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Review of Prisoners of the Past: South African Democracy and the Legacy of Minority Rule

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***Prisoners of the Past: South African Democracy and the Legacy of Minority Rule.* Steven Friedman. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 2021. 288 pp., paper ISBN 978-1-77614-685-7**

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Veteran political commentator and university professor Steven Friedman has written an interesting and highly readable analysis of contemporary South African political and economic life. His thesis is that South Africa's strengths and challenges emanate from the historic compromise that brought about the end of apartheid thirty years ago, the creation of a path to black majority rule in return for a guarantee that existing property relations favoring the white minority would not be changed. In Friedman's view the result of that compromise is a strong democratic political system undergirded by a progressive constitution and independent judiciary. In making that case Friedman rejects the argument that South Africa's shortcomings stem primarily from corrupt politicians who have squandered the country's opportunity for prosperity for all. Rather it is the other side of the bargain, the maintenance of the existing property ownership that is to blame for South Africa's continued racial and economic inequalities. In his analysis the author challenges the notion that nothing has changed since 1994 while agreeing that in many areas of South African life change has been minimal. To make his point for some change Friedman declares that compared to the constrained life faced under apartheid, South Africans are far freer today than before apartheid ended. To support this claim, he points to the strong growth in the black middle class rooted both in government jobs and in the business sector. He also notes that since the advent of democracy government services to those living in poverty have expanded significantly, especially in social grants and the treatment of HIV/AIDS. However, he acknowledges that many patterns from apartheid remain firmly in place. Poverty and inequality persist based on an economy that is marked by "insiders" with access to formal jobs and "outsiders" who do not have access to such jobs and must survive on social grants and casual work.

The author is clear that the democratic rights extended to all in 1994 was real and important change but the primary focus of the book, embodied in its title, is that too much has remained the same. The concept that he uses throughout the book to underscore South Africa's links to the past is "path dependence," a concept drawn from North American economist Douglass North. He acknowledges its curious use since North used it primarily in an ethnocentric way to justify the superiority of Western economic systems, but Friedman believes it provides a good framework for understanding South Africa's resistance to change. The most important clinging to the past was the idea put forward at the beginning of the democratic era was that the goal of the new society was to make the prosperity of whites under apartheid available to all. In other words, to make a society that worked well for four million whites work for a society of more than fifty million without any sacrifice of economic power from the white population. Friedman rightly points out that such an approach was bound to fail. At best it could bring a limited number of non-whites

into the inner circle of well-paying government and private sector jobs, but for the vast majority there would be little change. He offers some recent statistics to support this claim including the number of blacks in leading professional fields like engineering, accounting, and law at under 25%. He notes that these figures dispel a popular myth in South Africa that affirmative action has shifted control of key professions away from whites.

One of the best chapters of the book takes on the question of corruption in contemporary South African politics. He begins with the observation that in the journalistic coverage of the African continent there is a widespread perception that corruption begins in the post-independence period with black political leaders and in the South African case focuses on the concept of state capture and the Jacob Zuma presidency. To refute this common narrative the author documents the corruption (illegal use of government resources for private gain) back to the beginnings of colonization of the continent including in the South African case the personal enrichment of Jan van Riebeeck and Cecil Rhodes. He explains it in the terms of the colonizer mindset that the conquered country “belongs to its colonizers so they can use its resources for any purpose they choose”. More recently, he points to the final years of the apartheid government where, according to numerous researchers, corruption had become endemic. In some instances, officials enriched themselves in deals with international companies involved in power generation. Corruption peaked in the late 1980s when the end of the system was in sight, and many sought to enrich themselves while they could still do so. Citing a study by Hennie van Vuuren the author details how key international actors in apartheid-era corruption continued their operations with the ANC government, especially in the field of arm sales.

Friedman offers some insights into how corruption found its way into the ANC from 1990 onward. Most ANC leaders coming into power brought few resources with them, especially those coming from exile. As a result, many of them were vulnerable to support from wealthy businessmen who had prospered under apartheid through favorable government treatment and wanted continued success post-1994. Friedman argues that not all ANC leaders succumbed to these temptations, but many did including Jacob Zuma and his inner circle. Also documented is how the scramble for decently compensated government positions becomes a major point of contention within the ruling party and does not always lead to good governance. The scramble for government work becomes paramount in his analysis access to the best jobs in the private sector is generally not available to black South Africans. This chapter is summed up in his view that the Zuma administration did great damage to South Africa, but it did not disrupt an economy that was working for all when he took office in 2009. Rather the corruption was symptomatic that the economy worked for far too few.

Because Friedman’s analysis of South African society’s deeply problems is so convincing, providing ideas for a path forward is not an easy one. Crucial to his view of a path forward is a recognition that the bargain made thirty years ago is not working for the poor majority, a fact that was underscored by widespread rioting and looting in 2021. If key stakeholders in the elites collectively arrive at the view that a new bargain must be negotiated, it must be with poor majority having a seat at the table. Friedman does not provide any details on what that new bargain might entail but the logic of his book is that government policies must become more redistributive in nature.