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# A NEW MESSIAH TO FILL THE VOID IN SOUTH AFRICA'S PSYCHE

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Bronwyn Williams

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# Introduction

South Africans have a long history of waiting for Godot. The population of Africa's most prominent democracy is, notoriously, remarkably patient when it comes to suffering under political oppression and corruption. If history is to be any judge, South Africans are curiously helpless and seemingly incapable of self assertion in the face of threats and disasters. Instead, what South Africans want is a messiah. There is a deep national desire to be led.

The history of apartheid, and its far-too-delayed end, is emblematic of this national psyche, from the way the population meekly looked to – and listened to – the calls of their most famous and symbolic leaders to their patience and non-violence. Instead, South Africans waited patiently for their messiahs to lead them to the promised land.

A promised land that eventually arrived in 1994, even if it materialised not quite in practice as it was promised in principle. Over time, the rainbow faded, the old messiahs and great miracle-working men grew old, died and were replaced by, well no one worthy of their succession, yet the people wait patiently and hopefully still, against all evidence, for a new messiah to lead them on into the future.

## Charismatic leadership

Perhaps the sort of messianic leadership that the South African population seems drawn to can best be described as “charismatic leadership”<sup>1</sup>; defined as leadership obtained through gifts of grace, or charisma, rather than any specific credentials, established status or social or professional position, and regarded by their followers as being set apart from other people or even endowed with supernatural or superhuman powers<sup>2</sup>. Charismatic leaders are validated by the feelings and support of their followers. Often, they emerge and inspire their followers to irrational devotion during times of “psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress”.

As Tucker went on to say, “Charismatic leadership is specifically salvationist or messianic in nature... [This] helps explain the special emotional intensity of the charismatic response, and also why the sustaining of charisma requires the leader to furnish periodic ‘proof’ of the powers that he claims” or exudes. The followers respond to the charismatic leader with passionate loyalty because the salvation, or promise of it, that he appears to embody represents the fulfillment of urgently felt needs.”<sup>3</sup>

South Africa has been in a state of protracted distress, both fiscal and physical, for as long as living memory, making South African society particularly susceptible to falling in thrall to charismatic leaders who can promise them salvation.

This propensity for – indeed dependency on – charismatic leadership for forward motion can be traced throughout South Africa's checkered history.

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1 Willner AR, Willner D, 'The Rise and Role of Charismatic Leaders', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 358, New Nations: *The Problem of Political Development*, March 1965, pp. 77-88 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1036358>.  
2 Hofmeyr, B, 'Luthuli & Leadership', *Discernment*, November 2021, Edition 3. <https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/213/2021/13203-up-alli-discernment-3-albert-luthuli-and-charismatic-leadership.zp213491.pdf>.  
3 Tucker, RC 'The Theory of Charismatic Leadership' *Daedalus*, Vol. 97, No. 3, Summer 1968, pp. 731-756. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20023840>.



As Benda Hofmeyr points out, “This strongly suggests that when the situational determinant of a charismatic response is present, the presence or absence of a genuinely charismatic leader-personality may be a critical historical variable. The varied fate of the ANC’s struggle against the disempowerment of their people may be accounted for by the absence of such charismatic leader-personalities at certain times, and the presence of figures such as Luthuli – the Mandela before Mandela – and Mandela – should we say the Luthuli after Luthuli – at others.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, in the figure of Mandela himself, South Africans finally found the charismatic leader they were waiting for. The charisma of Mandela, and how his gravitas and legend put him in the driving seat of South Africa’s future before he held any real legal power, can perhaps best be studied in Justice Malala’s book, *The Plot to Save South Africa*, which describes in great detail the distinction between formal and informal leadership in the critical week after Chris Hani’s assassination, when South Africa’s future hung in the balance. Through Malala’s meticulous reporting, it becomes apparent just how surprisingly obediently South Africans waited to be led, and how against all odds, they listened to the instructions emanating from the chosen man they had put their faith in.

The bent towards charismatic leadership continued well past the Mandela era and into the “Zumafication” of politics in the early 2000s, described as nominally left-wing populist rhetoric without actual commitment to concrete pro-poor policy, and instead underpinned by masculine, nationalist messaging focused on past struggle heroes continuing to father the nation into the future<sup>5</sup>.

At that point, a Mandela-shaped hole in the South African psyche led the voting population to choose a big man, an undoubtedly charismatic, albeit not benign leader, over a career politician with credentials but lacking in magnetism. This bent towards personality over pragmatism has remained since. Incredibly, even in 2019, 61% of South Africans who participated in a Big Debate social survey said they had faith that the country’s current politicians had the vision and values to take South Africa forward<sup>6</sup>. This demonstrates an extraordinary amount of faith without evidence.

More recently, we witnessed what Zukiswa Pikoli described in the *Daily Maverick* as “populist and protectionist politics led by a crop of charismatic leaders”<sup>7</sup>. This was his description of the outspoken characters who rose to media and popular prominence in the aftermath of the July 2021 civil unrest, ranging from charismatic through to populist, and outright nationalist, leadership.

Since the 2021 unrest, South Africans have found themselves in no less distress, and continue to desire magical charismatic leadership, within or without the constraints of democracy, to save them from what to many is a hopeless existence.

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4 Hofmeyr, B, ‘Luthuli & Leadership’, *Discernment*, November 2021, Edition 3. <https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/213/2021/13203-up-alli-discernment-3-albert-luthuli-and-charismatic-leadership.zp213491.pdf>.

5 Mueller-Hirth, N, After the rainbow nation: Jacob Zuma, charismatic leadership and national identities in Post-Polokwane South Africa. Paper presented at 20th Annual ASEN Conference - Nation and Charisma, London, United Kingdom, 2010. <https://abdn.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/after-the-rainbow-nation-jacob-zuma-charismatic-leadership-and-na>.

6 Manzini, S, ‘Press Release: Poll reveals that South Africans still have faith in politicians’, *Social Surveys*, 21 March 2019. <https://socialsurveys.co.za/press-release-poll-reveals-that-south-africans-still-have-faith-in-politicians/>.

7 Pikoli, Z, ‘Opportunism de Lux: Charismatic, populist leaders fuelling xenophobia are not heroes’, *Daily Maverick*, 28 January 2022. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2022-01-28-opportunism-de-lux-charismatic-populist-leaders-fuelling-xenophobia-are-not-heroes/>.



The study used Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde's definition of populism as "a thin-centered ideology that separates society into two antagonistic groups – 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and insists politics should be an expression of the general will of the people". It found South Africa to be the second most populist country in the study (second only to Brazil, a fellow BRICS nation which shares many of South Africa's challenges), open to non-democratic solutions to everyday problems<sup>8</sup>.

Furthermore, an Afrobarometer survey from 2018, found, even before Covid and daily load-shedding, South African *support for democracy weakening and acceptance of authoritarian alternatives growing*<sup>9</sup>. As of 2018, only 42% of South Africans were happy with democracy. 62% of the overall sample (and 67% of those aged 18 to 35) were willing to "give up elections for a non-elected government that is able to provide jobs, housing, and security". This indicated an openness not just to populism but to authoritarianism, given a compelling enough promise.<sup>10</sup>

Ripe, in other words, for a new Messiah to come in from the wilderness, outside of the Constitution if required.

To quote Benda Hofmeyr again, "Our local historical present testifies to the continued existential distress of the vast majority of the population who remains disempowered and plunged into abject poverty, which makes for conditions ripe for the emergence of a new charismatic movement. What such a movement depends upon, though, is the concomitant emergence of an efficacious leader the glaring absence of which we have witnessed in the past 25 years."<sup>11</sup>

## An absent messiah

South Africa's continued blind optimism, desperation to attach itself to a hero figure despite the continued absence thereof, is perhaps best illustrated by the euphoric faith citizens of all demographics put in the election of President Cyril Ramaphosa. The president was obviously as tainted by the temptations of the flesh as all his peers, as evidenced by the current accusations of serious misconduct around undeclared foreign currency and past scandals around mixing private and public business. Yet he was held up by the populace, craving such a figure, as some kind of a long-awaited hero merely because he was less obviously flawed than his predecessor. Cyril was, in other words, made into a sort of (temporary) charismatic leader by the sheer faith and hope of the nation.

"Ramaphoria" continued into the Covid crisis, when shepherdless South Africans begged online and in the streets to "be led" and pleaded for their personal agency to be replaced by diktat. They gratefully gave up their rights to a man and his unelected emergency council, who took that offered power and converted it into bans on "crop bottoms", hot chicken, open-toed shoes and sea bathing, as well as a mafia monopoly on cigarettes and alcohol.

8 De Waal, JR, 'About the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project', YouGov, 1 May 2019. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2019/05/01/about-yougov-cambridge-globalism-project>; Businesstech, 'South Africa named as one of the most populist countries in the world', Businesstech 4 May 2019. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/314328/south-africa-named-as-one-of-the-most-populist-countries-in-the-world/>

9 Dryding, D, 'Are South Africans giving up on democracy?', Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 372, 14 July 2020. [https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab\\_r7\\_dispatchno372\\_are\\_south\\_africans\\_giving\\_up\\_on\\_democracy.pdf](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ab_r7_dispatchno372_are_south_africans_giving_up_on_democracy.pdf).

10 Patel, L and Graham, L, 'Study shows young South Africans have no faith in democracy and politicians', The Conversation, 11 June 2019. <https://theconversation.com/study-shows-young-south-africans-have-no-faith-in-democracy-and-politicians-118404>

11 Hofmeyr, B, 'Luthuli & Leadership', *Discernment*, November 2021, Edition 3. <https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/213/2021/13203-up-alli-discernment-3-albert-luthuli-and-charismatic-leadership.zp213491.pdf>.



The vast majority of the meek population accepted these restrictions on their rights and insults to their intelligence with praise and gratitude. At least, at last, they were led. Where they were being led to, though, was far from paradise.

In the years since, as Covid killed regardless of South Africa's harsh lockdowns and prohibitions, even by global standards, and the growing relative inequality and real poverty of the population contrasted nicely with the president's personal scandals involving the sale of prize million-rand buffalos and cash-stuffed mattresses, it has become apparent to even the most hopeful South Africans that Ramaphosa is not their next saviour: he is just another member of an out-of-touch elite, and very much a human being.

Alternative messiahs on which to hang the hope of the nation are few and far between.

All of the major political parties and players on the South African scene have been weighed and found wanting. The ANC's leadership is too old and too tainted by corruption to inspire much passion in any but their most devoted – and well-connected – party members. No new or noteworthy names have any hope of wresting power from within the ruling party.

As for the official opposition parties, the DA would be better suited to the political climate of the EU; this is the party of career civil servants rather than the charismatic leaders that South Africans dream of. (In other words, they are more like the nice young man your parents would like you to date, rather than the one you fall hopelessly in love with.) Any bright young things who started their career within the confines of the party and did show any promise in terms of capturing the public imagination went off on their own (often into more lucrative elite Harvard lobbyist circles and private sector management consulting and keynote-speaking roles) long before they could build a following capable of taking on the headless giant that is the current ANC. That is even without the party's numerous public own goals. Perhaps the most unforgivable, in the eyes of the nation's younger generations, is the party's choosing on principle to stand by its ageing matriarch, Helen Zille, and her decidedly unpopular stance and very public tweet storms on colonialism, over the party's future and relevance with the youth. Through moves like this, putting (debatable) principles over popular politics, the DA fails time and time again to harness the zeitgeist to its vision for the future of the country.

Even the EFF, once so full of populist vigour and promises of violent revolution, got rich, middle aged, and drunk on Johnnie Walker and Moët & Chandon before managing to get into power. A fatal mistake, the hypocrisy of which failed to impress the unemployed working-class target market that was theirs for the taking, if only they had shown some patience. Furthermore, it is critical to note that Julius Malema, even at his most bold and inflammatory, has focused his rhetoric on what he will take and from whom, rather than on articulating what and how he will give those loyal to him – on retribution rather than reward, punishments rather than promises of prosperity.

Few young people believe they will really be better off, even relatively, under the regime change he promises. They notice the lifestyle the party's leaders enjoy and see through the hypocrisy. Youthful apathy at the polls, even after the red berets entered the stage, only proves this point.



The myriad of other small parties can barely rouse a debate on Twitter, let alone rally the masses to move in their direction. Although it's not for want of trying.

It is worth noting that the rhetoric and narrative devices being employed by upstart contenders Mmusi Maimane, Songezo Zibi and the more nationalist Herman Mashaba all appear to attempt to tap into the charismatic leadership vacuum left by Mandela, and more recently, Zuma. However, the fundamental point of charismatic leadership is that it is bestowed unto chosen leaders (for better or for worse, as a blessing or a curse) *by the followers* rather than being a title that can be claimed or a role that can be played by the leader themselves.

As such, Maimane's attempt reflected in the paragraph below to cast himself as the hero in a hero's journey story is without substance unless he is given that role by his audience

*"I hold a vision for this country that I cannot shake off or ignore. SA is a land of possibilities, making it possible for a new generation to lead. I am part of that generation. I have fought battles against corruption, racism and extremism, and in those battles I have experienced the taste of defeat and triumph. I have been the man in the arena and now return to the arena because the work is not done. I return to the arena with greater determination and more vigour than before. I am back — on my own terms."<sup>12</sup>*

The core problem with the present South African political landscape, however, is not merely the lack of potential credible candidates. It is also the absolute lack of vision as to what comes next. Not one of the major or minor political parties, nor any of the independent candidates, has managed to articulate a vision for the future of South Africa, either positive or negative, that is emotive enough to inspire action among the populace.

The ruling party promises only a continuation of the far less than perfect present. The opposition parties promise only to do what their name suggests, oppose the status quo. They have failed one and all to articulate, let alone explain a credible road map towards any kind of future worth moving towards. They have failed, one and all, to realise what Mandela and Tutu understood, that, to lead, one has to at least pretend to know where one is headed.

## **Voter apathy does not mean a lack of desire to be led, only a lack of viable leaders**

The lack of options to be the object of the South African psyche's desire manifests itself in voter apathy. The long and winding queues that so enthusiastically welcomed Nelson Mandela as the first democratically elected leader of the nation have dwindled to the point that only 46% of eligible voters chose to cast their ballot in the 2021 local government elections. Voter apathy is most apparent in the youth. In 2021, 90% of eligible 18-19 year olds and 80% of eligible 20-35 year olds did not even register to vote. This is in stark contrast to the over-40-year-old cohort, where only 10% of eligible voters remain unregistered.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Hofmeyr, B, 'Luthuli & Leadership', *Discernment*, November 2021, Edition 3. <https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/213/2021/13203-up-alli-discernment-3-albert-luthuli-and-charismatic-leadership.zp213491.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Becker, M, and Ranciman, C, 'The youth vote in the 2021 Local Government Elections within five metropolitan municipalities', University of Johannesburg, Center for Social Change, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2021. <https://www.kas.de/documents/261596/10543300/The+youth+vote+in+the+2021+Local+Government+Elections.pdf/41ea7d35-a7c9-2098-6ad5-cb7ad12c5a1f?version=1.0&t=1643879656662>.





Youthful disillusionment with the current political menu options is hardly surprising in a country where the ruling party has suggested its internal definition of “youth” should include all those 50 or younger<sup>14</sup>. This even though only 9.25% of South Africa’s population is over 60. <sup>15</sup>Young voters have shown, in no uncertain terms, that when it comes to the current political parties, change will only occur one funeral at a time. Voting in national elections has little real sway when the political parties themselves are staffed by heavily entrenched networks of powerful, if uninspiring, established leaders.

Nonetheless, the desire of the population to “be led” has not diminished just because the current crop of leaders has failed to lead anywhere anyone wants to go. Rather, the absence of leadership has created a true power vacuum, which can and will be filled eventually.

The populist hole in the South African soul will be filled, either by another messiah in the mould of Nelson Mandela, Chris Hani and Desmond Tutu, that South Africa has been fortunate enough to attract in the past, or – more likely – in the form of an antichrist-like figure, the likes of which fellow African nations are all too familiar with, a more dangerous candidate with aspirations more akin to those of Muammar Gaddafi, Idi Amin, Robert Mugabe, and Théoneste Bagosora.

It would be a mistake to think that South African exceptionalism is a birthright. No, even the most patient populations have their breaking points, and even the most generous-hearted people are not immune to the appeal of populists who promise a future vision that seems both possible and preferable to their present situation.

What is more, although the vast majority of unregistered, apathetic youthful voters might not have much faith in the democratic process, or the candidates presented to them on the ballot, this does not mean that they lack a desire to be led or a demand for dramatic change.

Polling-station apathy should be seen as yet another warning that any real change to the South African political situation impelled by the youth is likely to come from outside the current political system altogether, or at the very least from outside the current established political parties.

Rather, we should look for signs of new leadership emerging from within South Africa’s disenfranchised, disenchanting, unemployed and uninspired youth bulge. The Fees Must Fall movement, which began on university campuses and was instigated by students rather than the established parties, should be viewed as an early signal as to what could lie ahead.

Although the movement has all but dissipated, the anger and resentment and frustration behind it has only mounted, as youth unemployment rates have grown to an incredible 61% in an economy lagging even its developing market peers. That pent-up youthful energy is at present breaking out in largely undirected fits and starts (the Luh Twizzy mall anarchy movement is just one example), ready and waiting to be harnessed by a messianic leader with both the charisma and the vision to direct it towards a singular cause worth rallying behind.

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13 Becker, M, and Ranciman, C, ‘The youth vote in the 2021 Local Government Elections within five metropolitan municipalities’, University of Johannesburg, Center for Social Change, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2021. <https://www.kas.de/documents/261596/10543300/The+youth+vote+in+the+2021+Local+Government+Elections.pdf/41ea7d35-a7c9-2098-6ad5-cb7ad12c5a1f?version=1.0&t=1643879656662>.

14 Grootes, F, ‘Age gap in SA becomes a chasm, setting the stage for eternal internal political succession battles’, Daily Maverick, 14 September 2022. <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-14-age-gap-in-sa-becomes-a-chasm-setting-the-stage-for-eternal-internal-political-succession-battles/>.

15 South African Government, ‘South Africa’s People’, 2021. <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/south-africas-people>.



As Miché Roberts writes, South African youth disillusionment can perhaps best be described by the term “waithood” or “youth-adult”, which refers to young people who cannot find a job and lack any clear path to independence being trapped in a form of extended childhood, where they are effectively immobilised in cycles of poverty and lack that effectively shut them out of their own futures and growth.<sup>16</sup>

“The period in which young people are trapped in dependency and unable to become economically active and obtain the independence expected of becoming an adult is termed ‘waithood.’ This condition has been transcending chronological age and is solidifying youth not only as a voting constituency but as a class of people (youth and adults alike) who have not achieved the markers of adulthood such as the ability to earn a living, pay taxes, and provide for a family. This has resulted in the emergence of the ‘youth-adult’ who is neither a dependent child nor an independent adult, and who is instead caught in the curse of waithood due to unemployment, lack of access to services, structural inequalities and narrowly distributed economic opportunities.” (Roberts, 2019)

The proximate result of mass “waithood” is a bubbling resentment that can flare up spontaneously – or be harnessed by a leader or an idea into a form of revolution. The Arab Spring movements which only succeeded in replacing authoritarianism with more populist authoritarianism should be a warning to any nation with a large population of “youth-adults” locked in limbo.

This concept of waithood, is, of course, compatible with the evidence of voter apathy (why vote if no one on the ballot will do anything) and with messiah theory (that youths are waiting for a leader who can credibly meet their needs).

## Four scenarios

From this vantage point, four scenarios emerge for the aftermath of the 2024 national elections, which are themselves best understood as a continuation of the status quo, regardless of an outright ANC win or a necessary nominal coalition government, which would have a very limited effect on the day-to-day lives of ordinary South Africans. These scenarios should be considered as extending through to the end of the decade.

The first scenario is that of an Absent Messiah, that is, a continuation of the current holding period. In this scenario, no new credible leadership figure emerges and the nation remains in precarious waiting for the arrival of the long-awaited new leader. Here, 2029 looks a lot like 2024, same situation, but even more fragile and ripe for a populist uprising.

The second scenario is that of the False Prophet. In this scenario, another noisy, yet ultimately impotent, EFF-esque party led by a fashionable, flashy-dressing, bug-talking leader sparks a false alarm with a powerful early start. It throws the privileged classes into panic about a coming class war that is, nonetheless, neutered from the start when the nascent leader is found to be as corrupt and connected as the current political class – despite grand speeches promising to be the next son of the soil. A wave of excitement dies down and the disillusioned masses return dissatisfied to their grinding lives.

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, M, ‘South African youth, disruptive politics, and apathy towards voting?’, *Transformer Journal*, Vol 20, No 1, 2019. [http://afesis.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Transformer-Vol-20-No-1\\_South-African-Youth-disruptive-politics-and-apaty-toward-voting-by-Miche-Roberts.pdf](http://afesis.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Transformer-Vol-20-No-1_South-African-Youth-disruptive-politics-and-apaty-toward-voting-by-Miche-Roberts.pdf).

The third scenario is that of The Second Coming. In this scenario, a new, young Mandela-type figure arises from an unlikely corner of the fringes of political establishment. Critically, this new figure has credibility and a track record as both a contrarian and as a person who has followed through in changing communities, either through business and/or politics. The person is under the age of 30, gaining the hearts and minds of the disillusioned youth. This figure is in constant danger of martyrdom by overpromising and underdelivering, but has enough charisma to draw votes away from the established parties and/or effect community-level changes without political permission at all.

The fourth scenario is that of An Antichrist. In this scenario, a classic populist rises to power with irresistible promises of both personal gains and violent redistribution, as well as retribution for the sins of the past. The falling middle classes join forces with the unemployed masses living on the poverty line. Together, they rally behind a fire-breathing Lenin/Stalin/Che figure who would be happy to burn the country to the ground to reshape it in his own image. If we cannot have a part of the future for ourselves, why have a future at all? This is the scenario we must guard against, particularly with regards to the restless youths stuck in waitness limbo, testing the waters in shopping centres with Luh Twizzy riots.

## **A vacuum waiting to be filled**

At present, South Africa has a gaping leadership vacuum. That vacuum will be filled, as all power vacuums are eventually filled. But to know by what, and when, we will need to wait, we have yet to establish. If we are to avoid the worst case “Antichrist” scenario, policy priorities for public and private sector leaders should orientate towards channelling youth energy towards a constructive, collaborative, and, critically, credible vision worth working towards.

This means finding, encouraging and grooming young political talent and giving younger voices opportunities to be heard in political and corporate circles. At present there are no such clear visions on the table, and few constructive alternatives for young un- and underemployed youths to participate in the future. This is both an opportunity and a threat as regards the future of South Africa.

Youth leadership development, community service and works programmes, alongside corporate internships and similar works programmes, could help channel undirected energy towards building rather than destroying the nation’s future.

However, what is really missing is a clear, assertive visionary – a charismatic leader ready to step up and fill the power vacuum with agency and hope – with the blessing of the people.





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