

On the Failed State, Artificial Arguments, and Artificial Intelligence

A Non-Contribution

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Introduction

The narrative of a failed South African state has gained currency among some prominent prophets of Armageddon as well as shadowy influencers who have penned an assortment of articles and editorials in this regard. The idea is propounded as a certainty at the high tea gatherings of lightly shaded Afro-pessimists, oppositionists, and patrons of local barber shops. Transitory moments and anecdotal realities are theatrically played out to fit a propensity towards tabloid absurdity. When violent crimes are televised live, when we witness extended hours of load-shedding, we as the elite pursue all avenues to avoid assuming responsibility for some of the current excesses of capitalism and governance failures. Instead, our common refrain is that the state has failed. There is another emergent plot point in this narrative which we do not address here, namely that of the national political scene moving from Ramaphoria to Ramaphobia (when I told a colleague four years ago that we should guard against sliding into Ramaphobia, she/he found this really objectionable).

A calm, reflective reader inevitably feels a sense of obfuscation and indignation when engaging with the subterranean pessimism embodied in the failed state narrative, no matter how it is communicated. The realities of transition and legitimate concerns are infantilised to fit a self-serving narrative. The rantings of the ‘Karens’¹ of South Africa are often replicated with superficial sophistication in submissions by academics, civil society activists and senior business leaders. To illustrate the growth in this phenomenon and the concomitant superficiality, it is necessary to refer to some of these in a more direct way by summarizing a selection of these articles and editorials. In the sequel to this non-contribution, we will draw extensively on narrative economics, a branch of economics that theorizes the correlation between popular narratives and economic behavior, decisions, and outcomes. There we will argue that the failed state narrative is influencing investment decisions and inhibiting the agency of state and non-state actors.

Before we summaries the articles by various commentators, we should refer to some basic definitions of failed or failing states from the metaverse, which serve to reinforce the superficiality of some of the current rants. Energetic and naïve outbursts often emanate from a type of robotic replication of data packaged as the truth by sane and reasoning non-machines. To take a step beyond disingenuousness, the approach that follows seeks to turn the tables in the discourse of the influencers by using Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a way that

1 Karen is pejorative slang for an obnoxious, angry, entitled, and often racist middle-aged white woman who uses her privilege to get her way or to police other people's behaviour.

seeks to put back the imperatives of judgment as we engage data and information casually packaged as knowledge, otherwise what we refer to here as Artificial Arguments (AA - not the anonymous call line for addicts).

The definitions that appear to prevail from a deeper online search is from the political scientist Robert Rotberg, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It is no coincidence that these are from the global North, which has been central in manufacturing consent about the idea of failed states, often used in turn to justify military and non-military interventions in order to secure its vested interests. According to Rotberg (2002), a failed state is 'a nation that can no longer claim legitimacy or perform the minimum functions of government, a condition that can result from civil war, international isolation, or domestic upheaval'. The Fund for Peace and *Foreign Policy Magazine* (2020) describes a failed state as 'a state that is failing to provide the basic functions and responsibilities of a sovereign government, including internal security, rule of law, and service delivery'.

For its part, USAID (2021) characterizes a failed state as one that is 'unable or unwilling to provide the basic functions necessary to meet the needs of its citizens, including security, health, education, and economic opportunity'. From these definitions, we can deduce that a failed state is a political entity that is unable or unwilling to provide the essential functions necessary to meet the needs of its citizens, such as internal security, rule of law, service delivery, health, education, and economic opportunity. States fail because of several factors, including civil war, domestic upheaval, and international isolation, contributing to the loss of legitimacy or the capacity needed to govern effectively.

Failed states endanger the safety and well-being of their citizens by failing to fulfil their essential responsibilities and obligations. The definitions outlined above underscore the importance of a government's ability and obligation to meet its citizens' needs and highlight the consequences of failing to do so. It is important to avoid the possible accusation of bias and conflict of interest, to offer a rejoinder, and to demonstrate the artificial characteristics of the emergent headlines that South Africa is already a failed state, or on the brink of becoming one. The approach used here is to disrupt this narrative by using AI to problematize the non-natural and often stylized state failure narrative. Readers should forgive the author for occasional lapses when he nails his own colors to the mast instead of only allowing artificial intelligence to answer back.

Selected articles advancing the failed state narrative.

Twenty-one articles and editorials about South Africa as a failing or failed state are summarized below. The articles have been chosen to give wide editorial leeway to vent their opinions as intellectual intervention. Not all the articles affirm the narrative of a failed state; some provide a counter-narrative.

Claire Bissek, 'Let's face the facts, South Africa (SA) is already failing,' *Financial Mail*, 25 April 2023

Bissek argues that South Africa is in serious trouble, with low investment, slow growth, and depleted growth drivers and fiscal buffers. She believes the country's economic vulnerability, fiscal fragility, and political uncertainty make it difficult to see how it can pull itself out of its current situation. Although President Cyril Ramaphosa and business leaders are optimistic that 'practical joint action' in three areas - energy, logistics, and crime and corruption - will

turn the economy around, Bisseker views the damage in these areas as too deep and entwined with vested political interests for any big reversal. She believes a complete change of heart and reform in nearly every area of the economy is required to turn things around, which in her view, is unlikely given the track-record of the ruling ANC. Bisseker cites the decline in the education system, low fixed investment, and dysfunctional government departments as further evidence of the country's structural decline, which began in 2009 and had been gathering pace ever since. Bisseker does not explicitly cite state capture in this context. While she acknowledges that the private sector and civil society are taking up some of the slack left by the state, she argues that systemic change is needed, which she sees little hope of achieving in the current climate.

Prof Steven Friedman, 'The 'Failed State' Fiction', April 2023

Prof Friedman argues that the term 'failed state' is a prejudice imported by some South Africans who have a bias against states that Caucasians do not run. Friedman notes that while criminal violence and poor government performance are issues in South Africa, labelling it a 'failed state' is unhelpful and makes little sense. He argues there is no such thing as a failed state, and that academics and journalists popularised the term close to the US security establishment following the September 11th attacks to justify the US government's intervention in states perceived as not strong enough to curb anti-Western terrorism. Friedman contends that instead of labelling states as 'failed,' we should look at whom they are failing and for whom they are working, as all states have both successes and failures. He concludes that the 'failed state' prejudice is a colonial hangover that needs to be abandoned if we want to deal with our problems effectively.

Business Day/BusinessLive, Editorial, 2 May 2023

This editorial suggests that the ANC wants a puppet president who will follow their populist inclinations rather than a strong president who will make tough decisions in the nation's interests. According to this publication, President Cyril Ramaphosa is seen as someone who cannot manage conflict within the governing party and can only speak his mind to the extent that the ANC allows him. The failures of the ANC in government are attributed to its tendency to regard itself as wiser than the collective expertise gathered in state departments, and to ignore its own accountants. The poisoned political climate within the ANC and the sense of panic as the 2024 general election approaches is seen as the real source of mixed messaging on important matters. The editorial concludes that the ANC will not allow a strong Presidency and wants a puppet in that office to improve its electoral chances next year.

BusinessTech, Speech by Magda Wierzycka, 2 May 2023.

In the speech, business tycoon Magda Wierzycka exclaims that South Africa has already transitioned into a failed state, primarily due to municipalities' failure to provide essential services. Wierzycka highlights the constitutional responsibility of municipalities to ensure services such as electricity and water, emphasizing their influence in this domain. She points out that when municipalities fail to fulfil their obligations, it has severe repercussions for the entire nation, with water resources being particularly precarious. The speech cites the Institute of Risk Management South Africa's (IRMSA) warning about the country's lack of decisive, ethical, and courageous leadership. This leadership deficit poses a significant risk and could push SA further towards state failure. The IRMSA report stresses the need for initiative-taking measures to stimulate economic growth and address the nation's challenges. Wierzycka's draws attention to the urgent need to address the ineffective provision of

essential services by municipalities and emphasises the critical role of ethical leadership in mitigating the risk of state failure.

Busani Ngcaweni, 'Is South Africa (really) a failed state?' *City Press*, 27 February 2022

Ngcaweni examines multiple reports that South Africa is on the verge of becoming a failed state by institutions such as the World Bank, Eunomix and the World Economic Forum. In this article, he discusses the two narratives that arise from these reports, one of them being the 'official line' that these are just conservative interest groups reasserting the old storyline that Black governments cannot lead. He contends that the state is defined by its capacity to exercise power over a given territory - and that the failure of public infrastructure can cause the state to be viewed as illegitimate by its citizens and the international community. The article concludes by discussing the counter-narrative to that of South Africa being a failed state, calling for recognizing the complexities of the situation and moving beyond simplistic cultural and racial typecasting of current realities.

Richard Cookson, 'South Africa is on the road to becoming a failed state', *Bloomberg*, 29 March 2023

Richard Cookson reflects on the state of South Africa, observing pervasive issues such as corruption, crime and electricity blackouts that hold the country back. Cookson argues that these problems stem from deep-rooted themes of corruption and theft that have persisted since the post-apartheid era, even under President Ramaphosa's leadership, despite initial hopes for change following his election in 2018. He says South Africa faces an alarming risk of becoming a failed state, grappling with high unemployment rates, a struggling economy, and capital flight. The article sheds light on the country's poor ranking on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and its recent naval exercises with China and Russia, which are unlikely to instill confidence in potential investors. Looking ahead to the next general election scheduled for 2024, Cookson suggests that the African National Congress's vote share is expected to slip below 51%, making it unlikely for any other party to secure a majority. This scenario indicates that a coalition government is the most probable outcome.

Jason Musyoka, 'Is South Africa a failed state?' *City Press*, 20 September 2020:

Musyoka challenges the claims circulating in the media that South Africa is on the verge of becoming a failed state. Musyoka rejects the notion that South Africa can be compared to countries like Somalia, Afghanistan, or Sudan, which he characterizes as 'rubbish dumps'. Using the Weberian school of thought to define a failed state, Musyoka argues that South Africa needs to meet the criteria. According to this perspective, a failed state exhibits persistent political violence, deep conflict, and intense competition among warring factions. Musyoka asserts that while there are areas of discontent in South Africa, it is nowhere near the dire circumstances seen in Somalia or Afghanistan. Musyoka criticizes the Africa Report and the Eunomia Group for providing weak analyses and projections that fail to capture the complex realities of South Africa. He emphasises that black South Africans should not be portrayed as the 'wretched of the earth,' and issues such as slow service delivery, corruption, and law enforcement gaps should not be oversimplified or seen linearly. In conclusion, Musyoka calls for honest, critical, and historically informed debates regarding the state of South Africa. He encourages a nuanced understanding of the country's challenges and complexities rather than succumbing to sensationalized claims of imminent failure.

Eeben Barlow, 'SA's ability to function as a democracy is increasingly questionable', *The Citizen*, 3 May 2023

Eeben Barlow, chair of Executive Outcomes, raises serious concerns about South Africa's ability to function as a democracy, suggesting it is teetering on the brink of failing. Barlow points to various alarming factors, including the recent FATF (what does this represent?) grey listing, a deteriorating economy, a faltering political trajectory, inadequate provision of basic services by the government, rising voter anger, rampant crime and corruption, deliberate sabotage of critical infrastructure, increasing militancy, frequent kidnappings, and a perceived weak judiciary. As a result, both domestic and foreign investors are becoming increasingly apprehensive and withdrawing their support. To address these issues, the author emphasises the urgent need to eradicate corruption at all levels of government and society. Barlow calls for a solid commitment to transparency and accountability towards the electorate, advocating for an independent judiciary free from political interference. Additionally, creating an appealing economic climate that attracts foreign direct investment is crucial. Without the leadership's unwavering dedication to implementing these measures, the article warns that South Africa will become a failed or even a collapsed state, with devastating consequences for its future.

Richard Calland, 'South Africa: A nation struggling, yet not a failed state', *Mail & Guardian*, 1 June 2022

Calland challenges the application of the term 'failed state' to South Africa. Calland argues that a failed state should not be relative but absolute. He emphasises that South Africa's challenges should be compared not to developed nations like Australia but to countries experiencing severe instability. Calland contends that the South African government maintains a legitimate grip on the security apparatus despite manifold weaknesses, distinguishing the nation from the catastrophic failures seen in Yemen, Somalia, Syria, Chad, or the Central African Republic.

University of Pretoria News, 'Is South Africa a failing state?' 11 November 2022

This article captures the discussions by a panel hosted by the University of Pretoria. Experts debated whether South Africa could be considered a failing state under the theme: 'Evaluating South Africa's Statehood: Failing Government or Failing State?' Professor Sandy Africa, Professor Danny Bradlow, and former Director-General of National Treasury, Dondo Mogajane, called for nuanced debate and careful use of language in this conversation. While acknowledging the government's failure to meet all public service delivery expectations, the panelists agreed that South Africa is not a failed state. They singled out the country's functioning institutions, legitimate democratic processes, and comparative strengths in elections and freedom of speech. However, they cautioned that if warning signs are ignored and challenges go unaddressed, South Africa could face more significant societal fractures and citizen uprisings. The discussion also delved into the KwaZulu-Natal uprisings in July 2021, which exposed the state's limited ability to protect its citizens. Professor Africa emphasised the importance of sustainable development and a transformative political culture to avoid further conflict. The panel concluded that while the South African government may fail in service delivery, the state remains robust. By recognizing the country's strengths, addressing existing challenges, and fostering inclusive development, South Africa can navigate a path away from catastrophic consequences and strive for a more prosperous future.

Brutus Malada, 'Let's not beat about the bush — South Africa is a failed state, now let's all stand up and fix it,' *Daily Maverick*, 5 September 2022.

In this opinion piece, Brutus Malada boldly declares that South Africa has reached a state of failure. For him, failure stems from the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a privileged few, leading to widespread poverty and destitution among most of the population. Malada urges a comprehensive examination of the underlying causes of this failure and the development of effective solutions. He writes about the erosion of accountability mechanisms, particularly within Parliament, and points to the pervasive influence of corrupt individuals in the country's governance. Despite the grim assessment, Malada maintains an optimistic outlook, emphasizing the importance of constructive public discourse to address the pressing challenges faced by South Africa. PS: we will not judge Malada by recent revelations that he made few millions for participating in an intellectual crime – the authoring of the 'unauthorized' biography where not only did the subject actively participate, but he also paid for the project.

African Leadership Programme [online], 'South Africa - a failed state?', February 2023

This article discusses the current state of South Africa and its potential to become a failed state. It contends that the government and state have failed due to the blurred lines between government, state, and party, allowing for poor service delivery, corruption, and the deployment of weak cadres. However, the author also presents counterarguments, such as government agencies successfully measuring and reporting on their performance, census-taking, and the judiciary system. It concludes that South Africa is an increasingly fragile state with weak capacity in many areas that have not delivered on the promises of democracy. The article suggests that the conflation of party, government, and state, with too few checks and balances, has allowed for rampant looting of the future of South Africa's children and the destruction of hope for all. The article ends with a call to action to address the issues facing South Africa and to recognize the impact of its colonial legacy.

Eunomix Business and Economics, South Africa risks becoming a failed state by 2030, cited by ENCA on 13 September 2020

According to a report by this Johannesburg-based political and economic risk consultancy, South Africa is on a trajectory towards a potential economic and political collapse by 2030 unless significant changes are made to the country's economic model and the implementation of growth-friendly policies. The report, cited by ENCA on 13 September 2020, attributes the elevated levels of inequality to apartheid-era laws and criticizes post-independence governments for their failure to generate sufficient job opportunities. Eunomix projects that by 2030, South Africa's security ranking will be near the bottom among more than 180 countries, while its prosperity levels will resemble those of Bangladesh or Côte d'Ivoire. The consultancy suggests that the government should pursue a 'dual track' strategy in response to these alarming predictions. This approach entails maintaining robust social support systems while adopting an aggressive special economic zone policy that promotes growth and employment, albeit potentially at lower wages. The report highlights the urgency for South Africa to address these issues and offers a potential path forward to avert the predicted collapse. By implementing growth-friendly policies and tackling economic inequality, the country may be able to redirect its trajectory towards a more prosperous and stable future.

Oscar van Heerden, 'Is South Africa a failing or failed state? Let us stop with the useless labels', *Daily Maverick*, 22 September 2020

van Heerden examines the criteria used to define these terms and questions their relevance in South Africa's unique historical trajectory, including colonialism and apartheid. He acknowledges that while South Africa faces significant challenges, it has also achieved notable milestones in its journey towards democracy. These accomplishments include the establishment of a progressive Constitution and Bill of Rights, an independent judiciary, and transparent government budget processes. van Heerden argues that these achievements should be considered when evaluating a country's progress. To further strengthen the young democracy, he proposes prioritizing addressing people skills, race issues, gender-based violence and cultural considerations. He mentions transparency and openness as vital characteristics of a prosperous state. He cites the democratic decision-making process in reopening public schools during the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of the country's commitment to transparency. He closes it by calling for a nuanced understanding of South Africa's complex realities, considering its challenges and achievements.

BusinessTech, 'South Africa is running out of time,' 2 April 2023

This article is based on an interview with the economist Prof Daniel Meyer. According to the article, he says there are growing concerns about the country's risk of becoming a failed state within the next seven years are discussed. He warns that the country's critical systems, such as service delivery, economic growth, and equal development, are delicate. If the situation does not improve, South Africa could quickly deteriorate into a failed state by 2030. Using his methodology based on the Fragile State Index, Meyer rates South Africa just under 5/10, indicating a middling situation with a negative outlook. The article cites experts who have expressed similar concerns about power cuts, service delivery failures, and the lack of decisive leadership. However, it emphasises that there is still an opportunity for the government and people of South Africa to change course by addressing corruption, promoting ethical leadership, and exercising their collective voice through informed voting.

Ebrahim Harvey, 'Why South Africa is a failed state: unveiling the socioeconomic crisis,' *News24*, 19 April 2023

In this article, Ebrahim Harvey forcefully avers that the country has become a failed state, citing the current socio-economic crisis as the worst in the country's history. Harvey challenges a previous article by Richard Calland, which disputed South Africa's failed state status, critiquing Calland's approach for relying on a top-down, bureaucratic, and legalistic perspective rather than considering the lived socio-economic conditions of the citizens. Harvey contends that the undeniable reality is that these conditions have been deteriorating, resulting in unprecedented levels of Black poverty, unemployment, and social inequalities, effectively positioning South Africa as the most unequal country globally.

Paul Hoffman, 'South Africa's downward trajectory: a struggle against failure,' *Daily Maverick*, 20 April 2022

Hoffman asserts that although South Africa is not yet a failed state, it is on a dangerous path towards that end state. He submits that the country is grappling with rampant corruption and a lack of trust in the government's ability to address pressing issues like poverty, unemployment, and inequality. Hoffman emphasises the urgency of combatting corruption and rebuilding public trust to prevent further deterioration. The article underscores the need

for effective measures and reforms to restore confidence, safeguarding South Africa from the brink of failure.

Max du Preez, 'Are we on a slippery slope to a failed state?' *Discovery South Africa Good News*, 2 December 2023

Du Preez argues that despite the prevailing challenges and widespread pessimism, the nation has the potential for positive transformation through effective leadership and active citizenry. He further highlights the need for a balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses, urging against despair. Finally, he envisions a future where South Africa can regain its stability, optimism, and global reputation by addressing education, corruption, and economic policies.

Eugene Brink, 'SA may be a failed state, but it is not a failed society', *PoliticsWeb*, 24 April 2023

In a thought-provoking article, Brink presents a compelling argument that while South Africa teeters on the brink of becoming a failed state, its resilient people persistently step up to address the shortcomings of a deteriorating government. Brink acknowledges the presence of numerous instances that exemplify the state's failures, such as dysfunctional municipalities and collapsing public services. However, he also highlights notable exceptions that defy this narrative, including the Western Cape Provincial Government, Midvaal, and uMngeni Local Municipalities, which exhibit some functionality. Moreover, Brink emphasises that despite these failures, South Africans still possess agency and a diverse array of individuals and groups beyond the government who actively combat decay and strive to enhance their quality of life. These include community members who clean parks or streets, the private sector, farming communities, taxpayer associations, and community policing forums. These examples illustrate the resilience and determination of South African society to be effective and improve their immediate surroundings.

The article concludes that while the state may falter in several ways, South Africa as a society has not completely succumbed to failure. The actions of its people and the presence of functional entities demonstrate that the spirit of resilience and collective effort remain strong, providing hope for the future. By highlighting these examples, Brink encourages a more nuanced perspective that recognizes both the state's failures and the ongoing efforts of individuals and groups to create positive change in South Africa.

Sue Heystek, 'How to invest for the possibility of a failed state,' *BizNews*, 17 May 2023

Heystek discusses the increasing concerns surrounding the potential economic collapse of SA. She highlights a feature in the respected business journal *Financial Mail* by Claire Bisseker, titled 'SA's Doomsday Clock,' which has sparked significant attention within the investment community. The feature provides a detailed analysis of SA's economic and financial trends, with development economist Claude de Baissac warning of an impending debt crisis in 2025 and the potential for South Africa to become a failed state by 2030 if the current mismanagement persists. Heystek advises investors, particularly those unable or unwilling to leave South Africa, to protect their assets by diversifying internationally. She suggests selling properties (except in the Western Cape), considering rental options, investing in accessible tax-free options, buying gold, opening foreign bank accounts, utilizing offshore investment platforms, acquiring in-demand skills, exploring cryptocurrencies, and even exploring international residency. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance

of seeking professional advice and mentions Magnus Heystek, a director, and Investment Strategist at Brenthurst Wealth, as a contact for further information.

Pitting AA Against AI

As these summaries demonstrate, regardless of perspective and persuasion, a growing number of public intellectuals and commentators are planting the idea of the country travelling along a trajectory towards a failed state, or at least highlighting a reality of episodic failure. Assessing these narratives is complex, given the multifaceted definitions and the identified features of failure. While some indicators of a failing state are flashing, based on the dominant definitions, which incorporate issues of corruption and poor service delivery, some factors suggest the country is not yet a failed state, such as its ability to hold free and fair elections, the presence of resilient and independent courts, a functional and thriving tax authority, and a robust business sector that survives regardless of what happens to the state. We have a vibrant fourth estate and active non-governmental organisations. Although many elect to downplay this, there is a state agency called the South African Social Security Agency that pays over fourteen million grants every month, without fail.

Whether South Africa is a failed state depends on one's definition and criteria. Therefore, it is essential to take a nuanced approach to this issue and to consider all the factors at play. Making use of the latest language learning model, ChatGPT, helps to avoid bias and to ensure a less emotive response. (Google's Bard was also used to answer the same questions listed below, and answers were consistent with ChatGPT). The chatbot's utility is that it has different ideas based on machine learnt definitions of the concept, which is contrasted with the facts amassed alongside writings about South Africa. In a way, technology is used to talk back, its claims to political neutrality notwithstanding.

We started by asking Change: Is South Africa a failed state? The response was, no, South Africa is not considered a failed state. We asked the platform to *elaborate*, and it responded as follows:

While the country faces numerous challenges such as elevated levels of crime, unemployment, poverty and inequality, it has a functioning government, an active civil society, and a strong and diverse economy. South Africa has a well-established democratic system and has held regular free and fair elections since the end of apartheid in 1994. It also has a free and independent media that is able to criticize and hold those in power accountable. Additionally, South Africa has a vibrant civil society that plays a key role in advocating for human rights, social justice and democracy. Furthermore, South Africa has a diversified economy that includes mining, manufacturing, agriculture, and services, and is one of the most industrialised countries in Africa. It is also a member of the G20 group of major economies and the BRICS association of emerging economies, which highlights its economic importance and global influence. However, South Africa still faces significant challenges such as elevated levels of inequality, unemployment and poverty, as well as social and political tensions. The country also faces challenges related to corruption, crime, and service delivery, particularly in some areas where basic services such as water, electricity, and healthcare are lacking. These challenges need to be addressed in order for South Africa to reach its full potential and become a more prosperous and inclusive society.

We then asked a slightly different question: Is South Africa *becoming* a failed state? The answer was:

It is difficult to predict the future of any country, but at present, South Africa is not considered a failed state. However, the country does face significant challenges that could potentially lead to increased instability and social unrest if they are not addressed effectively. Some of the major challenges facing South Africa include elevated levels of unemployment, poverty, and inequality, as well as persistent social and political tensions. In addition, the country has struggled with issues related to corruption, crime, and service delivery in some areas, which have eroded trust in the government and contributed to a sense of frustration among the population. However, South Africa also has many strengths, including a diverse and resilient economy, a well-established democratic system, and a strong civil society. The country has shown resilience in the face of past challenges, such as the transition from apartheid to democracy in the 1990s. The future of South Africa will depend on how well the government and society are able to address the challenges facing the country and work towards a more inclusive and prosperous future. While there are certainly risks and challenges ahead, it is important to recognize that South Africa has many strengths that could help it navigate these challenges and emerge as a stronger and more resilient society.

When asked whether there was hope for South Africa, the chatbot responded as follows:

The road to progress may not be easy, and it requires collective efforts from all sectors of society. However, South Africa has demonstrated the potential for positive change in the past, and with continued commitment, collaboration, and effective governance, there is hope for a brighter future.

Perhaps there is a meeting of minds between the machines and social actors, if we take a leaf from the very few proactive submissions cited above (most say the solution is a change of leadership, read as regime change), together with what ChatGPT or Google Bard commends South Africa should do to avoid becoming a failed state:

- **Strengthen governance and the rule of law:** South Africa should prioritize good governance, transparency, and accountability at all levels of government.
- **Promote economic stability and growth:** It is crucial to implement sound economic policies that promote stability and foster sustainable economic growth. South Africa should focus on attracting foreign investment, diversifying the economy, improving infrastructure, and creating an enabling environment for business development. Addressing high unemployment rates and promoting job creation should also be a priority.
- **Address social inequalities:** South Africa faces significant social inequalities, including income disparities, access to education, healthcare, and basic services. The government should implement policies that promote social inclusion, reduce poverty, and improve access to quality education and healthcare for all citizens. This can help alleviate tensions and foster a more equitable society.
- **Enhance education and skills development:** Investing in education and skills development is crucial for the long-term prosperity of South Africa. The government should prioritize improving the quality of education, especially in disadvantaged areas, and aligning the curriculum with the needs of the job market. This will empower the youth and enhance their employability.
- **Foster social cohesion and national reconciliation:** South Africa is a diverse country with a complex history. Promoting social cohesion, inclusivity, and national reconciliation is essential to

overcome divisions and build a united society. Encouraging dialogue, promoting cultural diversity, and addressing historical injustices can contribute to healing wounds and fostering a sense of national identity.

- **Ensure security and safety:** South Africa should prioritize the safety and security of its citizens. This involves addressing high crime rates, particularly violent crime, through effective law enforcement, community policing, and comprehensive crime prevention strategies. Enhancing border security and combating organized crime are also crucial for maintaining stability.
- **Strengthen institutions and civil society:** Building strong institutions, including an independent judiciary, robust civil society organizations, and a free press, is essential for a functioning democracy. South Africa should ensure the protection of human rights, freedom of expression, and the independence of media organizations to promote transparency and accountability.
- **Engage in regional cooperation:** South Africa should actively engage in regional cooperation initiatives and foster diplomatic relations with neighboring countries and international partners. Collaborating on issues such as trade, security, and migration can bring mutual benefits and contribute to regional stability.
- **Encourage citizen participation and civic engagement:** Active citizen participation and civic engagement are crucial for a vibrant democracy. The government should create mechanisms to involve citizens in decision-making processes, encourage public participation, and listen to the concerns and aspirations of the population.
- **Long-term vision and leadership:** South Africa needs visionary and ethical leadership that can inspire and guide the nation towards a prosperous and inclusive future. Leaders should prioritize the long-term interests of the country over short-term gains and work towards the common good.

It is ironic that this computer program, created in the global North where the failed state was invented to theorize its meddling in the affairs of post-colonial societies, can produce such nuanced results, and more seemingly relevant and straightforward recommendations than the mortal analysts in this country. We hardly need to state that the language learning model aggregates information from millions of sources on the internet. When asked the same questions about a country where data overwhelmingly points to failure, the chatbot responds in the same direction reminding us that stylized debates may trend in news headlines and social media even as the trendline suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

Some analysts and others believe the South African state has already failed. For others, this failure is creeping up, or we (the elite) are creeping up on it. To yet another constituency, the notion of a failed state is an imposed construct that prevents us from building a post-apartheid society that can dislodge a destructive stain of a colonial and separation history. While ChatGPT may calm some of our insecurities, it does not possess the human attribute of hope or our agency to build the nation we can be (and to prove a chatbot right in the process). At a minimum, it is hoped that this non-response from a critical source of Artificial Intelligence would bring much-needed astuteness to those prone to employing mariculture to exorcise themselves of the responsibility to build South Africa we want and deserve to live in.

Finally, what is a state? And under what conditions can it be deemed to have failed? There are various ideological and politically laden definitions of the state, such as Marxist and liberalist ones, which are poles apart. But the most used characterization of the state, as embedded in our constitution, are the three arms of the state: the Executive, the Legislature, and the Judiciary. Has the function of each of these arms of the state failed, or is it failing? The failed state narrative focuses primarily on the role of the executive, specifically its ability to meet

the socio-economic needs of the populace. Against this backdrop, various arguments suggest that the masses will rise in discontent due to poor service delivery, as evidenced by several socio-economic development indicators.

However, this commentary ignores that the executive's failure can be periodically addressed through scheduled democratic elections. The state would be considered failed if it obstructed the masses from participating in the resolution of socio-economic problems through regular, free, and fair elections. Suppose South Africa maintains its status as a functional democracy, supported by regular democratic elections where the dominant party can be ousted, as demonstrated in the last two local government elections (without diminishing the significance of service delivery in the democratic polity). In that case, it provides a pathway to overcome the challenges typically associated with a failed state.

If this pen may borrow ink from Dumisani Hlophe-Tembe commenting in social media, 'I suspect we are not dealing with the failure of the African state, but the failure of the application of the European state in Africa.' ChatGPT agrees: '... Overall, this statement raises valid points about the role of historical legacies in African governance but should be interpreted in conjunction with a broader analysis of the complexities and diversity within African states to comment on this.'

In a way this article challenges political scientists to study closely artificial intelligence trends and uses, and the extent to which they can be harnessed or manipulated to advance agendas that cannot be evaluated or based on political theory and practice.

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