

Source: CAPE ARGUS

Date: 06-Jun-2008

Topic: 27

Ref No: 1056



ID: 03600058-01

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Whose democracy is it, anyway?

The ANC has stolen the credit for the liberation of

South Africa, says Mamphela Ramphele.

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Adrian Hadland reports

The political elite in South Africa has become disconnected from ordinary people, says prominent social activist Mamphela Ramphele. The consequence of this disconnection has been the deterioration of our democracy as the elite focuses on grabbing wealth and power and the poor are abandoned to destitution and despair.

Ramphele, executive chairman of Circle Capital Ventures and a former managing director of the World Bank, was delivering a lecture under the auspices of the Difficult Dialogues initiative at UCT's medical school earlier this week.

The dialogues have been organised by the Economic Justice Initiative, partnered by the Cape Argus, and are aimed at encouraging ordinary South Africans to deliberate on the present state of their communities. The dialogues were also intended to help develop ways of engendering a common purpose and future prosperity and security for all, according to EJI co-founder Wilmot James.

In the inaugural Difficult Dialogues lecture, Ramphele said the ANC had succeeded in claiming all the credit for liberation.

The force of this claim, which many South Africans had simply allowed to take root, had stifled political debate and prevented citizens from taking up their responsibilities

to defend democracy.

"All of us are complicit in the notion that only the ANC delivered freedom to our country. But freedom was fought and won by ordinary people together with the liberation movements... We all need to claim credit for this democracy so we can also have the responsibility to defend it."

Allowing the ANC to monopolise the title of liberators has encouraged a number of very negative developments in South Africa, according to Ramphele.

It had encouraged the elite to focus their efforts on acquiring wealth, led to the appointment of under-qualified senior officials in the public service and isolated government leaders from the wishes and frustrations of the people.

"The process of delinkage has gone so far that leaders of our own

government were taken by surprise by the wave of xenophobia just as they were surprised by violence in places like Khutsong over municipal boundaries," Ramphele said.

"Suggestions of a third force reflect the lack of engagement with those communities. The third force is a scapegoat reflecting the denial of the state's failure to discharge its responsibilities."

Ramphele did argue that not everybody within the ANC was hell-bent on rifling assets and misleading the people. "Tensions within ANC

suggest some segments are aware of state capture and its use to consolidate state power."

But the majority party's jealousy and intolerance of opposition had made it resistant to reform.

Ramphele told the gathering how she had caused a storm of protest when highlighting to a parliamentary committee recently how a lack of capacity within the government was damaging hopes for a better life.

The committee alleged this was a racial charge aimed at undermining black people, Ramphele said. She had retorted that she had spent a great deal of time investigating government capacity both here and internationally, and it was clear that in South Africa this had become a fundamental problem.

The capacity problem had been severely exacerbated by nepotism and by poorly executed affirmative action programmes that had succeeded only in removing skilled white professionals and replacing them with underskilled and incompetent black ones.

"While all parties have to award their supporters, the widespread appointment of people beyond their level of competence undermines the competency of the state to help the masses, promotes their own elite interests and generates anger and resentment."

Ramphele said that during her tenure as vice-chancellor of UCT, even though there were overwhelm-

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ingly more white professors than black, not one white professor had left while she was in office.

"It is not possible to have 50% black professors at this time. You cannot develop the next generation without strong roots with which to do it. One has to take a long-term view, and as much as we would like to see 80% of engineers black, they are not and won't be for a very long time. So why don't we use what we have to fast-track engineers and enhance mentoring?"

The assumption that the ANC had sole claim to the title of national liberator had spawned a culture of intolerance in South Africa in which opposition politics were considered

illegitimate, Ramphele said.

"Our own Parliament has been slow to recognise opposition politics, but opposition politics is vital to the health of our democracy."

Zimbabwe was the classic example of a country in which the elite had become disconnected from its people, in which the ruling party had laid sole claim to the mantle of liberator and in which opposition

politics were denigrated by the state.

Ramphele read out a recent statement by the spouse of President Robert Mugabe, Sally: "Even if people vote for the MDC (Movement for Democratic Change), Morgan Tsvangirai will never set foot inside State House. He will only hear about what it looks (like) inside State House from people who have been there."

"Even if (Mugabe) loses, he will only leave State House to make way for someone from Zanu-PF."

The quote indicated just how far Mugabe and his party had drifted from ordinary Zimbabweans. "Even the votes don't count," she said.

Mugabe had been in jail for most of the liberation struggle. "Ironically, the settlement process in Zimbabwe was paved by a South African leader, John Vorster, who told (Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian) Smith the game was up."

Why had South Africa, and indeed no African country, told Mugabe that the game was up, Ramphele asked?

Because they recognised themselves in Mugabe's actions. They too felt vulnerable to see how a union-based movement can unseat a liberation party. "This has sent shivers down their spines to see how the potential of ordinary people can be mobilised to remove elites who have become delinked from the promises of freedom.

"The difference between Mugabe and Smith is that none of the SADC leaders have had the guts to say, 'The game is up'."

Africa had shown, through its many experiences of decolonisation, from Ghana in 1957, to our own very late birth as a democracy, how promises of freedom could be betrayed, Ramphele said.

"It is important to ask why these disappointments have come over the last decades and what lessons can be learned as we develop our own."

She quoted the great Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, who argued that neither corruption, nor subservience to foreign manipulation, nor second-class, hand-me-down capitalism could be blamed.

Instead, all such miseries could be blamed "on the prime failure of government", and in particular, the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed.

Ramphele argued that the challenge we face in our democracy is how to capture the idealism that sparked the struggle and make it real for ordinary people.

But there is much that can be done in South Africa, and elsewhere, to reverse the trend and start rebuilding our democracy into something lasting and vital, according to Ramphele.

Every skill we have has to be cherished and retained. We need to reintroduce respect for the law. Public servants need to start treating ordinary people with respect and carry out their work with commitment and devotion.

"Most black South Africans have no experience of a public service that is decent and respectful. We have chosen a very beautiful model of government, but we don't have

the people to people all of those positions. So our capacity problems are immense."

But perhaps one of the most important elements for a reconstruction of our damaged democracy was that South Africans commit themselves to being responsible citizens, with all the obligations and responsibilities that implies.

"You have to say, 'Yes, I am really a citizen.' Whether you are white or black, this country belongs to all of us."

We needed to discharge our reciprocal responsibilities, engage in a systematic re-education of our people about what democracy means and make use of our public space to interact and challenge within the appropriate standards of democratic behaviour, she said.

"It is important that we create opportunities for us to encounter one another so we can strengthen our democracy. We also have to recognise that the legacy of the struggle has left us with other disabilities, issues of civil disobedience, destruction of property, and the enforcement of solidarity action, which are all part and parcel of the old system."

Ramphele argued that the violence used in liberating South Africa had "come back to haunt us". The necklacing and violence that horrified South Africans in the 1980s had "infected" our new democracy.

"The quality of democracy is judged by the quality of life of the least among us," Ramphele said. "But the state cannot succeed alone in tackling inequities.

"What is needed is a social movement involving the youth, women and all elements of society to help each other contribute positively to civil-mindedness, solidarity and a pervasive sense of shared responsibility to promote the greatest good for the largest number of people."

● The Ramphele lecture was the first of 15 Difficult Dialogues planned over the next two years. Her presentation was based on her recently launched book, *Laying Ghosts to Rest*.

● Dr Adrian Hadland is a director of the Democracy and Governance research programme of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). He writes in his personal capacity.