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DEMOCRACY FATIGUE AND THE RETURN OF THE STRONGMAN TEMPTATION

When South Africans went to the polls earlier this year, the Government of National Unity (GNU) was heralded as a new dawn, a moment of collective renewal for a weary democracy. After years of division and dysfunction, the GNU promised stability, collaboration, and a shared national purpose. Yet, only months later, the latest Afrobarometer data reveals a more sobering reality: South Africans are losing faith not just in their leaders, but in democracy itself.

According to the survey, fewer than half of South Africans now support democracy, while nearly seven in ten are dissatisfied with how it works. Even more alarming, almost half of respondents say they would support military rule, a sharp increase from just 28% in 2022. This data should ring alarm bells. In a region where South Africa has long stood as a beacon of hope and a model of democratic governance.

The GNU was conceived as a pragmatic response to political gridlock,a coalition built not on ideology but on necessity. It brought together rivals in the hope of stabilizing governance and signaling to citizens that leaders could put the nation first. For a moment, it rekindled the possibility that South Africa could overcome partisanship to deliver for its people. But Afrobarometer's findings suggest that promise is quickly evaporating.

> THE GROWING FLIRTATION WITH MILITARY RULE IS NOT JUST A NATIONAL CONCERN, IT IS A REGIONAL WARNING

Asked whether the GNU has been effective at solving the country's most pressing problems, South Africans are split down the middle. Four in ten say it is working; an equal proportion disagree. The rest are unsure.

This ambivalence speaks to a deeper sense of fatigue. The GNU was meant to be a symbol of unity and reform. Instead, it risks being seen as another elite arrangement, heavy on symbolism and light on delivery. Its perceived ineffectiveness is not only damaging its own credibility but also placing the very idea of a Government of National Unity into disrepute. Across the region, other countries observing South Africa's experiment may now think twice before trying to replicate it.

The heart of South Africa's democratic malaise lies in the daily struggles of its people. Afrobarometer data confirm that unemployment remains the nation's greatest concern, cited by 55% of respondents, followed by crime and security, water, infrastructure, and corruption. Majorities of South Africans rate the government's performance on these issues as poor. Decades of unmet promises have eroded the social contract: citizens continue to participate in elections, but many no-longer believe that participation leads to change.

Democracy, once a symbol of liberation, now feels hollow for those still waiting for its material dividends. It is this disconnect between the procedural success of democracy and the failure of governance that fuels despair. When democracy stops delivering, people begin to question its worth.

Perhaps the most chilling revelation in Afrobarometer's Round 10 findings is the surge in tolerance for military rule.

NEARLY HALF OF SOUTH AFRICANS WOULD ACCEPT A MILITARY TAKEOVER

Nearly half of South Africans now say they would accept a military takeover, an unimaginable prospect for a country that once embodied the triumph of civilian democracy. This flirtation with authoritarianism is dangerous on multiple levels. For decades, South Africa has served as a yardstick for how democracy should be done in Africa, a moral and institutional anchor in a region often beset by instability. To see South Africans themselves wavering in their belief in democratic governance risks sending tremors far beyond its borders.

The timing could not be more precarious. Just last week, Madagascar became the first country in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to register a second successful coup, a troubling development in a region that has long prided itself on relative stability. That fact South Africans are now even entertaining similar sentiments reveals

the depth of disillusionment at home. Compounding the danger is South Africa's own fragile security landscape. The ongoing commission of inquiry, where Police Commissioner General Mkwananzi has been testifying, has exposed just how compromised and underprepared the country's security institutions have become. In such a context, any normalization of military intervention, even rhetorical, becomes perilous. A state that cannot fully trust its security apparatus cannot afford to romanticize military governance.

The very idea of a coup, once unthinkable in South Africa, must not be allowed to enter the realm of possibility.

> HISTORY SHOWS THAT ONCE A DEMOCRACY BEGINS TO TOLERATE AUTHORITARIAN ALTERNATIVES, IT RISKS A SLOW, IRREVERSIBLE SLIDE INTO INSTABILITY

South Africa's democratic health has always carried continental significance. From its early years of post-apartheid transformation to its constitutional jurisprudence and active civil society, the country has been a benchmark for democratic practice in Africa. Its faltering faith in democracy now risks sending a very different message: that even the region's strongest democracy can stumble.

If the GNU, intended as a unifying and stabilizing model, is seen as ineffective or purely symbolic, it could discredit the broader concept of inclusive governance across the continent. At a time when coups and contested transitions are re-emerging from West to Central Africa, the last thing the region needs is democratic backsliding in Pretoria. South Africa's strength has always been its moral authority, derived from its struggle against authoritarianism. To lose that would be to lose not only credibility but influence, and to weaken the democratic spine of Southern Africa itself.

The path forward lies not in despair but in renewal. Afrobarometer's data provide a roadmap for what citizens expect: jobs, security, water, and accountability. The GNU must deliver on these fronts with urgency and conviction. It must also confront its communication gap. Citizens are not just frustrated by poor service delivery; they are disillusioned by the sense that no one is listening. The GNU must make people feel heard again. It must embody transparency, not opacity; competence, not compromise. Above all, it must reaffirm that democracy can still deliver. The only antidote to authoritarian temptation is performance, the visible, tangible improvement of people's lives.

Afrobarometer's findings are not merely statistics; they are a mirror reflecting a nation at a crossroads. South Africans are weary, weary of promises, weary of politics, weary of waiting. But fatigue, if left unchecked, breeds danger. The growing tolerance for military rule is not just a measure of frustration; it is a symptom of a democracy that risks forgetting why it matters. If South Africa, once the continent's democratic lodestar, begins to lose faith in civilian rule, the ripple effects could destabilize an entire region. The GNU still has an opportunity to reverse this trajectory, but only if it transforms unity from a slogan into substance.

Democracy fatigue can only be cured by democratic renewal. South Africa must once again show the continent that democracy, even when it falters, can still find its footing, not through force, but through faith restored.

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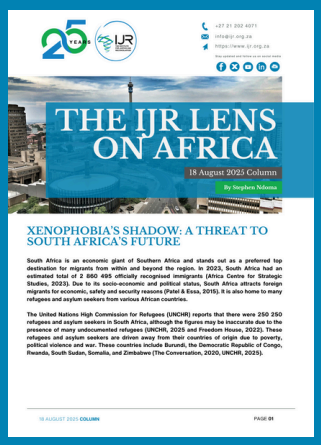

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