



MY VIEW

Brain drain may bar door to the Promised Land



By Teboho Loate

“WE HAVE some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now, for I have seen the Promised Land. I may not be there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people shall get to the Promised Land.”

These words of Martin Luther King are relevant to us in South Africa. Now that the elections in this country are over, have we reached the “Promised Land”? And if we have indeed arrived, are we all there? Does being there mean that we have fully occupied it?

Before the April 1994 general election, the people of South Africa dreamed of a different country, a different society, a different nation. All these different expectations were underpinned by the desire for democracy, transparency and accountability, influenced by the rhetoric of the “Promised Land”.

Of course, it may be too soon to start counting the possible eggs that will hatch as the realities of the struggle for “liberation” become apparent. There is the obvious argument that the new ANC-led government of national unity did not emerge into an empty environment. It must exist in an environment of complex established systems, of institutions with historical cultures, of institutionalised bureaucracies, where a sector of individuals believe that pre-election standards, values and norms are the qualities that need to be maintained in the post-election society.

The election did not magically transform society overnight. It only opened the door to transformation. This process is now under negotiation and the intense struggles which mark this rite of passage give notice that we have entered stage two of the liberation struggle.

Everything depends on the outcome of this process: the future shape of South African society; the location of power; the continuation or end of privilege; the empowerment or continued disempowerment of ordinary citizens; peace or perpetual estrangement.

The odds are incredibly high, the vested interests are many and the outcome is uncertain. Who should be charged with the responsibility of ensuring that transformation takes place? Will it once again be the political parties cutting deals that leave those with privilege protected by the Constitution, while those who struggled to get a piece of the cake continue to struggle?

If we are to authentically reshape our society, civil society in its myriad of forms must exercise its voice and its presence.

Which brings us to an important problem: the creaming off of civil society leaders into all levels of government, leaving behind a vacuum of leadership, skills and resources.

Principal sufferers of this brain drain are the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) whose people either facilitated or led the struggle towards democracy. Today, hundreds of former NGO leaders are in national and provincial government or are in the process of moving into the civil service. Others, whose talent was clearly marketable, have been recruited by big business, whose salaries were a siren song to upwardly mobile activists and policy planners. The possible nightmare of yet another leadership loss is looming with the imminent establishment of integrated local government.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) clearly puts the responsibility for development with communities on the ground. The government certainly does not have the capacity to implement all development and neither should it, if we want to break the tradition of top-down development.

With the need to move towards implementing RDP programmes, there is obviously an expectation that formerly oppositional modes of operation will be replaced by co-operation around development. The demands and challenges of this change will be enormous for the many major sectoral formations, such as civics and trade unions, as they grapple with the idea of building relations with the present government while not compromising their independence.

In this context, one must ask: how strategic has the ANC been in its approach to rebuilding society? By depleting NGOs and development organisations of leadership, has the ANC not crippled its most important allies in facilitating delivery within communities?

In the apartheid years, the government neutralised communities by detaining or co-opting their leaders. Our present government, for quite different reasons and in different ways, is doing the same thing.

If it is not to be guilty of mere lip-service to its stated support for a vibrant civil society, the government must ensure a climate conducive to the functioning of NGOs and community-based organisations. How is it to do this? Perhaps the first step is to ask some questions.

- What are the ANC and other liberation movements doing to build second-tier leadership within their organisations?

- How can the government strategically promote networking and co-operation between NGOs and discourage the fierce competition for “ownership” that has marked inter-NGO relations?

- How best can the ANC resolve existing tensions with the civics so that development can proceed?

Martin Luther King saw the Promised Land but, 26 years after his death, his people have still not arrived. We face the same possibility. ■

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