

# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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## *Get Out and Vote: The 30th Anniversary of South Africa's Democracy*

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On 29 May this month South Africans go to the polls thirty years after the first democratic election. It is hard to overstate how much is at stake in this election.

Normally I visit my homeland every year. In 2023 I spent six weeks there for the first time in four years, thanks to Covid. Based at our family home in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), I travelled even less than usual, partially because my vehicle, an old but reliable Mazda 323, was in urgent need of attention. It

was marvellous to be back in SA. I love the rolling hills of KZN around where we live. In June/July it is winter there with hot dry days and chilly nights, a delightful combination.

I always catch up with current literature when I visit and after four years there was a fair amount to read. I read crime and spy thrillers to relax and, courtesy of my cousin, I was delighted to discover the novels by Deon Meyer, set amidst the granular realities of the police and intelligence services of the new SA. Translated from Afrikaans into English, they are bestsellers. At the end of one of them Meyer has a postscript expressing all that has been achieved in the new SA and his optimism about SA's future. Ironically, Meyer wrote this around the very time that "state capture" was setting in under President Jacob Zuma. An effect of this catastrophic behaviour means that discussions of SA becoming a failed state are now being taken seriously nationally and internationally.

Octavian Smigelschi, *Young Man Reading*



The Zondo Commission, set up to investigate state capture, defines it as,

a project by which a relatively small group of actors, together with their network of collaborators inside and outside the state, conspired systematically ... to redirect resources from the state to their own gain. This was facilitated by a deliberate effort to weaken or exploit state institutions and public enterprises, but also including law enforcement institutions and intelligence services.<sup>1</sup>

The Zondo report is utterly devastating but to get a sense of the horrific, unbelievable, granular texture of all that went down one needs to read books like those of investigative reporter Jacques Pauw. Pauw's *The President's Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and Out of Prison* exploded like a bomb when it was published in 2017. He has since followed it up with *Our Poisoned Land: Living in the Shadows of Zuma's Keepers* (2022).

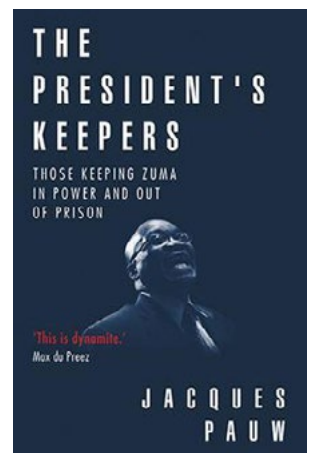
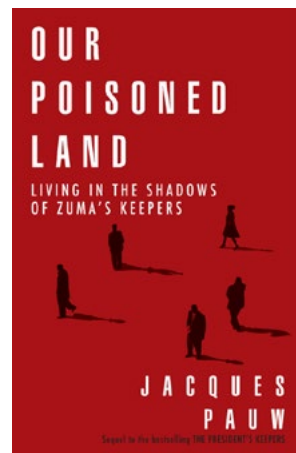
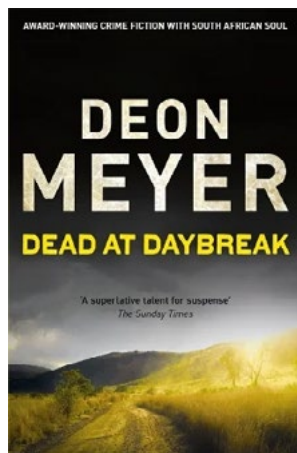
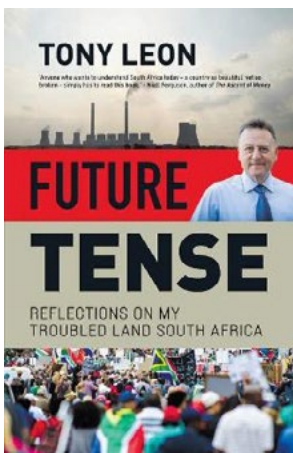
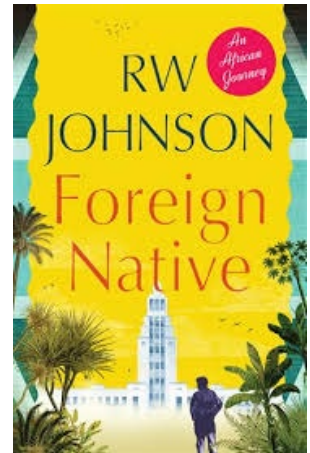
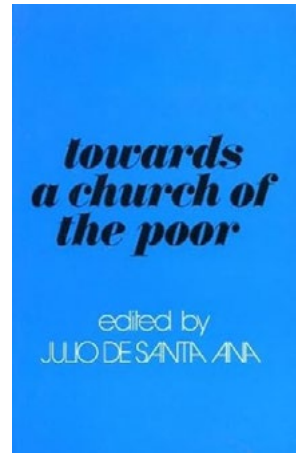
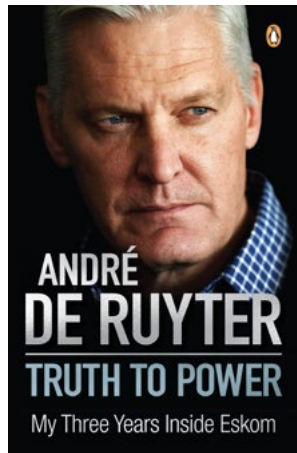
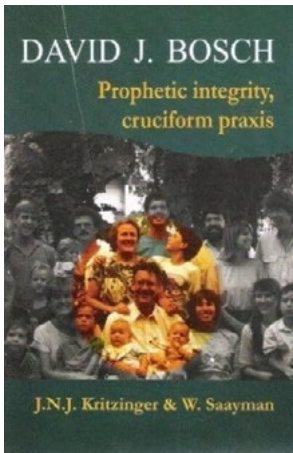
The old, pre-1994 SA was morally corrupt at its heart and this corruption bled into all areas of societal life. There was a strong commitment to law and order, but this was always racially tainted and overwhelmingly for the benefit of the

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Holden, 17-18; see <https://www.statecapture.org.za/site/information/reports> for the reports; see also Haffajee.

white community. Indeed, being back in SA reminded me just how horrific racism is. It ontologizes something like skin colour and this provides the rationale for writing off large swathes of the population as second rate by their very nature.

Sadly, corruption set in very early in the post-1994 SA, symbolised by the corrupt arms deal which has never been properly brought into the light (Feinstein 2009; 2012). With state capture corruption reached a whole new level in which virtually every area of public life was derailed and wantonly looted. The range of areas damaged is extraordinary, ranging from the National Treasury, SARS (Revenue Service), Transnet and PRASA (railways), South African Airways (SAA), Eskom (electricity), Denel (arms manufacturing), SABC, Alexkor (mining), Bosasa (including correctional service contracts), governance of the Free State, etc.

The immediate and long-term effects are worrying as many of the players in state capture remain in positions of influence as the ANC continues to fight out its identity with the result that there is little indication that government will deal decisively with the recommendations of the Zondo commission. My sense that something had shifted dawned on me when I landed at O. R. Tambo airport in Johannesburg and then at King Shaka International in Durban, exquisitely designed and one of my favourite airports. Nowhere to be



seen were any South African Airways (SAA) planes! The story of the demise of SAA, the corruption, incompetence and waste of vast sums of money, beggars belief (Leon 174–190; Holden 166–204). An attempt is being made to revive SAA, but we will see.

If the demise of SAA is one potent symbol of a gathering storm, then another is the inability of the government to provide the electricity the country needs. Long warned about this, power stations and utilities were nevertheless not maintained, the coffers looted, and the result is constant load shedding (= no electricity) in different stages. When I was in SA the book making the news was by the former CEO of Eskom, the electricity provider in SA, André de Ruyter, *Truth to Power: My Three Years Inside Eskom* (2023). While I was in SA we generally had 2 hours of load shedding per day. Shortly before I left, we were back to Stage 6 of generally 4 hours per day.

For a modern state to be viable it must provide basic public services and it is not hard to imagine what constant load shedding does to an economy and the life of citizens on a daily basis. Traffic lights not working is a reminder that this locality is undergoing load shedding and it was an experience watching Wimbledon only to have matches constantly interrupted by load shedding at crucial moments! South Africans have become creative in response: light bulbs are available with batteries in them that keep going for several hours when the electricity goes off and, especially in the Western Cape, there is a major move towards green energy. De Ruyter's book is, of course, *his* narrative, but it is harrowing reading with its descriptions of the state of power stations, cartels and corruption, incompetence, climaxing in his attempted assassination by someone putting cyanide in his morning coffee.

The fact that the Zondo Commission was so thorough is a reason for hope. However, much depends on the government's reaction to it. Individuals – and groups – both within and outside the ANC demonstrated remarkable courage in standing up against corruption, another sign of hope. South Africa has been blessed for years with outstanding investigative journalists and the fact that their work keeps getting published is another good sign. The Oxford historian R. W. Johnson returned to SA in 1994 to head up the Helen Suzman Foundation. He has written a series of important and provocative books about SA, seeking to tell the truth as he sees it. The autobiography of his SA life – he writes about his Oxford life in another book – was published in 2020: *Foreign Native: An African Journey*. It is fascinating reading and cheaply available in the UK.

The 2024 national elections in SA marks 30 years of ANC rule. This *needs* to be a watershed election. Unemployment

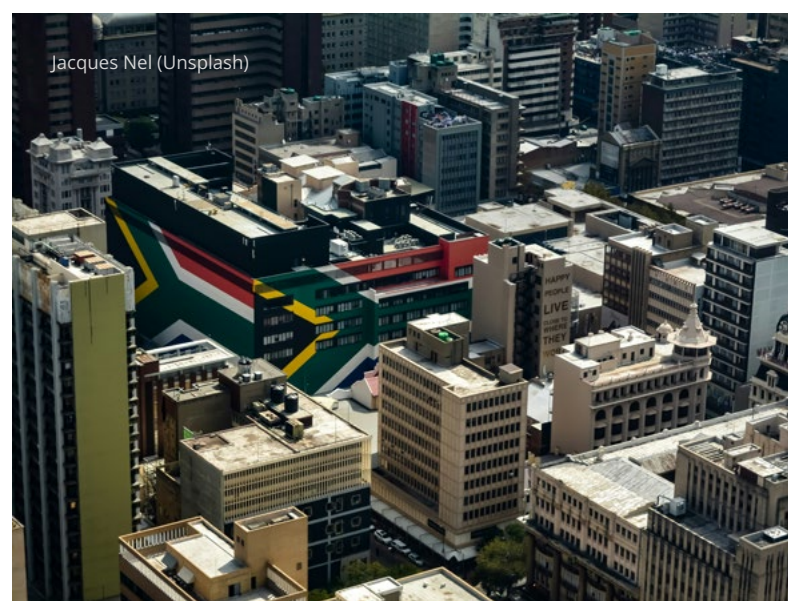
is catastrophically high in SA especially among young adults, crime is rampant, the economy is in bad shape and the gap between the wealthy and the vast numbers of poor far too large. The official opposition is the Democratic Alliance and one of many good aspects of Tony Leon's, *Future Tense*, is his exploration of the missteps of the DA in recent years, as well as its potential. Leon is the former leader of the DA.

[Brittanica says of a failed state](#) that,

A failed state is composed of feeble and flawed institutions. Often, the executive barely functions, while the legislature, judiciary, bureaucracy, and armed forces have lost their capacity and professional independence. A failed state suffers from crumbling infrastructures, faltering utility supplies and educational and health facilities, and deteriorating basic human-development indicators, such as infant mortality and literacy rates. Failed states create an environment of flourishing corruption and negative growth rates, where honest economic activity cannot flourish.

SA is not there yet but many of the signs are worrying and some of the above characteristics cut far too close to the bone. What none of the books I read discuss is the role of the church in SA. And yet, even in my short time back in SA, I came across stories of Christians doing amazing work and of organisations in civil society operating as salt and light. SA is part of the global community and can only flourish as such. We need to work to understand it – its history is complex, and to work with South Africans wherever possible to ensure a bright future for this beautiful country and its many inhabitants, not least the poor.

Indeed, as I returned to the UK, I found myself reaching again for Julio de Santa Anna's edited volume, *Towards a Church of the Poor*. In 2011 I visited Julio in Geneva. [Sadly, he](#)



[died this year](#). Many of us – including me – will have all sorts of questions about the liberation theological lens through which his book analyses the church and the poor. However, the issues it raises are vitally important and not least for SA today. I was given a remarkable book that I was unaware of by my good friend Wayne Barkhuizen, *David J. Bosch: Prophetic Integrity, Cruciform Praxis* (2011), which explores the great South African missiologist’s life and thought. Even as some churches still struggle to come to grips with their failures during the apartheid years, the current missional challenges in SA are immense, and we will need to draw on legacies such as that of Bosch. I suspect that if the churches rise to this challenge, then a literature comparable to the above will start to emerge from them.

It is easy to become fatalistic about South Africa’s demise. We should resist this temptation, and its sister, lethargy, not least because there is far too much at stake. Democracy is a gift to all South Africans and not just to Christians, of course. However, if Christians – and non-Christians – across the country take this landmark election seriously and get out and vote in an informed way it could change the country for decades to come, and bless the poor in unimaginable ways. In my companion piece “Old Testament Wisdom and Politics,” I develop a grid for working out how to vote. Here, I stress the importance of voting, and propose the following action:

- Pray
- Think about how to vote in an informed way
- Vote
- Pray
- And so on!

## Reading List

Asterisks indicate books I found most illuminating.

\*André de Ruyter, *Truth to Power: My Three Years Inside Eskom* (Penguin, 2023).

Julio de Santa Anna, ed., *Towards a Church of the Poor* (WCC, 1979).

Andrew Feinstein, *After the Party* (Verso, 2009).

--- \**The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade* (Jonathan Ball, 2011).

\*Paul Holden, *Zondo At Your Fingertips* (Jacana, 2023).

Ferial Haffajee, *Days of Zondo: The Fight for Freedom from Corruption* (No Place, 2022).

\*R. W. Johnson, *Foreign Native: An African Journey* (Jonathan Ball, 2020).

J. N. J. Kritzinger and W. Saayman, *David J. Bosch: Prophetic Integrity, Cruciform Praxis* (Cluster, 2011).

\*Tony Leon, *Future Tense: Reflections on My Troubled Land South Africa* (Jonathan Ball, 2021).

Deon Meyer, *Thirteen Hours, The Dark Flood*, etc.

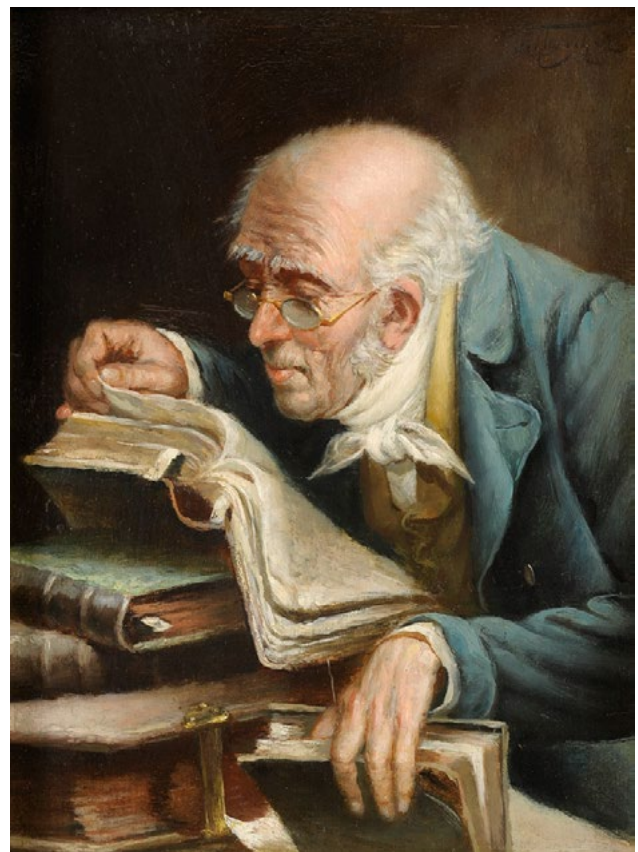
\*Jacques Pauw, *The President’s Keepers: Those Keeping Zuma in Power and Out of Prison* (Tafelberg, 2017).

--- *Our Poisoned Land: Living in the Shadows of Zuma’s Keepers* (Tafelberg, 2022).

Songezo Zibi, *Manifesto: A New Vision for South Africa* (Macmillan, 2022).

Helen Zille, *#Stay Woke, Go Broke: Why South Africa Won’t Survive America’s Culture Wars (and what you can do about it)* (Obsidian Worlds, 2021).

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Carl Schleicher, *The Bookworm*