

Active citizenry for democratic renewal

In a few days from now, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation and other organisations will host a memorial meeting to continue calling for accountability for the assassination of Babita Deokaran.

She was the Gauteng health official who was killed in August 2021 after blowing the whistle on corruption at Tembisa Hospital.

The hospital officials implicated in the questionable deals, were suspended several days ago – two long years later.

The UDF40 celebration today, has been themed around reigniting active citizenry – with an emphasis on accountability and transparency.

What does active citizenry mean though? If we take just the case of Babita Deokaran, should ‘active citizenry’ compel us to go to Tembisa Hospital and offer to repaint the walls as a tribute to her legacy? Or, does active citizenry mean that all of us here, should have been standing outside Tembisa Hospital every week in these last two years, demanding that the implicated officials be refused entry? Does it mean that we should have been at the doorstep of Gauteng government, calling for action against the officials?

As we talk about what is needed to get our country out of its current state of crisis, we need to rid ourselves of the perception that active citizenry is easy, and that will leave us with a warm, fuzzy feeling inside.

If it does, we need to ask ourselves, if we are doing active citizenry right? Are we doing something simply to make ourselves feel good, or are we doing active citizenry to change the culture of corruption, greed and wanton disregard for the wellbeing of people, that has come to characterise our politics.

There are three areas of focus around active citizenry that should be considered:

1. Active citizenry is not just something that you do on weekend. For public servants, this means that as an active citizen you need to stand your ground against the corrupt networks that continue to damage our institutions.

Your job is to stand up to against political interference that puts the wants of political parties and politicians, before the needs of the public.

You need to embody the recommendations of the Zondo Commission in your day-to-day work, so that the greed of both those in the private and public sector is held at bay.

This form of active citizenry is not easy. There are no medals at the end of the road, and no pats on the back. Just ask Cynthia Stimpel who stood up to state capture at SAA, or Martha Ngoye, who to date, is still being hounded and harassed for standing up to corruption at PRASA.

2. For the politician, active citizenry means that the time has come to put your country before your party.

Practically, this means isolating colleagues and friends who may be implicated in the Zondo report. Ideas of what it means to be a 'comrade' must change. It is all well and good that people have stood in the same trenches against apartheid, but today, in democratic South Africa, those who steal from the public purse have sold out our democracy. They have taken the bread off the table of the poorest in our country. Such people can no longer be considered 'comrades'.

Active citizenry for the politician is speaking out against attempts to reverse the Political Party Funding Act, which ensures that political parties need to be transparent about who funds them.

It also means holding the Executive to account even if they are members of your own political party – something which the Zondo report says Parliamentarians have failed at, miserably.

Active citizenry will not get you a seat at the popular table because it means calling out colleagues who use public platforms to demean journalists, civil society activists or opposition party members who ask the hard questions.

Active citizenry means not undermining the stability of municipalities, simply because you want the mayor to be from your own party.

Being an active citizen means that you are prepared to challenge, not just the teacher who kicks a pupil out of class for having natural hair, but the fellow politician who sings racially divisive songs, or whose rhetoric encourages xenophobia.

As a politician, you can easily learn what is required to be an effective active citizen by simply living the life of an ordinary citizen. Send your mother for healthcare to Tembisa Hospital. Put your child in a public school. Try using a PRASA train to get to work, and stand in a post office queue yourself only to be told that the systems are offline. When you do this, you will know what needs to be done as an active citizen.

3. For the ordinary person or organised formation, what does active citizenry mean?

While it is commendable to be handing out grocery hampers and blankets to those in need, there should be a differentiation between charity and active citizenry.

There is also a difference between holding people to account, versus doing their job for them. Your community should not be paying for cement to fill potholes in your street. Municipalities have budgets for road maintenance. Someone in the municipality is being paid to fix that pothole. An active citizen will find out who is in charge and put the necessary pressure on them to fix the pothole.

An active citizen will organise by teaching community members how to read municipal budgets and monitor local tenders.

There are other examples of active citizenry for organised formations - religious institutions committed to civic activism will not laud corrupt individuals in the congregation just because they offer regular donations. They will in fact kick them out. Organised business committed to active citizenry will isolate corrupt businesses. Labour unionists who are committed to active citizenry will call out the actions of striking workers who thrash the city or assault those who choose not to strike.

2024 will be an important year. It will mark 30 years of democracy, 40 years of the discredited Tricameral elections and 40 years since the Vaal uprising. We must make 2024 a turning point in our democracy.

Our call, as Defend our Democracy, is for 2024 to be proclaimed the Year of the Active Citizen.

Together with others in civil society, we will be visiting various provinces to encourage organisations and individuals to be part of a national campaign to observe the 2024 elections. As part of their civic duty, we want people to register as observers for the upcoming national and provincial government elections.

The 2024 elections will be highly contested, and you can contribute as an ordinary citizen observer in ensuring that the elections are indeed free and fair. This is but one way in which you can become an active citizen.

Today, active citizenry needs to draw from the fervour of the UDF years, but must recognise the 'enemy' has changed.

It needs to take inspiration from the hopeful years of 1990s, but realise that renewed hope does not lie in simplistic and naïve views on active citizenry.

It needs to learn lessons from the 2000s, that collective failure to hold power accountable can cripple a country.

Finally, the last decade has taught us that active citizenry, as it ought to be done, presents us with one last chance to reclaim, rescue and renew our democracy.

Zaakirah Vadi
Defend our Democracy
20 August 2023 – UDF40 Anniversary