



LETSEMA CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

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Democracy is not a Vending Machine

by Bennitto Motitswe

Sometime after the Second World War a renowned German citizen, Rev. Martin Niemoller, was widely quoted saying »When Nazis arrested the Communists, I said nothing; after all, I was not a Communist. When they locked up the Social Democrats, I said nothing; after all, I was not a Social Democrat. When they arrested the Trade Unionists, I said nothing; after all, I was not a Trade Unionist. When they arrested the Jews, I said nothing; after all, I was not a Jew. When they arrested Me, there was no longer anyone who could protest«. The main assertion in this piece is contextually provoked by this quotation and the idea is to # accentuate the centrality of citizen participation in freedom and democracy. There would absolutely be neither democracy nor government without people. Citizens are therefore the backbone for democratic governance.

Besides many common human ills faced by worldwide nations including a developing South Africa and/or a developed Germany, there are equally societal challenges including entrenching not just a citizen-owned democracy or a citizen-driven development characterised by constructive politics motivated by popular participation in public life affairs including on public matters relating to democratic governance and service delivery. Like in the case of Rev. Niemoller citizens must learn not to wait until they are personally »arrested and there is no longer anyone who could protest«. A people must learn more and more that they remain as interdependent as the left eye dependent on the right eye, including that they remain bound under a singular humanity with a common beginning defined in birth and a common destination defined in death. What really happens between birth and death is arguably, always as artificial as politics sometimes becomes.

The momentous question therefore becomes increasingly not what democracy is doing for citizens but what citizens are doing not only to profit materially but to genuinely safeguard and work tirelessly to entrench acceptable democratic cultures that could bear real benefit for humanity but youth and children to carry forward confidently with popular legitimacy and sustainability.

In contemporary modern like was arguably in earlier traditional democracies the law expect citizens to participate not only in democratic governance by electing public representatives but equally committing themselves as active actors in service delivery. It could be democratically suicidal to deposit blames of lack of either accountability or service delivery only on the doorstep of public representatives without equally interrogating the sustained role on the part of the electorate which must be seen beyond just casting sacred votes.

In any electoral democracy a vote remains importantly symbolic, however, must not simplistically translate into entitlement but must remain an enabling means for active and sustained participation by every affected and interested people to foster ethos of democratic governance and conquer the desperate need for service delivery. Whilst democracy is essentially about making responsible choices in the manner societies govern themselves, the most lacking lesson generally has to do with citizens fully grasping that the critical step towards active citizenship is much more than committing to the obligations that comes with open choices, but much more about translating such commitment into shared democratic cultures, more of ways of living healthier, safer, empowering, and quality lives, where expectations must always be matched with contributions. Surely the Rev. Niemoller could not have expected someone to protest for him when he never protested for anyone. This is increasingly a common challenge in the nature and character of democracies in the early 21st century where the electorate citizens treat elected representatives in a

Postal Address: P.O. Box 334, Groenkloof, 0027, City of Tshwane, South Africa

Office Address: City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, 9035 Zone 1 Offices, Ga-Rankuwa, 0208, South Africa

Tel.: +27(0)12 700 0804 // **Fax:** +27(0)86 603 6545 // www.letsemacentre.org

democracy like a vending machine. In using a vending machine the customer simply inserts coins and hastily awaits delivery of chosen or consumable products. This is almost a contrast with democratic governance where voting must arguably not only entitles the electorate some smooth governance and nice services but must be used an enabling tool for active and sustained participation in public policy decision-making and implementation processes.

Working to entrench democratic and developmental cultures in societies is necessary for socio-political-economic progress and humane solidarity (not just acts of sympathy) amongst diverse people of the progressive worldly ideologies. One amongst the plenteous lessons of worldwide struggles for freedom and democracy is the centrality of citizens acting in solidarity to overcome persistent societal ills. As the ever legendary President of Mozambique, Samora Machel (1933–1986) had argued that solidarity must not be reduced to an act of charity between governments and poor people, but insistently an act of unity in action between broad allies advancing change on different fighting terrains towards the same strategic objective. It therefore means that societies must start to interrogate who speaks on behalf of poor people? Just to ensure that poor people are no longer taken for a ride by the powers that be, and that those claiming to represent the poor are truly, agents of developmental change.

The citizen question is inevitably: what act of solidarity would be effective to entrench development, democracy, good governance, service delivery, etc, and how such could enhance social cohesion that mutually and equitably benefit all its committed active public actors? Put differently, can democracy without inclusive active participation help society to heal the persistent pain of human suffering beyond acts sympathy and charity? The vending machine mindset to democracy is increasingly dangerous for human development. And similarly, self-serving acts as espoused by Rev. Niemoller, belongs to the era before world wars. The new era based on democracy must seek promote ways that put citizens at the centre of defending and advancing democratisation and sustainable development. Whatever societies do, children and youth must be declared as the rightful beneficiaries, without disadvantaging others including the elderly and women for withstanding systematic and sustained sufferings. Our collective conviction must be premised on the need to work and stand together for the good of humanity and the public.

Bennitto Motitswe is a consulting Researcher, Trainer, and Analyst. He focuses on different themes and skills including active citizenship, human rights, electoral democracy, governance, leadership capacity development, public policy and politics, climate change and environment, and education for sustainable development. This article was first published in 2002.

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