

# Community lags as leaders fail

A new generation of citizens must step up and fill the gap left by our so-called leaders, writes **Benedict Xolani Dube**

**P**ARAPHRASING Noam Chomsky, “The ANC KwaZulu-Natal is stumbling the province around in a fog of mystification.” Indeed, KZN is “headed to hell in a handbasket”, as TS Elliot might say. The citizens of KZN by and large are clinging to a threadbare cloth.

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

Regrettably, our so-called African leaders collectively feign blindness and deafness. They have forsaken their leadership obligations. And in so doing, they have increased the burden that pins down the natural progression of our community.

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

to one is an injury to all”. Does it still apply today? 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.

On February 1, 2016, Bhengu and his fellow drivers were referred to as “nonsensical” when they blocked the flow of traffic in the Durban 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 failing to provide basic needs to their dependants, 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 organisations, and 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 by a company owned by an African family.



**DR IMTIAZ SOOLIMAN**



**VASU GOUNDEN**



**ASHWIN DESAI**



**JERRY COOVDIA**



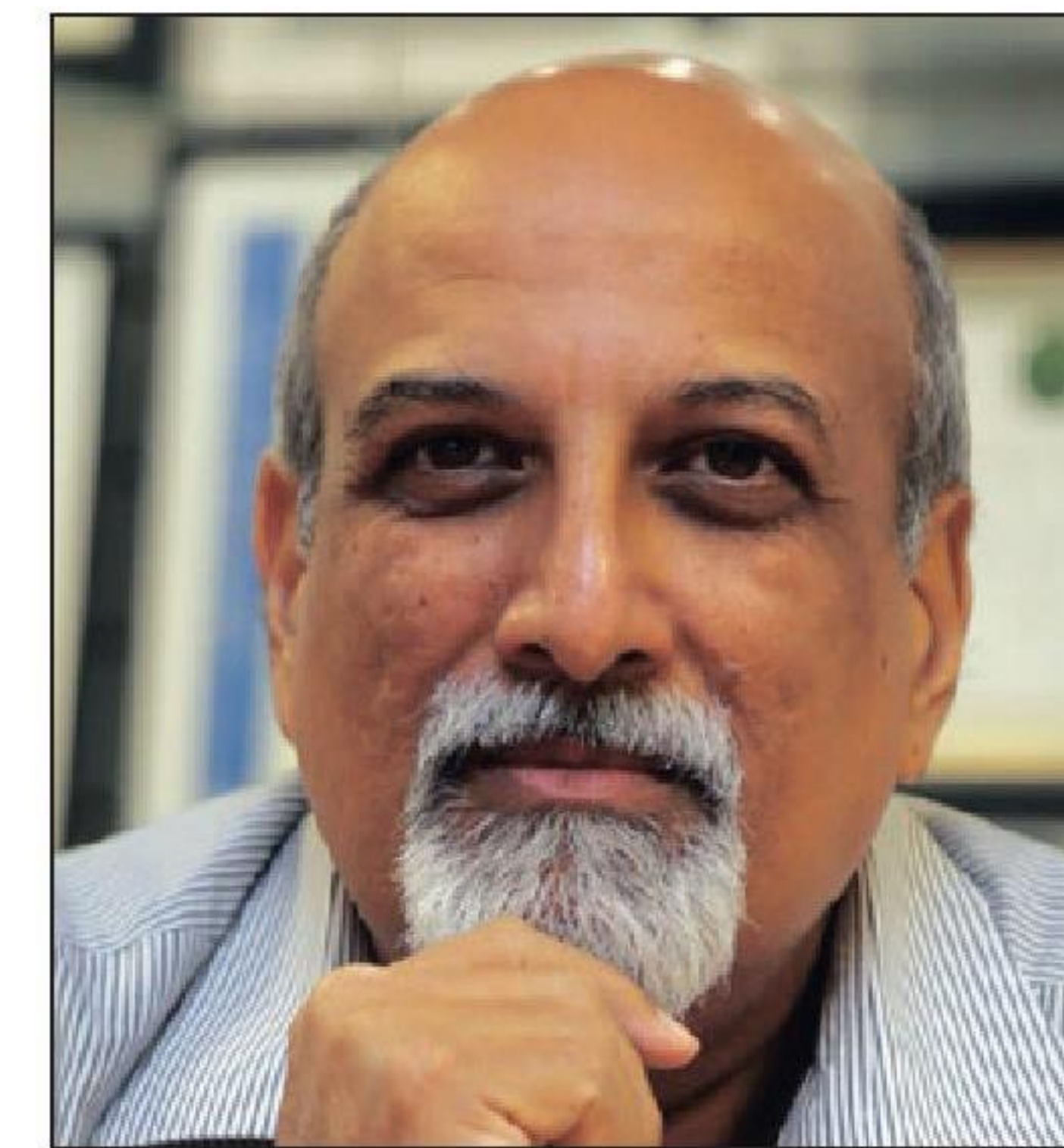
**ELA GANDHI**



**KESSIE NAIDOO**



**QUARRAISHAABDOOL KARIM**



**SALIM ABDOOL KARIM**

There was no “injury to one is any injury to all”. Where is our Ubuntu now?

eThekweni 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.

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? The cruise was to be at the expense of ratepayers. It is one of many excruciating kicks in the teeth of the destitute.

The same councillors have been accused, by their own bodyguards, of ignoring their challenges: “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 by scoundrels who masquerade as the voice 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?

The Xubera Institute for Research and Development (Xubera) believes that among the citizens of KwaZulu-Natal we have plenty of people who possess a spirit of bravery, honesty and integrity.

Africans cannot forever 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 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 coal face 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. Professors 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 Kessie Naidoo, Professor Hoosen (Jerry) Coovadia, Ela Gandhi, Judge Zakaria Mohammed Yacoob and Professor Ashwin Desai are independent, determined, and honest knights in shining armour on behalf of their communities.

All these community leaders have scars that bear testimony to their commitment to a good cause. They do not mind going public and standing against a popular tide to speak the truth. Surely every Indian child

wishes to emulate the character of these individuals?

Material poverty imbued with hopelessness is spiritually disempowering, leading to a multiplicity of vulnerability. 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 themselves to being midgets compared with 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 municipal 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 thrives 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 once 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. It further disempowers the oppressed.

Subsequently the national symbol of citizenship and identity is replaced by that of the anointed political liberation party. Scholars of sociology will argue that it is precarious when impermanent social structures such as political parties redefine the identity, morals and ethics of any community.

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 due to a 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 the 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 every African citizen be brave and lead 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 salvaging randomly for handouts and crumbs from the leaders of other communities.

● *Dube is a senior researcher at the Xubera Institute for Research and Development*