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Convention offers some hope but still needs fine-tuning

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AS a country, we stand on the precipice of hope rather than in the abyss of despair. The national convention of the people of South Africa which took place over the weekend offers some hope, but it is a hope which is emergent; a hope which should be interrogated beyond the literality it articulates.

What is going to be very important for the new party is the ideological path it chooses. This will be clear when its policies are cast and assessed in relation to those of the ANC.

The strength of the national convention is in having identified the fact that democracy has many enemies waiting in the wings and that there is an urgent need to protect it, through both deliberation and practical innovation.

The need to invent new forms and practices of democracy which combine representative and participatory democracy in order to improve the quality of the former through the contribution of the latter is an incontrovertible truth at this stage. The question is how it gets done.

On the other hand, the ANC, despite its shining liberation struggle credentials and its experience in leading the first democratically elected governments in the country, seems less innovative in its discourse and plans to deepen democracy. The increasingly strong voice of labour and communists within its ranks has made the ANC suspect, given that history has shown that democracy and the dictatorship of the "proletariat" have nothing in common.

The major virtue of democracy is not in its pretentious guarantees of equality but in the protection it affords to civic and individual liberties; the respect for spaces of dissent and an ear to listen to dissenting voices. The intolerance displayed by some ANC members during this period has made its commitment to democratic deepening questionable in some circles.

Contestation of positions is necessary for their refinement. Contestation of ideas encourages a culture of tolerance whereas an intolerant culture is a recipe for violence.

In the case of the ANC we have the advantage of hindsight; we know what it has done and can therefore construct imaginary postulations of what it can do in future.

But with the convention the case is different – it offers a future yet to be visited. One hopes it is not a case of "old milk" in new calabashes.

The fact that the convention has raised the possibility of re-viewing the country's electoral system provides a breath of fresh air. Many South Africans would welcome the

opportunity to choose the president of their country so that he or she can serve the nation without being caught in factional disputes and arbitrary recalls by a dominant faction with scores to settle.

The convention also introduced, though inadvertently, the important role citizens should play in interrogating the credentials of the kind of political leadership to choose and entrust with the responsibility to lead the country. But the deliberations of the convention didn't go far enough.

How do we get the voices of ordinary men and women, especially in rural areas, to be heard so that their aspirations, views and suggestions make it to decision-making to inform policy decisions? How do ordinary citizens hold government officials to account for non-delivery of services?

For the ANC-led government, limited spaces of democratic participation were biased towards "the organised", especially those organised under ANC structures. This has done more to shut out and make more voiceless the poorest of the poor, who uphold views completely different to those in ANC-led structures.

The beneficiaries of this system of "partocracy" were in turn subjected to active and constant surveillance of local party leadership. Hence the slippery slide into corruption, whose pervasive effects in compromising the delivery of facilities and services to the poor and marginalised should not be underestimated.

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