

Moral bankruptcy and spiritual recession in modern society: Implications for leadership building in South Africa¹

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In 2008, I was invited by the Centre of Conflict Resolution at University of Cape Town to speak about my book, *The Kanga and Kangaroo Court: Reflections on the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma*. The phrase, kangaroo court is one that South Africans are familiar with. It is one that evokes memories of necklacing, witch-burning, brutal slayings, and other horrific attacks that many suffered during the dark days of apartheid.

Using this phrase in this instance was meant to focus our attention beyond the courtroom to include the drama of the supporters with MaMkhize in the lead role. To say that many of us were shocked by the misogyny disguised as a defence for the people's hero expressed in the verbal insults, songs, and religious rituals is an understatement. The space outside the courtroom was transformed into a shrine in which the word "isifebe" (bitch) and "amadlozi" (ancestors) were mentioned in the same spiritual ritual.

Affected by the theatrics surrounding Jacob Zuma's rape trial, I wrote a book that gave an eagle's eye view of the trial examined within a broader context of oppression of women globally. From female infanticide to dowry deaths, sex trafficking to rape during the war, and discrimination against women which goes far beyond oppression of a woman by "her man". Rather, I approached women's oppression as a well-orchestrated and systemic form of discrimination meant to "keep women in their place". Violence, and most specifically rape, is one of the effective means of achieving such an objective.

The operative word in the title is *reflection*. A reflection of who we are and where we want to go as an emerging democracy is essential to bring home the fact that the making or breaking of a nation is our collective responsibility. After all, says Khalil Gibran in *The Prophet*,

"And a single leaf turns not yellow but with the silent knowledge of the whole tree,

*So the wrong-doer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of you all."*²

¹ Published in *Leadership*, Edition 28, March 2008

² Gibran, Khalil. 1983 *The Prophet*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker Publishers. p. 46

This means, ongoing moral decay within government is not a result of one individual. It flourishes with the silent and not so silent knowledge and approval of other members of the ruling party.

When he delivered the 2008 State of the Nation address, former President Thabo Mbeki referred to a state of confusion and a troubled sense of unease which the country experienced at the time. This, he highlighted, was a result of factors that include electricity crisis, an ever-increasing rate of fuel and food prices as well as a threat of a US economic recession.

In his speech, Mbeki assured the nation that something is being done to solve the electricity crisis. Very often, addressing a crisis that emanate from poor planning and lack of infrastructure requires swift action. This is because the economic impact of such a malfunctioning system is tangible and immediate.

In contrast, however, the impact of moral bankruptcy is not immediate and direct. Moral decay feast on the soul in the same way that termites attack a tree, building, or any other structure. The attack progresses slowly over time, eating up the soul one fibre after the other. Before we know it, vice is upheld and celebrated as virtue, and it becomes a ticket to power. At this point, the centre looks intact, but it is hollow inside. One day, when no one is looking, the entire structure collapses.

Not surprisingly, Mbeki's State of the Nation address failed to give attention to another kind of energy crisis, vast differences between the poor and rich driven by insatiable greed and corruption. Declaring war on poverty within the confines of a violent economy which upholds the value of the market over sanctity of human life will take us nowhere.

How do we focus our attention only on economic cost of power outages without addressing the impact of a darkness that emanates from rampant corruption amongst those charged with a critical task of serving the people? How do we allow ourselves to be led by people who are suffering from chronic greed?

Traditional politics teaches us that we must defer our power to political parties who believe in the principle of majority rules. What happens when the majority of the majority is greedy and corrupt?

Greed is the driving force behind excess and moral degeneration in our society. It is a major cause of inequality which breeds social instability which, in turn, result in economic downtown. As a chronic disease, emanates from mental incarceration and spiritual poverty.

The rapaciousness of the ruling party which we have witnessed so far will bring forth a moral decay which will eventually break down the society. It does not help much that members of the ruling party are elders. One would have thought that they will have a better understanding of their role as models of nobility and moral excellence.

Malidoma Some' profiles an elder as a mirror through which the child can see his or her life on a human plane. According to this definition, an elder's primary task

involves inviting the genius out of a person.³ By practicing constant self-reflection and moral rectitude, an elder acquires a deeper sense of knowing that who she or he chooses to become impacts on the entire community. In his words, Some' defines the following as the duty and responsibility of an elder:

“The old must live in the young like a grounding force that tames the tendency toward bold but senseless actions and show them the path of wisdom. In the absence of elders, the impetuosity of youth becomes the slow death of the community.”

In their role as keepers of shrines, elders are charged with the responsibility of intangible assets management. What legacy do we hope to leave for future generations if the elders are the ones who mismanage these assets? Who will initiate the young into adulthood when elders are involved in rampant destruction and suppression of values that form the bedrock of society? How do we expect the young to honour and practice restraint and fidelity when their elders are entrapped in a spiral of acquisition of positions, money, and power by any means necessary?

In the end, turning the tide of a moral gangrene that is feasting on our new democracy requires that we integrate and uphold the value of mutual interdependence in an era described by Fritjof Capra as one in which money is god and profit making our liturgy.⁴ The greatest financial investment we can make for our country is not only in mining gold and platinum but in mining the genius within every South African child.

Taking a firm stand against the prevailing state of moral bankruptcy as an impediment to leadership building within the new democracy is however, not meant to reinforce the racist view that African leaders are inherently corrupt. We all know that the current corrupt leadership is nothing compared to the most gruesome and immoral apartheid regime that not only stole from the indigenous majority but also killed without impunity.

However, the fact that the white regime was more immoral than the new government does not give current leaders justification and an excuse to use the past as a yardstick against which they measure their inability to lead a humane government. When it comes to humanity, the oppressor has little to teach to the world. What is there to learn from someone who chose to defy the teachings of his own God: “do unto others as you would like them to do unto you”?

We know from the past that changing the laws of the country will not necessarily bring a change in people's sense of self. Freedom is not a destination. It is a journey in which we recreate and liberate ourselves from internalised oppression and polarised thinking.

Now that we have attained the right to vote, a few questions remain: How can we speak to the divergent sectors of society and introduce a culture of transformational politics which goes beyond the current constraints of polarised thinking? Is it possible to uplift current partisan power struggle to a government

³ Some', Malidoma Patrice. 1999. *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual and Community*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.

⁴ Capra, Fritjof. 1988. *Uncommon Wisdom: Conversations with remarkable people*. London: Flamingo.

that can synthesise opposing views of conformists and alternative thinkers? How can we fuse political liberty with cultural, spiritual, and moral regeneration?

By infusing spirituality into politics, we should aim to create a culture which inspires people to honour and celebrate the highest godly given potential in others, irrespective of their political affiliation and ideologies. True spiritual politics will go beyond the usual electioneering rhetoric to include the inner dimension which is instrumental in liberating people not only from poverty but from bourgeoisie thinking and practices driven by greed in a capitalist economy.

In the end, spiritual politics does not only concern itself with changing the Constitution. It calls for a government that is willing to invest time and resources in ensuring that our humanity is returned to its original constitution. After all, politics that is devoid of humanity contributes nothing to human development.