



Thabo Makgoba

Amid the many signs of decay, clear signs of hope

Easter should be a time of celebration, of renewal and hope. But given the current state of the world, that is a hard sell. The Middle East is consumed by war, and those celebrating Easter in Jerusalem and other cities and towns across the region do so under the threat of drones and missiles.

Not only that, the conflict threatens to spread, and its effects – especially the restrictions on oil and gas exports – are being experienced across the globe. Escalating petrol and especially diesel prices raise the spectre of rationing, speed restrictions and higher food prices.

The war in Ukraine continues, with South Africans unwittingly and tragically dragged into it under false pretences. In Sudan we are seeing a repeat of the genocide of 20 years ago, apparently perpetrated by largely the same actors.

We are navigating a world filled with destruction and fear, not only abroad but at home. In many of our communities an almost unstoppable culture of violence seems to have taken hold, fuelled by the vulnerability that comes from increasing poverty, unemployment and the plethora of social pathologies that democratic governance has failed to address after three decades.

Waking up in the morning, it is almost a surprise not to read about a new corruption scandal involving those who pervert politics for self-serving ends. Whistleblowers, witnesses and professionals such as lawyers are assassinated in brazen attempts to escape the consequences of taking bribes from tenderpreneurs. In Cape Town, teenagers are killed, victims of gang violence, with frightening regularity, and domestic violence continues to stalk households everywhere.

Perhaps worst of all, the confusing spectacle of claim and counterclaim we are seeing before retired justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga and his fellow commissioners leaves the average South African unable to judge which police general is honest and who is controlled by a crime syndicate. Although we must wait for the commission to sort the truth from the lies, it is already clear that the public cannot rely on the police service's leadership, considered as a whole, to end the violence and criminality which have percolated to the top of society.

At the same time, we need to celebrate those officers in police stations across the country who do serve the public with dedication and empathy.

An evil which is not getting enough attention is how online gambling, easily accessible to anyone with a smartphone, is ruining people's lives. In a recent discussion paper on online and interactive gambling, the National Treasury reported that annual betting revenue in South Africa has skyrocketed by 390% in the past five years – from around R10.6bn to R52bn, with online betting estimated to generate more than R44bn a year.

At a recent meeting, Anglican bishops from across Southern Africa presented accounts of pensioners in South Africa gambling away their Sassa grants and students squandering financial aid for their studies. We heard of graduates who can't find work borrowing money to gamble with in the hope of making a living, and of young people committing suicide in despair as a result of losing everything. As Imraan Buccus has said, gambling has become "a form of economic self-medication, a desperate search for luck in a society that offers no opportunity".

The crisis that harmful gambling represents for society must be addressed urgently across government and civil society. We need to treat gambling the way we dealt with smoking and alcohol, and consider banning – or at least imposing strict restrictions on – gambling advertising and marketing.

But the story of Easter tells us that we need not despair. On Good Friday, we heard a story



Damage to the Kuwait-flagged Al-Salmi crude oil tanker after a drone strike. The US-Israel attacks on Iran have plunged the Middle East in war and cast a pall over celebrations of Easter in Jerusalem and many other places across the world. Picture: Reuters



While oppressive forces ruled 2,000 years ago, events unfolded that gave humanity reason not to despair. The same is true today

of events 2,000 years ago that were not so different from what we see today. The first Easter took place when Palestine was oppressed by the brutal machinery of the Roman Empire. It was preceded by the harsh reality of pain, destruction, the demise of dignity, a political trial that perverted justice, the nailing of a man to a cross and the lives of his followers torn apart.

Just as the story of resurrection brought hope to the followers of that man, so we are seeing clear signs of hope in South Africa today. Matric pass rates are improving. The media continues to play a crucial role in exposing bad governance.

Our finance minister tells us that levels of government debt are stabilising. Load-shedding is largely something of the past, and reforms in power generation and transport networks are giving hope for better economic growth and therefore job creation. Business leaders with strong liberation movement credentials tell me they are cautiously optimistic about the prospects for investment in new economic activity.

There is growing recognition that blindly enforcing the prescriptions of ideologues, whether on the left or the right, will not help our country to grow. Instead we are seeing the tens of thousands of highly qualified graduates emerging from our universities looking for more pragmatic solutions to our problems.

Thirty years ago, Desmond Tutu used to say that our country's festering wounds needed to be opened, cleaned and cauterised before we would see healing. Today the Madlanga commission can perform that role – as long as its report is followed by strong and courageous action to root out the rot in our justice system. The challenges posed by its report will present President Cyril Ramaphosa with the most consequential decisions of his presidency. Fortunately he has on his side the unprecedented ferment in political parties, underpinned by our tradition of vigorous dialogue and civic engagement, which has the potential to sideline ageing leaders with entrenched positions and to create innovative new alliances.

Make no mistake, the challenges we face are enormous, but turning around the ship of state in South Africa is more like altering the course of a supertanker than that of a speedboat – it will take time.

So this Easter, let us celebrate the signs of progress and our potential to do better as a nation. Prophetic faith insists that celebration itself can be an ethical act – a refusal to let cynicism have the final word. To rejoice responsibly is to affirm that goodness, beauty and human dignity are not illusions but signs of God's intention for the world.

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Peter Bruce

Losing in Iran, Trump casts his evil eye on Cuba

I'll never forget the doctor who treated my son Alex for a back problem in Havana in 2011 while he was studying with the Cuban National Ballet. The hospital was miles out of the city and we walked down corridor after corridor, signing in at door after door on weathered logbooks, until we arrived at the right one.

The doctor was slightly built, about my age. He wore glasses. Hardly had I introduced myself than he said: "I can see you have a thyroid problem." I was astounded. I had had my thyroid removed but how would he know? "Your eyebrows," he said, "they're short."

We spoke about Alex. He couldn't show us the scans he'd made because the screen wasn't working but he had them on a CD, which I still keep. When he learnt where we were from he said he'd fought against South Africans in Angola. "It was a hard war," he said, paying tribute to his enemy. "But we won."

It's not a point I argue. But this was a serious person and I remember liking him enormously. And I can't help wondering about him now as a deranged US president, Donald Trump, busy losing a war he started with Iran, prepares to cripple Cuba. "I do believe I'll have the honour of taking it," Trump said last month. What a pig.

My first two weeks in Havana, I stayed with a poor family in the old barrio in the middle of the city. They were lovely. For breakfast I was given a slice of bread with a small piece of butter, a fried egg and half a potato. Fruit was rare.

The family lived on rations. The ration shop was around the corner and opened briefly during the week, dispensing sugar, candles, eggs and the like, ticking off items in your ration book. In the hot evenings we sat out on the pavement, feet in the road, smoking and talking. Black-and-white TVs would flicker in some rooms opposite. Baseball was wildly popular.

The Cubans I met knew life could be better elsewhere. Many younger people would leave, as young people everywhere do. But I never found anyone who wasn't proud to be Cuban. They were patriots.

Almost everyone I met in the evening street or in the bars wanted to talk about the war against South Africa.

Self-obsessed fool that he is, Trump doesn't appreciate the power of nationalism and will make the same mistake in Cuba he is making in Iran. The government in Tehran may be despicable and Iranians may hate it, but there's something unifying about being bombed night and day. If Trump ever puts American soldiers on the ground in Iran, as he threatens by massing them in the area, he is going to be horrified by the result.

And that's not even allowing for the fact that the religious fanatics who control Iran regard their martyrdom as the highest of life's honours. Heaven help fighting people who actively want to die for their cause. An Easter thought.

Cuba, a paradise for sex tourism is, like Iran, a cruel dictatorship. There is no freedom of speech and it holds thousands of political prisoners. And like Iran and many other police states, Cuba can count on the unbending loyalty of the ANC.

Ninety miles away in Miami, though, Cuban exiles are eager for Trump to move on the old country and the worse he does in Iran the more likely it becomes that he will seek to redeem his heroic view of himself in his "own" hemisphere. I hope the family I stayed with and the doctor who helped my son survive what may be to come.

But given that South Africa is also somewhere on the same Trump list as Iran and Cuba, it's worth asking yourself if you would fight for this country in the admittedly highly unlikely event it were attacked.

I know I would. I was born and educated here and returned after 20 years working abroad. I've never regretted it. Yes, we have a rotten government but we've been run by nationalist English, Afrikaners and now Africans, forever and they all do the same thing: they take care of their own. It's up to opposition parties to change that.

That's not something a Cuban or an Iranian is able to say. We forget as we complain that South Africa is a remarkably free country. President Cyril Ramaphosa, for all his faults and deceptions, has been a solid guarantor of our democracy.

You watch a Ramaphosa opponent like the creepy ANC Gauteng premier Panyaza Lesufi promoting an EFF member to become the head of finance in our richest province and you get an idea of what Ramaphosa is up against from within his own party. While (or if ever) the opposition sorts itself out, we're probably lucky Cyril's there. Happy Easter.

Shock and awe, then relief as R7 magically becomes R3

We must be grateful for small mercies, the old people told us. They may well have been preparing us for what we went through this past week.

With the Führer of Jerusalem and his Chihuahua, the madman of Mar-a-Lago, having precipitated a worldwide economic meltdown by launching an unprovoked attack on Iran, we found ourselves facing a fuel hike of around R7 for petrol and R11 for diesel. Not of our making, for a change.

The national shocked reaction to the announcement was real as the airwaves and the social waves buzzed with exclamations. "That's madness! Where will we get the money! All prices are going to go up! There is no way we can cope! The government must do something to cushion the people!"

And the government listened. The R7 became R3 and the R11 became R7. And we all breathed a huge sigh of relief. "At least, you know, the government has helped." But obviously, by the time the first announcement was made, the government knew it was going to suspend the levies.

The announcements could have been made at once but that wouldn't have had the same impact as creating the shock and awe first and then bringing some relief. In fact, had they done it the other way, there could still have been an outcry that it was not enough, I mean R7 for diesel is big, not to mention R15 for paraffin.

But did you hear anyone still being really strident? In the psychology of winning hearts and minds, you start with a magnified problem, create indignation and then provide a solution, no matter how small. The appreciation, the gratefulness for the small mercies, is eternal.

Thus we saw finance minister Enoch Godongwana, brim



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hat and all, beaming like father Xmas as he told the nation, "... and I don't even know yet where I am going to get the money ... or how long we will do this because it all depends on the war in the Middle East".

Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump plunged the world into a crisis because the former wanted a war to keep Israelis behind him, so that the corruption charges awaiting him could stay in abeyance.

Prosecuting the prime minister in the middle of a war doesn't sound patriotic.

With Gaza somewhat receding into the background, a new war was needed. Why not Iran, which you have accused for many years of being on the verge of producing a nuclear weapon? Wasn't that the reason given for the June 2025 "obliteration" of Iran's nuclear facilities?

And of course, despite being obliterated last year, they had to be obliterated again this year. Netanyahu knows what he is doing. Nothing concentrates the mind like the possibility of jail.

It is not clear whether the leader of the free world knows what he is in for and why.

Trump's chopping and changing of the goals of the war, from regime change to facilitating a popular uprising, to

wanting all of Iran's oil, indicate a mission whose goals are based on the latest bomb, whether it falls in Israel or in the Arab proxy nations that bow before the two masters.

Trump had hoped for a quickie of a war that would provide a respite from the Jeffrey Epstein files scandal. Just as the raid on Venezuela had done. However, Iran is no Venezuela, nor is it Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The Iranian centre has held, despite the elimination of a layer of national leadership, including the supreme leader. The war has instead been a tit for tat, with the Arab enabler states that house US troops feeling the brunt as they are both attacked and doubly strangled.

About 90% of food for these desert nations is imported through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has closed. Their petrodollar wealth relies on the export of crude oil to different countries. Iran has stopped both flows.

And the world watches as the emirs, rulers, sultans and princes shuttle between capitals trying to find a solution that would avoid them joining the two infidels in attacking a Muslim nation.

And despite the daily bombardment, Iran still stands, retaliating and fighting. The fact that one month into this war, Iran can still dictate what it wants shows the miscalculation on Trump's part about how this was going to unfold.

As the world waits, we wait too, and citizens scramble to fill tanks and store diesel in a vain attempt to survive another day. And Godongwana hopes that by May 5 sense will have prevailed in Washington and Trump will have found an exit route he can spin into victory after using it.

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