

SA's democracy: The heritage we will bequeath to generations of the future

 By [Miller Matola](#)

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Democracy is a much yearned for and sought after system of governance. As a system where the popular will of the people is superior to the will of individuals, democracy represents the Elysium of multitudes of people around the world. Democracy and its actors are seen to bring policies and frameworks that will safeguard a well-run, productive, efficient and competitive state.

One of the most well-known democratic systems is that of ancient Greece in the 5th century BC, which was comprised of three separate institutions: the *ekklesia*, a sovereign governing body that wrote laws and dictated foreign policy; the *boule*, a council of representatives from the ten Athenian tribes; and the *dikasteria*, the popular courts in which citizens argued cases before a group of lottery-selected jurors. In the 21st century AD democratic systems continue to have these essential institutions in place to provide oversight of the exercise of democracy. Such is the enduring nature and longevity of democracy as a system of governance.

The system popularised by the Greeks has defined the journey of many civilisations since - it has defined the struggle for liberation and freedom from oppression for thousands of years and by countless martyrs, heroes and heroines. Why? In the words of the Greek historian Herodotus "In a democracy there is, first, that most splendid of virtues, equality before the law." It must be that inherent in each civilization, in each nation, the need for the equality of its people supercedes many of the other conventions. This equality is also an essential driver of social cohesion and citizenship.

The nature of our democracy

South Africa before 1994 was a country in search of the Promised Land of Democracy. Its people yearned to contribute to a country of the people for the people. We longed for a time that we would equally know, live and enjoy the freedoms associated with democracy. We looked forward to being able to express ourselves, engage in robust debate on issues that are dear to us, associate with people of different race if we chose to, live in areas of choice, pursue careers of our choice and closely related to all of these - was the opportunity to express our choice of who would govern our beloved and beautiful country. We eagerly awaited a time when our humanity and citizenship would give us equal rights and opportunities in our country.

We trembled with hope and anticipation and not an insignificant amount of trepidation and fear about what the South Africa of the future will look like. How would it work? How would we relate to each other?

Twenty years later and we now know that freedom of speech, association and movement, amongst a range of others. We

have in place institutions that govern and guide our journey towards building a robust democracy - a government (or the *ekklesia* of ancient Greece); a Parliament (the *Boule*) and a well-run transparent and effective judiciary (the *dikasteria*). We have a country in which the multitudes of our citizens - from their diverse genealogies - the San, the Khoi, the Basotho, Dutch, the British, and the French - have a place in our country and are, as articulated by Herodotus, equal before the law. This is the quintessential nature of our democracy!

With freedom comes responsibility

The question has been asked in the last few days - are recent events in our chapter 9 institutions, parliament, and government - a manifestation of democracy or anarchy? I think that as much as we can look to the past for examples we can emulate in nation building, we more often need to take responsibility for what we have as a nation, build on what is good and let go of what does not serve us in our quest for equality, freedom and liberty.

Yes, we have the freedom of speech we so ardently sought, we have the institutions that protect our freedoms including Parliament and the judicial system. However, with freedoms and rights comes responsibility. In South Africa we have a responsibility to remember where we come from with a singular focus on where we want to go - to a point of nationhood where we no longer see each other in our different colours, genealogies, religions, tribes - we need to see each other as South Africans playing our part to build and grow our nation. We want to take the unique lessons of our history and turn them into powerful motivators for the present and the future - motivators in our quest to build a cohesive and strong nation, the ambassadors of which will be our more than 50 million citizens.

Passing on to the next generation

As we commemorate National Heritage Month, let us remember that our heritage, our story as a nation, our democracy is what we bequeath to our children and the generations of South Africans who will come after us. We owe it to them to protect our democracy and its institutions. We must leave our children in a better space than we find ourselves, even though it is a huge improvement on that of our own forebears.

This requires that we impart to them a greater understanding of what our heritage stands for and consequently an appreciation and respect for those institutions that hold our constitutional democracy together and keep it alive. Disrespect and disregard for the very institutions that ensure that the centre of our nascent democracy holds and that anarchy is not unleashed on our society; is in itself not only a betrayal of our struggle for that very democracy, but also of our nation building project.

What is it that we want our children to remember us for - the building, safeguarding, refinement of our hard earned democracy? Or for its destruction as a noble system that enables everyone to know and exercise various freedoms and responsibilities that allow us to live our best lives? Only we can decide and only we can act accordingly.

ABOUT MILLER MATOLA

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