

South Africa's many faces

Lars Dahlström, 2015-05-10

Summer in South Africa is at its best in January, February, and March, at least for those of us who are temporary visitors. We were fortunate to be that for six weeks and once again South Africa showed many different faces. This time we saw the political and destructive faces and their antitheses, the promising faces.



Cape Flats, home for millions of South Africans behind Table Mountain.

From farce to tragedy

In the beginning of February the South African President Jacob Zuma had his state of the nation address to the South African people after last year's ANC victory in the national elections. Everyone, including many temporary visitors prepared us in front of the TV to listen to promises that were bound to be broken again.

To start with we experienced a political farce, even though based on one of the rules in the constitution that allows members of parliament to ask simple questions during all parliamentary meetings. Before Zuma could deliver his speech many of the members of the opposition party EFF, Economic Freedom Fighters, tried to get a response from Zuma on the question: When is Zuma going to pay back the government money spent on his house in Nkandla? Even the Public Prosecutor in South Africa has demanded a pay back of around 50 million Rand. No answer came from Zuma and this part of the address ended with the security forces moving all EFF parliamentary members, who always wear red working overalls, out from the plenary session under loud protests.

After this farcical event other members of parliament started to protest against the blockage of mobile traffic as well as the fact that security forces were allowed to operate in parliament. This resulted in a walk out by both DA (Democratic Alliance, the largest opposition party) and UDM (United Democratic Movement) members. When Zuma could start his state of the nation address only ANC members remained in the plenary.

Afterward, very few people remembered what Zuma promised in his nine-point-delivery for future development in a mangled South Africa. However, everyone remembered the farcical political drama.

The South African satirist Pieter Dirk Uys personified as Tanie Evita Bezuidenhout had her 'take of the nation address' the day before at the Cape Town Press Club and certified that there were

many calls for pay back from the powerful political elite. Tanie Evita also commented on the general idea in South Africa that ANC will rule until Jesus comes back. Tanie said that ANC will rule for ever, because Jesus will not get an entry visa to South Africa (as happened to Dalai Lama).

Politics in South Africa has not improved since EFF representatives have become members of parliament since last elections. Rather the opposite, politics has turned into bickering with little effect for ordinary people except for more frustrations and contempt.

Beyond the national political farce continues the struggle for a decent life amongst the majority of South Africans who lives on the margin. This society is developing a new type of division between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in spite of all the promises for a better life for all since 1994. The townships around Cape Town are growing and the Cape Flats have now reached the coastal road between N2 and Muizenberg including backyard dwellers, with the effect that the social stress that comes with overcrowded living spaces creates further violence.

In one of the areas outside Somerset West, a suburb to Cape Town, people no longer dare to visit outside in evenings and weekends, because of the violence. One weekend a policeman was killed and some civilians injured and the following week a group of teenagers under the influence of drugs acted as sharpshooters on small children in the area. To a certain extent it seems like violence has become normalized.

Many South Africans are aware of the humanitarian legacy from Nelson Mandela and his Ubuntu spirit, but also the legacy of violence from the colonial and apartheid eras as well as from the liberation struggle. The legacy of violence seems to affect today's strategies for conflict resolutions at all levels in society.



Mandela statue outside Drakenstein Correctional Service where Mandela spent his last days in prison

Violence against women and rape happen daily. The changed power relations between different groups in society have created new types of petty apartheid. Coloured travels on the trains into Cape Town have to stand up if a black traveller enters the train without a free seat. Lately, we have also

experienced the violence against migrant workers from other African countries that started in the Durban area and continued around Johannesburg and will probably continue until the xenophobic virus has disappeared. Meanwhile, President Zuma's suggested measures to tighten the immigration control, as an imitation of Fortress Europe, will only worsen the situation.

Many South Africans think that the largest treachery to the new South Africa is the leaders' failure to create a functional education system for all, i.e. an education system that can develop a more humane and socially just society. Bantu education was replaced by another dysfunctional system called Outcome Based Education (OBE). OBE was replaced by Curriculum and Assessment Policy System (CAPS) a couple of years ago and is today criticized for its strong control and governing.

Education reformers everywhere have forgotten the essence of teaching and learning processes, namely to develop knowledge and skills through participatory processes of investigations and discovery. These processes have too often been effectively hindered by control demands of new public management and testing hysteria.

In spite of the many educational weaknesses it is possible to see a few positive examples of good education in South Africa, even though the influences from international trends in education do not improve the situation.

Promising developments

The new school year started with a lack of places for some of the poor children in Cape Flats. There were not enough classrooms in the township called Mfuleni. Unemployed teachers then started to teach the children in a church tent. When this was written about in one of the largest Cape Town newspapers the education department had to arrange temporary classrooms and employ enough teachers.

Many educational buildings became redundant when the parallel system of education for different groups according to colour was dismantled after 1994 as a way to do away with apartheid and bantu education. The new ANC government decided to utilize these buildings to set up model schools in all provinces. However, up until today there is only one model school for secondary education available in the whole country. This school is *Western Cape Sport School* (WCSS) in Kuilsriver outside Cape Town.



The idea with WCSS is to recruit promising students from poor homes such as Godfrey, a 13 years old boy from one of the townships in the area. Godfrey has a single mother who struggles for a better life for herself and her children. We got an opportunity to visit WCSS and became impressed by the school buildings, the dedicated staff, as well as the available resources. The ambition of the school is to develop all aspects of the students including social skills, general knowledge, health, physical activities, and sport skills. The school has a medical doctor, physical experts, and offer a balanced diet for the majority of students who stay in the school hostels during the week. WCSS also cooperates with one of the universities in the Cape Town area to further develop its social, pedagogical, and sports programmes. WCSS is an unlikely torch of learning in the middle of social chaos and neglect that unfortunately also is affected negatively by the government's budget deficits with the consequences of increased costs for the parents.

Other good examples from education have been presented by Jonathan Jansen and Molly Blank in their publication titled '*How to Fix South Africa's Schools, lessons from schools that work*'. The book is supplemented with 19 videos from schools representing all provinces in the country as examples on what is possible to do today in the South African school system even though based on exceptional dedications.

When South Africa got its first democratically elected government under Nelson Mandela in 1994 the country was also pressurized to follow the global business trends and open up its borders for global capital as well as business under the devise of the 'free market'. This had the effect that many local products were replaced by imported copies often labelled 'made in China'. This also had negative effects on unemployment. Today we can see some recovering of South African production supported by national and provincial authorities. One such example is *Potina Ceramics*.



Potina in his workshop amongst his products.

Potina Ceramics is based in Lamotte Village, a new low cost area outside the wine and gourmet centre Franschoek, around 80 kilometres northeast from Cape Town. Vuyisa Potina is a skilled potter who has developed his products and marketization from local markets to export markets in USA and Germany. Potina combines traditional patterns and forms with modern techniques and design.

The garage is his workshop and his products can be seen in many of the galleries in and around Cape Town. Potina was busy firing a delivery to Germany, when we met him the last time before our trip back home to Sweden.



A happy and skilled artisan.

Reflective words

We left South Africa this time with mixed feelings.

Our despair was grounded in the inability of the political establishment to create possibilities for worthy living conditions for the 50% of South Africa's population who after more than 20 years of freedom from apartheid still live under miserable conditions, unemployment, and the oak of violence.

Our happiness rests with schools that work like WCSS with a mission for young South Africans from poor circumstances and artisans like Vuyisa Potina who is able to survive together with his wife and children on his excellent ceramics work.