

South Africa's social conservatism: a real and present danger

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As much as those of us who identify ourselves as social progressives would like to believe otherwise, the reality is that South Africa is an abode of social conservatism. Indeed, one of the most glaring contradictions of South Africa's post-apartheid 'transition' is that the widely acknowledged (and regularly celebrated) social progressiveness of the *Constitution* is, in large part, at fundamental odds with the beliefs and views of the majority of South Africans themselves.

Until a few years ago this was one of our best kept 'secrets'. If the heady 'rainbow nation' days of the early-mid 1990s served to largely obscure the political and economic fissures in South African society, then they positively buried many of the underlying realities of majoritarian social norms and values. While some of the 'colours' of that rainbow began to fade fairly quickly thereafter as increasing economic inequality and accompanying class struggle came to the fore, it has taken several more years for the divided, social heart and soul of South Africa to be exposed.

As could be expected, given South Africa's apartheid past, some of the earlier signs of this exposure appeared on the racial front. Whether it was ex-President Mbeki's playing of the race card to cover up and rationalise his own government's developmental failures and accumulation of power and privilege by a small black elite or the increasing cacophony of racist attitudes and incidences of racist attacks by whites, there was ample evidence to suggest that the constructed social unity of the 'rainbow nation' was rapidly unravelling. Nationalist chauvinism and xenophobia soon came out of the closet as hundreds of thousands of assorted 'foreigners' were deported, regular media headlines about trouble-causing 'aliens' blared forth and physical attacks on immigrants spread out across the country (foreshadowing the xenophobic pogroms of 2008).

Besides the consistent defence of narrow-minded patriarchal social relations and ongoing displays of general indifference to the epidemic of violence against women, in more recent times the most publicly visible and propagated form of social intolerance has been homophobia. It was none other than Jacob Zuma who got the ball really rolling back in 2006 when, at a public function, he proudly stated that, "when I was growing up *ungqingili* (gay men) would not have stood in front of me. I would knock him out". Although he later apologised, his complimentary remark that, "same-sex marriage is a disgrace to the nation and to God", and the positive reception such a view received from sizeable numbers of South Africans, gave firm indication of a deep seated and widely held social conservatism.

Empirical confirmation of this was clearly revealed in the Human Sciences Research Council's 2008 South African Social Attitudes Survey. The study, using a national representative sample of respondents aged 16 and older found that between 2003 and 2007 over 80% of the population across various age groups "consistently felt that sex between two men or two women was always wrong". Further, it found that

“gays and lesbians were characterised as ‘un-African’ and that intolerance towards homosexuality was prevalent”. One of the study’s authors, Vasu Reddy, accurately described these dominant views as, “an attempt to tell African gays and lesbians to ‘go back into the closet’ because you’re a ‘disgrace’ to African culture,” an attitude he said represented a view of homosexuality as “something that colonisers brought with them to contaminate African culture”.

Tragically but predictably, such views have been brutally translated over the last few years into the unprecedented levels of violence against black lesbians in particular, which has seen over 30 murdered and countless others physically and emotionally abused. In 2006, the young life of 19 year old lesbian Zoliswa Nkonyana of Khayalitsha was cut short by a gang of marauding male youths. In 2007, Sizakele Sigasa an outreach co-ordinator for the Positive Women’s Network, a lesbian rights organisation and her friend Salome Masooa were tortured, raped and brutally murdered in Soweto and Thokozane Qwabewas murdered in Ladysmith. In 2008, a string of hate crimes in Kwathema township against black lesbians saw Girly Nkosi murdered and former Banyana Banyana midfielder Eudy Simelanegang raped and stabbed over 20 times. In the same year, open drag queen Daisy Dube was brazenly gunned down in Yeoville by a group of men who had earlier heckled Daisy as *izitabane*.

The socially conservative rhetorical incubation for such crimes of hate reaches through the sinews of every level of South African society. Well known journalist, publisher and wannebe cultural icon, Jon Qwelane, spewed out hate filled epitaphs at lesbians and gays in a 2008 column –‘Call me names, but gay is not ok’ - in the nation’s largest daily circulation newspaper, the *Daily Sun*. Two years later and he has been given a diplomatic posting to Uganda, whose parliament is presently ‘debating’ an Anti-Homosexuality Bill that would give life imprisonment for "touch[ing] another person with the intention of committing the act of homosexuality."

Last year, Zehir Omar, a lawyer for the ‘Society for the Protection of the Constitution’, told the Judicial Services Commission that because High Court Judge Kathy Satchwell was a lesbian, “the majority of South Africans are God-fearing and will not be able to identify with the learned judge since there is no religion that condones homosexuality.” Not to be outdone, the PAC Youth League in a January 2010 statement targeting a homosexual relationship on the SABCTV’s, ‘Generations’, claimed that the soapie had “declared war with the African cultures and practices”. They went on to opine that this constituted being “part of officiating homosexuality and indoctrinated (sic) Africans with nonsense” and called for “the abolishment of homosexuality practices”.

Most recently, Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana walked out of artist and lesbian activist Zanele Muholi’s exhibition that featured pictures of semi-naked black women embracing each other, describing the exhibition as “immoral, offensive and against nation building”. No doubt, arch-homophobes Robert Mugabe and Sam Nujoma were applauding loudly in neighbouring Zimbabwe and Namibia respectively as was Zambia’s Southern Province Minister Daniel Munkombwe, who not long ago likened homosexuals to animals.

All of this is overlaid by the widening public propagation and political embracing of more socially reactionary versions of various religions and ‘cultural practices’. Whether it be church and/or ‘culturally’

enforced patriarchy, the self-constructed moralising against 'unnatural' social relations, the hypocritical repression of sex and sexuality or the exclusionary politics of racial, ethnic and national chauvinism, it all adds up to the same thing; 'they' are not 'we', and 'we' is what 'we' say 'we' are .

Beware.

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