



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

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The State of Public Integrity in South Africa

Introduction

I am honoured to contribute to these proceedings, recognising the immense responsibility we all share – of reflecting at this crucial time on the state of public integrity in South Africa.

We meet at a moment in the evolution of our proud nation, when the very foundations of our society, the bedrock of our Constitutional democracy are being tested.

A quarter of a century into our democratic journey, we are wrestling with persistent social ills, political fracture and economic stagnation, while fighting endemic corruption.

These phenomena place our collective future at risk.

Times such as these, represent moments of great peril, but also of promise. For in times such as these, when leaders are feeble, when institutions falter, when progress is forestalled, hope and courage must arise anew.

It is, when the creative potential of our national systems seem most weakened, that we must regain our strength and revisit our founding vision:

- Our vision of a new and better South Africa.
- A South Africa founded on the rule of law and on the rights of every individual.
- A South Africa founded on the idea and indeed the ideal, that we can become a more equitable society, and rise from the ruins of our past.

To realise our dream, we must behold anew the vision of a nation marked by high standards of public integrity, upheld in service of the common good.

A country is made of its territory, but a nation is made of its people and the manner in which they conduct their affairs.

As South Africa, we have committed ourselves to a constitutional dispensation.
We have chosen the rule of law above violence and anarchy.
We have chosen the common good over our individual or self-interest.
But, as a nation, have we truly chosen this high road?

The test of our public integrity is whether the norms of our society are aligned with the high standards, ethics and morals we espouse.

Whether the governance patterns, not only in our formal processes and codified documents, but whether we uphold our commitment to governance in the day-to-day expression of our actions.

The experience of the democratic years to date, and of the last decade in particular, have tested our resolve in these matters. In many instances, they have tested our joint and respective commitments, and too often, we have been found wanting.

What is the state of public integrity in South Africa?

We might look to the report of the Auditor General, to ascertain the degree to which our public coffers are being stewarded in the interests of our society.

We might look to the general state of our national fiscus and the allocation of our public purse, and note that our debts and dependencies are growing, even as our revenues and economic capacity declines.

We might look further still at the degree to which resources, meant for the most basic services in local government, reach their intended beneficiaries.

In all these instances we see an emerging pattern of a public sector beset with a lack of integrity. A basic lack of the will and capacity to adhere to the rules set out in our laws, regulations and the guidelines of public procurement.

The Auditor General informs us that while efforts are afoot to improve the real-time performance of audits, wasteful and irregular expenditure has in fact increased in most public institutions.

Of supreme concern is the persistence of the mismanagement of resources in our education system, and the deepening of corruption in the South African Police Services.

The SAPS, tasked with protecting our communities, cannot be the scene of ill-discipline and lawlessness, if we are to realise the dream of a crime free society. Likewise, our schools, the spaces meant for nurturing our young minds for personal development and learning, cannot be left to become overgrown by self-enrichment at the cost of our future.

The horrendous greed demonstrated by the misuse of public monies during the Covid-19 pandemic, testify to the decline of public integrity.

Predictably, these examples of an endemic culture of a lack of public integrity have undermined our national efforts at economic and social progress.

It should of course be mentioned that in many cases the '*corrupted*' in the public sector have been enabled and accompanied by '*corruptors*' in the private sector. To be fair, even in the faith sector and civil society, grotesque examples have abounded of an abusive relationship between leaders of institutions, and their followers.

We should not be surprised therefore that the Edelman Barometer and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, have observed a consistent decline in public trust in South Africa. If the institutions, tasked with serving the common interest, are *captured* or manipulated for self-interest, the extension of public trust would be misplaced.

There are glimmers of hope

Friends, these dark blotches on our national record should upset us greatly. But they should not leave us hopeless.

One of the many wonders of South Africa is that amid the darkness of our past and of these present difficulties, we remain a stubbornly hopeful people. We remain a people committed to overcoming our societal ills.

We remain committed to bringing into the light, into the realm of public judgement, the wrongs in our society.

The reason we know about our deficiencies as a society, is our willingness to investigate them, to report them and to discuss them. Indeed, as Professor Somadoda Fikeni says, "South Africa is a noisy democracy".

We are a democracy which cries out – *no more, and not in our name!* This is evidenced by the Zondo Commission, which the World Bank ranks as the most transparent judicial enquiry initiated by a sitting president anywhere in the democratic world.

Our democratic resilience is evidenced by the many protests and civic action which ordinary citizens engage in on a daily basis.

Our society is one which is made ill by a lack of public integrity, but as a people we are sickened thereby. We are willing to fight back.

The developments in the political arena, of new and emerging networks of activist citizens willing to enter public life to stand for greater accountability, is further evidence of our audacious democratic DNA.

More than 50% of the population who is eligible to vote, have chosen in these last local elections to vote with their feet. They have boycotted the voting process as an expression of their discontent with the manner in which the public affairs, their affairs, are being managed.

However, we have to recognise that a restoration of public integrity will not come about through sloganeering and picketing alone. Rather, a just and equitable public order will only be the product of painstaking reconstruction of our national project.

We need the construction of a new public norm of high moral and ethical commitment

Beginning at the foundation, South Africans must rebuild the critical norms that must underpin public integrity. These norms, of basic honesty, transparency, accountability, of the respect of private property and as importantly, the respect of public property, must be recovered.

No modern and prosperous society can survive if the citizens who live within her borders disrespect her common assets. No community can thrive if the unspoken rule of common property, be it infrastructure or financial resources, is not held in good faith by all.

The notion that one group in society must benefit, enjoy privilege or '*have their turn to eat*', is the antithesis of public integrity.

Public integrity rests on the belief that what belongs to the collective must be used in the pursuit of the common good.

But, the reconstruction of these foundational norms at the public level, cannot occur without reflection on the need for reform at the private level.

For how might a society, made up of members drawn from her communities, her families, her individuals, retain a semblance of integrity, unless the public ethic finds nourishment in the personal ethical and moral obligations of the people.

This brings to the fore the pressing yet long-term need for an enduring reconstruction of personal values among South Africa's people.

Truth be told, years and decades of oppression, dehumanisation, alienation and deprivation, have weakened the moral fibre of South Africa. So that, if we would dream of a public arena in which integrity, good governance and efficient public management is upheld, we must long for a private sphere in which basic integrity is paramount.

For this reason, self-reflection must take place in our communities. Self-correction must take place in our political movements, in our parties and ultimately in the halls of power, in government. It must lead us to a new commitment to act against wrongdoing, even when we see it in our own ranks.

Institutional reform

It is then, upon this foundation, that the painstaking work of institutional reform is required. By institutional reform we mean the recovery of the standards of good practice in the functional silos of

our state-owned enterprises. The restoration of our financial management standards, once celebrated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), as ranking among the top three in the world.

The reform of our institutions and the restoration of public integrity cannot be achieved without on the one hand, refining our regulatory frameworks, and on the other hand addressing the human dimension of the equation.

Research has shown that a crucial contributing factor to good governance is in fact the capacity, the level of skill and professionalism of the individuals who populate an institution. This means that we cannot in good faith demand a high standard of public integrity, without also ensuring that the basic competencies, of management and leadership, of decision making and judgement and of technical compliance, are embedded in the people on who we rely on to run our institutions.

This competence must include a standard of credibility and good ethics. We cannot hope to be governed with integrity, if we permit ourselves to select from among us those of poor reputation to be our leaders.

This means there must be a house-cleaning exercise. In political movements, in government, but also in business and, dare I say, in civil society. We cannot remove the '*bad apples*' by redeploying them and then pretend that we are committed to the restoration of public integrity.

If there are costs to bear for injustice and illicit acts, they must be borne by the perpetrators of those acts, not by the innocent public victims at whose expense they are done.

I said at the start that a nation is made of its people and the manner in which they conduct their affairs.

Nowhere is this more so than in matters of public integrity, for it is the very character of the nation that is on display.

There is therefore no value in pretending that South Africa has clothed itself in glory in this regard. However, the journey is not complete and the fight is not over.

Conclusion

Between 2021 and 2022 we will likely witness a significant political realignment in the democratic life of our nation. The degree to which we reform in matters of public integrity, will determine where we stand at the end of this process. Shortly thereafter, in 2024, South Africans will again express their confidence, or lack of confidence in their public representatives.

It will be an exciting and daunting time in which public integrity will be on trial. The degree to which governance and the delivery of services improves or stagnates, will underpin the entire national climate.

Accompanying this fact, will be the resultant impact of our economic performance as a nation, on our social wellbeing and especially on the 20 million or so South Africans that now depend directly on the state.

To the extent we succeed, in improving the performance of our public and private institutions in matters of governance, we will secure the future of our nation.

We dare not fail.

I am again inspired by the words of Oliver Tambo,

“We seek to create a united democratic and non-racial society. We have a vision of South Africa in which black and white shall live and work together as equals in conditions of peace and prosperity. ... a nation of which all of humanity can be proud.”

Indeed, my compatriots, for us to build a nation of which all of humanity can be proud, we must take up this challenge, to make public integrity the cornerstone of a new dispensation of efficient and effective governance. We must do so in service of the common good.

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