



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### WHAT BUYS GETS WRONG: EQUALITY IS NOT TOTALITARIANISM

**Fear is not a strategy - South Africa's future depends on fairness, not siege narratives**

*By Daryl Swanepoel*

Flip Buys's recent article, in which he invokes Martin Niemöller's warning about the dangers of totalitarianism, strikes the reader less as an argument and more as an act of rhetorical escalation. By adapting a text born in the shadow of Nazi repression, a text written in a world of arrests, disappearances and the machinery of state violence, he positions contemporary South Africa as though it were on a similar trajectory. "First they came for the farmers... then they came for Afrikaners' human rights... then they came for the judiciary... then they came for me," he writes, inviting the reader to believe that the democratic state is moving through society, targeting groups in sequence until no freedoms remain. But the examples he offers are not the signs of creeping tyranny, they are the ordinary, if often contested, policy debates of a society still wrestling with how to undo its past.

But to make sense of our present, we cannot pretend that all South Africans arrived at 1994 from the same starting line. This country remains one of the most unequal on earth, and that inequality is not an accident of economics or a quirk of poor policy, it is the living legacy of a system built deliberately to advantage one community over another. Apartheid did not merely tilt the field, it engineered a society in which Afrikaners were guaranteed employment through job reservation, protected ownership through race-based land laws and elevated through an education system that spent multiples more on white children than on black children. By contrast, black South Africans were dispossessed, restricted, under-educated and denied the most basic instruments of mobility. The residue of that architecture remains with us still: in wealth patterns that mirror the racial map of the past, in townships and homelands pushed to the periphery, in generational prospects that diverge long before a child enters school. To discuss contemporary South Africa as though apartheid were a minor historical footnote or as though its beneficiaries did not inherit measurable, enduring privilege, is to abandon honesty before the conversation begins.

What the data reveals is even harder to ignore. White-headed households earn on average R676,375 per year, compared with R143,632 for black African households, a ratio of nearly 4.7 to 1. White households spend roughly four times more and hold many multiples of the wealth of black households. These are not the statistics of a group being pushed out of society, they are the statistics of a group still buffered by history. Even in the arena of violent crime, where fear often runs deepest, the facts contradict the siege narrative. Eighty-five percent of murder victims in South Africa are black, and only three percent are white. These are not the contours of persecution, they are the contours of a deeply unequal society, still marked by the legacies it has not yet overcome.

None of this is to deny the genuine anxieties that many Afrikaners feel. It would be dishonest, even unkind, to pretend that economic insecurity is imagined or that the struggle to find work does not cut deeply into one's sense of dignity. Buys is right about one thing: it is always easier to preach patience,

justice and fairness from a position of stability and wellbeing. For those who feel themselves slipping in a harsher economy, fear is not abstract, it is lived. But fear, however understandable, cannot become a substitute for truth. Nor can it negate the demands of justice. In a truly equal South Africa, no racial group would enjoy near-full employment while another endures joblessness of catastrophic proportions. In a truly equal South Africa, income and opportunity would not fall so predictably along racial lines. Yet the data tells us how far we still are from that horizon. Black South Africans face unemployment several times higher than whites, white households earn nearly five times more and hold vastly more wealth. These are not the signs of a society that has overcorrected. They are the unmistakable traces of one still defined by its past.

The deeper issue, then, is not that Afrikaners are losing rights, but that many are grappling with the loss of certainty, the quiet, often unspoken assurances that their communities would always be protected first, considered first, advantaged first. For generations those assumptions were treated as normal and so their erosion can feel like the erosion of rights themselves. But it is only because the guarantees were never just that their disappearance now feels disorienting. When Buys invokes totalitarianism, he is not describing the South Africa we inhabit, he is giving voice to the discomfort of living in a society where one no longer occupies the centre by default. His warning speaks less to emerging oppression than to the unsettling experience of equality beginning to take root.

Fear is a powerful political force, but it is a poor foundation for national reflection. It tempts us to mistake equality for punishment and to interpret justice as threat. Once fear takes hold of the narrative, transformation is no longer understood as an attempt to repair the structural damage of apartheid, it becomes a spectre of imagined retribution. And when that happens, the space for a rational conversation narrows almost to nothing, a conversation we desperately need if we are to confront the persistence of inequality in this country. The differences in income, wealth, safety and opportunity do not hover in the abstract, they fall with numbing predictability along racial lines, shaping the daily lives of millions. These are not perceptions or grievances. They are measurable realities.

A society that ignores such disparities or comforts itself with the fiction that they will somehow resolve themselves, courts a danger far more elemental than ideology. Inequality does not simply sit in statistics, it seeps into emotion, expectation and the quiet resentments that gather at the edges of civic life. No majority in any democracy will consign itself indefinitely to higher unemployment, poorer schooling, lower safety and more fragile economic prospects while being asked to wait for a justice that never arrives. That is not how human beings work, nor is it how stable societies endure. A South Africa that refuses to broaden opportunity is a South Africa that will, eventually, fracture, not suddenly, but slowly, along its oldest fault lines. And Afrikaners, for all their current security, will not be insulated from the tremors of that fracture.

The wiser path, the more strategic path, is not resistance, but recognition. Transformation is not an assault on any community, it is a long-term investment in stability, a form of national insurance against the fractures deep inequality inevitably produces. At its heart, transformation is a commitment to building a society in which no group must live in the shadow of another's advantage, and no child inherits a ceiling imposed by the past. Affirmative action, BEE, land reform and similar instruments are not ideological indulgences, they are responses to conditions that persist precisely because apartheid's scaffolding did not vanish in 1994. Crucially, transformation is not designed to exclude white South Africans. Its purpose is to create systems that are representative rather than punitive. A workplace in a constitutional democracy should reflect the composition of the society it serves, a society that includes black, coloured, Indian and white citizens alike. Affirmative action therefore does not erase whites from opportunity, it guarantees them their fair share within a labour market that mirrors the country's demographic reality rather than the distortions of its past. True inclusion does

not diminish anyone. It draws everyone into a future where opportunity is not the inheritance of one group, but the shared expectation of all.

And this raises a more fundamental question: why would it be reasonable for any society to accept near-full employment for whites while tolerating extraordinarily high unemployment for black South Africans? On what ethical or practical grounds could such an imbalance ever be sustained? It is true, and important to acknowledge, that fear and insecurity are real experiences for many Afrikaners, and as already stated, it is always easier to speak of fairness from a position of stability and wellbeing. That anxiety deserves recognition, not dismissal. But fear cannot override justice. A society in which one group is securely anchored in opportunity while another is trapped in structural precarity is not simply unequal, it is volatile. Resentment grows quietly in such conditions, and if left unaddressed becomes instability. No democracy, and certainly no fragile one, can endure indefinitely on such uneven ground.

Buy's argues that history offers only two choices: societies that are free, but unequal, or societies that are equal, but unfree. This binary may serve an ideological narrative, but it collapses under even a cursory look at the world. The Nordic democracies, among the most equal societies on earth, also rank among the freest, happiest and most stable. This is not incidental, it is evidence that freedom and equality are not opposites to be traded off, but principles that reinforce one another when supported by strong institutions, inclusive economies and a shared social ethos. South Africa's constitutional project understands this nuance. Freedom without equality is fragile, equality without freedom is hollow. And while no healthy society expects identical outcomes for all, the defence of "inequality as natural" cannot extend to the kind of structural racial inequality South Africa inherited. The question is not whether citizens should earn the same, but whether entire groups should remain locked into vastly different life prospects, because of a past that continues to shape access to education, work, safety and wealth.

If South Africa is to navigate its complexities with wisdom rather than fear, it will require a more generous national imagination, one capable of seeing transformation not as a threat, but as a path toward a society finally liveable for all. Transformation is not the erosion of anyone's rights, it is the repair of a landscape so uneven that true freedom cannot take root without deliberate correction. Afrikaners are not being asked to relinquish their identity or surrender their security. They are being invited to help build a country in which every community can stand without the shadow of another's advantage, and in which every child, whatever their race, sees possibility rather than predetermined limits.

That work demands courage from all sides. It requires acknowledging the fears that change provokes while insisting that fear cannot override fairness. It requires recognising that stability cannot rest indefinitely on the uneven distribution of opportunity. Above all, it requires accepting that South Africa's future depends not on binary choices between freedom and equality, but on weaving the two into a shared democratic fabric.

Seen in this light, nothing about the project of transformation resembles the totalitarian spectre Buy's evokes. It is not an authoritarian march, it is the patient, often difficult, always unfinished work of democracy itself, the work of ensuring that rights are meaningful, because they are shared, and that dignity is secure, because it belongs to all.

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