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AN APPRAISAL OF SOUTH AFRICAN INTERNAL POLITICAL DYNAMICS VIS-À-VIS ITS BRICS MEMBERSHIP**Sandile Blessing Mkhwanazi***School of Government Studies, Faculty of Humanities, North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus, South Africa**E-mail: blessingsandile2000@gmail.com; 56220693@mynwu.ac.za**Received 30 March 2026; accepted the 2nd June 2026; published 30 June 2026*

Abstract. South Africa during the apartheid era and shortly after the demise of apartheid was an embodiment of the Western liberal order, which it pursued and implemented as it largely influenced both domestic and foreign policy. However, the complex interplay of different factors, including the decline of neoliberal hegemony led by the West and the emergence of the BRIC alliance, led to South Africa joining BRIC, which subsequently became BRICS. This largely shaped South African public policy and its development. South Africa remained the only African country in the BRICS bloc until 2023, when two other African countries joined BRICS. BRICS membership for members, especially for South Africa, implies that they operate in what is perceived as informal institutions, and these institutions shape their public policy and development trajectory; however, BRICS member states are still members of formal global institutions such as the United Nations, which are under the dominance of the West. After 2023, there were internal political changes in South Africa, following the general elections in May that saw the formation of the coalition government with different political parties, which are pro-West and anti-BRICS. These political changes imply that South Africa, as a member of BRICS, has forces within it that are opposed to the BRICS agenda; thus, there will be changes in public policy outlook and actions as the new political arrangements in South Africa have forces with pro-West ambitions. This article scrutinises South African policy and development as a BRICS member facing internal crisis and argues that internal political arrangements will impact South Africa's participation in BRICS and will adversely affect South Africa as far as benefits from the BRICS alliance are concerned. The quest for a multi-polar world will be challenging for South Africa due to its history with the West, as there are forces that would resist the change in favour of the established status quo.

Keywords: policy; development; internal politics; institutions; multipolar

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1. Introduction

South Africa as a polity has a complex history characterised by forces, codes and agencies that are in variance with each other. The complexity of South African history has shaped the current realities, as even in the contemporary era, there are still forces, agencies and codes opposed to each other; and these opposing forces are manifest in socio-economic and socio-political landscape of South Africa which is characterised by both racial and intra-racial bifurcation. The complexity of South African history and politics has its roots from the eras of Dutch occupation (1652-1795) and British rule (1795-1803). These two settler groups in South Africa brought with them different institutions that were to shape the history and politics of South Africa, often resulting in what is termed as Colonialism of Special Type (Fourie & Von Fintel, 2014; Nxumalo, 2026). Explicitly scrutinising the history of settler colonialism and how it shaped the politics and realities of modern South Africa is beyond the

scope of this article, however, few variables will be identified as their impact in South Africa are still felt and continue to shape lived realities in South Africa.

South Africa, after wars between the British and Dutch descendants adopted a code of being a British colony, albeit with a significant number of Dutch descendants settling in the colony. The British agents shaped the realities of the polity, and segregation was utilised as a strategy where well organised local initiatives and tribal authorities were used to govern the natives, in a quest to minimise the costs of overt coercion, albeit allied to the British crown (Allsobrook & Boisen, 2017). It must be noted that segregation was not a British invention in South Africa, it has its roots at the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and his fellows in 1652, who distanced themselves from the natives due to perceived differences in values and lifestyles (Strauss, 2022; Marco-Gracia et al., 2026). The practice of segregation has been a cornerstone in South African politics and has largely shaped socio-political and socio-economic dynamics of the country. In the segregated South Africa, Black Africans were governed by Whites (Waddy, 2010; Marco-Gracia et al., 2026).

The apartheid policy in South Africa was also based on segregation, albeit a different form of segregation from that of the United Party that governed South Africa prior to 1948. The National Party was also different from the United Party as it was made of Dutch descendants (the Afrikaners) opposed to the United Party which was a mixture of both English and Afrikaans speaking Whites. The National Party was opposed to urbanisation of Black South Africans as it associated them with the vice of crime and other social ills. Furthermore, the National Party's policy of apartheid was vague in 1948, hence observers at the time wrongly predicted that it will not win in the elections (Waddy, 2010). The effects of segregation and other racist legislations in South Africa are still being felt; and the racist legislations prior and during the apartheid era triggered resistance, largely from Black Africans and other races, however due to Black Africans being a majority, it is Black resistance that is largely noticeable. The most noticeable resistance movement to segregation and later apartheid policy was the African National Congress (ANC), which was formed in 1912, and was banned by the apartheid government in 1960 and unbanned in 1990 (van Wyk & van Wyk, 2024). The ANC later became the ruling party in a post-apartheid South Africa and has won all the elections for three decades. Under the governance of the ANC, South Africa joined the economic bloc constituted of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC), which was a different stance from its pro-Western roots and outlook.

2. Review of literature

A prelude to democratic era

Prior to the official demise of apartheid regime, the ANC as a liberation movement entered into negotiations with the apartheid government and it adopted other economic views and this culminated to adoption of neoliberal policies in South Africa, thus perpetuating poverty, unemployment and inequality. Further, this created resistance against the ANC, starting with opposition from social movements and later opposition political parties and recently this culminated with the decline in ANC support (Kgatle, 2020). During the negotiation period, the ANC was less of a political party, but more of a liberation movement that later converted into a conventional political party. The negotiations in South Africa were not the negotiations of equals, they can be deemed as negotiations between the liberation movement and the government. Further, the ANC had Nelson Mandela at helm, a leader who epitomised leadership through negotiation (Jordaan & Anstey, 2025; Rantete & Giliomee, 1992). Rantete and Giliomee (1992) point out that the transition in South Africa implied that the apartheid's regime control declined, however, the authoritarian elites still possessed greater capacity to shape political processes. Therefore, the negotiation processes subjected the ANC and set it up for failure and opposition in the future as it adopted macro-economic policies that has failed to reverse the effects of both colonialism and apartheid, especially in the economic front. Further, as Nelson Mandela adhered to negotiation, this became the basis of the future contradiction between multipolarity and dependency.

Prior to the formal negotiations between the liberation movements and the apartheid government, there were other negotiations to shape multiparty negotiations known as Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) (Jolobe, 2014; Alegi & Bolsmann, 2010). The negotiating period was characterised by complexity as different groups inhabited South Africa, namely Black South Africans, European descendants, Asian descendants and those with mixed ancestry (classified as Coloureds). Due to the prolonged eras of segregation, these groups had different rights and different socio-economic statuses, hence the complexity during negotiations. The complexity can also be attributed to access and control of resources, as South Africa under the British monarch was largely a racist polity, with most of the land reserved for White South Africans and prohibiting meaningful political participation of other racial groups that were categorised as non-White. It was the exclusion of Black South Africans that prompted the formation of the South African Native National Congress in 1912 (which later became the African National Congress in 1923) with an aim of fighting for inclusion and equality (Lodge, 2016; Twala, 2014). Therefore, the CODESA negotiations were not only about transition to democracy, they also challenged the entrenched ideas of the state and deployment of state power, and also entrenched identities and concepts tied to race. Since the negotiations were not the negotiations between equals, I hypothesise that the ANC was weaker compared to the apartheid business sector and government, hence this weakness was to influence its approach to negotiations and later trigger resistance to the democratic government as weaken South Africa as a polity.

Codes, agencies and political actors prior to BRICS

South Africa became a republic in 1961, a different code from its formation as Union of South Africa in 1910 (Johnson, 2025; Feather, 2019). Although the code changed, some dynamics remained the same as apartheid was still intact, and this code solidified White supremacy and Black segregation. Feather (2019) further states that as South Africa became the Republic based on White supremacy, there were changes in the geopolitical space as African countries were gaining independence from their colonial masters, while resistance to White rule in South Africa was already present, and South Africa was being increasingly isolated internationally due to apartheid policy. This is one of the codes that shaped the negotiated settlement in South Africa prior to the democratic era. South Africa changed the code in 1994, becoming a democracy after centuries of White rule and governance. The changing of this code necessitated the creation of democratic agencies in the form of institutions and different political actors were to emerge in the South African political landscape, and this time, and for the first time, Black Africans were to gain prominence in the political landscape. Further, as South Africa became a republic, it increased the use of repression and state-sponsored violence against liberation movements; and changed from having a prime minister to having a presidential system (Johnson, 2025).

The change of the codes did not imply the changes in some agents or attitudes held by some agents in South Africa. Considering that South Africa is a heterogeneous society, with long history of racial oppression, discrimination and segregation; the support for democracy intertwined with historical realities. As of 2003, nine years into democracy, Gibson (2003) finds that there was a racial and ethnic bifurcation in the support of democracy in South Africa. Gibson (2003) posits that the majority Black South Africans did not gain attitudes and skills to enable them to participate in democracy, while other groups, especially White South Africans were allowed to acquire such skills and exposure to function in a democracy. The question may be raised pondering if agencies in South Africa did change as democracy matured. The answer to such question must be multi-pronged as it must consider different perspectives and variables and different theories to explain if there was a change in agencies and democracy was fully embraced to ensure the stable growth both economic and politically. From institutional perspective, there has been an inertia of forces resulting in racial stratification, inequality with racial character and poverty (McKeever, 2024). This inertia was inherited by the democratic government in 1994, and later triggered protest action against the government. Ngwane (2010) reveals that as from 2004 civil society began protesting against the government, and these protests were largely in the urban peripheries; where Black Africans reside. The resistance against government in South Africa has received much scholarly attention. It has been termed as “rebellion of the poor”, “national revolt”, “turmoil”, “peripheral protest action” and “service delivery protests” (Mkhwanazi & Matyana, 2025; Ndasana et al., 2022; Alexander et al., 2018; Bond & Mottiar, 2013; Alexander, 2010). A scrutiny of this inertia and the resultant resistance indicates structural and governance

dimensions in South Africa. Therefore, prior to South Africa joining BRICS there were internal challenges as far as the agencies are concerned, and these challenges were not resolved by an act of South Africa joining BRICS. Further, there was a deficit of trust in democratic institutions.

The state of inadequate trust in democracy and democratic institutions in South Africa did not improve as democracy matured. A complex interplay of both political and economic variables eroded public trust in institutions and resulted in decline of ANC support and emergence of different political actors. Tsheola and Sebola (2023) associate democracy with lived experiences and those lived experiences are proportional to trust in public institutions. Deducing from Ngwane (2010) that South Africa has faced the challenge of one of the most frequent protest actions directed to the government, it is evident that the lived experiences of the significant number of people do not reap the expected benefits of democracy, thus inadequate trust in democratic institutions. Tsheola and Sebola (2023) indicate that South Africans are reluctant to trust public institutions and this has created political leadership vacuum. The authors also state that the decade long state capture is one of the culprits in reduced public trust of democratic institutions.

South Africa as a polity during the democratic era has been so far largely shaped by the ANC as it has been the dominant party for three decades. Under the ANC governance, South Africa has failed to resolve the challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality. Macroeconomic policies that has been implemented under the governance of the ANC are characterised by failure to grow the economy in a manner that reduces both poverty and inequality while creating employment. Starting with the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the ANC faced numerous challenges in implementing the RDP, which resulted in its failure. When the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) was approved as a macroeconomic policy after RDP, it also failed and inequality and unemployment increased, as GEAR resulted in 30% unemployment rate. GEAR was replaced by the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (AsgiSA), which aimed to minimise high unemployment by 2014. During the era of ASGISA public expenditure in infrastructure increased, however, both unemployment and poverty rates remained constant. As Mbeki left the office, ASGISA was replaced by the New Growth Path (NGP). NGP was short-lived, resulting in difficulty to quantify its effects, and it was soon replaced by the National Development Plan (NDP) in 2012. The NDP aimed to minimise poverty and inequality in South Africa by 2030 (Mahadea, 2014; Ansari, 2017; Rapanyane, 2022). With 2030 less than five years from the time of this writing, there are no solid indications that South Africa will fulfil the objectives of NDP by 2030. Maemu et al. (2025) tracked the progress towards the goals of the NDP, and findings indicate that the progress is below what was planned. Further, the emergence of COVID-19 did much damage as far as NDP goals are concerned.

To enhance understanding of South Africa vis-à-vis BRICS membership and its position within BRICS, it is crucial to briefly scrutinise South African heads of state as far as leading South Africa in different regions and economic blocs. Since South Africa joined the economic bloc of BRICS during the democratic era, South African democratic heads of state will be scrutinised, starting from Nelson Mandela as South Africa did join other regional blocs during Mandela era. South Africa re-joined the Commonwealth of Nations under the presidency of Nelson Mandela after leaving the Commonwealth in 1961 and also joined the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1994 (Dubow, 2017; Mahadew, 2024). The Commonwealth is a bloc of former British colonies made of 54 states, with Africa having 19 as members. This bloc has been a geopolitical agent, as it is based on a commitment that its member states are democratic and pro-human rights (Faseke, 2021). The Commonwealth was also vocal about racial treatment of Black Africans in South Africa, hence the issues of racial and political equality were central to the Commonwealth (Mole, 2017). Concerning Nelson Mandela, he supported exclusion of South Africa from the Commonwealth and also supported Commonwealth member states who challenged South Africa because of racial policies (Mole, 2017). There is a possibility that South Africa re-joined Commonwealth due to memories about opposition to apartheid, of which Commonwealth member states contributed.

Under Nelson Mandela's presidency, from political perspective much changed, however, from economic perspective, especially concerning access to and control of resources by the previously marginalised Black population, a lot remained the same. The government led by Nelson Mandela adopted neoliberal policies, and neoliberal influences can be observed in much of the ANC policy debates and policies that were implemented, ranging from RDP to more neoliberal GEAR (Williams & Taylor, 2000). As far as neoliberalism is concerned, and considering that it is supported by the West and Europe, there are debates that it is a form of neo-colonialism (Hanson & Hentz, 1999; Xie, 2018; Chen, 2024). Therefore, scrutinising the blocs that South Africa joined during the presidency of Mandela as well as the macro-economic policies implemented, South Africa was still an embodiment of the Western liberal order.

During the presidency of Thabo Mbeki South Africa was the founding member of IBSA Dialogue Forum in 2003. This is the geopolitical institution between three like-minded democracies of the global South to promote trade relations, security and scientific collaborations (Chevallier et al., 2008; Sidiropoulos, 2013). However, IBSA was not different from other regional blocs that South Africa has joined before, as it was not deemed as an opposition to Western liberal order. Further, as South Africa was the member of IBSA which aimed to foster South-South cooperation, internally it was still implementing GEAR and in 2006 adopted ASGISA. Evidence indicates that both GEAR and ASGISA failed to reach their goals of minimising unemployment and inequality in South Africa (Rapanyane, 2022). However, the ANC under the leadership of both Mandela and Mbeki was strong as there was only one splinter party, the UDM and it did not have massive voter support compared to the later splinter parties.

South Africa in BRICS: an alliance of unequals

South Africa joined BRICS in 2010. Before scrutinising the position of South Africa within BRICS to establish the thesis that South Africa is the weakest link in the BRICS, it is necessary to scrutinise the questions on South Africa's economic performance when compared to other BRICS members as well as scanning the international arena as South Africa joined BRICS after years of being an embodiment of the Western liberal order.

BRICS differ from other blocs that South Africa has membership as it is a powerful force to contend with as it represents 41% of the world population, 31.5% of global GDP and 16% of global trade, hence its bargaining power cannot be underestimated. In 2022, other countries applied to join BRICS, namely Iran, Argentina and Algeria, while numerous other countries expressed the desire to join (Papa et al., 2023). This indicates that BRICS alliance has the capacity to challenge the Western hegemony, and is a force to reckon with when it comes to global governance. Papa et al. (2023) also observe that there are other blocs that challenge the US led global dominance, such as RIC (Russia, India, and China) and IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) and these blocs utilise soft power as an instrument to neutralise US dominance. South Africa as a polity is a member of two regional blocs that neutralise US hegemony, namely BRICS and IBSA.

From head of state perspective, Jacob Zuma lobbied for South Africa to be the member of BRICS bloc, and this culminated to the invitation to join BRICS in 2010; and at the BRICS Summit of 2011, South Africa was formally a BRICS member (Besada et al., 2013). However, prior to joining BRICS, South Africa has experienced economic decline due to 2008 recession, and the recession's effects were also felt by BRIC bloc with Brazil also experiencing economic decline (Agarwal et al., 2022). Since the 2008 recession was largely linked to finance and financial instruments, the BRICS countries proposed to trade in their own respective currencies to protect themselves from the shocks associated with volatility of convertible currencies such as the United States dollar (Besada et al., 2013). South Africa after being an embodiment of the Western liberal order for the first time adopted a stance that challenges the Western hegemony through its affiliation with BRICS, and I hypothesise that this stance was bound to trigger resistance within South Africa and from the West due to perceived decline in influence. However, South Africa joined BRICS from the point of weakness, considering that it had an experience of failed macroeconomic policies since the democratic era.

Besada et al. (2013) states that South Africa upon joining BRICS was a smaller economy when compared to other economies that contended for BRICS membership such as Mexico, Turkey and South Korea. In 2010, comparing economic indicators for South Africa, the economy grew at 2.8% per annum, compared to China, India and Brazil which had growth at 10.3%, 9.7% and 7.5% respectively; thus, making BRICS an alliance of unequals as far as South Africa was concerned. Further, the other BRICS members are regional powers, with China being the regional hegemon in Asia. South Africa has been observed as having two separate foreign policies, one influenced by the state and the other influenced by non-state actors (especially the large business sector) thus making South Africa's soft power bifurcated (Shaw, 2015). Shaw (2015) points out that despite South Africa not being a regional hegemon, it is a regional power, as it hosts a diverse set of diasporas which influence economic activity in the region through remittances. In examining literature on BRICS and South Africa, most of the literature has narrowly focused on economics, especially GDP size, trade imbalances, investment capacity, and comparative economic weakness relative to China, India, and Russia (see Karagöz et al., 2025; Osinubi et al., 2025; Umair et al., 2025). Most of these studies are positivist in their outlook. Issues such as deeper structural, geopolitical, and governance dimensions behind South Africa's perceived weakness have received inadequate scholarly attention. As early as 2013, on one hand there were expressions of criticism and scepticism about the ability of the BRICS to sustain economic growth, and there were predictions that China will witness economic regression with declining rate of investments and India will start witnessing economic decline by 2018. This critique was largely from the West, and questions were raised about institutions BRICS sought to create (Pant, 2013). Pant (2013) on the other hand points, that other analysts predicted that BRICS economies have to capacity to grow and rival the G-7 countries (made of United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan). However, the 2008 recession resulted in global economic decline, the West and Europe were more adversely hit compared to the BRICS bloc; and China experienced massive growth despite the global recession of 2008, and there are projections that economic power will shift from the West to the East (Arora & Kalsie, 2018; Agarwal et al., 2025).

As there are Western voices critical of BRICS, South Africa and Brazil share the same characteristics in that both states were colonised and have a huge population of European descendants who later became economic elites and these elites utilise the instrument of the media to criticise the elected governments citing democratic immaturity, institutional incompetence and other perceived vices against the governing political organisations. The major narrative pushed is against the hegemony of the governing political organisations as they are associated with corruption, foreign policies lacking Western orientation, and media regulation (De Albuquerque, 2016). Considering that South Africa has been an embodiment of the Western values, the economic elites were against the move towards the East, hence, joining BRICS was a move against the economic elites in South Africa and would trigger opposition. As the economic elites in South Africa would oppose the BRICS, BRICS has also started creating alternative institutions of global governance, and started proposing a multipolar world order, which is different from the current order that is dominated by the United States (Laidi, 2011). Opposition to BRICS in South Africa occurs in the context where there has been minimal redistribution concerning access to and ownership of production factors such as land, mineral resources and corporate power; and failed economic policies of the past are a factor. This implies that the economic elites with Western interests can oppose the government intentions. BRICS is mostly presented as an anti-Western or multi-polar project while South Africa is largely tied to Western financial systems, European trade, Bretton Woods norms, and Western capital. This is a contradiction that is seldom theorised in literature. This article aims to answer the two questions:

1. Is South Africa simultaneously anti-hegemonic rhetorically but dependent materially?
2. Does BRICS actually diversify dependency rather than eliminate it?

In answering these questions, the article will utilise theoretical perspectives borrowed from neo-Gramscian theory, world systems theory, dependency theory and uneven development theory.

3. Research methods

To execute the purpose of this article, systematic review of literature was conducted. In utilising systematic review, there was an inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study. The inclusion and exclusion criteria was based on how the literature answers the research questions posed by this article, as well as the relevance of theoretical literature. The researcher adhered to the advice by Lame (2019) that in undertaking systematic review there are steps to be considered. Steps such as formulation of the review question, definition of criterion, location and selection of the studies, assessment of study quality, data extraction, analysis and presentation of results and interpretation of results were conducted. Different databases were consulted to source data. The consulted databases included Web of Science, Scopus, Sabinet, EBSCOhost and Sage. The researcher used keywords such as: “Democratic negotiations in South Africa”, “Republic AND South Africa”, “Democracy AND race in South Africa”, “Neoliberalism AND neo-colonialism”, “Economic indicators in BRICS countries” from period 2000 to 2026.

4. Resulting insights: is South Africa the weakest link?

It has been established above that South Africa has faced internal challenges prior to joining BRICS and after joining BRICS, internal challenges did not subside, but increased. The major political changes in South Africa came after the 2024 general elections which ushered a new political dispensation in South Africa, as the country came under the coalition government, dubbed Government of National Unity (GNU). As South Africa joined BRICS under the leadership of Jacob Zuma, the GNU happened under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa. Cyril Ramaphosa differs from other ANC presidents before him as he is a business tycoon, hence making class difference between him and significant number of voters. Assumption of power by economic elites results in skewed economic policies that usually works against the voter interests (Justesen & Markus, 2024). Justesen and Markus (2024) argue that evidence suggests that voters approach business tycoons with scepticism, hence this may explain the ANC’s performance under the leadership of Ramaphosa. However, business excellence can be interpreted that a candidate has the capacity to succeed in government. Ramaphosa further differs from the ANC presidents before him as he lacks prison or exile background, and this has prompted some critical voices against him as he is perceived as a weak leader (Musitha, 2019). Musitha (2019) indicates that as Ramaphosa ascended to ANC leadership, he was deemed as a savior of the ANC and saved it in the 2019 elections; and his ascension to power resulted in positive reactions of the markets, despite the ANC being in the state of decline. The decline of the ANC began as Zuma assumed power, implying that there were those opposed to him as a political actor. However, there were splinter parties from the ANC prior to Zuma’s ascension to power. The first party formed during the democratic dispensation was the United Democratic Movement led by Bantu Holomisa who was expelled from the ANC in 1996. His party contested the 1999 election and gained 3,5% of the votes. In 2008 a new political party was formed by the political actors who were unhappy of removal of the president Mbeki as a president of the country and was called Congress of the People (COPE). It contested the 2009 elections and received 7.4% of the votes. Lastly in 2012 Julius Malema who was the president of the ANC Youth League was expelled from the ANC and he formed the EFF, which received 6.4% of votes in 2014 elections. These splinter parties have been instrumental in the decline of ANC voter support (Musitha, 2019). There are crucial factors and questions as far as Zuma and Ramaphosa are concerned. Ramaphosa as a political actor was approved by the markets and he is a business tycoon. How does Ramaphosa’s ascension to power influence South African membership in BRICS? Considering that the economic elites are largely represented by White South African, how conducive or detrimental are the policies adopted during Ramaphosa’s administration to BRICS? The weakness of South Africa within BRICS lies in the answers to these questions.

If theoretical perspectives are adopted in relation to the political dynamics in South Africa, insights get deeper. Utilising the concept of clientelism from neo-Gramscian theory; where it is defined as a long-term relationship of unequal power where actors exchange goods and services that include political allegiance (Newman, 2025); provides better theoretical perspective to analyse South Africa. The relationship in BRICS as far as South Africa

is concerned somehow fits clientelism, however, there is inadequate equity amongst alliance partners as South Africa has a relatively smaller economy and population size compared to other BRICS members. However, as Gramscian theory states that clientelism aims at inducing subordination, I cannot argue that other BRICS member states, especially China is aiming to subordinate South Africa, as the concept of voluntary participation and sovereignty still applies in BRICS alliance. Further, for BRICS to be an alternative to the Western hegemony, it has to guard against full clientelism that will place either China or Russia at the position of being a patron. However, considering characteristics of a state such as military, population, territory and economic output, South Africa becomes a natural client in BRICS alliance. Clientelism is a crucial concept in analysing political relationships, as political relationships gravitate towards clientelism, unless there are factors that counter this natural gravitation (Newman, 2025).

As neo-Gramscian theory is concerned with power relations, and how power shapes the global order, Sundaram and Parmar (2026) expanded neo-Gramscian theory by examining multiplexity and international relations. In global order, powerful actors such as the US, European Union and China dominate any negotiation process in a way that favour their economic interests while less powerful actors are marginalised. This indicates that participation does not result in equity (Sundaram & Parmar, 2026). South Africa as far as international relations is concerned is not a powerful global actor, it is a powerful regional actor, hence, in the global stage it can be marginalised. Looking at the current leader of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, there is no evidence that indicates that he acquired his wealth using alternative systems from Western financial systems, dollarized markets, European trade and World Bank or International Monetary Fund norms. This indicates that South Africa, despite being a member of BRICS, is still dependent on the Western norm while in rhetoric, is anti-hegemonic. Despite South Africa opposing the hegemony of global North in rhetoric, it is still dependent on the very systems it purport to oppose, as alternative systems are not mature enough to challenge the Western dominance.

Scrutinising the global trade, the share of the United States dollar is estimated at 59% in 2023, and most of the BRICS members cannot escape the dollar dominance. Further, BRICS member states still function within the neoliberal orthodoxy it purports to oppose (Sundaram & Parmar, 2026).

Further, in global systems, evidence indicates that more powerful actors can behave recklessly with impunity and the consequences will be borne by less powerful actors. The 2008 financial crisis is a case indicating this. As global South movements are integrated into neoliberal order, they perpetuate it instead of altering it, hence protest action in the global South is largely ignored. The neo-Gramscian theory holds that dominant factions in the global arena always seek to maintain the rules, norms and institutions that guarantee their dominance, as well as counter other actors who aim to challenge the established hegemonic status (Sundaram & Parmar, 2026; Albert, 2025). South Africa as an actor in BRICS, albeit still under global neoliberal orthodoxy, will face resistance from the dominant factions of global capital; both from within South Africa and outside of South Africa. This also partly explains the actions by Trump where he weaponised aid against South Africa (see Sundaram & Parmar, 2026). However, alliances are not only formed based on interests of capital alone and events of global magnitude cannot be reduced to capital alone. There are other systems that trigger responses from hegemonic actors, such as racism, patriarchy and history. It must be considered that South Africa for a long time has been the only polity with majority Black African population in BRICS, while utilising Western systems.

Other theoretical perspectives are adopted from world systems theory and dependency theory. The world systems theory is based on the tenet that capitalist world has expanded to encompass every feature of life, that states are now part of the capitalist world. The capitalist expansion has evaded democracy, and triggered inequalities, and resulted in global division of labour. The global division of labour is not equal, it is driven by interlinked forms of subordinations, each feeding each other. Further, these divisions are based on geography (Ruvalcaba, 2024). The divisions in South Africa that has produced inequality can be observed in different spaces in South Africa as inequality is both racial and spatial. Further, capitalism also do not only produce the core and peripheries, but it also has systems of dispossessions that results in different forms of dependencies. Capitalist practices such as

slave trade, extractivist mining, the mercantile circulation of gold and silver in the new global financial system and emergence of world powers in Europe shaped how we think about Western modernity (Fernández, 2022). South African development as a polity is linked to extractivist institutions whose effects are still not minimised. Joining BRICS does not minimise the effects of these institutions. Based on dependency theory, certain polities are the peripheries of the global capitalist system. Countries that have low industrialisation levels are deemed as the peripheries (Ruvalcaba, 2024). Comparing South Africa to other BRICS countries, its industrialisation levels is low, hence it can be deemed as a semi-periphery thus increasing its dependency. Further, South Africa is not industrially mature to compete with highly industrialised states. As South Africa has joined BRICS, and the increasing investments by China in South Africa, I argue that BRICS has diversified dependency than eliminating it. This argument is based on comparison of South African investments in China against Chinese investments in South Africa.

Dependency theory indicates that dependency is based on colonial history, as former colonies inherited or were given institutions that failed them, thus creating and perpetuating dependency. Peripheral states inherited poverty as they inherited extractive institutions and this thwarts economic growth and development (Kumar, 2020). South Africa is no exception from other peripheral states, as it inherited extractive institutions. From economic perspectives extractive institutions such as migrant labour system, the Native Land Act of 1913 and the hut tax during the colonial era were extractive. Further, the economy of South Africa has been largely extractive as it has been based on mining, cheap Black labour and land disposessions. In the democratic era, South Africa has remained partly extractive as there has been an institutional inertia that is challenging to fundamentally change. The country's economy is still largely dependent on energy-mineral monopolies; inequality is still high; land ownership patterns have mostly remained the same and local government inherited uneven capacity. The dependency school of thought recognises that the global South will not develop as long as the structure derived from colonial era stands. Further, the dependency theory posits that the relationship in the international arena is characterised by dependency and dominance between two sets of states. States in the global North are deemed as the core, while states in Asia, Latin America and Africa are the periphery (Kumar, 2020).

If uneven development theoretical insights are considered, the question of uneven development is linked to the questions of racial capitalism, social reproduction and coloniality. The dynamics of capital mobility also produces uneven development. Uneven development can be observed in spatially unequal patterns of investments, employment, economic growth, and socio-ecological impact (Ortiz, 2025; Omstedt & Ebner, 2024). Omstedt and Ebner (2024) argue based on the concept that borders are created to create uneven spaces, as borders demarcating different countries create otherness based on uneven development. Within polities there are also mechanisms that create uneven spaces. In South Africa borders were utilised to create uneven polities in the form of homelands, resulting in differentiated citizenship. Further, racialised labour markets were a norm in South Africa and the effects of such institutions are still felt in South Africa. Further, in Southern Africa, Special Economic Zones also perpetuate uneven development.

From literature, the political changes in 2024 resulted in ANC losing majority status for the first time in 30 years and entered into coalition (GNU) government. The South African coalition between the major actors, the DA and ANC is characterised by ideological divergence, administrative fragmentation, and the absence of formal coalition protocols which results in constrained governance capacity (Noutchie, 2025). It is also possible to conceive a coalition between the ANC and its splinter parties which would have worked differently than the present coalition. Further, a state with constrained governance capacity is weak in any regional bloc due to its internal challenges. Noutchie (2025) further argues that due to ideological divergences between the ANC and the DA, consensus building and implementation of key legislative priorities have been delayed. It also created uncertainty for the business community and the public. This implies that the economic elites may oppose South African membership in the BRICS, and within the government there are actors who oppose South African membership in the BRICS due to ideological divergence which was not strong during the administration of Jacob Zuma.

Although South Africa is governed by the GNU, it does have experience of a different form of GNU in 1994. The original GNU in South Africa was unnecessary as the ANC secured an election victory at 62.65%, however, the GNU was formed to foster inclusion and reconciliation. The parties that formed the GNU were ANC, National Party (NP) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). The IFP was initially resistant to form the GNU, and the NP later pulled out of the GNU (Ihembe et al., 2024). Considering that the NP and DA are comparable in that they represent largely the White constituents and voter base, the question arise if the DA can pull out of the GNU as the NP did? The DA also stated that it aimed to prevent the coalition between the ANC and EFF or the newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP) (Ihembe et al., 2024). This has to be considered as the DA is a major actor in the coalition and pushes the narrative that a coalition where it is included is constitutional, while where the parties such as EFF and MKP are included is out of constitutional bounds. This indicates that in South Africa there are political forces that aim to influence policies and ensure that policies that are implemented favour the economic elites which has been largely adhered to Western values and liberal order. This shapes the position of South Africa within the BRICS.

5. Conclusion

South Africa got its democracy partly through negotiated settlement, resulting it adopting neoliberalism, which is ahistorical; and this perpetuated poverty, unemployment and inequality that was there during the demise of apartheid. Although the economy did grow, it failed to result in meaningful employment creation, as there was no fundamental redistribution of access and ownership of factor of production. Further, despite the change of South African code in the international arena, the agencies within South Africa largely remained; and the Black majority do not have meaningful agency as they do not control the economic apparatus, only the state apparatus through the ANC. As time progressed, the Western liberal order began to decline and as BRICS emerged as an alternative mode of global governance, which challenged the West, and South Africa joined, the agencies within South Africa are resistant to BRICS as their economic interests are aligned with the West, hence opposition to BRICS as well as the political actors which are pro-BRICS. Further, historically the ANC has opposed Western intervention to states such as Iraq, Libya and others; a stance that is interpreted as anti-West by Western aligned forces within South Africa and elsewhere.

There are fundamental and crucial perspectives that emerge from the findings of this article. Analysis of theoretical contributions indicate that South Africa is a 'sub-imperial' yet dependant state. While South Africa is regionally dominant in Southern Africa, it is structurally subordinate within BRICS and global capitalism. Neo-Gramscian approaches explain the contradictions of South Africa, as it acts as a transmission belt for neoliberal global capitalism into Africa; while it is constrained by global North finance, dollar dependency, and external capital. Further, South Africa lacks autonomous hegemonic capacity inside BRICS itself.

Another crucial perspective that emerged is how South Africa is a semi-peripheral shock absorber. Inputs from the world-systems theory indicate that South Africa absorbs contradictions between core and periphery, but it cannot fundamentally alter global accumulation structures. This leads to a conclusion that South Africa's weakness is not accidental failure, but it is structurally functional within the world system. Furthermore, inequality exist within BRICS, as other states dominate in different spheres while South Africa is industrially vulnerable. BRICS is not a balanced coalition, deducing from uneven development theory, BRICS is an uneven geopolitical bloc.

South Africa's inclusion in BRICS was geopolitical as opposed to economic. The inclusion of South Africa has largely benefitted China more than it benefitted South Africa; hence, South Africa's strategic value exceeds its material power. BRICS needed African representative and legitimacy more than South Africa needed BRICS membership. South Africa needed geopolitical prestige. However, material asymmetries remained unresolved, hence, placing South Africa in a weakest position.

This article has limitations that can be observed. The first major limitation was the focus of the article, as it prioritises structural explanations over micro-level social dynamics. Further, this article did not expand on how BRICS is an internally diverse bloc. The article may focus heavily on South Africa relative to the bloc, but did not fully explore factors such as intra-BRICS tensions, India-China rivalry, Russia sanctions and Brazil changing political and foreign policy orientations. The other limitation is the difficulty in measuring 'weakness'. The study conceptualises weakness primarily through structural dependency and uneven integration into global capitalism. Lastly, the study did not engage with global modern changes due to Fourth Industrial Revolution and technological changes and how they shape the arguments. Traditional dependency and world-systems frameworks were developed during industrial capitalism. Hence, they fail to capture the advent of 4IR. This includes factors such as platform capitalism, AI dependency, data colonialism, digital extraction, and fintech domination.

There are potential future research directions that can be pursued. Linked to the first limitation, future research can investigate internal hegemonies within BRICS, comparative semi-peripherality, and competing development trajectories inside BRICS. On measuring weakness, future research can operationalize "semi-peripheral weakness" quantitatively, develop composite geopolitical indices, and compare BRICS through longitudinal data.

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