



Message from the NSTF Executive Director

Energy and other power crises

Power outages have become part of life over the past decade. Headlines regularly announce the bad news yet again and articles are strewn with sentences like: 'A decade of corruption and mismanagement leave the country in the dark'; and 'lack of maintenance and investment in generation and distribution'. Government contracts have found their way to family and friends who didn't deliver on these contracts. As a result, critical infrastructure has not been built nor maintained. Where it was built the work was shoddy and overcharged. Public funds are being squandered. A severe electricity supply shortage contributes to public dissatisfaction, unrest and anger. Highly skilled people leave the country. Business and the economy are affected, as well as healthcare and education.

South Africa faces an emergency, and urgent and decisive action is needed. But this time, the above is not a description of our country – it is Venezuela. Like in South Africa, the electricity saga is all bound up with politics.

Into darkness

The worst blackout in the history of Venezuela (up to 2019) occurred from the afternoon of Thursday, 7 March 2019 and lasted until the Sunday in almost the entire country.

Hugo Chavez had initially blamed the blackouts on the drought caused by El Niño, and later blamed the United States, alleging that the US had sabotaged the electricity system, to install the opposition leader they favoured as president (Juan Guaidó, leader of Parliament). As the Venezuelan government cast about for excuses, Major General Motta Domínguez blamed iguanas, rodents, snakes, cats, squirrels, etc. on social media for chewing through cables and crawling into equipment while "looking for burrow, nest or place to hide".* However, Chavez eventually declared a State of Emergency of the National Electric Service in 2019, and admitted government's failure to do sufficient planning, maintaining the thermoelectric generation park as back-up when hydro energy generation failed, and the limitations of the national electricity transmission network and distribution systems. This admission was too late of course.

For a long time, the capital Caracas had been mostly spared loadshedding (or as they call it, electricity rationing), being the seat of government. But the time arrived when even Caracas could not escape power outages. Between 2010 and 2015, the socialist regime allegedly invested more than 40,000 million dollars in "generation and transmission equipment". An NGO investigated and prosecuted a number of Venezuelan officials and businessmen, including the former president of Electricidad de Caracas; former Deputy Minister of Energy; and former finance director of Electricidad de Caracas, who apparently took bribes of millions, in "exchange for juicy contracts". The emergency funding disappeared without trace.

Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999. He inherited an imperfect, but functioning, democracy. He made promises of a true democracy and a new state characterised by transparency. Then he proceeded to dismantle that same functioning democracy and destroy the judicial system. Chavez allegedly turned "one of the richest, most prosperous and democratic countries of the continent [South America] into one of the poorest, destroyed the oil industry, national production, health and education, and buried democracy, one of the strongest in the region." **

The electricity crisis is part of a much larger socio-economic crisis. By 28 March 2019, the United Nations estimated that about a quarter of Venezuelans were in need of humanitarian assistance, painting a “dire picture of millions of people lacking food and basic services”. The U.N.’s ‘Overview of Priority Humanitarian Needs’ further estimates that “94 percent of the 28.8 million people live in poverty, while some 3.4 million people have fled, with a further 1.9 million expected to follow in this year” (2019). Preventable diseases resurfaced due to the lack of access to safe drinking water, the report said. The shortage of water seems mainly related to the shortage of electricity, with the pumping of water being dependent on continuous power supply.

Sociologist Trino Márquez, who wrote [The Burial of an Imperfect Democracy \(shorthandstories.com\)](http://shorthandstories.com) says that Chavez and Maduro came to power with “a clear plan of domination”. They destroyed “the Armed Forces, the independence of the media, civil organizations, political parties and other organizations.”

Similarities with South Africa

The parallel situation between South Africa and Venezuela is striking. Government officials at high level abuse their political power to disburse patronage, stealing public money to do so. The critical work of building and maintenance of electricity infrastructure is not done or completed, because public money is syphoned off to buy loyalty or to enrich themselves and relatives. State owned entities and state institutions are destroyed. In South Africa, notably Eskom, Transnet, the security system and SARS were systematically dismantled. The damage that was done could have led us to a Venezuelan state of devastation. Not that our own situation is not dire, but we have not gone over the cliff yet. The balance of power in South Africa is miraculously holding it all together as we teeter on the edge.

The difference is that Venezuela has had a military government for all these years, and that the government dismantled democracy itself by doing away with the democratic structures of government, including the National Assembly. The court system, an essential part of a democratic government, was destroyed. In South Africa the looters have tried very hard to undermine the judicial system, and tying it up in knots with unreasonable appeals. They have not succeeded in demolishing the justice system, and democracy is still standing strong. Civil society is vocal and doing a good job of calling out corruption and mismanagement. There is freedom of speech, in a manner of speaking, on an official level, although whistle-blowers are being mysteriously assassinated.

It is also significant to note that the electricity supplier is not spared the devastating effects of corruption, both in Venezuela and South Africa. Nor is the electricity system spared the damaging effects of a ‘brain drain’ as people ‘flee’ the country for one that is safer, and where the electricity supply is reliable (in addition to the supply of other necessities). Highly skilled people have been leaving the country for many years, and there is probably a wave of such people on their way out as I write this. Compare Venezuela where 3.4 million people are estimated to have left – the better resourced and educated people among them. In a vicious cycle, the chances of building, repairing and maintaining infrastructure, plummet. We have to prevent a mass exodus of people from South Africa. Often the anger of the most affected turns to the more privileged (even the slightly more privileged), and against minorities, and ‘clever people’ who don’t know their place.

We are extremely lucky to live in a democracy and to have a functioning judicial system. Without this, there is no limitation of state power. With all our challenges as a country, we are flying much too close to the sun, and risk losing these most precious of institutions.

Both countries are grappling with widespread poverty, dysfunctional schools, a broken health care system and a high rate of violent crime. Both have one of the highest murder rates in the world (as of 2018) and the same score of about 36 people killed per 100 000 of the population.

A lack of electricity supply worsens the poor state of institutions and services that should be working to the benefit of the people, including the state of security and crime prevention. It is the ordinary people who suffer the most. The economy takes a battering too, leading to further unemployment and hardship.

Another distinct advantage of living in South Africa is the social grants system. In Venezuela the government has apparently done very little to alleviate the plight of its people, only handing out basic food parcels that are not enough to feed families. The social grants system relieves some of the suffering and ensures some degree of political stability.

The politicisation of the management of the power grid and electricity supply does not benefit anyone. Insisting that Andre de Ruyter should resign totally misses the point. No-one has a magic wand to fix the power crisis over-night, or even within two years. It is a huge, complex, and time-consuming task (requiring specialised skills) to overhaul the long-neglected system so that it can eventually function efficiently. The most we can hope for is a reliable, skilled and determined team of people at the helm of Eskom, who will ensure that the shortage of electricity does not develop into a total national blackout and a state of emergency. The team should ensure that maintenance is done steadily even while balancing supply and demand diligently second-by-second. **See the NSTF Discussion Forum on Loadshedding and power cuts – what is really going on? held on 25-26 October 2021. Particularly the talk by Gav Hurford, system operator at the national control centre at Eskom.**

What are we to do as South Africans?

1. **First of all, we must maintain the electricity grid at all costs.** Do maintenance and manage loadshedding. A three-day total black out is simply not worth the relative convenience of suspended loadshedding.
2. **Secondly, guard and preserve our democracy and its institutions at all costs**, including the rule of law and the right to vote in a free and fair election.
3. **Thirdly, bring those who are corrupt to book.** It is difficult in a country where the web of State Capture still weaves through our body politic, but tolerating those who have been corrupt will keep government and state entities entangled and unable to move with speed to repair the vast damage caused by corruption over more than a decade.

Allow Venezuela to be our wake-up call.

* Major General Motta Domínguez in his Instagram account on October 20, 2018.

**[The Burial of an Imperfect Democracy \(shorthandstories.com\)](https://shorthandstories.com)

Sources:

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[Venezuelans facing 'unprecedented challenges,' many need aid - internal U.N. report | Reuters](#) – article by [Michelle Nichols](#) for Reuters

UN Report: “Overview of Priority Humanitarian Needs” in Venezuela

[List of countries by intentional homicide rate - Wikipedia](#)

[The Burial of an Imperfect Democracy \(shorthandstories.com\)](https://shorthandstories.com)

[Loadshedding and power cuts – what is really going on? | National Science and Technology Forum \(nstf.org.za\)](#)