



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

### **A CREDO FOR A NEW SOUTH AFRICANNESS** **Artificial Intelligence: Learning from Global Public Sector Successes**

*By William Gumede*

South Africa, the world's most diverse society, will have to build a common national identity around a "civil religion", based on inclusive democracy, ethnic, colour and political diversity, core shared values and social justice for the vulnerable.

Diverse developing countries with a politically divided past, such as South Africa, obviously cannot find a solution in a nationalism based on shared culture or common citizenship or living in a shared space, alone. Because the South African nation, the 'imagined political community', is so diverse, creating a new South Africanness will also have to be based on politics.

South Africa's founding myth – based on politics – is the fact that the country managed to rise out of the ashes of a civil war, peacefully construct a democratic dispensation based on a new constitution, anchored in South Africa's ethnic diversity, and a new set of values, rules and political culture. The Constitution is the founding document of our political settlement that ended apartheid and ushered in non-racial democracy.

Colonial and apartheid governments have insisted that South Africa is a country with vastly different ethnic communities always on the verge of communal conflict, unless they are separated and run by one group or by a strong central state.

Yet, after 350 years of colonialism and apartheid, South African communities are not 'gated communities' with fixed borders; often, they overlap meaningfully. In other words, South Africanness is what Indian historian Sunil Khilnani calls, communities with 'interconnected differences'.

The fact that we are so ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse should then be the central element of a unique South African identity. And the fact that South Africa has a multiple identity should be at the centre of its shared South Africanness. The country's common identity and future should be built on acceptance of our differences, as a mosaic of the best elements of our diverse pasts and present, histories and cultures.

The starting point must be the premise that there cannot be one single definition of who is a South African. At the same token there cannot be one sole defining culture that indicates South Africanness.

Retreating into "nativism", wanting to seek an exclusive definition of South Africanness – which overrides the Constitution's core definition arguing for multiple identities, diversity and inclusivity as the pillars of South Africanness – undermines the idea of an inclusive South African identity.

The best way forward for South Africa is not Afrikaner or African nationalism, but what Michael Ignatieff described as “civic nationalism”, which aims to build a shared citizenship around a common civic identity, trumping individual or group ethnic-based identities.

In civic nationalism the glue that holds diverse societies together is equal rights and shared democratic cultures, values and institutions, rather than ethnic nationalism. In civic nationalism, a nation “need not be unified by commonalities of language or culture”.

Embracing, building on and leveraging South Africa’s diversity is crucial to lifting economic growth, inclusive development and maintaining societal peace. In fact, one of the reasons for post-apartheid South Africa’s low growth, development and peace has been the rejection of diversity – the continued polarisation along ethnic, colour and political affiliation.

Our common ambition should be to mould a new democratic identity for South Africa. This necessitates widespread public trust in the Constitution, democratic institutions, and democratic system overall. A prerequisite is absolute loyalty – not to a party, leader or tribe, but to the country’s Constitution.

Since democracy and the new Constitution are at the heart of South Africa’s new identity, undermining both cannot but undermine the formation of a new South Africanness. Yet, increasingly, the Constitution has often not been treated as a founding document by some political leaders.

Because a democratic state is so central in building a common South Africanness, the legitimacy of the state will hinge on whether it delivers. Herein lies the danger for nation-building, which is premised on an effective, inclusive and caring state.

The failure of the democratic state to deliver services to black South Africans has undermined many black South Africans’ confidence in the democratic state, just as they lacked confidence in the apartheid state, which did not deliver to them.

Leadership style also matters very much. There is going to be a premium on South Africa’s political leaders to govern at all times for every South African, not just for one political party, faction or ethnic group. Good public leadership is a pillar of good democratic governance. People often say South Africa lacks leadership. What they mean is that we need leaders that would govern in the best interests of all. Leadership that is in the widest public interest, aligned with the values of the Constitution and which is compassionate, promotes democratic governance.

Leadership is at a higher premium in societies that are ethnically diverse, have high levels of inequality, and where democratic rules, institutions and governance are not fully embraced by all. Poor leadership prevents the institutionalisation of democratic constitutions, laws and racial inclusivity. It would mean ordinary citizens supporting leaders, whether in government, politics, business or traditional affairs, on the basis of democratic values, not colour, ethnicity and culture.

In the South African type of colonial and apartheid history, white skins were bestowed with more social, political and economic power. Power was further dispersed based on skin pigmentation. Race, and the continued legacy of apartheid inequalities, is one of the fault lines in the country’s efforts to build a common South Africanness – which must therefore involve economic redress, tackling racism, and a rebalance of apartheid-inherited power relations.

In times of crisis, whether based on economic collapse, corruption or state failure, citizens in countries with diverse roots such as South Africa may fall back on historical self-identities, groups and divisions – making the forging of a shared new identity much harder, yet so much more urgent.

It will be critical that economic development policies focus on genuinely uplifting not only the poor, but the widest number of people at the same time, whatever their race, colour or political affiliation – rather than a small elite, whether white or black or both. If the poor black majority is left out of prosperity, a common South Africanness will remain a fading dream.

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