



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### THE ILLUSION OF LEVERAGE: WHY RACIAL ESCALATION NEVER ENDS WELL

*By Daryl Swanepoel*

What worries me of late is not that South Africans are debating race, identity and transformation. That debate is unavoidable in a society shaped as deeply by history as ours. What worries me is the manner in which the debate is increasingly being conducted, through distortion, exaggeration, selective facts and, in some cases, outright fabrication. When complex realities are reduced to slogans and half-truths are stripped of context and presented as existential threats, the consequences are rarely confined to the argument itself.

Those who spread such narratives may believe they are defending their communities, warning the world or strengthening their bargaining position. History suggests otherwise. Again and again, communities have convinced themselves that escalation, sharper language, harder positioning and greater confrontation, would force concessions and secure advantage. Almost without exception, it has done the opposite.

Consider Northern Ireland. What began as legitimate civil-rights demands escalated into decades of violence as both nationalist and unionist hardliners concluded that confrontation would strengthen their hand. The result was not leverage, but paralysis, economic stagnation, thousands of lives lost and a society locked into fear and mutual suspicion. When peace finally came through the Good Friday Agreement, it did not deliver outcomes won by escalation. It delivered compromises that could have been reached far earlier, without the bloodshed. Escalation had not strengthened anyone's position, it had merely narrowed the space for reason.

The same tragic logic played out in the former Yugoslavia, where ethnic entrepreneurs deliberately inflamed grievance to harden identities and mobilise support. Each side believed that sharpening division would secure territorial, political or moral advantage, but instead, it produced war, displacement, economic collapse and generational trauma. Even those who achieved nominal independence inherited fractured societies and weakened states. Escalation did not empower identity, it hollowed it out.

These examples matter because they reveal a deeper truth, namely that when debate becomes emotional mobilisation, rationality collapses. The conversation ceases to be about specific policies, specific failures or specific individuals. It becomes wholesale stereotyping. Entire communities are reduced to caricatures. Motives are assumed. Intentions are demonised. At that point, dialogue no longer functions as a problem-solving tool. It becomes a weapon.

This is the danger South Africa now faces. Fake news and half-truths do not merely misinform, they harden attitudes on all sides and they provoke fear where caution is required, anger where nuance is needed, and suspicion where trust is already fragile. The emotions they stir are not contained, they

ricochet through society, shaping perceptions and closing minds. And once attitudes harden, radical reactions, from any quarter, become more likely, not less.

Afrikaner purists, in particular, should reflect carefully on this trajectory. A South Africa marked by escalating racial hostility will not make life easier for Afrikaners. It will make it more complex, more tense and ultimately more precarious. Divided societies do not reward minorities with stability or security. They shrink economic opportunity, politicise culture and turn everyday life into a series of defensive calculations. The belief that escalation will secure protection is a dangerous illusion.

Self-interest, properly understood, is not advanced by social fracture. It is advanced by stability, predictability and coexistence. Minorities flourish in societies where institutions are trusted, where disagreements are managed rather than inflamed, and where identity is not permanently mobilised for conflict. History is unambiguous on this point. Communities that believed confrontation would strengthen their hand often discovered, too late, that it weakened everyone, themselves included.

This is why rational dialogue matters. Not as a moral platitude, but as a practical necessity. Rationality does not require surrendering principle or denying injustice. It requires resisting the collapse of complexity into fear-driven narratives. It requires acknowledging uncomfortable facts across the spectrum and engaging with them honestly. South Africa's transformation project, whatever its flaws, is not a zero-sum war between virtue and villainy. It is a difficult, contested attempt to reconcile historical inequality with a shared future.

Tolerance, too, is frequently misunderstood. It is not weakness. It is not the erasure of identity. It is the discipline of living with difference without resorting to fear. In plural societies, tolerance is not idealism, it is survival. Without it, politics becomes tribal, economics exclusionary and culture brittle.

Inclusivity follows from the same logic. An inclusive society does not ask anyone to abandon who they are. It asks only that identity not be weaponised against others. It recognises that dignity is not a finite resource and that the affirmation of one group does not require the humiliation of another. Transformation without dialogue becomes coercive. Dialogue without transformation becomes hollow. The challenge is to hold both together.

The alternative path, grievance inflation, racialised misinformation and permanent mobilisation, leads nowhere constructive. It produces outrage rather than solutions, entrenchment rather than understanding, and division rather than progress. Worse still, it trains citizens to see one another not as neighbours with competing interests, but as existential threats. Once that line is crossed, compromise is recast as betrayal and moderation as cowardice.

South Africa does not need fewer debates about race. It needs better ones. Debates grounded in fact rather than fear and arguments made in good faith rather than bad faith. Moreover, it needs leaders and commentators who understand that words shape realities and that recklessness in speech and action, can have consequences far beyond the moment.

Ultimately, the choice is not between speaking out and staying silent, instead it is between speaking responsibly and speaking recklessly. And it is between contributing to a society capable of managing its differences and undermining the very conditions that make peaceful coexistence possible.

Rational dialogue, tolerance and inclusivity are not naïve ideals, they are pragmatic necessities, and if self-interest is to mean anything beyond short-term emotional gratification, it must be pursued in the spirit of live and let live. Not because it sounds virtuous, but because in a country as complex and interdependent as South Africa, it is the only path that does not lead us all into a dead end.

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