



South Africa Quo Vadis

Changes, Challenges and Opportunities

By

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Master of Ceremonies,
Professors, Students and other Members and Leaders of the Faculty of Humanities
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I've got to recognize and express it as my singular honour and privilege that you who are responsible both for the conceptualization and organization of this momentous Spring Lectures have considered it appropriate to extend an invitation to me as one among the other guest speakers to grace and address this occasion.

For this gesture and the confidence you have expressed in me, I am indeed very grateful, humbled, if not downright, thankful.

You and I converge here today for this Spring Lecture at a time when South Africa is littered with morbid signs of a country in distress, a nation in panic mode and a people perceived leaderless. This disposition, which I find unfortunate and yet real, has been a gradual construct just about a decade after the dawn of our democracy and the adoption of the first democratic Constitution of the Republic.

Some leaders amongst us began to get excited about power, greed and access to public resources to the extent that what was conceived as the new nation has now been derailed from its original vision to a country of economic uncertainties and socio-political instability.

The uninterrupted torching of both public and private property including schools and universities, the unarrested culture of violence associated with protests mobilisation against poor public service delivery, taxi disputes and crime in general including the abuse of women and children, poorly guarded and uncontrolled border posts, incalculable high levels of social inequality, poverty, unemployment and joblessness, inept political leadership, poor economic growth, social instability, racism, ethnicity and unrelenting acts of corruption in all sectors of our society, are among the many other ills lending hand to a South Africa that already appears unbalanced in the face of its world peers.

As if not enough, we have now entered another era in our body-politic where we witnessed just in one week four or more cabinet ministers at different times and points, convening public press conferences to attack and undermine one another.

Those conferences produced so much confusion about the direction of government and its leadership to the extent that the Minister of Mining and Energy Mr Zwane is now under constant public pressure to consider his stay on the cabinet.

This is not to say anything or less about the conduct of Ministers Des van Rooyen, Blade Nzimande, Kibby Maphatsoe who have amplified exchanges and entered the fray between the Minister Gordhan Pravin of Treasury and the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigations (DPCI) – popularly known as the Hawks, over a matter that has to do with the Minister's conduct while at the helm of South African Revenue Service (SARS) as the then Commissioner.

Whether there is content or merit to the confrontation between the Minister Pravin and Hawks, it is a matter best left to law enforcement agencies to resolve rather than for the Ministers of Cabinet to use their selective judgement based on political factions to try and provide a solution. Those who continue to act this way are in actual defiance of the very Constitution that they are supposed to uphold and are not supposed to be taken seriously by the law-abiding citizens.

It is clear from these attacks and unguided altercations that South Africa has a divided cabinet and government from where the affairs of state are conducted.

The same goes for the National Parliament which continues to display tendencies that militate against the ethos of our nation-building project. It is clear from all these that we have a terribly divided nation whose unity we all have to work towards.

You have a situation where certain Members of Parliament simply stay away from debates and in certain instances stifling debate or delaying bills to go through. Certain ministers of cabinet who are supposed to be accountable to Parliament do not show up, as expected, to provide parliamentarians with answers to their prepared questions.

In all standards this picture is quite grim and troubling and does call for corrective action from those in authority and the citizenry in general.

At the nascent years of this democracy, able men and women of relative integrity and ability assumed leadership and gave us hope that South Africa has both the capacity and the readiness to play a leading role in the development of Africa and the world. At that time doomsayers were vocal in dismissing South Africa as ambitious and punching above its weight.

The country was the first among its African peers to advance the gender struggle so successfully that a number of women, representing the less disadvantaged sector of our society, were appointed to serve on cabinet and in Parliament almost reaching the 50/50 threshold that was aspired for. Up to this day the country boasts of a number of senior and very influential executive positions held by women. Although much still has to be

done to advance the struggle of women as an important component of society, the trend is generally encouraging.

It was the time when South Africa took the leadership of championing the African Renaissance concept followed by the establishment of the Africa Union, Pan-African Parliament and programmes such as NEPAD and the African Peer Review Mechanism. This was South Africa with an attempt to provide Africa with a united vision.

At the heart of this effort and vision was to reposition a country that had always been known as a pariah state into one that represents African hope and progressive values of human development.

In doing so, the midwives of our democratic Constitution envisioned the birth of a diverse nation united in purpose and goal. Borrowing from the Preamble of that Constitution, this is what they penned down as fundamental values around which a stable South Africa could be built:

“We, the people of South Africa,

Recognise the injustices of our past;

Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;

Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and

Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to - Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;

Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law; Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and

Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

May God protect our people. Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. Morena boloka setjhaba sa heso. God seën Suid-Afrika.

God bless South Africa. Mudzimu fhatutshedza Afurika. Hosi katekisa Afrika”.

Guided by both the letter and the spirit of this Preamble, it is inarguable that we have failed as a nation to live up to its expectations. We had all the opportunities to become a value-based society but failed in execution.

Whereas the Constitution sought to build a cohesive society that embraces democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights as our departure point for the new South Africa, today we have become even more polarised with tendencies of racism,

ethnicity and inequality thriving and feeding into the social fabric of a society that could have been otherwise united around these noble values.

We see racism manifesting itself in schools, universities, churches, sports and in many other public spaces. In a sense, as we saw how racist rules and codes of conduct are still used in institutions such as Pretoria High School for Girls to perpetuate a wrong and an illegal act.

Earlier we have seen the same attitude prevailing at some of the Universities where racial attacks degenerated into physical assault among students of racial diversity. So, you still have some people staying in South Africa who still use race to perpetuate their superiority of others.

In essence South Africa has been selective in living up to the dictates of our Constitution – failing to advance the cause of the poor, depriving land to the landless, allowing the affluence to ride roughshods over the less advantaged while refusing the majority access to quality education and health facilities.

The worst that South Africans suffered under this “glorious” Constitution which not only guarantees but protects and affirm human life is when 34 miners were killed in execution-style by heavily police in Marikana just over 4 years ago. The miners’ were appealing for better wages and working conditions and yet were mauled down.

The result of this massacre is that today the number of widows and orphans had multiplied and yet those responsible for raking home huge profits at the expense of the poor miners continue to live with their families in comfort and affluence.

Just over a year earlier, the country was exposed to yet another gruesome murder of Andries Tatane – a public protestor from Ficksburg in the Free State – who was equally demanding for justice in his hometown. In a society where the preamble of the Constitution affirms social justice, the man was killed in full view of the public – again execution-style.

So, we must with all determination ask the question, “...whose justice is being served when the less fortunate still face massacres in a constitutional democracy?” In other words, the argument should be, “...who is responsible to defend and protect the citizens against the state if state machinery is the one killing the citizens, some unarmed as in the case of Andries Tatane?”

One can only argue that acts such as these are bound to happen in situations where those who are in leadership abdicate their responsibility – choosing instead to focus on self-interests and menial issues.

Of course in the midst of all these melancholic and morbid signs, there are some cheerful stories that has defined our country and earned it a super space in the league of its peers.

The out-going Public Protector Advocate Thuli Madonsela and her team have served our democracy and the country with distinction. During their term of office they succeeded to display what it means to protect the public within the context of a constitutional democracy. They laid down the law, applied the Constitution and produced quality findings and reports without fear or favour.

We have experienced situations where the case lodged by Gogo Dlamini receives the same attention and consideration as cases lodged by those who hold high offices in the land and have influence.

The other of their ilk is the Constitutional Court. In a situation so gloomy, where democracy is being threatened by some politicians, it is heartening still to have an independent judiciary that executes its mandate with clarity of law and fearlessness as we continue to observe with this Court.

Only yesterday, Head of the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (Ipid)'s suspension from office, Mr Robert McBride, was dismissed against the Minister of Police by the Constitutional Court. So, in this regard democracy is working.

Earlier on we saw how President Zuma himself and Parliament were ordered to honour the recommendations of the Public Protector on Inkandla case. This is how we measure the commitment of those who make South Africa a successful constitutional state using the arms of state to deliver justice.

The other arm of democracy which has been doing well to keep politicians accountable to the Constitution is the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). As the past Chairman of the IEC Dr Brigalia Bam noticed the importance of elections in a democracy, the country has done well by holding and conducting regular elections:

“Elections are a celebration of democracy. Voting is indeed a core element of modern democratic government, but not the only one...(for) democracy is far more than just elections...it requires independent courts, non-partisan civil servants, robust institutions such as churches and universities; the rule of law and property rights; a free press, constitutional checks and balances, above all a culture of openness and tolerance especially of minorities. But voters’ ability to throw out non-performers out at regular intervals is still the indispensable sine qua non”.

At the recent Local Government Elections we have seen how Bam’s observation and assertion came to fruition. In a rare occurrence since the dawn of democracy South Africa has now entered the era of Coalition Governments and we have to look forward with great anticipation how this system will assist democracy while serving the voters.

So, while we lament the inactiveness of other institutions such as the Human Rights Commission (HRCSA) and the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE), there is hope in other institutions such as the Auditor General (AG) and recently the emergence of the Independent Communication Authority of SA (ICASA) and Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities.

To bring all these remarks to a conclusion, I need to urge you as social academics to participate in all projects that contribute towards the enhancement of this democracy by improving research particularly around communities that continue to receive the short end of the stick in this democracy.

That democracy is working for South Africans, there is need to address all social gaps that the Constitution alludes to. As Former President Nelson Mandela said in his Presidential Inaugural Speech let us only rest when democracy works for all; In this regard, we need to echo his words in practice when he proclaimed:

“Let there be justice for all.

Let there be peace for all.

Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.”

Thank you very much!

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