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### **The Perceptions of the Underlying Determinants of Civil Unrest and Violence in South Africa in July 2021**

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## **Abstract**

Unrestrained capitalism with concomitant racial discrimination and social inequality has become characteristic of South Africa in the post-apartheid period. The July 2021 riots are one of many protests that reflected the need for effective measures towards developing a more equal society. The purpose of this study is to document the varied perceptions of citizens about the contributing factors of the July 2021 riots. This qualitative study, which documents the perceptions of purposively selected community members in KwaZulu-Natal, illustrated that the current socio-economic circumstances and continued racial discrimination can be considered relevant structural concomitants of the riots. Through non-probability sampling, 19 in-depth interviews and 4 focus group discussions were conducted with scholars, journalists, students, community, religious leaders, and activists. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in critical race theory and racialised capitalism. Data revealed that perceived reasons for the riots were numerous, including economic disparity, social disintegration, and relative deprivation. Racial tensions between Africans and Indians in KwaZulu-Natal have historical antecedents. This study contributes to the documentation of the prevalence of violence in post-conflict societies in the global south and the continued existence of racial capitalism in South Africa. The practical value of these findings is that they may assist in identifying social cohesion policies and programmes to prevent the recurrence of such riots.

**Keywords:** *Riots, KwaZulu-Natal, Economic disparity, Racism, Indian South Africans*

## **Introduction**

When democracy was inaugurated in South Africa in 1994, there was widespread hope that the country would be able to create a rainbow nation based on the Freedom Charter adopted by the South African Congress Alliance in 1955, which committed to creating a non-racial democratic country that 'belongs to all who live in it' (Suttner, 2015;4). Framing a progressive constitution with an emphasis on citizens' rights was another remarkable feature. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also a bold measure aimed at reconciliation and harmonious future co-existence. However, the first democratic administration in South Africa adopted neoliberal principles for development in its effort to 'build a better life for all' (ANC campaign slogan) even though the ruling party and its allies were broadly committed to socialist principles (Suttner, 2015). Almost three decades after the onset of democracy, the country is now witnessing high levels

of unemployment, corruption, increasing vertical and horizontal inequality, and widespread protests over service delivery. South Africa is known for its high degree of violence and crime, which has often been attributed to the legacy of the apartheid era (Brooks, 2019). A high social cohesion deficit is a key factor in hindering the realisation of the lofty ideals of the Freedom Charter. This paper examines the different facets of the July 2021 riots drawing on the perceptions of key informants and stakeholders from cross-sections of society.

Modise (2020) explains that even though the apartheid era as a structure has demised, people are still predominantly living in residential locations previously demarcated by race and privilege. Moosa (2021) stated that interracial socialising only occurs in public spaces such as the workplace, educational institutions, and malls or shops. This has entrenched the racial divisions within South African society. Participants perceive the democratic ideology of comprehensive inclusion not to be practised, as Indians and Coloureds are sidelined and, in many instances, overlooked in the fight to secure employment and educational opportunities. The mandate of preferential treatment supports the employment of Africans above any other race group, premised on majoritarianism. In addition, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, Zulu ethnicity has been historically enmeshed with and is inseparable from politics (Olonisakin & Idemudia, 2022).

This study aims to document the varied perceptions of South Africans about contributing factors to the riots. The pre-existing issues of racial tensions between Africans and Indians in KwaZulu-Natal (erupting in the formerly Indian township of Phoenix with approximately 35 deaths) and the economic disparities between poor South Africans and the rich (erupting in widespread looting and approximately 350 deaths) are factors that have been noted herein as concomitants of the riots ostensibly initiated as a political stance against Zuma's incarceration (Hunter, Singh & Wicks, 2021). Although South Africa's 'culture of violence', which was characteristic of the apartheid era, was a contributing factor, there have been ongoing debates and investigations as to other reasons the July 2021 riots took place (Brooks, 2019).

### *A brief overview of the July 2021 riots*

It was widely reported and published that the trigger for the riots and mayhem in July 2021 was the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma.

Jacob Zuma was reportedly extensively involved along with his son Duduzane, the Gupta family<sup>1</sup>, prominent politicians, and government officials in the process of state capture<sup>2</sup> (Davis, 2022, April 30; Dlamini, 2022; Kruger, 2022; Hunter, Singh & Wicks, 2021).

President Zuma's involvement was allegedly inclusive of bribery, lobbying, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, parochialism, patronage, influence peddling, and embezzlement (Davis, 2022). His role has been central to facilitating the above-identified types of corruption. The role of the Zondo Commission was to investigate the allegations indicated above and to determine the judicial procedure thereof.

The initial protests began with attacks on interprovincial trucking, forcing road closures to bring the province to a standstill and contributing towards economic sabotage. The former president's supporters demanded that Jacob Zuma<sup>3</sup> be released immediately, and if not, they threatened that South Africa would become ungovernable. Political violence quickly became a violent mayhem of riots, lootings, fights, and murders across the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (Hunter, Singh & Wicks, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup>The Gupta brothers, who can be described as affluent Indian businessmen, relocated to South Africa in the 1990s and cultivated business relationships with executive members of the ruling party (the African National Congress) to an extent to which Ajay Gupta became an advisory council member of President Thabo Mbeki. Simultaneously, President Zuma's son Duduzane became a director of several businesses owned by the Gupta family. Thereafter, the Gupta family had shares in almost every sector (mining, aviation, dairy farming, media, and nuclear energy) in South Africa (Martin & Solomon, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>State capture is enabled when individuals and groups of people within the private and public sectors of a country have the capacity to influence the formation of laws, regulations, and national policies for personal advantage and gain (Martin & Solomon, 2016). The Gupta family had a close affiliation with President Zuma, and other ruling party members had the capacity to exert control and political power over South Africa during this period, which undermined the efficiency of the state through a direct culmination of an interdependent relationship between state capture and corruption. The centralisation of power and resources took place with no regard for the country's legitimacy (Dadawala, 2020; Martin & Solomon, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Zuma has been appealing against his fifteen-month jail term imposed for refusing to appear before the Zondo Commission of Inquiry and even attempted to use the Covid-19 pandemic as a reason to exempt himself from serving jail time. Hours after his internment at the Estcourt Correctional Services Centre located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, protests began (Davis, 2022; Dlamini, 2022).

Hunter, Singh, & Wicks (2021) describe how, by the 1st of July 2021, Jacob Zuma's supporters attempted to mobilise mass public support for him through violent protests, including using arms against the South African Police Services. His allies then went on to garner support from hostel residents<sup>4</sup>, taxi bosses, and the trucking industry within his community and neighbouring townships. By the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, social media platforms were inundated with messages to mobilise support for President Jacob Zuma through mass gatherings and night vigils<sup>5</sup>. By the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, the day President Zuma had to turn himself in, hundreds of supporters had gathered around Nkandla to communicate that they were ready to go to war with South African law enforcement agencies, sporadically setting off gunshots. It was then that the State Security Agency sent out communication that there was a demonstration of defiance against the law (Davis, 2022).

Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, South Africa experienced the looting of small and big businesses, offices of multinational corporations, and the destruction of public facilities and private properties in the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. The riots caused more than one billion US dollars of damage, approximately 150,000 jobs were in peril, and all essential services were halted, including transport and maritime. The economy was halted by temporarily closing approximately 200 shopping centres, 90 pharmacies, and more than 300 banks. Approximately 337 people lost their lives in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, and there were 3400 arrests made in respect of inciting looting, violence, murder, and arson (Hunter, Singh, & Wicks, 2021).

The report by the 'expert panel' appointed by President Ramaphosa reviewed the South African government's response to the protest. It concluded that multiple challenges contributed to the event (Hunter, Singh & Wicks, 2021). They included soaring unemployment<sup>6</sup> among the youth and the lack of a strategy to address it, inherited and increasing poverty and deepening inequality among South Africans. According to

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<sup>4</sup>Hostels in Kwamashu, KwaZulu-Natal, and the province of Gauteng became strongholds for mobilisation.

<sup>5</sup>Zuma supporters from rural KwaZulu-Natal, Kroonstad, and Bloemfontein in the Free State, and from Mpumalanga, were prepared to travel to Nkandla to participate in these gatherings.

<sup>6</sup>In 2021, the rate of youth unemployment in South Africa peaked at 49.86 per cent, an increase of 6.4 percent compared to the previous year.

the International Monetary Fund report (2020), which contains descriptions of inequality in South Africa, the wealthiest South Africans have more than 68% of income compared to 47% in other developing countries. South Africans (40%) classified at the bottom of the wealth hierarchy only account for 7% of income. The report excluded the impact of institutionalised racism among South Africans as being a contributing element (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

### *Understanding social disintegration in South Africa*

The non-racial doctrine was adopted after South Africa became a democracy, and people were encouraged to adopt their nationality as their identity rather than place emphasis on their ethnicity or racial categorisation. This identity was meant to be inclusive and common to all South Africans. Ramsay (2007) explained that the Indians and Coloured people expressed emotions that depicted them feeling economically and politically insecure, and the African Indigenous Zulu people of KwaZulu-Natal were also perceived to be a threat.‘ The ANC began to abandon its rhetorical commitment to non-racialism and increasingly adopted a pragmatic, multicultural conceptualisation of the South African nation that could accommodate diverse, even antagonistic, identities under one rubric: ‘the Rainbow Nation’ (Ramsay, 2007: 469).

Racial discrimination and prejudices are still persistent in South African society despite the aspirational preamble to the South African Constitution that states, ‘We, the people of South Africa, believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity’ (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Steyn (2024) affirms that racism still exists under the guise of meritocracy, equality, multiculturalism, and non-racialism. The educational approach to diversity and multiculturalism minimises and conceals the impact of systematic racism and how South African society still experiences it. “Structural racism remains deeply embedded in the institutional fabric of South African society. It permeates the economy, the labour market, the media, education, health, and housing” (Steyn, 2024; 163).

Social cohesion in a historically racially and economically divided society cannot be achieved based on only a preamble. Central to a socially cohesive society is a structured process of creating unity, inclusion, and participation across all hierarchies, race groups, and classes within a society (Steyn, 2024).

Ideally, society should be aware of the diversities among individuals and groups but should still function successfully despite this. This scenario is yet to be achieved in South Africa.

Critical Race Theory pronounces the coexistence and connectivity between racial and economic inequality, which are perceived to be the dominant determinants of the July 2021 riots. It is integral to this study because it describes systematic oppression, which is based on racism and prejudice, which has been the reality in South Africa. This theory engages with the realities that racial prejudice can contribute to fluid class classifications, social status, and the deepening of economic gaps in a preexisting unequal society. This further supports the concept that other prejudices further entrench race as a prejudice within the context of a society like South Africa.

Critical Race Theory has acknowledged an intrinsic relationship between race, racism, and power, which is also influenced by economics, history, context, group, and individual interest, as well as emotions and socialisation. Critical Race Theorists argue that racism can be systematically adopted by being built into laws, policies, and practices. Race as an intersecting concept needs to be analysed with other prejudices such as sexuality, gender, class, and ability. The systems of oppression are reinforced through a complex platform that is inclusive of all prejudices about race. Race and racism are social constructs. Discussions of racism in South Africa are limited as they do not adequately include economic structures and changes that have taken place post-apartheid (Delgado & Stafancic, 2010). There is a dominant perspective that indicates that South Africa's colonial and apartheid past influences race relations and has entrenched distrust and inequality among racial groups (Steyn, 2024; Bhoola, 2022<sup>7</sup>). The reality that the middle and upper classes live a very different lifestyle from the lower classes contributes to their lack of capacity to relate to the poor and their difficulties (Abraham, 2016). Studies (Mekoa & Busari, 2018; Steyn, 2024) have supported the notion that interracial trust is lower within

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<sup>7</sup> Bhoola, S. 'Are we going to blindly trust our leaders in 2023?' *The Post*. (30 December 2022), available at <https://www.iol.co.za/the-post/opinion/are-we-going-to-blindly-trust-our-leaders-in-2023-4b4f9a94-f6ef-44d5-9e9c-e57c874dfbda>, retrieved 3 March 2023.

heterogeneous societies than in homogeneous societies. These factors have hindered cohesiveness in various spaces in South Africa.

During and after the week of the riots, journalists reported the various murders and destructive events via mass media platforms, most of these reports lacked personal narratives and the opinions of citizens of KwaZulu-Natal, although Erasmus & Hlangu (2021) did cover this to some extent as they interviewed 30 people who were indirectly affected by the riots. The book *8 Days of Mayhem*, by journalists Hunter, Singh & Wicks (2021), articulates in detail the political machinations, intent, and sequence of events that led to the initial violence near former President Zuma's homestead.

Modise (2020) and Vhumbunu (2021) refer to the socioeconomic disparities of South Africans but exclude the legacy of historical racial injustices that African people in particular experienced during apartheid. Lamb (2019) explained that structural violence was initiated and consolidated during the colonial period and reinforced during the apartheid era.

Makonye (2022), Vhumbunu (2021), Mongale (2022), and Takudzwa (2022) describe the causes of the riots through the use of secondary data. Ngwane (2021) documents a critical account of the riots and includes a political analysis of the ANC<sup>8</sup> and its lack of efforts to address the current economic challenges South Africans encounter. He states that the working classes were motivated by the politics of former president Jacob Zuma's arrest and by economic disparity to participate in violent protests. Ngwane's work (2021) lacks empirical research and firsthand perspectives of South Africans.

Racial capitalism can be described as the process that closely associates a social and economic value with another person's racial identity. Implementing differential economic privileges for people of different race groups constitutes the underpinning of racial capitalism, where race and class broadly intersect. The root has been the policies of apartheid, and it has been perpetuated by unbridled capitalist relations and, ironically, to some extent by affirmative action in post-apartheid South Africa (Ramsay, 2007; Dubow, 2015; Botes, 2018; Makhulu, 2020; Pirtle, 2021). Takudzwa (2022) also supports these perspectives and indicates that racial capitalism is the most appropriate description to explain the inequality that has emerged post-democracy. The South

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<sup>8</sup> African National Congress (South Africa's ruling party).



African Reconciliation Barometer Survey of 2021 indicated that intergroup relations between Africans and other race groups have deteriorated since the demise of apartheid because of the socio-economic inequality that is predominantly experienced by Africans (Moosa, 2021). Africans mostly live with challenges of poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment. The data collated in this study correlates with previous studies that indicate the prevalence of racial capitalism and inequality (Dubow, 2015).

Documenting residents' perceptions of the week-long violent events contributes to the existing literature gap. Numerous studies present information on the July 2021 riots as a collective of both provinces where the riots took place. Few studies specifically document the perceptions of citizens in KwaZulu-Natal, and its value extends to determining requirements for social integration in South Africa. Perceptions of shared social identity can be central to attaining solidarity within a nation. Similarly, 'positive relations between the constituent groups in society are important for achieving social cohesion and development' (Olonisakin & Idemudia, 2022: 58).

'Social cohesion is seen to be an urgent pursuit in post-apartheid South Africa, and it is often invoked as a means to achieve a just and equal society, to quell xenophobic sentiment and violence, and to encourage national unity (Abrahams, 2016: 96). The value of documenting and understanding the perceptions of South Africans about race relations and present political and socio-economic circumstances reveals the discernments of study participants towards social integration and intergroup relations. It is perceptions that can be informative and useful in determining how committed South Africans are towards attaining social cohesion after the July 2021 riots and what needs to be done.

### **A qualitative methodological approach**

The choice of a qualitative methodological approach was based on the need to conduct in-depth face-to-face interviews with participants to document their perceptions of the underlying causes of the July 2021 riots. Given its conversational mode, flexible style, and prolonged character, the qualitative interview permitted us to engage in in-depth discussions (Babbie & Mouton, 2002). Purposive sampling enabled us to identify subsets of a larger population and identify suitable participants for this study. This approach allowed us to identify community leaders,

journalists, activists, priests, and scholars as participants for this study and representatives of all four South African official racial categorisations.

#### *The Participants:*

Nineteen<sup>9</sup> in-depth face-to-face interviews and four focus groups were conducted, which enabled a collation of detailed descriptions of the riots based on their experiences and their perceptions of the cause of the violent protests. The initial target was 20 interviews, and attaining the last interview with an identified community leader became impossible. Of the 19 participants, three were religious leaders, three were municipal employees, one was a ward councillor, three were journalists, two were community leaders, and seven were academics. The first focus group comprised two journalists and three academics employed at the University of Zululand. The second focus group comprised six administrative staff employed at the University of Zululand. The third focus group comprised six postgraduate students enrolled at the University of Zululand. The fourth focus group comprised 2 community leaders, 2 former activists, and 3 academics employed at Durban University of Technology as well as the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Data has been analysed according to content and thematic analysis.

#### *Discussion*

Most participants explained that there were primarily three motivations for perpetrators to initiate and sustain urban riots for eight days. Firstly, the political protest in support of South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma not being jailed and the factions in the ruling party (ANC). Secondly, South Africans have experienced food insecurity, poverty, and unemployment. Lastly, racial tensions predominantly between Indians and Africans living in KwaZulu-Natal came to the fore when rioters, who were predominantly Africans, attacked and looted Indian and White-owned businesses in and around the centre of the city and the area of Phoenix. This led to many in the Indian community fearing violence and believing that they were targeted based on their race. Data collated from the focus groups revealed that Indian residents of Phoenix set up roadblocks to prevent looters from entering their areas. Racial profiling at vigilant roadblocks led to bloody confrontations and the

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<sup>9</sup>All study participants were required to complete a consent and anonymity form. Some participants opted to remain anonymous, and others were willing to be identified.

death of approximately 36 people. There was a lack of concern for human dignity as violent protestors and residents at roadblocks physically assaulted people (Hunter, Singh, & Wicks, 2021).

Hunter, Singh, & Wicks (2021) describe an anti-Indian sentiment prevalent during this time. Multiple perceptions have emerged in an attempt to understand the anti-Indian sentiments in the province.

*Voices that illustrate that racial tension was a contributing factor to the riots*

The various focus group discussions with academics, journalists, administrative university employees, and postgraduate students revealed varying perspectives on whether historical racial tensions contributed to the July 2021 riots. The riots were destructive and violent amidst a community that resides in Phoenix, north of Durban. This area was formerly a residential area for the working class and poor Indians, and post-apartheid it has also become home to many Africans. Many Indian South Africans belong to lower socio-economic groups and are marginalised communities. Some have risen above that and can be described as middleman minorities.

Participants spoke of the ethnic conflict that existed historically between Indians and Africans due to indentured experiences, colonial immigration, and enforced segregation.

“The historical context of Indians treating Blacks badly is still brought into the present. Our grandparents and parents talk about their experiences during the Apartheid era” (Participant D).

Participant E explained that “we also were taught to see people of other race groups as different from us, and because of that, we were never united”.

There has been documented evidence (Vhumbunu, 2021; Takudzwa, 2022; Rudin, 2022; Steyn, 2024) of ethnic communities violently competing against each other for employment, education, political power, rights, property, and social amenities in Africa.

Gerhard Mare (cited in Irobi, 2005) explained that in South Africa, ethnicity and ethnic conflict are a causal response to unequal development and social and economic mobility. For instance, ethnic groups within indigenous African populations have violently mobilised to compete for access to resources. Zulus found solidarity amidst the Zulus and Xhosas amidst Xhosas.

Group classification continues in South Africa. The collated data from interviews and focus groups indicated that the racial categories of White, Indian, African, and Coloured are still utilised as identity markers

and act as enablers to access differential treatment, which is aimed at addressing the social and economic inequalities of the Apartheid regime. During apartheid, the Whites had preferential treatment in South Africa, and in the post-apartheid era, Africans had preferential treatment through the implementation of Black Economic Empowerment<sup>10</sup>. Data indicated that participants believed that these policies and the approach have contributed towards increased racial tensions among South Africans.

350 people died between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, approximately 36 of them in Phoenix, where the perpetrators were allegedly Indians who were residents of Phoenix (Hunter, Wicks, & Singh, 2021). It was reported that the killings resulted from unhealthy relations between Indians and Africans in this area and not merely self-defence. The prevalence of interpersonal violence has been much higher in poorer communities than in affluent communities in the cities (Davis, 2022; Ngwane, 2021).

There are reported incidents of African people being assaulted by Indians simply because of their racial identity, and Indians in turn being attacked by Africans (Dlamini, 2022). This event reignited historical tensions between Africans and Indians. The Durban riots of 1949 and the 1985 Inanda riots were the outcomes of racial tensions between Africans and Indians (Govender, 2021).

Ten participants expressed various beliefs about the racial tensions preexisting in South Africa before the riots. During a focus group discussion, an Indian female participant, who is an SABCradio producer and presenter, stated that ‘racial divisions, persisted within the community in Phoenix, despite attempts to unify Indians and Africans in the area’.

She explained that the riots were not only provoked by socio-economic and political issues but also racial issues. She explained her horror as she saw a person being set alight alive by another individual of a different race group in Phoenix. This act to her was indicative of the deep-rooted racial tensions among the people of the Phoenix community. She also referred to the new marginalisations that the Indians and Coloureds experience within the current context of the social and economic readdress mandate.

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<sup>10</sup>The ANC's economic policies of Black Economic Empowerment were put in place to support the redistribution of existing resources in an attempt to address the economic inequality historically defined by race (Rudin, 2022).

‘So there are so many things that are fuelling this level of racism and hatred and animosity. But you have to also ask yourself, is that enough to reason to burn an individual and walk away from that knowing that you've just killed an individual’ (Participant A).

The Indian community in Phoenix did feel discriminated against as Zulu-speaking Africans mostly attacked them. Participant F explained that certain racist stereotypes exist in Phoenix and Inanda (a neighbouring area to Phoenix).

She said, ‘In Phoenix, Indians believe that Africans are racist and are thieves, whereas, in Inanda, Africans perceive Indians to have racist attitudes, which result in behaviour that can be described as abusive and disrespectful towards Africans’.

Another response from participant C depicts a negative opinion of the intergroup relations between Indians and Africans.

‘I feel like Indian people are more racist than white people’ (Participant B). The young African male student observes that Indian people choose not to associate or socialize with Africans.

A focus group participant emphatically stated that there were more African deaths in Phoenix than Indian deaths, which depicted the hatred that Indians have for Africans based on historical reasons.

Participant D said, oh okay, I think the relationship has not been good. We are being told by our parents that Indians didn't treat them right in the workplace, and we experience it ourselves. The riots worsen the situation’. (Participant C).

An African female participant discussed how she perceived Indian South Africans to have a superiority complex based on the perceptions that they were historically advantaged compared to Africans and that they had a better social and economic standing during the apartheid era and in the post-apartheid phase. She refers to the abuse African domestic employees experience when employed in an Indian South African household. This is reaffirmed by Hans (2019), which discusses the plight of domestic workers in South Africa. Many are overworked and underpaid and sometimes ill-treated by their employers. However, this report does not refer to any particular race group that may be responsible for the ill-treatment of domestic workers. In 2019, Julius Malema, the leader of the political party The Economic Freedom Fighters, attacked Indian South Africans concerning the salaries of African domestic workers at a political rally in a suburban area in

Durban predominantly occupied by Indians. Verbal attacks such as these serve to exacerbate tensions between Indians and Africans. Participants too have indicated that these instances have contributed towards racial tensions.

Participant G explained that we could not ignore that most looters were from the African race group. Hunter, Singh & Wicks (2021) also informed South Africans that most looters were indeed African.

A ward councillor of a middle-class suburban area informed me that she is aware of the involvement of private groups comprising Afrikaans-speaking White South Africans. During the riots, they prepared to attack if the suburb encountered violent protests and looters. Social cohesion measures can be negatively impacted if these racially and ethnically defined groups continue to be exclusive and maintain attitudes that divide people.

An editor of a daily newspaper articulated his firsthand experiences during his senior schooling years. He described the racial divisions within his school in Durban North (a middle-class residential area). Teenage boys opted to socialise with people from their own race group. He explains this scenario as being due to socialisation and race education at home and school.

One of the religious leaders interviewed explained that racism is prevalent and alive in South Africa and around the world and is a contributing factor to the conflict that took place in Phoenix during the week of the July riots. However, she articulated that racial tensions are evident amidst all races and ethnicities. This perception was shared by most participants. Others believed that the riots were primarily motivated by socio-economic stresses and by Jacob Zuma being incarcerated. Another scholar articulated that interracial and intergroup discriminatory ideologies and related behaviour have been inadequately addressed within South Africa. He explained that the working relationship that Indians and Africans have shared historically has also impacted the relationship negatively and positively. He further explained that ethnic conflict among Africans is prevalent and has also been inadequately identified and evaluated. Three of the four journalists interviewed identified pre-existing racial tensions as a cause of the riots. Of the eight academic participants, five stated that they believed racial tension was a contributing reason for the Phoenix mayhem. Of the remaining three academics, two opted not to respond to this question, and the remaining participants contended that the causes were primarily political and socio-economic.

A former municipal employee explained that unhealthy race relations were not a cause of the riots, but rather the political shenanigans surrounding Jacob Zuma's incarceration and the divisions within the ruling party. He described instances of sporadic anti-Indian hate speech by African leaders in the province, and the comments mostly detailed economic disparity and comparisons between the economic and social mobility of Africans and Indians. A senior academic indicated that racial tensions did not motivate the riots and that Indians and Africans have lived cordially in Phoenix and KwaZulu-Natal. Ngwane (2021) reiterates that unhealthy race relations were not the primary cause of the riots. However, scholars Mongale (2022), Takudzwa (2022), and Africa, Sokupa & Gumbi (2021) all indicate that racial tensions and unhealthy intergroup relations contributed to the violence that persisted during the riots, but it may not necessarily have been the primary cause of the riots. Data collated from this study also reinforces that racial tensions were one of many contributing determinants of the riots, but not the primary reason.

An Indian male journalist during his interview explained that the violent attacks were driven by economic and social inequality, not racial hatred. He said the attacks have also been caused by self-defence and the need to protect families.

He noted that Africans and Indians were victims of violence and crime. He further explained that some of these communities had been inherently violent even before the riots. Gangsters, drug lords, and crime syndicates have become community leaders in some residential suburbs in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, indicating the prevalence of violence in these communities. Therefore, he was not convinced that interracial conflict could be pinned as a reason for the violent attacks in Phoenix. Similarly, a senior academic explained that the riots were never about interracial relationships but rather about the president's incarceration and the economic challenges that the poor have experienced recently, which have been further entrenched by political instability and the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Ngwane (2021) explains that before the riots, violence and stealing were prevalent, and it has almost always been associated with inequality, unemployment, starvation, oppression, and exploitation.

The focus group discussion, which comprised 6 students, collectively agreed that pre-existing racial tensions were partly responsible for the riots. A participant shared her perspective that interracial conflict has continued to exist in KwaZulu-Natal during the

post-apartheid era. She shared a personal incident of racial discrimination. As a young high school girl, she was reprimanded by Indian classmates to return to her birthplace location and attend a high school in that vicinity. She was enrolled at a high school in Asherville, Durban, formerly a school for Indians during the apartheid era.

Participant E indicated that Africans in KwaZulu-Natal, in particular, feel like they have been alienated from the economy because the Indian business community prefers to employ foreigners from neighbouring African countries living in the province rather than South Africans. This has also contributed to the lack of cohesiveness between these 2 groups of people. This perception is different from what recent empirical studies (Bhoola & Chetty, 2022) have revealed. Many African immigrants in Durban struggle to be employed in the formal sector and join the informal sector, where they engage in entrepreneurship. The informal sector is also inundated with local citizens who have negative attitudes towards foreigners.

Participant H explained that we have become segmented by class categories and that the animosity between the Indian and African communities is driven by economic inequality. He further believes that the Indian community has always been very business-orientated, and there are challenges for African entrepreneurs to enter that market. He reiterated that African entrepreneurs remain at the bottom of the supply and demand business chain. He voiced his opinion that racism continues to exist in South Africa.

However, he noted that the economic inequality between the Indians and Africans has contributed to the tensions between these two groups. Olonisakin & Idemudia (2022) explain that South Africans identify strongly with their racial identity. Delgado & Stefancic (2010) indicate that 'material determinism' in conjunction with Critical Race Theory explains that the system of racism has historically advanced the interests of white elites. The present research has affirmed that the legacy of white supremacy still manifests in post-apartheid South Africa and that economic inequality continues to increase between and amongst race groups. This is evident despite the number of African people from the lower economic strata joining the middle-income groupings.

*Voices that indicate the riots were caused by economic disparity*

The riots were triggered by poor South Africans who experienced severe economic challenges during the various periods of lockdown measures



put in place at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>11</sup>. The frustrations caused by unemployment and poverty aggravated the July 2021 riots and looting.

The prevalence of the various types of corruption by those in positions of power has resulted in a lack of trust South Africans have in their national, provincial, and municipal government (Bhoola, 2023). Over the last five years, many revelations of corruption, fraud, and embezzlement have occurred among politicians, other municipal employees, and wealthy businesspeople. According to data retrieved, the continuation of these malpractices is associated with the government's inability to address criminality appropriately and has contributed significantly to the disposition of discontent among South Africans. Governmental budgets have been disseminated inappropriately and have not reached service delivery and development projects intended for South Africans. (Holtug, 2022)

The data collated from in-depth interviews all concurred that poverty, hunger, and unemployment amidst political uncertainty and the lack of service delivery provoked people to participate in violent protests and criminal activities. Protests have become a means of communication for South Africans to voice their grievances to municipal authorities and the government (Bhoola, 2023). Botes (2018) states that since 2004, protests in South Africa have become far more intense, violent, and destructive.

A white male participant said that he believed people were angry and that law-abiding leaders and politicians do not govern South Africa. He explained that this precedence does allow people to believe that they are not obliged to conform to the country's legislature and governance directives. He describes South Africa as a country with a lack of moral or ethical authority because of the numerous fraud and corruption cases that have been unaccounted for by our government officials. . It may be argued that theft and related activities have become normalised in our society. Some South Africans are motivated to engage in criminal behaviour because of the lack of consequences. William Gumede (2021) discusses a growing culture of impunity in South Africa, which is

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<sup>11</sup>The movement of people was halted, and the livelihoods of people despite, their class distinction and type of employment, were challenged. Temporary contract and part-time employees in various sectors were intermittently and temporarily unemployed for uncertain periods. The impact was detrimental to these individuals and their families.

defined by a lack of accountability and no consequences for the perpetrators of criminal offences.

An African male participant said that South Africans experience a feeling of deception about their post-apartheid disposition. Access to resources, poverty, and unemployment are still a problem for many, and their expectations of a better life post-apartheid era are still to be met. Remnants of apartheid continue to prevail in contemporary South Africa. Despite the increase in the number of African families joining the middle class, White South Africans remained at the top of the salary scales and in positions of authority. Masipa (2018) explains that South Africans have inherited the triple challenge, which comprises unemployment, poverty, and inequality. Relative deprivation is an appropriate concept that can describe an individual's dissatisfaction in comparison to another individual's social standing. The concept is based on visible inequality as a motivating factor for a revolution. Relative deprivation can influence the behaviour of people and cause emotional distress and has been documented to be a cause of grievance (de Juan & Wegner, 2019). A former municipal employee also aligned his responses closely to relative deprivation. Feelings of discontent and deprivation develop when desires become legitimate expectations that are distorted by societies and deepening inequalities. He explained that some have access to resources and some do not.

This is further affirmed by Mongale (2022), who explains that the national poverty, high unemployment, and inequality coupled with feelings of being deceived by the government created a volatile situation prior to the riots. Economic inequality has been associated with the decline of social cohesiveness in societies.

You have to blame the government for it, you have to blame your Councillor for it, you have to blame the political structure for it, you know. You have to blame apartheid for it because apartheid made it such that the Indian community is a bit more economically stable than you are, right? So, to go now and we understand the frustration of not having food, of not having opportunities, of not having things right, but you can't go and want to burn somebody's house now because they got it (Participant D).

The relevance of this concept to understanding the emotions of the aggrieved South African is reiterated by a pastor of a prominent ministry in Durban. She explained that in some communities, hungry children attend the same schools as children from better economic groups, and

the tendency to compare each other's lifestyles begins at an early age. She further explained that 'it ultimately breeds contempt, anger, disappointment, and all of these sorts of things.

These perceptions are further affirmed by participant G. 'My take is I think people are more frustrated now. There are so many things that they have just not been met by the government. And the level of unemployment is very high'. (Participant C).

An African female academic explained that 'the high unemployment rate puts the country in jeopardy. I see this as a ticking time bomb because when people are hungry, they can do all sorts of things. So, my perception is that the Zuma matter was just used as a scapegoat'.

Masipa (2018) explains that many South Africans can be classified as victims in a highly unequal society and those who are impoverished are the victims of poverty and hunger because the socio-economic challenges persist.

Historically, the transition from apartheid to democratic South Africa has been characterised by violence. Violent protests are still perceived to be central to political contestation in KwaZulu-Natal, specifically where 20 000 lives were lost in the civil war between the ANC and the apartheid state-supported Inkatha (Rudin, 2022). Democracy has failed the people of KwaZulu-Natal (de Haas, 2016: 51). The discontent of South Africans has been communicated through the organisation of rallies and protests. Brooks (2019) revealed that protest action ensures that the plights of South Africans attract a response from the government. Therefore, the choice to protest is perceived to be effective and a means to exercise democracy. Adebayo & Chetty (2018) state that unfulfilled promises spur panic and apprehension, which can easily result in protests.

Brooks (2019) reiterates that relative deprivation is a reason for people to protest. Her data includes a reference to South African politicians who live materially comfortable lives in comparison to most South Africans who are impoverished. Manga (2012, cited in Adebayo & Chetty, 2018) explains that protests can be based on emotions of material deprivation within a society. Sustainable community development and cohesiveness within a society can be achieved by creating spaces that allow for the voicing of varying perspectives on racialised, ethnic, and related conflicts within communities. Through the opportunity to collectively share concerns, individuals can enhance an emotion of solidarity.

## **Concluding remarks**

The relationship between race, economic inequality, and violence is unique and complex. These complexities also contribute to the challenges in producing proactive social cohesion policies and programmes.

The study participants affirm that poverty, unemployment, poor service delivery, horizontal inequality, and the lack of progressive government interventions exacerbated by persistent racial capitalism are contributing causes of the July 2021 riots. Historical racial and economic tensions of the apartheid era did re-emerge during the riots. The events in Phoenix reignited racial tension between Africans and Indians, which fuelled further racial prejudices. Central to understanding racism within the context of South Africa's history of racial, economic, and social injustices is the fact that a racial hierarchy continues to exist and is a structural concomitant of violence. Further in-depth studies will be beneficial to pinpoint the key obstacles to a socially cohesive society and to document and consider the voices of South Africa that describe and prescribe the measures forward to rid the ills of our society. The varying negative perceptions that Indians, Africans and other race groups have of each other must be addressed through effective political interventions that have social and economic impacts.

The value of a cohesive society needs to be illustrated to South Africans through programmes that build confident self-concepts based on shared commonalities and civilised human values.

The growth and development of the African upper and middle classes since the end of apartheid also fosters the need to investigate how poor Africans perceive the conspicuous consumption of the African upper and middle classes and whether it is the same as they view the Indian and White upper classes. So, the question is whether race or social class is the primary determinant of social solidarity. Despite changes in policy in the post-apartheid era, apartheid spatial arrangements imposed on human geographies and psychological mindsets remain.

Through implementing effective economic development and social cohesion programmes, South African citizens can develop a functional and peaceful society despite the complexities of heterogeneity. Social cohesion cannot be achieved without appropriate moral courage and ethical leadership, somewhat elusive ideals in contemporary South Africa.

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