

# As we celebrate, we indict

## A personal reflection on 30 years of democracy by a rank-and-file activist

- By Shepi Mati

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*This is a personal reflection of a rank-and-file activist on 30 years of democracy in South Africa. Whilst it celebrates the achievements of democracy, it seeks to indict us all for the crime of ukuxhaphaza nokunyela abantu baseMzantsi Afrika, (abusing and trampling on the dignity of the people of South Africa). SHEPI MATI explores how the fight for democracy impacted on our emotions, our hearts and our experience of living under formal democracy.*

### Dedication

I would like to dedicate this personal reflection to the memory of those who lost their lives in their struggle to make this world more liveable and just. Among them, 33-year-old Andries Tatane, a resident of Maqheleng, who was shot dead by police in Ficksburg on 13 April 2011 whilst protesting for service delivery. And the 34 miners of Lonmin who were shot dead by police in Marikana whilst on strike demanding R12,500 for rock drill operators. Also 48-year-old Ayanda Kota, the tower of Makhanda, who succumbed to cancer – one of the pathologies we are subjected to under a system which puts profits before human life.



*Jazz music is the perfect metaphor for democracy. We improvise, which is our individual rights and freedoms; we swing, which means we are responsible to nurture the common good, with everyone in fine balance; and we play the blues, which means no matter how bad things get, we remain optimistic while still mindful of problems.*

Wynton Marsalis<sup>1</sup>

**T**his year marks 30 years of democracy in South Africa. April 2024 was 360 months since all South Africans – irrespective of colour, class, gender or creed – cast their votes to choose their public representatives for the first time. If we were to count this in days, it amounts to 10,958 days. I still remember the excitement and the buzz in the long snaking queue to cast our votes on that historic Wednesday at the Salt River Town Hall in Cape Town. I seek to trace my own personal journey as a young person belonging to a generation who, in the words of Franz Fanon, took up the challenge to define their mission and sought to fulfil it.

At issue here is whether we have fulfilled it or betrayed it. Although I speak for myself, I am a member of my generation of activists and militants. I have never lost hope in the dream and vision of social justice, and the capacity of what Fanon calls “the wretched of the Earth” and Uruguayan writer and journalist Eduardo Galeano calls “the nobodies” to be agents of social change.

## **Locating myself: inequality and democratic stirrings**

I belong to a generation born at the time of the banning of the ANC and PAC and the formation of Umkhonto We Sizwe. I have lived about half my life under democracy and half under apartheid.

About 90 days before I saw the sun across our well-endowed continent, the CIA and Belgian intelligence, with the assistance of local puppet Colonel Joseph Mabuto and the complicity of the United Nations, had just captured and murdered Congo’s democratically elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, and his two comrades, Joseph Koito and Maurice Mpolo. About four days before I emerged from my mother’s womb, 1,400 Cuban exiles, armed and financed by the United States of America, mounted an invasion at the Bay of Pigs on the south coast of the island. And by the time my umbilical cord was severed and I saw light for the first time, almost 1,200 members of the invading brigade were taken prisoner – soon to be exchanged with the US for \$53 million worth of baby food and medicines.

At that time in my country those born in public hospitals in the same year as me were either born in a Non-European Only or a European Only maternity section of the hospitals and destined for either a life of privilege or that of poverty, at the end of which they would be buried six-feet underground in a graveyard for Whites or Non-Whites – all depending on the colour of their skin.

I was born into a community that had been dispossessed of its land and natural resources by violent colonial conquest and occupation. It had been a community of independent producers who produced what they consumed and consumed what they produced until their encounter with the disruption of colonialism. Through the wars

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of dispossession and land theft, they were transformed into a proletariat which, in the words of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, had come to “produce what we don’t consume and consume what we don’t produce”.<sup>2</sup>

The diamond and gold mines needed labour. And to force the African peasants and independent producers to work on the mines, the colonial settler government imposed a limitation on or culling of livestock and introduced hut, poll and labour taxes and then required that this tax be paid in money (Callinicos, 2014). In this way the government of Cecil John Rhodes ensured that Africans formed a steady stream of cheap labour to the mines of Kimberley and Johannesburg. This, together with the primitive accumulation which had been provided by slavery in the Cape, built the economy of this country. The claim that it was the brains and muscle of the White man that built this country is a lie. Every generation of my own family, since the discovery of diamonds and gold between 1860 and 1880, joined this steady stream of people to the mines to dig for diamonds and gold. Slavery and cheap black labour are what built the economy of southern Africa.

A song of lament by Stompi Mavi captures the emotional toll of mine labour on those left behind to keep the home fires burning – the lovers, wives, mothers. It goes:

*Lomlung’ uTeba ngokwenene ndiyamzonda ngokuthath’ is’thandwa sam  
Andisoze ndiy’ eGoli  
Uzubathuthe loliwe, uzubathuthe loliwe  
Andisoze ndiy’ eGoli  
(This White man TEBA<sup>3</sup> I deeply loathe for taking away my lover  
I will never set foot in the City of Gold  
You carry them railways, you carry them railways  
I will never set foot in the City of Gold)*

When I reflect back on my own personal journey to a life committed to participatory democracy and social justice, I can identify some defining moments, often at the knee of my great-grandfather Daniel Daniso Mati. I was brought up by my great-grandparents, Daniso and Deliwe, in an isolated homestead called KwaDingane between what the KhoiKhoi called eKhubonqaba – and the colonialists called Adelaide – in what is now called the Eastern Cape province. Often my great-grandfather would send me after a stranger walking past our homestead on the way home to one of the many farms around. When I brought him back, my great-grandfather would engage in conversation with the stranger, offering tea and *amasi* and, after an evening meal, a place to sleep until he could resume his journey in the morning.

Years later I interviewed a Somalian refugee – a man who held a master’s degree in mathematics and was a highly regarded musician in his home country before the war – and he told me a similar story of growing up in Somalia where people lived as nomads, travelling great distances for trade, and often finding shelter overnight with strangers where they were fed and offered a warm bed, and in the morning, after exchanging the traditional *as-salaam-alaikum*<sup>4</sup> greeting, moving on to their destination.

Even today in our “multiply-wounded” and broken society (Cabrerá, 2002), when



I see a stranger walking past, I am tempted to offer them water, tea and a chair to rest. Or when I drive past someone walking, I want to offer them a lift onwards to wherever they're going. These are the deeply embedded values driving the heartbeat of those of us who, from an early age, were revolted by the cruel and inhuman treatment of one human being by another, and who committed ourselves to a struggle for human dignity and social justice.

The second defining moment was after my great-grandfather had passed on when it dawned on me that I was now on my own in the world and had to contribute to the household income of my uncles and aunts. As soon as I could string together a sentence in Afrikaans, *baas, ek soek werk*, I found myself working after school as a so-called garden boy and a caddie on the golf course for White people in Adelaide. Barefoot and wearing an oversized hand-me-down khaki shirt that used to be worn by my uncle as part of his South African Railways uniform – it was big enough to cover as my underpants as well – I walked the streets of the town and the suburbs to and from work amazed at how the Whites lived compared to us in our townships. As a curious child, I would ask myself 'why?' Why was it the way it was? The best answer I could find was maybe God wanted it this way for us. But as I grew older, this explanation was just not solid enough as more doubts began to flourish in my fertile young mind.

### Local to global and back

My generation was baptized by the victory celebrations of the racist rulers of our country as they massacred hundreds of protesters, banned the liberation movements, imprisoned the resistance leaders. As the poet Arthur Nortje says, "... the laager masters recline in a gold inertia behind the arsenal of Sten guns' (in Berthoud, 1984:1-14).

By the end of the 1960s our elder brothers and sisters had, in the words of Fanon,

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identified their mission and sought to fulfil it. At Rhodes University they walked out of the conference of the mainly White National Union of South African Students (Nusas) and launched the South African Students Organisation (Saso) heralding the era of Black Consciousness with its 'I'm Black and proud' and 'Black Power' slogans. This was the era of Afro hairstyles, dashikis and Nina Simone's *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. Thus we entered the 1970s awakening to talking walls in our townships that screamed 'Where is Barney Pityana?', 'The People Shall Govern', 'Down with Vorster'.

I was about to complete Standard Three (Grade 5) when on 19 October 1973 the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) took a decision to impose an oil embargo on the US. This was the Arab countries' response to US President Richard Nixon providing the Israeli government with \$2.2 billion emergency aid to support the Yom Kippur War. By January 1974 – as I was preparing to enter Standard Four – the price of oil had jumped from \$2.90 to \$11.65 per barrel of oil, which affected the price of every single consumable item. I remember as a child being regularly sent to buy bread and milk. If my memory serves me well, a half a loaf of brown bread in 1970 cost about 2 cents and a full loaf 4 cents. But after the 1973 oil price hike, if I left home with 4 cents I came back with only half a loaf of bread. OPEC lifted the embargo in March 1974 but the price of oil did not come down and the result was an increase in inflation. Of course, our *laager* masters, having long bought our White working-class brothers and sisters, were cushioned comfortably by a capitalist system based on racism and cheap black labour.

## The many lives of democracy

We are told democracy was born in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens about 500 years before the birth of Christ (Korovkin, 1981). Yet this was a slave-owning democracy and slaves did not enjoy the democratic rights of the rest of society. As for the story of democracy in Africa, Asia and in what Cuban patriot and freedom fighter Jose Marti calls 'Our America,' it is yet to be told.

In the US, the so-called shining example of democracy, women only achieved the right to vote in August 1920 with the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution. And although former slaves in the US were granted the right to vote under the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution, many states continued to deny this right to African-Americans. It was only in 1965 with the adoption of the Voting Rights Act that the right to vote was granted to African-Americans throughout the country.

Our own democracy was born on the streets in the struggle against colonialism, apartheid and social injustice. One of the most celebrated of these moments was the decade of mass action in defiance of apartheid laws, which culminated in the adoption of the Freedom Charter<sup>5</sup> in Kliptown in 1955. This was before I was born. The other great moment was the decade of mass protest and defiance in the 1980s, often ascribed to the call by the then banned and exiled ANC to "make the townships ungovernable and the institutions of apartheid unworkable."<sup>6</sup>

Communities mobilised and organised themselves against the rising cost of living, rent increases, deteriorating services in black townships, the lack of maintenance of infrastructure in schools. They formed street, area, neighbourhood and village



committees to defend themselves against anti-social elements, the police, the askaris<sup>7</sup> and the apartheid local authorities. These organs of people's power, as they became popularly known, became a *de facto* alternative government. The apartheid authorities, the bourgeoisie and local and global capital feared people's power. They feared the voice of the people, Galeano's 'nobodies' who he describes thus:

...The nobodies: the sons of no one,  
the owners of nothing.  
The nobodies: treated as no one,  
running after the carrot, dying their lives, fucked,  
double-fucked.  
... Who don't do art, but rather crafts.  
Who don't practice culture, but rather folklore.  
Who are not human,  
but rather human resources.  
Who have no face but have arms,  
who have no name, but rather a number.  
Who don't appear in the universal history books,  
but rather in the police pages of the local press.  
The nobodies,  
the ones who are worth less  
than the bullet that kills them.  
*"Los Nadies"* (The Nobodies), in Galeano's 1989 poetry collection  
*El libro de los abrazos* (The Book of Embraces)

It was this capacity to organise themselves and imagine a more humane future that the powers-that-be feared most and did everything to throttle. They unleashed a brutal campaign of violence in what has been termed low intensity warfare against households, neighbourhoods and communities where people lived, in the trains on their way to work, where they gathered to mourn loved ones. The apartheid agents, of all shades, would emerge out of the darkness and spray bullets at them or hack limbs and life out of these 'nobodies' who dared to challenge the hegemony of White supremacy and the market.

In the mid-1980s, with the imposition of the state of emergency and the banning of the Congress of South African Students (Cosas), we saw in Gramscian terms the ideological defeat of apartheid. Hence the resort to mass scale detention without trial, the banning of leaders of the Mass Democratic Movement, the unleashing of naked violence and the occupation of the townships by the apartheid military.

When the regime unbanned the liberation movements and called for peace and negotiation it was clear that the objective was to negotiate with a weakened opponent and extract maximum concessions from the other side.

Even the semblance of democratic consultation during the negotiation process soon became a sham. As a member of an ANC branch in Guguletu, I remember very clearly

attending a meeting to deliberate on the issue of the role of traditional leaders in a democratic system, only to hear from those who arrived late – because they had to catch up with the latest news on TV – that a decision had already been taken on this issue at the negotiations. This, if anything, demoralised ordinary rank and file members who had looked forward to participating in shaping the future of the country. Our agency was effectively outsourced to our leaders, something which, as the Hungarian philosopher István Mészáros once warned us, could have disastrous consequences: “Politics affects the life of everybody ... politics is far too important to be left to the politicians, even the most far-sighted of them (Mészáros, quoted in Kanellis, 2000).

When a democratic government came into power in 1994, a new discourse took root amongst our ranks – delivery at the expense of agency, consumers instead of citizens, products instead of services. And the ordinary men and women who only yesterday were at the forefront of dislodging, with their bare hands and their brains, a system declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations, were now expected to demobilise and go back home to wait for the government to deliver services.

Today we are told privatisation is the panacea to all our social ills and the market is worshipped like a God. This as the elite in our country is bent on pursuing neoliberal policies and belt tightening austerity measures. What they’ve forgotten, now that they have moved to the suburbs and left the townships behind, is that the poor have neither belts to tighten or full stomachs. Indeed the looting ‘now it’s our time to eat’ brigade, driven by the zeal of a market on steroids – *uwolazibhuqe* – have descended like vultures on their prey of SOEs (State Owned Enterprises) and are already gouging the carcass. Noam Chomsky warned, “that’s the standard technique of privatisation: defund, make sure things don’t work, people get angry, you hand it over to private capital.”

## Who do we blame?

The White man is a beneficiary of a system which over 300 years has subjected the people of this country to appalling conditions. And the Black man bears responsibility for the failure to deal with this.

## We celebrate...

There are substantial achievements we can celebrate under democracy; there has been massive housing provision by the democratic government. Sometime in 2017, Rhodes University was host to Prof Wamba dia Wamba, a guerrilla leader of one of the

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liberation movements in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I took him to visit the other side of Makhanda. After seeing the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) houses in Extension 9 and being told that these houses were provided for free as part of a national housing project by the Department of Human Settlement, he remarked that to his knowledge South Africa may be the only country in the continent to provide free housing to its citizens. This is in itself a remarkable achievement and the realisation of a dream encapsulated in the Freedom Charter of 1955. We celebrate this even as we indict those rapacious tenderpreneurs, who, inspired by the capitalist logic of keeping input costs down whilst reaping maximum profits, build houses whose walls begin to crack the minute they vacate the site.

The other achievement has been extensive provision of social grants, which have rescued the most vulnerable from starvation. As far as health care goes, we have made advances in terms of free health care for pregnant mothers and the broader provision of free care at public hospitals and community health centres. In fact, one of the local day hospitals in Makhanda provides what I consider the best dental care I have experienced in a long time. All for free.

### **We indict...**

In the IsiXhosa lexicon, *ukuxhatshazwa*, means to be abused in such a way that your dignity is crushed, to be taken advantage of. The hope and faith the majority of South Africans vested in the liberation movement is being taken advantage of by those who get into politics to feed their stomachs through looting, stealing and lying.

However, as we celebrate the achievements, we must acknowledge our health care system arrived under democracy on crutches. By the advent of democracy, the apartheid government had effectively privatised health care provision, which had led to the mushrooming of the medical aid industry and growth of the supply of private health care for the few. The system was so loaded that in 2019, of the total health budget of R462 billion, 51.3% was spent on funding the 15% of the population who are covered by private health care through the medical aid system whilst the remaining 48.7% of total health care spending was used to fund 85% of the population who are dependent on public health care (Simkins, 2021).

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A keen observer and passionate advocate of public health, Dr Kgosi Letlapa, recounts how in 1984 when he was a senior house officer working in a cardiothoracic department at Baragwanath Hospital, he could not have attended to White patients as hospitals were still segregated under apartheid.<sup>8</sup> Letlapa goes on to say it was after 1976 that the apartheid government “made a strategic decision to no longer invest in the public health care system, but to privatise it and build a private health care system”. The health care system inherited by the democratic government after 1994 was the result of careful planning of what Letlapa calls “pursuit of separateness under commercial guidelines not determined by the colour of your skin but by the colour of your money”.

At the time of writing, the President of South Africa had recently signed into law the National Health Insurance Act. Even though critics say it is lacking in a solid management and implementation plan, it has once again raised the hopes of a population which has either been left outside the provision of quality health care or is gradually drowning under the rising costs and shrinking services provided by the medical aid schemes.

As far as education goes, in many respects we began on the wrong footing. We closed down the teacher and nursing colleges, which arguably provided more practical training programmes, in favour of universities, which many say are way too academic. Then we messed up the language policy. Education provision has nearly decimated township schools, whilst what used to be called the Model C schools have thrived – even teachers in township schools send their children to Model C schools.

What we experienced growing up was the equalising role of public education. In our township schools the sons and daughters of teachers, nurses, lawyers and doctors sat in the same desks next to the sons and daughters of street sweepers, mineworkers and dustbin collectors. This was a guarantor of quality provision of education, despite the best intentions of apartheid.

Any self-respecting and genuine revolution builds on any positive and progressive aspects of social life obtained before the revolution. One of the most shortsighted decisions of the democratic government was the dismantling of the system of trade schools and apprenticeships, let alone the specialist teaching and nursing colleges. I would add the system of cooperatives and welfarism that lifted the Afrikaners and White community from paupers to a middle-class lifestyle in one generation. These instruments, it appears, were simply cast away under democracy. I am yet to find a rationale for such decisions.

## Hope and democracy

*“This world is not democratic at all ... The most powerful institutions, the IMF [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank, belong to three or four countries. The others are watching.”*

*Eduardo Galeano<sup>9</sup>*



The global situation of democracy in 2024 has reignited a sense of hope and optimism as young people – this generation – have taken to occupying their campuses right inside the belly of the beast, the US, and demanding a ceasefire of what most of humanity considers to be a genocide in Gaza. And this genocide is being carried out by one of the most sophisticated armies supplied by the taxes of the citizens. These young people – who include Jews of conscience – are saying ‘not in our name’.

Finally, when you’re in doubt and the prospects appear grim and grey, let one of the most vocal and prolific activists to emerge from the Indian subcontinent lift you up. This is a voice that often captures the depth of feeling of those who are in the trenches of the continuing struggles for personal and social emancipation:

*“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”*

Arundhati Roy<sup>10</sup> **NA93**

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See <https://billmoyers.com/story/democracy-jazz-wynton-marsalis-amazing-grace/>
- 2 Facebook post by Paul Kagame, press conference, May 13, 2016. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/100044367342302/posts/10153402661527282/>
- 3 TEBA (The Employment Bureau of Africa) was the successor to the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA later called Wenela), which was established in 1902 to recruit labour for the South African mines.
- 4 Arabic greeting meaning ‘Peace be upon you’
- 5 See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Freedom-Charter>
- 6 See <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/07/world/apartheid-foe-says-protest-in-white-areas-is-inevitable.html>
- 7 Askaris were informers and traitors who turned against their communities and joined the apartheid military and police forces.
- 8 Video interview, Tik Tok @pioneersofourgeneration
- 9 See <https://www.truthdig.com/videos/eduardo-galeano-this-world-is-not-democratic-at-all-video/>
- 10 From *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* by Arundhati Roy.