

Cosmopolitanism, not blackness, key to Charter

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There is a bigger issue than media freedom at stake in the debate about the independence of newspapers.

We get a sense of it from the recent column by Mukoni Ratshtanga, President Thabo Mbeki's spokesman, where he seeks to locate the discussion about the rights and responsibilities of the media in the context of a debate about values. "What values, freedoms and rights," he asks, "did we fight for and what place should they occupy in society?"

For Ratshtanga the nature of these values is unmistakable. This is what he says in reply to his own question above: "The centre of our moral universe, which must be vigorously asserted, as do all people assert theirs, is African." This rhetorical manoeuvre lets him defend the withdrawal of the SABC's Dali Mphahlele from the National Editors' Forum. It turns out that the manner in which the Sunday Times criticised the minister of Health was in conflict with African norms and values.

Yet there is reason to be less confident that post-apartheid values should be "African" values.

The struggle against apartheid under the banner of the Freedom Charter has a complex genealogy. What is often overlooked in the current situation is that the charter also articulated a vision of a cosmopolitan, democratic society. It invoked a principle of geography, rather than any ethnic or cultural principle, as the basis of South Africa's unity: what South Africans had in common was simply that they happened to live in the same territory.

It is important to identify this cosmopolitan tendency for at least two reasons. Currently, a certain revisionism is taking place that wants to underplay this aspect of the Congress tradition, if not write it out of history altogether. Moreover, the prospect of a workable cosmopolitan society in South Africa has made the current project of historical importance for progressive forces around the world. The stakes are very high: if South Africa is to be democratic it has to be nonracial.

The dominant challenge to the democratic project comes today from those wishing to articulate and defend a certain idea of the "native republic", one that encourages a certain standard of "African" norms.

A recurrent feature of the last few years has been the claim that criticism of the ANC government amounts, in effect, to a campaign against a native republic. The frequency and vigour of these claims has increased over the last couple of months.



Second opinion: Ivor Chipkin says those promoting 'African' values are the ones undermining the democratic ideals of the anti-apartheid movement

The argument goes that the intention or effect of criticism is to call into question the competence of black leaders, in particular, and black people in general. Even more sinister, by so doing criticism is said to undermine the legitimacy and sovereignty of the black government and the native republic more generally. Hence, and herein lies the coup de grace, criticism serves not to develop the democratic space but to undermine it.

Yet the novelty of the anti-apartheid tradition, especially as it was articulated by the ANC and its allies, was that it broke with the very logic of apartheid, and nationalism generally. It refused to reduce blackness to a question of race or culture. Incidentally, this was the centrepiece of Frantz Fanon's dispute with the Negritude movement.

Blackness was not simply a racial or cultural quality. Its measure was, above all, political. The term "black" referred both to those people oppressed and exploited by apartheid and to those who conducted themselves on the basis of certain political values.

It is the nature of these values that is at issue today.

Some would suggest that the values of racial solidarity or solidarity based on some or other "native" personality are at the heart of the ANC tradition. What is certainly true, however, is that black values were construed as democratic values.

On these terms, a black republic (or a national democracy) is not a native republic. Its measure is the degree to which the democratic project is advanced in South Africa, not the extent to which "authentic" black figures occupy positions of power and authority. We must endorse this vision of the republic against those wishing to invest the notion of blackness with a different standard.

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