

SA needs moral regeneration, urgently

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By George Devenish [Comment on this story](#)



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IT HAS been prominently reported in the media that a group of senior religious leaders have warned President Jacob Zuma in no uncertain terms that if political leaders did not stop the moral decay in South Africa, the church would mobilise civil society “to bring about a more healthy democracy” (“Clerics get tough with Zuma”, Pretoria News, December 11).

This group, including Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Church Leaders Consultation, declared in a letter to Zuma that South Africa yearned for new leadership in order to restore hope amid growing unhappiness about leaders who had “lost their moral compass”.

Virtually all informed commentators agree that moral regeneration is urgently required for our nation. Although President Zuma has repeatedly indicated that a discourse and strategy are required for moral regeneration in South Africa, very little has been done in this regard, and as a result we are confronted with escalating immorality and decay in society as a whole.

When the ANC came to power in 1994 and during the period of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, the ANC occupied the moral high ground.

Mandela bequeathed to us an inestimable legacy of moral integrity and selfless service which unfortunately has been squandered.

Today in both government and private sectors there is manifest corruption, fraud and dishonesty. Corruption has adversely affected service delivery, particularly in relation to local government, in which sphere there have been violent protests.

The issue is therefore of profound political and moral concern for those involved in public life as leaders and representatives. Moral regeneration involves recognition and application of universal values as found in section 1 of the constitution. These values include human dignity, equality and freedom, the most important of which is human dignity, accorded to all in South Africa.

The next is equality, which has both a legal and a social dimension.

Last is freedom or liberty. There is, however, a fundamental difference between liberty and licence. As citizens we are not at liberty to violate the rights of fellow citizens, in the same way as they are bound to respect ours.

The Bill of Rights is therefore not merely an enumeration of rights, but implied in their limitations are the awesome responsibilities of citizenship. These values found in our constitution are not merely the product of Western Christian civilisation, since they have a much wider universality about them. As such they are common to the great civilisations, philosophies and religions of the world, including the ideas of morality found in our indigenous African culture, known as ubuntu or humaneness. These values involve respect for human life and basic honesty in the way persons and officials act in communion with one another and the authorities.

This requires that persons must subject themselves to the authority of the state. Those in authority are obliged to exercise their powers in accordance with the constitution and the law. The property and resources of the state must be optimally used for the benefit of all.

These resources are not there for officials to enrich themselves at the cost of the state and its citizens. Unfortunately since this is increasingly occurring, it constitutes corruption, fraud and dishonesty, and is therefore morally reprehensible. If we are intellectually and morally honest we must admit that this is taking place to the prejudice of South Africa and its people, and that it needs a powerful strategy to counteract it. Indeed it constitutes one of the most formidable moral and political challenges facing us as a nation.

Sexual and personal morality also requires intellectual honesty. We are enriched by diverse cultures in South Africa having their origins in the East, West and Africa itself. Polygamy is part of this culture. However, it is fundamentally important to realise that does not justify promiscuity, which is anathema to all moral codes. It must therefore be condemned as such. Promiscuity impacts negatively on the HIV/Aids pandemic, the consequences of which are extremely serious and ethically challenging. Social and economic justice in relation to poverty, homelessness and unemployment is a moral issue as well.

South Africa is a most unequal society. According to the South African Survey 2009/2010, the Gini co-efficient is 0.60, reportedly the highest in the world. Furthermore 25 percent or 4 310 000 persons were unemployed and more than 60 percent of the African population live in poverty, with a monthly income of less than R515 per capita per month. This constitutes an inordinate moral and political challenge for South Africa. If the vast majority of black people in South Africa continue to live in abject poverty, the political human rights, such as freedom of expression or religion or association, enumerated in the Bill of Rights have very little significance. Such a situation could contribute to or precipitate a populist revolt that could overthrow the democratic order, with disastrous consequences for human rights.

The moral, political and social issues in South Africa are interrelated and it is necessary to have a wide-ranging discourse and strategy on these. Democracy, although imperfectly and embryonically, has taken root in the native soil of South Africa and in all three spheres of government. Nevertheless, South Africa is confronted with formidable problems of a socio-economic nature. These problems cannot be addressed adequately if there is widespread corruption and dishonesty in the government and the private sector.

It is for this reason that moral regeneration is essential in both the private and public sectors, if we are to succeed as a nation. As the government has failed to act decisively on this issue the leaders of civil society must take the initiative and force South Africa's political leaders to act and address the problems.

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<http://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/opinion/sa-needs-moral-regeneration-urgently-1.1441213#.VCEs9hacxfg>