

Culture of Concealment: Corruption South Africa Style

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DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA: Twenty one years after Nelson Mandela walked free, corruption has become the issue du jour in South Africa.

Even president Jacob Zuma who narrowly slithered out of a corruption trial before his election is blasting corruption in the ranks of the African National Congress which came to power as the morally superior alternative to an apartheid regime that shamelessly used the wealth it controlled to benefit Afrikaners and deprive the black majority of services.

“Let’s make a plan,” were the code words members of the all white National Party used to scheme ways of stealing state resources to benefit themselves, a cozy reality overshadowed by the vicious racial policies that outraged the world.

As the ANC prepared to win power democratically, there was concern among leaders that a deprived black majority might feel it was “their turn” and thus, their right to cash in on their political victory. Some of their leaders would soon be adopting the deceptive language of making “plans” as well.

On election day in 1994, while millions were at the polls, I sat in the empty ANC Headquarters board room, in a building once owned by Shell Oil, and interviewed the late Joe Slovo, an ANC leader, a lead negotiator and former head of the movement’s military wing, who worried even then about the dangers of his comrades seeking to profit personally.

“If we are seduced by the fleshpots,” he told me for the film, Countdown to Freedom, that I was making on the election, “we will be finished.”

Fast forward to 2011, in the post Mandela and Mbeki era, and Slovo’s fears are now an acknowledged problem turning into a crisis that is splitting the ANC into factions and adding tensions to its long term alliance with the COSATU unions and the Communist Party.

While the ANC’s Youth League is demanding nationalization, its leaders like Julius “Juj” Malema have reportedly been on the take, profiting from what Archbishop Desmond Tutu called “the gravy train.” While they play the blame game seeking nationalization of the mines, youth unemployment skyrockets with youth leaders not making that a priority.

COSATU’s chief, Zwelinzima Vavi, has been speaking out against a “predatory state on its way to becoming a banana Republic.” He denounces those who use the “levers of the state” to enrich themselves with high salaries, fancy cars and juicy government tenders/contracts that has led them to be ridiculed as “tenderpreneurs.”

In several high profile cases, top ANC leaders moved smoothly from politics to the private sector without flinching an eye. They took care of their needs and their comrade cronies. Upward class mobility displaced racial justice as their key concern. A leader of the mine workers in the fight against apartheid now runs McDonalds. Others became CEO's of conglomerates and investment groups.

While individual corruption is pervasive with a former National Police Chief found guilty of having been in business with a Mafioso gangster, and former ANC Defense Minister implicated in a multi-billion dollar arms deal with lots of illegal commissions and payoffs that have yet to be prosecuted, there are deeper institutional issues that are even more worrying because of what South Africa's great writer Njabulo S. Ndebele calls a "culture of concealment," the antithesis of transparency and accountability.

"The desire for and its concomitant culture of concealment are now spreading throughout the body politic, partly through proposed concealment legislation, partly through a militarized and brutal police force, partly through the patronage of cadre deployment, partly through the willingness of the voter to keep hoping, and partly through official self-righteousness in which truth is equated with government pronouncement."

Mamphela Ramphele, a black power activist in her youth turned respected academic and World Bank official, fears that "South Africa's young democracy is much more vulnerable and at greater risk than established Middle Eastern countries." She blames the failure to transform South Africa's educational system that has "left our young people at the mercy of those promising quick fixes."

The youth culture here—as in other countries—showcases affluent life styles and blatant materialism that lead many to take corrupt and criminal short cuts to finance fancy and unsustainable life styles.

Inequality has deepened. Johannesburg's Sunday Times reports, "Despite being one of the poorest regions in the world, the number of super-wealthy individuals in Africa grew faster in 2010 than in any other region." An official at the Daimler auto company told me that more Mercedes are sold in South Africa than Germany.

Egging all of this on are several big scandals in which the government is directly implicated as a key player barely enforcing conflict of interest rules.

- The Black Empowerment scams through which White-run companies co-opt a few blacks that get shares to advance their own agendas in the name of a phony racial balance and reparations. While some in the new black middle and upper class benefit, inequality is blatant. This has led to great cynicism and encourages greed. Money, not morality, is the driver in ANC sanctioned race to get rich quick.

- Big spectacles like the World Cup, subsidized by South Africa's tax payers, made for a big party that left the country with a huge debt that has requires cutbacks in public services. The soccer body FIFA called the World Cup in South Africa their most profitable ever, but they are the ones who got the most along with the local companies they favored. The games benefited corporate marketers with FIFA keeping TV rights money and paying no taxes. The press mostly covered the games, not the insidious wheeling and dealing behind it. TV stations refused to show a critical documentary.

- The biggest scandal, bigger than the corrupt arms deal, and “Oilgate” in which funds from oil sales were siphoned into ANC party coffers, is happening now with the construction of two multi-billion dollar coal fire plants that will not only increase pollution but benefit the ANC directly through a supposedly independent investment trust partnering with Hitachi of Japan.

South Africa, which gave up its Israeli supplied nuclear weapons in the apartheid days is also now planning a huge new nuclear power plant, despite Fukushima and the risks. According to the Financial Mail, the leading business magazine, there are already “rumors of corruption and cronyism.”

Of course, corruption is rife in other countries too, some born of revolutions like China whose President recently sounded like Jacob Zuma in denouncing crimes by officials. In China, they shoot many corrupt bureaucrats; in South Africa, they are largely ignored if not rewarded. In fact, anti-corruption police units and public prosecutors have been sidelined.

The US certainly can't lecture South Africa. I made a film, *Plunder The Crime of Our Time*, showing how our financial crisis is sparked by Wall Street crime in which U.S. *banksters* illegally transferred more wealth to themselves than the kleptocrats here could even conceive. The US now has more high net worth individuals than any other country.

I never imagined that the “new” South Africa, a country that I, and so many millions around the world fought for, would succumb so quickly to deep and blatant corruption. Much of it had its origins in the private sector's “helping”/bribing willing politicians.

It's painful for me to write about this because I have been a believer in South Africa's potential as a “Rainbow Nation” that has a lot to teach the world. It has improved the lot of millions even as poverty remains pervasive. There are great people here who sacrificed for their freedom and still struggle for the values and goals they believe in.

They know right from wrong.

An indictment of the corrupt few should not take our eyes off a majority that is conscious of where they have been and work hard to survive and prosper if possible.

At the same time, they too, are being put in jeopardy by what veteran journalist Allister Sparks calls “a corrupt game of greed.” If it is not combated, he warns, “it will be all downhill for the promising new South Africa.”

The faith in the promises of Nelson Mandela for a “better life for all” is running up against an avaricious and secretive clique in a party that operates like a “family” in the *Costa Nostra* sense, putting its own interests ahead of the public interest. The line between party and government is often blurred.

Mandela himself spoke to this shameful situation, “The symptoms of our spiritual malaise are only too familiar. They include the extent of corruption in both the public and private sector where office and positions of responsibility are treated as opportunities for self-enrichment ... We have learned now that even those people with whom we fought the struggle against apartheid's corrupt can themselves become corrupted.”

In South Africa, some activists have put their own twist on the slogan, “A Luta Continua” (The struggle continues) used by the liberation movement in neighboring Mozambique. They

say here, "The Looting continues."

At least in South Africa, leaders and the press recognize the problem and speak out. Perhaps that's something that politicians and financial leaders in the West, especially the United States, can emulate.

Media take note.

News Dissector Danny Schechter also wrote The Crime Of Our Time (Disinfo, 2010), a expose on financial crime. Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

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