
Daniel, J., Southall, R. and Lutchman, J. *State of the Nation: South Africa 2004 – 2005* HSRC, Cape Town, 2005.

Before embarking on this article the reviewer had to come to terms with two issues. The first was solving an issue of perspective – the book deals with South African current affairs and the author is a close student of these affairs, partially as a result of living through some of the events and debates discussed. Should the reviewer write from a micro perspective and comment on (and in doing so, add to) the issues and the debate, or adopt a more impartial role and provide a review of the book from a macro perspective?

After reading the publication the reviewer put aside his additional thoughts and comments and decided to adopt the latter role, deciding that the volume provided sufficient insights into the varieties and facets of modern day South Africa.

The second issue was one of technicalities – how does one comment effectively on a comprehensive review of all a

country's components (from political wranglings to economic ownership and employment issues while taking in a review of the current state of the dramatic arts and recognising South Africa's culturally diverse makeup) within the confines of a word-limited book review? A focus on a core number of chapters allowed the reviewer to provide an oversight of the publication while remaining within the bounds of brevity.

The publication is the 2005 edition, and the second in the series, of what will emerge as a thorough collection of the events, debates and issues making up the South African socio-economic fabric. Chapters for the 2006 edition have already been commissioned. The structure of the book is straightforward and logical. An inclusive introduction by the three editors outlines the main points of debate and contention of each chapter. In turn, the chapters are grouped into related clusters; politics, economics and society with a fourth cluster focusing specifically on South Africa's role toward the continent.

Each of the chapters deals with quite narrowly focused topics within the authors' wider disciplines. For example, Rummy's chapter under the economy section deals especially with ownership issues and privatisation in the broader economy. Although he touches on issues relating to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a hot button of debate in South Africa, the deeper discussion relating to BEE is held over for Southall to deal with two chapters later. Even this latter chapter on BEE dares not provide an exhaustive view of the topic, but instead deals with BEE in relation to South African corporate capital. BEE as a topic in South Africa has a myriad of channels for discussion, debate and dialogue, and it is perhaps a credit to the editors that they have limited chapters like this to specific contexts.

One of the highest profile debates in South Africa currently is the one dealing with the HIV plague. South Africa has the dubious honour of having the highest number of HIV+ people of any country. The South African president's views on the relationship between the virus and AIDS are well-known, as is the South African government's lack of delivery in this sector. Tim Quinlan and Sarah Willan march bravely into this quagmire of controversy. The chapter deals well with the convoluted relationship between various players in the South African government, opining that some early faults in positioning of lead personnel may have delayed or derailed future delivery. Importantly, the

chapter also briefly examines the effect of the epidemic on the nation's economy. These findings are not fleshed out in other chapters in the economic section of the book and it is up to the reader to draw connections and inter-relationships.

As illustrations of the larger collection of essays, the chapters mentioned above are easily readable and provide short introductions to the central topic. The authors then "set the scene" by providing some succinct detail on the issue under discussion, before embarking on a discussion of the issues and debates surrounding the topic. At times the authors' personal views are explicitly stated; at others their selection of supporting documentation and quotes from leading analysts aids them in stating their cases.

While many of the contributors are drawn from the HSRC, (the volume's publisher and South Africa's statutory research agency), this is somewhat balanced by a selection of academics from southern African universities. (It is good to see a Zimbabwean academic contributing to the volume, given the status of the debate about Zimbabwe on the continent). Finally, an added touch of individuals from the private sector, independent research houses and the media puts the last touches to the author complement.

What are the shortcomings of the publication? If any, they are as a result of an ambitious attempt to record and comment on a transforming and animated society. One small criticism is that while in most cases the chapters are well referenced; in others, only direct quotes are noted, while indirect references to others' work is left without acknowledgement. Inevitably, an ungracious reader may bemoan the absence of a chapter dealing with his or her favourite topic. To this reader I would suggest that they see this particular publication as a contributory volume in a wider work, and to wait eagerly for the following year's edition.

The book is an excellent snapshot of an evolving nation, dealing with internal, domestic, regional and global issues. It serves well as an on-going study to the knowledgeable student, and to the newcomer it is a credible introduction to the complexity that is South Africa.

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