

Populist rhetoric is destructive, divisive

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Are South Africans beginning to lose pride in our heroes and collective accomplishments by vilifying our struggle icons?



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Recently through the popular media I was struck by how South Africans have been bitten by a demagogic bug that destroys national pride and collective accomplishments. It has now become commonplace to denigrate some of our national heroes who are in the eyes of the world rallying symbols for a nation's hopes and pride. Even the iconic Nelson Mandela has not been spared and has been maliciously accused of betraying the struggle.

Of late, I also came upon two clips and photographs on (retired) Judge Thumba Pillay's Facebook timeline which showed stalwarts of the apartheid struggle. If pictures tell a thousand words, then these snapshots are silent witnesses to the power of the spirit of camaraderie that prevailed and the collective anxiety, pain and hurt that our national heroes and their loved ones have had to endure during the struggle for national emancipation.

The first of the photos showed Thumba Pillay, consulting with amongst others, Pravin Gordhan, Swaminathan Gounden, Kreesan Naicker and Fathima Meer. These activists were charged with others (43 in total) for contravening the Internal Security Act. The second photo depicts Ma Albertina Sisulu consulting with the Defence Team of the of the 1985 Treason Trial of United Democratic Front (UDF) activists. Included in the picture is the leader of the defence team, Senior Counsel Advocate Ismail Mohamed, Thumba Pillay, Sisa Njikilane, Mewa Ramgobin and George Sewpersadh.

Many of these activists are now deceased, but as a collective they played a critical role to promote our liberty. As heroes of a struggle against one of the most pernicious socially destructive systems the world has ever known, we should be relishing their legacy, which can also provide the wellsprings from which we can draw strength in facing the new and dynamic development challenges of a post-apartheid society.

These heroes did not compartmentalise the struggle on the basis of race, ethnicity, colour or creed. For these heroes, freedom was the essence of our humanity. They knew that which distinguishes us as a people is our capacity for free action and our free will. These freedoms must be cherished and protected.

Given their sacrifices, we are obligated to hold our heroes up to the nation, especially to young people, as examples of what the true meaning of leadership, citizenship, selfless work and sacrificial contribution is.

However, contrary to the spirit of these heroes who were prepared to sacrifice their lives for our freedom, South Africans

are witnesses to the mushrooming of a new leadership which is corrupt and has become popular by exploiting the ignorance and prejudice of ordinary people by whipping up passions and shutting down reason. Lies and half-truths are conjured, normally offered with conviction to followers who have their own self-interests and biases. They appeal to their follower's fears, hatred, anger and racial and ethnic prejudices.

It would seem that those who make these reckless assertions about heroes being 'sell-outs' suffer from selected amnesia, because it was not long ago that we celebrated a hero who united millions of South Africans into a nation. He was amongst others the architect of the country's transition from injustice to freedom without civil war. It was he and his struggle compatriots who stood against white domination and black domination and eschewed bitterness and revenge as well as passive acceptance of injustice. In essence they were heroes and freedom fighters, personified. Yet there are those of least substance, especially in terms of intrinsic values who dare to vilify our national heroes.

Instead of being focused on tomorrow, these detractors are focused on yesterday. Through their ignorance they are not aware that history is about the great national heroes. Our freedom is their legacy. In most societies, national heroes retain power long past their lifetimes as symbols incarnating national values and character and are often ascribed quasi saint roles and devotion in national consciousness.

Heroes are always part of a national collective. But not even as a member of a collective do our heroes such as Mandela deserve the kind of vilification they have received at the hands of the historically ignorant and morally bankrupt in recent months.

It would seem that South Africa is fast becoming a suffocating land of the 'pure', where the 'other' and the 'impure' are condemned to insignificance, regardless of what achievements and rewards they bring for the country. It's a shame that the world celebrates our heroes and we denigrate them.

Little do these new demagogic leaders realise that when they malign and prejudice the 'other' on the basis of race or ethnicity, essentially they are taking over from their past slave masters of the apartheid and colonial eras in not only destroying lives, but also dishonouring our heroes.

Increasingly, we are finding it difficult to pride ourselves on each other's accomplishments or to own theirs as ours collectively. The new brand of demagogic leadership is beginning to monopolise our socio-political national space that plays on ethnocentric antagonism, which in turn divides the nation to the extent that it becomes difficult for most of us to celebrate the positive contributions of each of us to nation-building and national pride.

Nowhere in the legacy of our heroes is there a promise that they were going to bring us to the end of history. The long walk to real freedom has just begun and in emulation, we should be forging new footprints for the future of a country that was once severely brutalised by the exigencies of apartheid. We definitely do not need its repetition, which some of the rabble-rousing leadership is demanding.

These new would-be leaders repeatedly use smoke screens to divert the attention of their uninformed followers on issues more favourable to themselves than the real issues. They seriously lack respect for minority rights and thus violate the cornerstone of our fragile democracy and its constitution which stresses that the 'will of the people' be respected at all costs. Anyone who raises objections risks being branded 'enemies of the people'. This is populism run rampant. It is a denial of politics itself and is the only alternative to governance by coercion and a probable tyranny of the majority.

In groups and larger collectives, these individual frustrations can become magnified. They project them onto individuals that appear to be the causes of the majority's distress and therefore deserving of their anger. These leaders manipulate opportunities for their own advancement, frequently by lying egregiously and threaten established rules of conduct and constraining institutions as enemies of the popular will which they claim to embody. They represent shadow aspects of our higher aspirations, what good intentions alone cannot account for.

At first the acidic remarks of these demagogues can seem almost whimsical, a bit of fiery rhetoric here, an insinuation

there, an exaggeration for good measure. They are symptoms of a much larger disease, a splitting in the collective, moving us toward a justification for hostility against minorities and ethnic groups.

Let us not be swayed by the rhetoric of these false leaders who even rubbish our national heroes. If we do that, we will see the emergence of transformational leaders, ones who mirror the intrinsic values of the Mandela and Ma Sisulu kind. They will transmit an understanding of an interconnected world and we will know their leadership by how they move us away from the precipice of continual conflict towards a consciousness of collective responsibility.

We must pull together, not pull apart as forcefully articulated by those who know very little of struggle but plunder of state resources. We must build bridges, not artificial barriers. We must shake hands, not point fingers. Let us rekindle the flame of cooperation, consensus-building and caring.

For after all, we would not be where we are today as a nation was it not for the heroic actions of those who fought for our freedom. We need to ask these degenerate leaders what they will leave for the generations to come. What are they sowing today for others to reap tomorrow? Are they building a foundation that will last, or are they merely living for selfish motives?

Our heroes should remind us that life is best lived in community and in fulfilling a purpose that is bigger than ourselves. We need to recapture that spirit of self-sacrifice. We can't build a society with each person just looking out for "me, myself and I".

Our national heroes would want us to carry on their work. Let us not disappoint them. As we celebrate the legacies of great leaders such as Mandela and Ma Sisulu let us rededicate ourselves to building a greater society on the foundations of freedom they left us. In the end, the lesson is that we are all capable of this kind of leadership, and the destination we travel toward will emerge from our collective imagination. Let it be a destination that is worthy of our courage and compassion.

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