

MAVERICK MAGAZINE

BEWARE OF POLITICAL AND COLLECTIVE AMNESIA

Whenever I read current complaints about the predicaments of our transition e.g. crime, delivery, corruption, capacity etc, I find it useful to reflect on our recent past and remind myself of a few historical facts.

Firstly:

Our transition was not the result of a successful liberation revolution; no matter how often this is alluded to buy the powers that be. If one thinks back on examples where this is claimed there are not many, if any, clear examples. Cuba stands out; Algeria maybe and so on. In our case one should be grateful that this was not attempted. In the examples mentioned the oppressors left "the scenes of the crime". In our case this was never going to happen and a protracted bloody conflict would have taken place instead where most of us would have been the losers. Fortunately, through the wisdom and or opportunism of the political leadership e.g. Mandela, de Klerk, Ramaphosa, Mbeki etc and the role of the Private Sector, a mutual stalemate was agreed upon, and our transition was negotiated into a liberal democratic constitution. The result was one of the most classical liberal Democratic Constitutions where formal equality and civil liberties were guaranteed and majority excesses constrained.

Secondly:

However, the current government came to power after decades of propogating one of the most redemptive ideologies of the 20th Century i.e.: National Socialism. It was redemptive in the sense that it promised a chicken in the pot for every one once

it came to power. So, in effect, we ended with a constitution that promised formal and constitutional equality but with a socio-economic reality based on substantial inequality. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 epitomises also the international collapse of the National Socialists ideology and its practices. For South Africa one of the consequences was the shift from R.D.P. to GEAR.

Thirdly:

The above dilemma was compounded by an enormous capacity constraint. Instead of preserving as much competence that was available, the Government felt obliged to reward democratic legitimacy over competence; to reward party loyalty over competence; to confuse authority with intelligence and dealing with corruption highly selectively if at all. All of this enormously compounded the difficulties of the country's capacity to deal effectively with delivery on areas such as education, health, law and order, security, public administration etc. It seems the President recognised these problems on his latest State of the Nation address. This is encouraging indeed.

Fourthly:

Replacing repressive stability with stability based on consent created enormous space for civil society action. A repressive regime clamps down hard on civil society action of which it does not approve. In Apartheid South Africa this was so in a very tangible sense e.g. suppression of freedom of movement, racial integration, maintaining social and economic inequalities etc. Now there is space. This has led to large scale uncontrolled urbanization, informal settlements; pressure for housing, educational and health facilities. Crime is also a symptom of a free civil society even though it is engaged in against the dictates of the constitution.

Finally:

Under a repressive regime, people became used to Government doing things for them even if one was member of the discriminated classes. Government told us where we could go; where we could sit or go to the toilet; with whom one was

allowed to have sex and where one could live in a house. A very natural expectation instead Government will carry on doing so in a "liberated" South Africa. e.g. Government would strongly provide for everything. "Where is the chicken in the pot? " As President Mbeki said in his latest State of the Nation address, freedom and liberty means nothing unless all of us work together to give it substance.

In conclusion then, it is going to depend not only on Government, but especially communities, the private sector, special interest organisations, how we organise ourselves and work, where possible with Government to address problems of poverty, security, education, health etc. The Government cannot do it alone even if it wants to, or promises to. A special responsibility will rest on mobilised citizens to identify and expose all acts of corruption in the private sector, and especially in Government, also between Government and the private sector.

As Santyana said: "Those who forget to lessons of history are condemned to repeat its mistakes". The future is also ours to make or break.

12/02/2007