

Book review

A Nation in crisis: An appeal for morality

Zulu, Paulus 2013

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Professor Paulus Zulu's 2013 book is authoritative. It stands as a compelling indictment of the lack of public morality in the governance of South Africa by governing bodies, parliament and the ruling political party – the African National Congress (ANC). The book undertakes a critical discussion of morality in South Africa, tracing its roots and its manifestation in the public sphere. The book is heavily laden with academic jargon but is not overbearing and remains palatable to the general reader who is not a student of morality as an academic discipline and its informing philosophies.

Zulu's model of analysis is borrowed from the works of Joseph Schumpeter who coined the 'thesis of political entrepreneurship' and is complemented by the concept of 'political instrumentalisation of disorder' as asserted by

Chabal and Daloz. However, there may be other conceptual sources and one should not downplay the influence of a concept borrowed from an essay written in 2008 by South African struggle poet, Breyten Breytenbach. He had coined the phrase ‘public office as an exercise in scavenging’. Supplementary to these three analytical frameworks is the perspective taken from political science that ‘one party dominance’ in a democratic state brings into question the very bona fides of that country’s democracy.

Broadly speaking, it is tempting to locate the book within those that analyse the patrimonial state. However, this is for the reader to infer as the book is subject to interpretation. I choose to view the book as an explorative indictment of the lack of public morality in those that govern, and to regard its setting largely as that of the interplay between the state and the ruling party. Zulu explores a vast number of examples: from the Travelgate scandal to the challenges facing the judiciary through the case between Judge John Hlope and Justices of the Constitutional Court. A number of public protests are cited, to indicate that citizens are revolting because of a dream deferred – the dream that was promised to them in 1955 through the declaration of the Freedom Charter and 39 years later in 1994 through the ushering in of democracy.

The book has seven chapters that deal (respectively) with the roots of public morality in South Africa, the question of a dream deferred, parliamentary oversight, democracy under siege, the widening wealth gap, the question on whether a universal standard for right or wrong exists and, lastly, issues of owning up and taking responsibility for one’s actions. Zulu offers this explorative indictment knowing fully well that not everyone will agree with his interpretation of events and certain actions; let alone his book. This Zulu attributes to the concept of ‘contested registers’, wherein there is no agreement on what is right or wrong and how the wrong should be rectified or maintained – thus leading to contested concepts of justice.

To illuminate this point, he gives an interesting account on how the discourse on Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as a tool for redressing the past injustices suffered by black people under colonialism and apartheid

is contested. However, Zulu is not interested in the concept or rationale of BEE per se (not to say this does not matter; it simply does not fit into his adopted analytical framework). He is occupied with looking at the conduct and practice of politicians and senior bureaucrats in implementing BEE. Here he details many cases that bring to fore the ubiquity of corruption in the dealings of those who govern.

Zulu finds contesting registers even within the ruling party itself, citing the desire by the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs to ban the holding of top municipality positions by political office bearers. The 2010 National General Council of the ANC called for a revision of the Bill that the Minister had submitted in Parliament to effect this desire to separate the party from the state. Herein we can note that the party was deliberately attempting to maintain its influence on the running of municipalities.

Zulu emphatically states that ‘public morality in governance is approaching a state of moral abyss’ (p. 160). For this to be turned around, he does make a number of proposals. These include electoral system reform, the election of men and women of integrity into political office and the improvement of governance systems. In the latter proposal, the author considers the idea of doing away with the second sphere of government – provinces. This is an idea hardly discussed, however. The discussion is mainly about re-demarcating provinces and about increasing or decreasing their number.

However, thinking of doing away entirely with provinces could revolutionise how we think about district municipalities and about devolving more powers to them. Ultimately, this could lead to the decentralisation of governance to bring it closer to people, create better space for accountability and transparency, and increase professionalisation by redeploying some provincial public servants at municipal level. I am simply expanding and thinking on this idea by Zulu. In the book he does not elaborate much on it.

Whilst the book traces and exposes the presence of malfeasance in the governing of present day South Africa, there is little tracing done of its roots and foundations within the apartheid government days. This would expand our understanding of whether the entire genesis of corruption is attributable

to the ruling party or whether certain aspects of it were systematically embedded in the structure of governance that the ANC inherited from apartheid. Of course, Zulu does not disagree that corruption existed under apartheid. At issue here is the lack of exposition on this aspect and how corruption has sustained itself in the era of democratic dispensation.

The BEE deals that are cited by Zulu as vehicles of this malfeasance are themselves owned and managed by people who either founded them or inherited them from apartheid era participants. These owners do not guard against the corruption, and in many cases wilfully assist to ensure these BEE deals benefit politicians, state officials or their friends and families. It will be important in future for a study to be conducted towards understanding this collusion in the making of corruption between the current ruling elite and the former ruling elite under apartheid. More so, because Zulu himself emphasises that South Africa is dealing with politics of transition and ethical dilemmas attendant to such a phase of development.

The final chapter is one of the most important in the book. Here, Zulu deals with how politicians and senior public officials react when they are confronted with wrongdoing. Finding a glimpse of hope in the actions of the Gauteng Provincial Minister of Health, Qedani Mahlangu, who apologised to affected mothers due to shortage of a baby formula in a public hospital, Zulu calls this a rare occurrence in South Africa. When a politician practises such a form of taking responsibility, he/she can be said to be within the 'confessional modality'. Here, the politician or senior official in the wrong exercises contrition (realising his/her wrongful act), then confesses to it and ultimately experiences atonement. Other forms of reaction include *legalism*, wherein the accused person responds with 'I will meet you in court', certainly a growing phenomenon these days with ever increasing numbers of court cases now involving Ministers and/or senior public servants across the government and in parliament.

The third response is *moral relativism*, wherein the accused points a finger at the pervasiveness of what they are being accused of, claiming that 'others are also doing it'. The fourth response is *restitutive morality*, wherein the

accused invoke historic successes and heroism to obfuscate the current accusation against them. This would fit in well with a perspective by Franz Fanon in his seminal *Pitfalls of National Consciousness* wherein he warned that liberation movements will tend to invoke struggle credentials to remain relevant in the face of people's despondency. The last response is *conferred innocence*, wherein the accused retorts by the Animal Farm dictum that some pigs are more equal than others.

Zulu's book can be summed up as a contribution to meet the need to build a South African democracy, anchored on sound and solid institutions, and led by men and women who function within the Kantian concept of deontological morality – wherein the actions of governance must in themselves be morally sound and ethical in pursuit of a noble end. Democracy for Zulu is built on three pillars: fraternity, equality and liberty. He counsels the reader soundly that 'a country's human rights record is not judged by the GDP per capita that it generates nor by conspicuous consumption, but rather by the absence of beggars in the streets' (p. 17). Therefore, consolidating the South African democracy is in the interest of building a more just and prosperous society – reversing the malaise that is leading millions of people to the perception of a dream deferred.