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Tasking Both Electorate and Elected Leadership

by Bennitto Motitswe

In this election dedication piece, Bennitto Motitswe is challenging ordinary citizens who elect public representatives during regular elections not to abandon their role of supporting the implementation of the very mandate they supported during election campaign. Motitswe contend that elections are not the end but the beginning of an ongoing mandatory relationship between the electorates and elected leaders to achieve co-governance.

Leadership is increasingly a growing and contested field of study. Arguably, in both traditional and modern conceptualisations of models of governance, especially in modern democracies, leadership remains inherently a matter of choice. The basic choice quiz often asked is: what policies would be most viable and who will best lead the implementation of such policies? This piece is dedicated in examining sustained roles of those electing and those elected by way of tasking both to defend electoral mandates and thereby democracy.

It really should not matter whether leaders are chosen in families, organisations and/or traditional communities. And therefore could be asserted that choice has always been the most appropriate manner of describing anything most synonymous with democratic leadership practices. The adjective »choice« is used in this dedication piece to denote »careful or conscious selection and/or election of leaders in modern societies« where democracy is seen as the most preferred way of self-governance today.

The one worrisome challenge for many surviving democracies around the world has been the increasing lack of participation in the inseparable democratic processes of election, governance and implementation. More often than not, where citizen participation exists, it is inconsistent or unsustainable – local electorate or voting citizens do not entirely grasp or are encouraged to sustain their interest or mandate before, in between, and after an election. The tendency on the part of elected leadership is also often to relax as they know that the electorate would most likely disappear immediately after elections and thereby abandoning the critical task of collaborating to implement the election mandate. The only time the electorate surface is when they (often violently) protest for service delivery or something.

This piece seek to pay homage to the concerted efforts displayed by those masses of citizen leaders and electorates who have sought to grasp the call never to abandon their right to participate in choosing who lead them, actively becoming part of co-governing post elections, and upholding principles of democracy including holding those they elected accountable by acting constructively and complementary at all required times, and who remain conscious of the historical tasks of seeking to reunite deeply divided worldwide nations, such like South Africa, which for a long time has been characterised by inhuman discrimination and polarisation amongst its citizens.

Any elected leadership is always tasked to think and act together with the electorate to strive to entrench equality amongst all those who elected them through participatory and representative approaches to governance. This reflection is an attempt to examine the tasks facing the elected leadership and to rediscover how the general electorate could meaningfully and consistently participate in achieving the shared broader mandates aimed at strengthening democracies. The centrality of equality towards achieving normal societies cannot be overemphasized in this piece.

In electing leadership for myriad activities and different spheres of human engagement, people consciously exercise their choice in participatory and representative democracies. Any election process is ordinarily

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categorised into three phases: pre-election, which includes mass campaigning and mobilising; the actual election itself, which include the main event of casting votes to choose leaders; and post-election, which includes aftermath assessment and implementing mandates. The emphasis in this piece is about active involvement of citizens throughout these phases.

Of course any election process is more than these obvious phases stated herein afore. This could mean that any election process is bigger than an election day as the main event. This is a different theme altogether, suffice to distinguish an election process as something mandatory throughout the term of office of the elected leadership. It is also always important that the electorate recognises that themselves also as citizen leaders form an integral part of implementing electoral mandates by finding meaningful roles often contradictory or complementary to those of entrusted public representatives.

There are acceptable standards and imperatives for running democratic elections around the world, although many countries still do not conduct satisfactory or universally acceptable elective processes. The credibility and legitimacy of an election process is always the focus of public interests and lies, inter alia, in its impartiality and reliability. Either as an event or a process, any selection or election of public leaders remains the most defining feature in developmental change and democratisation – and arguably the backbone for surviving worldwide models of cooperative or participatory governance.

As alluded to herein before that any election is characteristically a matter of exercising preferred choices through both regular voting and ongoing participation. It could further be impressed that in many societies today, other than in birth and in death, genuine human equality is most expressly seen through an election. An election offers humankind a rare opportunity to put to effect to one of the most critical principles of human rights; that all shall be equal before the laws as all are in birth and in death. Therefore also arguably, an election represents a moment of absolute equality where the poor and the rich cast a vote of equal value.

The irony of any election, however, is that while there is neither a poor nor a rich vote in terms of the value of a vote in an election, most electorates are always the poor majorities and the rich minorities seldom bother to vote. In what should be a free and fair election, citizens voluntarily choose to bestow a mandate with confidence, hope and trust to be carried with integrity and patriotism by the elected leadership of any country. Elections are fiercely contested and must be independently managed and monitored. Most elections around the world narrowly escape being blemished with the controversies of malpractices. More consideration in any election must be placed on the electorate without overlooking the importance of the electoral systems. Many observers note that there are no perfect electoral systems worldwide and therefore place any sacred election on the fact that such election reflects the will of the people – the popular choice by the electorate.

The election manifesto remains the central hallmark of a viably successful electoral process to the extent that it represents primary human needs and attempts to capture the holistic aspirations of the electorate. The elected leadership is tasked with shouldering and mastering the solemn discipline of balancing the defined needs and aspirations not only of the majorities who supports the pursuit but also, equally, of the minorities who oppose the popular course. Election promises must be co-owned by supportive citizens inasmuch as they are espoused by anyone put as the face of the election.

Thus the mandate bestowed on the elected leadership is virtually bound to translate into an all-inclusive, enforceable and sovereign voice of majorities – without discarding the right of minorities to voice policy alternatives. Throughout all phases of an election process mentioned herein before, intimate attention is normally paid to what the leadership is saying and doing in responding to the needs and advancing the aspirations of both majorities and minorities. It is always important that the elected leadership is seen to be serving all people without exposing, isolating or marginalising those who did not vote or support them. Elected leaders are mandated to implement laws for the entire society.

It must also be argued that the lifespan of an elected leadership is never enough to afford abstract polemical engagements – such lifespan is decisively meant for implementing short-to-medium term

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deliverables based on their manifesto and therefore the electoral mandate. There are equally persistent concerns about lack of enabling resources to implement the desired electoral mandates as envisaged in the campaign manifestos. The electorate correctly expect the elected leadership to run and shoot at the same time without wasting a single bullet. This sort of unbearable challenge often renders those elected, dismal casualties of their own public mandates.

In the South African Development Community (SADC) region, like elsewhere worldwide, elections have become a regular undertaking expected of maturing democracies. Five regular elections are scheduled during this 2004 including in Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia – and here in South Africa – April 14 will mark a third democratic election, and more importantly, will seal the first decade of freedom and democratic governance. All electorates who will be descending to the polls to choose their preferred leaders must do so knowing or grasping fully that theirs is to restore or refresh the democratic mandate of countries still emerging from the doldrums of inhuman suffering with much increased political tolerance and constitutional stabilities needing much focus. In South Africa today, acceptance of the election outcome and of an overwhelmingly elected leadership has become something to celebrate as it used to be the main reason for conflict and wars.

The electorate in South Africa must also remember that they will be exercising their birth right to enter into a mutually obligatory (social) contract with the elected leadership to collaborate (in a democratic government) towards achieving a shared vision born of historical evolutions and espoused in electoral campaigns. The utmost test for any democratic government today is to what extent such collaborative governance efforts could create jobs and end inhuman poverty. Both the electorate and elected leadership face the twin challenge of creating opportunities and facilitating a greater impact for developmental growth across all spheres of human life. This challenge intensely requires a suitably stable and broad-based democratic landscape for effective nurturing and everlasting success.

Clearly, there are many experiences and thoughts confronting both the electorate and elected leadership in the course of achieving democratisation and developmental change. Some argues that once chosen to political office the elected leadership tends to abandon the mandate given by the electorate and instead focuses on those who never voted them but possess monetary influence over them. Others contend that the electorate equally abandons their choice by not engaging or participating to secure the shared electoral mandate. Many more observers insist on holding both the electorate and elected leadership accountable towards achieving shared electoral mandate.

Neither the electorate nor the elected leadership alone would achieve the tasks of total human liberation. Both must be tasked and challenged beyond their narrow preferences and must endeavour swimming together using both left and right wings through the uneasy waves to reach the width and breadth of democratising cooperative governance. Political parties and governments on their own remain constrained to achieve everything promised during an election; it is now more than ever that every citizen in modern democracies sees themselves as part of owning-up to the implementation of all electoral mandates. The need for co-governance has never visited the many struggling communities like it is nakedly evident here in South Africa and elsewhere.

Bennitto Motitswe worked extensively throughout the first decade of democracy in South Africa focusing on social research themes, facilitating leadership learning, and analysing public policy. Motitswe rose through grassroots community activism, youth leader, and continues to contribute as a professional on themes including, inter alia, public policy, climate change, intergovernmental relations and structures, development and democratisation. This is an edited version of his article that first appeared in 2004.

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