

South Africa at 22 – offloading the burden of corruption

RECENTLY the SA Council of Churches (SACC) announced the Unburdening Panel chaired by the presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Bishop Ziphophile Siva, the president of the SACC.

Other members of the Unburdening Panel are Judge Yvonne Mokgoro, retired Constitutional Court Justice Dr Brigalia Bam, a previous general secretary of the SACC and a former chairwoman of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); and Bishop Mosa Sono, presiding Bishop of the Grace Bible Church.

The idea is to provide a safe space for people to unburden themselves of any experience of corruption since the dawn of democracy in 1994. It is also understood there may be many cases of corrupt practices that impact on people going back to apartheid days.

South Africa coming of age at 22 has the opportunity to reflect on the moral immaturity of its teens and resolutely shed itself of its childish

ways – of which corruption is a cancerous manifestation.

The shocking revelations of Vytjie Mentor and Deputy Minister Mcebisi Jonas, spanning a period between 2010 and 2015, may suggest there is a serious rot below the surface, with many people living with the burden of such knowledge – even in the context of a local municipality Fear and frustration abound, and the SACC panel of trusted individuals is intended to mitigate that fear and frustration.

Alarmed by these revelations, the SACC, along with the rest of the citizenry, wondered just how many other people have been approached in this way and at what level of government and its entities?

We wondered how many are in office and delivering for private interests? We wondered how many people are quietly living in pain, having lost their jobs in this frightening game, and some who, fearing for their lives, may have gone into silence? The panel initiative is one response to this challenge.

Accessible through the SACC website and a toll-free line, the secretariat has five advocates and five attorneys to record people's stories professionally; and with private hearings to ensure confidentiality, especially for those who seek to remain anonymous.

The Unburdening Panel is but one brick in the building blocks that may be necessary for South Africa to reverse the standard trend of countries in transition, and open the way for a fresh start.

Freedom Day must offer us the opportunity as a nation to make that fresh start, as the Prophet Isaiah says: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Under God, and in the spirit of an anthem that invites God's blessing of our land, we believe the time to make an about-turn from the path of corruption and its sequential social and economic decay. This is the direction of the South Africa we pray for; the country of our dreams and the promise of Freedom Day!

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Lest we chide ourselves too much, street crime, organised crime and corruption are a common feature of countries transitioning from authoritarian to open democratic systems of governance.

This has been the experience in Latin America, Russia and Eastern Europe – a situation where the state progressively degenerates into a vehicle that serves the private interests of public officials, whether elected officials or civil servants in the bureaucracy of the state.

Describing this phenomenon in Eastern Europe, a World Bank report said: "Media reports throughout the region tell of powerful firms and individual 'oligarchs' buying off politicians and bureaucrats to shape the legal, policy and regulatory environments in their own interests. Numerous high-profile

corruption scandals have revealed politicians abusing their authority to shift public resources to themselves and their allies through well-hidden stakes in a complex web of private and public companies. In many countries, the public perceives corruption to be woven into the basic institutional framework, undermining governance and weakening the credibility of the state."

Does any of this sound familiar?

No country in the world is totally free of corruption. Transparency International, which measures corruption levels in the world, ranks South Africa at 61 of 168 countries, along with Senegal, Montenegro and Italy, behind Botswana (28), Namibia (45) and Ghana (56); with the worst of Africa, Somalia (67), Sudan (165), Angola and South Sudan (163), and Libya (161). We are not yet in the ranks of the worst, but we could get there if we did not take the trouble to assess our situation and take corrective measures.

In 2010, BDO director James Roberts was reported to estimate fraud

and corruption leakage in the private sector to be about R100 billion a year (Sapa, August 20, 2010). Some numbers suggest an annual public sector leakage, such as the unverified R30bn a year mentioned by former head of Special Investigation Unit referencing Treasury sources.

If this is true, it will mean as we celebrate our 22nd year of democracy, we start to lament the loss, since 1994, of R560bn.

The South African democracy project opened with lofty ideals of a public service that was to set the pace and create the environment for the private sector to transform from any untoward old habits to a transparent and inclusive business dispensation.

In this context, the words of former president Nelson Mandela to ANC leaders in September 1994 are instructive:

"The new status which we assume in South African society carries with it an immense responsibility to establish clean, efficient and transparent government: a gov-

ernment that enjoys the confidence of the people because it works with them and cares about their plight... a government clean of corruption and nepotism, one that respects merit and at the same time acknowledges the needs of the lesser and weaker members of our society"

Since 1994, however, stories abound of deepening corrupt practices at all levels of our society – from rural village to the highest levels of government, where the allegations of state capture top the bill.

Other countries in transition may have failed to arrest the cancer of corruption, but as we have continued to recognise the magic of April 27 in our national psyche, we have the opportunity to use this moment to chart a new path, based on the platform of truth and integrity: "the truth will set you free!"

Now is the time to offload, unburden and make a fresh start!

With St Paul, we say to South Africa: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).