

THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

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RECONCILIATION AT A CROSSROADS: CAN SOUTH AFRICA STILL HOLD IT TOGETHER?

More than three decades after South Africa's democratic breakthrough, the country continues to wrestle with the promise and the pain of its transition. The 2025 South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), conducted one year into the Government of National Unity (GNU), offers a sobering and timely reminder that although South Africans remain deeply committed to democracy and unity, the material and political conditions necessary to sustain reconciliation are eroding at an alarming pace.

Against predictions of conflict and chaos, the 2024 elections produced neither violence nor destabilisation. Instead, the electorate accepted the ANC's historic loss of its outright majority and welcomed the formation of the GNU, a democratic milestone in its own right. Yet the Barometer makes it clear that this political maturity did not translate into renewed optimism.

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South Africans are divided in their evaluation of the GNU's effectiveness, with only 31% expressing high confidence in its ability or willingness to work together for the national good. Worse, confidence in political parties and public institutions remains chronically low, and distrust in leadership sits at levels nearly four times higher than in the early 2000s.



A staggering 79% of South Africans believe leaders are unconcerned about ordinary people's lives, an indictment that no coalition reconfiguration alone can paper over.

Reconciliation cannot thrive where exclusion persists. The SARB's findings underscore a brutal truth. South Africa's biggest barrier to unity is no longer race alone, but the gulf between the rich and the poor. While racial inequality persists, especially in lived poverty levels between Black and white South Africans, the survey highlights a broader reality: most South Africans simply do not feel that life is getting better. Only 33% believe they are better off than the average South African, and even fewer say their financial situation has meaningfully improved over time.

These frustrations do not emerge in a vacuum. Recent research shows that inequality remains racialised not only in lived experience but also in how South Africans are represented. A 2025 machine-learning analysis of South African news by [Ohamadike, Durrheim and Primus](#) found that post-apartheid media continue to associate wealth, investment, and productivity with "Whiteness," and welfare dependency, poverty, and crime with "Blackness," even in coverage produced after 1994.

This symbolic reproduction of apartheid-era economic meaning shapes public perceptions of who deserves opportunity, who is expected to carry the tax burden, and who is imagined as dependent on the state. Such narratives help explain why many South Africans, despite supporting democracy, do not feel that its promises reach them. They reinforce the politics of frustration and erode the very trust the SARB identifies as central to future reconciliation.

Perhaps the most striking warning from the report lies in how younger generations understand the country's past. Only a third of 18–24-year-olds say they know a great deal about apartheid or the democratic transition, compared with over 70% among older South Africans. This is not merely a knowledge gap. It is a potential rupture in the collective memory that has long anchored reconciliation. [Ohamadike et al.](#) warn that if young South Africans learn about their country through media narratives that reproduce racial hierarchies without understanding their historical roots, they inherit prejudice without context. Media bias, learned from post-apartheid language itself, teaches inequality as normal rather than constructed. If South Africa loses its shared truth, it risks losing the foundation upon which its democratic project stands.

The transformation debate reveals the same tension. While 82% of South Africans support the principle of a racially representative workforce, many are increasingly critical of how empowerment has been pursued. More than half, at 54%, believe B-BBEE has gone far enough and should be phased out. Seventy-six percent say hiring and promotion should be based strictly on merit, and 67% believe the continued use of racial categories does more harm than good.

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Citizens remain broadly committed to redress, but they are calling for a model of transformation that is fairer, more transparent and more effective.

This demand is not a rejection of transformation, it is a rejection of a transformation model that does not work for the majority. Here again, representation matters. The 2025 analysis by [Ohamadike, Durrheim and Primus](#) shows how media narratives present whites as “taxpayers” and blacks as “welfare-dependent,” reinforcing the perception that empowerment is a redistributive burden rather than a national investment. Reforming B-BBEE is therefore not only an economic intervention, but also a narrative intervention challenging the idea of who deserves wealth and opportunity in South Africa.

Recent policy developments suggest that government may finally be responding to these concerns. In November 2025, Trade, Industry and Competition Minister Parks Tau announced a [two-phase review of the B-BBEE framework](#), acknowledging that the current model has often benefited a narrow elite while failing to deliver genuinely broad-based empowerment. The planned review, which includes simplifying the codes, reducing compliance burdens and shifting towards demand-led empowerment that supports real job creation and enterprise development, aligns closely with the preferences expressed by ordinary South Africans in the SARB 2025.

Despite the turbulence, the Barometer reveals that national identity remains one of the strongest anchors of unity. Most South Africans still say being South African is central to how they see themselves and what they want for their children. A majority believe unity is both desirable and achievable. This reservoir of hope is perhaps South Africa’s greatest remaining asset.

The SARB points to four urgent priorities before the 2026 and 2027 local elections. The country must rebuild trust in institutions through transparency, responsiveness, and competence. It must deliver real progress on poverty, unemployment and inequality, which South Africans consistently identify as the greatest threat to reconciliation. It must strengthen social cohesion, especially across class and geographic divides, and invest in education about the past for younger generations. It must restore belief in the future by demonstrating that democracy can improve material conditions, not just protect political freedoms.

South Africa is not in a crisis of identity, it is in a crisis of delivery. The commitment to unity, democracy, and justice remains alive among ordinary people. But reconciliation cannot survive on sentiment alone. It requires tangible progress, especially for those who continue to bear the greatest burdens of poverty and exclusion.

The 2025 SARB findings are neither a death knell nor a celebration. They are a warning and a call to action. If the GNU, political actors, civil society, and citizens heed it, the promise of 1994 may yet be renewed. If not, the cracks in South Africa's nationhood, already widening, may become far more difficult to mend.

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The 2025 SA Reconciliation Barometer can be download on the link: www.ijr.org.za/resources

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