

On the pain of others and the brutality of nations: A media strategy in search of prevention of violence and atrocities against minorities.

Brilliant Mhlanga

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‘...when a leopard wants to feed on its young ones, it first accuses them of smelling like goats’, (Chinua Achebe).

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, we meet at a time when our social world is undergoing massive forms of social engineering; in terms of, the new structures and currency of communication brought about by social media in its variegated forms. Much as this celebration of the rise of social media may be seen as an important ingredient in conjuring a kind of communicative action – of mediating and representing subaltern voices; i.e., by giving them a kind of public sphere for airing their views and thus empowering them, it maybe important for us to consider the enormity of the challenges faced by ethnic minorities and the restrictive conditions within which they have been forced to subsist.

‘For the nation to live the tribe must die’ – underlying historical currencies

To begin with I prefer to refer to these as ‘travails of ethnic minorities & the brutality of nations’ on their minorities. And so, before I discuss the possible preventing scenarios; allow me to foreground my point of departure. By stating that, the state of ethnic minorities in Africa in general, and in particular, Southern Africa is quite an invidious one - all as a result of the fledgling African national project purveyed by nationalists whose majoritarian mindset informed them to coin and celebrate the statement – ‘divided we fall, united we stand.’ While the imperative has been to easily celebrate this view as an avowal for a progressive people, especially in the previous liberation obsessed era; a critical interrogation of this statement as a kind of ‘mantra’ presents to us with a clear case of

how power, its trappings, levers of the state and, ultimately, development then is centralised much to the detriment of the ethnic minorities who then are forced to depend on the benevolence of the majority. While it stands to reason that the colonial structures were oppressive and tended to be the preserve of a few minorities based on colour, it must be acknowledged that the logic of the liberation struggles, including its underlying ethos envisage what was called a ‘majoritarian rule’, without clearly delineating what it entails. Thus sowing the seeds for centralised systems of governance, with majority ethnic groups at the helm. Even our states had to be formed as successor states based on the ideological frameworks designed by those in the majority – and, in most cases, with the founding leaders of our states being from majority tribes. Also key as a running principle of the nationalist ideology, which informed the argument that, ‘divided we fall, united we stand’, was another clearly violent mantra that said, ‘...for the nation to live the tribe must die.’

The question then is; which tribe had to die? And the answer is simple, ethnic minorities faced the brunt of it. This was a clear statement announcing the atrocious intentions of the ‘would be liberators’, and no one dared to question it.

So what we had from the on-set are states without nationalist but tribalists masquerading in the garbs of nationalism, harbouring ambitions of abusing minorities. And as we may all know, the project of state formation is a violent process. And so what we have is a history ethnic violence, what others have referred to as civil wars associated with the independence period. These forms of violence stretch within Southern Africa, right across the continent of Africa. You would recall, the case of

ethnic clashes in South Africa in the early 90s in which minorities faced the brunt of it all, the case of Gukurahundi genocide in Zimbabwe, targeted at the Ndebele people (1982 – 88), the case of Frelimo vs Renamo in Mozambique, the problems of Angola, the case of Zambia's Barotseland, the case of Malawi's Ngoni people, right across the continent to the case of Biafra in 1967, in which millions of Igbo people were brutally massacred.

In view of all these, one is forced to invoke Ali Mazrui's views in which he asks;

‘... Is the colonial order being washed away with buckets of blood? Or are we witnessing the agonizing birth pangs of a genuinely postcolonial order? Is the blood, in fact, spilling in the maternity ward of history as a new Africa is trying to breathe? Until we know whether this is the birth of a truly decolonised Africa, we can not celebrate. In any case who can celebrate in the midst of all this blood and carnage’ (Mazrui 1995: 28).

Of hate speech and violence

The 21st Century is now typified by an extreme form of social violence whose scars are inflicted on the soul of the minority folk – HATE SPEECH/LANGUAGE! And so, we are reminded through the wisdom of our elders that, ‘...*when a leopard wants to feed on its young ones, it first accuses them of smelling like goats.*’ Hate speech and hate crime in Southern Africa straddle along identification processes of boundary making and is often fraught with unmarked social forms of violence. We can perceive it as a form of stereotypical representation of a particular group of people as the ‘other’ ethnic, which as a form of violence

interpellates in two ways. First, as a human rights violation, bordering on the normative and objective levels. Second, as a subjective and quite pragmatic way. Of concern here is the subjective form of violence whose visibility exists in two forms; i.e., as symbolic violence often embodied in language and speech forms in which those considered to be ‘outsiders’ and not belonging to a given social whole are negatively labelled. This kind of violence includes incitement through language using constructed formulaic processes of typifying ‘others’. In this instance relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms hinged on language as the carrier of symbols and signifier creates the violent imposition of stereotypes in which ethnic minorities are reduced to lesser beings and thus denied the status of ever being recognised in society; unless if they embrace certain values prescribed to them by the majority ethnicities. We see this with the Ndebele people in Zimbabwe, the Basarwa and the Kalanga in Botswana, the people of Barotseland in Zambia, etc. The universalization of stereotypes provides currency to hate-speech as a form of subjective violence. Hate-speech then becomes one form of subjective violence that exists as the perturbation of the ‘normal’ peaceful state of things; thus providing us with a new and most dangerous typology of violence, in the 21st century, whose traumatic impact is an attempt to decaffeinate those in the ethnic minority as the ‘other’.

PROPOSED PREVENTIVE MEASURES

In view of these state challenges, I wish to proffer a kind of radical rethink of our engagement with the concept of ethnicity as part of preventive measures that can be put in place to prevent violence and atrocities against minorities. To begin with, there is a need for a state and

government-centred social re-negotiation and acceptance of ethnicity, what we call the tribe, as a part of our lived reality. The failure by our governments to accept the existence of different ethnic (tribes) that make up our countries has not been helpful for the broader state developmental project in postcolonial Africa. In particular, on resource distribution and exploitation of natural resources; including access to power and state governance as a very important resource. The existence of different tribes in a country must be celebrated as part of a broader pluralistic engagement of cultural particularities that as a natural resources can be harnessed for the good of the nation, instead of criminalising it as 'tribalism', when politicians later turn on them using the media to valorise them and instrumentalise them for their stay in power. As we all know, in most of Africa, a safe politician is one who has the support of the majority ethnic group. Also what we have in most of Africa is a hypocritical conjecture of denying the existence of the tribe, including deploring it, as a 'five letter word', but then turn to accept it as tribal/ethnic violence, when it manifests itself in negative terms. I therefore, propose that instead of 'dipping our heads in the sand' we accept the tribe; its existence and work towards harnessing its potential as a natural resource. I wish to proffer that we need clearly defined communicative structures, especially media policies that allow for minorities to have a voice. This acceptance of the reality of our tribes has to be reflected in our legal frameworks, in particular constitutions, not merely as footnotes in our Bills of rights. There has to be a clear acknowledgement of the different ethnicities, including their languages. As we know, Language carries the culture of a people. And so, anyone who possesses a language possesses the world view and cultural particulars contained in that language as a structure of communication. As a result the protection of

languages, especially, minority languages must not be isolated from the different tribes within which they subsist.

Also while it is the preserve of a given state to protect its citizens, more often minorities tend to suffer at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them. We have seen this with the case of the Ndebele of Matebeleland, including their continued existence outside the margins of the state. We have seen this also with the Basarwa, of Botswana, the different San communities in South Africa, the people of Barotseland in Zambia, just to name a few.

In that regard there is need for clearly laid down regional legal instruments, in Southern Africa, for example, that are designed to protect ethnic minorities – to which Member States will after ratifying agree to have them translated into their domestic constitutions, paying particular emphasis to their contexts. These have to further cascade into different policies, of each Member State, designed to empower ethnic minorities as part of broader democratic processes. This can be done through a dedicated three tier system aimed at decentralising systems of governance – into, delegation, decongestion, and devolution. In some instances a federal project might be the solution.

It is also important to emphasize that recent studies continue to show that radio plays a key role in development processes in Africa. Radio continues to be the medium of choice, owing to low literacy levels. But on the other hand we know how radio as an important media has been essentialised and abused to fan and stock the ethnic fissures including ethnic violence. I therefore, wish to submit that radio like electricity which

can still electrocute but can still be used to illuminate, it too can be used for the greater good, in particular, its communicative potential and its enigmatic instance of capturing society through broadcasts in different languages to give ethnic minorities a voice. This can be a form of empowerment which I argue in a developmental processes leads to two key issues. First, is the granting of ethnic minorities space to voice their concerns and to empower them; thus protecting their rights and freedoms in a democracy. Second, is the existential responsibility it creates by allowing them to first transform their social state from being subjects and social 'others' to citizens who can determine the kind of development and life they wish to have as opposed to depending on the government. Further, I argue that this leads to a sustained emancipatory project for any progressive state. Allow me to illustrate this point by giving the example of South Africa which has 11 official languages in its constitution, and all those languages also have radio stations under the banner of the South African Broadcasting Corporation dedicated to serve each one of them including their ethnicities. As a result the different ethnic minorities feel empowered with the radio stations that broadcast in their languages mediating their voices and representing their cultural particulars. I propose that this as a media policy if implemented in most Southern African nation-states is likely to reduce animosity, suspicion and violence against minorities. Further, it affords ethnic minorities an opportunity to celebrate belonging to both their ethnic groups and the state without being coerced to belong in the case of the latter.

In conclusion, I wish to propose the strengthening of civil society organisations designed to fight for the rights of ethnic minorities. This must also be expanded to create regional and international structures for

ethnic minorities, in which, stakeholders will be ethnic minorities which they can use to lobby the international community. This becomes one way of preventing violence and atrocity in that such regional and international bodies working with domestic civil society organisations focused on ethnic minorities are then able to coin early warning systems to detect problems in a state. This also requires a clearly structured new media policy that seeks to harness the potential and promise of social media in their variegated forms.