

The Kairos in the past, present and future in South Africa: Prophetic voice after 40 years of the Kairos Document

**Author:**Leepo J. Modise¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Philosophy,
Practical & Systematic
Theology, College of Human
Sciences, University of
South Africa, Pretoria,
South Africa

Corresponding author:

Leepo Modise,
modislj@unisa.ac.za

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This article consists of five parts. Firstly, the statements are documented in the Kairos Document of 1985; secondly, the impact of the Kairos Document on the road to negotiation and freedom in South Africa is discussed. Thirdly, the article discusses the lack of the prophetic voice from 1994 to 2009, when the leadership landscape changed from President Mbeki to President Zuma, and corruption, stealing from the poor, state capture, and shifting consciousness surfaced in the democratic South Africa. Fourthly, the shift of the African National Congress (ANC) led by President Zuma from the South African Councils of Churches (SACC) as a prophetic voice to the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA) as the prophets in the court (pseudo-prophetic voice), like the Old Testament court prophets. The establishment of NICSA was the re-establishment of the state theology. Fifthly, the shift from the Zuma era to Ramaphosa's era, with a change to empowering the black elite, at the expense of the poor. The South African situation under the Government of National Unity will be evaluated based on the Kairos Document statement and the people of South Africa's voice on poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The research method to be followed is qualitative, involving a literature study and observation.

Contribution: The theological framework will be political theology, where the churches and theologians should speak for the people of South Africa.

Keywords: Kairos; prophetic voice; past; present; future.

Introduction

The political crisis in the Apartheid South Africa was the Kairos or moment of truth, not only for apartheid but also for the church. Kairos is a critical and decisive moment, a time of grace and opportunity, a challenge to decision and action (Kairos Document 1985:1). The Kairos Document turns 40 years old this year; it is essential to evaluate the intended statements of the Kairos Document. Firstly, I will engage the selected statements of the Kairos Document in 1985 to evaluate how far the democratic government, the church and the people of South Africa have achieved the intended destination.

Secondly, I will discuss the impact of the Kairos Document on the road to negotiation and freedom in South Africa. The churches and church leaders were motivated by the people's voice in the Kairos Document to intensify the struggle and sanctions from the international community.

Thirdly, I will focus on the lack of a prophetic voice between 1994 and 2009, when prophets were absorbed into government positions as ministers, directors, and ambassadors, until the reinstatement of state theology through National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA) to defend corruption and state capture. The shift to the Zuma government and the reinstatement of state theology caused Rev. Dr Frank Chikane to resign from his position in the democratic government and join to speak the truth to power. This moment has resuscitated the prophetic voice of the South African Councils of Churches (SACC) in democratic South Africa.

Fourthly, there was a shift from the SACC prophetic voice to the NICSA as pioneers of state theology in defence of President Zuma's governance. The shift of the prophetic voice was born out of two angles: the return of the prophet to the pulpit, since the politicians are back in the country, and the absorption of the prophets in government positions, where they were busy

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with administration and politicising while the critical issues that they raised during apartheid were not addressed. This shift then created the opportunity for a group of Christian leaders to reinstate state theology in defence of the state capture.

Fifthly, the shift from the Zuma government to the Government of National Unity, which will be evaluated based on the Kairos Document statements and the people of South Africa's voice on poverty, unemployment, and inequality. The problem statement in this article is the pendulum movement of the prophetic voice in the democratic South Africa. This problem statement will be discussed in detail in this article. The research method to be followed is qualitative, where a literature study will be conducted, and observation. The theological framework will be political theology, where the churches and theologians should speak for the people of South Africa.

The background and problem statement

The problem statement in this article is the pendulum movement of the prophetic voice in the democratic South Africa. During the liberation struggle, different theologies were mentioned and evaluated in the Kairos Document, and the Kairos Document identifies theologies that support the apartheid regime and justify apartheid scripturally, like the state theology. State theology was the theology that misused the biblical texts and Christian beliefs to justify the oppression of the people (Kairos Document 1985:4). The state theology saw the oppressive regime as an ordained structure for the chosen people of God, just like ancient Israel. Similarly, the Church theology saw the truth, but did not dare to oppose the regime on the real-life issues.

The other movement was the move to the Church theology, where many church leaders were making metaphysical or abstract Christian ideas irrelevant to the context in which the people of South Africa find themselves. This theology will emphasise reconciliation, peace, justice, and non-violence. Church theology Kairos Document sees it as an inadequate theology because there can be no reconciliation and genuine peace without justice, just as there can be no forgiveness without repentance. True justice cannot come from the oppressor in the form of concessions and reforms or non-violence, as violence is an overloaded concept; there is physical and structural violence (Kairos Document 1985). The church's theology lacks the here-and-now theological reflection; hence, it was too metaphysical. The other movement to theologise was necessary to address the real problems of the people of South Africa.

The prophetic theology was then the needed theology in the moment to challenge the evil governance structure in South Africa. The Kairos theologians in South Africa then reverted to the biblical truth to confront the tyrannical regime that has been the enemy of the common good because it governs in the interest of some people, not the entire

nation. There were four main principles of prophetic theology: participation in the struggle; transforming church activity; special campaigns; civil disobedience and moral guidance (Kairos Document 1985). Prophetic theology was the theology that confronted the ills in society, like oppression, the separation of people and the corruption of the white regime. This theology is also needed in the democratic South Africa, where there are reflections of the social ills that this voice was against. These social ills surface as corruption, theft from the poor, shifting consciousness, black elite as the replacement of white privilege in the apartheid regime, state capture, pervasive violence and structural violence.

Five years later, when the political prisoners were released and the dawn of democracy was actualised, the theology moved back to Church theology, and the prophetic theology was from the court, just like the Old Testament court prophets who were absorbed in the government as ministers, directors, and ambassadors. Makofane and Botha (2019:89) argue that Christian leaders have impacted South African politics. However, after the fall of apartheid and the dawn of democracy, they have reverted to false neutrality and gone into recess, which has led to their failure to impact social transformation. Motlhabi (2008:x), Mosoma (2015:19), Tshaka (2009:159) and Kritzinger (2012:237) have echoed the voices of Makofane and Both (2019) that the conspicuous silence of the Christian churches and their leadership in democratic South Africa is where racism, poverty, unemployment, and inequality reign supreme. The church does not operate in a political vacuum where these social ills occur. They found this silence surprising.

Theologies were in a pendulum move to and from the same situation from 1948 to 2025, where poverty, unemployment, and inequality are a reality. The Kairos Document needs to remind the churches and theologians to remain politicians of high order, where the prophetic voice is constant to address all social ills. The pendulum is from State theology to the Church theology again in the democratic South Africa. The absence of prophets in the church has created the opportunity for the presence of prophets outside of the church, who use the church to benefit from the government and the poor people, who look for answers from the church.

Research question

The main research question revolves around the research problem statement. The main research question is: *Why was there instability of prophetic theology in South Africa?*

The sub-questions are:

- *What makes the prophets move to and from in their theology based on the government of the day?*
- *How can we use the Kairos Document to assist with the current political situation in South Africa?*
- *Where is the church standing in South Africa?*

The aims of this article revolved around the research questions. The following are the research aims:

- To illustrate that there was instability in prophetic theology in South Africa.
- To demonstrate that prophets were moving to and from in their theologies based on the government of the day.
- To show that the Kairos Document can be used to assist with the current political situation in South Africa.
- To illustrate where the church stands in the current situation in South Africa.

The Kairos Document assisted in identifying the different theologies that have played an important role in bringing about liberation in South Africa. The following section will deal with the statements of the Kairos Document and their impact on the current situation.

Engagement on Kairos statements with the current democratic government

The first statement that I want to engage in is fascinating regarding the governance and morality of the time. The Kairos theologians assessed the Apartheid regime and its governance, as well as the attitude of the people of South Africa at that time. They looked at the government and the people's reaction and came up with the statement: 'The power of oppressive rulers requires the assistance of those they rule. They cannot secure and maintain political power' (Kairos Document 1985). Less than 20% of the population during that time signed the social contract with the government through a pseudo-democratic election, and the remaining 80% were forced to legitimise the regime through military forces and brutal laws. The white voters during the apartheid era, who were eligible to vote, were less than 20% of the population of the country. Kairos theologians define prophetic theology as a theology that empowers the 80% of the population not to submit blindly to oppressive rulers, but to exercise influence responsibly while maintaining obedience to legitimate authority. De Gruchy (2005) indicates:

The Kairos Document perceived that the church itself was a site of [the Apartheid] struggle ... Whereas Cottesloe and Message did not challenge the legality of the State, the Kairos Document described the state as tyrannical and therefore one that had to be resisted through acts of civil disobedience. (p. 198)

As stated by the Kairos Document (1985), the power of oppressive rulers requires the assistance of those they rule, and the prophetic theology emphasised that there must be resistance to the oppressive rulers; by so doing, they deny the ruler the power of assistance to rule. If the people deny the oppressive ruler the assistance to rule, the oppressive ruler cannot secure and maintain political power. The call from the people of South Africa was not to submit to the oppressive ruler, but to deny him or her power by disobedience. The same call for the people of South Africa during the democratic era is that they must resist the structural violence in the form of poverty, unemployment and inequality, which are the legacies of the Apartheid regime. The power of the

Government of National Unity rests with the people, who grant the government the power to violate their rights through structural violence. Modise (2025) states:

In this somewhat restricted sense, structural violence includes poverty exacerbated by the dramatic increase of inequality caused by international investors, both on a global scale and within many national societies, in this instance, the South African society. This violence manifests itself in the proliferation of sweatshops and other kinds of hard labour, including contemporary forms of slavery and trafficking in human beings. It continues manifesting through so-called natural disasters, where conscious policies have made populations vulnerable and unprepared for predictable harms triggered by dramatic weather and artificial events. (p. 130)

Violence will destroy our soul, even as their violence has destroyed their soul. We must know this (Boesak 1985). The Kairos Document taught us to resist such power; the vulnerable people must prevent the oppressive rulers from occupying the political power to rule the country. Based on prophetic theology, the church must equip its people to resist such government. Instead, the church will stand where God stands (Belhar Confession 1986).

The Kairos Document (1985) reminds the churches, denominations, and ecumenical churches that the God of the Exodus, the Father of Jesus of Nazareth, is not neutral and does not attempt to reconcile Moses and Pharaoh and perceive oppression as sin. The church that confesses this God should not be neutral in the apartheid era and the democratic era. The church in the past and currently is not immune to participation in the oppressive government, whether in physical violence or structural violence in South Africa and Africa in general; therefore, the church needs to repent before standing where God stands. Forster (2019) postulates:

The Kairos theologians cautioned that those parts of the church that had either succumbed to 'state Theology' or were denying pressing social realities within a form of 'Church Theology' were in theological error. They were denying their divine responsibility as the church. (p. 21)

Forty years later, the Kairos Document calls for repentance from theologians and churches for their failures during both the apartheid and democratic eras, including their silence or complicity regarding the Marikana massacre and the structural violence perpetuated through unemployment, poverty and inequality. The same has happened in other African countries like Rwanda, Kenya and elsewhere in Africa, where the church failed to take sides with the poor and those who are suffering.

According to Bataringaya (2017:96), Rwandese people were killed in the churches and parishes than anywhere else in Rwanda because the people see the churches as safe places. The genocide revealed that saints and sinners were involved in everyone, including Christians in general and clergy specifically. Observers admitted that the Christian church had lost any credibility it had before the 1994 genocide

because of its complicity in that evil event. The church has failed in its mission and lost its credibility, specifically during the genocide. Therefore, the church needs to repent before God and Rwandan society and seek healing from God (Bataringaya 2017:96). This is the message of Kairos theologians during apartheid that the church, through State theology and Church theology, has participated in the brutal genocide in South Africa, which was called the massacres, and the church, through its silence in the structural violence, still participates in this genocide of people who are dying because of poverty. With this statement that God is not neutral, Kairos Document calls the church to repent and reclaim its credibility before 1994. Hence, Kritzinger (1986) argues that prophetic theology is not just a chapter. It is the whole document, a way of doing theology (Kritzinger 1986).

The other statement that is still relevant for the current political situation in South Africa is the statement that encourages the participation of Christians in the political arena. Kairos Document (1985) indicates: 'Christians must participate in the struggle for liberation and a just society'. The statement spoke to the people of South Africa who did not have the right to participate in the election of the oppressive rulers; the people had to resist and participate in civil disobedience. With the assistance of the prophetic voices of the Kairos theologians, the resistance was heard internationally, and there was a reaction that led to the people of South Africa having their first democratic election in 1994. The act of voting is an act of participation in a participatory democracy. Modise (2024a) argues that after 1994, South Africans had the right to vote as an act of participatory democracy that produced representative democracy. The challenge of participatory democracy is that, once people have voted, they often fail to demand accountability from the government with whom they share the social contract. This recalls the echoes of the Kairos theologians, who insisted that Christians must participate in the struggle for liberation and the pursuit of a just society, and that they must hold the government accountable throughout its tenure. The church and the prophets must remind Christians about the importance of voting to sustain democracy. Modise (2024a) postulates:

The citizens' voices should be echoed in the government's and politicians' actions in implementing the social contract. Therefore, in a social contract, the sovereignty of the state system is invested in the people. (p. 107)

The participation in the social contract is the participation in the changing of the political landscape, the voting for the government that was envisaged by the Kairos theologians. Christians in the spirit of the Kairos Document ought not to abstain from voting; instead, they can change the government through their votes. Where does the Kairos Document encourage participation in their liberation today? The following statement reminds us of what to do when Christians are in the democratic era.

The spirit of the Kairos Document is still alive in the democratic era, which is packed with social ills that result

from poverty, unemployment and inequality. The Kairos theologians state: 'The Kairos Document was not final. It was meant to stimulate action, reflection, prayer and a return to the Bible with questions raised by the crisis of our times'. Kairos Document was not final, as the events unfolded on the wrong side of the people, and the spirit of Kairos will always prevail in that context. Modise (2024b:3) quotes Mosoetsa that South Africa's social and welfare policy framework has not achieved principal economic transformation, wealth and land redistribution or poverty eradication. South African government transfers merely help people to live from hand to mouth through social grants. In democratic South Africa, macroeconomic policies have yielded limited economic growth, resulting in significant job losses and rising inequality (Modise 2024a). This indicates that the Kairos Document is still relevant to assist politicians and theologians today in acting, reflecting on the Word of God and the political situation in the democratic era, and being involved in prayer. Furthermore, Modise (2024a) states:

The church is invited to perform this duty as part of its pastoral ministry. Apart from this pastoral kind of concern, the church is invited to take a stand on the current politico-socio-economic situation so that it may not succumb to the present state of affairs unconsciously, uncritically, and under the bewitchment of aliens, so that it may not become the unwitting agent of the spirit of the age in whatever form, instead of being impelled by the Holy Spirit. (p. 109)

Modise (2024a:109) indicates that the Kairos Document, in its call for the church to be involved in politics, is a reflection that the Kairos Document was not the final, but was meant to stimulate the actions, reflection, prayer and a return to the Bible with questions raised by the crisis of the time. The spirit of Kairos Documents has pushed the South African Council of Churches (SACC) to reflect on the situation during the crisis in South Africa and push for the participation of the Christian communities in the struggle of the people documented in *South Africa We Pray For*. The SACC acknowledges in this document that the Kairos Document is not final until poverty, unemployment, and inequality are removed from the nation. The SACC in *South Africa We Pray For* (2016):

It calls for a chorus of prayer and concerted work by congregations of churches in all neighbourhoods, and to extend the partnership to all people of goodwill in our communities. This is a call to all Christian churches and Christian witness agencies and institutions to join hands and bring together their candlelight, so that together we may be faithful to our calling to be the light of our society; a light through which we can together see the ills of our country, the ugliness of a divided society, the indignity of poverty and inequality; the pain of broken families; the scandal of corruption and maladministration; and the shame of the loss of public trust in State institutions. It is an invitation for each of us to bring the candlelight of our faith so that together we can also 'discover', under God, the ways and means to overcome these challenges, to the glory of the loving God revealed in Christ Jesus. (p. 7)

'South Africa We Pray For' correlates with the Kairos Document, which calls for prayer and action in times of crisis. It was the prophetic voice and Christian participation that

were neither heard nor seen - calls meant to stir congregations to action, to inspire reflection on the crisis at hand, and to lead communities into prayerful engagement for justice and reconciliation. Kairos Document emphasised the unity in action, when the Kairos theologians indicate: 'There is only one way forward to church unity - to be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed'. The echoes of the Kairos Document were not heard from 1994 to 2009.

The impact of the Kairos Document on freedom in South Africa

The Kairos Document was penned and signed in 1985, identifying and addressing the evils of the South African government, which did not consider most people's lives in South Africa. The South African sanctions of 1986, championed by Bishop of Johannesburg - later Archbishop of Cape Town, and former General Secretary of the SACC, Desmond Tutu, were deeply influenced by the convictions expressed in the Kairos Document (1985). Its prophetic statements helped propel church leaders to confront the State President, P.W Botha, with moral courage and theological clarity. Modise (2025) states:

The state of emergency led to negotiations. Because of the internal and external pressure, the apartheid regime had no choice but to agree to negotiate the terms of a new dispensation with the ANC [*African National Congress*] - Anti-Apartheid Act of the American Congress. Based on the sanctions, disinvestment, and boycott, the Afrikaners and the English became a strong pressure group for radical transformation in South Africa. (p. 134)

The year after 1985 was packed with events that put pressure on the apartheid government; this pressure was mounted by the spirit of the Kairos Document, which was living in Desmond Tutu, encouraging him to mobilise participation from the communities in South Africa and internationally. The courage from the Kairos Document to call the Christians to participate in their struggle, the call for action, prayer, reflection, and revisiting the Bible, was instrumental in the road to negotiation and ultimately freedom. The vocabulary and spirit of the Kairos Document assisted the theologians, members of the United Democratic Front (UDF), and unionists in mobilising activities that have put pressure on the South African government and the international community to strengthen the sanctions in South Africa. The mass actions that led the government to institute a state of emergency in 1986 were not innocent actions from the spirit of the Kairos Document. The results of those actions have led the international community to pressure political organisations in general, and the African National Congress (ANC) in particular, as well as the South African government, to release political prisoners and start to negotiate (Terreblanche 2012).

Forster (2019:26) reminds the South Africans and the Christians that in 1988, the state attempted to silence the prophets of the time. However, the prophets did not succumb to the threats and victimisation of the apartheid government. The spirit of the Kairos Document (1985), echoed in the prophetic witness, affirmed that oppression is a sin that

cannot be compromised with and must be eradicated. It expressed the hope that goodness, justice, and love would ultimately triumph, that all tears would be wiped away, and that peace would prevail (Kairos Document 1985:25).

The pressure from the prophets was countered by imprisonment, a state of emergency. However, these measures were carried out because of the conviction they had in the Kairos Document statement to end apartheid. The belief in goodness, justice, and love that will ultimately triumph, the hope of the lamb lying down with the lion, seemed to dawn on 27 April 1994. Yet, on that very day, the prophetic voice began to fade, as the prophets themselves lay down with the lion in the parliament, but without the fullness of the goodness, justice, and love had long proclaimed.

The lack of the prophetic voice in the democratic South Africa

We believe that goodness, justice, and love will triumph. One day, all tears will be wiped away, and the lamb will lie down with the lion (Kairos Document 1985). The Government of National Unity took over the government, and the people of South Africa believed they had participated in their struggle and the government's choice. Modise (2013:37) indicates that after 1994, the prophets were called back to the parishes and requested to focus on the spiritual well-being of the people and leave politics with politicians, as the politicians were back in South Africa from exile and prison. Some were called to the government as ministers, ambassadors, and directors. Forster (2019:29) agrees with Modise (2013):

After 1994, the social actors of power in South African society changed from the National Party and the Dutch Reformed Church. The African National Congress (ANC) is now the governing party in South Africa. At the same time, the mainline, largest English-speaking Churches (Such as the Anglican Church and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, etc.) now occupy social prominence and dominance in the religious sphere. The nexus of power is once again challenging the witnesses and the work of the church, as well as the credibility of the government in South Africa. The church is once again facing the threat of becoming embedded in the actions and intentions of the national state. (p. 37)

The lamb and the lion lie in the same place, without goodness, justice, or love. Tears are in the faces of many because of poverty, unemployment and inequality in the name of Affirmative Action, Black Economic Empowerment, which has created a few elites and left the majority of the people in poverty and unemployment (Terreblanche 2012). The prophetic voice was silent, as the prophets were like the Old Testament court prophets who prophesied what the king wanted to hear.

Bhiman (2014:50), Masuku (2014:16), Kritzinger (2012:237), Tshaka (2009:159), Motlhabi (2008:x), and Mosoma (2015:19) are concerned about the silence of the prophets in the democratic era, while the Kairos Document has called the Christians to be vocal in terms of the social ills, regardless of who is in power. All the prophets were gone with the dawn

of the democratic era; there were pockets of statements that criticised the government from the churches, and a few prophets were vocal and critical of the democratic government. Desmond Tutu remained the only prophet who retained the prophetic voice from the Kairos to the democratic era. After 2009, there was a shift in the prophetic voice; the voice of Esther of the Old Testament started to come out after hearing Mordecai's voice, saying if someone from somewhere can come and rescue the people of God, you will perish without assistance. The revival of the Christian leaders outside the National Executive Committee (NEC) of SACC and the election of Bishop Siwa, Rev. Chikane, Fr Lapsey and Bishop Mpumlwana (General Secretary) of the SACC in 2014 gave a voice to God back to the nation. These prophets reconstruct the SACC and speak on behalf of the people. The document called 'South Africa, We Pray For' was drafted by their leadership to guide the activities addressing communities' social ills (Mpumlwana 2016). These voices were very questionable because of the previous participation of the prophets in the party politics in the democratic era. What became particularly striking were the groups and individuals who rose up in opposition to the prophetic voice.

Forster (2019:29) reminds the South African Christian of the Rev Vukile Mehana, the then Chaplain General to the ANC, who defended the former President Jacob Zuma on his blasphemous statement that those who voted ANC will receive the award of going to heaven, while those who voted for the other parties will receive punishment of going to hell. The same minister of religion encouraged the ministers of religion in Cape Town to solicit votes for the ANC, where he fell in the trap of what Kairos was warning the church to stay away from: 'The question must avoid becoming a third force; its programmes must not confuse or counter the struggles of those representing the people' (Kairos Document 1985). Forster (2019:29), quoting him: 'You cannot have church leaders that speak as if they oppose the government...God will liberate people through this ANC government'. Forster (2019) illustrated how the churches and individual ministers opposed the Kairos Document's intended statements in the democratic context. The Kairos Document was not final but infinite, beyond the apartheid regime era.

The shift from the South African Councils of Churches to the National Interfaith Council of South Africa as the government's religious council

The lamb lies down with the lion but lacks goodness, justice, or love – prophetic voice, as in the form of justification of corruption. Velleem (2014:279) argues that the corrupted pseudo-prophetic voice was seen in the ordination of the former President Jacob Zuma as a pastor of the whole gospel church in KwaZulu-Natal. At the same time, the National Interfaith Council of South Africa (NICSA) was established in 2009, when Jacob Zuma took over the government. National Interfaith Council of South Africa supported Zuma's government of the ANC during that time.

The prophets, not known for political criticism or the prophetic voice, took the upper hand as the pseudo-prophetic voice to defend the government and benefit from the social development programmes. This pseudo-prophetic voice emerges as the Neo-State theology that the Kairos Document criticised during the apartheid era.

In 2014, the SACC experienced a significant shift in political theology, where the social actors took over the council and became critical of the government of the day. National Interfaith Council of South Africa then gained momentum from the court as a pseudo-prophetic voice. The member churches of NICSA were hiding behind the moral regeneration programmes in the provinces, and benefited from the human immunodeficiency virus or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV or AIDS) projects, moreover, in the North West province. The function of NICSA was to neutralise the prophetic voice of Tutu and SACC, which was revitalised by Bishop Masilo Mpumlwana, Bishop Siwa, Dr Frank Chikane, and Father Michael Lapsey. The SACC did not have credibility because the leadership had compromised their voice by being part of the government of the ANC, either directly or indirectly. Hence, different theologians ask: Where is the prophetic voice in the democratic era?

Kairos Document and the new desperation of the democratic government

The South African context needs the Kairos theologians to mobilise Christians from passive faith in the democratic era to active faith. The level of poverty, unemployment and inequality challenges the churches, theologians and Christians to do something about it. In 2019, research showed that out of 44% of young people who leave their country of origin, South Africa contributes 33% of young people leaving the country. The call of the South African President confirms this:

Earlier in April 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa, during a public appearance in Stellenbosch, said that young South Africans should not leave the country and that those who have already left should return and contribute to growing South Africa. (Janse van Rensburg 2019:n.p.)

This is a call not just to the youth but to all of us to play our part in the growth and development of our country. This is not just a call to action but an urgent one. Poverty, unemployment, and inequality are at such alarming levels in South Africa that they are compelling our young people to seek better opportunities elsewhere. The following are the voices of the young people who wrote to News 24 to give reasons for leaving the country:

Many who drop out of school automatically join the 54% of unemployed youth in the country. The lucky few who, by hook or crook, manage to get an education also struggle to find jobs. Young white South Africans are equally discouraged by the BE regulations, which, in many cases, explicitly bar them from being eligible for a position. (Janse van Rensburg 2019:n.p.)

The evidence of the voices of the young people will be represented by two voices recorded in News 24 on 18 April 2019, which is still a reality today:

‘Thologelo Rampa, 25, who recently moved to Australia, says: “How do you expect me to stay in a country where I hold two degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand but was unemployed for three years?”’ (Janse van Rensburg 2019:n.p.)

Young people have the qualifications, but the country does not have the necessary provisions to absorb them into employment. Poverty, unemployment and inequality are the main reasons why young people leave the country. Let us see the other comment:

‘Alternatively, as 24-year-old Matome Seketa, who has a communications degree but is unemployed, writes: “I am an older brother to two boys who are looking up to me. I used to tell them that education would help us get out of poverty. Still, since I hold a degree and have nothing to show for it, I do not know what to say to them anymore... my tune now is that education will help us get out of this country to a better one where one’s degree will be just enough to put meat on the table.”’ (Janse van Rensburg 2019:n.p.)

According to De Lannoy et al. (2020), despite significant investments in active labour market programmes across the government, private, and civil society sectors, South Africa faces persistently high levels of youth unemployment. The intractable nature of the challenge called for a systematic synthesis of evidence to better understand what contributes to the issue and inform policy and programmatic direction. Modise (2025) argues:

The total percentage of the country’s poverty level is 62.7%, while the unemployment rate was 32.4% in 2023, with women and youth being affected the most. This high rate of poverty, unemployment, and inequality is related to many structural violence activities, such as high crime rates, death related to poverty, human trafficking, and physical violence that led to many killings, namely farmer attacks and killings. The level of poverty increases the level of physical violence against Black and White farmers. (p. 140)

There is a clear illustration that there is a tendency towards violence that is caused by poverty, unemployment and inequality in the country that needs attention and action. The Kairos Document was and is against poverty, injustice and inequality among the people of God. Hence, the call for the prophetic voice from the prophets, not the prophets from the courts, but the prophets from God, like Desmond Tutu, who was a seasonal prophet in the apartheid era and the democratic era. The prophets who will echo the Kairos Document statement that encourages people not to accept, submit to, or cooperate with the power that does not provide, and protect the rights of the people. Kairos theologians state: ‘All power sources depend on acceptance, submission, and cooperation. These are not guaranteed’. This indicates that the churches and theologians in South Africa need to stimulate action while praying and revisiting the Bible.

Modise (2025:111), quoting Terreblanche (2012), points to the failures of the South African government as follows:

South Africans did not succeed in adequately addressing the apartheid legacy of abject poverty, high unemployment and growing inequality; the creation of a large new black elite with an extravagant get-rich-quick mentality and their consequent preparedness to use immoral and devious methods; South Africa did not succeed in creating a people-centred society; eradicate the politico-economic system that was dominated by the Mineral and Energy Complex during apartheid, which is still happening.

The arguments advanced in this section indicate clearly that the Kairos Document, though powerful in its time, was followed by a period in the democratic era in which the prophetic voice seemed to fall into a slumber. The prophetic theology was theology without the people; the SACC documents and statements were statements without action or carrying along the people with them to act; hence, West (2012:8) emphasises: ‘There can be no prophetic theology without people’s theology’. In the Kairos Document era, the people were instrumental in the fight against the injustice of the time; hence, the prophetic theology needs people’s theology to achieve a people’s government, which was turned into an individual’s government.

Results and discussion

The findings and recommendations that will be found from the arguments above will assist in restoring the Kairos Document theology to deconstruct the theologies that support the injustices of the moment.

Findings from the Kairos Document and the current context

In the arguments in this article, it was found that there is a pendulum of prophetic theology throughout the history of South Africa. The first finding is, right from the Apartheid era through to the democratic era, there was a pendulum movement in terms of the prophetic theology, movement from the State theology, Church theology and the prophetic theology, then the silence theology or Church theology where prophets were absorbed or returned to the pulpit.

The second finding from the argument is that, during the democratic era, there remains a familiar pattern of both supporting and opposing voices within the churches and the ecumenical movement, much like the apartheid era, when Afrikaans-speaking churches largely supported the government while English-speaking churches stood in opposition. Now, the English-speaking churches were supporting the ANC government, while the Afrikaans-speaking churches opposed subtly because of what had happened during apartheid.

The third finding of the argument is the parallel structure of ecumenical movement, which became highly polarised in their support of the government after former President Jacob Zuma assumed office in 2009. Since that time, there has been

a to-and-fro movement between Church theology and prophetic theology.

The fourth finding from the argument is that the Kairos Document torch-bearers were absorbed in the government spaces as ministers, directors and ambassadors; others pushed the public theology, which is more in line with Church theology, moving away from the liberation theology or to the arrival theology.

The fifth finding from the argument is that there was a movement from prophetic theology, which is supported by people's theology; the prophets were walking alone, without people. Hence, the Kairos Document encourages the mobilisation of the people's participation in doing theology.

The sixth finding from the argument is that Kairos Document can provide vocabulary for public statements that push the government to repent.

The seventh finding from the argument is that it was found that many injustices still need the Kairos Document to encourage Christians to participate in the liberation of the democratic government, liberation from poverty, unemployment, and inequality, which calls for the Kairos Document.

The eighth finding from the argument is that it was found that the people were very instrumental in changing the government of apartheid.

The ninth finding from the argument is that it was found that the church is neutral, not standing where it is supposed to stand, with the poor, oppressed and downtrodden or occasional prophets, even though injustices have remained constant from 1994 to the present.

Recommendations

From the arguments advanced in this article and the findings mentioned above, there are six recommendations that will assist the people of South Africa to live in the spirit of the Kairos Document. The recommendations are as follows:

- The first recommendation from the argument is that the prophetic theology should be constant and stable in this fragile, unstable and unjust country, through well-equipped ministers of the Word and sacraments, and theologians grounded in convictions of the Kairos Document.
- The second recommendation from the argument is that the prophetic theology should belong to the church, not the individual theologians or church leaders, because if the church leader becomes absorbed into the system, the prophetic voice is gone.
- The third recommendation from the argument is that the theological education should emphasise the prophetic theology to produce more prophets who are

ministers of the word, who are not cemented in the church building.

- The fourth recommendation from the argument is that the Kairos Document must be a part of the liturgy of the Christian churches in South Africa.
- The fifth recommendation from the argument is that Kairos Document is to be a living document that can be lived to bring a better life for all.
- The sixth recommendation from the argument is that the church must identify itself with the head of the church, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who identifies with the poor; therefore, the church should stand where Christ stands with the poor, oppressed and downtrodden.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article emphasised how the Kairos Document impacted the people of God during the difficult times of the apartheid government. The movement of theologies was discussed, and it was fascinating to find that there was a to-and-fro movement of theologies based on the government of the day. The interplay of the ecumenical movements in support or opposition of the democratic government illustrated how opportunistic prophets can be in the heated political moments. Finally, the injustice prevalent in South Africa leaves the prophets with no option but to go back to the Kairos Document to find the solution for the current political challenges.

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Author's contribution

Leepo J. Modise is the sole author of this research article. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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