

A code of conduct for activists

Introduction

The aim of this lecture is to help activists develop their understanding of the ideas of 'discipline' and a code of political conduct.

It aims to bring about a greater awareness of the dangers of negative tendencies and the desirability of good qualities. This becomes ever more important as the struggle for liberation and state repression intensifies.

Over the past three years we have seen the unprecedented quantitative growth of organisations within the democratic movement. Hundreds of thousands of new activists, both young and old have joined our organisations. Such developments are greatly welcomed and very inspiring.

If our struggle is to develop, we must be concerned not only to recruit new activists, but to improve the quality of our existing activists. The basic idea of this lecture is to help look at how the qualitative development of our activists can take place.

Those of us engaged in the noble cause of freedom are ambassadors in two senses. We represent the cause of the people. But the way in which we conduct ourselves reflects on our cause itself.

When reference is made to 'discipline' what is generally meant is rules, regulations and methods developed to regulate the conduct of individuals and organisations. The aim of such rules is to achieve maximum efficiency in fulfilling certain goals.

This applies to bodies and organisations ranging from sporting clubs to welfare organisations and commercial ventures.

When we refer to political discipline, we are talking about a set of rules and methods that allow activists to achieve their political goals as easily and effectively as possible. We call this set of rules and methods a code of conduct for activists.

In this lecture we have divided this code of conduct into two basic parts:

How activists need to work in their organisations
How activists need to behave

How activists need to work in their organisations

The decision making process

Democracy is one of the principles of our struggle. Therefore the way in which we make decisions in our organisations must be democratic, that is it must be based on the will of the majority of members.

Democratic decision making takes place when a mandated body in an organisation takes a decision through discussions and debates by all present.

The discussions and debates are democratic in the sense that those present have a right to be heard - irrespective of the views they hold. They also have the right to differ if they wish. these are rights and must be respected. This does not mean that any person has the right to dominate or to speak for longer than anyone else. The chairperson of the meeting has the right to allocate time to different speakers in such a way that all points of view are allowed equal airing.

Once matters have been debated, decisions need to be taken on the basis of a simple majority, unless otherwise state in the constitution of an organisation.

This decision then becomes binding on all concerned — the committee, the ordinary members and the organisation as a whole. It binds those who differed with the decision during the debate and those who may have voted against it as well as those who agreed with it.

The right to differ then falls away. In fact, the right to differ then transforms itself into the duty of implementing the decision.

Failure to observe both the democratic decision making process and the duty to implement collective decisions leads to differences, divisions, and decisions not being implemented. This leads to organisations becoming directionless and being unable to effectively achieve their goals.

The ideal activist in this particular respect is he/she who, although differing with the decision, nevertheless goes about implementing decisions with the same vigour and enthusiasm as those who approved of them.

There are times in the life of an organisation when decisions need to be taken in emergency situations without discussions. These decisions must then be reviewed when circumstances allow: the reason for the decision being taken needs to be looked at, and if members of the organisation approve the decision, then the decision needs to be formally passed.

Canvassing Opinions

by this is meant the soliciting of views with the object of swaying others to adopt some particular view.

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It may happen that those who differed with decisions go about agitating others who also differed, with the view of altering decisions already taken. Such actions are inexcusable.

Decisions need not be of a permanent nature. Circumstances change, and such changes often warrant altering decisions. but the correct constitutional procedures must be followed or other mechanisms provided for such changes.

It also happens that an organisation requires views expressed by various branches, area committees etc of that organisation on certain issues.

the issues are then referred to these branches, groupings in the different areas.

It might happen that a particular branch or a section within that branch hold a particular view on the issues referred to it.

It is politically incorrect for such a branch or section of the branch to approach other branches, groupings, sections of other branches with the view to canvassing their opinions, and attempt to win them over to its own view.

Such conduct must be avoided. Each branch has the ability to reach its own conclusions, Their independence to do so must be respected.

should a branch, section of branch, wish to canvass opinions of others on matters referred to all branches, it is entitled to do so, provided that it has the approval of the executive.

Cliquism/Factionalism

By this is meant the existence of exclusive little groupings inside an organisation which exist in order to

impose, or influence others to their point of view.

Members of such factions within an organisation owe their loyality first to their own faction and secondly to the organsiation. As a result they often result to distortions and misrepresentations in order to get their point of view across.

If permitted to go unchecked, such cliques or factions succeed in causing a lot of confusion and division. They automatically oppose whatever non-clique members propose without consideration of the merits of the proposals

Ultimately such cliques and factions can lead to splits and break-aways with the effectiveness of the organisation being greatly dimished and the organisation's goals remaining unrealised.

The airing of differences and grievances

It happens that at times, activists have grievances against other activists or against another branch or committee of the organisation.

often these grievances are found to be valid and well-founded.

The manner in which some activists go about airing their grievances is undesirable and politically irresponsible. They go about airing their grievances to all and sundry at times to people who are not even members of the organisation .

Such practices can lead to confusion and sow distrust, suspiscion and back-biting amongst activists.

Grievances must be aired and need to be resolved. It is harmful to the organisation not to do so. But grievances must be aired in a responsible way and through the proper

channels. If for instance an organisation has a committee to handle grievances, and misunderstandings, the activist must refer his or her grievances to such a committee, which will handle the matter, It may throw the matter open for discussion, or may summon the activists concerned to resolve the matter.

In the absence of such a special committee, the activist who has grievances can and must refer the matter to the executive or to some responsible official of the organisation with the view to having the matter resolved.

Airing grievances in this responsible way is likely to avoid hostility and divisions in most cases.

The basis of comradely discussions

By comradely discussions is meant the type of discussions among activists, be these discussions at meetings or out of meetings, which discussions turn out to be meaningful and fruitful on the one hand and which lead to the strengthening of bonds and relationships among activists on the other.

It sometimes happens that discussions among activists end up in arguments in hostility and misunderstandings and to the weakening of relationships among them. In fact they end up becoming meaningless.

This can happen for a number of reasons: an activist may be shouted down, not given an opportunity to speak, held in contempt or refusal to apologise or arrogance on the part of the offending activist.

The basis of comradely discussions is mutual respect, equality among activists; honesty and frankness in discussions; the willingness to grant a point

made by an activist; the readiness to withdraw uncalled for remarks and to apologise sincerely and with humility the willingness to return the courtesy of an activist who has had the courtesy to hear another activist self criticism etc.

Collectively the principles outlined above constitute the foundation stone of comradely discussions.

Punctuality

-Punctuality simply means promptness- the quality or the condition of being on time.

Meetings often start late, at times by as much as an hour or more. Appointments are not kept on time and tasks are not carried out promptly.

It is important to consider some of the implications of not being on time. Assume that a meeting starts half an hour or an hour late because while some activists were on time others were not.

Firstly by coming late, the late-comers showed disrespect for those who were on time and showed lack of consideration for those who were kept waiting. Their time could have been spent doing more useful things than waiting for activists to pitch up.

Secondly, it goes without saying that since the meeting started late, it will end later, or the business of the meeting will remain unfinished or matters are discussed hurriedly and without the consideration they deserve. All this reduces the efficiency of the organisation.

Lateness also encourages an attitude amongst those activists who were on time, to be late in the future. This leads to a situation where more and more activists arrive late and lateness becomes the rule.

This also encourages the idea that if one can put off attending on time, one can put off doing other things such as organisational

tasks for a later time, again retarding the progress and efficiency of the organisation.

At times there are valid reasons for activists pitching up late. It is desirable that explanations are formally made for lateness and the necessary apologies tendered.

Repeated infringements of punctuality by late-comers (unless valid explanations are made and accepted) should incur an official reprimand of the offender.

The taking of initiatives

Taking an initiative involves the readiness and the ability of an activist to take the first steps in starting something in the interests of the organisation and its goals.

Initiative-taking by activists constitutes the life-blood of an organisation, novel ideas etc.

But it happens at times that an enterprising activist thinks up some project and starts moving on his/her own without proper consultation and approval. At times this is done in all sincerity and goodness; at times in the hope of presenting the project as a fait accompli to other activists and the organisation; or to bolster his/her own image etc

New initiatives only become meaningful and strengthen the organisation if such initiatives are properly discussed and approved of.

Failure to do so, encourages activists to act on their own- they tend to become individualistic, and lose the capacity and the willingness to work as a collective.

Disciplinary measures

Every organisation political or otherwise needs to exercise control over the actions of its activists by means of rules, norms, etc. Failure to do so can lead to

a lack of accountability in the organisation. This can seriously damage the organisation.

To monitor actions of its members, organisations usually have disciplinary committees whose specific task is to ensure that a high standard of discipline is maintained by activists. Such committees are often given discretionary powers to deal with those whom the organisation considers to have violated organisational discipline.

In the absence of such committees, a special committee is established to handle offending activists or else the executive deals with the matter.

Some activists have an incorrect understanding of disciplinary action. They equate this with excessive punishment, the use of force and humiliation.

Such notions of disciplinary action are not acceptable for two reasons: discipline is aimed at correcting and building better activists and not at punishment and humiliation. Secondly such disciplinary measures lead to antagonism to the organisation from the receiving activist and those who know him/her.

The most important part of discipline for both minor and major offences is re-education. This may take longer, but in the end the organisation will emerge stronger.

The first step in this process is to make the activist aware of his/her conduct and to outline the adverse consequences of his actions and to dissuade him/her from repeating errors. Persuasion is the key-note of this step.

Should the activist continue with his/her misdemeanours, the next logical step would be to have him or her officially reprimanded.

Should a reprimand fail then suspension from the organisation

for some period would be considered. The final step would be to expel the activist from the organisation.

To summarise: persuasion, reprimand, suspension, expulsion in that order.

Some activists also have the notion that senior activists are beyond disciplinary measures by virtue of their leadership positions and their past contributions.

This is definitely incorrect.

there cannot be and activists must not apply different standards and different levels of discipline to different levels of activists. ON the contrary, senior activists committing errors must be seen in a more serious light than junior activists.

Desirable qualities among activists

The principle of political ethics

when activists from the leadership level to the grassroots level conduct themselves in a manner that enhances the stature and image of their organisations, and advances the cause then their actions are said to be in complete conformity with the principle of political ethics.

The point must be re-emphasised that each and every activists must consider himself/herself an ambassador of his/her organisation and who represents the hopes and aspirations of the oppressed people and the democrats for a united, just democratic and non-racial South Africa of the future

It goes without saying that any activist who conducts him/herself in a way that diminishes the stature and image of the democratic movement and retards the progress of

of the struggle, then such actions are in conflict with the principle of political ethics.

the notion needs to be dispelled that one's public life is separate from one's private life. IN the eyes of the public at large, the two are inseparable. One's conduct in private life must be such that it confirms the above principle.

The question of political morality

The history of the oppressed people's struggle for freedom is rich in examples of men and women who have dedicated their lives to the cause.

Many activists operate as full-time functionaries of the organisation within the democratic movement even under the most difficult conditions.

they do so with dedication and sincerity, irrespective of the odds and of the personal consequences to them.

To them the struggle is the first priority.

Personal considerations are of secondary importance- including wives and families, their livelihood and personal hopes and aspirations.

Many part-time activists pursue the struggle with the same dedication and spirit. It is one of the most difficult of codes to adhere to, but when activists adopt such an approach to the struggle, then their conduct is said to be the highest expression of political morality.

Criticism and self-criticism

Criticism is fault-finding and it involves passing unfavourable comments and remarks and judgements upon others and their ideas and actions.

Criticism falls into different categories:

Destructive criticism

Is fault finding in a manner that gives offence, and is intended to belittle or undermine ideas /suggestions of other activists-although the nature of the criticism might be valid. Such criticism merely undermines the basis of comradely discussions and must be avoided.

Constructive criticism

Is fault finding and the passing of judgement on ideas and etc but with the view to pointing out the weaknesses and faults of those ideas or those who put forward ideas. But pointing out weaknesses is not good enough. The second aspect of constructive criticism is the presentation of such alternatives that remove the weakness.

These two jointly constitute constructive criticism.

Self-criticism

Is basically finding fault with one's own ideas and with oneself self criticism is constructive criticism in relation to oneself and one's own ideas.

It is the most difficult type of criticism to level for it requires objectivity and the willingness and courage to admit faults and weaknesses in oneself.

Self-education and self-cultivation

Every political activist always stands in need to be well-informed about a whole range of developments about history current events, theory and economic issues.

It enables one to make accurate analyses on the basis of which one can greatly contribute to the formulation of policies, political direction political activity.

To cultivate such abilities it is necessary to read constantly and widely. Reading alone is not enough; theories ideas,

concepts etc are better understood and digested when discussed regularly with other activists.

With the passage of time, one is often surprised at the development of one's own understanding, powers of analysis, originality, the ability to pass knowledge on to others.

Two tendencies need to be guarded against:

One should be cautious of the notion that theory serves little purpose and that what really counts is practice. There is a dynamic and organic link between theory and practice.

Remember the famous saying:

'theory without practice is sterile, and practice without theory is blind.'

The reluctance to be well acquainted with and the tendency to look down upon the history, programmes and policies of other organisations. Activists need to demolish their standpoints and this can only be done effectively if activists are conversant with their standpoints, views, ideas etc. This must be done to establish the hegemony of one's own views and ideas.

Political loyalty

Loyalty refers to faithfulness to one's organisation policies, activists etc. It is an admirable trait in any activist.

One needs to defend one's organisation, its policies, etc against hostile influences, but one needs to guard against what may be termed as 'blind loyalty' the tendency to defend irrespective of valid criticisms, weaknesses etc.

A word of caution: loyalty must be displayed in a public way and discreetly and diplomatically especially when under attack in public. But having done so, criticisms must be levelled in private.

Another tendency to be guarded against is 'regional loyalty' At times, activists have the tendency to remain loyal to

ideas, colleagues, etc. because they come from the same area/region. It often proves very harmful to the organisation if this is done on the basis of regions- it needs to be done on the basis of the merits and demerits of ideas.

Security consciousness.

Security consciousness

Security consciousness on the part of activists refers to an understanding and awareness by activists of risks and dangers they present to themselves and more important to their colleagues by their irresponsible actions and behaviour, which can easily lead to arrest and untold harm and suffering.

This can be a lengthy topic, but a few examples of gross violations of security must be listed:

Loose talk: the tendency by activists to talk loosely must be guarded against, for it is difficult to say where such information eventually ends up. At times, loose talk is indulged in quite innocently. But at other times loose talk is the result of one's urge to convey the impression to others that he/she is in the know.

Passing on classified information: information that is restricted to closed circles such as the executive of an organisation or to some committee only. Passing on information creates the impression that it is intended to be passed on and in the process it becomes unclassified.

Knowing about matters: which is of no useful value to the person in possession of such matters. Accidents can easily take place, such as arrest, so that the authorities could become aware of such matters.

Laxity with which new members are so easily accepted as members of the organisations of the democratic movement. Such laxity can lead to the organisation being infiltrated by hostile elements.

The necessity of ensuring that the homes of activists are

clean Information which although legal, could be of a sensitive nature- minutes of meetings, records of decisions, such information lying around easily can easily fall into the wrong hands.

Telephone is a very easy and convenient means of communication and yet has proved to be the most dangerous security wise. It is no secret that telephones are tapped. Suffice it to say

Security consciousness is a matter that can never be over-emphasised as lack of it has led to the demise of many organisations.

Political ambitions

By this is meant the strong urge or desire by activists to seek political fame, honour and success. and of seeking high positions and positions of political power / influence. Such fame and honour will be bestowed on deserving activists. A word of caution is necessary: activists sincerity, dedication hard work and willingness to make sacrifices and undergo suffering must under no circumstances be misconstrued by his or her colleagues as evidence of harbouring political ambitions.

It can cause great harm and damage the organisation and it is an insult and injustice to such an activist.

Political opportunism

Political opportunism consists of the practice of using any and every opportunity to his/her advantage. without any consideration whatsoever as to whether such action is politically correct or not. Such tendencies must be curbed through a process of persuasion and education as the public view such tendencies on the part of the an activist as a reflection on the organisation itself.

Conclusion

The various aspects outlined above are inter-related and collectively they constitute a comprehensive meaning of the term political discipline. The achievement of all these aspects would be an ideal situation. It would constitute a qualitative leap in the development of a political activist. This in turn would lead to the qualitative development of the organisations of the democratic movement.

Under such a situation where all activists undergo such qualitative development, it is no pipe dream to say that the time span of the struggle would be greatly shortened.

But let it be said that no one is perfect. None is only a saint or only a sinner. For each activist possesses good and bad qualities. The point however is to use the finer political qualities as stepping stones to smooth out the rough edges.