

An open letter to my president, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa

DEAR Mr Ramaphosa

Congratulations on being elected the fifth president of our beloved republic.

There is an old phrase that states "cometh the hour, cometh the man". You, my dear president, are that man. I believe you have arrived at the portals of a fractured and seriously divided nation.

There is no doubt that your entrance, besides being fortuitous, is akin to a saviour coming at a most opportune moment to rescue a victim from imminent danger.

You, sir, have arrived at a critical juncture in our young democracy, a time when the soul of our nation is crying out for help. Bravo!

In the Madiba era, about 24 years ago we were told as citizens we needed to be actively involved in the governance of the country, not simply to find solutions to our problems and challenges, but also as an important channel to build communication and co-operation with the government and strengthen democracy.

This safeguard was put in place by you and other founders of the new South Africa to ensure that all citizens had an opportunity to provide input on policy formulation before it was put into effect.

We were enlightened that the process of ensuring the government worked for the overall public good required informed, organised, active and peaceful citizen participation.

Citizens, we were apprised, must understand ideas about citizenship, politics and governance. They also

needed the knowledge to make decisions about policy choices and the proper use of authority, along with the skills to voice their concerns, act collectively and hold public officials and leaders accountable.

Furthermore, we were informed that the democratic dispensation's advantage over all other forms of governance was the invitation it offered citizens to participate in shaping how they were governed, according to their particular vision of what freedom, justice and service delivery meant to them.

In your predecessor's era, the major tenets that should have upheld our fragile democracy were seriously threatened by rampant corruption and patronage politics.

The rights of citizens to voice their concerns and contribute to policy debate were virtually destroyed. Civil society was marginalised to the backwaters. The social compact between government and the citizenry died a slow and painful death.

Public servants went about policy-making nonchalantly, without full disclosure to the public. They feared revelations might derail their corrupt agenda. Rather than serve the people who elected them, the majority of these self-centred officials behaved as if they were doing the public a favour by dispensing a service.

Respect for human rights cannot be achieved in a society if citizens do not have full access to governance, by offering them all available opportunities to participate as important stakeholders in the develop-



President Cyril Ramaphosa in Parliament during the debate of his first State of the Nation address last week.

PICTURE AYANDA NDAMANE/AFRICAN NEWS AGENCY (ANA)

ment of a truly democratic system.

The government has to ensure that there is effective participation, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, inclusiveness and accountability in the governance of a country.

These are values which form the foundation of our democracy.

When our government fails to live up to the expectations of good

governance, civil society can intervene as a watchdog and help bring about a solution to a problem. Civil society thus has to become an advocate for remedial action, an agitator for aggrieved citizens, an educator for citizens' rights and a mobiliser for civil liberties.

Mr President, together with the great Struggle icons of our country and the crafters of our magnificent

constitution, you signed a promissory note in 1994 in which you pledged that every citizen would become the heir to a rising phoenix – the new South Africa.

This note was a promise that all citizens would be offered a better quality of life and social justice.

Given the malaise of contemporary South Africa, it is obvious today that your predecessor in leadership has defaulted on your promissory note. Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, your predecessor has repeatedly given the citizens of South Africa bad cheques which have come back marked "insufficient funds".

But I refuse to believe that the "moral bank" of South Africa is bankrupt. I refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.

So I ask that you make right the promise and cash this cheque, which will give all its citizens upon demand the right to the treasures of our beloved country: a better quality of life and social justice.

While I do not wish to continuously bemoan the current malady, I refuse to believe that South Africa does not have the will to develop. I refuse to believe that we do not have servant leaders like yourself who can salvage the mess we are in and lead us to the promised land.

I have hope. It is a hope deeply rooted in the belief that the majority of South Africans are full of promise and wish the best for the future of their country and children.

I have hope that, with your inter-

vention and a guiding moral compass, the country has the capacity and competence to chart a new future for all its people.

I have hope that your mission, expressed in your State of the Nation address, to reduce inequalities and poverty will be reinstated and again becomes a bearing point for our development trajectory, which will be devoid of rampant corruption, state capture, cronyism and discrimination.

I have hope that one day in the not too distant future citizens will be able to walk freely without fear of crime; that education will be free; that our children will not have to go to bed hungry; that national affordable health care will be readily available; that the nation will be properly housed and the citizenry will be at peace with itself.

I have hope that your vision for a better South Africa shall not be in vain. I have hope that your confidence in South Africa's sea of humanity will not be blemished by a few "dirty drops" in the nation's contemporary polity.

I have hope that sanity will prevail and the faith of the people in their dream of a South Africa without racial and other prejudice will be restored.

With the well-wishes of a devoted citizenry and your vision to charter a turnaround strategy, I am certain that South Africa will be able to hew out of the benchmarks of despair a new mission of hope.

With this newfound faith, South Africans will be able to transform the rattling discord of the current

political malaise into a beautiful symphony of respect for all. With this hope, we will be able to work together, experiment together, design, build, create, perform together, to stand up for democracy together, knowing full well that our future bodes well.

Within this perspective, Mr President, I implore you to empower civil society so that there is once more effective participation, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, inclusiveness and accountability in the governance of our country.

These actions from you will form the bedrock of our democracy.

I do understand that the challenges you face are enormous and cannot be wished away in a few months or years, but the nation has invested its trust in you to deliver with servant leadership.

We need to use whatever means necessary, especially the gripping narrative of civic action of the past, to catalyse the social capital that could feed into the power of civil society engagement to make a fundamental difference in the lives of millions of politically and socially marginalised communities. This, as you mentioned, requires a civil society to "lend a hand" and say "send me".

I am at your disposal.
With my best wishes

DHIRU SONI

● Professor Soni is director of research and innovation at Regent Business School and writes in his personal capacity.