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Between Imbizo and Battle Grounds: The Deterioration of the Public Sphere in South Africa

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Abstract

One of the proud inheritances of South Africa's democracy is public dialogue in the form of community forums, negotiations, and *imbizos*. Community forums have been part of social movements in the fight against both apartheid and posts-apartheid inequalities. Negotiations proudly characterised our transition to democracy which is based on principles of non-discrimination. *Imbizos* characterise the process of transformation by way of unmediated dialogues between the government and citizens. One way or another these forms of dialogue have been elements of the South African public sphere especially since the early 1980's. The vibrant and democratic engagement in the 1980's is in stark contrast to the present public sphere in the political realm¹. The emerging characteristics of South Africa's public sphere are apathy, intolerance and violence. Several explanations are put forward for this observation. Whereas some intellectual, social movements and observers appeal for the past and seemingly disappearing African democratic tradition of dialogue and our recent history of negotiated transition, the South African government seems to be withdrawing in the very deteriorating public sphere. It is not clear why the government is disappearing from the public sphere with regard to pressing issues. However, some of the plausible reasons are underestimation of transformation, increasing global dialogues, unaccountability, self-aggrandisement and consumerist individualism. The challenge is not only moral regeneration and the generation and distribution of wealth, but also the calibre of those who will lead and be involved in the South African public sphere when such issues are debated.

Keywords: Political Public Sphere, Government, Social Movements, Negotiations, Imbizo, Violence, Intolerance.

¹ Hereinafter referred as public sphere.

Introduction

This paper argues that the political public sphere in South Africa is deteriorating. It is deteriorating because it is characterised by apathy, intolerance and violence. The deterioration is compared with the traditional character of an imbizo and the vibrant anti-apartheid debates and activism. I conclude that fighting for a free public sphere is the responsibility of citizens but also taking into account constraining realities such as illiteracy and comprador tendencies. The paper is in five parts. The first part defines imbizo. The second one discusses and defends Habermas' notion of the public sphere in the political realm. The third one compares imbizo and the public sphere. The fourth part analyses the public sphere in South Africa. The final part suggests resolutions.

What is Imbizo?

Imbizo is a word from the Zulu language² in South Africa. It means a "gathering" for the purpose of discussing or relying important matters within a group or community. Its ultimate purpose is to ensure participation of members in the process of conceptualising, making and executing decisions. "The *imbizo*, in its traditional form, has constituted an important aspect of the indigenous African political system for many centuries, especially in Southern Africa. The general interpretation attached to the *imbizo* is one of being a communications tool", (Hartslief, 2005:1).

An inspiring and almost nostalgic yet vivid recollection of such gatherings is captured in the autobiography of former President of South Africa, Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela. Recalling his youth in rural Transkei he writes,

My later notions of leadership were profoundly influenced by observing the regent and his court. I watched and learned from the tribal meetings that were regularly held at the Great Place. These were not scheduled, but were called as needed, and were held to discuss national matters such as drought, the culling of cattle, policies ordered by the magistrate, or new laws decreed by the government. All Thembus were free to come - and a great many did, on horseback or by foot.

² In the Sesotho language is called 'kgotla'. However, imbizo is popularly used.

On these occasions, the regent was surrounded by his *amaphakathi*, a group of councillors of high rank who functioned as the regent's parliament and judiciary. They were wise men who retained the knowledge of tribal history and customs in their heads and whose opinions carried great weight.

Letters advising these chiefs and headmen of a meeting were dispatched from the regent, and soon the Great Place became alive with important visitors and travellers from all over Thembuland. The guests would gather in the courtyard in front of the regent's house and he would open the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and explaining why he had summoned them. From that point on, he would not utter another word until the meeting was nearing its end.

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. People spoke without interruption and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and were equal in their value as citizens. (Women, I am afraid, were deemed second-class citizens).....

At first I was astonished by the vehemence - and candour - with which people criticized the regent. He was not above criticism - in fact, he was often the principal target of it. But no matter how serious the charge, the regent simply listened, not defending himself, showing no emotion at all.

The meeting would continue until some kind of consensus was reached. They ended in unanimity or not at all. Unanimity, however, might be an agreement or disagree, to wait for a more propitious time to propose a solution. Democracy meant all men were to be heard, and a decision was taken together as a people. Majority rule was a foreign notion. A minority was not to be crushed by a majority...As a leader I have always followed the principles I first saw demonstrated by the regent at the Great Place, (Mandela, 1995:24 - 25).

The Great Place was a physical space for an imbizo, which displayed the following characteristics: (a) equality of men - albeit not women; (b) men who discussed matters of community interest - albeit within social stratification; (c) critical discussion of matters; (d) freedom to disagree with others including (e) freedom to disagree or criticise leaders; (f) reaching consensus rather than majority rule. These characteristics are reminiscent and

analogous to Jürgen Habermas' (1989) ideal and yet historical notion of Europe's 18th century bourgeois public sphere in the political realm. What is this public sphere?

The Publics Sphere in the Political Realm

Habermas' theoretical perspective arose from the following questions: how and why has critical public opinion developed and altered in the European societies? How best can we retain the function of the political public sphere in the light of societal changes as exemplified by the welfare state? In order to answer that question he finds answers in: (a) the conception of the public sphere in Europe (Germany in particular); (b) a historical comparative analysis of the existence and character of the public sphere from Greek societies, to high Middle Ages, to the bourgeois constitutional state, up to the social welfare state democracies; (c) the transformation of the function and character of the public sphere; and (d) a sociological analysis of the concept of public opinion.

Two most important and often misunderstood conceptions in Habermas' work are public sphere and public opinion. Public sphere is not the same as civil society or an assembly of people. It is:

A realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. We speak of the political public sphere in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state authority is so to speak the executor of the political public sphere, it is not a part of it (Habermas 1974:1).

Public opinion is not the same as people's perception or attitudes. It is 'The critical process that private people engaged in rational-critical public debate brought to bear on absolutist rule, interpreted itself as unpolitical: public opinion aimed at rationalising politics in the name of morality' (Habermas 1989:102).

It is the moral transformation of the institution of the political public sphere and public opinion that concerns Habermas. The transformation is in the form of the degradation of the public sphere and the liquidation of public opinion. By this he means that the public sphere is no longer a rational-critical endeavour; public opinion is non-public (i.e., not rational-critical). In the 19th and 20th century Europe,

The political public sphere of the social welfare state is characterized by a peculiar weakening of its critical functions. At one time the process of making proceedings public (Publizitat) was intended to subject persons or affairs to public reason, and to make political decisions subject to appeal before the court of public opinion. But often enough today the process of making public simply serves the arcane policies of special interests; in the form of "publicity" it wins public prestige for people or affairs, thus making them worthy of acclamation in a climate of non-public opinion (Habermas 1974: 55).

Unfortunately Habermas' argument and its process have been unfairly criticised. Thus as part of critically using his concept for my argument I would like to give him due credit first. A summary of criticisms against Habermas' are summarised in a lecture that was delivered by Hartmut Kaelble (2007). I will now juxtapose Kaelble's five criticisms with my understanding of Habermas (1989).

Firstly, Kaelble (2007) states that there is no single public sphere but rather a multiplicity thereof. My understanding is that Habermas was only interested in the political public sphere of 18th century bourgeois society. At no point did he mention that there was only one public sphere. Instead he makes the distinction between the political public sphere and the literary public sphere. He might not have been interested in other public spheres but he never argued that there was only one public sphere. In fact the subtitle of his book is 'an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society'. Thus he deliberately delimited his study. Rather a better criticism against Habermas is that he seems to think that the bourgeois political public sphere

is the most important one to which everyone should aspire. I base this criticism from his seemingly elitist and meritocratic response to the exclusionary character of the political public sphere of the 18th century bourgeois society. He states:

Consequently the Propertyless were excluded from the public of private people engaged in critical political debate without thereby violating the principle of publicity. In this sense they were not citizens at all, but persons who with talent, industry, and luck some day might be able to attain that status: until then they merely had to same claim to protection under the law as the other, without being allowed to participate in legislation themselves (Habermas 1989: 111).

Secondly Kaelble (2007) charges Habermas of being too normative and ignoring the fact that anti-democratic forces can and have used the public space to further their interests. My understanding is that the existence of anti-democratic forces was the very core of Habermas' thesis. He explains:

“public opinion takes on a different meaning depending on whether it is brought into play as a critical authority in connection with the normative mandate that the exercise of political and social power be subject to publicity or as the object to be molded in connection with a staged display of, and manipulative propagation of, publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer good, and programs. Both forms of publicity compete in the public sphere, but “the public opinion is their common addressee (Habermas 1989:236).

Habermas thus wanted to show that the development of the political public sphere was a direct result of transforming the nature of absolutist rule. Moreover he was aware of the existence of undemocratic and manipulative forces within the public sphere in the social welfare state.

Thirdly, Kaelble (2007:3) states ‘the distinction between the public sphere of citizenry and the representative sphere of the monarch and power-holders is artificial if applied to the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact these spheres are intertwined’. My response is that Habermas only made the conceptual distinction and not an empirical one. In fact in chapters IV and V he explains

how intertwined the spheres are and how the political public sphere has transformed partly because of the intertwining private and public spheres!

Fourthly, Kaelble (2007) agrees with some historians' criticisms that public spheres in the Enlightenment are not distinctly superior. In the 19th and 20th dictatorships controlled the public sphere and in democracies social movements successfully launched their statements in the media. Journalists and intellectuals remained independent. My response is that Habermas does not claim the superiority of the public sphere during the Enlightenment. Instead he is fascinated by the development and the distinct character of that public sphere. He asserts:

Public discussions about the exercise of political power which are both critical in intent and institutionally guaranteed have not always existed - they grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society and could enter into the order of the bourgeois constitutional state only as a result of a particular constellation of interests (Habermas 1974: 50).

After the development of such a sphere he notes (and is very disappointed in) its transformation into a non-public and manipulated public sphere by the media and corporations.

Finally, Kaelble (2007) criticises Habermas' thesis as limited to national public spheres and lacking to reflect or envisage transnational public spheres. I think this an unfair criticism. Habermas' intention was to study the development and degradation of the national public sphere – not anything transnational. Moreover, he was writing during and after World War II. This was a period of heightened nationalism; decolonisation; Fordism; the welfare and imperial states; and increased economic protectionism in Europe. It was therefore fitting and understandable to frame a thesis within national boundaries. Kaelble's criticism can also be directed to him. He could think of transnational public sphere probably because he lives in an age of neoliberal globalisation; regional integration; transnational flexible production; a push for minimalist states and international cooperation; and international social movements. Writers and social commentators are to a large extent influenced by contemporary events and discourses.

Contemporary events and discourse in South Africa can be analysed by partly using the concept of the public sphere in the political realm. The short discussion of the public sphere and brief explanation of imbizo lays the basis for the use of both concepts to understand the problem with the public sphere in South Africa. In order to demonstrate the problem I begin with the comparison of an imbizo and the public sphere.

Imbizo and the Public Sphere

Even though I will use both concepts to make an argument of the degradation of the public sphere in South Africa, the concepts are by no means similar in abstraction and praxis. However as I will later show – using Mamdani's (1996) analysis- I do not imply that imbizo is strictly African and rustic, and that the public sphere is strictly European. I only wish to demonstrate that I have thought about these concepts and how they can help us to understand the South African situation. Several points need to be taken into account as comparisons between imbizo and the public sphere.

Firstly an imbizo and the public sphere developed at different times and places. The temporal and special development of the public is explained by Habermas as I have noted above. However there is no evidence available about the development of imbizo. It is often assumed that this has always been a feature in many African societies. Given the history of humankind it is of course lazy and uniformed to assume the pre-ordained existence of imbizo. I can only rely on evidence of its existence but cannot make claims about its development so far.

Secondly, imbizo as we understand it in its traditional form was in the context of colonialism. Mandela's (1995) autobiography states that the regent was part of the hierarchy of British rule in South Africa. Mamdani (1996) reminds us of the mode of rule in colonial Africa that bifurcated the state into urban-rural and citizen-subject relations. With his analysis in mind one cannot glorify or romanticise imbizo. It could not have wholly served the interest of the regent's subjects. Its agenda too could not have wholly been drawn by local communities.

Thirdly, the purpose of the public sphere in the political realm served to challenge absolutist rule and discuss the exercise of political power. The purpose of imbizo is not to discuss only the exercise of political power. It includes discussions of community development; relaying important information; planning future events and; responding to a crisis. The public sphere as we understand it today also discusses more than the exercise of political power. However –

according to Habermas- it has lost that character because the discussion are manipulated by the media, the government and the corporations.

Fourthly, the similarity between imbizo and the public sphere in the political realm is the rational-critical character of discussion and formation of public opinion. The idea is to persuade by means of reason and morality. Even though the public sphere and imbizo have changed in the 21st century capitalist countries, what makes them peculiar is their belief in rational discussion, persuasion by reason and morality, and consensus.

Finally, another similarity between imbizo and the public sphere is that they both have a power centre. There is a difference though. Imbizo's power centre (tribal authority) is very ambiguous as indicated by Mamdani's mode of rule in colonial and post colonial Africa. Its power centre is in the rural areas yet this power is subject to the central colonial power in the urban areas. The public sphere's power centres are the three estates (church, prince and nobility) and later the 19 and 20th century states. However I am not suggesting that power is static and centred only in the state. Orvis (2001) demonstrate how power can be diffused through patronage, ethnicity and traditional authority. In particular, Calland (2006) explains the intricate, centrist and unfolding character of power in South Africa politics.

With this distinctions and overlaps between imbizo and the public sphere I will now analyse what has been happening to the post – apartheid South African public sphere. Four phenomena can be identified. The first one was political liberalisation & an opening up of a democratic public sphere. The second one was the re-emergence of social movements. The third one re-use of violence in national, community and organisational matters. The third one is racialisatation of national matters. The final phenomenon is the decline of public sociology.

The Public Sphere in South Africa

(a) Political liberalisation

Political liberalisation officially started in 1990 when apartheid laws were repealed and most political prisoners were released unconditionally. This created a free public space in the political real. It was free because political discourse and symbols were no longer censored or illegal. It was a public sphere because there was a power centre - the apartheid government.

This power was the subject of political discourse. The aim was to dismantle apartheid political power and create a free non-discriminatory society.

In order to create a non-discriminatory society issues had to be discussed rationally and critically in the political public sphere. Several organisations and movements were part of the rational-critical debate towards a new South Africa. These include organisations and movements such as: Congress of South African Trade Unions; Pan Africanist Congress; South African Communist Party; African National Congress; South African National Civil Society Organisation Coalition; National Party; National Coalition of Gays and Lesbians; South African Council of Churches; Conservative Party; South African Student Congress; Inkatha Freedom Party; Labour Party.

The public sphere was not just occupied by civil society organisation and political parties. The very process of transition was negotiated by a coalition of government, business, trade unions and political parties. It was the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. (CODESA). The process was highly influenced by debates during the liberalisation stage. The main debates at the time were whether South Africa was ultimately to become a federal or unitary state; capitalist or socialist state; mono or multi lingual; and of course the best ways to distribute wealth and other resources such as land and tenure rights. The debates were vibrant, rational and critical to both the negotiations process and the envisaged future.

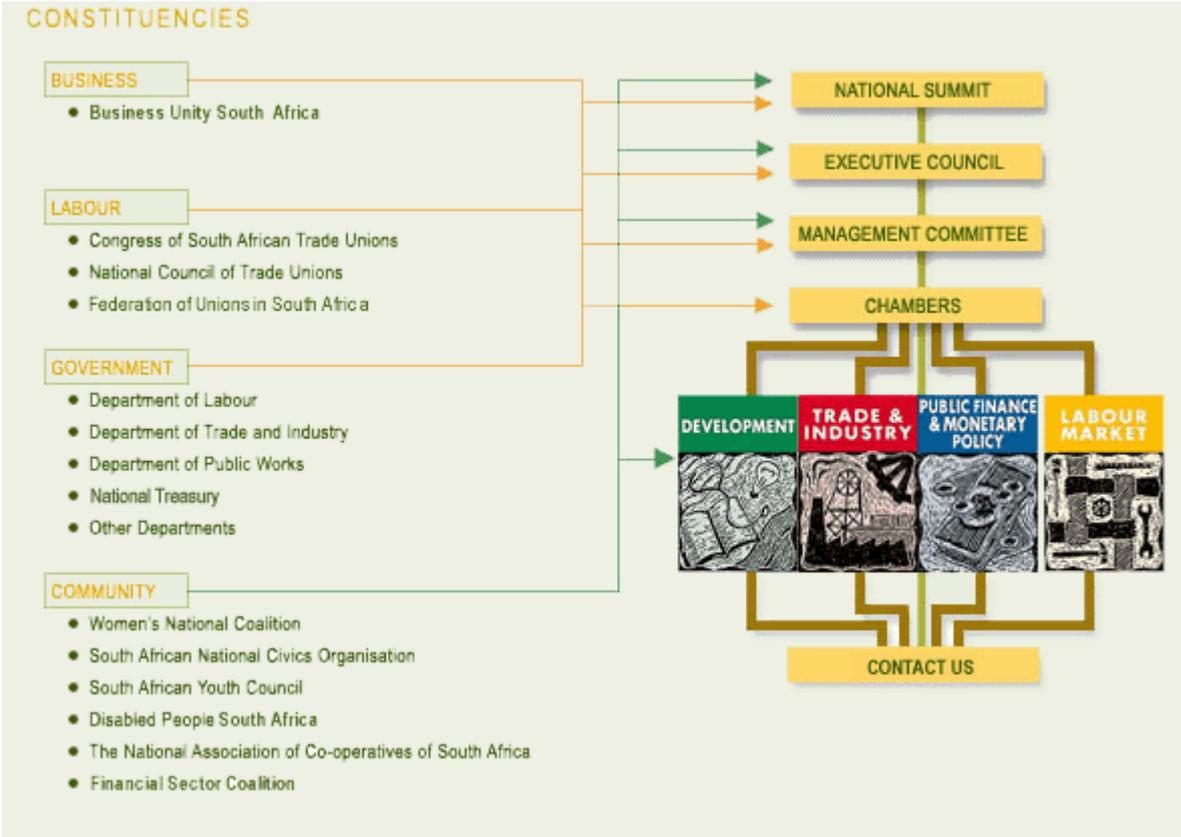
This future was not only discussed in CODESA and political circles. Universities were teaching and researching transition theories; poverty alleviation; development; social political and economic rights; alternative socio-economic and alternative political systems. Corporate organisations were discussing business opportunities in the envisaged economic liberalism but within the debates of nationalisation. The churches were debating social justice and their role in reconstructing the country. Non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs) raised awareness, money, programmes towards alleviating some social ills³. The world was discussing the future of South Africa. It was – at that time - in the spirit of the country.

³ As Ballard et al note ‘One of the most striking features of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa is that many of them are new, and a number of them emerged from the late 1990’s’ (Ballard, Habib, Valodiia and Zuern 2006:14)

Of great importance in that spirit was the establishment and engagement of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). It is a corporatist institution in which labour, government, business and civil society organisation discussed and reach consensus on socio-economic policy imperatives.

The following figure shows the range and structure of those who are involved in NEDLAC:

Figure 1: The NEDLAC structure:



(Source: www.nedlac.org.za)

What makes this institution important is not just the concerns that are discussed but because it is social dialogue.

Social dialogue is defined by the ILO to include all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information between, or among, representatives of governments, employers and workers, on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. It can exist as a tripartite process, with the government as an official party to the dialogue or it may consist of bipartite relations only between labour and management (or trade

unions and employers' organizations), with or without indirect government involvement. Social dialogue processes can be informal or institutionalised, and often it is a combination of the two. It can take place at the national, regional or at enterprise level. It can be inter-professional, sectoral or a combination of these (International Labour Organisation 2007:1).

Even though decisions that are taken in NEDLAC are non-binding, the process itself allows for critical debate - not in the political realm though. However much of the debates in NEDLACE are influenced by domestic and global political imperatives such as unequal terms of trade and ownership of natural resources. Even though NEDLAC's agenda is not necessarily neutral or all inclusive, at least it allows critical debate regarding some policy matters. This is a necessary feature of any public sphere – weather in the political realm, literary realm, or in this case socio-economic realm.

Another important aspect of South Africa's political liberalisation was the reform of labour laws. The aim of the reform was to move away from adversarial industrial relations to co-operative and peaceful one. It is what Webster (1999) refers to as the 'defusion of the Molotov cocktail'. The struggles against apartheid were not just about political power but also about economic exploitation. Hence part of the South African labour movement is termed political unionism or social movement unionism which:

'Emerges in authoritarian countries such as the Philippines, Brazil and South Africa, where workers are excluded from the central political decision making processes. It differs from conventional trade unionism in that it is concerned with labour as a social and political force, not simply as a commodity to be bargained over. As a result, its concerns go beyond the workplace to include the sphere of reproduction' (Webster 1994:281).

(b) *Re-emergence of social movements*

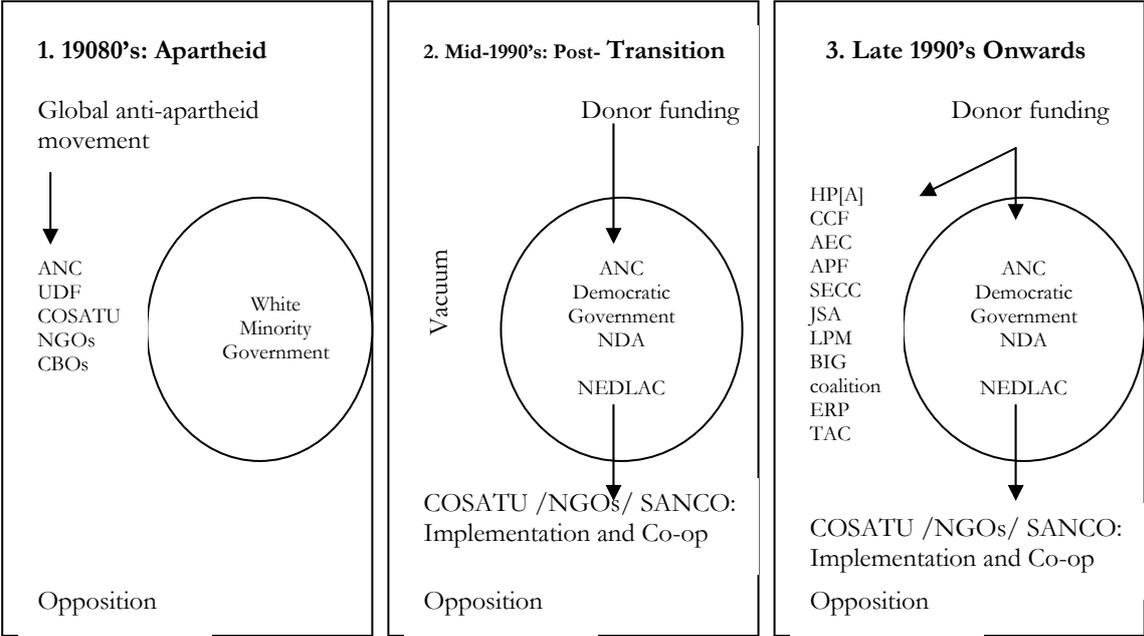
The second phenomenon is the re-emergence of social movements in South Africa. Habib et al (2006:399) argue that there are six broad categories that indicate political projects of these social movements. The categories are activisms directed against: government policy and service delivery; landlords, banks and state in eviction and land tenure cases; government policy on employment conditions and labour practices of business; corporations and

government on environmental conservation; social prejudice against minorities; and multinational organisations with regard to odious debt and restitution for their role in apartheid policies.

These movements have been operating in a free environment in which they voice their concerns, mobilise support and made some gains. For example the Treatment Action Campaign successfully mobilised and won a court case against the Minister of Health to provide universal access to anti-retroviral drugs for pregnant HIV/AIDS victims. In other examples the courts have ruled in favour of some poor communities to receive free basic services such as water.

This public sphere has not always existed as it is today in South Africa. According to Habib et al (2006) the character of the public sphere has changed over time in South Africa. Figure 2 below shows the relationship between government and social movements during and after apartheid. During the apartheid era activism at both local and international level was aimed at dismantling apartheid. The public sphere in the political realm did not exist because both the media was censored and public debates on politics were banned. The closest thing to a political public sphere was within liberal politics in parliament and intellectual circles (Welsh1975). However the ANC, UDF and COSATU were in the forefront of the struggle against apartheid power notwithstanding harassment, killings and detentions without trial by the apartheid government.

Figure 2: The reinvention of South Africa’s social movements⁴



Source: Ballard, Habib, Valodia and Zuern (2006:15).

According to Adam (1975) the apartheid government used four means of control to maintain power and privilege that was challenged by liberation movements. These means are coercive control; ideological control; political control; and economic control. Coercive control suppressed and criminalised opposition to apartheid. The judiciary was not wholly independent of the executive. Ideological control was largely propagated by the media, public education and the church. Moreover

‘It is this racially ordered reality, rather than the specific agencies of mind control, that is responsible for a depoliticized consciousness, often inconceivable to the outside observer. Blacks and Whites no longer need to be specifically socialized for their differential expectations and roles, but just

⁴ The acronyms in the figure are as follows:
 ANC African National Congress
 UDF United Democratic Front
 COSATU Congress of South African Trade Unions
 CBOs community-based organisations
 NEDLAC National Economic and Labour Council
 SANCO South African National Civic Organisation
 CCF Concerned Citizens Forum
 AEC Anti-eviction Campaign
 APF Anti-privatisation Forum
 SECC Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee
 LPM Landless People’s Movement
 JSA Jubilee South Africa
 HPA Homeless People Alliance
 TAC Treatment Action Campaign

exposed to a social structure so powerful that it commands adherence almost by itself' (Adam 1975:314).

Political control refers to government laws and policies and how they are applied differently to different 'racial' group in South Africa. The government imposed separate different development and ethnic self-governance through Bantustans. However, Bantustans did not have real power but were mere puppets of the apartheid power centre. This was also evident in economic control. The rural reserves and Bantustans depended on the apartheid economic centre as exemplified by migrant labour, black cheap labour and the so called 'civilised labour policy' which ensured skilled jobs for whites against blacks and in the Cape for 'coloureds' against blacks. The apartheid government thus manipulated the public sphere maintain the system of white privilege.

In the mid-1990's the political public sphere began to open but the space for social movements was empty. The main vehicle for debates was NEDLAC and donor funding was directed to non-governmental organisations and civic organisations. However, in the light of poor service delivery, cost-recovery policies and deepening poverty, South Africa witnessed an emergence of mostly radical social movements. Some are socialist in orientation and others are transformationalist. Some are co-operating with the government and others are seeking alternatives to the present government. Presently these movements use different tactics – including debates - towards gaining their demands. Unfortunately, the rise of these movement coincided with apartheid type violence within civil society thereby disturbing the political public sphere.

(c) Violence and vulgar in the public sphere

Violence and coercion are acceptable features of a state which has legitimate authority to sanction them within the bounds of the law. It is thus illegal and unacceptable when violence, intimidation and coercion are used by citizens over others. It is this unacceptable form of violence, intimidation and coercion that South Africa has experienced in the last 10 years.

Vulgar and violence are embedded in South Africa's history of political struggles. We have done nothing on moral regeneration. Recently ordinary South Africans express their frustration in violent manners. In November 2005 Kabelo Thibedi held a Home Affairs staff

hostage with a toy gun demanding his frustratingly long-awaited ID (identity document), In 2006 trains were turned into death coaches when some members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) engaged in a harrowingly bloody industrial action (workers who refused to partake in the strike were intimidated, assaulted or killed). In 2007 residents of Moutse of the Sekhukhune district municipality protested against their incorporation into Limpopo by burning ANC T-shirts emblazoned with the picture of President Thabo Mbeki and insulting him. In 2008 immigrants are killed and ANC members turn meetings into violent confrontations⁵. As radical social movements coincide with the violence so does the return to old apartheid categories in the South African public sphere.

In fact since the ANC 52nd Congress in 2007 the ruling party has not only been divided by personalities but vulgar and intimidation has characterised some sectors of the ANC with the ANC Youth League in the forefront of making careless utterances and gestures. This list of events is long. However, the summary observation is that the ANC has not only grown intolerant but is also losing its tradition of intellectual and respectful debates that Mandela recalls not only for the Great Place but during his activism in the ANC too. Instead we are witnessing a regress to apartheid style of the political public sphere.

(d) Racialisation of the political public sphere

Apartheid successfully separated South Africans in terms of race and the legacy thereof abounds in all aspects of post-apartheid South Africa. That is why the preamble of the South African constitution states:

‘We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity’,
(Republic of South Africa 1996: 1).

It is however sad that with one of the most liberal constitutions in the world and the struggle against racism and other forms of discrimination our political public sphere tends to revive the ghosts of the past – apartheid categories. The ANC government has grown intolerant and

⁵ In June 2008 two members of the ANC stabbed its Western Cape provincial secretary Mcebisi Skwatsha, They were expelled from the party after a disciplinary hearing. When

arrogant of criticisms. It's response to criticism can be put into four categories depending on one's 'race'. Blacks who criticise the government are regarded as afro-pessimists who believe nothing can come good from a black government. On the other hand whites who criticise the ANC are regarded as racists. The situation has deteriorated to an extent of personality attacks rather than rational-critical discussion of political matters. The media⁶ also tends to report on personalities rather than on actual government programmes. The table below shows this categorisation that tends to stifle and intimidate the political public sphere in South Africa:

Table 1: ANC government response to criticisms

	Black (African, 'Coloured' & Indian)	White
Agree with ANC government	<i>Comrade</i>	<i>Progressive</i>
Criticising ANC government	<i>Counter-revolutionary and afro-pessimist</i>	<i>Counter-revolutionary and racist</i>

A case of such categorisation can be demonstrated by the ANC Youth League responses to recent judgements on the pending corruption allegations and prosecution attempts of the ANC's president by the National Prosecuting Authority. When Judge Hilary Squires ruled that there Mr Schabir Sheik had a "generally corrupt relationship with Jacob Zume" the ANC Youth league branded him an anti-revolutionary racist. Then when Judge Nicholson ruled that there were procedural errors in prosecuting Jacob Zuma, the ANC Youth League branded the judge as progressive. The question is not so much the categorisation but that it is also extended to the judiciary which is supposed to be independent of political influences.

The threat to our public sphere is now reflected by the events following the recall and resignation of President Thabo Mbeki. The ANC has adopted some kind of Leninist democratic centralism. This is a case in which after discussion and agreements, dissent from the party is not allowed. In this case, on October 2nd the outgoing Premier of Gauteng – Mbazima Shilowa- was reprimanded by the ANC for publicly stating that President Mbeki was treated unfairly and unjustly. He made the comments as part of his reason to resign too after President Thabo Mbeki was recalled. To add, in an open letter to the secretary general of the ANC, the former Minister of Defence - Mosiua Lekota- wrote:

⁶ In 2000 the South African Human Rights Commission investigated racism in the media. The findings of concluded that racism existed in the media. The commission proposed measures such as racism awareness training and sensitising journalists to be self-conscious when writing articles.

‘However, for some time now, I have lived with the growing sense that our leadership has veered the organisation away from the established policy priorities and customary democratic norms of the ANC....

For instance, those who express views that are contrary to popular opinion in meetings and conferences of the organisation are later hounded out and purged from organisation and state structures. This is contrary to the ANC's democratic culture....

Instead of instilling respect for institutions of democracy, our leaders issue threats that if judicial proceedings do not result in outcomes they prefer, the country will be brought to a standstill....

Blatant threats to kill for certain individuals if desires other than their own are not satisfied are made with impunity. When democracy-supporting institutions intervene to stop such delinquent behaviour, more of our leaders come out in loud support for threats to kill’ (Lekota 2008:1-2)⁷.

(e) *Diminishing public sociology*

In her activism against corporate and government power in the abuse of the environment, Cock defines public sociology as: ‘a form of both intellectual and political engagement. It is defined by a critical scholarly engagement with contemporary public issues. From the standpoint of environmental sociologists the crucial public issue is the pollution and destruction of the natural resource base on which development depends’ (Cock, 2004:1). In stretching her argument Cock (2006) notes that there is a social crisis in South Africa as exemplified by deepening poverty, inequalities and poor service delivery. She argues that there is a privatisation of the public sphere in which individuals are forced to seek private measures to resolve socially produced problems such as access to water and electricity. She also points out that power is no longer in the hands of the nation state but in global networks that make it difficult to mobilise against it.

This power is perspicaciously explained for developed countries by Kuttner when he says:

⁷ As I write this paper Lekota and other dissatisfied ANC members are heading preparations for a national convention to discuss the future of South African and the possibility of forming a new break-away party from the ANC.

Investors, who are free to move money to locations of cheap wages and scant regulation, gain power at the expenses of citizens whose incomes are mainly based on wages and salaries. That tilt, in turn, engenders more deregulation and more globalism. The global money market, not the democratic electorate, becomes the arbiter of what policies are 'sound'. In this climate, a Democratic President, a Labour Prime Minister or a Social-Democratic Chancellor can snub the unions, but he'd better not offend Wall Street or the City of London or Frankfurt, (Kuttner (2000:115).

The power of multinational companies and investors is well documented in discussing the negative consequences of structural adjustment programmes in Africa and in particular the adoption of neoliberal economic policies in South Africa. Mihevc (1995) explains the negative consequences of neoliberal policies in Africa. He also stresses the emerging role of civil society organisations in challenging national governments and global corporations' power in determining both economic and political outcomes. This is essentially Habermase's public sphere at both national and transnational level. In South Africa, however, the difficulty in speaking truth to power is exacerbated by the post-1994 decline in public debates.

Nzimande laments:

'During the first decade of our freedom there has generally been a complaint about a decline in debates, particularly left debates. This has been attributed to a number of reasons, real and perceived. These include euphoria over the transition, the uncertainties accompanying all major political transitions, the emphasis on reconciliation to stabilise our democracy, a perceived ANC leadership "intolerance" of debate on major issues, a somewhat "dislocated" mass movement, and lack of appropriate public platforms for debate other than the mainstream bourgeois media. Despite major advances made during the first decade of our freedom, it is perhaps the persisting problems facing our country that are becoming a wake-up call, particularly to the left, that now we need to sober up and have more frank, critical and open debate about our transition' (Nzimande 2005:1).

Where to from here?

The traditional imbizo as we understand it is nothing near to what is happening at this moment in South Africa. There are government imbizo programmes where the government conveys information, listens to community concerns and discusses service delivery plans with communities. Hartslief (2005) argues that government imbizos have a potential and they should not be used merely as means of conveying information. However ‘It cannot be that those in government rely only on their own wisdom and that of their consultants. The government has to find administrative ways – and not the occasional *imbizo* – to structure the collective intelligence of the population into its decision processes’ (Mangu, 2005: 77-78).

It is this collective intelligence that is diminishing in the South African political public sphere. Not only is the collective diminishing but so too are some old yet relevant values. Not only is ‘public opinion’ racialised as I explained above it is also based on crony engagements. In thinking about Stephen Biko⁸ and the present situation in South Africa, Buhlungu opines:

It is pointless to speculate what Biko would have said or done had he been alive today. But what is clear is that we are a society that has not heeded the powerful message that he and others worked so hard to convey. Part of the explanation is that the dominant political narrative devalues the contribution of those who waged the struggle within the country, and elevates the contribution of those who went into exile or were imprisoned. Thus, in terms of this dominant narrative, having been a military commander in a liberation movement carries more value than the work that Steve Biko and others undertook during their time’ (Buhlungu 2008: 21)

I think there are five aspects that South African can do to ensure that the political public sphere is not further threatened. The first one is to continue to be vocal about any issue that is of importance to individuals and group. Freedom of speech is guaranteed in the constitution. However it is this freedom that has been curtailed yet reserved for a few who are able to control what might be said and how it can be interpreted. It is good that South Africa has

⁸ Stephen Bantu Biko was anti-apartheid activist who is popularly known for the Black Consciousness Movement in which he tried to do what Julius Nyerere would later call ‘decolonising the mind’.

different voices but how these voices want to be heard is a problem. It is unacceptable to intimidate or silence people.

Then the second aspect that South Africa should not compromise on is the rule of law. The recent calls by the ANC and its alliances (South African Community Party and Congress to South African Trade Unions) to find a political solution to a judicial case against the ANC president should be viewed in serious light. Regardless of political differences, the law cannot and should never be bent in favour or against any citizen. Of course such a situation can only be accomplished in a country with leaders of high moral intellectual virtue - something that is lacking in the present ANC. As I write one of the reasons for the planned national convention is to emphasise constitutionalism and the rule of law. The organisers of the convention argue that the ANC has lost its principles as adopted in the 1955 Freedom Charter.

The third aspect is the continuation of research, campaigning and teaching about the South African social crisis at communities, schools, colleges and universities. History abounds with evidence that those who seek hegemony begin by sponsoring their think tanks to manipulate the public sphere. One way to counter their strategies is providing alternative knowledge and popular voices. However we must be careful that such alternative knowledge and popular voices don't create hegemonies too. One way to guard against that is the maintenance of a rational-critical public sphere.

Thirdly I think the government of former President Nelson Mandela made a mistake to confuse a liberation fighter with a government official. Public administration should be a professional career, not a token of appreciation for having being part of the anti-apartheid struggle. Governance requires both skill and virtue to administrate the country's citizens, visitors and friends. It is people with moral, professional and political virtue that can respect and promote the public sphere.

Finally we should understand that South Africa has had different forums in its fight against apartheid and in the post-apartheid democracy. Much of the space for discussion has been institutionalised and also limited as the above arguments state. In fighting for a free public sphere we should be aware that it can never be the same as Habermas' liberal constitutional state. Rather it will function with a clear understanding that there is still a majority of South

African who are poor, illiterate or in the minorities. Often these categories are unable to partake meaningfully in the public sphere in the political real.

Moreover Lumumba-Kasango (2005) warns of the danger of thinking that we can apply liberal democracy in Africa the way it is applied in the west and America. He argues that challenges to democracy in Africa includes access to basic resources, tolerance, system of checks and balances and protection of citizens. In tackling the challenge Ndegwa maintains:

If we accept that democratization is a complex and multilayered process that is long term....analysts should look beyond the present pre-occupation with elections, constitutions, and institutional structures. We should also direct our attention to discourses enacted in civil society (with and without the state as a partner), changing social norms, and especially indications of a s spreading democratizing imperative outside state arenas (e.g., within local level associations), (Ndegwa 2001:12 – 13).

In effect then, the public sphere in South Africa is a constellation of interests including those of the media and government too. Government is competing too because as I have stated above the South African situation is such that any aspect of citizens life can be politicised. Moreover, Habermas (1989) himself observed that the welfare state brought with it the structural transformation of the public sphere. Calland (2006:331) diagrammatically shows the intricate nature of power in South Africa. Regardless of the transformation and the present political problems such as the global networks of power, both imbizo and Habermas' political sphere teach us one thing – the value and the need for rational-critical public opinion.

In terms of what is presently happening to the political public sphere in South Africa, and how we might salvage the situation, I close in agreement with both Dexter and Ndebele that:

'Possibly the most worrying feature of this new political culture is its revisionism. One of the main criticisms of Thabo Mbeki's leadership was that he had stifled or discouraged debate. Yet during his tenure as president of the ANC and the country, members of the liberation movement openly debated economic policy, health policy and related issues, the arms deal, the alleged

conspiracy against Zuma and many other issues, without the fear of being silenced, disciplined or expelled. The debate was vigorous, robust and even rough at times...For the national democratic revolution to be a success and achieve the objectives of a united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous democracy, there can be no holy cows...The biggest threat to the future of our democracy and to our constitution is the conspiracy to silence us through intimidation...The real conspiracy is the one that seeks to limit our role as citizens, to make some above the law and to undermine our constitution. We need to mobilise all our people in deference of the constitution, the rule of law and the right to speak our minds whenever we may choose to do so, without fear or favour' (Dexter, 2008:20).

'Yes we are an ordinary society now, perhaps still reeling under the expectations that destiny owes us something. But when we became free, we lost our innocence. Yet we have to realise, too, that our new status does carry enormous opportunities. These opportunities suggest that a new kind of greatness will begin to be forged once we get down to mastering the new values and rules by which we have chosen to govern ourselves; to embrace the future boldly with a flexible, if somewhat pained, creative intelligence. That could be one of the many paths towards renaissance' (Ndebele 2002:95).

Conclusion

I have argued that the political public sphere in South Africa is deteriorating because of violence, intolerance and reinvention of apartheid racial categories. The argument has been supported by analysing the South African political public sphere during and after apartheid. The conceptual framework that was used to illustrate the argument was that of imbizo and Habermas' political public sphere. The deterioration was compared with the traditional character of an imbizo and the vibrant anti-apartheid debates. I concluded that fighting for a free public sphere is the responsibility of citizens but also taking into account contemporary realities.

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