

# A tonic for nation-wide despair



No-one can be neutral about the future of South Africa. Despite an increasing number of people losing hope and making plans to leave, for most of us it is the only home we have.

So there has been some satisfaction in the increasing number of constitutional plans and bills of rights supporting the establishment of an open democracy.

Of course, with an election in the offing, all the parties are canvassing for support for their platforms. This is as it should be. That the majority are forward-looking and democratic suggests that negotiations have carried us quite far across the great divides of the 1980s.

Whether ordinary citizens are ready for a non-racial democracy in a single South Africa is another matter entirely.

There is a widespread fear of politics – and thus of all the activities that go with an election.

There are a rising number of people joining organisations that predict race war and despair.

People continue to band together in order to survive – and an increasing number find that survival in either petty or organised crime.

Disquieting reports of civil servants taking their pensions and running continue to emerge.

All these are actions of defeat – whether political or economic. We cannot build a new democracy on this foundation.

So there is an absolute priority to take the agreements and good relationships out of the negotiating forums and into the streets.

The elections will provide an opportunity to do this. Parties will have to explain themselves as they canvas for support. We want to encourage them to do this. And those who want a free and fair election will want to support them in their campaigns.

But before the elections, there is another task, and this can be done only by those who do not have to win the election. Voter education must be done, and it has to be done by non-partisan educators.

Everyone in South Africa has to hear these four messages:

- Your vote is important
- Your vote is secret
- You can vote
- You can trust and accept the results

The parties, and those who are campaigning on behalf of a party, have an ulterior motive – there is always the strong

temptation to give only that information which benefits their cause. State bodies are perceived to be biased towards particular parties.

So non-partisan voter education is essential to make sure that the elections produce a trusted and credible result. There will be a special burden on groups providing this education to prove their non-partisan nature.

The SABC can help these groups by collaborating with them, rather than attempting to control the flow of voter education across the airwaves. Without the legitimacy provided by civil society bodies with credibility, the majority of listeners will distrust the messages.

The parties can help by not calling their canvassing efforts “voter education”. Rather they should invite an independent group to educate their members – and get on with the urgent job of doing everything legal to win.

No one believes that elections are the answer to all our problems.

We have repeatedly made the point that there is much to be done to educate South Africans for democracy. Our society needs the skills, the attitudes and the values which functioning democracies take for granted, but which apartheid has denied us.

Although elections are not everything, they can provide us with the kick-start we need. Trusted and representative government, the ending of international isolation, the chance for a new start in human rights, policing, civil service, development projects – these are the tonics we

all need to deal with the malady of violence and despair.

Because of this, South Africans need to grasp the opportunity. There have been many editorials telling us that we have reached the point of no return – so we do not want to “cry wolf”. But if we do not get these elections right, we could find ourselves in a terrifying power vacuum with a headless bureaucracy and armed forces with no central accountability. No one should underestimate the dangerous passage we are going through.

Elections take the initiative away from the negotiators and put it into the hands of the people. We owe it to ourselves to be well prepared and to make it work. For democracy’s sake. For the people’s sake.



Namibia 1989: elections can provide us with a kick-start.

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