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DEALING WITH THE PAST, BUILDING THE FUTURE TOGETHER

IN DEPTH

Public perception on reconciliation in South Africa

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It is almost unimaginable to make sense of present-day South Africa, without considering the formative role that the concept of 'reconciliation' has played in its shaping. Sometimes explicitly invoked and at others implicitly assumed, its presence continues to loom large in both public- and private debates about the how its society has evolved in the 24 years that followed its political transition in 1994.

In what remains a divided society, opinion in these debates continues to diverge. Yet, few would dispute that the country faces significant challenges. Some may even go as far as characterising the present juncture as a tipping point. Post-apartheid South Africa may display the outward traits of a vibrant political democracy, but its institutions are increasingly being weighed down by the pressures of unfulfilled expectations. Poverty continues to afflict the black majority disproportionately; its inequality levels – both in terms of income and access to critical services – count amongst the highest in the world; its education system is floundering; and high unemployment figures take on particularly devastating dimensions for young black people. For them and their parents, political freedom has not translated into economic liberation, and increasingly, the foundational tenets that underpinned the transition of the 1990's are being questioned. Counting amongst these is the notion of 'reconciliation' – or at least the way in which it has been conceived of during the transition years into the 2000s.

How did the reconciliation concept come to occupy such a central position in the country's political discourse? The short answer can be formulated as: pragmatism in

the absence of clear winners – while they no longer controlled the political playing field, white South Africans remained dominant in the economy. The somewhat longer version may also include reference to the difficulty that an unreconciled, divided society would have posed for finding consensus on strategies to undo the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. As a result, the country political elite – comprised of a new order, embodied primarily by the newly-elected African National Congress (ANC) government, and an old order, represented by the former National Party (NP) that governed apartheid South Africa since 1948 – had to reach agreement in the mid-nineties on how it would address the country's past, without compromising the stability of its future, against the backdrop of what at the time still had been a fragile peace.

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) became a pivotal institution during this transitional period. Tasked with the investigation of gross human rights violations that were committed with a political mandate between 1962 and 1994, the TRC prioritised reconciliation, but departed from an assumption that reconciliation could only materialise once families and friends of victims were provided with the truth about the fates of their loved ones. To overcome the obstacle that the destruction of evidence during the last days of apartheid might have had for obtaining such truth, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995 provided for the possibility of amnesty to perpetrators (whom in the opinion of TRC commissioners) provided full disclosure of their acts. The Commission commenced with its hearings in 1996, and by the time it concluded its work in 2002 with the release of its final report,, the TRC's processes and findings were challenged by several political parties, including the ANC and the NP in the course of if existence. Evidently, the TRC did not seek favour with a particular political force at the time.

Apart from a thinly staffed unit in the National Department of Justice, the work of the commission was terminated after the submission of the final report, without any significant measures put into place to follow up and act on the full scope of the Commission's recommendations pertaining to issues, such as the promotion of reconciliation, justice, and memorialisation. In 2000 after the commission completed its public hearings, a number of former TRC staffers set up the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) as a non-profit think tank to pursue these objectives outside of a government context. To ensure that it keeps a finger on the pulse of the South African nation, to understand how South Africans conceived of reconciliation outside of the TRC process, and to capture how this concept was evolving in its wake, the IJR launched the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB).

The SARB, is a national public opinion survey that measures citizen attitudes towards reconciliation, transformation and national unity among nationally representative sample of adult South Africans. As the first of its kind, and one of only a handful of social surveys dedicated to reconciliation globally, the Barometer has become an important catalyst for public debate, a knowledge and policy resource for decision-makers, and a database for academics concerned with the extent to which South Africans have managed to engage with the country's brutal past. It remains the gold standard for such measurement in South Africa, and has inspired and given rise to similar measurement instruments elsewhere in the world.

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The survey is conducted bi-annually (previously annually) through face-to-face interviews with adult South Africans in the language of the respondent's choice, and employs a multi-stage stratified random sample design based on a sampling frame obtained from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA). The final sample is weighted, using the

most recent population estimates from StatsSA in order to ensure that data is representative of the South African adult population. The survey makes use of a questionnaire comprising close-ended responses and measurement scales. The majority of questions are posed in the form of a five-point Likert scale. A few questions allow for "Other" as a response category, for which respondents can provide an alternative response to that provided.

Given the conceptual density of the concept "reconciliation", the project is fully aware of the difficulty and limitations involved in such a project. It does therefore not claim that this survey is able to capture the full nuanced meanings of the concept, but it does try to measure those aspects that are quantifiable. To avoid reductionism, the survey does not make use a single definition of reconciliation. It instead recognises the difference in emphasis that various scholars and observers employ in describing this phenomenon. It furthermore also accepts that such emphasis may vary depending on the unique contexts within which reconciliation takes place.

Since its inception the survey went through two iterations. From 2003-2013, it focussed on the measurement of six key variables (human security, political culture, cross-cutting political relations, race relations, historical confrontation and dialogue), and for each of these a series of indicators were developed. These variables represented a synthesis of the insights that the IJR obtained from a series of national focus group exercises in 2001, aimed at gauging the expectations that ordinary South Africans had of the concept 'reconciliation'. Conscious of the effect that time can have on the reliability of our survey, this process was repeated in 2011. Following this exercise, it became clear that a reformulation of some of the anchoring variables were required to give greater prominence to issues, such as socio-economic justice, as well as the more psychological and relational aspects of reconciliation. This process was concluded in 2015 with a reformulated set of variables pertaining to power relations, democratic political culture, apartheid legacy, racial reconciliation, progress in reconciliation, and perceptions of social change.

One does not have to look further South Africa's traditional- and social media outlets to realise that the country remains a divided society. Hardly any key issue in the country escapes from being interpreted through the lens of race, often giving rise to insult and

anger. Was this to be the only gauge by which to measure the state of social relations in South Africa, there would have clear grounds for despondence. Through its findings, the SARB's results confirm much of the distrust and tension witnessed by the casual observer. And yet, it also provides a picture that is far more nuanced, pointing to particular policy areas that can be leveraged for change and, importantly, a continued desire for national unity that supersedes the existing schisms that pervade society.

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This is where the great utility of instruments like the SARB lies. It is an independent, empirically sound, measurement instrument that looks beyond the headlines and ask a representative sample of South Africans direct and pertinent questions about the prospects for a more inclusive society, as well as the obstacles that stand in its way. It seeks to understand the attitudes that underpin the day-to-day expressions of intolerance and to highlight the potential levers for change. What makes it particularly useful is its longitudinal nature, which allowes policymakers and academics alike to track change over time and triangulate findings with particular events or periods that might have had an impact on how people view their own place in South African society, as well as their relations with others.

This has allowed us to discern a number of recurring themes, including:

1. Inequality as the primary source of social division: Amongst other things, the SARB requests respondents to indicate what they consider the most important social divisions in the country. In successive surveys since 2005, the most frequently cited primary source of social division mentioned is economic inequality, while race typically featured lower down the list. While this does not mean that class has 'replaced' race as

the primary obstacle to national reconciliation – the two still largely overlap – it nevertheless remains interesting to note, given the rapidly expanding nature of income inequality not only between groups, but also within groups.

2. Intergroup contact and socialisation: Given the remnants of South Africa's apartheid era geography and town planning, South Africans still primarily interact and socialise with people from their own historically-defined racial categories. Levels of contact are highest amongst those find themselves in the so-called formal economy and take place in 'legislated spaces', such as the work place, where measures such as affirmative action obliges employers to cultivate a more diverse and racially representative workforce and in retail spaces, which have been actively integrated since 1994.

3. Questions of Trust: In a deeply divided society, public institutions can potentially play an important role in unifying a society, through the competent and equitable execution of their respective mandates. South Africa has witnessed a precipitous decline in public confidence in key institutions, since the mid-2000s. Much of this may be explained by impediments to government service delivery, resulting from the global economic crisis, and hence declining tax revenues, during the latter half of the previous decade. Yet, equal blame should be apportioned to reckless squandering of resources, as seen with the proliferation of corruption under the administration of former President Jacob Zuma.

Findings such as the above highlight and serve as a unique tool to inform and shape public debate on societal issues, and helps to identify key areas for dialogue, discussion, lobbying, advocacy and change. The value of the SARB project to date, and in future, thus lies in the ability to empirically track change and nuance in the discourse around reconciliation and social cohesion. While societies are complex and their development is almost never linear, instruments such as the SARB allow the IJR to distil the development of trends, but also the actors and events that could cause disruption in the system. The presentation and responses to its findings, in turn, allows the IJR to contribute in the shaping of a more equitable and inclusive society.

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