

Strong Civil Society: A condition for good governance

An Address by:

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There are few countries in the world about which the Financial Times could offer two such apparently contradictory editorials, within one month of each other: the one very positive, acclaiming South Africa's impeccable hosting of the FIFA World Cup; the other decrying the lurch towards secrecy and media suppression, and using the word 'Zimbabwe' to underline the seriousness of their reading of the situation.

This is a place where two narratives can, and often do, jostle for supremacy. It can make it a very confusing society to understand and respond to. And I want to acknowledge at the very outset, to this very important gathering of philanthropists, that this imposes great challenges for you in reaching decisions about grant-making.

On the one hand, it may at times appear as if South Africa is beyond hope, such is the precariousness of its society and the intensity of the challenges we face. On the other, depending on which direction you face and where you look for evidence, one might even be able to reasonably reach a very different conclusion: that South Africa is doing just fine and does not need your resources.

However, my reading not just of the democratic trajectory of South Africa, but my analysis of South Africa's role as an economic driver of change and as a standard setter for open, accountable governance, invites you to reject both approaches.

South Africa deserves your support because while there are many positive things happening here, we are reaching a fork in the road and we must avoid traveling in the wrong direction.

The consequences of doing so are almost unthinkable: the hopes of the millions around the world who were inspired by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu dashed; confidence in Africa's ability to defy the clichéd narrative of poverty and famine, kleptomania and corruption, state failure, bitterly undermined.

South Africa must not fail.

In a very short period of sixteen years, our country has moved from the pinnacle of a globally-celebrated example of a society overcoming racist oppression. We accumulated no less than three Nobel Peace laureates and numerous other global accolades as the international community, that stood alongside us in our quest for liberation, sought to continue to support the new democratic order.

We crafted through a process of broad consultation, under the mantle of a Constitutional Assembly, a constitution that won widespread acclaim for its far-reaching bill of rights and institutional arrangements, and for its progressive vision.

We set about to re-calibrate the apparatus of the state to deliver the promises of the constitution, and the imperatives of transformation. An over-arching government policy framework – that of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) – was formulated to guide this process. At the opening address this morning you have had the benefit of the insight of former Minister, Jay Naidoo.

Government has delivered on some of its promises. Some houses have been built, some sanitation infrastructure installed; some schools, clinics and hospitals have been built.

Yet it would be difficult to argue that the quality of life for the vast majority of our people has improved. Poverty, unemployment and inequality continue to hamper our development as a caring, just and interdependent society.

The mission to deliver a just and decent society is being derailed by a bare-knuckled contest for power and resources. Whilst we may have built schools, hospitals and clinics we have not been able to direct the resources to these institutions to enable them to function properly and deliver a quality service to the people.

Regrettably, painfully, we are witnessing a transition from the politics of social justice, liberation and public service to that of personal wealth accumulation, concentration of political power and hegemony.

During the same period, I have noted how generally muted the response of civil society has been – with notable, and noble, exceptions. Instead of taking their futures by the scruff of the neck, the majority of South Africans have become passive spectators.

The notion of ‘active citizenship’ has been lost.

These are the main reasons why in September this year we launched the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution (CASAC). Recognizing that while there were a number of very capable civil society organizations focusing on particular rights or specific issues, there was no one organization whose mandate was the constitution itself – as a framework of accountable governance that offered a progressive vision of the future, based on those ideals of equality and justice that I know are also close to your hearts.

We did so against a backdrop of political change in the country that I now wish to turn to and to sketch. I should add that we launched CASAC at Liliesleaf Farm, Johannesburg, the site of the arrest of the Rivonia Trialists, and we did so for a reason: the Constitution was a product not just of political compromise, but also of a profound political struggle based on the principles of the Freedom Charter – a struggle and a set of principles, whose values are in danger of being submerged by the rush to personal enrichment of a new, venal conservative faction that straddles the right-wing of the ANC alliance and a broader political establishment that has formed over the past decade.

These developments threaten not only the progressive vision of the constitution but potentially our whole democratic foundations and our prospects for future prosperity.

It is entirely, appropriate, therefore, that this distinguished assembly of philanthropists should be aware of how we got to this point so quickly so that your own interventions can be better attuned to our current and future needs.

My own analysis is informed by the various vantage points that I have: as a member of the ANC, as a former senior public servant during the 1990s, and now, latterly, as a business leader and founding Chairman of CASAC.

In our struggle for liberation we were guided by the revolutionary theory that we must seize state power in order to use that institution to advance the objectives of freeing our people from poverty, economic marginalisation and subjugation. The state would be transformed from an entity aimed at serving the apartheid system to one that would be a catalyst for the delivery of services to all. Its transformation was more than the pursuit of the race and gender reordering, but fundamentally to populate it with a competent fresh generation of cadres passionate about the new vision and competent and qualified to deliver it.

Oponents of change peddled a misleading view that this was at the expense of competent citizens. In the early years of the post apartheid period, the new crop of civil servants was drawn from the ruling party and its allies in the trade union movement as well as the broader civil society structures.

We considered it urgent that a competent progressive state was established quickly, able to address the needs of the population as a whole. This view was shared by the donor community who also placed greater emphasis on partnership with the democratic state.

The result was a great reforming government; and a state that developed legislation, policy and social programmes designed to deliver on our democratic constitutional mandate.

On the other hand civil society structures were stripped of much of their intellectual and strategic capacity as well as financial and other resources, as the new democratic state commanded these resources.

Similarly with the ruling political party, the centre of power shifted to the state.

The tail began to wag the dog.

This was a sharp contrast to our great political traditions:

For one, the struggle for liberation saw the mobilisation of the broadest coalition of civil society; the religious formations, youth and student bodies, trade unions, women's groups, academics and various professional organizations, rural structures and many others.

Many of these were in the ANC aligned United Democratic Front, operating under the umbrella of the Mass Democratic Movement. The seizure of state power was ultimately not a result of gallant military actions of a marauding liberation army, but largely popular struggles and resistance as well as international pressure.

By default rather than design we disempowered and marginalized these structures of civil society as we institutionalised the politics and agenda of transformation. It was as if we concluded that these forces who had been entrusted with delivering the demise of apartheid, could not be relied upon to play a meaningful role in the construction and development of a liberated society.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that this was a grave strategic misjudgment.

Our language as government and the ruling party promised to do things for the people: Delivering *to* and *for* the people rather than in partnership with them became a new approach to transformation. Consequently power was concentrated in the state.

The demobilisation of an active, independent civil society and even of active community action resulted.

Our proud history of popular participation was submerged under the rush for access to state resources. Many people of integrity and progressive values were either forced out of public life, or, increasingly, saw no space to operate. Many of these people are itching to return to public service in one form or another.

The ruling party and the state became seen as the only vehicle through which transformation could be pursued. With this realisation the politics of opportunism and self service began to take root.

In turn, I think it is fair to say that the reality of politics in an open democratic sphere saw the ANC attract to its ranks new members motivated by both a desire to make a meaningful contribution to transformation, but also self-serving careerists and opportunists seeking personal advancement and gain.

The latter group saw the membership of the ruling party as a means to resources and personal accumulation.

The ANC had lost the capacity it had as a liberation movement to develop its cadres, through political education programmes and other means, to assume strategic roles in the organization, in government and in society

It has tended to rely on those with claims to liberation struggle credentials, often failing to nurture a new breed of young bright minds capable of leading in a legitimate, accountable fashion.

In those circumstances, opportunism thrives as sound and reasoned thinking gives way to popularism.

This was also a consequence not only of weak or marginalized civil society structures, but also the absence of a legitimate opposition party capable of challenging the ruling party. The most organised among them lack credibility as they are seen as relics of the erstwhile white politics of the apartheid era.

Other newly formed opposition parties have been engulfed by bitter internal divisions and personality politics.

As the gap between what the state promised and what was delivered widened, a vibrant civil society has become increasingly conspicuous by its absence.

The resourcefulness, innovation and ability of civil society bodies to respond to the needs of communities in a manner that specifically addresses their needs is much needed. Not only can such bodies articulate the needs of the people, but in partnership with government they can help deliver services to communities, ensuring a level of transparency and accountability in the use of public resources.

Against a promise of economic redistribution, the reality is a widening income gap. Increased social security grants and other social support programmes of government have failed to stem the tide of grinding poverty which has worsened since 1994. Where quality basic education was a goal, the daily experience in most black working class and rural communities is one of a poor and deteriorating system to which even educators are not prepared to send their children. A similar scenario has been played out with the public health service.

The system that promises houses, water, jobs, health services, education and many other civic services should not be surprised to wake up to a society that is so dependent on the state. Even more importantly, we must accept that the culture of entitlement has been bred by politics of promise and dependency that have characterised the post apartheid era.

To fix the collapsing school system in black townships and rural areas requires active participation of those communities. It is them who see school children loitering instead of being in class or teachers who skip class to shop, attend memorial services or engage in other trivial activities. Similarly with the health care system, the beautiful clinics we have built must be properly resourced, and when those resources are provided, they must not be siphoned off by staff and sold illegally in townships and rural communities. Responsible citizens should agitate to engage in these matters and correct the anti-social behaviour of some of our citizens.

Government must work in collaboration with civil society and communities and empower the latter to be active citizens, taking responsibility for the development of their communities.

In his Steve Biko Memorial Lecture of 2001, Zakes Mda puts it thus:

“Our movement away from a people-centred government to a government by deployment breeds the arrogance of power. The arrogance of power goes hand-in-glove with corruption. But rural development is not only thwarted by corruption at the local level. The biggest constraint to development is corruption at the centre where funding from our taxes and from the donor community is controlled. Ineptitude and inefficiency also play their part.”

Nine years hence, his predictions ring true as many join the ruling party with an expectation of being deployed to positions of power and responsibility. Some in business see donations to a political party as a transactional cost of securing government tenders.

Some in leadership roles encourage this behaviour as they themselves become beneficiaries of this theft of state resources. We are fast becoming gripped by the politics of cronyism and patronage. At times, political connection and loyalty rank ahead of technical and administrative competency for business and roles in government.

Consequently administrative authority often succumbs to political pressure at all levels of government. Incompetent people are often appointed to strategic roles to facilitate the procurement of goods and services from well connected, but unsuitable providers at exorbitant costs. Managers and supervisors often cannot act against civil servants who are incompetent, but politically well connected for fear of repercussions.

A weak, inefficient and incompetent state is emerging with local and provincial governments being the worst affected. Unsurprisingly, there is growing discontent and protests in communities; the local government election next year could be the first since 1994 to be marked by serious violence and disruption rather than peaceful, free and fair democratic process.

In a recent issue of Financial Mail, its editor Barney Mthombothi asks the question as to why people who showed so much courage during the dark days of the liberation struggle are not prepared to raise their voices anymore.

It is the fear of government and party reprisal, or worse being cut off from the succulent supply of state contracts.

So, now is the time to speak up. But it would be unreasonable to expect individuals to be independent-minded without organizations into which their commitment to the constitution and to social transformation can be channeled.

It is for that reason that we have established the CASAC in order to create a platform for citizens to assume their role as ultimate custodians of the constitution. We aim to partner with other civil society structures in order that we engage as active participants in the development of our society.

We seek to partner with institutions established in terms of chapter nine of our constitution (Public Protector, Human Rights Commission) established in order to support the constitution, as well as government wherever possible.

In the early phases of our programme CASAC will focus on two key areas: firstly the allocation of resources and the effectiveness of delivery in the education sphere; and secondly public accountability. We are examining potential initiatives in these areas and aim to stimulate public debate with regard to policy interventions. These two focus areas are inter-linked - a state that is unable to openly explain and justify its actions, and to protect itself from the scourge of corruption, can never serve the imperative of social transformation nor its people.

This is an undeniably *political* response to a political problem. It cannot be otherwise. We need civil society organizations with the credibility, the organizational muscle, and astute leadership, able to stand up to the ruling party when necessary but also capable of constructively engaging with it.

While it is understandable and appropriate that philanthropists such as you would want to fund grassroots projects that ‘touch the people’ and which have immediate, tangible outcomes, my analysis of political trends insists that we also need – as a society – the ability to engage with political power at a macro-level.

We need to be able to join the dots; we need to be able to see the full picture from above and not avoid or ignore the systemic challenges, and political threats, that may fatally undermine all our efforts to change peoples’ lives for the better.

More than anything we need to restore the ability of South Africans to come together and process differences so that they can arrive at consensus – after all, this was a hallmark of our political transition of the early 1990s.

I am grateful to you for your continued interest in the development of our country. The grants that you can provide enable us to act with the urgency, independence and creativity necessary to meet the needs of the hour and to help us build the stable, prosperous society our children deserve.

You have a very important role to play – it is as significant now as it ever was. This country is full of promise; the World Cup showed what we are capable of.

But there are dark clouds above us; we cannot ignore them. As we approach the fork in the road, you can help us ensure that we do not lose our way.

Thank you.