



Whites and democracy in South Africa

by Roger Southall, Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2022, 270 pp, £48.78 (hardcover), ISBN: 97884702890.

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Provost has put great scholarship and profound imagination to a worthy purpose.

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Whites and democracy in South Africa, by Roger Southall, Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2022, 270 pp, £48.78 (hardcover), ISBN: 97884702890.

In this wide-ranging book, Professor Roger Southall interrogates the attitudes of white South Africans in respect of politics, democracy, and race relations in the country. The book is organised into three sections: the first is historical, focusing on South Africa as a white-dominated settler society that transitioned to a formal non-racial democracy, and the attitudes of white South Africans in regard to this history. The second section deals with white attitudes towards democracy after 1994, unpacked in relation to policy, party, and identity concerns. The third focuses on the future of white people in South African politics.

There are ample interesting and rich insights in this text, many of which could have been further developed in relation to the volume of supporting contextual and theoretical content. Of these, however, two arguments stand out. The first is that, despite benefitting from a racist settler society historically, ordinary white South Africans have largely embraced democracy today. The second is that white South Africans need to do more to realise a non-racial democracy in the future by confronting specific structural legacies of apartheid. In sum, most white South Africans have transitioned somewhat from settlers to citizens but need to do more to help bring about a non-racial, democratic future.

Let us begin with the first argument. Drawing on primary evidence from eight focus groups conducted in four major cities around the country, Southall makes the case that white South Africans mostly have embraced democracy and its core values. Furthermore, they participate vigorously in democratic politics in all its forms, whether public debate, social media, voting, using the courts, and increasingly, protest. This is important because the number of white South Africans has grown to around 5 million, even as their relative size has decreased from roughly 22% in 1910 to 9% today. Second, as the 'ordinary white' respondents make clear, they are in South Africa to stay. Most simply could not afford to emigrate, even if they wanted to. Third, white South Africans remain disproportionately well-off and retain strong links to Britain and its other white-dominated colonies. All of this is important for future stability and prosperity of South Africa as during the

transition to democracy in the 1990s, the most organised, resourced, and violent opposition to democracy came from the white right. This is simply no longer the case today.

At the same time however, Southall points out that while white South Africans have embraced democracy, many remain ambivalent in their attitude to the new order, and to the sins of their racist past. Hence, whites tend to be more conservative than most other groups, with many taking a more nuanced view of apartheid or claim ignorance of its extremes. Further, in party terms, white people tend to support opponents of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), principally the Democratic Alliance (DA) and more right-wing parties. On ideological questions, they also tend to skew more right than most South Africans, and some remain overtly racist, even if this is expressed more in private rather than public spaces. Lastly, the cities of South Africa remain significantly segregated along racial lines, although this too is changing with black upward mobility.


While these empirical insights resonate, two questions remain. First, while Southall notes the significant and growing diversity of the views of white South Africans, I would have liked to have heard more from his respondents themselves on whether they felt like they shared a common racial identity, and if so in what terms? More importantly, there is little to nothing on black perceptions of white people politically. This seems to me a crucial gap in the main argument not only because all identities are socially imposed to some degree, but whiteness in particular is (oppositionally) defined in relation to blackness. Thus, what black people think of white people politically matters for what white people can be and do in the public realm. Focusing on white people alone misrepresents what is necessarily a mutually defining identity and politics.

The second main argument is about whiteness, and its functional links to global economic and political systems. This is an idea that has had many manifestations in academia since the political decolonisation movement of the 1960s, and its economic 'neo-colonial' and cultural 'decolonial' echoes. In the introduction Southall engages explicitly with debates on whiteness as a product of a white supremacist power structure, and the arguments of Charles W. Mills, Biko, and Fanon, amongst others, directly identifying talk of colour blindness as a form of racism for example. In the conclusion, Southall adds the problem of what he terms 'unintended racism' or racialised social norms that people might impose on others unconsciously – a good example being imposing white norms about what constitutes 'neat hair' at school. He goes on to link these norms to wider institutions and finishes by arguing that white people need to help redress substantive racial equality, land access, black poverty, and racial segregation to help realise a non-racial democratic South Africa.

While each of the sub-arguments is left somewhat open, and indeed the overall argument needs more development, the clear thrust of the conclusion is to identify the structural characteristics of racial supremacy that still need redress in South Africa, and to place a moral onus on white South Africans to do more to bring about change. This is formally quite a strong position to hold, but Southall does a masterful job of presenting it in a considerate and balanced way that I think most white people could consider. I suspect that this

is no accident. Not just because Southall is a highly experienced and thoughtful scholar, but also because he is writing for whites who *want* democracy in South Africa.

In sum, *Whites and democracy in South Africa* is more than a well-informed and skilful academic argument, it is also a call for white people to take responsibility for their part in building a democratic and non-racial future, and it also offers some clear direction on what needs to be done.

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Against decolonization: taking African agency seriously, by Olufemi Taiwo, Hurst and Co., 2022, xv + 258 pp., £14.99, ISBN 9781787386921

This book sets out with a key purpose that decolonisation and its applicability should not be expanded beyond what it is originally supposed to mean. Olufemi Taiwo kicks against the indiscriminate application of decolonisation to anything that appears to share a connection with colonialism. He describes the decolonisation movement as being obsessed with highlighting wrongs without necessarily considering the alternative that what is being defined as wrong may have been incorrectly categorised and may be right in the modern world.

According to Taiwo, decolonisation, as it is presently conceptualised, has lost its way, and it is now like a master key that fits into every available keyhole, except it does not actually unlock the doors. He also argues that decolonisation seems to be imposing values on contemporary African thinkers. His position suggests a redress of the struggle for decolonisation among scholars, as well as an outlook towards exploring an alternative perspective, especially as they apply to the challenges facing Africa. From the outline of the argument in the book, Taiwo has clearly done a superb job, particularly in cautioning against losing the sanctity of what decolonisation means and what it originally set out to achieve. However, it is worth pointing out that the argument about the meaning and applicability of decolonisation should not be so boxed in.

African realities and experiences contradict Taiwo's perspectives. The argument against decolonisation appears to portray decolonisation as a game of payback for what the colonial masters did in Africa decades ago, when it should be seen as a patriotic struggle to Africanize Africa. If this involves replacing the West's epistemology and system of scholarship with an equally functional system and encompassing epistemology of African perspectives, then so be it.