely constrained. This is why economic democracy cannot be reduced to deregulation. Markets operate within pre-existing distributions of resources. Those distributions influence who can compete successfully. Historical inequality therefore reproduces itself through apparently neutral market mechanisms. The child of a wealthy family may inherit property, education, business networks, and financial security. The child of a poor household may inherit none of these assets. Over generations, economic power becomes institutionalised. The democratic state has a legitimate role in breaking this cycle through education, social investment, infrastructure, land reform, enterprise support, and access to capital. Social grants are important for reducing extreme poverty, but long-term transformation requires productive inclusion. Citizens need pathways from dependency to ownership and productive participation. This requires schools that produce skills, financial systems that expand opportunity, infrastructure that connects communities to markets, and economic policies that encourage new enterprises. The objective should be to transform citizens from passive recipients of economic growth into active participants in wealth creation. Privatisation becomes problematic when it operates within an unequal society without mechanisms for widening participation. Private enterprise can be socially productive when embedded within an economy that continuously creates new opportunities. Economic democracy therefore requires a broad distribution of productive capabilities.

Township economies provide an important arena for this transformation. South Africa's townships contain enormous entrepreneurial energy but often remain disconnected from major corporate supply chains and financial systems. Small businesses operate in retail, transport, food production, services, construction, technology, and creative industries. Yet many remain trapped at subsistence scale. The state can change this through infrastructure, procurement, training, financing, market access, and regulatory reform. Large corporations can also contribute by integrating township businesses into supply chains. Such integration should not become tokenistic. It should create genuine commercial relationships in which smaller firms develop the capabilities required to compete independently. Digital platforms can potentially expand market access, but they also introduce new forms of dependence on large technology companies. This again illustrates the complexity of private power. A platform can empower a small entrepreneur while simultaneously controlling access to customers and extracting fees. Economic transformation therefore requires examining the terms under which markets are organised. The goal should be to create pathways toward independence rather than permanent dependency. Township industrialisation can become a major component of South Africa's developmental strategy if government treats townships as productive economic spaces rather than merely residential areas requiring social services. This would help address spatial inequality and unemployment simultaneously. It would also broaden the base of private enterprise. A genuinely democratic capitalist economy should not consist primarily of large corporations surrounded by economically dependent communities. It should contain dense networks of small, medium, cooperative, and large enterprises interacting productively.

The rural economy presents similar opportunities and challenges. Rural South Africa contains agricultural land, mineral resources, tourism potential, renewable-energy opportunities, and substantial human capital. Yet rural communities often experience limited access to markets, finance, infrastructure, and industrial facilities. Private investment can stimulate rural development, but it can also create dependency if communities possess little bargaining power. Community ownership models can therefore play an important role where natural resources are developed on communal or traditional land. Such models should provide transparent benefits, professional

management, and genuine participation rather than symbolic consultation. Rural development also requires roads, irrigation, electricity, digital connectivity, storage, processing facilities, and market access. The state must provide infrastructure that private firms may not find profitable to build independently. Private enterprise can then operate within this enabling environment. This is a classic example of how public investment can crowd in private investment rather than crowd it out. The developmental state should therefore not measure success merely by the amount of private investment attracted. It should ask whether investment transforms local productive capacity. A mine that creates employment but leaves communities without sustainable economic opportunities after closure may have limited developmental value. An agricultural project that develops local processing, skills, logistics, and ownership may generate broader benefits. Economic sovereignty therefore requires measuring the quality and distribution of economic development rather than its aggregate volume alone.

The media and information economy must also be included in any analysis of privatised power. Ownership of newspapers, television networks, digital platforms, advertising systems, and telecommunications infrastructure can influence the information environment within which citizens form political opinions. This does not mean that private media organisations automatically undermine democracy. Independent private media can be essential for holding governments accountable. However, media concentration can narrow the diversity of perspectives available to citizens. Advertising markets can shape which media organisations survive. Digital platforms can determine which information becomes visible through algorithms and commercial incentives. The result is a new form of economic power over public discourse. Democratic sovereignty therefore requires both media freedom and media pluralism. The state should not control journalism politically, because that would undermine democratic accountability. But competition policy, transparency of ownership, public-interest broadcasting, and support for diverse media ecosystems can help prevent excessive concentration. The distinction is crucial. A democratic society needs independent media capable of criticising government. It also needs a sufficiently plural media environment so that no small group of private interests controls the national conversation. Information is therefore an economic and political resource. In the digital age, control over communication infrastructure can influence the distribution of political power. The privatisation of communication therefore deserves the same analytical attention as the privatisation of electricity or transport.

Technology companies increasingly introduce another layer of economic sovereignty. Digital platforms can operate across national borders while collecting data from millions of citizens. Data has become a valuable economic resource. Companies can use information to improve services, target advertising, develop artificial intelligence, and shape consumer behaviour. Governments therefore face new questions about data sovereignty, privacy, cybersecurity, digital taxation, and technological dependence. South Africa cannot simply prevent foreign technology companies from operating. Digital integration is necessary for economic development. But it can develop domestic capabilities in data infrastructure, software development, cloud services, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. Universities, public institutions, and private companies can collaborate to develop local expertise. Government can also establish appropriate rules governing data protection and competition. The strategic principle should be that digital participation does not automatically require technological dependency. South Africans should increasingly become producers of digital value rather than merely consumers of foreign platforms. This is another dimension of the unfinished economic transformation. The economy of the future will depend increasingly upon intangible assets such as knowledge, software, intellectual property, data, and technological

capabilities. If ownership of these assets remains concentrated outside Africa, economic sovereignty will remain incomplete even if traditional industries are locally owned. South Africa therefore needs a twenty-first-century economic transformation strategy. It must democratise access to digital skills and technological production just as previous generations sought to democratise access to land, industry, and political rights.

Education itself can be understood as an economic infrastructure of sovereignty. Universities produce knowledge, engineers, lawyers, scientists, economists, managers, doctors, teachers, and researchers. If a country lacks sufficient technical expertise, it must import capabilities from elsewhere. This creates dependence. South Africa has substantial educational and research capacity, but unequal access and uneven institutional performance limit the full potential of this resource. A democratic economic strategy should therefore connect education directly to industrial policy. Universities should participate in research relevant to energy, mining, agriculture, manufacturing, telecommunications, logistics, biotechnology, and digital technologies. Technical colleges should provide skills aligned with emerging industries. Private companies can support apprenticeships and research partnerships. Government can finance strategic research while preserving academic independence. Knowledge production should become part of economic transformation. This is particularly important because private companies increasingly compete through innovation rather than simply physical assets. A country that controls mineral resources but lacks the technologies required to process them may remain subordinate in global value chains. Education therefore transforms the quality of sovereignty. It gives citizens the ability to understand and reshape the economic systems in which they participate. The democratic state must consequently treat human knowledge as strategic infrastructure. Economic independence without intellectual capacity is fragile. Pan-African economic transformation requires a continent capable of producing its own experts rather than perpetually importing expertise to manage African resources.

The regional dimension is equally important because South Africa's economic power extends throughout Southern Africa. South African corporations operate across neighbouring countries in banking, telecommunications, retail, mining, insurance, logistics, and other sectors. This regional presence can support economic integration and investment. Yet it can also create asymmetric relationships in which South African capital possesses greater bargaining power than smaller neighbouring economies. The Southern African Development Community therefore faces the challenge of integrating markets while preventing excessive concentration. Regional infrastructure, cross-border investment, competition policy, labour mobility, and industrial coordination can help distribute benefits more broadly. South Africa's economic strength should ideally become an instrument of regional development rather than a source of regional domination. Pan-Africanism requires recognising that national economic sovereignty and regional integration are not opposites. A strong South African economy can contribute to continental development if its capabilities are connected to regional value chains. Railways, ports, electricity networks, telecommunications, financial systems, and manufacturing networks can be organised across borders. Such integration can reduce dependency on external markets and create economies of scale. However, regional integration must include safeguards against exploitation. Smaller economies need regulatory capacity and bargaining mechanisms. South Africa should therefore pursue a regional developmental strategy rather than simply exporting capital. Economic power becomes legitimate when it creates shared productive capacity. The ultimate objective should be a Southern African economy capable of competing globally while retaining African strategic agency.

The African Continental Free Trade Area creates an even larger horizon for this discussion. African countries possess enormous resources and markets but remain constrained by fragmented production systems and limited intra-African trade. Economic sovereignty at the continental level requires building African value chains that reduce dependence on external suppliers. South Africa's industrial base could play a significant role in this process. Its financial institutions, manufacturing companies, mining expertise, technological capabilities, and infrastructure could contribute to continental industrialisation. Yet this role must be managed carefully. Pan-African economic integration should not simply reproduce colonial patterns in which one country becomes a regional supplier of capital while others remain resource exporters. Integration should facilitate shared industrial development. African states should cooperate on infrastructure, energy, digital systems, finance, manufacturing, agriculture, and skills. Private corporations can be central actors in this process. But governments must establish continental rules that protect competition and prevent exploitative concentration. Economic sovereignty should therefore increasingly be understood at multiple scales. Citizens require national democratic control, states require regional bargaining power, and Africa as a whole requires continental strategic autonomy. The privatisation of power within one country is therefore connected to the broader global structure of economic power. African economies often negotiate with multinational corporations individually, weakening their bargaining position. Continental coordination can create greater leverage. Pan-Africanism therefore has an economic dimension that requires institutional architecture, not merely political rhetoric.

The question of foreign ownership should consequently be handled with analytical precision. Foreign investment is not inherently exploitative. Many countries have developed through substantial foreign capital. South Africa itself requires investment to expand infrastructure, industry, technology, and employment. The problem arises when foreign ownership occurs in strategic sectors without sufficient mechanisms for domestic capability development. A foreign-owned company can operate successfully while contributing significantly to national development through taxes, employment, training, procurement, and investment. Conversely, a domestically owned company can exploit workers, avoid taxes, or capture political institutions. Nationality of ownership is therefore an insufficient measure of economic justice. The more important question is the institutional relationship between ownership and public objectives. Does investment deepen local capabilities? Does it transfer technology? Does it create sustainable employment? Does it contribute to infrastructure? Does it respect environmental obligations? Does it support local suppliers? Does it operate within competition rules? Does the state retain the capacity to regulate it? These questions provide a more sophisticated framework than simply categorising capital as South African or foreign. Economic nationalism can become counterproductive if it discourages productive investment. But unrestricted openness can produce dependency. The appropriate position is strategic openness. South Africa should welcome productive capital while negotiating conditions that maximise developmental benefits. This requires confidence in national institutions. A strong state does not fear private capital because it knows how to regulate and negotiate with it. A weak state may either surrender to capital or attempt arbitrary controls. Neither approach produces sustainable sovereignty.

The central problem therefore becomes one of state capacity. Every major economic strategy ultimately depends upon institutions capable of implementation. South Africa has extensive constitutional and administrative structures, but capacity varies across institutions and levels of government. Where institutions are professional and independent, regulation can be effective. Where corruption, political interference, vacancies, inadequate skills, or weak management prevail, even well-designed policies can fail. The privatisation of power often advances through institutional

weakness. When citizens lose confidence in public institutions, they increasingly rely upon private alternatives. Private security replaces public policing. Private healthcare supplements inadequate public services. Private education becomes an escape from struggling public schools. Private transport compensates for weak public systems. Private electricity generation emerges when public supply becomes unreliable. These developments are understandable individual responses. Yet collectively they can create a two-tier society. Wealthier citizens purchase alternatives while poorer citizens remain dependent upon declining public services. This is a form of social privatisation even when no formal state asset is sold. Public institutions become residual systems for those who cannot afford private alternatives. Democracy is thereby weakened because citizens experience fundamentally different states according to their economic position. Rebuilding public capacity is therefore essential not because everything must be publicly provided, but because citizens must have access to competent public systems. A democratic state cannot remain legitimate if quality citizenship becomes effectively purchasable.

Private security is a particularly revealing example of this phenomenon. South Africa's large private security industry reflects public concerns about crime and the limitations of state policing capacity. Private security companies provide valuable services to households, businesses, communities, and infrastructure operators. Yet the growth of private security also reveals an unequal distribution of safety. Wealthier citizens can purchase additional protection, while poorer communities may remain dependent upon overstretched public services. This illustrates how market mechanisms can transform a universal public right into a differentiated private commodity. Security cannot be treated solely as a market service because it is also a constitutional responsibility. The state must therefore maintain effective policing while allowing private security to operate within appropriate rules. Similar dynamics exist in healthcare and education. Private institutions can expand choice and quality, but excessive dependence upon private provision can create social fragmentation. The long-term objective should not be to eliminate private alternatives. It should be to ensure that public institutions remain sufficiently strong that private services represent choices rather than necessities created by institutional failure. This distinction is central to democratic equality. If the wealthy increasingly live within private systems while the poor depend upon deteriorating public systems, society becomes politically fragmented. Citizens may inhabit the same constitutional state but experience fundamentally different realities. The privatisation of power therefore has a social dimension that extends beyond corporate ownership.

The same principle applies to healthcare. South Africa possesses a substantial private healthcare industry alongside a large public healthcare system. Private healthcare can provide advanced services and reduce pressure on public institutions for those who can afford it. Yet unequal access creates profound social divisions. The state therefore faces the difficult task of improving public healthcare while regulating private providers. The issue is not whether private healthcare should exist. The issue is whether the health system as a whole reflects the principle that human wellbeing should not be determined exclusively by purchasing power. The same analysis applies to education. Private schools and universities can provide valuable educational alternatives, but the quality of public education remains central to democratic equality. If economic power determines educational quality, inequality becomes self-reproducing. Children from wealthy households acquire advantages that translate into better employment and greater wealth, while poor households face constrained opportunities. Economic transformation must therefore invest in public capabilities. This is not inconsistent with private enterprise. Indeed, a strong public education system can create a more skilled workforce that benefits private businesses. Public health can create a healthier workforce and reduce social costs. Public transport can connect workers to employment. Public infrastructure

can reduce business costs. The state and private sector are therefore not inherently competing systems. They can be complementary when institutional responsibilities are clearly defined. The objective is a mixed economy in which markets operate within strong public foundations.

The question of public-private balance ultimately returns to the meaning of democracy itself. Political democracy assumes that citizens should possess meaningful influence over decisions affecting their lives. Economic decisions increasingly determine those lives. Employment, housing, energy, transportation, communications, finance, and access to technology shape the practical possibilities of citizenship. If citizens have no meaningful mechanism for influencing the institutions that control these resources, democracy becomes incomplete. This does not mean every economic decision must be subject to direct popular voting. Complex economies require specialised decision-making. But democratic institutions must retain the ability to set the rules within which economic actors operate. Parliament must be able to legislate. Regulators must be able to enforce. Courts must be able to review. Civil society must be able to scrutinise. Workers must possess rights. Consumers must have protection. Communities must have mechanisms for participation in major developments affecting them. Investors must also possess legal certainty. This is the architecture of economic democracy. It recognises that expertise and markets are necessary while insisting that ultimate legitimacy remains public. Private enterprise can flourish within this framework. Indeed, businesses often perform better when rules are clear and institutions are credible. Economic democracy therefore should not be confused with economic centralisation. It is better understood as the institutional subordination of concentrated economic power to constitutional public authority.

The ANC's greatest achievement in this field was arguably the creation of a political framework within which economic transformation could be pursued democratically. The party helped establish universal political citizenship, constitutional government, labour rights, affirmative policies, social protection, and a legal framework for transformation. These achievements should not be minimised. Millions of black South Africans gained rights, public services, social grants, formal employment protections, and political representation that apartheid explicitly denied. The post-apartheid state also expanded access to electricity, housing, water, education, healthcare, and social protection on a massive scale. These changes demonstrate that the democratic state did possess transformative capacity. Yet the limitations are equally important. Political liberation did not fundamentally dissolve concentrated ownership of capital. Economic inequality remains extraordinarily high. Unemployment remains a structural crisis. Many communities remain disconnected from productive economic networks. The corporate economy remains concentrated. Public institutions in strategic sectors have experienced severe governance and performance problems. The lesson is therefore neither that liberation failed nor that it fully succeeded. It transformed the political order while producing an incomplete economic transformation. The privatisation of power became one of the mechanisms through which this incompleteness manifested itself. As public institutions weakened, private actors increasingly filled gaps. As private markets expanded, the state sometimes became more dependent upon external capacity. As ownership transformation remained limited, concentrated economic power persisted. The democratic revolution therefore changed who governed but did not completely change who possessed economic power.

This distinction helps explain the paradox of political control without comprehensive economic control. The ANC could win elections and control Parliament while simultaneously confronting corporations capable of moving capital, changing investment strategies, influencing markets, and negotiating with government from positions of substantial strength. This does not mean that corporations secretly govern South Africa. Such a claim would oversimplify reality. Government

possesses substantial authority through taxation, legislation, regulation, public spending, licensing, and constitutional power. But power is relational. Government and capital depend upon one another in different ways. Business needs political stability, infrastructure, legal certainty, skilled workers, and functioning institutions. Government needs investment, employment, tax revenues, technology, and productive economic activity. The relationship is therefore one of mutual dependence but unequal bargaining power across different sectors. In some areas the state is stronger. In others, large corporations possess significant leverage. The analytical task is to map these relationships rather than declare a single actor sovereign. Post-apartheid South Africa is best understood as a negotiated political economy in which public authority and private capital continuously interact. The problem arises when the bargaining relationship becomes so unequal that government cannot credibly pursue public objectives. Economic sovereignty therefore requires maintaining countervailing power. The state must possess alternative sources of finance, technical expertise, infrastructure, investment capacity, and regulatory authority. Only then can it negotiate with private capital on relatively equal terms.

The future of South African economic transformation should therefore not be defined by a simple return to nationalisation. Nationalisation can be appropriate in particular strategic circumstances, but ownership alone does not guarantee transformation. Poorly governed public institutions can reproduce inefficiency and corruption. The more ambitious objective is strategic economic democracy. This would combine public ownership where strategically justified, competitive private enterprise where markets function well, strong regulation where concentration exists, developmental procurement where government has purchasing power, broad-based ownership where historical exclusion persists, and public investment where markets underinvest in national capabilities. It would also require stronger competition policy and greater transparency around corporate ownership and political finance. Such an approach would recognise the productive role of capital without allowing capital to become politically sovereign. It would recognise the importance of markets without allowing markets to define every social priority. It would strengthen the state without turning government into the owner of every economic activity. Most importantly, it would measure success by whether ordinary citizens acquire greater productive capabilities. The ultimate objective is not to maximise the size of the public sector or private sector. It is to maximise the productive freedom of society. A democratic economy should enable citizens to own assets, create enterprises, obtain skills, access finance, find employment, participate in markets, and influence the institutions governing strategic resources. That is a far more meaningful conception of economic liberation.

The pan-African dimension of this argument cannot be ignored. South Africa's economic structure remains connected to a wider international system in which African countries often export commodities, import manufactured products, depend upon foreign technology, and compete for investment. Privatisation can deepen this dependency if strategic infrastructure and productive assets become controlled by actors whose principal interests lie outside the continent. Yet private capital can also help Africa build the industrial capacity required for continental transformation. The answer is therefore not to reject private investment but to Africanise the terms of economic development. African states need stronger institutions, deeper regional markets, development finance, technological capabilities, and coordinated industrial policy. They must become capable of negotiating with multinational corporations collectively rather than individually. South Africa can contribute significantly because it possesses industrial and financial capabilities that many African economies lack. But its role should be that of a continental industrial partner rather than a regional economic hegemon. The ultimate objective should be an Africa that produces, processes, finances,

transports, communicates, and innovates for itself while remaining open to global trade. This is the economic meaning of self-determination. Political flags and constitutional independence are insufficient if the productive foundations of national life remain externally dependent. Pan-African sovereignty requires economic institutions capable of translating Africa's enormous human and natural resources into African-owned productive capabilities.

The final question, therefore, is not whether privatisation is good or bad. It is whether the privatisation of particular functions increases or decreases democratic control over strategic economic power. This distinction allows legitimate private enterprise to be protected while excessive concentration is confronted. A private company that competes fairly, pays taxes, employs workers, respects regulations, innovates, and contributes to productive development is not an enemy of democracy. A private monopoly capable of dictating terms to consumers, suppliers, workers, and government presents a different problem. A private infrastructure operator functioning under transparent public regulation can strengthen national capacity. A private contractor whose survival depends upon political connections can weaken it. A foreign investor that transfers technology and develops local suppliers can contribute to sovereignty. A corporation that extracts resources while generating minimal domestic value may deepen dependency. A state-owned enterprise that provides strategic infrastructure efficiently can advance national development. A state-owned enterprise captured by political interests can undermine it. These distinctions are indispensable. They prevent the debate from becoming an ideological contest between capitalism and socialism. South Africa requires institutions capable of determining where each model works best. The purpose of economic policy should be to construct a balanced architecture in which no single centre of power—state, corporation, financial institution, political party, or foreign investor—can dominate the national economy without accountability.

The deeper lesson of post-apartheid South Africa is therefore that the privatisation of power can occur without the formal privatisation of every public asset. Power moves whenever institutions become dependent upon actors they cannot effectively regulate, whenever citizens must purchase essential alternatives because public systems have weakened, whenever concentrated capital acquires privileged political access, whenever public procurement becomes a channel for private enrichment, and whenever strategic economic decisions become insulated from meaningful democratic accountability. The answer is not to abolish markets but to democratise the institutions within which markets operate. The state must know what it owns, what it regulates, what it depends upon, and where its bargaining power is weak. Parliament must scrutinise strategic economic arrangements. Regulators must possess the expertise and independence necessary to discipline concentrated capital. Citizens must have access to information about ownership and public contracts. Workers and communities must possess meaningful participation in economic decisions affecting them. Private enterprise must remain free to innovate and compete, but freedom cannot mean immunity from public accountability. The unfinished task of the post-apartheid revolution is therefore to transform political democracy into deeper economic citizenship. The question is not simply who occupies government offices. It is who possesses the resources, infrastructure, capital, technology, information, and institutional influence required to shape the material conditions of national life. South Africa liberated political authority from apartheid, but the democratisation of economic power remains incomplete. The historical challenge is to ensure that private economic power becomes a productive partner of democracy rather than an alternative centre of sovereignty. Only when citizens possess both political rights and meaningful economic capabilities can the promise of liberation approach its fullest democratic meaning.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHITE WEALTH, BLACK POVERTY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF ECONOMIC APARTHEID

The central contradiction of post-apartheid South Africa is that political power changed hands far more rapidly than economic power did. In 1994, the democratic transition transferred the commanding authority of the state from a white minority government to a constitutional democracy based on universal citizenship, political equality and majority rule. Yet the economic structure inherited by that democracy was not reconstructed with comparable speed. The mines, farms, corporations, financial institutions, prestigious schools, professional networks, urban property markets and accumulated family assets that had been shaped by centuries of colonial conquest and

apartheid exclusion did not suddenly become racially neutral because South Africa acquired a democratic constitution. The fundamental question, therefore, is not whether apartheid ended. It unquestionably did as a formal political system. The more difficult question is whether the material consequences of apartheid were dismantled at the same speed. The evidence suggests that they were not. The World Bank has described South Africa's transition as incomplete and has found wealth inequality to be substantially more extreme than income inequality, with the wealthiest ten percent holding about 70.9 percent of household net wealth while the poorest half held only about 4.2 percent. It also found that being white or South African Indian remained a strong predictor of wealth, demonstrating that historical exclusion continues to influence contemporary accumulation. The significance of this finding is profound: democracy changed the rules of political membership, but it did not erase the balance sheets of history. South Africa therefore entered freedom carrying two different clocks—the political clock of liberation and the economic clock of accumulated capital—and the second moved much more slowly.

To understand this contradiction, one must reject the simplistic proposition that every white South African is wealthy or that every black South African is poor. Such a proposition would reproduce precisely the kind of racial essentialism that serious scholarship should overcome. There are poor white South Africans, prosperous black South Africans, wealthy black entrepreneurs, struggling white households, and enormous class differences within every racial category. The analytical issue is structural rather than individual. Apartheid did not distribute wealth according to the personal morality, intelligence or productivity of particular individuals; it constructed a racial system in which access to land, education, employment, finance, housing, citizenship, business opportunities and geographical mobility was systematically differentiated. When such a system is dismantled, its beneficiaries do not begin from zero and its victims do not begin from an equal starting line. Historical advantage becomes contemporary capital through inheritance, property appreciation, educational credentials, professional networks, savings, investments and social connections. This is why the appropriate concept is not “white wealth” as a statement about every white individual, but historically accumulated racialised wealth. The distinction matters intellectually and politically. It prevents the critique of economic apartheid from becoming a crude accusation against an entire population while simultaneously refusing the opposite error of pretending that history has no economic afterlife. The question is therefore not whether whiteness mechanically produces wealth, but whether a society in which racialised privilege accumulated over generations continues to reproduce unequal opportunities across generations. The evidence strongly suggests that it does. South Africa's extraordinarily high wealth inequality, combined with the World Bank's finding that race, parental education, location and family wealth strongly influence inequality of opportunity, makes the historical dimension impossible to ignore.

Inherited wealth represents perhaps the least visible but most powerful mechanism through which apartheid continues after apartheid. A child does not choose the economic circumstances into which he or she is born, yet those circumstances profoundly influence the possibilities available throughout life. A family that accumulated a house during periods when property ownership was protected and subsidised by the state can transmit that house to children as an asset, a source of collateral, a residence and eventually an inheritance. A family that accumulated shares, businesses, farms, pensions or other investments can transfer not merely money but productive capacity. A family without such assets must often begin the economic race by paying rent, supporting unemployed relatives, servicing debt and attempting to acquire assets from earned income alone. The difference is enormous. Wealth generates further wealth because assets can appreciate, produce rental income, serve as collateral and finance education or entrepreneurship. Poverty reproduces

itself because the absence of assets forces households to use income primarily for consumption and survival. In this sense, the economic consequences of apartheid operate through mechanisms that do not require an apartheid law to remain on the statute book. The racial order can reproduce itself through apparently neutral institutions such as the property market, banking system, inheritance system, education system and labour market. This is one of the most important distinctions between legal equality and substantive equality. Legal equality says that individuals possess the same rights; substantive equality asks whether individuals possess remotely comparable capacities to exercise those rights. A democratic constitution can prohibit racial discrimination while millions remain separated by radically unequal stocks of inherited capital.

Land provides perhaps the clearest illustration of this unfinished transformation. Colonial conquest and apartheid transformed land into an instrument of racial domination, dispossessing African communities and concentrating productive agricultural and urban land in white hands. The democratic government therefore inherited not simply a land market but a land order created by political coercion. The 2017 Land Audit found that white individuals accounted for approximately 72 percent of individually owned agricultural farms and holdings by area, while African individuals accounted for about 4 percent; coloured individuals accounted for 15 percent and Indian individuals for 5 percent. The official audit was careful about its methodology: it examined registered private individual ownership and did not constitute a complete census of every form of landholding in South Africa. Nevertheless, its findings exposed the depth of the historical imbalance. This is not merely a question of symbolism. Land is an economic asset, a source of agricultural production, collateral, residence, rental value, inheritance and political bargaining power. The persistence of concentrated land ownership therefore means that one of apartheid's most important economic foundations was only partially transformed after 1994. The issue cannot be reduced to a contest between those who believe all land should remain untouched and those who demand immediate redistribution. A serious democratic project must confront the historical origins of ownership while developing lawful, productive and sustainable mechanisms for redistribution, tenure security, agricultural investment and community development. Otherwise, political liberation remains disconnected from the material geography of the country.

Property extends the land question into the urban economy. Apartheid deliberately engineered South African cities according to racial hierarchy, placing black communities far from centres of employment, finance, commerce and high-value property. The consequences survive through spatial inequality. Property in Johannesburg's northern suburbs, Cape Town's affluent districts, Durban's established residential zones and other historically privileged areas has generated enormous intergenerational value, while many black households remain concentrated in townships and peripheral settlements where property markets have historically been weaker and access to economic opportunity more limited. The significance of property is therefore not simply that one family owns a larger house than another. Property determines access to schools, transport, employment networks, commercial activity, credit and neighbourhood opportunities. A house purchased decades ago in an appreciating urban area can become a multi-generational financial platform. A house in an economically marginalised location may provide security and dignity but generate substantially less capital. The post-apartheid state has expanded housing access dramatically and millions of households have benefited from public housing and infrastructure programmes, but housing delivery alone cannot dissolve the spatial structure inherited from apartheid. The deeper challenge is to transform land-use patterns, transport systems, municipal investment and property markets so that black ownership does not remain concentrated in low-value

peripheral spaces. Economic apartheid persists wherever geography continues to determine economic destiny according to racialised historical patterns.

Corporate ownership represents another dimension of the same problem because modern capitalism distributes power through control of productive assets rather than through ownership of land alone. The large South African corporate economy emerged through mining houses, industrial conglomerates, banks, insurance companies, energy companies, retail groups and other institutions whose development was intertwined with colonial extraction and apartheid-era political economy. Democratic governments introduced Black Economic Empowerment, competition policy, employment equity, procurement reform and sectoral transformation requirements precisely because political democracy without corporate transformation would leave the architecture of economic power largely intact. There has been substantial change. Government reported in 2024 that black ownership in mining had risen from approximately 2 percent in 2004 to about 39 percent, demonstrating that transformation has not been imaginary or entirely symbolic. Yet the achievement also reveals the scale of the original imbalance: twenty years of legislation and policy were required to move from approximately 2 percent to approximately 39 percent in one strategically important sector. The correct interpretation is neither that transformation failed nor that transformation is complete. It is that transformation has produced measurable structural change while remaining incomplete. The distinction is crucial because democratic legitimacy requires both recognition of progress and intellectual honesty about unfinished work.

Mining illustrates especially clearly the relationship between political sovereignty and economic power. South Africa's mineral wealth was central to the construction of its industrial economy and to the accumulation of capital that shaped the country's corporate elite. Apartheid did not simply discriminate against black people socially; it organised labour and ownership in ways that channelled value upward while confining black workers largely to the bottom of the production system. The post-apartheid Mining Charter and the Mineral and Petroleum Resources Development Act sought to alter this relationship by recognising mineral resources as belonging to the nation and establishing requirements for transformation. Government's reported increase in black ownership from 2 percent in 2004 to approximately 39 percent is therefore historically significant. But ownership percentages must be examined carefully. A shareholding percentage does not automatically mean equivalent control, equal distribution among black citizens, or equal access to the economic benefits generated by mining. Ownership can be concentrated among a small number of politically connected or financially capable investors. It can be financed through complex debt arrangements. Community ownership can be structured in ways that create formal participation without necessarily producing transformative local development. Consequently, the central question must move from “Who owns what percentage?” to “Who exercises effective control, who receives the economic returns, who bears the social and environmental costs, and how broadly is ownership distributed?” A democratic economy must measure transformation not only by nominal ownership but by substantive power.

Access to finance is one of the most decisive mechanisms through which historical inequality reproduces itself. Entrepreneurship is frequently presented as though all individuals enter the market with nothing more than an idea, determination and willingness to work. This is a romantic conception of capitalism rather than an accurate description of how capital-intensive economies function. A person who owns property can potentially use it as collateral. A person with wealthy relatives can access informal investment. A person embedded in established professional networks may find clients, partners, lawyers, accountants and investors more easily. A person without

collateral, family capital or established networks may possess an excellent business idea but still struggle to secure financing. Thus, the apparently neutral language of "entrepreneurial ability" can conceal unequal starting conditions. South Africa's post-apartheid state recognised this problem through institutions such as the National Empowerment Fund, the Industrial Development Corporation and programmes supporting black industrialists. In 2024 government reported that around 1,000 black industrialists had received support during the preceding five years, with those firms employing more than 90,000 workers. Such interventions demonstrate that the state can alter access to capital. But they also demonstrate why public policy remains necessary. If private capital markets reproduce historical patterns of collateral and network exclusion, democratic government cannot simply declare the market neutral and withdraw. Economic citizenship requires mechanisms through which previously excluded citizens can acquire productive capital on meaningful terms.

Education is another form of capital, although it is often treated merely as a social service. Apartheid deliberately created different educational systems because it understood that controlling knowledge meant controlling the future distribution of economic opportunity. The Bantu Education system was therefore not simply an educational failure; it was an instrument of economic design. Its purpose was connected to the production of a racial labour hierarchy. Post-apartheid South Africa has made enormous investments in education, expanded access to universities and colleges, introduced no-fee schooling, expanded financial assistance and substantially increased the number of black graduates. Government reported that the matric pass rate reached a record 82.9 percent in 2023 and that the proportion of learners completing twelve years of education rose from 45 percent in 2008 to 62 percent in 2022. These achievements matter enormously. Yet educational access does not automatically translate into economic equality when school quality remains geographically differentiated and when labour markets reward scarce skills. The World Bank has emphasised that skills, education and location remain central to inequality of opportunity in South Africa. Thus, the unfinished struggle is not merely to increase the number of black graduates but to equalise the quality of education, professional networks, research opportunities, technological access and pathways from education into productive employment.

Professional networks constitute a form of invisible capital that is difficult to quantify but extremely important. Economic systems operate through relationships: lawyers recommend lawyers, executives recruit from trusted networks, investors seek familiar partners, companies prefer suppliers with established reputations and professionals frequently obtain opportunities through personal connections developed at schools, universities, clubs and workplaces. Apartheid-era exclusion prevented black South Africans from participating equally in many of these networks. The democratic state can change formal eligibility rules overnight, but networks take generations to reconstruct. This is why formal non-discrimination can coexist with persistent inequality of opportunity. A young black professional may possess the same degree as a white professional while entering the labour market without equivalent access to influential networks. Over time, the difference accumulates. One person obtains a position that leads to another opportunity, then another, while the other must repeatedly enter competitive markets without inherited social capital. The resulting inequality can appear to be the product of individual merit when it is partly the product of accumulated relational advantage. A rigorous analysis of post-apartheid economic power must therefore examine not only who owns shares and land but who knows whom, who sits on which boards, who has access to decision-makers, who receives referrals, who can mobilise investment and whose professional credibility is reinforced by institutional networks.

The labour market is where inherited inequality meets contemporary economic exclusion most visibly. South Africa has a highly unequal distribution of employment, wages and skills, and unemployment has disproportionately affected black South Africans, especially young people. This is not surprising given the historical architecture of the economy. Apartheid created a labour market designed around racial segmentation, geographical separation and unequal education. Democracy abolished the legal framework of racial employment discrimination, introduced employment equity and expanded labour rights, but it inherited an economy whose productive structure remained heavily concentrated and whose skills distribution had been shaped over generations. The democratic government has therefore attempted to use employment equity to accelerate representation while also using minimum wages, social grants and skills programmes to protect vulnerable citizens. Government's own 2024 account recognised that millions of young people remained outside employment, education or training despite thirty years of democracy. This exposes a central weakness in the post-apartheid economic settlement: political equality can coexist with labour-market exclusion. A person who possesses the right to vote but cannot access meaningful employment remains formally free yet materially constrained. Democracy must therefore be judged not only by ballots and institutions but by whether citizens possess credible economic pathways through which political freedom can become lived dignity.

The emergence of a black middle class is one of the most important achievements of post-apartheid South Africa and should not be minimised in any serious account. Millions of black South Africans have acquired university degrees, professional positions, homes, businesses, vehicles, investments and access to consumer markets that were heavily restricted under apartheid. Black professionals now occupy senior positions across government, business, academia, medicine, law, finance, engineering, media and technology. Black entrepreneurship has expanded, and worker ownership schemes have introduced forms of participation that were rare before democracy. Government reported in 2024 that more than half a million workers had become owners through employee share ownership schemes. These developments demonstrate that the post-apartheid state has transformed real dimensions of economic life. Yet the rise of a black middle class should not be confused with the abolition of racialised wealth inequality. A middle class can grow substantially while the distribution of capital remains highly concentrated. Indeed, the emergence of black professionals and entrepreneurs may coexist with mass black unemployment and poverty. The relevant question is therefore whether the black middle class is becoming a broad foundation for intergenerational asset ownership or whether it remains a relatively narrow layer carrying the economic burdens of extended families still affected by structural unemployment and poverty.

The growth of black capitalism also raises difficult questions about the meaning of economic transformation. If the objective is simply to replace some white shareholders with black shareholders while leaving concentrated corporate structures unchanged, then transformation may alter the racial composition of ownership without fundamentally democratising economic power. Conversely, if black ownership becomes dispersed, productive and institutionally embedded, it can help reconstruct the social basis of capitalism. This distinction separates elite transformation from mass transformation. A small number of black billionaires or politically connected businesspeople can demonstrate that racial barriers have been penetrated, but their existence does not by itself prove that economic apartheid has been dismantled. The historical objective was broader: to enable ordinary black citizens to acquire land, capital, productive assets, education and opportunities for accumulation. This is why worker ownership, cooperative enterprise, community investment, black industrialisation and broad-based shareholding matter. President Ramaphosa's 2024 worker ownership address recognised that employee share ownership can move workers from being merely

wage earners to becoming participants in capital ownership. Such policies point toward a more democratic capitalism. Their success, however, depends upon whether ownership produces genuine economic voice, sustainable dividends and long-term asset accumulation rather than temporary or symbolic participation.

Black Economic Empowerment itself should therefore be examined with intellectual balance. It would be historically inaccurate to portray it as an empty political slogan because it has changed ownership, management, procurement and entrepreneurial opportunities in significant parts of the economy. Yet it would also be analytically weak to treat every empowerment transaction as evidence of broad-based liberation. The central weakness of some forms of empowerment has been the possibility of elite concentration, where a limited number of politically connected individuals accumulate opportunities while the majority of black South Africans remain outside productive ownership. This creates a difficult paradox: policies designed to correct historical exclusion can themselves generate new forms of inequality if benefits are captured by narrow networks. The answer cannot be to abandon transformation. It must be to democratise transformation. Broad-based empowerment should mean that workers, communities, small businesses, women, young entrepreneurs and ordinary households participate in ownership and value creation. The state's responsibility is therefore not simply to produce black faces in corporate boardrooms but to expand the ownership base of the economy. The question is whether economic transformation creates a larger number of citizens with productive assets or merely creates a new intermediary elite between concentrated capital and the broader population.

Finance is particularly important because ownership without financing capacity can remain dependent ownership. Many empowerment transactions require capital, and capital often comes from institutions already embedded within the existing financial system. This can create complicated structures in which nominal black ownership exists alongside substantial debt obligations. If the transaction succeeds, wealth can accumulate; if it fails, the ownership stake can disappear. Consequently, transformation requires not merely the redistribution of shares but the creation of independent financial capacity among historically excluded groups. This includes development finance, pension-fund participation, sovereign investment, cooperative banking, affordable credit, entrepreneurial support and the creation of investment institutions capable of building long-term black capital. The objective should be to create an indigenous capital-owning class that is not permanently dependent upon political patronage or external financial sponsors. In this sense, economic sovereignty requires financial sovereignty. A nation may possess political independence while its citizens remain structurally dependent upon capital controlled by a narrow domestic elite or external investors. The post-apartheid project therefore needs to be evaluated according to whether it has created institutions through which black South Africans can accumulate and reproduce capital independently over generations.

The persistence of economic apartheid can also be observed through intergenerational mobility. A genuinely transformed society should progressively weaken the relationship between the circumstances of birth and the economic destiny of adulthood. South Africa has not yet achieved this. The World Bank has found that circumstances such as race, location, parental education and family wealth strongly influence inequality of opportunity and that intergenerational mobility remains extremely low. This means that the democratic promise of equal opportunity remains incomplete. The child of a wealthy family can receive educational support, live in a well-resourced neighbourhood, inherit property, access networks and receive financial assistance when starting a business. The child of a poor household may possess equal constitutional rights while confronting

poor schooling, unemployment, inadequate transport, family dependency and the absence of capital. Both children may technically compete under the same law, but they do not compete from the same starting line. The central democratic task is therefore not to make outcomes identical but to prevent inherited racialised disadvantage from determining life chances to such an overwhelming degree. A society cannot claim full economic transformation while the social location of one's parents remains such a powerful predictor of one's future.

The spatial structure of apartheid intensifies this problem. Economic opportunity in South Africa is geographically concentrated, while the population remains spatially segregated. Many black communities remain distant from major employment centres and bear high transport costs simply to reach jobs. Time and money are therefore extracted from households before workers even arrive at workplaces. This creates a hidden economic tax on poverty. Wealthier households can live near employment, use private transport, access quality schools and participate in commercial networks. Poor households may spend hours travelling between townships and economic centres, reducing time available for education, childcare, entrepreneurship and community participation. The spatial question is consequently an economic question. Apartheid's geography continues to influence productivity, household costs and opportunity. The democratic state has invested heavily in housing and infrastructure, but the deeper transformation requires integrated urban planning, affordable public transport, mixed-income development and the decentralisation of economic opportunity. Until black citizens can live near productive economic centres rather than being spatially exiled from them, the economic consequences of apartheid will remain embedded in the physical geography of the republic.

The persistence of wealth inequality must also be distinguished from income inequality. Income is the flow of money received during a period; wealth is the stock of assets accumulated over time. This distinction is fundamental because a society can reduce income poverty without substantially transforming the distribution of wealth. Social grants, minimum wages and public services can improve living standards while ownership of land, shares, businesses and high-value property remains concentrated. The World Bank has emphasised precisely this point, describing South Africa's wealth inequality as even more extreme than its income inequality and reporting that the top ten percent own approximately 70.9 percent of household net wealth. Wealth determines resilience. A household with assets can survive unemployment, finance education, withstand emergencies and invest in new opportunities. A household without assets is vulnerable to every economic shock. This is why poverty reduction alone cannot constitute economic transformation. The post-apartheid state must ask who owns the productive assets that generate future income. Without changing that distribution, government may continuously redistribute income while leaving the underlying architecture of capital concentration largely intact.

The South African state has nevertheless achieved important redistributive successes that must be acknowledged. Social grants have become a critical mechanism for reducing extreme poverty and providing income security to millions of households. Public education, health services, subsidised housing, electricity expansion, water infrastructure and other programmes have materially improved the lives of millions of black citizens. Government reported in 2024 that social assistance reached more than 26 million people each month, while the national minimum wage introduced in 2019 immediately raised wages for more than six million workers. These achievements demonstrate that the democratic state has not simply abandoned the poor to the market. It has actively redistributed resources and expanded social citizenship. But redistribution and transformation are not identical. Redistribution can alleviate the consequences of inequality without necessarily changing the

ownership structures that generate it. The deeper objective must therefore be to combine social protection with asset transformation, productive employment, education, industrial development and broad-based ownership. Otherwise the state risks becoming a permanent compensatory mechanism for an economic structure it has not fully transformed.

The most difficult question concerns the relationship between the African National Congress and economic compromise. The ANC inherited an economy that was deeply integrated into global capitalism and dependent upon domestic corporate institutions, foreign investment and sophisticated financial markets. A sudden attempt to dismantle existing ownership structures could have generated capital flight, investment collapse and economic instability. The democratic leadership therefore faced a genuine strategic dilemma: how could it transform capitalism without destroying the productive capacity required to finance democracy itself? The negotiated settlement produced a political compromise in which property rights, constitutionalism and market institutions were preserved while the state pursued redistribution and transformation through regulation, public spending and empowerment policies. From one perspective, this was pragmatic statecraft. From another, it allowed historically concentrated economic power to survive in modified form. The ANC's economic strategy therefore cannot simply be described as betrayal or success. It was a compromise between revolutionary aspirations and the constraints of governing an economy whose productive assets were already concentrated. The historical question is whether that compromise was temporary and strategic or whether it gradually became an accommodation with the existing structure of economic power.

The Freedom Charter provides an important standard against which this compromise can be evaluated. Its famous economic vision was not simply about placing black individuals into existing elite positions. It articulated a broader conception of democratic ownership in which the wealth of the country would be shared by the people. The democratic state subsequently adopted policies that moved in this direction, but the economy did not become collectively or broadly owned. Instead, South Africa developed a mixed model combining state ownership, private corporations, black empowerment, social redistribution and international investment. This model has produced genuine social and economic gains, yet it has not eliminated concentrated ownership. The 2024 mining ownership figure of approximately 39 percent black participation demonstrates significant movement but also illustrates that transformation remains a process rather than a completed revolution. The deeper question is therefore whether the post-apartheid economic project should aim merely at racial inclusion within capitalism or at a more fundamental democratisation of capital. Pan-African political economy must take this question seriously because political independence without economic capacity has historically left African states vulnerable to external pressures and internal oligarchies.

Foreign capital adds another layer of complexity. South Africa cannot realistically isolate itself from international investment. Its economy requires capital, technology, markets and integration into global production networks. The problem is not foreign investment itself but the conditions under which investment operates. A democratic economic strategy must ensure that investment contributes to domestic productive capacity, employment, skills development, local ownership and technological advancement. Otherwise, capital can enter profitable sectors while leaving structural ownership patterns relatively unchanged. At the same time, attempts to transform ownership must preserve macroeconomic stability because instability disproportionately harms poor households. Inflation, unemployment, currency depreciation and declining investment do not hurt all citizens equally. Wealthier households often possess assets that hedge against economic shocks, while poor

households depend primarily upon wages and grants. Consequently, economic transformation requires a sophisticated balance between sovereignty and openness. The objective should not be autarky but strategic economic independence: the capacity of the democratic state and its citizens to determine the direction of development rather than merely reacting to the preferences of capital.

The persistence of economic apartheid is also visible in entrepreneurship. South Africa possesses extraordinary entrepreneurial energy among black citizens, particularly in townships and informal economies, yet many entrepreneurs remain excluded from high-value supply chains. Informal traders may generate income but lack access to commercial property, affordable credit, technology, procurement contracts and stable infrastructure. Small businesses often struggle to transition into medium and large enterprises because the economic ecosystem is dominated by established firms with greater capital and market access. Government's black industrialist programmes represent an important attempt to address this structural gap, and official figures indicate that around 1,000 black industrialists were supported in the five years preceding 2024. Yet the long-term objective should be to create institutions that allow black businesses to grow without indefinite dependence upon government programmes. A transformed economy should generate its own ecosystems of black-owned manufacturers, financiers, logistics companies, technology firms, agricultural enterprises and exporters. The ultimate measure of empowerment is therefore not the number of beneficiaries of a government scheme but the emergence of durable productive institutions capable of reproducing wealth independently across generations.

A further danger lies in confusing political representation with economic control. South Africa has achieved an extraordinary transformation in political representation. Black citizens occupy the presidency, parliament, provincial governments, municipalities, courts, universities and senior public institutions. Yet political office does not automatically translate into control over private capital. Government can legislate, tax, regulate and procure, but private corporations make investment decisions according to their ownership structures, boards, shareholders and market incentives. This creates a duality of power. The state possesses democratic legitimacy and substantial regulatory authority, while private capital possesses control over productive assets, investment flows, employment decisions and access to markets. Neither side completely controls the other. The central question of this book—who actually exercises power?—must therefore distinguish between constitutional power and structural economic power. Post-apartheid South Africa succeeded in democratising the former far more thoroughly than it democratised the latter. That does not mean private capital is inherently illegitimate; it means that democracy becomes incomplete when citizens possess political equality while the economic resources necessary to shape their lives remain highly concentrated.

This is why the concept of economic apartheid remains analytically useful, provided it is used carefully. It should not mean that apartheid literally continues unchanged. It does not. Nor should it imply that contemporary white citizens personally created every inequality that exists today. Rather, economic apartheid describes the persistence of institutional and material inequalities generated by a previous racial order whose effects survive through accumulated assets, spatial structures, educational disparities, occupational patterns and networks of capital. It is therefore a historical concept, not an accusation against individuals. The distinction is essential because serious scholarship must separate inherited structural advantage from personal culpability. A white South African born after 1994 did not personally create apartheid. But that person may inherit an asset, a location, an educational advantage or a network whose economic value was shaped by historical conditions. Similarly, a black South African born after 1994 did not personally experience every

apartheid law, but may inherit the consequences of dispossession, poor education, spatial exclusion and lack of family wealth. The democratic project must therefore address inherited structures without creating inherited guilt.

The achievements of post-apartheid transformation should consequently be measured against the extraordinary difficulty of the task. The democratic government did not merely inherit poverty; it inherited an entire economy structured by racial hierarchy. It had to expand social protection, build houses, provide services, transform the public sector, introduce employment equity, regulate corporate behaviour, promote black ownership, redistribute land, reform mining, expand education and maintain economic stability simultaneously. In several areas, the state achieved major advances. Government's own evidence indicates substantial growth in black mining ownership, black industrialists, worker ownership and farmland held by black South Africans. These achievements should be recognised because historical analysis becomes propaganda when it sees only failure. Yet the same evidence reveals the incompleteness of the transformation. If black ownership in mining is approximately 39 percent after twenty years of empowerment policy, that is significant progress but not evidence that economic power has been democratised throughout the sector. If around 25 percent of farmland is reported as black-owned, that is a major change but also means that the transformation target remains unfinished. The correct intellectual position is therefore neither celebration without criticism nor criticism without recognition.

The deeper problem is that South Africa's economic growth model has not generated sufficient employment to absorb the population entering the labour market. The World Bank has recently noted that poverty remains widespread and that roughly 37 million South Africans, or about 62 percent of the population, were living below its $6.85-per-day threshold around mid-2024; it also reported that approximately half of the country's wealth remained concentrated in the hands of the top one percent. These figures reveal the structural limits of redistribution without sufficiently rapid inclusive growth. A democratic government can redistribute grants and provide public services, but long-term emancipation requires productive employment and asset accumulation. The objective cannot be to manage poverty indefinitely. It must be to reduce the number of people who need poverty relief because they possess jobs, enterprises, land, skills, savings and productive assets. This requires industrial policy, infrastructure, reliable electricity, functioning ports and railways, technological development, agricultural transformation and access to finance. Economic justice is therefore inseparable from economic growth—but the question is what kind of growth, who owns the productive assets behind it, and who captures the resulting value.

The crisis of economic transformation also exposes the limitations of purely racial approaches to inequality. Race remains indispensable because apartheid racialised opportunity, but class increasingly determines how benefits and disadvantages are distributed within racial groups. A wealthy black executive and a poor black unemployed youth do not experience the economy in the same way. Similarly, a wealthy white investor and a poor white worker occupy very different positions. The future of transformation must therefore become both anti-racist and class-conscious. It must dismantle racialised historical privilege while preventing the creation of a narrow black elite that reproduces extreme inequality under a different racial composition. This is the point at which Pan-African economic thought can make an important contribution. Liberation should not merely produce African participation in an inherited economic hierarchy; it should expand the number of Africans who possess productive capital and decision-making capacity. The goal should be an economy in which race ceases to predict wealth because historical privilege has been progressively neutralised and productive opportunity has been democratised. Economic transformation should

therefore be judged by the expansion of ownership, dignity, capability and productive citizenship across the entire population.

The most fundamental challenge is thus to move from redistribution to accumulation. Redistribution asks how existing national income should be shared. Accumulation asks who possesses the assets that generate future national income. South Africa has become increasingly sophisticated in redistribution through grants, public services, progressive taxation and labour protections, but the accumulation question remains much harder. Who owns the farms that produce food? Who owns the mines that produce minerals? Who owns the companies that manufacture goods? Who owns the financial institutions that allocate credit? Who owns the technology platforms that increasingly structure economic life? Who owns the commercial property through which businesses operate? Who owns the pension and investment capital that finances corporate expansion? Who possesses the knowledge and networks that determine access to high-value opportunities? These are questions about structural power. Until black South Africans broadly possess productive assets capable of generating and reproducing wealth, economic equality will remain vulnerable. A democratic state can distribute money today, but ownership determines who possesses economic power tomorrow.

The answer, therefore, cannot be a simplistic call for the state to seize everything or for the market to be left untouched. Both extremes misunderstand the complexity of South Africa's political economy. The state must remain a powerful developmental institution capable of regulating capital, redistributing land, enforcing competition, expanding education, financing industrialisation and correcting historical exclusion. But the state must also avoid replacing private racial oligarchy with politically connected state oligarchy. Economic democracy requires accountable institutions, transparent procurement, competitive markets and broad-based ownership. Corruption and state capture demonstrate what happens when political authority becomes a mechanism for private accumulation. The lesson is not that government should withdraw from economic transformation; it is that government must transform the economy through institutions strong enough to prevent patronage from becoming the new mechanism of accumulation. The post-apartheid state therefore needs both developmental capacity and democratic accountability. It must challenge concentrated capital without creating concentrated political patronage. This is the difficult balance between economic sovereignty and constitutional democracy.

The unfinished character of economic transformation should not, however, lead to historical pessimism. The South African experience demonstrates that structural change is possible. The abolition of apartheid laws, expansion of political rights, growth of black professional and entrepreneurial classes, increased black participation in mining, expansion of social protection, growth of worker ownership and redistribution of substantial agricultural land all demonstrate that institutions can be changed. The problem is speed, scale and depth. Economic structures accumulated over centuries cannot reasonably be expected to disappear within three decades, but neither can the passage of time become an excuse for indefinite postponement. The moral legitimacy of the democratic project depends upon its capacity to convert formal freedom into material opportunity. The Constitution created the political foundation for this transformation. The next phase must deepen the economic foundation. That means broadening ownership, improving education, expanding productive employment, integrating spatially divided communities, increasing access to finance, supporting black industrialisation and ensuring that economic transformation reaches ordinary households rather than remaining concentrated among elites.

The central conclusion of this chapter is therefore deliberately uncomfortable: South Africa abolished apartheid as a political regime much more decisively than it abolished apartheid's economic consequences. The ANC and the democratic state achieved an extraordinary political revolution, but the economic revolution remained partial. The state acquired democratic legitimacy, institutions were transformed, racial exclusion was outlawed, millions of citizens gained services and opportunities previously denied to them, and significant progress occurred in black ownership across strategic sectors. Yet the distribution of wealth remains extraordinarily concentrated; land remains historically unequal; property and financial capital remain major sources of inherited advantage; unemployment remains devastating; and race continues to correlate strongly with economic opportunity. The World Bank's evidence that the top ten percent own about 70.9 percent of household net wealth, combined with official evidence of persistent racial differences in income and land ownership, demonstrates why the economic question cannot be declared settled. The historical verdict must therefore be balanced: the ANC did not fail completely, nor did it complete its revolutionary mission. It democratised political power while only partially democratising economic power. That unresolved contradiction is perhaps the defining feature of post-apartheid South Africa.

The future of South African democracy will ultimately depend upon whether this contradiction can be resolved without destroying the constitutional order or productive economy that democracy created. The task is not to punish historical beneficiaries as individuals but to dismantle inherited systems of unequal opportunity. It is not to create racial hostility but to eliminate the material structures that make race such a powerful predictor of wealth. It is not to abolish private enterprise but to democratise access to productive capital. It is not to replace white economic elites with black economic elites while leaving the majority excluded, but to expand ownership so substantially that economic citizenship becomes a reality for millions. A genuinely post-apartheid economy would be one in which a child's economic destiny is no longer strongly determined by the racial and class position of his or her parents; in which land ownership is broad and productive; in which black businesses can scale into major corporations; in which workers possess meaningful stakes in the enterprises they sustain; in which finance is accessible beyond established networks; in which education creates genuine mobility; and in which political democracy is matched by economic agency. Only then will South Africa be able to say that it did more than change who governs. It will have changed who owns, who produces, who accumulates, who decides and who benefits from the wealth of the nation. The unfinished struggle is therefore not merely for redistribution. It is for the democratisation of economic power itself. That is the deeper meaning of economic freedom after apartheid.

PART III — LAND, CAPITAL AND THE UNFINISHED LIBERATION

Chapter Six

The Land Question: Who Owns South Africa?

Land is more than property. In the history of South Africa, land has been the material foundation upon which sovereignty, racial hierarchy, accumulation and political authority were constructed. Colonial conquest did not merely transfer territory from African societies to European settlers; it reorganised the relationship between people, production and political power. The dispossession of African communities created a political economy in which ownership of land became inseparable from access to wealth, credit, agricultural markets and social status. Apartheid subsequently institutionalised and intensified that process through territorial segregation, forced removals, racial zoning and restrictions on African landholding. The democratic transition therefore inherited not simply unequal ownership, but an entire spatial and economic order in which historical possession had been converted into contemporary capital. The land question after 1994 must consequently be understood as a question of democratic transformation rather than merely agricultural administration. If political liberation transferred formal sovereignty to the majority while leaving major concentrations of productive assets substantially intact, then the relationship between political democracy and economic democracy remains incomplete. The central question is therefore not simply how much land has been redistributed, but who possesses the capacity to determine the purposes for which land is used, who captures its economic value, who controls agricultural production, and who can transmit land-based wealth to future generations. The deeper issue is whether democratic citizenship can be fully realised when the material foundations of citizenship remain profoundly unequal. In this sense, the land question is one of the clearest places where the achievements and limitations of post-apartheid transformation meet.

The historical origins of South Africa's land inequality are well established, although their contemporary implications remain contested. The 1913 Natives Land Act is particularly important because it legally consolidated a racial geography in which Africans were restricted to a small fraction of the country's land while white agricultural ownership was protected and expanded. The 1936 Native Trust and Land Act subsequently increased the area theoretically available to Africans, but did not dismantle the underlying system of racial territorial inequality. These measures were not isolated administrative mistakes. They formed part of a broader colonial political economy in which African communities were progressively separated from independent access to land and incorporated into an economy dependent upon migrant labour, wage employment and commercial agriculture controlled overwhelmingly by white interests. Land dispossession therefore served two functions simultaneously: it removed Africans from productive resources and created a labour reservoir for mines, farms and emerging industries. The political economy of apartheid cannot be understood without recognising this relationship between landlessness and labour dependence. When African households lost productive land, their economic autonomy was weakened; when their economic autonomy was weakened, wage labour became increasingly necessary; and when labour became necessary, employers gained greater structural power over African livelihoods. The land question was therefore always simultaneously a labour question. It was also a question of capital formation because land generated collateral, income, inheritance and access to investment opportunities. A family denied secure ownership of productive assets was disadvantaged not only in the present generation but across generations. The legacy of dispossession consequently survives beyond the legal institutions that created it.

Apartheid transformed this historical inequality into a comprehensive system of territorial engineering. Rural reserves, commercial farming districts, townships, homelands and urban settlements were organised through legislation designed to reproduce racial hierarchy spatially. The Group Areas Act, forced removals and homeland policies fractured communities and disconnected millions of people from land that had previously supported social, cultural and economic life. Urbanisation did not erase this history because the migrant worker economy often reproduced dependence rather than genuine economic emancipation. The result was a country in which race and geography became deeply correlated with access to productive assets. White-owned commercial farms were connected to financial institutions, agricultural markets, infrastructure and state-supported agricultural development, while many black rural communities confronted overcrowding, insecure tenure and limited infrastructure. The contemporary land debate therefore becomes distorted when it is presented as though unequal ownership emerged from neutral market transactions. Markets operate within historical institutional conditions. If one group begins with legally protected ownership, accumulated wealth, established financial relationships and inherited productive assets while another begins with dispossession, restricted mobility and limited capital, subsequent market outcomes cannot simply be interpreted as evidence of equal opportunity. The market can reproduce inequalities whose original causes were political. This is why land redistribution remains a democratic question. The issue is not whether private property has a legitimate place in a constitutional democracy; it is whether constitutional democracy can tolerate the indefinite reproduction of an ownership structure substantially shaped by racial conquest and legislation.

The 2017 Land Audit became politically significant precisely because it provided quantitative evidence for an inequality that had long been visible historically and geographically. According to the audit, white individuals accounted for approximately 72 percent of agricultural land held by individual owners, while black African individuals accounted for approximately 4 percent. The figures require careful interpretation because the audit measured particular categories of registered ownership rather than providing a complete description of every form of landholding in South Africa. It also cannot simply be read as a census of all land, because state land, communal land, trusts, companies and other legal entities create complexities in ownership classification. Nevertheless, its significance is substantial. It demonstrated that the end of apartheid had not produced anything approaching an equal distribution of individually owned agricultural land. The persistence of such an ownership pattern more than two decades after democratic transition raises a profound question: what does political equality mean when access to one of the country's most historically significant productive assets remains radically unequal? The answer cannot be reduced to the claim that constitutional rights have failed. South Africa's democratic Constitution established extraordinarily important protections for equality, dignity, property rights and restitution. Yet constitutional recognition and material transformation are not identical processes. A constitution can abolish racial legal discrimination without automatically abolishing the economic structures produced by centuries of racialised accumulation. The land audit therefore exposes the difference between political decolonisation and economic decolonisation.

The African National Congress entered government in 1994 with a political tradition that understood land redistribution as part of the broader transformation of colonial and apartheid society. The Freedom Charter declared that the land should be shared among those who work it, reflecting a conception of liberation in which political freedom was inseparable from economic justice. Yet the post-1994 government confronted an extraordinary dilemma. It had to transform ownership without provoking economic collapse, protect constitutional democracy while reversing

historical injustice, reassure investors while expanding black ownership, and reconstruct rural communities after decades of apartheid engineering. These contradictions were not imaginary. They represented the difficult political terrain of transforming a capitalist economy whose property relations had been profoundly racialised. The ANC's approach therefore evolved around land restitution, redistribution and tenure reform, supplemented by broader black economic empowerment policies. The constitutional framework, particularly Section 25, sought to balance property protection with the public interest and the need to redress past dispossession. This represented a deliberate attempt to avoid both unrestricted confiscation and permanent protection of historical privilege. The problem was that the institutional capacity necessary to implement this compromise was often weaker than the political expectations surrounding it. Land reform became trapped between a constitutional commitment to transformation and an administrative system struggling to deliver it. The result was a policy field in which expectations rose faster than implementation.

The first major pillar, land restitution, sought to address communities and individuals who had been dispossessed after the 1913 cut-off date through racially discriminatory legislation. Restitution was therefore not simply redistribution based on poverty; it was an attempt to recognise specific historical claims. This distinction is crucial because land reform contains different principles of justice. Restitution asks what was taken and from whom. Redistribution asks how land should be allocated in a society where ownership is historically unequal. Tenure reform asks how people who occupy land without secure ownership should obtain enforceable rights. These objectives overlap but cannot be collapsed into one policy. A community may have a legitimate restitution claim without possessing the capital necessary to farm commercially. A landless rural household may require access to land even though its ancestors cannot establish a specific restitution claim. A farm worker may live on agricultural land for decades without possessing formal title. A communal community may possess customary rights that do not fit neatly into individual freehold ownership. The complexity of these relationships explains why land reform cannot be solved through a single numerical target. The central question is how different forms of land justice can be combined into a coherent democratic strategy.

The second pillar, redistribution, was intended to broaden access to agricultural land beyond those able to acquire it through the market. Yet the willingness of the state to intervene was shaped by the broader macroeconomic settlement of the democratic transition. The post-apartheid government did not nationalise the commanding heights of the economy, nor did it abolish private property as the foundation of commercial production. Instead, it sought to transform ownership incrementally while preserving economic stability. The resulting willing-buyer, willing-seller framework became particularly controversial. Supporters argued that voluntary transactions respected property rights and avoided coercive expropriation. Critics argued that a market-based model placed the burden of historical correction upon a state attempting to purchase assets at market prices from owners whose wealth had itself been accumulated within a historically unequal system. If land prices reflected scarcity, established infrastructure, financial access and productive potential, then poor beneficiaries could not easily compete with established commercial owners. The market therefore risked reproducing the very inequality that redistribution was supposed to overcome. The disagreement was not merely ideological. It concerned whether historical injustice could realistically be corrected through institutions designed primarily for ordinary market exchange.

This dilemma exposes a broader paradox of post-apartheid transformation. Political liberation created a government with democratic legitimacy, but democratic government inherited an

economy in which private ownership remained a major source of structural power. The state could legislate, tax, regulate and redistribute, but it did not automatically possess unlimited fiscal resources or administrative capacity to transform every asset relationship. Land became one of the arenas in which the limits of state power became visible. The government could declare ambitious redistribution objectives, but implementation depended upon budgets, land valuation, beneficiary selection, institutional competence, agricultural support, infrastructure and political coordination. Where these capacities were weak, land reform could become bureaucratic rather than transformative. Farms could be transferred without adequate post-settlement support. Beneficiaries could receive land without irrigation, finance, equipment or market access. Communities could win restitution claims but face unresolved disputes about governance and development. In this way, the question changed from "Who owns the land?" to the equally important question "What does ownership enable?" Ownership without productive capability can remain economically fragile, while productive capability without secure ownership can remain vulnerable to dispossession. Genuine land reform therefore requires both redistribution of assets and redistribution of the institutional capabilities necessary to make those assets economically meaningful.

The ANC's record on land consequently contains both genuine achievements and serious failures. It would be intellectually dishonest to claim that nothing changed after 1994. Millions of hectares have been transferred through restitution and redistribution programmes, customary tenure has received greater legal recognition, and the state has attempted to expand black participation in agriculture and rural economies. Democratic institutions have also created legal mechanisms through which communities can challenge historical dispossession. Yet it would be equally misleading to present these interventions as having fundamentally transformed the structure of land ownership. The persistence of extreme disparities indicates that reform has not matched the scale of the historical problem. The ANC succeeded in creating the legal and political possibility of land transformation, but struggled to translate that possibility into a sufficiently rapid restructuring of ownership and rural economic power. This is one of the central contradictions of the post-apartheid project: the liberation movement acquired political authority but inherited economic structures whose transformation required sustained institutional capacity, capital and political courage. The result has been a partial revolution in political sovereignty accompanied by a much slower revolution in material ownership.

The political explosiveness of land arises partly because land operates simultaneously as material resource and historical symbol. For black South Africans, the demand for land often represents more than an agricultural claim. It represents the demand to reverse a history in which political domination was physically imposed through the seizure of territory. Land carries memories of dispossession, forced removals, broken communities and lost inheritance. It therefore cannot be treated solely as a commodity. At the same time, for existing commercial farmers and property owners, land represents livelihood, accumulated investment, family history and economic security. These interests cannot simply be dismissed as illegitimate because the broader ownership structure is historically unequal. A democratic land policy must therefore distinguish between the legitimacy of correcting structural injustice and the legitimacy of protecting people against arbitrary state action. The challenge is to construct institutions capable of achieving redistribution without reproducing new forms of insecurity, political patronage or economic destruction. A serious African land policy must be transformative without being reckless, historically conscious without becoming racially vindictive, and economically productive without protecting inherited privilege indefinitely.

This is where the politics of race becomes unavoidable. South Africa's land debate is frequently framed as though mentioning race itself is divisive. Yet the racial structure of land ownership is historically documented. Race became embedded in property relations through explicit legislation, and contemporary inequality cannot be understood without recognising that history. The answer, however, cannot be to essentialise economic identity by treating every white landowner as personally responsible for apartheid or every black claimant as automatically entitled to any particular property. Collective historical responsibility and individual legal responsibility are different concepts. The objective of transformation should be to dismantle racialised structures, not to replace one racial hierarchy with another. This distinction is fundamental to a mature Pan-African analysis. Decolonisation should expand the substantive freedom of African people without reducing justice to racial revenge. The objective is to create a society in which race no longer predicts access to land, wealth and productive power. Land reform therefore succeeds not when one racial group becomes permanently dominant over another, but when historical racial privilege ceases to determine the distribution of economic opportunity.

The deeper economic question is who possesses the ability to turn land into capital. Land ownership can provide collateral for loans, generate rental income, support agricultural production, increase household wealth and create an inheritance for future generations. Consequently, unequal land ownership produces cumulative inequalities. A family possessing productive land may finance education, diversify into business, withstand economic shocks and pass assets to its children. A family without productive property may remain dependent on wages, social grants or informal economic activity. The difference compounds across generations. This is why land reform cannot be assessed solely by counting hectares transferred. Ten thousand hectares transferred into economically unproductive arrangements may have less transformative impact than a smaller number of strategically located properties connected to infrastructure, finance, irrigation and markets. The central measure must therefore be the extent to which land reform changes the distribution of productive capacity. If the beneficiaries remain unable to generate sustainable income, land redistribution may produce legal ownership without economic emancipation. Conversely, if beneficiaries acquire land and build sustainable enterprises, the transfer can become a foundation for long-term black capital formation.

This brings the chapter to the question of agricultural capital. South Africa's commercial agricultural sector is sophisticated, technologically advanced and deeply integrated into domestic and global markets. Large-scale commercial farming developed under a history of state support, favourable credit arrangements, infrastructure provision, agricultural research and market access. The contemporary success of many commercial farms cannot therefore be attributed simply to individual entrepreneurial talent detached from history. Productive efficiency matters, but institutions matter too. The question is whether the capabilities that enabled commercial agriculture to become successful can be democratised. If black farmers are expected to enter the market without equivalent access to finance, extension services, storage, logistics, insurance, technology and markets, then redistribution will be structurally handicapped. The objective should not be to destroy productive agriculture but to broaden ownership and participation in its value chains. A genuinely transformative land programme would therefore connect land redistribution to agricultural finance, agro-processing, logistics, research, irrigation, cooperative development and market access. The land question is ultimately a value-chain question.

There is also a distinction between land ownership and control over land-based economic systems. A person may own a farm while suppliers, banks, processors, retailers and exporters control much

of the value generated from agricultural production. In this sense, land reform cannot be separated from concentration elsewhere in the economy. If new black farmers become dependent upon dominant input suppliers, financiers and buyers, ownership may change without the structure of economic power changing sufficiently. This is the broader lesson of post-apartheid transformation: formal ownership is important, but ownership alone does not exhaust power. Power also resides in access to finance, technology, information, infrastructure, markets and political networks. The ANC's black economic empowerment project encountered similar difficulties in other sectors, where changes in shareholding did not necessarily produce broad-based economic control. Land reform risks repeating that pattern unless beneficiaries become capable of exercising power across the agricultural value chain. The real test is therefore whether redistribution creates independent black economic agency rather than merely transferring assets into precarious ownership.

The rural economy reveals another dimension of the problem. Land redistribution is frequently discussed as though its principal beneficiaries should be commercial farmers. Yet rural South Africa contains farm workers, labour tenants, communal land users, informal settlers, subsistence producers, traditional authorities and households dependent on multiple livelihoods. Their interests are not identical. Farm workers may seek secure housing and tenure rather than ownership of commercial farms. Communal residents may require stronger customary rights without necessarily demanding individual title. Emerging farmers may need commercial land and capital. Young people may require access to land for new enterprises rather than traditional agriculture. A successful policy must therefore recognise plural forms of land use. The obsession with a single ownership model can obscure the diversity of rural realities. The central democratic principle should be secure, meaningful and economically productive rights over land, adapted to different social circumstances. Land justice is not necessarily synonymous with universal private title.

The issue of communal land raises particularly difficult questions about gender, customary authority and democratic accountability. Traditional communities possess legitimate historical institutions, but customary governance can sometimes coexist uneasily with constitutional commitments to individual equality and democratic participation. Women may face weaker practical control over land despite constitutional equality, while young people may find themselves excluded from decision-making structures dominated by elders. If land reform transfers authority from the state to traditional institutions without establishing adequate accountability, the result may simply relocate power rather than democratise it. A Pan-African approach should therefore neither romanticise customary authority nor dismiss it as inherently backward. African institutions must be understood historically and reformed democratically. The objective should be to preserve legitimate communal relationships while guaranteeing equal rights, transparent governance and meaningful participation. Land decolonisation must not create new internal forms of domination within African communities.

The question of women is particularly important because land ownership has historically been mediated through patriarchal structures as well as racial ones. A land reform programme that increases black ownership while leaving women dependent upon male relatives would represent an incomplete form of transformation. Economic emancipation requires that women possess enforceable rights to land, inheritance, productive resources and decision-making. This is not an imported add-on to the land question. African women have historically performed substantial agricultural labour while frequently possessing weaker formal control over productive assets. Correcting racial inequality without correcting gendered inequality can therefore reproduce internal hierarchies. The democratic land question must ask not only whether Africans own land, but which Africans own it, under what legal conditions, with what rights, and with what capacity to make

decisions. The ultimate objective should be broad-based social ownership rather than the creation of a new narrow class of black landlords.

Another structural issue is urban land. The South African land question is often reduced to commercial agriculture and rural redistribution, yet urban land is central to wealth and opportunity. Housing markets, access to well-located land, transport infrastructure and municipal planning determine whether people can reach jobs, schools and economic opportunities. Apartheid deliberately placed black communities on the urban periphery, producing spatial inequality that persists today. A household may possess a formal house but remain economically disadvantaged because the property is located far from employment centres and has limited market value. Conversely, well-located urban property can appreciate dramatically and become an important source of intergenerational wealth. Urban land reform must therefore address spatial apartheid, affordable housing, informal settlements and access to economically valuable locations. If land transformation focuses exclusively on farms while urban land values remain concentrated, the broader property structure will remain unequal. The unfinished land question is consequently rural and urban simultaneously.

The persistence of spatial inequality demonstrates why land cannot be separated from infrastructure. Land becomes economically valuable partly because roads, railways, electricity, water systems, schools, hospitals, telecommunications and commercial centres connect it to wider economic networks. Apartheid invested unevenly in these networks according to racial priorities, and democratic reconstruction has not eliminated all of the inherited spatial inequalities. A newly redistributed farm without reliable roads or irrigation may have limited productive value. A township house far from economic centres may provide shelter but limited wealth creation. A peri-urban plot without secure services may remain economically precarious. Land reform must therefore be integrated with infrastructure planning. Otherwise the state risks redistributing geographical space without redistributing the economic opportunities attached to that space. The objective should be to transform the geography of opportunity itself.

The role of the state is consequently central. The state is the only institution with the democratic mandate and fiscal capacity to coordinate land redistribution at national scale. Yet state power must be exercised transparently. Land reform becomes vulnerable to corruption when beneficiary selection is opaque, when politically connected individuals receive preferential access, or when public land is allocated through patronage. The danger is especially acute because land is scarce, valuable and politically symbolic. If redistribution becomes a mechanism through which a small politically connected elite acquires large assets, the policy may deepen popular cynicism. The question then shifts from white ownership to elite ownership. A genuine liberation project must reject both. The objective is not simply to change the racial composition of a property-owning elite but to broaden economic power throughout society. The democratic state must therefore establish transparent land registers, public allocation criteria, independent oversight, community participation and mechanisms for challenging abuse.

This issue exposes one of the most important compromises of the post-apartheid settlement: the tension between mass transformation and elite accommodation. The ANC inherited a political economy in which concentrated private capital possessed substantial influence. Rather than fundamentally restructuring all ownership relations, the democratic state often sought negotiated incorporation of black elites into existing economic structures. Black Economic Empowerment became one of the principal mechanisms through which this occurred. The strategy produced

important black participation in corporate ownership and management, but it also generated criticism that transformation disproportionately benefited a relatively small politically connected class. Land reform faces the same danger. If redistribution produces a narrow group of wealthy black landowners while millions of poor Africans remain landless or insecurely housed, the racial composition of ownership may change without the social distribution of power changing sufficiently. The question therefore becomes whether transformation is producing mass economic citizenship or merely elite substitution.

The concept of an African capitalist class is not inherently contradictory to Pan-Africanism. Indeed, broad-based African capital formation can be essential to overcoming colonial economic dependence. The problem arises when black capitalism becomes detached from social transformation and reproduces concentrated accumulation without expanding productive opportunities. The historical objective of liberation was not simply to create African faces within inherited structures of wealth. It was to expand the economic sovereignty of the African majority. Land can play a crucial role in that process because it provides a productive asset capable of supporting agriculture, housing, enterprise and community development. But this requires a land policy designed around broad-based ownership and productive use rather than politically connected accumulation. The question is therefore not whether black ownership is desirable; it is whether black ownership is sufficiently broad, productive and socially transformative.

The debate over expropriation without compensation must be situated within this broader structural analysis. Supporters of expropriation argue that compensation can make transformation prohibitively expensive and that the constitutional framework permits stronger intervention in the public interest. Critics warn that poorly designed expropriation could undermine property rights, agricultural investment, financial stability and constitutional certainty. Both concerns deserve serious consideration. A mature policy should reject simplistic claims that expropriation automatically constitutes either liberation or catastrophe. The relevant questions are institutional: Which land should be prioritised? Under what circumstances? What legal safeguards should apply? How should historical injustice, public interest and economic sustainability be balanced? How can the state prevent politically motivated seizure? How can it accelerate redistribution without destroying productive capacity? The constitutional debate is therefore less about whether property rights should exist and more about what kind of property regime is compatible with substantive equality.

The principle of compensation itself requires historical and economic analysis. If the state purchases land at full market value, it may effectively use public resources to reproduce the financial value of assets whose historical appreciation occurred within a racialised property system. Yet compensation can also protect citizens from arbitrary deprivation and help maintain economic confidence. The solution need not be an absolute principle in either direction. Different categories of land may justify different approaches under constitutional and statutory law. Abandoned land, illegally acquired public land, land obtained through state subsidy, underutilised land, land held purely for speculation and highly productive farms may present different policy considerations. A sophisticated land regime should therefore distinguish rather than generalise. Transformation requires precision. The objective should be to identify where public intervention can achieve the greatest social benefit while minimising unnecessary economic disruption.

One of the greatest weaknesses of the land debate is its tendency to substitute rhetoric for institutional design. Political speeches can generate enormous expectations, but land cannot be

redistributed through rhetoric. It requires cadastral information, valuation systems, legal adjudication, financial mechanisms, beneficiary identification, agricultural support and long-term monitoring. Where these institutions are weak, even politically courageous legislation can fail. The history of land reform demonstrates that implementation capacity is as important as political intention. The ANC government often articulated transformative goals but struggled to create institutions capable of executing them consistently. This gap between promise and implementation contributed to growing frustration among communities and became fertile ground for populist political mobilisation. The danger is that every failure becomes evidence that constitutional democracy itself is incapable of delivering justice, when the deeper problem may be institutional weakness and insufficient political prioritisation.

The land question also exposes the relationship between democracy and time. Historical dispossession occurred over generations, while democratic governments are expected to produce visible transformation within electoral cycles. The political incentives therefore encourage governments to announce ambitious targets while the institutional process of reform remains slow. Communities that have waited decades for restitution may understandably experience administrative delays as another form of injustice. Yet accelerated redistribution without proper planning can create new failures. The state therefore faces a temporal dilemma: justice demands urgency, while sustainable transformation demands institutional preparation. The solution is not indefinite delay but a credible, transparent timetable supported by measurable milestones. Communities should know what claims are being processed, why delays occur, what resources are available and what outcomes are expected. Democratic legitimacy depends upon accountability for both action and inaction.

There is also a generational dimension. South Africa's young people inherited a democracy without inheriting equivalent economic assets. Many young Africans live in urban areas and may have limited direct connection to agriculture, but they remain affected by land inequality through housing costs, unemployment, spatial exclusion and intergenerational wealth disparities. Land reform should therefore not be designed exclusively around older generations with historical claims. A future-oriented land policy must consider how land can become a platform for youth enterprise, agro-processing, renewable energy, housing, technology and rural industrialisation. Young Africans should not inherit a political discourse about land without inheriting meaningful economic opportunities connected to it. If land reform is to contribute to national development, it must connect historical justice to future production.

Food security adds another layer of urgency. South Africa possesses a highly developed agricultural sector capable of supplying domestic and international markets. Land redistribution must therefore avoid creating a false opposition between justice and food security. The real question is whether food security can be maintained while ownership becomes more inclusive. There is no inherent reason why black ownership must mean lower productivity. Countries can combine broad-based ownership with advanced agriculture if they invest in training, research, finance and infrastructure. The challenge is transition management. New farmers require support during the period between acquisition and commercial viability. Cooperative models, public-private partnerships, agricultural development finance and producer organisations can reduce these risks. The objective should be to build a new generation of competitive African farmers and agribusiness owners rather than treating beneficiaries merely as recipients of land.

The agricultural value chain also reveals how economic power can remain outside direct democratic control. Even if land ownership changes, major economic decisions may still be influenced by banks, agribusiness corporations, processors, retailers and international markets. These institutions determine access to capital, inputs, distribution channels and prices. Thus, land reform without market reform may leave beneficiaries economically dependent. This is a critical lesson from the wider post-apartheid economy. Structural power is not always located in the visible ownership of factories or farms. It can reside in networks of finance, logistics, technology and market access. Democratic transformation must therefore ask who controls the infrastructure through which land generates value. Without this wider analysis, land reform can become a redistribution of assets without a redistribution of economic sovereignty.

The question of international capital is equally important. South African agriculture operates within global commodity markets and depends on international prices, export demand, imported inputs and financial conditions. This creates opportunities but also vulnerabilities. A transformation programme that ignores international market dynamics could expose emerging farmers to severe shocks. Yet international integration should not become an excuse for preserving inherited ownership. The objective should be to build domestic capabilities that allow South African producers, including new black producers, to participate competitively in global markets. Agro-processing is particularly important because raw agricultural commodities often generate less value than processed products. If land reform is connected to processing industries, logistics and export infrastructure, redistributed land can contribute to industrialisation rather than merely primary production.

The land question therefore belongs within the broader Pan-African question of economic sovereignty. Across Africa, colonial economies frequently organised land, minerals and labour around external accumulation. Political independence transferred formal state sovereignty but did not always dismantle economic dependency. South Africa represents one of the continent's most sophisticated examples of this contradiction. It possesses substantial productive capacity, advanced financial institutions and globally competitive corporations, yet its historical racial inequalities remain exceptionally deep. Land is one of the places where the contradiction becomes visible. A democratic state can possess sovereignty over territory while large portions of productive land remain concentrated in ownership patterns shaped by colonial and apartheid history. Pan-Africanism therefore requires more than continental solidarity and diplomatic cooperation. It requires a political economy capable of expanding African control over productive resources while maintaining institutions that support prosperity, rights and accountable government.

This does not mean that every African country should adopt identical land policies. Historical circumstances differ. Zimbabwe, Namibia, Kenya and South Africa have distinct colonial histories, property systems and agricultural structures. Comparative African experience can nevertheless provide useful lessons. Zimbabwe demonstrates both the political necessity of addressing extreme land inequality and the dangers of weak institutional implementation, economic disruption and polarised politics. Namibia illustrates the persistence of colonial land concentration despite independence. Kenya demonstrates the complexity of land ownership, ethnicity, settlement and political mobilisation. South Africa must learn from these experiences without mechanically importing their policies. The central principle should be that land reform requires both historical legitimacy and institutional competence. Without legitimacy, it becomes contested. Without competence, it becomes unstable.

The emotional force of the land question should therefore be recognised rather than dismissed. Communities that were forcibly removed from productive land cannot be expected to view property purely through abstract economic theory. At the same time, a democratic society cannot govern effectively through historical emotion alone. Justice must become institutional. The challenge is to convert legitimate historical grievances into policies capable of producing measurable improvements in ownership, livelihoods and opportunity. This is where political leadership matters. Leaders must explain why reform is necessary while also explaining how it will work. They must resist both the politics of complacency and the politics of reckless mobilisation. The land question demands statesmanship because it sits at the intersection of history, race, capital, agriculture, law and national identity.

The ANC's compromises become especially visible when examining the relationship between land and broader economic policy. The movement entered government with a radical liberation tradition but operated within a global capitalist economy. The adoption of macroeconomic policies emphasising fiscal discipline, investment confidence and market stability narrowed the range of immediate economic interventions available to the state. This was not simply betrayal; it was a strategic response to real constraints. Yet strategies have consequences. A government that prioritises macroeconomic stability can preserve the capacity to govern, but it may also slow redistributive transformation. Conversely, a government that pursues rapid redistribution without protecting productive capacity can undermine the very economic base required to sustain social programmes. The central question is therefore whether South Africa found the correct balance. The evidence from land inequality suggests that whatever stability was achieved, it did not produce sufficiently rapid structural transformation in ownership.

The post-apartheid settlement can consequently be described as a political revolution constrained by an economic compromise. The ANC achieved what apartheid's rulers had insisted was impossible: universal political citizenship, constitutional democracy, majority government and a legal order founded on equality. That achievement should never be minimised. Yet the political transfer of power did not automatically transfer productive assets. The new state inherited private property relations whose origins lay partly in racial conquest. The ANC attempted to transform those relations gradually rather than overturn them entirely. Land became the clearest test of that strategy. The question is whether gradualism can correct inequalities whose reproduction is itself gradual and cumulative. Every year that ownership remains concentrated is another year in which capital, income and inheritance continue to accumulate unevenly. Reform therefore has a compounding dimension. Delay is not neutral because existing owners continue to benefit from appreciation, income and intergenerational transfer.

This is why land inequality should be understood as a form of structural power rather than merely a distributional statistic. A person who owns productive land possesses options that a landless person does not. They can borrow, invest, lease, produce, sell or bequeath. Ownership therefore creates bargaining power. In a democratic economy, bargaining power influences wages, political influence, access to finance and social mobility. If racial groups possess dramatically unequal levels of such power, then formal political equality coexists with substantive economic inequality. This is not unique to South Africa, but South Africa's history makes the contradiction unusually stark. The land question exposes the limits of a conception of democracy that stops at the ballot box. Political democracy requires citizens capable of exercising political rights; economic democracy requires citizens possessing meaningful access to resources that make those rights socially consequential.

The issue of sovereignty therefore returns to the centre of the chapter. Sovereignty is often defined as the authority of the state over its territory. But democratic sovereignty should also involve the capacity of citizens collectively to shape the distribution and use of resources within that territory. If the majority possesses political power but remains structurally dependent upon concentrated private ownership, then sovereignty is incomplete in the economic sense. This does not imply that all property must be publicly owned. It means that the public must possess sufficient regulatory and redistributive power to ensure that private accumulation does not permanently reproduce racialised exclusion. The objective is not the abolition of markets but their democratisation. Land can remain privately owned while becoming more broadly accessible, more productive and more socially accountable.

The land question also challenges simplistic understandings of property rights. Property rights are important because they provide security, encourage investment and protect citizens against arbitrary state action. But property rights have never been absolute. Every constitutional order defines conditions under which property can be regulated in the public interest. In South Africa, this principle is particularly significant because the existing distribution of property is inseparable from historical legislation. The question is therefore not whether property rights should exist but how they should function within a society committed simultaneously to security, restitution and transformation. A mature constitutionalism must hold these principles together rather than treating one as automatically superior to all others. The failure to reconcile them produces either property insecurity or transformative stagnation.

One of the most important lessons is that land reform cannot be delegated entirely to politicians. Civil society, universities, traditional communities, farmers, labour organisations, agricultural institutions, municipalities and business must participate in designing workable solutions. Public debate should move beyond slogans such as "land back" or "protect property" and address concrete questions of ownership, productivity, tenure, financing and governance. Academic research has a particularly important role because the debate is frequently distorted by selective statistics and political propaganda. A rigorous land discourse should distinguish between agricultural land and total land, individual ownership and corporate ownership, registered title and customary rights, restitution and redistribution, ownership and control. Without these distinctions, public debate becomes vulnerable to manipulation by both defenders of the status quo and advocates of simplistic solutions.

The media also bears responsibility. Land stories can easily become racialised spectacles in which complex economic realities are reduced to emotional confrontation. A serious public conversation should investigate who owns what, how ownership is structured, what land has been redistributed, what beneficiaries have achieved, why projects have failed, which institutions have underperformed and where successful models exist. Journalism should examine both historical injustice and contemporary administrative failure. It should investigate concentration without demonising individuals and investigate government failure without allowing inherited privilege to disappear from the analysis. A democratic society requires information capable of sustaining difficult conversations rather than media narratives that merely intensify polarisation.

The constitutional settlement itself should be understood as a framework for transformation rather than a barrier to it. South Africa's Constitution does not simply protect existing property interests; it also contains commitments to equality, dignity, restitution and socio-economic transformation. The challenge is therefore interpretive and institutional. How can constitutional principles be converted

into policies that change material realities while maintaining legal certainty? This requires courts, Parliament, the executive and civil society to engage the issue continuously. Constitutional democracy should not freeze the distribution of wealth at the moment of political transition. If that occurred, constitutional protection would unintentionally become a mechanism for preserving historical inequality. Conversely, transformation should not be pursued in ways that destroy the rule of law. The strength of the South African constitutional project lies precisely in its attempt to reconcile justice with legality.

The failure to resolve the land question has consequences beyond agriculture. It contributes to public distrust, political radicalisation and perceptions that democracy has delivered political equality without economic emancipation. Parties that campaign on land redistribution gain support partly because they articulate a genuine historical grievance. Their political success should therefore not be dismissed simply as populism. Populism becomes powerful when established institutions fail to address real grievances. The appropriate response is not merely to condemn radical rhetoric but to make democratic institutions more capable of delivering credible transformation. If constitutional democracy cannot address deeply entrenched material inequality, citizens may increasingly question its legitimacy. Land therefore becomes a test of whether democracy can transform itself from a system of political representation into a system of substantive social justice.

Yet the opposite danger is equally real. If political actors present land expropriation as a simple solution to unemployment, poverty and inequality, they risk creating expectations that land alone cannot satisfy. South Africa's economic problems are multidimensional. Unemployment, weak industrialisation, unequal education, spatial segregation, financial concentration and infrastructure deficits all contribute to inequality. Land reform can help address some of these problems, especially in rural development and wealth formation, but it cannot substitute for comprehensive economic transformation. A credible liberation strategy must therefore connect land to industrial policy, education, housing, finance, employment and technological development. The land question is central, but it is not sufficient by itself.

The idea of land as intergenerational capital provides perhaps the strongest reason for urgency. Wealth compounds. Assets acquired by one generation can finance opportunities for the next. When historical dispossession removed African families from productive land, it did not merely impoverish those alive at the time. It reduced the asset base inherited by subsequent generations. The contemporary wealth gap is therefore partly a legacy of unequal inheritance. Land reform can interrupt this process by creating new forms of asset ownership that African families and communities can transmit into the future. But this requires secure rights. Temporary allocation without durable tenure may not generate the same wealth effects as stable ownership or enforceable long-term rights. The land question must therefore be measured not only in hectares but in the ability of beneficiaries to build durable wealth.

A transformative land policy should consequently pursue several objectives simultaneously: historical restitution, broad-based redistribution, secure tenure, productive agriculture, rural industrialisation, food security, women's land rights, youth participation, transparent governance and sustainable environmental management. These objectives may sometimes conflict, but policy must balance them rather than sacrificing one entirely to another. The most important institutional principle should be diversification of approaches. Some land should be returned through restitution; some should be redistributed to emerging farmers; some should support housing and urban development; some should remain under communal tenure; some should support conservation and

environmental objectives. A single ideological formula cannot govern such diversity. What matters is whether the overall system expands substantive access to land and productive opportunity.

The environmental dimension cannot be ignored. South Africa faces water scarcity, climate change, soil degradation and ecological pressures. Land redistribution that ignores environmental limits can create unsustainable agriculture. Conversely, environmental regulation that disproportionately restricts poor communities can become another form of exclusion. A democratic land policy must therefore combine ownership rights with sustainable land management. New farmers require access to climate-resilient technology, water-efficient irrigation and agricultural knowledge. Rural communities require infrastructure that allows them to adapt to environmental change. The land question is therefore also a question of ecological sovereignty: who decides how territory is used, who benefits from natural resources, and who bears the environmental costs of production?

At the centre of the debate remains a fundamental contradiction: South Africa achieved one of Africa's most important political transitions without completing the economic transformation necessary to dismantle the material foundations of apartheid. The state became democratic; society did not become economically equal. Law became formally non-racial; property remained historically racialised. Political office became accessible to the majority; productive assets remained concentrated. The land question embodies this contradiction with unusual clarity. It demonstrates that the abolition of discriminatory law is not identical to the abolition of discriminatory outcomes. Historical privilege can survive the institutions that created it because wealth, property and capital possess institutional continuity. The challenge of post-apartheid South Africa is therefore to convert political equality into substantive economic citizenship.

The ANC's historical contribution must be evaluated within this tension. It deserves recognition for ending apartheid rule, establishing constitutional democracy, expanding citizenship, implementing social programmes and creating legal mechanisms for restitution and redistribution. It also deserves criticism for the slow pace of land reform, administrative weaknesses, policy inconsistencies and the failure to transform the structure of ownership at a scale commensurate with the historical problem. A serious Pan-African intellectual position does not require either unconditional celebration or unconditional condemnation of the ANC. Liberation movements should be judged by what they achieved, what they promised, what constraints they faced and what choices they made within those constraints. The land record reveals both courage and compromise. The movement understood the historical importance of land, but government frequently struggled to convert that understanding into institutional transformation.

The more profound criticism is therefore not that the ANC "did nothing" about land. It is that it did not sufficiently transform the political economy surrounding land. Redistribution was often treated as a programme within the existing economic system rather than as part of a comprehensive restructuring of rural capital. This distinction matters. Giving a farmer land without finance, infrastructure and market access leaves the wider structure intact. Returning property without rebuilding communities may resolve title while leaving poverty. Changing ownership without changing value chains may produce nominal transformation. The unfinished task is therefore to connect land redistribution with the democratisation of the institutions that make land productive. This is where land becomes capital, capital becomes economic power, and economic power becomes political influence.

The question "Who owns South Africa?" must therefore be expanded. Who owns farms? Who owns urban land? Who owns agricultural companies? Who controls agricultural finance? Who controls processing? Who controls retail distribution? Who controls logistics? Who controls intellectual property and technology? Who controls the financial institutions that determine who can expand? Who controls the political networks through which land policy is implemented? And who possesses the capacity to transmit productive assets to future generations? These questions reveal that ownership is multidimensional. A society may redistribute land while leaving financial and commercial power concentrated elsewhere. The true measure of transformation must therefore be the extent to which ordinary African citizens acquire meaningful economic agency across the entire system.

The land question ultimately asks whether liberation can be inherited as an economic reality rather than merely remembered as a political victory. A democracy in which the majority votes but remains disproportionately excluded from productive assets contains an unresolved contradiction. That contradiction does not invalidate democracy; it places a responsibility upon democracy to deepen itself. South Africa's constitutional order created the political space within which this transformation can occur. The challenge is whether political institutions possess the imagination, administrative competence and courage to use that space effectively. The land question should therefore not be framed as a choice between democracy and redistribution. Properly understood, land redistribution is one of the ways through which democracy can become more substantive.

For Pan-Africanism, the lesson is larger than South Africa. Political independence without control over productive resources remains incomplete. A continent cannot achieve genuine sovereignty if its peoples remain disconnected from the land, minerals, finance, technology and industries upon which national prosperity depends. South Africa's experience demonstrates both the power and the limitation of political liberation. The transfer of governmental authority can transform the state while leaving deeper economic structures partially intact. The task of the next phase of liberation is therefore not simply to capture government but to democratise economic power. Land stands at the centre of that project because it connects territory, food, capital, identity, inheritance and sovereignty. To resolve the land question is not to punish history; it is to prevent history from permanently determining the future.

The unfinished land revolution therefore requires a new social compact. It must acknowledge the legitimacy of historical restitution, protect legitimate constitutional rights, expand broad-based African ownership, strengthen communal and individual tenure, empower women and youth, support productive agriculture, democratise agricultural finance, develop rural infrastructure, expand agro-processing and create transparent institutions capable of preventing corruption and elite capture. It must reject both complacency and recklessness. It must recognise that land is emotionally sacred to historical memory while treating land policy as an economic system requiring evidence and competence. Above all, it must place the majority's right to meaningful economic participation at the centre of democratic development. The question is no longer whether land matters. It is whether South Africa is prepared to confront the distribution of land as a question of power.

The enduring significance of the 2017 Land Audit lies precisely in this confrontation. Its figures do not by themselves provide a policy solution, but they force the democratic state to confront the empirical persistence of racialised ownership. They challenge the comforting assumption that political liberation automatically produces economic liberation. They demonstrate that the historical

geography of ownership survives through legal titles, capital accumulation, inheritance and institutional continuity. The figures should therefore be treated neither as a weapon against an entire racial group nor as an inconvenience to be dismissed. They should be treated as evidence of a structural problem requiring structural intervention. The objective of democratic land reform should be to ensure that the racial identity of a citizen no longer predicts their probability of owning productive land.

Ultimately, the land question is a question about the meaning of freedom itself. If freedom means merely the right to vote, South Africa's liberation was extraordinarily successful. If freedom also means the capacity to possess productive assets, build wealth, secure a livelihood, raise children with greater opportunities and participate meaningfully in the economy, then liberation remains unfinished. Land is not the whole of economic freedom, but it is one of its deepest foundations. The historical struggle over South African territory created a hierarchy in which political and economic power became mutually reinforcing. The democratic project has dismantled much of the political hierarchy but has not yet dismantled the economic architecture with equal force. The challenge of the present generation is therefore to complete the transition from political liberation to economic citizenship. That requires neither racial revenge nor blind faith in markets. It requires a democratic political economy in which historical injustice is confronted, productive capacity is expanded, property rights are reconciled with public interest, and the ownership of the nation's productive resources becomes progressively less determined by the racial geography of the past. Only then can the promise of liberation move from the ballot box into the material foundations of everyday life.

Chapter Seven

The Black Majority and the Ownership Question

The central contradiction of post-apartheid South Africa is that political democracy transferred formal sovereignty to the black majority without fully transferring the ownership of the economic structures through which social power is reproduced. The achievement of universal suffrage in 1994 was historically immense because it destroyed the legal architecture that had denied the black

majority meaningful political citizenship. The African National Congress therefore succeeded in one of the most consequential dimensions of its liberation project: it converted a racially exclusive political order into a constitutional democracy founded on equal citizenship. Yet political equality and economic ownership are not synonymous. A citizen may possess the vote while possessing little productive property, limited access to capital, insecure employment and almost no influence over the strategic allocation of investment. The ballot determines who governs the state, but it does not automatically determine who owns mines, banks, corporations, agricultural land, intellectual property, pension capital, logistics networks or industrial infrastructure. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the unfinished character of liberation. South Africa therefore presents a paradox in which the numerical majority exercises considerable electoral power while a relatively concentrated ownership structure continues to exercise enormous economic power. The question is not whether democracy arrived; it did. The deeper question is what democracy was capable of transforming beyond the political sphere. The answer is necessarily complicated, because the post-1994 order simultaneously dismantled racial legislation, expanded social citizenship, created new black economic elites and preserved substantial continuities in the distribution of productive wealth. The ownership question therefore moves the analysis beyond the celebration of representation toward the harder terrain of material power. It asks who possesses assets, who controls capital, who determines investment, who captures profits and who bears economic risk. It also asks whether liberation should be measured principally by access to political office or by the transformation of the underlying relations through which wealth is produced and accumulated. In this sense, the ownership question is not an attack on constitutional democracy but an attempt to complete its social meaning.

The ANC entered government in 1994 carrying a profoundly transformative historical mandate, but it inherited an economy whose architecture had been deliberately constructed over generations to privilege white ownership, accumulation and institutional power. Apartheid was not merely a political system of racial segregation; it was an economic order that organised labour, land, finance, education, industrial development and spatial geography around racial hierarchy. White ownership was therefore embedded not only in individual fortunes but also in corporate institutions, financial networks, professional systems and accumulated intergenerational advantages. The democratic government faced the extraordinary task of simultaneously preventing economic collapse, attracting investment, expanding social services, stabilising public institutions and transforming the inherited distribution of economic power. Its compromises must therefore be understood historically rather than reduced to either heroic triumph or political betrayal. The ANC did not simply abandon transformation, nor did it accomplish the revolutionary economic reconstruction that some of its constituencies imagined. Instead, it pursued a mixed strategy in which redistribution through taxation and social expenditure existed alongside market-oriented macroeconomic management and policies designed to integrate black South Africans into existing corporate structures. This strategy produced real gains. Millions gained access to electricity, housing, social grants, education, formal political rights and other forms of citizenship previously denied or severely restricted. A black professional and managerial class expanded dramatically. Black entrepreneurs entered sectors that had previously been overwhelmingly white-controlled. Yet the structural concentration of wealth remained extraordinarily resilient because ownership reproduces itself through capital accumulation, inheritance, networks, access to finance and control over productive assets. The state could legislate racial equality much faster than it could transform accumulated capital. The political settlement therefore created a new democratic state without creating an entirely new economic order. This distinction is essential because it explains why post-apartheid South Africa can simultaneously be described as a profound democratic success and an incomplete economic

transformation. The failure to understand both dimensions produces either romanticism or cynicism. Serious scholarship requires neither. It requires examining precisely how political power, state policy, corporate ownership and social class interacted after 1994.

Voting does not automatically produce ownership because political citizenship and economic citizenship operate through different institutional mechanisms. The vote gives individuals a formal capacity to participate in choosing governments, while ownership provides continuing control over productive resources and streams of income. A voter may change a government every five years, but a shareholder can retain an economic claim over an enterprise for decades. A citizen can elect representatives who promise transformation, while a corporation can determine investment decisions according to its board, shareholders, financing conditions and expected returns. This difference reveals why electoral majorities do not necessarily become economic majorities. Democracy distributes political authority through universal suffrage, whereas capitalism distributes economic power through property, capital and market institutions. These systems interact, but neither automatically dissolves the other. South Africa's constitutional framework protects both democratic government and property rights, creating a complex terrain in which transformation must be pursued without simply assuming that political authority can command economic restructuring at will. The result is a permanent tension between democratic legitimacy and inherited economic power. Governments may possess the authority to regulate corporations, tax wealth, restructure markets, support industrial development and implement affirmative measures, yet they remain constrained by constitutional principles, fiscal realities, international capital flows, domestic investment conditions and institutional capacity. This does not mean that economic transformation is impossible. It means that transformation requires deliberate institutional strategies rather than assuming that political representation itself will produce material redistribution. The history of post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates this repeatedly. Political office changed hands according to democratic rules, but corporate ownership changed much more slowly. The racial composition of government transformed dramatically, while the racial and class composition of major asset ownership remained substantially unequal. The central lesson is therefore that democracy must be understood as both a political and socioeconomic project. If the black majority possesses the vote but remains disproportionately excluded from substantial ownership, then the democratic project remains incomplete in the economic sphere. The challenge is to transform ownership without destroying productive capacity, to redistribute wealth without generating new forms of dependency and to democratise economic decision-making without confusing state power with social ownership.

The emergence of the black middle class represents one of the most visible accomplishments and most contested consequences of post-apartheid transformation. Apartheid deliberately restricted the development of a substantial black professional and entrepreneurial class by controlling education, occupational mobility, property ownership and access to economic opportunity. Democracy dismantled many of these restrictions, allowing black South Africans to enter professions, universities, corporations, government departments and entrepreneurial sectors on an unprecedented scale. The growth of black lawyers, doctors, academics, engineers, managers, executives, consultants and entrepreneurs therefore constitutes genuine social transformation. It demonstrates that political liberation can expand human capabilities and create new social classes. Yet the black middle class also occupies an ambiguous position within the ownership question. Its expansion does not necessarily signify mass ownership because professional income and corporate employment are not equivalent to control over productive assets. A black executive who receives a substantial salary may possess considerable individual wealth while remaining an employee within a corporation

whose ownership structure remains concentrated. A black entrepreneur may establish a successful company without altering the ownership structure of an entire industry. A black professional may enter a previously exclusive institution without transforming the distribution of national wealth. The black middle class therefore represents both progress and limitation. It is evidence that apartheid's racial barriers were penetrable after democracy, but it also illustrates how individual mobility can coexist with structural inequality. This distinction matters because transformation can become reduced to the appearance of racial inclusion within existing institutions rather than the reconstruction of those institutions. The question should therefore not be whether black people have entered the economy; they unquestionably have. The question is how many possess durable productive assets, how widely ownership is distributed and whether the accumulation of black wealth is becoming sufficiently broad to alter the architecture of economic power. A democracy that produces a larger black middle class has achieved something important. A democracy that transforms the mass ownership of productive wealth has achieved something deeper.

Black Economic Empowerment emerged partly from recognition of this problem. Its underlying rationale was that formally ending apartheid would not automatically dismantle the accumulated economic advantages created by apartheid. If markets were simply declared racially neutral after decades of racial engineering, existing ownership patterns could reproduce themselves through inheritance, networks, capital access and institutional continuity. BEE therefore attempted to introduce mechanisms through which black participation in ownership, management, procurement, skills development and enterprise development could be expanded. In principle, this was a rational response to a historically constructed economic inequality. The challenge was implementation. Any policy intended to transform ownership must distinguish between genuine participation and symbolic compliance. If empowerment becomes primarily a mechanism for changing the racial identity of beneficiaries without expanding broad productive capacity, its transformative potential diminishes. If ownership transactions enrich a small number of politically connected individuals while workers and communities remain excluded, the policy can reproduce concentration under a different racial configuration. Yet dismissing BEE altogether would also be analytically inadequate. The policy opened corporate opportunities, facilitated new black businesses, altered procurement patterns and created pathways into ownership that would have been difficult to achieve through laissez-faire economics alone. The deeper problem was that empowerment operated within an economy still characterised by concentrated capital, unequal educational outcomes, uneven access to finance and substantial barriers to entry. It therefore confronted structural conditions far larger than any single regulatory framework. BEE could alter who participated in existing capitalism, but it could not by itself reconstruct the entire system of accumulation. This distinction explains why empowerment has generated both legitimate achievements and legitimate criticism. Its supporters can point to expanded black participation, while its critics can identify cases in which benefits were concentrated among elites. Both observations can be true simultaneously. A rigorous assessment must therefore ask not whether BEE worked or failed in absolute terms, but what type of transformation it produced, who benefited, what ownership was created, what ownership remained concentrated and whether the policy generated autonomous black productive capacity.

One of the most damaging distortions of empowerment is fronting, because it transforms a policy intended to democratise economic participation into an exercise in institutional deception. Fronting occurs when enterprises create the appearance of meaningful black participation without transferring corresponding authority, economic benefit or genuine ownership. In such circumstances, black individuals may be presented as shareholders, directors or beneficiaries while strategic control remains elsewhere. This practice exposes a central weakness in transformation

policies: legal compliance can sometimes be separated from substantive change. An enterprise may satisfy the formal appearance of empowerment while leaving the underlying structure of decision-making intact. Fronting therefore matters not merely as an administrative violation but as a political-economic phenomenon. It reveals how established economic power can adapt to transformation requirements without necessarily surrendering control. The danger extends beyond individual fraudulent arrangements because repeated symbolic compliance can undermine public confidence in the entire project of economic transformation. When citizens observe contracts awarded in the name of empowerment but perceive benefits flowing repeatedly to a narrow circle of intermediaries, they may conclude that transformation is simply a mechanism for elite enrichment. Such perceptions can create resentment among both black workers and black entrepreneurs who struggle to gain genuine access to capital and markets. They can also produce racialised misunderstandings by encouraging the false belief that black economic advancement itself is illegitimate. The appropriate response is therefore not to abandon transformation but to strengthen its substantive character. Ownership should involve real economic rights, transparent financing, meaningful voting power and measurable productive contribution. Procurement should generate sustainable businesses rather than temporary intermediaries. Beneficiaries should possess genuine agency rather than serving as corporate decorations. Transformation must be measured by control, value creation, employment, asset accumulation and long-term sustainability. Without these standards, the language of empowerment can be appropriated by precisely the structures it was designed to transform.

Elite capture represents a broader problem than fronting because it concerns the distribution of transformation benefits within the black population itself. A policy can be racially inclusive at the level of eligibility while socially exclusive at the level of actual beneficiaries. This is one of the most difficult questions confronting post-apartheid transformation because it requires moving beyond a simple binary between white capital and black citizens. The black population is not economically homogeneous. It contains unemployed workers, rural households, informal traders, emerging entrepreneurs, professionals, public servants, executives, investors and extremely wealthy individuals. Consequently, the transfer of economic opportunity from predominantly white ownership structures to a small black elite does not necessarily constitute broad economic liberation. It may represent racial reconfiguration without sufficient social democratisation. Elite capture becomes especially problematic when political proximity provides advantages in accessing contracts, licences, financing or state-linked opportunities. In such circumstances, public resources can become instruments of private accumulation, weakening both economic transformation and democratic accountability. The result is a dangerous convergence in which political influence and economic privilege reinforce one another. This is not uniquely South African, but South Africa's history makes it particularly consequential because the legitimacy of transformation rests heavily on its ability to address historical racial exclusion. The answer cannot be to prevent successful black individuals from accumulating wealth. Such an approach would itself reproduce racialised restrictions. The real objective should be to create an economy in which black success is not limited to a politically connected minority and in which accumulation becomes increasingly broad-based. A black capitalist class is not inherently incompatible with liberation. The crucial question is whether its emergence contributes to productive expansion, employment, industrialisation and wider asset ownership or merely substitutes one narrow ownership elite for another. Transformation should therefore be judged by the breadth, durability and productive consequences of ownership rather than the racial identity of a handful of beneficiaries.

The rise of black billionaires and major black corporate figures is often presented as definitive evidence that apartheid's economic order has been transformed. Such achievements are historically significant because they demonstrate that black South Africans can acquire extraordinary wealth in an environment once legally designed to exclude them. They break powerful psychological assumptions about racial economic hierarchy and create new possibilities for black entrepreneurship, investment and philanthropy. Yet the existence of black billionaires cannot by itself answer the ownership question. A society can produce a handful of exceptionally wealthy black individuals while leaving millions of black households without meaningful productive assets. The presence of black wealth at the summit of the economic hierarchy therefore tells us something about individual mobility but less about the structure of mass ownership. This distinction is crucial. Liberation cannot be measured solely by how many black people have reached the top of a pyramid whose base remains unequal. If the pyramid itself remains highly concentrated, changing the racial composition of the summit represents an important but incomplete transformation. The deeper objective should be to broaden the ownership base so that workers, households, communities, cooperatives, small enterprises and emerging entrepreneurs possess meaningful claims over productive assets. This does not require hostility toward black wealth. On the contrary, substantial black capital can become a powerful instrument of industrial development if deployed strategically. The question is whether private accumulation becomes socially productive and whether mechanisms exist through which economic success generates broader opportunities. A billionaire who builds productive industries, creates employment, invests in local suppliers and expands ownership can contribute to structural transformation. A billionaire whose wealth depends primarily on political connections, financial extraction or monopoly privileges may contribute much less. Wealth therefore has to be evaluated not simply by its quantity but by its source, productive function and social consequences. The objective should be to transform the architecture through which wealth is generated and distributed, not merely to produce a new racial identity among the wealthiest individuals.

The emergence of black industrialists is consequently more significant for the ownership question than the mere multiplication of black executives or wealthy individuals. Industrial ownership involves control over productive capabilities that can generate employment, technological learning, supply chains, exports and long-term accumulation. A black-owned manufacturing enterprise, logistics company, engineering firm, agricultural processor or technology company can therefore have transformative significance beyond the personal wealth of its owners. It can create productive capacity that remains embedded within the economy and potentially generates opportunities for other businesses. This is why industrial policy and black entrepreneurship must be connected. If empowerment remains concentrated in consulting, brokerage and intermediary services, it may produce financial gains without sufficiently altering the productive structure. Industrialisation requires patient capital, technical skills, infrastructure, market access, procurement certainty and institutional support. It also requires entrepreneurs who can survive beyond state contracts and politically mediated opportunities. The development of black industrialists therefore represents an opportunity to move transformation from transactional empowerment toward productive ownership. Yet the obstacles are formidable. Large incumbents possess economies of scale, established supplier relationships, financing networks, technology and brand recognition. New entrants may face higher borrowing costs and weaker access to markets. Public procurement can help overcome these barriers, but procurement alone cannot substitute for competitiveness. The long-term objective must therefore be to create black-owned firms capable of competing domestically and internationally without permanent dependence on government. Such enterprises can become vehicles for economic sovereignty if they accumulate technology, intellectual property and productive capital. The

industrialist question thus connects racial transformation with the larger developmental challenge of building a South African economy capable of producing sophisticated goods, expanding exports and creating decent employment. Black ownership matters most when it becomes inseparable from productive transformation.

The worker ownership question introduces a deeper conception of economic democracy because it challenges the assumption that transformation must occur primarily through entrepreneurs and investors. Workers are central producers of economic value, yet under conventional corporate arrangements they generally possess limited direct control over strategic decisions. They may receive wages while ownership claims remain concentrated elsewhere. A genuinely broad-based transformation agenda must therefore consider mechanisms through which workers can accumulate capital and exercise meaningful influence over enterprises. Employee ownership schemes, cooperatives, worker trusts, pension-fund participation and other collective ownership mechanisms can potentially democratise wealth without abolishing private enterprise. Such models are particularly important in a country where unemployment and inequality remain deeply entrenched. If workers receive only wages while the capital value of enterprises rises over decades, their economic position can remain precarious even when employment is stable. Ownership creates the possibility of accumulating wealth through appreciation and dividends rather than relying exclusively on monthly income. However, worker ownership must not be reduced to symbolic shareholding. Workers need information, governance rights, financial literacy and institutional structures capable of protecting their interests. Poorly designed schemes can simply transfer risk from employers to employees without giving workers meaningful control. Effective worker ownership therefore requires professional management combined with genuine participation in ownership and governance. The pension system also presents a potentially important avenue because large pools of workers' savings can become sources of long-term investment in productive enterprises. The fundamental principle is that those who produce value should have opportunities to participate in the wealth generated by that value. Such a principle does not necessarily require revolutionary nationalisation. It requires rethinking the distribution of capital claims within firms and across society. Economic democracy can therefore complement political democracy by expanding the number of citizens who possess durable stakes in productive assets.

The concept of broad-based transformation is ultimately an attempt to solve the central weakness of elite-centred empowerment. Transformation should not stop when a few black individuals enter boardrooms; it should ask whether ordinary citizens acquire assets, skills, income and productive opportunities. Broad-based transformation requires an ecosystem rather than a single policy. It involves education, vocational training, access to finance, land reform, infrastructure, procurement, competition policy, industrial development, cooperative institutions, worker ownership and support for small businesses. These components reinforce one another. An entrepreneur without finance cannot expand. A worker without skills cannot enter higher-productivity industries. A small manufacturer without infrastructure cannot compete. A community without market access cannot turn assets into sustainable income. A black-owned business without technological capabilities may remain dependent on established firms. Consequently, ownership transformation must be integrated with productive transformation. It is not sufficient to transfer shares if beneficiaries lack the capacity to manage enterprises or if enterprises themselves remain structurally dependent on a small number of dominant corporations. Broad-based empowerment must therefore be measured over time. The relevant question is whether beneficiaries become progressively more economically independent, whether assets generate sustainable income and whether new enterprises become capable of surviving competitive pressures. Transformation that produces temporary transactions

but no durable accumulation will eventually reproduce dependency. Transformation that builds productive capabilities can change the structure of society. The distinction is between redistribution as an event and transformation as a process. South Africa needs the latter. The ownership question therefore demands policies capable of creating intergenerational economic assets rather than short-term enrichment. A democratic society cannot remain satisfied with formal equality while economic opportunity is transmitted through inherited wealth and unequal access to capital. Broad-based transformation is an attempt to make economic citizenship more substantive.

The difference between creating black billionaires and transforming mass economic ownership therefore deserves explicit emphasis. A black billionaire is an individual outcome; mass ownership is a structural condition. One can exist without the other. The appearance of black wealth at the top of the income distribution can coexist with extraordinary inequality among the majority. The relevant historical question is not whether black people can become rich, because post-apartheid South Africa has already demonstrated that they can. The question is whether millions of black citizens can accumulate productive wealth sufficient to alter their economic security and bargaining power. Mass ownership might involve pension assets, shares, productive land, cooperative enterprises, employee ownership, small businesses, housing equity, intellectual property and community-controlled enterprises. Its significance lies in the distribution of economic agency. A society in which millions possess some form of productive capital is structurally different from one in which ownership remains concentrated among a narrow elite. This is why wealth statistics alone can mislead. Aggregate black wealth can increase while inequality within the black population also increases. Transformation must therefore consider distribution, not merely totals. The success of a few entrepreneurs should be celebrated, but their success should not be mistaken for evidence that the ownership question has been solved. Indeed, successful black entrepreneurs can become important agents of broader transformation if they invest in productive sectors, mentor emerging enterprises, support worker participation and build supply chains that distribute opportunities. The challenge is to connect individual success to collective advancement. The liberation project should not demand equality of outcome in every circumstance, but it should demand a social structure in which historical exclusion no longer determines who can accumulate capital. The objective is not to flatten economic differences but to democratise the capacity to create wealth. That is a much more demanding and constructive conception of economic transformation.

The ownership question also exposes the limits of relying upon the state as the principal instrument of economic liberation. Because the ANC controls the government for much of the post-apartheid period, it has often been assumed that state power could simply be translated into economic transformation. But the state is not the economy. Government can regulate, tax, spend, invest, procure and legislate, yet productive capacity remains distributed among firms, households, financial institutions, workers and investors. A state that attempts to substitute political command for economic capability may generate inefficiency, corruption or dependency. Conversely, a state that retreats entirely from economic transformation leaves historical inequalities largely to market forces that did not create them but can reproduce them. The challenge is therefore to develop a capable developmental state that uses public authority to reshape incentives, expand capabilities and democratise access to capital without turning economic transformation into patronage. This requires professional institutions, transparent procurement, independent regulation, credible competition policy and long-term industrial strategy. It also requires political discipline. If public resources become instruments for rewarding political loyalty, the developmental state becomes an avenue for elite accumulation rather than broad transformation. The state's legitimacy depends on demonstrating that intervention serves public objectives rather than private networks. South Africa's

experience therefore suggests that state power is necessary but insufficient. Political authority must create conditions under which society itself becomes increasingly capable of producing and owning wealth. Economic democracy cannot be permanently administered from government offices. It must eventually become embedded within firms, communities, financial institutions and households. The state should therefore be understood as an architect and enabler of transformation rather than its permanent substitute.

The persistence of concentrated corporate power raises another dimension of the ownership problem. South Africa's economy contains powerful corporations with extensive assets, sophisticated managerial systems and established market positions. These institutions possess capacities that are essential to national production, employment and investment, but concentration can also limit economic contestability. When a small number of firms dominate important sectors, emerging enterprises may struggle to enter markets regardless of their racial identity. Transformation therefore requires more than changing the composition of shareholders; it also requires examining the competitive structure of markets. Competition policy becomes an instrument of democratic economic transformation because excessive concentration can restrict entrepreneurship and reinforce existing power. Small and medium enterprises require access to markets, infrastructure, finance and procurement opportunities if ownership is to broaden. This is especially important because many black entrepreneurs operate at the margins of larger corporate value chains. They may supply established corporations without ever becoming independent producers with substantial bargaining power. The objective should therefore be to create pathways through which smaller enterprises graduate into larger, technologically capable and export-oriented firms. That process requires long-term policy rather than isolated empowerment transactions. It also requires confronting monopolistic practices where they exist and ensuring that public policy does not unintentionally protect incumbents. Economic democracy is strengthened when more citizens can become producers, employers, shareholders and innovators. It is weakened when entry barriers remain high and ownership is effectively inherited through established corporate structures. South Africa's challenge is consequently not simply to redistribute existing ownership but to multiply the number of economically significant owners. New firms and industries must emerge continuously if the ownership structure is to become genuinely dynamic. Transformation should therefore be linked to competition, innovation and industrial renewal.

Financial power is particularly important because ownership ultimately depends upon access to capital. The racial wealth gap cannot be transformed sustainably if aspiring entrepreneurs, farmers, workers and communities cannot secure affordable long-term finance. Historical exclusion from banking and property markets created cumulative disadvantages that do not disappear when discriminatory laws are removed. Families with inherited assets can borrow against property, finance education, survive business losses and transfer capital to their children. Families without assets may depend almost entirely on wages and expensive credit. This creates a cycle in which wealth generates further wealth while poverty reproduces financial vulnerability. The ownership question must therefore include the democratisation of finance. Development finance institutions, pension capital, community finance mechanisms and responsible private lending can play important roles, but capital must be directed toward productive activity rather than speculative extraction. Financial inclusion should mean more than access to consumer credit. It should mean access to capital capable of creating assets and enterprises. The distinction is profound. Borrowing to consume may provide temporary relief while increasing household vulnerability; borrowing to build productive capacity can create long-term wealth. South Africa therefore requires a financial architecture that encourages productive investment among historically excluded groups. Such a

system must balance developmental objectives with financial discipline because unsustainable lending ultimately destroys the very beneficiaries it intends to assist. The central principle is that capital markets should become instruments of productive democratisation rather than mechanisms through which existing wealth compounds automatically. If ownership is the destination, access to patient capital is one of the roads leading there.

Land remains inseparable from the ownership question because property is not merely an economic asset but a source of security, collateral, productive capacity and social power. Apartheid's land policies dispossessed black South Africans on a massive scale and created spatial patterns that continue to influence economic opportunity. Land reform therefore has significance beyond agriculture. Secure and productive land ownership can support rural enterprises, housing development, tourism, conservation, manufacturing and local economic ecosystems. Yet land transfer alone cannot guarantee economic transformation. Productive ownership requires infrastructure, finance, markets, technical knowledge and secure tenure. A farm without capital, roads, irrigation, storage or market access may become an asset without sufficient productive capacity. Conversely, land held under secure and economically viable arrangements can become the foundation for intergenerational wealth. This is why the ownership question must avoid simplistic debates between land redistribution and market efficiency. The deeper objective is to create productive forms of ownership that correct historical dispossession while supporting food security, employment and rural development. Land reform should therefore be connected to industrial and financial policy. Agricultural ownership can generate processing industries, logistics networks and rural employment when integrated into broader value chains. Black ownership in agriculture should not be confined to primary production if the goal is economic sovereignty. The real transformation occurs when ownership extends from land to storage, processing, distribution, branding and export. In this sense, the land question and the ownership question are inseparable components of a larger struggle over control of the economic value chain.

The mineral economy presents an even sharper contradiction because South Africa's historical wealth was built substantially through extraction while the benefits of mineral resources were distributed unequally. Democratic government changed the legal and political framework governing mineral resources, but the deeper question of who captures value from extraction remains unresolved. Mineral ownership involves more than the legal title to a resource. It includes control over mining companies, financing, technology, infrastructure, processing, logistics and downstream manufacturing. If minerals are extracted and exported with limited domestic value addition, the country may possess geological wealth without fully capturing the developmental benefits. A transformative ownership strategy must therefore consider the entire value chain. Black participation in mining ownership is important, but black industrial participation in mineral processing and manufacturing may be even more consequential for long-term development. The objective should be to transform mineral wealth into productive capabilities that remain within the country. This requires infrastructure, energy security, technical skills, investment and coherent industrial policy. It also requires environmental responsibility because communities should not be asked to exchange ecological destruction for limited economic benefits. Mining communities must possess mechanisms through which they participate in the economic value generated from resources extracted from their territories. The ownership question therefore extends beyond shareholders to communities and future generations. A democratic society must ask not merely who owns shares in mining companies but who benefits from the country's mineral endowment. If the majority remains primarily a consumer and taxpayer while strategic resources generate concentrated private wealth,

political democracy has not yet produced economic sovereignty. Mineral transformation must therefore move from ownership transactions toward value-chain transformation.

The same principle applies to pension funds, because workers' accumulated savings represent one of the largest potential sources of collective economic power. Pension capital can finance infrastructure, industry, housing, technology and other long-term investments. Yet workers who contribute to large investment pools do not necessarily experience themselves as owners of the assets financed by their contributions. This reveals an important distinction between indirect ownership and meaningful economic agency. If workers' savings are invested productively, their pensions can become instruments of collective wealth accumulation. If investment decisions remain remote and opaque, the social ownership potential of pension capital remains underdeveloped. South Africa therefore possesses an opportunity to connect retirement savings with developmental objectives while preserving fiduciary responsibility and professional investment standards. Workers should not be compelled to finance politically motivated projects regardless of risk. But neither should their collective capital be viewed solely through the lens of passive financial returns when responsible investment can support productive transformation. The key is governance. Workers and beneficiaries require transparency regarding where capital is invested, what risks are accepted and what developmental outcomes are generated. The ownership question can therefore be reframed as a question of institutional capital: who controls the enormous pools of savings generated collectively by citizens? If millions of workers are indirect investors in major corporations, then the potential exists for a deeper form of economic democracy. Such democracy requires sophisticated institutions rather than slogans. It requires trustees, regulators, investment professionals and beneficiaries capable of connecting financial returns with long-term social objectives. The democratic ownership of capital must be governed responsibly if it is to become an instrument of liberation rather than political interference.

The black entrepreneurial class also deserves a more nuanced assessment than either celebration or condemnation. Entrepreneurship can be a powerful vehicle of liberation because it enables individuals to move from dependence on wages toward control over productive assets. Successful entrepreneurs create firms, employ workers, develop products, generate tax revenue and build capital. In a society emerging from racial exclusion, the creation of a large black entrepreneurial class is therefore historically important. But entrepreneurship cannot carry the entire burden of structural transformation. Not everyone can or should become an entrepreneur. Modern economies require workers, professionals, cooperatives, public institutions, researchers, engineers and large corporations as well as small businesses. Moreover, entrepreneurship becomes difficult when markets are dominated by established firms and access to finance is unequal. The responsibility of the state is therefore not to romanticise entrepreneurship but to build an environment in which productive enterprise can emerge and grow. This includes reducing unnecessary regulatory barriers, improving infrastructure, expanding skills and ensuring fair competition. At the same time, black businesses must be encouraged to move beyond dependence on government procurement. Sustainable economic power arises when enterprises possess customers, technologies, brands and productive capabilities that allow them to compete independently. The maturation of black capitalism should therefore be measured by autonomy rather than proximity to political power. An entrepreneurial class dependent upon state patronage is vulnerable to political change and contributes little to genuine economic sovereignty. An entrepreneurial class rooted in production and innovation can become a durable pillar of democratic transformation.

There is also a profound ideological question concerning what economic liberation should mean in a post-apartheid society. The liberation movement historically contained multiple economic traditions, including African nationalism, socialism, social democracy, worker organisation and developmental nationalism. The democratic settlement did not resolve these tensions; it institutionalised them within a constitutional market economy. Consequently, debates about ownership often become arguments about competing conceptions of liberation. One perspective emphasises private property and entrepreneurship as mechanisms for expanding black wealth. Another emphasises worker control and social ownership. Another prioritises state ownership of strategic assets. A developmental perspective seeks to combine markets with strong state coordination and industrial policy. None of these approaches should be treated as self-evidently sufficient. Nationalisation can transfer formal ownership without producing effective control or productivity. Private entrepreneurship can generate wealth without broad distribution. Worker ownership can democratise firms but requires strong governance and financial capability. State-led development can coordinate investment but can also become vulnerable to political patronage. The serious question is therefore not which ideology sounds most revolutionary but which institutional arrangements expand productive capacity, economic agency and broad ownership simultaneously. South Africa needs a pragmatic but transformative political economy. The objective should be to construct a system in which markets generate innovation, the state corrects historical and structural failures, workers participate in ownership, communities benefit from resources and capital becomes progressively more widely distributed. Economic liberation must therefore be understood as an institutional project rather than a slogan. It requires designing relationships among state, capital, labour and society that are substantially more democratic than those inherited from apartheid.

The ANC's compromises should consequently be evaluated with historical precision. The movement did not simply betray the economic aspirations of the liberation struggle, because it implemented substantial redistribution through public services and social programmes and created unprecedented opportunities for black participation in the formal economy. Nor can it be said to have completed economic liberation, because ownership and wealth remained highly concentrated and many black South Africans remained excluded from secure employment and productive assets. The post-apartheid settlement was therefore a compromise between transformative aspirations and the practical constraints of governing an advanced capitalist economy integrated into global markets. The challenge is that compromises can become permanent structures if they are not periodically reconsidered. A transitional strategy designed to stabilise democracy can eventually become an economic settlement in its own right. This is one of the central questions surrounding the post-apartheid trajectory. Did policies intended as transitional mechanisms become sufficient substitutes for deeper restructuring? In some areas, the evidence suggests that they did. The expansion of black representation within existing corporate structures sometimes became easier than transforming ownership itself. Political inclusion could therefore advance faster than economic redistribution. The task for contemporary transformation is not to condemn every compromise but to identify where compromise has become structural stagnation. A mature liberation project must be capable of revisiting its own settlements. It must ask which achievements should be defended, which policies should be redesigned and which economic structures require more fundamental intervention. The ownership question is precisely such a reassessment. It shifts the debate from whether apartheid ended to whether its economic consequences have been sufficiently dismantled.

The greatest danger is that transformation becomes reduced to representation. A corporation may appoint black directors while maintaining highly concentrated ownership. A government department may employ black senior officials while procurement remains captured by established

networks. A university may diversify its leadership while unequal access to elite educational opportunities persists. A boardroom may become racially representative while strategic assets remain controlled through complex financial arrangements beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Representation matters because exclusion matters, but representation should be treated as one dimension of transformation rather than its final destination. Economic power is exercised through decisions about investment, production, employment, technology, ownership and capital allocation. The people making those decisions therefore possess structural power regardless of their racial identity. A black executive operating within a concentrated corporate structure may be racially transformative at one level while leaving the deeper structure unchanged at another. Conversely, a white-owned enterprise may create substantial opportunities for black workers and suppliers without altering its ownership. These complexities demonstrate why racial representation and economic transformation cannot be collapsed into a single measure. The post-apartheid project requires both. South Africa must dismantle racial exclusion while simultaneously democratising economic power. One without the other produces an incomplete settlement. Racial inclusion without ownership can create symbolic equality. Ownership without democratic institutions can create oligarchy. The objective is a democratic political economy in which racial equality, social mobility, productive ownership and institutional accountability reinforce one another.

Mass ownership also has an intergenerational dimension. Economic inequality persists partly because wealth can be transmitted from parents to children through property, education, financial assets, social networks and business ownership. The descendants of families who accumulated under apartheid do not personally bear responsibility for historical injustice, but they may inherit its material advantages. Likewise, descendants of families dispossessed or impoverished by apartheid may inherit fewer assets and fewer opportunities. This means that transformation cannot be assessed only through present-day income. It must consider accumulated wealth and the capacity to transfer wealth across generations. The expansion of black homeownership, business ownership, pension savings and educational attainment can therefore have transformative consequences even when immediate inequality remains high. The objective is to create a new intergenerational wealth trajectory in which black households increasingly possess assets that can support their children. This is why broad-based ownership is more consequential than one-time empowerment transactions. A shareholding that produces temporary income may be useful, but an enduring asset base capable of supporting future generations has greater structural significance. Economic liberation becomes durable when it changes the inheritance patterns of society. The descendants of today's workers should inherit more than educational aspirations; they should inherit tangible productive and financial assets. Such transformation would alter the social geography of opportunity over decades. It would also reduce the extent to which historical racial inequality is reproduced through private inheritance. The ownership question is therefore fundamentally a question about the future as much as the present.

The distinction between consumption and accumulation is equally important. Post-apartheid social programmes have expanded access to basic services and provided essential income support to millions, and these achievements should not be minimised. Social protection is an essential component of democratic citizenship. But social expenditure alone cannot solve the ownership problem because consumption support does not necessarily create productive assets. A household may gain improved access to services while remaining economically dependent on wages, grants or precarious informal activity. Sustainable transformation requires combining social protection with asset-building strategies. Education can increase human capital; housing can provide an asset base; enterprise support can create businesses; worker ownership can create financial capital;

infrastructure can raise the productivity of communities. The challenge is to connect these forms of social investment so that citizens move progressively from vulnerability toward economic agency. This requires a long-term developmental framework rather than isolated programmes. The objective is not to replace social protection with market discipline but to ensure that protection becomes a bridge toward greater productive independence where possible. Economic democracy is strengthened when citizens possess multiple sources of security and income. A society in which millions depend exclusively on wages is vulnerable to unemployment and economic shocks. A society in which households possess diversified assets, skills and ownership stakes has greater resilience. The ownership question therefore concerns the architecture of security itself. It asks whether citizens have enough productive resources to withstand economic shocks and participate meaningfully in growth.

The political implications of unresolved ownership are profound. Economic inequality can weaken democracy when citizens conclude that political participation has little effect on their material lives. If elections change governments but do not significantly alter access to wealth, employment and opportunity, democratic legitimacy can become fragile. Citizens may begin to regard political institutions as distant from economic reality. This does not mean that democracy has failed; it means that political democracy must continually demonstrate substantive relevance. Economic transformation is therefore not merely an economic objective but a democratic necessity. A citizen who has the right to vote but no realistic opportunity to accumulate assets may possess formal equality without experiencing full socioeconomic citizenship. The challenge for democratic government is to convert political equality into conditions that enable citizens to exercise meaningful agency in society. Ownership is one mechanism through which that agency can be strengthened. A citizen who owns a business, cooperative share, pension asset, productive land or other capital possesses a different relationship to the economy than someone who depends entirely upon insecure employment. Broadening ownership can therefore strengthen democracy by creating a wider class of citizens with a material stake in economic stability and institutional accountability. Economic democratisation is consequently not a rejection of liberal democracy. It can be understood as the deepening of democracy into the economic sphere. The post-apartheid project will remain incomplete if the state is democratic but the economic institutions surrounding it remain excessively concentrated and socially inaccessible.

The future of transformation should therefore move from transactional empowerment toward structural economic democratisation. Transactional empowerment asks who receives shares, contracts or appointments in a particular deal. Structural transformation asks whether the economic architecture is changing so that ownership, capital and productive capability become progressively more widely distributed. This requires moving beyond compliance-driven approaches toward measurable outcomes. How many sustainable black-owned firms have been created? How many workers possess meaningful ownership stakes? How much productive capital is held by historically excluded communities? How many enterprises have progressed from small suppliers into independent industrial firms? How much value is being added domestically rather than exported in raw form? How effectively are pension assets contributing to long-term productive investment? How many households have acquired assets capable of generating intergenerational wealth? These questions provide a more rigorous basis for assessing transformation than simply counting empowerment certificates or board appointments. They shift the debate from identity to structure without abandoning the racial history that made transformation necessary. They also make transformation compatible with evidence-based policymaking. A successful policy should be capable of demonstrating measurable changes in ownership and productive capability over time.

Where it fails, it should be redesigned rather than defended through political rhetoric. Where it succeeds, it should be expanded. The objective is to institutionalise transformation as a measurable developmental process.

The ultimate lesson is that the black majority's political victory was indispensable but not sufficient. The democratic revolution broke the legal and political foundations of apartheid and created a constitutional order in which black South Africans became equal citizens. That achievement should never be trivialised. Yet political liberation created the possibility of economic liberation rather than completing it automatically. The ownership question remains because economic power operates through assets, capital, corporations, land, finance, technology and productive capacity that are not transformed merely by changing governments. The ANC succeeded in dismantling formal political apartheid, expanding black participation in the economy and constructing significant mechanisms of redistribution and empowerment. It also compromised with inherited economic structures because the transition required stability, investment, constitutional accommodation and management of a complex capitalist economy. Those compromises were historically understandable, but they cannot become an excuse for permanent economic inequality. The next stage of transformation must therefore ask harder questions about ownership itself. It must distinguish black representation from black control, black wealth from mass ownership, empowerment from fronting, entrepreneurship from patronage and redistribution from productive transformation. It must recognise the achievements of the black middle class while refusing to mistake elite mobility for mass liberation. It must support black industrialists while demanding productive independence. It must expand worker ownership without sacrificing enterprise efficiency. It must make empowerment genuinely broad-based rather than narrowly transactional. Above all, it must recognise that the objective is not merely to create a black elite capable of occupying positions previously reserved for whites. The deeper objective is to create a society in which the economic capacity to own, invest, produce and accumulate is distributed far more broadly across the black majority and across South African society as a whole. The unfinished struggle is therefore not simply about who governs South Africa. It is about who owns it, who produces its wealth, who controls its productive future and who has the institutional power to determine how that wealth is used. Until those questions are confronted with the same seriousness with which political liberation was pursued, the transition from apartheid to democracy will remain historically monumental but economically incomplete.

Chapter Eight

Can the ANC Control the State?

The proposition that the African National Congress has “lost control of the state” is rhetorically powerful but analytically incomplete, because it assumes that a governing party ever possessed unlimited control over the South African state after 1994. To understand the question properly, one must distinguish between electoral dominance, partisan influence, governmental authority, administrative command, constitutional sovereignty and structural power. The ANC won political office through democratic elections, and for three decades it remained the principal governing party

at national level, exercising enormous influence over the composition and direction of the executive. Yet electoral victory did not translate into ownership of the state in the conventional authoritarian sense, because the Constitution deliberately constructed a state in which political majorities are constrained by law, institutional separation, judicial review and legally protected rights. The democratic settlement therefore created a paradox at the centre of post-apartheid power: the liberation movement acquired government, but it did not acquire an unrestricted state apparatus through which it could simply reproduce the organisational logic of the liberation movement. The distinction matters because the ANC was simultaneously a political organisation, an electoral machine, a historical liberation movement and the governing party of a constitutional republic. These identities generated different expectations about what governmental control should mean. Within the movement's historical political imagination, victory could naturally be understood as the transfer of political authority from apartheid institutions to representatives of the oppressed majority. Within constitutional democracy, however, political authority is not equivalent to sovereign ownership. Government exercises power on behalf of the constitutional order rather than above it. Consequently, when commentators declare that the ANC has "lost control," they often describe declining electoral dominance, weakened organisational discipline, corruption, administrative deterioration or the emergence of coalition politics rather than the loss of control over a state that the Constitution never permitted the governing party to command absolutely. The deeper question is therefore not whether the ANC controls the state, but which parts of the state it can influence, which parts it can direct, which parts it can negotiate with and which parts remain institutionally insulated from partisan command. That question reveals a much more complicated distribution of power than the language of political victory or political defeat suggests. It also exposes the limits of liberation politics when transformed into constitutional government. The ANC did not simply inherit the apartheid state unchanged, nor did it completely replace its institutional architecture with a revolutionary state. It negotiated, transformed, constitutionalised and partially democratised that architecture. The resulting state therefore contains both the achievements of liberation and the constraints of compromise.

Parliament represents one of the clearest arenas in which the ANC historically exercised political power, because parliamentary majorities allowed it to determine legislative priorities, approve budgets, establish policy frameworks and provide democratic legitimacy to executive programmes. Yet even parliamentary supremacy is constitutionally limited, because Parliament itself is subject to the Constitution and legislation can be invalidated when it conflicts with constitutional requirements. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the South African transition. The liberation movement entered government with a powerful electoral mandate, but that mandate was deliberately embedded within a constitutional system designed to prevent temporary majorities from becoming permanent political sovereignty. Parliament therefore became neither a revolutionary congress nor an instrument of unrestricted party command, but a constitutional legislature whose authority derives from democratic elections and is exercised within legal boundaries. The ANC's parliamentary dominance nevertheless gave it enormous practical power, particularly when party discipline enabled its members to vote collectively on major legislation and budgets. For many years, the numerical strength of the ANC meant that parliamentary outcomes were often predictable, allowing the executive considerable political space to implement its programme. Yet parliamentary dominance should not be confused with institutional control. Opposition parties retained representation, parliamentary committees possessed oversight functions, public hearings created avenues for participation, and constitutional litigation enabled civil society and affected communities to challenge legislative action. The Constitutional Court's jurisprudence has repeatedly demonstrated that Parliament cannot simply invoke electoral legitimacy to escape constitutional

obligations. This is where the post-apartheid settlement became intellectually significant: the democratic majority was recognised, but majority rule was subordinated to constitutional supremacy. The ANC could win elections, form governments and pass laws, but it could not legally declare itself sovereign over the Constitution. That arrangement protected minorities, individuals and institutions from majoritarian excess, but it also frustrated those within liberation politics who expected political victory to produce a more direct transformation of social and economic relations. Parliament could legislate land reform, labour regulation, affirmative action, public procurement and economic transformation, but legislation could still be challenged if it violated constitutional principles. The resulting tension between democratic mandate and constitutional limitation is not evidence that democracy failed; it is evidence that South Africa chose constitutional democracy rather than unlimited parliamentary sovereignty. The ANC therefore possessed substantial legislative power without possessing unrestricted constitutional power. Its parliamentary majority gave it the capacity to govern, but not the legal capacity to govern beyond the constitutional framework. The important historical question is whether that limitation weakened the liberation project or provided the institutional framework necessary to make liberation politically sustainable. A serious Pan-African analysis should resist simplistic answers, because constitutional restraint can simultaneously protect democracy and limit the speed or scope of transformative change.

The executive branch presents a different dimension of power because it is here that political authority is translated most directly into policy, administration and state action. The President appoints the Cabinet, determines broad government priorities and exercises significant constitutional authority, while ministers oversee departments responsible for implementing public programmes. During the ANC's long period of national dominance, this gave the party extraordinary capacity to shape the direction of government through its control of the executive. Yet the President does not constitutionally become the owner of the public service merely by appointing ministers, and ministers cannot lawfully treat state institutions as extensions of party structures. This distinction became increasingly important as South Africa confronted allegations of corruption, state capture, patronage and the politicisation of public administration. The idea of "cadre deployment," whatever its original political rationale, became particularly controversial when political appointment practices were alleged to undermine professional administration and institutional independence. The central constitutional principle is that public administration must serve the public rather than a political party. Consequently, an ANC government could determine policy, but it could not legitimately transform every public official into a partisan operative. This is one of the fundamental limits imposed by constitutional democracy on liberation movements that become governing parties. A movement accustomed to political mobilisation must learn to govern through institutions whose personnel owe their legal duties to the Republic rather than to the movement. The distinction is especially important because the South African state is not merely the executive branch. It includes courts, legislatures, independent institutions, municipalities, regulatory bodies and professional administrative structures. The executive can coordinate these institutions to varying degrees, but it cannot simply command all of them. Even within departments, ministers operate through legal frameworks, budgets, delegated authority and administrative procedures. The practical quality of executive control is therefore dependent upon bureaucratic capacity, institutional legitimacy and administrative competence. Where the public service is weak, political authority can exist formally while implementation power remains fragmented. Where officials resist unlawful instructions, constitutionalism may appear as an obstacle to political government even though it is actually protecting the legality of the state. This creates another paradox: a governing party may be politically dominant while simultaneously being administratively constrained. Conversely, it may possess formal authority but lack the organisational capacity to implement its own policies

effectively. The claim that the ANC "lost the state" therefore becomes misleading unless one specifies whether one is discussing political command, executive authority, administrative capacity or institutional legitimacy. These are different forms of power, and post-apartheid South Africa has never concentrated all of them in the hands of a single political organisation.

Provincial government complicates the idea of national political control even further because South Africa's constitutional system deliberately distributes governmental authority across national, provincial and local spheres. Provinces possess constitutionally recognised responsibilities and institutions, although their powers exist within a framework of cooperative government rather than sovereign federal independence. The ANC's historical dominance across many provinces gave it significant political influence beyond the national executive, but provincial administrations were never simply regional branches of Luthuli House in constitutional terms. Provincial legislatures derive their authority from the Constitution and provincial elections, while premiers and executive councils operate within legally defined mandates. This arrangement reflects a central feature of South Africa's democratic settlement: decentralisation was intended to prevent the excessive concentration of political authority while ensuring national coherence. Yet decentralisation also creates opportunities for divergent political outcomes, administrative experimentation and conflict between national and provincial priorities. The ANC could therefore possess a national majority while facing weakening support or stronger opposition in particular provinces. This distinction became increasingly important as electoral competition intensified and coalition politics became more significant. A party's declining vote share in a province may reduce its political influence without eliminating its constitutional presence within the state. Conversely, a party may retain provincial government while lacking the administrative capacity to deliver effectively. Provincial power therefore depends not merely on electoral numbers but on institutional competence, fiscal resources, intergovernmental relations and political legitimacy. The constitutional principle of cooperative government further means that spheres must respect one another's constitutional status rather than treating lower levels as subordinate administrative offices. National government can exercise considerable coordinating authority, but provincial and local governments retain legally defined responsibilities. This arrangement complicates narratives of both ANC domination and ANC collapse. The party's long electoral dominance gave it an extensive political network, but that network did not erase the constitutional architecture of multilevel government. Indeed, one of the most important transformations after apartheid was the replacement of a highly centralised and racially authoritarian state with a constitutional system that distributed authority. The difficulty was that decentralisation did not automatically produce effective governance. Provincial and municipal institutions could suffer from corruption, patronage, weak management and financial instability even when their constitutional mandates were clear. The lesson is therefore that constitutional distribution of power does not guarantee democratic effectiveness. It creates institutional possibilities whose success depends upon political culture, administrative professionalism, accountability and material capacity. The ANC's challenge was consequently not simply to control provinces, but to govern them through institutions that were designed to possess their own constitutional legitimacy.

Municipal government reveals perhaps the sharpest distinction between political representation and actual governmental capacity because local government is where citizens encounter the state most directly. Water, sanitation, electricity, roads, refuse collection, housing administration and local economic development transform constitutional principles into everyday experience. For many citizens, therefore, the question of who controls the state is answered not in Parliament or the Union Buildings but at the municipal office, the clinic, the school, the electricity connection and the local

service point. The ANC's extensive municipal presence historically gave it substantial political power, but local governance also exposed the limitations of that power. Municipalities operate within legal, fiscal and administrative frameworks that limit what political office-bearers can simply order. Councillors are elected representatives, municipal managers are public officials, procurement procedures are regulated, and municipal budgets are subject to statutory requirements and oversight. Yet political influence can still become deeply entrenched through appointments, contracts and local party structures, producing a grey zone between legitimate political direction and illegitimate institutional capture. This grey zone has contributed to some of the most serious governance failures in post-apartheid South Africa. Where political loyalty becomes more important than competence, municipal institutions can lose administrative capacity even while elected leaders retain formal authority. Where procurement becomes a mechanism of patronage, the state can remain constitutionally democratic while its practical resources are diverted into networks of private accumulation. This demonstrates that constitutional democracy does not eliminate the possibility of elite capture; it changes the legal and institutional conditions within which capture occurs. Municipalities also demonstrate that political control can coexist with administrative impotence. A party may control the council but still struggle to repair infrastructure, collect revenue or maintain reliable services. Conversely, municipal officials may possess technical knowledge that politicians require, giving the bureaucracy a form of practical power that is not captured by electoral statistics. The question therefore becomes one of institutional interdependence rather than simple command. Political leaders need administrators, administrators need political authorisation, municipalities need fiscal transfers and residents demand accountability from both. The ANC's decline in some municipalities therefore represents a genuine loss of political power, but it should not automatically be interpreted as proof that the party has ceased to influence the state as a whole. Municipal power is dispersed, negotiated and conditional. The constitutional order deliberately makes it so. The deeper problem is whether South Africa has developed sufficiently capable local institutions to convert democratic representation into material transformation. Without such capacity, electoral power can become symbolically impressive but socially disappointing. The result is a state in which political authority exists, yet the everyday experience of citizens may suggest that authority is absent.

The civil service is one of the most decisive arenas for understanding the limits of party control because public administration is simultaneously political in purpose and professional in operation. Governments are elected to establish priorities, but permanent administrative institutions must implement those priorities according to law, procedure and professional standards. This distinction was especially significant after 1994 because the democratic government inherited a bureaucracy shaped by apartheid's racial and ideological priorities while simultaneously needing that bureaucracy to implement constitutional transformation. The challenge was therefore not simply to replace personnel but to transform the philosophy, composition, objectives and accountability of public administration. Black advancement within the public service was an important component of democratisation, yet demographic transformation alone could not guarantee institutional effectiveness. A public service can become more representative while remaining inefficient, or it can become technically capable while remaining insufficiently transformed. The difficult task was to achieve both. The ANC's political dominance allowed it to influence appointments and administrative priorities, but constitutional principles placed legal boundaries around that influence. Public officials are expected to serve the constitutional state rather than a party. This became particularly consequential in debates surrounding senior appointments, cadre deployment and allegations of patronage. The controversy should not be reduced to a simple claim that political appointments are inherently unconstitutional, because democratic governments necessarily make

certain political appointments. The more serious question is whether partisan influence extends beyond legitimate political responsibility into the manipulation of professional institutions for factional or private purposes. When that occurs, the problem is not simply party dominance but the conversion of public power into network power. Such network power can be more difficult to identify than formal political authority because it operates through relationships, contracts, appointments, informal influence and access to decision-makers. It can therefore survive changes in government if networks become institutionalised. This is one reason the phrase "ANC lost control of the state" can obscure more than it reveals. Political control may decline while networks established during earlier periods continue to influence institutions. Conversely, a government may retain political authority while lacking control over procurement systems, technical expertise or implementation chains. The modern state is simply too complex to be understood as a machine operated by a single political headquarters. It is an ecosystem of institutions, professions, rules, interests and relationships. The real struggle over state power therefore occurs not merely over who occupies political office, but over who controls information, appointments, budgets, procurement, regulatory discretion and implementation capacity. That is the deeper meaning of administrative power in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter 9 institutions occupy a particularly important place in this architecture because they embody the constitutional principle that democracy requires more than periodic elections. Institutions such as the Public Protector, Human Rights Commission, Auditor-General, Electoral Commission and other constitutionally recognised bodies exist to support accountability, protect rights and strengthen democratic governance. Their importance lies precisely in the fact that they are not ordinary departments under the direct command of the executive. They occupy a constitutional space designed to enable scrutiny of government itself. This creates an unavoidable tension with any governing party that has enjoyed prolonged electoral dominance. A liberation movement may understandably regard itself as the legitimate representative of the majority, but constitutional democracy requires that even the majority's representatives remain subject to independent scrutiny. The existence of Chapter 9 institutions therefore represents one of the clearest examples of the transformation of liberation politics into constitutional statehood. Their authority derives neither from party permission nor from executive goodwill but from the Constitution. The Auditor-General can expose irregular expenditure, the Public Protector can investigate maladministration, the Human Rights Commission can address rights violations and the Electoral Commission can administer elections independently of partisan government. Their effectiveness depends, however, upon resources, leadership, institutional credibility and respect for their findings. Where political actors attack such institutions whenever their findings are inconvenient, constitutional accountability becomes vulnerable. Yet the very existence of these institutions demonstrates that political power has been deliberately fragmented. The ANC cannot lawfully abolish institutional scrutiny simply because it won an election. Nor can opposition parties convert these institutions into partisan instruments without undermining their constitutional character. Their proper role is therefore neither pro-government nor anti-government. It is pro-constitutionalism. This distinction is crucial in evaluating South Africa's post-apartheid order. A government may experience independent oversight as frustrating because oversight slows decisions, exposes mistakes and imposes procedural obligations. But from a democratic perspective, that friction is not necessarily dysfunction. It can be evidence that institutions are working. The deeper question concerns whether Chapter 9 institutions possess sufficient structural independence to withstand political pressure and whether their recommendations are consistently translated into corrective action. Their existence therefore represents a major success of the constitutional settlement, while their occasional institutional weaknesses reveal the continuing vulnerability of democracy. The

ANC did not lose control of these institutions because it once legitimately owned them. Rather, it never possessed lawful ownership of them. Their independence was part of the constitutional architecture from the beginning.

Independent regulators provide another example of power existing outside straightforward partisan command. Modern economies cannot be governed solely through parliamentary speeches or presidential directives because complex markets require specialised institutions capable of regulating electricity, telecommunications, broadcasting, competition, financial services, transport and other sectors. Regulators therefore occupy a critical position between democratic politics and technical administration. They make decisions that can affect corporations, consumers, investors and public entities, often on the basis of statutory mandates rather than direct political instruction. Their existence reflects recognition that certain forms of decision-making require expertise, continuity and institutional insulation from short-term political pressures. Yet independence does not mean complete political isolation. Regulators are created by legislation, operate within statutory frameworks and remain accountable to constitutional principles and parliamentary oversight. The question is therefore one of bounded autonomy. A regulator must be sufficiently independent to make lawful decisions without improper political interference, while remaining sufficiently accountable to prevent bureaucratic power from becoming unanswerable power. This balance is particularly significant in a country where economic transformation remains one of the central unresolved questions of liberation. Regulation determines access to markets, licences, spectrum, infrastructure and competition, meaning that regulatory decisions can indirectly shape the distribution of economic power. The ANC could therefore influence the economic environment through legislation and executive policy without directly owning or controlling every regulatory decision. This demonstrates why political power and economic power must be analysed separately. A government may change the rules of the market, but corporations and financial institutions may still possess considerable structural influence over investment, employment, capital allocation and production. Conversely, independent regulators may constrain both government and business. The state is therefore neither simply an instrument of capital nor simply an instrument of the ruling party. It is a contested institutional field. The ANC's capacity to shape that field has been significant, but its ability to command every actor within it has always been limited. This is not an accidental weakness but a deliberate feature of constitutional democracy. The more difficult question is whether regulatory independence has produced sufficient public accountability and transformation. Independence can protect institutions from political capture, but it can also create technocratic distance from democratic demands if not balanced by transparent accountability. South Africa's challenge is therefore to democratise regulation without politicising it. That distinction is essential if the constitutional state is to mediate between popular sovereignty, institutional expertise and economic power.

The courts represent perhaps the most dramatic constitutional limitation on governing-party power because judicial review places the actions of political institutions under legal scrutiny. The Constitutional Court was created as one of the central guardians of the new constitutional order, and its authority to invalidate unconstitutional legislation or executive action fundamentally altered the relationship between political power and law. Under apartheid, law itself was frequently used as an instrument of racial domination, meaning that liberation movements understandably viewed legal institutions with suspicion. The post-apartheid constitutional settlement sought to transform law from an instrument of authoritarian power into an instrument for protecting dignity, equality, freedom and accountability. This transformation produced an extraordinary institutional paradox: the ANC, as the principal political force of liberation, became one of the principal subjects of

constitutional litigation. Once it entered government, the movement had to accept that courts could scrutinise decisions taken by its own representatives. The constitutional state therefore converted the former liberation movement from an opponent of state authority into an institution subject to state law. This was a profound transformation in political identity. The ANC could not legitimately argue that its historical role exempted it from judicial scrutiny. Nor could courts claim political sovereignty over elected representatives. The constitutional settlement instead established a relationship in which courts interpret and enforce constitutional requirements while elected institutions retain responsibility for policy choices within constitutional boundaries. This arrangement has generated political controversy because judicial intervention can appear to constrain the mandate of elected governments. Yet the alternative would be to permit electoral majorities to determine the legality of their own conduct. That would undermine constitutionalism. The critical issue is therefore not whether courts should constrain government, but how they should exercise that power without becoming substitute policymakers. Judicial independence must coexist with democratic legitimacy. The courts are not elected governments, but governments are not above the courts. This balance is one of the defining characteristics of South African democracy. It means that the ANC's political authority has always existed within a legal order capable of saying no. That capacity to say no is not evidence of judicial hostility to liberation. It is part of the institutional price of constitutional democracy. The liberation project therefore succeeded politically by taking control of government while simultaneously accepting that government itself would remain constrained by law.

Constitutional limitations are frequently portrayed by revolutionary movements as obstacles because they prevent governments from acting with the speed and discretion associated with revolutionary transformation. Yet this interpretation requires qualification because constitutionalism can also protect transformative politics from arbitrary reversal. The South African Constitution contains extensive rights relating to equality, dignity, housing, health, education, labour and democratic participation, creating legal obligations that governments can be required to fulfil. Constitutional rights therefore do not merely restrain the state; they also impose positive responsibilities upon it. This dual character is essential to understanding the relationship between the ANC and the constitutional order. The party could not simply implement every historical demand of the liberation struggle in whatever manner it wished, but it could use constitutional government to pursue transformation through legislation, budgeting, public institutions and social programmes. The Constitution therefore transformed revolutionary aspirations into legally structured policy commitments. The problem arises when constitutional requirements collide with political impatience, fiscal constraints, administrative weakness or competing rights. Land reform, housing, economic empowerment, public procurement, affirmative action and redistribution all demonstrate how difficult it is to translate broad constitutional commitments into concrete social outcomes. A constitutional right does not automatically create resources, administrative capacity or political consensus. Yet the Constitution establishes a normative framework against which government can be judged. This means that the ANC's historical achievements should not be measured only by whether it could command institutions, but also by whether it could use constrained power effectively. The difference is profound. Unlimited political control might allow rapid decisions, but it can also produce authoritarianism and institutional abuse. Constitutional government slows power down precisely because it requires justification, consultation, legality and accountability. The question is whether that slower process produces durable democratic transformation. In many respects it has. South Africa avoided the authoritarian consolidation that might have followed a dominant liberation movement assuming unlimited sovereign power. At the same time, constitutional restraint did not eliminate inequality, unemployment, poverty or racialised

economic structures. This creates the central contradiction of the chapter: the constitutional state successfully prevented political domination by the governing party while proving less capable of rapidly dismantling structural economic domination. The ANC therefore encountered a system that was strong in limiting political power but more difficult to transform economically. That asymmetry deserves serious scrutiny.

The phrase “ANC has lost control of the state” becomes particularly problematic when it is used to describe the contemporary political environment without distinguishing electoral power from institutional power. The ANC's electoral decline is real in political terms when measured through reduced vote shares, weakened majorities and increased dependence on coalitions or agreements. But electoral decline does not mean that every institutional legacy of decades of governance disappears simultaneously. Political parties leave behind laws, policies, appointments, administrative cultures, networks and institutional practices that can survive changes in electoral fortunes. Conversely, an incoming government can win office while inheriting a bureaucracy, judiciary, regulatory environment and public sector whose structures it cannot immediately transform. State power therefore has institutional memory. It cannot be understood solely through the electoral calendar. The ANC's historical dominance gave it the opportunity to shape the state over an extended period, including the composition of institutions, the direction of policy and the development of administrative norms. Some of those consequences were positive, including racial transformation, expanded social provision, constitutional consolidation and democratic inclusion. Others were deeply problematic, including allegations of patronage, corruption, institutional weakening and state capture. The important analytical point is that both dimensions can coexist. A movement can democratise a state while simultaneously creating new forms of elite access to state resources. It can expand representation while weakening administrative professionalism. It can strengthen constitutional institutions while politically contesting their independence. It can achieve racial transformation in political institutions while failing to transform the ownership structure of the economy. Such contradictions are not evidence that the entire democratic project was fraudulent. They are evidence that political transformation is multidimensional. The ANC's decline therefore should be understood as the erosion of one form of power rather than the disappearance of all forms of influence. The question should be who controls which institution, under which law, with what resources and subject to what accountability. Only then can the distribution of power be accurately mapped. The state is not a single object that can simply be possessed or lost. It is a constellation of institutions operating at different levels and according to different rules. The language of “control” therefore needs to be replaced with a more sophisticated vocabulary of influence, authority, capacity, accountability, autonomy and structural power.

The concept of state capture further demonstrates why political and institutional control cannot be treated as identical. State capture involves the distortion of public institutions for the benefit of particular networks or private interests, meaning that formal government may continue to exist while practical decision-making is redirected through informal relationships. The phenomenon associated with the Zuma era revealed the vulnerability of constitutional institutions to political pressure, factional networks and private influence. Yet it also demonstrated the resilience of the constitutional order because investigative journalism, civil society, courts, public institutions and official inquiries exposed and contested these practices. The important lesson is that state capture does not occur simply because one party controls government. It occurs when formal political authority becomes entangled with private networks in ways that undermine public accountability. This distinction is crucial to understanding the ANC's relationship with the state. The party may have exercised electoral and executive dominance, but that dominance did not prevent factions,

business interests, bureaucratic actors and private networks from competing for influence. Indeed, excessive concentration of political power within one party can create incentives for internal factions to treat control over public institutions as a route to economic accumulation. This is why the problem of state capture cannot be solved merely by replacing one faction with another. The deeper challenge is to strengthen institutions capable of resisting informal capture regardless of which party governs. South Africa's constitutional framework contains precisely such mechanisms, but their effectiveness depends on political culture and institutional courage. The courts, Auditor-General, investigative agencies, media and civil society can expose abuses, but they require resources and public legitimacy. Where political leaders respect institutional independence, constitutional safeguards become stronger. Where leaders seek to manipulate them, democratic institutions become vulnerable. The experience therefore complicates the claim that the ANC was either omnipotent or powerless. It was powerful enough to shape political appointments and policy environments, but it was never powerful enough to eliminate all competing centres of authority. At moments of institutional crisis, the struggle was not simply between the ANC and opposition parties but between constitutional government and networks seeking to subordinate public institutions to private interests. That distinction is fundamental. The constitutional state can survive the decline of a governing party, but only if its institutions retain enough independence to withstand whoever occupies political office.

The judiciary, Chapter 9 institutions and independent regulators also reveal that South Africa's constitutional state was designed around the principle of dispersed power rather than unified political command. This arrangement has historical significance because the liberation struggle was directed against a state in which political power was highly concentrated and racialised. The democratic transition therefore confronted two dangers simultaneously: preserving enough state capacity to govern effectively while preventing the new majority from reproducing authoritarian concentration under a different political identity. The Constitution responded by distributing power across institutions and establishing mechanisms of accountability. This was not a rejection of majority rule but an attempt to make majority rule compatible with individual rights and institutional restraint. The ANC's acceptance of this arrangement was itself a significant achievement of the transition. It meant that the liberation movement accepted the possibility that it could lose elections and that state institutions should survive beyond its political dominance. That principle is easy to overlook because the ANC governed nationally for so long that constitutional succession appeared hypothetical for much of the democratic era. But the significance of constitutional democracy becomes clearer when electoral competition becomes more intense. A democratic state must be capable of serving citizens regardless of which party wins. Public institutions cannot be treated as the property of the party that currently occupies government. This is precisely why the constitutional distinction between party and state matters. Political parties compete for state office; they do not own the state. Governments exercise executive authority; they do not own public institutions. Ministers establish policy; they do not own public servants. Parliament makes laws; it does not possess unlimited constitutional authority. Courts interpret law; they do not govern the country. Chapter 9 institutions investigate and oversee; they do not replace elected government. Regulators regulate; they do not become sovereign economic authorities. This intricate division is sometimes frustrating, but it is the institutional grammar of constitutional democracy. The ANC's historical political strength therefore existed within a system that was designed to prevent any party from becoming identical with the state. The decline of ANC electoral dominance does not invalidate that principle. On the contrary, it demonstrates why the distinction was necessary. The constitutional state must outlive political parties.

A Pan-African interpretation of this question should nevertheless avoid romanticising constitutionalism as a neutral or automatically emancipatory force. Constitutions are political settlements, and the South African Constitution emerged from negotiations shaped by unequal economic and institutional power. Political liberation did not occur in a vacuum. The ANC negotiated the transition with actors representing established economic interests, existing institutions and minority political constituencies. Consequently, the constitutional settlement successfully dismantled formal apartheid while leaving significant elements of the inherited economic order intact. This creates a critical distinction between political sovereignty and socioeconomic sovereignty. The black majority obtained universal suffrage, representation and formal political equality, but ownership of land, capital, productive assets and corporate wealth was not transformed at the same pace. The constitutional order protected property rights while permitting regulation and redistribution under defined conditions. This balance was politically understandable, but it generated a long-term contradiction. The democratic state possessed substantial authority over legislation and public expenditure, yet the commanding heights of the economy remained influenced by private ownership, financial markets and corporate decision-making. The ANC could therefore exercise political power without fully commanding the economic structures that shaped employment, investment and accumulation. This is why the claim that the ANC "lost control of the state" can obscure the more important question of whether political government ever equated to socioeconomic control. The answer is clearly no. The post-apartheid state was powerful enough to establish democracy but constrained in its ability to restructure every dimension of the inherited political economy. This was not simply a constitutional problem. It was also a consequence of global capitalism, domestic capital structures, fiscal constraints, investor confidence, international economic integration and the internal strategic choices of the governing party. The constitutional order therefore should be judged neither as the enemy of liberation nor as its complete fulfilment. It was the institutional compromise through which liberation entered the terrain of democratic statehood. That compromise protected political rights while leaving unresolved questions of ownership and structural inequality. The challenge for contemporary South Africa is therefore not merely to defend constitutionalism against political majorities but to ask whether constitutional democracy can become sufficiently transformative to address the material foundations of racial inequality. A constitutional order that protects political freedom while tolerating extreme structural inequality can remain formally democratic yet substantively incomplete. The intellectual task is to hold both truths simultaneously.

The ANC's relationship with constitutionalism also changed the meaning of revolutionary legitimacy. During the liberation struggle, legitimacy derived substantially from resistance to apartheid and from the claim to represent the oppressed majority. After 1994, however, legitimacy increasingly depended upon electoral performance, constitutional compliance, service delivery and socioeconomic outcomes. The moral authority of liberation could not permanently substitute for effective governance. This transition placed enormous pressure on the ANC because the movement's historical legitimacy had to be converted into institutional legitimacy. A liberation movement can survive periods of organisational weakness when its historical purpose remains morally compelling, but a governing party must continually justify its authority through performance and accountability. The constitutional order accelerated this transformation by requiring government to operate through transparent institutions rather than revolutionary command. The ANC therefore faced an unavoidable institutionalisation dilemma. To govern effectively, it had to become more bureaucratic, professional and procedurally disciplined; yet excessive bureaucratisation could distance the party from the mobilisation culture that had historically sustained it. Conversely, preserving movement-style organisational practices inside

government could encourage politicisation of institutions. The tension became particularly visible in debates about cadre deployment, state appointments and party-government relations. The fundamental constitutional principle is that the state must not become indistinguishable from the party. Yet political parties inevitably seek to influence public policy and leadership. The boundary therefore cannot be defined as complete separation but as lawful differentiation. Political parties may contest elections, develop manifestos, mobilise citizens and propose appointments within legitimate legal frameworks. They may not lawfully convert public institutions into instruments for partisan or private purposes. This distinction represents one of the central achievements of the constitutional settlement. It requires political organisations to accept that winning an election means receiving a mandate to govern, not acquiring ownership of the public realm. The ANC's historical difficulty was therefore not that the Constitution suddenly deprived it of power. Rather, constitutionalism required the movement to redefine what legitimate power meant. The state was no longer the enemy to be conquered, nor was it simply the instrument of the ruling movement. It became a public institution whose authority was limited by law. This was a profound political transformation. Whether the ANC fully adapted to that transformation remains one of the central questions of post-apartheid political history.

The distinction between state capacity and party control is equally important. A government can possess constitutional authority but lack the administrative capacity to implement its decisions. South Africa's challenges in electricity, transport, local government, policing, health administration and public infrastructure demonstrate how formal authority can be undermined by institutional weakness. When citizens experience service failure, they often interpret the problem as evidence that government has lost control. Sometimes that interpretation is justified. Yet service delivery failure may also arise from corruption, skills shortages, procurement problems, infrastructure decay, fiscal constraints, organisational fragmentation or poor management. The concept of control therefore needs to account for capacity. A government cannot meaningfully control an institution if it cannot ensure that decisions are implemented effectively. This is where the ANC's historical record becomes particularly complicated. Its political dominance gave it extraordinary opportunities to build capable institutions, but governance failures demonstrated that political authority alone does not produce administrative competence. In some areas, the state expanded social provision dramatically, while in others institutional performance deteriorated. The unevenness of this record challenges both triumphalist and catastrophic interpretations. It is inaccurate to claim that the ANC simply transformed the state successfully, just as it is inaccurate to claim that it merely reproduced apartheid under black political leadership. The post-apartheid state contains substantial transformation alongside substantial institutional continuity and serious governance failures. The same government that expanded access to social grants and democratic citizenship could preside over procurement scandals and municipal dysfunction. The same constitutional order that protected political freedoms could coexist with severe socioeconomic inequality. The same public service that became more racially representative could experience shortages of expertise and management. These contradictions should not be treated as anomalies. They are central to understanding the complexity of post-apartheid governance. Political liberation altered who could legitimately exercise public authority, but it did not automatically create the institutional capacity required to exercise that authority effectively. The unfinished task is therefore not simply to regain “control” but to build a state capable of implementing constitutional promises. State capacity is itself a form of democratic power. Without it, constitutional rights remain partially aspirational. With it, government can translate democratic mandates into tangible improvements in people's lives.

The role of political parties inside Parliament further demonstrates why the state cannot be equated with party structures. The ANC historically maintained strong party discipline, allowing its parliamentary caucus to function as an important mechanism through which electoral mandates became legislative outcomes. Yet party discipline has always existed alongside constitutional duties. Members of Parliament are elected through a political system but exercise public legislative functions. This creates an ethical and constitutional tension when party loyalty conflicts with oversight responsibilities. A representative may be expected by the party to support executive policy while simultaneously being required to scrutinise government expenditure and conduct. The strength of parliamentary democracy therefore depends partly on whether legislators can perform oversight without treating party loyalty as absolute. The same issue applies to opposition parties. Opposition is not merely obstruction; it is a constitutional component of accountability. Committees, debates, questions and investigations allow Parliament to scrutinise the executive. The effectiveness of these mechanisms depends upon political culture as much as constitutional design. A dominant party can weaken oversight if its majority is used mechanically to protect the executive. Yet an opposition can also weaken governance if every policy disagreement is converted into a legitimacy crisis. Mature constitutional democracy requires adversarial politics without institutional destruction. The ANC's long parliamentary dominance therefore had both stabilising and problematic dimensions. It enabled coherent government and predictable legislation, but it could also reduce the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight when party loyalty became stronger than institutional independence. As electoral fragmentation increases, the opposite challenge emerges. Coalition politics can strengthen accountability by reducing single-party dominance, but unstable coalitions can also make long-term governance more difficult. Neither dominance nor fragmentation is automatically democratic in practice. What matters is whether institutions remain capable of deliberation, accountability and lawful decision-making. The constitutional state therefore cannot be evaluated solely by the number of seats held by the governing party. It must be evaluated by the quality of institutional checks operating within and around Parliament. The real measure of power is not simply whether the ANC can win a vote, but whether political authority remains accountable after the vote has been won. That is the constitutional meaning of limited government.

The executive's relationship with the bureaucracy also reveals the difference between democratic mandate and institutional autonomy. A government must be able to implement its manifesto, otherwise elections become meaningless exercises in symbolic representation. At the same time, public officials must be protected from arbitrary political commands because administrative neutrality is necessary for continuity and legality. This is not a contradiction to be eliminated but a tension to be managed. Ministers provide political direction, while officials provide professional implementation. When the distinction collapses, the state becomes vulnerable to patronage. When it becomes excessively rigid, elected governments may find themselves unable to implement legitimate policy. South Africa's constitutional framework therefore seeks a middle path in which public administration is responsive to democratic government while remaining guided by constitutional values and professional principles. The difficulty lies in maintaining that balance in a political environment where parties compete intensely for access to public resources. The ANC's long period in government gave it considerable influence over administrative culture, but it also exposed the party to the dangers of becoming too deeply embedded in state institutions. The longer a party governs, the more difficult it can become to distinguish party networks from governmental structures. Political relationships become institutional relationships; appointments create loyalties; former officials enter political life; business interests develop connections with government. This creates a risk of what might be called institutional partisan sedimentation, where layers of historical

political influence remain inside public institutions even after electoral circumstances change. Yet such sedimentation is not uniquely an ANC phenomenon. Any dominant governing party can generate it. The constitutional principle must therefore be general rather than partisan. South Africa needs institutions capable of resisting capture regardless of who governs. If constitutional protections are defended only when one's preferred party is in opposition, constitutionalism becomes a weapon rather than a principle. The real test is whether political actors defend institutional independence even when those institutions produce inconvenient outcomes. That is the standard by which the ANC, opposition parties, civil society and the judiciary should all be judged. A constitutional state survives not because political actors are inherently virtuous but because institutions make abuse more difficult and accountability more possible. This is the deeper reason why the ANC could never legitimately exercise unlimited control over the state.

The phrase “lost control” also needs to be interrogated from the perspective of factionalism within the ANC itself. A political party is not a single individual with a single will. It is a coalition of leaders, factions, ideological tendencies, provincial structures, business relationships, trade union allies and grassroots constituencies. Consequently, saying that “the ANC controls the state” can conceal internal struggles over who within the ANC actually exercises influence. The history of the post-apartheid state includes repeated contests between national leadership, provincial structures, party factions, ministers, senior officials and external interests. Political authority therefore moves through networks rather than descending automatically from the top. The state can become a site of intra-party competition precisely because controlling appointments, budgets and institutions provides access to resources and influence. This is why state capture cannot be understood simply as a relationship between government and business. It can also involve struggles within political organisations over access to state power. The constitutional order provides mechanisms for limiting such struggles, but it cannot eliminate factional politics. Political parties remain voluntary organisations with their own internal cultures, ambitions and conflicts. The constitutional state becomes vulnerable when those internal conflicts are projected directly into public institutions. Institutions begin to function according to factional calculations rather than legal mandates. Officials may become aligned with political camps, appointments may become instruments of factional consolidation and regulatory decisions may acquire partisan significance. The remedy is not to eliminate political competition but to strengthen institutional barriers between party competition and state administration. This is another reason why the ANC's electoral decline should not automatically be celebrated as the end of a particular form of state influence. A fragmented political environment can still produce factional capture if institutions remain weak. Conversely, a strong constitutional system can contain political conflict even when parties are deeply divided. The key variable is therefore institutional resilience. South Africa's future democratic stability depends less on which party dominates Parliament than on whether public institutions can remain lawful when political competition intensifies. The state must belong constitutionally to the public, not operationally to whichever faction happens to control a political organisation. This is perhaps the most important lesson of the post-apartheid experience.

There is also a profound ideological question concerning whether the ANC's acceptance of constitutionalism represented a retreat from revolutionary politics or the successful institutionalisation of liberation. Critics from the left have argued that the negotiated settlement constrained transformative possibilities by preserving property relations, market institutions and constitutional limitations on state power. From this perspective, the ANC won political office but accepted a socioeconomic order in which capital retained considerable structural power. Critics from the liberal constitutionalist tradition, by contrast, may regard the same settlement as a

remarkable achievement because it prevented majoritarian politics from becoming authoritarian and established rights-based government. Both interpretations contain elements of truth. The constitutional settlement was simultaneously emancipatory and limiting. It abolished legal apartheid, established universal citizenship and protected fundamental rights, but it did not abolish capitalism or eliminate inherited economic inequality. It created political democracy without producing immediate economic democracy. The critical question is therefore not whether the ANC "betrayed" or "fulfilled" liberation in absolute terms, but which dimensions of liberation were institutionalised and which remained unfinished. Political equality was dramatically advanced. Legal racial discrimination was dismantled. Democratic participation became universal. The judiciary became constitutionally independent. Yet land ownership, corporate concentration, wealth inequality and patterns of capital accumulation remained profoundly unequal. The ANC therefore entered government with a political mandate that was larger than the institutional means available to fulfil every element of the historical liberation imagination. Its subsequent policy choices shaped the extent to which that structural contradiction was confronted. The Constitution itself provided tools for transformation, but it also imposed procedural and substantive constraints. The outcome was a negotiated form of democratic statehood in which revolutionary aspirations had to coexist with legal pluralism, property rights, independent courts and market institutions. That was not necessarily a failure. It may have been the price of achieving peaceful democratic transition. But the price should be analysed honestly. Political liberation did not automatically produce socioeconomic sovereignty. The ANC controlled government without controlling every structural determinant of economic life. This distinction should remain central to any serious analysis of post-apartheid power. Otherwise, criticism of the ANC risks blaming political institutions for inequalities generated by a much broader political economy.

The constitutional state also altered the meaning of sovereignty itself. Under conventional nationalist thinking, sovereignty is often understood as the capacity of a government to make authoritative decisions within its territory. Constitutional democracy complicates this understanding by placing government under a higher legal framework and recognising rights that cannot simply be withdrawn by ordinary political majorities. South Africa's sovereignty therefore belongs to the constitutional order as a whole rather than to the governing party. This is one of the most important differences between liberation government and revolutionary government. A revolutionary government might claim authority from the historical legitimacy of struggle; a constitutional government derives legitimacy from elections and legality. The ANC had to move from one form of legitimacy to the other. This transformation required a fundamental reorientation of political expectations. The party could not simply argue that because it had fought apartheid, it possessed permanent authority over state institutions. It had to accept that future generations could elect different representatives. The Constitution therefore institutionalised political uncertainty. That uncertainty is not a weakness; it is a condition of democracy. A government that cannot be peacefully replaced is not genuinely democratic. For many years, however, the ANC's electoral dominance made the possibility of alternation seem remote. This may have encouraged a political culture in which party-state boundaries became blurred. As competition increased, the importance of those boundaries became clearer. If political power changes hands, institutions must remain functional. Civil servants must continue serving the Republic. Courts must continue applying law. Regulators must continue exercising statutory mandates. Chapter 9 institutions must continue investigating public institutions. Municipal administrations must continue operating. This continuity is the practical expression of constitutional sovereignty. The state is therefore stronger than the party because the state is designed to survive the party. The ANC did not fail simply because it could not dominate every institution. Rather, the constitutional order succeeded because it

prevented the governing party from becoming synonymous with the state. The real democratic achievement lies in making political authority temporary while making constitutional institutions enduring. That principle is perhaps the clearest answer to the chapter's central question.

The question of whether the ANC was “defeated by the Constitution” therefore requires a more nuanced answer than either constitutional triumphalism or revolutionary disappointment permits. In one sense, the Constitution undeniably constrained the ANC's ability to exercise power according to the logic of a liberation movement. It prevented the party from treating electoral victory as unlimited sovereignty, required it to submit executive decisions to judicial review and established independent institutions capable of investigating government. In that sense, the Constitution defeated the possibility of unrestricted party-state fusion. But in another and deeper sense, the Constitution did not defeat the liberation movement; it converted its political victory into democratic statehood. It gave the ANC an institutional mechanism through which the majority could govern without reproducing the authoritarianism that had characterised apartheid. It transformed political struggle into constitutional politics, racial exclusion into formal equality and authoritarian administration into accountable government. The Constitution therefore represented both constraint and achievement. Its limitations were the limitations necessary to prevent the new democratic order from becoming another form of domination. Its protections created the political space in which liberation could become sustainable rather than merely victorious. The historical irony is that a movement may feel constrained precisely because the constitutional system protects the legitimacy of the democratic transformation it helped create. Once political power is constitutionalised, no party can claim permanent ownership of it. This is the essence of democratic succession. The ANC's loss of electoral dominance, therefore, should not be interpreted as proof that the constitutional settlement failed. It may actually demonstrate that the settlement worked. A Constitution that permits a governing party to lose power without collapsing the state is a successful democratic institution. The more important question is whether political parties are willing to accept this logic. If the ANC can govern when elected and accept opposition when defeated, it demonstrates constitutional maturity. If opposition parties can challenge the ANC while defending the institutions that will eventually constrain them when they govern, they demonstrate the same maturity. Constitutional democracy is therefore a system in which no political organisation receives permanent immunity from accountability. Its purpose is not to ensure that the ANC remains powerful, nor to ensure that the ANC disappears. Its purpose is to ensure that government remains lawful regardless of who wins elections.

Yet the celebration of constitutional limitation must not obscure the problem of structural power. The Constitution may constrain political domination while leaving other forms of power relatively intact. Corporate ownership, financial markets, land concentration, inherited wealth, global capital flows and control over productive assets can influence public policy without directly controlling the constitutional institutions of the state. This means that a government can be democratically elected and constitutionally powerful while still operating within an economic environment it does not fully control. The distinction between political power and structural economic power is therefore indispensable. The ANC's electoral victories gave it authority over taxation, regulation, public spending and social policy, but they did not make the government the owner of the economy. Private corporations could relocate capital, investors could respond to policy uncertainty, markets could constrain fiscal choices and wealthy actors could use economic resources to influence public discourse and political networks. This does not mean that capital secretly controls everything, nor does it justify conspiratorial explanations. It means that economic power operates through structural mechanisms different from electoral authority. A Pan-African political economy must therefore ask

not only who occupies government but who owns productive resources, controls capital, determines investment and shapes employment. The post-apartheid constitutional state succeeded in democratising political authority far more comprehensively than it democratised economic ownership. This is perhaps the greatest unresolved contradiction of the transition. The black majority became the decisive electoral constituency, but electoral power could not automatically overcome inherited patterns of wealth concentration. The ANC could change laws, establish institutions and expand social programmes, but it had to operate within a complex political economy. The result was a state that was politically transformed but economically constrained. Understanding this distinction prevents the false conclusion that the ANC either controlled everything or controlled nothing. It controlled important political instruments, but it never controlled the entire field within which those instruments operated. The state itself was embedded in national and global economic structures. The unfinished liberation question therefore concerns how democratic political authority can be converted into greater socioeconomic power without destroying constitutional rights or institutional independence. That remains one of the defining challenges of contemporary South Africa.

Courts, regulators and constitutional institutions are therefore not simply obstacles to political transformation; they can also become instruments through which citizens demand transformation from government. This point is essential because constitutionalism is sometimes reduced to a doctrine of restraint. In reality, constitutional institutions can compel governments to fulfil obligations that political leaders might otherwise postpone. Rights litigation has enabled communities to challenge inadequate public services, unlawful administrative action and failures of government accountability. Judicial review can therefore function not only as a brake on government but as a mechanism for enforcing government responsibility. This dual function complicates the claim that constitutionalism is inherently conservative. A constitutional state can restrain government from acting unlawfully while simultaneously requiring it to address inequality and rights violations. The difficulty lies in determining the appropriate boundary between judicial enforcement and political policymaking. Courts must not become elected governments, but governments must not ignore constitutional duties simply because policy implementation is politically difficult. This balance is especially important in a society emerging from institutionalised racial oppression. Formal equality alone cannot erase historical disadvantage. Constitutional democracy therefore requires both protection against discrimination and policies capable of addressing inherited inequalities. The ANC's transformative programme operated within this constitutional framework, using affirmative action, social programmes, land policies and economic regulation to pursue substantive change. The extent and effectiveness of those policies remain contested, but the constitutional framework itself did not prohibit transformation. Instead, it required transformation to occur through law. This is a profound difference from revolutionary politics conducted outside institutional constraints. The price is that change may be slower, more contested and more legally complex. The benefit is that policies gain legitimacy through procedures that can survive political turnover. In this sense, constitutionalism can protect the continuity of transformation. A future government may alter policy, but it cannot simply abolish constitutional commitments to equality and dignity. The ANC's challenge was therefore to understand constitutional limitations not merely as restrictions but as instruments for embedding democratic gains. Where the party failed to distinguish these functions, constitutionalism could appear hostile. Where it recognised them, the Constitution became an ally of democratic transformation. The historical record contains evidence of both interpretations.

The relationship between the ANC and the state must also be evaluated through the principle of accountability. Political power without accountability becomes domination, while accountability without effective authority becomes administrative paralysis. The constitutional order seeks to balance both by giving elected governments enough power to govern while creating mechanisms through which that power can be challenged. Elections provide vertical accountability because citizens can remove governments. Parliament provides institutional accountability through oversight. Courts provide legal accountability. Chapter 9 institutions provide specialised oversight. The media and civil society provide public scrutiny. Administrative law provides procedural accountability. These mechanisms overlap rather than operate independently. Their combined effect is to make government power contestable from multiple directions. This is one of the principal reasons why the ANC could never legitimately exercise complete control over the state. Even during periods of overwhelming electoral dominance, government remained exposed to litigation, public protest, investigative journalism, parliamentary scrutiny and institutional review. The effectiveness of these mechanisms varied, but their existence changed the nature of political authority. The state became a contested public institution rather than an instrument of the ruling movement. The danger, however, is that accountability mechanisms can themselves become politicised or weakened. If institutions are captured, they cease to function as independent checks. If public trust collapses, even legitimate decisions may be interpreted as partisan. If political parties attack every adverse judgment as illegitimate, constitutional authority is weakened. Conversely, if courts and oversight institutions appear to substitute their own preferences for democratic choices, they can also undermine legitimacy. Constitutional democracy therefore depends upon institutional restraint on all sides. No institution can function effectively if every disagreement becomes a battle over sovereignty. The ANC's historical experience illustrates this tension because its political dominance sometimes generated suspicion of institutional independence, while its own leaders sometimes challenged institutions that constrained them. Yet the proper response to institutional conflict is stronger constitutional practice rather than institutional destruction. The question is not whether government should be powerful. It must be powerful enough to govern. The question is whether its power remains accountable. That is the essence of the constitutional state.

The evolution of the ANC from liberation movement to governing party also raises the broader Pan-African question of how liberation movements should govern after independence or democratic transition. Across the continent, many liberation movements became dominant political parties and subsequently faced the same dilemma: how to preserve historical legitimacy while accepting constitutional limits, electoral competition and institutional independence. South Africa's experience is distinctive because the constitutional settlement was particularly explicit in separating party authority from state sovereignty. The ANC therefore confronted a problem shared by many African liberation movements but within an unusually strong constitutional framework. The danger for liberation movements is that historical legitimacy can become a substitute for contemporary accountability. A party may begin to regard criticism as betrayal because it remembers the sacrifices of the liberation struggle. Yet constitutional democracy requires citizens to judge governments by present conduct as well as historical achievement. Conversely, opponents of liberation movements can sometimes ignore genuine historical achievements by reducing decades of transformation to current governance failures. Both approaches are intellectually inadequate. A mature Pan-African analysis must recognise the achievements of liberation while scrutinising the institutions created after liberation. South Africa's constitutional order represents an important African contribution to the theory of democratic statehood because it attempted to reconcile majority rule with institutional restraint, social transformation with rights protection and political sovereignty with constitutional supremacy. Its success should not be measured by whether it eliminated political conflict.

Democracy is not the absence of conflict. Its success should be measured by whether conflict can occur without destroying institutions. The ANC's political decline therefore provides an important test. If power can change hands while courts remain independent, public servants continue functioning, regulators remain operational and constitutional institutions continue exercising oversight, then South Africa demonstrates that liberation can become institutionalised democracy. If political transition produces attempts to capture or dismantle these institutions, the country risks reversing that achievement. The future therefore depends less on preserving one party's dominance than on preserving the distinction between party and state. This is perhaps the most enduring lesson South Africa can offer the continent.

The central question can now be reformulated more precisely: who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa? The answer is not the ANC alone, nor Parliament alone, nor the President alone, nor the courts alone, nor capital alone. Power is distributed across a constitutional system in which different institutions possess different forms of authority. The ANC historically exercised extraordinary electoral and executive influence, particularly when it possessed parliamentary majorities. Parliament exercised legislative power but remained constitutionally constrained. The executive exercised governmental authority but remained subject to law. Provinces and municipalities exercised decentralised governmental responsibilities. Public servants exercised administrative and technical power. Chapter 9 institutions exercised oversight. Regulators exercised specialised statutory authority. Courts exercised constitutional review. Private capital exercised structural economic influence. Civil society, trade unions, media organisations and social movements exercised forms of social and political pressure. International markets and institutions also affected the policy environment within which the state operated. The resulting system is therefore one of dispersed power rather than unitary sovereignty. This does not mean that all actors possess equal power. They plainly do not. Institutions with greater resources, expertise, networks or economic leverage can exercise disproportionate influence. But unequal power should not be mistaken for total control. The analytical task is to map relationships between different centres of power. The ANC's historical significance lies in its ability to transform political representation and gain control of government through democratic elections. Its principal limitation was that government itself operated inside a constitutional order designed to prevent political monopoly. Its further limitation was that political control did not automatically translate into control over the economic structures that reproduced inequality. Its major achievements included democratisation, constitutional government, racial political inclusion and the expansion of social citizenship. Its compromises included accepting a negotiated political economy, operating within inherited economic structures and struggling to reconcile party organisation with professional state administration. Its failures included moments when political networks undermined institutional independence and when administrative weakness prevented constitutional promises from being realised. Its enduring challenge is to transform political authority into effective, accountable and materially transformative governance. The state, in other words, was never simply “lost.” It was always contested.

The most provocative answer to the chapter's question is therefore that the ANC was neither defeated by the Constitution nor fully liberated by it. It was transformed by it. The constitutional order forced the liberation movement to abandon the idea that political victory could legitimately produce unlimited institutional command, but it simultaneously provided the legal foundation through which the movement could exercise majority government peacefully and democratically. This transformation was historically significant because it converted revolutionary legitimacy into constitutional legitimacy. The ANC had to accept that it could govern only through institutions that

might also constrain it. It had to accept that its laws could be challenged, its ministers could be scrutinised, its officials could be investigated, its decisions could be overturned and its electoral majority could eventually disappear. Yet those constraints also protected the democratic state from the instability that often follows the concentration of power around liberation movements. The Constitution therefore did not simply limit liberation; it institutionalised its political achievement. The deeper failure was not that the ANC lacked unlimited control, but that political authority proved insufficient to transform the deeper economic structures inherited from apartheid. South Africa democratised sovereignty without fully democratising ownership. It transformed political citizenship more rapidly than economic power. The result is a state in which the black majority possesses decisive political rights while many forms of structural economic power remain distributed unevenly. This is why the next stage of the intellectual inquiry cannot stop at the question of who controls Parliament or the Presidency. It must ask who controls capital, land, corporations, finance, infrastructure, technology, productive assets and the conditions under which citizens participate in the economy. The constitutional state answers one part of the liberation question: who may legitimately govern? It does not by itself answer the entire question of who possesses material power. The ANC's historical project therefore remains unfinished not because constitutional democracy defeated liberation, but because political liberation created the institutional conditions for a deeper struggle over socioeconomic transformation. The constitutional order established the democratic arena. It did not predetermine the outcome of every contest within that arena. That contest remains open.

Ultimately, the phrase “ANC has lost control of the state” should be replaced by a more rigorous proposition: the ANC's historical dominance over government has weakened, but the state was never constitutionally designed to belong to the ANC in the first place. What has changed is the party's electoral capacity to determine who occupies key political offices and how government policy is formulated. What has not changed is the constitutional principle that public institutions derive their authority from the Constitution and the law rather than from the permanent authority of any political organisation. This distinction represents one of the most consequential achievements of the post-apartheid settlement. It means that the state can survive political transition. It means that courts can continue functioning when governments change. It means that public administration can, at least in principle, serve citizens regardless of party affiliation. It means that regulators can continue exercising statutory responsibilities. It means that Chapter 9 institutions can scrutinise whoever holds office. It means that Parliament can become more fragmented without the Republic becoming institutionally fragmented. The challenge is to ensure that these principles are not merely written into constitutional text but sustained in political practice. The ANC must learn that losing political dominance does not mean losing the democratic state. Opposition parties must understand that gaining government does not mean owning the state. Public servants must recognise that their ultimate loyalty is to the constitutional order. Citizens must understand that democratic participation extends beyond voting and includes oversight, litigation, protest, public debate and institutional engagement. Civil society must defend constitutional institutions even when those institutions challenge its preferred political outcomes. Business must recognise that economic freedom does not eliminate obligations to the constitutional society in which markets operate. The courts must protect constitutional supremacy while respecting the proper sphere of elected government. Chapter 9 institutions must remain independent without becoming politically unaccountable. Regulators must balance expertise with democratic legitimacy. Parliament must exercise oversight rather than merely reproduce party arithmetic. These requirements define the mature constitutional state. The ANC's greatest historical achievement may therefore not have been its ability to control government, but its participation in creating a system in which no party could legitimately control

the entire state. The unfinished task is to make that system not only politically democratic but economically transformative. Only then can South Africa's post-apartheid settlement move from political liberation toward a more comprehensive conception of democratic sovereignty.

Chapter Nine

The Judiciary: Protector of Democracy or Constraint on Revolutionary Transformation?

The question of the judiciary in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be reduced to the crude proposition that courts either serve democracy or obstruct transformation, because the constitutional order itself contains both democratic emancipatory possibilities and institutional constraints upon majoritarian political power. The judiciary emerged from a legal system historically implicated in colonial conquest, racial segregation and apartheid, yet the constitutional settlement after 1994 deliberately attempted to transform law from an instrument of racial domination into an instrument of rights-based democratic government. The decisive institutional rupture was therefore not simply the replacement of white judges by black judges, but the relocation of judicial authority within a new constitutional architecture. Section 165 of the Constitution establishes that judicial authority is vested in the courts and that courts are independent and subject only to the Constitution and the law, which they must apply impartially and without fear, favour or prejudice. It further prohibits interference with the functioning of courts and obliges organs of state to protect judicial independence, impartiality, dignity, accessibility and effectiveness. This arrangement is fundamentally different from the parliamentary sovereignty that characterised earlier constitutional arrangements, because the democratic government itself became subject to a higher legal order. The ANC therefore won political power in 1994 but did not acquire unlimited constitutional power. It inherited the authority to govern, legislate and formulate policy, but it did not inherit the authority to determine unilaterally what the Constitution means. The revolutionary movement entered government through an institutional settlement in which political authority was deliberately separated from judicial authority. That separation was essential to preventing the new majority from reproducing the authoritarianism of the old minority regime. Yet it also created the central tension of transformative politics: a movement seeking to reconstruct society must operate through institutions whose legitimacy depends partly upon limiting the movement's own power. The judiciary therefore became simultaneously a guardian of democratic emancipation and a potential

obstacle to particular forms of revolutionary transformation. The intellectual task is not to decide in advance which description is correct, but to investigate when courts have expanded democratic power, when they have restrained government unnecessarily, and when judicial intervention has protected the very constitutional conditions necessary for transformation. The deeper question is consequently not whether judges are politically conservative or progressive in the abstract, but what conception of democracy the constitutional order requires them to enforce. This makes the South African judiciary one of the most important sites for understanding who actually exercises power after apartheid.

The constitutional design must first be understood as a deliberate response to the dangers of concentrated political authority. Apartheid demonstrated that legal institutions could be used to give authoritarian policies the appearance of legality, and the post-apartheid Constitution therefore sought to prevent democratic government from becoming an unlimited government. Constitutional supremacy replaced the assumption that Parliament could ultimately determine the legality of its own actions. The founding values include constitutional supremacy and the rule of law, meaning that elected majorities remain powerful but are not legally sovereign in an unrestricted sense. Courts acquired authority to review legislation and executive conduct against constitutional standards, while section 172 requires a court deciding a constitutional matter within its power to declare inconsistent law or conduct invalid to the extent of its inconsistency. This is a profound redistribution of power because it means that unelected judges can invalidate decisions made by elected representatives. Yet the constitutional legitimacy of that power derives from the democratic settlement itself rather than from judicial self-appointment. The people, through the constitutional process, authorised courts to exercise constitutional review. The apparent contradiction between democracy and judicial review therefore becomes more complicated: constitutional democracy is not merely majority rule, but majority rule conducted within institutional and rights-based limits. The judiciary is consequently not external to democracy; it is one of the institutions through which South African constitutional democracy is constituted. Nevertheless, the existence of judicial review creates an unavoidable democratic dilemma whenever elected governments claim a mandate for profound socioeconomic change. A government may receive millions of votes for land reform, public ownership, redistribution or restructuring of state institutions, yet still discover that its preferred legislation can be challenged before judges. The political mandate therefore does not automatically translate into unlimited legal authority. This distinction is central to understanding post-apartheid power. Political sovereignty belongs to the people, governmental authority is exercised through elected institutions, but constitutional authority is structured through a legal framework that neither Parliament nor the executive may simply disregard. The ANC's revolutionary project therefore entered a constitutional state in which the means of transformation were themselves constitutionally regulated. That was simultaneously a democratic achievement and a limitation on revolutionary discretion. The question is whether this limitation ultimately protects transformation from arbitrary power or protects existing structures from sufficiently radical change.

Judicial independence is indispensable to this constitutional arrangement because without an independent judiciary constitutional supremacy would become largely symbolic. A court that depends upon the executive for its survival, promotion, salary or continued tenure cannot effectively review executive power. South Africa's Constitution therefore gives judges significant institutional protection, including security of tenure and restrictions on their removal from office. A judge cannot simply be dismissed because a government dislikes a judgment. Removal requires constitutionally prescribed findings and parliamentary action involving a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly. This protection is not a privilege granted to judges for their personal benefit but

an institutional guarantee intended to protect citizens against arbitrary government. Judicial independence therefore has a profoundly democratic purpose even though judges themselves are not elected. The citizen who loses property, liberty, livelihood or access to government services must be able to challenge state power before an institution capable of deciding against the government. At the same time, independence cannot mean judicial isolation from society. Courts operate within a social order marked by extreme inequality, racialised wealth distribution, poverty, unemployment and the continuing consequences of colonialism and apartheid. A judiciary that mechanically applies inherited legal concepts without understanding these structural realities could preserve injustice while formally satisfying the requirement of independence. The constitutional project therefore requires independence from political interference while simultaneously requiring sensitivity to constitutional transformation. These two principles are not inherently contradictory. A judge can be independent from government while recognising that the Constitution itself contains an explicit commitment to transformation, equality, dignity and social justice. The danger arises when judicial independence is confused with ideological neutrality, as though law can be interpreted without historical assumptions or institutional perspectives. Every legal system contains inherited concepts, precedents and professional cultures. The transformation of the judiciary must therefore concern not merely who sits on the bench but how constitutional law understands the social purposes of justice. Judicial independence should protect judges from political coercion, but it should not protect the legal profession from legitimate democratic scrutiny concerning access, representation, accountability and transformative constitutional interpretation.

The transformation of the judiciary must consequently be examined on two distinct levels: demographic transformation and jurisprudential transformation. Demographic transformation concerns the racial and gender composition of the bench and the broader accessibility of the legal profession to historically excluded South Africans. Jurisprudential transformation concerns whether judicial reasoning has moved beyond the assumptions and doctrines inherited from a racially unequal legal order. Section 174 expressly requires that the need for the judiciary to reflect broadly the racial and gender composition of South Africa be considered in appointments. This constitutional provision is significant because it recognises that representational legitimacy matters in an institution exercising enormous public authority. Yet demographic transformation alone cannot establish substantive transformation. A judiciary can become increasingly representative while still reproducing doctrines that privilege property, contract, procedural formality or inherited legal assumptions over socioeconomic justice. Conversely, a judiciary can produce transformative judgments even while its composition remains imperfectly representative. The serious question is therefore how institutional composition and constitutional reasoning interact. A black judge is not automatically a revolutionary judge, just as a white judge is not automatically an opponent of transformation. Such racial determinism would reproduce precisely the simplistic categories that serious constitutional analysis should overcome. The relevant issue is whether the institution's composition, professional culture and jurisprudence collectively reflect the constitutional project of overcoming apartheid's legal and socioeconomic legacy. The transformation process also involves broadening pathways into the legal profession, strengthening legal education, improving access to senior counsel and judicial office, and addressing inequalities in the institutions that supply future judges. The constitutional objective is therefore deeper than replacing faces on the bench. It requires constructing a legal system in which historically excluded communities can participate meaningfully in the production, interpretation and enforcement of law. Transformation of the judiciary should thus be understood as institutional democratisation without political capture. The challenge is to produce a judiciary that is socially representative, constitutionally faithful, intellectually independent and conscious of South Africa's historical inequalities.

The Judicial Service Commission occupies a crucial position within this architecture because judicial appointments are neither exclusively executive nor exclusively judicial. The Constitution establishes the JSC as a multi-institutional body involved in selecting judicial candidates, while the appointment process incorporates political, professional and judicial participation. The Department of Justice explains that the JSC publishes vacancies, receives nominations, shortlists candidates, conducts public interviews and communicates recommendations to the President. This process creates an important democratic compromise. Judges require independence from the executive, but democratic society also requires a legitimate process for determining who will exercise judicial power. The involvement of political representatives is therefore not automatically evidence of political interference. In a constitutional democracy, democratic institutions have a legitimate interest in the composition and quality of the judiciary, provided that appointments remain governed by constitutional standards rather than partisan loyalty. The President's role is constitutionally significant but constrained by consultation and the JSC framework. For ordinary judges, the President appoints on the advice of the JSC, while senior appointments involve additional constitutional procedures. This means that the judiciary is neither completely insulated from democratic politics nor simply an extension of executive government. The arrangement reflects an attempt to balance independence, accountability, representativeness and competence. The controversy surrounding judicial appointments therefore deserves more sophistication than allegations that one political party simply controls the courts. The real institutional question is whether appointment procedures consistently produce judges whose independence is credible, whose competence is demonstrable and whose social legitimacy is sufficiently broad. Public interviews and professional scrutiny can strengthen legitimacy, but they can also become politically contentious when candidates are questioned about their constitutional philosophy. This is inevitable because judicial philosophy affects the distribution of power. The crucial safeguard is therefore transparent criteria and principled deliberation rather than the elimination of politics from appointments altogether. Politics cannot be removed from constitutional institutions, but it can be constitutionalised, constrained and made publicly accountable.

The judiciary's relationship with the ANC government demonstrates why constitutional review can become politically controversial even when it is legally legitimate. Since 1994, governments led by the ANC have repeatedly faced litigation challenging legislation, administrative decisions, procurement processes, appointments, electoral arrangements and executive conduct. The existence of such litigation does not establish judicial hostility toward the ANC. Rather, it demonstrates that constitutional democracy creates institutional mechanisms through which citizens, political parties, civil society organisations and businesses can challenge government action. Courts have sometimes ruled against government and sometimes upheld government decisions. The pattern must therefore be evaluated case by case rather than through a narrative of permanent judicial opposition. The Constitutional Court's own record includes decisions involving prisoners' voting rights, parliamentary processes, presidential conduct, socioeconomic rights and administrative justice. These judgments reveal that judicial review has not been directed exclusively against the transformative state. In some circumstances courts have compelled government to extend rights, improve administrative processes or reconsider policies that disproportionately burden vulnerable groups. In other circumstances courts have accepted significant governmental discretion. The judiciary has therefore functioned neither as a permanent opposition party nor as a rubber stamp for government. It occupies a different constitutional position. Its authority derives from legal interpretation, not electoral competition. This distinction is essential because political actors naturally interpret adverse judgments through the lens of political struggle. A government pursuing transformation may experience judicial intervention as obstruction, while communities challenging

government failures may experience the same judiciary as their only effective avenue of protection. The meaning of judicial power therefore changes according to one's location within the political and socioeconomic hierarchy. The unemployed citizen seeking social protection, the community resisting eviction, the business challenging regulation and the minister defending policy may all experience the same constitutional court differently. A rigorous account must hold these perspectives together rather than privileging one. The judiciary's political significance lies precisely in its capacity to redistribute practical power through legal remedies without becoming itself a political government.

One of the most important examples of this redistributive potential lies in the field of socioeconomic rights. The South African Constitution does not merely protect classic civil and political liberties; it also recognises rights concerning housing, healthcare, food, water, social security and other socioeconomic interests. This was an extraordinary constitutional development because it placed material deprivation within the domain of constitutional concern. The Constitutional Court's landmark decisions in *Government of the Republic of South Africa v Grootboom* and *Minister of Health v Treatment Action Campaign* demonstrated that socioeconomic rights could generate enforceable obligations against government. The Court's jurisprudence has also included protection of social security rights for permanent residents and meaningful engagement before certain evictions. This record complicates the argument that the judiciary simply protects existing property and capitalist interests. In important cases, courts have required the state to take vulnerable people seriously and to design reasonable policies capable of addressing deprivation. Yet the Court has generally avoided converting socioeconomic rights into an unlimited judicial power to design budgets or substitute its preferred policy for that of elected government. This restraint reflects an institutional recognition that resource allocation involves complex choices involving taxation, administration, competing priorities and democratic accountability. The judiciary therefore occupies an intermediate position between enforceable rights and governmental policy discretion. Its task is to determine whether government has acted constitutionally, not to become the country's economic planning ministry. This distinction is central to understanding why judicial enforcement can both advance and constrain revolutionary transformation. Courts can require government to fulfil constitutional obligations while refusing to dictate the entire architecture of economic policy. The resulting jurisprudence is neither purely conservative nor revolutionary. It represents a constitutional model in which social transformation is legally required but institutionally mediated. The success of this model depends heavily on whether courts interpret reasonableness and progressive realisation in ways that genuinely confront structural deprivation.

Administrative law represents another major redistribution of power because it places governmental decision-making itself under legal scrutiny. Under apartheid, administrative authority was often exercised within a system designed to exclude the majority from meaningful participation. The post-apartheid constitutional order therefore made procedural fairness, legality and rationality central components of democratic government. The Promotion of Administrative Justice Act and constitutional principles allow citizens to challenge decisions affecting their rights and interests. This means that government cannot simply invoke its electoral mandate as justification for every administrative act. Ministers, municipalities, departments and public bodies must exercise power lawfully, rationally and procedurally fairly. For a government committed to transformation, this creates both protection and frustration. It protects communities from arbitrary decisions by officials, but it can also slow policy implementation and create opportunities for litigation. The deeper issue is that transformation requires capable administration, not merely transformative legislation. A government may adopt progressive laws yet fail to implement them because of corruption,

incompetence, procurement failures or bureaucratic weakness. Judicial review can expose these failures, but it cannot replace administrative capacity. Litigation can compel officials to reconsider decisions, comply with statutory duties or provide reasons, but courts cannot manage every department. The danger of excessive judicial intervention is therefore real if courts begin converting legal review into continuous administrative supervision. Yet the opposite danger is equally serious: excessive judicial deference can allow bureaucratic dysfunction to persist at the expense of constitutional rights. The appropriate constitutional balance requires courts to distinguish between legitimate policy discretion and unlawful administrative action. This is why administrative law is one of the most important arenas in which ordinary citizens encounter constitutional democracy. The judiciary becomes not simply an institution for elite constitutional litigation but a mechanism through which the exercise of public power can be made accountable. In this sense, judicial review is a form of democratic control rather than an alternative to democracy.

The property clause presents a more difficult problem because property is simultaneously a protected constitutional right and one of the central institutional foundations of South Africa's historically unequal economic order. The Constitution protects property but does not make property rights absolute. Section 25 prohibits arbitrary deprivation and regulates expropriation, while simultaneously requiring legislative measures to enable land reform and access to natural resources. The constitutional architecture therefore attempts to reconcile two potentially conflicting objectives: protection against arbitrary dispossession and transformation of the material consequences of apartheid. This compromise has generated intense political debate because land is not merely an economic asset in South Africa. It is connected to colonial conquest, racial dispossession, agricultural production, spatial segregation, identity and historical justice. A revolutionary movement committed to land redistribution therefore confronts a constitutional framework that protects existing property interests while expressly recognising the need for reform. The legal question is not whether property can ever be expropriated, because the constitutional framework permits expropriation subject to prescribed conditions. The more difficult question concerns the conditions, compensation, public purpose, public interest and legislative mechanisms through which reform should occur. Constitutional jurisprudence has repeatedly rejected the simplistic proposition that property rights are absolute barriers to land reform. At the same time, it has also rejected arbitrary seizure as a legitimate substitute for lawful transformation. In the constitutional imagination, land reform must therefore be radical enough to confront historical dispossession but lawful enough to avoid reproducing arbitrary power. This tension illustrates the central paradox of post-apartheid transformation. The Constitution recognises the injustice of the past while simultaneously protecting legal stability in the present. That compromise was essential to democratic transition, but it inevitably limits the speed and form of revolutionary redistribution. The unresolved land question therefore cannot be understood solely as judicial obstruction; it is partly the consequence of the negotiated constitutional settlement itself.

The Constitutional Court's approach to land and property demonstrates that constitutional law can be simultaneously transformative and conservative in institutional effect. In cases concerning land rights, tenure and eviction, the Court has emphasised that the Constitution supports orderly land reform while refusing arbitrary seizure or automatic constitutional transfer of ownership. A significant judicial articulation of this balance recognises that the Constitution requires legislative and other measures to strengthen tenure, open access to land and progressively realise adequate housing, rather than simply transferring title through constitutional fiat. This is intellectually important because it rejects two opposite myths. The first myth is that the Constitution freezes apartheid-era property relations permanently. The second is that the Constitution itself commands

immediate revolutionary redistribution without legislative mediation. Neither proposition accurately captures the constitutional structure. The Constitution establishes transformation as a constitutional objective while leaving considerable responsibility to Parliament and the executive to design the mechanisms through which transformation occurs. Courts then assess whether those mechanisms comply with constitutional standards. This creates a division of labour between political branches and the judiciary. Parliament determines policy and legislation, government implements programmes, and courts determine legality and constitutionality. The problem emerges when political institutions fail to use the space available to them. If government possesses constitutional authority to pursue land reform but does not develop effective legislation, institutions or administrative capacity, the resulting failure cannot fairly be attributed entirely to judges. Judicial constraints become one part of a larger political economy of transformation. The question should therefore be reframed from "Why did the courts prevent land reform?" to "How did political institutions use, or fail to use, the transformative space created by the Constitution?" This reframing moves the analysis away from judicial scapegoating and toward institutional accountability. It also reveals that revolutionary transformation can be constrained not only by courts but by legislative hesitation, administrative weakness, economic power, bureaucratic fragmentation, corruption and political compromise. The judiciary may enforce the rules within which transformation occurs, but political actors determine many of the choices made within those rules.

The protection of property also demonstrates why legal rights cannot be analysed outside the broader distribution of economic power. A constitutional property right is formally available to everyone, but individuals do not enter the property system with equal resources. A wealthy corporation defending a property interest possesses legal representation, financial resources and institutional capacity that a poor rural community may lack. Formal equality before the courts can therefore coexist with substantial inequality in the ability to litigate. This is one of the deepest challenges facing constitutional democracy in a highly unequal society. Judicial independence protects everyone in principle, but access to judicial protection depends heavily on socioeconomic circumstances. The constitutional commitment to legal aid, public interest litigation and civil society intervention therefore becomes crucial. Organisations capable of representing marginalised communities can transform litigation from an elite mechanism into a vehicle for broader democratic participation. The history of South African constitutional litigation contains numerous examples of community organisations and civil society groups using courts to challenge state policies or protect vulnerable populations. This means that the judiciary cannot be understood merely as an institution occupied by judges. Judicial power is also shaped by who can bring cases, who can afford lawyers, which arguments are developed, which facts reach the record and which communities are represented. Litigation itself is therefore a political economy. Wealth can purchase legal capacity, but constitutional democracy can partially counterbalance that advantage through public interest litigation and rights-based organisations. The challenge is ensuring that courts remain accessible enough for constitutional rights to become practical rather than theoretical. If constitutional litigation becomes primarily a contest between wealthy corporations and government, the judiciary could inadvertently reinforce existing economic power. If, however, litigation is accessible to workers, communities, tenants, informal traders, women, rural populations and poor households, judicial review can become an instrument of democratic redistribution. The question of who exercises judicial power must therefore include not only judges but also the social actors capable of bringing disputes before them.

The judiciary's relationship with business is particularly important when investigating who exercises structural power in post-apartheid South Africa. Courts protect contracts, property, commercial

certainty and procedural legality because a functioning economy requires predictable rules. Yet the protection of legal certainty can appear politically conservative when inherited economic structures are deeply unequal. A business corporation may invoke constitutional rights to resist regulation, expropriation, licensing decisions or administrative action. Government may respond that such protections constrain its ability to transform the economy. Neither side is automatically correct. Constitutional democracy requires both the ability of government to regulate economic activity in the public interest and protection against arbitrary state power. The real question is therefore whether courts interpret economic rights in a manner that leaves meaningful democratic space for regulation and redistribution. A judiciary that treats every regulatory burden as equivalent to unconstitutional interference would effectively constitutionalise existing economic power. Conversely, a judiciary that treats property and contractual rights as irrelevant whenever government invokes transformation would undermine legal certainty and potentially permit arbitrary dispossession. The constitutional order attempts to navigate between these extremes. The resulting jurisprudence is therefore a struggle over the boundary between private economic autonomy and public regulatory authority. This boundary has enormous consequences for who actually exercises power. If corporations can routinely defeat public regulation through litigation, structural economic power remains concentrated outside democratic control. If government can regulate without meaningful legal limits, political power may become arbitrary and unpredictable. The constitutional challenge is to ensure that private capital remains subject to democratically enacted regulation while the state remains subject to constitutional legality. This is not a simple contest between capital and government because courts must protect the constitutional rights of citizens against both. Workers may need protection from employers, communities from corporations, consumers from abusive practices and investors from arbitrary government action. The judiciary therefore occupies a potentially decisive position in mediating the relationship between political authority and economic power.

The constitutional state also transformed the meaning of parliamentary power. Under parliamentary sovereignty, a government with sufficient legislative support could potentially enact policies with relatively limited judicial scrutiny. Under constitutional supremacy, Parliament legislates within a framework of rights, institutional competence and constitutional values. This means that electoral victory no longer produces unlimited lawmaking power. For a liberation movement, this is an enormous conceptual transition. The ANC had historically understood political mobilisation in terms of liberation from an illegitimate state, but after 1994 it became the government responsible for operating a constitutional state. The movement therefore had to move from revolutionary opposition to constitutional governance. This transition required accepting that political opponents, civil society organisations, private citizens and even former apartheid-era institutions could challenge government through legal mechanisms. The judiciary became one of the institutions through which the new democratic order restrained the government that had itself been born from the liberation struggle. This should not be understood as a betrayal of the revolution. It was part of the constitutional settlement through which the revolution acquired democratic legitimacy. Yet the settlement necessarily transformed the meaning of revolutionary power. The liberation movement could no longer claim that its historical legitimacy automatically entitled it to determine constitutional meaning. Its historical role remained politically significant, but constitutional authority belonged to the new legal order. This distinction is crucial because liberation movements everywhere face the temptation to convert historical legitimacy into permanent institutional entitlement. South Africa's constitutional framework resisted that possibility by creating institutions capable of holding the governing party accountable. The judiciary thus represents one of the places where the post-apartheid state ceased to be an extension of liberation movement authority and

became a constitutional state governed by rules applicable to all. Whether that development strengthened or weakened transformation depends upon what kind of transformation is being measured. It weakened unrestricted revolutionary discretion but strengthened the possibility of rights-based and accountable transformation.

The doctrine of separation of powers further complicates the revolutionary question because transformation requires coordination among institutions while constitutionalism requires institutional boundaries. Parliament makes laws, the executive implements them and courts interpret and enforce constitutional limits. These functions overlap in practice, but none can simply absorb the others. The executive cannot legislate indefinitely without parliamentary authority, Parliament cannot execute every policy itself, and courts cannot become general administrators of government. This division is designed to prevent the concentration of state power. Yet it also creates institutional friction. A government may regard judicial review as interference with executive authority, while courts may regard executive resistance as a threat to constitutional supremacy. Political conflict therefore becomes inevitable. The crucial issue is whether institutional conflict occurs within constitutional boundaries. A healthy constitutional democracy does not eliminate conflict between branches; it creates lawful procedures through which such conflict can be managed. Judicial independence is particularly important when political majorities become frustrated with institutions that limit their preferred policies. At the same time, judicial restraint is important because judges must recognise that policy choices often involve information, expertise and democratic accountability that courts do not possess. Separation of powers therefore requires humility from every branch. Politicians must accept legal limits, while judges must recognise institutional limits. The constitutional order becomes unstable when either side claims unlimited authority. If the executive treats electoral victory as a licence to ignore courts, constitutional government collapses into majoritarian executive rule. If courts treat constitutional interpretation as permission to determine every significant policy question, democratic government risks becoming judicial government. The South African experience is therefore best understood as a continuing negotiation over institutional competence. The judiciary's legitimacy depends partly upon demonstrating that intervention is constitutionally necessary rather than politically desirable. The executive's legitimacy depends upon demonstrating that respect for judicial orders is compatible with continued pursuit of its democratic programme. The tension is unavoidable, but constitutional maturity consists in managing it without destroying either democratic government or judicial independence.

The question of judicial review becomes particularly acute when courts invalidate legislation supported by a substantial electoral mandate. From the perspective of ordinary electoral politics, this can appear undemocratic. A governing party can win elections, develop legislation through Parliament and still discover that a court declares part of that legislation unconstitutional. Yet the constitutional response is that electoral legitimacy is not the only form of democratic legitimacy. The constitutional settlement itself represents a commitment to protect minorities, rights and institutional limits even when majorities are politically powerful. Democracy without constitutional limits can become majoritarian domination. The protection of rights is therefore partly designed to prevent the majority from exercising unlimited power over minorities or unpopular groups. This principle was particularly important in a society emerging from racial domination, because the architects of the new order understood that institutions must protect citizens regardless of who controls government. The paradox is that the black majority, after centuries of political exclusion, inherited a constitutional system that placed legal constraints upon its newly acquired political authority. This can understandably produce frustration when transformation is slow. Yet the alternative would be a political system in which every change in electoral majority could potentially

destroy institutional safeguards. The deeper democratic achievement is therefore that the Constitution transformed the majority from a historically excluded population into the sovereign political constituency while simultaneously binding the government elected by that majority to universal constitutional principles. The judiciary is the institution charged with enforcing many of those limits. Its power is consequently derived from the same democratic constitutional settlement that produced majority rule. Judicial review should therefore not be described simply as judges overruling the people. More accurately, judges enforce constitutional rules that the democratic settlement established to govern the exercise of public power. The difficult question remains whether judges interpret those rules too narrowly or too expansively. That question is legitimate and should be debated vigorously. But it is fundamentally different from alleging that courts have no democratic legitimacy whatsoever.

The transformative potential of constitutional litigation is perhaps most visible when courts confront government failure rather than government ambition. In many socioeconomic cases, communities have not approached courts because they oppose transformation but because they demand that government fulfil constitutional promises. The poor may litigate for housing, social security, healthcare, meaningful consultation, lawful administration or protection against arbitrary eviction. Such litigation demonstrates that constitutional democracy can empower citizens against a government that is itself nominally committed to liberation. This is a crucial development because democratic accountability cannot depend entirely upon elections every few years. Citizens need institutional mechanisms through which they can challenge governmental failure between elections. Courts provide one such mechanism. The resulting relationship between the judiciary and the liberation project is therefore more complicated than the opposition between conservative judges and progressive government. Sometimes the judiciary acts as an enforcement mechanism for the social promises of the liberation movement itself. A government can possess progressive constitutional commitments while simultaneously failing to implement them. Courts can then compel the government to take those commitments seriously. This does not make judges revolutionaries. It means that constitutional rights can become instruments through which citizens demand accountability from a government that claims revolutionary legitimacy. In this respect, judicial power can deepen rather than weaken democratic transformation. Yet litigation cannot substitute for political organisation. A court judgment can establish a right, invalidate a decision or order government to comply with the law, but it cannot by itself build houses, create industries, reform land ownership or eliminate unemployment. Judicial remedies therefore have limits. They are most effective when political institutions possess the capacity and willingness to implement constitutional obligations. The judiciary can open institutional space for transformation, but political society must occupy that space. The liberation project ultimately fails if citizens wait for judges to accomplish what democratic institutions should be doing through legislation, administration, economic policy and social mobilisation.

The question of revolutionary transformation therefore requires distinguishing between legal constraint and political failure. It is tempting for governments to blame courts whenever policies encounter obstacles, particularly when those policies involve controversial redistribution. Yet not every failure of transformation is caused by judicial intervention. South Africa's post-apartheid economic difficulties have involved many factors, including unequal ownership structures, limited productive capacity, unemployment, spatial inequality, fiscal constraints, administrative weakness, corruption, state capture, policy uncertainty and political contestation. The judiciary operates within this broader political economy rather than determining it. If a government fails to redistribute land effectively, the relevant explanation must examine legislation, budgetary priorities, agricultural

policy, institutional capacity and political interests alongside judicial decisions. If public enterprises fail, courts cannot automatically be blamed for managerial failures. If black ownership remains limited, the analysis must investigate financial markets, corporate structures, access to capital, skills, procurement systems and the design of empowerment policy. Judicial review may constrain particular governmental actions, but it does not explain the total structure of economic power. This distinction is vital for a rigorous investigation into who exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa. Structural economic power often resides outside government entirely. Corporations, financial institutions, property owners, professional networks and global capital can exercise enormous influence without controlling courts. The judiciary may regulate some of these actors, but it does not create the underlying distribution of wealth. The revolutionary movement's failure to transform certain economic structures cannot therefore be explained simply by constitutional constraints. Constitutionalism created boundaries within which economic transformation had to occur, but political choices determined how aggressively those boundaries were used. The central analytical error would be to treat constitutional constraint as a complete explanation for incomplete transformation. It is only one variable in a much larger system of political economy.

The issue of judicial appointments deserves equally careful treatment because accusations of political capture can arise from both directions. On one side, critics may argue that a governing party exercises excessive influence over appointments and therefore threatens judicial independence. On the other side, defenders of the judiciary may portray every political criticism as an attack on institutional independence. Both positions can become intellectually lazy. Appointment processes inevitably contain political elements because the Constitution deliberately involves the President, political representatives and the JSC. The relevant question is therefore not whether politics exists in appointments, but whether constitutional safeguards prevent political loyalty from becoming the decisive criterion. Competence, integrity, independence, constitutional commitment and representativeness must remain central. Public interviews are important because they allow society to observe how candidates understand the judicial role. But public visibility does not itself guarantee impartiality. Nor does professional pedigree automatically guarantee independence. Judicial legitimacy depends upon both the integrity of the appointment process and the subsequent conduct of judges. A judge appointed through a constitutionally valid process can still lose legitimacy through poor reasoning or perceived bias. Conversely, a politically controversial appointment can nevertheless produce a genuinely independent judge. Institutional analysis must therefore focus on patterns rather than assumptions. Evidence of appointments, judgments, disciplinary processes, public reasons and institutional behaviour is more persuasive than racial or political speculation. This is especially important in South Africa because historical racial inequality makes simplistic assumptions about judges particularly dangerous. The fact that a judge belongs to a particular racial group does not establish ideological loyalty. Nor does professional association with institutions historically dominated by whites prove political allegiance to economic privilege. Serious scholarship must examine actual decisions, legal reasoning and institutional behaviour. Judicial transformation requires precisely this kind of evidence-based scrutiny.

The judiciary's institutional history also means that transformation cannot be measured against an imaginary starting point in which the legal system was completely neutral before 1994. South Africa's legal institutions were shaped by colonialism and apartheid, and many legal doctrines survived the transition even though their political environment changed. The post-apartheid constitutional project therefore had to transform an existing legal system rather than create an entirely new one. This produced continuity as well as rupture. Courts retained professional structures, precedents and legal traditions, while constitutional supremacy changed the normative

foundation within which those traditions operate. This explains why judicial transformation has sometimes appeared slower than political transformation. Changing a legal culture is more complicated than changing legislation. Lawyers are trained within institutions, precedents accumulate over decades, and judicial reasoning develops incrementally. Constitutional transformation therefore involves reinterpretation as well as replacement. The transformative constitutional tradition associated with South African jurisprudence has attempted to recognise this by treating dignity, equality, freedom and substantive justice as central interpretive values. Yet debates continue over how far judges should go in reshaping common law, property law, contract law and administrative principles. A cautious judge may emphasise institutional continuity and legal certainty, while a more transformative judge may emphasise constitutional purpose and social justice. Neither position is automatically illegitimate. The constitutional question is whether the interpretation faithfully advances the text, structure and values of the Constitution. Transformation therefore cannot simply mean choosing the interpretation with the most radical economic consequences. Radicalism without constitutional discipline can become arbitrary. Conservatism without historical consciousness can preserve injustice. The challenge is to develop a jurisprudence capable of producing structural change while maintaining legal legitimacy. This is one of the most intellectually demanding tasks of the post-apartheid constitutional project.

The relationship between judicial independence and racial transformation also requires careful examination because the legitimacy of the judiciary cannot be separated completely from the historical experience of racial exclusion. For generations, black South Africans encountered law not primarily as a source of protection but as an instrument of control. Pass laws, land laws, labour regulations, residential restrictions and political repression were all mediated through legal institutions. The constitutional transition therefore had to convince the black majority that law could become a vehicle of citizenship rather than domination. Judicial transformation is consequently partly a project of rebuilding public trust. Representation matters because institutions perceived as socially alien may struggle to command legitimacy even when formally independent. But representation must be accompanied by substantive accessibility. A judiciary that contains greater racial diversity but remains physically, financially and procedurally inaccessible to poor communities cannot fully satisfy the democratic promise of transformation. The constitutional principle of equality therefore extends beyond appointments into the everyday functioning of courts. Delays, legal costs, language barriers, geographic distance and procedural complexity can effectively deny justice even when the legal right exists. This means that the transformation of the judiciary must include court infrastructure, legal aid, digital accessibility, community legal education and procedural reform. Independence without accessibility risks producing an institution that is constitutionally pure but socially distant. Transformation without independence risks producing an institution vulnerable to political capture. The constitutional challenge is to achieve both simultaneously. A democratic judiciary must be independent enough to resist government but accessible enough to belong to the public. Its legitimacy must arise not merely from professional standards but from the practical experience of citizens who depend upon it. The post-apartheid constitutional order therefore remains unfinished wherever legal rights exist formally but cannot be effectively exercised.

The courts' treatment of executive accountability provides another important test of constitutional democracy. The executive controls enormous resources and possesses the capacity to make decisions affecting millions of people. Judicial review provides a mechanism through which presidential and ministerial power can be subjected to constitutional scrutiny. This is particularly significant because the ANC's long electoral dominance created the possibility of close relationships

between party and state. Constitutional government requires a clear distinction between the interests of a governing party and the legal obligations of the state. The judiciary can reinforce this distinction by requiring executive actors to act according to law rather than party preference. This role became especially significant during periods of institutional crisis and allegations of state capture, when questions arose about whether public institutions were being used for factional or private purposes. Courts and commissions of inquiry became part of a broader process of reconstructing accountability. The significance of this cannot be reduced to partisan victory or defeat. If courts can compel powerful political actors to obey constitutional rules, they strengthen the state itself. A constitutional democracy requires the principle that no political leader is above the law. Yet courts must also avoid transforming every political disagreement into a constitutional emergency. The legitimacy of judicial intervention depends upon identifiable legal standards and evidence. The judiciary's role is strongest when it enforces clear constitutional obligations rather than attempting to govern through judgments. Executive accountability therefore illustrates the constructive potential of separation of powers. Political power becomes legitimate not because it is unconstrained, but because it operates within institutions capable of correcting abuse. In this sense, judicial independence protects democratic government from becoming captured by individual political leaders. It is not an enemy of political power; it is one of the conditions under which political power becomes constitutionally legitimate.

The judiciary's role in protecting electoral democracy further demonstrates that constitutional review can strengthen rather than weaken majority rule. Elections are meaningful only when citizens can participate freely, when electoral institutions operate lawfully and when political competition remains protected. Constitutional litigation concerning voting rights, electoral procedures and political participation has therefore been central to South Africa's democratic development. The Constitutional Court's jurisprudence includes cases concerning prisoners' voting rights and parliamentary electoral arrangements. Such decisions demonstrate that courts can expand political participation rather than simply restrict government. The judiciary's democratic function must therefore be evaluated across multiple dimensions. It protects individuals from state power, but it also protects the institutional conditions through which citizens exercise collective political power. If electoral institutions can be manipulated without legal remedy, majority rule becomes vulnerable to institutional distortion. If Parliament can change electoral rules for partisan advantage without constitutional scrutiny, democratic competition can be weakened. Judicial oversight can therefore protect the integrity of the political process itself. This is especially important in a dominant-party environment, where one party's electoral strength can produce institutional advantages that smaller parties cannot easily overcome. Constitutional review can provide a counterweight to such dominance. Yet again, judicial intervention must remain anchored in constitutional standards rather than political preference. The judiciary cannot determine who should win elections. It can, however, determine whether the rules governing elections comply with constitutional requirements. This distinction preserves the separation between adjudication and political competition. Courts protect the democratic arena without becoming contestants within it. Their power is therefore indirect but substantial. By controlling the legality of political procedures, they help determine the conditions under which political power is acquired and exercised.

The deeper structural problem is that constitutional democracy can redistribute political power without automatically redistributing economic power. South Africa's experience illustrates this distinction with unusual clarity. The black majority gained the vote, Parliament became democratically legitimate, and political office became accessible to black citizens on a scale previously prohibited. Yet ownership of productive assets, corporate concentration, financial capital

and patterns of wealth remained far more resistant to rapid transformation. The judiciary forms part of the legal architecture within which this economic structure operates, but it does not control the entire structure. Property law, corporate law, contract law and commercial regulation create legal conditions within which economic power is exercised. Courts enforce these rules, but Parliament and the executive determine much of the regulatory framework. This distinction matters because critics sometimes attribute economic continuity directly to judicial conservatism. There is some basis for investigating how legal rules protect existing economic interests, but the analysis must extend beyond the bench. Economic power survives through ownership structures, capital markets, inheritance, education, corporate governance, financial access, global investment networks and institutional relationships. Courts are one component of this system. The constitutional protection of property can preserve legal stability, but property inequality is not created solely by judges. The central political question is therefore how much democratic space exists within the constitutional framework for restructuring ownership. The answer is significant because the Constitution explicitly recognises land reform and socioeconomic transformation while protecting against arbitrary deprivation. This means that democratic government possesses more transformative authority than is sometimes acknowledged. The limitations are real, but they are not absolute. The decisive question becomes whether political institutions have developed sufficiently ambitious and legally sound strategies to use the constitutional space available to them. If they have not, blaming courts risks concealing political responsibility.

A serious Pan-African analysis must also resist the temptation to treat constitutionalism as inherently foreign or anti-African. Constitutional democracy in South Africa emerged from a particular historical struggle, but its institutions cannot be understood simply as imported Western mechanisms imposed upon Africa. The constitutional settlement was negotiated through South African political movements, civil society, lawyers, communities and political organisations responding to the country's own history. The Constitution reflects international constitutional ideas, but it also embodies specifically South African experiences of racial domination, liberation, reconciliation and social reconstruction. The judiciary must therefore be evaluated according to the constitutional commitments South Africans established rather than according to a simplistic opposition between African sovereignty and constitutional law. The more interesting Pan-African question concerns how African societies can use constitutional institutions to achieve substantive liberation rather than merely formal political independence. If courts protect human dignity, political participation and socioeconomic rights, they can contribute to democratic emancipation. If legal systems become inaccessible, elitist or disconnected from material inequality, constitutionalism can lose legitimacy among populations experiencing persistent poverty. African constitutionalism therefore needs both institutional independence and social transformation. The challenge is not to abolish constitutional constraints but to ensure that constitutional constraints do not become mechanisms for preserving inherited privilege. South Africa's experience offers a particularly important case study because its Constitution simultaneously protects individual rights and mandates transformation. The unresolved tension between these principles is not necessarily evidence of constitutional failure. It may instead represent the unavoidable difficulty of attempting to transform an unequal society without creating a new system of arbitrary power. A Pan-African intellectual approach should therefore ask how constitutional institutions can be redesigned, interpreted and democratised to serve African developmental objectives while preserving accountability. The objective should not be judicial submission to political movements, but constitutional institutions capable of supporting democratic economic transformation.

The concept of constitutional supremacy must therefore be distinguished from judicial supremacy. The Constitution is supreme, but that does not mean judges possess unlimited authority to determine every political question. Courts interpret the Constitution within cases brought before them, according to legal procedures and evidence. Parliament remains responsible for legislation, while the executive remains responsible for policy implementation. This distinction is crucial because criticism of judicial overreach can be legitimate without rejecting constitutional supremacy itself. If courts begin deciding matters better suited to legislative or executive determination, they risk weakening democratic accountability. Conversely, if political branches refuse to accept binding judgments, they undermine constitutional supremacy. The proper balance requires institutional dialogue rather than institutional warfare. Parliament can respond to judicial decisions through constitutionally compliant legislation. Government can redesign policies after courts identify defects. Courts can defer to reasonable legislative choices where the Constitution leaves room for policy discretion. This dynamic allows constitutional democracy to evolve without any single institution becoming absolutely dominant. Judicial power is therefore strongest when it remains connected to constitutional interpretation and weakest when it becomes indistinguishable from political administration. The same is true of executive power. Government is strongest when it uses its democratic mandate to formulate effective policy within constitutional boundaries and weakest when it attempts to bypass institutions that impose accountability. The post-apartheid state must therefore be understood as a system of negotiated institutional power rather than a hierarchy in which one branch permanently dominates the others. This institutional pluralism can frustrate rapid transformation, but it also protects society from the dangers of concentrated authority. The central question is whether the resulting balance is sufficiently flexible to permit structural change. If it is, constitutionalism becomes an instrument of transformation. If it is not, constitutional reform itself may eventually become necessary.

The constitutional limitation on revolutionary power was nevertheless a conscious feature of the settlement rather than an accidental consequence. The negotiated transition required political compromise among actors with radically different visions of South Africa's future. The constitutional order consequently had to reassure historically privileged groups that political change would not automatically become arbitrary dispossession while simultaneously promising the majority that democracy would produce substantive equality. This compromise was politically necessary for peaceful transition, but it created contradictions that remain unresolved. The black majority obtained political sovereignty but did not inherit immediate economic sovereignty. Existing property rights received constitutional protection while land reform became a constitutional obligation. Government acquired enormous policy authority but became subject to judicial review. The ANC gained electoral power but accepted institutional limits upon that power. These were not incidental details. They were foundational components of the post-apartheid settlement. The revolutionary project therefore changed its form. Instead of overthrowing the legal order, it attempted to transform society through constitutional institutions. This was both a strategic achievement and a source of limitation. Constitutional transformation requires patience, legislation, institutional capacity and legal contestation. Revolutionary movements often seek speed, centralisation and decisive control, whereas constitutional democracy rewards deliberation, legality and incremental institutional development. The resulting tension should be recognised rather than disguised. The ANC's compromises were not necessarily betrayals, because some compromises made democratic government possible. But compromises can also become permanent constraints if political institutions fail to renegotiate or exploit the available constitutional space. The question is therefore whether the constitutional settlement remains capable of supporting deeper transformation decades after political liberation. That question cannot be answered by condemning the judiciary

alone. It requires examination of Parliament, the executive, political parties, civil society, economic elites and the broader political economy.

The judiciary's greatest contribution to democratic transformation may therefore be its capacity to make power answerable. This function extends beyond protecting liberal individual rights. A constitutional state requires every exercise of public power to possess a legal justification. Ministers must act within their authority, municipalities must comply with statutory duties, Parliament must respect constitutional rights, and public officials must exercise discretion lawfully. Such requirements may appear procedural, but they have profound political significance. They transform citizens from subjects of government into rights-bearing participants capable of challenging government. This is particularly important in societies where historical patterns of authority have encouraged citizens to depend upon political patrons rather than institutions. Constitutional litigation can therefore weaken patronage by replacing personal political relationships with enforceable legal rights. Yet courts cannot eliminate patronage by themselves. Constitutional culture depends upon citizens knowing their rights, lawyers representing them and institutions responding to judgments. The judiciary is therefore part of a larger ecosystem of democratic accountability. Its effectiveness depends upon legal education, civil society, parliamentary oversight, independent journalism and public participation. When these institutions are weak, courts can become overloaded with disputes that should have been resolved politically or administratively. Judicial power cannot compensate indefinitely for institutional failure elsewhere. The ideal constitutional democracy distributes accountability across multiple institutions. Courts should be a last line of constitutional defence rather than the first and only mechanism through which citizens obtain justice. This perspective also protects the judiciary from unrealistic expectations. Judges cannot reconstruct the economy, eradicate poverty or replace democratic political organisation. Their constitutional function is narrower but indispensable. They ensure that those who exercise public authority remain accountable to law. That function is a foundation upon which broader transformation can be built.

The question of whether courts constrain revolutionary transformation must therefore be answered with a qualified affirmative, but the qualification is decisive. Courts do constrain government because constitutional democracy is designed to constrain government. They can invalidate legislation, suspend governmental action, require reconsideration of administrative decisions and enforce rights against elected institutions. This necessarily limits the freedom of a revolutionary movement to implement every policy according to its own preferred timetable and method. But constraint is not synonymous with obstruction. A constitutional limitation becomes obstruction only if it prevents transformation that the Constitution itself permits or requires. Where courts protect arbitrary property claims against legitimate regulation, the judiciary may narrow democratic economic space. Where courts protect communities from arbitrary eviction, enforce social rights or require lawful administration, they may actually strengthen transformation. The correct analytical method is therefore functional rather than ideological. Each judicial intervention should be examined according to whose power it restricts, whose rights it protects, what constitutional principle it applies and what consequences follow. This approach avoids both romanticising the judiciary and demonising it. Courts are institutions exercising real power, and that power deserves scrutiny. But judicial power must be distinguished from economic power, political power and historical privilege. Evidence must establish the connection before conclusions are drawn. A judgment protecting property does not automatically prove that judges serve white capital. A judgment against government does not automatically prove judicial hostility to the ANC. A transformative judgment does not automatically prove that courts are revolutionary institutions.

Each proposition requires empirical and jurisprudential investigation. This is the level of discipline required if the analysis is to move beyond political rhetoric. The judiciary should therefore be understood as one arena in which the broader struggle over South Africa's unfinished transformation is legally expressed.

Ultimately, the South African judiciary occupies a paradoxical position within the post-apartheid order: it is simultaneously a product of the constitutional settlement, a guardian of that settlement, a constraint upon elected government and a potential instrument through which the constitutional promises of liberation are enforced. Its independence protects democracy from political domination, but independence alone does not guarantee transformative justice. Its demographic transformation matters, but representation alone does not guarantee progressive jurisprudence. Its constitutional review powers can frustrate government, but they can also protect citizens from governmental failure and executive abuse. Its protection of property rights can preserve economic stability, but those rights operate within a Constitution that expressly recognises land reform and socioeconomic transformation. Its enforcement of administrative law can delay government action, but it can also prevent corruption, arbitrariness and bureaucratic abuse. The central lesson is therefore that the judiciary neither simply protects the old order nor simply advances the new one. It mediates the conflict between continuity and transformation through constitutional law. The ANC's revolutionary project succeeded in achieving political emancipation, democratic majority rule, constitutional citizenship and access to state power, but it entered a legal order that deliberately prevented political victory from becoming unlimited sovereignty. Where the project compromised, those compromises must be investigated politically rather than attributed automatically to judges. Where economic transformation remained incomplete, structural ownership and capital must be analysed alongside constitutional constraints. The judiciary's real power lies in its ability to determine whether exercises of state authority comply with the constitutional rules of the democratic order. That is substantial power, but it is not total power. The deeper post-apartheid question therefore becomes whether the constitutional framework can be interpreted and developed in ways that permit genuine redistribution without sacrificing legality, rights and institutional independence. If the answer is yes, the judiciary can become an ally of transformative democracy even while constraining revolutionary discretion. If the answer is no, then the problem is not simply that courts are obstructing transformation, but that the constitutional settlement itself may require democratic reconsideration. The mature Pan-African position is therefore neither to subordinate courts to political movements nor to treat courts as untouchable guardians above democratic criticism. It is to demand a judiciary that is independent from political capture, transformed in composition, accessible to ordinary people, intellectually conscious of colonial history, rigorous in constitutional reasoning and capable of protecting both political democracy and socioeconomic transformation. The ultimate test is not whether judges obey the government or defeat the government, but whether the legal order enables the people to exercise meaningful democratic power over the institutions that shape their political and economic lives.

CHAPTER TEN

WHO CONTROLS THE SOUTH AFRICAN NARRATIVE?

The struggle for political power in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be understood adequately by examining elections, parliamentary majorities, cabinet appointments and control of the state alone, because modern political power increasingly depends upon the capacity to shape information, define public problems, establish the vocabulary through which citizens interpret events, and determine which voices receive sustained visibility. The central question, therefore, is not simply who governs South Africa, but who possesses the institutional, technological and economic capacity to influence what South Africans see, hear, read, discuss and ultimately believe to be politically important. The transition from apartheid to constitutional democracy transformed the formal architecture of political communication, replacing censorship and racial state propaganda with constitutional protection for freedom of expression, an independent regulatory system, a public broadcaster, commercial media and an increasingly plural digital environment. Yet the disappearance of formal apartheid censorship did not automatically produce equality in the distribution of communicative power. The contemporary information order is more complex because influence is dispersed across public institutions, private corporations, advertisers, journalists, editors, political parties, technology companies, social-media platforms, international news organisations, individual influencers and increasingly sophisticated algorithmic systems. South Africa consequently presents a paradox: it possesses one of the continent's most institutionally developed media environments while simultaneously confronting profound inequalities in ownership, resources, technological access and agenda-setting capacity. The democratic revolution therefore succeeded in opening the communicative sphere, but it did not abolish the economic structures through which communication is produced and distributed. The question of who controls the South African narrative must consequently be approached as a question of power rather than merely a question of journalism. A newspaper headline, television bulletin, radio programme, viral video or social-media trend may appear to be an isolated communicative product, but each is embedded within institutions possessing different degrees of capital, technology, professional authority and access to political decision-makers. South Africa's media environment includes public and commercial broadcasters, a comparatively small number of major publishing groups and an expanding ecosystem of digital-born outlets and individual news creators. The result is neither simple state control nor simple market freedom. It is a contested field in which different centres of power compete to establish the meaning of South African reality. The deeper democratic question is therefore whether citizens merely possess formal freedom to speak, or whether society possesses sufficiently plural structures to ensure that different social classes, racial communities, languages, regions and political traditions can actually participate in determining the national narrative.

The South African Broadcasting Corporation occupies a particularly important position within this struggle because the SABC embodies the contradiction between public ownership, democratic mandate, institutional independence and political contestation more directly than almost any other

media institution. It would be intellectually inadequate to argue that the ANC simply controls the SABC because the Corporation is a public broadcaster operating within a constitutional and statutory framework that imposes obligations extending beyond the interests of whichever political party happens to control the executive government at a particular moment. The constitutional architecture requires broadcasting regulation in the public interest and emphasises fairness and diversity of views broadly representing South African society. ICASA explicitly identifies this constitutional requirement as part of its mandate, while the Broadcasting Act provides the framework governing broadcasting activities in the public interest. The SABC's own statutory framework speaks of safeguarding the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of South Africa, ensuring plurality of news, views and information, serving diverse programming needs and strengthening participation and capacity among historically disadvantaged groups. This matters enormously for the interpretation of post-apartheid political power. The SABC cannot analytically be reduced to a government department because its democratic legitimacy depends upon institutional responsibilities that are supposed to serve society as a whole. Nor can it be understood as politically neutral simply because legislation declares its independence. Institutions do not operate in an institutional vacuum. Their boards, executives, journalists, financial circumstances, regulatory obligations, technological infrastructure and relationships with political authorities all influence their practical autonomy. Political contestation therefore occurs not only through direct interference but through appointments, public criticism, funding pressures, institutional instability, editorial disputes, regulatory processes and struggles over the meaning of public interest. The SABC becomes politically contested precisely because controlling its narrative would confer enormous political value, while maintaining its independence is essential to democratic legitimacy. This distinction is fundamental. The correct question is not whether the ANC possesses a hidden switch through which it can determine every SABC broadcast, but whether the institutional environment allows governing parties, opposition parties, business interests, journalists, civil society and citizens sufficiently independent access to the public broadcaster. The answer must be investigated empirically rather than assumed ideologically. The SABC represents an important achievement of the democratic transition because the old apartheid broadcasting order was transformed into a public-service model grounded in constitutionalism. Yet the continuing contestation surrounding the Corporation demonstrates that legal transformation does not automatically eliminate political pressure. Public broadcasting becomes democratic only when its institutional independence is sufficiently strong to withstand competing pressures from government, opposition, commercial interests and organised political influence. The SABC is therefore not simply an instrument of ANC power; it is one of the principal arenas in which South African political power is contested.

The transformation of broadcasting after apartheid must be understood against the extraordinary historical power possessed by the apartheid state over information. Under apartheid, communication was not simply a neutral sphere in which competing perspectives happened to coexist; it was part of the architecture through which racial domination was legitimised, maintained and reproduced. The state regulated broadcasting, restricted political expression, censored dissent and attempted to construct an official national reality in which white minority rule appeared legitimate while African resistance was represented as disorder, communism or criminality. The democratic transition therefore confronted an enormous institutional challenge: it had to create a media system capable of serving a society that had been deliberately divided by language, race, geography, class and political ideology. The post-1994 settlement responded by constructing a constitutional order in which freedom of expression, access to information, independent regulation and public broadcasting became central components of democratic life. ICASA was established as a Chapter 9 institution,

with responsibility for regulating broadcasting, telecommunications and postal services in the public interest and promoting competition and diversity. This institutional arrangement represents one of the important successes of the ANC-led democratic transition. The liberation movement did not simply inherit the apartheid information system unchanged; it participated in constructing a new legal and regulatory order designed to prevent the state from monopolising communication. But the transformation also produced a second problem that liberation movements historically encounter when political power is transferred without equivalent transformation of economic power. Ownership of communication infrastructure and media enterprises cannot be redistributed merely through constitutional language. The market possesses its own institutional logic, and media organisations require capital, advertising, technology, skilled personnel and audiences. Consequently, a democratic media system may be politically pluralistic while remaining economically concentrated. This is one of the central contradictions of post-apartheid communication. The state can abolish formal censorship while the market continues to determine which institutions possess the resources necessary to speak at national scale. A newspaper may be legally free to publish an investigation, but it must still finance journalists, printing or digital infrastructure, distribution, legal defence and technology. A community radio station may possess editorial independence but lack the advertising revenue required to maintain a professional newsroom. A social-media user may have constitutional freedom to speak but lack the visibility enjoyed by a well-funded political organisation or celebrity influencer. The post-apartheid media revolution therefore transformed political rights much more rapidly than it transformed the economic foundations of communicative power. This is not an argument for state control of the media. It is an argument for recognising that political freedom and communicative capacity are related but distinct forms of power. The democratic achievement lies in opening the space; the unfinished question concerns who possesses the resources to occupy that space effectively.

Commercial television introduces another dimension to this struggle because its power is derived from a different institutional logic from that of public broadcasting. Commercial broadcasters do not primarily exist to reproduce a governmental mandate; they operate within competitive markets in which audience attention is converted into advertising revenue, subscriptions, sponsorships and commercial value. This can create important independence from government because commercial broadcasters are not structurally dependent upon direct public financing in the same manner as a public broadcaster. Yet commercial independence from government should never be confused with independence from economic power. A broadcaster whose survival depends upon advertisers, investors, subscribers and audience ratings faces pressures of a different kind. The central commodity of commercial media is attention. The more effectively a broadcaster captures attention, the more valuable its audience becomes to advertisers. This creates an incentive to prioritise programming capable of attracting large audiences, generating emotional engagement and sustaining repeated consumption. Political communication therefore enters a commercial environment in which news competes with entertainment, sport, celebrity culture and dramatic controversy. The consequence is that the most socially important story is not necessarily the story that receives the greatest exposure. A complex discussion of land reform, industrial policy or fiscal transformation may struggle to compete with a dramatic political confrontation that can be compressed into a compelling television segment. Commercial television consequently exercises agenda-setting power not necessarily by censoring particular ideas but by determining the relative visibility and emotional intensity of competing issues. This is a subtler form of power than the censorship associated with authoritarian regimes. It does not require a minister to telephone an editor and prohibit a story. It can operate through programming choices, audience analytics, advertising priorities, newsroom resources, scheduling decisions and assumptions about what

viewers will watch. South Africa's commercial television environment is therefore part of the democratic pluralism created after apartheid, but it also demonstrates the limitations of market-mediated freedom. The existence of several television channels does not automatically mean that society possesses several equally powerful sources of narrative authority. Diversity of outlets is not identical to diversity of ownership, and diversity of ownership is not identical to diversity of perspectives. A democratic media analysis must therefore distinguish between formal plurality, institutional plurality, economic plurality and substantive plurality. Only the latter truly answers whether historically marginalised communities possess meaningful power to influence national discourse.

Newspapers occupy a similarly complicated position. South Africa's newspaper tradition played a significant role in challenging apartheid, exposing corruption and providing platforms for political debate, but the economic foundations of print journalism have undergone profound disruption. The decline of print advertising, changing consumer behaviour, digital competition and rising operational costs have weakened traditional newspapers and forced many organisations to reduce staffing, restructure operations or migrate aggressively toward digital platforms. Reuters Institute reporting on South Africa notes that legacy print media have faced substantial commercial pressure, while the broader market has experienced declining print circulation and newsroom contraction. This economic transformation changes the nature of narrative power. Newspapers once possessed extraordinary gatekeeping authority because they controlled scarce physical channels through which information reached mass audiences. Digital technology has radically reduced the cost of publication, allowing almost anyone to create and distribute news-like material. But the decline of the traditional newspaper does not necessarily democratise information. Instead, power may migrate from editors and publishers toward search engines, social-media platforms, advertising exchanges and influential personalities. The old gatekeepers lose some power while new gatekeepers emerge. Moreover, the resources required for investigative journalism remain considerable. A serious investigation into corruption may require months of reporting, legal review, document analysis, travel and source protection. A social-media post alleging corruption can be produced in minutes. The two forms of communication may appear together in the same digital environment, but they do not possess equivalent epistemic value. This creates a paradox in which the technological democratisation of publication can coexist with the economic weakening of professional journalism. The result may be greater volume of information but less capacity to verify it. For democracy, this is dangerous because citizens require not merely more speech but reliable information through which political claims can be evaluated. The decline of professional newsrooms therefore has consequences beyond the media industry itself. It can weaken the institutional capacity of society to investigate government, corporations and political organisations. The democratic state may become more transparent in principle while becoming less intelligible in practice because citizens are confronted by enormous quantities of competing information without equivalent increases in verification capacity. The struggle over the South African narrative therefore increasingly concerns not merely who speaks but who can afford to investigate, verify, contextualise and sustain a story long enough for it to matter.

Radio remains one of the most important and sometimes underestimated sources of political power in South Africa because its accessibility, linguistic diversity and relatively low technological barriers allow it to reach audiences that may not consume newspapers or subscription television. Radio also possesses a particularly intimate relationship with audiences. The presenter enters the listener's home, workplace, taxi, shop or car, creating a form of communicative proximity that can make radio personalities politically influential. Community radio is especially significant because it

can articulate local grievances and perspectives that national media organisations may overlook. The scale of South Africa's radio sector illustrates the importance of this decentralised communicative infrastructure. In February 2026, ICASA reported that it had licensed 18 public sound broadcasting services, 26 commercial sound broadcasting services and 206 community broadcasting service licences. This plurality represents a major democratic achievement when compared with the centralised information structures of apartheid. It means that the national narrative is not produced exclusively in Johannesburg, Cape Town or Pretoria. Rural communities, provinces and linguistic communities possess institutions capable of generating their own political discourse. Yet the existence of community licences does not automatically guarantee institutional sustainability. Many community broadcasters operate within difficult financial environments and must compete for limited advertising revenue while maintaining regulatory and public-service obligations. Financial weakness can become a form of political vulnerability because institutions dependent upon sponsorship or state-linked funding may experience pressures that are not visible as formal censorship. Radio therefore demonstrates the broader principle that communicative sovereignty requires more than legal permission to broadcast. It requires sustainable institutions. A station cannot provide meaningful pluralism if it lacks resources to employ journalists, maintain equipment, investigate stories and retain skilled personnel. The ANC's democratic project deserves recognition for creating a regulatory environment that significantly expanded broadcasting diversity, but the unfinished economic question remains whether historically disadvantaged communities possess the financial means necessary to sustain independent media institutions. The liberation of the frequency spectrum is therefore only one stage of media transformation. The deeper question is whether the social groups historically excluded from narrative power can maintain institutions capable of competing within the contemporary information economy.

Digital media has disrupted the old architecture of South African political communication more dramatically than perhaps any other development since 1994. The internet has weakened the monopoly previously enjoyed by newspapers, broadcasters and political parties over mass communication. A citizen with a smartphone can now record an event, publish commentary, distribute documents, challenge an official narrative and potentially reach millions of people without requesting permission from a traditional editor. This is a profound democratising achievement. It has enabled previously marginalised voices to bypass institutions that may have ignored them. It has also created new opportunities for investigative journalism, independent commentary, political education and diaspora engagement. South Africa's internet penetration reached approximately 78 percent in the 2026 Reuters Institute country data, demonstrating the substantial scale of digital participation. Yet digital empowerment must not be romanticised. Access to publication is not equivalent to access to visibility. The internet has solved the problem of distribution far more effectively than it has solved the problem of attention. Millions of people can publish, but only a small number of accounts become highly visible. The struggle has consequently shifted from controlling the printing press or television transmitter toward controlling attention. Search rankings, recommendation systems, follower networks, platform moderation, advertising budgets and viral dynamics influence which messages rise above the enormous volume of competing information. Digital media has therefore decentralised the capacity to speak while simultaneously centralising important forms of infrastructural power in global technology companies. This creates an unusual political configuration. A South African activist may possess greater freedom to speak than at any previous point in the country's history while remaining dependent upon a privately owned foreign platform whose algorithms determine how widely that speech is distributed. Political sovereignty and technological sovereignty consequently diverge. The democratic state governs its territory, but significant portions of the communication infrastructure

through which citizens understand politics are governed by private companies headquartered outside South Africa. The political implications are profound because decisions about recommendation systems, moderation policies, advertising technologies and platform design can affect public discourse without being made through South African democratic institutions. Digital media has therefore expanded freedom while simultaneously creating new dependencies.

Social media intensifies this transformation because it converts citizens from passive consumers of political communication into participants in a continuous, interactive information struggle. Facebook, X, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and other platforms have created environments in which politicians can communicate directly with citizens without relying exclusively upon journalists. Political parties can announce policies, attack opponents, mobilise supporters and respond to crises in real time. Ministers can communicate directly with citizens while opposition parties can construct alternative narratives without waiting for television interviews. Activists can organise campaigns rapidly, while ordinary citizens can expose misconduct through photographs and videos. This directness represents a substantial democratic advance because it weakens the exclusive gatekeeping authority once possessed by mainstream media. Yet social media also transforms political communication into a competition for emotional attention. Content that provokes anger, fear, outrage, amusement or identity-based solidarity can travel rapidly because users are more likely to share material that generates strong emotional responses. Political actors therefore have incentives to frame complex structural questions through simplified narratives. Economic inequality can become a conflict between racial groups; migration can become a question of criminality; corruption can become a personalised story about individual politicians; land reform can become a binary contest between justice and property rights. Such simplification is politically powerful because it reduces complicated institutional processes into emotionally accessible narratives. The danger is that citizens become increasingly mobilised around representations of reality rather than reality itself. South Africa's history makes this particularly consequential because questions of race, class, land, migration, identity and historical injustice carry extraordinary emotional weight. Social-media politics can therefore either deepen democratic participation or intensify social fragmentation depending upon the institutional environment in which it operates. The 2026 Reuters Institute findings indicate that social-media-based news creators are becoming increasingly influential in South Africa while traditional newsrooms continue to contract. The rise of creators means that narrative authority is increasingly distributed among individuals whose institutional accountability may differ substantially from that of professional news organisations. This is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. It means that the public sphere has become more plural, more personalised and potentially more unstable.

Corporate ownership represents perhaps the most difficult question because democratic discourse ultimately depends upon institutions requiring capital. South Africa's media transformation therefore cannot be analysed purely through the language of journalistic ethics. One must ask who owns the companies, who appoints executives, who controls investment decisions, who receives advertising revenue, who bears financial losses and who possesses the capacity to acquire or close media outlets. Ownership does not mechanically determine editorial content, and simplistic claims that an owner directly dictates every headline would underestimate professional journalism and institutional culture. Nevertheless, ownership creates structural power because owners determine the economic boundaries within which editorial organisations operate. They can invest in investigative journalism or reduce newsroom expenditure. They can acquire digital platforms or withdraw from unprofitable markets. They can prioritise national coverage or local journalism. They can support innovation or focus on short-term profitability. The structural influence of

ownership is therefore often indirect rather than conspiratorial. South Africa's media landscape has historically included major publishing groups alongside public and commercial broadcasters, and the sector has experienced significant consolidation and disruption. The key question is whether sufficient ownership diversity exists to prevent any narrow set of economic interests from possessing disproportionate agenda-setting power. This concern is particularly important because media ownership intersects with broader economic ownership. If financial capital remains highly concentrated, media ownership may reproduce some of the same inequalities that exist in other sectors. A political democracy can therefore coexist with an economically concentrated communication system. Citizens may vote equally while possessing radically unequal capacities to shape public discourse. One wealthy corporation can finance professional journalists, data analysts, lawyers, public relations specialists and advertising campaigns on a scale impossible for a community organisation. The democratic implications extend beyond editorial independence. They concern the distribution of communicative capacity itself. If ownership determines who can sustain national-scale media institutions, then ownership becomes a component of political power. This is why media diversity cannot be reduced to counting television channels or newspapers. The deeper issue is whether society possesses a sufficiently broad distribution of institutional resources to ensure that competing social interests can participate meaningfully in defining the national agenda.

Advertising is one of the least visible but most powerful mechanisms through which economic power enters the media system. Media organisations need revenue, and advertising has historically provided a major source of that revenue. The advertiser does not necessarily need to censor a journalist directly. Economic incentives can influence media organisations through audience targeting, commercial partnerships, sponsorship arrangements and expectations about brand safety. The central issue is therefore not that advertisers routinely dictate editorial decisions, but that the financial survival of media organisations is connected to markets whose preferences shape institutional behaviour. Digital technology has intensified this problem because advertising revenue increasingly flows through global platforms rather than directly to publishers. The Competition Commission's Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry examined precisely this structural problem, investigating the impact of major technology companies on South African media and the advertising-technology market. Reuters Institute reporting notes that the inquiry was concerned about the weakening of South African journalism and recommended measures including support for journalism sustainability and greater fairness in algorithmic distribution and revenue-sharing arrangements. This development reveals a fundamental shift in the political economy of information. The traditional media system monetised audiences by selling advertising space or airtime. The digital system increasingly monetises user attention through sophisticated data-driven advertising ecosystems. A publisher may create the journalism, but another company may capture a significant share of the advertising value generated when that journalism is distributed online. This weakens the financial base of professional journalism without necessarily reducing demand for information. Citizens continue consuming news, but the economic value associated with that consumption may increasingly accrue to intermediaries. The consequences are political because financially weakened newsrooms have fewer resources to perform the watchdog functions upon which democracy depends. The advertising question is therefore not a technical matter confined to business economics. It is a question about whether democratic societies can maintain institutions capable of producing public-interest journalism when the economic infrastructure supporting journalism is being transformed by multinational technology companies.

Algorithms constitute a new form of political power because they increasingly mediate the relationship between information producers and citizens. An algorithm does not need to possess a

political ideology to have political consequences. It merely needs to determine which content receives greater visibility, which content is recommended, which posts appear first and which stories disappear beneath an enormous volume of competing information. The resulting power is infrastructural rather than explicitly ideological. A platform company may not decide that a particular political party should win an election, yet the design of its recommendation system can influence which political messages receive attention. The contemporary information environment therefore introduces a new form of gatekeeping in which editorial selection and computational selection coexist. Reuters Institute research describes social-media news selection as involving both journalists and the algorithms developed by technology companies, with the latter making display decisions partly on the basis of users' previous behaviour and social connections. This means that the public sphere is increasingly personalised. Two citizens can inhabit substantially different information environments while living in the same city and facing the same political election. Each may receive a different sequence of stories, videos, commentators and political claims. The old national newspaper created a shared information environment in which millions of citizens might encounter the same front page. Algorithmic media fragments that common environment into personalised streams. This fragmentation can increase political participation by exposing citizens to material relevant to their interests, but it can also weaken the shared factual foundation required for democratic debate. The political consequences are especially serious in a society marked by deep historical and socioeconomic inequalities. If algorithmic systems amplify content that generates engagement rather than content that improves public understanding, political debate can become increasingly dominated by sensationalism. The result is not necessarily propaganda in the traditional sense. It is an attention economy in which emotionally powerful information may systematically outperform careful analysis. South Africa's narrative is therefore increasingly shaped by a combination of human editorial judgement and machine-mediated visibility. Understanding political power now requires analysing both.

Political parties themselves have adapted to this transformation, and the ANC's communication strategy illustrates the broader shift from institutional politics toward permanent narrative competition. In the era of mass newspapers and scheduled television bulletins, political parties depended heavily upon journalists to interpret their activities for the public. Social media has reduced that dependence. Parties can release speeches, policy documents, videos and statements directly to supporters. They can frame controversies before journalists publish their interpretation. They can rapidly respond to criticism and mobilise supporters around hashtags or campaigns. This is a major change in the relationship between politics and journalism. The journalist is no longer necessarily the first intermediary between politician and citizen. However, direct communication also creates incentives for parties to construct highly controlled narratives. A political party can publish the strongest version of its own argument without necessarily exposing citizens to the strongest counterargument. This creates a fragmented political communication environment in which parties can speak to their own constituencies while avoiding the institutional pressures associated with adversarial journalism. The ANC's long historical experience as a liberation movement gives it an additional advantage in narrative politics because its political identity is embedded within powerful historical symbols of resistance, democracy and national liberation. Yet that historical legitimacy can also become contested when citizens compare liberation credentials with contemporary governance outcomes. Opposition parties similarly construct competing narratives around state failure, corruption, economic exclusion and political renewal. The result is a struggle in which political organisations attempt not merely to persuade citizens about policies but to define the moral meaning of South African history itself. Who represents the liberation tradition? Who betrayed it? Who protects constitutional democracy? Who defends economic transformation?

Who speaks for the poor? Who speaks for business? These are narrative questions as much as policy questions. Political power consequently depends upon the capacity to make one's interpretation of national reality appear legitimate. The media environment does not simply transmit these competing narratives; it helps determine their visibility, credibility and emotional resonance.

International news organisations add another layer because South Africa's national narrative is not produced entirely within South Africa. Reuters, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Bloomberg, AFP and other international organisations can influence how global audiences interpret South African politics, while their reporting can subsequently circulate back into domestic debate through social media and local publications. This creates a form of external agenda-setting power. International reporting can elevate issues that domestic institutions have neglected, provide valuable comparative perspectives and expose abuses that powerful domestic actors would prefer to conceal. International journalism can therefore strengthen accountability. But international media also operate through their own institutional priorities, editorial cultures, geopolitical assumptions and audience markets. Africa has historically been vulnerable to representations produced through external frameworks that emphasise crisis, instability, corruption, violence and dysfunction while giving insufficient attention to structural history, social resilience and African agency. The question is not whether foreign journalists are inherently biased; such a claim would be intellectually crude. The more important question is whether African societies possess sufficient capacity to produce and distribute their own interpretations of events to domestic and international audiences. Narrative sovereignty requires the ability to tell one's own story, not merely to complain when outsiders tell it differently. South Africa's political significance means that international news organisations frequently treat it as a major African democracy, an emerging economy, a regional power and a society confronting unresolved racial and economic inequalities. Their representations therefore affect investor perceptions, diplomatic debates, tourism, international political discourse and even domestic elite behaviour. When international coverage becomes a reference point for local political actors, external narrative power becomes internal political power. This does not mean South Africa should isolate itself from international journalism. Rather, it requires the development of strong domestic journalism, African research institutions and independent public-interest media capable of engaging international narratives with evidence and intellectual confidence. A sovereign democracy must be open to external scrutiny without becoming intellectually dependent upon external definitions of its own reality.

The question of language is also fundamental to narrative power because South Africa's constitutional democracy formally recognises linguistic diversity while the political economy of national media remains strongly influenced by languages with greater commercial reach. Language is never merely a technical communication mechanism. It carries history, cultural identity, social status and political authority. When political debate occurs predominantly through a narrow linguistic register, citizens whose primary language differs from that register may participate through translation rather than through direct cultural ownership of political discourse. The expansion of multilingual broadcasting represents an important democratic achievement because it allows public information to reach citizens in their own languages. Yet the production of high-quality investigative journalism in multiple languages requires significant resources. Translation itself can also alter meaning because political concepts do not always carry identical cultural implications across languages. The question of who controls the narrative is therefore partly a question of who controls the linguistic terms through which political reality is described. A national debate about transformation, reconciliation, land, migration, crime or citizenship can acquire different meanings depending upon the language and community through which it is communicated.

Radio has played an especially important role in sustaining this plurality, with hundreds of community broadcasting licences contributing to the country's diverse media environment. Yet linguistic diversity remains economically vulnerable if advertising markets reward some audiences more heavily than others. The danger is that commercial logic can gradually privilege languages and communities with greater purchasing power. In such circumstances, formal equality of languages can coexist with unequal communicative resources. This is another example of the distinction between constitutional achievement and structural economic power. The ANC-led democratic transition expanded formal recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity, but the market determines many of the practical resources available to sustain that diversity. Narrative sovereignty therefore requires not only the legal recognition of languages but investment in institutions capable of producing journalism, educational programming, investigative content and digital media across the linguistic spectrum.

The relationship between the media and political elites also deserves more sophisticated treatment than the familiar accusation that journalists are either enemies of government or servants of opposition interests. Media institutions operate within networks of access. Political leaders possess information that journalists require, while journalists possess platforms that politicians need. Each side therefore depends upon the other. A government may criticise hostile reporting while simultaneously cultivating relationships with sympathetic journalists. Opposition parties may condemn media bias while seeking favourable coverage. Business leaders may court journalists to shape perceptions of regulatory policy. Civil society organisations may strategically release reports to influence news cycles. The result is an ecosystem of mutual dependence. Political power can therefore operate through access rather than direct censorship. A journalist who receives privileged access to ministers, corporate executives or opposition leaders may obtain information unavailable to competitors. Sources can shape stories through selective disclosure. Politicians can reward sympathetic media outlets with access while excluding hostile ones. Such practices are not necessarily illegal or inherently corrupt; access journalism is a normal feature of political reporting. The danger arises when access becomes so important that journalists hesitate to challenge powerful sources for fear of losing future cooperation. This can create subtle forms of agenda-setting in which political elites influence not what journalists are legally permitted to report but what they are able to report efficiently. South Africa's democratic institutions therefore depend upon journalism possessing enough institutional strength to withstand the pressures associated with access. Investigative journalism is particularly important because it reduces dependence upon official narratives by generating information independently. Yet investigative journalism is expensive, time-consuming and legally risky. The weakening of newsroom resources can therefore strengthen the relative power of official sources even in a formally free media environment. The central issue is consequently not whether journalists are politically biased in some abstract sense, but whether the institutional conditions allow journalism to investigate powerful actors regardless of political affiliation.

The ANC's relationship with the media must consequently be understood through the tension between liberation legitimacy and constitutional accountability. As the organisation that led the struggle against apartheid and became the governing party after 1994, the ANC inherited enormous symbolic authority. Its historical narrative became part of the moral foundation of the new South Africa. Yet democratic government requires the governing party to accept scrutiny precisely because historical legitimacy cannot substitute for contemporary accountability. The media's role is therefore not to protect the ANC's liberation legacy nor to destroy it, but to investigate the organisation as a governing institution. This distinction becomes particularly important when

criticism of government is interpreted as hostility toward the liberation movement itself. A democratic media environment must be able to distinguish between criticism of policies, criticism of officials and rejection of the historical struggle for liberation. Conversely, journalists must avoid reducing the ANC's entire political tradition to the failures of particular administrations. Intellectual seriousness requires both historical recognition and contemporary scrutiny. The media can fail democracy by becoming a partisan instrument against the governing party, but it can also fail democracy by becoming excessively deferential toward a liberation movement because of its historical legitimacy. The correct democratic position is neither hostility nor reverence. It is accountability. This is why the SABC's statutory requirement for plurality of news, views and information is so important. The principle implies that public broadcasting should provide space for government and opposition, experts and citizens, urban and rural communities, majorities and minorities. The SABC should therefore be judged by whether it enables plural democratic participation rather than by whether its coverage is favourable to the ANC. Political parties should compete for public support through argument rather than institutional capture. The broadcaster's responsibility is to ensure that citizens encounter competing perspectives sufficiently to make informed judgements. The democratic achievement of the ANC is strengthened, rather than weakened, when institutions created during the transition are genuinely capable of scrutinising ANC governments. A liberation movement confident in constitutional democracy should not require permanent narrative protection.

The opposition parties occupy their own complicated position in the information struggle. Democratic opposition requires access to media because opposition parties must be able to scrutinise government, articulate alternative policies and mobilise voters. Commercial media and social media can therefore compensate for some of the advantages possessed by governing parties through access to state institutions. Yet opposition organisations can also reproduce the same simplification and polarisation they accuse governing parties of encouraging. South African politics increasingly takes place in a media environment in which dramatic statements can travel faster than detailed policy analysis. Opposition parties therefore face incentives to frame political competition through scandals, personalities and outrage. This can create a cycle in which government responds defensively, opposition escalates its rhetoric and media organisations amplify conflict because conflict generates attention. The citizen consequently receives a highly dramatic representation of political life while underlying questions of economic structure receive less sustained attention. The central challenge is to move political communication from spectacle toward substantive democratic argument. This requires journalists willing to ask not merely whether a minister made a controversial statement but what policy produced the outcome under discussion. It requires opposition parties capable of offering credible alternatives rather than defining themselves entirely through opposition to the governing party. It requires citizens capable of distinguishing between political performance and political competence. Media institutions can assist this process through investigative journalism, data journalism, explanatory reporting and sustained policy analysis. But such journalism requires resources. Again, the political economy of information becomes decisive. If revenue models reward short, sensational and highly shareable content, then serious policy journalism becomes economically disadvantaged. Democracy consequently faces a structural contradiction: the information most necessary for rational democratic decision-making is often more expensive to produce and less commercially attractive than the information most effective at generating attention.

The relationship between media and race in South Africa is particularly sensitive because the country's economic and social structures were created through racial domination. It would therefore

be insufficient to speak about media ownership and access without asking how racial inequality affects the distribution of communicative power. The post-apartheid state introduced measures intended to expand participation by historically disadvantaged groups, and the broadcasting framework explicitly promotes ownership, control and management by historically disadvantaged communities. These measures represent an important attempt to connect political liberation with economic and institutional transformation. Yet ownership transformation is not equivalent to the transformation of narrative power. A media organisation can possess more diverse ownership while retaining newsroom cultures, professional assumptions and audience structures inherited from an earlier period. Conversely, journalists from historically marginalised communities can enter mainstream institutions without possessing decision-making authority. The deeper issue is therefore who determines editorial priorities, who occupies senior management, whose expertise is treated as authoritative and whose experiences are considered nationally representative. The media can reproduce inequality not only through explicit racial exclusion but through habitual assumptions about what constitutes a national story. Events in wealthy urban centres may receive greater coverage than rural deprivation. Corporate perspectives may receive more sustained attention than informal workers. English-language political elites may be interviewed more frequently than community organisers speaking in African languages. These patterns do not necessarily result from deliberate discrimination; they can emerge from newsroom routines, resource allocation and assumptions about audience value. Nevertheless, their cumulative effect can reproduce unequal narrative visibility. The democratic transformation of media therefore requires attention to representation at multiple levels: ownership, management, journalism, language, source selection, geographic coverage and audience participation. South Africa's constitutional achievement lies in establishing a legal framework that recognises these principles. The continuing challenge is to translate formal commitments into durable institutional practices.

The concept of "public interest" must also be examined critically because it is often invoked as though society possesses a single, universally agreed understanding of what the public needs to know. In reality, different social classes, communities and political traditions possess different conceptions of public interest. A mining company may regard regulatory certainty as a public interest; mineworkers may regard wages and safety as the central public concern; environmental activists may emphasise ecological protection; government may emphasise economic growth and tax revenue; communities may emphasise land and health. Journalism inevitably selects among competing definitions of importance. Public broadcasting therefore cannot simply ask what interests the public in the sense of what attracts the largest audience. It must ask what information citizens require to participate meaningfully in democratic life. This is why the SABC's statutory responsibilities extend beyond entertainment and commercial success toward plurality, education, cultural development and public-service obligations. The challenge is maintaining these obligations in an environment where public institutions face financial pressures and audiences have unprecedented alternatives. If public broadcasting becomes indistinguishable from commercial broadcasting, its democratic justification weakens. But if it becomes disconnected from audience interests, it risks losing relevance and reach. Public interest broadcasting therefore requires a difficult balance between democratic responsibility and audience accessibility. The question of control is consequently not merely who appoints the SABC board or who funds the Corporation. It is whether the institution possesses sufficient autonomy and resources to define public interest through professional editorial processes rather than through political instruction or commercial pressure. This is precisely why the distinction between government broadcasting and public broadcasting is so important. Government broadcasting serves the political interests of the government; public broadcasting serves citizens. The post-apartheid constitutional settlement

sought to establish the latter. The ongoing institutional struggle concerns whether the principle can be consistently realised in practice.

Financial sustainability is perhaps the greatest threat to media independence because an institution that cannot survive economically cannot exercise independence for very long. The South African media sector has experienced significant disruption, including newsroom contraction, print decline and pressure on traditional revenue models. Reuters Institute's 2026 assessment describes continuing contraction in newsrooms, the closure or reduction of legacy operations and increasing competition from digital creators. This transformation has consequences for democratic power because journalists are not merely content producers; they are institutional investigators. When a newsroom loses journalists, it loses the capacity to attend parliamentary committees, monitor courts, investigate municipalities, analyse budgets, cover remote communities and sustain long-term investigations. The public sphere may remain crowded with commentary while becoming poorer in verified information. This is one of the central paradoxes of the digital revolution. The number of communicators increases while the number of professional investigators may decline. Social media can produce an enormous volume of political commentary without replacing the institutional labour of journalism. The challenge is therefore to develop sustainable models for public-interest journalism in a digital economy. Possible approaches include public funding mechanisms protected from political interference, philanthropic support, membership models, subscriptions, community ownership, cooperative journalism and fairer relationships between publishers and technology platforms. Each model carries risks. Public funding can create political vulnerability; private philanthropy can create donor influence; subscriptions can favour wealthy audiences; advertising can commercialise editorial priorities; platform dependence can weaken publisher autonomy. There is no perfect solution. The democratic objective must instead be institutional plurality so that no single funding model becomes dominant enough to control the entire information system. South Africa's experience demonstrates that media independence requires both legal safeguards and economic resilience. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of expression cannot finance a newsroom. A regulatory mandate cannot pay investigative journalists. Editorial independence therefore ultimately depends upon material institutional capacity.

The rise of digital creators changes the hierarchy of narrative authority even further. Traditional journalists once possessed professional credentials, institutional platforms and editorial legitimacy that distinguished them from ordinary commentators. Digital platforms have weakened these distinctions. A politically influential individual can now acquire millions of followers without formal journalistic training or institutional affiliation. This democratises public debate because citizens can encounter perspectives excluded from mainstream media. It can also create new forms of personality politics in which the credibility of the individual becomes more important than the evidence supporting the claim. Reuters Institute's 2025 research found that social media is a major source of news in South Africa and highlighted the growing presence of news creators and influencers alongside established organisations such as N24, eNCA and the SABC. This means that the South African narrative is increasingly produced by a hybrid system combining professional journalism, citizen reporting, political communication, entertainment personalities and algorithmically amplified creators. The boundaries between news, commentary and activism are becoming increasingly fluid. That fluidity can energise democracy because citizens participate directly in political discourse. But it can also undermine standards of verification. The public may struggle to distinguish a carefully investigated report from a confident assertion delivered through an attractive video. The problem is not simply misinformation. Even accurate information can become misleading when stripped of context. A short video can show an event without explaining

what happened before or after it. A statistic can be technically correct while being presented in a way that creates a false impression. A political clip can be authentic while being selectively edited. Democratic resilience therefore requires media literacy alongside media freedom. Citizens need the intellectual tools to evaluate sources, identify incentives, distinguish evidence from assertion and understand how algorithms shape visibility. The state cannot simply solve this problem through censorship because excessive state intervention can itself become a threat to democratic freedom. The solution must include education, independent journalism, platform accountability and a culture of evidence-based public reasoning.

The algorithmic fragmentation of the public sphere raises an even deeper question about whether South Africa still possesses a shared national narrative. In the twentieth century, millions of citizens might listen to the same radio bulletin, watch the same evening news or read the same major newspaper. Today, citizens can inhabit radically different media environments. One person may receive a stream dominated by government achievements, another by opposition criticism, another by racial grievance, another by economic commentary and another by entertainment. This fragmentation can weaken the common factual foundation necessary for democratic deliberation. Democracy does not require citizens to agree, but it requires them to disagree about something sufficiently shared to make disagreement meaningful. If citizens cannot agree even about basic facts, political debate can become a contest between incompatible realities. This danger is amplified by personalised algorithms that learn from user behaviour. The system is designed primarily to maximise relevance and engagement, not necessarily to maximise exposure to opposing viewpoints. Reuters Institute research on news personalisation highlights the increasing sophistication of recommendation systems and the possibility of AI-driven personalisation of both news selection and format. South Africa therefore faces a future in which citizens may receive increasingly customised political realities. This creates a new democratic challenge that did not exist in the same form during the early years of constitutional democracy. The old question was whether the state or a corporation controlled the broadcast transmitter. The new question is who controls the computational systems that determine what each individual sees. These systems are often opaque to users and difficult for governments to regulate effectively because they operate across national boundaries. Democratic sovereignty must therefore be reconsidered in technological terms. A country may possess constitutional sovereignty while remaining dependent upon foreign digital infrastructures for the circulation of political information. South Africa's media policy debates must consequently extend beyond broadcasting licences and ownership percentages toward algorithmic transparency, data governance, platform accountability and digital competition.

The Competition Commission's investigation into digital platforms is particularly significant because it demonstrates that the struggle over narrative power has become inseparable from competition policy. The Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry recognised that the economic relationship between digital platforms and news publishers can affect the sustainability of journalism itself. Reuters Institute reports that the Commission recommended measures including financial contributions from Google toward journalism sustainability, algorithmic fairness and improved revenue sharing by major platforms. Whatever one's position on the specific recommendations, the underlying insight is crucial: communication infrastructure has become an economic market, and market structure affects democratic information. If a handful of technology companies control search, social distribution, advertising technology and audience analytics, they can exercise enormous structural influence without directly owning traditional news organisations. This is a new form of power that does not fit comfortably within older categories of state versus private media. The platform can simultaneously be a distributor, advertiser, data intermediary,

search engine and gatekeeper. Its interests may diverge from those of publishers and citizens. The democratic challenge is therefore to design regulatory institutions capable of governing this hybrid power without destroying innovation or freedom of expression. South Africa's experience is particularly important because it illustrates how a post-colonial democracy can confront global corporate power within a domestic constitutional framework. The ANC's political control of government cannot by itself determine the policies of global technology companies. Yet the South African state can regulate markets, protect competition, strengthen public-interest journalism and participate in international negotiations. This represents a different kind of sovereignty: not ownership of every communication institution, but democratic capacity to establish rules under which communication markets operate. The future of media power will depend increasingly upon this regulatory capacity.

The internationalisation of information also complicates the traditional idea that national governments control national narratives. South African citizens consume content produced in the United States, Europe, Asia and elsewhere alongside local journalism. International social-media trends can influence domestic political debates within hours. Foreign governments can use information campaigns, diplomatic communication and strategic narratives to influence public opinion. International corporations can shape advertising markets and platform policies. Global celebrities can influence South African political conversations without possessing any formal political office. This means that narrative power is increasingly transnational. The state remains powerful, but it is no longer the sole or even necessarily dominant institution capable of shaping political communication. The 2026 Reuters Institute assessment notes that trust in news in South Africa has been affected partly by incursions into the media ecosystem by foreign states. This development deserves serious attention because foreign influence can operate through apparently ordinary media channels. Information sovereignty therefore requires transparency about funding, ownership, political affiliations and sources of organised influence. Yet vigilance against foreign influence must not become an excuse for suppressing legitimate international journalism or criticism. A democratic South Africa should be capable of distinguishing between foreign propaganda, legitimate international reporting and ordinary global cultural exchange. The answer to external narrative power is not isolation but stronger domestic institutions. A society confident in its own journalistic, academic and intellectual capacity can engage foreign narratives critically without being overwhelmed by them. Pan-Africanism is especially relevant here because African countries have historically experienced a deficit of narrative sovereignty. African realities have frequently been interpreted through external intellectual and media frameworks. South Africa, as one of the continent's most influential democracies, has an opportunity to contribute to a different model in which African societies possess the institutional capacity to explain themselves to the world on their own terms.

The broader question of narrative control therefore leads directly back to the unfinished economic transformation of post-apartheid South Africa. Political democracy redistributed formal political authority through universal suffrage, constitutional government and representative institutions. Yet information power remains connected to capital, technology, professional expertise and institutional ownership. The ANC succeeded in dismantling the formal apartheid information regime and constructing a constitutional framework based on freedom of expression, public-interest broadcasting, independent regulation and media diversity. It also created institutional mechanisms intended to expand participation by historically disadvantaged communities. These are substantial achievements and should not be dismissed through simplistic claims that "nothing changed." Something fundamental changed: the legal identity of the citizen changed, censorship was radically

constrained, broadcasting became more pluralistic, community media expanded and citizens acquired unprecedented opportunities to challenge official narratives. But the democratic revolution did not completely democratise the economic foundations of communication. Capital remains unevenly distributed; media organisations remain exposed to commercial pressures; digital infrastructure is increasingly controlled by multinational corporations; advertising revenue has migrated toward platforms; professional journalism faces financial contraction; and algorithms increasingly determine visibility. The ANC's project therefore succeeded politically more decisively than economically in the information sphere. It created the democratic rules of the communicative game but did not completely transform the ownership and economic structures within which the game is played. This distinction mirrors the broader argument of post-apartheid political economy: political liberation can coexist with continuing structural inequality. Information power becomes another arena in which formal citizenship and substantive power diverge. Every South African may possess the legal right to speak, but not every South African possesses an institution, audience, technology or financial capacity capable of making that speech nationally consequential.

The concept of democratic narrative power must therefore move beyond the simplistic binary of state control versus media freedom. South Africa does not fit neatly into either category. The contemporary information order is a plural, competitive and highly unequal ecosystem in which state institutions, corporations, journalists, advertisers, political parties, technology companies, civil society organisations and individual citizens all exercise different forms of power. The state controls legislation, regulation and public institutions; corporations control substantial financial resources and media infrastructure; journalists control professional forms of verification and agenda-setting; platforms control algorithmic distribution; advertisers influence economic sustainability; political parties mobilise organised constituencies; and citizens control attention through their consumption and sharing decisions. None of these actors possesses absolute control. The crucial question is therefore which actors possess disproportionate structural capacity. A democratic media system should not require every participant to possess equal resources, which is impossible, but it should prevent any narrow concentration of power from becoming capable of determining public reality without effective countervailing institutions. This is where the SABC becomes symbolically important. Its statutory mandate to provide plurality of news, views and information represents an institutional recognition that democracy requires more than market competition. Public broadcasting exists precisely because certain forms of communication are too important to be left entirely to market incentives. But public broadcasting itself must remain accountable and independent because public ownership can become politically dangerous if institutional safeguards are weak. The ideal therefore lies neither in state dominance nor market dominance but in institutional plurality supported by constitutional rights, independent regulation, sustainable financing and professional ethics. South Africa's democratic future depends upon achieving this balance.

The decisive question, then, is not whether the ANC controls the South African narrative, because no single organisation can plausibly control the entire contemporary information environment. The more rigorous question is how different forms of power interact to determine which narratives become nationally influential. The ANC possesses the enormous advantage of governing-party visibility, historical legitimacy, institutional access and organisational networks, but it operates within a media system that includes adversarial commercial broadcasters, independent newspapers, community radio, digital outlets, international media and millions of social-media users. The SABC is constitutionally and statutorily constrained by principles of public service, plurality and regulatory oversight, meaning that its political contestation must be analysed through institutional

mechanisms rather than presumed partisan ownership. Commercial media possess editorial autonomy but remain exposed to market incentives. Newspapers retain investigative authority but face declining traditional revenue. Radio remains extraordinarily diverse but economically vulnerable. Digital creators expand participation while weakening traditional distinctions between journalism and commentary. Social-media platforms democratise publication while centralising algorithmic distribution. International organisations broaden the information environment while introducing external narrative frameworks. Advertising finances media while simultaneously shaping economic incentives. Corporate ownership provides resources while creating structural influence. Algorithms personalise information while fragmenting the public sphere. Political parties communicate directly with citizens while encouraging increasingly controlled narratives. The resulting system is not a dictatorship of information but a competition among unequal centres of communicative power. The real democratic task is therefore to prevent inequality of economic power from becoming inequality of political voice.

The future of South African democracy will consequently depend increasingly upon whether the country can construct what might be called **communicative democracy**: a system in which citizens possess not only the formal right to express political opinions but meaningful institutional access to the production, verification and circulation of public knowledge. Such a system would require continued protection of SABC independence, stronger and sustainable public-interest journalism, genuine diversity of media ownership, protection and development of community radio, multilingual content, transparent political communication, media-literacy education, responsible platform regulation and competition policies capable of confronting the concentration of digital power. It would require journalists to resist both political capture and commercial sensationalism. It would require political parties to accept adversarial scrutiny while refraining from manipulating public information. It would require corporations to recognise that media are not ordinary commodities because journalism performs a democratic function. It would require technology companies to accept that algorithms capable of shaping public discourse possess social responsibilities extending beyond shareholder value. It would require citizens to understand that freedom of expression carries an obligation to distinguish evidence from propaganda. Most importantly, it would require the democratic state to understand that controlling information is not the same thing as governing democratically. The strongest democracy is not one in which government controls the narrative; it is one in which government cannot monopolise the narrative. South Africa's post-apartheid transformation therefore reaches an important conclusion in the information sphere. The ANC succeeded in opening the communicative space, dismantling formal apartheid censorship and constructing institutions intended to guarantee plurality and public participation. It compromised, as all governing movements can, whenever political interests collided with the institutional independence required by constitutional democracy. But the deepest structural limitation lies beyond party control: the economic and technological concentration of the means through which information is produced and distributed. The unfinished liberation of South African democracy is therefore partly a struggle for **narrative sovereignty**—not sovereignty as censorship, propaganda or state ownership, but sovereignty as the capacity of a diverse people to participate meaningfully in determining how their society understands itself. Whoever shapes the questions a nation asks, the evidence it considers credible and the stories through which it interprets its past and future exercises a form of power that can be as consequential as the power exercised from Parliament. In twenty-first-century South Africa, the battle for democracy is consequently also a battle over who gets to define reality.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

INFORMATION WARFARE AND THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

The struggle over political power in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be understood solely through Parliament, elections, political parties, the presidency, the courts or the formal institutions of the state, because contemporary power also operates through the production, circulation and internationalisation of information. A government may possess constitutional authority while simultaneously losing control over the narrative through which that authority is interpreted at home and abroad. In this sense, information has become a strategic arena in which legitimacy is constructed, challenged and sometimes destroyed. The central question is therefore not simply who governs South Africa institutionally, but who possesses the capacity to define what South Africa means to domestic audiences, international investors, foreign governments, multilateral institutions and global public opinion. The ANC entered government in 1994 with an extraordinary reservoir of historical legitimacy derived from the liberation struggle against apartheid, but the democratic state inherited a communications environment whose international structures had been shaped over decades by powerful Western media institutions, diplomatic networks, academic establishments, philanthropic organisations and global financial centres. The ANC could win elections and command the machinery of government without necessarily controlling the global production of knowledge about South Africa. This distinction became increasingly important as domestic conflicts concerning corruption, land, inequality, state capacity, violence, race, constitutionalism, foreign policy and economic transformation were translated into international narratives. The revolutionary movement therefore entered government with political sovereignty but not complete narrative sovereignty. That gap remains one of the most consequential features of post-apartheid power.

Who defines South Africa internationally is consequently a more complicated question than asking which government is formally recognised by foreign states. International perceptions emerge from a dispersed ecosystem of newspapers, television networks, financial analysts, universities, think tanks, diplomatic missions, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, advocacy groups, social-media platforms, diaspora organisations and political actors. Each possesses a different kind of influence, and none should automatically be treated as a hidden command centre. Yet the cumulative effect of these institutions can be politically decisive because international legitimacy is rarely produced by governments alone. A country becomes an object of international interpretation through the stories that are selected, repeated, translated and amplified. A domestic protest can become an international human-rights crisis; a parliamentary dispute can become evidence of democratic decline; a corruption scandal can become a symbol of state failure; an economic policy can be interpreted as either developmental nationalism or dangerous interventionism. These descriptions are not politically neutral because they influence how investors assess risk, how diplomats interpret governments, how international organisations formulate recommendations and how foreign publics understand African political realities. The decisive issue is therefore not whether foreign actors possess influence—they plainly do—but whether that influence is transparent, accountable and consistent with the sovereign democratic choices of South

Africans. A rigorous Pan-African analysis must resist both extremes: the naïve assumption that international narratives are objective reflections of domestic reality and the conspiratorial assumption that every unfavourable international narrative must have been manufactured by foreign powers. Between those extremes lies the difficult terrain of evidence, institutional relationships and competing interests.

The historical roots of this information imbalance reach deeply into the colonial and apartheid eras. South Africa was never merely a domestic political question because apartheid generated a vast international solidarity movement involving governments, churches, universities, labour organisations, cultural institutions, journalists, activists and civil-society organisations. International information campaigns helped expose apartheid and mobilise sanctions, boycotts and diplomatic pressure. This history matters because it demonstrates that international information networks can contribute to emancipatory political transformation rather than simply undermine sovereignty. Indeed, foreign solidarity with the liberation struggle formed part of the international environment within which apartheid became increasingly illegitimate. Contemporary South Africa therefore cannot plausibly argue that international civil society is inherently hostile to African sovereignty. The more sophisticated question is whether networks that once assisted liberation have evolved into institutions whose contemporary agendas sometimes diverge from the priorities of the democratic majority. Historical continuity should not be confused with political equivalence. The international support received by anti-apartheid organisations was often explicitly intended to weaken racial domination and facilitate democratic transformation. Contemporary funding relationships must instead be evaluated according to their actual purposes, governance structures, conditions and political consequences. Research published in 2026 on US foundation support for South African civil society between 1988 and 1996 demonstrates that major American foundations provided substantial support to civil-society organisations during the democratic transition, illustrating that international philanthropic resources were already part of the political ecosystem before 1994. The lesson is not that such funding was illegitimate, but that international resources have long interacted with South African political development and therefore deserve empirical scrutiny.

The ANC's revolutionary project nevertheless achieved something historically extraordinary: it converted an international liberation movement into a constitutional state whose legitimacy rested upon universal citizenship rather than racial supremacy. This achievement should not be diminished by later failures. The democratic transition dismantled apartheid's formal political order, established universal suffrage, created constitutional protections and placed previously excluded Africans at the centre of state power. It also transformed South Africa's international diplomatic position from pariah state to influential constitutional democracy. Yet political liberation did not automatically produce informational sovereignty. The institutions that interpret South Africa internationally remained considerably more dispersed than the institutions of the state itself. Government could issue statements, but international journalists decided which statements became news. Ministers could announce policies, but financial analysts interpreted their implications. Parliament could pass legislation, but foreign think tanks could publish assessments that shaped international perceptions of that legislation. Diplomatic missions could explain Pretoria's position, but international advocacy organisations could construct competing accounts. The ANC therefore encountered a structural contradiction: it controlled formal political institutions while operating within an information environment in which many powerful channels remained outside its direct authority. This is not necessarily evidence of foreign domination; it is a characteristic of modern global political communication. The state possesses coercive and administrative authority, whereas information

networks possess agenda-setting, framing and reputational power. Modern sovereignty therefore has both territorial and communicative dimensions.

International media occupy an especially important position within this architecture because they determine which domestic events become internationally significant. South Africa's political crises are frequently interpreted through categories that have international resonance: corruption, state capture, democratic erosion, racial conflict, xenophobia, land expropriation, investor confidence, constitutionalism and human rights. Such categories are not necessarily false, but the selection and hierarchy of stories can shape international understanding disproportionately. A township service-delivery protest, for example, can be interpreted either as evidence of democratic participation or as evidence of governmental collapse depending upon the framing adopted by the journalist. A land-reform debate can be described as a legitimate response to historical dispossession or as a threat to property rights and investment depending upon the analytical framework. A foreign-policy decision can be presented as principled non-alignment or geopolitical opportunism. The question therefore becomes who possesses the authority to establish the dominant interpretive frame. This is where information warfare differs from conventional propaganda. Information warfare does not require fabricated facts. It can operate through selection, repetition, emphasis, omission, sequencing and amplification. A collection of individually accurate reports can nevertheless produce a distorted understanding when certain realities are systematically emphasised while others receive limited attention. South Africa's information sovereignty therefore requires not censorship, but pluralism: the ability of African institutions, journalists, scholars and citizens to produce competing interpretations capable of entering global circulation.

Diplomatic missions represent another important layer of international narrative power. Embassies do not merely perform ceremonial functions; they communicate political assessments, cultivate relationships, engage government departments, interact with civil society, brief journalists and report developments to their capitals. Such activity is normal diplomacy and should not automatically be described as interference. Foreign governments are entitled to understand political developments in countries with which they maintain relations. The problem arises when diplomatic engagement crosses into covert political mobilisation, financing, coordination or pressure intended to shape domestic political outcomes without transparency. The distinction must therefore be evidentiary. An embassy meeting with an opposition politician is not by itself proof of interference. A diplomat attending a civil-society conference is not evidence of a regime-change programme. A foreign-funded NGO criticising government policy is not automatically an instrument of a foreign state. Evidence would require more: documented funding arrangements, instructions, coordinated campaigns, lobbying activities, communications demonstrating direction, institutional agreements, or other verifiable relationships establishing that an ostensibly independent actor was acting on behalf of a foreign political interest. Without such evidence, accusations of foreign interference become politically convenient allegations rather than serious analytical conclusions. A democratic South Africa must therefore defend its sovereignty without converting suspicion into proof.

Non-governmental organisations create an even more complex problem because they occupy the space between domestic civil society and international networks. NGOs can perform indispensable democratic functions by documenting abuses, providing legal assistance, supporting vulnerable communities, conducting research and holding governments accountable. Many have deep roots within South African society and cannot reasonably be characterised as foreign instruments merely because they receive international grants. At the same time, foreign funding can create legitimate questions about institutional priorities, donor influence, reporting requirements and agenda-setting.

The answer is transparency rather than blanket hostility. If an organisation receives funding from a foreign foundation, citizens should be able to know the source, amount, purpose and relevant conditions of that funding. If the organisation retains independent decision-making authority, that should be demonstrable through its governance arrangements and programme structures. If a donor explicitly conditions funding upon political advocacy, that relationship should be disclosed and examined. The existence of foreign funding is therefore a fact requiring investigation, not a conclusion proving political control. The National Endowment for Democracy openly states that it provides grants to nongovernmental organisations, including civic organisations and independent media, across more than 100 countries. Its own explanation also describes its role as complementary to official US democracy-promotion efforts. These admissions establish that international democracy-support networks exist; they do not, by themselves, establish that any particular South African organisation is controlled by a foreign government.

Think tanks similarly exercise power through knowledge production. Their influence rarely takes the form of direct commands. Instead, it operates by defining problems, producing concepts, generating policy recommendations and establishing the vocabulary through which political developments are interpreted. A think tank that repeatedly describes South Africa as suffering from institutional decay can influence diplomatic and investment perceptions even when it does not formally possess governmental authority. Another organisation may interpret the same developments through the language of structural inequality, racial capitalism or incomplete transformation. Both may produce evidence, yet their conceptual frameworks can lead audiences toward different political conclusions. Knowledge is therefore not simply descriptive; it can become constitutive of political reality. Governments respond to ratings, policy assessments, risk reports and international research because these assessments affect capital flows, diplomatic confidence and reputational standing. The ANC's difficulty has often been that it attempted to contest international narratives after they had already consolidated. A more strategically mature democratic movement would invest in African research institutions, independent journalism, universities, multilingual media and international intellectual networks capable of producing authoritative interpretations rather than merely reacting to external ones. Narrative sovereignty requires institutional capacity.

The rise of social media has dramatically democratised the production of political narratives while simultaneously making information warfare more difficult to detect. Unlike traditional media, social platforms allow political parties, governments, activists, journalists, diaspora organisations and ordinary citizens to communicate directly with global audiences. This has weakened the monopoly previously enjoyed by major international broadcasters and newspapers. A township activist can now reach audiences in London, Johannesburg, Lagos or Washington without passing through a foreign newsroom. The same technology, however, enables misinformation, coordinated amplification, anonymous influence operations and emotionally manipulative political messaging. A viral video may acquire millions of views without establishing who produced it, who financed its distribution or whether its interpretation is accurate. Algorithms reward engagement rather than truth, and outrage travels faster than complexity. Political legitimacy can therefore be destabilised by narratives whose factual foundations remain uncertain. The democratic answer cannot simply be state control of social media because that would create another form of informational domination. Instead, citizens require media literacy, transparent political advertising, independent fact-checking, platform accountability and stronger investigative journalism. The objective should be to create a society capable of interrogating information rather than one in which government determines what information citizens are permitted to receive.

Diaspora organisations represent another politically significant dimension of information power. South Africans living abroad remain politically connected to domestic developments and often possess access to international media, professional networks, universities, advocacy organisations and foreign political institutions. They can amplify concerns that might otherwise receive limited international attention. They can also provide resources, expertise and international solidarity to domestic campaigns. This is not inherently illegitimate. Diaspora political participation is a normal feature of transnational democracy. Yet diaspora organisations can sometimes become detached from the political experiences of citizens who remain within the country, particularly when international advocacy rewards dramatic narratives more strongly than nuanced analysis. A domestic political disagreement can therefore be transformed into an international campaign in which one faction presents itself as representing the entire country. The critical question is representativeness. Who authorised the organisation to speak for South Africa? How many members does it represent? Who funds its advocacy? Does it disclose relationships with foreign political actors? Does its messaging accurately reflect domestic opinion? These questions are essential because international visibility can create an illusion of domestic legitimacy. A movement may be highly influential abroad while possessing limited support at home. Conversely, communities with little access to international networks may possess substantial domestic legitimacy while remaining almost invisible internationally.

The same problem applies to political advocacy networks, which can connect domestic organisations with international lawyers, academics, journalists, parliamentarians, lobbyists and human-rights institutions. Such networks can be valuable mechanisms through which marginalised communities acquire international visibility. They can also become instruments of political pressure. Again, the distinction must be established through evidence rather than assumption. Coordination becomes politically significant when there is documented evidence that actors are working according to a common strategy, sharing resources, receiving instructions, exchanging intelligence or pursuing mutually agreed political objectives. Mere ideological agreement does not prove coordination. Two organisations may condemn the same government because they independently reach the same conclusion. A foreign academic may criticise South Africa because of scholarly conviction rather than government instruction. A diplomat may meet an activist because diplomacy requires engagement with civil society. An NGO may receive foreign funding while maintaining complete programmatic independence. The burden of serious scholarship is therefore to establish the relationship between actors rather than infer it from proximity. Without this methodological discipline, the concept of foreign interference becomes so broad that it explains everything and therefore proves nothing.

The concept of foreign influence must consequently be separated carefully from foreign control. Influence exists everywhere in international politics. Governments influence one another through diplomacy, trade, investment, culture, education, media, aid and intellectual exchange. South Africa itself seeks to influence other African states and global institutions through diplomacy, peace initiatives, economic relations and political advocacy. It would therefore be intellectually inconsistent to demand that other countries possess no influence over South Africa while accepting South Africa's legitimate attempts to influence international affairs. Foreign control is a much stronger claim. It implies that an external actor possesses meaningful direction over decisions that would otherwise belong to domestic institutions or political actors. Establishing such control requires evidence of dependency, command, conditionality, covert coordination or institutional capture. Funding alone is insufficient. Contact alone is insufficient. Shared ideology is insufficient. Public criticism is insufficient. Even substantial financial support does not necessarily establish

political control unless evidence demonstrates that funding was linked to political direction. This distinction is indispensable for a Pan-African scholarship that seeks to expose genuine structures of power without reproducing the conspiratorial habits that often weaken African political analysis.

The regulation of political financing illustrates the seriousness with which South Africa itself recognises the danger of opaque political influence. The Political Party Funding Act regulates public and private funding and requires disclosure of donations to political parties. It prohibits donations from foreign governments and agencies and restricts foreign private funding, while permitting limited foreign support for training, skills development and policy development. This legal architecture reveals an important constitutional principle: political competition must remain sufficiently transparent to protect democratic sovereignty. Yet the existence of regulation also demonstrates why political funding allegations must be carefully distinguished from NGO funding, research grants, media investment and philanthropic support. A foreign-funded civil-society project is not automatically a political donation to a political party. A university grant is not automatically campaign financing. A diplomatic programme is not automatically covert intervention. The categories matter. Democratic sovereignty is strengthened when laws identify precisely what constitutes prohibited influence and require disclosure where appropriate. It is weakened when politicians use vague accusations to discredit legitimate criticism. The correct response to potentially improper foreign influence is therefore investigation, auditing, disclosure and enforcement rather than rhetorical nationalism.

The deeper problem is that international information power intersects with domestic class power. South Africa's political economy remains characterised by profound inequalities in wealth, ownership, media access, professional networks and institutional resources. Political democracy gave the majority the vote, but voting power does not automatically produce equal capacity to communicate with global audiences. Wealthy corporations can hire international public-relations firms, legal advisers, consultants and lobbyists. Large political organisations can maintain media departments and international offices. Well-resourced civil-society organisations can produce research and maintain global networks. Poor communities may possess powerful political grievances but lack the resources required to internationalise them. Thus, the information struggle is partly a class struggle. The question is not merely whether foreigners influence South Africa but which South Africans possess the capacity to attract, interpret and mobilise foreign attention. Internationalisation can therefore amplify domestic inequalities. Wealthy interests can frame economic policy in the language of investor confidence, while poor communities may struggle to translate unemployment and landlessness into internationally legible policy arguments. The democratic challenge is to ensure that global communication does not become another arena in which economic privilege determines whose voice travels furthest.

This helps explain why the ANC's revolutionary project experienced both success and compromise in the informational sphere. Its success lay in transforming the official identity of South Africa from apartheid state to constitutional democracy and in placing African political agency at the centre of international diplomacy. The new government acquired enormous moral authority and international recognition. It built diplomatic relationships across Africa and the developing world, expanded South Africa's participation in multilateral institutions and articulated principles of sovereignty, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. Yet the compromise was that political authority was sometimes exercised defensively rather than strategically. Government responses to international criticism could become reactive, while internal scandals created opportunities for foreign media and international advocacy organisations to define the meaning of South African democracy. The state

frequently possessed information but lacked narrative coordination. Different departments communicated contradictory positions, political leaders contradicted one another, and governing-party factionalism generated competing narratives. Once political fragmentation enters the information environment, foreign actors do not need to manufacture divisions; they can simply report and amplify them. This is a crucial point because not every crisis of international legitimacy is externally engineered. Many are generated domestically and subsequently internationalised.

The phenomenon of state capture illustrates this dynamic particularly clearly. Domestic political conflicts involving corruption, procurement, public enterprises and elite networks became international stories about the health of South African democracy. International media did not create the underlying political problems; domestic actors, institutions and networks produced much of the evidence upon which the narratives were constructed. The same principle applies to controversies surrounding land reform, unemployment, inequality, policing and public administration. International narratives become powerful partly because they can attach themselves to real domestic grievances. Foreign information actors may exaggerate, simplify or selectively frame those grievances, but they do not necessarily invent them. A serious Pan-African critique must therefore distinguish between the production of a crisis and the interpretation of a crisis. Domestic failures create the raw material; international information networks can determine how that material is packaged and circulated. If South African institutions wish to reduce external narrative vulnerability, the first requirement is not censorship or propaganda but competent governance. A government that delivers effectively, communicates transparently and investigates wrongdoing possesses a much stronger foundation from which to contest hostile narratives than a government that attempts to suppress criticism while leaving the underlying grievances unresolved.

There is also an important ideological dimension to the international narrative struggle. South Africa is frequently interpreted through competing intellectual traditions: liberal constitutionalism, neoliberal economics, African nationalism, Marxism, Pan-Africanism, social democracy, racial capitalism theory and market-oriented development discourse. Each framework highlights certain realities while obscuring others. The international dominance of particular conceptual languages can shape what policy choices appear reasonable. For example, a policy may be evaluated primarily through its effect on investor confidence rather than its implications for historical redistribution. Conversely, a policy may be celebrated as transformative without sufficiently examining its administrative feasibility or economic consequences. Intellectual power therefore operates before policy decisions are even made because it determines the criteria by which those decisions are judged. The ANC's historical challenge has been that it inherited a liberation ideology but governed within an international political economy whose dominant institutions frequently privilege market stability, fiscal credibility and investor confidence. The resulting tension was not simply a conflict between black political power and white economic power; it was also a conflict between competing systems for defining legitimate economic knowledge. Structural power persisted partly because the language of economic necessity could constrain the range of politically imaginable alternatives.

International legitimacy also affects the behaviour of domestic elites. Political leaders know that foreign governments, investors, credit institutions, universities and media organisations are watching their decisions. This can create incentives for governments to moderate policies that might otherwise be politically attractive domestically. Such moderation is not necessarily foreign control; governments routinely consider international consequences when making sovereign decisions. But when external expectations become so powerful that elected governments fear violating them more than disappointing their own constituencies, a democratic legitimacy problem emerges. The issue is

particularly serious in highly unequal societies where economic dependence can transform external preferences into domestic constraints. South Africa's constitutional democracy therefore exists within a broader international political economy in which sovereignty is formally recognised but materially conditioned by capital mobility, trade relationships, investment expectations and diplomatic power. Information power reinforces these economic structures by producing narratives about what constitutes responsible governance. The country that is labelled unstable may face higher costs of capital; the government labelled unpredictable may face diplomatic isolation; the policy labelled radical may experience intensified investor scrutiny. Narrative power can therefore become economic power without any foreign actor issuing a direct command.

A genuinely Pan-African approach must consequently reject the false choice between sovereignty and accountability. African states require sovereign capacity to determine their political and economic futures, but sovereignty cannot mean immunity from criticism. Human-rights organisations, journalists, researchers and foreign governments have legitimate interests in South Africa's democratic conduct. Likewise, South African citizens have a legitimate interest in knowing when external actors are attempting to shape domestic political outcomes. The answer is reciprocal transparency. Foreign governments should disclose diplomatic and political activities where law requires it. NGOs should transparently report funding and governance arrangements. Think tanks should disclose significant donors and potential conflicts of interest. Media organisations should maintain editorial standards and disclose relevant ownership structures. Political parties should comply with funding laws. Diaspora organisations should accurately represent themselves rather than claiming authority they do not possess. Governments should disclose their own international lobbying and public-diplomacy activities. Such reciprocal standards would make it much more difficult for hidden influence to operate while protecting legitimate international cooperation.

The ultimate crisis, therefore, is not merely that South Africa may be influenced by external information networks; it is that democratic citizens may lose confidence in their ability to distinguish truth from organised political narrative. Once citizens believe that every media report is propaganda, every NGO is foreign-funded, every diplomatic statement is an imperial instruction and every government statement is state propaganda, democratic discourse becomes impossible. Conversely, if citizens assume that international media are always neutral, NGOs are always independent, governments are always truthful and think tanks are always objective, they become vulnerable to sophisticated forms of influence. Democratic resilience requires neither absolute trust nor permanent suspicion. It requires institutions capable of verification. Investigative journalism must trace money. Parliament must scrutinise foreign relationships where relevant. Civil society must disclose funding. Universities must protect intellectual independence. Regulators must enforce political-finance laws. Citizens must learn to distinguish evidence from insinuation. In this sense, information literacy becomes a component of national sovereignty. A population incapable of interrogating information cannot exercise meaningful democratic power regardless of how advanced its constitutional institutions may be.

The final question is therefore not simply who controls South Africa's information environment, but who has the capacity to shape the terms on which South Africa is understood. The answer is plural and contested. The South African state possesses formal authority; political parties possess mobilisation networks; corporations possess economic resources; international media possess global reach; diplomats possess privileged access; NGOs possess moral and legal legitimacy; think tanks possess intellectual authority; social-media networks possess extraordinary amplification capacity; diaspora organisations possess transnational connectivity; and ordinary citizens possess the

democratic power to accept, reject or reinterpret competing narratives. No single actor controls the entire system. Yet unequal resources mean that some actors can make their interpretations travel farther than others. This is where the unfinished business of the democratic revolution becomes visible. Political liberation transferred state power to the majority, but it did not eliminate unequal control over capital, expertise, media infrastructure, international networks or global knowledge production. The ANC succeeded in transforming the political order, compromised in the incomplete transformation of several structural institutions, and inherited an international information system that remained only partially democratised. The next stage of African democratic sovereignty therefore requires not the construction of a state propaganda machine, but the creation of an intellectually confident society capable of producing, interrogating and exporting its own knowledge. South Africa must become not merely an object of international reporting but a producer of authoritative narratives about itself and Africa. That requires investment in African universities, independent journalism, public-interest research, multilingual digital platforms, investigative institutions, transparent civil society and internationally connected African scholarship. Above all, it requires intellectual discipline: every claim of foreign interference must be investigated through evidence of funding, coordination, lobbying, diplomatic intervention, communications or institutional relationships. **Foreign influence is not automatically foreign control.** The distinction is not a concession to foreign interests; it is a defence of analytical integrity. Only by making that distinction can South Africa expose genuine external interference without mistaking international engagement for domination, defend sovereignty without suppressing criticism, and complete the unfinished democratic project of transforming political freedom into genuine informational and intellectual sovereignty.

Chapter Twelve

Xenophobia: Social Crisis or Political Instrument?

The question of xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be reduced to a question of irrational hatred, spontaneous criminality, or an unfortunate conflict between poor communities and foreign nationals. It must be situated within the broader political economy of democratic South Africa, where political liberation transformed the formal structure of political authority without completely dismantling the inherited distribution of economic power, land, wealth, productive assets and spatial advantage. The democratic settlement created universal political citizenship, constitutional equality and representative government, but it did not automatically produce economic equality. Millions of black South Africans entered the post-apartheid era with political rights but without comparable access to capital, secure employment, productive property and accumulated wealth. At the same time, South Africa remained deeply integrated into regional migration networks that had existed long before 1994. Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Basotho, Malawians, Nigerians, Congolese, Somalis and other Africans became part of an increasingly complex social and economic landscape. The resulting tensions cannot be understood without recognising that migrants often enter precisely those labour markets and neighbourhood economies already experiencing severe deprivation. Xenophobia therefore develops at the intersection of material insecurity, political frustration, racialised historical inequality, weak state capacity and

contested ideas of belonging. The central analytical problem is consequently not merely why one impoverished African attacks another impoverished African, but why political and economic conditions make such antagonism conceivable in the first place. More importantly, one must ask who gains when social anger is redirected horizontally towards migrants rather than vertically towards institutions, policies and structures that reproduce inequality. That question does not absolve perpetrators of responsibility, nor does it deny genuine concerns about undocumented migration, criminality or pressure on public resources. It instead demands a deeper investigation into the political uses of grievance. Xenophobia can be a genuine social crisis and simultaneously become a political instrument. The two propositions are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the political power of xenophobic mobilisation often arises precisely because the underlying grievances are real.

Unemployment provides one of the most important foundations for understanding xenophobic resentment in South Africa, although unemployment alone does not automatically produce hostility towards foreigners. A society in which large numbers of citizens struggle to find stable employment inevitably becomes vulnerable to narratives that identify visible outsiders as competitors for scarce opportunities. The problem becomes especially acute among young people who possess educational qualifications but encounter an economy incapable of absorbing them into dignified work. For many young South Africans, democracy promised not merely the right to vote but a meaningful improvement in material life. Where those expectations remain unfulfilled, frustration can acquire a political direction. Yet the migrant worker is often more visible than the structural causes of unemployment. A foreign trader operating a small shop, a migrant construction worker, a domestic worker or an undocumented labourer can be physically identified, while monetary policy, industrial restructuring, capital concentration, automation, corporate decisions and historical patterns of ownership are far less visible. This asymmetry of visibility matters politically. It becomes easier to blame an individual migrant than to interrogate the architecture of the economy. It is easier to accuse foreigners of taking jobs than to ask why an economy with enormous productive capacity fails to generate sufficient decent employment. It is easier to demand immigration controls than to debate the concentration of economic ownership. Consequently, unemployment can become a reservoir of political resentment from which xenophobic narratives draw legitimacy. Political entrepreneurs can transform economic anxiety into an identity conflict by presenting foreigners as the immediate cause of deprivation. Such arguments may resonate because they speak to real experiences, even when their causal explanation is incomplete or misleading. The crucial distinction is therefore between recognising competition within labour markets and attributing structural unemployment primarily to migrants. A rigorous political economy must examine both. Otherwise, legitimate economic grievances can be converted into ethnic or national antagonism while the deeper distribution of economic power remains comparatively invisible.

Inequality intensifies this problem because South Africa's post-apartheid economy remains characterised by extraordinary differences in income, wealth and access to economic opportunity. The democratic state inherited an economy shaped by colonial dispossession, racial capitalism, apartheid spatial planning, unequal education and highly concentrated ownership. Political democracy could dismantle discriminatory legislation more rapidly than it could transform accumulated wealth. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the limits of liberation. The African majority achieved political sovereignty through universal suffrage, constitutional rights and democratic institutions, yet political sovereignty did not automatically translate into collective economic ownership. A society can therefore be formally democratic while remaining materially unequal. When inequality persists across generations, citizens may reasonably ask whether democracy has delivered its promised social transformation. But the answer to that question can be

distorted when migrants become the symbolic representatives of economic competition. A poor South African may observe a foreign-owned informal business and conclude that the migrant is economically advancing while local citizens remain excluded. Yet that observation does not explain the wider distribution of capital. The migrant entrepreneur may himself operate with minimal resources, long working hours, insecure legal status and little access to formal finance. The larger contradiction is that both the local citizen and the migrant can be positioned near the bottom of an economic hierarchy whose upper levels remain dominated by considerably greater concentrations of capital. Horizontal conflict therefore becomes a substitute for vertical analysis. Instead of asking who owns productive assets, who controls finance, who determines investment and who benefits disproportionately from economic growth, political debate can become fixated upon who occupies a particular street stall. This is precisely why xenophobia must be studied within the politics of inequality. It becomes most dangerous when structural deprivation is translated into competition between communities that have limited power over the underlying economic system.

Migration itself is neither a new phenomenon nor an inherently destabilising force in Southern Africa. The region has historically been connected through movement of workers, traders, families, refugees and communities across borders that were often drawn by colonial authorities without regard to pre-existing social and economic networks. The mining economy of South Africa historically depended heavily upon migrant labour from across the region. Basotho, Mozambican, Malawian and Zimbabwean workers participated in regional labour systems long before contemporary debates about illegal migration emerged. Colonial borders divided communities while economic structures encouraged mobility. Post-apartheid migration therefore represents continuity as much as change. The difference is that contemporary migration occurs within a constitutional democracy that formally recognises equality and human dignity while simultaneously operating within a region characterised by enormous economic disparities. South Africa's relative economic strength makes it an important destination for migrants seeking employment, education, safety and commercial opportunity. This reality creates policy dilemmas that cannot be solved through moral denunciation alone. The state must regulate borders, establish credible immigration systems, distinguish refugees from economic migrants, combat trafficking and enforce labour laws. At the same time, it must recognise that migration is embedded in regional economic integration and that Africans moving across African borders are not historical strangers to one another. A Pan-African perspective therefore rejects both uncontrolled romanticism and exclusionary nationalism. It insists upon orderly migration without constructing migrants as inherently inferior. The failure to develop credible migration governance creates an institutional vacuum in which citizens, political organisations and informal actors may attempt to enforce their own understanding of who belongs. Xenophobia thrives particularly where the state appears unable to manage migration transparently and fairly. The solution is therefore not simply to condemn xenophobia but to build institutions capable of governing migration with consistency, legality, humanity and regional responsibility.

Competition over resources provides another important dimension of the crisis. South African communities experiencing inadequate housing, overcrowded schools, limited healthcare access, unreliable municipal services and scarce employment opportunities may perceive migrants as competitors for benefits that citizens believe should belong primarily to them. This perception becomes especially powerful where public institutions lack sufficient capacity. Yet the analytical mistake is to assume that the presence of migrants automatically explains scarcity. A clinic overwhelmed by patients may reflect underinvestment, poor administration, population growth and broader weaknesses in the health system rather than simply the presence of foreigners. A housing shortage may reflect decades of spatial inequality, land constraints, urbanisation and inadequate

housing construction. Pressure on schools may result from demographic changes and insufficient public investment. When the state fails to explain these structural causes convincingly, social communities search for explanations that are immediately visible. Migrants can become convenient targets because their presence is tangible. A political actor seeking rapid mobilisation can therefore exploit the perception of scarcity by defining the migrant as an undeserving competitor. This produces a dangerous transformation of social policy into identity politics. The question changes from “Why are there insufficient resources?” to “Why are they receiving resources that should belong to us?” That change may appear subtle, but politically it is profound. It converts a distributive problem into a membership conflict. The resulting anger can then be directed at foreign nationals rather than at the institutional arrangements governing distribution. A serious democratic state must therefore confront resource scarcity through transparent allocation, reliable statistics and effective public communication. It must also ensure that social protection policies are designed in ways that citizens understand. Otherwise, uncertainty becomes fertile ground for political manipulation.

Political mobilisation becomes particularly significant when xenophobia is transformed from an expression of frustration into an organised political narrative. Democratic politics necessarily involves competition over votes, legitimacy and public attention. Political parties and movements therefore have incentives to identify issues that can mobilise particular constituencies. Migration is especially politically useful because it connects economic anxiety with questions of national identity, sovereignty and security. A politician can present himself as the defender of citizens against outsiders, even when the underlying problems are beyond the immediate capacity of immigration policy to solve. Such rhetoric can produce a simple political story: citizens are suffering, foreigners are arriving, therefore foreigners are responsible. The simplicity of this narrative is precisely its political strength. Structural economic explanations require historical knowledge, statistical evidence and institutional analysis. Xenophobic narratives require only an identifiable “other.” The danger becomes greater when political organisations use inflammatory language that legitimises collective suspicion. Even without explicitly calling for violence, repeated claims that foreigners are responsible for unemployment, crime, housing shortages or business competition can normalise exclusion. The distinction between political accountability and political scapegoating therefore becomes essential. Democratic leaders should articulate citizens' grievances without converting migrants into enemies. They should acknowledge concerns over illegal migration while rejecting collective blame. They should distinguish between undocumented status and criminality, between individual misconduct and group identity, and between legitimate border management and racialised exclusion. Where political leaders fail to make these distinctions, they may deepen the very social instability they claim to oppose. Xenophobia consequently becomes not merely a social pathology but a test of democratic political responsibility.

The question of crime perceptions is particularly sensitive because communities have legitimate concerns about safety, policing and criminal activity. It would be intellectually dishonest to dismiss every public concern about crime involving foreign nationals as imaginary. Foreign nationals, like South African citizens, can commit crimes, participate in criminal networks or become victims of crime themselves. The analytical problem begins when individual criminality is transformed into collective criminal identity. A migrant who commits a crime is treated not as an individual offender but as evidence that an entire national group is dangerous. This form of collective attribution is a classic mechanism through which prejudice acquires political legitimacy. Crime is emotionally powerful because fear alters how communities interpret unfamiliar people. The foreign accent, unfamiliar surname, different cultural practices or transnational business network can become

markers of suspicion. In neighbourhoods already affected by violence, those markers may acquire extraordinary significance. Political actors can then reinforce the association by presenting foreigners as a general security threat. The result is a feedback loop in which crime anxiety produces xenophobic suspicion, xenophobic suspicion encourages informal surveillance and vigilantism, and incidents involving migrants are then interpreted as confirmation of the original belief. Law enforcement becomes weaker because community actors begin taking the law into their own hands. This undermines constitutional democracy because the authority to determine guilt and impose punishment belongs to lawful institutions rather than crowds. A serious security policy must therefore distinguish between immigration enforcement and criminal justice. South Africa requires effective policing against criminal networks regardless of nationality. It also requires reliable evidence about crime patterns rather than politically convenient assertions. Security cannot be strengthened by abandoning equality before the law. On the contrary, the rule of law is most necessary precisely where public fear is greatest.

Informal settlements provide another environment in which economic insecurity and xenophobic politics can intersect. Informal settlements often embody the unresolved consequences of apartheid spatial planning, rapid urbanisation, land scarcity and inadequate housing supply. Residents may live in overcrowded conditions, experience insecure tenure and face limited access to municipal infrastructure. Within such environments, competition over land, trading space, services and employment can become intensely personal. Foreign nationals may operate informal shops or businesses within communities where local residents also seek opportunities. Competition can therefore occur not only between citizens and migrants but among entrepreneurs, workers, landlords, consumers and informal traders more generally. When municipal governance is weak, disputes may be settled through informal power rather than predictable administrative processes. This creates opportunities for organisations claiming to represent “the community” to exercise authority over who may trade, live or operate within particular spaces. Such organisations can become politically influential because they occupy the gap between formal government and everyday survival. Their legitimacy may derive from genuine community representation, but it can also be used to exclude vulnerable groups. The state faces a difficult challenge because it cannot simply criminalise every form of community organisation without weakening participatory democracy. At the same time, it cannot permit informal authority to become a substitute for constitutional governance. The long-term answer lies in upgrading settlements, expanding affordable housing, improving municipal services, regularising trading environments and creating fair mechanisms for resolving local economic disputes. Where residents experience genuine improvements in living conditions, the political attractiveness of scapegoating can decline. Where deprivation remains permanent, however, identity-based mobilisation can continue to flourish.

Service delivery failures are frequently interpreted through the lens of migration because public services are among the most immediate points of contact between citizens and the state. When residents wait for houses, struggle to obtain municipal services or experience inadequate healthcare, frustration naturally seeks an explanation. The danger is that government failures can be narrated as evidence that foreigners are receiving preferential treatment. Such claims can become particularly powerful when official information is incomplete or poorly communicated. A citizen may see a migrant accessing a public facility without knowing the legal framework governing that service. Conversely, migrants may believe that they are being systematically excluded even where policies formally provide access. The resulting uncertainty creates fertile ground for rumours. Rumours do not require factual accuracy to produce political consequences. They merely require sufficient social trust to be believed. When government institutions are distrusted, people may place greater

confidence in community narratives, political activists or social media messages. Xenophobic entrepreneurs can therefore fill an information vacuum. They can claim that foreigners receive houses, steal jobs or dominate public services, sometimes without providing credible evidence. The state must respond through transparent data, public education and accountable service delivery rather than simply denouncing the resulting anger. If public institutions function effectively, it becomes easier to distinguish scarcity from discrimination. If they function poorly, political actors can transform administrative failure into ethnic grievance. Service delivery is therefore not merely a governance issue; it is also an issue of social cohesion. A state that cannot provide reliable services creates conditions in which citizens may begin competing over belonging itself.

Identity politics deepens the problem because nationality is never simply a legal category. It is also a psychological and political construction through which people define who belongs to a community. Post-apartheid South Africa inherited a complicated identity landscape shaped by African nationalism, racial classification, language, ethnicity, citizenship and the history of colonial borders. The democratic project attempted to construct a non-racial constitutional citizenship while recognising the diversity of South African society. Yet economic inequality can destabilise this inclusive national identity. When material opportunities are scarce, people may seek solidarity through narrower identities. Nationality becomes politically attractive because it provides a seemingly clear boundary between “us” and “them.” The irony is that Pan-African history demonstrates how artificial many such boundaries can be. Southern African communities have long crossed borders, intermarried, traded and worked together. Colonial governments transformed mobility into an administratively controlled phenomenon by imposing territorial borders and racial labour regimes. Contemporary xenophobia can therefore reproduce, in another form, some of the divisions that colonial political geography created. This does not mean that national citizenship is meaningless. States require citizenship, borders and legal jurisdictions. But nationalism becomes destructive when it treats African migrants as fundamentally alien to African societies. A democratic South Africa must therefore hold two principles together: constitutional citizenship within a sovereign state and African solidarity beyond the state. These principles are not inherently contradictory. Indeed, South Africa's constitutional democracy can become stronger when it demonstrates that sovereignty does not require hostility towards neighbouring peoples. The challenge is to construct a form of national belonging confident enough to coexist with continental solidarity.

Foreign nationals themselves must also be understood as heterogeneous social actors rather than a single category. The phrase “foreign national” can conceal enormous differences in class, nationality, legal status, occupation and vulnerability. A highly skilled professional, a refugee, a small-scale trader, an undocumented farm worker, a university student and a multinational executive may all technically be foreign nationals while occupying radically different positions within South African society. Political discourse that treats them as one homogeneous group therefore obscures the actual distribution of power. It can also create an unusual contradiction in which migrants with very little economic power are portrayed as powerful competitors while large corporations with substantial economic resources receive comparatively less scrutiny. The small shopkeeper becomes visible as an economic threat because he operates directly within a township or informal settlement. Large-scale ownership structures may remain distant from everyday political consciousness. This distinction matters enormously for the analysis of power. If the objective is genuinely to understand economic exclusion, then the investigation must examine capital ownership, labour markets, financial institutions, procurement systems, land ownership, industrial concentration and access to productive assets. Nationality should not become a substitute for

political economy. At the same time, government must regulate businesses legally and fairly regardless of nationality. Foreign nationals operating businesses illegally should be subject to the law, just as South African citizens should be when they violate regulations. The principle must be universal enforcement rather than selective persecution. A state that enforces laws according to nationality rather than conduct undermines both justice and social stability. The objective should be lawful participation, not collective exclusion.

The deepest contradiction exposed by xenophobia is that poor South Africans and poor migrants may occupy similar positions within the same economic hierarchy while being encouraged to interpret each other as competitors. This is one of the most important questions for any serious investigation of post-apartheid political economy. Who benefits when workers fight workers rather than interrogating the structures governing wages, employment and ownership? Who benefits when informal traders destroy one another's businesses rather than collectively demanding fair access to markets, finance and municipal trading spaces? Who benefits when communities fight over scarce houses without asking why housing shortages persist decades after democratic transition? Who benefits when migrants become the explanation for unemployment while the concentration of capital receives less attention? These questions should not be answered through conspiracy theories. There is no need to assume that a single hidden actor coordinates every xenophobic incident. Political instrumentalisation can occur through ordinary incentives, institutional failures and opportunistic rhetoric. Politicians benefit when complex structural problems can be reduced to emotionally powerful enemies. Local power brokers may benefit when community fear increases their authority. Criminal networks may benefit when law enforcement becomes distracted or communities become fragmented. Media organisations may benefit from sensational conflict because controversy attracts attention. Social media actors may benefit from outrage because polarisation generates engagement. The point is not that every participant consciously seeks these outcomes. The point is that political systems can generate beneficiaries without requiring central coordination. Xenophobia therefore deserves to be analysed as a field of power rather than merely as an attitude.

The ANC's historical position in this debate is particularly complicated because the movement emerged from a liberation tradition that was explicitly connected to African solidarity and international anti-colonialism. The liberation struggle depended upon solidarity across borders, including support from African states and international movements. The post-apartheid democratic project therefore inherited an ethical obligation to reject racial and national domination. Yet governing a sovereign state introduced new responsibilities. The ANC-led government had to balance constitutional rights, border management, labour regulation, domestic political pressure and regional obligations. The contradiction between liberation internationalism and national governance became increasingly visible as migration pressures intensified. On one side stood the principle that Africa's liberation should ultimately transcend colonial fragmentation. On the other stood the practical reality that government must respond to citizens demanding employment, housing, security and services. The danger arises when electoral pressure pushes a liberation movement towards rhetoric that treats African migrants primarily as a domestic burden. Such a shift can represent a departure from the broader internationalist tradition that historically characterised African liberation movements. But the analysis must also acknowledge that government has legitimate responsibilities to regulate immigration. Pan-Africanism cannot mean the disappearance of state capacity. A sovereign African state requires borders, laws and institutions. The crucial question is what those institutions are designed to achieve. Are borders instruments of orderly mobility and security, or are they transformed into mechanisms of racialised exclusion? Is

immigration policy integrated into regional development, or is it primarily reactive to domestic political pressure? Does the state address unemployment through industrial policy, or does it increasingly frame migrants as the problem? These questions reveal the tension between revolutionary ideals and governing pragmatism.

The politics of xenophobia also reveals the limits of electoral democracy when economic grievances are not adequately resolved. Voting gives citizens the ability to change governments, but elections cannot by themselves transform structural inequalities. If every electoral cycle becomes a competition over who can promise greater protection from foreigners, the political system may reproduce the underlying problem rather than solve it. Parties can compete over restrictive migration policies while leaving deeper economic structures intact. This can create an illusion of decisive action. Closing borders may produce an immediate political signal, but it does not automatically create industries, jobs, affordable housing or functioning municipalities. Deporting undocumented migrants may address violations of immigration law, but it does not resolve the structural conditions that encourage migration in the first place. Similarly, blaming foreign traders does not address the barriers facing South African entrepreneurs. Democratic accountability therefore requires citizens to distinguish between symbolic politics and transformative policy. The critical question should not simply be which party promises to "deal with foreigners," but which political programme can address unemployment, inequality, spatial segregation, education, industrial capacity, housing and regional economic integration simultaneously. This is where the concept of structural economic power becomes central. If democratic governments repeatedly respond to material frustration with symbolic exclusion, political power may appear strong while economic power remains fundamentally unchanged. The state can control immigration enforcement without controlling the deeper mechanisms that determine investment and employment. Xenophobia can therefore become a symptom of the limits of political power rather than evidence that migrants themselves possess excessive power.

The informal economy provides a particularly revealing example of this contradiction. Informal businesses frequently become highly visible in townships and poorer urban communities, and foreign nationals are often prominent participants in some segments of informal trade. Their success can provoke resentment among local entrepreneurs who face similar barriers. Yet the success of some migrant businesses should not be interpreted as evidence that migrants collectively dominate the economy. Informal entrepreneurship often reflects survival under conditions of exclusion from formal employment and finance. Migrant entrepreneurs may rely on family networks, transnational supply chains, pooled capital and intense labour discipline. South African entrepreneurs can face similar constraints while also possessing different forms of access and support. The appropriate policy response is therefore not to define entrepreneurship by nationality but to expand fair access to finance, training, procurement, premises, infrastructure and markets. If government creates an environment in which citizens and migrants can compete lawfully, xenophobic competition becomes less politically useful. Where regulation is arbitrary, opportunities are scarce and corruption shapes access to trading spaces, nationality can become a proxy for competition over privilege. The state must consequently confront both illegal practices and discriminatory mobilisation. It should regulate businesses through transparent criteria and ensure that enforcement does not become collective punishment. A developmental state should be capable of supporting citizens without turning foreign residents into permanent enemies. Economic empowerment should mean expanding productive capacity rather than redistributing resentment. The objective must be to increase the economic space available to everyone while ensuring that citizens receive meaningful opportunities through legitimate public policy.

African solidarity offers the conceptual alternative to xenophobic nationalism, but solidarity must be grounded in material realities rather than rhetorical declarations. It is easy to proclaim that Africans are brothers and sisters; it is more difficult to design institutions capable of managing migration, employment and social protection fairly. Pan-Africanism cannot survive merely as an emotional appeal to continental unity. It must become an economic and political project. If African states remain separated by extreme economic disparities, migration pressures will continue. If regional economies are poorly integrated, workers will continue moving towards stronger labour markets. If borders remain administratively weak while labour markets remain interconnected, irregular migration will persist. The answer cannot be perpetual hostility between neighbouring populations. Southern Africa requires coordinated migration governance, regional labour standards, infrastructure integration, industrial cooperation and mechanisms for recognising qualifications across borders. Such measures would not eliminate competition, but they could reduce the conditions under which competition becomes destructive. African solidarity should also mean that South Africa does not carry the entire burden of regional economic inequality, while neighbouring states should not be expected to accept the permanent loss of skilled and working-age populations. Regional development must therefore become a shared responsibility. The Pan-African argument is not that South Africa should abandon national interests. It is that national interests are ultimately strengthened when neighbouring African societies become economically stronger. A prosperous Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi or Eswatini can reduce migration pressures while creating larger regional markets. Solidarity, properly understood, is therefore not charity. It is enlightened political economy.

The role of the media and digital platforms must be examined because contemporary xenophobic politics is increasingly shaped by information flows rather than physical community interaction alone. Social media can circulate allegations about crime, immigration, employment and public services at extraordinary speed. A single unverified claim can reach thousands of people before authorities have an opportunity to establish the facts. Images and videos can be detached from their original context and presented as evidence of broader narratives. Political entrepreneurs can exploit these dynamics by producing emotionally charged messages that divide citizens from migrants. At the same time, media platforms can expose abuses, document violence and provide migrant communities with avenues for defending themselves. The issue is therefore not whether media is inherently xenophobic or inherently progressive. It is a field of political struggle. The power to define the meaning of an event is itself a form of power. If an incident involving an individual migrant is framed as evidence about an entire nationality, the media contributes to collective suspicion. If the same event is investigated within its legal and socioeconomic context, the public may reach a different conclusion. Responsible journalism must therefore distinguish allegation from evidence and individual conduct from group identity. Governments also have a responsibility to communicate accurate migration statistics and enforcement information. Information vacuums are politically dangerous. Where citizens do not know how many migrants are present, how public services are allocated or what immigration laws actually provide, speculation becomes easier to weaponise. Democracy requires not merely freedom of speech but an informed public capable of evaluating competing claims.

Civil society occupies an important position between the state and communities because it can challenge both government failure and xenophobic mobilisation. Human rights organisations, churches, universities, community groups and migrant associations have frequently attempted to defend vulnerable populations while also addressing the grievances of local citizens. Their role is complicated because defending migrants can sometimes be misrepresented as ignoring citizens'

concerns. A sophisticated civil society response must reject that false choice. It is possible to defend migrants from violence while simultaneously demanding better services for South African communities. It is possible to oppose xenophobia while supporting lawful immigration enforcement. It is possible to defend constitutional rights while demanding accountability from foreign nationals who violate the law. Such balanced positions are essential because social cohesion cannot be built through moral absolutism alone. Communities need institutions that can mediate disputes before they become violent. They need accessible mechanisms for reporting crime, resolving commercial disputes and addressing discrimination. They need credible leadership capable of separating legitimate grievances from collective blame. Universities have a particular responsibility because they can produce empirical research rather than allowing political debate to rely on anecdote. Scholars should investigate migration flows, labour-market effects, crime statistics, housing pressures and public-service utilisation with methodological discipline. Evidence cannot eliminate political conflict, but it can narrow the space available for misinformation. A democratic society should therefore treat civil society not as an enemy of government but as part of the institutional architecture through which government can be held accountable.

The law presents another critical dimension because xenophobic violence fundamentally challenges the constitutional principle of equality. A constitutional democracy cannot permit nationality, ethnicity or foreign status to determine whether a person is entitled to protection from violence. At the same time, constitutionalism recognises that citizenship and immigration status have legal consequences. The state therefore possesses authority to determine who may enter, remain and work within its territory according to law. The challenge is to exercise that authority without permitting administrative enforcement to become collective persecution. The distinction between lawful immigration enforcement and xenophobic violence must remain absolute. Police must investigate crimes regardless of the nationality of suspects or victims. Courts must adjudicate individual cases based on evidence. Immigration officials must enforce immigration law through lawful procedures rather than through public humiliation or collective punishment. Communities must not substitute mob justice for the judicial process. When these distinctions collapse, the legitimacy of the state itself is weakened. Foreign nationals may lose confidence in law enforcement, while citizens may begin believing that formal institutions are ineffective. The resulting vacuum can encourage vigilantism and private enforcement. The constitutional state therefore has a dual obligation: to protect residents from violence and to regulate migration effectively. Failure in either direction creates instability. The state cannot maintain democratic legitimacy by protecting constitutional rights while allowing uncontrolled administrative disorder, nor can it establish order by abandoning constitutional protections.

The question of who benefits from xenophobia must therefore be answered at several levels rather than through a simplistic identification of one political actor. Electoral politicians may benefit when complex economic grievances are translated into a recognisable enemy. Local power brokers may gain authority when they claim to defend communities from outsiders. Criminal groups may exploit disorder to eliminate competitors or seize property. Certain media ecosystems may gain audience attention from sensational conflict. Social media personalities may gain influence through polarising narratives. Yet the most important beneficiary may be the status quo itself when structural economic questions disappear from political debate. If citizens are encouraged to focus primarily on migrants, less political attention may be directed towards wealth concentration, labour-market segmentation, land inequality, corporate power, financial exclusion and the institutional weaknesses that reproduce poverty. This does not mean that xenophobia is deliberately manufactured by the entire economic elite. Such a claim would require evidence and could easily

become another form of political simplification. The stronger argument is structural: every society contains incentives that can redirect anger away from powerful institutions towards more vulnerable populations. Migrants often have weaker political representation and fewer institutional resources than citizens. They can therefore become politically convenient targets. The tragedy is that citizens who attack migrants may believe they are defending their economic interests while simultaneously weakening the possibility of collective action around those interests. Workers divided by nationality are less capable of organising around shared labour rights. Traders divided by identity are less capable of demanding fair market conditions. Communities divided by nationality are less capable of confronting municipal failures. Xenophobia can therefore fragment precisely those social groups that might otherwise demand deeper economic transformation.

This fragmentation raises a profound question about the unfinished character of South Africa's democratic revolution. The liberation movement succeeded in destroying apartheid's formal political order, establishing universal suffrage, constitutional government and a non-racial legal framework. It achieved a historic transformation that should not be minimised. Yet political liberation did not completely transform the economic geography inherited from colonialism and apartheid. Wealth, land, capital and opportunity remain unevenly distributed. The persistence of these inequalities means that democracy operates under conditions of structural contradiction. Citizens possess political equality while experiencing material inequality. Xenophobia can emerge from that contradiction because the democratic state is held responsible for improving social conditions while lacking unlimited capacity to transform the economy. When expectations collide with structural constraints, political frustration becomes inevitable. The question is where that frustration goes. It can produce demands for economic redistribution, public investment, land reform, industrial transformation and stronger labour rights. Or it can produce hostility towards migrants. The first direction challenges structures of inequality; the second divides communities at the lower levels of the hierarchy. Political leadership therefore matters enormously. Governments can either educate citizens about structural causes or exploit simplified explanations. Opposition parties can either develop serious economic programmes or compete through anti-migrant rhetoric. Civil society can either deepen public understanding or reproduce sensationalism. The trajectory of xenophobia consequently tells us something important about the quality of democratic politics itself.

A rigorous approach must also resist the temptation to romanticise migrants as uniformly innocent victims or South African citizens as uniformly irrational perpetrators. Such binary thinking prevents serious scholarship. Migrant communities can contain individuals who exploit labour, evade regulations, participate in crime or engage in unfair commercial practices, just as citizen communities can contain individuals who do the same. The state must respond to conduct rather than nationality. Where foreign businesses violate labour or commercial laws, enforcement should occur. Where South African employers exploit undocumented migrants because they can pay lower wages, those employers must also be held accountable. This latter point is crucial because migration debates often focus exclusively on migrants while ignoring employers who create demand for irregular labour. An undocumented worker does not create an exploitative labour market alone. Economic incentives can encourage businesses to recruit vulnerable workers because insecure status reduces bargaining power. Consequently, migration policy cannot be separated from labour regulation. If government wants to protect citizens' employment opportunities, it must enforce minimum labour standards across the economy rather than simply targeting foreign workers. Otherwise, businesses may continue benefiting from cheap labour while workers fight one another over diminishing opportunities. The structural solution is therefore stronger labour institutions,

credible workplace inspections, fair wages and accessible legal remedies. Xenophobia becomes less attractive when citizens understand that the central problem is exploitation rather than nationality. This is another reason why the political economy of xenophobia must be analysed beyond the street level.

The future of South African democracy will depend partly on whether the country can construct a politics in which economic frustration is converted into democratic demands rather than xenophobic violence. Citizens must have avenues through which grievances can be expressed and addressed. Youth unemployment requires credible economic programmes rather than symbolic blame. Housing shortages require accelerated construction, spatial transformation and land-use reform. Municipal failures require institutional capacity, professional administration and accountability. Informal traders require infrastructure and fair regulation. Migration requires coherent national and regional governance. Crime requires effective policing and functioning courts. Inequality requires sustained transformation of productive opportunity. None of these problems can be solved by making foreigners the central political explanation. Indeed, scapegoating migrants can make solutions harder because it fragments the constituencies that would need to cooperate in demanding them. The democratic alternative is a politics of shared material interests. A South African worker and a migrant worker may have different legal statuses, but both can be harmed by labour exploitation. A local trader and a foreign trader may compete, but both can suffer from corruption and inadequate infrastructure. Residents of informal settlements may have different nationalities, but all require water, sanitation, electricity, housing and security. Recognising these shared interests does not erase legitimate differences. It creates a foundation for negotiating them without violence. Democracy becomes meaningful when conflict is institutionalised through law, elections, collective bargaining, community participation and public debate rather than through exclusion and vigilantism.

The Pan-African lesson is therefore particularly important. South Africa cannot become genuinely sovereign and economically transformative while remaining trapped in a political culture that treats neighbouring Africans as permanent outsiders. The continent's colonial borders created states, but African economic and social realities have always crossed those borders. A future-oriented Pan-Africanism must therefore combine national development with regional integration. South Africa needs a strong domestic economy capable of creating opportunities for its citizens, but it also needs a stronger Southern African regional economy capable of reducing the enormous disparities that drive migration. Industrialisation, infrastructure, energy cooperation, agricultural development, regional transport corridors and harmonised labour standards can create a more balanced regional system. Such a project would gradually reduce the perception that migration is a zero-sum competition between nations. The strategic objective should be to expand the productive capacity of the region rather than merely police the movement of impoverished people. If economic opportunities are geographically concentrated, people will move towards them. Borders cannot permanently suppress economic incentives. Sustainable regional development must therefore accompany migration governance. Pan-African solidarity is strongest when it produces institutions capable of making solidarity materially beneficial. It cannot remain merely a moral slogan invoked after violence occurs. It must become an economic architecture that reduces the structural causes of conflict.

Ultimately, xenophobia in post-apartheid South Africa is both a social crisis and a potential political instrument. It is a social crisis because real communities experience unemployment, inequality, crime, overcrowding, inadequate services and intense competition for economic survival. It becomes a political instrument when those grievances are selectively interpreted through the

category of nationality and when migrants are presented as the principal explanation for problems produced by much larger structural forces. The central question therefore remains: who benefits politically when economically frustrated citizens turn their anger against other Africans instead of against structural economic inequality? The answer is not a single organisation, party, corporation or hidden conspiracy. Different actors can benefit at different moments, while the greatest structural consequence is fragmentation of the popular classes and diversion of political attention away from the distribution of economic power. The historical significance of South Africa's democratic transition should therefore be judged not only by whether citizens can vote, but by whether democratic institutions enable them to transform material conditions without turning vulnerable communities against one another. The unfinished struggle is not simply between South Africans and foreigners. It is between a political economy that reproduces insecurity and a democratic project seeking to convert political freedom into substantive social and economic citizenship. The true test of Pan-African democracy is whether Africans can recognise that their destinies are interconnected without denying the legitimate responsibilities of sovereign states. South Africa must protect its citizens, regulate migration, enforce the law and expand economic opportunity, while refusing to construct African migrants as collective enemies. The ANC's revolutionary project succeeded profoundly in breaking the formal political monopoly of apartheid and establishing democratic citizenship, but its compromises and the persistence of structural economic inequality demonstrate that political liberation alone cannot complete social transformation. Xenophobia exposes precisely this unfinished terrain. When citizens are persuaded to fight one another at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, the deeper question of who controls capital, land, productive assets, finance and economic decision-making can disappear from view. The democratic challenge is therefore to redirect anger from scapegoating towards structural reform, from exclusion towards lawful governance, and from African fragmentation towards a more substantive Pan-African political economy. Only then can the promise of liberation move beyond the ballot box into the material conditions of human dignity.

Chapter Thirteen

Can Economic Power Produce Political Destabilisation?

The central question of this chapter is not whether economic power can influence politics, because history provides abundant evidence that it can, but rather how that influence operates within the constitutional democracy created after apartheid, through which institutions it travels, and at what point influence becomes domination, corruption, capture or destabilisation. The transition of 1994 transferred formal political sovereignty from an apartheid state to a democratic constitutional order, but it did not simultaneously redistribute all the economic resources, ownership structures, financial networks, professional expertise and institutional relationships accumulated under the previous political economy. This distinction is indispensable to understanding the character of post-apartheid power. The African National Congress inherited the machinery of government and obtained electoral legitimacy, but it did not inherit absolute control over capital, finance, productive assets, investment decisions, corporate media, international markets or the accumulated wealth of historically advantaged economic groups. Consequently, South African democracy has always

contained a duality: political power became substantially democratised, while economic power remained considerably more concentrated and socially unequal. The ANC's revolutionary achievement therefore cannot be dismissed, because it dismantled apartheid's political monopoly, established universal citizenship, created constitutional rights, expanded social protection and transformed the racial composition of political authority. Yet neither can the democratic transition be romanticised as a complete transfer of power, because the commanding heights of the economy continued to operate according to institutions and incentives that elected governments could influence but could not simply command. The crucial analytical task is therefore to investigate the relationship between political authority and economic capacity without reducing every conflict to conspiracy. Economic actors can shape political outcomes without secretly controlling governments, just as governments can regulate markets without possessing complete sovereignty over economic life. The post-apartheid state must consequently be understood as a contested arena in which elected officials, corporations, organised labour, investors, civil society, professional elites, media institutions, courts and international actors continuously negotiate the boundaries of legitimate power. The most serious question is not whether one hidden group controls everything, but which actors possess the greatest capacity to determine what political choices are considered possible, affordable, legitimate and sustainable. This shifts the analysis from conspiracy to political economy, from accusation to evidence, and from speculation to institutional investigation. It also makes it possible to distinguish documented influence from structural influence and political speculation, a distinction essential to any intellectually credible Pan-African examination of contemporary South Africa.

Economic power first operates through the most obvious mechanism: the ability to provide or withhold financial resources from political organisations. Democratic elections require money for organisation, communication, transport, research, staffing, mobilisation and public campaigning, meaning that political parties inevitably operate within an economic environment. The danger arises when access to financial resources becomes so unequal that political competition ceases to represent merely competing ideas and becomes competition between unequal capacities to communicate, organise and influence. South Africa recognised this problem constitutionally and legislatively, particularly after litigation concerning the opacity of private political funding. In *My Vote Counts v Minister of Justice and Correctional Services*, the Constitutional Court held that information concerning private political funding was sufficiently important to democratic participation that it needed to be recorded and made reasonably accessible to the public. The Court explicitly connected transparency with the public's ability to identify whose interests political actors might be expected to favour once elected. The subsequent political funding framework introduced disclosure obligations and limits, including disclosure of donations above R100,000 and a maximum annual private donation of R15 million from a single donor to a party. These regulations represent an important democratic achievement because they acknowledge that private money can create public consequences. Yet regulation does not eliminate influence. Money can enter political systems through legitimate donations, professional services, lobbying, associations, fundraising structures, social relationships and networks that are difficult to measure through conventional party-finance statistics. Therefore, the question is not simply how much money political parties receive, but what political ecosystem is created by the unequal distribution of resources surrounding them.

Campaign financing becomes particularly significant when the financial relationship between political parties and economic actors creates expectations of reciprocal access. Such reciprocity does not necessarily constitute corruption. A business contributing legally to a political party may simply be exercising a constitutionally protected political interest, while a party accepting such

funding may remain entirely capable of making independent policy decisions. The analytical problem begins when financial relationships are accompanied by preferential access, regulatory concessions, procurement opportunities, appointments, privileged information or political decisions that cannot reasonably be explained by public policy considerations alone. South Africa's experience with state capture demonstrates that this danger was not merely theoretical. The State Capture Commission found that state capture occurred on an extensive scale and documented networks involving public and private-sector actors. The significance of this finding is that economic influence cannot be analysed exclusively as something imposed upon government from outside. Capture may arise through relationships in which political officeholders, businesspeople, consultants, intermediaries and professionals become mutually dependent. The corruptor and the corrupted can become parts of the same institutional network. The lesson is therefore more sophisticated than the proposition that "business controls politics." Sometimes political actors exploit business; sometimes business exploits political actors; sometimes both cooperate for private advantage; and sometimes legitimate partnerships are unfairly portrayed as corruption. A rigorous political economy must distinguish among these possibilities through documentary evidence, financial records, procurement data, testimony, court findings and institutional investigations. Without such distinctions, criticism of economic power becomes vulnerable to the very propaganda techniques it seeks to expose.

Lobbying represents a second mechanism through which economic power enters democratic decision-making. In a constitutional democracy, lobbying is not inherently illegitimate. Corporations, trade unions, professional associations, civil society organisations, religious institutions and community groups all have legitimate interests that they seek to communicate to policymakers. The problem is not advocacy itself but inequality of access. A multinational corporation employing lawyers, economists, public-relations specialists and policy consultants may possess an institutional capacity to influence legislation that a rural community, informal trader or unemployed worker simply cannot match. Political equality at the ballot box therefore does not automatically produce equality in the policy-making process. One citizen has one vote, but organisations possess dramatically different capacities to organise information, produce policy proposals, obtain meetings, mobilise experts and sustain political campaigns. Economic power can thus influence politics without purchasing a single vote. It can shape the policy environment before Parliament debates an issue. It can determine which alternatives are presented as economically credible and which are dismissed as unrealistic. It can frame taxation, labour regulation, mining policy, energy reform or land policy as questions of investor confidence rather than questions of social justice. This is structural influence rather than necessarily clandestine influence. The important distinction is that structural influence can exist even when no individual politician has been bribed. When policymakers understand that certain economic decisions may trigger capital flight, investment delays, currency instability or employment losses, they may modify policy because economic consequences are real. Influence therefore emerges from the structure of dependency itself.

This is where the concept of structural economic power becomes more useful than the simplistic language of hidden control. A government may possess legal sovereignty over a territory while remaining economically dependent upon investment, credit, taxation, trade, employment and the confidence of domestic and international capital. The state can legislate, regulate and tax, but it cannot completely disregard the economic consequences of its decisions without potentially weakening its own fiscal capacity. South Africa's repeated efforts to attract investment demonstrate this structural relationship. The 2026 South Africa Investment Conference, for example, brought

together government, organised business, labour, civil society, investors and international participants as part of a strategy to mobilise domestic and foreign capital. Government itself describes investment mobilisation as essential to growth, employment, industrialisation and infrastructure. This does not prove that investors dictate government policy. It demonstrates something more important: capital possesses structural significance because governments require productive investment to achieve many of their developmental objectives. The state consequently negotiates with economic actors from a position that is simultaneously sovereign and constrained. This is not unique to South Africa. It is characteristic of contemporary capitalist states. The analytical challenge for post-apartheid South Africa is to determine whether the developmental state can use economic relationships strategically without allowing dependence upon capital to become political subordination.

Media ownership constitutes another important dimension of economic power because political legitimacy depends partly upon the ability to communicate political interpretations to the public. In the contemporary information environment, ownership of media organisations, control over advertising revenue, access to distribution networks and relationships with advertisers can influence which issues receive sustained attention and how political controversies are framed. Yet here again, a distinction between influence and control is essential. A newspaper publishing criticism of a government does not prove that its owners seek to destabilise that government. A television network criticising a political party does not automatically establish a corporate conspiracy. Journalists may have independent professional motivations, editorial cultures may be internally contested, and audiences themselves influence media markets. Nevertheless, ownership and revenue structures matter because media organisations require capital to survive. Advertising markets can influence newsroom economics, while ownership can influence long-term institutional priorities. Political power therefore increasingly depends upon the capacity to shape not only what citizens believe but what they repeatedly encounter as politically important. In this respect, economic power can influence the agenda without dictating every editorial decision. A sophisticated analysis must investigate ownership structures, financial relationships, editorial governance, advertising dependence, audience data and content patterns before drawing conclusions. The question should never simply be "Who owns the media?" but "How does ownership interact with editorial institutions, commercial incentives, professional norms and political interests to shape the public sphere?"

Advertising deserves separate attention because it represents an often invisible form of economic influence. Media organisations may depend upon advertising revenue, while political actors and corporations increasingly purchase visibility through digital platforms, sponsored content, public relations and strategic communication. Advertising can therefore influence the political environment without resembling traditional propaganda. It can determine which organisations possess the resources to communicate continuously and which political voices remain marginal. The rise of digital communication has complicated this further because political messaging can be targeted at particular demographic groups through platforms whose algorithms and commercial incentives are largely outside democratic control. The result is an asymmetry between formal political equality and communicative capacity. A citizen may possess exactly the same constitutional right to express an opinion as a corporation, yet the corporation can potentially spend vastly more resources ensuring that its message reaches millions of people. This does not mean that money automatically determines public opinion; citizens are not passive objects and political messages frequently fail. But it does mean that economic resources influence the probability that certain narratives will be heard, repeated and normalised. In a democracy, therefore, the distribution

of communicative resources deserves almost as much attention as the distribution of electoral resources. Political destabilisation may emerge when populations lose confidence that the information environment reflects their experiences, while elites believe that their preferred interpretations possess disproportionate legitimacy.

Think tanks and policy institutes provide another channel through which economic resources can become intellectual influence. Their role should not be caricatured. Independent research organisations can strengthen democracy by producing evidence, challenging government and providing expertise unavailable within political institutions. The problem arises when research capacity becomes systematically dependent upon particular funders and when financial relationships are insufficiently transparent. Funding does not automatically invalidate research. Nor does criticism of government establish that an organisation is acting on behalf of private interests. But funding can shape institutional priorities, research agendas and the kinds of policy questions that receive sustained attention. A corporation does not need to write the conclusions of a report to benefit from an intellectual environment in which its preferred policy assumptions become conventional wisdom. Conversely, a public-interest organisation can also receive donor funding while producing rigorous and independent research. The correct response is transparency, methodological scrutiny and disclosure rather than ideological suspicion. A serious African political economy must therefore ask who finances research, who defines research priorities, what methodologies are used, who sits on governing boards, where experts move professionally and whether institutional positions change in ways correlated with funding relationships. These questions transform speculation into empirical inquiry.

Civil society occupies an equally complex position. The post-apartheid democratic order rightly recognises civil society as an essential component of constitutional accountability. Non-governmental organisations have challenged corruption, defended human rights, litigated against unconstitutional conduct and represented communities excluded from formal political institutions. Some have therefore strengthened democracy precisely by resisting both government and corporate power. Yet civil society itself is not politically neutral simply because it is outside the state. Organisations possess donors, institutional cultures, professional networks and ideological commitments. Some are community-based; others are internationally connected. Some depend heavily upon philanthropic funding; others rely upon membership or public donations. The fact that an organisation receives external funding does not prove that it is an instrument of foreign political interests. Nor does domestic funding guarantee independence. The appropriate question is whether an organisation discloses its funding, follows transparent governance procedures, produces independently verifiable research and remains accountable to the constituency it claims to represent. This is especially important in South Africa because constitutional democracy has created powerful legal avenues through which civil society can influence government. Litigation, public campaigns and investigative research can substantially alter political outcomes without any electoral mandate. Such influence may be democratically valuable, but it also raises a fundamental question: who speaks for whom, and through what institutional authority?

Litigation represents perhaps the clearest example of non-electoral political influence that can nevertheless be constitutionally legitimate. South Africa's courts have become important arenas for political-economic contestation because constitutional rights provide citizens, organisations and businesses with mechanisms to challenge state decisions. Litigation can stop unlawful procurement, compel administrative action, protect property rights, advance environmental interests, defend labour rights or force greater transparency. Economic actors with extensive legal resources may

possess greater capacity to litigate than poorer communities, creating an inequality in access to constitutional remedies. But the opposite can also occur: well-organised civil society groups can use strategic litigation to challenge powerful corporations or government departments. The critical variable is therefore not simply wealth but organisational capacity. Professional legal networks can convert resources into political influence because lawyers translate economic or social interests into constitutional claims that courts can adjudicate. The danger would be to treat every successful court challenge as evidence of economic capture. Courts make decisions according to legal standards, and litigants can lose despite possessing substantial resources. Yet economic inequality can still affect which disputes reach court, how extensively they are researched and whether parties can sustain years of litigation. Political power thus operates not only through Parliament and elections but through the capacity to transform interests into legally cognisable claims.

Professional networks provide a subtler mechanism of influence because contemporary states rely heavily upon specialised expertise. Economists, lawyers, accountants, engineers, consultants, investment professionals, public-relations specialists and former government officials often move between public and private institutions. Such mobility is not inherently corrupt; indeed, governments need expertise and private firms benefit from understanding regulatory environments. Yet revolving-door relationships can create conflicts of interest when individuals retain close relationships with former employers, future employers or professional networks while participating in decisions affecting those interests. The problem is therefore not professional mobility itself but inadequate safeguards against conflicts of interest. The post-apartheid state has repeatedly required technical expertise to manage complex institutions, particularly in finance, infrastructure, energy, telecommunications and public procurement. When expertise is concentrated outside the public sector, government becomes dependent upon actors whose professional incentives may not perfectly coincide with public objectives. This is one reason why state capacity matters so profoundly. A democratic government that lacks technical capacity may possess political sovereignty but struggle to exercise it effectively. Economic power can therefore become political power through the unequal distribution of knowledge. The person who understands a complex financial transaction, procurement structure or regulatory system may possess influence disproportionate to his or her formal political position.

Corporate political relationships became especially visible during the period associated with state capture. The evidence examined by the Zondo Commission demonstrated that private-sector actors were not merely passive beneficiaries of governmental corruption but, in some cases, actively participated in networks that manipulated public institutions. The official account of the Commission's findings identifies private actors including consultants, advisers, accountants, auditors, lawyers, bankers and providers of goods and services among those implicated in the weakening of institutions and corruption. This is crucial because it destroys two simplistic assumptions simultaneously. The first assumption is that only politicians can capture the state. The second is that all private business is inherently opposed to corruption. The evidence demonstrates that political and economic networks can become mutually reinforcing. Business actors may seek access to state contracts; politicians may seek private enrichment; intermediaries may facilitate relationships; professional firms may provide technical mechanisms; and weakened institutions may allow the network to operate. This is documented influence because it is supported by an extensive public inquiry rather than conjecture. But even here caution remains necessary. The existence of state capture does not mean that the entire South African business community participated in it, nor does it prove that all subsequent political instability is orchestrated by capital. The historical lesson

is narrower and stronger: private economic actors can participate directly in the manipulation of state power when institutional safeguards fail.

International investment introduces another layer of influence because South Africa exists within a global financial and commercial system. Domestic economic policy is shaped partly by the need to attract investment, maintain trade relationships, secure access to technology, finance infrastructure and preserve macroeconomic credibility. Foreign investors do not possess votes in South African elections, but their investment decisions can affect employment, tax revenue, exchange rates, industrial development and the availability of capital. Governments therefore pay attention to investor expectations. This can become a form of structural influence because policymakers anticipate the economic consequences of decisions even when no investor directly requests a particular outcome. The state may moderate policy not because it has been ordered to do so but because officials calculate that aggressive action could produce economically damaging consequences. Such influence is difficult to identify because it often occurs through expectations rather than explicit instructions. It is therefore different from documented lobbying. The analytical challenge is to determine when reasonable concern about economic stability becomes excessive deference to capital. A government that ignores investment conditions can damage its citizens through unemployment and declining revenues, but a government that treats investor confidence as more important than constitutional obligations can undermine democratic sovereignty. The balance between developmental pragmatism and democratic autonomy is one of the central contradictions of post-apartheid political economy.

Diplomatic pressure can interact with economic pressure in equally complex ways. States do not conduct foreign policy solely through military power. Trade relationships, investment agreements, development finance, sanctions, market access, diplomatic engagement and international reputational pressure all influence domestic policy environments. South Africa's international economic relationships therefore form part of its domestic political economy. Yet claims that foreign governments deliberately destabilise South Africa require a high evidentiary threshold. Diplomatic disagreement, criticism of government policy or pressure to maintain particular standards does not by itself constitute destabilisation. To establish intentional interference, one would need documentary evidence, credible testimony, financial trails, operational links or other verifiable evidence demonstrating purposeful activity. Without such evidence, the responsible scholar must describe the possibility as speculation rather than fact. This distinction is particularly important in Pan-African analysis because African states have historically experienced genuine external interference, economic dependency and geopolitical manipulation. The existence of historical imperialism makes external influence plausible, but plausibility cannot substitute for evidence in a specific case. A rigorous anti-colonial scholarship must therefore resist both naïveté and paranoia. It must recognise structural dependency while refusing to attribute every domestic crisis to an external hand.

The question of destabilisation becomes more complicated when economic actors respond to political uncertainty. Businesses may delay investment, move capital, reduce production or publicly criticise government policy when they believe political conditions threaten profitability. From a corporate perspective, these actions may represent ordinary risk management. From a political perspective, however, large-scale economic withdrawal can create unemployment, fiscal pressure and social dissatisfaction that weaken the government. The same action can therefore have economic and political consequences without having been designed as political destabilisation. A corporation closing a factory because of declining profitability may contribute to unemployment

without intending to overthrow a government. Conversely, a group of businesses coordinating economic pressure specifically to force political concessions would represent a more deliberate form of political influence requiring closer investigation. The difference lies in intent, coordination and evidence. This is why the language of "economic destabilisation" should be used carefully. Economic decisions can destabilise political systems as unintended consequences of market behaviour, while political actors can deliberately exploit economic vulnerabilities. The scholar's responsibility is to establish which mechanism is operating rather than assuming intentionality.

Labour represents an important counterweight to corporate economic power because organised workers possess collective economic capacity that can also become political power. Strikes, collective bargaining, demonstrations and industrial action can disrupt production and place pressure upon governments. Yet it would be absurd to describe every strike as political destabilisation. Labour organisations have legitimate economic and constitutional interests, and collective action is an established feature of democratic society. At the same time, organised labour has historically played a major role in South African politics, and the relationship between labour, the ANC and the broader liberation movement demonstrates how economic organisation can become political organisation. The post-apartheid settlement therefore did not create a simple conflict between government and capital. It produced a triangular relationship involving government, organised business and organised labour, supplemented by civil society and communities. Each possesses different forms of power. Capital controls investment and productive resources; labour controls collective production through organisation; government controls law and public institutions; civil society can mobilise legitimacy and litigation; and voters ultimately confer electoral authority. Political instability may occur when these forms of power become mutually antagonistic and institutional mechanisms fail to mediate their conflicts. Economic power can therefore produce political destabilisation not only through corporations but through broader struggles over production, wages, ownership and distribution.

The media, business and political class also intersect through elite social networks that are difficult to capture in conventional institutional analysis. Political leaders may share professional backgrounds with corporate executives; lawyers may represent both state institutions and private companies; former officials may enter corporate boards; business leaders may participate in public policy forums; academics may advise governments while consulting for private interests; and journalists may move between media, communications and political institutions. None of these relationships is inherently improper. Complex societies require interaction among institutions. But networks can become politically significant when repeated relationships create trust and access unavailable to outsiders. Influence may therefore operate through informal channels rather than formal lobbying. A phone call between two people who have known each other for decades can sometimes accomplish what an official application cannot. Yet the existence of such relationships does not prove corruption. The analytical task is to identify whether informal access produces materially different outcomes, whether conflicts are disclosed, whether decisions follow lawful procedures and whether comparable actors receive equal treatment. This is where social-network analysis, procurement records, corporate directorship data, parliamentary disclosures and investigative journalism can complement conventional political analysis. Power often resides not only in institutions but in the relationships connecting institutions.

One of the most important consequences of concentrated economic power is the ability to define what counts as "realistic" policy. Political programmes do not operate in an abstract world. Governments must confront budgets, debt, inflation, employment, investment, trade and production.

Economic elites can influence the boundaries of debate by establishing assumptions about what markets will tolerate. This is sometimes described as the power of exit: capital may possess the option to move elsewhere, reduce investment or wait. The government consequently faces a political economy in which certain choices carry greater economic risks than others. Yet structural influence should not be confused with absolute power. South African governments have repeatedly regulated industries, expanded social spending, implemented labour protections, pursued affirmative action and adopted redistributive policies despite resistance from some economic interests. The state therefore retains significant capacity. The central issue is the balance of bargaining power. If government has strong institutions, technical capacity, broad social legitimacy and diversified economic relationships, it can negotiate more effectively with capital. If the state is administratively weak, politically fragmented and fiscally constrained, economic actors gain greater leverage. The long-term solution to structural economic influence is therefore not merely to condemn business but to strengthen democratic state capacity and broaden ownership.

The ANC's own historical trajectory illustrates this contradiction. The movement entered government with a revolutionary tradition committed to political liberation and socio-economic transformation, yet it inherited an economy structured by apartheid-era ownership patterns, global capitalism and severe racial inequality. The Reconstruction and Development Programme expressed ambitions for redistribution and social transformation, while the subsequent adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy reflected greater emphasis on macroeconomic stability and market confidence. This evolution has often been interpreted either as pragmatic statecraft or as ideological compromise. A more rigorous interpretation recognises elements of both. The ANC succeeded in establishing political democracy, dismantling legal racial supremacy, expanding access to services and creating institutions through which previously excluded citizens could participate in political life. But the movement did not fundamentally socialise the commanding heights of the economy. In making compromises necessary to secure economic stability and preserve investment, it accepted substantial constraints upon the speed and scope of economic transformation. The consequence was that political power became dramatically more representative while wealth and economic ownership remained deeply unequal. This gap created a structural vulnerability in which democratic expectations could exceed the state's capacity to deliver economic transformation. Disappointment could then be interpreted as political failure even when some constraints originated outside direct governmental control.

The consequences of this unresolved economic contradiction can be observed in the relationship between inequality and political legitimacy. Citizens who possess the formal rights of democracy but experience persistent unemployment, poverty, insecure housing and unequal economic opportunity may reasonably question what political freedom means in material terms. Democracy cannot survive indefinitely on constitutional symbolism if citizens believe that political equality coexists with permanent economic exclusion. At the same time, economic frustration does not automatically prove that economic elites are manipulating social unrest. Protest can arise organically from genuine deprivation, state failure, corruption, poor service delivery and unmet expectations. It is therefore dangerous to interpret every mass mobilisation as externally sponsored. Such interpretations can delegitimise legitimate grievances and prevent governments from addressing their causes. Nevertheless, economic actors may sometimes exploit existing grievances, amplify particular narratives or support political organisations whose interests align with their own. Again, evidence is decisive. Researchers should investigate funding, coordination, messaging, organisational links and material benefits rather than assuming causality from political coincidence.

The distinction between spontaneous social crisis and organised political exploitation should remain an empirical question rather than an ideological conclusion.

The concept of "descent voices" can therefore be reformulated into a more analytically defensible concept of mediated political influence. Rather than claiming that particular economic groups deliberately manufacture disorder, one can investigate how powerful actors may amplify, redirect or benefit from existing social tensions. A corporation may support a public campaign against regulation; an industry association may finance research challenging a government policy; a media organisation may repeatedly foreground particular grievances; a political consultancy may develop targeted messages; a civil society organisation may litigate against a government programme; or investors may communicate concerns about policy uncertainty. None of these actions is necessarily illegitimate. Political democracy is partly constituted by competing attempts to influence policy. The issue becomes problematic when influence is concealed, when public institutions are captured, when information is deliberately manipulated, when financial relationships are hidden or when private interests systematically override public accountability. The concept therefore shifts from "who is secretly causing disorder?" to "who has the capacity to amplify particular political conflicts, through which institutions, with what resources, and to whose benefit?" That question is both more difficult and more intellectually productive.

Political destabilisation can also occur when competing centres of power become locked into mutually reinforcing crises. Government may weaken institutions through patronage; business may respond by withholding investment; declining investment may deepen unemployment; unemployment may intensify protest; protest may increase political uncertainty; political uncertainty may further discourage investment; and weakened institutions may become more vulnerable to corruption. Such a cycle does not require a mastermind. Structural systems can produce destabilising outcomes through feedback loops. This is one of the most important lessons from the South African experience of state capture. The official response to the Zondo Commission acknowledged that corruption weakened state institutions and that the effects extended into infrastructure, public enterprises, law enforcement and the wider economy. Political instability can therefore be generated by institutional decay itself. Once citizens lose confidence in government, business loses confidence in institutions, and institutions lose capacity, the resulting crisis may become self-reinforcing. Economic power matters within this process because private actors possess resources that allow them either to adapt to institutional weakness or exploit it. But institutional weakness remains the central vulnerability.

The South African experience consequently requires a redefinition of what democratic sovereignty means. Sovereignty cannot mean that an elected government exercises unlimited control over every economic decision. In a globalised economy, no democratic government possesses such power. Nor can sovereignty mean that markets are allowed to dictate public policy. Democratic sovereignty should instead mean that elected institutions retain the capacity to regulate economic relationships according to constitutional principles, public interest and democratically determined priorities. This requires strong public institutions, transparent procurement, independent regulators, competitive markets, effective taxation, capable public enterprises where appropriate, empowered labour institutions, social protection and meaningful public participation. It also requires economic transformation that broadens ownership and reduces the extreme concentration of wealth. Without these foundations, political democracy remains vulnerable to structural economic inequalities. The challenge is therefore not to abolish private economic power but to ensure that no private actor possesses sufficient power to place democratic institutions under permanent constraint. The state

must be capable of negotiating with capital without becoming its servant and capable of regulating markets without destroying productive capacity. This is the difficult middle ground that post-apartheid South Africa has struggled to occupy.

A serious Pan-African analysis must also resist the temptation to reproduce colonial assumptions about African political incapacity. When African governments experience instability, external commentators sometimes attribute the problem to corruption, ethnic conflict or institutional weakness while ignoring international financial structures, historical patterns of ownership and unequal bargaining relationships. South Africa requires a more balanced interpretation. Its problems cannot be explained entirely by colonialism or global capitalism, because domestic elites, political parties, officials, corporations and citizens possess agency. But neither can they be understood entirely through domestic corruption or political incompetence, because South Africa operates within a global economic system whose rules shape investment, trade, finance and development choices. Pan-African scholarship must therefore examine the interaction between internal agency and external structure. Economic sovereignty means more than transferring political office from colonial rulers to African governments. It requires the capacity to determine developmental priorities, build productive economies, mobilise domestic resources and negotiate international relationships from a position of greater autonomy. The unresolved question for South Africa is whether political liberation has been sufficiently matched by economic democratisation. If not, the country's democracy remains formally sovereign while materially constrained by structures whose origins predate 1994.

The distinction among documented influence, structural influence and political speculation should therefore become a methodological principle for the entire study of South African power. Documented influence exists where evidence establishes a relationship between an economic actor and a political outcome, such as proven procurement manipulation, disclosed political donations, documented lobbying, court-established corruption or findings of a public commission. Structural influence exists where the economic system gives certain actors or classes greater capacity to shape the range of political choices, even without direct coordination or secret instructions. Investor dependence, ownership concentration, unequal access to expertise and disparities in organisational resources belong largely to this category. Political speculation exists when an actor is accused of directing events without sufficient evidence to establish the relationship. It may sometimes later become documented influence, but until evidence emerges it must remain a hypothesis. This distinction is not a concession to establishment politics; it is a defence of intellectual seriousness. A Pan-African scholar who wants to expose domination must possess standards of proof stronger than those used by the institutions being criticised. Otherwise, legitimate structural criticism becomes vulnerable to dismissal as conspiracy theory.

The final question, therefore, is whether economic power can produce political destabilisation in post-apartheid South Africa. The answer is yes, but not necessarily through secret orchestration, and certainly not in every instance where political conflict coincides with economic interests. Economic power can destabilise politics through campaign finance, lobbying, unequal access to policymakers, media ownership, advertising, professional networks, litigation, investment decisions, corporate relationships, international economic pressure and the structural dependence of governments upon productive capital. It can also destabilise politics indirectly when economic inequality produces social frustration that governments fail to resolve. At the same time, government itself can destabilise the economy through corruption, arbitrary decision-making, institutional decay, policy uncertainty and failures of administration. The relationship is therefore reciprocal rather than one-

directional. The state can capture business, business can capture the state, political parties can exploit economic networks, and economic actors can exploit political weaknesses. The decisive issue is institutional accountability. South Africa's post-apartheid achievement was to democratise political authority, but the unfinished project is to democratise the distribution and governance of economic power without destroying economic dynamism. The revolutionary project succeeded in breaking apartheid's monopoly of political citizenship, but compromised in the transition by accepting economic structures that limited the depth of redistribution. The consequence is a democracy in which citizens possess powerful constitutional rights while economic power remains unevenly distributed. The future of South African democracy will therefore depend upon whether the country can transform this unequal relationship between political and economic power into a more balanced social contract. The objective should not be the persecution of capital, the romanticisation of the state or the suspicion of every independent institution. It should be the construction of a democratic political economy in which capital is productive but accountable, government is powerful but constrained by law, civil society is independent but transparent, media institutions are free but pluralistic, and citizens possess not only the right to vote but meaningful power over the economic conditions that shape their lives.

Chapter Fourteen

From Liberation Movement to Electoral Competition

The history of post-apartheid South Africa cannot be adequately understood merely as the history of the African National Congress moving from liberation movement to governing party and eventually to a party facing electoral decline. The deeper question is what happened to the relationship between political liberation, state power and social transformation once the anti-apartheid movement inherited the institutions of the state in 1994. The ANC entered government with an extraordinary historical legitimacy because it represented, in the imagination of millions, not simply another political organisation but the principal institutional expression of a century-long struggle against racial domination. Its electoral dominance therefore initially possessed a meaning that exceeded ordinary party politics. Voting ANC could signify citizenship, dignity, liberation and historical restitution. Yet precisely because the party became synonymous with government, the distinction between the liberation movement, the state and the governing party gradually became blurred. This produced both enormous political strength and a structural vulnerability. The ANC could claim responsibility for democratic achievements, expanded social provision and constitutional government, but it also increasingly became the institutional target for unemployment, inequality, corruption, electricity failures, collapsing municipalities and administrative incompetence. The decline of ANC dominance must therefore be interpreted not simply as voter dissatisfaction with a party, but as the fragmentation of a political compact established during the transition from apartheid. The central historical contradiction is that political liberation created democratic state power without automatically transferring the deeper structures of economic power. Consequently, successive ANC governments exercised considerable authority over the state while operating within an economy whose ownership, investment patterns and productive structures remained substantially shaped by inherited concentrations of wealth. The

electoral crisis that eventually emerged was therefore partly the crisis of a liberation movement attempting to govern a democratic state without having fully transformed the material foundations of power.

The first decades of democracy nevertheless demonstrate that the ANC did achieve historically consequential transformations that should not be obscured by later failures. It dismantled apartheid's formal political order, established universal democratic citizenship, expanded social grants, widened access to basic services, created institutions of constitutional accountability and placed racial equality at the centre of the legal order. The state became formally answerable to a constitution rather than to racial supremacy, and millions of previously excluded citizens obtained political rights that had been systematically denied to them. The ANC also succeeded in maintaining a relatively stable democratic order during an extraordinarily difficult transition, avoiding the large-scale civil conflict that many observers had feared. These achievements matter because a serious Pan-African analysis cannot reduce liberation history to a narrative of betrayal. The problem is more intellectually demanding: one must identify where the revolutionary project succeeded politically while asking why those successes did not produce an equivalent redistribution of economic power. The ANC transformed the political architecture of South Africa much more rapidly than it transformed the ownership architecture of the economy. It created a democratic state capable of universal political representation while leaving considerable economic authority in institutions, corporations, financial markets and property structures that had developed under apartheid and colonial capitalism. The consequence was an unusual duality: black South Africans became politically sovereign while remaining deeply unequal in economic power. That contradiction eventually entered electoral politics because democratic citizens judge governments not only by constitutional principles but also by whether those principles produce tangible improvements in everyday life.

For much of the post-1994 period, however, the ANC's political dominance concealed the depth of this contradiction. Its electoral victories created the appearance of a relatively stable governing consensus even as the socioeconomic foundations of that consensus became increasingly fragile. The ANC won overwhelming majorities in the first democratic elections and subsequently maintained national dominance for decades. Its position was strengthened by the weakness of the opposition, the historical credibility of the liberation struggle, organisational networks reaching deep into communities and the emotional power of its political identity. Electoral support was therefore not simply transactional. For many voters, particularly older generations, the ANC represented an historical debt owed to those who had sacrificed their lives and freedom for democracy. Opposition parties consequently faced a profound legitimacy problem: challenging the ANC could be interpreted, fairly or unfairly, as challenging the historical meaning of liberation itself. Yet this political inheritance could not remain indefinitely immune from generational change. A liberation movement derives legitimacy partly from remembered history, but democratic parties must continually reproduce legitimacy through present performance. As the generation born after 1994 became numerically and politically significant, the symbolic power of the liberation narrative began competing with a different experience of South Africa: unemployment, precarious work, inequality, corruption, inadequate housing, failing municipalities and expensive living costs. The political question therefore shifted from “Who liberated us?” toward “Who can govern effectively and transform our material conditions?” That transition represented one of the most consequential changes in South African political consciousness.

The ANC's electoral decline was consequently gradual before it became dramatic. Its national vote share remained dominant for many years, but the direction of travel became increasingly revealing. The party's overwhelming historical majorities began eroding, first modestly and later substantially. The Electoral Commission's historical data demonstrate that the ANC's support fell from the extraordinary levels of the early democratic period to 65.90 percent in 2009, 62.15 percent in 2014 and 57.50 percent in 2019, before reaching only 40.18 percent in the 2024 national election. This was not an ordinary electoral fluctuation. It represented the collapse of a governing majority that had once appeared structurally permanent. Yet even this decline must be interpreted carefully. The ANC did not suddenly become politically irrelevant. It remained the largest single party nationally in 2024 and retained substantial support in several provinces. The transformation was instead from dominance to plurality. This distinction is essential because it changes the logic of political power. A dominant party can govern largely according to its own internal priorities; a plurality party must negotiate, bargain and form alliances. The electoral decline therefore did not automatically mean the disappearance of ANC power. It meant the end of the ANC's ability to exercise national governmental power without substantial dependence upon other political forces.

The rise of opposition parties must likewise be understood as a structural transformation rather than merely a collection of electoral events. The Democratic Alliance consolidated itself as the principal opposition within the constitutional system, while the Economic Freedom Fighters transformed radical economic discourse into a significant electoral force. More recently, the emergence of the uMkhonto weSizwe Party demonstrated that the ANC's historical constituency could fragment in ways that traditional opposition analysis had underestimated. The 2024 election was therefore not simply a contest between the ANC and a single challenger. It became an increasingly pluralised political marketplace in which different parties competed for different interpretations of black political identity, economic emancipation, constitutionalism, nationalism, regional belonging and institutional reform. The electoral system itself facilitated this fragmentation because proportional representation lowers the barrier to parliamentary representation and permits smaller parties to convert relatively modest national support into legislative seats. The 2023 electoral reforms also permitted independent candidates to contest national and provincial elections for the first time, further widening the potential field of political competition. The fragmentation of the electorate therefore reflected not simply declining ANC discipline but a broader democratisation of political choice. South African citizens increasingly demonstrated that historical loyalty did not necessarily require permanent electoral loyalty.

The changing black electorate is at the centre of this transformation. The political consciousness of a citizen born under apartheid cannot be assumed to be identical to that of a citizen born after 1994. The former may experience democracy as liberation from racial exclusion; the latter may experience democracy as an ordinary political system that must justify itself through performance. This generational difference does not mean that younger black South Africans have abandoned the historical significance of liberation. Rather, it means that liberation has become a baseline expectation rather than the sole measure of political legitimacy. The young citizen asks why political freedom has not been accompanied by comparable economic freedom. The young graduate confronts unemployment despite educational achievement. The young entrepreneur confronts electricity insecurity, bureaucratic barriers and limited access to capital. The young township resident confronts spatial segregation that survived the formal abolition of apartheid. The young rural citizen encounters weak municipal capacity and inadequate infrastructure. In this context, the ANC's historical narrative can sound increasingly distant if it is not connected to the economic realities of the present. The IEC reported that the 2024 voters' roll contained 27.79 million

registered voters, with people aged 18–39 accounting for approximately 42 percent of registered voters. This demographic reality means that the future of South African politics will increasingly be determined by citizens for whom apartheid is inherited history rather than lived political memory.

Youth political alienation therefore deserves to be interpreted as more than electoral apathy. It reflects a deeper crisis concerning the meaning of democratic representation. When young citizens believe that voting changes governments but not their structural economic circumstances, democratic participation can become psychologically disconnected from political efficacy. Abstention, protest voting, support for new parties and political cynicism can all represent different expressions of the same underlying frustration. The danger for the ANC is particularly acute because the party historically benefited from a powerful emotional relationship between political identity and organisational loyalty. Younger voters are less likely to accept the proposition that they owe permanent allegiance to an organisation because of sacrifices made before they were born. Their political loyalty is more conditional. They evaluate parties through employment prospects, corruption, service delivery, public safety, housing, education, electricity, transport and economic opportunity. This does not necessarily make them ideologically conservative or anti-ANC. Indeed, young voters can support radical redistribution while simultaneously rejecting the ANC's claim to be the natural vehicle of transformation. This is why the emergence of parties such as the EFF and MK must be analysed partly as symptoms of a generational demand for political authenticity. The question is not simply whether young people remain committed to liberation ideals; the question is whether they believe existing institutions and parties still possess the capacity to realise those ideals.

Economic frustration has been perhaps the most powerful force undermining the old political compact. South Africa's constitutional democracy inherited one of the world's most unequal societies, and three decades of democracy have not eliminated the structural concentration of wealth. Government has expanded social protection, basic services and public infrastructure, but economic inequality remains extraordinarily persistent. The political problem arises when citizens compare the formal promise of equality with the material experience of exclusion. Democracy promises equal citizenship; capitalism distributes opportunity unequally. The state therefore becomes caught between two expectations: citizens demand transformative intervention, while economic structures impose constraints upon what government can immediately redistribute without generating other economic consequences. The ANC has frequently attempted to navigate this contradiction through policies that combine market participation, affirmative action, black economic empowerment, social grants, public investment and developmental-state aspirations. Yet these measures have produced uneven outcomes. A politically liberated majority can therefore conclude that the economy remains fundamentally organised around inherited patterns of wealth and opportunity. The resulting frustration is not irrational. It reflects the unresolved contradiction between political democracy and economic oligarchy. The crucial issue is that economic power does not require direct control of government to exercise political influence. Capital allocation, investment decisions, employment, credit, land ownership, corporate concentration and control over productive assets can constrain governments even when those governments possess electoral legitimacy.

Corruption transformed this structural frustration into a crisis of trust. Corruption is politically devastating because it converts the state from an instrument of public transformation into a perceived mechanism of private enrichment. When citizens see political office associated with patronage, procurement irregularities or factional networks, the moral authority of liberation politics deteriorates. The problem becomes even more severe when corruption occurs within institutions

that were created to embody democratic transformation. The Zondo Commission's investigation into state capture exposed the extent to which networks involving political actors, public institutions and private interests could compromise state capacity. The official government account of the reform period acknowledges that state capture damaged institutions and that efforts were subsequently made to rebuild law-enforcement agencies and public institutions. Yet the deeper lesson is not simply that particular individuals were corrupt. It is that a governing party can become vulnerable when access to the state becomes a source of political accumulation. Once party competition, factional financing and public procurement become intertwined, the state ceases to function exclusively as a public institution and begins operating as an arena of intra-elite competition. This weakens administrative professionalism and creates a vicious cycle: declining performance generates public anger, political insecurity generates factional struggle, factional struggle intensifies patronage, and patronage further undermines institutional performance.

State capture therefore represents a particularly severe contradiction in the trajectory from liberation movement to governing party. A liberation movement historically seeks to capture the state from an oppressive minority and transform it into an instrument of popular sovereignty. State capture reverses that relationship by allowing private networks to capture portions of the state for narrow interests. The distinction is conceptually profound. The democratic state is supposed to belong constitutionally to the people; the captured state becomes vulnerable to networks capable of bending public institutions toward private accumulation. This explains why corruption has damaged the ANC more profoundly than ordinary administrative failure. A broken streetlight suggests incompetence; captured procurement systems suggest betrayal. The first creates frustration, while the second creates moral disillusionment. Citizens begin asking whether political liberation simply transferred access to state resources from one elite to another. Such perceptions are especially destructive for a liberation movement because its legitimacy is based upon the promise that the state exists to reverse historical domination. When the state becomes associated with patronage and elite enrichment, the symbolic distinction between apartheid-era exclusion and post-apartheid corruption becomes politically blurred, even though the two systems remain historically and morally different. The ANC's electoral decline is therefore partly a crisis of credibility concerning its ability to maintain the ethical distinction between public power and private accumulation.

Service delivery failures intensified this legitimacy crisis because they translated institutional weakness into everyday experience. Citizens do not encounter the state primarily through constitutional theory; they encounter it through water, electricity, roads, schools, hospitals, policing, refuse collection, housing and municipal administration. When these systems function, democracy becomes tangible. When they fail, constitutional promises can appear abstract. The ANC government can legitimately point to enormous post-1994 improvements in access to services, including expanded access to clean water and formal housing. Government itself records substantial progress from the apartheid-era baseline. Yet the existence of progress does not eliminate contemporary grievances. A citizen may acknowledge that democratic South Africa has achieved more than apartheid while simultaneously asking why a municipality cannot maintain infrastructure or why electricity supply remains unreliable. Political legitimacy is therefore cumulative rather than retrospective. Historical achievements cannot permanently compensate for current institutional failures. This is particularly important because local government failures are often attributed to the national governing party even when responsibility is constitutionally distributed among different spheres of government. The ANC's long national dominance nevertheless made it difficult for the party to distance itself from these failures. The result was a gradual erosion of the argument that the ANC should be trusted because it alone possesses the organisational capacity to govern.

Internal factionalism compounded every other problem. A liberation movement organised around collective struggle can become unstable when political competition shifts from defeating an external regime to controlling internal access to state power. Factions then acquire incentives to capture party structures, provincial branches, municipal organisations and leadership positions because these positions influence appointments, resources and political careers. Internal competition is not inherently undemocratic; indeed, pluralism within a political party can be healthy. The problem emerges when factionalism replaces ideological debate with patronage networks and personal loyalty. In such circumstances, leadership contests become struggles over access to the state rather than disagreements about national strategy. The ANC's long periods of internal conflict illustrate the difficulty of maintaining revolutionary cohesion after becoming a governing institution. The organisation simultaneously became a political party, a state management apparatus, a patronage network, a historical movement and a vehicle for competing economic interests. These roles could not always be reconciled. The consequence was a growing distance between the language of collective liberation and the reality of internal political competition. Voters increasingly witnessed an organisation debating itself while public institutions struggled outside the party conference environment. This created an impression of political inwardness: a movement historically created to transform society appeared increasingly preoccupied with managing its own internal balance of power.

Leadership legitimacy consequently became inseparable from institutional legitimacy. Nelson Mandela possessed an extraordinary moral authority because he embodied sacrifice, reconciliation and the transition from apartheid to democracy. Successive leaders could not simply reproduce that legitimacy because historical circumstances had changed. Thabo Mbeki offered an intellectual and developmental vision; Jacob Zuma mobilised a different political constituency and style; Cyril Ramaphosa emerged partly as a figure associated with renewal, institutional reconstruction and economic reform. Yet every leadership transition confronted the same structural problem: can personal authority substitute for organisational renewal? The answer is ultimately no. A political organisation cannot indefinitely survive through the charisma of individual leaders if its institutions are perceived as dysfunctional. Ramaphosa's presidency has attempted to restore state institutions and rebuild public confidence, but the political burden inherited from the previous decade remains substantial. The 2024 election demonstrated that leadership renewal did not automatically restore the ANC's historic majority. This is an important lesson for liberation movements across Africa: replacing leaders without transforming organisational culture can produce only temporary political recovery. Leadership legitimacy must be continuously reconstructed through institutional performance, ethical conduct, policy coherence and responsiveness to citizens. The electorate ultimately judges whether the governing party can turn political authority into effective public power.

The 2024 election was therefore a watershed because it transformed a gradual decline into a new constitutional reality. The ANC received 40.18 percent of the national vote, its first fall below 50 percent in a national democratic election. The DA obtained approximately 21.81 percent, the MK Party approximately 14.58 percent and the EFF approximately 9.52 percent, creating a fragmented National Assembly in which no party possessed an independent governing majority. The significance of this outcome extends far beyond the arithmetic of parliamentary seats. For the first time since 1994, the ANC had to construct national government through inter-party negotiation. The psychological effect was equally important. The assumption that the ANC was naturally entitled to govern disappeared. Voters demonstrated that historical legitimacy could coexist with electoral rejection. The 2024 result therefore constituted a profound democratic statement: liberation history

belongs to the nation, not permanently to one political organisation. The ANC could no longer treat its historical role as an automatic electoral mandate. It had to compete for legitimacy within the same constitutional arena as every other party. In this respect, the election represented not the failure of democracy but one of democracy's most consequential achievements—the ability of citizens to peacefully redistribute political power without destroying the constitutional order.

The rise of the MK Party added another dimension to this watershed because it revealed that the ANC's decline could not simply be interpreted as a straightforward movement from ANC to liberal opposition. The fragmentation of the ANC's historical constituency occurred along multiple ideological and regional lines. Some voters moved toward parties promising stronger economic transformation; others moved toward parties emphasising nationalism, constitutionalism, ethnic or regional interests, anti-establishment politics or institutional reform. The resulting electoral landscape became much more complex than the old binary of liberation movement versus opposition. This matters because political competition is no longer organised exclusively around the historical racial divide. Although race remains central to South African political economy, voters increasingly combine racial identity with class position, region, generation, ideology, leadership preferences and perceptions of state performance. The 2024 election demonstrated that black political identity itself is politically contested. There is no single “black vote” automatically belonging to the ANC. There are multiple black political constituencies with different understandings of economic justice, national identity, redistribution and democratic governance. This fragmentation may ultimately deepen democracy, but it can also intensify political instability if parties exploit identity grievances without developing coherent programmes for economic transformation.

Coalition politics emerged from this fragmentation not as an ideological preference but as an institutional necessity. Once the ANC fell below 50 percent, the arithmetic of parliamentary government changed fundamentally. The party could no longer govern alone and instead entered negotiations with other parties. The resulting Government of National Unity brought together parties from across the political spectrum and was presented by government as a response to the electorate's demand for cooperation. This development is historically significant because it normalises the idea that government belongs to negotiated parliamentary majorities rather than permanently to a single liberation organisation. Coalition politics can create stronger accountability because governing parties must negotiate publicly and accommodate alternative perspectives. Yet coalitions can also produce instability when political parties prioritise offices over coherent policy. The danger is especially acute where party fragmentation encourages small parties to exercise disproportionate bargaining power. South Africa must therefore learn to distinguish between coalition government as democratic pluralism and coalition government as elite bargaining. The first can deepen democracy; the second can reproduce the very patronage politics that contributed to the ANC's decline.

The Government of National Unity also complicates the interpretation that the ANC has simply “lost power.” It has not. The ANC remained the largest party after the 2024 election and continued to occupy the presidency through parliamentary election. Its continued presence at the centre of government demonstrates that electoral decline is not equivalent to state displacement. Indeed, the ANC retained substantial influence over the executive and remained indispensable to the formation of national government. The constitutional state therefore did not transfer wholesale from ANC control to opposition control. Instead, the structure of political authority became negotiated. The Presidency, cabinet, Parliament and provincial governments increasingly reflected multiple parties.

The ANC retained institutional power but lost unilateral political power. This distinction is fundamental to understanding the post-2024 state. The party has not disappeared from government; rather, its relationship to government has changed from command to negotiation. Government itself describes the GNU as involving parties across the political spectrum and as being structured around shared priorities including inclusive growth, poverty reduction and building a capable state. The historical significance therefore lies not in the removal of the ANC from the state, but in the end of its monopoly over the political direction of the state.

This raises the deeper question of what "the state" actually means. If state power is understood simply as control of the executive, then the ANC clearly still possesses considerable state power. But if state power is understood more broadly—as the capacity to determine policy, shape institutions, allocate resources, command legitimacy, influence markets and establish the national political agenda—then the answer becomes much more complicated. Political parties do not exercise all forms of power. Economic actors, corporations, organised labour, professional institutions, civil society, courts, media organisations, financial institutions and international markets also possess forms of structural influence. The ANC's electoral decline therefore cannot be interpreted as the transfer of all power from one political organisation to another. It represents the redistribution of one important dimension of power: electoral and governmental authority. The deeper economic structure remains more resistant to electoral change. This distinction is essential for a Pan-African analysis because it prevents the mistaken assumption that changing the governing party automatically transforms the political economy. A government can change without ownership structures changing. Ministers can change without corporate concentration changing. Parliamentary majorities can change without land distribution changing. Elections redistribute formal political authority; they do not automatically redistribute structural economic power.

This is where the ANC's revolutionary project both succeeded and compromised. It succeeded in establishing political democracy, universal suffrage and constitutional equality while expanding the social responsibilities of the state. It succeeded in creating a political order in which black South Africans possess formal sovereignty unimaginable under apartheid. But it compromised where political liberation became insufficiently connected to structural economic transformation. The post-apartheid settlement did not amount to a complete economic revolution. The ANC accepted significant continuities with the existing economic order while attempting to transform it incrementally. This produced a compromise that was historically understandable but politically costly. The movement inherited an economy deeply integrated into global capitalism and dominated by large corporations, financial institutions and established property relations. Radical rupture carried risks of capital flight, economic contraction and institutional instability. Yet gradualism also carried risks because slow transformation could create the perception that political liberation had stopped at the doors of economic ownership. The resulting contradiction became one of the central sources of contemporary political dissatisfaction. The ANC could legitimately claim to have transformed the political state while opponents could legitimately argue that it had not sufficiently transformed the economic system.

The decline of the ANC must therefore not be celebrated uncritically by those who assume that opposition victories automatically represent economic emancipation. Some opposition parties represent alternative ideological projects that may strengthen constitutional accountability but do not necessarily challenge concentrated economic power. Others advocate radical redistribution but may lack convincing institutional strategies for implementation. Still others mobilise identity politics more effectively than they develop developmental programmes. The fragmentation of

political authority therefore does not automatically democratise economic power. Indeed, fragmented governments can become more vulnerable to lobbying, business influence and transactional bargaining if institutional safeguards are weak. A rigorous analysis must consequently reject the simplistic binary in which ANC decline equals democratic liberation and opposition growth equals political progress. The real question is what each political force intends to do with power and which social interests its policies empower. The democratic test is not merely whether parties alternate in office. It is whether political institutions become more accountable, public resources more equitably distributed, economic opportunities more accessible and citizens more capable of influencing decisions that affect their lives. Without these transformations, electoral competition can become competition among elites for control over the same inherited structures.

The relationship between elections and economic power is therefore one of the central paradoxes of contemporary South Africa. Citizens can vote governments out, but they cannot vote directly on who owns corporations, mines, banks, land or productive infrastructure. They can change ministers, but they cannot simply change investment patterns through electoral preference. They can elect representatives promising redistribution, but implementation remains dependent upon administrative capacity, fiscal resources, legal constraints, market responses and institutional negotiations. This does not make elections meaningless. On the contrary, elections determine who controls the legitimate coercive and administrative authority of the state. But state authority is embedded within a wider field of economic power. The ANC's experience demonstrates that political sovereignty and economic sovereignty are not identical. The party acquired the former in 1994 without fully acquiring the latter. Its subsequent electoral decline does not change that fundamental reality. South Africa may move from ANC dominance to coalition government while still retaining substantial concentrations of economic power outside direct democratic control. The central intellectual task is therefore to examine not only who governs but who has the capacity to constrain what government can do.

The transformation toward coalition politics may nevertheless produce an important democratic opportunity. A dominant-party system can generate complacency because governing parties assume that electoral defeat is unlikely. Coalition politics changes those incentives. Parties must maintain relationships with other political organisations, negotiate policy, justify compromises and anticipate the possibility that voters may punish them for failure. Parliament becomes potentially more consequential because executive power is no longer guaranteed by a single overwhelming majority. Opposition parties can exercise greater leverage, while smaller parties can become decisive in legislative bargaining. Yet this opportunity will only become democratic progress if coalition institutions become transparent and accountable. If coalition agreements are negotiated privately around positions and patronage, the system may reproduce rather than resolve the crisis that produced it. South Africa therefore requires a political culture in which coalition bargaining is treated as constitutional governance rather than political auctioneering. The success of the new era will depend on whether parties can distinguish legitimate compromise from ideological surrender and public negotiation from private patronage. The ANC's transition from dominance to coalition government thus becomes a test not only of the ANC but of the maturity of South African democracy itself.

There is also a Pan-African lesson in the ANC's transformation. Liberation movements across the continent frequently confront the same historical dilemma: the organisation that liberated the nation becomes the organisation that governs the nation, and eventually its historical legitimacy becomes institutionalised as political entitlement. The danger is that liberation credentials become a

substitute for democratic renewal. Once that happens, opposition is portrayed as disloyalty, criticism as betrayal and electoral defeat as historical ingratitude. South Africa's experience demonstrates both the power and the limits of this model. The ANC's electoral decline proves that liberation legitimacy cannot be permanently inherited by successive generations without being renewed through performance and accountability. Yet the answer is not to discard liberation history. The answer is to democratise its meaning. Liberation should belong to citizens rather than to party structures. The objective of a liberation movement should ultimately be to create institutions capable of surviving without the permanent dominance of the movement itself. In that sense, the ANC's loss of electoral monopoly could be interpreted not only as a political defeat but as a possible measure of the democratic success of the constitutional order it helped establish.

The crucial distinction, therefore, is between losing an election, losing government and losing the state. The ANC has certainly lost its historic electoral monopoly. It has lost the capacity to assume that national government will automatically remain under its exclusive control. It has lost the psychological certainty that liberation history guarantees electoral dominance. But it has not lost the South African state in any complete sense. It remains a major governing force, continues to occupy the presidency and retains significant institutional, provincial and organisational influence. More importantly, many of the structures through which political and economic power operate remain broader than any single party. The post-apartheid state itself has become a contested institutional field rather than a possession of the ANC. Courts, Parliament, provincial governments, municipalities, independent institutions, civil society, organised labour, business and citizens all participate in determining how power is exercised. The decisive historical change is therefore not the disappearance of ANC power but its pluralisation. The ANC has moved from being the unquestioned centre of political authority to being one powerful actor within a more competitive political order.

The answer to the chapter's central question is therefore deliberately more complex than either "yes" or "no." **The ANC has not lost the South African state; it has lost its historic monopoly over political power.** The distinction matters because it captures the precise character of South Africa's democratic transition. The ANC remains deeply embedded within the state, but the state is no longer politically identical to the ANC. The party continues to exercise governmental authority, yet it must increasingly negotiate that authority with other political organisations and social forces. At the same time, the loss of electoral dominance does not automatically mean that structural economic power has become democratised. The fundamental post-apartheid contradiction therefore survives: political power has become increasingly competitive while economic power remains considerably concentrated. The 2024 election opened a new chapter because it demonstrated that voters can peacefully terminate a governing monopoly without terminating the constitutional order. The challenge now is whether coalition politics can convert electoral pluralism into deeper democratic accountability and whether political competition can eventually be connected to meaningful economic transformation. The future of South Africa will not be determined simply by which party wins the next election. It will be determined by whether democratic institutions can progressively bring political, social and economic power into a more accountable relationship with the people in whose name sovereignty is exercised.

Chapter Fifteen

The Coalition State and the End of Political Monopoly

The most consequential political transformation in post-apartheid South Africa is not merely the decline of the African National Congress as an electoral organisation, but the dissolution of the political monopoly through which the liberation movement once translated its historical legitimacy into governing authority. For three decades, the ANC occupied a unique position in the political imagination of the country: it was simultaneously a political party, a liberation movement, a historical institution and, for millions, the principal embodiment of the struggle against apartheid. Its electoral dominance after 1994 created an unusual relationship between democratic legitimacy and liberation legitimacy, because voting for the ANC was often understood not simply as choosing a government but as affirming the historical project of liberation itself. That relationship began to fracture as social inequality persisted, public institutions weakened, corruption became increasingly associated with political networks, service delivery became uneven, unemployment remained structurally high, and the distance between liberation rhetoric and everyday socioeconomic experience widened. The decisive rupture came with the 29 May 2024 national election, when the ANC failed to secure an outright majority and obtained approximately 40 percent of the national vote, forcing it to govern through negotiation with other political formations. The resulting Government of National Unity represented more than an administrative arrangement: it marked the institutionalisation of political pluralism after an era of dominant-party government. The Presidency itself described the outcome as a watershed requiring parties to work together, while the new administration became the seventh democratic administration and incorporated multiple parties into national government. The historical significance therefore lies in the fact that the ANC remained powerful without remaining sovereign over the political system. It continued to occupy the presidency and retain substantial institutional influence, but its authority became conditional upon bargaining. The post-apartheid state consequently entered a new phase in which political power is increasingly dispersed, negotiated and contested rather than monopolised by a single liberation organisation.

The end of political monopoly must nevertheless not be confused with the disappearance of ANC power. The ANC did not suddenly become politically irrelevant when it lost its majority; rather, its relationship to power changed fundamentally. Under dominant-party conditions, the ANC could often convert electoral supremacy into legislative control, executive coherence and considerable influence over provincial and municipal government. Its internal decisions frequently possessed consequences far beyond the party itself because the distinction between party strategy and state strategy was blurred by the scale of its electoral dominance. The decline of that dominance introduces a different political arithmetic. The ANC must now secure partners, negotiate parliamentary majorities, accommodate competing policy agendas and anticipate the possibility that its coalition partners may withdraw support or mobilise public opinion against it. The significance of this transformation is therefore constitutional as much as electoral. Democracy becomes more genuinely competitive when no single party can assume that historical legitimacy will automatically reproduce electoral dominance. Yet the transformation also exposes a paradox. A liberation movement that once sought to democratise political power can discover that its own success in democratic government eventually produced institutional habits associated with political concentration. The irony is profound: the ANC's liberation achievement created the democratic institutions that ultimately enabled voters to discipline the ANC itself. The Constitution became

larger than the organisation that had helped bring constitutional democracy into existence. This is one of the most important achievements of South Africa's post-apartheid settlement. The democratic state has acquired an institutional autonomy that means liberation history cannot permanently substitute for contemporary performance. A party may invoke Nelson Mandela, the Freedom Charter, the anti-apartheid struggle and the sacrifices of generations, but citizens remain constitutionally entitled to ask whether contemporary government is delivering justice, dignity, security, employment and equality. The coalition state therefore represents a moment in which historical legitimacy is subordinated more decisively to electoral accountability.

Coalition government also changes the meaning of political negotiation. Under dominant-party conditions, negotiation largely occurred within the governing party, between factions, ideological tendencies, provinces, alliance partners and competing political networks. Once electoral monopoly disappears, negotiation moves outward into the visible architecture of the state. Cabinet appointments become negotiated. Legislative priorities become negotiated. Budgetary choices become negotiated. Parliamentary voting becomes negotiated. Even the language through which government explains policy must accommodate different constituencies. The 2024 Government of National Unity initially brought together eleven parties, although the subsequent governing configuration consisted of ten signatories to the GNU framework. The parties included organisations as ideologically diverse as the ANC, Democratic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Patriotic Alliance, Pan Africanist Congress of Azania, Freedom Front Plus, United Democratic Movement, Rise Mzansi, Al Jama-ah and Good. Such diversity demonstrates that coalition government is not simply a technical response to an electoral arithmetic problem. It creates a political environment in which fundamentally different conceptions of the South African future must coexist within the same executive structure. The ANC's historical commitment to transformation, racial redress and socioeconomic redistribution encounters parties with stronger commitments to market-oriented economic policy, federalist tendencies, cultural nationalism, immigration restriction or alternative conceptions of state reform. Coalition government therefore transforms ideology from an internal party struggle into an institutional struggle. What was previously debated within the broad ideological universe of liberation politics is now contested openly between political organisations with different constituencies and historical traditions. This can strengthen democracy because citizens can observe ideological disagreement rather than experiencing it as opaque factional conflict. Yet it can also produce paralysis when coalition partners cannot reconcile competing mandates. The coalition state consequently becomes both an opportunity for democratic deepening and a laboratory for institutional instability.

The concept of negotiated governance is particularly important because South Africa's coalition era cannot be understood through the conventional distinction between government and opposition. In a majority system, government possesses the authority to govern while opposition parties primarily scrutinise, criticise and seek electoral replacement. In a coalition system, parties may simultaneously govern together, compete against each other and publicly criticise one another. This creates a much more complicated structure of political accountability. A minister may belong to one party while serving within a cabinet whose programme reflects compromises with several other parties. A governing party may oppose aspects of government policy while remaining responsible for the government's overall performance. Coalition partners may claim credit for successful reforms while blaming one another for unpopular decisions. The electorate consequently has to determine who is responsible for what. The 2024 GNU attempted to address this problem through a Statement of Intent and a minimum programme that established common principles around constitutionalism, accountability, evidence-based decision-making, professional public

administration and socioeconomic development. Yet formal agreement does not eliminate political contradiction. A coalition agreement can establish procedural rules, but it cannot erase ideological differences or competing electoral incentives. Each party remains accountable to its own supporters. Each therefore has an incentive to demonstrate distinctiveness even while participating in collective government. This creates what may be called the paradox of coalition responsibility: parties must cooperate enough to govern but differentiate themselves enough to survive electorally. The resulting politics is inherently unstable because cooperation and competition occur simultaneously. Coalition government is therefore not the abolition of political conflict; it is the institutionalisation of political conflict inside government itself.

This raises the difficult question of whether coalition government will improve or weaken state capacity. The answer cannot be assumed in advance. Coalition systems can produce better government when negotiations force political actors to justify decisions, moderate extreme positions and incorporate wider constituencies. They can also produce worse government when parties treat public institutions as bargaining instruments or when cabinet stability becomes dependent upon perpetual political negotiation. South Africa's experience at municipal level already demonstrates both possibilities. Since the 2016 and 2021 local elections, numerous hung councils have required coalitions, and evidence from local government indicates that unstable alliances, personality conflicts, policy incoherence and executive turnover can undermine service delivery and institutional continuity. The national coalition therefore inherits an institutional lesson from municipalities: coalition government is not automatically democratic government. Democracy requires mechanisms capable of translating political disagreement into effective public administration. Without such mechanisms, pluralism can become fragmentation. The central question is consequently not whether South Africa should have coalition government, but whether South Africa can build a coalition culture capable of distinguishing legitimate political disagreement from institutional sabotage. A mature coalition democracy requires rules governing cabinet disputes, legislative confidence, budget negotiations, appointment processes, party discipline and public communication. It must also establish boundaries between legitimate bargaining and patronage. If political parties negotiate for policy concessions, that is democratic politics. If they negotiate for control over state resources, procurement networks or public institutions, the coalition becomes another mechanism for reproducing elite capture. The difference between the two is therefore fundamental to the future of South African democracy.

The danger of policy paralysis is particularly acute because the problems confronting South Africa require long-term consistency rather than short-term political bargaining. Electricity reform, logistics infrastructure, water security, land reform, industrial development, public transport, education, healthcare, policing and local government reconstruction cannot be solved through constantly shifting political compromises. They require institutional continuity extending beyond electoral cycles. Coalition politics can complicate such continuity because every major policy decision becomes vulnerable to ideological disagreement. The 2025 budget crisis illustrated this problem. By late 2025, the Presidency acknowledged that the GNU had experienced significant difficulties around the budget process and that these difficulties had generated lessons about the need for more effective consultation. Such episodes demonstrate that coalition government introduces a new dimension of political risk into economic governance. Fiscal policy is never merely technical. Decisions about taxation, social spending, public investment, debt and redistribution embody competing conceptions of the state. A party committed to fiscal restraint may view expenditure differently from a party whose constituency demands expanded social protection. A party emphasising private investment may prioritise regulatory reform differently from a party

demanding stronger state ownership. A party representing historically excluded communities may judge economic policy according to redistribution, while another may judge it through investment, growth and competitiveness. Coalition government forces these competing philosophies into direct negotiation. That may improve policy by exposing assumptions to scrutiny, but it can also delay decisions at precisely the moment when decisive intervention is required.

The ideological contradictions within the coalition are therefore not incidental; they represent the deeper question of what kind of political economy South Africa is becoming. The ANC's liberation tradition emerged from a political movement that imagined democracy alongside socioeconomic transformation. The Freedom Charter's conception of political freedom was connected to economic justice, redistribution and collective ownership of strategic resources. Yet the post-1994 state also inherited a global economic system in which capital mobility, fiscal constraints, financial markets, international investment and private property remained powerful structural realities. Over time, the ANC itself adopted increasingly pragmatic approaches to economic management, balancing redistribution with market confidence and macroeconomic stability. The coalition era intensifies this contradiction because alternative parties can now exercise direct governmental influence over economic policy. The question is no longer simply whether the ANC's internal ideological debates favour state intervention or market reform. The question becomes whether the national government can reconcile fundamentally different philosophies of economic governance within a single programme. The coalition state may therefore accelerate the transformation of the ANC from a hegemonic liberation movement into a conventional centre-left governing party that must negotiate with centre-right and regional parties. That transformation could either moderate the ANC's revolutionary inheritance or force it to articulate more clearly which elements of that inheritance remain politically non-negotiable. The future of South Africa's political economy will consequently depend not merely upon which party controls the presidency, but upon which coalition ideas become institutionalised in budgets, legislation, regulation and public administration.

National and provincial power introduce another layer of complexity. South Africa is not governed through a purely centralised political structure. Provinces possess constitutionally defined responsibilities, while municipalities exercise important functions affecting everyday life. The decline of ANC dominance at the national level therefore does not automatically produce a uniform decline of ANC influence throughout the state. Political authority can be distributed unevenly across geographical territories. A party may lose national dominance while retaining significant provincial or municipal strength. Another party may become dominant in one province while remaining marginal elsewhere. Coalition politics can therefore generate different governing arrangements at different levels of government. The national government may be a coalition while a province remains governed by a single party. A municipality may have a completely different coalition from the provincial government above it. This fragmentation can deepen democratic representation because political power becomes geographically differentiated. But it can also create institutional conflict when different levels of government pursue contradictory political priorities. Questions of infrastructure, policing, housing, healthcare, education and economic development frequently cross governmental boundaries. Where political authority is divided among parties, responsibility can become difficult to trace. Each level can blame another for failures. Citizens may experience the state as fragmented rather than responsive. The constitutional design therefore faces a practical test: can cooperative governance survive increasingly competitive party politics? The answer will shape whether coalition government becomes a democratic innovation or an administrative burden.

The provincial question also exposes a central weakness in the traditional understanding of ANC power. For many years, discussions of political dominance focused primarily on the national presidency and Parliament. Yet real power in South Africa is dispersed through provinces, municipalities, traditional authorities, state-owned enterprises, regulatory institutions, public procurement systems and bureaucratic networks. The end of national ANC monopoly therefore does not mean the disappearance of entrenched political networks. Some networks will survive through provincial institutions, municipal administrations or relationships between politicians and organised economic interests. Political power can migrate. When one institution becomes less accessible, political actors may seek influence elsewhere. This is why electoral change should not be confused with structural transformation. The ANC can lose votes without losing every mechanism through which its historical networks exercise influence. Conversely, opposition parties can enter government without necessarily acquiring control over the deeper institutional architecture of the state. Coalition politics thus creates a distinction between occupying office and exercising effective power. A minister may possess formal authority but depend upon officials, regulators, procurement systems and external economic actors to implement decisions. A party may hold a parliamentary majority on a particular issue but lack administrative capacity to execute its programme. A coalition may control Cabinet while economic power remains concentrated among private corporations, financial institutions, major investors and other actors outside electoral accountability. The fundamental question introduced by this chapter therefore remains the question that has governed the entire book: who actually exercises power?

The coalition state makes this question more difficult because political power is now visibly divided while economic power remains structurally concentrated. The democratic transition succeeded in transferring sovereign political authority from apartheid institutions to elected representatives, but it did not completely reorganise the ownership structure of the economy. The coalition era does not automatically change this reality. Indeed, coalition governments may become more dependent upon private economic actors because political fragmentation increases the importance of investment confidence, business cooperation and negotiated economic reform. The Presidency explicitly emphasised cooperation between government and business around energy, logistics, telecommunications, crime and corruption, reflecting the reality that government requires collaboration with economic actors to overcome structural constraints. This collaboration can be productive when it mobilises private capacity for public purposes. But it raises a democratic question when private actors acquire disproportionate influence over policy priorities. If governments require business cooperation to maintain electricity supply, transport infrastructure, investment and employment, then private economic actors inevitably possess bargaining power. The danger is that the coalition state could become politically pluralistic but economically narrow. Citizens may choose among multiple political parties while major economic decisions remain shaped by institutions and actors whose power is not derived from elections. Political competition therefore does not automatically equal economic democratisation. The post-dominant-party era must be judged not only by how many parties sit in Cabinet but by whether ordinary citizens gain greater influence over the distribution of economic opportunity and productive resources.

This distinction is crucial to understanding where the ANC's revolutionary project succeeded and where it compromised. Its greatest achievement was undoubtedly the destruction of apartheid's formal political order and the creation of a constitutional democracy based on universal citizenship, representative government, rights and judicial review. It transformed the political meaning of citizenship by removing racial exclusion from the formal architecture of the state. It created institutions through which citizens could vote, organise, litigate and hold government accountable.

It also established an international reputation for constitutionalism and negotiated political transition. Yet political liberation did not automatically produce socioeconomic liberation. The persistence of extreme inequality, spatial segregation, unemployment and concentrated ownership demonstrates that political democracy and economic democracy are different historical projects. The ANC's compromises were therefore not simply moral failures or ideological betrayals; many emerged from the practical constraints of governing a complex economy inherited from apartheid and operating within a global capitalist system. Nevertheless, acknowledging constraints should not erase responsibility. A liberation movement must ultimately be judged by whether its compromises preserve the possibility of transformation or gradually convert revolutionary politics into managerial politics. The coalition state now forces this question into the open because the ANC can no longer determine the national policy agenda alone. Its revolutionary inheritance must survive through negotiation rather than command.

The decline of ANC monopoly also changes the meaning of opposition politics. For much of the post-1994 period, opposition parties operated under conditions in which replacing the ANC nationally appeared remote. Their primary role was therefore to criticise, scrutinise and mobilise. Coalition politics transforms them into potential governing parties. The Democratic Alliance, Inkatha Freedom Party, Patriotic Alliance, Freedom Front Plus and smaller parties can no longer define themselves exclusively through opposition because participation in government exposes them to the responsibilities and compromises of administration. This creates a crucial test of political maturity. Opposition parties often acquire popularity by promising alternatives to the governing party. Governing parties must then demonstrate whether those alternatives are administratively feasible. Coalition participation removes the protective distance between promise and implementation. A party that criticises government policy while governing within the same Cabinet must explain its compromises to its voters. It cannot simultaneously claim complete opposition and complete governmental responsibility. The result may be politically uncomfortable but democratically useful. South Africa's opposition parties are being forced to demonstrate whether they possess governing philosophies rather than merely anti-ANC identities. The end of ANC monopoly therefore challenges every political organisation, not just the ANC. It asks whether the country's political class is capable of moving beyond liberation-versus-counter-liberation narratives toward concrete debates about state capacity, economic restructuring, social justice and democratic accountability.

The ideological diversity of the coalition also has implications for South Africa's racial and historical politics. The ANC's legitimacy has historically been intertwined with the memory of racial oppression and liberation. Other parties have approached the post-apartheid settlement from different historical perspectives, sometimes emphasising liberal constitutionalism, nonracialism, ethnic or regional representation, market economics, cultural identity or alternative forms of African nationalism. Coalition politics forces these narratives into shared institutional space. This could either deepen national reconciliation or reopen historical conflict. If political parties use coalition government to delegitimise one another's constituencies, the country may experience increased polarisation. If they use coalition government to negotiate a common conception of citizenship while preserving ideological differences, the system could mature. The challenge is particularly acute because South Africa's democracy is still haunted by unresolved historical questions concerning land, wealth, race, spatial inequality and economic ownership. These questions cannot simply be removed from politics by procedural coalition agreements. They remain embedded in the material structure of society. A coalition that treats historical injustice as irrelevant risks alienating communities whose political identity remains connected to liberation. A coalition that treats history

as an absolute justification for every policy risks alienating citizens who demand institutional efficiency and contemporary accountability. The task is therefore not to choose between history and governance, but to establish how historical justice can inform contemporary policy without becoming a substitute for effective administration.

Coalition government also changes the psychology of political legitimacy. Under ANC dominance, the party could often argue that despite failures, it remained the only organisation with the historical credibility to protect the democratic settlement. That argument becomes weaker once voters demonstrate that alternative governing arrangements are constitutionally possible. Citizens begin to view government less as the possession of a liberation movement and more as a temporary institutional mandate. This is an important democratic development. Political parties become servants of the constitutional order rather than proprietors of the state. The psychological transformation may ultimately be more significant than the arithmetic of seats. South Africans increasingly learn that governments can change without democracy collapsing. This is a major test of democratic consolidation. A mature democracy is not one in which one party governs forever; it is one in which political power can change hands peacefully while institutions continue functioning. The 2024 election demonstrated this principle at national scale. The subsequent coalition negotiations demonstrated that political actors could construct a government without an outright majority. The challenge now is to ensure that this flexibility does not produce permanent instability. Democratic consolidation requires both alternation and institutional continuity. Citizens must be able to remove governments without destroying the state, and governments must be able to cooperate without destroying electoral competition.

There is, however, a danger that coalition government becomes a marketplace of political bargaining rather than a mechanism of democratic accountability. The language of compromise can conceal transactions that citizens cannot observe. Political parties may negotiate over cabinet positions, committee chairs, provincial influence, legislative concessions and administrative appointments. Some bargaining is normal and legitimate. Yet the absence of transparency can create conditions in which public office becomes a commodity exchanged among political elites. South Africa's history of state capture demonstrates why this danger must be taken seriously. The central lesson of state capture was not merely that individuals can become corrupt; it was that institutional weaknesses can permit political and economic networks to penetrate public decision-making. Coalition fragmentation can potentially create new opportunities for such networks if political parties become dependent upon external financing or if narrow majorities make governments vulnerable to pressure. The coalition state must therefore strengthen transparency, parliamentary oversight, procurement safeguards and public participation. Otherwise the end of one political monopoly could simply produce multiple smaller monopolies operating through negotiated access. The democratic test is whether coalition politics disperses power toward citizens or merely redistributes elite access among political parties. The distinction is fundamental. Political pluralism without social accountability can become elite pluralism. Genuine democratisation requires that citizens possess meaningful mechanisms to scrutinise not only who governs but how governing bargains are constructed.

The question of policy paralysis must therefore be examined alongside the possibility of policy innovation. Coalition politics can sometimes produce reforms that a dominant party would avoid because no single party possesses sufficient political incentive to act alone. When responsibility is shared, parties may be willing to support difficult reforms because political costs are distributed. Coalition partners can also bring different expertise, constituencies and institutional relationships

into government. The Presidency has argued that the GNU has enabled reforms across energy, logistics, telecommunications, water and visas, while also promoting infrastructure investment and public-private cooperation. These developments suggest that coalition government should not automatically be interpreted as governmental weakness. The more sophisticated argument is that coalition government changes the mechanism through which state capacity is produced. Under dominant-party government, coherence can come from central political authority. Under coalition government, coherence must come from negotiated consensus, professional administration and agreed long-term priorities. The latter may be slower but can potentially be more resilient if institutions become stronger than individual parties. The danger emerges when political negotiation overwhelms administrative competence. The opportunity emerges when political competition encourages professional institutions to become more autonomous from partisan control. Coalition government may therefore unintentionally accelerate the professionalisation of the state if parties recognise that no single organisation can rely indefinitely upon political dominance to compensate for weak administration.

The GNU's proposed clearing-house mechanism illustrates precisely this attempt to institutionalise disagreement rather than allow disagreement to paralyse government. The mechanism was created to resolve policy differences among coalition partners, with the Deputy President convening the inaugural meeting in October 2024. Its existence reveals an important truth about coalition government: disagreement is not evidence of failure. The failure occurs when institutions lack a mechanism for managing disagreement. A coalition democracy requires procedures through which conflicts can be identified, debated, negotiated and resolved without bringing government to a standstill. This is particularly important in South Africa because political disagreement is often connected to questions of race, class, ideology and historical memory. Informal bargaining may therefore become emotionally charged and institutionally destabilising. Formal mechanisms can provide a structured arena for resolving differences. Yet institutions alone cannot guarantee success. Coalition partners must develop a political culture in which compromise is understood as legitimate rather than treacherous. This may be difficult for liberation movements and ideological parties accustomed to interpreting compromise through the language of betrayal. The ANC's own history contains a powerful culture of struggle in which principled political positions are often judged against the possibility of compromise. Coalition politics requires a different political psychology: one in which compromise can be understood as an instrument for advancing principles under conditions of pluralism. The future of the GNU will depend significantly upon whether South African political culture can make this transition.

This transition also requires reconsidering the meaning of revolutionary purity. Liberation movements are often judged according to whether they remain faithful to their founding ideals. That question is legitimate, but it can become politically sterile if revolutionary purity is measured only through rhetoric. The more meaningful question is whether institutions continue to advance the substantive objectives for which liberation was originally fought. If political freedom exists but economic exclusion remains severe, the revolutionary project remains incomplete regardless of how frequently liberation symbols are invoked. Conversely, if a coalition government comprising ideologically diverse parties expands democratic accountability, strengthens public institutions and improves socioeconomic inclusion, it may advance aspects of the liberation project even without using revolutionary language. This is the paradox of post-liberation politics. A revolutionary movement can lose political dominance while some of its historical objectives survive through constitutional institutions and public policy. The ANC's revolutionary heritage may therefore outlive the ANC's monopoly. The Constitution, social grants, affirmative action, public education,

expanded citizenship, democratic participation and rights-based institutions are now embedded within the state in ways that cannot simply be identified with one party. The liberation legacy has become institutionalised. The question is whether that institutionalised legacy can continue evolving. Coalition government may force it to do so by requiring political actors to defend its substantive principles rather than relying upon the historical authority of the organisation that originally championed them.

The end of political monopoly therefore does not necessarily represent the defeat of the liberation project. It may represent its next historical stage. Liberation movements become historically mature when their foundational principles cease to depend upon permanent organisational control. The ANC's greatest democratic achievement may ultimately be that it helped create institutions through which South Africans can peacefully remove it from dominance. This does not absolve the party of its failures. Nor does it mean that political competition automatically produces better governance. It means that the democratic order has developed beyond the assumption that the liberation movement must remain politically dominant in order for liberation itself to survive. That distinction is intellectually essential. The state belongs to citizens, not to the historical organisation that liberated them. The ANC's revolutionary heritage therefore has to be measured against universal democratic principles rather than organisational permanence. If the ANC remains influential because citizens freely choose it, that is legitimate. If it seeks special political entitlement because of its liberation history, that would contradict the democratic principle it helped establish. The coalition era makes this distinction unavoidable. Political legitimacy must now be renewed through performance, persuasion and electoral consent.

At the same time, the coalition state reveals the limitations of electoral politics as a mechanism for redistributing power. Citizens can change governments, but they cannot automatically change the ownership structure of the economy through elections. They can vote for redistribution, but implementation depends upon administrative institutions, fiscal capacity, property relations and economic structures. They can elect parties promising transformation, but those parties must negotiate with financial markets, businesses, investors, international institutions and domestic economic elites. Consequently, the post-dominant-party era should not be interpreted as the final democratisation of power. It is a democratisation of political competition, not necessarily a democratisation of socioeconomic power. The distinction returns us to the central argument of this book. Who exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa? The answer is increasingly fragmented. Political power is shared among parties, executives, legislatures, provinces and municipalities. Constitutional power resides in institutions designed to constrain political authority. Administrative power rests within professional and sometimes politicised bureaucracies. Economic power remains substantially concentrated outside direct electoral control. Social power operates through organised communities, civil society, labour, business, media and increasingly digital networks. The coalition state therefore makes the power structure more visible because no single political party can plausibly claim to represent all dimensions of national power.

The national-versus-provincial question will become even more important as political competition develops. Provinces can become laboratories for alternative governing models, especially when different parties control different territories. Successful provincial governments may acquire political legitimacy by demonstrating better administrative performance, while poorly governed provinces may become symbols of institutional failure. This could strengthen federalising tendencies within South African politics even though the constitutional system remains fundamentally cooperative rather than federal in the classical sense. Political parties may

increasingly campaign not only on national ideology but on provincial records of governance. The result could be a gradual transformation of South African political identity from one dominated by national liberation narratives toward a more territorially differentiated democratic competition. Yet this development carries risks. Regional political identities can deepen representation, but they can also produce ethnic, linguistic or geographic fragmentation. South Africa's constitutional architecture was deliberately designed to prevent the country from becoming permanently divided along such lines. Coalition politics must therefore balance territorial autonomy with national solidarity. The challenge is not to eliminate regional political difference but to ensure that regional difference remains compatible with a shared constitutional citizenship.

The coalition state also changes the role of Parliament. Under dominant-party government, parliamentary majorities can reduce the capacity of opposition parties to influence legislation, even when formal oversight mechanisms exist. A hung Parliament creates different incentives. The executive must take parliamentary arithmetic seriously because legislation may require support beyond the governing party. Committees can become more influential because coalition parties and opposition parties may align issue by issue. Parliament can therefore become a more meaningful arena of negotiation rather than merely a chamber in which government decisions are ratified. This development could strengthen representative democracy if parliamentarians use their increased leverage to scrutinise executive power rather than bargain for partisan advantage. The danger is that legislative bargaining becomes transactional. The opportunity is that Parliament becomes genuinely deliberative. South Africa's democratic system therefore faces a choice between two forms of coalition politics: one based on elite negotiation behind closed doors and another based on transparent parliamentary deliberation. The second would represent a deeper democratic achievement. It would shift political bargaining from private party rooms toward public institutions where citizens, media and civil society can observe competing arguments. In this sense, the end of ANC monopoly could strengthen rather than weaken the constitutional separation of powers if Parliament embraces its expanded role.

There is also a profound generational dimension to this transition. Younger South Africans who did not personally experience apartheid are less likely to treat liberation history as a sufficient reason for permanent political loyalty. Their political expectations are shaped by unemployment, digital communication, corruption scandals, inequality, education, housing, migration, crime and economic opportunity. For this generation, the moral authority of liberation must compete with the immediate realities of citizenship. This does not mean that young South Africans reject the liberation struggle. Rather, they may demand that its promises be translated into material dignity. Coalition politics reflects this changing political psychology because it creates space for voters to support different parties according to contemporary interests rather than inherited historical allegiance. The decline of political monopoly can therefore be interpreted as a generational democratisation of political choice. The ANC cannot simply assume that the historical relationship between struggle and electoral loyalty will reproduce itself indefinitely. Opposition parties similarly cannot assume that dissatisfaction with the ANC automatically guarantees support for their own programmes. Each must earn legitimacy among citizens whose political identities are increasingly fluid. This could produce a more competitive but also more volatile electorate. Political parties will have to become more responsive, communicative and policy-oriented because voters can increasingly punish poor performance through electoral switching.

The ultimate test of coalition government will therefore be whether it can convert political fragmentation into democratic accountability without converting fragmentation into governmental

incapacity. The answer will depend on institutional design, political culture, administrative professionalism and the willingness of parties to place constitutional government above partisan survival. The early experience of the GNU demonstrates both promise and difficulty. Government has emphasised stability, common priorities and policy implementation, while acknowledging disagreements, including serious tensions around fiscal policy. This duality should be treated neither as proof of success nor as evidence of inevitable failure. Coalition governments are inherently negotiated political systems. Their success cannot be measured by the absence of disagreement. It must be measured by whether disagreement produces better decisions, whether institutions remain functional, whether public services improve, whether corruption is constrained and whether citizens experience greater accountability. A coalition that never disagrees may simply be suppressing conflict. A coalition that disagrees but resolves its disagreements institutionally may be democratically healthy. The real danger is not disagreement but the inability to transform disagreement into legitimate collective action. South Africa's future therefore depends upon building what might be called a culture of negotiated statecraft: a political practice in which competing parties understand that government is neither a prize to be captured nor a battlefield to be permanently conquered, but a constitutional responsibility to be exercised under conditions of pluralism.

The revolutionary heritage of South Africa must consequently be reconstructed rather than abandoned. The central achievement of the liberation struggle was the assertion that political authority must ultimately derive from the people rather than from racial hierarchy, minority domination or colonial privilege. The coalition state extends that principle by demonstrating that even the liberation movement itself is subject to the sovereignty of the electorate. This is not a repudiation of liberation; it is one of its deepest democratic consequences. Yet the revolutionary project cannot be reduced to elections. The struggle also sought social justice, economic dignity, equality and the transformation of inherited structures of power. These objectives remain incomplete. Coalition government will be historically meaningful only if it creates the institutional conditions under which those unresolved questions can be addressed more effectively. If coalition politics becomes merely a competition among political elites for cabinet positions, it will represent the fragmentation of political power without the democratisation of society. If it strengthens Parliament, professionalises administration, improves accountability, expands participation and confronts structural inequality, it may become a new vehicle for completing unfinished aspects of the democratic revolution. The question is therefore not whether the ANC has lost power, but what kind of power will replace its monopoly and for whose benefit that power will be exercised.

The deeper historical lesson is that political monopoly was never the same thing as complete political sovereignty, just as electoral defeat is not the same thing as complete loss of power. The ANC's three decades of dominance gave it enormous influence over the state, but economic structures, bureaucratic institutions, global markets, private capital, civil society and constitutional courts always constrained and interacted with that authority. The coalition state makes this plural structure impossible to ignore. Power is now more visibly negotiated between political parties, institutions and social forces. This can deepen democracy if citizens gain greater capacity to influence those negotiations. But it can also produce a more sophisticated form of elite politics in which competing parties negotiate access to state power while the underlying distribution of economic power remains largely intact. The fundamental task for South African intellectuals is therefore to resist both romanticism and cynicism. Romanticism would treat coalition government as automatically democratic simply because the ANC has lost its monopoly. Cynicism would conclude that nothing has changed because economic elites remain powerful. Both positions are

inadequate. Something profound has changed: electoral competition has become more consequential, governmental authority is more fragmented, and political parties must negotiate their access to state power. But something equally profound remains unresolved: the socioeconomic structures that determine who possesses wealth, productive resources, employment opportunities and economic influence. The post-dominant-party era must therefore be understood as a transformation of political power rather than the completion of democratic transformation.

South Africa now stands at a historical threshold in which the political order created after apartheid is entering a second maturity. The first democratic era was defined by the transition from racial authoritarianism to constitutional democracy and by the extraordinary political dominance of the ANC. The second era is likely to be defined by competitive pluralism, coalition governance, institutional bargaining and increasingly complex relationships between national, provincial and local authority. This transformation should not be feared simply because it is unfamiliar. Democracies become mature when political power becomes transferable, contestable and institutionally constrained. But maturity also requires that political competition produce substantive governance rather than permanent instability. The coalition state must therefore answer a fundamental democratic question: can South Africa move from a politics of historical representation to a politics of accountable performance without abandoning the unfinished socioeconomic promises of liberation? The answer will determine whether the post-apartheid settlement becomes merely a successful transition or the foundation of a deeper democratic transformation. The ANC's revolutionary project succeeded spectacularly in dismantling formal apartheid and establishing universal political citizenship. It compromised where political and economic transformation became constrained by governing realities, elite interests and institutional weaknesses. It failed, or at least remained incomplete, in transforming the deeper structures of economic inequality and concentrated ownership. The coalition state now opens a new chapter in which no political organisation can claim permanent ownership of the democratic project. South Africa's future will depend upon whether this new pluralism distributes power beyond political parties and into the hands of citizens themselves.

The final question, therefore, is not whether the ANC has fallen from dominance, but whether South Africa has learned how to democratise power beyond the party-state relationship. The liberation movement's historical achievement must now be separated from the idea of permanent political entitlement. The Constitution must remain stronger than every party. Parliament must remain stronger than executive convenience. Citizens must remain sovereign over political organisations. Provinces and municipalities must possess meaningful institutional capacity while remaining integrated within national constitutional government. Economic policy must be subject to democratic debate rather than determined exclusively by either political elites or private economic interests. Coalition government should become a mechanism through which competing visions are reconciled publicly, not a private marketplace in which political actors exchange influence. If that happens, the end of ANC political monopoly may become one of the most important democratic developments since 1994. It would mean that South Africa has moved beyond the first generation of liberation democracy into an era in which political legitimacy must continually be earned. The revolutionary heritage would not disappear; it would be transformed from a historical claim into an enduring democratic obligation. The true measure of liberation would then cease to be who governs and become a more demanding question: **whether the institutions of democracy enable ordinary South Africans to exercise meaningful power over the political, economic and social forces that shape their lives.** Only when that question is answered affirmatively can the post-apartheid revolution be regarded not merely as politically successful, but as historically complete.

THE GLOBAL DIMENSION

Chapter Sixteen

South Africa Between Africa and the West

South Africa entered the post-apartheid international order carrying a profound contradiction at the heart of its foreign policy: it was simultaneously an African state emerging from colonialism and apartheid, a middle-income industrial economy deeply integrated into Western capitalism, and a liberation-state whose political imagination had been shaped by international solidarity against racial domination. The democratic transition therefore did not merely change Pretoria's domestic political architecture; it transformed the country's understanding of sovereignty, legitimacy and international power. The post-1994 government sought to replace apartheid's coercive regional diplomacy with a foreign policy grounded in human rights, multilateralism, African solidarity, peaceful conflict resolution and the sovereignty of nations. Officially, South Africa's foreign policy continues to identify Pan-Africanism, South-South cooperation, multilateralism and a more equitable international order as central principles. Yet the deeper question is whether South Africa possesses sufficient economic, military, technological and financial autonomy to translate these principles into independent geopolitical power. The answer is necessarily complicated. South Africa exercises considerable diplomatic influence, but influence is not the same thing as structural power. It can speak loudly in international institutions without possessing the economic capacity to compel stronger states to change their behaviour. It can challenge Western positions while remaining dependent upon Western markets, financial systems, technologies and investment. It can deepen relations with China and Russia without becoming economically independent of Europe and North America. Consequently, South Africa's global position should not be romanticised as either full sovereignty or Western dependency. It represents a continuous negotiation between political autonomy and structural interdependence. That negotiation reveals one of the central unresolved questions of the post-apartheid project: whether political liberation can be consolidated internationally when the economic foundations of national power remain partially embedded in institutions and markets inherited from the global order against which liberation movements historically struggled.

The geopolitical position of South Africa is unusually consequential because geography, demography, resources, industrial capacity and political history converge within one state. It sits at the southern gateway of the African continent, possesses major ports connecting Atlantic and Indian Ocean commercial systems, controls important mineral resources, maintains one of Africa's most diversified industrial economies and operates within both continental and global diplomatic institutions. Its economic relationship with the world is therefore impossible to separate from its political identity. The country is too large and strategically important to behave as an isolated

peripheral state, yet too economically constrained to operate as a conventional great power. This produces what may be described as middle-power sovereignty: the ability to influence international agendas through diplomacy, coalition-building, legal institutions and normative arguments rather than through overwhelming military or economic force. The post-apartheid state deliberately constructed such influence. Instead of reproducing apartheid's regional destabilisation, democratic South Africa sought to become a mediator, peace-builder and advocate of multilateralism. Its diplomatic footprint expanded substantially after 1994, reflecting an effort to reposition Pretoria from an international pariah into an influential participant in global governance. But this diplomatic transformation also created a structural dilemma. The more South Africa integrated itself into the global economy, the more exposed it became to the preferences of powerful external actors. International investment, export markets, credit conditions, technology, energy systems and financial networks all influence the practical limits within which foreign policy can operate. Sovereignty therefore cannot be measured simply by whether Pretoria can issue an independent diplomatic statement. It must also be measured by whether South Africa can absorb the economic consequences of disagreeing with powerful partners. This is precisely where the distinction between formal sovereignty and substantive sovereignty becomes indispensable.

The African dimension of South Africa's foreign policy represents perhaps the clearest continuation of the ANC's revolutionary inheritance. The liberation struggle was never understood merely as a South African struggle because apartheid itself was embedded within a regional and international system. Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe and other African states paid enormous political, economic and human costs in confronting apartheid's regional strategy. The post-1994 government therefore inherited a moral obligation to treat Africa not as a peripheral foreign-policy theatre but as the primary geographical foundation of South African identity. This principle remains visible in the official foreign-policy architecture of Pretoria, which identifies Africa as a focal point and emphasises participation in African Union structures, conflict prevention, regional integration and continental development. Yet this African commitment has also generated tensions. South Africa's economic power can make neighbouring states suspicious of Pretoria's intentions, particularly when South African corporations dominate regional markets or when Johannesburg's diplomatic initiatives appear unilateral. The country's immigration debates have further exposed the contradiction between Pan-African rhetoric and popular anxieties about migration, unemployment and competition for scarce resources. A state cannot credibly claim continental leadership while allowing domestic political discourse to treat African migrants as permanent outsiders. The credibility of South African Pan-Africanism therefore depends not only on diplomatic declarations but also on whether ordinary Africans experience South Africa as a partner rather than a regional hegemon. The revolutionary project succeeded in transforming South Africa's official identity from racial nationalism toward continental solidarity, but the unfinished task is to convert that ideological commitment into an institutional, economic and social reality.

BRICS represents the most visible institutional expression of South Africa's attempt to escape the geopolitical limitations of a Western-centred international system. The decision to join Brazil, Russia, India and China created a platform through which Pretoria could participate in debates concerning global financial governance, development, trade, multilateral institutions and the distribution of international power. South Africa's participation cannot be understood simply as an alliance against the United States or Europe. Its strategic significance lies in the creation of additional diplomatic and economic options. For a middle power, strategic autonomy often depends upon diversification rather than isolation. If South Africa relies excessively upon one geopolitical bloc, its bargaining power declines; if it maintains meaningful relationships across several centres

of power, it gains room for manoeuvre. The 2023 BRICS summit hosted in South Africa demonstrated the importance Pretoria attached to this platform, while the expansion of BRICS increased the geopolitical weight of the grouping and intensified debates about the future of the international order. Nevertheless, BRICS should not be treated as a revolutionary alternative to global capitalism in any simplistic sense. Its members possess divergent political systems, economic interests, strategic priorities and relationships with the West. China is not Russia; India is not Brazil; South Africa is not China. BRICS is therefore better understood as a coalition seeking greater bargaining power within global governance than as a unified ideological bloc. The revolutionary achievement lies in South Africa's refusal to accept that Western institutions must constitute the only legitimate diplomatic centre of gravity. The compromise lies in the fact that BRICS itself operates within the same global capitalist system that South Africa seeks to reform.

The relationship with the United States illustrates the complexity of South Africa's geopolitical balancing act more clearly than almost any other bilateral relationship. Washington remains an important economic, technological, diplomatic and security partner, while South African businesses have substantial commercial interests in the American economy. South Africa's own diplomatic authorities describe the United States as a strategic partner and highlight trade, investment, technology, tourism, science, security and other areas of cooperation. Yet political disagreements have periodically exposed the limits of this partnership. Pretoria's positions on Palestine, Russia, international law, sanctions, military exercises and domestic economic legislation have generated suspicion among sections of the American political establishment. The central issue is therefore not whether South Africa is "anti-American", a description that obscures more than it explains, but whether Washington accepts South Africa's claim to independent strategic agency. A genuinely sovereign foreign policy requires the ability to disagree with a powerful partner without automatically abandoning the relationship. South Africa's difficulty is that disagreement can carry material consequences when the stronger partner controls substantial market access, investment, financial influence and technological capacity. This is the geopolitical equivalent of the economic power problem examined throughout this book: formal equality between states does not eliminate structural inequality between them. A South African president may possess the constitutional authority to determine foreign policy, but that authority operates within an international system in which capital, trade, technology and financial institutions can constrain the practical consequences of political decisions.

The European relationship presents a similar but historically distinct problem. Europe is simultaneously a former colonial centre, a major trading partner, a source of investment and technology, a political actor within multilateral institutions and a significant market for South African exports. The post-apartheid state therefore inherited an unusual diplomatic challenge: it had to construct relations with societies whose governments and corporations had historically benefited in different ways from apartheid-era economic structures while simultaneously seeking continued cooperation in the new democratic era. The ANC's revolutionary project did not seek the diplomatic isolation of Europe after liberation; instead, it pursued engagement, investment and economic integration. This represented a pragmatic compromise with global capitalism. The democratic state understood that political legitimacy alone could not generate employment, infrastructure, technological development or industrialisation. Consequently, South Africa's post-apartheid leadership sought to attract international capital while using the state to advance transformation through instruments such as affirmative procurement, black economic empowerment and industrial policy. The contradiction was that foreign investment could support development while also reinforcing patterns of ownership and market concentration that limited transformative economic

sovereignty. The European relationship therefore embodies the broader post-apartheid settlement: political independence was achieved, but economic interdependence was retained. The strategic question is not whether South Africa should sever relations with Europe, which would be economically irrational, but whether it can engage Europe from a position of increasing productive strength rather than permanent dependence. The real test of sovereignty is whether international partnerships expand South Africa's developmental capabilities or merely deepen its role as a supplier of commodities and a consumer of externally generated capital and technology.

Relations with Russia occupy a particularly sensitive position because they combine historical liberation solidarity with contemporary geopolitical conflict. During the apartheid era, the Soviet Union supported liberation movements in southern Africa, while the ANC and its allies maintained relationships with socialist and anti-colonial forces across the international system. That historical memory remains politically important, especially among sections of the liberation movement that interpret contemporary global politics through the experience of anti-apartheid struggle. Yet post-apartheid South Africa cannot simply reproduce Cold War loyalties because the international environment has fundamentally changed. Russia is now a major military power involved in a devastating war in Ukraine, and Pretoria's position on the conflict has attracted intense international scrutiny. South Africa has attempted to justify its non-aligned posture as a refusal to become subordinate to competing geopolitical blocs, arguing that dialogue, negotiation and multilateralism should take precedence over bloc politics. The intellectual strength of this position is its insistence that African states should not be treated as instruments in conflicts determined elsewhere. Its vulnerability is the perception that neutrality can become selective when the historical and political sympathies of the governing elite influence the application of principles. The challenge for South African diplomacy is therefore to establish a consistent standard: sovereignty must be defended whether the violator is an adversary, ally or historic partner. If international law becomes a principle applied only against Western states, South Africa's normative credibility weakens; if it is applied universally, Pretoria can legitimately claim that its non-alignment is principled rather than opportunistic. The distinction is crucial for understanding the country's attempt to transform liberation solidarity into contemporary international law.

China has arguably become the most consequential long-term relationship in South Africa's strategy of diversification. Diplomatic relations were formally established in 1998, and the relationship has since developed into a comprehensive strategic partnership involving political, economic and institutional cooperation. China offers South Africa access to an enormous market, infrastructure financing, manufacturing partnerships, technology and a geopolitical counterweight to Western dominance. For Pretoria, engagement with Beijing therefore creates possibilities that did not exist within a purely Atlantic-oriented foreign policy. But the China relationship also raises difficult questions about dependency. Diversifying from Western capital to Chinese capital does not automatically produce economic sovereignty if the underlying relationship remains one in which South Africa exports raw materials while importing higher-value manufactured goods and technology. Economic decolonisation cannot simply mean replacing one external partner with another. It requires transforming the structure of production itself. The real question is therefore whether Chinese engagement contributes to South African industrialisation, skills development, technological transfer, local value addition and African regional development. The 2024 elevation of China-South Africa relations to an all-round strategic cooperative partnership demonstrated the depth of political commitment between the two states. Yet strategic partnership should not be confused with strategic dependence. South Africa's interests require a relationship with China that is cooperative without becoming subordinate, just as its relationship with the United States must

remain cooperative without becoming subordinate. The liberation principle of sovereignty is therefore tested not by whom South Africa chooses as a partner but by whether it possesses enough productive capacity to negotiate with every partner from a position of dignity.

South Africa's engagement with the Middle East further demonstrates the expansion of its foreign policy beyond the traditional Atlantic and African spheres. The region is strategically important because of energy, trade, investment, religion, maritime routes, security and its centrality to international conflicts. Pretoria has cultivated relations with countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Iran and others while attempting to position itself as an advocate of dialogue and international law. This engagement reflects an increasingly multipolar conception of diplomacy in which South Africa refuses to define its global identity exclusively through relations with Washington, London, Brussels, Beijing or Moscow. Yet Middle Eastern diplomacy also exposes the difficulties of balancing economic interests with normative commitments. Gulf states possess enormous financial resources and increasingly significant investment capacity, while South Africa has substantial developmental needs. The temptation for any government is therefore to separate economic diplomacy from political principle. The post-apartheid state's challenge is to resist this fragmentation by developing a coherent doctrine in which commercial engagement and normative diplomacy reinforce rather than undermine one another. South Africa's international identity has considerable symbolic value because its own liberation history gives it credibility among societies that interpret global politics through anti-colonial experience. But symbolic credibility can disappear quickly if principles are selectively applied. The country therefore needs a foreign policy capable of recognising the complexity of Middle Eastern politics without reducing every conflict to a simple division between oppressors and victims. A mature Pan-African diplomacy must possess moral clarity without abandoning analytical sophistication.

The African Union represents the institutional arena in which South Africa's continental ambitions are most directly tested. Pretoria has historically argued that Africa must speak with greater unity in global affairs and that continental institutions require stronger political and economic capacity. The African Union provides a platform for peacebuilding, conflict prevention, development coordination and international representation, but its effectiveness remains constrained by the sovereignty of member states, limited financial resources and disagreements among governments. South Africa's own influence within the AU therefore depends upon its ability to build coalitions rather than merely assert leadership. The country cannot assume that its relatively advanced economy automatically entitles it to continental authority. Other African states have their own historical experiences, strategic interests and political calculations. Moreover, Pretoria's domestic weaknesses can undermine its continental credibility. A country struggling with unemployment, inequality, electricity insecurity, infrastructure deterioration and political fragmentation cannot indefinitely present itself as the unquestioned model of African governance. The stronger interpretation of South African leadership is therefore not that Pretoria should dominate Africa but that it should contribute institutional capacity to continental integration. The revolutionary project succeeded in repositioning South Africa as an African state rather than an exceptional settler enclave, but the deeper Pan-African project remains incomplete. African unity requires not merely diplomatic speeches but integrated markets, infrastructure corridors, industrial value chains, educational cooperation, financial institutions and collective bargaining power in global institutions. South Africa's future influence will depend on whether it helps build those structures rather than merely seeking prestige within them.

SADC provides an even more immediate test of South Africa's regional power because southern Africa is the geographical environment in which Pretoria's decisions produce direct consequences. South Africa is the largest economy in the region and therefore exercises structural influence over trade, finance, migration, infrastructure and investment. Yet economic size can produce resentment when neighbours perceive Pretoria as imposing its preferences rather than building consensus. The post-apartheid state inherited a region profoundly shaped by the liberation struggles against colonialism and apartheid, making regional solidarity a central component of its political identity. South Africa's participation in regional peace and security initiatives reflects this historical responsibility. But the region also demonstrates the limits of South African power. Pretoria cannot resolve every political crisis, cannot unilaterally determine electoral outcomes in neighbouring states and cannot transform regional economies without cooperation from other governments. The deeper challenge is therefore to convert South Africa's economic weight into shared regional development rather than hegemonic control. This means investing in regional infrastructure, energy connectivity, industrial corridors, transport networks and cross-border economic integration. It also means recognising that migration within southern Africa is not merely a security problem but a historical and economic reality. If South Africa wants to exercise genuine regional leadership, it must help create conditions in which movement across borders becomes economically productive and socially manageable rather than politically weaponised. Regional sovereignty is strengthened when neighbouring states become more capable together, not when the largest state becomes increasingly dominant.

The question of Israel and Palestine represents perhaps the sharpest expression of South Africa's liberation identity in contemporary international diplomacy. Pretoria's position has been shaped by an explicit comparison between apartheid South Africa and the Palestinian experience, although the historical and legal differences between the two situations must be carefully analysed rather than collapsed into rhetoric. South Africa has repeatedly advocated Palestinian self-determination and criticised Israeli policies, while in December 2023 it instituted proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice under the Genocide Convention. The case became one of the most consequential examples of a Global South state using international law against a powerful state and its allies. The ICJ record confirms that the proceedings remain active and that the Court issued provisional-measures orders during the case. From the perspective of South African diplomacy, the significance extends beyond the immediate legal dispute. Pretoria attempted to demonstrate that international law should not be reserved for powerful states and that post-colonial countries can use international institutions to challenge alleged violations by states enjoying substantial diplomatic protection. This represents one of the clearest continuities between the anti-apartheid movement and contemporary foreign policy. Yet the legal route also carries risks. International litigation cannot by itself compel geopolitical actors to comply, and the political consequences of confronting Israel extend into South Africa's relationships with the United States, Europe and influential Middle Eastern actors. The Palestine question therefore illustrates the central thesis of this chapter: sovereignty is not simply the freedom to choose a position; it is the capacity to sustain that position when powerful actors disagree.

South Africa's international legal diplomacy deserves special attention because it represents a distinctive form of power available to a middle-income state. Unlike military power, legal diplomacy does not require nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers or enormous financial reserves. It requires constitutional credibility, diplomatic expertise, legal institutions, strategic patience and the willingness to place disputes before international courts and organisations. South Africa's use of international law reflects the post-apartheid state's attempt to convert the moral authority gained

through its own liberation history into contemporary institutional influence. This strategy is particularly significant because the international system remains deeply unequal. Powerful states frequently possess greater military, economic and diplomatic resources than developing countries, while international institutions often reflect historical distributions of power. Legal diplomacy can therefore become a mechanism through which smaller and middle powers contest the assumption that material strength determines legal legitimacy. But there is an important limitation. Law itself operates within political structures. Courts can issue judgments and provisional measures, but enforcement often depends upon states and international institutions. Consequently, South Africa's legal diplomacy should not be romanticised as a substitute for economic and political power. Its greatest effectiveness occurs when legal arguments are supported by diplomatic coalitions, public legitimacy, regional solidarity and economic resilience. The revolutionary achievement is that South Africa has learned to use institutions once associated with global power as instruments of post-colonial agency. The unfinished task is ensuring that legal diplomacy is supported by the material capabilities necessary to sustain its consequences.

The consequences of challenging powerful international actors therefore cannot be understood only in terms of diplomatic disagreement. They operate through multiple channels, including trade, investment, financial relations, public narratives, diplomatic pressure, visa policies, intelligence cooperation, military relationships and access to international institutions. This is why foreign-policy independence is inseparable from domestic economic strength. A state that imports most of its critical technologies, depends heavily on external capital and requires foreign markets for major export sectors may possess legal sovereignty while having limited capacity to absorb economic retaliation. South Africa's relationship with the United States illustrates this problem particularly clearly. Pretoria has continued to describe Washington as a vital strategic partner while simultaneously defending its right to pursue independent positions on international and domestic matters. In 2025, South African officials were already dealing with tensions involving trade and wider geopolitical disagreements while emphasising that bilateral relations remained important. This demonstrates the practical meaning of strategic autonomy: it is not the absence of interdependence but the ability to prevent interdependence from becoming political subordination. South Africa's challenge is therefore to build enough economic resilience that diplomatic disagreements do not automatically become national crises. Industrial policy, technological capability, diversified exports, energy security, financial depth and regional economic integration are consequently not merely domestic development objectives. They are instruments of foreign-policy sovereignty.

The Western response to South Africa's independent diplomacy also reveals the limits of simplistic interpretations of international politics. It would be intellectually inadequate to describe every disagreement between Pretoria and Western governments as evidence of imperial manipulation, just as it would be equally inadequate to portray every South African foreign-policy decision as irrational hostility toward the West. States pursue interests. Washington, Brussels, Beijing, Moscow, Pretoria and every other capital operate within political systems shaped by domestic constituencies, economic interests and strategic calculations. The task of a serious Pan-African analysis is therefore to identify structures without reducing every event to conspiracy. Western states possess disproportionate economic and military influence because of historical accumulation, technological leadership and institutional power. South Africa's challenge is to navigate that unequal system without surrendering its capacity for independent decision-making. The same analytical standard must be applied to China and Russia. Their partnerships with African states can create developmental opportunities, but neither should automatically be interpreted as benevolent

alternatives to Western power. Pan-Africanism cannot mean replacing Western dependency with Eastern dependency. It must mean constructing African capacity to negotiate with all external powers. This distinction is fundamental. A continent becomes sovereign not when it chooses the "right" foreign patron but when it develops the economic, technological, institutional and political capabilities necessary to avoid requiring patrons altogether.

This brings the analysis directly back to the question of who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa. Internationally, the constitutional state clearly exercises formal authority. The President is constitutionally responsible for foreign policy, while the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation manages its formulation and daily execution within the executive system. Parliament, the courts, civil society, business and the media also influence foreign-policy debate. Yet formal institutional authority is only one layer of geopolitical power. A second layer consists of international economic relationships. South African exporters depend upon access to major markets; corporations require foreign capital and technology; financial institutions operate within global systems; universities and scientific institutions rely upon international networks; and strategic industries depend upon imported technologies. A third layer consists of international institutions whose rules were largely constructed before the democratic transformation of South Africa. The result is a country whose government has considerable diplomatic agency but whose economy remains embedded within structures it does not control. This does not mean that South Africa is powerless. It means that its power is relational. Pretoria can influence agendas, form coalitions, litigate, mediate and negotiate, but its ability to compel outcomes remains limited. The deepest post-apartheid foreign-policy question is therefore not whether South Africa is sovereign in law, because it clearly is, but whether sovereignty has been translated into sufficient material capability to make political independence durable.

The ANC's revolutionary project achieved an extraordinary international transformation in 1994. South Africa moved from pariah status to diplomatic legitimacy, from regional destabilisation to regional peacebuilding, from racial isolation to African and global integration, and from a foreign policy built around white minority survival to one officially grounded in constitutionalism, human rights and multilateralism. The country's transformation was therefore not merely domestic. It altered the geopolitical identity of southern Africa and changed how the international community imagined the continent. Nelson Mandela's presidency became a global symbol of reconciliation, while the subsequent governments attempted to institutionalise the principles associated with liberation diplomacy. South Africa's official foreign-policy doctrine continues to emphasise multilateralism, African Renaissance, constitutional values and international law. This represents a substantial revolutionary success. Yet success should not be confused with completion. The post-apartheid government inherited an economy whose ownership patterns, financial institutions, corporate structures and technological dependencies could not be transformed overnight through political liberation. The same problem reappears internationally. Political sovereignty was achieved immediately through constitutional transition, but economic sovereignty required long-term structural transformation. The ANC therefore succeeded in changing the diplomatic identity of the state more rapidly than it succeeded in changing the material foundations of its international power. This distinction explains why South Africa can simultaneously behave as an independent diplomatic actor and remain vulnerable to external economic pressure.

The greatest compromise of the post-apartheid foreign-policy project may therefore be found not in any individual diplomatic decision but in the economic assumptions underlying international engagement. The democratic government correctly recognised that South Africa needed foreign

investment, international trade, technology and access to global markets. But the developmental bargain often assumed that integration into global capitalism would gradually produce sufficient domestic transformation. The results have been mixed. South Africa became deeply integrated into global markets, but structural inequality remained severe, unemployment remained extraordinarily high, and ownership of major economic assets remained concentrated. Consequently, international economic integration did not automatically produce economic democracy. In some cases, it reinforced the bargaining power of established corporations because the state remained dependent upon private investment and business confidence. This creates a subtle form of power that is difficult to observe because it does not operate through direct political command. No foreign corporation needs to order the South African government what to do. The possibility of capital withdrawal, investment hesitation, currency volatility or market reaction can itself influence the policy environment. This is the international extension of the structural economic power examined earlier in the book. The state governs formally, but it governs within an economic system in which actors outside the democratic chain of accountability possess substantial capacity to reward, constrain or punish policy decisions.

South Africa's foreign policy must consequently be evaluated through the concept of strategic autonomy rather than ideological alignment. Strategic autonomy does not require hostility toward the West, unquestioning friendship with China, solidarity with Russia or permanent opposition to Israel. It requires the institutional capacity to decide issue by issue according to national and continental interests. Pretoria's own recent diplomatic language has explicitly described non-alignment as engagement with all international partners rather than membership in a geopolitical bloc. This is a potentially powerful doctrine because it avoids the binary logic that has historically forced weaker states to choose between competing great powers. Yet strategic autonomy requires consistency. If South Africa claims neutrality in one conflict while applying a different moral standard in another, its credibility diminishes. If it invokes sovereignty to defend one government while overlooking violations by another, its principles appear instrumental. If it condemns Western dominance while tolerating dependency upon another external power, its anti-imperialism becomes incomplete. A mature foreign policy must therefore be simultaneously pragmatic and principled. Pragmatism protects national interests; principle protects national legitimacy. South Africa's international credibility will depend upon maintaining both. The objective should not be to become anti-Western or anti-Eastern but pro-African, pro-sovereignty, pro-development and consistently committed to international law.

The question of economic power is particularly important because South Africa's diplomatic ambitions cannot be separated from the structure of its mineral economy. The country possesses resources that are strategically important to advanced industrial economies, including minerals associated with energy transition, manufacturing and technology. This creates potential leverage. Yet resource wealth becomes geopolitical power only when a country controls more than extraction. If raw minerals leave the continent and higher-value processing, technology, manufacturing and intellectual property remain elsewhere, then resource abundance can coexist with structural dependence. South Africa therefore faces a classic post-colonial development challenge: converting resource endowment into industrial sovereignty. This requires beneficiation, research and development, infrastructure, skills, financing and regional value chains. The issue is not simply whether multinational corporations operate in South Africa. International capital can contribute significantly to development. The critical question is the distribution of value, decision-making power and technological knowledge within those relationships. A sovereign economic strategy would seek partnerships that increase domestic productive capability rather than merely expand

extraction. This would strengthen foreign policy because economic diversification increases diplomatic flexibility. A state that can produce, process, finance and export sophisticated goods has greater bargaining power than one dependent upon exporting commodities and importing manufactured products. Economic transformation is therefore not separate from geopolitics; it is one of its foundations.

South Africa's position within the Global South also gives it an opportunity to redefine what international leadership means. Historically, global leadership has often been measured through military expenditure, financial power or the ability to establish rules for others. South Africa represents a different model based upon diplomacy, constitutionalism, legal advocacy, coalition-building and moral authority derived from its liberation history. This model can be especially valuable for developing countries confronting an international system in which their formal sovereignty often exceeds their material power. South Africa can help build coalitions around reform of the United Nations Security Council, international financial institutions, development finance, trade rules, climate justice and access to technology. It can also use institutions such as BRICS, the G20, the African Union and other multilateral forums to amplify African priorities. South Africa's successful G20 engagement demonstrated the potential for an African middle power to bring continental concerns into global economic debates, while its cooperation with China and other emerging economies has reinforced calls for a more balanced international economic architecture. But leadership requires delivery. The continent will not judge Pretoria primarily by the eloquence of its diplomatic speeches. It will judge it by whether South African leadership contributes to infrastructure, investment, industrialisation, peace and economic integration. International prestige without domestic or continental developmental results risks becoming diplomatic theatre.

There is also a democratic question at the heart of foreign policy. Who gets to define South Africa's international interests? Constitutionally, foreign policy is primarily an executive responsibility, with the President holding ultimate authority and the responsible minister conducting the portfolio. Yet foreign policy affects ordinary citizens through employment, food prices, energy costs, migration, tourism, exports, sanctions, international investment and security. If foreign policy is therefore treated exclusively as an elite diplomatic domain, the democratic project remains incomplete. Citizens should understand why South Africa participates in BRICS, why it maintains relations with the United States, why it supports African integration, why it takes particular positions on Palestine, and what economic risks accompany these choices. Parliamentary oversight, public debate, academic research and civil-society participation can strengthen foreign-policy legitimacy. This does not mean that every diplomatic negotiation should become a referendum. Diplomacy requires confidentiality and professional expertise. But strategic direction should remain democratically contestable. The deeper democratic principle is that international sovereignty belongs to the people even when its day-to-day exercise is delegated to constitutional institutions. This is particularly important because foreign-policy choices can produce consequences far beyond the electoral cycle. A government can sign an agreement whose economic effects last decades. Democratic accountability therefore requires institutions capable of examining not only the immediate political benefits of foreign-policy decisions but also their long-term implications for national development.

The Israel-Palestine question has consequently become more than a foreign-policy issue for South Africa; it has become a test of the country's post-apartheid moral identity. The ANC's historical solidarity with liberation movements makes Palestine symbolically significant, but the government's decision to pursue legal proceedings internationally transformed symbolic solidarity into

institutional action. The significance of the ICJ case lies partly in the fact that South Africa chose a legal rather than purely rhetorical mechanism. This strategy aligns with Pretoria's broader attempt to strengthen international law and multilateral institutions. However, the case also illustrates the danger of allowing liberation history to replace rigorous legal and geopolitical analysis. South Africa must demonstrate that its legal claims are grounded in evidence, treaty obligations and consistent principles rather than merely political sympathy. If it succeeds, its influence extends beyond Palestine because it strengthens the principle that international law can be invoked by states from the Global South against powerful actors. If it fails to maintain analytical discipline, opponents can portray its diplomacy as ideological activism rather than principled legal statecraft. The distinction matters enormously. Post-apartheid South Africa's greatest international asset is not military strength. It is credibility. That credibility was earned through the country's own transformation from apartheid to constitutional democracy and through its willingness to use institutions rather than unilateral force. Protecting that credibility requires consistency, evidence and respect for legal processes even when political passions are intense.

The international consequences of South Africa's foreign policy ultimately return the reader to the central argument of this book: political power and economic power are not identical. The ANC and the democratic state successfully captured the institutions of political government in 1994, and subsequent governments acquired substantial authority over foreign policy, diplomacy and international representation. Yet they did not acquire equivalent control over the global economic structures within which South Africa operates. International banks, investors, multinational corporations, trading systems, technological networks and powerful foreign governments continue to possess forms of structural influence. This does not mean that they secretly govern South Africa. Such an argument would be analytically crude. It means that the state operates within a field of constraints created by unequal distributions of global resources. The post-apartheid settlement therefore produced a paradox: South Africa is politically sovereign but economically interdependent; diplomatically assertive but materially constrained; African in identity but globally integrated; critical of Western dominance but dependent upon Western markets; increasingly aligned with emerging powers but unwilling to become subordinate to them. These contradictions are not evidence that democracy failed. They are evidence that political liberation is only one dimension of sovereignty. The unfinished revolution lies in transforming the economic and institutional foundations upon which sovereignty rests.

The final lesson is therefore neither that South Africa should abandon the West nor that it should embrace the East, neither that BRICS will liberate Africa nor that Western institutions must inevitably dominate it. The strategic objective must be far more ambitious: South Africa should use every available international relationship to build African capacity, diversify economic partnerships, strengthen domestic productive power and democratise global governance. Its relationship with the United States should be constructive without becoming subordinate; its relationship with Europe should be commercially beneficial without reproducing colonial economic patterns; its relationship with China should expand industrial and technological capability without generating new dependency; its relationship with Russia should preserve diplomatic channels without compromising consistent principles of international law; its Middle Eastern relationships should combine economic pragmatism with political credibility; and its African relationships should prioritise integration over regional dominance. BRICS should be treated as an instrument of diversification rather than a new ideological bloc. The African Union should be strengthened as a vehicle for continental sovereignty. SADC should become more economically integrated. International legal institutions should be used strategically, but with rigorous evidence and

consistent standards. Above all, South Africa must recognise that its greatest geopolitical vulnerability remains domestic: a country divided by inequality, unemployment, weak infrastructure and concentrated economic power will struggle to sustain an ambitious foreign policy indefinitely. The ultimate measure of post-apartheid sovereignty is therefore not how loudly South Africa speaks in the world, but whether it possesses the economic, institutional and democratic capacity to withstand the consequences when it speaks independently.

Chapter Seventeen

Foreign Capital and the Sovereignty Question

The question of sovereignty in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be answered adequately by examining the formal powers of Parliament, the presidency, provincial governments, municipalities, or even the governing party in isolation from the international economic system within which the South African state operates. Political sovereignty, understood constitutionally, means that the people possess the authority to determine their political institutions, elect representatives, formulate laws, and hold public officials accountable. Economic sovereignty, however, concerns something more difficult: the capacity of a government to make fundamental economic decisions without being compelled, constrained, disciplined, or heavily influenced by actors whose authority does not derive from the South African electorate. This distinction is essential to understanding the paradox of post-apartheid democracy. The African National Congress succeeded spectacularly in transferring formal political power from a racially exclusive state to a constitutional democracy based upon universal citizenship, political equality and representative government. Yet the transition did not simultaneously transfer control over the commanding heights of the economy from historically concentrated private ownership into democratic social control. The political order was transformed more comprehensively than the underlying architecture of capital ownership. Consequently, South Africa became politically sovereign while remaining deeply embedded within an international capitalist system whose rules, institutions, investors and markets possess considerable influence over the boundaries within which elected governments can act. The central question is therefore not whether South Africa is sovereign in a legal sense, but how much practical economic sovereignty a democratic government possesses when investment, finance, technology, trade, currency stability and access to international capital are indispensable to national development.

Foreign direct investment illustrates this contradiction with particular clarity. South Africa requires external capital because its developmental ambitions are enormous: industrialisation, infrastructure expansion, energy transition, technological modernisation, employment creation and economic transformation all require resources that cannot simply be generated through taxation or domestic

savings alone. Foreign investors can bring capital, technology, managerial expertise, access to international markets and productive capabilities that accelerate development. There is therefore no intellectually serious Pan-African argument for pretending that foreign capital is inherently exploitative or that every foreign investment constitutes a form of economic imperialism. The more important question is the institutional relationship between capital and sovereignty. Capital becomes politically consequential when a government fears that policies considered necessary for social transformation will provoke capital flight, investment withdrawal, currency depreciation, higher borrowing costs or international reputational damage. At that point, the government may retain the constitutional authority to legislate but become more cautious about exercising that authority. The decisive mechanism is not always direct political interference; often it is anticipation. Ministers, central bankers and officials may calculate what international investors are likely to tolerate before introducing policy. This creates a form of indirect power in which markets do not need to command the state explicitly because governments internalise the anticipated reactions of markets. Democratic sovereignty can therefore coexist with economic constraint. The electorate may choose a government with a transformative mandate, while the government subsequently discovers that implementation depends upon maintaining the confidence of actors who never appeared on the ballot.

The history of South African mining makes the sovereignty question even more complicated because the country's mineral economy predates the democratic state and helped shape the political economy of the entire region. Gold, diamonds, platinum-group metals, coal, iron ore, manganese and other strategic resources have historically connected South Africa to global industrial capitalism. Mining generated enormous wealth, but that wealth was distributed within a profoundly racialised system in which Black labour was exploited while ownership, finance and managerial authority remained concentrated. The end of apartheid therefore created a fundamental dilemma for the ANC: political liberation had to be accompanied by economic transformation, but radical restructuring of mineral ownership risked confronting deeply entrenched domestic and international capital. Policies such as Black Economic Empowerment, mining ownership requirements, social and labour plans, beneficiation initiatives and broader transformation legislation attempted to change the distribution of economic opportunity without destroying productive capacity or international investment relationships. These measures produced important gains, including the emergence of a Black business class and greater representation within corporate structures. Yet they also revealed a limitation of transformation through elite participation. Changing the racial composition of shareholders, directors and executives does not automatically democratise the underlying ownership structure of the economy. A mine may become more racially representative at the leadership level while strategic decisions remain governed by profitability, global commodity cycles and shareholder expectations. The deeper question consequently remains unresolved: who ultimately controls the resources, where does the value go, and how much of the mineral wealth is converted into broad-based social development?

Multinational corporations occupy a particularly significant position because their power is simultaneously economic, technological and organisational. A large multinational enterprise may operate across jurisdictions, move capital between countries, control intellectual property, determine supply chains, influence investment decisions and negotiate with governments from a position of considerable institutional strength. South Africa benefits from the presence of such companies because multinational firms can connect local production to global markets and introduce advanced technologies and managerial capabilities. Yet the same integration creates asymmetry. A government negotiating with a corporation that can potentially relocate production, redirect

investment or restructure operations does not negotiate from an entirely equal position. The corporation may have alternatives; the state often has fewer. This does not mean that multinational corporations control South Africa in some simplistic conspiratorial sense. It means that bargaining power is unevenly distributed. A sovereign government can regulate labour standards, taxation, environmental obligations, competition, localisation and ownership, but the practical effectiveness of regulation depends upon the state's administrative capacity and its willingness to withstand possible economic consequences. The question of power therefore moves beyond ownership alone. Power resides in the ability to make credible decisions, impose costs, offer incentives, threaten exit, provide alternatives and determine which options are economically viable. The multinational corporation becomes powerful not because it replaces the state, but because its resources and mobility alter the conditions under which the state exercises authority.

Banking reveals another dimension of the same problem because modern economies cannot function without sophisticated financial systems. South Africa possesses a comparatively advanced banking sector, and the country's major financial institutions perform indispensable functions in allocating credit, managing savings, facilitating payments, underwriting investment and connecting businesses to domestic and international capital markets. Yet banking power is not equivalent to governmental power. Banks operate according to regulatory requirements, but they also assess risk, price credit, determine lending conditions and allocate financial resources according to institutional calculations. Small businesses, emerging entrepreneurs, municipalities and households may therefore experience economic power through the apparently neutral mechanism of credit availability. A government can announce industrial policies and development strategies, but if productive enterprises cannot obtain affordable finance, those strategies may remain rhetorical. The structure of financial intermediation consequently influences which sectors grow, which firms survive and which communities gain access to economic opportunity. This becomes especially important when the state's developmental priorities differ from conventional risk assessments. Public authorities may consider investment in poor communities, township enterprises, rural infrastructure or emerging industries socially necessary even when private financial institutions consider such projects commercially risky. The sovereignty question therefore concerns not only whether banks obey the law, but whether democratic society possesses sufficient public financial instruments to ensure that private credit allocation does not become an unintended veto over national development priorities.

Technology has introduced an even more complex form of external dependence because economic sovereignty increasingly depends upon technological capabilities that cannot be produced domestically overnight. Digital infrastructure, telecommunications, cloud computing, advanced manufacturing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, semiconductors, payment systems and data centres have become strategic assets. South Africa's ability to regulate these areas is therefore connected to intellectual property regimes, foreign technology providers, international standards and global supply chains. A government may be politically independent while depending heavily upon technological systems developed and controlled elsewhere. Such dependence does not necessarily constitute domination, but it creates strategic vulnerability. When a country lacks domestic alternatives, its negotiating position weakens. Technology also transforms the meaning of sovereignty because data increasingly functions as an economic resource. The question is no longer simply who owns mines, factories or banks, but who owns the infrastructure through which information is generated, processed, stored and monetised. A genuinely developmental state therefore requires technological sovereignty alongside political sovereignty. The ANC's historical liberation project was principally concerned with overcoming racial political domination, but

twenty-first-century economic liberation requires the ability to participate meaningfully in the production of knowledge, technology and digital infrastructure. Without such capabilities, South Africa risks remaining a consumer and regulator of technologies whose strategic foundations lie elsewhere.

The energy sector demonstrates perhaps more visibly than any other sector how economic dependence can constrain governmental freedom. Electricity is not merely another commodity; it is the foundation upon which industrial production, mining, transport, telecommunications, hospitals, schools and households depend. South Africa's long struggle with electricity supply exposed the limitations of relying upon a single dominant public utility while simultaneously confronting questions about private generation, renewable energy, coal dependence, grid investment and energy transition. The transition toward renewable energy introduces another sovereignty dilemma. South Africa requires enormous investment to modernise its energy system, and much of that investment can come from international capital. Yet financing conditions, technology suppliers, climate commitments and global energy markets can influence the direction and pace of transition. A transition that is financed externally may produce significant developmental benefits, but it can also create new forms of dependency if domestic manufacturing, skills development and technological ownership are neglected. The strategic challenge is therefore to avoid replacing one dependency with another. Moving from fossil-fuel dependence toward renewable energy is not automatically equivalent to achieving energy sovereignty. True sovereignty requires domestic capabilities in generation, transmission, storage, manufacturing, maintenance and technological innovation. Otherwise, South Africa may successfully decarbonise while becoming dependent upon imported technologies, foreign financing and external supply chains.

Infrastructure presents the same contradiction in physical form. Roads, ports, railways, water systems, telecommunications networks and logistics corridors determine whether a national economy can function efficiently. South Africa's infrastructure needs are substantial, and public finances alone may not always be sufficient to meet them. Partnerships with private and foreign investors can therefore accelerate construction and modernisation. Yet infrastructure also creates long-term contractual relationships that may restrict future governments. Public-private partnerships, concession agreements, development finance arrangements and externally financed projects can involve commitments extending across decades. The government that signs an agreement may leave office long before the agreement expires, while subsequent governments remain bound by its terms. This raises a fundamental democratic question: how should present governments balance immediate developmental needs against the sovereignty of future governments? If infrastructure agreements contain extensive guarantees, tariffs, repayment obligations or dispute-resolution mechanisms, the state may possess less flexibility than it appears to possess formally. Sovereignty therefore includes intergenerational economic freedom. A democratic government should not merely ask whether an infrastructure project can be financed today; it must ask whether the contractual structure will permit future citizens to alter policy when circumstances change. Development without long-term policy autonomy can become another form of dependency.

International financial institutions further complicate the distinction between formal independence and substantive economic autonomy. Institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other multilateral development agencies provide finance, expertise, technical assistance and institutional support. Their role cannot simply be reduced to domination because many developing countries actively seek their assistance, particularly during fiscal or balance-of-

payments pressures. Nevertheless, international finance often comes with expectations concerning fiscal management, institutional reform, governance, debt sustainability and market regulation. These expectations can influence domestic policy even where formal conditionality is limited. The deeper issue is structural: countries with abundant domestic savings, diversified economies and strong currencies possess greater bargaining power than countries that require external financing to sustain investment or stabilise their economies. South Africa's relative economic sophistication gives it more policy space than many developing states, but it does not eliminate external constraint. The ability to borrow internationally, attract investment and maintain financial credibility becomes part of the state's strategic calculations. Consequently, sovereignty cannot be measured solely by whether international institutions can legally order South Africa to change its policies. It must also be measured by how much the possibility of losing access to external finance influences what policymakers consider feasible.

Credit ratings represent one of the clearest examples of how private and semi-public forms of authority influence democratic states. Rating agencies assess sovereign creditworthiness and communicate judgements that can affect investor perceptions and borrowing conditions. Their evaluations are not equivalent to elections, constitutional courts or parliamentary decisions, yet they can have material economic consequences. A negative assessment may contribute to increased borrowing costs or heightened perceptions of risk, while a positive assessment may improve investor confidence. The crucial issue is therefore not whether rating agencies deliberately control governments but whether governments adapt their fiscal and economic strategies partly in anticipation of how ratings agencies and international investors will interpret them. This creates an unusual form of authority. A private institution can possess no constitutional power to veto legislation while nevertheless influencing the economic cost of legislation. The democratic state remains legally free but economically disciplined. This is one of the defining features of contemporary global capitalism: power increasingly operates through prices, risk assessments and expectations rather than explicit commands. The sovereignty question must therefore include these indirect mechanisms. If a government can technically adopt a policy but anticipates that doing so will significantly increase the cost of borrowing, the policy may remain politically possible yet economically difficult. The difference between formal freedom and practical freedom becomes decisive.

Currency markets provide another mechanism through which external capital can discipline domestic policy. The South African rand is integrated into international financial markets, and its value responds to domestic economic conditions as well as global perceptions, commodity prices, interest-rate differentials, geopolitical developments and movements of international capital. Currency depreciation can increase the cost of imported goods, fuel, machinery and technology while simultaneously improving export competitiveness. Sharp movements can therefore have consequences far beyond financial markets. A government attempting to pursue aggressive fiscal expansion, monetary intervention or unconventional economic policies may face market reactions that affect inflation, capital flows and borrowing costs. The Reserve Bank's institutional independence further illustrates the tension between democratic accountability and macroeconomic credibility. Independence is designed to protect monetary policy from short-term political pressures and preserve price stability, but it also means that elected governments cannot simply instruct monetary authorities to finance political priorities without regard to macroeconomic consequences. This arrangement represents a deliberate limitation on majoritarian power in favour of institutional stability. The question is not whether such independence is inherently good or bad. The Pan-African intellectual question is whether the balance between monetary autonomy, democratic accountability

and developmental necessity is appropriate for a society attempting to overcome historically structured inequality.

Trade agreements introduce another layer of constraint because economic sovereignty does not mean economic isolation. South Africa's prosperity depends substantially upon regional and international trade. Its membership of the Southern African Development Community, African Continental Free Trade Area and broader international trading arrangements reflects the reality that African development requires larger integrated markets. Trade agreements can create opportunities by opening markets, reducing barriers and encouraging investment. At the same time, they establish rules that can restrict governments from adopting certain forms of protection, discrimination or industrial policy. This creates a fundamental tension between openness and developmental autonomy. Historically industrialised countries often used extensive state intervention during their own development, including tariffs, subsidies, procurement policies and strategic industrial support. Developing countries are frequently encouraged to liberalise within a rules-based international system that may reduce the policy instruments available to them. The issue is therefore not whether South Africa should reject international trade, but whether the architecture of trade permits sufficient developmental flexibility. A sovereign African economy must be able to trade with the world without surrendering the capacity to build domestic productive capabilities. Economic integration should enlarge sovereignty through collective bargaining power rather than diminish sovereignty through permanent dependence.

The African Continental Free Trade Area provides an opportunity to reinterpret sovereignty beyond the narrow framework of the nation-state. South Africa cannot achieve complete economic self-sufficiency, nor should it seek to do so. Its strategic interests are better served by participating in a continental market capable of increasing bargaining power relative to global corporations and external powers. Pan-African economic sovereignty therefore requires a shift from national isolation toward continental integration. If African countries negotiate separately with multinational corporations, international lenders and major trading powers, they frequently possess weaker bargaining positions than they would collectively. A continental market of hundreds of millions of consumers can create economies of scale, encourage intra-African industrialisation and provide a stronger foundation for technological development. South Africa's economic sovereignty is consequently inseparable from the sovereignty of Africa as a whole. This is consistent with the deeper logic of Pan-Africanism: political independence without economic cooperation leaves African states vulnerable to external leverage. The objective should not be to expel foreign capital but to transform the conditions under which it enters Africa. Capital should encounter African states capable of negotiating collectively, insisting upon local value addition, technology transfer, skills development, environmental responsibility and fair taxation. Continental integration can therefore become an instrument for converting fragmented national sovereignty into collective economic power.

Yet the history of the ANC reveals why this transformation has been difficult. The liberation movement inherited a country in which political power and economic power were organised according to fundamentally different principles. The democratic state could legislate immediately, but it could not instantaneously reconstruct ownership patterns developed over more than a century. The ANC consequently pursued a negotiated transition that prioritised political stability, constitutionalism and economic continuity. This was historically understandable. A violent confrontation with domestic and international capital could have generated severe economic disruption and potentially undermined the fragile democratic settlement. The compromise therefore

had rational strategic foundations. But every compromise produces consequences. By preserving substantial continuity in property ownership, financial structures, corporate organisation and global market integration, the democratic transition protected productive capacity while leaving significant structural economic power outside direct democratic control. The ANC's revolutionary project consequently achieved its greatest success in political liberation and its greatest compromise in the economic transformation of ownership and accumulation. Black political citizenship became universal, but economic citizenship remained deeply unequal. This contradiction explains much of the disappointment surrounding post-apartheid transformation. The electorate gained the right to change governments, but changing governments did not automatically mean changing the underlying distribution of productive wealth.

Black Economic Empowerment represented an important attempt to address this contradiction, but its achievements and limitations must be examined honestly. It created opportunities for Black participation in ownership, procurement, management and corporate advancement and helped produce a new Black entrepreneurial and professional class. However, transformation sometimes became associated with politically connected elites rather than mass economic empowerment. Where ownership transactions depended upon financing from existing financial institutions, the resulting structures could reproduce rather than fundamentally disrupt existing patterns of capital. Where empowerment became compliance-oriented, firms could satisfy formal requirements without transforming deeper productive relationships. This is not an argument for dismissing BEE or denying its historical importance. Rather, it demonstrates the limits of racial transformation when separated from broader structural questions of capital accumulation, industrial policy, land, finance, technology and worker participation. A Black-owned enterprise operating within an unchanged financial and market structure does not necessarily possess greater systemic power than the corporation it replaced. The objective of economic transformation should therefore move beyond who sits at the table toward who controls the table, who establishes the rules, who owns productive assets, who determines investment priorities and who captures the surplus generated by economic activity.

The mining question illustrates the tension between resource nationalism and investment dependence particularly sharply. South Africa possesses mineral resources whose strategic importance extends far beyond its borders. The global transition toward electric vehicles, renewable energy, advanced batteries and digital infrastructure has increased the significance of minerals such as platinum-group metals, manganese and other strategic commodities. This gives South Africa potential bargaining power. Yet mineral wealth alone does not guarantee sovereignty. A country may possess resources underground while foreign companies control technology, finance, processing, logistics and access to global markets. Resource nationalism therefore cannot be reduced to demanding greater state ownership. The real issue is the construction of an integrated mineral-development strategy capable of moving from extraction toward beneficiation, manufacturing and technological development. If Africa exports raw minerals and imports finished technologies, then mineral abundance can coexist with structural dependency. The sovereignty question consequently becomes a question of value chains. Who owns the processing plants? Who manufactures the machinery? Who controls patents? Who finances exploration? Who determines commodity prices? Who captures the highest-value stages of production? Without answers to these questions, the possession of mineral resources may provide revenue without producing genuine economic independence.

The financial sector raises an equally profound issue concerning the relationship between private wealth and democratic authority. Political democracy is based upon the principle that citizens possess equal political rights, but economic systems do not distribute influence equally. Individuals and corporations possessing enormous financial resources can influence investment, employment, lobbying, media ownership, philanthropy and public discourse in ways unavailable to ordinary citizens. South Africa's constitutional order limits direct political domination by private actors, but economic inequality can still translate into unequal political influence. The most important power of capital is often not the ability to purchase legislation openly; it is the ability to determine which economic options appear realistic. A government may consider expanding public ownership, strengthening labour rights, imposing higher taxation on wealth or restructuring financial institutions, but the anticipated reaction of investors becomes part of the policy calculation. In this sense, capital can exercise structural power without issuing political instructions. This is why conventional accounts of democracy that focus exclusively on elections are insufficient. A society may be electorally democratic while possessing profound inequalities in the capacity to shape economic outcomes. The democratic challenge is therefore to construct institutions through which economic power becomes more accountable without destroying the productive incentives and investment necessary for development.

The relationship between foreign capital and the South African state must consequently be understood through bargaining rather than simple domination. The state is not powerless. South Africa possesses a substantial domestic market, strategic minerals, sophisticated institutions, infrastructure, skilled professionals and access to regional markets. These assets provide bargaining power. Government can regulate corporations, impose taxation, establish labour standards, enforce competition law, determine environmental requirements and influence public procurement. The problem arises when state capacity is weakened by corruption, institutional fragmentation, political uncertainty, poor implementation or inadequate alternatives. The stronger the state, the more effectively it can negotiate with capital. The weaker the state, the more likely it is to compete for investment by offering concessions. This produces a crucial distinction between investment attraction and investment dependence. Attracting investment is developmental when the state determines the strategic conditions under which capital contributes to national objectives. Dependence emerges when the government becomes so concerned about retaining capital that it progressively narrows the range of policies it is willing to pursue. Sovereignty is therefore strengthened not by rejecting capital but by strengthening the state's capacity to negotiate with it.

This leads directly to the question of whether the South African government possesses meaningful policy freedom. The answer is neither absolute freedom nor complete constraint. South Africa possesses considerable policy autonomy in many areas, particularly because it has a large domestic economy, established constitutional institutions, a diversified productive base and relatively sophisticated public administration. Yet policy freedom varies according to sector and circumstance. Government has more freedom when policies do not threaten major investment interests, external financing conditions or macroeconomic stability. It has less freedom when a policy affects strategically important investors, sovereign borrowing costs, currency stability or access to international markets. This means sovereignty is multidimensional rather than binary. A country can possess extensive political sovereignty, moderate fiscal sovereignty, constrained monetary sovereignty, partial technological sovereignty and significant dependence upon international trade and investment. Such differentiation is analytically more useful than the simplistic claim that South Africa is either independent or controlled. The real intellectual task is to identify the specific institutions and relationships through which external economic power enters

domestic policymaking. Only then can democratic reform be designed intelligently rather than rhetorically.

The greatest danger is therefore not foreign investment itself but the absence of a coherent national developmental strategy capable of disciplining investment toward public objectives. Capital naturally seeks returns. It cannot be expected to behave as though it were a developmental state. If government does not establish clear priorities, private capital will determine investment according to profitability rather than social necessity. This is why industrial policy, public development finance, competition regulation, strategic procurement, research investment and skills development matter. A developmental state does not abolish markets; it shapes them. The objective is to ensure that markets operate within a framework designed to produce broad-based economic transformation. South Africa's challenge is to create institutions capable of coordinating public and private investment around long-term objectives. Such coordination requires competence, transparency and accountability. Without these, state intervention can become patronage, corruption or political allocation. But the opposite extreme is equally dangerous: leaving strategic economic decisions entirely to market forces assumes that private profitability will automatically produce social development. History provides little justification for that assumption. Economic sovereignty therefore requires a capable state that neither submits blindly to capital nor imagines that government can replace productive markets through administrative command.

The role of international capital must also be considered within the broader history of global inequality. The international economic system was not created on an equal starting line. Industrialised economies accumulated capital, technological knowledge and institutional advantages over centuries, while many African economies were structured around extraction, commodity exports and dependent trade relationships. Postcolonial states entered the global economy with limited industrial capacity and significant development needs. South Africa inherited an unusually advanced industrial economy by African standards, but one structured around racial exclusion and concentrated capital. Consequently, integration into global capitalism provided both opportunity and constraint. International markets could support industrial growth, but they could also reinforce commodity dependence. Foreign investment could create jobs, but profits could also leave the country. Global technology could accelerate development, but dependence on imported intellectual property could limit domestic capabilities. External finance could fund infrastructure, but debt could restrict future policy choices. The correct Pan-African position must therefore reject both romantic isolationism and uncritical globalisation. Africa needs the world, but the world also needs Africa. The strategic objective is to transform that relationship from one of dependence into one of mutual interdependence based upon stronger African productive capabilities and bargaining power.

The currency, banking and investment systems also reveal why the concept of sovereignty must be expanded beyond the state itself. Modern economic power operates through networks rather than only through territorial institutions. An investor in London, a mining corporation headquartered elsewhere, a bank operating in Johannesburg, a rating agency assessing sovereign risk, a technology company controlling a platform and a pension fund allocating capital may all influence economic outcomes in South Africa without sharing a common political institution. Power becomes dispersed across a network of actors. The state remains central because it possesses legal authority, taxation powers, regulatory capacity and coercive legitimacy, but it no longer possesses exclusive control over the economic environment. This is a defining characteristic of globalisation. The democratic challenge is therefore to extend accountability across these networks. Domestic regulation must be combined with regional cooperation, continental institutions and international rules capable of

preventing corporations from exploiting jurisdictional fragmentation. Tax avoidance, illicit financial flows, transfer pricing and regulatory arbitrage demonstrate why national sovereignty alone is insufficient. A country may enact excellent laws but struggle to enforce them if capital can move across borders faster than regulatory institutions can coordinate.

For South Africa, the solution cannot be a return to economic autarky because such a strategy would undermine the country's productive potential and isolate it from markets, technologies and investment opportunities. Nor can sovereignty mean simply maintaining formal political institutions while allowing external economic pressures to determine the practical boundaries of public policy. A more substantive conception of sovereignty would mean possessing enough productive capacity, financial resilience, technological competence, institutional strength and regional solidarity to make strategic decisions without catastrophic dependence upon external approval. This is a more demanding standard than legal independence, but it is also more realistic. Sovereignty should therefore be measured by the availability of alternatives. Can the government finance essential infrastructure through multiple channels? Can it source technology from several partners? Can it regulate foreign corporations without fearing economic collapse? Can it process its own minerals? Can it manufacture strategically important goods? Can it sustain food and energy security? Can it negotiate trade agreements from a position of strength? Can it mobilise domestic savings for national development? Every additional alternative expands sovereignty; every critical dependency narrows it.

The ANC's historical legacy must consequently be judged through this more sophisticated framework. It achieved an extraordinary political revolution by dismantling apartheid's legal architecture and establishing a democratic constitutional order. It expanded citizenship, political participation and formal equality on a scale that should not be minimised. It also introduced significant social programmes, public services and economic transformation initiatives that altered the lives of millions. Yet the movement did not fundamentally overturn the architecture of capital ownership. The compromise was partly deliberate and partly imposed by economic realities. The ANC entered government in a global environment in which capital mobility had increased, socialist alternatives had weakened and international economic institutions strongly favoured market-oriented governance. Its leadership faced the challenge of governing an economy integrated into global markets while simultaneously responding to enormous expectations for redistribution. The resulting policy trajectory therefore reflected compromise between liberation ideals and macroeconomic constraints. The tragedy is not that compromise occurred; all serious governing requires compromise. The tragedy is that the country did not always build sufficiently powerful public and developmental institutions to ensure that compromise produced a progressively more transformed economy. Political liberation became durable, but economic transformation remained incomplete.

This incomplete transformation helps explain why South Africa's post-apartheid political conflicts increasingly revolve around economic sovereignty. Debates over land, mining, electricity, industrialisation, public ownership, foreign investment, trade, monetary policy and Black economic empowerment are not merely technical policy disputes. They are arguments about who should have the authority to determine the country's economic future. One side fears that aggressive intervention will undermine investment, weaken the currency and reduce growth. Another argues that excessive accommodation of capital perpetuates historical inequality and converts political democracy into a limited form of social citizenship. Both concerns contain legitimate elements. The central challenge is to escape the false choice between neoliberal dependence and economically destructive populism.

South Africa needs an economic model capable of combining investment, growth, redistribution, technological development and democratic accountability. Such a model would require strategic state capacity rather than ideological absolutism. It would recognise that capital is necessary while insisting that capital operates within a national developmental framework. The question should never simply be whether foreign capital is welcome. The question should be: under what conditions does foreign capital strengthen South African sovereignty rather than weaken it?

The answer ultimately lies in redefining sovereignty as capacity rather than isolation. A sovereign South Africa is not one that refuses international investment, rejects multinational corporations or withdraws from global trade. Such a country would be neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. A sovereign South Africa is one capable of engaging the global economy on terms that advance the interests of its people. It must possess institutions strong enough to regulate corporations, financial systems capable of mobilising domestic capital, industrial strategies capable of creating value beyond raw-material extraction, technological policies capable of producing knowledge domestically, energy systems capable of supporting industrial development, and regional alliances capable of increasing African bargaining power. Foreign capital should be treated as an instrument of development rather than as the architect of development. Multinational corporations should be partners subject to public rules rather than substitute governments. Credit ratings should inform policy rather than determine it. Currency markets should be managed responsibly rather than feared politically. Trade agreements should enlarge productive possibilities rather than permanently restrict developmental choices. International financial institutions should provide resources and expertise without becoming the authors of national development strategies.

The deeper Pan-African lesson is that the struggle for liberation did not end when the apartheid state disappeared. The first liberation concerned political citizenship and racial domination; the second concerns economic agency within a global system structured by unequal ownership, technology, finance and bargaining power. South Africa's experience demonstrates that political sovereignty without sufficient economic capacity remains vulnerable to external pressures. But it also demonstrates that economic sovereignty cannot be achieved through national rhetoric alone. It requires institutions, capital, skills, technology, industrial capabilities, continental cooperation and disciplined public leadership. The question of who exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa must therefore be answered at several levels simultaneously. The electorate exercises constitutional power. Parliament exercises legislative power. The executive exercises governmental power. Courts exercise constitutional authority. Provinces and municipalities exercise territorial authority. But corporations, banks, investors, international financial institutions, rating agencies, technology firms and global markets exercise forms of structural economic power that do not originate in elections. The central democratic challenge is to bring these forms of power into a more accountable relationship with the public interest. Until that happens, South Africa will remain politically sovereign but economically constrained: a democracy capable of changing governments more easily than it can change the deeper structures through which economic power is accumulated, allocated and exercised.

Chapter Eighteen—THE FAILURE OR TRANSFORMATION OF THE REVOLUTION

Did the ANC Abandon the Revolution?

The most provocative question confronting the history of post-apartheid South Africa is not whether the African National Congress achieved anything after 1994, but whether it transformed the foundations of power deeply enough to prevent the restoration of the economic and social relations upon which apartheid had been built. The question must therefore be framed beyond the simplistic opposition between “revolutionary success” and “revolutionary betrayal,” because both formulations conceal important historical realities. The ANC inherited a state whose political architecture was being democratised but whose economy remained profoundly concentrated, racially unequal and institutionally connected to the accumulation patterns of the apartheid era. It inherited mines, banks, corporations, agricultural land, industrial conglomerates, financial institutions, urban property markets and productive assets that were not transferred wholesale into democratic ownership. Political sovereignty changed dramatically, but economic sovereignty changed much more slowly. The ballot became universal, Parliament became representative, the judiciary acquired constitutional independence, racial legislation was dismantled, and millions of citizens acquired rights that apartheid had denied them. Yet the decisive question is whether political democracy acquired sufficient command over the material structures that determine the distribution of wealth, opportunity and productive power. The Freedom Charter had imagined a South Africa in which the people would govern and the country's wealth would belong to its people. The Reconstruction and Development Programme translated part of that aspiration into a developmental programme centred upon meeting basic needs and restructuring society. But the trajectory from the RDP to GEAR represented a significant shift in the governing philosophy of the democratic state. The ANC did not simply abandon its revolutionary language; it increasingly attempted to reconcile liberation with macroeconomic stability, investor confidence, private accumulation and global integration. This produced a hybrid political economy in which democratic government possessed extensive constitutional authority while private capital retained enormous structural influence. The revolution therefore did not disappear in 1994; it entered a new and deeply contested phase in which the struggle moved from political liberation toward the transformation of economic power. The tragedy, if one wishes to call it that, lies not in the absence of change but in the incompleteness of transformation. The achievement of democracy was historic, but the consolidation of an economically democratic society remained unfinished.

The Freedom Charter remains the most important ideological reference point for evaluating whether the post-apartheid settlement represented transformation or compromise. Adopted at Kliptown in 1955, the Charter articulated a radical democratic conception of citizenship in which South Africa's wealth, land and political institutions would serve the people rather than a racially defined minority. Its famous propositions concerning the people governing, the nationalisation of monopoly industries, redistribution of land and the democratic control of economic resources were never merely decorative slogans. They represented a political theory of liberation in which political equality was inseparable from economic restructuring. The Charter's historical importance is precisely that it refused to treat apartheid as merely a racial problem detached from capitalism,

property and class power. It understood racial domination as embedded within a broader system of economic organisation. Consequently, the post-1994 question cannot simply be whether apartheid laws disappeared, but whether the economic architecture that sustained racial privilege was sufficiently reconstructed. Here the ANC encountered a fundamental contradiction. It had won political power through a liberation movement whose ideological traditions contained socialist, nationalist, democratic and mixed-economy currents, but it inherited a globally integrated capitalist economy whose stability depended upon domestic and international confidence. The liberation movement therefore became the governing party of a constitutional capitalist state rather than the revolutionary movement of an unconstrained postcolonial rupture. This distinction is critical. Once the ANC became responsible for currency stability, fiscal management, employment, investment, public debt, international trade and the confidence of domestic and foreign investors, its revolutionary programme had to operate through institutions that constrained the speed and scale of redistribution. The party's leadership consequently confronted choices that had not existed in the same form while it was in opposition. The question became not simply what should be transformed, but what could be transformed without destabilising the economy and undermining the state's governing capacity. The result was neither pure continuity nor complete rupture. It was a negotiated transformation in which some institutions were radically reconstructed while others remained substantially intact. The Freedom Charter survived as an ethical and political horizon, but its economic clauses were increasingly interpreted through the practical constraints of a market-based democratic economy. The controversy therefore concerns the distance between the Charter's transformative imagination and the actual institutional settlement that emerged after 1994. That distance became one of the central fault lines of post-apartheid politics.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme represented the early democratic state's clearest attempt to translate liberation into a material programme of social reconstruction. The RDP recognised that democracy could not be sustained by constitutional rights alone if millions of citizens remained without adequate housing, electricity, water, education, healthcare and economic opportunity. Its underlying philosophy was therefore developmental and redistributive: political democracy had to produce tangible improvements in everyday life. The programme understood that apartheid had created not only racial discrimination but spatially organised poverty, unequal infrastructure, fragmented communities and highly unequal access to public resources. The state therefore had to become an instrument of reconstruction. In important respects, it did. Democratic South Africa witnessed massive expansion in access to electricity, formal housing, social grants, water infrastructure and basic services. Millions of households previously excluded from public provision entered systems of social protection and state-supported development. These achievements should not be trivialised because they demonstrate that democratic government materially altered the lives of large sections of the population. Yet the RDP also encountered institutional and fiscal limitations, and by 1996 it was effectively displaced by the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy. The significance of this transition extends beyond a change in policy terminology. GEAR represented a more market-oriented macroeconomic framework that placed fiscal discipline, competitiveness, inflation control, investment and economic growth at the centre of economic management. Its defenders argued that redistribution without sustainable growth would be fiscally impossible and that South Africa required investment and macroeconomic stability to overcome unemployment and poverty. Its critics argued that the shift weakened the redistributive ambitions of the liberation movement and placed the preferences of capital closer to the centre of economic policy. Both interpretations contain part of the truth. The state needed growth and macroeconomic stability, but the distribution of growth remained deeply unequal. The fundamental problem was therefore not simply whether GEAR was “neoliberal” or

"revolutionary," but whether the economic strategy created sufficient mechanisms for transferring productive power, wealth and ownership toward the historically excluded majority. The RDP had framed transformation as reconstruction; GEAR increasingly framed it as growth with redistribution. The historical question is whether redistribution became strong enough to alter the underlying ownership structure. In that respect, the record remained deeply incomplete.

GEAR became one of the defining symbols of the argument that the ANC had abandoned its revolutionary project, although such a conclusion requires greater analytical precision. The policy did not repeal the Constitution, dismantle public institutions or reverse the democratic transition, and it did not prevent the state from undertaking substantial social spending. Rather, it signalled a shift in the state's approach to the relationship between markets and transformation. The government increasingly accepted that private investment, domestic capital formation and integration into the global economy were indispensable to national development. The strategic assumption was that a growing economy would expand the resources available for redistribution. Yet growth does not automatically transform ownership, and markets do not automatically correct historically produced inequalities. An economy can grow while its productive assets remain concentrated. It can create employment while reproducing unequal bargaining power between labour and capital. It can generate tax revenue while leaving land, finance, mining and industrial ownership substantially concentrated. This was the central contradiction that emerged in democratic South Africa. The state acquired political legitimacy and extensive regulatory authority, but it did not necessarily acquire direct control over the commanding heights of the economy. Capital retained the ability to allocate investment, relocate resources, influence employment decisions and respond to policy through market mechanisms. Government could legislate, tax, regulate and procure, but it could not simply command the economy in the manner imagined by some interpretations of the Freedom Charter. The ANC consequently moved toward a model of transformative capitalism rather than revolutionary economic expropriation. Black ownership and participation were promoted through legislation and policy, but the broader structure of private ownership remained largely intact. This produced an enormous expansion of the black middle and professional classes, but it did not eliminate mass unemployment or structural poverty. It also generated new forms of elite accumulation in which politically connected individuals could gain access to economic opportunities without transforming the underlying architecture of ownership. The result was a transformation of racial representation within capitalism rather than the abolition of capitalism's structural inequalities. That distinction lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding the ANC's post-1994 record. The revolutionary project was transformed, but whether it was transformed sufficiently remains an unresolved historical question.

Black Economic Empowerment emerged as perhaps the most ambitious attempt to reconcile economic transformation with continued private ownership. Its basic premise was historically defensible: if apartheid had deliberately constructed an economy in which white ownership and management dominated productive assets, then democratic transformation required deliberate mechanisms to broaden black participation. BEE therefore sought to increase black ownership, management, skills development, procurement and enterprise participation. It created opportunities that had previously been structurally closed to the black majority and contributed to the emergence of a substantial black corporate, professional and entrepreneurial class. This represented genuine transformation and should be acknowledged as such. Yet BEE also exposed the limitations of attempting to transform an unequal economy primarily through participation in existing ownership structures. Ownership deals could create individual or group enrichment without substantially changing the distribution of productive assets across society. Some transactions became associated

with politically connected elites, fronting arrangements and narrow forms of empowerment that benefited a relatively small number of beneficiaries. The emergence of a black capitalist class was historically significant, but the question remained whether black capitalism could become a vehicle for mass economic emancipation. If empowerment produces shareholders but does not create sufficient employment, productive capacity, industrial ownership and broad-based wealth, then its transformative reach remains limited. This does not mean BEE was inherently a failure. Rather, it demonstrates the difference between changing the racial composition of ownership and democratising ownership itself. The former can occur while the latter remains incomplete. A revolutionary interpretation of economic transformation would ask not merely how many black individuals entered corporate boardrooms but how many communities acquired durable productive assets. It would ask whether workers gained stronger ownership rights, whether small producers gained access to capital, whether townships became productive economic centres, whether rural communities gained secure control over land and whether industrial policy created domestically controlled productive capacity. BEE achieved some of these objectives, but unevenly. Its greatest weakness was that transformation could become measured through compliance scores rather than structural redistribution. In that sense, the empowerment project risked converting the revolutionary question of economic justice into an administrative question of corporate participation.

Land reform represents perhaps the most emotionally and politically charged measure of whether the democratic revolution transformed apartheid's material foundations. Apartheid did not merely discriminate against black South Africans in urban life; it reorganised land ownership, settlement and agricultural production through a long history of dispossession. The democratic state therefore inherited a land question that was simultaneously economic, historical, spatial and psychological. The constitutional settlement attempted to reconcile property rights with land reform, creating a framework in which restitution, redistribution and tenure reform could proceed within constitutional limits. This represented an important democratic compromise, but the pace and scale of land transformation became a major source of frustration. The principle that property could not simply be treated as inviolable was established, yet the practical mechanisms for transferring land were often slow, bureaucratic and financially constrained. Land reform therefore became an example of a broader pattern in which the state possessed transformative authority but struggled to convert that authority into rapid structural change. The problem was compounded by the complexity of agricultural productivity, land valuation, institutional capacity and the need to ensure that beneficiaries could sustain productive use. A serious Pan-African analysis cannot reduce the land question to a simple slogan of expropriation, because productive agriculture requires infrastructure, finance, skills, markets and institutional support. Nevertheless, caution cannot become a permanent justification for postponement. If political liberation leaves the ownership and spatial distribution of land largely intact, then the economic geography of apartheid continues to shape the post-apartheid order. Land is not merely an asset; it is power, security, identity and productive capacity. The unresolved land question therefore demonstrates the limits of a transformation strategy that seeks to reconcile historical justice with inherited property relations without sufficiently accelerating redistribution. It also reveals how constitutional democracy can simultaneously enable transformation and constrain the methods through which transformation can occur. The challenge was never simply whether land should be redistributed, but whether democratic institutions could achieve redistribution at a scale capable of fundamentally altering inherited patterns of ownership. That remains one of the most serious unfinished dimensions of the revolution.

The nationalisation debate reveals even more clearly the distance between the Freedom Charter's economic imagination and the eventual policy trajectory of the democratic state. The Charter's call

for the nationalisation of monopoly industries generated generations of debate over whether the commanding heights of the economy should be placed under public ownership. Mining became particularly symbolic because mineral wealth had historically been central to South Africa's racial capitalist order. Nationalisation advocates argued that mineral resources belonged to the people and that democratic control over strategic resources could finance development, industrialisation and redistribution. Opponents warned that indiscriminate nationalisation could damage investment, weaken productive efficiency, increase fiscal risks and destabilise the economy. The ANC ultimately did not embrace wholesale nationalisation of the economy. Instead, it pursued regulation, taxation, licensing, empowerment requirements, public ownership in selected strategic areas and partnerships between the state and private capital. This represented a profound departure from the most radical interpretation of the Freedom Charter. Yet it would be analytically inaccurate to describe the decision simply as surrender. Nationalisation is only one instrument of economic sovereignty, and state ownership can itself fail when institutions are captured, poorly managed or politically manipulated. The deeper issue is whether society exercises effective control over strategic resources, not merely whether the legal title belongs to the state. A public corporation can remain unaccountable to citizens just as a private corporation can remain structurally powerful over government. What matters is democratic capacity, institutional competence and the ability to direct investment toward national developmental objectives. South Africa's experience with state-owned enterprises demonstrates precisely this dilemma. Public ownership without effective governance can produce corruption, inefficiency and fiscal crisis. Private ownership without strong public regulation can reproduce concentrated economic power. The revolutionary question therefore cannot be reduced to “state versus private.” It must ask who controls strategic decisions, who benefits from production, who bears risk and who possesses the institutional power to determine national economic priorities. The ANC's retreat from wholesale nationalisation therefore marked a transformation of revolutionary strategy, but not necessarily the abandonment of economic sovereignty as an objective. The unresolved question is whether alternative mechanisms of democratic economic control were developed strongly enough to compensate for the rejection of nationalisation.

The social grant system represents one of the clearest areas in which the democratic state delivered a form of social revolution even without transforming ownership. Millions of South Africans gained access to income support through pensions, child-related grants, disability support and other social protection mechanisms. This fundamentally altered the relationship between poor citizens and the state. Under apartheid, state resources were distributed through an explicitly racial hierarchy; democratic government expanded social protection on the basis of citizenship and social need. The social grant system consequently became a major instrument of redistribution and a crucial component of household survival. It reduced extreme deprivation, supported children, sustained elderly citizens and injected purchasing power into poor communities. From a social-democratic perspective, this was a major achievement of the post-apartheid state. Yet grants also expose the limits of redistribution without structural economic transformation. A grant can alleviate poverty, but it cannot by itself create productive ownership, industrial employment or secure livelihoods. When millions of citizens depend upon social transfers because the economy cannot absorb them into decent work, redistribution begins to compensate for the failures of the productive system rather than transform it. The state becomes an allocator of survival without becoming sufficiently powerful as an organiser of productive inclusion. This creates a paradox at the heart of South African democracy. The government became extraordinarily important in the daily survival of millions of people while remaining less capable of restructuring the private accumulation system that generated inequality. The welfare state therefore mitigated the social consequences of economic

exclusion without fully abolishing the mechanisms that reproduced that exclusion. This should not diminish the significance of social grants; rather, it clarifies their historical meaning. They were evidence that the democratic state could redistribute resources effectively, but they also demonstrated that social citizenship had developed faster than economic citizenship. Political rights became universal in 1994, social protection expanded substantially thereafter, but secure access to productive assets, quality employment and economic ownership remained deeply unequal. The revolutionary project consequently achieved considerable redistributive capacity without achieving comprehensive economic democratisation.

Housing provides another powerful example of the complexity of the ANC's record. The democratic government constructed millions of houses and expanded access to formal shelter on a scale that should be understood against the extraordinary housing deprivation inherited from apartheid. Entire communities that had been relegated to informal settlements or racially segregated townships gained access to formal housing, electricity, sanitation and municipal services. The provision of a house became one of the most tangible symbols of democratic citizenship. Yet housing policy also reproduced some of the spatial contradictions of the old order. Many low-income developments were constructed far from economic centres, employment opportunities and efficient transport networks. A person could receive formal housing while remaining physically separated from the productive economy. The result was a paradox in which the state improved the physical condition of millions of households without fully dismantling the spatial geography through which apartheid had organised economic exclusion. Property ownership expanded, but the value and location of many properties remained constrained by inherited urban patterns. Townships remained economically peripheral while wealthy metropolitan areas continued to concentrate capital, services and opportunity. Housing therefore illustrates why transformation must be measured not only by the quantity of state delivery but by the restructuring of spatial power. A house is not simply a roof; it is an asset, a location, an entry point into markets and a foundation for intergenerational wealth. If housing policy provides shelter without creating access to economic centres, financial capital and productive opportunities, then it partially addresses poverty without fully dismantling its structural geography. The ANC government can legitimately claim a historic housing achievement, but the deeper revolutionary objective of spatial justice remained incomplete. The democratic state changed the beneficiaries of public housing dramatically, yet it did not fully redesign the economic geography inherited from apartheid. This distinction between delivery and transformation is essential. Delivery improves people's lives; transformation changes the structures that determine why certain people require delivery in the first place. Post-apartheid South Africa achieved much of the former while struggling to complete the latter.

Education constitutes another arena in which the democratic state produced major changes while confronting profound structural obstacles. Apartheid education was explicitly designed to reproduce racial hierarchy, with black education deliberately under-resourced and oriented toward subordinate economic roles. Democratic government therefore had to construct a common national education system while expanding access and attempting to remove racial barriers. Significant progress occurred in enrolment, institutional integration, curriculum reform, school infrastructure and access to higher education. Yet equality of access did not automatically produce equality of outcomes. Wealthier communities continued to possess schools with stronger resources, better infrastructure, more stable learning environments and greater access to supplementary educational opportunities. Universities expanded access to historically excluded groups, but the cost of higher education and broader inequalities in schooling continued to constrain social mobility. The student movements that emerged around fees and decolonisation demonstrated that the younger generation understood

precisely this contradiction. Formal equality had been achieved, but substantive equality remained elusive. The education struggle consequently moved from the question of racial exclusion to the question of social reproduction. Who has the resources to acquire elite qualifications? Who attends institutions with the strongest reputations? Who can afford accommodation, technology and transport? Who converts education into employment and ownership? These questions demonstrate that educational transformation cannot be separated from economic transformation. A democratic state can abolish racial barriers while leaving class inequalities powerful enough to reproduce privilege through new mechanisms. The ANC therefore deserves recognition for democratising access, but it must also be judged against the continued reproduction of unequal educational outcomes. The revolutionary promise of education was not simply universal enrolment; it was the creation of a society in which birth no longer predicted intellectual opportunity. That objective remains unfinished. Education became more democratic, but the unequal distribution of social and economic capital continued to shape educational achievement. Thus, once again, transformation occurred but did not penetrate every structural layer of inequality.

Healthcare demonstrates a similar pattern of substantial progress combined with persistent structural inequality. The democratic state expanded access to public healthcare and sought to dismantle the racial hierarchy of apartheid medicine. Primary healthcare, maternal services, HIV treatment and other public interventions produced major social gains, while later reforms such as National Health Insurance reflected the ambition to move toward a more unified system. The expansion of healthcare rights represented a profound departure from apartheid's unequal provision. Yet South Africa continued to operate a highly unequal health system in which private healthcare served a relatively smaller, wealthier population while the public system carried the burden of the majority. This duality mirrors the broader structure of the economy. The state can guarantee constitutional rights while material inequalities determine the quality and speed with which those rights are experienced. The healthcare system therefore became a microcosm of post-apartheid political economy: democratic government expanded access without completely eliminating market-based stratification. Public hospitals could be overwhelmed by demand while private institutions possessed sophisticated infrastructure and financial resources. The question of transformation therefore extends beyond whether the state spends more money. It concerns whether citizens enjoy comparable social rights regardless of income. In this sense, healthcare exposes the limits of a political settlement that democratised citizenship but did not completely socialise the distribution of essential services. The ANC's achievement was significant because it created a legal and institutional framework for universal rights. Its limitation was that the socioeconomic conditions necessary to realise those rights remained unequal. A revolutionary interpretation of healthcare would therefore judge success not simply by access but by equality of outcomes, dignity and institutional quality. The democratic state moved South Africa substantially away from apartheid healthcare, but it did not eliminate the economic divisions that continue to structure health. This reinforces the broader argument that political liberation created the conditions for transformation without guaranteeing its completion.

Industrial policy represents one of the areas where the ANC attempted to move beyond redistribution toward productive transformation. A revolutionary economic project cannot rely indefinitely upon social transfers; it must create productive capacity, skilled employment, domestic industrial ownership and technological capabilities. South Africa inherited an economy highly concentrated in mining, finance, energy, manufacturing and large corporate conglomerates. The democratic state therefore developed industrial policies intended to promote manufacturing, localisation, beneficiation, small enterprise development, infrastructure and strategic sectors. These

interventions reflected an understanding that the market alone would not necessarily generate the industrial transformation required by a deeply unequal economy. Yet industrial policy repeatedly encountered the structural power of established capital, infrastructure constraints, energy shortages, skills deficits, global competition and institutional weaknesses. The challenge was particularly acute because South Africa entered democracy at a moment when globalisation was accelerating and international production networks were becoming increasingly competitive. Domestic industries therefore faced pressure to reduce costs while the state sought to promote employment and redistribution. This created a difficult balancing act. Protection could support local industry but raise prices or provoke international retaliation; openness could attract investment but expose domestic producers to stronger competition. The ANC's industrial strategy therefore became a continuous negotiation between developmental ambition and global economic realities. Some sectors benefited from state support, procurement and industrial policy, but the economy did not undergo the scale of structural diversification necessary to absorb millions of unemployed citizens. This is one reason why unemployment became such a persistent challenge despite decades of democratic governance. Political inclusion expanded faster than productive inclusion. The state succeeded in creating new institutions and programmes, but the productive economy remained insufficiently transformed to provide mass employment. The revolutionary project therefore encountered its deepest obstacle not necessarily in Parliament but in the structure of production itself. Without a sufficiently dynamic and inclusive productive system, political democracy risks becoming responsible for managing deprivation rather than eliminating its causes.

State-owned enterprises provide perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the tension between public ownership and public control. Companies such as Eskom, Transnet, South African Airways and other state entities were expected to perform strategic developmental functions, including energy provision, transport, logistics and infrastructure. In principle, these institutions represented mechanisms through which the democratic state could retain influence over strategic sectors and support national development. In practice, governance failures, political interference, corruption, procurement weaknesses, debt accumulation and operational deterioration severely weakened some of these entities. The resulting crises generated arguments that state ownership itself was inefficient and that greater private participation was necessary. Yet such a conclusion risks confusing failures of governance with the concept of public ownership. The central issue is not whether an enterprise is publicly or privately owned in the abstract, but whether its institutional design allows it to serve a coherent public developmental purpose. Eskom's crisis, for example, had consequences far beyond the corporation itself because energy is the foundation of industrial production and economic activity. When a strategic state institution fails, the state does not merely lose money; society loses productive capacity. The state capture period made this problem even more severe by demonstrating how political networks could appropriate public institutions for private accumulation. This was perhaps the darkest contradiction of the post-apartheid revolution: institutions created to serve the public could become instruments for elite extraction. Yet the appropriate response cannot simply be to privatise everything, because private monopoly can also generate forms of structural power beyond direct democratic control. The real challenge is to build competent, transparent and accountable public institutions capable of exercising strategic economic power without becoming vehicles for political patronage. In this respect, the failure of some state-owned enterprises was a failure of governance, leadership and institutional design rather than proof that public ownership is inherently incompatible with efficiency. The revolutionary question remains whether South Africa can construct a state strong enough to control strategic assets while democratic enough to prevent their capture.

The concept of state capture fundamentally altered the interpretation of the post-apartheid political economy because it revealed that corruption was not simply a collection of isolated criminal acts but could become a mechanism through which public power and private economic interests interacted. State capture demonstrated that political office, public procurement, state-owned enterprises and private business networks could become interconnected systems of accumulation. This was devastating for the credibility of the liberation movement because the ANC had historically presented itself as the instrument through which political power would be used for collective emancipation. When sections of the political elite became associated with patronage and private enrichment, the revolutionary state appeared to reproduce precisely the kind of elite domination that liberation was supposed to overcome. Yet state capture should not be interpreted as proof that the entire ANC or the entire democratic state was captured. South Africa's institutions—including investigative journalism, courts, civil society, opposition parties, professional bodies and investigative commissions—demonstrated considerable resilience. The exposure of corruption itself revealed that democratic institutions retained capacities for accountability. The deeper lesson is that political liberation does not automatically produce ethical government. A movement can inherit a state, control Parliament and command electoral majorities while still struggling to develop institutional cultures capable of resisting patronage. This problem is particularly severe when a liberation movement remains simultaneously a political party and a carrier of historical legitimacy. The moral authority of liberation can become a resource for political protection, making criticism appear hostile to the revolution itself. Yet a genuine revolutionary tradition should treat accountability as an extension of liberation rather than an attack upon it. The people cannot become sovereign if public institutions are captured by private networks. Economic transformation cannot occur if state resources are diverted from development into elite accumulation. Thus state capture represented not merely corruption but a direct assault upon the possibility of democratic economic transformation. It showed that the greatest threat to a developmental state may come not only from external capital but from the internal conversion of public authority into private wealth.

The most difficult question, therefore, concerns who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa. The formal answer is straightforward: constitutional institutions exercise sovereign authority through Parliament, the executive, courts and democratic elections. But political power and structural economic power are not identical. A government can legislate while corporations decide whether to invest. Parliament can pass laws while financial markets determine the cost of capital. Ministers can announce industrial strategies while firms determine production decisions. The state can regulate mining while private companies retain operational control over mineral extraction. Government can promote transformation while wealth accumulated over generations continues to provide private actors with enormous economic leverage. This is what political economists describe as structural power: the capacity to influence government not necessarily through direct commands but through control over investment, employment, capital allocation and economic activity. South Africa's democratic state therefore exists within a political economy where private capital possesses substantial structural influence. This does not mean that corporations secretly govern the country or that elected institutions are meaningless. It means that the state governs within constraints created by the organisation of economic power. The ANC understood this reality, which partly explains its cautious approach to radical economic restructuring. The fear of capital flight, declining investment, currency instability, credit downgrades and economic contraction influenced the boundaries of feasible policy. Such constraints are real, but they also reveal the unfinished character of sovereignty. If a democratic majority cannot meaningfully alter the distribution of productive resources because economic disruption would be too costly, then formal political sovereignty coexists with structural economic dependence. This is not unique to

South Africa; it is a general feature of capitalist democracies. Yet South Africa's history makes the contradiction especially sharp because the economy was constructed through racial dispossession and colonial extraction. The unresolved question is therefore not whether capital has power, but whether democratic institutions possess enough countervailing power to ensure that capital serves society rather than society serving capital. That is the deeper economic sovereignty question left by the democratic transition.

The ANC's relationship with organised labour further demonstrates the complexity of its transformation. The alliance between the ANC, the South African Communist Party and COSATU provided the liberation movement with a powerful working-class component and gave organised labour an important role in shaping democratic policy. Labour rights expanded enormously after 1994, collective bargaining became constitutionally protected, minimum labour standards strengthened and workers acquired legal protections that apartheid had denied them. These achievements were not insignificant. They represented a fundamental transformation of the legal status of labour. Yet legal rights did not eliminate economic insecurity. South Africa remained characterised by high unemployment, informal work, precarious employment and unequal bargaining power. The working class gained political rights but continued to face substantial economic vulnerability. This contradiction became particularly visible when workers confronted the state itself during strikes and protests. The democratic government could simultaneously be the representative of workers politically and the employer or regulator against whom workers mobilised. The revolutionary alliance therefore contained an internal contradiction: the movement that had historically represented labour became responsible for governing a capitalist economy in which labour conflict remained inevitable. The resulting tensions demonstrated that liberation movements become transformed by the responsibilities of government. They must mediate between competing social classes rather than simply represent one side of a revolutionary struggle. This inevitably produces compromises. The ANC became a governing coalition of interests encompassing workers, emerging black business, rural communities, professionals, public-sector employees and political elites. Its revolutionary identity therefore increasingly required the management of contradictions rather than the elimination of them. Whether this constituted betrayal or maturation depends upon one's theoretical framework. A Marxist interpretation may emphasise the persistence of class power; a nationalist interpretation may emphasise the expansion of black citizenship and ownership; a social-democratic interpretation may highlight redistribution and public services. The historical record supports elements of all three. The central conclusion is that the ANC transformed the political position of labour without fully transforming the economic structure within which labour sells its work. That gap between political emancipation and economic emancipation remains fundamental.

The emergence of a black middle class represents another achievement that simultaneously demonstrates the success and limitations of the post-apartheid revolution. Apartheid deliberately excluded the black majority from many professions, ownership structures and senior positions within the economy. Democracy opened universities, professions, government institutions, corporate leadership and entrepreneurial opportunities to a much larger black population. A substantial black middle class emerged, and this represents genuine social transformation. Families that had been systematically excluded from economic advancement gained access to professional careers, property ownership, education and business opportunities. Yet the emergence of a black middle class also generated a debate over whether the revolution had become a project of elite incorporation rather than mass emancipation. If transformation is concentrated among those with the education, networks and resources necessary to access empowerment opportunities, then the

majority may experience political inclusion without equivalent economic advancement. This is where the distinction between representative transformation and structural transformation becomes decisive. A Parliament that reflects the racial composition of the population is transformed in one sense. A corporate economy in which ownership remains concentrated is not transformed to the same degree. A public service that employs large numbers of black professionals is transformed institutionally. A labour market in which millions remain unemployed remains structurally unequal. The black middle class therefore became both a product of the revolution and a reminder of its unfinished character. It demonstrated that apartheid's racial barriers could be dismantled, but it also revealed that social class increasingly became a central mechanism through which inequality was reproduced. The danger is not the existence of a black middle class; indeed, its expansion is essential to a healthy democratic society. The danger lies in mistaking elite advancement for comprehensive emancipation. A successful revolution should not merely replace the racial identity of elites; it should expand the number of people who possess meaningful economic security and productive agency. The ANC succeeded spectacularly in opening doors that apartheid had closed, but it struggled to ensure that the economic staircase behind those doors became accessible to the majority. That is why the debate over transformation cannot be reduced to racial representation. It must include class, ownership, geography, employment and access to capital.

The charge that the ANC abandoned the revolution is therefore simultaneously compelling and inadequate. It is compelling because the post-1994 government did move away from some of the more radical economic expectations associated with the Freedom Charter and the early RDP. It accepted a mixed economy, retained substantial private ownership, rejected wholesale nationalisation and increasingly relied upon market mechanisms to organise production. It is inadequate because it ignores the scale of political, social and institutional transformation that actually occurred. Apartheid was dismantled as a legal order. Universal suffrage was established. A progressive Constitution became the foundation of the state. Social grants expanded. Housing and basic services reached millions. Black participation in government, professions and business increased dramatically. Labour rights were strengthened. Public healthcare and education expanded. South Africa became a constitutional democracy in which the principle of racial supremacy was formally destroyed. These are not minor reforms; they represent a historic transformation of the political order. The more precise argument is therefore that the ANC transformed the revolution from a project of revolutionary rupture into a project of negotiated democratic reconstruction. In doing so, it preserved some revolutionary objectives while abandoning or postponing others. This transformation was partly voluntary and partly imposed by historical circumstances. The collapse of the Soviet Union altered the global ideological environment. The end of apartheid required negotiation rather than military victory. International finance and globalisation imposed constraints. Domestic capital remained powerful. Institutional capacity was uneven. The democratic state faced enormous expectations while inheriting a deeply unequal economy. The ANC therefore chose a path that sought to combine political liberation with economic stability. The historical cost of that choice was that some structural inequalities proved more resilient than anticipated. But the benefit was that South Africa avoided a potentially catastrophic rupture and established one of the world's most ambitious constitutional democracies. The question should therefore shift from “Did the ANC abandon the revolution?” to “What happened to the revolution when it became responsible for governing a capitalist, globally integrated and structurally unequal state?” That question produces a much more sophisticated historical interpretation.

The answer is that the revolution became institutionalised, moderated and partially socialised through the democratic state. Revolutionary demands were converted into constitutional rights,

public programmes, regulatory frameworks, affirmative action, social grants, land reform mechanisms, housing programmes and developmental strategies. This was not the disappearance of revolutionary politics but its bureaucratic transformation. The language of liberation became embedded in legislation and state institutions. The struggle moved from street mobilisation and underground organisation toward parliamentary legislation, litigation, elections, public administration and policy implementation. Such institutionalisation was necessary because liberation had to become durable rather than merely symbolic. But institutionalisation also created distance between political ideals and everyday experience. A revolutionary movement can mobilise millions around a moral vision; a government must allocate budgets, manage bureaucracies, negotiate contracts and make incremental decisions. The transition from movement to government therefore inevitably changes political behaviour. The ANC's historical dilemma was that the very success of its liberation created responsibilities that constrained its revolutionary methods. Once it became the government, it could no longer simply denounce the state; it had to administer it. It could no longer treat capital merely as an adversary; it had to manage an economy dependent upon private investment. It could no longer regard opposition as illegitimate; it had to operate within constitutional pluralism. It could no longer promise immediate transformation without considering fiscal and institutional capacity. In this sense, the ANC did not simply abandon the revolution; it domesticated it within the institutions of constitutional democracy. The problem is that domestication can gradually become depoliticisation. When revolutionary goals are converted into technical programmes, citizens may lose sight of the structural questions that generated the revolution in the first place. Housing becomes a delivery target, empowerment becomes a compliance score, land reform becomes an administrative process and industrial policy becomes a departmental programme. The deeper question of who owns society's productive wealth can disappear behind bureaucratic language. That is perhaps the most profound transformation of the revolution: not its destruction, but its conversion from a mass political project into an ongoing administrative project.

A genuinely Pan-African assessment must therefore resist both romanticisation and condemnation. It is intellectually insufficient to portray the ANC as either the heroic continuation of liberation or the party that betrayed every revolutionary principle. Both narratives flatten history. The ANC achieved what many anti-colonial movements could not: it transferred political sovereignty through negotiation, constructed a constitutional order recognised for its rights protections and maintained democratic institutions through profound social and economic pressures. It also failed to transform many structural inequalities with the speed and depth that liberation expectations demanded. These realities coexist. The revolution succeeded politically while remaining incomplete economically. It succeeded institutionally while encountering serious failures of governance. It expanded social citizenship while failing to create sufficient economic citizenship. It broadened black ownership while leaving large concentrations of private wealth intact. It expanded public services while permitting enormous disparities in their quality. It transformed the racial composition of the state while struggling to transform the economic architecture surrounding the state. It strengthened democratic legitimacy while becoming vulnerable to patronage and corruption. It created a more inclusive society without fully dismantling the inherited geography of privilege. This is why the historical category of "transformation" is more useful than the binary category of "success or failure." Revolutions rarely proceed according to the original plans of their architects. They encounter institutions, classes, markets, international systems, internal contradictions and unexpected historical forces. The ANC entered government with a revolutionary inheritance but operated within a negotiated constitutional settlement. It therefore transformed some structures, adapted others and preserved still others. The critical scholarly task is to identify which was which.

Political power was transformed profoundly. Social citizenship was transformed significantly. Economic ownership was transformed partially. Land was transformed incompletely. Industrial power was transformed unevenly. Financial power remained highly concentrated. Spatial inequality remained deeply entrenched. The resulting order was neither apartheid nor the socialist society imagined by the most radical interpretations of the liberation tradition. It was a democratic capitalist South Africa undergoing incomplete decolonisation.

The ultimate historical test of the ANC's revolutionary project is therefore whether political liberation became economically irreversible. This formulation changes the debate completely. The objective of a successful democratic revolution is not merely to transfer office from one political elite to another; it is to create institutions, ownership patterns, social capabilities and economic opportunities that make the restoration of racial domination materially impossible. South Africa has unquestionably made such restoration politically difficult. The Constitution, universal suffrage, democratic institutions and transformed public administration have fundamentally altered the political order. Yet economic inequality remains sufficiently deep that inherited patterns of wealth continue to influence opportunity, education, property ownership and social power. Economic liberation has therefore not reached the same level of irreversibility as political liberation. The revolution changed who could vote much more decisively than it changed who controlled productive assets. It changed who could govern much more decisively than it changed who could determine investment. It changed the racial composition of public institutions more rapidly than it changed the distribution of wealth. This is not an argument for denying the achievements of democracy; it is precisely an argument for taking democracy seriously enough to examine its material foundations. Political equality cannot remain secure indefinitely if economic exclusion becomes unbearable. A democratic order requires citizens who possess not only formal rights but realistic opportunities to participate in economic life. The ANC's greatest unfinished task was therefore to connect political sovereignty with economic sovereignty. The question of revolution remains alive because the structural conditions that generated the liberation struggle were only partially transformed. Apartheid as law is gone, but apartheid as inherited economic geography, accumulated wealth, spatial inequality and social stratification has proved far more difficult to dismantle. The revolutionary project therefore did not fail in its entirety, nor did it fully succeed. It became a historical compromise between emancipation and continuity. The decisive judgment must be that the ANC transformed South Africa profoundly, but not profoundly enough to make economic emancipation irreversible.

The central lesson is consequently that the ANC should neither be understood as having simply abandoned the revolution nor as having completed it. It transformed the revolution into a constitutional, electoral and developmental project, and in doing so achieved an extraordinary political rupture with apartheid. Yet it did not sufficiently alter the ownership and control of the productive system to eliminate structural economic power outside direct democratic control. The Freedom Charter remained a moral compass, but its most radical economic implications were moderated. The RDP established an important redistributive ambition, but GEAR shifted the centre of gravity toward macroeconomic stability and market confidence. BEE expanded black participation but sometimes produced narrow elite accumulation rather than mass ownership. Land reform recognised historical dispossession but failed to redistribute land with the speed and scale necessary to resolve the structural question. Nationalisation remained contested and largely unrealised, while strategic public ownership suffered from governance failures in important state-owned enterprises. Social grants became a powerful mechanism of redistribution, but dependence upon them exposed the inadequacy of the productive economy. Housing transformed access to

shelter while leaving spatial inequality deeply entrenched. Education and healthcare became more inclusive while remaining stratified by class and inherited economic power. Industrial policy attempted to deepen domestic production but encountered global competition, infrastructure constraints and weak productive capacity. These contradictions demonstrate that the revolutionary project cannot be measured by policy announcements alone. It must be evaluated according to who owns, who controls, who decides and who benefits. The answer is complex: the democratic state possesses immense political power, but private capital, concentrated wealth and inherited economic structures continue to exercise substantial structural influence. The ANC's historical achievement was to make political apartheid unsustainable. Its historical limitation was failing to make economic apartheid equally unsustainable. That is the unfinished revolution. The future of South African democracy therefore depends upon whether the country can move beyond the achievement of political liberation toward the democratisation of economic power without destroying constitutionalism, productive capacity or institutional accountability. The revolution is not dead; it has changed form. Its unfinished question is no longer simply who governs South Africa, but who owns the conditions under which South Africans live, work and produce. Until that question is confronted with equal seriousness, the historical transition of 1994 will remain one of the greatest political achievements of the twentieth century and one of the most incomplete economic transformations of the postcolonial era.

Chapter Nineteen

The Capture of the Liberation Movement

The history of post-apartheid South Africa cannot be adequately understood through the comforting assumption that political liberation automatically transferred effective power to the majority of the population. The African National Congress achieved an extraordinary historical victory by dismantling the formal political architecture of apartheid and establishing universal adult suffrage, constitutional government and a democratic state founded upon equality before the law. Yet the transition simultaneously created a profound contradiction between political sovereignty and socioeconomic power. The majority acquired the vote, but voting power did not necessarily translate into control over the commanding heights of the economy. The state became democratically representative while patterns of ownership, wealth concentration and corporate influence remained deeply unequal. It is within this contradiction that the question of the capture of the liberation movement must be situated. Capture did not mean simply that a few corrupt individuals stole public money, although corruption became an important expression of the problem. It also concerned the gradual transformation of political relationships, institutions and incentives through which sections of the liberation movement became increasingly connected to networks of private accumulation. At the same time, private capital developed sophisticated mechanisms for influencing public policy without necessarily controlling the state directly. These two processes must never be collapsed into one analytical category. Private economic power influencing government is fundamentally different from government officials exploiting public authority for private enrichment. Both can undermine democratic transformation, but their origins, mechanisms and responsibilities are different. The first concerns the political influence of

concentrated economic power; the second concerns the corruption or capture of public authority by political and administrative elites. The distinction matters because otherwise the historical responsibility of capitalism can be confused with the individual responsibility of corrupt politicians. Equally, blaming everything on corporate power can become a convenient method of avoiding accountability for political wrongdoing. The central question, therefore, is not merely whether the liberation movement was captured, but by whom, through what mechanisms, to what ends, and with what consequences for the democratic project.

Political patronage became one of the most important mechanisms through which the liberation movement's internal political culture intersected with the institutions of the democratic state. Patronage is not unique to South Africa, nor is it automatically synonymous with corruption. Political organisations everywhere reward loyalty, appoint trusted individuals and construct networks of political support. The problem emerges when political loyalty becomes a substitute for competence, public accountability and institutional independence. Within the post-apartheid environment, the enormous administrative machinery inherited from apartheid had to be transformed while simultaneously delivering services to a population historically excluded from political and economic citizenship. The ANC therefore inherited both a state and a political movement, but the boundaries between the organisation and the government could not always remain clear. Party structures influenced appointments, political factions competed for access to state institutions, and public positions could acquire value as instruments of political advancement. This created incentives in which access to government resources became entangled with access to political power. The danger was not simply that incompetent people might be appointed. The deeper danger was that the state could gradually become understood as an extension of the political organisation rather than as an autonomous constitutional instrument belonging equally to all citizens. Once that distinction weakens, public office becomes vulnerable to factional struggles. Government appointments become political assets. Procurement becomes a mechanism for distributing economic opportunities. State-owned enterprises become centres of strategic influence. Municipalities become sites of local patronage. The liberation movement then begins to reproduce the very logic of exclusion it originally sought to overcome, although in a radically different political context. Apartheid had organised exclusion through racial domination; patronage can organise exclusion through political affiliation, factional loyalty and access to networks. The moral contradiction is therefore severe: a movement founded upon mass political mobilisation risks becoming separated from the masses when political access becomes mediated by elite networks.

The concept of state capture must be approached with equal analytical precision because it is frequently used as a universal explanation for every institutional failure in South Africa. State capture refers to a situation in which private or factional interests systematically influence state institutions, appointments, procurement, policy and public resources for purposes inconsistent with the public interest. The phenomenon associated particularly with the Zuma era demonstrated how relationships between political leaders, business interests and state institutions could become extraordinarily consequential. The Gupta family's relationship with senior political figures became emblematic of this problem, while investigations into state-owned enterprises, procurement processes and senior appointments revealed the vulnerability of institutions to political interference. Yet state capture should not be interpreted merely as the story of one family or one presidency. Its deeper significance lies in the institutional weaknesses that allowed networks of influence to operate. Where appointment systems become politicised, procurement systems become vulnerable. Where political accountability is weak, bureaucratic resistance can become dangerous for officials who challenge powerful interests. Where state-owned enterprises have enormous financial resources

but weak governance, they become attractive sites for political and commercial manipulation. State capture therefore represents an advanced stage of institutional decay in which the boundaries between political authority and private interest become dangerously porous. But an important distinction must remain: state capture is not identical to private capital lobbying government. Businesses routinely seek favourable policy, tax treatment, regulatory certainty and access to decision-makers. Such influence becomes democratically problematic when economic power effectively purchases political access or systematically distorts public policy. State capture is more severe because it involves the systematic penetration or manipulation of public institutions themselves. The distinction between lobbying and capture is therefore one of degree, institutional effect and purpose.

Tender politics represents another major dimension of the transformation of liberation politics into a system of economic distribution mediated through state procurement. Public procurement is indispensable to any modern state because governments must purchase infrastructure, professional services, technology, construction, medical supplies and countless other goods. In a society emerging from apartheid, procurement also carried a legitimate transformational purpose. Policies such as affirmative procurement and Black Economic Empowerment sought to break the historical exclusion of Black South Africans from commercial ownership and public contracting. The problem arose when the legitimate objective of economic transformation became entangled with political patronage and rent-seeking. Instead of building productive Black enterprises capable of competing sustainably in the economy, procurement could sometimes create companies dependent upon political connections and state contracts. In such circumstances, empowerment became vulnerable to becoming enrichment for intermediaries rather than broad-based economic transformation for the majority. Tender politics could therefore create a peculiar form of capitalism in which political access became an economic asset. Companies sought relationships with political figures, while politicians and officials could exploit procurement processes to reward allies. The resulting system distorted competition, weakened public value and encouraged inflated contracts. It also undermined legitimate Black entrepreneurship because businesses genuinely capable of competing could find themselves disadvantaged by politically connected competitors. The problem consequently cannot be reduced to corruption alone. It concerns the structure of economic opportunity created by the state. If government becomes the primary gateway through which politically connected individuals acquire wealth, then the state unintentionally becomes an incubator of a dependent elite. Transformation becomes transactional rather than developmental. Economic liberation becomes measured by who receives contracts rather than by whether ownership, productive capacity, technological capability and employment opportunities are fundamentally redistributed.

Elite accumulation became particularly controversial because it exposed a fundamental tension within the liberation movement's ideological inheritance. The ANC historically represented a broad coalition involving workers, intellectuals, rural communities, professionals, businesspeople and political activists. Its anti-apartheid project was simultaneously national, democratic and socially transformative, although its internal traditions contained competing interpretations of socialism, capitalism, nationalism and mixed-economy development. After 1994, a new Black political and business elite emerged. Its emergence cannot automatically be condemned. The creation of a Black capitalist class was explicitly part of the effort to dismantle racial exclusion from ownership and management. The problem was not the existence of Black wealth itself. The problem arose where accumulation became detached from productive transformation and increasingly dependent upon political access. A genuinely transformative Black bourgeoisie could have played a historic role in industrialisation, investment, technological development and employment creation. Instead, some

forms of elite formation became associated with politically connected transactions, state contracts and preferential access. This generated a perception among sections of the population that liberation had produced a new elite without sufficiently transforming the economic conditions of the majority. Such perceptions are politically explosive because they convert the language of liberation into a question of distributive justice: if political freedom was achieved in 1994, why did economic inequality remain so entrenched? The answer cannot simply be that corruption stole the revolution. South Africa inherited an extraordinarily concentrated economy, unequal spatial development, racialised ownership patterns and structural unemployment. But corruption and patronage could make those structural problems worse by diverting resources that could otherwise have supported public investment and social transformation. Elite accumulation therefore represents both a consequence of unresolved structural inequality and a mechanism through which inequality can reproduce itself within the democratic order.

Factionalism further complicated the relationship between the liberation movement and the state. Political factions are normal within democratic organisations because individuals and groups inevitably disagree over ideology, strategy, leadership and policy. The danger arises when factional competition becomes a struggle for control over state resources rather than a contest over competing visions of the public good. Within the ANC, leadership contests increasingly became connected to questions of who controlled provincial structures, municipalities, state-owned enterprises and national government institutions. Political power therefore acquired a material dimension. To control a political faction could mean influencing appointments, procurement and access to state resources. This transformed internal organisational competition into something more consequential than ordinary ideological disagreement. Factionalism could weaken the state's capacity because public institutions became vulnerable to the political calculations of competing networks. Officials could be promoted or removed not simply because of performance but because of perceived loyalty. Institutions could become battlegrounds in broader struggles for political dominance. The result was a gradual erosion of institutional coherence. The liberation movement, once united by opposition to apartheid, increasingly confronted the difficulties of governing a complex capitalist democracy in which political power itself had become economically valuable. This is why the analysis of factionalism must go beyond personalities. It must examine the institutional incentives that make political office valuable as a mechanism for accumulation. Where political competition controls access to economic opportunity, factional conflict becomes materially intense. The political organisation then risks becoming a marketplace of networks rather than a movement of ideological mobilisation.

Business-government relationships constitute an even more complicated terrain because democratic governments cannot govern modern economies without interacting with business. South Africa requires investment, employment, technological development, infrastructure, finance and industrial capacity, much of which depends upon private enterprise. It would therefore be simplistic to argue that every relationship between government and business constitutes capture. Governments must consult corporations, negotiate with investors, regulate industries and collaborate with business associations. The real democratic question concerns the distribution of influence within these relationships. Large corporations possess resources, expertise, lawyers, economists, lobbyists and access to decision-makers that ordinary citizens frequently lack. Their influence can therefore become structurally greater than that of dispersed citizens. This does not necessarily mean that corporations secretly control the state. Rather, it means that economic inequality can translate into unequal political influence. A corporation capable of threatening investment withdrawal may possess leverage unavailable to an unemployed citizen. A financial institution capable of moving

capital across borders may have policy influence that an informal worker does not. The democratic state therefore operates within a field where economic power is unevenly distributed. Yet this structural influence should be distinguished from politicians personally receiving benefits from businesses. The former is a question of political economy; the latter may constitute corruption. A rigorous analysis must examine both without confusing them. Private capital can constrain governments through market power even where no law has been broken. Government elites can simultaneously exploit public office for private gain even where corporate actors are not involved. The challenge for democratic transformation is therefore to ensure that neither concentrated capital nor political patronage becomes capable of overwhelming constitutional accountability.

Corruption represents the most visible and morally devastating dimension of the crisis because it converts public resources into instruments of private enrichment. Yet corruption should not be treated as merely a moral defect of individual politicians. It is also an institutional phenomenon. Corruption becomes easier where oversight mechanisms are weak, procurement systems are opaque, political appointments undermine professional administration and law-enforcement institutions lack independence. The corruption of public officials is therefore facilitated by structures that make misconduct profitable and punishment uncertain. In South Africa, allegations surrounding procurement, municipalities, state-owned enterprises and politically connected businesses demonstrated how corruption could become systemic rather than exceptional. The greatest damage was not necessarily the value of every individual corrupt transaction. It was the cumulative erosion of institutional capacity. When contracts are awarded for political reasons rather than public value, infrastructure costs increase. When appointments are made according to loyalty rather than competence, administrative performance deteriorates. When state-owned enterprises are drained through maladministration and corruption, the broader economy bears the cost. When citizens observe repeated scandals without consequences, political legitimacy declines. Corruption thus becomes a form of democratic taxation imposed disproportionately upon ordinary people. The poor suffer when hospitals lack resources, municipalities fail, electricity systems deteriorate and public infrastructure is neglected. The wealthy may sometimes protect themselves through private alternatives. This creates a profoundly unequal experience of citizenship. The corruption crisis therefore has to be understood not simply as theft from the Treasury but as theft from the democratic promise itself.

The term “revolutionary legitimacy” becomes especially important at this point because the ANC's authority historically rested upon more than electoral popularity. It emerged from decades of resistance, sacrifice, imprisonment, exile, underground organisation and mass mobilisation. Its legitimacy was therefore rooted in historical memory. After 1994, the movement inherited an extraordinary reservoir of moral authority. However, historical legitimacy cannot survive indefinitely without contemporary performance. Every liberation movement eventually confronts the transition from heroic resistance to ordinary governance. The danger arises when leaders begin to assume that past sacrifice provides permanent political immunity. Citizens eventually judge governments according to hospitals, schools, electricity, employment, housing, safety, infrastructure and economic opportunity. When political elites become visibly wealthy while communities remain impoverished, the symbolic connection between liberation and social justice weakens. The problem is intensified when allegations of corruption involve individuals associated with the liberation movement. Citizens can begin to interpret elite privilege not as an accidental deviation from liberation but as evidence that liberation itself has been redirected. This is why corruption within a liberation movement carries a greater symbolic cost than corruption within an ordinary political party. The movement's historical claim is moral and emancipatory. Its betrayal therefore produces

disappointment at the level of political identity. The question becomes not merely "Who stole?" but "What happened to the struggle?" Revolutionary legitimacy consequently depends upon the capacity of the movement to demonstrate that political freedom remains connected to material dignity. Without that connection, historical memory gradually loses its capacity to sustain political loyalty.

The distinction between private capital influencing government and government elites using state power for private accumulation must therefore remain at the centre of any serious analysis. Private capital can influence government through lobbying, investment decisions, policy advocacy, corporate associations, media ownership, professional networks and control over productive resources. Such influence is rooted primarily in economic power. Government elites using state power for private accumulation operate through a different mechanism: they exploit authority over public institutions, budgets, contracts, appointments or regulation for personal or factional benefit. Their power is political and administrative. The two phenomena can intersect, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. A mining corporation seeking favourable regulation is exercising economic influence; a minister manipulating a procurement process to benefit a politically connected company is exercising public authority for private purposes. A wealthy businessperson funding political activities may seek influence without capturing the state; a political leader who directs a state enterprise to benefit associates may abuse the state without any independent corporate conspiracy. Sometimes the relationship becomes mutually reinforcing, creating networks in which politicians provide access and businesses provide resources. That is where capture becomes particularly dangerous. But analytical clarity requires tracing the direction of influence rather than simply describing everyone involved as part of "the elite." The phrase "elite" can otherwise become so broad that it explains nothing. Democratic accountability requires identifying who possesses which form of power, how that power is exercised and whether it remains subject to constitutional constraint.

The deeper structural problem was that political democracy was established within an economy whose fundamental architecture could not be transformed overnight. The apartheid state had deliberately constructed a racialised economy in which land, capital, finance, industrial ownership and skilled employment were concentrated disproportionately in white hands. The democratic state therefore faced a contradiction between political equality and inherited economic inequality. The ANC had to govern within a capitalist economy while attempting to transform that economy through democratic policy. The Government of National Unity and subsequent administrations pursued a mixed strategy combining social welfare, fiscal discipline, market mechanisms, affirmative action, Black Economic Empowerment and public investment. These policies produced substantial gains in housing, social grants, electricity connections, education access and other dimensions of social citizenship. Yet economic ownership remained highly concentrated. This meant that the democratic state did not possess unlimited capacity to transform society. It had to negotiate with capital, attract investment and maintain macroeconomic stability while pursuing redistribution. The failure to resolve this contradiction should not be explained solely by corruption. Structural power mattered. Financial markets, corporations, international investors, credit conditions and domestic business confidence all influenced the boundaries within which governments operated. But structural constraints do not eliminate political responsibility. Governments still make choices about taxation, industrial policy, labour regulation, procurement and public investment. The question is therefore not whether the ANC could have abolished capitalism immediately, but whether it could have developed a more coherent strategy for transforming the distribution of economic power while maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Black Economic Empowerment illustrates precisely this tension between structural transformation and elite accumulation. Its historical rationale was compelling because a society that had excluded Black people from ownership could not claim to have achieved substantive equality merely by giving everyone the vote. Economic empowerment sought to change ownership, management, skills development and participation. Yet implementation sometimes favoured politically connected individuals with the financial capacity to participate in large transactions. This produced a paradox in which policies designed to democratise capitalism could contribute to the concentration of opportunity among a relatively small group. The answer is not to abandon economic transformation. Doing so would leave apartheid's economic legacy largely intact. The answer is to redefine transformation in terms of broad-based productive capacity rather than elite transactional enrichment. A genuinely transformative programme would strengthen worker ownership, cooperatives, small enterprises, industrial development, agricultural production, technological innovation and community investment. It would create pathways for ordinary Black citizens to become producers, entrepreneurs, shareholders and skilled professionals rather than merely beneficiaries of state contracts. Transformation must therefore be measured by changes in productive power, not simply changes in the racial identity of corporate beneficiaries. If Black elites become richer while structural unemployment remains extraordinarily high and township economies remain weak, transformation becomes difficult to defend as a mass project. The objective should be an economy in which previously excluded citizens possess meaningful productive and ownership power. That is a much more demanding standard than simply replacing white beneficiaries with Black beneficiaries within existing structures.

State-owned enterprises became another arena where the contradiction between public ownership and political control became visible. Enterprises such as Eskom, Transnet, South African Airways and others were expected to serve strategic developmental objectives while operating within complex commercial environments. Their economic importance made them vulnerable to political interference, procurement abuse and leadership instability. Yet the failures of state-owned enterprises should not be interpreted as proof that public ownership itself is inherently inefficient. Nor should their problems be attributed entirely to private capital seeking to weaken them. Public institutions can be powerful instruments of developmental transformation when professionally governed and strategically directed. The central issue is governance. A state-owned enterprise becomes vulnerable when boards are politicised, executive appointments are unstable, procurement is manipulated and long-term strategy is subordinated to factional interests. At the same time, private interests can seek opportunities created by public-sector weakness, particularly where lucrative assets or markets are involved. This produces a double danger. Political elites can undermine public institutions for private or factional gain, while private capital can benefit from the resulting institutional deterioration. The democratic response must therefore reject both simplistic state worship and simplistic privatisation. What matters is whether institutions serve the public interest, possess professional competence and remain accountable to citizens. Public ownership without accountability can become patronage. Private ownership without effective regulation can become oligarchic economic power. Democratic transformation requires neither romanticism nor ideological rigidity but institutional capacity.

The experience of state capture also exposed the importance of institutions that stand between political authority and personal power. South Africa's constitutional architecture contains powerful safeguards precisely because the country's history demonstrated the dangers of unchecked authority. An independent judiciary, parliamentary oversight, investigative journalism, public auditing, professional civil servants and independent Chapter Nine institutions are therefore not technical

accessories to democracy. They are mechanisms through which citizens prevent political power from becoming arbitrary. The deterioration of governance occurs when political actors begin treating oversight as hostility rather than constitutional necessity. A democratic government should welcome institutional scrutiny because accountability protects legitimate authority from the consequences of illegitimate behaviour. Where leaders attack investigators, manipulate appointments or undermine independent institutions, the problem is not simply political disagreement. It concerns the architecture of constitutional democracy itself. The struggle against state capture therefore demonstrated the importance of institutional resilience. South Africa's democratic system did not collapse because courts, journalists, investigators and civil society continued to resist. The eventual exposure of networks of corruption demonstrated that constitutional institutions could still function even after significant political pressure. This is an important achievement of the democratic transition. The lesson is not that South Africa's institutions failed completely. Rather, they were tested severely and demonstrated both vulnerability and resilience. The revolutionary project therefore survived in part because constitutional democracy created institutions capable of resisting attempts to subordinate the state to factional or private interests.

Civil society played an equally important role in preventing the complete normalisation of corruption and political capture. Investigative journalists, civic organisations, opposition parties, whistle-blowers, academics, trade unions and ordinary citizens repeatedly challenged abuses of public power. The public exposure of corruption demonstrated that democratic accountability does not belong exclusively to Parliament or government agencies. Society itself is an important arena of political oversight. This is particularly significant in a liberation movement because historical loyalty can make criticism politically difficult. Citizens may fear that exposing corruption will strengthen opposition forces or undermine the historical movement. Yet genuine democratic loyalty sometimes requires criticism. A liberation movement cannot be protected from accountability by invoking its history. Indeed, the more important the movement's historical contribution, the more important it becomes to protect its institutions from corruption. The defence of democracy cannot depend upon unconditional loyalty to any party. It must depend upon loyalty to constitutional principles, social justice and public accountability. Civil society therefore becomes a second line of democratic defence when political institutions become compromised. Its role is not to govern but to scrutinise, mobilise, expose and demand correction. The persistence of such institutions demonstrates that South African democracy retains social resources capable of resisting political degeneration. The challenge is to convert episodic resistance into durable institutional accountability.

The consequences of political patronage were particularly severe at local government level because municipalities are the places where citizens encounter the state most directly. National political controversies may appear distant, but municipal corruption becomes visible through broken roads, unreliable water, poor sanitation, dysfunctional waste collection and inadequate maintenance. Where political patronage determines local appointments and contracts, citizens experience the consequences as everyday humiliation. The promise of democracy becomes disconnected from the reality of public administration. This produces an especially dangerous form of political alienation because people begin to associate democracy itself with incompetence. Yet the problem is not democracy. The problem is the degradation of democratic institutions by patronage, weak administration and insufficient accountability. The liberation movement therefore faces the challenge of rebuilding the relationship between political representation and public service. Local government requires professional managers, competent engineers, accountable procurement

officials and capable financial administrators. Councillors must represent communities rather than operate primarily as intermediaries for political networks. Public procurement must be transparent enough that citizens can see who receives contracts and why. Local participation must extend beyond elections to meaningful community oversight. Without such reforms, the democratic state risks becoming formally representative but substantively distant. A constitutional right has little meaning to a citizen whose municipality cannot deliver basic services because institutional capacity has been hollowed out by political competition.

The question of business influence also requires a critique of the romantic idea that the state exists outside the economy. Governments require capital to build infrastructure, companies to produce goods, financial institutions to mobilise investment and employers to create jobs. The state therefore necessarily interacts with economic actors. The problem is not interaction but unequal bargaining power and weak public regulation. A government that depends excessively upon private investment may become reluctant to pursue policies that powerful corporations oppose. Conversely, a government with weak administrative capacity may become dependent upon politically connected intermediaries who claim to represent business interests. This creates a form of dependency that can be described as political-economic rather than simply corrupt. The democratic state must therefore develop its own expertise and institutional capacity. It needs economists, engineers, lawyers, planners and industrial strategists capable of negotiating with corporations from a position of knowledge rather than dependency. Otherwise, private capital can exercise influence not because it secretly controls government but because government lacks equivalent institutional capacity. This distinction is critical. Structural economic power does not require a conspiracy. It can operate through ordinary market relationships. A corporation does not need to bribe a minister to influence policy if the government fears the consequences of capital flight, investment withdrawal or industrial decline. Democratic economic sovereignty therefore requires a capable state that can regulate capital while recognising the productive role of business.

At the same time, the liberation movement must accept that its own political elites cannot escape responsibility by blaming capitalism for every failure. It is intellectually inadequate to argue that corruption is merely a consequence of capitalist structures. Capitalism may create incentives for accumulation, competition and profit, but public officials remain responsible for how they use public authority. A minister who manipulates a tender cannot legitimately defend the conduct by pointing to historical economic inequality. A politician who appoints an incompetent ally to a public institution cannot justify that decision by invoking transformation. A businessperson who participates in corrupt procurement cannot hide behind the language of empowerment. Revolutionary politics must therefore maintain a demanding ethical distinction between redistribution and theft. Redistributing power from historically privileged groups to historically excluded groups is a legitimate political objective. Diverting public resources into private hands is not redistribution. It is appropriation. Transformation creates new opportunities for citizens; corruption creates opportunities for connected individuals. The two are morally and politically incompatible. The challenge is especially important for a movement that claims to represent the historically dispossessed because corruption by its leaders can delegitimise legitimate demands for redistribution. It allows opponents of transformation to portray every affirmative policy as patronage. Thus corruption does not merely waste money; it damages the intellectual credibility of economic justice itself.

The greatest danger of elite capture is therefore not simply financial loss but ideological demobilisation. Liberation movements depend upon the belief that collective political action can

change history. When citizens conclude that political mobilisation merely creates another elite, the possibility of collective transformation becomes weakened. People withdraw into individual survival. Politics becomes transactional. Votes become commodities. Patronage replaces ideology. Public office becomes a route to personal advancement. This is particularly dangerous in societies where inequality remains severe because the poor can become dependent upon political networks for access to scarce resources. Instead of demanding structural reform, citizens may be compelled to seek individual favours. Democracy then becomes clientelistic rather than emancipatory. The citizen becomes a supplicant rather than a rights-bearing participant. Such a transformation is fundamentally inconsistent with the liberation tradition. The struggle against apartheid sought to create citizens capable of determining their collective destiny, not subjects dependent upon political patrons. Reversing this tendency requires rebuilding participatory institutions, strengthening local democracy and ensuring that social rights are delivered through transparent systems rather than personal networks. The liberation movement must therefore recover the political meaning of citizenship. People should not need access to a politician to obtain what the Constitution already recognises as a public entitlement.

The ideological crisis becomes deeper when political elites accumulate wealth visibly faster than the communities they claim to represent. Wealth itself is not evidence of wrongdoing, and a democratic society should not condemn successful entrepreneurship merely because individuals are politically connected. The relevant question is how wealth was acquired. If political figures build legitimate businesses through productive investment, innovation and entrepreneurship, their success can contribute to economic transformation. If wealth depends primarily upon public contracts, privileged access or manipulation of state institutions, the political consequences are different. Citizens become suspicious not simply of individual wealth but of the entire transformation project. The emergence of a politically connected class can therefore generate resentment among both poor citizens and legitimate Black entrepreneurs. The poor may see the elite as beneficiaries of a struggle fought in their name. Honest entrepreneurs may see political connections as unfair competition. This creates a double legitimacy crisis. The liberation movement can only resolve it by making economic advancement increasingly independent of political patronage. A transformed economy must create multiple pathways to prosperity. Universities, technology, agriculture, manufacturing, finance, cultural industries and small enterprises must all become spaces where citizens can accumulate wealth through productive activity. Otherwise, the state remains the principal gatekeeper of economic opportunity, and whoever controls the state will inevitably face enormous incentives to manipulate that power.

The long-term lesson of state capture is therefore that democratic institutions must be stronger than political personalities. South Africa's experience demonstrated the danger of allowing political authority to become concentrated around individuals whose networks extend into business, government and party structures. But it also demonstrated that institutional resistance can make capture reversible. Courts, commissions, journalists, investigators and civil society created mechanisms through which abuses could eventually be exposed. This institutional resilience should be recognised as one of the major successes of the post-apartheid democratic project. The revolutionary achievement was not destroyed by every episode of corruption. Rather, constitutional democracy provided mechanisms through which corruption could be contested. That distinction matters because an overly pessimistic interpretation can be as analytically weak as an overly celebratory one. South Africa is neither a failed democracy nor a completed liberation society. It is a contested democracy in which different forms of power continuously struggle for influence. The state can be captured, but it can also resist capture. Capital can influence government, but

government can regulate capital. Political elites can abuse public authority, but institutions can expose and punish them. Citizens can become disillusioned, but they can also organise. The political future therefore remains open. The question is whether democratic institutions can become sufficiently powerful to ensure that neither private wealth nor political patronage overwhelms the public interest.

The ANC's revolutionary project therefore cannot be judged through a simple binary of success or failure. It succeeded profoundly in the political sphere by destroying apartheid's legal order, establishing universal citizenship, creating constitutional government and opening the state to the Black majority. It also produced substantial social transformation through public housing, social grants, electricity expansion, education access and other programmes that materially altered millions of lives. Yet its project was compromised by failures of economic transformation, corruption, patronage, factionalism and the inability to prevent political access from becoming a pathway to accumulation. The movement did not simply abandon the revolution, nor did it complete it. It entered a new historical phase in which political liberation had to be converted into economic and institutional transformation. Some of its leaders pursued that objective seriously; others became entangled in networks of patronage and accumulation. Some business actors sought legitimate partnerships with government; others exploited political relationships for private gain. Some institutions resisted capture; others became vulnerable to it. The history is therefore contradictory because power itself is contradictory. South Africa's post-apartheid order contains both democratic empowerment and structural inequality, constitutional accountability and institutional weakness, public transformation and private accumulation. The task of scholarship is not to erase these contradictions but to explain them.

Ultimately, the capture of the liberation movement should be understood as a warning about what happens when political liberation becomes separated from institutional discipline and economic democratisation. A liberation movement does not cease being revolutionary simply because it enters government, but government fundamentally changes the conditions under which revolutionary politics operates. The movement must now manage budgets, regulate markets, appoint officials, negotiate with investors and administer millions of citizens. Every one of these functions creates opportunities for either public transformation or private accumulation. The decisive question becomes whether political authority remains subordinate to the public good. The post-apartheid experience demonstrates that the greatest threat to democratic transformation does not come from one source alone. It can emerge from concentrated private capital influencing policy, from politicians exploiting public office, from bureaucracies losing professionalism, from factions capturing institutions and from citizens becoming dependent upon patronage. These forms of power can reinforce one another, but they remain analytically distinct. The future of the liberation project therefore depends upon rebuilding the separation between party and state, professionalising public administration, strengthening procurement institutions, regulating political finance, protecting whistle-blowers, enforcing anti-corruption law and deepening broad-based economic ownership. More fundamentally, it requires recovering the ethical principle that public power belongs to the people. The revolution's unfinished task is not simply to produce a different group of elites. It is to transform the structures through which power, wealth and opportunity are distributed. Until that transformation occurs, South Africa will remain politically democratic but economically incomplete, constitutionally liberated but structurally unequal. The ultimate measure of the liberation movement will therefore not be whether some of its leaders became powerful or wealthy. It will be whether ordinary citizens acquired durable power over the political and economic institutions that shape their lives.

WHO REALLY CONTROLS SOUTH AFRICA?

Chapter Twenty

Mapping the Architecture of Power

The most intellectually important question in understanding post-apartheid South Africa is not simply who wins elections, who occupies the Union Buildings, or which political party commands the largest parliamentary delegation, but where power actually resides across the institutional, economic, social and international architecture of the Republic. The question therefore requires a Power Map rather than a racial caricature of domination. South Africa is neither adequately explained by the proposition that political power belongs entirely to the African majority nor by the counter-proposition that economic power remains entirely in the hands of a historically privileged racial minority. Both propositions contain elements of truth, but neither captures the complexity of the post-apartheid political economy. The Constitution deliberately distributes state power among the executive, legislature and judiciary, while society itself contains powerful corporations, financial institutions, organised labour, civil society organisations, traditional authorities, media organisations, universities, digital platforms and international actors. The central task, therefore, is to discover how these centres of power interact, constrain one another and sometimes cooperate.

Electoral power constitutes the most visible foundation of democratic legitimacy because elections determine who receives the formal mandate to govern. Since 1994, universal adult suffrage has transformed the political status of the African majority from subjects of an exclusionary state into citizens capable of determining the composition of government. The African National Congress became the dominant electoral vehicle of that transformation and, for three decades, exercised extraordinary political authority because its historical legitimacy was reinforced by electoral victories. Yet electoral power is not identical to total power. A vote gives citizens the authority to choose representatives, but it does not automatically transfer ownership of mines, banks, corporations, farms, media platforms, pension assets, technological infrastructure or international capital networks to those citizens. The 2024 election dramatically demonstrated this distinction when the ANC lost its national majority and was compelled to govern through a coalition arrangement with other parties. The electoral sphere therefore establishes democratic authority, but it operates alongside institutions and economic relationships that elections cannot simply abolish.

Executive power is concentrated in the President, Cabinet and the wider administrative state, making the executive one of the most consequential centres of political power in South Africa. The executive proposes policies, controls departments, appoints ministers, directs national programmes and exercises enormous influence over public expenditure and state-owned enterprises. Yet executive power is constitutionally constrained. The President cannot simply govern outside Parliament, the courts, legislation or constitutional requirements. This creates an important paradox in post-apartheid governance: the government may possess immense authority over public

institutions while simultaneously lacking equivalent authority over private economic structures. Ministers can legislate, regulate and procure, but they cannot simply command private corporations to invest, banks to lend, shareholders to transfer ownership or international investors to accept state preferences. The executive therefore possesses substantial administrative power but operates within a constitutional order in which economic power is partly external to the electoral mandate. The practical question is consequently not whether the executive is powerful, but which forms of power remain beyond its direct command.

Legislative power belongs formally to Parliament, provincial legislatures and municipal councils within their constitutional spheres, and Parliament possesses the authority to make national law and exercise oversight over the executive. Yet legislation itself reveals the tension between democratic sovereignty and structural constraints. Parliament can enact transformative laws affecting labour, land, competition, taxation, procurement, corporate governance and social welfare, but legislation must survive constitutional scrutiny and operate within an economy capable of responding to it. Parliamentary power is therefore neither symbolic nor unlimited. The legislature can alter the rules of economic life, but the actors governed by those rules retain resources with which to adapt, litigate, lobby, restructure ownership, move capital and influence public debate. This means that democratic legislation represents a real achievement of post-apartheid transformation, while also demonstrating that formal lawmaking does not automatically produce substantive redistribution. The ANC-led state succeeded in creating an inclusive legal order, but the deeper question remains whether the economic consequences of that legal order have been sufficiently transformative.

Judicial power represents another decisive centre because the South African Constitution created an unusually powerful constitutional judiciary capable of reviewing legislation and executive action. Courts are constitutionally independent and are required to apply the Constitution and law impartially. This has profoundly altered the relationship between political authority and citizens. Under apartheid, law was frequently an instrument of racial domination; under constitutional democracy, law has become an instrument through which citizens, civil society organisations and political opponents can challenge the state itself. This is one of the great successes of the democratic transition. Yet judicial power also creates an important limitation on majoritarianism. Even an elected government cannot legitimately do everything that its electoral majority desires. Constitutional rights, institutional independence and judicial review establish boundaries around democratic power. Consequently, South Africa cannot be understood as a simple majoritarian democracy in which the electoral winner exercises unrestricted sovereignty. It is a constitutional democracy in which electoral power, legislative power and judicial power continually negotiate the boundaries of legitimate authority.

Economic power is perhaps the most important sphere for understanding the unfinished character of the liberation project because political liberation did not result in the wholesale transfer of productive assets into democratic or popular ownership. South Africa emerged from apartheid with a sophisticated capitalist economy whose ownership structures had developed through generations of racial exclusion, mining accumulation, corporate consolidation and unequal access to land and finance. The democratic state inherited this economic structure rather than replacing it overnight. Black Economic Empowerment, affirmative action, public procurement, labour rights, social grants, land reform and state-led development have significantly altered participation and representation, producing a substantial Black business and professional class. Yet transformation of participation is not identical to transformation of underlying ownership. The Competition Commission continues to investigate concentration and participation in the economy, demonstrating that economic

concentration remains an important policy concern. The post-apartheid achievement therefore lies partly in opening economic citizenship, while the unfinished question concerns who possesses enduring control over productive capital.

Financial power deserves separate treatment because the owners of capital are not necessarily identical to the visible owners of companies. Banks, pension funds, asset managers, insurers, institutional investors and financial markets determine which enterprises obtain capital, at what price and under what conditions. The South African Reserve Bank possesses constitutionally protected independence and responsibility for monetary and financial stability, while the broader financial system mediates enormous volumes of capital through institutions whose decisions affect households, corporations and government. Monetary policy therefore represents a crucial example of power that is public but deliberately insulated from day-to-day partisan control. The government determines the broader policy framework, while the Reserve Bank independently implements monetary policy through instruments such as the policy rate. This arrangement protects macroeconomic stability, but it also demonstrates that democratic power operates through institutional delegation. South Africans elect governments, but they do not directly vote on interest rates, liquidity conditions, bank regulation or the daily allocation of private credit.

The financial sphere also exposes one of the deepest contradictions of post-apartheid democracy: the state can possess constitutional sovereignty while remaining dependent upon the confidence of financial markets. Government borrowing costs, currency movements, investor perceptions, credit conditions and capital flows influence the space available for fiscal policy. A government that seeks rapid redistribution must therefore consider not merely what is politically desirable but what is financially sustainable within an open and globally integrated economy. This does not mean that financial markets govern South Africa in some secret or absolute sense. Such a claim would be simplistic. Rather, financial actors exercise structural power because their decisions can affect the economic environment within which elected governments operate. Structural power differs from direct command. A pension fund manager does not need to order a minister to change policy; the possibility of capital moving, investment declining or borrowing costs increasing can influence the range of policies governments regard as feasible. The critical question is therefore not whether markets rule South Africa, but how democratic authority negotiates with financial power.

Land represents perhaps the most emotionally charged dimension of the Power Map because land is simultaneously an economic asset, a symbol of dispossession, a source of identity and a foundation of political legitimacy. The post-apartheid state has pursued land reform, restitution and redistribution, yet the historical concentration of landownership remains significant. The government's 2017 Land Audit found that white individuals held approximately 72 percent of agricultural and farm land owned by individual owners, while African individuals held approximately 4 percent within that particular category and dataset. The audit also cautioned that its data concerned registered private ownership and did not constitute a complete account of every form of landholding. The analytical significance is therefore larger than the statistics themselves: political liberation did not immediately eliminate historically accumulated property relations. Land demonstrates how historical power can survive regime change through institutions of property, registration, inheritance, capital and law. The ANC could dismantle apartheid legislation, but transforming the economic geography created by centuries of dispossession has proved considerably more difficult.

Corporate power constitutes another major centre in which ownership and control operate through boards, shareholders, executives, supply chains, intellectual property, infrastructure and market concentration. South Africa possesses globally significant corporations and highly sophisticated business institutions, and the democratic state depends upon them for investment, employment, taxation, infrastructure and economic growth. This produces a relationship that is neither pure domination by business nor complete state control. Government can regulate corporations, impose taxes, enforce competition law and establish labour standards, while corporations can respond through investment decisions, restructuring, litigation, lobbying and market behaviour. The relationship is therefore one of negotiated interdependence. The post-apartheid state has successfully transformed corporate representation through Black ownership initiatives, affirmative procurement and executive diversification, but representation must not be confused with control. A black executive inside a historically concentrated corporation does not necessarily mean that ownership structures have been democratised. The deeper question is whether productive capacity, strategic decision-making and accumulated capital have become socially accountable or merely more racially diverse at selected points within the corporate hierarchy.

The history of state capture provides perhaps the clearest warning against assuming that political office automatically equals sovereign control. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry into State Capture documented extensive attempts to manipulate state institutions, procurement systems, state-owned enterprises, security structures and political decision-making. Its investigations covered entities including Eskom, Transnet, the State Security Agency, PRASA, the SABC and other institutions. State capture demonstrated that power can flow in the opposite direction from the conventional assumption: private networks can seek to capture public institutions rather than the state simply controlling private capital. The lesson is profound. Democracy can be undermined not only by military coups or unconstitutional seizures of power but by networks that penetrate legitimate institutions through appointments, procurement, patronage, political financing and personal relationships. The post-apartheid state therefore became a battlefield in which political authority, bureaucratic authority and private accumulation sometimes converged. The struggle was not simply between state and market, but over who could control the interface between them.

Political patronage must consequently be understood as a mechanism of power rather than merely as an ethical failure. Patronage emerges when access to public resources, appointments, contracts or opportunities becomes connected to political loyalty. In a society marked by severe inequality, unemployment and historical exclusion, control of state resources possesses enormous political value. This creates incentives for political actors to construct networks around public institutions. Yet patronage can simultaneously weaken the revolutionary objectives that justified political liberation because state resources become instruments for private accumulation rather than collective transformation. The tragedy of state capture was therefore not simply that money was stolen from the state; it was that the legitimacy of democratic institutions was converted into an opportunity structure for competing elites. The question “who controls South Africa?” must consequently include political intermediaries who stand between citizens and institutions. They may not own the country's largest corporations or financial assets, but they can exercise considerable power over access to public resources.

Media power determines which interpretations of South African reality become visible, credible and politically influential. Newspapers, television broadcasters, radio stations, digital publishers and social media platforms do not merely report politics; they help construct the categories through which citizens understand politics. Media power can expose corruption, amplify marginalised

voices and hold governments accountable, thereby strengthening democracy. It can also simplify complex structural problems into personalised racial or partisan narratives. The danger is particularly acute when the public is encouraged to interpret economic inequality exclusively through interpersonal competition rather than ownership structures, or to interpret xenophobia exclusively through the behaviour of migrants while ignoring unemployment, state capacity and political mobilisation. Media institutions therefore participate in the production of political common sense. Whoever influences the framing of national problems can influence the boundaries of political debate. Yet media power itself is fragmented, contested and increasingly dispersed across conventional newsrooms, independent journalists, social media creators and digital communities.

Digital power has transformed the architecture still further because control over information no longer belongs exclusively to newspapers, broadcasters or political parties. Search engines, social networks, messaging platforms, data infrastructures and algorithmic recommendation systems increasingly determine what citizens encounter, how quickly narratives spread and which political emotions become amplified. Digital platforms can democratise political communication by allowing citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers, but they can also facilitate misinformation, manipulation, coordinated propaganda and political polarisation. South Africa's political landscape is consequently no longer governed only through speeches from Parliament or the Presidency; it is also shaped through hashtags, viral videos, influencers, online campaigns and digitally organised communities. The digital sphere creates an unusual form of power because those who control infrastructure may be geographically outside South Africa while profoundly influencing domestic political discourse. This is an important contemporary dimension of sovereignty: a country can possess territorial sovereignty while citizens' informational environments are partly structured by transnational corporations whose headquarters, servers, ownership structures and regulatory relationships lie beyond its borders.

Security power is concentrated in institutions responsible for policing, intelligence, defence, border control and criminal justice, making the coercive capacity of the state a crucial component of sovereignty. Democratic government requires that coercive institutions remain subordinate to constitutional authority rather than becoming independent political actors. The State Capture Commission's investigation into the State Security Agency and Crime Intelligence demonstrated how dangerous institutional manipulation becomes when intelligence and security structures are diverted from constitutional purposes. Yet security power extends beyond formal state institutions. Private security companies, corporate intelligence, organised criminal networks and community defence structures also influence the practical distribution of coercive capacity. South Africa's extraordinary private-security economy illustrates that the state's monopoly of legitimate coercion is complicated by the existence of extensive private security infrastructure. The democratic challenge is therefore to ensure that force remains accountable to law while recognising that security itself has become a market. Whoever can purchase protection possesses a capacity unavailable to citizens who cannot afford it, producing a profound inequality in practical security.

International power further complicates any attempt to identify a single sovereign centre. South Africa operates within a global system of trade, investment, diplomacy, international law, financial markets and geopolitical competition. Foreign governments can exert influence through diplomacy, sanctions, aid, defence relationships and trade arrangements; multinational corporations can influence investment and employment; international financial institutions can shape development debates; and global markets can affect the value of the rand and the cost of capital. Yet South Africa is not simply a passive recipient of external power. Its diplomatic choices, BRICS participation,

African continental leadership, positions on Palestine and Israel, peace initiatives and role within SADC demonstrate that Pretoria itself seeks to shape international politics. The appropriate analytical framework is therefore reciprocal power. South Africa exercises agency abroad while simultaneously experiencing constraints from the international system. The sovereignty question is consequently not whether foreign influence exists, but whether South African institutions possess sufficient democratic capacity to negotiate that influence in accordance with national and continental interests.

Social power belongs to communities, religious organisations, labour unions, civic associations, traditional authorities, student movements, neighbourhood organisations, professional bodies and social movements capable of mobilising citizens outside formal electoral structures. South Africa's democratic history demonstrates that organised society can force issues onto the national agenda even when political parties are unwilling to act. The constitutional system itself recognises public participation as an important dimension of democratic legitimacy. Social power therefore represents an essential corrective to the idea that citizens exercise power only once every few years through elections. Protest, litigation, union mobilisation, community organising and civil society advocacy can alter policy and expose abuses. At the same time, social mobilisation can be fragmented, geographically unequal and vulnerable to political manipulation. The ability to mobilise does not automatically establish a coherent national programme. Nevertheless, the existence of organised social power demonstrates that the South African state does not possess exclusive authority over political meaning.

Labour power is particularly important because organised workers occupy a strategic position between political democracy and economic production. Trade unions played a historically decisive role in the anti-apartheid struggle and became central participants in the post-apartheid political order. Collective bargaining, strikes and labour representation have given workers mechanisms through which they can challenge employers and influence policy. Yet labour power has also encountered structural limits produced by unemployment, informalisation, technological change and declining union density in some parts of the economy. Millions of unemployed South Africans possess a political voice but lack equivalent bargaining power in the workplace because they are outside formal employment. This creates a fundamental contradiction in the democratic economy: the Constitution may recognise extensive political equality while the labour market distributes bargaining power unequally. A serious Power Map must therefore distinguish citizenship power from workplace power. The person who possesses one vote may possess almost no power over wages, working conditions or corporate investment decisions.

Intellectual power is frequently neglected because it appears less tangible than money, law or coercion, yet whoever defines legitimate knowledge can shape the categories through which society understands itself. Universities, think tanks, economists, journalists, legal scholars, historians, political scientists, business schools and international research institutions participate in defining what is considered rational, feasible or radical. The post-apartheid intellectual project has generated major African scholarship challenging colonial categories and recovering indigenous perspectives, but the production of knowledge remains embedded within global academic hierarchies. International journals, university rankings, funding structures, research networks and publishing systems can influence which questions receive recognition. Intellectual power therefore concerns more than academic prestige; it concerns the authority to define the problem before political society debates the solution. If inequality is defined primarily as a problem of skills, policy responses will

differ from those produced when inequality is defined as a problem of ownership and historical accumulation. Ideas therefore become instruments of power.

Traditional authority constitutes another layer that complicates the simplistic image of a modern constitutional state. South Africa's constitutional order recognises traditional leadership within the broader system of governance, particularly at local and community levels. Traditional authorities can possess social legitimacy, customary influence and community mobilisation capacity that does not arise from elections in the conventional party-political sense. Their power may intersect with questions of land, identity, culture and local governance. This creates both possibilities and tensions. Traditional institutions can preserve community structures and cultural continuity, but questions of accountability, gender equality, land administration and democratic participation can arise where customary authority intersects with constitutional rights. The Power Map must therefore recognise that political authority is plural. The South African citizen may simultaneously be subject to constitutional government, municipal administration, customary institutions, family structures, religious leadership and community expectations. Power is consequently layered rather than concentrated in one institutional location.

The developmental state represents an additional arena in which power is exercised through budgets, infrastructure, public employment, social grants, education, healthcare, housing and state-owned enterprises. The democratic state inherited enormous responsibility for correcting the material consequences of apartheid, and it has achieved substantial redistribution through social grants, public services, infrastructure expansion and broadening access to education and healthcare. These achievements should not be minimised. Millions of citizens experienced tangible improvements in legal status, social protection and access to state services after 1994. However, developmental capacity has often been weakened by corruption, administrative failure, institutional fragmentation and the erosion of state-owned enterprises. This reveals another distinction between power and capacity. A government may legally possess authority over electricity, transport, water and infrastructure while lacking the administrative capacity to exercise that authority effectively. Sovereignty without institutional capability becomes formal rather than substantive. The liberation movement therefore inherited the power to govern but had to build the capacity to transform.

The relationship between race and power must consequently be reconstructed with greater intellectual precision. It would be historically absurd to deny that white South Africans benefited from an economic system constructed around racial privilege, and contemporary land and ownership data demonstrate that historical inequalities have not disappeared. Yet it would equally be analytically inadequate to describe contemporary South Africa as though apartheid's racial hierarchy survived unchanged. A substantial Black political, managerial, professional and entrepreneurial elite has emerged, and political authority is now overwhelmingly derived from democratic citizenship rather than racial classification. The problem is that political transformation and economic transformation have proceeded at different speeds and through different mechanisms. South Africa has therefore produced a complex configuration in which racial inequality remains structurally significant while class inequality increasingly cuts across racial categories. The country contains Black billionaires and Black ministers, white working-class communities, an expanding Black middle class, multinational corporations and millions of economically marginalised citizens. Power has become more racially inclusive without becoming socially equal.

The concept of elite formation is therefore indispensable. Every political transformation generates new elites, and the end of apartheid was no exception. The ANC's political ascendancy produced a

new political class, while Black Economic Empowerment and corporate transformation created opportunities for Black entrepreneurs, executives and investors. This represented genuine progress because political liberation without the emergence of new economic actors would have left racial exclusion intact. Yet elite formation becomes problematic when access to state institutions becomes a mechanism for private accumulation rather than a pathway toward broad-based transformation. The challenge is not that Black elites exist; the challenge is whether elite advancement is connected to wider social emancipation. A genuinely transformative democracy should enable individuals from historically excluded communities to accumulate wealth while simultaneously expanding the productive capabilities and ownership opportunities of the broader population. The distinction between empowerment and elite enrichment is therefore central to understanding where the liberation project succeeded and where it became compromised.

The post-apartheid settlement can thus be interpreted as a negotiated redistribution of different forms of power rather than a complete transfer of power from one social bloc to another. Political sovereignty shifted decisively to the democratic majority. Constitutional citizenship replaced racial subjecthood. Parliament, elections and universal suffrage created unprecedented political inclusion. Yet property, corporate ownership, financial institutions and global capital were not completely reconstructed. The ANC therefore inherited a state capable of governing a capitalist economy rather than a revolutionary state designed to abolish capitalism. Its strategic choices reflected this reality. The leadership sought growth, investment, redistribution and stability simultaneously, producing compromises that sometimes appeared necessary for economic survival and at other times appeared to weaken the transformative ambition of the liberation movement. The intellectual error is to classify every compromise as betrayal or every reform as revolution. History is more complicated. Political movements transform structures while also adapting themselves to structures they have not yet conquered.

The architecture of power also reveals why South Africa's contemporary political fragmentation matters. The end of the ANC's parliamentary majority means that electoral power itself has become more dispersed. The emergence of coalition politics creates opportunities for stronger parliamentary accountability and forces parties to negotiate rather than assume permanent dominance. But coalition politics also creates new opportunities for bargaining, instability and patronage. Political parties now compete not merely for votes but for positions, committees, provincial administrations, municipalities and policy influence. This transforms the relationship between electoral legitimacy and executive authority. The era in which one liberation movement could assume that electoral dominance represented the permanent political identity of the nation has ended. Yet the decline of ANC dominance does not automatically mean the redistribution of economic power. Political pluralism can change who controls government without changing who owns productive assets. The new era therefore requires analysts to distinguish the fragmentation of political power from the democratisation of economic power.

The deepest question is consequently whether the South African state is capable of exercising strategic power over the economy without destroying constitutional democracy or economic dynamism. A democratic developmental project requires the state to regulate markets, promote competition, invest in infrastructure, expand productive capacity, support industrialisation, redistribute opportunity and protect workers and consumers. But it also requires institutional competence, fiscal discipline, judicial independence and protection against corruption. The answer cannot be a romantic return to unlimited state control because the history of state capture demonstrates that public ownership without public accountability can become an instrument of

private extraction. Nor can the answer be unrestricted market liberalism because historical inequalities in ownership mean that formally free markets can reproduce accumulated advantages. The real challenge is to construct a democratic developmental state in which markets operate within socially legitimate rules and public institutions possess sufficient capacity to prevent private power from becoming political sovereignty.

The Power Map finally demonstrates that South Africa cannot be said to be controlled by one centre of power. The ANC and other political parties possess electoral and governmental authority; Parliament possesses legislative authority; courts possess constitutional authority; the Reserve Bank possesses constitutionally protected monetary and financial functions; corporations possess productive and organisational power; financial institutions allocate capital; landowners possess property power; media institutions influence narratives; digital platforms influence information flows; security institutions possess coercive capacity; civil society can mobilise citizens; traditional authorities possess customary influence; intellectual institutions shape knowledge; and international actors influence the environment within which national decisions are made. None of these centres possesses absolute power. Each operates through relationships of dependence, competition, cooperation and constraint. South Africa is therefore best understood as a plural architecture of power rather than a pyramid controlled by a single group.

The final conclusion of this chapter must therefore reject two equally misleading interpretations: that the democratic government controls everything because it wins elections, and that an historical racial elite controls everything because it retains substantial economic assets. Neither proposition adequately explains the Republic. South Africa is governed through competing centres of power whose resources differ fundamentally: some possess votes, others capital; some possess law, others land; some possess institutional legitimacy, others technological infrastructure; some possess coercive authority, others the ability to shape narratives and investment decisions. The unfinished task of the liberation project is therefore not simply to replace one racial ruling class with another political elite. It is to democratise the distribution of power itself. The decisive question for the future is whether South Africa can move from political democracy toward deeper economic and social democracy without destroying the constitutional institutions that made political liberation possible. The country is consequently neither controlled by one centre nor completely decentralised. It is a contested field in which political, economic, financial, judicial, corporate, social, intellectual, digital and international powers continually struggle to determine the direction of the Republic. That is the real architecture of post-apartheid South African power.

A NEW PAN-AFRICAN INTERPRETATION

Chapter Twenty-One

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE MEANING OF AFRICAN SOVEREIGNTY

The question of sovereignty in post-apartheid South Africa cannot be reduced to the formal transfer of governmental authority from a white minority regime to a democratically elected African majority. Political sovereignty was unquestionably one of the great achievements of the liberation struggle, because the African majority acquired the constitutional right to determine who governs, how government is constituted, and what political values should guide the state. The 1994 transition therefore represented an historic rupture with apartheid and colonial domination. Yet sovereignty has several dimensions, and the possession of the vote does not automatically constitute comprehensive control over the material conditions of national life. A state may possess a sovereign parliament, an independent judiciary, a democratic constitution and regular elections while important decisions affecting production, investment, employment, land, minerals, finance and technological development remain strongly conditioned by forces beyond direct democratic control. The central intellectual challenge is consequently to distinguish between juridical sovereignty, political sovereignty, economic sovereignty and popular sovereignty. South Africa achieved an extraordinary degree of juridical and political sovereignty in 1994, but the distribution of economic power was not transformed with comparable depth. The enduring question is therefore not whether liberation occurred, but how far liberation penetrated the underlying architecture of power.

The historical significance of 1994 becomes clearer when sovereignty is understood against the background of colonial conquest and apartheid capitalism. Colonialism did not merely establish foreign political authority; it reorganised land, labour, property, minerals and markets in ways that concentrated productive assets in the hands of a racialised minority. Apartheid subsequently institutionalised this economic order through legislation, territorial segregation, labour controls, racial exclusion and state-backed accumulation. The liberation movement inherited a state whose political legitimacy had collapsed but whose economic architecture could not simply be dismantled overnight. The democratic settlement consequently involved a profound compromise between political transformation and economic continuity. The ANC acquired governmental authority while South Africa remained integrated into a capitalist economy characterised by highly concentrated ownership, sophisticated financial institutions, powerful corporations and deep connections with international capital. This was not necessarily evidence of betrayal in the simplistic sense sometimes suggested by revolutionary rhetoric. It was the product of a complex historical bargain in which political stability, constitutional democracy, economic confidence and social transformation had to coexist. Yet every bargain has consequences. The central consequence was that political power was democratised more rapidly than economic power.

This distinction helps explain both the extraordinary successes and the profound frustrations of the post-apartheid project. The democratic state dismantled the legal architecture of apartheid, established universal citizenship, expanded political participation and created one of the world's most ambitious constitutional frameworks for equality and human dignity. Millions gained access to electricity, water, housing, social grants, education and public services that had previously been distributed according to racial hierarchy. Black South Africans entered universities, professions, Parliament, business and the public administration on a scale unimaginable under apartheid. A new constitutional order established institutions designed to prevent the arbitrary exercise of state power. These accomplishments must not be minimised by economic criticism. The democratic revolution changed the political status of the majority profoundly. Nevertheless, political inclusion did not eliminate inherited economic inequality. The black majority could become constitutionally equal citizens while remaining structurally disadvantaged by historical patterns of asset ownership, spatial segregation, educational inequality and access to productive capital. The contradiction between

political equality and economic inequality therefore became one of the defining features of post-apartheid South Africa.

The meaning of economic sovereignty becomes especially important when examining the country's mineral wealth. South Africa possesses strategic resources whose importance extends beyond its national borders, including platinum-group metals, manganese, chromium, coal, gold and other minerals essential to industrial production and contemporary technologies. The question is not simply who extracts these resources, but who determines the conditions under which extraction occurs, who finances production, who controls processing and marketing, who captures the greatest share of value, and where the resulting wealth is ultimately accumulated. A sovereign state may legally own mineral resources while private corporations, international commodity markets, financial institutions and technological suppliers exercise considerable influence over their exploitation. This does not mean that foreign investment is inherently colonial or illegitimate. South Africa requires capital, technology, expertise and access to global markets. The deeper issue is whether international participation occurs within a national development strategy that maximises public value, industrialisation, employment and technological sovereignty, or whether the country remains primarily an exporter of raw or semi-processed commodities. Economic sovereignty therefore requires bargaining power, not isolation.

The same argument applies to finance. Political democracy operates within an economic system in which capital can move across borders, investment decisions respond to expectations of profitability and financial institutions possess considerable influence over the allocation of credit. Governments must therefore negotiate not only with voters but also with markets, investors, lenders, corporations and international economic institutions. This does not mean that markets literally govern South Africa, nor does it imply that elected governments possess no agency. Rather, it means that state decision-making occurs within constraints generated by the structure of capitalism. A government that wishes to expand public expenditure must consider inflation, debt sustainability, borrowing costs and investor confidence; a government seeking industrial transformation must confront the availability and price of capital; and a government attempting radical redistribution must anticipate economic reactions that can affect investment and employment. The sovereignty question consequently becomes one of democratic economic capacity: how much room does a government actually possess to pursue the economic programme for which citizens elected it?

This is where the distinction between formal sovereignty and substantive sovereignty becomes indispensable. Formal sovereignty means that South Africa possesses internationally recognised territorial authority and the legal capacity to conduct its own affairs. Substantive sovereignty means that the population possesses sufficient institutional and economic capacity to determine the country's developmental trajectory. A country may be formally sovereign while remaining dependent on imported technology, external finance, foreign markets and international intellectual property. It may control its borders while lacking control over the terms of commodity production. It may have a national currency while remaining vulnerable to movements in global capital. It may possess political independence while depending heavily on external technologies for strategic sectors. None of these conditions automatically constitutes foreign domination, because interdependence is intrinsic to the modern international economy. But sovereignty becomes shallow when interdependence is systematically asymmetrical. The Pan-African question is therefore not whether Africa should disconnect from the world, but whether Africa can participate in the world economy from a position of greater bargaining power.

South Africa's experience demonstrates that political liberation itself can create new possibilities for economic transformation, but it cannot guarantee them. The ANC government possessed legislative and administrative authority that the liberation movement had previously lacked. It could introduce affirmative action, Black Economic Empowerment, land reform, social programmes, public procurement policies and industrial strategies. These instruments produced significant changes in the composition of professional and corporate elites and enabled the emergence of a substantial black business class. Yet the results also generated a difficult contradiction. Empowerment policies could transform ownership at the level of particular firms and transactions without necessarily altering the underlying concentration of wealth and productive capacity. A small number of politically connected individuals could accumulate extraordinary fortunes while millions remained unemployed or economically insecure. This produced legitimate criticism of elite enrichment, but the analysis should distinguish between the creation of a black capitalist class and the transformation of capitalism itself. Representation within ownership is not identical to structural redistribution. A system can become racially more inclusive while remaining socially unequal.

The phenomenon of black economic empowerment therefore deserves a more sophisticated interpretation than either celebration or dismissal. Its defenders can legitimately argue that apartheid deliberately excluded Black South Africans from ownership, management and high-income professions and that corrective measures were historically necessary. Its critics can equally argue that empowerment sometimes became transactional, concentrating benefits among politically connected elites while failing to build mass-based productive capacity. Both observations can be true simultaneously. The crucial question is whether economic transformation creates broad ownership, productive capabilities, industrial development and social mobility or merely redistributes access to elite networks. A Pan-African political economy must therefore move beyond the binary opposition between foreign capital and black capital. The decisive distinction should be between extractive and developmental capital, between concentrated and broad-based ownership, and between accumulation that deepens productive capacity and accumulation that merely transfers existing wealth. Africanisation of ownership is important, but democratisation of economic power is more fundamental.

The persistence of extreme inequality raises an even deeper question about the relationship between democracy and economic justice. Liberal democracy generally guarantees political equality through the principle of one person, one vote, but economic life does not operate according to one person, one share. A wealthy individual possesses purchasing power, access, property and networks that can influence society in ways unavailable to a poor citizen. Large corporations can employ thousands, influence investment patterns, shape supply chains and participate in policy consultations. Financial institutions can determine access to credit. Property owners possess assets whose value can appreciate over time, while households without assets remain dependent primarily upon wages or social transfers. Consequently, formal political equality coexists with substantial differences in material power. The South African experience demonstrates that democracy can coexist with extreme inequality, but the existence of that compatibility does not make the condition democratically satisfactory. If political equality never produces greater social and economic equality, democracy risks becoming procedurally legitimate while substantively exclusionary.

The constitutional order nevertheless provides an important foundation for confronting this contradiction. South Africa's Constitution does not merely establish elections; it recognises socio-economic rights, equality, human dignity and the obligation of public institutions to act within a framework of constitutional accountability. This makes South African democracy more expansive

than a narrow electoral system. Yet constitutional rights require institutional capacity, fiscal resources and political commitment to become lived realities. The existence of a right to housing does not automatically create adequate housing; the recognition of equality does not automatically eliminate spatial segregation; and the right to education does not automatically produce equal educational outcomes. The gap between constitutional promise and material experience therefore becomes one of the most important sites of political contestation. Sovereignty must ultimately be judged not only by the independence of institutions but by the ability of citizens to experience freedom as a material condition of life.

The land question sits at the centre of this debate because land represents more than property. It is simultaneously an economic resource, a source of social identity, a foundation of agricultural production and an historical symbol of dispossession. Colonial conquest and apartheid produced profound inequalities in land ownership and settlement patterns. Democratic South Africa therefore inherited a spatial geography in which wealth and opportunity remained strongly concentrated. Land reform has consequently become a test of whether political liberation can address the material consequences of colonialism. Yet land redistribution is not merely a question of transferring hectares. Productive land requires infrastructure, finance, irrigation, markets, agricultural knowledge and institutional support. A poorly designed redistribution programme can create nominal ownership without sustainable production, while an overly cautious programme can preserve historical inequalities. A serious sovereignty project must therefore treat land reform as part of a broader strategy of rural development, food sovereignty, agricultural industrialisation and inclusive ownership.

The energy question reveals another dimension of sovereignty. South Africa's developmental capacity depends heavily upon reliable and affordable electricity, yet the electricity crisis demonstrated that the formal existence of a national utility does not automatically guarantee energy sovereignty. Energy security depends upon infrastructure, investment, governance, technical competence, maintenance and a coherent national strategy. The crisis also illustrates the dangers of confusing public ownership with effective public control. A state may formally own strategic infrastructure while allowing institutional weaknesses to undermine its capacity to deliver. Conversely, private participation does not necessarily eliminate sovereignty if the state possesses strong regulatory and strategic capacity. The real issue is whether energy policy serves a democratically determined developmental purpose. Energy sovereignty therefore means more than owning power stations; it means possessing the institutional, technological and financial capacity to guarantee energy security while advancing industrialisation and environmental sustainability.

South Africa's industrial structure raises a parallel question about value chains. A country that exports minerals and imports higher-value manufactured products remains vulnerable to what political economists have historically described as unequal exchange and commodity dependence. The problem is not simply that raw materials leave the continent. The deeper issue is that the most sophisticated stages of production—processing, advanced manufacturing, technology development, intellectual property and global branding—often occur elsewhere. South Africa possesses significant scientific and industrial capabilities, but the broader African economy remains insufficiently integrated into continental value chains. Economic sovereignty therefore requires moving from extraction toward beneficiation, manufacturing and technological innovation. This is not an argument for autarky. It is an argument for strategic participation in global production from a stronger position. Africa should not merely ask how much foreign investment it can attract; it should ask what capabilities that investment leaves behind.

Foreign capital must therefore be analysed neither through romantic nationalism nor through uncritical neoliberalism. Foreign investment can create employment, transfer technology, expand production, provide access to international markets and finance infrastructure. It can also generate repatriated profits, deepen commodity dependence or strengthen corporate bargaining power where the state lacks regulatory capacity. The decisive question is the institutional framework governing investment. A sovereign developmental state should establish conditions under which capital contributes to national objectives while protecting workers, communities, the environment and long-term productive capacity. This requires transparent taxation, strong competition policy, local procurement where economically rational, skills development, research investment and enforceable environmental standards. Sovereignty does not mean rejecting foreign capital; it means ensuring that foreign capital operates within a framework established by democratically accountable institutions rather than becoming an alternative centre of political authority.

The ANC's revolutionary project must therefore be assessed historically rather than morally simplified. Its greatest achievement was to transform the state from an instrument of racial minority domination into a constitutional democracy founded on universal citizenship. It expanded political rights, dismantled apartheid legislation and created conditions for a profound reconfiguration of public life. It also recognised that liberation had an economic dimension through policies directed at redistribution, empowerment, social welfare and economic transformation. Yet the movement confronted a structural dilemma: it entered government while inheriting a highly concentrated capitalist economy embedded within global markets. The leadership had to govern an economy whose productive capacity depended upon institutions and actors that had developed under the previous order. The compromise was therefore not simply an individual political decision; it reflected the balance of forces confronting the new government. The historical question is whether subsequent governments sufficiently shifted that balance in favour of the majority.

There were moments when the democratic state demonstrated considerable capacity to challenge established economic interests. Competition policy, labour legislation, social grants, public investment, empowerment policies and state-led infrastructure initiatives demonstrated that government was not merely an instrument of existing capital. The post-apartheid state possessed substantial transformative potential. Yet state capacity was weakened by corruption, patronage, administrative failures, political factionalism and institutional erosion. State capture represented one of the most damaging distortions because it demonstrated how democratic institutions could be appropriated by networks seeking private advantage. The problem was not simply that individuals stole public resources. State capture weakened the developmental capacity of government itself. When procurement becomes a mechanism for accumulation rather than public value, citizens lose twice: first through the theft of resources and second through the deterioration of institutions that were supposed to deliver transformation.

This leads directly to the question of who actually exercises power in post-apartheid South Africa. The answer cannot be reduced to the President, Parliament, the ANC, business or foreign governments. Power is distributed across a complex institutional ecosystem consisting of elected officials, political parties, civil servants, courts, corporations, financial institutions, organised labour, civil society, media organisations, professional associations, international investors and increasingly organised communities. Some actors possess coercive power, others economic power, others legal authority, others informational power and others social legitimacy. The President can appoint ministers, but cannot simply command capital to invest. Corporations can influence investment and employment, but cannot legislate. Courts can invalidate unlawful government

action, but cannot construct an industrial economy. Workers can withdraw labour, but cannot alone design national fiscal policy. Sovereignty therefore exists through a continuous negotiation among different forms of power.

This plural distribution of power is not necessarily a weakness of democracy. Indeed, constitutional democracy is deliberately designed to prevent any single institution from exercising unlimited authority. The problem arises when economic power becomes so concentrated that it acquires disproportionate influence over political outcomes or public policy. Democratic institutions may remain formally independent while material inequalities distort the capacity of citizens to participate equally in political life. Campaign financing, lobbying, access to policymakers, media ownership and corporate networks can create channels of influence unavailable to ordinary citizens. This is why the Pan-African interpretation of sovereignty must include the democratisation of economic influence. The question is not whether private enterprise should exist; it should. The question is whether economic institutions are sufficiently accountable to the broader public interest.

South Africa's international position adds another layer to the sovereignty question. The country occupies an unusual place within Africa: it is simultaneously a major African power, an emerging economy, a member of important global institutions and a state whose economic system is deeply integrated into Western and global markets. Its foreign policy has consequently been shaped by competing imperatives. South Africa seeks strategic autonomy while maintaining extensive trade and investment relationships with Europe, North America, Asia and other regions. Its diplomacy increasingly reflects a desire for a multipolar international order in which African states exercise greater agency. This approach is consistent with a long Pan-African tradition that rejects the idea that African states must permanently align with one external bloc. Strategic autonomy, however, requires material capacity. A country cannot easily exercise independent foreign policy if its economy is excessively dependent upon a narrow set of external markets or technologies.

The Palestinian question has also demonstrated the significance of South Africa's conception of international sovereignty. South Africa's decision to pursue legal action against Israel at the International Court of Justice placed questions of international law, colonialism, occupation and self-determination at the centre of its foreign policy. Whatever one's political interpretation of that decision, it demonstrated that Pretoria understands sovereignty partly through the language of universal legal principles rather than narrow national interest. This position has reinforced South Africa's image among many Africans as a state willing to challenge powerful actors through international institutions. Yet such diplomacy also exposes the country to geopolitical pressure. The broader lesson is that principled foreign policy requires domestic resilience. International independence cannot be separated from economic and institutional strength.

Pan-Africanism requires South Africa to go beyond symbolic leadership. As one of the continent's largest economies, its responsibilities extend beyond national borders. South Africa's financial institutions, corporations, universities, technological capabilities, infrastructure and diplomatic networks give it considerable capacity to contribute to continental transformation. But continental leadership can become contradictory if South African economic expansion across Africa reproduces the same extractive patterns historically associated with external capital. A genuinely Pan-African South Africa must therefore ask whether its corporations contribute to African industrialisation, skills development, local ownership and regional value chains. Pan-Africanism cannot mean merely replacing European or North American corporations with South African corporations while maintaining the same unequal economic relationships. African solidarity requires mutually

beneficial integration, shared industrial capacity and respect for the sovereignty of neighbouring states.

The African Continental Free Trade Area provides an important institutional opportunity in this regard. Continental integration can expand markets beyond the limitations of individual national economies, encourage industrial specialisation and create stronger bargaining power in global trade. South Africa should therefore treat African integration not merely as a diplomatic aspiration but as a strategic economic project. Its industrial capabilities can contribute to continental value chains in manufacturing, finance, pharmaceuticals, energy, transport, digital technology and professional services. At the same time, South Africa must recognise that smaller African economies require space to develop their own productive sectors. Continental integration should not become a mechanism through which the strongest economies dominate weaker ones. A Pan-African economic order must combine openness with developmental safeguards, ensuring that integration produces shared capabilities rather than hierarchical dependence.

The question of sovereignty ultimately returns to the people. If sovereignty belongs theoretically to the people but economic decisions remain incomprehensible, inaccessible or unaccountable to them, democratic sovereignty remains incomplete. Citizens should be able to understand how public resources are allocated, how major economic agreements are negotiated, how natural resources are governed and how strategic industries are regulated. Transparency is therefore not merely an administrative virtue; it is an instrument of sovereignty. Public participation in economic policy must extend beyond elections. Communities affected by mining, infrastructure, land acquisition and industrial projects must have meaningful avenues for participation. Workers and citizens must have greater access to information about the economic decisions that shape their lives. Popular sovereignty requires institutions through which citizens can influence the economic architecture of the state rather than merely choose political representatives every few years.

A new Pan-African interpretation of sovereignty must consequently reject the false choice between nationalism and globalisation. Africa cannot withdraw from the global economy, nor should it seek to do so. The objective should instead be strategic interdependence: the ability to trade, borrow, invest and cooperate internationally while retaining sufficient productive and institutional capacity to pursue democratically determined national and continental objectives. This requires investment in universities, scientific research, industrial technology, infrastructure, public administration and human capital. It requires states capable of negotiating complex contracts and regulating sophisticated corporations. It requires regional institutions capable of coordinating energy, transport, finance and trade. Above all, it requires an African developmental philosophy in which economic integration serves human development rather than merely facilitating the movement of commodities and capital.

South Africa therefore represents neither a completed revolution nor an abandoned revolution. It represents an unfinished historical project whose political dimension achieved extraordinary success while its economic dimension remains deeply contested. The democratic state succeeded in establishing citizenship, constitutionalism and political equality on a scale that transformed the country's history. It compromised in the sense that the transition preserved substantial elements of the inherited economic order and accepted a negotiated coexistence between democratic government and concentrated private wealth. It subsequently struggled to use the instruments of state power consistently because corruption, factionalism, institutional weakness and elite accumulation damaged its transformative capacity. Yet the conclusion should not be despair. The

institutions of democracy remain powerful resources through which deeper transformation can be pursued. The challenge is to convert political sovereignty into greater economic sovereignty without destroying constitutional democracy, private initiative or international cooperation.

The deepest lesson for Pan-Africanism is therefore that the liberation of a nation cannot be measured solely by who occupies the presidential palace. Real sovereignty exists when a people possess the political, economic, technological and institutional capacity to shape the conditions of their collective existence. South Africa's historical achievement was to defeat apartheid's political monopoly and establish democratic citizenship. Its unfinished task is to democratise the material foundations upon which citizenship depends. This does not require the abolition of markets, the expulsion of foreign investors or the romantic restoration of a precolonial past. It requires a developmental state capable of negotiating with capital, regulating markets, expanding productive ownership, strengthening public institutions and integrating national transformation with continental development. The future of South African sovereignty will therefore be determined not simply by elections, but by whether democracy can progressively redistribute capabilities as well as rights.

Pan-Africanism must consequently ask a more demanding question than whether Africa is formally independent. It must ask whether African societies control the knowledge, capital, technology, land, resources, institutions and productive systems necessary to determine their future. South Africa, because of its history and economic weight, occupies a central position in answering that question. Its responsibility is not to become a hegemon over Africa but to help construct an Africa capable of negotiating with the world on more equal terms. Political sovereignty must become economic capacity; economic capacity must become technological capability; technological capability must become social development; and social development must ultimately deepen popular democracy. Only then can the promise of liberation move from constitutional text into material reality. The true measure of the post-apartheid revolution is therefore not whether South Africa became democratic—it did—but whether democracy can ultimately acquire enough economic power to make freedom meaningful for the majority. That is the unfinished sovereign project of South Africa, and it is inseparable from the unfinished project of Pan-African emancipation.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The ANC, South Africa and the African Revolution

The history of the African National Congress cannot be understood merely as the history of a South African political party, because its historical meaning exceeds the territorial boundaries of the state it eventually came to govern. Founded in 1912, the ANC emerged within a colonial order that denied the African majority political sovereignty, territorial dignity, economic ownership and equal citizenship, and its development therefore became inseparable from the wider African struggle against colonial domination. Its significance grew as South Africa became one of the principal sites where racial capitalism, settler colonialism and imperial economic interests converged. The ANC's political vocabulary was consequently shaped by a struggle that was simultaneously national, racial, social and continental. Its leaders increasingly understood that the liberation of South Africa could not be detached from the liberation of Africa because apartheid itself depended upon a regional system of political, military and economic relationships extending far beyond South Africa's

borders. The organisation's historic legitimacy therefore rested not only upon its resistance to apartheid but upon its contribution to the broader African revolution. Yet this history must be approached critically rather than romantically. The ANC was a movement of extraordinary endurance, but it was never ideologically uniform, economically omnipotent or historically infallible. It contained nationalists, socialists, Africanists, liberals, trade unionists, constitutionalists, revolutionaries and pragmatists whose disagreements shaped the compromises of the transition. Its ultimate achievement was the destruction of formal apartheid political rule, but the deeper question is whether the economic and geopolitical structures that sustained racial domination were sufficiently transformed. That distinction is fundamental to understanding post-apartheid South Africa and the unresolved question of African sovereignty.

The historic place of the ANC in Africa is therefore comparable, in a particular South African context, to the place occupied by other great liberation movements that challenged European colonial rule across the continent. The ANC became one of the most internationally recognised representatives of the African struggle because apartheid was increasingly understood as an affront not merely to South Africans but to the political conscience of the African continent. The organisation's international diplomacy, underground structures, armed struggle and political mobilisation transformed the South African question into an international question. African states provided diplomatic, military, educational and material assistance to South African liberation organisations even when doing so exposed them to economic retaliation or military aggression from Pretoria. Countries such as Tanzania, Zambia, Mozambique, Angola, Botswana and Zimbabwe became important theatres of the regional liberation struggle, while the Organisation of African Unity provided a continental political framework for opposing apartheid and supporting liberation movements. The ANC's struggle was thus sustained by African solidarity as much as by its own internal mobilisation. This historical fact creates an important moral obligation for contemporary South Africa: a country whose liberation benefited from African solidarity cannot treat the continent merely as an external market, security problem or source of migrants. The liberation of South Africa was partially an African collective project, and its post-apartheid responsibilities must therefore be interpreted through the same continental lens. South Africa's wealth, diplomatic influence and institutional capacity impose obligations that cannot be reduced to narrow national interest. The revolutionary generation understood this more clearly than many contemporary policy debates suggest.

Nelson Mandela occupies an extraordinary position within this history because his personal trajectory became a symbol through which the South African struggle was communicated to the world. Yet an academically serious interpretation of Mandela must move beyond the mythology of the solitary liberator. Mandela was produced by a collective political tradition and depended upon generations of activists, workers, intellectuals, women, students, clergy, trade unionists and underground organisers whose sacrifices made his political leadership possible. His imprisonment transformed him into an international symbol, but the movement around him continued to evolve during his captivity. Mandela's later embrace of negotiation, reconciliation and constitutional democracy was historically consequential because it helped prevent South Africa from descending into a prolonged civil conflict during the transition. His commitment to national reconciliation also provided a moral vocabulary through which a deeply divided society could imagine political coexistence. Nevertheless, reconciliation contained an unresolved contradiction. Political reconciliation could be achieved more rapidly than economic reconciliation because political institutions could be transformed through constitutional settlement while ownership structures required much deeper redistribution. Mandela therefore inherited a historical dilemma rather than a

simple choice between revolution and reform. The ANC had to construct democratic legitimacy while governing an economy still marked by extreme inequalities in ownership, wealth and productive power. The political settlement was therefore simultaneously a triumph and a limitation: it dismantled apartheid's political architecture while leaving substantial elements of the economic architecture intact. Mandela's greatness lies partly in recognising the necessity of democratic transition, but historical analysis must also ask what the transition made possible and what it postponed.

Oliver Reginald Tambo represents another dimension of the ANC's historical importance, particularly because his leadership demonstrated the strategic significance of international solidarity. While Mandela became the world's most recognisable imprisoned political leader, Tambo carried the organisational and diplomatic burden of maintaining the ANC as a viable liberation movement in exile. His work connected the South African struggle to African governments, socialist countries, international organisations, churches, trade unions and solidarity movements. Tambo understood that apartheid could not be defeated exclusively through armed confrontation inside South Africa because the regime possessed overwhelming military, financial and institutional resources. The liberation struggle therefore had to operate simultaneously in political, diplomatic, economic, cultural and military arenas. His leadership helped internationalise the demand for sanctions and contributed to the development of a global anti-apartheid movement. Yet Tambo's greatest historical contribution may have been his understanding that liberation required political organisation capable of surviving repression. His generation recognised that movements become vulnerable when they confuse charismatic leadership with institutional capacity. That lesson remains relevant to contemporary African politics, where liberation movements frequently struggle to transform revolutionary legitimacy into accountable governance. The post-liberation crisis is often not simply a crisis of ideology but a crisis of institutions, succession, accountability and political imagination. Tambo's legacy therefore should not be reduced to nostalgia; it should be treated as an intellectual challenge to contemporary leadership.

Walter Sisulu similarly represents the organisational foundation without which the ANC's celebrated leadership would have been impossible. Sisulu was a political organiser whose importance lay partly in connecting intellectual leadership with mass political activity. The history of liberation movements is often written around presidents and imprisoned heroes, while the patient labour of organisers is marginalised. Yet revolutions are sustained through networks, political education, recruitment, mobilisation and institutional discipline. Sisulu understood that political struggle required relationships between leaders and ordinary people, between ideological principles and practical organisation. His generation demonstrated that political authority cannot be created solely through speeches; it must be built through sustained engagement with communities and through a willingness to absorb political risk. This organisational culture was central to the ANC's survival under conditions of repression. It also explains why the movement was capable of becoming a governing party after 1994. But the very organisational characteristics that produced liberation could later generate contradictions in government. A movement built for struggle is not automatically a movement designed for constitutional administration. Underground discipline can become centralisation; political loyalty can become patronage; movement solidarity can become intolerance of internal dissent; revolutionary deployment can become politicisation of the state. The transition therefore required not merely a change in political objectives but a transformation of organisational culture. One of the central questions of post-apartheid South Africa is whether that transformation was sufficiently achieved.

The intellectual history of South African liberation also cannot be understood without Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness tradition. Biko challenged the psychological foundations of apartheid by insisting that oppression was sustained not only through laws and institutions but through the internalisation of inferiority. Black Consciousness represented an insistence upon psychological liberation, political self-definition and the restoration of African dignity. Its significance extended beyond the immediate political structures of apartheid because it questioned the assumptions through which black people were encouraged to understand themselves. Biko's contribution therefore complicates simplistic narratives in which liberation is defined only as the acquisition of political office. A people can achieve formal citizenship while remaining economically dependent, culturally alienated and psychologically conditioned by inherited hierarchies. Black Consciousness consequently provides an important analytical instrument for evaluating post-apartheid South Africa. If political equality is not accompanied by meaningful social dignity, educational transformation, economic ownership and cultural self-confidence, then liberation remains incomplete. Biko's critique also challenges the assumption that African emancipation can be achieved through incorporation into institutions whose deeper economic and cultural foundations remain substantially unchanged. His legacy raises the uncomfortable question of whether South Africa achieved political decolonisation without fully achieving economic and epistemic decolonisation. In this sense, Biko remains indispensable to any serious interpretation of the ANC's revolutionary project, even though he was not an ANC leader and his political tradition developed independently of the organisation.

The relationship between the ANC and the broader liberation movements of Southern Africa is equally important because apartheid functioned as a regional system rather than an isolated domestic policy. The white minority government understood the survival of apartheid partly through the creation of a strategic buffer around South Africa. It supported or destabilised governments and movements where necessary, conducted military operations beyond its borders, and treated neighbouring states as part of its security environment. The liberation of Angola, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe therefore had direct implications for the South African struggle. The struggle against colonialism and apartheid became geographically interconnected. The defeat of Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique changed the regional balance; Zimbabwe's independence altered the political environment to South Africa's north; Namibia's independence weakened Pretoria's regional position; and the liberation of South Africa finally transformed the political geography of Southern Africa. These interconnected struggles demonstrate that African liberation was never simply a collection of separate national stories. It was a regional historical process. Yet the post-liberation era has often encouraged states to retreat into national frameworks. The movements that once understood their struggles as interconnected sometimes became governments primarily concerned with domestic survival. This shift from revolutionary internationalism to state-centred nationalism is one of the central features of Africa's post-liberation crisis.

The post-liberation crisis must therefore be interpreted with intellectual honesty rather than with either romantic condemnation or unconditional defence of liberation movements. Once liberation movements become governments, they inherit the institutions, economic structures and international relationships created by the systems they defeated. Political independence does not automatically produce economic sovereignty. A government may control parliament, ministries, police institutions and diplomatic representation while remaining constrained by capital markets, inherited property structures, global corporations, debt obligations, technological dependence and international trade arrangements. South Africa illustrates this dilemma with particular intensity because apartheid's

political order was dismantled without the wholesale reconstruction of the economic order. The new democratic state acquired political authority over an economy whose ownership patterns remained highly concentrated. This does not mean that nothing changed. Millions gained political rights, social grants expanded dramatically, access to electricity and housing improved for many communities, education and health systems were expanded, and legal discrimination was constitutionally prohibited. But these achievements coexisted with extraordinary inequality, unemployment, spatial segregation and concentrated ownership. The central analytical mistake is therefore to treat political liberation and economic liberation as identical processes. They are related but distinct. The ANC achieved a historic political revolution in 1994; the unfinished question concerns the depth and direction of the economic revolution that was supposed to accompany it.

The negotiated transition itself must be situated within the balance of forces that existed at the end of apartheid. The ANC entered negotiations with enormous moral legitimacy and mass support, but it did not enter as a movement possessing unrestricted power over the South African economy. White-controlled corporate capital remained deeply entrenched, international investors possessed significant influence, and the global economic environment favoured market-oriented policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union also altered the ideological environment in which liberation movements operated. The Cold War had previously provided competing models of development and international alliances; its end reduced the strategic space for movements seeking radical alternatives to capitalism. South Africa's leadership therefore faced a difficult calculation: preserve political stability, attract investment, avoid economic isolation and establish constitutional democracy while attempting to reduce historically produced inequality. The compromises that followed should neither be dismissed as betrayal nor celebrated as inevitable wisdom. They should be examined as the outcome of a particular historical balance of power. The ANC could determine legislation, but it could not simply decree the redistribution of every asset without confronting the economic and international consequences. The deeper problem was that the transition created democratic political power without simultaneously creating equally powerful instruments of democratic economic transformation. This asymmetry became one of the defining characteristics of post-apartheid South Africa.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme represented an important early attempt to connect democratic liberation with socioeconomic transformation. It recognised that political rights had little meaning if millions remained trapped in poverty, inadequate housing, unemployment and exclusion. Yet the subsequent shift toward more market-oriented macroeconomic policy reflected the pressures confronting the new government. This policy evolution generated one of the most enduring debates within South African political economy: whether the ANC gradually abandoned the revolutionary project or transformed it in response to economic realities. The answer requires greater sophistication than either accusation allows. The ANC did not simply cease to be a liberation movement, nor did it simply continue its revolutionary programme unchanged. It moved from revolutionary opposition to the management of a complex capitalist economy. In doing so, it accepted many constraints associated with global markets and private investment. This produced macroeconomic stability and helped integrate South Africa into the global economy, but it also limited the speed with which ownership and wealth could be transformed. The resulting contradiction was profound: the state was democratically legitimate but economically constrained; it possessed extensive regulatory authority but did not possess equivalent ownership of productive assets; it could redistribute income through social policy but struggled to transform the underlying structure of wealth. The post-apartheid economic settlement therefore became a compromise between democratic redistribution and capitalist continuity.

The question of who exercises power in contemporary South Africa must consequently distinguish between formal political power and structural economic power. The ANC, particularly during its period of dominant electoral control, possessed immense political authority through government institutions. Parliament legislated, cabinets formulated policy, ministers controlled departments and elected governments determined public expenditure. Yet political authority did not translate automatically into ownership of mines, banks, corporations, land, technological systems or global investment networks. South Africa's economy remained embedded in national and international capitalist structures that could constrain governmental choices. Large corporations, financial institutions, investors and organised business therefore exercised forms of influence that did not require electoral mandates. This is not uniquely South African; it is a characteristic tension within capitalist democracies. But in South Africa the contradiction is intensified by the historical fact that economic inequality was created through racialised dispossession and therefore carries a profound democratic significance. If a majority possesses political equality while economic power remains highly concentrated, then the question becomes whether democracy has transformed the distribution of substantive power or merely changed the rules through which political representation occurs. This is why the analysis of South Africa must move beyond the simplistic question of whether the ANC governs. The ANC governed, but it never exercised absolute power. The state operated within an economy whose structural power was distributed across multiple actors.

The ANC's relationship with organised capital consequently became one of negotiation rather than straightforward domination. Government required investment, employment creation, tax revenues and economic growth, while business required political stability, infrastructure, predictable regulation and access to markets. This mutual dependence created a political economy in which neither side could easily eliminate the other. The democratic state could regulate capital but also needed capital; capital could influence policy but could not openly replace democratic government. The resulting relationship produced both opportunities and vulnerabilities. On one hand, cooperation with business helped preserve economic stability and maintain South Africa's international attractiveness. On the other, excessive dependence on private economic actors could weaken the capacity of the democratic state to pursue structural transformation. This tension becomes particularly visible in sectors such as mining, finance, energy, telecommunications and logistics, where ownership, capital intensity and technical expertise create barriers to rapid transformation. The issue is therefore not whether business secretly controls everything, but whether certain forms of economic power possess disproportionate influence over policy choices. A rigorous analysis must reject conspiratorial explanations while still recognising structural power. Power can operate without secret meetings. It can operate through investment decisions, capital allocation, market expectations, ownership concentration, technological control and the ability to determine where economic activity occurs. In that sense, the post-apartheid state transformed political power more rapidly than it transformed structural economic power.

The emergence of Black Economic Empowerment was partly an attempt to address this imbalance by creating mechanisms through which black South Africans could participate more extensively in ownership, management and procurement. BEE represented recognition that political democracy could not be sustained indefinitely alongside an economy in which historical racial exclusion remained visible in ownership and corporate leadership. It produced new black business elites and expanded opportunities in several sectors. Yet it also generated criticism because empowerment transactions sometimes benefited politically connected individuals disproportionately while failing to transform the economic position of the black majority. This distinction between elite transformation and mass transformation is crucial. A society can increase the number of black

executives, shareholders and politically connected entrepreneurs without fundamentally altering the concentration of wealth. The existence of a black capitalist class does not necessarily constitute economic decolonisation. Nor does its existence invalidate the historical necessity of correcting racial exclusion. The deeper question is whether empowerment policies produce broad-based productive capacity, ownership, employment and community wealth or merely redistribute access to elite positions. Where empowerment becomes closely associated with political patronage, it can corrupt the very idea of transformation by converting historical justice into private accumulation. The challenge for the ANC was therefore to create a democratic economic order rather than simply a more racially diverse elite within the existing order.

The crisis of state capture demonstrated the dangers that arise when the distinction between public power and private accumulation becomes blurred. The state capture period revealed how political networks, procurement systems, public enterprises and commercial interests could interact to redirect public resources toward private beneficiaries. The phenomenon cannot be reduced to a single family, faction or president because its deeper significance lies in institutional vulnerability. A liberation movement that historically mobilised the state against apartheid could, under different conditions, become vulnerable to the capture of state institutions by networks operating within the movement and around it. This represents one of the tragic contradictions of post-liberation politics. The same organisational networks that once enabled political mobilisation can become channels through which patronage is distributed. The state then becomes an arena of accumulation rather than an instrument of transformation. Yet it would also be historically inaccurate to suggest that corruption defines the ANC as a whole or that state capture represents the inevitable outcome of liberation politics. South Africa's constitutional institutions, judiciary, investigative bodies, civil society and independent media demonstrated significant resilience. The political crisis therefore produced both damage and institutional resistance. The lesson is that revolutionary legitimacy cannot substitute for institutional accountability. A movement that fought for democracy must eventually submit itself to the democratic institutions it created.

The post-liberation crisis is also a crisis of political imagination. Liberation movements often possess powerful languages of resistance before independence but struggle to develop equally compelling languages of governance after independence. Opposition politics asks who is responsible for oppression; government must additionally answer how society should organise production, education, healthcare, technology, land, energy, employment and international relations. The transition from resistance to governance therefore requires a transformation in intellectual capacity. It demands policy institutions capable of thinking beyond electoral cycles and factional competition. South Africa's difficulties cannot be explained solely by corruption or leadership failures. They also reflect structural problems in state capacity, municipal governance, industrial policy, education, infrastructure and economic coordination. A revolutionary movement must therefore continuously renew its intellectual foundations if it is to remain historically relevant. The danger is that liberation becomes an inheritance rather than a project. Once political legitimacy is derived primarily from historical struggle, leaders may begin to assume that past sacrifice automatically legitimises present authority. But democratic legitimacy must be renewed through contemporary performance, accountability and public participation. The descendants of liberation movements do not inherit the right to govern; they inherit the responsibility to justify governance.

South Africa's responsibilities toward Africa must consequently be understood as both historical and strategic. South Africa is not simply another African state. Its economy, financial institutions, corporations, infrastructure and diplomatic influence give it disproportionate weight within

Southern Africa and the wider continent. It is a member of the African Union, SADC, BRICS and other multilateral frameworks, and its choices affect regional economic and political dynamics. The country therefore has an obligation to use its power in ways that strengthen continental sovereignty rather than reproducing hierarchical relationships within Africa. South African companies operating elsewhere on the continent should be understood as part of this responsibility. Economic expansion can contribute to African integration when it creates productive capacity, employment and infrastructure, but it can also reproduce extractive relationships if African markets become merely destinations for South African capital. Pan-Africanism requires a different conception of regional economic power: one based upon mutual development, industrial cooperation, technology sharing, infrastructure integration and shared value creation. South Africa's continental role should therefore not be judged simply by the size of its investments or diplomatic influence but by whether its presence strengthens African economic autonomy. The revolutionary heritage of the ANC provides a moral foundation for such a responsibility, but contemporary policy must convert that moral heritage into practical institutional commitments.

The African National Congress historically understood that apartheid represented a threat to the continent as a whole, but contemporary South Africa sometimes struggles to sustain that continental consciousness. National politics can become dominated by domestic electoral competition, unemployment, crime, service delivery, migration and economic pressures, leaving little political space for broader African questions. Yet these issues are themselves continental. Migration, for example, cannot be understood exclusively through the language of border enforcement because Southern Africa has long been connected through labour, commerce, family networks and historical movement. South Africa's mines, agriculture, construction industry and urban economy historically depended upon regional labour migration. Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Basotho, Swazis and others were incorporated into economic networks created long before contemporary borders acquired their present political significance. To treat African migrants simply as outsiders is therefore historically misleading. The modern border did not erase the historical interdependence of African societies. Pan-Africanism does not require states to abandon immigration regulation, but it requires migration policy to be compatible with human dignity, regional integration and historical consciousness. South Africa's challenge is to reconcile legitimate state regulation with the principle that African people should not be treated as inherently foreign to one another.

This contradiction becomes particularly visible in the phenomenon of xenophobia. Xenophobic violence in South Africa represents one of the deepest ideological contradictions in the post-apartheid African project because it pits Africans against Africans within a country whose liberation was sustained by continental solidarity. When migrants from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and other African countries are attacked, excluded or scapegoated, the moral meaning of the liberation struggle is weakened. The contradiction is especially painful because many neighbouring countries sacrificed for South Africa's freedom. Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Angola and Botswana were not distant observers of apartheid; their populations and governments carried substantial costs because of their support for liberation. Xenophobia therefore cannot be dismissed merely as an irrational social problem. It must be understood within a political economy of scarcity, unemployment, inequality, weak service delivery and perceptions of competition. But structural pressures do not excuse violence. A democratic state must prevent the conversion of economic frustration into racialised or national exclusion. The appropriate response is to confront the conditions that generate insecurity while simultaneously defending the constitutional principle of human equality. Pan-Africanism cannot survive if Africans become enemies whenever resources become scarce.

Xenophobia also exposes a conceptual weakness in the idea of citizenship when citizenship is treated as an absolute boundary of moral concern. Modern states require citizenship because governments need territorial jurisdiction, legal identity and administrative responsibility. But Pan-Africanism emerged precisely because colonial borders divided societies that possessed historical, linguistic, cultural and economic connections. The challenge is therefore not to abolish citizenship but to prevent citizenship from becoming a justification for African hierarchy. South Africa can maintain immigration controls while supporting regional mobility; it can enforce labour standards without treating migrants as criminals; it can protect public services without demonising foreigners; and it can regulate undocumented migration without tolerating collective punishment. The question is whether state capacity is used to administer migration rationally or whether political actors mobilise public anger against vulnerable communities. Where the latter occurs, xenophobia becomes politically useful because it converts structural failures into a simplified narrative of external blame. Migrants become convenient targets for unemployment, crime, housing shortages and inadequate services even when these problems are rooted in much deeper institutional and economic structures. A serious Pan-African politics must therefore expose scapegoating as a diversion from structural accountability.

The ANC's revolutionary heritage creates an especially demanding standard against which South Africa's treatment of other Africans should be judged. The organisation's struggle depended upon international solidarity, and many of its members lived in neighbouring countries while conducting political work against apartheid. South African liberation activists were refugees and political exiles in African countries. They crossed borders because apartheid denied them legitimate political space within their own country. Had neighbouring states adopted a narrow doctrine that foreigners were inherently dangerous or economically illegitimate, the liberation struggle would have been severely weakened. This history should not be used sentimentally, but it should inform contemporary policy. The African migrant arriving in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban or Pretoria is not automatically equivalent to the apartheid-era political refugee, and modern states face legitimate challenges concerning documentation, crime and labour regulation. Yet the historical memory of African solidarity should create a political culture resistant to collective demonisation. The ANC cannot credibly claim a continental revolutionary heritage while allowing African nationalism to become exclusionary nationalism. The challenge is to reconstruct an African patriotism that loves South Africa without despising Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho, the DRC or any other African society.

The question of South Africa's continental responsibilities also extends to foreign policy. The ANC inherited a diplomatic tradition shaped by anti-colonialism, non-alignment and solidarity with liberation movements. South Africa's post-apartheid foreign policy therefore often sought to position the country as a bridge between the Global South and the international system. Its support for multilateralism, African institutions and the peaceful resolution of international conflicts reflects elements of this tradition. Yet foreign policy can become contradictory when economic interests, security considerations and domestic political pressures compete with ideological commitments. A genuinely Pan-African foreign policy should prioritise African peace, economic integration, strategic autonomy and collective diplomatic power. It should strengthen African capacity to negotiate with external powers rather than encouraging African states to compete individually for favour. This is particularly important in an international system where major powers increasingly compete for African minerals, markets, strategic infrastructure and geopolitical influence. Africa must not become an arena where external powers reproduce divide-and-rule strategies through contemporary economic instruments. South Africa's size gives it an opportunity to support

continental bargaining power, but that opportunity carries responsibility. Leadership in Africa should not mean dominance over Africa; it should mean strengthening institutions through which African states collectively exercise sovereignty.

The ANC's relationship with Pan-Africanism must therefore be distinguished from narrow party nationalism. Pan-Africanism is not simply support for African unity as a slogan; it is an intellectual and political project concerned with the sovereignty, dignity and collective development of African peoples. The ANC contributed significantly to this project through its resistance to apartheid and its participation in the wider liberation struggle. But post-apartheid governance has sometimes revealed the tension between national political priorities and continental responsibilities. A state can become economically successful while contributing insufficiently to continental transformation. It can advocate African integration while protecting domestic industries from African competition. It can celebrate Pan-African solidarity while permitting xenophobic political narratives. It can speak of African unity while corporations from the country expand across the continent without sufficiently deep developmental partnerships. These contradictions do not invalidate Pan-Africanism; they demonstrate why Pan-Africanism must remain an active critical principle rather than a ceremonial ideology. The ANC's historical contribution gives South Africa a special responsibility to close the gap between rhetoric and practice. The revolutionary legacy should become a standard against which contemporary state behaviour is evaluated.

The unresolved land question further demonstrates the complexity of the revolutionary project. Apartheid was not merely a political system of racial classification; it was a system of territorial and economic dispossession. Land ownership, spatial segregation and unequal access to productive resources were central to the construction of white supremacy. Democratic government therefore inherited a structural contradiction: universal political citizenship existed alongside deeply unequal patterns of land and wealth. Land reform became one of the most politically sensitive dimensions of transformation because it sits at the intersection of historical justice, agricultural productivity, property rights, rural development and constitutionalism. A rigorous analysis should reject both extremes: the claim that land redistribution is inherently destructive and the claim that political liberation is complete without substantial transformation of land relations. The issue is how redistribution can be pursued at sufficient scale while protecting food security, productive capacity and democratic legality. The historical significance of land means that it cannot be treated merely as a technical property-market question. It is also a question of sovereignty, belonging and the material foundations of citizenship. The ANC's difficulty in resolving this issue illustrates the broader problem of attempting to transform inherited economic structures through institutions that remain embedded within those same structures.

The same contradiction appears in mining, where South Africa's mineral wealth has historically been central to the accumulation of capital and the development of industrial power. Mining contributed enormously to the formation of South African capitalism, but it also relied upon racialised labour systems whose effects remain visible. The post-apartheid state inherited a mineral economy that was deeply integrated into global markets and corporate ownership structures. Attempts to increase state participation, community benefits and black ownership have produced substantial political debate. Yet the fundamental question remains whether mineral resources serve broad developmental objectives or primarily generate returns within a system of concentrated ownership. This question is not uniquely South African. Across Africa, the extraction of minerals frequently occurs within relationships where African states possess territorial sovereignty but external capital possesses substantial technological, financial and market power. South Africa

therefore faces a broader Pan-African challenge: how can African mineral wealth be converted into industrialisation rather than merely export revenue? The answer requires regional value chains, mineral beneficiation, technological development, African financial institutions and strategic coordination. The ANC's revolutionary project would remain incomplete if political sovereignty were separated from control over the productive foundations of sovereignty.

The post-apartheid experience also reveals that democratic institutions themselves constitute revolutionary achievements that should not be underestimated. The Constitution established a rights-based order designed to prevent the return of authoritarian racial government. Independent courts, a constitutional framework, an electoral system, an independent media environment and institutions supporting public accountability created a political architecture fundamentally different from apartheid. These achievements matter because revolution should not be measured only by the amount of property redistributed or the number of institutions nationalised. A society in which citizens can vote, challenge government, litigate against the state and organise politically possesses forms of freedom that previous generations were denied. Yet constitutional democracy must also remain socially substantive. Formal rights become fragile when citizens experience extreme economic exclusion and institutional failure. Democracy requires not only legal equality but meaningful access to opportunity, security, education and economic participation. The challenge is therefore to deepen democracy rather than dismiss it as insufficiently revolutionary. The constitutional settlement should become a platform from which economic democracy can be expanded, not an endpoint beyond which structural transformation becomes politically unnecessary.

The ANC's greatest achievement and greatest limitation can therefore be located within the same historical event: the transition to democratic government. The achievement was immense because a racial dictatorship was replaced by universal suffrage, constitutional government and majority rule without the destruction of the country's basic institutional continuity. The limitation was that political transformation occurred within an economic system whose deeper structures could not be rapidly overturned. The result was a hybrid order: politically democratic, economically unequal, socially divided and increasingly integrated into global capitalism. This hybrid character explains many of South Africa's contemporary contradictions. It explains why black political power can coexist with concentrated corporate ownership; why constitutional equality can coexist with racialised poverty; why a liberation movement can govern a capitalist economy; why South Africa can be a leading voice for African solidarity while simultaneously experiencing xenophobic violence. None of these contradictions are accidental. They are products of the historical settlement. The task of scholarship is not to choose selectively between celebration and condemnation but to explain the structural relationships connecting these outcomes. South Africa's post-apartheid order is neither simply a failure of revolution nor an uncomplicated success. It is an unfinished historical transformation.

The future of the African revolution in South Africa therefore depends upon whether liberation can be redefined for a post-apartheid generation. The central questions are no longer simply how to defeat apartheid political institutions, because those institutions have formally disappeared. The questions now concern economic democracy, land, employment, industrialisation, education, technological sovereignty, energy security, regional integration, accountable government and continental solidarity. A contemporary revolutionary project must therefore be capable of moving from the politics of resistance to the politics of reconstruction. It must ask who owns productive assets, who controls capital, who designs technology, who determines investment, who controls information and who benefits from African resources. It must also ask what kind of African society

South Africa seeks to build. If liberation means only that political office has changed hands, then the revolutionary project becomes dangerously narrow. If liberation means expanding the capacity of ordinary Africans to exercise meaningful economic, political and social agency, then the project remains alive. This interpretation neither demands a return to the past nor rejects the achievements of constitutional democracy. Instead, it calls for a second transformation: the deepening of political liberation into substantive economic and continental sovereignty.

The ANC's historic responsibility, therefore, is no longer to reproduce its revolutionary legitimacy through historical memory but to reinterpret that legacy for contemporary conditions. Mandela teaches the importance of reconciliation without requiring historical amnesia. Tambo teaches international solidarity and strategic organisation. Sisulu teaches political organisation and mass mobilisation. Biko teaches psychological liberation and the refusal of internalised domination. The liberation movements of Southern Africa teach that African freedom is interconnected and that national independence cannot be separated from regional solidarity. The post-liberation crisis teaches that revolutionary movements can become vulnerable to patronage, corruption, institutional decay and elite accumulation when political power becomes an end rather than an instrument. South Africa's responsibility toward Africa teaches that continental leadership must be measured by solidarity rather than dominance. Xenophobia teaches perhaps the harshest lesson of all: a liberation movement can defeat racial apartheid and still confront the danger of reproducing exclusion through national boundaries. The unfinished African revolution therefore requires a political imagination capable of combining South African democracy with African solidarity, constitutional rights with economic justice, national sovereignty with continental integration, and political liberation with structural transformation. The ANC's historical greatness will ultimately be measured not only by what it defeated but by whether its legacy can help produce an Africa in which political freedom is accompanied by economic sovereignty and in which Africans no longer become foreigners to one another.

THE SECOND LIBERATION QUESTION

Chapter Twenty-Three

From Political Liberation to Economic Liberation

The central historical achievement of 1994 was the transfer of political sovereignty from a racial minority regime to a constitutional democratic order founded upon universal citizenship, political equality, representative institutions and the principle that government derives its legitimacy from

the people. The apartheid state was dismantled as a formal political system, the franchise was extended to the black majority, Parliament became representative of the entire citizenry, and the Constitution established an ambitious architecture of rights, accountability and democratic government. In that decisive sense, South Africa experienced a genuine political liberation, and it would be historically inaccurate to describe the transition merely as a cosmetic change of government. The African National Congress inherited a state that had been constructed principally to protect white political domination, and over the subsequent decades it transformed many of the institutions, laws and social assumptions through which that domination had been exercised. Yet political sovereignty and economic sovereignty are not identical. A population may possess the vote while remaining structurally dependent upon economic institutions over which it exercises limited influence. Citizens may elect governments capable of changing legislation while simultaneously confronting concentrated ownership of land, corporations, financial institutions, productive assets, technology and industrial infrastructure. The central question therefore becomes more profound than whether South Africa is democratic in the constitutional sense. It is whether democracy has acquired sufficient economic substance to allow the majority to exercise meaningful power over the material conditions of its existence. The second liberation question begins precisely at this point: what does political freedom mean when economic structures inherited from colonialism and apartheid continue to shape who owns, finances, produces, invests, employs and accumulates wealth? Economic liberation, properly understood, does not require the abolition of private property or the suppression of legitimate entrepreneurship. It requires asking whether ownership and opportunity are sufficiently distributed to make political citizenship materially meaningful. The unfinished question is therefore not whether South Africa is free, but whether freedom has penetrated the economic foundations of society.

The ANC's revolutionary project must consequently be evaluated with greater intellectual seriousness than either unconditional celebration or simplistic condemnation permits. Its first major success was unmistakable: it converted a liberation movement's political legitimacy into a governing mandate and used that mandate to construct a constitutional order in which racial exclusion from political citizenship was formally abolished. The democratic state expanded access to basic services, social grants, education, housing, electricity, water, healthcare and public infrastructure for millions of citizens who had previously been deliberately excluded from the full benefits of the state. The political economy of apartheid could not simply disappear overnight, because its inequalities had been accumulated over generations through legislation, land dispossession, racial labour markets, spatial planning and preferential access to finance and education. Nevertheless, the democratic government substantially altered the distribution of public resources and created new pathways through which black South Africans could participate in economic life. Black middle classes expanded, black professionals entered institutions previously dominated by whites, black entrepreneurs acquired corporate assets, and affirmative-action policies transformed employment patterns within many sectors. Black Economic Empowerment, despite its contradictions, attempted to alter ownership and participation in the economy. Public procurement became an instrument for redistribution, while state-owned enterprises were expected to support developmental objectives. These were not insignificant achievements. They demonstrate that political power can reshape economic outcomes even without immediately transforming the ownership structure of the entire economy. Yet the limits of the project emerged when redistribution through state policy became disconnected from deeper transformation of productive capacity. A politically liberated state could provide access to consumption without sufficiently transforming ownership, industrial concentration and capital formation. It could create beneficiaries without creating a broad and durable black productive class rooted in manufacturing, technology,

agriculture, finance and intellectual property. The distinction between inclusion in an existing economy and transformation of the economy itself therefore became central to the second liberation question.

Land represents perhaps the clearest expression of the unresolved relationship between political liberation and economic liberation. Apartheid did not merely discriminate against black South Africans in employment or political representation; it reorganised the physical geography of ownership and opportunity through dispossession, territorial segregation and legislation governing land tenure. The democratic settlement therefore inherited an extraordinarily unequal spatial and property structure whose consequences extended far beyond agriculture. Land determines housing, commercial development, agricultural production, industrial location, municipal revenue, wealth accumulation and access to credit. When ownership remains highly concentrated, the consequences are transmitted across generations because property can be inherited, mortgaged, developed and used as collateral for further accumulation. Political equality does not automatically dismantle that cycle. The land question consequently cannot be reduced to the emotional politics of redistribution or to a binary argument between property rights and expropriation. The deeper issue is how a democratic society repairs historically engineered dispossession while simultaneously creating productive agricultural systems, secure tenure, viable rural economies and equitable urban development. A sophisticated land reform programme must therefore distinguish between restitution, redistribution, tenure reform, agricultural productivity, urban land, communal land and speculative ownership. It must also ask who benefits from land markets, who receives development finance and who possesses the technical capacity to convert land into sustainable productive wealth. Where reform is poorly administered, corruption and elite capture can replace racial exclusion without creating broad-based ownership. Where reform is excessively cautious, historical concentrations of wealth remain substantially intact. Economic liberation therefore requires neither reckless destruction of productive assets nor preservation of inherited inequality under the language of legal certainty. It requires a democratic land economy capable of converting property from an instrument of historical exclusion into a foundation for broad citizenship, productive independence and intergenerational wealth.

Capital constitutes the second great battlefield of economic sovereignty. Political liberation gave citizens the formal right to participate in economic life, but participation depends heavily upon access to finance. The person without collateral, savings, inherited wealth or institutional relationships encounters a profoundly different economy from the person who possesses established assets and access to affordable credit. This is why entrepreneurship cannot be treated simply as a matter of individual courage or innovation. Entrepreneurship is structured by the availability of capital, infrastructure, markets, technology, education, networks and state support. A young black entrepreneur may possess extraordinary talent while remaining unable to secure financing on terms comparable to an established corporation. A small agricultural producer may possess land but lack irrigation, machinery, storage, transport and market access. A township enterprise may have customers but lack working capital and digital infrastructure. In this sense, economic inequality reproduces itself through the architecture of finance. The banking system does not have to consciously discriminate against the majority for historical inequalities to persist; inherited differences in collateral and asset ownership can reproduce unequal outcomes through apparently neutral lending criteria. The question for democratic government is therefore whether financial institutions are merely allocating capital efficiently according to existing wealth or whether the financial system is also contributing to the transformation of the productive structure. Development finance institutions, public procurement, industrial policy and targeted credit can play a role in

correcting market failures, but they can also become vehicles for patronage when institutional independence is weakened. The challenge is consequently to democratise access to capital without politicising every allocation decision. Economic sovereignty requires a financial architecture that rewards competence and productivity while deliberately expanding access to those historically excluded from accumulated capital.

The question of industrial ownership is equally fundamental because a nation can possess abundant natural resources while remaining economically dependent if it does not control sufficient stages of production. South Africa historically developed a sophisticated industrial economy around mining, energy, manufacturing and finance, but the structure of that economy was deeply connected to colonial extraction and racial capitalism. The democratic period inherited corporations with enormous accumulated assets, established supply chains, international connections, intellectual property and financial capabilities. Black participation expanded, but the deeper concentration of economic power proved considerably more difficult to transform. The challenge was never simply to place black individuals on corporate boards or to transfer shares through empowerment transactions. The deeper challenge was to create a diversified ownership structure in which large numbers of citizens, cooperatives, pension funds, communities, workers and black entrepreneurs possess meaningful productive stakes. Ownership matters because it determines where profits accumulate, where investment decisions are made and who ultimately controls strategic economic priorities. A country may have black executives managing corporations while the strategic ownership of capital remains highly concentrated. It may have successful black entrepreneurs without creating a broad base of black industrial capitalists. It may celebrate empowerment transactions while leaving the underlying productive architecture largely unchanged. The second liberation therefore requires moving beyond representation toward structural participation. The question is not simply who sits in the boardroom but who owns the boardroom's underlying assets, who finances expansion, who controls intellectual property, who determines investment priorities and who receives the long-term returns generated by economic activity. Without confronting these questions, transformation can become managerial rather than structural.

Finance itself represents a form of power that is frequently underestimated in political analysis because it operates through institutions that appear technically neutral. Governments can change laws, but they cannot easily compel capital to invest in every region, industry or community. Investors can influence the cost of capital, determine the attractiveness of particular sectors and relocate resources in response to changing expectations. Large financial institutions possess analytical capacities, international networks and accumulated information that individual citizens cannot easily replicate. Pension funds, asset managers, banks and institutional investors therefore participate in shaping the economic future even when they do not exercise formal political authority. The existence of these institutions does not make democracy meaningless; rather, it demonstrates that political power and economic power operate through different mechanisms. The democratic state controls taxation, regulation, public spending and legislation, but economic actors influence investment, employment, credit and capital allocation. The problem arises when democratic institutions lack sufficient capacity to coordinate these forces toward national development. Economic sovereignty therefore does not mean subordinating every financial institution to political command. It means developing strong regulatory, industrial and developmental institutions capable of ensuring that financial power contributes to productive transformation rather than merely reinforcing existing concentrations of wealth. South Africa's pension and institutional capital, for example, represents enormous potential developmental power when deployed responsibly. The question is whether such capital can support infrastructure,

industrialisation, housing, technology and productive enterprises while preserving fiduciary responsibility. The second liberation thus requires a sophisticated conception of democratic economic governance in which capital remains productive, accountable and socially embedded.

Technology introduces an even deeper dimension of sovereignty because twenty-first-century power increasingly depends upon control over knowledge, data, digital infrastructure, patents, advanced manufacturing and technological capabilities. Colonial economies were often subordinated through control of land and raw materials; contemporary economies can be subordinated through technological dependence. A country may possess minerals critical to global technological industries while importing the advanced machinery, software, processing technologies and intellectual property required to transform those minerals into high-value products. It may export raw materials while importing finished technologies at substantially higher prices. Such a structure creates an apparent paradox in which resource abundance coexists with technological dependence. Economic liberation therefore requires asking not only who owns mines and factories but who owns the knowledge that makes production possible. Universities, research institutions, laboratories, technology firms and vocational colleges become instruments of sovereignty. Education becomes economic infrastructure because societies that cannot generate, absorb and adapt technology remain vulnerable to external dependency. South Africa possesses significant scientific and educational capabilities, but the challenge is converting intellectual excellence into mass productive capacity. The objective should not be technological isolation. No modern economy can produce everything internally, and international cooperation is essential. The objective is strategic capability: the ability to negotiate, innovate, manufacture, adapt and participate in global value chains from a position of knowledge rather than permanent dependency. Economic sovereignty in the contemporary era therefore demands a knowledge revolution alongside land, capital and industrial transformation.

Education must consequently be understood not merely as a social right but as an instrument of economic power. Apartheid deliberately structured education to reproduce racial hierarchy, and the democratic state inherited profoundly unequal educational institutions. Political liberation opened universities, schools and professions to the majority, but unequal educational outcomes continue to influence who gains access to high-income occupations, advanced research, professional networks and entrepreneurial opportunity. The question is not simply how many children attend school but what quality of education they receive, what technological resources are available, whether teachers possess adequate support, whether universities can conduct world-class research and whether vocational education corresponds to industrial requirements. An economy cannot become sovereign if its citizens are systematically excluded from the knowledge required to control complex production. Education also affects political power because informed citizens are better positioned to scrutinise government, corporations and institutions. The second liberation therefore requires an educational settlement capable of producing scientists, engineers, doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs, agricultural specialists, artisans, programmers, researchers and public administrators at scale. This means confronting the unequal geography of educational opportunity rather than celebrating aggregate enrolment figures alone. It means treating early childhood development, mathematics, science, technical education, universities and research funding as components of national economic strategy. The transformation of education must consequently be linked directly to the transformation of production. Otherwise the country risks producing graduates into an economy that does not generate sufficient productive employment for their capabilities.

Housing reveals another contradiction between political citizenship and economic citizenship. The democratic government expanded access to housing on a scale unimaginable under apartheid, and millions of households gained improved shelter and basic services. Yet the location and economic value of housing remain central problems. A house situated far from employment opportunities, reliable public transport and commercial centres may provide physical shelter without providing full economic citizenship. Apartheid's spatial geography continues to impose costs through long commuting distances, fragmented urban economies and unequal access to infrastructure. Property also functions as a mechanism of wealth accumulation, meaning that households living in areas with weak property markets do not necessarily accumulate wealth at the same rate as households located within dynamic economic centres. Thus housing policy cannot be evaluated only by counting units constructed. It must be assessed according to whether it creates secure assets, connects people to economic opportunity, supports community development and enables intergenerational wealth formation. Urban land reform, transport investment, mixed-income development and infrastructure planning therefore become components of economic liberation. The democratic state must confront the inherited spatial economy in which millions of citizens live geographically separated from the centres where capital, employment and opportunity are concentrated. Political equality cannot fully compensate for an urban geography that systematically increases the economic cost of being poor. Economic liberation therefore demands a spatial revolution in which cities become instruments of integration rather than monuments to historical segregation.

Productive employment is perhaps the most direct measure of whether political liberation has acquired economic substance. A citizen who possesses the vote but cannot find stable work faces a profound contradiction between formal citizenship and material security. Employment provides income, dignity, skills, social networks, access to credit and opportunities for advancement. Unemployment, by contrast, can produce dependency, social frustration and political alienation. The problem cannot be solved through public employment alone because sustainable economic sovereignty requires productive sectors capable of generating value and employment at scale. This demands industrial policy, infrastructure investment, agricultural development, energy security, skills formation, technological innovation and support for small and medium enterprises. The state must therefore become more than a distributor of welfare; it must become a strategic developmental institution capable of shaping the conditions under which production occurs. Yet developmental government must also avoid the opposite danger of excessive bureaucratisation, politically connected contracting and inefficient state enterprises. The South African experience demonstrates that state power can be used both to advance transformation and to create opportunities for corruption. The answer is not to retreat from developmental government but to strengthen institutional competence, transparency, professional administration and public accountability. Economic liberation requires a capable state because markets alone do not automatically correct historically produced inequalities. But it equally requires productive citizens and competitive enterprises because the state cannot manufacture prosperity through redistribution indefinitely. The relationship between state, market and society must therefore be redesigned around productive transformation rather than ideological absolutism.

Natural resources constitute another dimension of the second liberation because South Africa's mineral wealth raises a fundamental question about who ultimately benefits from the country's geological inheritance. Mining generated enormous wealth and helped construct modern South Africa's industrial economy, but extraction also produced environmental damage, labour exploitation, spatial inequality and historically unequal accumulation. The contemporary resource question should therefore move beyond the simplistic proposition that nationalisation automatically

equals economic liberation. State ownership can produce developmental benefits where institutions are competent and accountable, but it can also reproduce inefficiency, patronage and political capture. Conversely, private ownership can mobilise capital and technical expertise while generating concentrated returns and externalising social costs if regulation is weak. The real question is therefore how resource wealth is governed in the public interest. Royalties, taxation, beneficiation policies, community ownership, environmental standards, worker participation and sovereign investment mechanisms can all contribute to ensuring that mineral wealth produces broader social value. The strategic issue is whether South Africa can move from being principally an exporter of commodities toward greater participation in processing and high-value manufacturing. Beneficiation is not simply an industrial slogan; it represents an attempt to retain a greater portion of the value generated from natural resources within the domestic economy. Yet beneficiation requires energy, infrastructure, skills, technology and markets. The resource question therefore connects directly to every other component of economic sovereignty. A nation does not become economically liberated merely because its citizens possess mineral rights in law. Liberation requires institutional capacity to convert natural wealth into broad-based productive power.

The emergence of a black capitalist class represents one of the most complicated dimensions of the post-apartheid transformation. On one interpretation, the growth of black business ownership is a historic achievement because apartheid deliberately excluded black South Africans from meaningful participation in capital accumulation. On another interpretation, the concentration of empowerment benefits among politically connected elites risks producing a narrow class whose prosperity is disconnected from mass economic transformation. Both observations can be simultaneously true. The problem is therefore not black capitalism itself, nor is the solution to prevent black South Africans from becoming wealthy. A genuinely transformed society must produce black industrialists, financiers, farmers, technology entrepreneurs and corporate leaders. The critical question is whether wealth creation expands the productive base and creates opportunities for wider participation or merely transfers ownership claims among small elites. Empowerment becomes transformative when it creates durable enterprises, employment, technological capability and broad ownership. It becomes politically corrosive when access to state contracts becomes more important than productivity, innovation and competitive capacity. This distinction helps explain why the debate over state capture became so consequential. The corruption of public institutions did not merely steal money from the state; it altered the relationship between political authority and economic accumulation. When access to political office becomes a mechanism for private enrichment, liberation politics risks becoming a route into elite accumulation rather than a mechanism for popular emancipation. The second liberation therefore requires a democratic ethic of accumulation in which wealth is legitimate when generated productively, but political office cannot be converted into private economic entitlement.

The phenomenon commonly described as state capture should consequently be interpreted within the broader architecture of economic power. It would be too narrow to understand state capture simply as corruption by particular individuals or factions. At its deepest level, it represented a struggle over the ability to redirect public institutions, procurement systems, state-owned enterprises and administrative authority toward private interests. The revelation that networks could influence appointments, contracts and strategic decisions exposed the vulnerability of democratic institutions to economic interests operating through political channels. Yet this should not lead to the conclusion that all economic influence over government is illegitimate. Every democracy contains relationships between business, labour, civil society and the state. The crucial distinction is whether those relationships are transparent, institutionalised and accountable or secretive, coercive and

corrupt. South Africa's experience demonstrated that formal democratic institutions can coexist with informal networks of power capable of distorting public policy. This is precisely why the second liberation requires democratic control over the institutions through which economic power intersects with political authority. Strong procurement systems, independent law enforcement, professional public administration, transparent political financing and effective parliamentary oversight are not bureaucratic technicalities. They are instruments of economic democracy. Without them, public resources can become mechanisms for private accumulation. The liberation state must therefore protect itself not only from racial domination but also from the emergence of a new oligarchic relationship between political office and economic privilege.

At the same time, an intellectually serious account must resist the temptation to portray white economic power as completely unchanged since 1994 or to imply that the post-apartheid economy has experienced no transformation whatsoever. Ownership patterns have changed, management structures have diversified, black professionals have entered elite sectors, new businesses have emerged and capital markets have undergone significant transformation. The post-apartheid economy is not simply apartheid reproduced unchanged. Yet transformation at the level of participation does not necessarily equal transformation at the level of structural control. A small number of major corporations can retain enormous influence over investment, supply chains, finance and markets even while their executive leadership becomes more racially representative. Economic power is therefore multidimensional. It includes ownership, management, financing, technology, market access, infrastructure, intellectual property, information and the capacity to influence policy. A black executive may possess substantial managerial power while shareholders retain ultimate ownership rights. A government may regulate a corporation while remaining dependent upon its investment and employment capacity. A small entrepreneur may enter the market while confronting oligopolistic structures that restrict competition. The objective of analysis must therefore be to identify these different layers rather than reduce economic power to racial identity alone. The post-apartheid question is not simply whether whites remain wealthy or whether blacks have become wealthy. It is how wealth, ownership, institutional authority and productive capabilities are distributed across South African society. Such an analysis is more difficult than racial arithmetic, but it is also more capable of explaining the actual operation of power.

The democratic state itself occupies an ambiguous position within this architecture. On the one hand, government possesses immense formal authority: it legislates, taxes, regulates, spends, owns public enterprises, controls public land and determines national policy. On the other hand, government is constrained by constitutional rules, fiscal realities, institutional capacity, global markets and the reactions of economic actors. This means that neither the romantic image of the omnipotent state nor the neoliberal image of the powerless state accurately describes South Africa. The state has considerable power but its power is unevenly distributed across sectors and institutions. A government can change labour legislation, but cannot instantly create factories. It can establish an industrial policy, but requires private and public capital to implement it. It can redistribute land, but must provide infrastructure and agricultural support if redistribution is to become productive. It can expand education, but the transformation of human capabilities takes generations. Economic sovereignty is therefore a long-term institutional project rather than a single legislative event. The ANC's greatest strategic difficulty was perhaps that political liberation generated expectations of rapid material transformation while the inherited economic structure was far more resistant to change. This tension created fertile ground for political disappointment. Citizens reasonably asked why political freedom had not produced economic equality, while governments confronted the practical limits of transforming an economy embedded in global

capitalism. The second liberation question emerges precisely from this contradiction between democratic expectation and structural constraint.

South Africa's membership in the global economy further complicates the meaning of sovereignty. The country is integrated into international trade, global financial markets, multinational corporate networks and regional production systems. This integration generates investment, technology, employment and export opportunities, but it also creates vulnerabilities. Capital can move across borders, international commodity prices fluctuate, exchange rates affect domestic purchasing power, and global technological firms can possess capabilities that domestic companies cannot easily replicate. Economic sovereignty therefore cannot mean autarky. A modern African state cannot simply withdraw from international markets and expect prosperity to follow. The objective must instead be strategic integration: participating in globalisation from a position that maximises domestic productive capabilities and minimises structural dependency. This requires negotiating trade arrangements carefully, developing regional value chains, protecting strategic industries where justified, investing in research and development and using international partnerships to build domestic capacity. The Southern African Development Community becomes particularly important because economic sovereignty at national level can be strengthened through regional integration. South Africa's industrial and financial capabilities could support continental production networks rather than simply serving as an intermediary between global capital and African consumers. In this sense, economic liberation is also Pan-African. A fragmented continent remains vulnerable to external economic domination because individual states possess limited bargaining power. Regional markets, infrastructure corridors, energy systems and industrial cooperation can create a larger African economic space in which value is retained and circulated within the continent.

The Pan-African dimension of economic liberation is especially important because South Africa's economic power exists within a regional system rather than in isolation. Its corporations, banks, retailers, telecommunications companies and financial institutions operate across Southern Africa, creating both opportunities and tensions. South Africa can become a driver of regional industrialisation, but it can also reproduce dependency if regional economies become merely markets for South African capital without developing their own productive capacities. A genuinely Pan-African approach therefore requires reciprocity. South Africa's economic strength should contribute to regional development through investment, infrastructure, skills transfer, industrial partnerships and fair trade rather than creating a hierarchy in which neighbouring countries supply labour and consumers while value is concentrated in South African headquarters. This is also connected to migration. Economic integration without social inclusion can generate resentment and create conditions in which migrants become scapegoats for structural unemployment and inequality. Xenophobia can therefore be understood partly as a distorted social response to economic insecurity. The correct response is not exclusion of African migrants but expansion of productive capacity and regional cooperation. The second liberation must therefore transcend narrow nationalism. South Africa cannot achieve complete economic sovereignty while the surrounding region remains economically fragmented and vulnerable. African sovereignty is ultimately collective because capital, resources, labour and markets cross borders regardless of political boundaries.

The role of organised labour must also be reconsidered within the second liberation. The liberation struggle established a powerful relationship between political mobilisation and workers' rights, and democratic South Africa constructed a labour regime with significant constitutional protections. Yet labour representation does not automatically resolve the broader question of economic ownership.

Workers can possess strong bargaining rights while remaining employees within enterprises whose strategic decisions are controlled elsewhere. Worker participation in ownership, pension funds, cooperatives and enterprise governance can therefore become important instruments of economic democracy. South Africa possesses enormous pools of institutional capital through retirement funds, offering the possibility of linking workers more directly to long-term asset ownership. But such mechanisms must be managed professionally and transparently. They cannot become instruments for political patronage. The deeper objective is to transform workers from passive recipients of wages into participants in the accumulation process. This does not mean eliminating entrepreneurship or management. It means exploring forms of ownership and governance that allow workers to share in the wealth they help produce. Economic democracy becomes more meaningful when citizens possess not only voting rights in elections but also ownership rights within the productive institutions that shape their livelihoods. This is one of the areas where the second liberation can move beyond the traditional binary between capitalism and socialism. The objective is a plural economy containing private enterprise, public institutions, cooperatives, worker ownership, community ownership and developmental finance, all operating under democratic rules and competition.

The most serious danger to the second liberation is therefore not capitalism itself but the concentration of economic power without adequate democratic counterweights. Concentrated capital can be productive and innovative, but when economic concentration becomes excessive it can weaken competition, reduce opportunities for new entrants and increase the capacity of powerful actors to influence public policy. Economic democracy consequently requires strong competition policy, transparent regulation and institutions capable of preventing private monopolies from becoming quasi-public authorities. The same principle applies to state power. A government that controls excessive economic resources without accountability can become equally dangerous. The objective is not to replace private oligarchy with state oligarchy. It is to construct institutions in which economic power is distributed, productive and accountable. South Africa's democratic achievement provides the constitutional foundation for such a project, but constitutional rights require material institutions capable of giving them substance. The right to equality means little if structural economic exclusion remains overwhelming. The right to dignity is weakened when unemployment becomes permanent. The right to education is incomplete if educational inequality determines economic destiny. The right to housing is diminished when spatial segregation continues to separate citizens from opportunity. Economic liberation is therefore not a departure from constitutional democracy; it is an attempt to deepen it.

The second liberation question also requires a new understanding of the meaning of the state. The state should neither be romanticised as the automatic representative of the people nor condemned as inherently inefficient. It is an arena in which different social forces struggle to define national priorities. Political parties, corporations, labour organisations, communities, professional associations, civil society, traditional authorities and international institutions all seek influence. The democratic question is therefore who has sufficient organisational capacity to shape state decisions and whose interests remain weakly represented. Wealth can purchase expertise, legal advice, lobbying capacity and political access; poor communities often struggle merely to obtain attention from public institutions. This asymmetry creates a form of unequal citizenship that is not necessarily visible in constitutional law. Everyone may possess one vote, yet organised economic interests can possess many channels through which they influence policy between elections. The solution is not to abolish organised interests but to strengthen democratic institutions that force competing interests into transparent processes. Parliament must possess stronger research capacity,

regulatory agencies must be professionally independent, municipalities must have competent administrations, and citizens must have meaningful avenues for participation beyond periodic elections. The second liberation therefore includes an institutional revolution in the way economic decisions are made. Economic sovereignty requires citizens to know not merely who governs but how decisions concerning land, finance, infrastructure, resources and industrial policy are actually reached.

The ultimate test of economic liberation is consequently whether ordinary citizens possess expanding capabilities to determine their own economic futures. Ownership matters, but ownership alone is insufficient. Land without finance may remain unproductive; education without employment can generate frustration; housing without transport can reproduce exclusion; mineral wealth without beneficiation can reinforce dependency; entrepreneurship without markets can collapse; political representation without institutional accountability can become symbolic. Economic liberation must therefore be conceived as an integrated system of capabilities. Citizens require access to productive assets, quality education, affordable finance, technology, infrastructure, healthcare, housing, markets and meaningful employment. The objective is not identical outcomes for every individual but a society in which historical racial exclusion no longer determines economic destiny with such extraordinary force. This requires intergenerational transformation because accumulated wealth reproduces itself through inheritance, property appreciation, educational advantage and social networks. A government that redistributes income without transforming wealth structures may reduce immediate hardship while leaving long-term inequality intact. Conversely, a government that focuses only on growth may increase national wealth without ensuring that its benefits are broadly distributed. The second liberation therefore demands a synthesis of growth and redistribution, entrepreneurship and social protection, markets and developmental planning, individual initiative and collective investment.

The ANC's historical record should therefore be judged according to a more demanding standard than whether it maintained political office. It succeeded magnificently in destroying the legal architecture of racial political exclusion and made significant progress in extending public services, social citizenship and political representation. It also created conditions under which a substantial black middle class and a new generation of black professionals and entrepreneurs could emerge. Yet it did not fully dismantle the inherited concentration of economic ownership, and its later years were damaged by corruption, patronage, institutional decline and the weakening of state capacity. The failure was not simply that the revolution was abandoned, because the historical record is more complicated than that phrase suggests. Rather, the liberation project was partially transformed, partially compromised and partially constrained by the realities of governing a complex capitalist economy within a global system. Some leaders pursued genuine structural transformation; others pursued personal accumulation; institutions sometimes advanced public interests while at other times becoming vehicles for factional struggle. The tragedy is that these contradictory processes occurred simultaneously. The correct intellectual response is therefore neither nostalgia nor denunciation. It is reconstruction. The question now is what a democratic economic transformation can look like after the first generation of liberation politics has revealed both the possibilities and limitations of state-led redistribution.

The second liberation must ultimately be understood as a project of democratic economic sovereignty rather than a demand for revenge against any racial or economic group. South Africa cannot build a just future by reproducing the exclusions of the past under new identities. It must build a productive society in which black majority citizenship is translated into broad access to

capital, land, knowledge, technology, enterprise and opportunity while protecting constitutional rights, legitimate property, entrepreneurship and institutional accountability. This requires a new social compact between state, business, labour and communities. The state must become capable and developmental without becoming predatory; business must become productive and innovative without becoming oligarchic; labour must defend workers while participating in productive investment; communities must demand accountability while developing institutions of local economic organisation. The second liberation also requires confronting the psychological legacy of apartheid: the assumption that wealth and expertise naturally belong to a narrow social class while poverty is treated as an unavoidable characteristic of the majority. Economic transformation must change not only ownership statistics but the social imagination of what African citizens are capable of owning, creating and controlling. A genuinely liberated society should not merely produce more black consumers inside an unchanged economic structure. It should produce black scientists, manufacturers, investors, farmers, technology owners, intellectual property creators, financiers, exporters and industrial strategists whose capabilities reshape the productive architecture of the country.

The final question is therefore not whether South Africa should choose between political democracy and economic transformation, because the two must ultimately reinforce one another. Political democracy without economic inclusion risks becoming formally equal but materially unequal citizenship. Economic transformation without democracy risks becoming authoritarian redistribution controlled by a new elite. The unfinished liberation must therefore unite political sovereignty with economic sovereignty under constitutional democratic principles. The first liberation answered the question of who may govern South Africa politically: the answer became the citizenry as a whole rather than a racial minority. The second liberation asks who possesses the material capabilities to shape the country's economic destiny. Its answer cannot be a single race, party, corporation, state institution or class. It must be the democratic people organised through institutions capable of preventing both private oligarchy and public capture. This is why the struggle for land, capital, technology, education, industrial ownership, housing, productive employment, entrepreneurship and natural resources is not a collection of disconnected policy debates. They constitute the architecture of sovereignty itself. The unfinished task is to convert citizenship from a primarily political status into a comprehensive social and economic reality. South Africa's democratic revolution will remain incomplete if the majority can choose governments but cannot meaningfully influence the structures through which wealth, productive opportunity and economic power are distributed. The second liberation therefore does not demand the destruction of democracy or markets; it demands their democratisation. It asks whether freedom can move from the ballot box into the factory, from Parliament into the boardroom, from constitutional rights into ownership, from political equality into economic capability, and from the formal end of apartheid into the substantive creation of a sovereign, productive and socially just African political economy.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Reconstructing a Sovereign South African State

The question of reconstructing a sovereign South African state begins with a distinction that is frequently obscured by the formal existence of constitutional democracy: political sovereignty is not identical to economic sovereignty. South Africa achieved an extraordinary political transformation in 1994 by dismantling the formal architecture of apartheid and establishing a constitutional order founded upon universal citizenship, political equality, representative government, fundamental rights and the rule of law. Yet the transition did not automatically transfer the commanding heights of the economy into democratic ownership. The state inherited an economy whose productive structure had been historically designed around racial extraction, mineral wealth, concentrated finance, cheap labour, spatial segregation and the accumulation of capital in predominantly white corporate hands. The central challenge therefore cannot be reduced to whether South Africa has elections, parliament and constitutional rights; it must ask whether the majority of citizens possess sufficient economic power to give substantive meaning to those political rights. Sovereignty requires the capacity of a democratic society to determine the direction of its productive system, to influence the allocation of capital, to protect strategic resources, to build domestic productive capabilities and to prevent private concentrations of wealth from acquiring political influence disproportionate to their democratic mandate. A sovereign state does not abolish private enterprise, nor does sovereignty necessarily require indiscriminate nationalisation. Rather, it establishes a political and institutional order in which capital operates within a clearly defined democratic developmental framework. The reconstruction of South Africa therefore requires neither romantic restoration of an imagined past nor mechanical imitation of foreign economic models. It requires an historically conscious project capable of completing the democratic revolution by confronting the structural economic relationships that political liberation necessarily left partially unresolved.

Democratic economic planning must consequently become one of the foundations of South Africa's second liberation. Planning should not be confused with the bureaucratic command economies of the twentieth century, nor should it mean that government attempts to determine every price, investment decision or entrepreneurial activity. Democratic planning means that the country collectively establishes long-term developmental priorities and aligns public institutions, infrastructure investment, industrial policy, skills development, research, finance, procurement and regional integration around those priorities. The central question should be simple but transformative: what kind of economy does South Africa require if it is to eradicate racialised poverty, mass unemployment, spatial inequality and excessive dependence upon commodity exports? A developmental state must possess sufficient institutional capacity to answer that question and then coordinate resources accordingly. The private sector can remain an important partner, but private profitability cannot be permitted to become the sole mechanism through which national priorities are determined. If capital flows overwhelmingly toward speculative activity, luxury consumption, financial extraction or short-term returns while productive industrial capacity deteriorates, democratic government must possess policy instruments capable of correcting that imbalance. Planning should therefore involve Parliament, organised labour, business, municipalities, universities, communities, agricultural organisations and civil society, rather than becoming an elite exercise conducted exclusively within ministerial offices. The purpose is to democratise economic decision-making itself. South Africa cannot claim complete sovereignty if the electorate can change governments but cannot meaningfully influence the fundamental direction of investment, production, employment and ownership.

Land reform must form another pillar of this reconstruction because land in South Africa is not merely an agricultural commodity; it is inseparable from the historical architecture of conquest, dispossession, racial citizenship and economic exclusion. The democratic state inherited a profoundly unequal land system created through centuries of colonial expansion and apartheid legislation, and the persistence of unequal ownership has consequences extending far beyond agriculture. It affects housing, rural development, food production, wealth accumulation, spatial justice and the capacity of communities to establish sustainable economic enterprises. Yet land reform must be designed with exceptional institutional seriousness because justice requires both transformation and legal certainty. A credible programme should establish transparent mechanisms for identifying land subject to legitimate restitution claims, prioritising strategically important agricultural and developmental opportunities, preventing speculative dispossession and ensuring that compensation, where legally and constitutionally applicable, is determined through fair and transparent processes rather than arbitrary political discretion. The objective should not be to create insecurity among citizens or destroy productive agriculture but to transform an inherited structure in which land ownership remains excessively concentrated. Productive land must be connected to finance, irrigation, extension services, agricultural technology, markets, storage, processing and transport. Otherwise, transferring land without transferring productive capability merely changes ownership documents while reproducing poverty. Genuine land reform should therefore create a new class of African farmers, cooperatives, agro-industrial enterprises and community-owned agricultural institutions capable of participating competitively in domestic and international markets. Sovereignty over land ultimately means that land becomes an instrument of broad-based development rather than a permanent monument to historical dispossession.

The expansion of black industrial ownership must move beyond the narrow conception of empowerment as participation in transactions involving shares in existing corporations. One of the limitations of post-apartheid economic transformation has been that ownership programmes have sometimes produced politically connected beneficiaries without fundamentally restructuring the architecture of productive power. Black South Africans require ownership not only of financial instruments but of factories, logistics companies, technology enterprises, agricultural-processing facilities, mining-service companies, energy projects, telecommunications infrastructure and intellectual property. Industrial ownership is significant because production creates capabilities that passive financial ownership cannot necessarily reproduce. A sovereign industrial strategy should therefore identify sectors in which historically excluded entrepreneurs can be supported through patient capital, development finance, preferential procurement, technical training and market access. Public procurement can become an instrument of industrial transformation if it rewards genuine domestic production rather than companies that merely intermediate foreign goods. Development finance institutions should be evaluated not simply by the volume of money they distribute but by the productive capabilities created through their investments. The objective should be the emergence of a diversified African-owned industrial bourgeoisie that is productive, innovative, internationally competitive and accountable to the broader developmental interests of society. This would represent a profound shift from empowerment as elite incorporation toward empowerment as structural transformation.

Strategic state ownership should likewise be reconsidered without falling into the false binary between total nationalisation and unrestricted privatisation. Certain sectors possess such systemic importance that democratic government cannot responsibly surrender all strategic influence to market forces or foreign ownership. Energy, rail infrastructure, ports, water systems, critical minerals, strategic telecommunications infrastructure and selected financial capabilities may require

significant public participation because their failure can compromise the functioning of the entire economy. State ownership, however, must be accompanied by professional governance, transparent procurement, independent oversight and measurable performance standards. The history of South Africa's state-owned enterprises demonstrates that public ownership alone does not guarantee public benefit. Institutions can be captured by political networks, weakened through corruption or transformed into vehicles for private enrichment. The answer to these failures is not necessarily abandonment of strategic state capacity but its reconstruction. Public enterprises should operate under clear developmental mandates while remaining subject to Parliament, auditing institutions, competition rules where appropriate and public scrutiny. Strategic ownership should be justified by national developmental interests rather than ideological symbolism. The state must own what it needs to own, regulate what it needs to regulate and partner with the private sector where partnership creates genuine national value. Sovereignty means possessing options. A government that has no public capacity in strategically decisive sectors becomes dependent upon private actors whose interests may not always coincide with the national developmental project.

Stronger competition policy is indispensable because democratic political institutions cannot function effectively when economic power becomes excessively concentrated. Competition is not simply a technical concern of economists; it is a question of democracy. Where a small number of corporations dominate essential sectors, they can influence prices, suppliers, employment conditions, investment patterns and even political agendas. South Africa's history of economic concentration means that competition policy must be understood as part of the unfinished transformation of apartheid's economic inheritance. The objective should be to prevent dominant firms from using market power to exclude emerging competitors, suppress suppliers or extract excessive rents from consumers. Competition authorities require sufficient resources, independence and enforcement capacity to challenge anti-competitive conduct regardless of the political or economic influence of the firms involved. At the same time, competition policy must avoid punishing companies merely because they are successful or large. The relevant issue is whether market power is being abused and whether excessive concentration prevents the emergence of productive competitors. Special attention should be given to barriers confronting black-owned enterprises, small producers, cooperatives and regional African businesses. Procurement systems, access to infrastructure and finance, intellectual property arrangements and distribution networks can all become hidden mechanisms of exclusion. Democratizing the economy therefore requires democratizing access to markets. A genuinely sovereign economy should not be one in which political equality coexists with permanent economic oligopoly.

Worker ownership represents another neglected dimension of economic democracy. The traditional debate has often placed the worker and the shareholder on opposite sides of the productive system, as though employees must permanently sell their labour while ownership remains concentrated elsewhere. Yet workers are not merely inputs into production; they are creators of value, institutional knowledge and productive capability. South Africa should therefore explore stronger forms of employee ownership through cooperatives, employee share ownership schemes, pension-fund investment, worker trusts and negotiated participation in corporate governance. Such mechanisms must be designed carefully so that they do not become symbolic allocations of shares without meaningful influence or financial benefit. Worker ownership should give employees a genuine stake in the long-term success of enterprises while maintaining professional management and accountability. Pension and retirement assets, which represent enormous pools of domestic savings, can also contribute to productive investment provided that fiduciary standards and risk controls remain robust. The deeper principle is that democracy should not stop at the factory gate. If

citizens spend most of their lives in workplaces governed through highly unequal structures, political democracy remains incomplete. Economic citizenship requires mechanisms through which workers participate in decisions affecting employment, investment, technological change and the distribution of productivity gains. The liberation tradition's historic concern with human dignity can therefore be extended into the workplace through institutions that recognise labour as a participant in ownership rather than merely an expense on a corporate balance sheet.

Domestic capital formation must become a central objective of economic sovereignty because an economy that continually depends upon external capital remains vulnerable to external preferences. South Africa possesses substantial financial resources, institutional investors, pension assets, banks and sophisticated capital markets, yet a decisive question remains: how much domestic wealth is being transformed into productive investment that expands employment and industrial capacity? A developmental strategy should encourage savings and investment toward infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture, technology, housing and productive enterprises rather than allowing excessive capital to circulate primarily through speculative or externally oriented channels. This does not mean closing the economy to foreign investment. Foreign capital can contribute technology, expertise, markets and financing. But foreign investment should complement domestic capability rather than substitute for it. South Africa must cultivate institutions capable of mobilising domestic savings for national development while maintaining sound financial regulation and protecting citizens from reckless financial experimentation. Universities, pension funds, development banks, municipalities and private financial institutions can all contribute to an ecosystem of domestic capital formation. The country should also encourage African investment networks capable of financing African enterprises across borders. The objective is to create an economy in which South Africans are increasingly owners, investors, producers and innovators rather than simply consumers in markets whose commanding institutions are externally controlled. Capital sovereignty is not financial isolation; it is the ability to determine a meaningful proportion of one's developmental destiny.

African-centred trade must constitute a deliberate departure from the inherited pattern in which African economies frequently trade more extensively with external powers than with one another. South Africa possesses industrial capacity, financial sophistication and logistical advantages that could make it a major engine of continental economic integration. Yet this potential cannot be realised through rhetoric alone. African-centred trade requires investment in transport corridors, customs harmonisation, payment systems, standards, digital infrastructure, regional value chains and industrial complementarity. South African manufacturers should be encouraged to regard African markets not as secondary destinations but as part of the country's strategic economic space. Likewise, South Africa should support the development of productive capabilities in neighbouring countries rather than pursuing relationships based exclusively on market dominance. The deeper Pan-African principle is that African sovereignty cannot be achieved by individual states acting as isolated national units while remaining dependent upon external centres of finance, technology and consumption. Continental integration can create economies of scale that individual African countries cannot achieve alone. The African Continental Free Trade Area offers an institutional framework through which this potential can gradually be developed, but its success depends upon productive transformation rather than merely reducing tariffs. South Africa's sovereign reconstruction should therefore link domestic industrialisation with continental industrial development. The ultimate objective should be an African economic system capable of producing, financing, trading and technologically advancing on a scale that reduces structural dependence.

Industrialisation must consequently return to the centre of South African economic policy. The country cannot permanently depend upon the export of minerals and raw materials while importing increasingly sophisticated manufactured goods and technologies. Mineral wealth can generate substantial revenue, but an economy built predominantly around extraction remains vulnerable to commodity cycles and can reproduce an enclave relationship between resource-rich territories and externally oriented corporations. Industrialisation means moving upward through value chains: processing minerals domestically, manufacturing machinery, developing chemical industries, producing agricultural equipment, expanding pharmaceutical capability, building transport technologies and creating digital and advanced manufacturing industries. Industrial policy should therefore be strategic, evidence-based and disciplined. Government support should come with performance requirements, including employment creation, domestic procurement, skills development, export performance, research investment and technological upgrading. Firms receiving public support must not be permitted to privatise gains while socialising losses indefinitely. Industrialisation also requires infrastructure capable of moving goods efficiently and reliably. Electricity, railways, ports, water, telecommunications and logistics are not peripheral services; they are the physical foundation of productive sovereignty. The challenge is therefore to construct an industrial ecosystem rather than isolated industrial projects. South Africa's future economic power will depend not merely on how much it extracts from the ground but on how much knowledge, technology, manufacturing capability and value it creates from those resources.

Agricultural transformation must be integrated into this industrial strategy because agriculture represents both a question of land justice and a question of national food sovereignty. South Africa possesses considerable agricultural capacity, but the structure of agricultural production, ownership and market access remains deeply uneven. Transformative agricultural policy must simultaneously support commercial agriculture, emerging farmers, communal producers, cooperatives and agro-processing enterprises. The false choice between productive commercial farming and land transformation should be rejected. The real objective should be to expand the number of productive participants in the agricultural economy while protecting food security and strengthening domestic value chains. Rural infrastructure, irrigation, extension services, agricultural finance, storage facilities and transport must be expanded because land without productive infrastructure cannot generate sustainable livelihoods. Agricultural universities and research institutions should become engines of African-centred innovation in drought resistance, climate adaptation, seed development, mechanisation and digital agriculture. Agro-processing is particularly important because raw agricultural commodities generate less value than processed food, packaging and branded products. A sovereign agricultural economy should therefore seek to transform South Africa from a producer of commodities into a producer of food systems. Such transformation can create rural employment, reduce food insecurity, expand black ownership and strengthen regional exports. Agricultural sovereignty ultimately means ensuring that the country can feed its population while creating opportunities for millions of citizens to participate meaningfully in productive rural economies.

Technology sovereignty must become one of the defining principles of the twenty-first-century liberation project because political independence becomes increasingly fragile when societies depend upon foreign technologies for essential systems. Digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, telecommunications, semiconductors, data centres, software, biotechnology and advanced manufacturing increasingly shape economic and geopolitical power. South Africa possesses universities, engineers, scientists and entrepreneurs capable of participating in these fields, but national capability requires sustained investment rather than isolated innovation competitions. Government should support research institutions, technology parks, university-

industry partnerships, domestic software development and African digital platforms. Public procurement can create early markets for domestic technological enterprises, while intellectual property policies can encourage commercialisation without sacrificing open scientific collaboration. Data should also be treated as a strategic resource whose governance must protect citizens while enabling innovation. Technology sovereignty does not mean refusing foreign technology; such an approach would be unrealistic and counterproductive. It means possessing sufficient domestic capability to understand, adapt, develop and secure critical technologies rather than becoming permanently dependent upon external suppliers. The next phase of African liberation will increasingly be fought in laboratories, data centres, universities and digital networks. A country that cannot produce or control significant portions of its technological infrastructure risks surrendering economic and political autonomy even while maintaining formal constitutional sovereignty.

Energy sovereignty is equally fundamental because no modern economy can industrialise without reliable, affordable and sustainable energy. South Africa's energy crisis exposed the vulnerability created when a strategic national system loses institutional capability, investment discipline and effective governance. Energy policy should therefore be approached not merely as a question of electricity supply but as a central component of industrial strategy. The country possesses significant renewable-energy potential, mineral resources relevant to energy technologies and scientific capabilities that can support a diversified energy system. The challenge is to combine public capacity, private investment, technological innovation and regulatory stability in a coherent national framework. Renewable energy, grid modernisation, storage, transmission infrastructure and responsible use of existing generation capacity should be considered within an integrated strategy rather than through ideological battles between competing technologies. South Africa should also seek to develop domestic manufacturing capabilities around energy equipment, batteries, electrical components and associated technologies. This would transform energy transition from a potential source of industrial dislocation into an opportunity for industrial renewal. Energy sovereignty does not mean autarky; it means ensuring that the nation's economic and social life is not permanently vulnerable to failures in a strategic system. Reliable energy is the foundation upon which manufacturing, mining, agriculture, digital infrastructure, healthcare, education and small enterprise all depend.

Media plurality must also be recognised as an essential component of democratic sovereignty because political power depends not only upon who owns factories or banks but also upon who controls the production and circulation of information. South Africa possesses a relatively vibrant media environment, yet ownership concentration, commercial pressures, advertising dependence and unequal access to communication infrastructure can constrain the diversity of public discourse. A democratic society requires media institutions capable of scrutinising government, corporations and political parties without becoming instruments of any one of them. Public broadcasting should therefore be institutionally protected from political interference while being held to high standards of editorial independence and public accountability. Community media deserves stronger support because local journalism can give visibility to citizens whose experiences rarely reach national platforms. Digital platforms have democratised communication but have also created new forms of concentrated power through algorithms, advertising systems and platform ownership. Media plurality must therefore include technological plurality. The objective is not to create a state-controlled media environment but to prevent any combination of government, corporate capital or foreign platform power from dominating the information ecosystem. Democratic sovereignty requires citizens who can access competing facts, arguments and interpretations. Without an

informed citizenry, elections can become periodic rituals rather than mechanisms through which society meaningfully evaluates competing visions of national development.

Stronger public institutions are indispensable because no transformation programme can succeed if the institutions responsible for implementing it are weak, politicised or incapable of enforcing their own rules. The central lesson of South Africa's experience is that constitutional design, however sophisticated, cannot substitute for institutional integrity. Parliament must exercise genuine oversight; municipalities must deliver services competently; regulators must be independent; professional civil servants must be protected from arbitrary political interference; courts must remain independent; auditing institutions must possess sufficient authority; and public procurement must be transparent. The reconstruction of sovereignty therefore requires rebuilding the administrative state as a professional instrument of democratic government rather than treating the state primarily as a source of political appointments and patronage. The developmental state must be capable without becoming authoritarian and politically accountable without becoming administratively captured. This requires professional recruitment, continuous training, performance management, digitalisation, institutional memory and consequences for misconduct. Political parties should retain their legitimate democratic role, but the permanent fusion of party networks with public administration must be resisted. A sovereign state is not one in which politicians control everything; it is one in which elected authorities establish democratic priorities while professional institutions implement lawful decisions competently. The strength of democracy ultimately depends upon whether citizens encounter the state as an effective public institution rather than as a distant arena of political competition.

Anti-corruption enforcement must therefore move beyond periodic scandals and become an enduring institutional principle. Corruption is frequently described as theft from the public purse, but its deeper significance is the conversion of public authority into private economic power. When contracts are manipulated, appointments are sold, regulations selectively enforced or public enterprises captured, democratic sovereignty is weakened because resources intended for collective development are redirected toward networks of accumulation. South Africa's experience demonstrates that corruption cannot be defeated simply through speeches or investigations after the damage has occurred. Prevention, detection, prosecution and asset recovery must operate as an integrated system. Procurement systems should be transparent and increasingly digital, beneficial ownership information should be accessible to authorised oversight institutions, conflicts of interest should be rigorously managed, whistle-blowers should receive meaningful protection and law-enforcement institutions should possess operational independence. Political leaders and business figures should be held to equivalent standards before the law. Yet anti-corruption policy must also avoid becoming selective political warfare in which prosecutions are pursued according to factional interests. The legitimacy of enforcement depends upon consistency. A sovereign democratic state must establish the principle that public office is a public trust and that no political party, corporation, wealthy individual or state official possesses immunity from accountability. Corruption is not merely a moral failure; it is an attack upon national development itself.

Regional economic integration completes the architecture because South Africa's sovereignty cannot be fully secured within a fragmented Southern African economic environment. The country's economic strength creates responsibilities as well as opportunities. South Africa must deepen cooperation with the Southern African Development Community while recognising that integration cannot be reduced to diplomatic summits. Infrastructure corridors, electricity pools, agricultural value chains, industrial partnerships, labour mobility, financial integration, education networks and

cross-border investment can transform Southern Africa into a more coherent economic space. Such integration should also address the political tensions that arise when unequal economies share borders. South Africa cannot pursue prosperity while treating the economic insecurity of neighbouring states as an external problem. Migration, trade and employment should be governed through regional institutions capable of balancing national interests with collective development. A more integrated region can reduce the structural conditions that generate irregular migration, economic desperation and social conflict. It can also create larger markets for African-owned firms and allow specialised production across national boundaries. Regional sovereignty therefore complements national sovereignty rather than undermining it. A South Africa that is economically powerful but regionally isolated would remain vulnerable; a South Africa embedded in a prosperous, integrated Southern African economy would possess greater strategic autonomy. The Pan-African principle is clear: sovereignty is strengthened when African states possess the capacity to act together.

The programme outlined above ultimately requires a redefinition of what liberation means in the twenty-first century. The first liberation confronted the political machinery of racial domination; the second must confront the structures that reproduce unequal economic power after formal racial rule has disappeared. This does not mean that apartheid's legacy explains every contemporary failure, nor does it mean that contemporary South Africa can avoid responsibility by permanently invoking historical injustice. A mature liberation politics must simultaneously understand history and accept responsibility for the present. The ANC's historic contribution cannot be erased because the movement achieved something of enormous consequence: it helped dismantle apartheid, established democratic government and created a constitutional framework within which transformation became possible. Yet historical achievement cannot become a permanent exemption from criticism. The democratic state must now be judged by whether it has used its political authority to expand substantive economic citizenship. Reconstruction therefore requires a political movement and intellectual tradition capable of moving beyond the opposition between market fundamentalism and state romanticism. The relevant question is not whether the state or private sector should dominate everything, but whether the institutional arrangement produces broad-based capabilities, productive employment, democratic ownership and national resilience. Sovereignty is ultimately measured by capacity: the capacity to feed the population, generate energy, build infrastructure, develop technology, finance investment, regulate capital, protect workers, sustain public institutions and participate confidently in the African and global economy.

The reconstruction of South Africa must therefore be understood as a project of democratic state-building rather than simply an economic policy package. Democratic economic planning, land reform, black industrial ownership, strategic state capacity, competition policy, worker ownership, domestic capital formation, African-centred trade, industrialisation, agricultural transformation, technological sovereignty, energy security, media plurality, institutional integrity, anti-corruption enforcement and regional integration are interconnected dimensions of one larger proposition: political democracy must acquire the economic foundations necessary to sustain itself. None of these reforms can succeed in isolation. Land reform without agricultural finance can fail; industrialisation without energy security can collapse; black ownership without domestic capital can remain dependent; state ownership without institutional integrity can reproduce corruption; competition policy without enforcement can leave oligopolies intact; regional integration without domestic production can merely expand markets for external corporations. The transformation project must therefore be coordinated around a coherent national developmental strategy. Its ultimate purpose should be neither revenge nor redistribution for its own sake, but the construction

of a productive, inclusive and sovereign economy in which citizenship carries material as well as political meaning. South Africa's democratic revolution will remain incomplete so long as millions possess the formal right to vote while lacking meaningful economic power over the conditions under which they live and work. The second liberation question therefore becomes unavoidable: who owns, finances, produces and controls the wealth of the nation? Reconstructing a sovereign South African state means ensuring that the answer is no longer determined primarily by the inherited structures of racial capitalism, concentrated private power or external dependency, but increasingly by a democratic people exercising informed and accountable control over their collective economic destiny.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The Future of South Africa's Revolution

The question of the future of South Africa's revolution cannot be answered by asking whether the African National Congress remains electorally dominant, whether its historical symbols retain emotional power, or whether its leaders continue to invoke the language of liberation. The more fundamental question is whether the political settlement produced in 1994 can still serve as the institutional foundation for a genuinely emancipatory South African society. The ANC entered government carrying the accumulated authority of a liberation movement that had fought racial domination, colonial dispossession, apartheid capitalism and political exclusion for generations. Its historical mission was therefore considerably larger than the ordinary programme of a political party. It was expected to transform the relationship between state and citizen, dismantle racial hierarchy, democratise institutions, broaden economic ownership and restore dignity to a dispossessed majority. In important respects, that mission achieved historic victories. Political apartheid was abolished, universal citizenship was established, constitutional democracy was constructed, racial discrimination became legally impermissible, and millions of people gained access to housing, electricity, water, education and social protection that apartheid had systematically denied them. Yet political liberation did not automatically produce economic sovereignty. The democratic state inherited an economy whose ownership structures, financial institutions, productive assets, land patterns and corporate networks had been shaped by centuries of colonialism and apartheid. The revolution therefore entered government confronting an unresolved contradiction: political authority had changed hands more rapidly than economic power. The future of the revolution depends upon whether that contradiction can still be confronted democratically, intelligently and institutionally rather than rhetorically.

The ANC's historical mission must consequently be understood in two distinct but interconnected phases. The first was the destruction of apartheid as a system of political domination, while the second concerned the transformation of the social and economic order that apartheid had created. The first phase produced spectacular constitutional change because political authority could be transferred through negotiations, elections and legislation. The second phase proved considerably more difficult because economic power was embedded in property relations, accumulated capital,

corporate structures, financial markets, professional networks and international economic relationships. This distinction explains why South Africa can simultaneously be described as one of Africa's most important democratic successes and as a country in which profound socioeconomic inequalities remain. The democratic revolution succeeded in changing the rules of political citizenship, but it struggled to transform the underlying distribution of productive power. The constitutional order gave every citizen formal equality, yet formal equality cannot by itself erase inherited disparities in wealth, land ownership, education, spatial development and access to capital. The danger is therefore that democracy becomes interpreted merely as periodic elections while the deeper question of who controls investment, production, land, finance and employment remains insufficiently democratised. A serious revolutionary tradition cannot accept such a narrow definition of political freedom. Freedom must include the capacity of citizens to influence the material conditions governing their lives. The future ANC project, or whatever political movement succeeds its historical role, must therefore recover the connection between political democracy and socioeconomic emancipation without abandoning constitutionalism, pluralism or democratic accountability.

Yet the limits of liberation movements in government must also be confronted honestly. A liberation movement is historically structured around resistance, mobilisation, sacrifice and the creation of political unity against a common enemy. Government requires different qualities: institutional discipline, administrative competence, fiscal responsibility, professional management, long-term planning and the capacity to make difficult decisions even when those decisions are unpopular within one's own political constituency. The transition from liberation movement to governing party therefore creates an inherent institutional tension. The movement's political culture may remain oriented toward struggle while the state requires predictable administration. Party loyalty can begin to compete with professional competence; revolutionary legitimacy can become a substitute for contemporary performance; liberation credentials can become a mechanism for political entitlement. Where this occurs, the historic legitimacy of the movement becomes gradually detached from the practical legitimacy of government. Citizens may continue respecting the sacrifices of previous generations while simultaneously demanding better schools, functioning municipalities, reliable electricity, safer communities, efficient public transport and accountable institutions. This is not necessarily rejection of the liberation struggle. It can actually represent its logical continuation. A generation born after apartheid does not owe permanent political loyalty to organisations merely because those organisations played heroic roles in history. Historical contribution deserves honour, but democratic authority must continually be renewed through performance, integrity and responsiveness. The liberation movement therefore cannot demand that history exempt it from the ordinary standards of democratic government.

One of the central dangers confronting the revolutionary project is the transformation of liberation into political inheritance. Once liberation becomes a source of permanent legitimacy rather than a continuing programme of social transformation, political institutions can become detached from the people in whose name they were created. The language of the revolution can then survive while its socioeconomic substance weakens. This is particularly dangerous because South Africa possesses a highly sophisticated political vocabulary of transformation, empowerment, reconciliation, non-racialism and social justice. Political language, however, must ultimately be tested against material outcomes. If young people remain excluded from meaningful economic opportunity, if township economies remain structurally marginalised, if rural communities remain separated from productive assets, if land inequality persists and if wealth remains concentrated despite decades of democratic government, then the revolutionary question remains unfinished. The issue is not whether every

inequality can be eliminated by state intervention, because modern economies require markets, entrepreneurship, private investment and productive incentives. The question is whether the economic system produces broad-based citizenship or reproduces concentrated power behind a democratic political façade. A democratic state must therefore ask who owns productive assets, who controls finance, who determines investment priorities, who captures value from natural resources, who controls technological infrastructure and who possesses the institutional capacity to influence public policy. These questions move the debate beyond slogans and toward the actual architecture of power.

The rise of a new political generation is perhaps the most consequential development in South Africa's political future. The generation that came of age after 1994 does not possess the same psychological relationship to apartheid as those who experienced its violence directly. For many young South Africans, apartheid is historical memory rather than lived experience. Their political consciousness is therefore shaped by unemployment, digital technology, inequality, corruption, education, housing, climate pressures, migration, entrepreneurship, cultural identity and the frustration of entering adulthood in an economy that often appears unable to absorb their aspirations. This does not make the new generation less political; it makes its politics different. It is less likely to accept political authority solely on the basis of historical credentials and more likely to demand measurable outcomes. Its political question is not simply who defeated apartheid but who can construct a society in which freedom has tangible meaning. The emergence of this generation may therefore force South African politics beyond the binary categories inherited from the twentieth century. The central contest may increasingly concern competing visions of economic citizenship, institutional integrity, social justice, African identity and democratic renewal. Political parties that fail to understand this generational transition may discover that historical legitimacy diminishes rapidly when it is not translated into contemporary relevance.

The new generation also has the potential to redefine the meaning of African nationalism. South African nationalism was historically complicated by colonialism, apartheid, ethnicity, class and the deliberate fragmentation of African society. The democratic project sought to replace racial nationalism with constitutional citizenship and a broader conception of South African belonging. Yet the constitutional idea of citizenship must coexist with the reality that South Africa is part of a wider African social, economic and historical system. Millions of African migrants cross the country's borders for employment, education, trade, family and refuge, while South African businesses operate throughout the continent. A new political generation therefore has the opportunity to reject both xenophobic nationalism and an abstract cosmopolitanism disconnected from local socioeconomic realities. It can construct a mature African citizenship rooted in constitutional rights, regional solidarity and reciprocal responsibility. Such a conception would recognise that migration pressures are often symptoms of uneven continental development rather than evidence of inherent hostility between African peoples. South Africa cannot claim continental leadership while treating fellow Africans as permanent outsiders. At the same time, regional solidarity requires functioning immigration administration, economic planning and public services. Pan-Africanism must therefore become institutional rather than merely rhetorical. It must be reflected in trade policy, labour mobility, education, infrastructure, security cooperation and democratic diplomacy.

The possibility of a new social contract is consequently central to South Africa's future. The original democratic settlement established a constitutional framework capable of accommodating enormous political differences, but the social contract cannot remain frozen in the circumstances of the early

1990s. A new generation requires an updated agreement concerning what citizens owe the state, what the state owes citizens, what business owes society and what responsibilities accompany economic freedom. Such a contract would have to combine individual rights with social obligations and economic transformation with institutional stability. Government must guarantee basic services and equal citizenship while citizens must participate constructively in democratic institutions. Businesses must retain legitimate rights to profit and investment while recognising that economic activity occurs within a society whose stability depends upon shared prosperity. Labour must defend workers' interests while contributing to productive economic institutions. Civil society must hold government accountable without weakening democratic institutions themselves. The new social contract should therefore not be a return to state socialism nor a surrender to market fundamentalism. It should be a democratic developmental compact in which markets operate within a constitutional framework and the state possesses sufficient capacity to direct investment toward broad-based national development. The central objective must be to make citizenship materially meaningful.

Economic transformation is impossible without confronting the institutional relationship between democracy and ownership. Elections determine who occupies political office, but they do not automatically determine who controls capital. A company board is not elected by the population; investment decisions are not normally subjected to democratic deliberation; pension funds, banks, corporations and financial institutions operate according to specialised legal and economic structures. This does not mean that private economic institutions are inherently illegitimate. It means that democratic society must develop mechanisms through which economic power remains accountable to broader social objectives. The challenge is to create institutions capable of reconciling private enterprise with public interest. South Africa could therefore deepen mechanisms of worker participation, broaden employee ownership, strengthen competition policy, expand development finance, improve access to capital for historically excluded entrepreneurs, support cooperative enterprises and use public procurement more strategically. Such policies would not abolish markets. They would democratise participation in markets. Economic transformation should ultimately be measured not simply by how many politically connected individuals acquire wealth but by whether millions of ordinary citizens acquire productive capacity, assets, skills, financial inclusion and meaningful economic agency. That distinction is essential if the second phase of the revolution is to avoid becoming another form of elite accumulation.

The land question remains another decisive test of whether the democratic revolution can complete its historical mission. Land is not simply a commodity in South Africa; it is simultaneously an economic resource, a source of historical identity, a foundation of rural livelihoods and a symbol of dispossession. Colonial conquest and apartheid fundamentally reorganised ownership and spatial geography, producing inequalities that cannot be resolved merely through formal legal equality. Yet land reform must be approached with greater sophistication than either romantic redistribution or absolute defence of existing ownership structures. Productive agricultural land must remain productive, communities must receive secure tenure, beneficiaries must receive technical and financial support, and land policy must be integrated with infrastructure, markets, water security and agricultural development. A land programme that transfers property without productive capacity may reproduce poverty rather than eliminate it. Conversely, a system that treats inherited ownership as permanently untouchable risks converting historical injustice into constitutional permanence. The future revolutionary project therefore requires a land settlement capable of combining restitution, redistribution, productivity and social justice. The objective should not

simply be to change the names on deeds but to transform the relationship between land, citizenship and economic opportunity.

The same principle applies to industrial policy and natural resources. South Africa possesses substantial mineral wealth, sophisticated financial capabilities, industrial infrastructure and a strategic geographical position, yet resource wealth has historically been accompanied by severe inequalities in ownership and community benefit. A genuinely transformative state must therefore ask whether mineral extraction generates sufficient national developmental value. Resource nationalism need not mean arbitrary nationalisation or hostility toward foreign investment. It can mean ensuring that mining contributes to domestic processing, technological development, infrastructure, employment, fiscal capacity and community advancement. The strategic question is whether South Africa exports raw materials while importing high-value manufactured products, or whether it uses its natural resources as a foundation for industrialisation. The latter requires long-term planning, technical competence and collaboration between state institutions, universities, labour and industry. Economic sovereignty is not achieved merely by changing ownership; it requires developing the knowledge, technology, infrastructure and human capital necessary to control value chains. The revolution of the future must therefore be intellectual as well as economic. A nation cannot be sovereign if it possesses resources but lacks the technological and institutional capacity to transform them.

Education will determine whether this transformation is possible. The revolutionary struggle was fundamentally a struggle over human dignity and therefore also a struggle over knowledge. Apartheid deliberately produced unequal educational systems because political domination required unequal access to intellectual development. Democratic South Africa expanded educational access dramatically, but access alone does not guarantee educational justice. The future challenge is to build an education system capable of producing scientists, engineers, doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, administrators, artists, agricultural specialists and political thinkers who can participate in national reconstruction. Universities must not become detached from national development, while vocational education must no longer be treated as a second-class alternative to academic education. South Africa needs a knowledge economy rooted in African realities and connected to global scientific networks. It also requires historical education capable of teaching young citizens about colonialism, apartheid, liberation and contemporary political institutions without reducing history to partisan mythology. A society that forgets its history becomes vulnerable to manipulation; a society imprisoned by its history cannot build the future. Education must therefore become the bridge between historical consciousness and future capability.

The democratic state itself must also be reconstructed as an instrument of public power rather than merely a site of political competition. The crisis of state capacity is not simply a technical problem. It is a constitutional problem because citizens cannot exercise meaningful rights where institutions cannot deliver the conditions necessary for those rights to become real. A constitution can guarantee equality, but equality requires functioning schools, courts, hospitals, municipalities, police services and administrative systems. The future revolutionary project must therefore place public-sector competence at the centre of political transformation. Recruitment should increasingly reward expertise and integrity rather than political loyalty. Public institutions require stable professional leadership, transparent procurement, credible auditing and consequences for corruption. Local government deserves particular attention because citizens encounter the state most directly through municipalities. When refuse is not collected, roads collapse, water systems fail or electricity becomes unreliable, citizens experience the state not through constitutional philosophy but through

daily frustration. Democratic legitimacy is therefore produced through ordinary institutional performance. The revolution must learn that building capable institutions is itself revolutionary work.

The struggle against corruption must consequently be understood as a struggle over sovereignty. Corruption is frequently presented as an ethical problem involving dishonest individuals, but systemic corruption is more serious because it allows private networks to penetrate public institutions and convert state authority into private accumulation. When contracts, appointments or regulatory decisions are manipulated for political or commercial advantage, the boundary between public power and private wealth becomes blurred. The result is not merely financial loss; it is the privatisation of sovereignty. Citizens begin to perceive the state as an instrument controlled by connected elites rather than as a democratic institution belonging to society. This undermines confidence in democracy itself. The future political order therefore requires stronger institutional barriers between political office, public procurement and private enrichment. Transparency must become routine rather than exceptional. Independent oversight institutions must possess real capacity. Whistle-blowers require meaningful protection. Political parties must develop internal accountability mechanisms capable of disciplining their own members. Without such reforms, the language of transformation can become discredited because citizens may reasonably conclude that transformation means merely changing the beneficiaries of elite power.

South Africa must also reconsider the relationship between state power and private capital without falling into simplistic ideological categories. The history of apartheid demonstrates that markets are not automatically neutral institutions because markets operate within legal and political structures created by particular societies. At the same time, the failures of many state-owned enterprises demonstrate that public ownership without effective governance can generate inefficiency, corruption and fiscal pressure. The future therefore requires a more sophisticated developmental state capable of regulating, partnering with and strategically influencing private capital. The question should not be whether the state or the market must completely dominate, but what institutional arrangement best serves national development. Strategic sectors may require stronger public influence, while competitive sectors may benefit from private entrepreneurship. The key is to ensure that neither public officials nor private corporations can exercise unaccountable power over the national interest. South Africa's economic future should be judged by employment creation, productive investment, technological advancement, household prosperity and social mobility rather than by ideological purity.

A new political settlement must also restore the principle that opposition is not treason and government is not ownership of the nation. One of the weaknesses that can emerge when liberation movements dominate politics for extended periods is the temptation to equate criticism of the governing party with hostility toward the liberation struggle itself. That equation is ultimately destructive because democracy depends upon disagreement. The liberation tradition should be confident enough to survive criticism, and opposition parties should be responsible enough to criticise government without undermining constitutional institutions. South Africa's future requires a political culture in which electoral competition is normal rather than existential. Governments must be removable without the state collapsing, and opposition parties must be capable of governing rather than merely protesting. This is especially important for the new generation, which is likely to judge political organisations less by their historical identity and more by their competence. Democratic maturity means accepting that political power is temporary while

institutions are permanent. The state belongs to the people, not to the party that happens to control it.

The future of the revolution will also depend upon whether South Africa can overcome the spatial geography inherited from apartheid. The architecture of racial segregation continues to influence where people live, where they work, how long they travel, which schools their children attend and which communities have access to economic opportunity. Political equality has not eliminated geographical inequality. Millions of people remain economically distant from centres of employment, while transport costs consume significant portions of household income. A genuinely transformative development strategy must therefore integrate housing, transport, industrial development, education and municipal planning. Townships cannot remain primarily residential spaces from which workers travel long distances to economic centres. Rural communities cannot remain dependent upon limited state transfers while productive opportunities are concentrated elsewhere. Urban development must create economically integrated communities rather than reproducing segregation under new administrative names. Spatial transformation is therefore one of the clearest ways in which constitutional democracy can become materially visible. The future revolution must build places in which people can live, work, learn and participate without apartheid geography continuing to dictate their possibilities.

South Africa's democratic future is inseparable from the future of the African continent. The country occupies a unique position because its economy, institutions and diplomatic influence give it continental significance, while its history imposes a special responsibility to use that influence constructively. South Africa cannot become genuinely sovereign by isolating itself from Africa. Its prosperity is connected to regional stability, continental trade, migration, infrastructure, energy and security. The African Continental Free Trade Area creates opportunities for South African industry, but those opportunities must be approached through partnership rather than economic domination. South African corporations operating elsewhere in Africa should be expected to contribute to sustainable development rather than reproducing extractive relationships. Pretoria's foreign policy should remain committed to African peace, self-determination and multilateralism while maintaining the strategic capacity to pursue national interests. Pan-Africanism must therefore become practical diplomacy. It should mean building railways, energy systems, digital networks, universities, financial institutions and industrial partnerships that connect African economies. A sovereign South Africa should not aspire to become a hegemon over Africa; it should aspire to become a reliable pillar of African collective sovereignty.

This responsibility is particularly important because South Africa's international position gives it a capacity to influence debates about global inequality, Palestine, development finance, climate justice and reform of international institutions. The country emerged from apartheid with an international reputation rooted in negotiation, reconciliation and human rights, but that reputation must continually be renewed through consistent policy. African diplomacy should not merely seek prestige; it should seek structural change in the international order. South Africa can contribute to campaigns for fairer global financial institutions, greater African representation in international decision-making, technology transfer, debt reform and equitable climate financing. It can also strengthen South-South cooperation with Latin America, Asia and other regions confronting historical inequality. The principle should be that foreign policy is an extension of national and continental development. A country cannot claim sovereignty while remaining passive within institutions that shape global economic rules. South Africa's revolutionary inheritance therefore

carries an international dimension: the struggle against racial domination must evolve into a struggle for a more equitable international system.

The greatest danger to South Africa's revolutionary future is not necessarily the disappearance of the ANC, because political organisations can decline and new organisations can emerge without the historical project itself disappearing. The greater danger would be the disappearance of the idea that democracy should transform the material conditions of the majority. If political competition becomes merely a contest over offices, patronage and electoral numbers, then the revolutionary content of democracy will gradually disappear. Conversely, if economic transformation becomes an excuse for authoritarianism, corruption or the destruction of constitutional rights, then the democratic achievement of 1994 will also be undermined. South Africa therefore faces the challenge of holding two principles together: political freedom and socioeconomic transformation. Neither can sustainably exist without the other. Political freedom without economic opportunity can become hollow; economic transformation without political freedom can become coercive. The future requires a democratic developmental order capable of pursuing both simultaneously. This is the deeper meaning of the second liberation question: how can political citizenship become economic citizenship without sacrificing constitutional democracy?

The ANC's future role should consequently be determined not by nostalgia but by whether it can renew its intellectual and organisational capacity to answer this question. Its historical mission cannot simply be repeated because history has changed. The organisation that defeated apartheid cannot assume that the same political vocabulary will automatically address unemployment, automation, climate change, artificial intelligence, digital inequality, demographic change and global economic restructuring. A renewed liberation tradition would need to become intellectually ambitious again. It would have to cultivate economists, philosophers, scientists, constitutional scholars, engineers, administrators, entrepreneurs and social theorists capable of designing institutions rather than merely mobilising voters. It would have to reconnect political leadership with communities and rebuild trust through measurable delivery. Most importantly, it would have to accept that criticism from younger generations is not a rejection of liberation but potentially an invitation to complete it. If the ANC succeeds in renewing itself around democratic economic transformation, it may continue contributing to South Africa's future. If it cannot, history may preserve its heroic role while political society moves beyond it.

Ultimately, the future of South Africa's revolution will be determined by whether the country can transform the meaning of liberation from a historical achievement into a living democratic practice. Liberation must mean more than the right to vote; it must include the capacity to live with dignity, obtain meaningful work, access quality education, participate in economic life, own productive assets, move freely, enjoy security and influence decisions that shape one's future. Sovereignty must mean more than a national flag and elected government; it must include institutional capacity, economic resilience, technological competence and the ability to pursue national interests without surrendering democratic accountability. Pan-Africanism must mean more than solidarity speeches; it must involve practical continental integration, shared development and collective sovereignty. The revolutionary project of the future must therefore be simultaneously national, democratic, economic, intellectual and African. Its objective should not be revenge against history but mastery of history. South Africa has already demonstrated that an apparently permanent political order can be transformed. The unfinished question is whether it can now demonstrate that political liberation can be converted into broad-based economic freedom without destroying the democratic institutions

that made liberation possible. The answer will determine not merely the future of one political party, but the historical meaning of South Africa's democratic revolution itself.

CONCLUSION

Who Owns the Future?

The final question of this book should not be whether white people control South Africa, because such a formulation is analytically inadequate, politically reductive and historically incapable of explaining the complex architecture of power that has emerged since 1994. South Africa is not governed by a single racial bloc operating through a unified conspiracy, nor can the persistence of racialised inequality be explained by attributing contemporary political and economic outcomes to the intentions of every white citizen. The more serious question is who possesses the material, institutional, political, financial, technological, cultural and intellectual resources through which the country's future is actually shaped. This requires moving beyond the visible theatre of elections towards the deeper structures that determine what governments can do, what businesses can own, what workers can negotiate, what communities can demand and what citizens can realistically influence. Democracy established political equality in the formal sense, but formal equality did not automatically produce equality of productive capacity. The ballot gave the majority political citizenship, while the inherited structure of ownership continued to distribute economic power unevenly. Consequently, the central contradiction of post-apartheid South Africa is not simply between racial groups but between political democracy and unequal material power. It is within this contradiction that the unfinished character of the country's liberation must be understood.

The African National Congress therefore occupies a historically paradoxical position. It achieved something of extraordinary significance: it helped destroy the formal political architecture of apartheid and established universal citizenship under a constitutional democratic order. The transition dismantled racial political supremacy, extended voting rights to the black majority, created institutions committed to equality before the law and placed human dignity at the centre of the constitutional project. These achievements should neither be minimised nor romanticised away in the search for an argument about unfinished liberation. Millions of South Africans experienced tangible changes in political status, public representation, access to services and opportunities that were denied to them under apartheid. Yet the revolutionary question did not end when political apartheid ended. The liberation movement inherited a society in which economic ownership, spatial organisation, land distribution, industrial concentration, financial capital, professional expertise and accumulated wealth had been profoundly structured by colonialism and apartheid. The ANC could therefore capture the state without immediately capturing the economic system through which social power had historically been accumulated. The transition represented a fundamental transfer of political authority, but it did not constitute an equivalent transfer of economic sovereignty.

This distinction between political authority and economic power is essential to understanding the South African experience. A government may possess legislative authority, command public institutions and enjoy an electoral mandate while simultaneously confronting private concentrations of capital capable of constraining policy choices. The state can regulate markets, but it cannot simply abolish the accumulated institutional power of capital without confronting investment,

employment, financial stability, production and international economic relationships. Consequently, the post-apartheid state entered a difficult terrain in which political transformation had to coexist with an inherited capitalist economy deeply integrated into global markets. The resulting settlement was neither a complete continuation of apartheid nor a complete economic revolution. It was a negotiated political transformation within an economic structure that retained substantial historical continuity. This produced a peculiar form of democratic sovereignty in which citizens acquired political rights while economic power remained unevenly distributed among corporations, investors, financial institutions, property owners, professional classes and politically connected elites.

The question of ownership therefore becomes unavoidable. Who owns land, productive enterprises, mines, financial institutions, major corporations, intellectual property, infrastructure and technologically sophisticated businesses? Who controls the institutions that allocate credit and investment? Who possesses the expertise necessary to influence complex economic policy? Who determines where capital flows and which regions receive investment? Who has the capacity to absorb economic shocks while millions of citizens remain vulnerable to unemployment and precarious livelihoods? These questions reveal why the language of political liberation can become misleading when detached from political economy. A citizen may possess the right to vote every five years yet possess almost no productive assets, limited bargaining power in the labour market and little influence over decisions determining the economic conditions of everyday life. Democracy therefore cannot be reduced to electoral participation. A deeper democratic order must also examine whether citizens possess meaningful economic capabilities through which they can influence the conditions under which they live.

At the same time, this book must resist the temptation to romanticise the state as inherently synonymous with the people. The post-apartheid experience demonstrates that the state itself can become a site of elite accumulation, patronage, bureaucratic failure and political contestation. Black political empowerment created new elites who acquired access to state institutions, public contracts, corporate opportunities and financial networks. Some used that access to advance legitimate transformation, build enterprises and diversify ownership. Others participated in corruption, patronage and forms of accumulation that reproduced inequality under new political conditions. The existence of a black elite therefore does not demonstrate that economic liberation has been achieved. Nor does black political participation automatically represent mass economic empowerment. The decisive question is whether transformation expands productive capabilities across society or merely transfers opportunities from one narrow elite configuration to another. A revolutionary project becomes compromised when liberation is increasingly experienced as elite mobility rather than popular empowerment.

This is one of the deepest lessons of the post-apartheid period. Political movements that emerge from liberation struggles inevitably confront the danger of becoming custodians of institutions rather than instruments of continuing transformation. Once political office becomes connected to access to contracts, appointments, influence and wealth, the liberation organisation can begin to develop interests distinct from those of the masses that originally sustained it. The problem is not uniquely South African; it is a recurring dilemma in post-colonial politics. The liberation elite inherits a state designed historically to administer unequal societies and must then transform that machinery while simultaneously operating it. Without powerful systems of accountability, democratic participation and institutional renewal, the movement can become absorbed by the very structures it once intended to transform. South Africa's challenge has therefore not been merely to

change who occupies government offices, but to change the relationship between state power, economic power and popular sovereignty.

The ANC's compromises must consequently be evaluated historically rather than morally simplistically. The negotiated transition required compromises because South Africa stood at a dangerous historical crossroads in which political violence, economic instability and institutional collapse were genuine possibilities. The settlement created constitutional democracy, protected individual rights and established mechanisms for peaceful political competition. These were extraordinary achievements. But every political settlement contains choices about what is transformed immediately, what is postponed and what remains substantially intact. The central economic compromise was that political democracy would coexist with a largely market-based economy whose ownership patterns had been profoundly shaped by apartheid. This did not mean that the ANC abandoned transformation altogether; it pursued affirmative action, Black Economic Empowerment, social grants, housing programmes, public services, labour protections and other interventions. Nevertheless, the scale and structure of economic ownership remained insufficiently transformed to eliminate the fundamental concentration of wealth.

The consequences are visible in the persistence of inequality. South Africa can simultaneously be one of the continent's most sophisticated constitutional democracies and one of its most unequal societies. It can possess globally competitive corporations, advanced financial institutions and sophisticated legal infrastructure while large sections of its population remain excluded from secure employment, quality education, productive assets and spatially integrated economic opportunity. This contradiction demonstrates that economic modernity and social justice are not automatically synonymous. A modern financial system does not necessarily produce mass prosperity. A globally competitive mining sector does not necessarily create equitable ownership. A sophisticated stock exchange does not mean that ordinary citizens possess meaningful influence over corporate decision-making. Democracy must therefore interrogate not merely whether markets function efficiently but whom those markets empower, whom they exclude and how their benefits are distributed.

The persistence of structural economic power should also not be confused with a claim that white South Africans collectively exercise political control. Contemporary South Africa contains competing interests among black and white business owners, multinational corporations, organised labour, state institutions, political parties, civil society organisations, professional associations, traditional authorities, religious institutions, international investors and ordinary citizens. Power is fragmented, negotiated and frequently contested. Yet fragmentation does not mean equality. Some actors possess dramatically greater resources than others. A major corporation can employ armies of lawyers, economists, consultants and public-relations specialists. A poor household may struggle to have a municipal complaint answered. A sophisticated investor can move capital across jurisdictions. An unemployed worker may possess little leverage beyond collective organisation. Political equality therefore coexists with unequal capacities to convert resources into influence. This is the central political-economic problem that simplistic racial explanations obscure.

Financial capital represents another crucial centre of power. Banks, pension funds, asset managers and institutional investors influence the availability and cost of capital upon which businesses, households and governments depend. Their decisions can affect corporate expansion, infrastructure development, property markets and investment patterns. They do not necessarily need to dictate government policy directly to exercise influence. The structural power of finance frequently

operates through the constraints imposed by capital mobility, credit conditions, investor confidence and expectations concerning fiscal and monetary policy. Governments must therefore govern within an economic environment in which financial decisions made beyond direct democratic participation can materially affect national outcomes. This does not make financial institutions illegitimate enemies of democracy; rather, it demonstrates why democratic sovereignty requires institutions capable of regulating concentrated economic power while maintaining economic stability.

Multinational corporations introduce another dimension to the question of sovereignty. South Africa is embedded within a global economy in which ownership, investment, technology, supply chains and corporate decision-making frequently cross national boundaries. A corporation operating in South Africa may have shareholders distributed across several countries, financing arrangements connected to international markets and strategic decisions influenced by global headquarters. The South African state retains regulatory authority, but its policy choices occur within an international system characterised by competition for capital, technology and markets. This means that sovereignty in the twenty-first century cannot simply mean control of territory. It must also mean the capacity to negotiate equitable terms within global economic networks. A genuinely sovereign South Africa would not necessarily reject international investment; it would possess sufficient institutional strength to ensure that investment contributes to national development rather than allowing national priorities to become permanently subordinate to external accumulation.

Foreign governments also form part of this architecture of influence, although their power should not be exaggerated into a universal explanation for domestic problems. Major states exercise influence through diplomacy, trade, investment, security cooperation, development finance, technology and geopolitical relationships. International institutions similarly influence the policy environment through financial standards, trade rules, development frameworks and regulatory expectations. Yet external influence becomes effective partly because domestic institutions permit or require it. A sovereign state is not simply one that resists foreigners rhetorically; it is one capable of negotiating external relationships from a position of institutional confidence. South Africa therefore needs neither isolationism nor dependency. It needs strategic internationalism: the capacity to cooperate globally while retaining sufficient policy autonomy to pursue democratic development.

The media constitutes another important site of power. Whoever controls the ability to frame national problems possesses a form of intellectual and political influence. Media organisations determine which issues receive sustained attention, which voices become authoritative and which interpretations of events become normalised. Social media has democratised communication in important ways, allowing citizens and movements to bypass traditional gatekeepers, but it has simultaneously created new concentrations of algorithmic influence, disinformation and political manipulation. The battle over South Africa's future is therefore also a battle over narrative. Who defines what counts as transformation? Who decides whether inequality is primarily a racial, class, institutional or governance problem? Who determines whether migration is presented as a humanitarian question, an economic issue or a security threat? Intellectual power matters because societies do not respond to material conditions automatically; they respond through interpretations constructed by political actors, academics, journalists, business leaders and movements.

Universities and intellectual institutions consequently possess power that is often underestimated. The ability to define legitimate knowledge is itself a form of social authority. South Africa's universities inherited intellectual traditions shaped partly by colonial epistemologies, but they have

also become important centres of African scholarship, critical thought and democratic debate. Decolonisation must therefore extend beyond changing curricula mechanically. It should involve recovering African intellectual traditions while maintaining rigorous engagement with global knowledge. A sovereign intellectual order would not reject Western scholarship simply because of its origins, nor would it accept inherited theories uncritically. It would ask whether knowledge serves African realities, whether African experiences generate theory rather than merely supply case studies and whether universities are accessible enough to reproduce intellectual citizenship across society. The struggle for sovereignty is therefore partly a struggle over who has the authority to define South Africa's problems and imagine its possible futures.

The judiciary represents yet another centre of power, but one that must be understood differently from corporate or electoral power. Constitutional democracy deliberately places limits on majoritarian government by protecting rights and establishing independent institutions. Courts can therefore invalidate governmental actions even when governments possess electoral mandates. From one perspective, this can appear to constrain popular sovereignty; from another, it protects citizens against arbitrary power. The deeper challenge is to ensure that constitutionalism does not become detached from social justice. Courts cannot redesign the economy through judicial decree, but they can protect rights, enforce administrative accountability and prevent abuses of state authority. The constitutional order therefore represents neither an enemy nor a substitute for democratic transformation. Its legitimacy depends upon maintaining a difficult balance between majority rule, individual rights, institutional independence and the social purpose of democracy.

Civil society occupies a similarly ambiguous position. Human rights organisations, churches, trade unions, community movements, professional associations and advocacy groups can act as counterweights to both state and corporate power. They give citizens mechanisms through which grievances can become organised political demands. Yet civil society itself is unequal. Some organisations possess international funding, sophisticated communication infrastructure and access to political elites, while others operate with almost no resources. The existence of civil society does not automatically guarantee popular empowerment. What matters is whether democratic institutions provide genuine space for ordinary communities to organise and whether public authorities listen to those voices. A living democracy requires more than elections; it requires continuous participation between elections.

The question of labour is equally central to the future of South African democracy. Workers possess collective power because production depends upon their labour, yet unemployment and precarious employment weaken that bargaining position. Organised labour can influence wages, policy and political debate, but workers outside formal employment often remain structurally marginalised. This creates a contradiction in which the formal labour movement may be powerful while unemployed youth, informal workers and economically excluded communities possess comparatively little institutional voice. The future of economic democracy therefore requires expanding the concept of worker power beyond traditional industrial structures. It requires thinking seriously about cooperatives, employee ownership, community enterprises, skills development, public employment, productive infrastructure and mechanisms through which workers can participate in decisions concerning the enterprises upon which their livelihoods depend.

Land remains one of the most symbolically and materially important dimensions of this unfinished transformation. Apartheid transformed geography into an instrument of political and economic domination, producing spatial patterns that continue to shape access to employment, transport,

education and wealth. Land reform is therefore not simply about agricultural acreage. It concerns property, urban space, housing, food systems, inheritance, cultural identity and economic opportunity. Yet land reform must avoid both symbolic politics without productive strategy and technical economic programmes without historical justice. A serious transformation programme must answer difficult questions about tenure, compensation, agricultural productivity, community rights, urban land markets and institutional capacity. The objective should be to democratise access to productive assets while preserving food security, economic stability and the long-term productive capacity of the land.

Economic transformation must similarly move beyond the narrow idea that ownership can be transformed merely by changing the racial composition of corporate shareholders. Genuine empowerment requires productive capacity. It means creating enterprises capable of surviving independently, expanding access to finance, developing technological competence, strengthening industrial capabilities and enabling communities and workers to participate in wealth creation. If Black Economic Empowerment becomes primarily a mechanism through which politically connected individuals acquire shares or contracts without broadening productive capabilities, its transformative potential is limited. The objective should be economic citizenship: a society in which ordinary people possess skills, assets, institutions and opportunities through which they can become producers rather than permanently remaining recipients of redistribution.

This requires a different understanding of redistribution itself. Social grants have played an important role in reducing extreme deprivation and supporting millions of households, but redistribution cannot become the permanent substitute for structural employment creation. A democratic state must protect people from poverty while simultaneously building the productive foundations that make mass economic independence possible. The long-term objective should therefore be to combine social protection with industrialisation, infrastructure, education, technological development, agricultural transformation and enterprise formation. A society cannot redistribute its way permanently out of structural inequality if its productive system continues to generate insufficient opportunities. The unfinished revolution must therefore be understood as a struggle not merely over how wealth is divided after production but over who participates in production itself.

The crisis of public institutions further complicates the question of sovereignty. A state can possess extensive constitutional powers yet lack the administrative capacity to implement them effectively. Corruption, political patronage, weak municipal administration, infrastructure failures and institutional decay can transform formal state authority into practical incapacity. In such circumstances, private actors sometimes assume functions that should belong to public institutions, while citizens increasingly experience the state as unreliable. The solution cannot simply be more centralisation. It requires rebuilding capable institutions governed by professional standards, transparent procurement, accountable leadership and democratic oversight. A sovereign developmental state is not a state that controls everything; it is a state capable of performing the functions necessary to ensure that markets, communities and public institutions operate within a framework of social purpose.

The future of South Africa therefore depends heavily upon the quality of its political leadership. The liberation generation deserves historical recognition for the role it played in ending apartheid, but no liberation movement can remain permanently legitimate merely because of its historical contribution. Democratic legitimacy must be continuously renewed through performance,

accountability and responsiveness. Political parties must be judged by what they do with power rather than what they did before obtaining it. The electorate must possess genuine alternatives, and institutions must ensure that political competition does not degenerate into ethnic mobilisation, patronage or permanent polarisation. The democratic state belongs to citizens, not to parties. This principle is essential if liberation history is to remain a source of democratic legitimacy rather than becoming a permanent shield against accountability.

South Africa's greatest challenge may therefore be the transformation of political citizenship into substantive citizenship. Political citizenship means possessing the vote and equal legal status. Substantive citizenship means possessing realistic opportunities to develop one's capabilities, participate in economic life, access quality public institutions and influence decisions that shape one's future. The distinction is fundamental. A person who formally possesses every constitutional right but lives in conditions of permanent economic exclusion experiences democracy differently from a person who possesses property, education, networks, mobility and economic security. Constitutional democracy must therefore continually ask whether its formal promises are becoming social realities. Otherwise, the distance between constitutional ideals and everyday life can create democratic disillusionment.

The Pan-African significance of South Africa's experience lies precisely here. South Africa was not merely another African state emerging from colonial domination. Its liberation struggle carried continental significance because apartheid represented one of the most developed systems of racial capitalism and minority political domination in modern history. The democratic transition therefore generated hopes that political liberation could be followed by social and economic reconstruction. If those expectations remain incompletely fulfilled, the lesson for Africa should not be that democracy has failed. The lesson should be that democracy must be deepened. Political sovereignty, economic sovereignty and intellectual sovereignty must reinforce one another. A continent cannot achieve meaningful independence if its states possess flags and elections but lack productive capacity, technological autonomy, institutional strength and control over strategic resources.

The South African question is therefore ultimately a question about the meaning of sovereignty itself. Sovereignty cannot simply mean replacing white political rule with black political representation. That would reduce liberation to the racial composition of government. Nor can sovereignty mean transferring economic assets to a narrow political elite while the majority remains economically dependent. True sovereignty requires the democratisation of power across society. It requires citizens who possess political voice, workers who possess bargaining power, communities that possess productive assets, institutions that possess integrity, governments that possess policy capacity and economies that possess strategic independence. Sovereignty becomes meaningful when the nation can make decisions according to the interests of its people without being structurally incapable of implementing those decisions.

This does not mean that South Africa should pursue autarky or reject capitalism altogether. The challenge is to construct a democratic political economy capable of disciplining capital while encouraging productive investment. Markets can generate innovation, employment and wealth, but markets do not automatically produce equality or justice. States can redistribute resources and provide public goods, but states can also become inefficient, corrupt or authoritarian. The task of democratic political economy is therefore to establish institutions capable of balancing these forces. South Africa needs productive markets, capable public institutions, socially responsible capital, strong labour organisations, effective competition policy and democratic accountability. The

objective should not be to abolish economic power but to prevent its concentration from becoming so extreme that it overwhelms democratic citizenship.

The future also belongs to South Africa's youth, and their position reveals the urgency of this transformation. A generation born after apartheid cannot be asked indefinitely to live upon the symbolic achievements of 1994. Young South Africans judge democracy through employment prospects, education, housing, safety, technological access, mobility and the possibility of building independent lives. If democratic institutions cannot convert political freedom into meaningful opportunity, frustration will inevitably grow. The responsibility of the present generation is therefore to transform the achievements of political liberation into the foundations of a more substantive economic democracy. Young people must not inherit merely the memory of liberation; they must inherit institutions capable of producing dignity, opportunity and participation.

The future of South Africa should consequently not be framed as a choice between racial reconciliation and economic transformation. Reconciliation without justice can become superficial, while justice without reconciliation can become destructive. The objective must be a democratic transformation that recognises historical injustice without converting history into permanent racial antagonism. White South Africans should not be treated collectively as enemies, just as black South Africans should not be assumed collectively to possess political power merely because a black majority governs. The relevant unit of analysis is power: who owns, who decides, who benefits, who influences and who bears the costs. Once the debate is organised around these questions, it becomes possible to identify both racialised structures and class structures without reducing one to the other.

The deepest challenge, therefore, is to prevent South Africa from confusing representation with transformation. Representation matters profoundly because political institutions must reflect the democratic majority. But representation becomes insufficient when the structures governing wealth creation remain concentrated. A black minister, black parliamentarian or black business leader may represent a historic transformation of political access, but that individual achievement does not by itself alter the economic position of millions of citizens. Transformation becomes meaningful when individual advancement contributes to institutional and societal change. The goal of liberation should not be to create a small number of exceptional beneficiaries capable of entering previously exclusive spaces. It should be to change the conditions under which entire generations live.

The unfinished revolution consequently requires a new social contract. That contract must unite constitutional democracy with economic democracy, public accountability with productive development and national sovereignty with international cooperation. It must recognise the achievements of the post-1994 order while refusing to treat those achievements as the endpoint of history. It must defend the Constitution while demanding that constitutional rights acquire material substance. It must acknowledge the legitimacy of private property while confronting excessive concentration. It must encourage entrepreneurship while preventing politically connected accumulation from becoming a substitute for broad-based empowerment. It must strengthen the state without allowing the state to become an instrument of party domination. Above all, it must return political economy to the centre of democratic debate.

The decisive question, then, is not whether South Africa has completed its revolution. Revolutions should not be understood as single historical events that begin on one day and end on another. Liberation is an ongoing process through which societies continually confront inherited structures

of domination and construct institutions capable of distributing power more democratically. South Africa completed one revolutionary task in 1994: it ended formal minority political rule and established democratic citizenship. It partially advanced another through social policy, legal reform and economic empowerment. Yet it has not fully resolved the structural distribution of productive wealth, land, opportunity and economic influence. The unfinished nature of this transformation should not be interpreted as evidence that liberation was meaningless. Rather, it demonstrates that political liberation is a necessary foundation upon which deeper economic and social liberation must be constructed.

The ultimate task of the next generation is therefore neither to destroy the democratic settlement nor to worship it as an untouchable achievement. It is to deepen it. South Africa must move from democracy as periodic voting towards democracy as continuous popular power; from ownership concentrated in relatively few hands towards broader economic citizenship; from dependency towards strategic sovereignty; from inherited spatial inequality towards integrated development; from elite-centred empowerment towards mass productive empowerment; and from political rhetoric towards measurable institutional transformation. Such a project would honour the sacrifices of the liberation struggle more faithfully than either nostalgia or ideological absolutism. It would recognise that freedom is not exhausted by the removal of legal oppression. Freedom must eventually become the capacity of people to shape the material conditions of their own existence.

Who, then, owns the future? No single racial group, political party, corporation, institution or foreign power possesses the entire answer. The future is contested among those who control political institutions, capital, land, technology, knowledge, media, organised labour, public administration and electoral legitimacy. Yet the distribution of these forms of power remains unequal, and the majority's possession of the vote has not automatically produced equivalent possession of the material resources required to shape national destiny. The central democratic task is therefore to close the distance between political citizenship and economic power. South Africa's future will be determined by whether its democracy can transform that imbalance without sacrificing constitutionalism, pluralism, economic vitality or social peace.

For Pan-Africanism, this conclusion carries an even broader meaning. The liberation of Africa cannot be measured only by the disappearance of colonial flags or the election of African governments. It must ultimately be measured by the capacity of African peoples to control their resources, shape their economies, produce their knowledge, determine their development priorities and negotiate the international system on equitable terms. South Africa's experience demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of political liberation without sufficiently deep economic restructuring. Its history warns against the illusion that sovereignty can be secured through political office alone. It also demonstrates that constitutional democracy, if continually deepened, can provide an institutional framework through which economic and social transformation can proceed peacefully.

The unfinished revolution should therefore not become an invitation to permanent racial conflict. It should become an intellectual and political project for democratising power. Its central vocabulary should be ownership, accountability, capability, justice, production, sovereignty, participation and dignity. The question is not which race should dominate South Africa next. The question is whether domination itself can be progressively displaced by democratic power distributed across society. The objective is not to replace one hierarchy with another but to construct institutions in which no narrow class, racial elite, corporation or political faction can permanently monopolise the nation's

future. That is a more demanding revolutionary vision because it requires confronting power wherever it exists, including within the institutions established by the liberation movement itself.

South Africa's unfinished revolution therefore belongs neither exclusively to the ANC nor exclusively to its opponents. It belongs to the people. The liberation movement created the political opening; the Constitution created the democratic framework; generations of activists created the historical possibility; but the future depends upon whether citizens can convert political freedom into substantive power. The task ahead is to ensure that the democratic majority does not remain merely an electoral majority but becomes an empowered social majority with meaningful access to productive resources, knowledge, institutions and opportunity. Only then can the promise of liberation approach completion. The final question of this book is therefore not whether apartheid ended in 1994. It did. The deeper question is whether the structures that apartheid built have been sufficiently transformed to make freedom materially meaningful. That question remains open, and the answer will determine the future of South Africa.

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GLOSSARY

The glossary defines the principal concepts used throughout the book. Definitions are framed for the purposes of this study and should be read in relation to the book's broader argument about political, economic, institutional and social power.

ANC: African National Congress, the liberation movement that became the governing party of South Africa after the 1994 democratic election.

Apartheid: A system of legally enforced racial domination and segregation that structured political citizenship, residence, labour, education, land ownership and access to public life.

African Renaissance: A political and intellectual project concerned with Africa's renewal, dignity, development, integration and capacity for self-determined action.

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE): Policies designed to increase black participation in ownership, management, employment, procurement and other areas of economic activity.

Capital: Financial and other accumulated resources used to produce goods and services, generate income and influence economic decisions.

Capital accumulation: The process through which wealth and productive assets are acquired, reinvested and expanded over time.

Constitutional democracy: A democratic system in which elected authority operates within a supreme constitutional framework that protects rights and limits public power.

Constitutional supremacy: The principle that the Constitution is the highest law and that legislation or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid.

Economic democracy: The idea that citizens should have meaningful participation and influence in the ownership, governance and distribution of productive resources.

Economic sovereignty: A state's capacity to shape its productive, financial, technological and developmental choices without being structurally dependent on external actors.

Elite capture: A condition in which public institutions, policies or resources are disproportionately shaped or appropriated by narrow political or economic elites.

Economic apartheid: The persistence of deeply unequal patterns of ownership, wealth, opportunity and spatial development associated with the historical racial political economy.

Freedom Charter: The 1955 political programme adopted at Kliptown that articulated a vision of a democratic South Africa and linked political freedom with social and economic transformation.

Globalisation: The increasing integration of national economies, institutions, markets, technologies and societies across borders.

Land reform: Policies and programmes intended to address historical dispossession and unequal land ownership through restitution, redistribution and tenure reform.

Liberation movement: A political organisation formed to challenge and replace a system of domination, particularly colonial, racial or authoritarian rule.

Market economy: An economic system in which prices, production and allocation are substantially influenced by market exchange, while government may regulate and participate in the economy.

Pan-Africanism: An intellectual and political tradition emphasising African unity, solidarity, dignity, self-determination and collective development.

Political authority: The legitimate institutional capacity to make and enforce public decisions through government, parliament, courts and other constitutional institutions.

Political sovereignty: The formal authority of a people and state to govern themselves and determine public affairs through legitimate institutions.

Post-apartheid state: The South African political and institutional order established through the democratic transition beginning in the early 1990s and constitutionally consolidated after 1994.

Racial capitalism: An analytical concept describing the historical interaction between racial domination and capitalist accumulation in shaping South Africa's economy and society.

Redistribution: The transfer or reallocation of income, assets, services or opportunities through public policy and other mechanisms.

Revolutionary transformation: A process intended to alter the underlying political, social and economic structures of a society rather than merely changing its government.

State capture: The systematic distortion or manipulation of public institutions and state resources for private, factional or political interests.

State capacity: The ability of public institutions to formulate policy, collect revenue, enforce law, deliver services and implement long-term programmes effectively.

Structural economic power: The capacity to shape the conditions under which other actors operate through ownership, investment, finance, markets, technology, employment or control of productive resources.

Structural inequality: Persistent unequal outcomes produced and reproduced by institutions, inherited assets, social structures, geography and unequal access to opportunities.

Sovereignty: The authority and practical capacity of a political community to determine its own affairs and pursue its collective interests.

Transformation: A sustained process of changing institutions, ownership patterns, opportunities and social relations so that inherited systems of exclusion are substantially altered.

Universal suffrage: The principle that adult citizens should possess the right to vote without racial, gender or other discriminatory exclusion.

Xenophobia: Negative attitudes, hostility, discrimination or violence directed against people perceived as foreigners or outsiders, often intensified by political, economic or social insecurity.

Ubuntu: A relational African ethical principle commonly expressed through ideas of shared humanity, mutual responsibility, dignity and interconnectedness.

Coalition government: A government formed by two or more political parties or groupings that cooperate to exercise executive authority.

Judicial review: The power of courts to examine public action or legislation for compliance with the Constitution and applicable law.

Social citizenship: The substantive enjoyment of social and economic rights and public services necessary for meaningful participation in society.

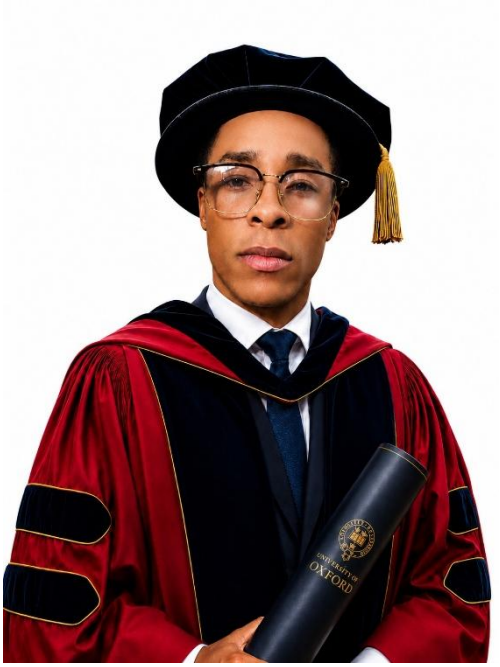
Productive ownership: Ownership or effective control of assets and enterprises that generate goods, services, employment, income and future wealth.

Political economy: The study of how political institutions, power relations and economic structures influence one another.

Developmental state: A state that deliberately uses institutional capacity, policy and public investment to shape structural economic development and productive transformation.

Dependency: A condition in which a country's development choices are significantly constrained by external economic, technological, financial or geopolitical relationships.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Professor Talent Rusere

Professor Talent Rusere is a Zimbabwean academic, political thinker, human rights advocate and Pan-Africanist whose work is centred on democracy, constitutionalism, human rights, African sovereignty, political participation and the continuing struggle for social and economic justice on the African continent. His intellectual and public work is informed by a conviction that political independence cannot be considered complete where citizens remain excluded from meaningful economic opportunity, democratic participation, institutional accountability and the full enjoyment of their fundamental rights.

His scholarship and public interventions examine the relationship between political power, democratic institutions and the deeper structures that determine the distribution of opportunity and influence in African societies. He approaches contemporary African political questions from both an academic and Pan-African perspective, seeking to move beyond narrow interpretations of democracy that focus exclusively on elections while neglecting questions of economic power, social exclusion, historical inequality, institutional capacity and popular sovereignty.

Professor Rusere has developed a particular interest in the relationship between African liberation movements and the post-colonial state. His work asks difficult questions about what happened to the revolutionary aspirations that inspired generations of African liberation movements after independence was achieved. In this regard, he is concerned not only with whether Africans possess the formal right to vote, but also with whether democratic institutions genuinely enable ordinary citizens to exercise meaningful influence over the political, economic and social conditions governing their lives.

His Pan-African intellectual outlook places African history at the centre of contemporary political analysis. Rather than treating Africa's political challenges as isolated national problems, he considers them within the broader historical experiences of colonialism, apartheid, imperialism, racial capitalism, forced migration, economic dependency and the struggle for self-determination. His approach therefore recognises that questions of democracy, migration, xenophobia, human rights and sovereignty are interconnected dimensions of the unfinished African liberation project.

Professor Rusere is also associated with human rights advocacy through his work with the Southern Africa Human Rights Lawyers High Commission (SAHRL), an initiative concerned with strengthening human rights consciousness, democratic accountability and regional solidarity in Southern Africa. Through this work, he has advocated for greater attention to the rights of African citizens and migrants, democratic participation, electoral justice, constitutional governance and the responsibilities of governments and regional institutions.

A significant dimension of his public intellectual work concerns the rights of Africans who live outside their countries of citizenship. He has drawn attention to the democratic implications of diaspora exclusion, arguing that African states must reconsider conventional understandings of citizenship and political participation in an increasingly interconnected continent. For him, migration should not automatically be understood through the language of threat and exclusion, but also through the historical reality of African mobility, labour, family networks, trade and regional integration.

His interest in South Africa is particularly significant because the country represents one of the most important democratic experiments on the African continent. The transition from apartheid to constitutional democracy transformed the country's political order and produced one of the world's most celebrated constitutional frameworks. Yet Professor Rusere's analysis is concerned with the contradictions that emerged after liberation: persistent economic inequality, unemployment, poverty, racialised patterns of wealth ownership, social exclusion, political disillusionment and recurring tensions surrounding migration and citizenship.

In examining xenophobia, he does not reduce the phenomenon to individual prejudice or hostility towards foreigners. Instead, his analysis considers the structural conditions under which xenophobic politics can emerge, including unemployment, poverty, competition over limited resources, failures of public administration, political mobilisation, misinformation and the manipulation of social anxieties. He argues that the fight against xenophobia requires more than condemnation after violence occurs; it requires democratic institutions capable of addressing the material conditions that generate insecurity and resentment.

Professor Rusere's intellectual position is therefore rooted in the belief that human rights must be understood as lived realities rather than merely constitutional declarations. A constitution may guarantee equality, dignity and freedom, but those guarantees become meaningful only when institutions, governments and societies actively protect them. His work consequently places considerable emphasis on the relationship between legal rights and the social, economic and political conditions necessary for those rights to be realised.

As a Pan-Africanist, he also advocates a conception of African solidarity that transcends artificial colonial borders without denying the legitimate sovereignty of African states. He views regional integration, democratic cooperation, free movement, human rights protection and shared economic

development as essential components of a more cohesive African future. At the same time, he recognises that continental solidarity requires responsible governance and cannot succeed where states fail to protect either their citizens or foreign nationals residing within their territories.

Professor Rusere's scholarship is characterised by a willingness to interrogate established political narratives. He is particularly interested in the gap between the formal institutions of democracy and the actual distribution of power within society. His central concern is therefore not simply who occupies political office, but who possesses the economic resources, institutional influence, social networks and structural power capable of shaping national outcomes.

This perspective informs his broader interpretation of African liberation. For Professor Rusere, the attainment of political independence and constitutional democracy represented historic victories, but they did not automatically dismantle every structure inherited from colonialism and apartheid. The contemporary African challenge is consequently to transform political freedom into substantive freedom by addressing economic exclusion, institutional inequality, unequal ownership and the continuing external influences that constrain national policy choices.

His work reflects a broader intellectual commitment to recovering African agency. He argues that Africans must be active authors of their political and economic future rather than passive subjects of policies designed elsewhere. This requires stronger democratic institutions, accountable leadership, independent intellectual traditions, civic participation and an African political culture capable of confronting difficult questions without fear.

Professor Rusere's writing also seeks to connect academic scholarship with public debate. He believes that intellectual work should not remain confined to universities and academic conferences but should contribute to the understanding of ordinary citizens, policymakers, activists, journalists, students and community leaders. His books and public interventions therefore seek to make complex political questions accessible while maintaining a rigorous analytical foundation.

His contribution to debates surrounding democracy and xenophobia in South Africa is grounded in this wider philosophy. He challenges both simplistic nationalist explanations that blame migrants for structural problems and simplistic accounts that ignore legitimate concerns surrounding migration governance, border administration, employment and public services. His approach seeks a more balanced democratic framework in which the rights of citizens and migrants are protected while governments remain responsible for effective and accountable migration management.

Professor Rusere's work ultimately reflects a belief that the African liberation project remains unfinished. Political independence created the institutional foundation upon which African societies could build, but the deeper objectives of dignity, equality, prosperity, sovereignty and democratic self-government require continuing intellectual and political engagement. The task of his generation, in his view, is not merely to preserve the achievements of previous liberation struggles but to examine honestly where those struggles succeeded, where they were compromised and where new forms of transformation are required.

Through his scholarship, advocacy and public engagement, Professor Talent Rusere seeks to contribute to this continuing conversation about Africa's future. His intellectual project is animated by the conviction that democracy must be measured not only by the existence of elections, but by

the extent to which people possess genuine political voice, social dignity, economic opportunity and protection under the law.

This book is therefore part of a broader intellectual endeavour: to interrogate the meaning of democracy in contemporary Africa, to understand the historical and structural roots of xenophobia, and to ask whether democratic institutions are capable of producing societies in which citizenship, migration, human rights and human dignity can coexist. It invites readers to move beyond political slogans and confront the deeper realities shaping African societies.

Professor Talent Rusere writes from a Pan-African perspective, but his questions are universal. Who belongs? Who exercises power? Who benefits from democracy? Who remains excluded? What obligations do states owe to citizens and migrants? And, most importantly, can democracy fulfil its promise when political equality exists alongside profound economic and social inequality?

These questions define much of his intellectual journey and provide an important foundation for understanding the arguments developed throughout this book.