

"We are a nation against the ropes" - Jay Naidoo

Stellenbosch University

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Former COSATU GS tells Stellenbosch University audience that few are in mood for celebrating 20 years of democracy

South Africa 'against the ropes', says Jay Naidoo

"Twenty years into South Africa's democracy, we should have been celebrating, yet it seems that no one is much in the mood to do so. We are a nation against the ropes," former cabinet minister and Cosatu leader Jay Naidoo said at Stellenbosch University (SU) Wednesday evening (16 April).

He was delivering the third annual Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert (FVZS) honorary lecture, hosted by the University's FVZS Institute for Student Leadership Development, and sponsored by the Konrad Adenauer Institute (see video below).

"We are sliding into a system of crony capitalism. And that is where government has to overcome a huge trust deficit with citizens," Naidoo said.

"The overwhelming view is that delivery is poor, marred by corruption, and that systems fail because of incompetence and mediocrity. This is what sparks the fury, the anger that is driving much of the close to 13 000 service delivery protests each year."

The people of South Africa do not trust the leaders, Naidoo said.

"Time and again I hear people say democracy is on sale to the highest bidder."

He urged the audience to demand that all tenders be published on the internet, that all ministers' entertainment and travelling expenses are made public, that politicians and state officials use public hospitals and schools.

Turning to what he called the "mess in the platinum mining industry", he blamed both companies and union leaders.

"Where have you ever heard of a strike going on for three months without the parties finding a way of talking to each other and resolving their dispute. This is just another example of our leaders not caring."

What is needed, is greater accountability, Naidoo said, referring to a 2003 report by an Electoral Task Team headed up by Slabbert, a Stellenbosch academic and former politician who had resigned from Parliament and initiated talks with exiled members of the liberation movement during apartheid.

"That report needs to be dusted off," Naidoo said, highlighting its finding that the vote at five-yearly intervals is insufficient to ensure political accountability.

"It is time for the report to be debated publicly. It had recommended abandoning the proportional representation system and adopting a hybrid model with elements of both the constituency system and proportional representation. The report found that the current electoral system encourages members of parliament to be accountable to their party rather than the electorate. It is a damning indictment of our parliament, the sovereign institution of our democracy."

Directly addressing students and other young people, Naidoo said, "You are facing the perfect storm - the intersection between the financial crisis, food insecurity, fuel shortages and climate change. The tide of human greed threatens the foundations of our survival. You have more power than you realise. You can choose to be a bystander or you can choose to make your mark on the world by fighting for justice. You are not the leaders of the future; you are the leaders of today who have to create a better life for all."

Responding to a question from the audience, Naidoo said though he does not subscribe to the "Vote No" campaign launched by former cabinet minister Ronnie Kasrils, he understands the frustration that led to it.

"They are responding to political arrogance and a crisis of leadership. And I dismiss any attempt to minimise these people's contribution to the struggle for our democracy. They were some of our most courageous fighters for freedom.

"I share their unease in my political home, the ANC. I tell my comrades 'My loyalty is to God, my children, the constitution and my own conscience, and if you don't like it, you can jump in the ocean.' We need men and women of integrity who can stand up and speak truth to power."

Dr Leslie van Rooi, head of the FVZS Institute said it is apt that Naidoo delivered the honorary lecture in 2014 - a year in which 20 years of democracy is scrutinised.

"Through this lecture Jay helps us to contemplate the legacy of a remarkable leader; Van Zyl Slabbert. It encourages both the audience and students of the Institute to follow the principles of this legacy.

The lecture was attended by a number of prominent South Africans among them Van Zyl Slabbert's son, Riko, his widow, Jane and his twin sister Marcia Taak. His daughter, Tania, could unfortunately not be at the event.

SU Rector and Vice-Chancellor, Prof Russel Botman, announced at the event that the Slabbert family had entrusted Stellenbosch University with Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert's documentary collection. This includes books as well as rare correspondence and documents related to his professional life and important events in South African politics.