

# The Cape Narco State

Andrew Charter – 22.01.25

One of the endless dilemmas of life and the universe at large, I would argue, is the apparent simultaneous existence of radically opposing states of everything. Certainly of everything we are yet capable of perceiving. Perhaps it is a precondition of existence. A necessity for beauty. The nourishment of imagination. And something both inescapable and perpetual. Call it entropy, if you will. And conceivably the human story is one defined by of our engagement with entropy, whether we recognise its presence or not.

The states of prosperity and degradation can be found to interlock and to cohabit the same domain. And, of course, highly variable are the measures by which we define and quantify such conditions. It is also valid to consider whether or under what circumstances one state may subsume the other, and what the implications are thereof.

In the Western Cape Province these two most natural of forces, when considered from the societal perspective, are engaged in furious combat. Where the implications of the incremental creep of degradation are existential for the capacity of the province to deliver the long-run prosperity that it is so evidently capable of bring to fruition, both for its residents and the Southern African region at large.

Under DA stewardship the Western Cape has been the recipient of appreciable economic upliftment and diversification. This is an achievement for which they should be heralded, and a refusal to acknowledge as much demonstrates only that one is bereft of plain sight and is likely adulterated by ideology. It nevertheless remains self-evident that masses of impoverished citizens still reside in ever growing *favelas*, a problem borne of many fathers. And one could indeed argue that much of the Cape's economic gain has been driven by the push factors compelling migration both domestically and abroad, as it has been the pull factors of reasonably functional government and the extraordinary natural beauty that is offered by the province.

Nonetheless, in South African terms the Western Cape is attracting substantial private and commercial investment capital, and there is a deluge of formal migrants possessed of consequential vocational expertise. The municipalities are generally efficient or at least functional, corruption appears to be of manageable proportions, the international reputation of the province as a destination for tourism or place of residence continues to appreciate, the working culture is becoming more vigorous, and economic diversification is palpable. And whilst it may never eclipse Gauteng as South Africa's primary economic engine (although it might), the balance of economic power in the country will forever be more multi-polar and less Highveld centralised.

The Cape; therefore, enjoys the potential to accumulate sufficient economic gravity to become a propellant of commerce and upliftment in its near periphery, as well as supplant Johannesburg

as the primary international investment conduit for much of Southern Africa. There is much cause for Cape optimism indeed.

However, in parallel with the emergent preeminence of the Western Cape relative to the balance of South Africa and the wider Southern African region, it is faced with the risk of a malevolent long-run devolution of sovereignty arising from the advancing entrenchment and capability development of its narco gangs, as well as related non-state actors. The Cape resides at the precipice of decent into an effective narco state, and it is not clear to me that the executive leadership of the provincial or national government are anywhere near suitably cognizant as to how few minutes or seconds remain before reaching the proverbial midnight.

The Cape is a major conduit of international drug trafficking, for reasons *inter alia* both historical and logistical. For many of the same interrelated reasons, it is also infamous as a habitat for gangs. What differs today from that which has traditionally existed in the maelstrom of the province's criminal underworld is that the resident gangs are ascending the ladder of operational sophistication into highly multidisciplinary syndicates, whilst certain vestiges of the major international cartels have secured well entrenched beachheads from which they will be thoroughly difficult to evict. When one then ventures to conceptualise the extremely difficult to discern resident status of international terror organisations, which have long utilised South Africa as a retreat of sorts, due concerns arise as to whether the Cape's current overt trajectory of prosperity may not in time be entirely overawed by a rapidly transmogrifying underworld leviathan, the most troubling dimensions of which may yet remain largely camouflaged from view.

This vulnerability has arisen to a very large degree due to the complete implosion of South Africa's security and intelligence capabilities, which are central government managed functions, and the blame certainly resides at the ANC's feet in this regard. I also see no evidence to suggest that this collapse in key pillars of state enjoys any likelihood of near-term abatement, at least not at a central government level.

What further concerns me is that I don't believe the DA provincial government, nor its national leadership, are vaguely equipped to conceive of the specific nature of this problem and by what means it can be addressed. Pave a road, the DA may be capable of doing, but attending to highly sophisticated and well resources trans-national and international crime syndicates strikes me as being very well beyond their competency, or even their present dialogue. This does not bode well insofar as sustaining the Cape's long-term prosperity in its tussle with the mustering forces of degradation.

Whatever be the multifactorial stimulants of the phased emergence and evolution of this Cape underworld, what by my judgement is indisputable is that the sinews of a narco state are coalescing into muscular form. One in which the vacant sovereign security apparatus has been occupied by a complex overlapping menagerie of local and foreign syndicates. And whilst many of the gangs can still be distinguished based on some configuration of tribal, racial, linguistic, cultural, geographic or other overt characteristic, these traditional expressions of affiliation will become less explicit as certain leaders or factions attain the critical mass necessary to metastasize into entities that adopt corporate like organisational doctrines.

A cardinal evolutionary point in this regard will be attained when the syndicates transition from rule to goal orientated systems, as seemingly transpired during the 1980s in Columbia and subsequently in Mexico. What follows immediately thereafter is the adoption of specialisation and the pursuit of niche expertise. Then comes militarisation, logistical distinction, financial excellence, and a highly refined political understanding. At which point the criminal system has matured into an adversary with the institutional proficiency of a dynamic small to medium sized state. And where the delineation between the formal and criminal economy will wholly disappear.

The leap from a central focus being that of South East Asia destined perlemoen smuggling to that of global or continental fentanyl trafficking, as well as that of localised extortion and racketeering to that of the engagement in international scale venture capital and highly resourced political lobbying, will be unexpectedly speedy. Underestimate the ability of the criminal economy to emerge as the societal hegemon at one's peril.

The Cape; therefore, may be most appropriately defined as being at a 'pre-Escobarian' stage of syndicate development. It won't remain there indefinitely.

What is also underappreciated in most quarters is the extent of strategic, operational and tactical sophistication of modern criminal syndicates and, perhaps most terrifyingly, the extraordinary intimacy of their relations with the conventional definition of equally formidable global terror organisations. One of Trump's first acts of his second term was the designation of the South and Central American cartels as being terrorist organisations, which signifies an appropriate redefinition of the nature of their operations and an improved appreciation of their underworld alliance systems. It was not simply a politically expedient relabeling.

I focus on the Western Cape regarding this subject not because the balance of South Africa is somehow immune or irrelevant, but due to the fact that the Western Cape may prove to be where the sovereignty of the South African state makes its last stand.

In ideal circumstances, the SAPS Special Task Force, augmented by SANDF Special Forces, and fed intelligence by an entirely new crime intelligence function, would be resourced and directed to undertake a furious nationwide campaign against the worst of the worst. The capabilities to do so exist, as do the people and the prerequisite motivation. Political apathy wedded to the criminalisation of central government will, in all likelihood, sadly preclude this.

The next best measure from the perspective of the Cape provincial government is then the formulation of its own crime intelligence capability, in conjunction with a gendarme-like paramilitary battalion devised on some combination of the SAPS Special Task Force and the BOPE tactical policing unit that is the renown of Rio de Janeiro. There are no doubt Constitutional or otherwise legislative impediments to the provincial government undertaking such initiatives; however, a failure to thoroughly consider the above would be a dereliction of responsibility.

Furthermore, South Africa appears to be well on its way to meaningful political and economic decentralisation, which I anticipate will bring with it a devolution of certain central government functions to the orbit of the provinces. Whether this decentralisation transpires with broad

political consensus as an effective reset and reordering of the structure of government into a more federal-like system, or manifests haphazardly with the risk of partial or comprehensive balkanization of the country, remains to be seen. But decentralisation in one form or another is to my mind as sure a component of South Africa's future as is the daily magnificence of our sunrise. As such, the provincial government has additional cause to think more systematically regarding its future security competency requirements.

I am also of the view that provincial security functions could be rendered cost-effective and scalable with the addition of thoughtfully structured reserve force elements, and that certain innovative funding mechanism could be employed to aggregate the required capital. It is an opportunity to demonstrate imagination. The DA is required to raise the bar of its thinking, and to not become captive to the detached echo chamber of situational awareness and reasoning that readily bewitches the attentions of the politically engaged. They may also have little time to do so, as it is not clear to me that the DA will remain politically dominant in the Cape over the medium-term.

Even if the province in some manner ultimately rises to the occasion, there will be a lag-time for this to occur with any efficacy. Accordingly, I would advocate that the Cape public at large commence with envisioning a problematical trajectory in the security status of the province over the forthcoming 10 to 15 years and employ the typical south African vim and vigour in preparing accordingly.

A reference case for the 10-odd year horizon may be that of present-day Brazil. This would entail entirely ungovernable *favelas* which are completely subject to the dominion of the major syndicates - existing as territories effectively severed from the balance of the province, much like entirely independent feudal principalities which serve as vassals subservient to higher criminal authorities. Huge acts of industrial crime may become commonplace, where entire factories or large-scale public assets are ransacked overnight with marked professionalism. The SIGINT, ELINT and related EW capabilities of the syndicates will become major vectors of intelligence gathering, and may prove to represent a competency well in excess of any possessed by whatever residual sovereign expertise exists at the relevant time. At some stage reports will arise of 12.7mm calibre weapons being employed against private security companies or police, and drones will become incorporated as key criminal capability multipliers. Kidnapping of higher value persons will become more commonplace. But just as in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and other wonderful cities and states of Brazil, in many locations and precincts life will continue very much as it does today. Weddings, negronis and wine estates will still be emblematic of the marvel of the Cape. It will represent the simultaneous existence of radically opposing states of being.

Much can be learned from what the citizenry, private security companies and corporates achieved in the failed insurrection of 2021 in KwaZulu-Natal. At the lowest resolution, that of the individual or the family, be armed and prepared. And resist with great fortitude any attempts to disarm law-abiding citizens.

At the highest practical resolution, that of the local residential or agricultural organisation, engage in dialogue regarding mechanisms of basic command and control. The World is

becoming one of heterogenous precincts – chose and be prepared to defend yours should the rubber hit the road. And do not underestimate what a swarm of incremental capabilities embedded within the citizenry and private sector are able to achieve. It may sound like anarchy, but it may prove to be the habitat within which a new dispensation of productive governance arises.

Whatsmore, don't be seduced into believing that these challenges are uniquely South African or developing world ones. They are not.

The objective of this proposition is not to sew pessimism, but rather to propagate awareness and hopefully stimulate consideration. As with everything, a solution lies before us, we are required just to provoke it into life.

Unless we hope that entropy favours the victory of prosperity over degradation.