

South Africans tends to be Extremist, and Intolerant!

Monday 5 Sept, 2011.



By *Ralph Mathekga*

The ongoing developments in our national debates should be an indictment on us as a nation when it comes to how we have conducted debates in this country since the collapse of apartheid regime. This speaks particularly to the role played by opinion makers and intellectuals when it comes to setting the agenda on national debates. We have recently seen acrimonious debates touching on economic transformation, raising a question on who should actually shape debates in the country. The ANC Youth League has been at the forefront of setting the agenda on national debates, although the league's contributions consistently lack nuances and sometimes a sense of balance. Adding to this picture is the Miyeni "black snake" debate which also shows that we tend to be extreme as we attempt to engage each other on economic and socio-political affairs. The response to Miyeni's tirade - by having him fired - is but an extreme retaliation to an extremist viewpoint.

The reality is that it is not only the ANC Youth League that tends to take such extreme approaches on national debates, but it is also opinion makers with a regular access to a space to express their views. We need to pause and reflect on how the space for public debates in South Africa

has tensed so much in the past 17 years.



Our rainbow explosion (photo from: <https://matarikidimension.wordpress.com/tag/robbyne-laplant/>)

The chief instigator of extremist views seems to be the ANC Youth League; notably its position about nationalisation of mines and expropriation of land without compensation. The legend goes that the Youth League dares say things that many subscribe to, but do not have the guts to say so openly. The League's position is an issue that continue to gain traction in the psyche of majority of South Africans, even some intellectuals. It is necessary to ask how a society comes to create a space for extreme positions such as those propagated by the Youth League. This is not to launch an undue attack on the thinking of the Youth League, but merely to understand how the League thrives among a significant number of South Africans through its extremist views on the dialogue on economic transformation.

The root cause of this problem seems to emanate from the location of political, social, and economic debates in South

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Africa. The idea of the 'rainbow nation', coupled with the exaggerated need to maintain national unity, has given South Africans a false lull of national purpose to an extent where the ability to set the agenda on national issues became an occupation left to the care of a political party, the ANC. A political party was left to serve as a custodian of unity in South Africa and also the driver of the rainbow nation. Having gained the political and moral capital as a liberation movement, the ruling ANC has had a windfall of being looked upon when it comes to providing both political leadership and also leadership in setting the agenda on debates in the country. Even the nature and type of criticism that the party is subjected to when its members show poor judgements indicate the deep seated belief that the party is the natural custodian of not only progress in the country, but also what is of national interests. The ANC has been treated as an embodiment of the notion of "we the people".

The intellectuals have subsequently retreated from setting the agenda as to what is of national interest and what need to be on the national agenda; showing that even the intellectuals also looked upon the ANC not as a political party that would run into typical problems confronted by any political party in a post liberation scenario, but rather as an extraordinary political formation; a "demigod".

Due to the self-interested nature of political parties pertaining to the environment within which they operate, the ANC could only tolerate debates that do not run contrary to the interests of

the dominant elites within the party. Those elites would naturally start developing own interests that may be contrary to national interest at a point in time. To expect the political elites to inspire debates on issues that are of national interest par excellence, is a step too far from the reality of the gathering conflict of interest that would always be apparent in the echelons of power.

This situation leaves a vacuum when it comes to the existence of robust debates on issues of national interests, such as transformation of the economy. The existence of a vacuum when it comes to debating issues of national interest is an obvious indication of what happens when the responsibility to set the agenda has shifted from the intellectuals to political parties.

Due to the multifaceted interests that the ruling ANC represents in the country, it would be impossible for the party to play a proactive role in setting the agenda on issues of national importance, even if the party wanted to.

It is the intellectuals who bear the responsibility to come to understand political parties for what they are. As Anthony Downs stated in his book *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, political parties are self-interested entities aimed at maximising opportunities to win elections. If that is properly understood, then the intellectuals - from a non partisan point of view - should not rely on political parties to set the agenda on issues of national interests. Intellectuals should play a more pronounced role in setting the debates on a constant basis so that a vacuum does not gather and subsequently be occupied

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by those who hold extremists views, as it is currently the case in South Africa.

If there was a robust but nuanced debate, that would serve as a repellent against the emergence and sustenance extremist views. With no robust conversation and critical dialogue on issues such as economic transformation, any view on the subject would certainly gain traction irrespective of how poorly formulated it may be. The reality is that South Africa requires a conversation on these issues and there has not been any as the nation relied upon the ruling ANC to initiate and steer this dialogue.

One of the greatest challenges South Africa has faced since the collapse of apartheid was to let the guts down when it comes to applying the theory of the state on a 'new' democratic dispensation. If the state is seen as an arena upon which different interest groups would compete to have their interest secured, as Karl Marx indicated, we would then understand that under no conditions should a political party be relied upon to set the agenda on issues of national importance. Political parties are vehicles for capturing the state and hence may be compromised once they captured the state. This applies to the ANC as well.

With the collapse of apartheid, the fascination has been with the inauguration of the "black government", instead of focusing on a rather democratic government. This fascination meant we abandoned the theory of the state in South Africa as we thought this applied only to apartheid regime which had all elements of a repressive entity; organised repression being a feature that dominates

the curriculum when it comes to the study of theory of the state. Towards the collapse of apartheid regime, for example, writer and activist Nadine Gordimer was enthusiastic about the formation of the "black government" and its potential to lift majority of the black population from poverty. There is no theory of "black government" in the study of politics, but rather the theory of state and that of democracy. By packaging the ANC led government as a black government, the ANC led state would manage to escape robust scrutiny that should be subjected to any political party. Consequently, the ANC was relied upon guide South Africa on all fronts.

The ensuing domination of extremist views in the public debates in South Africa logically flows from the long period of retreat of intellectuals and opinion makers when it comes to setting the agenda on critical issues involving economic and socio-political affairs. Without continuous nuanced debates on these touchy issues, the space gets bigger and bigger and it will inevitably be occupied by extremists rendering it difficult to regain perspective on national debates. It is unfortunate that the ANC Youth League is consistently becoming the first on the scene when it comes to raising uncomfortable issues in the country. The league's intolerance of those who hold opposing views is rather a setback on an open democratic society and would negatively impacts course of the national debates.

It is upon the intellectuals and opinion makers to be the first on the scene when it comes to raising fundamental questions regarding progress in our democracy. By deliberately ignoring those issues because

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they are unpopular would only create an opportunity for the emergence of those who hold extreme views. After all, it should be the role of intellectuals to raise unpopular debates and help the nation to steer through those impasses. As a political party, the ruling ANC should rather be responding to debates emanating outside the party machinery and not be responding to issues raised within its ranks and the Youth League. In a sense, the debate we think we are having as a nation on nationalisation of mines is contaminated by internal politics within the ruling party and its structures, including the league. As a nation, we are in fact being spectators in an ongoing debate taking place within the ANC. It is important to rather raise these issues beforehand, so we can be participants ©.

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