

DEBATE- Citizen and State

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Why do post-colonial states and their institutions fail to entrench accountability and deliver on the mass mandate? Why and how do citizens come to be usurped/dominated by the state?

Introduction

In my input I want ask: with the vast majority of people in African countries having been *subjects* under colonialism (as in South Africa before 1994), and having become *citizens* through national liberation struggles culminating in South Africa in 1994, how far have we come?

To begin with, we need to clarify our notions of 'subject' and 'citizen' and subjecthood and citizenship.

First, as with notions such as development, there are 'thick' and 'thin', notions of democracy and citizenship – 'thin' notions reduce them to the formal, legal and primarily political dimensions; 'thick notions' encompass wider economic and social concerns and dimensions.

Amartya Sen has put it well with respect to development:

Development...is...a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. Focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance...

Second, the question of 'how far we have come' cannot be confined to the general level. It has to also be considered in relation to the realities of social class, 'race' and gender, the divides of urban and rural, employed and unemployed, and those who wield authority and power within our society and those who are at a distance from such power.

Third, between the poles of 'subject' and 'citizen' there are perhaps a range of conditions such as semi-subjecthood and semi-citizenship and the like.

Fourth, historical development is seldom the relentless triumphant march on *all* fronts of freedom over oppression, social justice over exploitation and inequality, or for that matter citizenship over subjecthood. Some policies and actions may expand and deepen democracy and citizen rights in certain areas; others may create or reinforce subjecthood in some domains.

The end of formal colonial rule all over Africa and in South Africa's case in 1994 was politically, without doubt, a revolutionary breakthrough.

From being a racially exclusive capitalist democracy with strong authoritarian characteristics, we became a capitalist 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 rights that did not exist for all, or at all, prior to 1994.

As a society, as social groups and individuals we, and especially black South Africans, made a significant transition and advance in 1994 from 'subjects' to 'citizens'. Yet, almost 20 years into our democracy some of us (many of us) are concerned about the state of democracy and citizenship rights in South Africa and in other African countries.

So how are we to account for the failures and shortcomings of postcolonial states with respect to social justice, accountability and the like?

1. First, it seems to me there is inadequate commitment to or ability to grapple with economic realities – for example the dubious honour of being the most unequal society on earth, poverty and unemployment, unbridled accumulation of the most primitive kinds and crass materialism – all of which compromise the promise of a substantive citizenship that the Constitution holds out, destroy innumerable lives and wreak havoc in our country and condemn many South Africans to conditions that are more associated with being subjects and subjecthood.

We especially see this in our schooling, large parts of which continue to compromise the provision of high quality education to children and youth and thwart the realization of their potential.

Education is strongly connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, to the cultivation of a humane society, and the defence, assertion and pursuit of citizen and human rights and active democratic participation. Yet our schools (perhaps our universities?) 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 does this mean for the kind and quality of life and citizenship that can be exercised by those that have been failed by our schools?

2. Second, of course, our shameful colonial and apartheid pasts are a factor. But entirely? Are not some of our problems rooted in developments post-independence?

What about laws and policies being enacted in relation to traditional rural authorities, which make rural people the subjects of unelected traditional leaders? There are major implications for the citizen rights of rural black people, and their participation at local level and for accountability. There are especially major consequences for women and girls, which are already being felt in highly adverse ways.

3. Immanuel Wallerstein argues that national liberation movements "set themselves the double policy objective of economic growth and greater internal equality". Posing "what is the demand for development all about?" he states that

the twin goals indicate the double answer. On the one hand, development was supposed to mean greater internal equality, that is, fundamental social (or socialist) transformation. On the other hand, development was meant to mean economic growth which involved 'catching up' with the leader (i.e. the US).

Wallerstein argues that the "organizational cement" that enabled the two conceptions to coexist was the notion that there was a strong association between the twin objectives of economic growth and greater equality. However, he argues that historical experience shows that 'social transformation and catching up are seriously different objectives. They are not necessarily correlative with each other. They may even be in contradiction with each other' (Wallerstein, 1991:115-6). Wallerstein concluded that:

4. In some quarters it is argued that democracy and meaningful citizenship is impossible without particular levels of economic development. This suggests that we have to wait for economic development to ensure democracy and meaningful citizenship. Like the late Claude Ake who wrote on this matter I don't accept this.
5. What are we to make of Reuel Khoza of Nedbank's remark on the 'emergence of a strange breed of leaders' whose 'moral quotient is degenerating', and his concern whether we have an 'accountable democracy,' and his challenge that 'we have a duty to call to book leaders who cannot lead.' If he is correct, how precisely are we to address these problems?
6. Why is it that far too many in positions of power and entrusted with leadership of key institutions are sorely wanting in values and conduct in tune with ethical, responsible and accountable leadership?

What accounts for the failures on the part of those entrusted with leading to grasp fully their profound constitutional, moral and social responsibilities in a society that proclaims a commitment to human dignity, social equity and justice?

7. Are there any alternatives to the seeming triumph of short term electoral politics, of elite level politics and bargaining that makes most citizens spectators or the like the crowd in a Shakespearian drama, to be wheeled on and off at the director's command?

Is it to be the Leipzig or Tahrir Square way or back to grassroots organising reminiscent of the early 1980s in the new conditions of the availability of social media. They are of course not entirely complete alternatives.

Or perhaps we think citizen duty is voting every five years. Or perhaps, shocked and awed, or thoroughly discouraged by contemporary politics, we cannot conceive any longer how we can be agents of change. Or perhaps we have been just numbed into silence.

We have to avoid cynicism and despair. Madiba writes that 'there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.' Instead, we must remain optimistic, keep our 'head pointed toward the sun, (our) feet moving forward.'