

Dealing with the Charismatic Triumphalist Approach of Trump to The South African Government

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Abstract. Triumphalism is an attitude that one's ideas or even politics will ultimately triumph and dominate over others. This study uses a critical literature review approach by searching into databases such as google scholar using keywords such as triumphalist approach, Donald Trump, and South African government. The reviewed literature in qualitative research demonstrates that a triumphalist approach was used by the president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, in his political campaigns and approach to geopolitics. Literature also demonstrates that this kind of approach has some links with the charismatic movement, including New Apostolic Reformation, hence the construction of a framework, a charismatic triumphalist approach. Trump's triumphalist approach has been used, for example, to freeze the United States of America's government aid to South Africa and impose a 30 percent unilateral tariff on South Africa. The rationale for these harsh decisions against South Africa has been the wrong perception of anti-white transformation policies, while in reality, South Africa is trying its best to address the injustices of the past in the signing of the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, the Expropriation Act, and the National Health Insurance (NHI) Act. The key research question is how to address the charismatic, triumphalist approach of Trump towards the South African government. This article proposes a theory of sovereignty on its transformation agenda and foreign policies. The article found that sovereignty can help South Africa not to be distracted by Trump's triumphalism, not only in the present but also in the future, in dealing with adverse situations against the country and the continent at large.

Keywords Charismatic triumphalist approach; Donald Trump; Cyril Ramaphosa; South African government; Triumphalism, politics

Introduction

Recently, President Cyril Ramaphosa put pen to paper on an expropriation Act empowering the government to reclaim land deemed of national importance. This refers to privately owned land that might be repurposed for vital community needs—think schools, clinics, or hospitals. The intent behind this action is to right the wrongs of historical injustices like land dispossession. The process of expropriation promises not to unfold recklessly, but to involve dialogue with current landowners, ensuring avenues for potential compensation are explored. Importantly, the Bill also does not encroach upon private properties such as homes or commercial establishments. In addition, President Ramaphosa has also signed the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, which advocates for compulsory preschool, particularly Grade R, addresses issues of inclusivity in the language of instruction, and regulates homeschooling. Furthermore, President Ramaphosa signed the National Health Insurance (NHI) Act for the offering of quality health care services to all South Africans. The signing of these Acts, that is, the Expropriation Act, the BELA Act, and the NHI Act, has triggered some harsh decisions by the president of the United States of America, President Trump, against the South African government in recent times. This is because of the administration of Trump's perception of these policies as an "anti-white" agenda. Two major decisions were taken in this regard. First is the freezing of the United

States of America's government aid to South Africa. Second, there is the imposition of a 30 per cent unilateral tariff in South Africa. There is a link between these decisions and President Trump's charismatic triumphalist approach to politics. The research question that this article seeks to address is how the South African government can respond to these harsh decisions and their link to the triumphalist approach. In responding to the research question, the article will look at the roots of the triumphalist approach in Trump's presidency. This approach is discussed in conjunction with the charismatic movement, particularly the New Apostolic Reformation. The article will highlight the key findings on the harsh decisions taken against the South African government. The last section will look at the theory of sovereignty as a helpful approach that the South African government can take in dealing with adversity, such as the freezing of aid and high trade tariffs.

South Africa's transformation agenda is aimed at addressing the challenges of economic inequality, social inequality and the historical inequalities brought about by the apartheid system (Gumede 2013; Brankovic, Mphahlele, Nunu, Ngxukuma, Njana and Sishuba 2020; Saka 2024). Apartheid was a system that saw the separation of people into different races such as black, coloured, Indian, and white (Wolpe 1990, Posel 2001, Mhlauli and Mokotedi 2015). During apartheid, learners could not learn in their own languages but rather were forced to learn in Afrikaans, hence the 1976 protests by students such as Tsietsi Mashishinini of Morris Isaacson High School (Maphunye 2017). Consequently, economic privileges were reserved for the whites whilst the black majority only ate from the crumbs that fell from the white masters' table. The various economic approaches, such as the Reconstruction Development Plan (RDP), Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative (ASGISA), Broad Based Economic Empowerment, and even the National Development (NDP), are not anti-white but rather endeavours to try and bring economic and social equality (Moyo and Mamabolo 2014, Mosala 2022, Naidoo and Maré 2015). Similarly, the various education approaches and even Acts such as Bela are not anti-white but rather approaches to try and solve the educational imbalances that exist between various racial groups in South Africa. Even the land reform approach, such as the expropriation act, is meant to ensure that the land is returned to its rightful owners. Therefore, the South African transformation agenda is important for dealing with all these different inequalities using the Constitution of the Republic. The transformation agenda is important to deal with different social ills like unemployment and poverty amongst the black majority in the South African context. However, a triumphalist approach, as adopted by President Trump, took action without paying attention to the circumstances that called for these different economic approaches, land reform acts, and educational acts.

Triumphalism within a political context refers to an attitude of victory and superiority over others. Van Schenck (2024:155) explains that "Triumphalism is a response pattern inflamed when the Western subject's self-proclaimed universal authority over knowledge and being is placed under a perceived threat". In this way, triumphalism becomes a mechanism in which the superiority of those who claim to be triumphant over others is protected. Triumphalism consists of three elements, namely, aggressive individualism, chauvinistic rationalism, and ruthless culturalism (Asante, 2006; Heywood, 2014; Chen, 2017; and Van Schenck, 2024). In the first element, Van Schenck (2024:156) links the triumphalist approach with a reactionary rhetoric that demonstrates the very aggressive individualism in the protection of Western-centric worldviews and superiority. Van Schenck (2024:156) goes on to say that "triumphalism provides rhetorical resources for white Christian men to dig in their heels and reassert their privilege and individuality at the expense of both collective solidarity and the individual life-worlds of marginalised people". This also applies to the triumphalist approach that considers the reassertion of a specific country, like the United States of America, at the expense of other countries. Hence, the idea of a triumphalist approach is very much linked to the nationalist approach, where a particular nation can perceive itself as being superior to other nations. This brings us to the second element of chauvinism, which is the superiority of a group of people that, in the process, sees other groups as weak (Heywood, 2014). The goal is to make others feel inferior while the triumphant group feels very superior. Hence, there is a link here with nationalism because one nation can consider itself stronger than others. The last element of triumphalism is ruthless culturalism, which is an attitude of viewing one's culture as being superior to other cultures and consequently demanding the suppression of other cultures by one's own. Asante (2006:157) explains that,

Ruthless culturalism is the promotion of the European and American political ideal as the most correct form of human society. Any assault on this ideal is considered emotional, irrational, and immoral. They defend this construct with numerous machinations of science, politics, statistics, and literature. These mechanisms allow many ruthless culturalists to maintain their hegemonic imposition by creating symbolic, economic, and cultural domination in most sectors of society. Therefore, the triumphalist approach is based on an individual undermining a group of people, which leads to a particular nation exercising authority over other nations and consequently one culture perceiving itself as being over and above other cultures. Triumphalist approach, in summary, is very reactionary, individualistic, chauvinistic, and culturalist.

In the context of the politics of President Donald Trump, his triumphalist approach is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition, particularly the charismatic movement. In the first place, Trump is seen as the one sent by God to deliver his people in the same way that biblical models like Moses were sent by God (Light, 2023:535). With this kind of revelation about him being a liberator comes the notion of victory over others. There is also a strong connection between Trump's idea of triumphalism and the teachings of the charismatic movement on the life of victory and triumph. It is therefore not surprising that, according to Light (2023:535), "Trump appointed a prominent prosperity preacher, Paula White, as his spiritual advisor in 2002 and appointed her again to his religious cabinet in 2016. Trump's personal resonance with the prosperity gospel explains why its partisans are his most fervent supporters". This speaks directly to the acquaintance of Trump with the message of victory propagated by the prosperity gospel preachers in the United States of America. Other than Paula White, Trump associated himself with other televangelists who would speak openly and prophesy about the victory of Trump even before the elections. Another interesting connection is between Trump and the New Apostolic Reformation, which is also known for Christian nationalistic ideas (Williams, 2024:15). In addition, the New Apostolic Reformation, like the charismatic movements in the United States of America, is known for messages of victory and authority. It is within the New Apostolic Reformation where the offices of Apostles and prophets are common, who often preach about messages of victory. Both the New Apostolic Reformation and the charismatic movements can be studied and understood in the context of the broader Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity. The charismatic triumphalism is also seen in the failure by Trump and some of the prophets and televangelists to accept his defeat in 2020 (Berry, 2023). This is because the triumphalist approach is the one that fails to accept defeat and always perceives leaders like Trump as victorious. Hence, most of these televangelists and prophets prophesied of Trump's restoration to power, also as part of the triumphalist approach.

There is strong evidence that President Trump used the charismatic triumphalism approach in his political campaigns and his ultimate victory in his first term (2016) and the second term (2024). Light (2023:540) explains that in his first term, "evangelicals voted for Trump because he is a white Christian nationalist". Thus, it is correct to point out that his victory is connected to what Asante (2006) calls "white triumphalism," which is connected to nationalism as part of the elements of triumphalism discussed by Van Schenck (2024). It is clear then that most white nationalists voted for Trump in a reactionary mode to defend their superiority. This means that Trump's presidency is also coming with that kind of reactionary rhetoric to defend the superiority of whiteness in the American context. Therefore, it is this white Christian nationalist approach that produces the white triumphalist approach as demonstrated in the reactionary rhetoric of Trump. This is helpful in not being surprised by seeing Trump making unreasonable decisions, particularly in his second term, that seem to be disadvantaging other nations and undermining democracy in America. Trump's political decisions are mainly informed by his charismatic triumphalism that seeks to be individualistic, chauvinistic, and culturalist, as the main elements of triumphalism discussed by scholars such as Asante (2006), Chen (2017), Heywood (2014), and Van Schenck (2024). Trump's triumphalist approach is well summed up by Connolly (2017:2):

Trump, I want to say, is not a Nazi. He is a neo-fascist who pursues hyper-aggressive nationalism, a law-and-order President who gives way too much power to the police, a proponent of white triumphalism, and the practitioner of a rhetorical style that regularly smears opponents to sustain the Big Lies he advances to energize his constituency and deflect them from hearing critical perspectives.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Trump is more of a charismatic triumphalist who lords it over others using all the elements of triumphalism in his campaigns and political leadership. The next section of this current study looks at the methodological techniques and approaches that can be used in the reflection of this charismatic triumphalist approach in the political leadership of Trump.

Methodology

Data were gathered using a literature review in qualitative research, which is mainly a critical review of the existing literature on a particular subject to identify existing research gaps (Barnett-Page and Thomas 2009; Schryen 2015; Baako, Alhassan, and Gidisu 2022). A critical review was conducted by searching important themes such as triumphalism, the South African transformation agenda, and Donald Trump in important engines such as Google Scholar. The process involves working with literature to examine and deduce valuable knowledge in the subject to develop new insights for the present and future discourses in that subject. In the context of this study, the main subject discussed is the triumphalist approach in the presidency of Donald Trump and its reactionary rhetoric toward the South African government. The literature relevant to this study is on the conceptualisation of the triumphalist approach, particularly as informed by the Christian tradition and the charismatic movement in the presidency of Donald Trump.

The study looked at the relevant literature on the executive decision by President Donald Trump to freeze America's government aid to South Africa to link it to a charismatic triumphalist approach. In addition, the article explored the literature on the group of 49 Afrikaners who accepted the offer of President Donald Trump to receive refugee status to live and work in the United States of America, and its link to the charismatic triumphalist approach. The article reviewed literature on the 30% increase in trade tariffs to South Africa by the United States of America. The literature review on these themes is based on scholarly books, peer-reviewed articles, and book chapters. The main research question is how the South African government can respond to the triumphalist approach of President Donald Trump on both the freezing of aid and the tariff increases. The objective of the study is to develop a theoretical framework that can address adversity, particularly faced by a nation like South Africa. In other words, the study is interested in the relevant framework that the South African government can use, considering the current challenges, specifically as informed by the decision taken by President Donald Trump.

This article uses the theory of sovereignty. Sovereignty is a word used to describe the authority that is held by an individual or even an organisation or any other territory (Schmitt, 2005; Besson, 2012; Moses, 2014). Besson (2012) explains that sovereignty is not just authority but refers to the supremacy of such a territory. In the context of this study, it refers to the supremacy held by the state, such as South Africa. The theory of sovereignty becomes a framework in which the supreme authority of an individual, or in this context, the state, can be unpacked and applied to a specific context (Schmitt, 2005). When the state exercises its supreme authority, it does not allow external forces to influence its core decisions on various issues, including policies, laws, and acts. Sovereignty in the context of the state is extended beyond the will or authority of an individual to the sovereignty of the society. The theory of sovereignty is applied to the South African government in how it responds to the charismatic triumphalism of President Donald Trump. This theory is relevant since the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1994) states that “

The Republic of South Africa is one sovereign, democratic state founded on the following values: Human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedoms. Non-racialism and non-sexism. Supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law. Universal adult suffrage, a national common voters' roll, regular elections, and a multi-party system of democratic government, to ensure accountability, responsiveness, and openness. Therefore, the discussions of this study will look at how the theory of sovereignty can be applied in the context of the two main decisions taken by President Donald Trump on reversing aid to South Africa and imposing a 30 percent tariff increase.

The Findings

The rise of President Trump to the white house has seen some developing tensions between his administration and the South African government. This is because even in his administration in the first term, Trump was very critical of the transformation programs of the South African government, particularly its land reform. This manifested more in his second term because of his alignment with Elon Musk, who supported him during his campaigns. Elon Musk, who is a White South African living in the United States of America, is also unlikely to support the transformation agenda of the South African government (Marwala 2021). This has led to a more hostile attitude towards the South African government in the second term of President Donald Trump since 2024. Consequently, President Donald Trump demonstrated his triumphalism when he was quick to freeze America's government aid to South Africa. Kohnert (2025:11) explains that, given these tensions, Trump decided to cut the aid to South Africa in February 2025. According to the USAFacts (2025:1):

The United States has historically provided substantial foreign aid to South Africa, focusing on humanitarian assistance, health programs, and economic development. In fiscal year (FY) 2023, the U.S. committed about \$441.2 million in aid, with projections of \$564 million for FY 2024 and \$103.3 million for FY 2025. This aid is primarily non-military, with 99.9% allocated for economic purposes, including health initiatives like the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Although some, like the European Union, came in to try and fill the gap left by the USA, this does not eliminate the tensions that exist between the South African government and the USA. In addition, this does not eliminate the triumphalist approach of President Donald Trump towards the South African government. The reasons behind this radical decision to cut the aid were that South Africa was involved in a genocide with its transformation program, forcefully taking the land of white South Africans. According to Kohnert (2025:11), these, in the mind of Trump, were "terrible things" done by the South African government. In addition, the tension between South Africa and Trump's administration might have been triggered by the filing of the genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December 2023. Nonetheless, whether Trump's radical decisions are justifiable or not, they demonstrate the charismatic triumphalist approach towards the South African government.

The triumphalism of Donald Trump was also seen when he offered help for the Afrikaners, who, according to him, were facing genocide in South Africa. Kohnert (2025:12) explains that "In addition to the aid freeze, he offered to help refugees from the Afrikaner community, mostly white descendants of early Dutch and French settlers, settle in the US". Sending an aircraft to pick up Afrikaners from South Africa was a demonstration of some form of superiority over the government of South Africa. One cannot imagine President Cyril Ramaphosa sending an aircraft to the United States to pick up black Americans who are facing various challenges in the United States of America. Thus, this form of action is nothing but a form of triumphalism that seeks to demonstrate superiority over the government of South Africa. In stark contrast, the vast majority of white South Africans continue to bask in the glow of "white privilege," while many black individuals grapple with the harsh realities of poverty, unemployment, and systemic inequalities. Now, let's talk numbers: there are approximately 4,504,252 white South Africans. Figure 49 is a mere blip—less than 1%—and certainly does not warrant the label of a white genocide in the country. The tragic incidents on farms are not isolated; they are part of a broader tapestry woven with the threads of high crime rates affecting both farmers and farmworkers, irrespective of their skin colour. Recently, President Cyril Ramaphosa put pen to paper on an expropriation Bill, empowering the government to reclaim land deemed of national importance. This refers to privately owned land that might be repurposed for vital community needs—think schools, clinics, or hospitals. The intent behind this action is to right the wrongs of historical injustices like land dispossession. Yet, rest assured, this process will not unfold recklessly; it will involve dialogue with current landowners, ensuring avenues for potential compensation are explored. Importantly, this Bill does not encroach upon private properties such as homes or commercial establishments.

President Donald Trump also demonstrated his triumphalism when he imposed a 30 percent unilateral tariff on South Africa (Edwards and Chien 2025, Kohnert 2025, Britz, Olekseyuk, and Vogel 2025). Edwards and Chien (2025:3) explain that “Earlier this year (2nd April), President Trump also invoked the International Emergency Economic Power Act (IEEPA) to impose a 10% reciprocal tariff on imports from most countries, with country-specific (30% for South Africa) reciprocal tariffs to kick in from the 1st of August, unless an alternative agreement is negotiated”. This is more like a punishment to South Africa since other countries’ tariff increases are less than 30%, thus demonstrating the triumphalist approach towards the South African government. This means that all products sent to the US from South Africa would also be part of this 30% tariff, separate from all sectoral tariffs. If, by any means, there is avoidance of this 30% tariff through, for example, transshipping products and goods, then the US government would impose even a higher tariff. This is rather a superior approach from the US government towards the South African government. It further demonstrates the charismatic triumphalist approach of President Donald Trump. According to Kohnert (2025:11), “His move has sent shockwaves through South Africa, with experts fearing he may use the opportunity to end preferential access to the US market through the special US-Africa trade programme known as the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)”. Williams (2015:3) explains that:

The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) is a nonreciprocal trade preference program that provides duty-free treatment to U.S. imports of certain products from eligible sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. There are 49 candidate SSA countries with 39 currently eligible for the preference benefits. Congress first authorized AGOA in 2000 to encourage export-led growth and economic development in SSA and improve U.S. economic relations with the region.

The current radical decisions taken by President Trump not only threaten the South African government and its trading relations with the US government, but also the very successes made by AGOA. The point made here is that this demonstrates the charismatic triumphalist approach towards the South African government.

Discussion

The South African government is a sovereign country as stated in the Constitution of the Republic. Thus, the theory of sovereignty guarantees the sovereign status of the country, whereby its transformation agenda, as demonstrated through the signing of the Expropriation Act, the BELA Act, and the NHI Act by President Cyril Ramaphosa, cannot be dictated by other countries, including the USA. As long as these Acts do not threaten the supremacy of other countries, there appears to be no hindrance to their implementation. As long as these Acts do not threaten the lives and livelihoods of fellow South Africans and are in line with the constitution of the republic, then the country can go ahead with their implementation. As discussed in the preceding sections, the Expropriation Act, for example, is not meant to disadvantage any white South African, and no one, as per the Act, would be forcefully removed from their farm or private property. But the Act aims at targeting unoccupied land and strategically using it for the benefit of the public.

Similarly, the BELA Act is aimed at addressing the injustices of the past and allowing all South Africans to attend schools free in the language of instruction that they can understand. The Act is aimed at bringing inclusivity to the schooling system, particularly in basic education, including pre-school. The act is not aimed at disadvantaging anyone in the South African context. The NHI Act will ensure that all South Africans have access to a quality health care system, as opposed to only the rich and the middle class accessing quality health care in the current dispensation (Whyte and Olivier 2023). Therefore, it does not make sense why the Trump administration seeks to freeze aid and impose tariffs in the quest to fight transformation. While these actions are disproportionate under normal diplomatic standards, they align predictably with a triumphalist worldview. Hence, it is suggested here that the South African government is expected to remain adamant and relentless in the implementation of the transformation agenda.

The theory of sovereignty is also relevant to the discussions around the South African government and its foreign policies. The filing of the case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, for example, is consistent with South Africa's foreign policy and commitment to multilateralism, regional cooperation, promotion of human rights, and economic development. The filing of this case in solidarity with the people of Palestine is consistent, particularly with the issue of human rights and ending the genocide in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Besides, South Africa, having experienced apartheid in the past, cannot be silent and watch the injustices persist as propagated by the Israeli government against the people of Palestine. South Africa is better placed to understand the challenges faced by the people of Palestine because the country has faced similar challenges in the past. But the filing of the case at the ICJ not only demonstrates solidarity with the people of Palestine but also demonstrates the country's sovereignty (Andrews 2025). In keeping up with this sovereignty, South Africa cannot be threatened by the US government to withdraw the case; such a withdrawal would be tantamount to giving away its sovereignty. Withdrawing such a case because of the freezing of aid and 30% tariffs would be tantamount to selling the sovereignty of the South African government. Therefore, it can be asserted here that South Africa remains a sovereign state amid the threats of aid cuts and the tariff increase.

South Africa's stance on these geopolitical issues is important for the continent and the global South in general. Yes, the sovereignty of the South African government is important. But most importantly, the position of South Africa on transformation issues on land reform, education, and health not only benefits the country but the continent as a whole. This also speaks to the issue of the ability for the South African government to form other trading partners, not to replace the US, but in addition to the latter. The South African government cannot in the 21st century continue to depend on Aid such as the one recently cut by President Donald Trump. At some point, the country needs to demonstrate its sovereignty, even when it comes to economic development. The point made here is that such economic independence would benefit the continent and the global south in general. This speaks to the development of trade agreements on the continent, where Africa can become an economic powerhouse that will not always depend on the US for Aid but rather trade with the latter as equal partners. This is one way in which the triumphalist approach of the Trump administration can be overcome, particularly in the long term. This is how the South African government can deal with the triumphalist approach of President Donald Trump.

Conclusion

This article reviewed literature on the charismatic triumphalist approach to political campaigns and geopolitics in the presidency of Donald Trump and its influence on decision-making. The article was interested in how this approach has, for example, influenced the decision of President Donald Trump to decide against South Africa to freeze the aid given to the country and to impose a 30% tariff hike on the country. The article found that President Trump misconstrued the transformation agenda in the signing of the Expropriation Act, the BELA Act, and the NHI Act. The president did not understand the historical conditions surrounding the signing of such acts and misconstrued them as an anti-white agenda. The main research question that the article sought to answer is how the South African government can respond to such misinterpretations of its laws, bills, and acts. This article proposed the theory of sovereignty, in which the South African government would be able to respond to the harsh decisions rather than being reactionary. In responding to these harsh decisions, the South African government is a sovereign country, and it is expected to maintain its foreign policy and how it addresses conflicts on the continent and in the world. The South African government should be sovereign in how it addresses the transformation agenda in dealing with the injustices of the past.

Therefore, there is a need for further engagement in explaining to the international community that the Expropriation Act, the BELA Act, and the NHI Act are not anti-white acts but rather plans to ensure equality in important issues on land, education, and health. South Africa's sovereignty is important not only for the country but for the continent and the countries in the Global South. Furthermore, there is a need for South Africa to form new trading partners and strengthen inter-African trade agreements so it no longer depends on

US aid. In this way, the sovereignty of South Africa should be protected to send a clear message that the country can make and stand by its own decisions and not be threatened by external forces and influences.

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