



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **TRUTH, NOT ALARMISM: WHY EVIDENCE MATTERS IN SOUTH AFRICA'S MINORITY DEBATE**

*By Daryl Swanepoel*

Every society has a duty to take allegations of injustice seriously. When communities claim that they are threatened, marginalised or persecuted, those concerns deserve careful scrutiny and fair hearing. The protection of minorities is, after all, one of the defining tests of any constitutional democracy.

But there is an equally important obligation in public debate: claims of injustice must be grounded in evidence and presented in proportion to the facts. When narratives of persecution become exaggerated or detached from empirical reality, they do not strengthen the case for justice. They undermine it. In a diverse society such as South Africa, where trust between communities remains historically fragile, the dishonest or distorted presentation of facts can do real and lasting damage.

In recent years, a narrative has gained increasing traction in certain advocacy circles portraying Afrikaners as victims of systematic persecution in South Africa. This narrative has been amplified both domestically and internationally, often accompanied by claims that Afrikaner farmers are being targeted for murder, that Afrikaners are under existential threat or that South Africa is descending into a form of racialised hostility directed against its white minority.

These are serious claims. But serious claims require serious evidence. And when one examines the available facts more carefully, the picture that emerges is far more complex and far less alarmist than the narrative suggests.

Take the issue most frequently cited as evidence of persecution, which is farm murders. These are horrific crimes and deserve the strongest condemnation. But South Africa is a country facing extraordinarily high levels of violent crime affecting communities across racial and geographic lines. Official police statistics record roughly twenty-seven thousand murders annually. Within that tragic total, farm murders account for several dozen cases per year. That does not make those crimes any less devastating for the families involved. But it does mean they form part of a broader national crisis of violent crime, rather than evidence of a systematic campaign against a particular racial group.

When farm murders are presented internationally as proof of targeted ethnic violence, without the necessary statistical context, the result is not greater understanding, but distortion. The narrative shifts from confronting South Africa's real and complex crime problem to promoting a simplified story of racial persecution.

That distortion matters, because it damages the credibility of legitimate concerns about rural safety and property rights. When claims are presented in exaggerated form, critics can easily dismiss them entirely, even when underlying problems deserve attention; in other words, exaggeration weakens the very arguments it seeks to advance.

The damage, however, goes beyond credibility and in South Africa's political and social context, exaggerated narratives of Afrikaner persecution also deepen mistrust between communities. Many black South Africans interpret such claims as an attempt to invert the moral narrative of the country's past or to portray post-apartheid South Africa as a place where historical victims have suddenly become oppressors. Whether that interpretation is fair or not, the effect is the same. Defensive reactions, harden attitudes and reduce willingness to engage constructively with Afrikaner concerns.

In a society where minorities depend on cooperation with the broader population to secure their rights and interests, that dynamic is profoundly counterproductive and therefore, advocacy that alienates the very people whose understanding and support are necessary for progress it ultimately weakens the position of the community it seeks to defend.

The tragedy is that this approach risks obscuring the genuine contributions Afrikaners continue to make to South African society and the legitimate issues that deserve discussion, such as rural safety, language rights, cultural institutions and economic opportunity among them. These are matters that could form part of a broader national conversation about fairness, inclusion and shared citizenship.

There are, of course, legitimate policy debates that deserve serious engagement. Questions around policies such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment, the debate on expropriation without compensation and the future of mother-tongue education raise complex issues about redress, economic inclusion, property rights, language policy and long-term economic sustainability. These are important national conversations in which Afrikaners, like all South Africans, have every right to participate and express their concerns. But complex policy disagreements should not be recast as evidence of ethnic persecution. When ordinary policy disputes are framed in existential or racial terms, the result is not clarity but distortion.

But that conversation becomes far more difficult when the debate is framed in terms of existential persecution, rather than empirical reality.

There is also a deeper irony. Survey data consistently suggests that inter-racial trust in South Africa remains stronger than many observers assume. Significant majorities of South Africans across racial groups continue to express trust in one another and support the idea of a shared national future. This does not mean that tensions do not exist. They do. But it does mean that the foundations for coexistence remain more robust than alarmist narratives often acknowledge.

If that is the case, then exaggerating racial conflict risks creating the very divisions that the data suggests are not yet entrenched.

None of this is an argument for complacency. South Africa faces serious challenges: high crime levels, uneven state capacity and persistent inequality. Minority communities, like all others, are entitled to raise concerns about safety, rights and opportunities. But those concerns must be advanced with intellectual honesty and empirical discipline.

Public debate in a constitutional democracy must meet certain basic standards. Claims must be supported by evidence. Evidence must be interpreted proportionately. And arguments must be framed in ways that advance justice, rather than deepen division.

The dishonest or exaggerated presentation of South Africa's realities does not serve the interests of Afrikaners. It does not serve the interests of other communities. And it certainly does not serve the long-term project of building a cohesive and inclusive society.

If South Africa is to confront its challenges honestly, then its public discourse must be guided not by alarmism or grievance politics, but by reason, evidence and fairness. Only then can genuine injustices be addressed and shared solutions found.

Exaggeration may mobilise attention in the short term. But in the long run, truth is always the stronger foundation on which to build a future.

***Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute, an independent think-tank that promotes public policy research, constitutional democracy and social cohesion in South Africa.***