

## **Citizenship rights: Still Long Road to Travel**

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our democracy is a good time to reflect on the progress that we have made with respect to citizenship in post-1994 South Africa.

1994 was a revolutionary breakthrough. From being a racially exclusive authoritarian society in which millions were downtrodden subjects, we became a democracy in which for the first time almost all inhabitants became citizens.

Critical here was a commendable Constitution, including a Bill of Rights, which held out the promise of an extensive range of human, social and economic rights that did not exist for all or at all prior to 1994.

During the past 20 years there have been significant economic and social gains and achievements. At the same time, there continue to be many challenges, and key institutions of our democracy have come under strain as a result of too many in power seeking to use the state as their private piggy bank.

Still, a relatively independent judiciary, free media, autonomous universities and the like remain intact. Witness in this regard the magnificent performance of the Public Protector's office under Thuli Madonsela.

However, a number of contemporary realities, compromise the ideal of full and substantive citizenship rights for all that the Constitution promises. Indeed, they condemn large numbers of people to conditions that are associated with subjecthood and being subjects.

First, we have the dubious honour of being the most unequal society on earth. During the past 20 years income inequality has increased. This poorest 20% receive a measly 2.7% of national income and obtain 55% of their income through social grants. The top 10% take home 52% of national income.

The consequences of the inherited and new divides of 'race', class, gender and geography are all too evident. Hunger, poverty and unemployment blight our democracy. Millions of citizens are mired in desperate daily routines of survival while, alongside, thievery, unbridled accumulation and crass materialism run rampant.

What does citizenship mean for those who are poor, unemployed and struggle to eke out a living in South Africa?

Second, patriarchy and sexism continue to stifle girls and women realizing their potential and the contribution they can make to society and development. Gender violence is a pervasive, morbid ill that destroys innumerable lives through the rape and abuse of women, and the so-called 'corrective' rape of gay and lesbian people.

To what extent are women and members of our LGBTi community able to lead secure lives and fully realize the promised fruits of citizenship that our Constitution proclaims?

Third, our schooling system continues to evince problems that compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart them from fulfilling their potential.

Despite almost universal formal participation in schooling, our schools have significant problems related to drop-outs, retention, progression and successful completion. 'The simple reality is that enrolment is not the same as attendance and attendance does not imply learning'.

2.8 million or over 40% of people between the ages of 18-24 are neither in education or training, nor in employment. This is not only 'an educational problem, but constitutes a social and economic disaster'.

Education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the cultivation of our common humanity. It facilitates the pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation.

Yet, our schools by and large fail to develop the critical capacities that are essential for functioning as democratic citizens, not to mention the basic literacies that citizens require to function effectively in a complex and changing society.

What are the consequences of the educational failures of our schooling for millions of South Africans? What does this mean for the kind and quality of citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been and are being failed by our schools?

Fourth, we must keep a vigilant eye on those in our country who make 'recourse to rousing affirmations of identity and entitlement' and promote populist discourses of 'authenticity' – who claim to know 'who is a *real* South African, who is a *real* African, who is *black*, what is a *man*, (and) what is the role of *women*' in society.

Those who for self-serving reasons stridently give ever more 'narrow and exacting' answers to these questions and spread parochial and dubious views on culture and tradition could unleash dangerous developments and reduce millions to subjecthood.

We must of course energetically undo the huge social inequalities that were bequeathed to us by apartheid. But we must also be acutely aware that using solely 'race' to advance redress and social equity could dangerously ossify racial categorisations and continue to construct identities primarily along the lines of 'race'.

Our strategies must *erode* and *dissolve* racial thinking and categories and permit rich, multiple, fluid and dynamic identities to emerge. We should never lose sight that the fundamental goals are a non-racial and non-sexist society in which all can flower.

Finally, there is a tendency to silence critics of government and the state by questioning their credentials to speak publicly and their record of anti-apartheid 'struggle'.

The view that we must satisfy certain conditions before we can express our views as citizens is wrong and dangerous. It effectively turns millions of citizens, including all those born after 1994, into subjects. It is our constitutional *right* as citizens to freely express our views and to critique.

It is our *obligation* to 'speak truth to power', when those who wield economic and political power have to be reminded of their responsibilities and be rebuked for their looting of public resources and unethical and immoral conduct.

Drawing attention to the limited economic and social rights and opportunities enjoyed by millions of South African citizens is not to question the value of citizenship rights. Citizenship for all in South Africa was a huge achievement and a significant gift of our realization of democracy.

It is to draw attention to the distance we have yet to travel to make citizenship count for *all* South Africans. It is to also caution against narrow and limited notions of citizenship that reduce it purely to its formal, legal and political dimensions.

We need to embrace an expansive and multi-faceted notion of citizenship that encompasses wider economic and social dimensions. This is the only basis on which we can ensure that all South Africans lead rich, rewarding, productive and secure lives.

In the final chapter of *Long Walk to Freedom*, Tatamkhulu Nelson Mandela writes:

The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed.

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.

The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.

'The truth' on the eve of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our democracy is that:

- We are citizens, but our citizenship is as yet inadequately developed and we are yet to 'live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'.
- 'Our devotion' in practice to an extensive and multi-faceted conception of citizenship is debatable and has to be struggled for and still won.
- Madiba's counsel that 'with freedom (and citizenship) comes responsibilities' has all too quickly been forgotten in many quarters in South Africa.

On 7 May we have an opportunity to exercise our citizenship and shape the destiny of our country. We must use this opportunity and all possible opportunities to together realize the South Africa of our Constitutional ideals.

**This is an edited version of the graduation address of Dr Saleem Badat, vice-chancellor of Rhodes University.**