

7 of 12 DOCUMENTS

The Sunday Independent (South Africa)

September 12, 2010
E1 Edition

A state unable to face its failures is one that's unstable

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South Africa is one of the new democracies battling with the moral content of its politics. There is a growing moral valley between our democracy's founding figures and the incumbent leader, Jacob Zuma. The president is rather a natural point of reference when it comes to the moral deficit of leadership in South Africa.

Zuma's array of personal indiscretions and how it compromises his ability to lead the ruling party and the country has reduced his leadership to a game of survival, instead of being a leader capable of adhering to a set of principles. The question of poor moral content in South African politics, however, goes beyond Zuma's administration.

Our peculiar historical path to democracy will have a lasting impact on how we will relate to the state in years to come. During apartheid the state was an enemy of the people. With the collapse of apartheid came expectations that it would then be radically transformed into the guardian of the people.

We shifted from one extreme of disobedience of the state to unreservedly embracing it. Our expectations were that the end of apartheid was an opportunity for the emergence of a state that would function and carry itself as the opposite of the apartheid state. We expected a state that was perfectly the opposite of apartheid. A perfect state.

Our expectations of the state are not only unrealistic, but create a heavy burden on it to the extent where its failure to live up to our fantasies becomes a real threat to our growing democracy. Our overnight shift from apartheid, although preceded by many years of struggle, meant that we missed out on a gradual adaptation to learning how to relate to the state in a way that would allow us to have healthy and necessary doubts about its conduct. We do not have good experience when it comes to understanding its capability or inherent weaknesses and potential faults. The hopes that we had for the democratic state following the collapse of apartheid were so high that we did not think we would later need to question the state's conduct at some point. We constructed a perfect state.

If the state is built on awareness of the fact that it can be manipulated to further the interests that contravene the public good, then we will reserve the right to question the state.

We would understand that it could not be a perfect state. In that way the state would not resort to hostile measures whenever its motives were being scrutinised.

This understanding would constitute a mature relationship between the state and the people. The high expectations that most South Africans have of the state build a relationship that does not allow citizens to associate it with imperfections. By not seeing it as imperfect, we cannot speak out whenever it shows poor judgement. Criticising the state becomes

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immoral and unpatriotic. This echoes the belief that it embodies the moral content of our society and our moral code is underwritten in politics, guarded by politicians.

It is troubling to place the moral code of a nation in politics because politics is at times a game of expediency and survival. The hurt we suffer when our politics is no longer seen to embody our moral code, drives us to change government. But if we embraced the idea that even a democratic state may occasionally display moral failure, then we would know better to protect our moral fibre, and embrace the idea that we need to question the state.

History teaches us that the most stable state is the one that allows citizens to engage its imperfections on an ongoing basis, understanding that imperfections are part of the state. The denial of imperfections among our leaders is so strong that any voice that points to their imperfections is treated with suspicion and ultimately silenced.

If leaders insist on being treated as perfect then they should deliver perfectly.

A state that insists on being seen as perfect and takes measures to maintain its perfect facade is ultimately the most unstable, and citizens lose hope in it easily. It will then respond by plastering the holes, hiding imperfections instead of openly discussing them.

Is this our state? The Protection of Information Bill is a way to maintain the facade of a perfect state; an attempt to hide information that would potentially harm the perfect picture of a state. It feeds into our fantasies of a perfect state. This is ultimately the greatest threat to the stability of our democracy - an imperfect democracy where imperfections should be discussed openly!

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LOAD-DATE: September 11, 2010

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

JOURNAL-CODE: SI