

Dr Rekgotsofetse Chikane

As we approach the celebration of 30 years of democracy and the 7th election of our democratic dispensation, there have been countless evocations of the importance of our democracy and maintaining its integrity. We have seen all sectors of society vocally support the idea of constitutional democracy and acknowledge the contradictions inherent within our society. We have also seen a rise, while not equal in its veracity, in the questioning of our democracy and its underpinning assumptions, which have seemingly maintained certain forms of apartheid logic. What is common between these two schools of thought is the belief that our democracy, while young, is sufficiently mature enough to be questioned and critiqued.

While this view may be true, I believe it is misguided in that both views fail to recognise that this 'young and mature' democracy has not been consolidated. Furthermore, this lack of consolidation has created a quizzical situation in which we are determining the state of our democracy without acknowledging that this democracy is incomplete.

The basic tenet of a multi-party democracy, whether competitive or not, is that when a change in power takes place, the country doesn't burn down. That it continues to hum as a background process within our lives. It keeps the system functioning without us ever realising its presence unless we need to recognise its presence through activities like troubleshooting. The institutions designed to troubleshoot our constitutional democracy, whether that be the actual constitutional court, parliament, civil society or in the case of this year's elections, the IEC itself, are mandated to ask questions of a democracy to seek guidance on how it should function as a background process.

Democracy should, in an ideal world, not function as a process that requires us to defend and protect it constantly. This situation is indicative of how the competitiveness of our democracy is not based on electoral outcomes but rather on the competition to have the power to determine what our democracy should or should not be. So when our focus on democracy becomes less about its functionality in the background and more on whether the process works, it is the clearest sign that our democracy is not functioning as it should be. Therefore, asking whether our democracy should be considered young or mature at the age of 30 becomes less relevant when posed with the question of whether it is consolidated and accepted. This consolidation will never take place without the loss of the ANC at a national level. Which would be the ultimate test of our democratic dispensation.

For the ANC to lose and for the reaction to the results of an election outcome - the will of the people - to be respected even when it fundamentally alters the status quo of our country functions as the only means to consolidate our democracy. It's the ultimate test. This is not any form of advocacy for the ANC to lose, but rather something I believe to be a matter of fact.

Challenges to the nature of democracy before this consolidation point to two factors that I believe are driven by fear. One which we as the electorate are responsible for and the other being organisations that seek to question the authority of the institutions designed to protect our currently incomplete democracy.

The first is an electorate, while spoilt for choice, seemingly fearful of a failed consolidation and the potential outcomes of this. It leads to voter behaviour that seemingly maintains the status

quo of an ANC victory according to what some argue to be a lack of viable alternatives or a mistrust of alternatives. For instance, Rise Mzansi while apparently filled with local organisers, the experience of seasoned political activists and a financial war chest (at least when compared to other new parties), questions are still posed about whether they can govern. Questions that inherently assume that they would be a disruption to the current status quo of government. It is an odd situation for a party to find themselves in. This argument of a lack of viable alternatives can be explained through prospect theory which states, that citizens would prefer the certainty of poor governance from the ANC, over the uncertainty of good or bad governance by an alternative party. The fear of the unknown and its impact on consolidation drives citizens towards the certainty of an unconsolidated status quo.

Secondly, let's use the Democratic Alliance as a case in point. Mistrust seems to emerge from the fear that the party, regardless of its attempts to alter its image, still only represents a very small minority of the country. Therefore, creating a fear that having them in power would disrupt what we currently understand to be a non-ideal situation, but a situation that we can live with. The fear here emanates from the belief, whether it be the DA, IFP, FF+, EFF or otherwise, that these organisations might threaten our current certainty. Our apparent fear of change as an electorate makes us our own worst enemy regarding consolidating our democracy.

The second factor that can be observed before elections is the fear of being unable to alter the status quo once democracy is consolidated. Within this context, we see the questioning of our democratic and constitutional architecture. While this is not necessarily bad and should ideally be encouraged. When it is done with the intent to halt any form of just and fair consolidation, then this questioning should be challenged. We see this most clearly through political parties that have begun questioning whether our elections will be free and fair in a manner based less on evidence and instead through both politicking and electioneering. It is all part of the elections campaigning game, but within a democratic dispensation still, to be consolidated, it poses existential risks to the system.

While critiquing the last 30 years of democracy should undoubtedly take place, we must acknowledge that this critique should be couched in a firm understanding that our democracy has not been consolidated and is, thus, still left to interpretation. So long as our democracy remains in this position it ensures that many of our decisions as an electorate are made from a fear of uncertainty and change. However, so long as we remain fearful, democracy will never be consolidated. We find ourselves in a paradoxical situation.

Therefore, while we, as the electorate, experience this uncertainty and fear, it becomes vitally important that the constitutionally designated institutions created to question our constitutional democracy are defended. Questioning these troubleshooting mechanisms, whether the IEC or others, without evidence or merit creates a situation in which troubleshooting is undertaken by troublemakers.

Protecting the integrity of our elections through activities such as voter education or our organisation, Defend Our Democracy's Election Watch campaign to observe campaign all function as means of ensuring that even while our electorate might be fearful or uncertain about what a consolidated democracy looks like and behaves, the electorate remains protected within this context. Defend Our Democracy is a national civil society movement which is non-political partisan and is mobilizing other civil society movements across the country to observe the upcoming elections.

Regardless of your choice during this election, do not let fear or cheap electioneering drive your decisions...even if that means leaving our democracy incomplete.

Rekgotsofetse Chikane is the Deputy Chairperson of the National Committee of Defend Our Democracy, and he writes in his personal capacity.