

THE COURAGE OF LEADERSHIP

What makes South Africa's democratisation process interesting is that we keep reverting to our past, both distant and recent, to draw necessary lessons to help us navigate the rapids found in the present era. One such lesson that has seen South Africa survive the worst that could have happened is the key issue of social dialogue.

by Kgalema Motlanthe

While we are seeking to change society from the noxious past to a refreshing present marked by human rights, justice and prosperity, the economic system we are living through is also changing us.

Social dialogue has been the bedrock upon which consensus was and is built to crack the most difficult socio-political situations. Conflicts of all sorts are endemic to all democratising societies; South Africa is no exception.

The shape of present day South Africa has been wrought by this doctrine to social conflicts. Once again political thinkers provide us with a useful theoretical framework to comprehend the value of consensus for South Africans struggling with the reality of post-apartheid challenges.

South Africa's democratic consolidation holds because it is based on consensus within the political community. In this regard I wish to break down consensus into two component parts, all of which contribute to South African stability'.

Firstly, South Africa has consensus over 'ultimate values'. While ultimate values are normally not seen as possible in a society that is heavily internally fissured along racial, ethnic, religious and linguistic lines, especially when such a society has just emerged from autocracy, South Africa is arguably holding its own on this front.

For this South Africa can thank the 'Mandela phenomenon'. Epitomising the essential goodness of the struggle in the classical sense, the epic figure of Nelson Mandela radiated values that have not only transcended the barriers mentioned above but also, bound most South Africans together. These values could be said to offer South Africans something to live for; they point to a shared, indivisible future in which all South Africans have a stake. In a way they have morphed into a

legitimising philosophy for our democratic state.

The strategic vision of the liberation struggle was defined by the key goal of the achievement of a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and just society. Throughout his life Nelson Mandela was shaped by this very vision, of which he subsequently became a distinctive embodiment in words and in deed.

Inspired by this vision, most South Africans, across race, class and political affiliation are alive to both the nature and scope of responsibility with which we are faced at this point in history. Differentiated as they may be by a polarising history, most South Africans are nevertheless bonded by a deep conviction in the achievability of the dream of a prosperous nation, united in diversity. This climate of positive thinking about our future throws up ideal conditions for the consolidation of ascendant values that bind our nascent nation together.

In this connection the demise of Nelson Mandela left us a legacy which shines an eternal light to our aspired future.

The second type of consensus that defines our current state of democratic consolidation is 'rules of procedure', which refers to minimising disloyalty by binding all players to obtaining rules by dint of fairness and equality for all. Of course the challenge here is that we should always strive to maintain highest standards of fairness, for once some participants start perceiving unfairness or that rules of procedure are loaded against them, the process will wobble and probably collapse.

With the legitimacy of the rules of procedure intact, no one player can just walk away from the process of



engagement, making it easy for all us to employ the same vehicle to resolve our differences.

The benefit we hope to derive from this dimension of consensus is that the institutions that underpin democracy, namely, the rules of procedure, assume a life of their own, becoming not only impersonal but self-perpetuating, often in a virtuous cycle.

Thus rooted in societal culture, it becomes second nature to all members of society that no one is above the law in all facets of society, including the constitution, the police, courts, labour bargaining councils and all other institutions that either govern lives or serve as arbiters or interpreters of the law.

I would be insincere if I did not reflect on the political state of South Africa today, given the importance of the present conditions on the evolving contours of the future of our democracy.

As you are aware, South Africa was conceived in racial iniquity. Our socio-historical self-consciousness was cast in impermeable racial moulds from the very beginning of our nation. This is an important dimension to bear in mind as we look at the twenty years of democracy in terms of transitioning from the apartheid state and attempting to understand the process of consolidating democracy.

The legacy of the past racist economic policies remains the dominant reality on current socio-economic landscape. Essentially apartheid was about racially skewed production, distribution and consumption of resources. Despite all our successes from the moment we entered into a transitional period to a post-apartheid political system, we are convinced

that democracy cannot be consolidated on the basis of history alone.

This is an all-important point to note, for as long as the majority of South Africans languish in hunger, homelessness, illiteracy and diseases, among other social ills, for so long will our system of democracy hang on a thread. Put differently, our system of democracy cannot survive long in social conditions that hold out nothing for the majority of the population.

The real challenge for us has been to forge an economic programme which allows us to overcome the inherited economic structure by steadily moving to an economic approach which will liberate the productive forces and lead to a better society.

In this regard, we have since 1994 tried out a few economic programmes, including, recently, the National Development Plan (NDP), to address these accumulated disabilities of our history. The NDP has been generally acceptable as the road map to the attainment of growth and development. The NDP has laid out the parameters within which each social partner can make a contribution towards the achievement of our shared vision. This shared vision entails the reduction of poverty, stimulating economic growth, effecting economic transformation and creating employment. Ineluctably, the achievement of these goals is partly predicated on the role of an engaged private sector. This role has to be seen within the context of a broad and continued social dialogue comprising government, the private sector, labour unions and civil society as primary players.

It is also notable that we are seeking to bring about

More than 50 000 households in the Western Cape have no toilets at all and almost 60 000 households use the bucket system, according to the 2011 Census. In areas such as Khayelitsha in Cape Town, thousands of people are forced to relieve themselves in extremely awkward conditions.
Photo: Masixole Feni

comprehensive socio-economic changes within an unchanged socio-economic formation, which, in turn, is imposing limitations on what the democratic state can do. We have to succeed in our objectives in the context of an accelerated process of globalisation, leading to a greater integration of the nations of the world, the limitation of the sovereignty of states and the growing disparities between the rich and the poor.

The struggle to transform the South African society and emancipate ourselves takes place within a concrete and ever-changing national and international environment. This environment calls upon all of us whose sights are set on democratic transformation to pursue our objective always mindful of the changes as well as the subjective and the objective factors which characterise this environment.

Yet an observer cannot miss the point that the exercise of state power throws up its own challenges in all societies. Indeed post-colonial history is choking on such cases, South Africa included. This is shown by the appetite for the dishonest means of wealth accumulation that has emerged over the twenty years of our exercise of state power.

While we are seeking to change society from the noxious past to a refreshing present marked by human rights, justice and prosperity, the economic system we are living through is also changing us. This is the challenge that faces the ANC in power today. We have designated this phenomenon 'the sins of incumbency'. By this I am not suggesting a mechanical view that says we are trapped in a rotten post-apartheid life about which we cannot do anything. Indeed change is possible!

It takes the courage of leadership to come to terms with this malady, in ways that help the organisation cleanse itself of these conditions. It cannot be a matter of wishful thinking; steps have to be taken to bring up a generation of committed cadres with a singular purpose to help move society forward.

One of our biggest challenges is state capacity to deliver services to society. Oftentimes government has found itself between a rock and a hard place. Government has had to rely on the bureaucratic machinery to implement its programme of social transformation. However, this has not always been easy.

In his book, *Beyond the Miracle*, veteran journalist, political analyst and author, Allister Sparks, observes that: '...apartheid's legacy of poor education for the majority of the population and the way the job reservation laws favouring whites truncated the skills base



In April this year the Africa Studies Centre at the University of Oxford hosted the 20 Years of Democracy in South Africa Conference. The event included speakers from around the world who shared their thoughts, research and experiences of the last 20 years in the South African political, economic and social landscapes. This article is an edited excerpt from the keynote address by then Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe.

Further information about the 20 Years of Democracy in South Africa Conference can be found at the African Studies Centre website:
<http://www.africanstudies.ox.ac.uk/1994-2014-20-years-south-african-democracy>

of our working class.²³ Former senior public servant Barry Gilder makes the point more lucidly when he explains that:

*"Many of us drawn into the public sector had little or no experience of governing, of managing large organisations and budgets, of the complex and incomprehensible processes and procedures we were suddenly expected to follow, of myriad law and regulations we had to comply with, of the requirement upon us. And we were charged, by history and our own beliefs, with providing health, education, employment, welfare services – and Freedom – to the four fifths of the population previously neglected by apartheid."*²⁴

Many of the current social protests witnessed in South Africa's urban landscape can be ascribed to these discontents of history.

Moving on, we have to address all these deficiencies as a matter of urgency. On the strength of social dialogue, we have the possibility to draw on the talents in society to address these challenges within the framework of a developmental state.

I would like to conclude by reasserting that despite all odds South Africans are determined to make the process of democratisation irreversible.

We have made a historic transition from a system condemned by the United Nations as a 'crime against humanity', to a democratic society. Transitioning from apartheid to democracy saw the emergence of mainstream society bound together by the vision of a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and just society.

Social dialogue played a key role in this regard, helping us to build broad consensus that saw the whole spectrum of political community drawn into the multi-party, dialogic process.

We have since been wrestling with the intricacies of strengthening democracy in the face of some testing challenges. We have embarked on a process to address these key deficiencies. As we do that, we are also confronting the spectre of corruption, a weak state and some of the discontents of history. Similarly, we have launched a frontal attack on these maladies.

It would not be fair to look at our state of democracy as if it is coeval with matured democracies, which, despite their deep historical roots, would still not adequately satisfy some of the five points of democratic consolidation mentioned above.

Democracy is a process. More importantly, democracy is embedded in social conditions, and its thriving presupposes social justice and expanding floor of human comfort. I am confident in the creative spirit of South Africans to elevate our democratic experience to the level where democratic practice becomes second nature.

Despite all odds there will be a way. In this I am inspired by the penetrating wisdom of the novelist Bernard Malamud (1914-1986) that: 'There comes a time in a man's life when to get where he has to – if there are no doors or windows – he walks through a wall.'

Endnotes

1. Valenzuela, J Samuel. 1990. Democratic consolidation in post-transitional settings: notion, process, and facilitating conditions. Working Paper 150, December.
2. Sparks, Allister. 2009. *Beyond the miracle*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
3. Gilder, Barry. 2012. *Songs and secrets: South Africa from liberation to governance*. Johannesburg: Jacana.