

When democratic governance goes hi-tech, we all win

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COMMENT



CAN you recall that momentous day – April 27, 1994 – when we all eagerly stood in endless queues to cast our votes in the first democratic dispensation for all? As ordinary citizens we were excited that we could for the first time voice our opinions about our future, and have a say in the new development drama that was about to unfold.

We earned the right to participate in the decision-making process of the new hard-won democracy. It was euphoric, especially because in the apartheid era as blacks we were denied political franchise.

In that “Madiba era” we were informed that, as citizens, we needed to be actively involved in the governance of the country, not simply as a way to find solutions to our concerns, but as an important channel to build communication and co-operation with the government and strengthen democracy. This safeguard was put in place by our founding elders to ensure citizens had an opportunity to provide input on policy decisions before they went into effect.

We were further enlightened that the process of ensuring that government worked for the overall public good required informed, organised, active and peaceful citizen participation. Citizens, we were appraised, must therefore understand ideas about citizenship, politics and the government.

They needed 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 also 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 visions of what freedom, justice and service delivery meant to them.

In the “Zuma era”, now 23 years ahead, the major tenets that uphold our fragile democracy are being seriously threatened by rampant corruption and patronage politics.

The rights of citizens to voice their opinions and concerns and contribute to policy debates have literally been decimated. Civil society has been marginalised to the periphery of society.

Within the context of the social compact between government and the citizenry, public servants and leaders now conduct policy-making without full disclosure to the public. These sycophants wilfully and grossly neglect to engage the public, fearing that the public might derail their corrupt agendas.

Rather than serve the very people who have elected them, the majority of these pompous self-individualised officials behave as if they are doing the public a favour in dispensing a service. For these so-called “public servants” their work is not a “calling”, but rather a means to enrich their pockets.

Respect toward human rights cannot be achieved in a society if citizens do not have full access in governance by offering them all opportunities to participate as important stakeholders for the development of a democratic system.

The term “citizen” has an inherently political meaning that implies a certain type of relationship between the people and government. Citizens have a set of rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate in decisions that affect public welfare. In addition to the intrinsic democratic value, participation is an instrumental driver of democratic and socio-economic change, and a fundamental way to empower citizens.

In most democracies, civil so-

ciety organisations are a vehicle through which citizens can aggregate their interests, voice their preference and exercise the power necessary to affect sustained change.

However, this requires citizens learning to work together and to play a variety of complementary political roles that include, acting as watchdogs; advocates, mobilisers, educators, researchers, and policy analysts.

Unfortunately, in South Africa, citizen action and civil society activism is reduced to a few organisations and individuals that have the financial means or “patronage clout”. More recently, though, some

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civil society organisations have accessed the Constitutional Court for justice. The majority of the citizenry, however, has no voice. In such a desperate situation, citizens in utter frustration, resort to bedlam and service delivery strikes.

In turn, these last-resort actions, sometimes violent, bear adequate testimony to a breakdown in the social compact between citizenry and the government. Democracy suffers in such a parlous ecosystem.

How then do we reaffirm the position of our citizenry in legitimately partaking in the governance of the country? Especially given that the existence of effective public institutions to meet citizen needs, accountability and transparency in the public policy and decision-making processes, enforcement of the

rule of law, checks and balances, and citizen participation are also important components of democratic governance?

It is quite obvious that existing processes in the citizen’s participation of governance in our country has failed miserably and in response to the above question, we have to re-establish the importance of the principle for democratic governance through a renewed strategy.

In this respect, South Africa needs to refer to the UN Development Programme which has been promoting the use of information and communications technology (ICT) as a catalyst for development. Since 2001, the programme has increased its focus on promoting e-governance and access to information.

This strategic approach focuses on increasing participation by all of society’s stakeholders in democratic processes and encouraging the establishment of basic services for the poorest and most marginalised members of society.

The interest in e-governance is based on a reality that ICT has advanced considerably, and broken through to social and political life. In view of the advantages offered by these technologies (speed, cost reduction, wider reach), they are now crucial for the work of civil society organisations and for governments, which can use them for intra-governmental communication and for providing services and communicating with citizens.

In essence, ICT enhances citizen participation by enabling them to interact better with each other and with their elected officials.

E-governance and e-participation, therefore, are crucial phases in the development of governance. Studies of such processes illustrate that citizen participation through the use of ICT is developing effectively in most developing countries.

Evidence indicates that governments have demonstrated a real

willingness to transform relationships between government services and their users, particularly by strengthening the use of ICT and by offering information services online. Studies show that civil society, likewise, is also committed to implementing initiatives to improve democratic governance using ICT.

It is therefore essential to emphasise the crucial importance of establishing innovative participation channels and citizen-centric policies for South Africa to promote citizen participation in order to strengthen our infant democracy. In this regard, even the use of the ubiquitous mobile phone has immense possibilities.

E-participation can mobilise citizens to engage with others within their communities, express their needs and open up new ideas for responding to the current challenges facing South Africa.

New forms of digital citizenship, particularly mobile technologies, have the potential to improve the commitment of stakeholders in the political process, reversing a trend towards disengagement, enabling better access to information and focusing services on those who need them most.

To this end, better promotion of the new innovative and technological initiatives should be integrated into governance policies because they represent a powerful tool for achieving citizen participation in South Africa.

As Noam Chomsky, one of the foremost social scientists of our time, says, “The internet could be a very positive step towards education, organisation and participation in a meaningful society.”

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