

Helen Suzman Memorial Lecture

Delivered by Professor Thuli Madonsela on 21 November 2018

We celebrate the epic footprint of the fearless, relentless crusader for democracy, Helen Suzman, at a time when democrats in this country - and elsewhere in the world - are scrambling for a winning formula for rebooting democracy. The growing pains of sustaining and keeping democracy on track may be different from their quest, which essentially entailed being midwives of what we today refer to as “inclusive constitutional democracy”.

In South Africa, not so long ago we were united in viewing this phase of our democracy as a “New Dawn”. The idea of a new dawn presupposes that something old must give way to something new. There is general consensus that the pedestal of hope that we were riding at the dawn of democracy, and until the end of President Mandela’s administration, needs rebooting.

Democracy is a system. When a system has become dysfunctional the answer often lies in rebooting.

It is my considered view that, to transcend the challenges facing it, democracy requires a deliberate reimagining and rebooting process.

Why does our democracy need rebooting or a new dawn? In South Africa, some say all we need is to intentionally clean up and rebuild democracy and its institutions to recover from the lost decade of directionless policy choices compounded by heightened corruption, capture, clienteles and assault on the rule of law. The damage is said to include a devastated economy and broken public institutions.

Others say we need a new deal as the one reflected in the Constitution has failed to capture the complexities of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. One of the challenges frequently mentioned in this regard is the land question. The solidification of structural and systemic racial inequality and related poverty characterized by acute joblessness particularly among the historically

oppressed groups is another. Others believe we need to rethink the question of effective accountability particularly by the President and the rest of the Executive. This particular concern was raised sharply during the tenure of President Jacob Zuma who was eventually forced to leave office without completing his second team. Incidentally, it is his term that is referred to as the lost decade. Linked to that is a call for reform of the electoral system in line with a report prepared under the leadership of van Zyl Slabbert, a former colleague of Helen Suzman.

The truth about the perils of democracy is far more complex.

Democracy is in trouble all over the world. This was the consensus at the Athens Democracy Forum hosted by the New York Times in Athens earlier this year. There's a refrain among global leaders at the helm of governments and multilateral bodies that "democracy is in peril". Such sentiments pervade discourse in the World Economic Forum and the United Nations, among others.

In as much as there has been and still are different ways of articulating democracy since its inception in Athens, and part of Africa, among others, some of its fundamentals are regarded as universal. Democracy comes from a combination of two Greek words made up of *demos* and *kratos*, meaning, people's rule or power. At the core of democracy, accordingly, should be the will of the people, expressed directly or indirectly through representatives. In 5th Century Athens for example, democracy was more inclusive. Every village was represented and each person had a chance to be a representative as names of the council of 500 were picked from lots with all names of the citizens. The one way that democracy was not inclusive was the fact that women and slaves were excluded.

Today, even old democracies seem to be in a state of flux regarding democracy as we know it. One of the trends is the emergence of the strong men phenomenon. Anecdotal evidence as gleaned from social pages, among others, suggests that many of the emerging "strong men" across the globe are accepted by their followers as benevolent

dictators. Curiously, even in established democracies many people seem okay with leaving decisions about their collective affairs and resources in the hands of so-called benevolent dictators.

My view though, is that benevolent dictatorship is a bit of an oxymoron. For example, some saw Gaddafi as a benevolent dictator. Suppression of freedom, including freedom of the media and opposition parties, cannot be benevolent. This is not limited to leaders who are universally labelled as dictators. For example, the US, which is not only a relatively old democracy but one viewed as the gold standard, is in the news virtually every day over the alleged assail of accountability institutions and the media, by its President.

Truth be told, even the most benevolent of dictatorships has succumbed to the iron law of oligarchy. Some of it may not be immediately apparent during the life of the dictator. A number of Asian and East European countries make interesting case studies in this regard.

In any event, dictatorship whether benevolent or malevolent is anathema to democracy. While democracy - be it direct, representative or both as is the case in South Africa - is essentially about the will of the people, dictatorship is about the will of one person. Those lamenting the crisis of democracy include the author of *The Life and Death of Democracy*. He identifies phenomena such as the strong men in countries such as Russia, America, Hungary, Uganda and Tanzania as part of the evidence. The rise of nationalism and extremism are also seen as signs of loss of faith in democracy.

Why is democracy in crisis in both established democracies and transitional democracies like South Africa which not so long ago was hailed as a miracle and an exemplary nation that rose from a painful past, like a phoenix, to be seen as a global leader on many fronts particularly social justice, human rights, transitional democracy leadership and a deliberate pursuit of peace.

Economist Dambisa Moya, agrees with world leaders that democracy is in peril. She further advises that if action is not taken to save democracy, it will collapse, taking world peace with it. In her book titled *The Edge of Chaos: Why Democracy is Failing* Moyo opines that democracy is failing because of growing poverty and inequality. She says:

“Around the world, people angry at stagnant wages and growing inequality have rebelled against established governments and turned to political extremes – from revolutions of the Arab Spring to brexit ...”

She argues for the reform of democracy and opines that economic growth is necessary for global stability and that liberal democracies are failing to produce it. Moyo advises that to save itself democracy must reign in unbridled capitalism.

My experience as Public Protector, Chair of Social Justice at Stellenbosch University and Founder of the Thuma Foundation confirms that most of those that reject democracy do so because they feel that it does not meet their needs regarding belonging to a community. This is the case regardless of whether the group is historically oppressed or historically privileged.

At the first democracy Dialogue (#Demologue) of the Thuma Foundation, we had Palesa Mosa who had been arrested on June 16, 1976. Palesa Mosa was brutalized and harassed then and in the following years. In the end her education and general human development was arrested. Today she is among the 64.2% blacks of African descent that are poor. This is despite her being an informal trader. During the June 16, Intergenerational #Demologue, Palesa stated that she and her peers fought for freedom but ended up only getting democracy and poverty. She explained that under apartheid the pass prevented them from living fully and blossoming to their full potential. Today, poverty does what the pass did. “Poverty is the new pass”, she said. Her concerns were reiterated at a GIBS dialogue where among others, NoMatter, a Masters graduate, said our

parents fought for freedom but were given democracy instead. We don't want democracy.

We get similar comments in our stakeholder engagements in preparing ground for the Mosa Plan on Social Justice. The Mosa Plan for social justice is an initiative that is modelled on the post-World War 2 Europe Recovery Plan initiated by American President Eisenhower. The thinking then as is the thinking under the Mosa Plan was that European governments alone could not tackle the poverty and infrastructure devastation. The thinking was also that the mindset that inspired the war needed to be changed.

Except for the RDP in the early years, which in any event was a government-alone plan, there has been no comprehensive recovery plan in South Africa. The impact has been an exponential growth of poverty and inequality. Our research shows that poverty operates like debt. If reduced in minuscule amounts it grows. The Mosa Plan seeks to mobilize academic research and civil society resources as a catalyst to break the back of poverty and inequality to help South Africa to achieve zero poverty and equalized opportunity by 2030.

What is equalized opportunity many ask? The same question is asked about social justice. Our working definition which is informed by that of the UN is that social justice is about fair and just distribution of opportunities, privileges and burdens. It is also about fair treatment of all persons regardless of identity. Social justice as we understand it, includes remedial justice to correct historical imbalances.

That's the sticky point. Some believe that the introduction of our forward-thinking Constitution, which among others promises to free the potential and improve the quality of life of all citizens, achieved equality. Is this true?

Let me share the way a colleague I met during my year at Harvard teaches 8-year olds about social Justice. She makes one group wear blue and the other pink. She tells them that when the first whistle blows, only the blues may run. When the second whistle blows the

blues must stop. She then tells them you are now equal and when the whistle blows you must all run. She ignores the protests of unfairness from the pinks until they have run. The pattern that ensues is that the fastest of the pinks catch up with the slowest of the blues. She then asks them for ideas to correct the injustice.

Capitalism assumes that everyone has the same starting line and fair chance to succeed. Is that a correct assumption in a country where the majority were cobbled in stones while others were given unearned advantages?

The left behind are not limited to the historically unprivileged. Unemployment is affecting all groups although disproportionately affecting blacks and women due to leveraging exponentiality.

What's in it for you if you are privileged? The answer lies in James Patrick Kinney's poem, *The Cold Within*. James Patrick Kinney understood the principle of Ubuntu.

Hunger is a threat to democracy, the rule of law, peace and stability. While it is a human rights violation, it is also a threat to human rights. Structural inequality also undermines economic efficiency as the country uses less resources than it could. The reality is the future will get worse. Even more concerning are children growing with underdeveloped brains due to lack of nutrition.

The Democracy Crusader we commemorate today also understood it. She understood that as long as there is injustice somewhere there cannot be sustainable peace anywhere.

She chose neither to look the other way nor to feel ashamed of the power and privilege she had for being born white in a country that placed a premium on whiteness. She used that power and privilege to crusade for human rights and a democracy that works for all.

What are we doing wrong? What did they do right?

- Ethical leadership: right was always right and wrong, wrong- no matter who the actors were. They tried not to be part of the problem.
- Purpose driven leadership: human rights remained at the center.
- Impact conscious leadership: they never used the enemy's destructive tools.
- Committed to serve all: as part of service, they all leveraged power and privilege to create the world they wanted to live in.

Every generation has an opportunity and responsibility to make things better. We have both. Signs show that we are poised to reboot democracy. That's the debt we owe Helen Suzman, Nelson Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and others who gave the democracy and human rights crusade their all.

I stand for simple justice, equal opportunity and human rights.

What do we stand for? Will we walk the talk?

Thanks you.

God Bless you all.