

## **WE HAVE MOVED FROM THE CROSSROADS TO A CRITICAL JUNCTURE**

Daily Maverick Opinion Article  
23 June 2022

South African author Adrian Leftwich argued that “politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies.” That said, there is no single definition of the term politics. We all should however see when politics is happening.

An important debate continues, and it should. Former head of policy and government communications in the Thabo Mbeki presidency Joel Netshitenzhe added his [voice](#), arguing that we are in a strategic moment, and we need a social compact. It might very well be that we are in a critical moment instead of a strategic moment. We are in a crunch time. In medical terms, South Africa as a patient is critical but probably still stable (for now).

The post-apartheid administrations have undertaken many initiatives towards the social pact. None of the efforts have yielded desired results. It is probably still correct to argue for a social compact. The question could be what kind of a social compact. It is also important to probe whether the National Development Plan was [is] not the social pact South Africa needed. The answer is probably yes.

The critical moment we find ourselves in calls for a much deeper reflection. The area that needs more attention is the economy and wellbeing, arguably. Politics is what it is. Otto von Bismarck is reported to have said “politics is not a science but an art.”

The ongoing developments should not surprise us because it is to be expected that in a significant political period of decisive political events there would be campaigns and counter-campaigns. This does not mean that serious allegations that are made in relation to political actors should be taken lightly.

I align myself with those who argue that relevant authorities, including law enforcement agencies and the judiciary, must be seized with the necessary legal processes. The rest of us should focus on what must be done to deal with socio-economic challenges facing our society. Indeed,

politics could be one of the reasons why we find ourselves in what appears to be a downhill spiral.

The economy is struggling to recover. Social ills, including crime and lawlessness, are accelerating. Wellbeing is in decline. There appears to be a close relationship – not a correlation – between the state of our economy, the levels of human development and social ills. We have seen crime getting out of hand as the economy declines and as wellbeing deteriorates. South Africa has not been serious enough in advancing wellbeing, particularly in the past 12 years or so.

Human development, as measured by the human development index, has effectively been standing still since 2013. Of late, even without latest data at our disposal, we can see that wellbeing is deteriorating. In fact, the rate of unemployment would support this hypothesis or observation. The standard of living is declining as demonstrated by weakening per capita incomes. How are people making a living?

The South African economy has remained fragile since the dawn of democracy. Although there was growth and some jobs in the most part of the Mbeki era, the economy has always performed below its potential. It has been difficult to pursue the necessary restructuring of the economy. Government has often tried alone. The private sector and organized labour standing by folding arms while opposition parties stood on sidelines.

There has not been a shortage of efforts from the side of the government in trying to forge partnerships with the private sector. Organized labour on the other hand has narrowly focused on the interests of those who are employed. That said, government has not been able to provide necessary leadership and direction needed to ensure that all partners contribute to the socio-economic wellbeing of the majority of South Africans.

Crime has become so rampant such that no one feels safe. How did we get here? There are other societies with economic challenges that are similar to ours but people can still live in relative peace. It has become difficult to attribute high crime rates to poverty and inequality in South Africa. Undoubtedly, poverty and inequality contribute to crime. However, we have to ask a question if the robberies and hijackings we are experiencing are linked to poverty and inequality.

It would seem that we are on an uncontrollable downhill. The economy is going to take a while to improve. The police and the army cannot be everywhere to contain crimes. Politics will always be politics. Something

has got to give. James Carville was probably correct that “it is the economy, stupid!”

There is one important area that we can readily address: we can make more effort in improving wellbeing. Granted, this would take a long period of time. It is possible that some interventions can have immediate results. There are enough proposals on the table regarding what we must do in relation to policies, implementation, small and medium enterprises, informal sector, the labour market and so on and so forth.

In the meantime, we are forced to do whatever is feasible within the prescripts of the law to protect ourselves and our loved ones.