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CENSORSHIP:-

*** GENERALLY AND FOCUS ON SOVIET-
UNION**

*** WITHIN THE LIBERATORY
MOVEMENT**

*** IN A LIBERATED SOUTH AFRICA *
FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND RELIGIOUS
SENSIBILITIES**

NOTE TO THE READER

This article is based on a contribution made by a member of the Executive of the New Unity Movement to a panel discussion. The panel discussion was organised by the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa as part of its 12th Training Programme held in Cape Town from 25-30 December 1988.

The panel discussion dealt with the topic: "Censorship and Contending Ideologies in Contemporary South Africa" and was held on 29 December 1988.

INTRODUCTION:

The organisers of this panel discussion have requested me to deal with three specific topics:

1. Censorship within the Liberatory Movement.
2. Reflections on Censorship in a liberated South Africa.
3. Freedom of Speech and Religious Sensibilities with particular reference to the controversial Deedat video on Hinduism.

To these three aspects I have added my own viz., on censorship generally but spotlighting censorship in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. It is with this aspect I commence my contribution.

1. ON CENSORSHIP GENERALLY

a) Background:

Of all forms of life on earth, only homo sapiens i.e. humankind, has grown and developed. All other forms of life have made no progress whatever. It is true that fish evolved into a reptile but as a fish it has remained unchanged.

The very dramatic difference between human beings and the rest of the living creatures can be attributed to one basic cause, namely, the human ability to formulate and communicate ideas, both simple and complex. Human beings have been able to do this because nature has endowed us with special equipment.

Our marvellous brain formulates ideas and stores experiences in memory. By using symbols - sounds (speech) making marks (writing and paintings), body language (miming and dancing), we are able to communicate with others. These qualities are given physical expression through our sensitive hands, our stereoscopic vision and our vocal chords and tongue.

Without these attributes, human beings would not have survived in earth's environment. According to V.G. Childe, human beings are otherwise exceptionally ill-equipped:

"His teeth are not adapted for cropping grass like a deer's, or for killing deer like a tiger's; he has no fur nor even body hair to keep out cold.

Neither exceptional fleetness enables man, like a gazelle to escape carnivorous beasts, nor do protective disguises allow him to elude them as a hare might."

(Society and Knowledge by V.G. Childe)

However, by employing the endowments given by nature, human beings have been able to work with and where necessary to conquer their environment. This is so because these endowments have enabled human beings to become tool-making creatures.

Ideas and experience form the basis of knowledge which is transmitted as accumulated knowledge from one generation to another over thousands of years thereby transforming human beings into god-like creatures with the ability to both create wonderful things and also to become the most fear some and destructive beings.

The progress and development of human society means the progress and development of ideas. Therefore, although the force of change in history is the change in the mode of production, it is ideas which reflect that change and express the need for that change. Hence ideas make change possible.

From the above, it follows that in general, suppression of ideas and their communication to others, works against those forces which have been and are responsible for human progress and development. Censorship i.e. the suppression and restriction of ideas and their communication to others, is negative proof of the potency of ideas.

One writer stated that every idea is an incitement to action. There is truth in that statement because acts are no more than muscular responses to the command of the brain (Jurisprudence by Paton).

The history of censorship is also a history of the struggle for the freedom to formulate and express ideas. A large part of human history is the history of the intense struggle against ignorance and superstition and against those who had a vested interest in maintaining and propagating ignorance and superstition.

It will therefore be seen that censorship strikes at the very heart of human development; it seeks to destroy the very essence of our uniqueness and therefore of our humanness.

b) Our Approach to Censorship:

As participants in the liberatory struggle, we approach censorship from at least two perspectives.

(i) Censorship of ideas and activities which seek to alter relationships in Society whether political, social or economic, is obviously imposed to protect vested interests. Its purpose is to thwart, suppress or eliminate those forces working for change. In our case, our opposition to censorship forms part and parcel of our struggle to liquidate oppression and exploitation.

The consideration here is a practical one - the removal of an impediment to our work. It also provides a rallying point of opposition to the ruling class by mobilizing intellectuals, students and advanced workers against censorship. If we define censorship in its wider sense to include bannings of individuals and organisations, meetings, demonstrations and to also include detentions and imprisonment, then many more layers of society can be mobilised in opposition to the system which spawns these restrictions.

(ii) Most political programmes of organisations in the liberatory movement include a demand for the freedom of conscience, thought and other related civil liberties. The demand is at once an attack on the

ruling class and an undertaking to guarantee the freedom of conscience, speech and other related civil liberties in a liberated and democratic South Africa.

The demand for these freedoms gives recognition to the fact that these basic freedoms have been and are presently being violated. Hence the demand and hence the need for the guarantee.

The ruling classes, from time immemorial, have been first to recognise the power of ideas. They used this power to indoctrinate the population and thereby were able to maintain an oppressive and exploitative society predominantly by controlling the minds of people. Naked force as an oppressive technique was only used as a last resort. The reactions of ruling classes to ideas propagating radical change depended on their strength and stability. These reactions have ranged from ridicule and dismissal to exile, imprisonment and death. Countless numbers became martyrs for no other reason than the fact that they had brilliant and creative minds, searching and restless intellects. Their very gifted minds had sealed their death warrants.

But if the ruling class or the establishment has acted ruthlessly against the thinkers, the dissidents and the doubters, the latter have turned out to be formidable adversaries with characteristics of persistence, fearlessness, tenacity and defiance. Neither the dreaded Inquisition nor the horrible prospect of being burnt at the stake, neither the gallows nor the firing squad succeeded in stamping out this breed of people. In the end the ruling class must suffer defeat because time is always on the side of change which resolves major contradictions in society.

c) Censorship in Russia

In Tsarist Russia during the 19th Century there was strict Censorship. Ironically, that period was also the golden age of Russian literature. It was the time of literary giants - Tolstoy, Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Gogol, Dostoevsky and others. That period saw the creation of Masterpieces and immortal works. Those writers who were politically inclined used their literary talents to escape the searching eyes of the censors. Hence Turgenev's "Sketches from a Hunter's Album" with an innocuous title and seemingly innocuous contents slipped past the censor, only, later, to have him dismissed for letting through subversive literature. Ivan Krylov conveyed his message through animal fables written for children but avidly read by students and adults.

Strict as the Tsarist censorship was, it was mildly benign when compared with censorship during the heyday of Stalinism - from about the mid-thirties until Kruschev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956.

George Bernard Shaw claimed that assassination was the extreme form of censorship. Shaw was in fact saying that censorship taken to extremes led to assassination. Disagreement with and criticism of Stalin initially

meant imprisonment for the critic. Later, critics were executed. When the slaughter got on its way, people were killed for no other reason than that Stalin imagined them to be his opponents.

The writers were placed in a special dilemma. Writing was their living. What were they to do? Some wrote according to their conscience and paid the supreme penalty. Others, like Ilya Ehrenburg, wrote to please the dictator and survived the purges. Others, still, chose to remain silent. Isaac Babel, probably the most talented writer after the revolution, once told his audience that he invented a new genre - that he had become a master in the genre of SILENCE. He simply stopped writing. Even that did not save him from imprisonment and death in one of Stalin's prison camps.

The terrifying might of the State in implementing censorship snuffed out the flame of intellectual creativity for decades. The flame flickered briefly during the Khrushchev era. Yevtushenko wrote bold and critical poems. Neizvestny, the abstract sculptor, made history when he got into a public argument with Khrushchev about his works. There were others. But they were the exceptions rather than a general trend. When Brezhnev deposed Khrushchev, the dead hand of Stalin once again strangled cultural life.

Censorship had become all pervasive. It was not confined to politics, literature, history and the like. It invaded every field of activity. Those of us who were old enough in the mid 1950s to understand will recall the book "Not by Bread Alone" by Dudinstev. Although the actual story dealt with a young inventor who was a victim of the bureaucracy, the book itself caused a sensation throughout the reading world. The sensation lay in the act of confirming the existence of a bureaucracy and a criticism of that bureaucracy.

The deadening effect of censorship affected technology, agriculture, productivity and economic growth. In "Not by Bread Alone", the acceptance of the hero's invention - a machine for centrifugal casting of drain pipes - would have meant an admission that the bureaucrats had erred badly in their version of a certain engineering process.

Gorbachev represents the technocrats who want the growth and development of the Soviet economy through efficiency and productivity. Gorbachev and his colleagues have realised that the huge bureaucracy is choking the Soviet Union to death. Hence GLASNOST - openness! Glasnost is the antithesis of censorship. The present Russian leadership face the Herculean task of destroying the inertia of the bureaucracy. Glasnost is one of the weapons to accomplish this task. They hope to encourage people to debate and discuss openly. Censorship is to be reduced to a minimum. By so doing, they hope to create their own West Wind to blow away dead leaves and to breathe new air and life into Soviet society.

2. CENSORSHIP WITHIN THE LIBERATORY MOVEMENT

a) It is common knowledge that all political organisations in the liberatory movement apply and practise censorship of a sort in relation to other organisations and forces.

b) We cannot view censorship in the abstract nor must we be idealistic in our approach.

c) An organisation makes use of various mechanisms to propagate its ideas newspapers, newsletters, journals, pamphlets, mass meetings, study groups, books etc. These mechanisms are set up with a single purpose, namely, to promote the interests of that organisation and to present that organisation in the most favourable light to the reader or audience. These mechanisms are not created for the other organisations to use and enjoy.

d) Political organisations are rivals - competing with one another in the recruitment of members and to gather support for their programmes, policies, principles and analyses. Consequently, one cannot, in all seriousness, expect one organisation to do public relations work for another.

e) All organisations identify their own interests with those of the oppressed and exploited people. If it were otherwise, no organisation would be able to justify its existence and activities.

f) In promoting its own programme, policy, principle and tactics, an organisation is obliged to criticise other organisations, either expressly or impliedly, as adopting an incorrect approach.

g) The political struggle is in the first instance a battle of ideas and polemics become an essential feature of that struggle. This is inevitable and is borne out by the history of all political struggles.

h) All this is understood and accepted by the organisations concerned. So while it is unrealistic to expect an organisation to promote the interests of its rival, there is nothing to prevent organisations from opening the pages of their journals and newspapers to debates and discussions to other organisations. But this can only be done through arrangement, reciprocity and the belief that such debates and discussions can only heighten consciousness and enhance the liberatory movement as a whole.

i) I am not unmindful of the approach of certain organisations like the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, Umtapo Centre and SACHED. These organisations believe that one aspect of their contribution to the liberatory struggle is to expose their members and constituencies to the ideas of all the tendencies of a liberatory movement.

j) However, "Censorship" within the liberatory movement goes far beyond what has been described above. There are many instances where members of one tendency are denied the right to express their views by being shouted down, by threats of physical violence and of actual physical violence by members of another tendency. There are instances when activists are denied the right to distribute their political literature and in other cases,

members are denied the right to function as an organisation. Extreme censorship does, indeed, lead to assassination. The UDF - AZAPO conflict is proof of that tragic phenomenon.

k) We therefore have the strange situation with members of numerically small tendencies being compelled to keep one eye on security police and the other on hoodlums (claiming to represent a major tendency) when doing their political work.

l) The obvious purpose of thuggery and the employment of fascistic methods is to eliminate all rivals from the political arena, so that once the decks are cleared that particular tendency can claim that it is the sole and authentic representative of the oppressed people. And it, and it alone, must negotiate with the rulers the future of the country and its people.

m) Unfortunately for these elements, the ruling class has no intention of dealing with a single organisation. If the other authentic organisations of the people are removed from the scene, the ruling class will create its own organisations and bestow authenticity on them. When that happens the situation changes dramatically. These organisations will not be easily intimidated. They will do the intimidating. They will be armed and when that proves insufficient, the ruling class will come to their rescue. We have seen this recurrence in various parts of the country but nowhere is it so vivid and deadly than in the Pietermaritzburg area.

n) No organization, on its own, can take on the ruling class. Not even trained braggarts can dispute this. Only the effort of all organisations in the liberatory movement will match and defeat the ruling class. But for that to happen, there must be a relationship of tolerance, comradesly debates and discussion and above all, the acceptance of the fact that all organisations in the liberatory movement are making a contribution to the struggle, to a lesser or greater extent.

3. CENSORSHIP IN A LIBERATED SOUTH AFRICA

a) It is the avowed goal of all segments of the liberatory movement to entrench and guarantee the freedom of thought, conscience, speech, expression and other civil liberties in a liberated South Africa.

b) We cannot view our abhorrence of censorship in the abstract or fall into the liberal trap of opposing all forms of censorship.

(i) Like all modern and civilised governments, our new government will ensure that the public, especially our young, will be protected from hard pornography, sado-sexual acts being glorified, encouragement to violence, drugs, prostitution and other forms of destructive decadence and degradation.

(ii) Censorship in the social and political field will depend on the degree of vulnerability of liberated South Africa. If the new state is in danger of being overthrown and there is the possibility of a return to fascism and racism, then that State will be entitled to defend the society it represents with all the means at its disposal, including censorship.

(iii) Certain systems of ideas like fascism, racism, sectionalism, which have been proved to be disastrous to humankind, must be banned. We are not liberals. Racism must be made a crime and its perpetrator or propounder must be tried and sentenced - most probably to undergo psychotherapy.

These are the kinds of instances where censorship will be applied.

Barring those, liberation will mean the unfettering of the mind and talent.

These must be a flowering of arts - writers, painters, architects, sculptors, musicians and dancers must be given every encouragement in the pursuit of beauty.

The seekers and creators of beauty, together with our thinkers and scientists will occupy a place of pride in our society. It will be their function to work for the upliftment of the whole of society and that would mean the paramountcy of the interests of the workers and peasants - those toiling millions who produce the wealth of society and whose labour will make it possible to provide the leisure and facilities to make the arts and sciences flourish.

d) The underlying approach means turning our face away from censorship and towards the freedom of conscience, thought and expression. This attitude is at one with John Milton when he said:

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties".

e) A societally-orientated intelligentsia will not engage in muck writing. The literary critics, who stand between the writer and the public, will tackle bad writing. People's organisations, cultural societies and schools will cultivate healthy reading habits. And they, too, will deal with bad writing. Writers who try to disseminate anti-social values will be dealt with by having their writings discussed, and if called for, publicly discredited. When that happens, sales will be poor, very little by way of royalties and the publisher would have burnt his fingers.

f) Most of all we will have learnt from history. We will have learnt how people with fertile minds and skills were persecuted, driven to exile and even killed because they propounded views different to officially accepted ones. In numerous cases, the victims were shown to be right and such views were made into official views by subsequent generations.

Take the case of Vincent van Gogh. He painted a blaze of colours.

During his lifetime, hardly a single one of his paintings was sold. He lived a life of penury and deprivation. He became famous only after his death. Today his paintings fetched many millions of dollars. The painter himself will not enjoy one cent of that money. Or take the case of Percy Shelley, the best known English poet. He was hounded and persecuted and driven into exile. During his short life, not one of his poems was published by the Establishment Press. Even in death his persecutors would not let go. One such person went to the extent of publishing an obituary which read along these lines: "Shelley, infidel poet. Now he knows whether there is a god or not."

g) Terrible crimes have been committed against great and noble people. Having been proved wrong, how can society make amends? In what form will the reparation be? Take the case of Sergei, the son of Leon Trotsky, who was a scientist and anti-political. He was arrested, imprisoned and later executed on trumped-up charges. Fifty years later, in November 1988, Sergei was rehabilitated and found innocent of all the charges levelled against him. Since Sergei has been dead for fifty years, what good is it to him to be rehabilitated now?

h) Because of the enormity of the wrongs and the impossibility of remedying them in most cases, we must learn to avoid the gallows to deal with a dissident; we must think many times and very carefully before we damm new ideas. We must remember that every great truth is first conceived in the mind of a single individual. It is only later that the majority comes to accept that truth. In the meantime, it is a minority which is the custodian of that truth.

i) We must teach people to judge harshly those who persecuted others because of intolerance and who circumvented tried and tested democratic procedures of applying justice. We must do this because the harsh judgment must fit the enormity of the crime. We must also do this so that we, ourselves, should not be judged less harshly, if we commit similar crimes.

4. FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND RELIGIOUS SENSIBILITIES:

In "APDUSA VIEWS" of July 1986 we wrote:

"We hold that people have the right to worship and practice their religion as they choose. Our standpoint flows from the realization that people feel very deeply about their religion and regard it as one of the most important aspects of their existence. Provided that religion does not offend civilized conduct, the freedom of worship must be guaranteed and defended by all enlightened people. Belittling other religions by making hurtful or disparaging remarks is a gross violation of a basic human right and therefore must not be tolerated."

Yet we also hold that there must be the freedom of speech, thought and other related civil liberties.

The one freedom can impinge on and interfere with the other. Where freedoms conflict with one another, we must set up checks and balances. No society will permit unrestricted religious practices. Where any practice offended civilized values, that practice has been suppressed. Examples of such practices are: human sacrifice to the gods; the practice of Suthee where a living widow is expected to follow her husband into the funeral pyre; the stoning to death of an adulteress. As a rule all freedoms are accompanied by certain restrictions since they are all capable of abuse.

In the case of religion, there are very special considerations. Interfering with religion is like fooling around with dynamite. The consequences can be highly explosive. A quick glance at history will show that numerous wars were fought on religious grounds although the real reasons for those wars were other than religious. Governments and leaders learnt a long time ago that one of the most effective methods of inflaming the passions of a people into war was to raise the spectre of danger to their religion.

So powerful is the attachment of people to their religion, that even Marxist governments have had to accommodate and make allowance for the practice of religion by people who believe in it.

In South Africa, those citizens who are of Indian descent are, in the main, adherents of Hinduism or of Islam. Happily for us, the partition of India and the consequent bloody Hindu-Muslim riots scarcely caused a ripple here.

That is not to say that the relationship between adherents of Hinduism and Islam has been flawless. Sectionalists from both groups have, from time to time, attempted to whip up hostilities. But the leadership from both communities have always stood fast and were able to rout the mischief-makers.

When, therefore, the Deedat issue flared up, we had hoped that people would show contempt for the man by ignoring him. However, we must stress that Deedat's attack on Hinduism was a vicious one. He equated the Hindu God, Sivalingam and the Goddess Yoni as representing the male and female sexual organs and therefore the allegation that adherents of Hinduism worshipped these organs.

Members of the Hindu community were highly incensed at the crude and distorted interpretation of their religion. Mr Sonny Rambritch presented us with a sophisticated explanation:

"A true and sincere seeker will see the many facets of natural law and truth the Sivalingam represents. A simple mind will simply see it as God. The All-beneficent. A scientist will see it as representing the Cosmos - the play and display of the laws of nature, of atoms, molecules and electrons - from the smallest to the largest.

The Sivalingam represents the fusion of the Polar opposites, neither the negative or the positive exists alone - night/day, spirit and matter, man and woman. They are opposites yet not opposites".

(The Herald - 27.4.1986)

As against this kind of interpretation, Deedat's is lascivious and sickening.

The "Herald" of a week earlier carries the following report:

"Mr Deedat said this week his comments about the idols were supported by a London report. . . . which stated that the Hindu mystic saint, Sai Baba had the 'divine power' to 'ejaculate' several Sivalinga from his mouth.

'I interpret the report as meaning Sai Baba has been ejaculating male reproductive organs from his mouth.' "

With an attack sinking to such a low level, tempers frayed and threats of physical attacks were made. This situation, if permitted to go on without intervention, might well have led to a Hindu-Moslem conflict in South Africa.

The weekly newspaper, "The Leader" played an important role in bringing the whole matter into the open.irate members of the Hindu community were afforded an opportunity to reply to Deedat and also to ventilate their feelings; so were others who wished to express their views. Once the matter was brought out into the open, there was no place for rumours and misinterpretations. It was all there in black and white. The public debate divided the Indian community, not along religious lines but into pro and anti Deedat camps. The vast majority of the people, consisting of Hindus, Muslims and Christians formed part of the anti-Deedat camp.

Deedat and his clique were soundly thrashed and the matter is no longer an issue. That was achieved without running to the ruling class and getting Deedat's tapes banned.

The Deedat issue taught us a number of things. We learnt something about the Hindu religion; we learnt how Deedat and his clique function and operate but above all we learnt how to deal with Deedat and his kind without using the structures of the Publications Act - structures which are designed to apply the most rigorous censorship against the liberatory movement.

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