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"A luta continua!"[1] On Freedom, Freedoms and the Role of the Church in South Africa with Special Reference to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa[2]

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Abstract

In the context of a colloquium on views of and challenges to freedom across three continents, this essay, from a South African perspective, examines freedom through the lens of philosopher and economist Amartya Sen. It pays particular attention to Sen's view of the multidimensional and instrumental character of freedom(s). An overview is given of the role of South African Christian churches in the struggle for political liberation prior to 1994, before focusing specifically on the contribution of URCSA. The discussion also includes examples of remaining "unfreedom" in post-1994 South Africa, again as understood through Sen's framework of instrumental freedoms, URCSA's ongoing commitment in this regard is then considered. The essay demonstrates that notwithstanding periodic critique to the contrary, URCSA has maintained its prophetic witness through its ministries, and that in these endeavours the multidimensional nature of freedom is consistently acknowledged – often against the backdrop of the Belhar Confession, itself a product of the struggle for political freedom.

Keywords: South African Church History; Freedom; Amartya Sen; Apartheid; URCSA

Introduction

The word "freedom" has resounded throughout the history of South Africa. South Africa is renowned for its successful struggle against apartheid; it reveres the "Freedom

[1] This Portuguese phrase, "The struggle continues," ("A luta continua") served as a rallying cry for FRELIMO during Mozambique's war of independence. It was subsequently adopted in the South African liberation struggle and has since come to symbolise the imperative for ongoing engagement in the pursuit of justice and equality, even subsequent to the attainment of political liberation. (See The Constitutional Court Art Collection at https://ccac.concourttrust.org.za/artworks/a-luta-continua.)

[2] Paper read at a REET/FVT/SU online colloquium on "Freedom: Narratives in Dispute. Theological discernment and dialogue in and between different contexts", October 2024.

Charter"[3], commemorates "Freedom Day"[4] and has established a "Freedom Park"[5]. Yet, on 31 August 2024, Siya Kolisi, captain of the South African national rugby team, dedicated the victory in the 10th Freedom Cup series over New Zealand to "South Africans who are still not free" (Wright 2004). How can this be the case in a nation whose constitution is heralded as "the most progressive constitution in the world" (SAHC 2022) and is "widely acknowledged … as a transformative constitution with its primary concern … to facilitate change in political, economic and social relations" (The South African Constitution 2022)? Moreover, how can this be so, for the purposes of this essay, given the role of churches played in the attainment of freedom in 1994, particularly with reference to the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa? A good point of departure is an examination of the concept of "freedom".

On freedom and freedoms: The perspective of Amartya Sen

In 1999, Indian-born Harvard professor of economics and philosophy, and Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen, published his seminal work, *Development as Freedom*. Writing within the context of development, Sen articulates a freedom-centred view of development (cf. Sen 2021). Of particular relevance is Sen's conceptualisation of the *multidimensional* nature of freedom.

Sen distinguishes between "substantive" and "instrumental" freedoms, as well as the respective roles of various freedoms. Substantive freedom denotes the actual capability of people to achieve the kinds of lives they have reason to value. It transcends mere formal freedoms (such as the right to vote) and encompasses individuals' genuine opportunities to pursue their aspirations and enhance their well-being. This results in "richer and more unfettered" lives, enabling people to become "fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions [ability to choose] and interacting with – and influencing – the world in which we live" (Sen 1999:14–15). Accordingly, substantive freedoms permit one "to be fully incorporated in … fields of human endeavour as an active player or contributor" (Magsino 2010:2).[6]

Instrumental freedoms, or their instrumental roles, refer to the manner in which different types of freedoms *contribute to the expansion of* human freedom in general. Instrumental freedoms and their interconnections significantly *advance other freedoms* (Masgino 2010:5). In short,

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[3] The Freedom Charter is a foundational South African political document adopted in in 1955 by the Congress Alliance, a coalition that included the ANC, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organisation, and the South African Congress of Democrats. The Charter articulates the foundational principles of freedom and democracy for South Africa, commencing with its iconic declaration: "The People Shall Govern!"

[4] Freedom Day is an annual public holiday in South Africa, commemorating the country's inaugural democratic general elections held on 27 April 1994.

[5] Located outside Pretoria, the Freedom Park heritage site and museum commemorates all South Africans who perished during the South African Wars, the World Wars, and under the apartheid regime.

[6] The concept of well-being extends beyond conventional material indicators, such as car ownership, which itself presupposes a certain level of financial means. As Klaasen (2014:73) succinctly observes, "A person might own a car … [But,] [if] the person cannot drive the car, then we cannot judge the well-being of the person by the fact that she owns a car."

> … freedoms of different types typically help to sustain each other. What a person has the actual capability to achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social facilities, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives. *These opportunities are, to a great extent, mutually complementary, and tend to reinforce the reach and use of one another. ... By focusing on the interconnections between freedoms of different types, it takes us well beyond the narrow perspective of seeing each freedom in isolation.* (Sen 2021) [emphasis added – LH & SM]

Sen subsequently provides a (non-exhaustive) list of five instrumental freedoms. Their interconnectedness ensures that individuals are not the mere passive recipients of freedoms but "agents who, because they are granted opportunities, are actively involved in shaping their own destinies both as individuals and as a social unity" (Masgino 2010:3). These freedoms foster capability-enhancing environments by orienting political, economic, social, and civic structures towards safeguarding the freedom of individual agency. Sen identifies the following freedoms:

Political freedoms: Opportunities to participate in governance and to shape democratic institutions in accordance with shared values and priorities. This includes participation in, critique of, and dissent from public discourse, as enabled by political freedom and civil rights, voting rights (cf. Sen 1999:38).

Economic facilities: Opportunities to access and utilise economic resources for consumption, production, or exchange. Individual economic entitlements depend on resource ownership, opportunities for utilisation, conditions of exchange (e.g., market mechanisms and pricing), employment opportunities, equitable remuneration, and the relationship between national and individual wealth, as well as its distribution (Sen 1999:38–39). Again, it is not about wealth itself but what wealth allows one to do.

Social opportunities: These pertain, for instance, to health and educational opportunities to enable individuals to enhance their lives and fully realise their substantive freedoms. Such opportunities not only improve health outcomes and reduce mortality but also augment capabilities for participation in political and economic life (Sen 1999:39).

Transparency guarantees: These relate to the freedom to engage with others under guarantees of openness and clarity. They ensure accountability and mitigate corruption and financial malfeasance (Sen 1999:39–40). They also enhance the ability to report such abuses and to access an effective law enforcement system (Beiser 2020:17).

Protective security: This enables societies to function as safety nets for their members, particularly the most vulnerable, for example, in times of economic or social crisis. It encompasses, for example, unemployment benefits, income supplements, relief interventions, but also protection against criminality and violence (cf. Maboloc 2008:11; Beiser 2020:17; Anad and Santos 2007).[7]

Given Sen's multidimensional interrelated conception of freedom/s, the focus now shifts to how the churches in South Africa and subsequently, that of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, participate in the ongoing struggle for freedom.

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[7] For Sen's more detailed view on the relationship between violence, crime and poverty, see Sen 2011, specifically p.11 with specific reference to the South African context.

South African churches and the struggle for political freedom

The struggle for political freedom in South Africans has a protracted and well-discussed history. Most historians trace the origins of apartheid back to 1948, when the all-white National Party ascended to power, excluding all other racial groups and institutionalising apartheid as official government policy. Regarding the response of South African churches,

> [a]fter 1948, the synods, conferences, and assemblies of churches protested against every piece of legislation they considered unjust. Innumerable resolutions were passed against everything designed to further apartheid and entrench discrimination. Countless deputations were sent to … ministers of state to express concern and raise objections. Programmes were initiated to try to deal with racism at the local congregational level. Pastoral letters were published, expressing the mind of the churches at the highest level. Indeed, there was no lack at all of official protest against apartheid, in principle and sometimes in practice. (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:86)

These observations from the seminal text, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, are accurate though not universally applicable to all churches, nor to the same degree, nor consistently over time. Masuku (2014:151) differentiates between churches that supported apartheid, those that rejected it, and those that adopted a stance of "quiet diplomacy" toward apartheid or, as the De Gruchys (2005:56) observe, those who regarded "racial separation as scriptural, some as blatantly unscriptural, and others as pragmatically necessary but not ideal". The principal church that supported (and even theologically legitimised) apartheid was the white Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) – also the "mother church" of URCSA and its antecedents. DRC members dominated government and civil service at all levels, including the police and military. This does not imply that dissenting voices were entirely absent withing, the church, but such dissent occurred at significant personal and professional risk.[8]

English-speaking churches, such as the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church, predominantly opposed apartheid as early as 1948, criticising legislation that deprived black South Africans of parliamentary representation and constitutional rights. Statements repudiating the biblical justification of apartheid also were issued early on by the Congregational Assembly and the Baptist Union (De Gruchy 2005:52). Although the Roman Catholic Church found itself in a precarious position due to the "deep-seated anti-Catholicism in Dutch Reformed and National Party circles" (Cusack 2020), this multi-racial church also resisted apartheid early on (see Abraham 1989). The South African Catholic Bishop's Conference, for example, issued a statement against apartheid

[8] Early DRC opponents include two Stellenbosch theology professors, B.B. Keet (1885–1974) and Ben Marais (1909–1999). However, both remained within the DRC, unlike figures such as Beyers Naudé (1915–2003) and Nico Smith (1929–2010). Originating from prominent Afrikaner clerical backgrounds, Naudé and Smith were ostracised by their communities for their opposition to apartheid. Naudé abandoned a promising leadership trajectory within the DRC, joined the "coloured" DRC, and became director of the Christian Institute (see below). Smith affiliated himself with the "black" DRC, resigning his professorship at Stellenbosch to minister in a black township for several years. Both endured intense scrutiny and harassment from security forces; notably, Naudé was subjected to seven years of house arrest.

in 1952 and strongly opposed racial segregation in its parishes and in its schools, and, in a pastoral letter in 1957, denounced apartheid a "blasphemy" and "intrinsically evil" (Egan 2022:51). The Roman Catholic Church also produced notable and influential figures in the churches' struggle against apartheid, such as the Archbishops of Durban and Cape Town respectively, Dennis Hurley (2015–2004) and Stephen Naidoo (1937–1989) and, of course, Fr Albert Nolan (1934–2022), co-author of the Kairos Document.

The most well-known church responses to apartheid came from the Anglican Church of South Africa. Over time, this church became distinguished by its cadre of clerical activists, including Fr. (later Archbishop) Trevor Huddlestone and Archbishops of Cape Town, such as Geoffrey Clayton (1884–1957), Joost de Blank (1908–1968), and, pre-eminently, Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931–2021). Tutu was also the first black general secretary of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) (1978–1984), general secretary of the All-African Council of Churches (1987–1997), a Nobel Peace laureate (1984) and, after the fall of apartheid, chairperson of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995–2002). In all these capacities, especially during the turbulent 1980s, Tutu was unparalleled in his efforts to internationalise the plight of black South Africans.

The struggle for political freedom was not confined to efforts of individuals or single denominations; rather, ecumenical initiatives played a pivotal role. Examples include the 1949 Rosettenville Consultation, which constituted a formal ecclesiastical repudiation of apartheid by English-speaking churches (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:56). At the Cottesloe Consultation (7–14 December 1960), the South African WCC member churches addressed "the worsening racial situation in the country" (Randall in Masuku 2014:161). Of considerable ecumenical significance was the Christian Institute (CI) of Southern Africa, established in 1963 under the leadership of Beyers Naudé. Its purpose was "[t]o draw attention to the injustice and disruption caused by the apartheid system in South African society and in the churches … [and] to strengthen the resistance of Christians against that system" (Kistner in Masuku 2014:161). Before its banning in 1977, the CI fulfilled its mandate, inter alia, through its newsletter *Pro Veritate* and SPROCAS (the Study Project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society, 1969–1973), in collaboration with the South African Council of Churches (see Duncan and Egan, 2019). The non-denominational Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT), founded in 1963, was instrumental in advancing liberation theology, emphasising the need to put into practice Christ's message to free the poor and oppressed; The ICT was also responsible for the production of the seminal *Kairos Document*.[9]

The Christian Council of South Africa, founded in 1934 (known since 1968 as the South African Council of Churches), progressively adopted a more vociferous stance in its critique of the apartheid regime, a trajectory already presaged in the *Message to the People of South Africa,* delivered at the council's inaugural meeting. In 1975, the (black) DRCA became an observer at the SACC, the ("coloured") DRMC in 1978 and the (Indian) RCA in 1980. In 1979, Sam Buti, moderator of the DRCA, became the president of the SACC. The SACC was, for many years, subjected to state-sanctioned harassment,

[9] This document represents "a moment of truth" in the churches' struggle against apartheid, offering "a Christian, biblical and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa" at the time (see Kairos Southern Africa 2011).

surveillance, and intimidation, culminating in the destruction of its Johannesburg offices by a government-ordered bombing in 1988.

Two other ecumenical bodies of particular relevance to the genesis of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) are ABRESCA (the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa) and the *Belydende Kring* (The Confessing Circle). The former was founded in 1981 under DRCM minister and anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak. It later included theologians, pastors and laity from all four Dutch Reformed (also the white DRC), Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches. ABRESCA exhorted its constituent denominations to recognise apartheid as heretical and to persist in their opposition thereto. The Confessing Circle, established in 1974, sought not only the unification of the four Dutch Reformed Churches, but also "to witness prophetically against the political and economic injustices of the apartheid system" (Kritzinger 2019; De Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio 1990:161–8 on ABRESCA).

Finally, the establishment of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983 was of considerable significance. Although not exclusively ecclesial or ecumenical in nature, the UDF encompassed approximately 700 churches, civic associations, trade unions, sport and student organisations. Led by anti-apartheid luminaries such as Boesak, Tutu, Albertina Sisulu, Oscar Mpetha, and Helen Joseph, the UDF was formed in opposition to the so-called Tricameral Parliamentary System (one separate legislature each for whites, coloureds and Indians, never for black South Africans). The UDF

> … became one of the most successful anti-apartheid organizations in South Africa, garnering a membership of approximately 3 million by 1985. Its activities included the promotion of boycotts, protests, and strikes, pressuring the Apartheid system with their philosophy of ungovernability. (JSTOR n.d.)

The UDM ushered in a new phase in the anti-apartheid struggle, coinciding with the intensification of armed resistance and the declaration of two States of Emergency (July 1985 to March 1986 and June 1986 to October 1990), during which

> [d]etention without trial, torture, the murder of political activists, and the fomenting of violence in black townships, became the day-to-day business of state security agencies. Thousands of people, including many Christians and people of other faith communities were detained tortured and killed. (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:196)

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA)

Modise (2019:2) distinguishes between URCSA's "pre-existence" and "actual history". The former refers to URCSA's preunification history, when it existed as two separate racially defined denominations, the "coloured"[10] Dutch Reformed Mission Church

[10] "Coloured" refers to an apartheid classification of people of "mixed descent" – indigenous Khoisan, European colonists, slaves from the East, and black tribes that migrated from the African interior towards the south (Reformed Family Forum 2017). Under apartheid, white, Indian, black, and coloured South Africans were compelled to reside in segregated areas, maintain separate education systems, and were legally prohibited from intermarrying, among other restrictions. A distinct Indian Reformed Church (later the Reformed Church

(DRMC) and the black Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA). Both grew from the missionary work of the Dutch Reformed Church that started in 1824. In 1829, the DRC Synod formally rejected discrimination based on skin colour, particularly at worship services and holy communion. However, in an about turn, its 1857 synod decided in favour of separate services for different racial groups. This ultimately resulted in the official formation in 1881 of the DRMC and much later, in 1963, the DRCA.[11] The latter two formally unified in 1994, forming URCSA.[12] Today, URCSA is a multicultural and multilingual church with approximately 900,000 members in 783 congregations in 90 presbyteries and seven regional synods distributed all over South Africa, Namibia and Lesotho (Reformed Family Forum, 2017).

The participation of URCSA (and its antecedent bodies, the DRMC and DRCA) in the South African struggle for political emancipation became pronounced only in the latter half of the 1970s, notably upon their accession to the SACC as observers (De Gruchy and De Gruchy 2005:xxiv). Despite their historical and financial ties to the white DRC, these "daughter churches" found it increasingly untenable to maintain silence in the face of systemic injustice. While a comprehensive account of their involvement exceeds the scope of this discussion, the De Gruchys identify two particularly salient contributions: (1) the international declaration of a *status confessionis* regarding apartheid as a heresy, and (2) the adoption of the Belhar Confession. These developments are both historically intertwined.

During the 1982 World Alliance (now Communion) of Reformed Churches (WARC) General Assembly in Ottawa, the DRCM delegation, led by Allan Boesak, proposed the formal designation of apartheid as a heresy, asserting it to be contrary to both the gospel and the Reformed tradition. In its "Declaration on Racism", WARC affirmed this position, recognising the emergence of a *status confessionis* within the South African context. WARC also suspended the Dutch Reformed Church's membership in the organisation and unanimously elected Boesak as its president (until 1991). According to Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2018:12), "from this point onwards Boesak was construed by the news accounts as one of the main spokespersons on apartheid."

That same year, at the DRCM Synod, Boesak, Rev. Isaak Mentor and three lecturers from the University of the Western Cape (where DRMC pastors were trained) (Dirkie Smit, Jaap Durand and Gustav Bam) were appointed to draft a preliminary confession of faith, now known as the Belhar Confession. Adopted in 1986, the confession, though not mentioning apartheid expressly, addressed three issues: the unity of the church, reconciliation, and the justice God wills for the world. It rejected "any doctrine which … sanctions … the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour". As a church called to that "stand where God stands, namely against injustice", the DRMC affirmed its commitment "to stand by people in suffering and need" and "to witness against and strive against any form of injustice and with the wronged." According to De Gruchy and De Gruchy, (2005:193–4) in this,

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in Africa) was established in 1968 and has not joined the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA).

11 The DRCA was formed in 1963 by the joining of the four provincial black Dutch Reformed Mission Churches originally established in 1910, 1932, 1951, and 1952, respectively.

12 For a more on the history of URCSA see its website at https://urcsa.net/history/ as well as Adonis (2002) and Landman (2019).

> … the first confession of faith adopted by a church within the DR tradition since the 17th century … the principles articulated in the *Cottesloe Statement*, as well as *The Message to the People of South Africa*, were now finally and logically developed in a confession of faith by a church which, after years on the periphery, had come to the forefront in the struggle against apartheid.

Today the Belhar Confession is known globally, and its significance in the South African churches' struggle cannot be overemphasised, serving to awaken Christian conscience and provide a theological protest against apartheid. At the unification of the DRMC and the DRCA to form URCSA, Belhar was also included in the confessional basis of the new church.[13]

A lutua continua! The South African Churches and the post-1994 struggle for freedom

After 1994, with political freedom having been achieved, many South African churches faced the question: What next? Many that strongly supported liberation ideals and the struggle were challenged to exercise critical engagement with the ANC government and to sustain their prophetic role in a radically altered political landscape, recognising that "[t]he end of Apartheid will not mean the end of the prophetic ministry of the Church but merely the release of the thrust of that ministry to other areas in society" (SACC Presidential address, 1987, quoted in Görazon Dedication: 2011). This transition proved challenging for many churches, which have, at times since 1994, been accused of relinquishing their prophetic voice (cf. Strydom 1997, Resane 2017, Gribble and Jacobs 2023).[14] Despite such critique, it was clear that the South African struggle for freedom in other forms has remained a central concern for churches, both individually and collectively, since 1994. At an ecumenical level, the most prominent and broadly representative is the South African Council of Churches (SACC).[15] The post-1994 South African context is discussed below in light of Sen's conceptualisation of freedom as multidimensional and the instrumental roles of diverse freedoms.

Economic freedom post-1994?

South Africa currently has the largest economy and highest GDP on the African continent with "low levels of foreign currency debt, a diversified economy, sophisticated financial system, and [a] flexible exchange rate regime" (IMF 2023). Nevertheless, drawing on the title of Nelson Mandela's autobiography, Stellenbosch economist Johan Fourie in his *Our Long Walk to Economic Freedom* (2022a) asserts that the country's "long walk" to political freedom has not ended regarding its economy.

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[13] On the importance of these events in the history of the DRMC and the DRCA, see Cloete and Smit (1984) and Plaatjies Van Huffel (2013).

[14] Cf. Kgatle (2018) goes as far as to say, "Not only did the prophetic voice of the SACC become part of the system, it allowed the system to swallow it."

[15] Some of these initiatives or associations long precede 1994. While some have been mentioned above, others include the National Initiative for Reformation in South Africa, the Southern African Christian Leadership Assembly, the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa, the South African Christian Leaders Initiative, and the National Church Leaders' Consultation (see Pillay 2017).

Fourie (2022b) delineates the post-apartheid South African economy into two periods. The first, from 1995 to 2007, was marked by GDP growth up to 5%, improvement of macroeconomic indicators, and reduction in poverty levels down to 29%. Subsequently, after 2007, this trajectory was reversed. According to Fourie, this was attributable not only to the global financial crisis, but especially due to the adoption of populist policies, including a R500 billion wage bill arising from cadre deployment within government and pervasive "state capture".[16] Consequently, GDP declined to -6% accompanied by a deterioration in the standards of ordinary South Africans. Economically, many South Africans remain far removed from the aspirations underlying earlier government interventions, such as the Reconstruction and Development Plan (RDP 1994) and the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan. A comprehensive analysis of the myriad of local and international factors – including the economic devastation wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic – exceeds the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to note that, on a global scale, South Africa persistently records the highest Gini coefficient (0,63 in 2023), that 1% of the population holds 55% of the aggregate personal wealth (2020), that the poverty rate stands at 62.7% (2023), an unemployment rate at 32,1% (at 59,2% for people between 18 and 24), and that the nation continues to grapple with service-delivery challenges, dysfunctional state-owned enterprises, and deteriorating infrastructure[17] (cf. World Bank Group 2024).

Social opportunities post-1994

With reference to Sen's conception of freedom pertaining to social opportunities – especially in the domains of health and education – significant transformations have occurred in South Africa since the demise of apartheid. The previously racially segregated education departments have been supplanted by a unified system, comprising single departments for both "basic" (primary and secondary) and post-school education.[18] Overall, access to education for previously disadvantaged South Africans has improved markedly (see South African Government 2024a). However, despite the constitutional guarantee of educational rights for all citizens, efforts to redress the enduring legacies of apartheid have yielded mixed results, particularly in rural areas, as

> South Africa's education system leaves many children behind due to crumbling infrastructure, teacher shortages and a lack of educational progress. Only 20% of

[16] This term refers to the wide-spread corruption, estimated by some to amount to 100 billion USD, during the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009–2017). This phenomenon prompted the establishment of the Zondo Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Corruption, and Fraud in the Public Sector (2018–2022).

[17] The national airline carrier (South African Airways) has often had to be bailed out by the government to the tune of billions of rands over the past two decades. Similarly, the South African railway system is largely non-functional, and the national electricity supplier, Eskom, has, since 2007, subjected the country to recurrent rolling blackouts, all of which have exacerbated South Africa's economic challenges.

[18] Black student numbers increased from 50.4% in 1994 to 79.4% in2020 of the total number of South African students. This growth is partly attributable to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which provides funding to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. By 2019, 42% of tertiary students were beneficiaries of NSFAS (Masutha and Motala 2023:200). However, NSFAS has also faced persistent allegations of underfunding, financial mismanagement, and administrative delays (cf. Universities of South Africa 2023).

> public schools are properly functional, with an enormous gap between the results they achieve and the outcomes of the other 80% of public schools. … (Somer 2023)

In the realm of healthcare—specifically child mortality, undernourishment, and HIV infection rates—UNICEF acknowledges that, since 1995, South Africa has made substantial progress, particularly in expanding access to primary healthcare (UNICEF South Africa 2023). Other sources, however, adopt a less sanguine perspective. The government itself concedes the prevalence of "old and often poorly maintained [public] health facilities" and an insufficient number of medical professionals, while additional challenges include protracted waiting times, poor hygiene and infection control, shortages of medicines and equipment, and inadequate record-keeping (Maphumulo and Busisiwe 2019). Regrettably, the majority of South Africans (71%) are dependent on public healthcare. Ironically, the minority (27%), those with access to medical insurance and private healthcare, enjoy services among the best globally (Rensburg 2021).

Transparency guarantees

The freedom to engage with others under conditions of transparency and openness constitutes another formidable challenge for South Africans. With a Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) score of 41 (2023), South Africa ranks significantly "below the global average…stumbling into the category of flawed democracies." This does not imply that corruption was absent prior to 1994; rather, it underscores the gravity of the present situation. The index pertains solely to public sector corruption, but according to PWC (2024), by 2020, 42% of private South African companies had experienced bribery and corruption, compared to a global average of approximately 30%. This trend persists despite the existence of numerous governmental agencies tasked with combating corruption (see South African Government 2024b), including a Special Investigating Unit and an Investigating Directorate on Corruption. The President reported in the 2024 State of the Nation Address that over 1,300 corruption convictions (500 involving government officials) were secured in the preceding four years (SONA 2024).

Protective security

The provision of protective security, understood as societal safety nets in times of economic and social crisis—such as unemployment benefits and government social grants (predominantly old age and child grants, supporting 26 million out of a population of 62 million)—is present, albeit under continual pressure regarding sustainability. South Africa's response to the Covid-19 pandemic exemplifies its capacity to address health, social, and economic disasters, having "been a standout in the region"—not least by "working with faith leaders to fight against Covid-19…" (Devermont and Mukulu 2020).

Nevertheless, even a cursory review of available literature reveals the acute vulnerability of South Africans, particularly the impoverished, to violent crime. South Africa records the highest overall crime rate in Africa and the fifth highest globally (surpassed only by Venezuela, Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, and Haiti) (World Population Review 2024). This includes the third highest incidence of rape (after Botswana and Lesotho), and Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg are the only three cities worldwide to have recorded more than 2,000 murders in 2022/23 (BusinessTech 2023).

URCSA and the "other freedoms" post-1994[19]

In some circles, it has been observed that, "that with the dawn of democracy in 1994, URCSA went into a slumber and seized to be prophetic as in the days of apartheid" (Fortuin 2015:5). According to others, however, URCSA not only played a pivotal role in the struggle for political freedom prior to 1994, but as a member of the ecumenical church in South Africa, and independently, it continues to engage with Sen's other freedoms. How then does URCSA do this?

First, since 1994, there is has been an explicit consciousness within URCSA that the struggle for freedom, in its various dimensions, remains unfinished. This is evident in the manner in which URCSA has consistently acknowledged this across multiple platforms and at all levels of church governance, including resolutions and declarations at regional and general synodal assemblies, but also through media statements, pastoral letters and in its church newspaper, *URCSA News*.

We will now discuss a few examples of the above. In relation to economic freedom post-1994, URCSA has frequently addressed issues of poverty and economic justice. One notable example was the establishment of an Economic Justice Working Group, which reported to the URCSA Fifth General Synod in 2008 (URCSA 2008a, cf. Beukes and Plaatjies van Huffel 2016). Furthermore, URCSA identified the challenges of poverty, unemployment and economic justice as strategic priorities in its Strategic Plan, 2016–2024 (URCSA 2016a:18). URCSA also expressed concern for affordable, quality education in the context of the #FeesMustFall campaign (2015–2016), issuing a pastoral letter to congregations following the 2016 General Synod (URCSA 2016b).

URCSA responded to the widespread violence, looting, and destruction in parts of the country in 2021, following the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma on corruption charges, as well as to corruption more broadly (URCSA 2021a and b). Regarding transparency and corruption, URCSA was a co-signatory to two "strongly-worded letters" addressed to government in 2012, and in 2015, its leadership called on members to participate in the March Against Corruption, asserting that "ordinary citizens need to take responsibility again to ensure that corruption is eradicated in every sphere of society" (Plaatjies van Huffel 2018).

At its 2016 General Synod, URCSA called for action "to prevent and counter incitement to gender-based violence" (URCSA 2016c). In response to violence—particularly xenophobic violence and violence against women and children—the URCSA issued strong statements following waves of xenophobic attacks in South African townships (2008; 2015; 2019) (URCSA News 2008b; URCSA 2019a). The URCSA Cape Synod also urged its congregational, service, and witness ministries to develop a framework for addressing South Africa's "culture of violence" (URCSA Cape Synod 2019b). Regarding the HIV/AIDS pandemic, see URCSA's response (2005), and regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, see URCSA (2021a) and *URCSA News* (1:2021).

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[19] It is important to acknowledge that, although this essay focuses on URCSA's role as a denomination in the struggle for liberation both prior to and following 1994, numerous individual URCSA-affiliated academic theologians – some of whom are now deceased – have participated in "the struggle" for decades. Notably, some of these individuals have either not identified with, or have actively resisted, the designation of "public theologian." These include figures already referenced or cited, such as Dirkie Smit, Jaap Durand, Nico Koopman, Tinyiko Maluleke, Vuyani Vellem, Russel Botman, Thias Kgatla, Klippies Kritzinger, Christina Landman, and Mary-Ann Plaatjies van Huffel, among others.

Second, URCSA's concern regarding the absence of Sen's freedoms is manifest in a range of initiatives and ministries at both congregational and synodal levels. Examples include the Cape Empowerment Trust in the Western Cape, which seeks to enhance educational opportunities through programmes and bursaries spanning early childhood to adult education (URCSA 2014), and URCSA's collaboration with the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRASD) in health programmes combating HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Notably, URCSA's partnership with Badisa, a non-profit organization jointly administered with the Dutch Reformed Church (Western Cape), is

> committed to social development through 134 community-based programmes in the Western and parts of the Northern and Eastern Cape …. [committed to] serve, justice, excellence and stewardship … providing social welfare services to ALL in need, irrespective of their age, gender, race or religion (Badisa 2024).

Third, it is especially significant that in all the aforementioned examples of URCSA's post-1994 responses, the church explicitly recognises the inextricable linkages between various forms of freedom, which is central to Sen's multidimensional and instrumental understanding of freedom. Frequently, "unfreedoms" are connected to underlying, often subtle, vestiges of historic or emergent racism and discrimination—no longer solely white against black, but also across racial groups and socio-economic strata. The correlation between inadequate education and economic injustice is often highlighted (cf. Botman 2006), as are the connections between economic injustice and unequal access to security and health, and their roles in exacerbating corruption, unemployment, and criminality. In its statement on the widespread violence and looting in 2021, URCSA declared:

> WE are aware that the current DESTRUCTION is fuelled by systemic looting and corruption, WHICH OVER DECADES, dismantled our socio-economic systems, eroded the basic tenets … AND DESTROYED the moral fibre of our society. (URSCA 2021) [emphasis in the original]

Fourth, and finally, URCSA's ongoing advocacy for instrumental freedoms is frequently grounded in the church's cherished Belhar Confession. URCSA reminds South Africans that these freedoms must be considered in dialogue with the confession's three central themes: unity, reconciliation, and justice. For instance, in delivering the annual Belhar Confession Lecture (2022), former URCSA General Synod Moderator, Thias Kgatla, identified "seven interrelated areas" that epitomise contemporary South Africa and are addressed by Belhar. Among these are "[r]acism in all its forms and manifestations in society," "[f]emicide: the killing of women or girls by men," and the observation that "[economic] [i]nequality leads to corruption; corruption leads to further inequality" (Kgatla 2024:5). As Beukes (in Pillay 2022:14) notes:

> the Belhar Confession … [has been] used on various topics and challenges such as injustice, poverty, corruption, ethical leadership, racism, xenophobia,

discrimination, the LGBQTI discourse, HIV/AIDS, globalisation, violence, gender-based violence, among others.

Conclusion

This essay has examined freedom through the lens of philosopher and economist Amartya Sen, with particular attention paid to the multidimensional and instrumental character of freedom(s). It has provided an overview of the role of South African Christian churches in the struggle for political liberation prior to 1994, focusing specifically on the contributions of URCSA. The discussion then turned to instances of "unfreedom" in post-1994 South Africa, as understood through Sen's framework of instrumental freedoms, and considered the ongoing commitment of URCSA in this regard. It has been demonstrated that, notwithstanding periodic critique, URCSA has maintained its prophetic witness through its ministries, and that in these endeavours the multidimensional nature of freedom is consistently acknowledged—often against the backdrop of the Belhar Confession, itself a product of the struggle for political freedom.

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