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Columnist

NEVA MAKGETLA: Consider inequality when diagnosing the insurrection

Fixing the causes
of violence requires
solidarity
expressed through
long-term, large-
scale programmes

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by NEVA MAKGETLA AND
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Picture: 123RF/prazis

It's always stupid to throw a lit cigarette stub into the brush. Usually nothing happens. In a drought, however, it can explode into a wildfire that threatens lives and houses. In that case, the police should certainly track down and charge the person who lit the flame. But unless communities work together to build fire resistance there will always be another spark to set off catastrophe.

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Similarly, SA has to ask not only who instigated

the recent insurrection, but why so many people were willing to participate in the looting and destruction that followed. The difference in the diagnosis is critical. If we blame security failures the answer is to improve intelligence and bulk up policing on the street. The logical conclusion is to call for the army to deploy on a mass scale, presumably to throw a ring of steel around the townships, or for the relatively well-off to form their own (sometimes murderous) militias.

Both responses are depressingly reminiscent of the 1980s. The measure of a successful democracy cannot be the ability to repress the poor, who are the vast majority of SA voters. Doubtless a smarter, more responsive and effective justice system is needed, but it famously cannot fix the roots of crime. Those lie in the deep inequalities long generated by SA's

economy, which have been sharpened by the quiet desperation of the Covid-19 depression.

Besides asking who instigated the looting, we also have to ask why so many joined in. After all, it's hardly surprising that people plundered the township malls, which remain enclaves of opulence in working-class communities that survive from a threadbare combination of uncertain jobs and small businesses, social grants, family help and credit. Ultimately, if we want a more peaceful and cohesive society we must do far more to build a just and inclusive economy.

The pandemic depression has worsened SA's notorious economic inequalities. Most visibly, surveys find that formal managers and professionals suffered no net job losses. In contrast, about one in 10 other workers was still out of their job as of March, despite the

bounce-back in GDP from April as well as some improvement in overall employment. Job losses are highest among those with lower qualifications, incomes and assets, who can least afford them.

The restoration of special grants and the Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (Ters) on Sunday is welcome. But terminating them both earlier this year, long before either the economy or employment had recovered, surely fuelled the flames of unrest.

Relief programmes are critical in the short run. But they don't do much about the factors that still reproduce inequality almost a generation after apartheid ended. Critical mechanisms are the profound inequalities in ownership of productive and financial assets, largely starting with inherited wealth; in education; in access to infrastructure; and in

pay scales and
workplace organisation.
In SA, differences in
income from work and
assets adds even more to
overall economic
inequality than
joblessness.

This is where the tired
debate about growth and
inequality comes in. Yes,
more rapid growth
would make it easier to
address the root causes
of economic inequality.
Objectively speaking,
however, deeply unequal
economies everywhere
grow more slowly. As
recent events showed,
you can't sustain
strategies that please big
business when most
citizens haven't seen
much benefit from them.

It's easy to wring our
hands over violence and
theft. But fixing it
requires effective
solidarity, expressed not
through temporary
charity but through
long-term, large-scale
programmes to address
the roots of inequality.
The business and
political elites who

benefit from the status quo will need to accept significant short-run costs and risks to build sustainable prosperity in the longer run. As the recent events demonstrated, change is disruptive, but the cost of avoiding it is escalating.

• *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*

**What
sparke...**

South
Africa has
recently...



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**Martin
Neethling**

• 3 months ago

The minute we start talking about addressing inequality via ‘programmes’, and pontificating that ‘elites’ need to accept ‘short term costs’, we can be sure that the views being shared by the writer are of absolutely zero value. SA has had negative GDP per capita for a decade now, and recently the Economist opined that SA was increasingly uninvestable, and this is precisely because growth has seeped away on the

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back of ideological
policy making that
thinks 'programmes'
and 'master plans'
are the solution. And
that business is
somehow trying to
maintain the status
quo. I'd wager you'd
be hard pressed to
find a single
business owner in
KZN who wants the
status quo
maintained. More
likely they'll say they
want the State to
fulfil its most basic
role of protecting its
citizens, that the
port and railway and
road infrastructure
remain open and
efficient, that
revenue services
clamp down on the
burgeoning illicit
economy, that
businesses are given
the most support
possible to build and
employ. Sadly none
of these things
constitute the status
quo that these elites
theoretically benefit
from.

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**Paul
Whelan**



Martin
Neethling

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Fair

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comment. Of course the issue of inequality needs to be addressed and that is a long term undertaking that one might argue will never be complete. But it also seems obvious that the prime cause of this unrest is political, not 'economic' - the division in the ANC - that made a swift and effective response by the state impossible. The 'state' can hardly be said to exist in a party-state in which the party is split. Efforts to reduce inequality, even when in place, will come to nothing if law and order are at risk.



**Poo
Bear**



Paul
Whelan

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