

Not the end of our democracy - yet

By Martin Nicol

Citizens in democracies frequently choose not to vote. But candidates still get elected – and have the same duties and responsibilities, as representatives of the people, as they would have if they were the victors in a popular landslide.

As citizens, we can call on elected representatives to account for their actions and performance whether we voted for them or not.

After elections, whatever the percentage poll, our multi-party system of democratic government remains there “to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness”.

Even on election day registered voters still have a choice on whether or not to vote – or spoil their ballot.

In the local government election 2021, some 200,000 voters – about 2% of the total – submitted spoiled ballots, where their voting intention was not clear. This is not exceptional – it is in line with previous elections.

“Vote-shedding”, a theme of our cover illustration, does not automatically mean that democracy takes a holiday. When the poll is low – and our universal adult suffrage, common voters roll and regular elections fail in their intended function of giving voice to the will of the people – there is a need for civil society to step up.

The enervated electorate have been drained of hope by politicians of all persuasions. Their low participation rate indicates a profound lack of confidence in the political class who have put themselves forward as national and local leaders.

UCT psychology professor, Wahbie

Long, writes in a book that Moira Levy reviews, There is a brokenness at the heart of our nation that cannot be wished away... South Africans feel alienated in almost every sense – from their loved ones, from their work activities, from their political leaders and, most of all, from each other.”

Those who won the election in November 2021, really just took first prize in a lottery. They, and their discredited political parties, have no mandate from the citizenry.

But democracy has several strings to its bow. The Constitution and a whole raft of laws provide opportunities for citizens to participate in government, whether as individuals or as part of organised civil society.

This participation is more important now than ever before. There is a newly urgent need to organise more effectively outside the arena of political parties. The flawed citizens who the weak tides of fortune have washed up in the shallows as governors of our municipalities will indulge in new miseries unless they are lobbied, influenced and pressurised in favour of the public interest.

Tracy Ledger’s article on local government after the elections is doubly bleak. She argues that municipalities so seriously lack access to money and resources that even honest administrations, unfettered by political infighting and corruption, would make little progress with service delivery. Our cities are in crisis and rural areas remain in distressing neglect, as they continue to decline.

Rural voices are given a hearing in



a research article on Jolukuqu, a village near Mthatha. Aphiwe Mgushelo and Alex Bara used information from satellite photographs to track the decline in the cultivation of traditional fields (*amasimi*) and then interviewed the community to find out why. People said they would cultivate again if they had fences to protect their land. But where would the money come from? Jolukuqu lies in a desecrated district municipality, long under ineffective administration, that bears, so unfairly, the name of Cde O.R. Tambo.

In something of an understatement, Asghar Adelzadeh says that “the overall growth and development outcomes of the post-1994 economic policy framework have been extremely disappointing”. The strong signs are that disappointment is likely to continue. It is the result of poor policy leadership by the government that seems totally set in place. This is not necessary – Adelzadeh draws on comprehensive modelling of the SA economy to suggest that it is realistic and possible – even today – for bold policy interventions to shift the path of economic development onto a better route for the coming decade. In his



most optimistic (but least probable!) scenario, 2030 unemployment will be 12% — not the zero promised by the defunct National Development Plan, but also not the 37% where we are headed at present, according to the forecasts of the economic model.

Gordon Young's contribution on Black Economic Disempowerment also points to the need for a policy shift – away from concentrating on black ownership as an end, towards black business success as the means for real, wider empowerment. Portraying our government as a well-meaning but blind, clumsy giant (new acronym BCG?) he points the way, but expresses no optimism for sense prevailing.

Eskom is the underlying theme of our cover illustration. *New Agenda* reflects on the cold war between the upfront CEO of Eskom and the obdurate and blinkered minister responsible for energy foresight and planning. There is no short-term recovery possible and the journey onwards – whoever comes out on top – will mean several more years of the self-created power blight that deadens our economic prospects.

Etienne Vlok points to the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area as an impressive achievement that could assist economic regeneration. This will, however, require considerable investment in infrastructure, completely new attitudes to border controls and actual goodwill between countries. Free trade presents threats to labour standards for organised workers. The nature of many international supply chains also present major obstacles for link-climbing, particularly when some parties prioritise “localisation” strategies.

Finally, IFAA is delighted that world-renowned development economist, Professor Ha-Joon Chang of the University of Cambridge, accepted an invitation to deliver the inaugural Ben Turok Memorial lecture in Cape Town on 30 November. The full lecture will be available on the [IFAA website](#) and on the [UWC Facebook page](#). 

Sustainability in all dimensions

and phantsi neo-liberalism, phantsi!

By Martin Nicol

Dr Nicol is the guest editor of the Institute for African Alternative's flagship magazine, *New Agenda*, and the senior researcher on IFAA's Checks and Balances Project. With a background in trade unionism and political activism, he retired from the research unit of the South African Parliament in 2019.

The inaugural Ben Turok Memorial Lecture was delivered in Cape Town on 30 November 2021 by the eminent economist and author, Ha-Joon Chang, Professor of Political Economy of Development at the University of Cambridge. The title of the lecture was “Structural Transformation and Sustainability – Changing Role of the State in Developing Countries.” MARTIN NICOL provides a summary of what the professor had to say.

The lecture was given before an audience in the Ashley Kriel Memorial Hall at Community House, Salt River – the same complex as the IFAA offices. It was also streamed online via Zoom and Facebook. The lecture was introduced by Cde Kgalema Motlanthe in a recorded message. Introductory remarks were also made by Professor Tyrone Pretorius, Rector and Vice-Chancellor at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Zunaid Moolla, Director of IFAA, Ivan Turok, representing the family, and Umesh Bawa, Director: International Relations, UWC. Professor Julian May, director of the Centre of Excellence in Food Security, UWC, introduced the keynote speaker. >>