

Anglican Archbishop opposes Secrecy Bill - Open Letter to President Zuma

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From the office of the Archbishop of Cape Town

The Most Revd Dr Thabo Makgoba, Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, has written the following open letter to President Jacob Zuma, calling for him to return the Protection of State Information Bill to Cabinet, for inclusion of an adequate public interest provision.

Dear Mr President,

I write to you as one who grew up under a system that oppressed and censored the media – a system that invoked fear in anyone who dared to read, or embrace, different views to those of the government of the day. The passage of the Protection of State Information Bill has stirred up in me vivid memories of my time as a student in the 1980s at Wits, and the traumatising experience of police ransacking our residence as they looked for classified material. The undercurrent of fear running through our lives that this created is so totally in contradiction to the open atmosphere of constructively critical readings of our life and times which we so much need in South Africa today.

Of course, every country has state secrets, and needs to classify them as such and protect them. I fully understand this. That South Africa needs to replace the old law from apartheid times, I also fully agree. Yet I also hear the cry that the current bill passed this week lacks the one necessary thing, an adequate public interest clause that relates to the criminality of those who 'transgress' on these grounds. I have heard some lawyers, with politicians, argue that this is not necessary, and that the law will not be used to penalise those who bring wrongdoing to light. But across the journalistic world, among members of civil society and trade unions, and in community-based and faith-based organisations, there are wide-spread concerns at both the severe sentences, and the wide-ranging provisions for classification of material by any organ of state. These have the potential to create an atmosphere similar to repressive apartheid censorship, and thereby gag the truth; hide corruption; conceal maladministration, incompetence and unjust practices; and stunt our open society at every level from the national and international to the most local.

Therefore I respectfully appeal to you, sir, to consider sending the bill back to cabinet before signing it into law. We know that, if signed as it stands, it will be challenged in the Constitutional Court. Surely South Africa needs the time and energy this will consume, to be directed to the far more urgent needs of social cohesion and rebuilding the ruins left by apartheid. These are so evident in most of our townships, for example in their health, education and housing infrastructure, let alone across rural South Africa.

As a fellow South African and Christian, I ask you not to sign this bill. Listen again to the cries of your people.

Yours in the service of Christ

+Thabo Cape Town

Issued by the Office of the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town

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