

# Who will stand up for us in this valley of silence?

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TO PARAPHRASE American linguist, cognitive scientist, historian and political activist Noam Chomsky, “The ANC in KwaZulu-Natal is stumbling around the province in a fog of mystification.”

Indeed, KwaZulu-Natal is “headed to hell in a handbasket” as British essayist TS Elliot might have said.

The citizens of KwaZulu-Natal by and large are clinging to a threadbare cloth.

A frightful fall is imminent, the consequences of which we will endure for generations.

Desperation has primarily enveloped the African community. Constant ear-splitting cries of the condemned from the sinkhole of vulnerability and despair raise goosebumps.

Frail hands of the ill-fated still endeavour to touch the fringe of our community leader’s garments. Regrettably, our so-called African leaders collectively feign blindness and deafness. They have forsaken their leadership obligations. And in so doing, they have only increased the burden of shackles that pin down the natural progression of our community.

Journalist O Jeffrey, in his book titled *After The Darkest Night Comes the Day: Change*, quotes a heart-piercing speech by Dr Martin Luther King jr on March 31, 1968, when addressing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the Episcopal National Cathedral, Washington DC.

He said this: “On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ and Vanity comes along and asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question ‘Is it right?’ And there

comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.”

In the past, we rallied around political goals conceptualised from an ethos of ubuntu, the African conception of humanism which proclaimed “an injury to one is an injury to all”. Does it still apply nowadays?

We Africans must ask ourselves some hard questions, in particular about what is right and what has gone terribly wrong in our province.

“We are sick and tired of working without being paid. Transnet is getting millions from eThekweni municipality... but every month we are not getting paid on time,” said Nhlanhla Bhengu.

Bhengu and his fellow drivers on February 1 in 2016 were referred to as “nonsensical” as they blocked the flow of traffic in eThekweni city centre.

There was no public outcry regarding their grievances. These breadwinners were stripped of their dignity and manhood, and disempowered as the protectors and providers of their families.

Contemplate in totality the repercussions of a man who says, “I am in debt now because I have to borrow money to buy groceries.” While these breadwinners, embarking on strikes, were confronted with the harsh realities of failing to provide the basic needs to their dependants such as school uniforms, school fees and other household needs, community leaders and politicians stuck their heads in the sand.

Church leaders, meanwhile, failed to stand up and defend the exploited. The recent crop of social justice and empowerment groups like Mazibuye African Forum, In-

jenje YamaZulu, Imbumba Business Forum, Amadelangokubona, and many other black professional organisations that claim to speak for the exploited were conspicuously silent.

Meanwhile, the injustice was not meted out by Indian, White or coloured business people, but in fact by a company owned by an African family. There was no “injury to one is any injury to all”. Where is our ubuntu now?

eThekweni Municipality councillors are being pompous and arrogant. They pretend to know little about poverty. It is sad that almost all of them have forgotten that they come from the most humble family backgrounds.

They are today’s Marie Antoinette, the queen consort of Louis XVI. Remember the aborted, sinful boat cruise where 40 councillors were expected to board the MSC Sinfonia for a cruise to the Portuguese Islands between March 4 and 7 in 2016?

That cruise was to have been at the expense of ratepayers.

The aborted cruise is one of many excruciating kicks in the teeth of the destitute.

The same councillors have been accused, by their own bodyguards, of ignoring challenges confronting their protectors: “We have been raising our salary predicament since 2005. We have raised it with management; the city manager is aware of it.”

Are the souls of our African academics, intellectuals and community leaders in covenant with cowardliness, expediency and vanity? The hope and soul of the community is wretchedly laid bare for the prophets of mirage to feast on. Our historical quest to attain social justice for all has been forsaken on the floor, to be stamped on by scoun-

dreels who masquerade as voices of the downtrodden.

Who has the courage and the will to pick up the ethos of social justice among the current crop of African community leaders? Who monitors the most excruciating injustices meted out against citizens in KwaZulu-Natal?

Harriet Martineau, in 1840, wrote Toussaint L’Ouverture’s biography, *The Hour and the Man*. Toussaint L’Ouverture was a brave hero who led the slaves of St Domingo to “throw off the yoke of slavery”.

We are stuck in an hour of desperation. The Xubera Institute for Research and Development still adheres to a belief that among the citizens of KwaZulu-Natal we have plenty of our own Toussaint L’Ouvertures, people who possess the spirit of bravery, honesty and integrity.

## Benevolence

Africans cannot for ever survive on the benevolence of other community leaders. The silence of our community leaders was exposed by Professor McQuoid-Mason, president of the Commonwealth Legal Education Association, who took it upon himself to approach the public protector about the living conditions and ongoing killings in Glebelands Hostel, Umlazi, south of Durban. He did not seek political leadership directives or a government meeting for approval to tackle the Glebelands Hostel dilemma.

Dr Rama Naidu, of the Democracy Development Programme and Vasu Gounden, of the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, have been at the coalface of untangling these social knots for decades.

Their research institutes are non-partisan and financially

self-sustaining. They operate outside the confines of traditional academic institutions.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim and Quarraisha Abdool Karim have deservedly been honoured internationally for their sterling work in health science research. Their Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa has become an internationally recognised institution.

Dr Imtiaz Sooliman of Gift of the Givers is undisputed so far.

Advocate Kassie Naidoo, Professor Hoosen (Jerry) Coovadia, Ela Gandhi, Judge Zakeria Mohammed Yacoob and Professor Ashwin Desai are determined and honest knights in shining armour on behalf of their community.

All the above-mentioned community leaders bear scars as a testimony of their resilience in a good cause. They do not mind going public and standing against a popular tide to speak the truth. Surely each and every Indian child wishes to emulate the character of these individuals?

Raymond Williams, a Welsh-born Marxist intellectual, observed that: “While it is true that those who hold material domination are also those who exercise spiritual domination, what is decisive is not only the conscious system of beliefs, meanings and values imposed, that is the dominant ideology, but the whole social process lived practically with these specific values and beliefs.”

Material poverty imbued with hopelessness is spiritually disempowering, leading to a multiplicity of vulnerabilities. Toxic tentacles of political parties have encroached and enfolded the spiritual space. Political leaders have ascended to an incarnation of hope. The church principals have relegated them-

selves to midgets compared to political leaders. They are on their feeble knees with bowed spines, begging for mercy from political leaders.

In the recent xenophobia outbreak, the public took note of an assortment of church leaders, in their medieval regalia, being shepherded to the valley of nothingness by municipality officials and politicians. In the twinkling of an eye, without reporting a substantial solution emanating from their soliloquies with municipality officials, they disappeared to their respective bottomless holes.

Traditionally, church leaders are perceived as crusaders of truth and protectors of the vulnerable. Strangely, we have not heard them protesting against social ills, rampant government and corporate corruption and the prevailing apartheid system, that excludes and still thrive on dehumanising African people.

In this valley of silence, especially from church leaders, one recalls Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and an anti-Nazi dissident, who said: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”

Karl Marx departed somewhat early, not having had the chance to witness the mutation of political parties to become the “opium of the people”.

In African countries, after the de-legislation of colonial laws, the anointed liberation political party evolved into a super-social structure. It re-engineered the values, beliefs and norms of the country. Christopher Hadnagy eloquently summarises it as “social engineering is an art of human hacking”. It further disempowers the oppressed. Subsequently the national symbol of citizenship and identity is re-

placed by that of the anointed political liberation party.

Scholars of sociology such as Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski, Harriet Martineau, Pierre Bourdieu, Alexis de Tocqueville and Herbert Spencer argue that it is precarious when impermanent social structures such as political parties redefine the identity, morals and ethics of any community.

The footprints of the National Party and National Socialist German Workers’ Party are infamous examples.

The point of analysis converges to the reality that a lack of fearless truth-tellers within the African community is because of fear of ostracism. Let the conscience of African academics, church leaders, professionals, the business community, forward thinkers and many more, lead them to do the right thing by warmly embracing the frail hands of the condemned.

It is time for community leaders to take a “position that is neither safe, nor political, nor popular, but they must do what conscience tells them is right”.

I still hold a belief that the African soul and integrity have not been devoured by the offers of impotent government appointments such as commissions, boards and other non-consequential committees.

Let each and every African citizen be Toussaint L’Ouverture by being brave and leading our beloved province to throw off the yoke of slavery. For the sake of the next generation, we must depart from this Earth knowing that we stopped Africans from salivating randomly for hand-outs and crumbs from leaders of other communities.

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