


Adapting prophetic sociopolitical witness to coalition governments in South Africa

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There has been an outcry over the lack of effectiveness of the Church's prophetic sociopolitical witness in recent years in South Africa. This practical theological article uses Heitink's empirical-hermeneutic-strategic approach and participatory action research to examine this premise. I discuss some of the reasons for this failure that my hermeneutical research has highlighted. Then I suggest a new action theory that would make this witness more effective in the light of the current new complex political dispensation (represented by a coalition called the Government of National Unity) and possible future coalition governments. The action theory then suggests that there has to be a new alignment between the South African Council of Churches (SACC), denominations and church networks and a mobilisation of local congregations, and the resources provided by lay experts in local congregations. This new alignment and mobilisation may make it more politically expedient and compelling for the government to take notice of the Church's criticism and ideas.

Contribution: This article proposes the means by which the SACC, and denominational and church networks and congregations may engage effectively in prophetic sociopolitical witness with the presumed new future political complexity of coalition governments.

Keywords: prophetic sociopolitical witness; National Democratic Revolution; neo-patronage; coalition governments; local congregations.

Introduction

The 2024 National Elections in South Africa created a new political dispensation. The ANC (African National Congress) entered into a coalition government with the largest opposition party the DA (the Democratic Alliance), and with some other much smaller parties to form a Government of National Unity (GNU). This has introduced a new level of complexity as regards the Church's present and future prophetic sociopolitical witness towards South African governments. The author uses an analysis of the success or failure of past engagements with previous governmental administration, to determine how the Church's prophetic sociopolitical witness may now need to operate in order to exert an influence on the GNU and any future coalitions.

Research methods and design

In this article, I adopt Heitink's (1999) practical theological approach to the problem of how the Church's prophetic sociopolitical witness may influence the government in the new political dispensation. This approach advocates conducting practical theological research 'from three different angles' – empirical (what is going on), hermeneutical (why is it going on) and strategic (how it might be changed).

Heitink was a Professor of Practical Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam until 2008, where he is now an Honorary Professor. In his book 'Practical Theology', one of the issues he advocates is Practical Theology entering the public domain and contributing to the public cause by investigating the area of tension between the Church and politics (Heitink 1999:298, 299) as a vehicle of renewal in culture, state and society (Heitink 1999:298–301). He places particular emphasis on this ameliorating the poor, quoting Ter Schegget (1971):

The Christian community does not get involved in party politics but does take a political stand in favour of the poor, the oppressed the discarded ... and the church cannot remain politically neutral. (p. 29)

Heitink's practical theological approach is an ideal Practical Theology model by which to assess the tension filled relationship between the South African church and the socialist oriented ANC. The reason for this is that it is based on the pastoral cycle, the roots of which lie in Cardin's 'see-judge-act'

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methodology (Ward 2017:78, 79) (as also the approaches of Browning, Van Der Ven and Osmer [Ward 2017:74, 91]). Cardin was a Roman Catholic priest who, in the 1920s, began unionising workers to form 'The Young Trade Unionists' (Jeunesse Syndicaliste), which became an international network called 'The Young Christian Workers' in 1924 (Jeunes Ouvrières Chrétiennes). Cardin developed the 'see-judge-act' method to aid young workers to effectively attend to a broad range of social justice causes (Sands 2018:3). Not surprisingly, this method has a socialist orientation and was later employed in liberation theology, which according to Ward (2017:90) 'was heavily influenced by Marxism'. Interestingly enough, it also had an instrumental influence in the development of the 1985 Kairos Document (Sands 2018:1).

Heitink's approach is a praxis based theology clearly defining Practical Theology as the mediation of the Christian faith in society. The current situation is called praxis 1. Its formal object is to relate theological insights to empirical facts in a methodological and systematic manner to design a new action theory. This, when implemented, is called praxis 2. It borrows the methods of other sciences (usually the action sciences, such as sociology and economics) integrating them into a theological hermeneutical-empirical approach (Heitink 1999:7, 220 ff.). Furthermore, it advocates a constant reassessment of existing action theories and their implemented praxes to continually develop new modified action theories in the light of continually changing societal situations (Heitink 1999:9).

He provides a theory for the satisfactory hermeneutical interpretation of empirical data using Habermas' theory of communicative action in conjunction with Ricoeur's (1991:144–145) theory of action, that stresses the similarities between the interpretation of social reality and the interpretation of texts. This provides the basis whereby Habermas' lifeworld may be analysed and criticised using a practical theological hermeneutic (Thiselton 1992:387).

This research used documentary sources, mostly secondary; but a few were original. It is also participatory and perhaps even at times somewhat autoethnographic, in that I am now an emeritus minister of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in South Africa (UPCSA) and am able to use experience gained from having pastored six congregations in South Africa since 1976. This included working at all levels of church government across cultural divides and pastoring one almost wholly black immigrant congregation, and even now I am still unofficially interacting with disadvantaged communities in the gang-ridden Cape Flats. At the same time, I had the privilege of being the CEO (an executive position) of two church-supported welfare organisations (one with a budget of over 1 million rand per year) for 7 years. This involved interacting with people and communities ranging from the poorest of the poor to municipal mayors. At this time, I also coauthored a paper on the subject which was published in 2013 investigating ways by which the Church may strive to diminish the corrupt practices prevalent in South Africa hindering service delivery. Especially in the last 25 years, these interactions have revealed

to me the trauma that ordinary, (mostly) decent South African citizens are facing, who simply want to earn an honest living and provide for their families.

I have become dismayed at what I have judged to be the seeming irrelevance of church reports concerning social, economic and governance issues at both Presbytery and General Assembly. They have mostly failed to address what I consider to be the real issues. I also wondered why the SACC has seemingly allowed their engagement with the government to be ignored. This has led me to believe that 'something must be done' in the words of Zeffass (1974:167), a famous Practical Theologian.

The empirical perspective

In this empirical section, I present my interpretation of what is prophetic sociopolitical witness and then its effectiveness as utilised by the ecumenical church (represented largely by the SACC) since 1994. I commence by considering the differences and similarities between prophetic sociopolitical witness and Public Theology.

Why do I choose the term prophetic sociopolitical witness?

Nanthambwe (2024:7) believes that 'the church should embrace Public Theology as a practical ministry to address the challenges faced by people in South Africa'. His reason for this is that it extends the scope of theology so that it engages openly with secular society in the community which often focusses inwardly. In my opinion, this is a profitable approach for the Church to adopt in more secular societies, such as in what Weyel et al. (eds. 2022:6) call the 'more secularized Europe', or in those countries which are dominated by other religious traditions than Christianity. Also, if one believed that the ANC is not greatly influenced in any way by Christianity, or gives no heed to the Christian values of the great majority of the South African population, or believes that Christian values may hinder civic cooperation, then using this definition of Public Theology may be the best approach.

However, I believe that it is an unnecessary and unhelpful approach in South Africa where 79.8% of its population profess to be Christians (Statistics SA 2021). This indicates that most of the electorate honour many Judeo-Christian values, be it either in the observance or in the breach. They should also give any democratically elected government pause for reflection upon the advice given by the Church, who represent a large proportion of that electorate. I am also worried that the distinctiveness of the Church's witness might be lost in the 'Public Theology' label, which sometimes is given a very ambivalent meaning. Marty (1974:332), who first used the term 'Public Theology', defined it as, 'the distilling of a nations, religious experience, practice, and behavior in the light of some sort of transcendent reference'. A more appropriate definition for South African use would be that given by Markham (2020), who defines it as:

Public theology is the explication of, witness to, and agency toward the vision that God intends for social life within the parameters of the Christian tradition. (p. 180)

Yet, I have two problems even with this definition. Firstly, if this is the definition an author is using, it needs to be clearly spelt out, because of the ambiguity in how it has been used in the past. Secondly, it makes no mention of God using prophetic witness through the Church. So, I prefer the term prophetic sociopolitical witness.

My definition of sociopolitical witness

Prophetic sociopolitical witness is prophetic because it claims to originate from the Spirit-inspired appropriate application of the Judeo-Christian scriptures to today's context, enabling the Church to make a relevant and significant contribution to the discourse on South Africa's future (Dreyer 2019:11).

It is sociopolitical because it pertains 'to social comment and socio-economic and political critique of a society and its body politic' (Nell 2009:565). It thus focuses upon structural issues and injustices from the perspective of the latest informed social analysis searching for 'the signs of the times' (Fortein 2019:8). In my opinion, this is the second most important aspect of prophetic sociopolitical witness. I am in agreement with Acemoglu and Robinson¹ (2012:38, 64) who, reflecting upon the last 4000 years of political history, have come to the conclusion that politics is the main determinant of whether a country becomes poor or wealthy. This is because politicians choose the rules that govern a country's economy and ultimately its prosperity. While the local church has the crucial role of building social capital by ameliorating social conditions in their local communities, it will accomplish little in the grand scheme of things unless it persuades government at the municipal and national levels to deal with corruption, crime and unemployment.

Yet, sociopolitical witness must begin as a witness stemming from the Church's life as a light and a lamp on a hill to the surrounding community (Mt 5:14–16). Local congregations have a responsibility to proclaim and work for justice in their local community (Nel 2015:368), where it is the preeminent, concrete, visible expression of God's love (Nel 2015:369). Such witness gives the Church credibility within the community and on the larger stage. It is even more effective in Africa because most people identify themselves by the local congregation which they attend for worship (Fergusson 2004:157) and especially so in South Africa where they often span ethnic, cultural and socio-economic divides (Eigelaar-Meets, Gomulia & Geldenhuys 2010:54).

In fact Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:14–16 should be seen as a promise to Christ's followers that if they act as salt and light, they will beneficially influence society. Salt's power is because of its intrinsic difference from the medium into which it is put, and light only lights up darkness when it is visible (Tasker 1961:63–64). Thus, acting as salt and light necessarily means opposing corruption as they interpenetrate society as 'a kind of moral

antiseptic' (Tasker 1961:63–64). This is not an option but what Jesus expects of all who have faith in him (Tasker 1961:63–64).

It is enacted within 'the ultimate horizon of God's Kingdom' (Meeks 1979:67). Thus, the extension of the Kingdom, not the Church, must be the primary starting point for prophetic sociopolitical research. As Wright and Bird (2024) comment:

The Church's answer to the global crises of our day is, in sum, the kingdom of God. The Church's message and mission rest on the notion that God is King, God has appointed Jesus as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and the Church's vocation is to build for the kingdom! (p. 14)

God has chosen to extend his kingdom by inviting his church to share in the *missio Dei* and the Spirit's life-giving power, by means of its witness, proclamation and its life-giving contributions in this world. This has historically (and still does) necessitated its involvement in politics concerning poverty, justice and human flourishing in every respect (economically, a competent and fair criminal justice system; artistically, ecological etc., so that each realises his or her full unique God-given potential).

Thus the missional Church, as an agent of the kingdom of God, within the *missio Dei*, is tasked with keeping governments accountable, when possible, to the teachings and precepts of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. This applies to individual congregations as well as broader church institutions, as Fergusson comments (2004):

Each Christian congregation carries an obligation to promote the *bonum commune* ... it seeks to influence ... the framing of laws, the constitutional arrangement of its society, the institution of marriage, and the provision of education, health care and social welfare. (p. 150)

It is vital for prophetic sociopolitical witness to emphasise hope. This is because, as Fourie (2022) comments:

Behavioural scientists have identified that we have a 'negativity bias', that negative things have a greater impact on our psychological state than positive things, even if the two are of equal proportion. (p. 2)

Not only that, but to be faithful to the scriptures because the Old Testament prophets were not only voices of judgement, but also voices of hope (Brueggemann 2019:ix). Such transforming hope takes birth within the human heart when God's righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ is received by faith into human hearts (Barth 1956:101). This new hope then engenders hope not only in Christians, but to all within their sphere of influence, so that it initiates hope-filled societal action.

Why is the Church's intervention with the government necessary?

Prophetic sociopolitical witness is not only a God-given mandate at all times, but particularly a vital necessity in South Africa because of the unsatisfactory performance of the ANC government in the last 15 years. This has seen the invasive growth of corruption into almost every area of society, the growth of criminal cartels, failure of service

1. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson were awarded The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel 2024.

delivery, serious crime, drug use (especially in the Cape Flats townships) and unacceptable levels of unemployment especially among young adults. Corruption alone, as Dreyer (2019) observes, has resulted in:

[E]conomic deprivation for millions of South Africans, mainly by corruption on a massive scale. Taxpayers' money, which should have benefited the poor, flowed in streams to individuals and companies in their unbridled quest for private wealth. (p. 11)

Corruption is not new in South Africa. It became endemic under the rule of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Welsh 2000:90). It was massively exacerbated by the greed and corruption which accompanied the diamond and gold field rushes in the 19th century. This was not improved by 'the notorious corruption of the Nationalist government' (Welsh 2000:522). However, it seems that the ANC has taken it to a new level so that it has seriously damaged the economy.

A recent World Bank report, issued in 2025, asserts that over the past decade, South Africa has grown at only 0.7% per year, which is four times slower than other middle-income countries. Real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is at the same level it was in 2007. This report continues by stating that economic opportunities remain deeply unequal, with two-thirds of South Africans living in poverty and 40% of adults, mainly young people and women, either unemployed or discouraged from looking for a job (Engelbrecht & Van Leggelo-Padilla 2025:n.p.).

One reason for the tragic performance of the economy is the unchecked corruption which has progressively afflicted the ANC. Ever since the Arms Deal scandal erupted in 1999, with accusations of serious, costly corruption, the ANC has been haunted by continual increasingly serious accusations (Storey 2012:17). Even the ANC leadership itself acknowledged corruption in their ranks as far back as the Mbeki era (Hollands 2007:frontispiece page). It was most dramatically exposed by the Zondo Commissions report on 'State Capture', as summarised in the 2024 State of the Nation Address (SONA) briefing. The Commission recommended that many specific ANC-connected persons should be criminally investigated, which unfortunately has yet to happen.

The seriousness of the situation is exacerbated by the fact that much was promised but little has been accomplished (Bentley 2013:91). This has led to a loss of hope and diminished the sense of well-being among the general populace. As Vorster (2023:2), among others, comments, the hope of 1994 has mostly dwindled in South Africa. South Africans are now ranked, on the recent happiness report, well below some (other) countries where highly unstable politics and economic instabilities reign (Vorster 2023; World Happiness Report 2023).

The notion of tangible hope has consequently faltered after nearly three decades of ANC rule (Vorster 2023). In a Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) voter survey poll,

conducted after the South African 2021 municipal elections, the results were interpreted as indicating that a large majority of the adult populace felt that their lives have worsened in the last 5 years and there had been a loss of faith in the current political dispensation (Struwig et al. 2022:37–39, 67, 236). This might be a dangerous trend because, as two of the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics winners comment, 'once democracy fails to live up to expectations, it ceases to become such an attractive prospect' (Acemoglu & Johnson 2023:95).

In the next section, I examine why the Church has failed to effectively be engaged with the ANC government to ameliorate its corruption and disastrous policies.

The hermeneutical perspective

The SACC has sought to engage with the government since 1994 by means of open letters and personal meetings of the SACC's President and General Secretary and delegations with government personnel, and/or cabinet ministers and/or the President. Despite their best efforts, many articles, over the last 15–20 years, have expressed concern about the seeming failure of this advocacy since the end of apartheid in 1994. I refer to authors such as Pillay (2017:1), Kgatle (2018), Baron and Maponya (2020) and Mkhize (2024:1). While this is a valid concern, the author suggests that this failure is not entirely or even mostly the Church's fault.

In the first pre-1994 era, most of this witness was focused mainly on a single issue, being the evils and consequences of apartheid and removing the National Party government from power. This ultimately successful witness was assisted by much funding and support from outside South Africa (Pillay 2017:1, 2). The second era lasted from 1994 to 2009, during the Mandela and Mbeki presidencies. In this era, the ruling ANC government was willing to engage with the Church, although the organisation was mainly interested in using the Church to further its own policies (Pillay 2017:2, 3). The third era encompasses the Zuma Presidency (2009–2019). In this era, the government disregarded the SACC and solely engaged with some independent church networks such as that of Rhema and some African Initiated Churches (AIC) who supported its actions and policies (Pillay 2017:3, 4). Amazingly, even Bishop Tutu, a respected struggle stalwart, was disregarded (Khuzwayo 2012:124).

In the fourth era, which began with the Ramaphosa presidency in 2019, there seemed to be a new openness at the part of the government to engage with and listen to church organisations. For instance, the President met with the World Council of Churches (WCC) General Secretary, the General Secretary of the SACC and discussed (WCC 2023):

[L]oad shedding, unemployment, inequalities, crime, corruption, and slow response to the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption, and Fraud in the Public Sector. (n.p.)

Yet, this ostensible new openness unfortunately did not seem to result in many changes concerning ANC ideology, policy

and actions to curb corruption and crime, and decrease unemployment. I will consider the fifth era, which was entered into in 2024, which I call the coalition era, in the strategic section of this study.

To conclude this section, the reasons for this failure for the seeming lack of the Church to effectively engage with the government in prophetic sociopolitical witness may be laid at the door of both government and the Church (as primarily represented by the SACC). Yet, perhaps as I attempt to show next, the government's responsibility has been the greater.

The government's contribution to the failure of prophetic sociopolitical witness

The first reason why the government resisted criticism may have been because of the initial growth of the economy, during the Mandela and Mbeki presidencies. This, not surprisingly, may have persuaded them and many in the country, that their ideology was the correct one for South Africa, so why change it?

Yet, there is much evidence that a political ideology called the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) could have been the main reason for this obduracy. The NDR was originally conceived of as a three-stage process by Joe Slovo, in 1987, beginning with a national democratic stage, progressing through a socialist democratic stage and ending with a communist state (Wieder 2013: 292). It would appear that the ANC government was being driven to implement this socialist ideology of the NDR under the influence of the SACP (South African Communist Party) and COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) (Filatova 2012:29, 30). As Kornelius (2013:213), in his biography on Angela Merkel, comments concerning political agendas, 'Long-term aims ... sometimes make it difficult to take the next political step'. Thus, it may be arguably proposed that the ANC did not want this long-term agenda to be sidetracked through engagement with the Church.

Dagger and Ball (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025:n.p.) describe socialism's commendable aim as the reduction of inequality through the redistribution of wealth. It seeks to achieve this by implementing social and economic doctrine that calls for public rather than private ownership, and control of property and natural resources in the hands of the government. It is predicated upon the idea that the government is the most effective agent to achieve this aim. Although a laudable theory, it certainly has not achieved this purpose in South Africa with its sluggish economy which has mainly achieved the enrichment of just a few 'Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) millionaires'.

Despite this apparent failure, the NDR is now seemingly being reemphasised as the professed ANC ideology under the Ramaphosa presidency. It would appear from their 5-year planning documents that the ANC has now made the decision to enter stage 2. The ANC's General Secretary opened the 2017 54th National Conference report by stating that (ANC 2017):

The 53rd National Conference (in 2012) characterized our current phase as the second phase of the transition of the National Democratic Revolution towards the National Democratic Society. This phase should be characterized by radical socio-economic transformation ... [which] has always been an integral and critical component of advancing the National Democratic Revolution. (pp. 1.4, 1.6)

In the 2022 National Conference report (ANC 2022), it is mentioned 14 times.

The implementation of the NDR has had three instruments. The first is through winning a political majority at the ballot box so that legislation could be passed through parliament without being successfully opposed. The second is through cadre deployment. Cadre deployment has been defined in two ways. Swanepoel (2021) defines cadre deployment as:

The appointment by government, at the behest of the governing party, of a party-political loyalist to an institution or body, independent or otherwise, as a means of circumventing public reporting lines and bringing that institution under the control of the party ... (p. 449)

The third instrument was Neo-patrimonialism. This is defined by Beresford (2015:227, 228) as a politico-economic system in which there is a blurring, or complete breakdown, of the distinction between public and private authority. It may be defined as authority being exercised through informal patron-client networks rooted in social institutions and loyalties as opposed to being based upon meritocratic impersonal decisions especially concerning State and municipal appointments and procurement. It is universally practised worldwide and is not always associated with corruption to the degree that is has in South Africa. In the ANC, powerful patrons are called 'gatekeepers'. It is a means by which political leaders 'in positions of authority within the ruling party or in public office control access to resources and opportunities in order to forward their own political and economic ends' (Beresford 2015:228). This means that the ANC has successfully turned political power into economic power in order to get further political power (Beresford 2015:235).

The Church's contribution

The Church must also take some responsibility for this failure, even in the pre-2009 period for several reasons. One factor that was outside of their control was that after 1994, the SACC lost financial support from donors and was forced to lay off staff and shut down programmes (Pillay 2017:2). Perhaps also, excusably and understandably, the SACC had not developed a plan to deal with the new and emerging moral, social context. Many church leaders also felt uncomfortable about criticising fellow struggle compatriots faced with the difficult task of governing South Africa (Storey 2012:13–16). In addition, as Rhoda Kadalie (quoted in Lloyd 2018:138–139) pertinently observed, 'many blacks ... felt it disloyal to speak out ... [because] they had so deeply internalized the notion of victimhood that they could not criticize their own' and that many other South Africans felt so guilty about the past or were 'too busy ingratiating themselves with the new government'.

Pillay's (2017:2) research indicates that the second factor for this failure, was that the SACC became disconnected from the 'aspirations of the poor and grassroots communities. Indeed, Baron and Maponya (2020:1, 2) are of the opinion that the average church member seems to have lost the vision that they, as the local congregation, are sent by God to be a prophetic witness to the government. This is not surprising because of the top-down approach of the SACC and probably of most prophetic socio-economic witnessing in most denominations. This was certainly the case in the UPCSA, where congregations were more or less told what they ought to be concerned about by its now named, Church in Society Committee.

The hermeneutical analysis seems to indicate that there were, and still are, three major stumbling blocks which have prevented the SACC from influencing the ANC government. These are, firstly, the government's ideological commitment to implementing the NDR through cadre deployment; secondly, the government's failure to tackle corruption because of its need to ensure the funding needed to maintain its neo-patrimonialist networks; then thirdly, the failure of the SACC and prophetic sociopolitical denominational committees to raise sufficient support from local congregations by not including them in the process or adequately representing their concerns.

The strategic perspective

The new flexible action theory

This new action theory proposes firstly that for the Church to even stand a chance of influencing the government in the new fifth era of prophetic sociopolitical witness, there has to be a new working flexible model, depending on which political parties are in the ruling coalition. This would involve the SACC and denominational and church networks abandoning their previous top-down approach and seriously listening in a systematic fashion to the concern of ordinary church members and espousing them. It is suggested that this would then lead to the latter's mobilisation as a form of mass protest. Secondly, that those church bodies engaging with all levels of government now need to use the human resource capital of experts (in the fields of law, private enterprise, economics, sociology) that exist in many local congregations and also engage with and cooperate with civil society organisations and businesses (see section 'Why do I choose the term prophetic sociopolitical witness?').

They would also need a flexible approach concerning whom to engage with in the government and with other civic organisations, faith organisations and businesses, especially, but not only if a government emerges that is openly hostile to the Church or religion in general.

As Fergusson (2004) comments:

We need increasingly to think of the church as belonging with these other bodies in civil society and seeking to promote its particular vision of the common good through influence, conversation, shared resources and the making of common

cause. In doing so, we require to develop a differentiated model for the church's social contribution which leads to neither domination, nor cultural captivity, nor isolation. (p. 164)

He draws examples of this from Spain, the USA, Poland and Brazil. In each of these cases, the churches had no direct access to the levers of state power, yet their recent contribution to their respective societies is of measurable significance (Fergusson 2004:162).

Its implementation as praxis 2

The fifth era came into being because of the ANC's decline to 39% of the vote in the 2024 National Elections and the resultant formation of a coalition government mainly with the DA. Not only might coalition government be the new form of government for many years to come but might eventually even see the demise of the ANC as a serious political player as has already happened to many 'decolonising' liberation movements in Africa (Mbandlwa 2023).

The formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) coalition has already made engaging with the government far more complex than in previous eras. Indeed coalition politics are mostly volatile, difficult and necessitate compromises being made by all associated coalition partners (See for instance Merkel's experience with coalitions in the Bundesrepublik, Deutschland [Kornelius 2013:85–104]). The GNU, whether it lasts or not, may be a herald of a political complexity stretching into a long-term future, with the real possibility that no political party will ever again acquire more than 50% of the votes in a National Election. This will provide a far more difficult scenario for the Church to interact with government than previously. The situation may be increasingly complexified by coalitions collapsing and being speedily reformed between different political parties with different agendas, especially those with more radical agendas such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) or uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK).

The EFF is a radical, left, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement with an internationalist outlook:

It subscribes to the Marxist-Leninist and Fanonian² schools of thought on its analysis of the state, imperialism, class and race contradictions in every society. (EFF Constitution 2019:4)

It aims to (EFF constitution 2019):

[C]ompletely overthrow the neo liberal anti-black state as well as the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes, the establishment of the dictatorship of the people in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the triumph of socialism over capitalism. (p. 8)

This will involve expropriation of South Africa's land without compensation; the nationalisation of mines, banks and other strategic sectors of the economy without compensation; and the building of state and government

2. Fanon (1925–1961) advocated the oppressed black race to totally break with the colonial past and all forms of the colonial system by means of an apocalyptic revolutionary praxis (Drabinski 2019:n.p.).

capacity, which will lead to abolishment of tenders (EFF Constitution 2019:8).

The EFF will possibly be far less accommodating to engaging with most church denominations and networks because their policies are far more Marxist than the ANC. It would be well for the Church to consider the mistake which was made by the Lutheran Church in 1946 in East Germany. At that time, many pastors thought that Communists and Christians shared the same benevolent goals, and so were prepared to work peacefully with this newly established communist state. They were soon disabused especially when the State classified pastors as enemies of the State (Marton 2021:12–15).

The MK party's constitution is not as explicit as the EFF's constitution, not mentioning Marxism. It is clear about land redistribution, but not explicit about who will be the beneficiaries. It seems to major on attaining freedom from all colonial (past and present) political and economic institutions, so that South Africa will be able to establish African institutions so as to (Xumkhonto weSizwe Party Constitution 2024):

[T]ake our own political decisions without supervision from the white former colonisers and the imperialist global West ... and the people of South Africa ... should be able to own, control and meaningfully benefit from the economic resources, systems and determine our destiny without, neo apartheid and neo-colonial interference and racist supervision ... uMkhonto weSizwe Party stands totally and fundamentally opposed to collaboration with colonial, neo-colonial forces and their descendants who still uphold and defend colonial intentions and aspirations. (pp. 4–6)

Perhaps, rather surprisingly, it might be easier for the Church, especially the charismatic and Pentecostal Churches, to engage with MK than the EFF because its leader and founder, Jacob Zuma, professes close links with Christianity despite his alleged corruption, sexual immorality and polygamy. He has claimed repeatedly that he always starts from basic Christian principles and that Christianity, alongside the ANC, constitutes one of two central pillars around which his worldview is shaped stating, 'Christianity is part of what I am; in a way it was the foundation for all my political beliefs' (Van Onselen 2008, quoted from Urbaniak & Khorommbi 2020:64). He has also been ordained as an Honorary Pastor in the Full Gospel Church in 2007 (Urbaniak & Khorommbi 2020:64).

The new flexibility required by the South African Council of Churches

I will first of all consider the new flexible engagement required by an organisation like the SACC. I, by no means, disparage the efforts the SACC has made to influence the ANC government over the years. Yet, my analysis suggests that this engagement fell on deaf ears because of the ANC's unwillingness to abandon its NDR ideology and its need to financially sustain its corrupt neo-patrimonial power base. However, at the moment it would appear that the electorate is

in process of virtually rejecting the ANC's ideology, with its resultant neo-patrimonialism, cadre deployment, corruption and inefficiency. The reason for this is that they can see that the ANC's policies have not worked since 2008–2009 to raise the living standards of the poor and decrease inequality.

The new action theory may need to be modified at regular intervals, which Heitink's (1999) approach allows for. It suggests that the SACC or other commensurate interdenominational church organisations will require much greater flexibility concerning how to engage with the government and in addition intensive political and economic research. This will apply to both with whom they engage, and the personnel employed to do so. The most difficult question that will need to be answered is with whom to engage. The ideological differences between the ANC and the DA are considerable. The DA's ideology focuses on establishing a free market economy with much less government control. On the other hand, the ANC openly admits in its 2025 National Executive Committee (NEC) policy document (ANC Department of Communications, Information & Publicity 2025:10) that the signing into law of the Bella Bill, the National Health Insurance (NHI) bill and the Expropriation Bill in 2024 and 2025 is a continuation of its NDR ideology.

The NEC (2025) document clearly outlines the many current and serious problems with the South African economy. Yet, it fails to clearly identify what the ANC considered to be their causes or that they might need to modify their NDR ideology. In fact, there is no sign of the ANC abandoning its NDR policy, mentioning the NDR 17 times. In fact the NEC (2025) states that:

To pursue the NDR effectively, the democratic movement needs to have a decisive influence over the state and a clear mandate to govern in pursuit of fundamental change. Without state power, the NDR will not succeed ... The false notion that the character of the ANC and strategic objective of the NDR has now been redefined by a single tactic of forming a broadly inclusive GNU, is a distortion of the realities our movement faced. This should be dismissed out of hand. (pp. 7, 9)

The SACC needs to consider that they are engaging with a political organisation that has refused to abandon its ideology, rejecting advice from a struggle stalwart such as Bishop Tutu (Khuzwayo 2012:124) and then one of its ex-finance ministers, Tito Mboweni. In 2020, Mboweni tweeted a message to the ANC saying 'If you cannot affect deep structural reforms then the game is over! Stay as you are and you are downgraded to junk status' (Mboweni 2020).

Moreover, it cannot be assumed that meeting with the President will suffice because there is no guarantee that whatever the suggestion made by the Church that the President might seem to favour will be agreed to by coalition partners. So, does the Church meet with the President, one party at a time or also with individual cabinet ministers or their representatives, depending upon their portfolio? Perhaps only trial and error will provide the answer to this. On this note, this flexibility should also

include engagement with provinces and municipalities because many are now being run by differing political parties or coalitions.

As to the personnel doing the engaging, well-educated and informed experts need to be either consulted or included, as well as congregational ministers or church executives, so that they not only criticise but are also able to put forward positive, practical and thought-provoking ideas. As Fergusson (2004:149) comments, the Church's ability to intervene in the wider political arena requires the inclusion of informed persons, not only theologians or ministers, but legal experts such as human right lawyers, experts in finance, businessmen, sociologists, educationalists and economists. In my experience, we have a rich resource of these experts in many of our local congregations who have the requisite skills and would be willing to become involved.

The role of local congregations

De Gruchy (2014) pointed out:

Church leaders can speak and act as much as they like, but if they do not have the support of the local churches, or if they are not in touch with what is happening on the ground, they soon become impotent figureheads. (p. 176)

So, the new action theory prioritises the incorporation of local congregations in prophetic sociopolitical witness. This would involve, firstly, alerting the SACC and denominational bodies and networks as to grassroots community and congregational concerns. Until now, the opinions of local congregations do not appear to have been included in the process of engaging with national or municipal government. Yet, these should surely be ground zero for prophetic sociopolitical witness. It needs to begin with knowing and discovering the concerns of the local population with its diversity. Secondly, they need to be encouraged to mobilise for engagement with national and municipal governments through such actions as protest marches or boycotts. One would expect that this alone should get the attention of those in the GNU or existing coalition and cause them to listen to those engaging with them in prophetic sociopolitical witness because it will be a measure of what will happen at the polls.

Yet, individual local congregations cannot act in isolation because they often only represent a small section of a social community and lack the necessary resources. They need to be supported with the vision, the resources and personnel of church denominational and network bodies (De Gruchy 2014:176). They or the SACC would need to drive the process. How will this work?

At the moment, prophetic sociopolitical concerns are a 'top-down' process both concerning the SACC and the General Assembly Committee responsible for prophetic sociopolitical witness in the UPCS, which is known as the Church in Society Committee. In effect, this means that local congregations are

told what they should be concerned about. I found evidence of this in their reports (which might also be the case with other denominations and church networks). On examining five of its Executive Committee and General Assembly reports from the period between 2017 and 2023, I found that its *modus operandi* seems to be to tell Regional Presbytery Committees and congregations what they should be concerned about. These reports are very detailed, well written and insightful, yet there is no reference at all to eliciting the concerns of the members of local congregations (Church in Society 2017:174–200, 2018:514–528, 2019:179–185, 2021:314–404, 2023:257–390).

The Church and Society's national and regional committees are mostly composed of UPCS local church ministers who must be well acquainted with the primary problems in the communities in which they have ministerial charges. Yet, in my opinion, there seems to be a major disconnect between the concerns of those on the committee and those of their congregational members. As the HSRC voter survey report (Struwig et al. 2022:69–75) revealed, the most pressing concerns are corruption, crime and safety, cost of living, unemployment, service delivery, load-shedding and the lack of water and sanitation. Yet, the most recent Church in Society (2023:257–282) report only very briefly mentions corruption once and the other concerns not at all.

So I propose, either with the encouragement of the SACC, or of their own violation, that denominational prophetic sociopolitical witnessing organisations conduct a properly organised survey of the members of a cross section of representative local congregations. The results will then be analysed and reported back to the participating congregations including the actions that they intend to take to raise these concerns with the government. It is hoped that this will lead to the establishment of prophetic sociopolitical witnessing committees in some of the participating local congregations. Then it may also have the effect not only of alerting political parties to the groundswell of public opinion regarding misgovernance but of inspiring the members of local congregations to engage in prophetic sociopolitical witness with all levels of governance, (perhaps initially prioritising that with local municipalities). Such witness might include community protests and demanding meetings with elected local officials.

The above-stated process and the Church's prophetic sociopolitical witness will become much more influential if there was cooperation at all levels between denominational and network bodies and also between local congregations in the same localities, regardless of which denomination or network these latter might belong to. The advantage of the SACC organising the abovementioned process is that from their 2025 webpage, I have counted that they have a 30 strong membership. In addition, 3 blocks of churches have membership – the Council of African Independent Churches, Rhema-International Federation of Christian Churches and the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa. Various Christian interdenominational country-wide organisations are also associated with them. They also have

affiliate councils in seven out of South Africa's nine provinces. It is interesting to note that there are discussions as to whether they should become part of a unitary SACC (SACC 2025).

The criterion of success

What will be the criteria of success? Those involved in Prophetic socio-political witness must be prepared for short-term or even total failure, such as was experienced by prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos. Jesus himself declared to the scribes and pharisees that as many prophets were murdered, so he was going to be, which is perhaps the ultimate form of rejection (Mt 23:31). While we hope that such drastic measures will not be taken against the Church because of its sociopolitical witness in South Africa today, it implies that prophetic witness will often be rejected and may earn the enmity of the ruling authorities.

How then do we judge the success or failure of our prophetic sociopolitical witness? From a human perspective, it will be if the government listens to the Church and even begins to take small steps that will start to deal with inequality, corruption, unemployment and crime in this country. Of course, they may never listen and it may only be when a new political party or coalition emerges that government will give heed to the Church's witness.

Is it a worthwhile endeavour? The message of Psalm 127:1, 2 is that success is outside of our control and depends upon God, because it is God alone who gives success. Its message may be summed in this context, that the Church must work and prophesy while continually looking for better building methods, but it is God alone who gives success.

Conclusion

In summary, the innovative aspects of the proposed new action theory are:

- The implementation of a bottom-up mobilisation process of local congregations.
- The employment of interdisciplinary experts in the above-mentioned sociopolitical organisations from fields such as human rights lawyers, businessmen, sociologists and economists who worship in Christian congregations, but also at times may come from civic organisations, business and other faith organisations.
- A constant flexible re-examination of the policies of the political parties and of whatever governing coalitions that are formed in parliament. Further, how to engage with them and also with opposition parties and what matters need to be raised and who should carry this out.
- Engagement with government at all levels, national, provincial, municipal and perhaps even with individual ward councillors.
- Sociopolitical witness will probably be more effective if there is cooperation between Christian and Church advocacy organisations at national, provincial and local levels. It will be even more effective if it includes civic society, business and other faith organisations in areas where there is agreement.

- That the results, their seeming success or failure, be assessed after each engagement but also over the long term and methods be readjusted accordingly.

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