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The Sunday Independent (South Africa)

August 22, 2010
E1 Edition

The good and the bad about central planning; A Planning Commission could improve delivery. Or it might lead to increased dictatorship

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SECTION: Pg. 17

LENGTH: 884 words

IN a democratic system, the processes through which decisions are made are as important as the results achieved through those decisions. This means that democratic governments should be consultative in relation to the process of governing on one hand, and they also have to ensure that their decisions bear substantive impacts on the lives of the people.

This throws democracy into a dilemma and may frustrate democratically elected leaders to an extent where they may start to lean towards dictatorship.

Dictatorships are distinctly not consultative and the only obligation that government has in a dictatorship system is to deliver substantive results to the people through identifying the so called "common good".

Why do we have to ponder on this settled debate?

The answer is that whenever the democratic route gets harder and frustrating, each and every democratic government would naturally flirt with institutions that are known to belong in a dictatorship.

The leaders' inclination to adopt dictatorship institutions is usually motivated by the need to be efficient in delivering its mandate.

Being a democracy it is, the government in South Africa occasionally shows fascinations with institutions that belong in dictatorship regimes. One such institution is the Planning Commission established by the Zuma administration.

The Planning Commission has been established to "develop long term development vision for government". The commission, it has been stated, will draw from the wider public. Its notable character is that it promises to offer opportunity to the wider public outside government to play a role and make contributions to government planning .

This is a noble call in the spirit of democratic reach. However, it cannot be ignored that the commission also comes out of frustration with the system where government plans odiously trickle down from the ruling party manifesto to cabinet and then to line ministries or government departments.

This process is in essence consultative in the sense that there is filtering, refinement, and adaptation processes that

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government plans go through from being a party mandate to a line department programme. The filtering process is in effect a democratic process and the plan is dispersed among different government departments into implementable programmes.

The line of accountability in South Africa is cognisant of the flow of responsibility from the president, cabinet, and government departments as the government mandate is being implemented.

By imposing the Planning Commission as a body chaired and co-ordinated in the presidency, the flow of responsibility and ultimately the line of accountability in government would have to be altered accordingly. Under the commission, the responsibility of government departments as agencies responsible for devising and implementing a government plan, would be watered down.

The commission, while it promises to reach out to the people in drawing on long- term government plans, would have to supersede cabinet and the executive when it comes to authority and accountability.

The commission effectively constitutes a new centre of power in government. It is tempting to argue that since the commission would draw from the general public, it constitutes further democratisation and consultation on government programmes. This depends heavily on whether the commission would indeed reflect the general views of the public and that of commissioners in drawing long term government vision. By the mere fact that the commission is chaired and co-ordinated in the Presidency, the final word on the plan may inevitably be that of the Presidency, sidelining the views of commissioners and that of the general public.

In that sense the consultative and public reach approach of the commission would simply be a means to legitimise the preference of the Presidency and sanitise it as a product of the general public. This type of outcome would be worse than the previous process where plans evolved through cabinet and government departments.

There is no doubt regarding the need to develop plans to ensure delivery of services and attaining broader development goals in the country.

That government ministers (line ministries) continue to disappoint when it comes to developing plans is incontestable.

However, the problem has to do with incumbents and as such it does not mean that we have change institutions and create supra institutions that would render the devolution of power a thing of the past.

Where government departments have performed satisfactorily in terms of planning, there is value in having departments' constituents play a part in planning. That value is simply a democratic principle of delegation of power and responsibility in government; consultative, at least in principle.

Underlying this principle is the notion that democracy is not only about delivering substantive goods and services to the electorate, but it is also about how decisions are made.

If we forsake this delegation of responsibilities, we might as well appoint an efficient consulting firm to run government.

That will surely deliver services, but it will diminish the role of government as an arena for expression of political life, the core of democracy.

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LOAD-DATE: August 21, 2010

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

The good and the bad about central planning; A Planning Commission could improve delivery. Or it might lead to increased dictatorship The Sunday Independent (South Africa) August 22, 2010

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

JOURNAL-CODE: SI

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