

Constructive Criticism versus the Vanguard Party

We have recently seen a storm of disagreement with standing government policies. It started with the ban of cigarettes and booze during a prolonged “lockdown”. Government back off on the booze ban but hung tough on the nicotine issue. Not only have the respective business interests taken court action, but even inside the Cabinet there seems to have been some disagreement. For example, the Police Minister wanted to keep “prohibition” in place, linking booze to higher crime levels and even to higher occupancy of hospital beds, especially in ICU where these are needed for Covid-19 victims.

Meanwhile the Finance Minister lamented the loss of “sin tax” revenue from alcohol and tobacco products. At a time when he is struggling to make ends meet, due to the extra spending of the Covid-19 induced emergency. These are vexing issues, to be sure.

Then came the interim budget this week, delivered on Zoom, and without the Minister’s symbolic aloe beside the podium. He was frank about our dim prospects, and even mentioned the “B-word” usually avoided in budget speeches (i.e. bankruptcy). It is pretty clear that a show-down is looming between those who want to keep spending recklessly and those who don’t want the country to sell its soul to the IMF. Fiscal responsibility is not unknown to some socialist governments, but others are inclined to throw fate to the wind and ignore the imperative of balancing the budget. Austerity under socialism does not always come from “prevention measures” – it is sometimes the punishment for spending sprees. Not to mention looting and plundering the treasury under the cover of classic socialist rhetoric.

Another sign of tension this week was when a cabinet minister lamented about the recent Constitutional Court decision, to tone down the “cadre deployment” and allow independent candidates to run in all elections. If you thought that the rise of the EFF shook up Parliament, wait until this new dispensation starts! It will be nothing less than parliamentary revival.

But she opined that government could not possibly re-design the Electoral Act in two short years! Even though it has been over a decade since the Van Zyl – Slabbert Commission recommended to the ANC that it do exactly that. This is when the arrogance of a liberation movement turned political party reaches insane proportions. Can no one see the self-preservation implicit in her comments? Some in the ANC would like to run yet another election using proportional representation – the system that gives it a perpetual edge. Not to mention the fact that it feeds patronage, which feeds corruption, which turns government into a leaky bucket.

But of all the signals of the Vanguard Party ethos, none was greater than watching the ANC’s response to the wise advice given by Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng in a Zoom interview on YouTube. He was joined by the Chief Rabbi of South Africa, and the discussion was hosted by the editor of the Jerusalem Post. I watched the interview on line, and I can witness that the Chief Justice went out of his way to state that he was stating his personal views, not those of his government.

In calling for his retraction or resignation – by MP Mandla Mandela – has he forgotten that in a constitutional democracy we have the freedom of expression?

Mogoeng Mogoeng pointed out a double-standard – that we still have excellent relations with the countries that colonized South Africa, in spite of all the harm they did. Yet we confront Israel, which never did us any harm. His logic was sound and pointed to our opportunity to role-model forgiveness and reconciliation, instead of the stridence of existing policy.

It is not my intention here to take sides in this policy debate. What concerns me is what motives the ANC has in calling for the Chief Justice to resign? Is it really about Israel or is there an ulterior motive? Is the Chief Justice being punished because his court has recently mandated the revision of the Electoral Act in a way that will shift power to the people – away from the “vanguard party”?

Not long after Polokwane, Mashele and Xobo wrote a book called The Fall of the ANC. It turned out to be prophetic. Those in power were called “vindictive triumphalists” and the others they called “soul-battered mourners”. This was playing out again in the strident way that MP Mandela called for Mogoeng to retract his personal views – or resign as Chief Justice.

Was it not this same ANC that helped Sudan’s ex-president Bashir dodge an arrest warrant and slip out of South Africa? Only to have government threaten to pull out of the ICC in retaliation for such a court order being issued? Where did Bashir’s diplomatic immunity end? He is now in detention pending trial for crimes against humanity. It would be good for the ANC to eat some humble pie and recognize that voices like Mogoeng are highly esteemed.

The vanguard party model is waning. A new and better constituency system of voting is waxing. Move over Mandla Mandela and make room for dissident views that could prove to be predominant some day soon.