

TELL NO LIES, CLAIM NO EASY VICTORIES!

By Thabo Mbeki
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Last year on December 15, Max Boqwana, the CEO of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation (TMF) posted a Notice on this Facebook page that starting in January this year we would post a number of articles I would write.

Max wrote that some of the communications received by the TMF *"request that President Mbeki should comment on matters which arose during the years he served in our country's Presidency. These include direct criticisms that were and have been made over the years concerning his own personal conduct in Government."*

He continued and said: *"In this regard some of our interlocutors have expressed concern that if the negative things repeatedly said about him and the Governments he led are false, the failure to correct them is to allow these to become established as historical truths."*

I must confess that I decided that I should indeed use the opportunity that had arisen, to publish the promised articles, to correct a mistake we had made over the years. That mistake was our failure systematically to challenge and rebut the many falsehoods which had been propagated especially during the years I served in Government.

But before I proceed further, let me take this opportunity sincerely to thank the very many people, at home and abroad, who have read and commented on the Articles we started posting on this Facebook page from January 11.

The comments on the Articles have served as an important school since they exposed me to the thinking and the many ideas and suggestions we must obviously consider and, if possible, act upon.

This includes those comments and observations which have expressed disagreement with what I said. These have helped to ensure that all of us do indeed respect, practically, the view advanced during earlier years in China – let a hundred flowers bloom: let a hundred schools of thought contend!

Max Boqwana and the Editors of this Facebook page have informed me that they will post the figures which will indicate the recorded number of people who have accessed the Articles, including this one.

I have no doubt that those figures will confirm the reality that very many people, at home and abroad, remain intensely interested intellectually to engage the many important issues relevant to changing the human condition for the better, and the role of leadership in this regard.

In this regard my approach to the Articles has been that I should focus on presenting the facts at my disposal, on any of the matters I sought to address, rather than engage in polemical discourse.

Of course I understood that very well that others who might read the Articles could have facts other than those I might present, and would therefore challenge what I would have said, thus to arrive at both a more accurate historical record and therefore a more correct understanding of objective reality.

What informed the approach I am trying to explain is my abiding concern about what I consider to be a matter of fundamental and strategic importance to any genuinely revolutionary or progressive process radically to change society for the better, in the genuine interest of the masses of the people.

The matter of fundamental and strategic importance to which I refer is respect for the truth and honesty in the conduct of public affairs on the part of any revolutionary or progressive movement.

Related to this is of course the corollary consideration that such revolutionary or progressive movements should understand why others would resort to the use of lies and dishonesty to promote their objectives, and take the necessary action to ensure that the resultant fabrications do not get entrenched in the public mind as representing the truth.

It is in this context that I fully understood the warning contained in the Max Boqwana's Notice I mentioned earlier, when he wrote of "*the failure to correct (falsehoods, which allows) these to become established as historical truths.*"

To put this matter directly – for some years now I have been concerned that, as South Africans, we face the very serious threat and danger that the resort to untruths and dishonesty is becoming an entrenched practice in terms of the conduct of public affairs!

It was to confront this reality that, as I have said, I thought that my Articles must essentially focus on the presentation of facts on any of the matters I sought to address, thus to present practical examples of how fabrications have been used to advance particular political agendas.

Contrary to this, and as you, our readers, know, some who responded to the Articles through the commercial media made the wrong assertion which reflected their own level of understanding, that all I was trying to do through the Articles was to re-write history, such that I could present myself and my supposed legacy in a positive light.

The first edition of the on-line Bulletin, *ANC Today*, was published at the end of January 2001. In the "*Letter from the President*" which introduced the Bulletin I wrote:

"The world of ideas is also a world of struggle. ANC Today must be a combatant for the truth, for the liberation of the minds of our people, for the eradication of the colonial and apartheid legacy, for democracy, non-racism, non-sexism, prosperity and progress."

The Articles we have been publishing on this Facebook page, fifteen (15) years, later have sought to live up to this commitment – to be "*a combatant for the truth, for the liberation of the minds of the people...*"

As you, our readers, will have seen, some in our country have responded to the Articles by making passionate pleas that we should stop the writing and publication of these Articles.

It will perhaps not surprise you that exactly the same passionate pleas were made many years ago to stop the publication of the "*Letter(s) from the President*" which appeared in each edition of *ANC Today* while I was President of the ANC.

Mr Mondli Makhanya is one of those who have made the call that we should discontinue the publication of the current series of Articles. The very same Mr Makhanya made a similar call many years ago that *ANC Today* should stop publishing the "*Letter from the President*".

Then, Mr Makhanya tried to support his call among others by stating that he knew that thousands of South Africans were opposed to and embarrassed by these "*Letter(s) from the President*", and that *ANC Today* was a publication I abused unjustly to attack all those who disagreed with me.

In Volume 7, No. 31 • 10 - 16 August 2007 of *ANC Today*, the then Editor, Smuts Ngonyama, challenged Mr Makhanya on all the assertions he had made.

With regard to the matter of the abuse of the Bulletin unjustly to attack various individuals, Smuts wrote that in the 327 editions of *ANC Today* published up to that point, 311 had carried "*Letters from the President*". He then said that twenty-six (26) of these "*Letters*", this is 8,36%, had contained comments of the kind which Mr Makhanya identified as amounting to "*attacks on people who irked the President in one way or another*".

Smuts Ngonyama then wrote: "*Consequently we must conclude that Makhanya was especially offended by the contents of 8,36% of the Letters from the President that ANC Today has published. Even if we agreed with Makhanya that these letters were particularly offensive, which we do not, we would like to understand from Makhanya why 8% of the "offensive" content*

of opinion pieces written by the President justifies the suppression of the 92% that makes up the rest of this content."

As Editor, Smuts Ngonyama then offered Mr Makhanya space in *ANC Today* to respond to the comprehensive rebuttal of all his claims and assertions which the Bulletin had published and wrote:

"We would be honoured if Makhanya responds to the requests we have made (for him to substantiate his assertions) and the questions we have posed. We undertake truthfully to publish the substance of any and all responses he might kindly send to us, taking all necessary measures to ensure that we do not distort or misrepresent anything he might say.

"We do not believe that Makhanya would avoid the simple obligation to tell the truth as he sees it. That truth would be composed of verifiable facts...He could not have hoped to educate us out of our bad ways, if he was unwilling to tell us where and how, exactly, we had erred, including how we had come to base our opinions and actions on false information...

"We are determined to resist the temptation to believe that Makhanya's claims amount to nothing more than a campaign of disinformation, to which others subjected us as we fought for our liberation."

Mr Makhanya never took up the offer made by *ANC Today* freely to use the pages of the Bulletin to substantiate his assertions with facts!

I have dwelt on the matter relating to what Mr Makhanya tried to do nine (9) years ago, and repeated this year, to pose the important questions, which also relate to the latest episode – why did Mr Makhanya consider himself duty bound to try to stop the then President of the ANC from expressing his views about the current issues of the day, however wrong they might have been, and whose interests would be served by such silencing of the then President of the ANC?

It is perfectly obvious that to the extent that the *ANC Today* "Letter(s) from the President" challenged various views that had been expressed by others, which had become generally accepted as established truths, what Mr Makhanya would have achieved if we had accepted his appeal, whether he intended this or not, would have been to help ensure these "*generally accepted established truths*", however untruthful they were, were not questioned.

This also relates to the current series of Articles, and again means that if we accepted Mr Makhanya's advice, this would ensure that the fabrications which were propagated, and which we failed to challenge, remain forever in the public mind as the established truth!

Thus does the practice become entrenched as normal behaviour in the conduct of public affairs that the deliberate propagation of lies is permissible.

While I served as President of the ANC we did our best to speak out against this practice, including and especially as it had also seeped into our democratic movement.

As an example, *ANC Today*, Volume 1, No. 31 • 24 - 30 August 2001, published a Letter from the President entitled "*Tell no lies, claim no easy victories*". The Letter was responding to false allegations about how the Government was handling the matter of the restructuring of state assets, and said:

"(During the struggle against colonialism), at all times the African movement for national liberation respected and always upheld the truth. The late, celebrated African leader from Guinea-Bissau, Amilcar Cabral, expressed this in an evergreen saying when he advised the liberation fighters of his country and all Africa: "Tell no lies. Claim no easy victories".

"The ANC itself has lived on to celebrate its 90th anniversary because throughout its life, it has always striven not to tell lies and not to claim easy victories. It will live on for many more years, continuing to enjoy the confidence and support of our people, because of its continuing devotion to honesty and truthfulness..."

Speaking as President of the ANC, in 1998 I had the uncomfortable but necessary task of communicating to our own Comrades, who had convened in the 10th Congress of the South African Communist Party (SACP), the opposition of the then ANC leadership to the resort to falsifications to advance particular political objectives.

After commenting on various matters which had arisen as the SACP discussed important issues that had to do with the objectives of the Democratic Revolution after 1994, I said, among others:

"(If the Communist Party disagrees with the ANC) it is better that this is stated openly and substantiated with objective arguments, rather than advanced through techniques that are new to our movement, of spreading falsifications about the positions of any of the organisations of the Congress Movement..."

"The practice within our movement to tell lies about one another must come to an end! So must we end the practice of claiming easy party victories for the cause of the revolution on the basis of having told lies about our own comrades..."

At the 2007 ANC National Conference in Polokwane I said: "*Over the years we have seen the persistent propagation of outright falsehoods intended to*

discredit our leadership. These have included entirely false claims about a shift of the policy making function from the constitutional structures of the movement to government, intolerance of different views (and so on)...I must mention yet another challenge that has assumed a higher profile during the years since our last National Conference. This is the practice that again is entirely foreign to our movement - the practice of using untruths, of resort to dishonest means and deceit to achieve particular goals.

"Throughout the most difficult years of our struggle, our movement always refused to resort to these means to hide our reverses and difficulties and present a more optimistic picture than the circumstances justified. It was for this reason that what the late Amilcar Cabral once said gained great popularity in our ranks - tell no lies: claim no easy victories!"

During our years of struggle against apartheid we were victims of the Disinformation Campaign of the propagation of lies about the broad liberation movement and its leaders, conducted by the apartheid intelligence services under the programme named STRATCOM. Some examples of the STRATCOM campaigns appear in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Reports.

We were of course also aware of similar programmes that had been implemented elsewhere in the world to demonise and present in a negative light leaders of progressive movements, with the objective to defeat these movements. One of these was the infamous COINTELPRO, the STRATCOM of the United States FBI.

Under this COINTELPRO, Edgar Hoover, then Director of the FBI, and his colleagues, did everything they could to discredit Dr Martin Luther King Jnr, with the specific intention to tame and weaken the Civil Rights Movement and Struggle.

William Sullivan was the FBI head of Intelligence Operations under Edgar Hoover and therefore one of the principal actors against Dr King.

The April 1976 Report of the *US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities* ("Church Committee") says: "(In 1964) Assistant Director William Sullivan proposed that the FBI select a new "national Negro leader" as Dr King's successor. In proposing the plan, Sullivan stated:

"It should be clear to all of us that Martin Luther King must, at some propitious point in the future, be revealed to the people of this country and to his Negro followers as being what he actually is – a fraud, demagogue and scoundrel. When the true facts concerning his activities are presented, such should be enough, if handled properly, to take him off his pedestal and to reduce him completely in influence. When this is done, and it can be and will be done, obviously much confusion will reign, particularly among the Negro people...The Negroes will be left without a national leader of sufficiently

compelling personality to steer them in the proper direction. This is what could happen, but need not happen if the right kind of a national Negro leader could at this time be gradually developed so as to overshadow Dr King and be in the position to assume the role of the leadership of the Negro people when King has been completely discredited.

"For some months I have been thinking about this matter. One day I had an opportunity to explore this from a philosophical and sociological standpoint with [an acquaintance] whom I have known for many years...I asked [him] to give the matter some attention and if he knew any Negro of outstanding intelligence and ability to let me know and we would have a discussion. [He] has submitted to me the name of the above-captioned person. Enclosed with this memorandum is an outline of [the person's] biography which is truly remarkable for a man so young. On scanning this biography, it will be seen that [he] does have all the qualifications of the kind of a Negro I have in mind to advance to positions of national leadership..."

Of course the media is also used to propagate such STRATCOM disinformation.

The outstanding ANC leader, Joe Gqabi, was murdered by apartheid agents in Harare in July 1981. Soon after this assassination, the newspaper 'The Citizen' published an Editorial in which it made the scurrilous claim that Joe Gqabi had been killed by a faction within the ANC led by our late leader, Nelson Mandela.

The newspaper cooked up a story that the ANC was divided into two factions, one being a 'Mandela faction', and other a 'Tambo faction'. To hide the fact that an apartheid hit-squad had killed Joe Gqabi, it lied and said the 'Mandela faction' had killed Joe Gqabi 'because he had defected to the 'Tambo faction'.

All of us know of the use of gross falsifications at the international level to justify reactionary pursuits. We saw this when the US and the UK argued wrongly that they had intelligence information which confirmed that Iraq under Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, which the country did not have.

This fabrication was used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which has produced disastrous results for Iraq and the wider Middle East.

Similarly, another fabrication was used to justify the NATO military campaign against the Libyan Government led by Col Muammar Khaddafi. This has led to a virtual collapse of Libya as a State and instability and worse in the African Sahel and as far afield as Syria.

Of the falsehood that was used to justify the unacceptable NATO aggression against Libya, Prof Alan Kuperman wrote in the Boston Globe on April 14, 2011:

"Evidence is now in that President Barack Obama grossly exaggerated the humanitarian threat to justify military action in Libya. The President claimed that intervention was necessary to prevent a "bloodbath" in Benghazi, Libya's second largest City and last rebel stronghold.

"But Human Rights Watch has released data on Misurata, the next biggest city in Libya and scene of protracted fighting, revealing that Moammar Khadafy is not deliberately massacring civilians but rather narrowly targeting the armed rebels who fight against his government..."

"Nor did Khadafy ever threaten civilian massacre in Benghazi, as Obama alleged. The "no mercy" warning, of March 17, targeted rebels only, as reported by The New York Times, which noted that Libya's leader promised amnesty for those "who throw their weapons away." Khadafy even offered the rebels an escape route and open border to Egypt, to avoid a fight "to the bitter end."...

"By the time Obama claimed that intervention had prevented a bloodbath, The New York Times already had reported that "the rebels feel no loyalty to the truth in shaping their propaganda" against Khadafy and were "making vastly inflated claims of his barbaric behaviour."

The challenge we all face is to join in struggle and stand up to defeat the destructive tendency to base the conduct of public affairs on lies, dishonesty and disinformation.

This calls for vigilance on the part of the population as a whole and therefore the sustained development of the capacity among all of us of the ability to base our judgements on factual reality, to make independent critical judgements, and to recognise the real difference between "media opinion" and "public opinion".

In the end it seems clear that we should judge what is right or wrong in terms of the conduct of public affairs in our country in terms of the value system which such conduct represents and promotes, in terms of whether it serves the interests of the people as a whole, and in terms of whether it is sustained by honest and sustained accountability to the people.

It is obvious that disrespect for the truth and honesty, and deceit and double-dealing are exactly the instruments and practices which would be and are used by those who, intent to serve their own interests, are opposed to such determination of what is right or wrong.

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