

# South Africa: A nation sitting on a keg of gun powder

By [Prince Charles](#)

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French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, describing the process of de-individuation in his 1895 book titled *The Crowd: A study of the Popular Mind* argues that "the masses have never thirsted after truth; they turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim. An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will".



Prince Charles, youth activist, Activate! Change Drivers

This characterisation is befitting of the situation currently playing itself out in South Africa where political elites, in their battle for power, resort to inflaming and using the impoverished majority (and their material conditions) as proxies; and conveniently disappearing afterwards, leaving the poor bearing the brunt of law enforcement while they (the elites) watch from their ivory towers of privilege.

## Political demagogues fanning the flames

What began as a legal tussle between Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo and former President Jacob Zuma has morphed into a raging furnace with a life of its own, with political demagogues effectively fanning the flames. Wide-scale protests, which began under the guise of #FreeJacobZuma quickly escalated into destruction of property and looting in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, leaving more than 70 people dead so far. The situation has left President Cyril Ramaphosa with no other choice but to deploy the armed forces in order to quell the raging public violence.

The aftermath of this chapter will certainly leave South Africa and its institutions weaker, including the Constitutional Court, which was once inundated with landmark cases where it became an arbiter of how the Bill of Rights should be interpreted. Cases like *S v Makwanyane* and another where the court ruled that the death penalty was inconsistent with the Constitution and the right to life; the case of *Bhe and others v Magistrate, Khayelitsha and others* where the court ruled that male primogeniture was inconsistent with the right to equality and female children could inherit from their fathers' estates; *S v Grootboom* on the right to housing. Gone are those days where the apex court was preoccupied with complex social justice questions, questions which directly made freedom a tangible ideal to many vulnerable communities, some of whom would

never afford to step into such a court. The court has now become entangled in protracted political cases between the elites which threaten to erode its legitimacy.



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## Exiles residing on the periphery

Beyond the political spectacle that is unfolding, it is clear that there are people within our midst who feel that they are no longer part of the dynamic we call South African society; they are exiles residing on its periphery - firstly displaced by apartheid into permanent exclusion, but today inequality, poverty and the widening social distance have become the invisible barriers ensuring they remain there. It is on these peripheries that elites and populists will forever manipulate and recruit, hence it is crucial that young people become the necessary agitators for meaningful socioeconomic change in this lifetime.

Keeping people in poverty is expensive, as we have seen spectacularly these past few days. The thin balance holding this country from exploding must not rest solely on a pendulum controlled by the political elite who at times exhibit a predisposition to expediency. Young people must, therefore, wrestle the balance of power away from the elites; this they must do by mobilising around what the Constitution says; it is the rule of law that can ensure a stable blueprint upon which a just and equitable society can be built. We can no longer rely on messianic thinking where we expect a great leader to emerge and save us from the rapids - crisis has become the norm and we are now our own saviours.



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## Evading accountability

Political elites will spend half-a billion rand on elective conferences but will not lift a finger to fight youth unemployment; they will burn the country to the ground to evade accountability but will never lift a boot to fight for youth access to free education. This is because they are subscribers to the iron law of institutions which states that those who control institutions care first and foremost about their power within the institutions than the power of the institution itself. They would rather see the entire nation fail if they are not guaranteed power within it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Prince Charles is a humanist, post-religious youth activist and a sociology and politics graduate from the Nelson Mandela University in Gqeberha. He is also a member of the Activate! Change Drivers network, a network of over 4,200 young people driving change for the public good.

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