



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

A CONSTRUCTIVE CONTRIBUTION TO RE-ENERGIZE SOUTH AFRICA

By Buyelwa Sonjica and Klaus Kotzé

Our political moment is pregnant. Notwithstanding the restlessness and noise surrounding it, the upcoming election affords South Africans the opportunity to take stock of 30 years of democracy. It also allows us to turn the page and chart the path toward a successful and socially just future.

When we become absorbed in a negative national narrative, we see everything through a negative gaze. We neglect the privileges and responsibilities afforded to us under the Constitutional order. Our pessimism and myopia bind us in a negative and destructive citizenship. We blame and point fingers at others. We feel helpless and thereby neglect our civil duties.

The failures of the democratic era do not only belong to the criminals and abusers of power. It also belongs to us, to the citizens of South Africa. While we have witnessed commendable efforts to hold power to account, too often have we simply given the country away to criminals. We have done this by either getting stuck in narratives that do not serve South Africa Inc.; critiques devoid of strategy. It has also happened when we have stood by, allowing others to capture our state. When we have allowed corruption and malfeasance, big and small, public and private.

While the sensational nature of our information feeds may have us believe that all is lost, broken and stolen, it is worth taking a step back and observe our broader reality. When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change. Yes, South Africa continues to suffer major failures, but we should not forget the repressive and unfree, divided state that reigned before the transition. Today ours is a unitary, transforming state. We have a remarkably free society where those with views contrary to the government can speak freely and pursue their personal choices, without censure. We are not lost because of corrupt and ineffective elements in the state. We should not simply berate our national institutions. Instead, we need to capitalise on what the people's constitution has given us to promote democratic progress.

The elections and the commemoration of 30 years of democracy allow us the opportunity to re-focus and consolidate our path forward. To shed the empty negativity and constructively re-energise South Africa Inc.

Our provocation is for greater participatory politics. To invoke citizens to actively pursue their constitutional responsibilities: to contribute to the establishment of a society based on democratic

values, social justice and human rights. After all, South Africa is a Republic, we are the agents of the state.

When we take a positive approach, we are reminded of the multitude of current realities that were impossible to imagine before democracy. Not only do we take for granted that South Africa remains a free and moderate society where the majority of people want to co-exist, despite their extensive differences. We remain a society that is broadly committed to a unitary state guided by transformational aspirations laid out in the Constitution. A major departure from pre-democratic days.

We interact across racial, ethnic and religious divides. Our shared public spaces, mixed schools, and diverse workplaces offer tangible proof that South Africans have collectively denied the separation that Apartheid enforced. We have delegitimised any imposed system of control. The divides remain real, but instead of adopting fatalistic approaches, we should increasingly involve ourselves in the public space.

The upcoming elections offer us the opportunity to become constructive agents as we move to unlock the enormous potential of the state. Yet, while we should all vote, voting once every few years is not enough. We all need to be active participants in the political process that builds South Africa Inc.

Participatory politics will look different for everyone. What is shared is a positive and constructive approach vis a vis the perniciousness of cynicism. A positive approach gets things done. There are many examples throughout South Africa of community-led initiatives that have brought significant upliftment. This can-do attitude has brought people together, has instilled pride and has demonstrated the republican spirit we must pursue in South Africa. Whether in the political or civil space, organisations and initiatives are forming to build the South Africa they envision. By doing so, they are shedding the dependency on others (principally the state) that we as South Africans have become used to. Our participation in politics must not seek to deride or counter the work of the state. Instead, we must adopt an attitude of complementarity. Working together to build the future we want.

By asking tough questions. By actively involving ourselves as stakeholders of our national aspirations, we responsibly populate the public space afforded to us.

The upcoming elections provide each and every one of us the opportunity to truly be active citizens. In all our different ways, we must demand that the constitutional principle of participatory democracy does not only receive lip service. We, the people, must ensure that the state pursues and enacts true public participation. Only by demanding and then taking up greater participation in the political process can we bring stability and progress to our beloved South Africa.

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