



South Africa's white nationalists are their own worst enemy

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A number of apparently unrelated events has dominated public attention in South Africa during the past several weeks.

On 21 August Adam Catzavelos posted [a video](#) while on holiday in Greece, in which he celebrates the fact that “there is not one k****r in sight.” The clip went viral, and prompted a national outpouring of rage.

Three days later, US President Donald Trump [tweeted](#) that he had instructed Secretary of State Mike Pompeo “to closely study the South Africa [sic] land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers.”

His post came two hours after a short segment aired by Tucker Carlson on *Fox News*, which claimed that South African President Cyril Ramaphosa had “changed the country’s Constitution to make it possible to steal land from people because they are the wrong skin colour”.

And on Thursday last week, Ernst Roets, the deputy CEO of AfriForum, made a submission to Parliament which included a bizarre tirade against communism, a denial that whites had ever “stolen land” (had he heard of the Natives Land Act?), and a sequence of loud dog whistles for his right-wing supporters.

While the connection between these incidents may seem vague, it cuts to the core of South Africa’s present crisis. In different ways, all three are symptoms of a resurgence – or perhaps more accurately, a resurfacing – of white nationalism more than two decades after the end of apartheid. Rather than dismissing the nationalists in our midst, we should pay attention – and oppose them.

Following our first democratic elections in 1994 and the subsequent adoption of the Constitution, a majority of white South Africans enthusiastically embraced the new regime. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and broadcast live across the world, was a public show of forgiveness for the heinous crimes committed under apartheid. For victims, it offered a platform for the expression of deep pain and a way to find out the truth about what had happened in the darkest years of apartheid rule. For many perpetrators, it represented a ticket out of jail. And for millions of white South Africans who had been complicit with a racist system – whether by their action or silence – it signalled an opportunity for redemption.

For a brief period, this fragile arrangement brought a sense of calm and a surprising level of social cohesion. Now, however, the initial euphoria that marked the transition to democracy is fading, and the growth of the economy is slowing.

The tension in the air these days is almost palpable. The dramatic eruption of student protests in 2015 and 2016 sent seismic tremors through our young constitutional democracy, and prompted a vigorous and unprecedented expression of anger from a generation once expected to relinquish the burdens of the past. At the same time, successive corruption scandals and economic decline weakened the ANC, once the party of liberation. In response, former President Jacob Zuma – now facing trial for corruption – resorted to increasingly populist and polarising rhetoric, much of which focused on race.

The dust of that tumultuous period is beginning to settle, and many of us rightfully celebrated the appointment of President Ramaphosa earlier this year. But there are new dangers on the horizon. The revival of the debate about land reform has revealed old divisions lying just beneath the surface. Many white South Africans, interpreting the debate as a threat to their property and safety, have reacted with fear and aggression. These emotions found vivid expression in the events of last week.

A growing minority of white South Africans feels under attack, and cites the government's plan to expropriate certain land without compensation as evidence of a conspiracy against it. This has led to a resurgence of white nationalism, a rise in racial attacks, and increasingly vocal mobilisation by right-wing political groups. High-profile incidents of racism have become more commonplace in recent years as the fabric of reconciliation and non-racialism has frayed.

The sentencing of Vicki Momberg to an effective two years in prison for shouting racist slurs at a black police officer was just one example among many, most of which are never reported. A vicious cycle has emerged in which white South Africans feel threatened by populist rhetoric, retreat further into a default posture of hostility and aggression, and fuel the very same rhetoric.

Meanwhile, white nationalist groups have begun to reach out to sympathetic allies in the rest of what they perceive as the “white world” for support. Groups such as AfriForum, which claims self-righteously to “protect the rights of minorities”, have travelled to Australia, the United Kingdom, and now the United States, spreading false statistics about violence against white farmers in an effort to sow panic and fear. The *Fox News* segment which aired in August followed a visit by AfriForum leaders Kallie Kriel and Ernst Roets to the country in May, during which Mr Roets appeared on the same show. White nationalists have cast themselves as the spokespersons of a vulnerable minority, and have assembled a small network of supporters to drive their agenda internationally. These include such figures as Marian Tupy, a hitherto unremarkable junior researcher at the right-wing Cato Institute who also appeared on Carlson's programme and has since called for the US government to place sanctions on South Africa.

Few reasonable people believe the narrative that these groups are proposing. Ours is a stable and peaceful democracy with a strong civil society, an independent judiciary, and a critical media. Minority rights are firmly entrenched, and white South Africans remain disproportionately wealthy and secure – indeed, they are immensely richer and safer than any other group living in

the country. On the sensitive issue of land reform, the government is targeting only a limited number of farms which were unlawfully confiscated during apartheid, and has pledged repeatedly to abide by the law, uphold property rights, and protect agricultural output.

Instead, the hysterical response of some white South Africans to the prospect of land reform is evidence of an underlying paranoia and sense of fragility. The fear of displacement, after centuries of unchallenged power and privilege, finds expression in increasing attempts to portray the white minority as victims. And the fear of vengeance, itself a tacit acknowledgement of the legacy of apartheid, prompts people like Mr Roets and Mr Tupy to seek assurances from white leaders abroad.

While white nationalists remain a small minority in the country, their resurgence in activity and profile presents a real threat to the success of South Africa post-apartheid. So does their encouragement by prominent leaders in the West. It stokes divisions and perpetuates interracial hatred. It rubs salt in the wounds of those who suffered extreme indignity under apartheid. And it fuels popular resentment of all white South Africans, many of whom have failed to acknowledge or repent for the role that they played in upholding an inhumane regime.

It is by no means a novel statement that AfriForum lacks any factual evidence to substantiate its claims, that it knowingly manipulates information and releases unverified data, that it holds positions that are ahistorical and insensitive to the realities of apartheid, and that its statements offend the dignity of black South Africans.

But what the organisation's leaders and more than 200,000 members fail unfathomably to realise is that their behaviour is self-defeating. They are, in fact, their own worst enemy. By antagonising the vast majority of South African voters, allying with hated and discredited figures, and claiming to represent all white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, they sow the seed of their own demise.

For evidence of this self-sabotage, one need look no further than the response of members of the Constitutional Review Committee in Parliament to Roets' submission. The usually moderate UDM MP Mncedisi Filtane offered an emotional reply:

"I want to thank this gentleman... you have hardened our attitude, that maybe we don't even need a Codesa [on land]. The Constitution has to be amended in a matter of months if we've got such people in the country. And then we can go back to war if need be. That's where you have sent me from now onwards."

The ACDP's Steve Swart addressed Roets directly:

"You've heard people here that are hardening their hearts as a result of what you have said today."

Put simply, the more belligerent and bellicose groups like AfriForum become, the greater the public ire they will attract. In the end, white South Africans will themselves suffer the consequences of a hostile and divided society.

Today, every South African is forced to confront the deep rifts that remain in our society and, most important, to evaluate their place within it. This is especially true of white South Africans, who have retained virtually all of the wealth and privilege they accumulated under apartheid and now dread its removal. Indeed, the questions facing white South Africans cut to the heart of their private and social identities: What is my place here? What is expected of me now? On what terms can I remain?

There is only one way forward for young white South Africans like me. We must fight the resurgence of racism and white nationalism both at home and abroad. We must make the case for a South Africa in which the victims of apartheid's worst abuses are justly compensated, racial inequality is eradicated, and the dignity and security of all are protected.

That will require humility, sacrifice, and a steadfast commitment to justice.