

Editorial

Democracy has come some way – and has a long way still to go

By Martin Nicol

The novelist, Upton Sinclair, wrote in “The Jungle” published in 1906 –

“...when election day came, ... the same night watchman took Jurgis and the rest of his flock into the back room of a saloon, and showed each of them where and how to mark a ballot, and then gave each two dollars, and took them to the polling place, where there was a policeman on duty especially to see that they got through all right. ... Jurgis met men who explained all this mystery to him; and he learned that America differed from Russia in that its government existed under the form of a democracy. The officials who ruled it, and got all the graft, had to be elected first; and so there were two rival sets of grafters, known as political parties, and the one got the office which bought the most votes.”

Democracy has come a way since 1906: universal suffrage (only men could vote in most democracies in 1906); rules against buying votes; and principles of acceptable behaviour (buttressed by law) that apply to those who are elected or appointed to public office.

The exercise of state power has also taken new directions – where even autocratic rulers prefer to hold elections. Here the buying of votes experienced by Jurgis would be preferable to the violent intimidation of voters, the suppression of rival parties and disqualification of popular alternative candidates. Democracy needs voting, but elections do not indicate democracy!

IFAA held a sobering workshop in August – in the shadow of coups in Niger and Gabon and a below-standard election in Zimbabwe (all three rated as ‘authoritarian regimes’ in the 2022 Democracy Index of the *Economist*) – and in the wake of South Africa’s skilful brokering of the Bigger Broader Brics, soon to comprise four ‘flawed democracies’ and seven regimes where political pluralism is non-existent or severely limited.

The workshop’s focus was on the ethical guidelines that ought to be respected by our freely elected representatives. Voting and elections are central to democracy –but ‘*institutions of democracy*’ all need to be strong for democracy to work. They also need to be guided by ethical standards to provide the checks and balances on those who have (or ought to have!) power and influence.

These institutions are, together,

- Parliament, legislatures and councils;
- The Executive authorities;
- The Judiciary;
- Free media;
- Civil society; and in South Africa
- the Chapter 9 institutions supporting constitutional democracy (including

the Electoral Commission and the Auditor-General).

So it is not just Parliament that matters – as is illustrated in the articles in this issue of *New Agenda* reporting on the workshop and reflecting on ethics and accountability issues.

Speakers dwelt on the existing ethical codes of conduct in place to regulate the behaviour of members of legislatures and government entities, not only in South Africa – where they are surprisingly well established – but, the workshop was told, that are now found in the majority of countries across the world.

The workshop was also addressed by leaders of two prominent UK-based governance monitoring and regulatory bodies who described how codes of conduct, as useful as they certainly are, can be subverted or found wanting.

However, the workshop also learned of Britain's Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, a statutory body which has successfully developed a model to hold Members of Parliament to account when it comes to their personal financial responsibilities.

IFAA welcomed the presence at the workshop of Parliament's Deputy Speaker, Lechesa Tsenoli, who offered his own perspective on aspects of ethical governance and parliamentary oversight – and how the institution of Parliament can be continually improved.

The workshop, titled Ethics, Parliament and the Elected Representative, was part of IFAA's 'In Defence of our Constitutional Democracy' project, also known as Decode. It engages Parliament and civil society on the need for electoral and parliamentary reform, particularly in the wake of the Zondo Commission's recommendations and their lacklustre implementation (thus far).

This issue of *New Agenda* publishes a comprehensive report on the work the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) is currently doing in collaboration with the Zondo Commission to track the government's implementation of the extensive reforms that were recommended to tackle corruption and prevent a recurrence of state capture.

The journal includes contributions on food systems in Africa, taxation as a means of regulating the minibus taxi sector using the example of Tanzania, and proposals to improve land reform beneficiary support in South Africa.

Finally, it pays tribute to the late Wilson Sidina, a largely unheralded struggle icon who passed away at the end of July after a lifetime spent in service of economic justice, nonracialism and transformation. Today there is not enough acknowledgment of his contribution to the struggle and *New Agenda* publishes his obituary as a tribute to him but also in recognition of all the heroes and heroines who fought hard yet died without due recognition of the role they played – we salute the likes of Oscar Mpetha, Zoli Malindi, Christmas Tinto, Annie Silinga, Mama Mtiya, Mama Holo, Zora Mehlomakhulu, Wilson Fundani, Fred Gona, Mziwonke Pro Jack and the many others now resting with them.