

What Freedom Day Means Today

By Siyabonga Mviko

It is difficult to gauge the true meaning of Freedom Day in South Africa today. There are many reasons to be appeased, which also depend on the social and economic position one occupies, but generally, there is a growing list of things to be unhappy about.

For political elites, as a mini social class, there have been numerous rewards to repeat following the first democratic elections in 1994. It is often joked that while the cost of food, fuel, electricity, and other utilities constantly rises in South Africa, worker wages remain constant or grow only fractionally, in comparison. This cruel situation is not mirrored by the wages of public office holders such as ministers, mayors, and MPs, for example.

Since 1994, the salaries of this group have been increasing in proportion to rises in inflation and changes in the economic conditions of the country. In 2004, the Independent Commission for the Remuneration of Public Office Bearers recommended that then President Thabo Mbeki adjust salaries for judiciary members and politicians by 6%, which he effected. Since then, there have been at least four other hikes of 5%, 4.4%, and more recently, under the current President Ramaphosa, another 2.5%, with the last adjustment of 3% made in 2022.

By contrast, most working class South Africans are taking enormous financial losses. These hardships are as a result of the rising cost of living. While President Ramaphosa approved a 2.5% salary raise for public office bearers in 2016, two years later Treasury hiked the Value-Added Tax by 1%, resulting in a general rise in the price of goods and services, further deepening poverty. This burdening of the 'consumer' was not the last one because recently, most members of the so-called Government of National Unity agreed to further increase VAT, although that has been put on hold and eventually reversed as the EFF and the DA took the matter to court.

Freedom in democratic South Africa has been plagued by other issues besides economic problems. In 2025, 31.9% of the population is unemployed, but something to note is that South Africa's wages for the general workforce and labour tend to be less compared to most developing nations. The International Labour Organization's 2018 report said that "Among low-income and middle-income countries, South Africa and Namibia have the highest inequality, Armenia and Mongolia the lowest." Other 'wage' issues highlighted by the same report relate to the gender pay gap, a problem South Africa has. This is a critical issue, which is further compounded by the fact that South Africa has many single-mother households.

Other problems working class people in South Africa face include limited access to basic services. The fact of loadshedding and now the growing water crisis nationwide are two big issues to beckon. These are not the only ones, there is growing violence in working class communities. Disturbingly, one element of violence on the rise is sexual in nature. One thinks about the recent #JusticeForCwecwe

march several weeks ago while the matter of the disappearance of Joshlin Smith is in court today.

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