

Freedom and responsibility

Popular calls from politicians to suppress or deny one's conscience are an indictment of our freedom

OPINION

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APRIL is all about freedom, celebrating the time that freedom came for all with the birth of the new South Africa, a place where all citizens are equals, and the end of a despotic government in which only some were free.

Whether we are from the previously oppressed or the oppressor, we were all freed from our respective chains in 1994, so that we all can bask in the light of living in a free and equal society. But what is the meaning of freedom?

“Freedom” stems from the word “fre-

edom”, encompassing meanings such as self-determination, exemption from despotic control and civil liberty.

When we reflect on freedom, there are three kinds of freedom we need to consider: freedom from “something”, freedom to do something and freedom as a mind-set.

“Freedom from” something refers to aspects such as freedom from oppression and freedom from a despotic government. Although obtainment of this freedom in South Africa demanded many years of struggle, costing the per-

sonal freedom and lives of many, this “freedom from” was constitutionally achieved in April 1994, and a government should now be able to keep this in good state. However, with a president found guilty by the Constitutional Court for not upholding his oath of office in regards to then public protector Thuli Madonsela's recommendations that Zuma pay back some of the money spent on his home at Nkandla, her evidence of state capture and the president's refusal to accept responsibility, and attempting to silence her, one can quite rightly question whether South Africa is really free from a despotic government. True freedom from despotic oppression demands also freedom from more implicit oppressions by those in power.

The second kind of freedom is about

the liberty to live your life the way you choose to, which is an inherent human right. However, too often we see the misconception that this freedom implies one can do whatever one wants to do, including oppress others, be selfish, unethical and corrupt, and exploit those who have no power, etc. This is an immature perspective of what freedom means. Freedom is not infinite, self-determination does not mean freedom of action with disregard to its consequences. If freedom is expressed indiscriminately, it ultimately lapses again into despotism and anarchy. Unconfined freedom can be as devastating and disruptive as legalised oppression. In the words of Madiba: “... for to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others”.

With a history of oppression in South Africa, often there is a delusion that anything done in the name of freedom is above and beyond criticism. However, it can never be just the freedom of a chosen few, but the freedom of all must be upheld. Freedom of self-determination is not only a right, but “with freedom comes responsibility” (Eleanor Roosevelt). Even when we are free, we remain responsible and accountable for everything we do. With responsibility comes the duty to respond appropriately and the liability to be held accountable for what we do. As Jean-Paul Sartre said: “Man is condemned to be free”; it is exactly because I am free, that I cannot blame anyone else for my deeds and choices. Freedom without responsibility creates a culture of hedonistic, short-term gratification, promotes arrogance

and hubris, widespread corruption and abuse of power for one's own benefit, at the cost of those you are supposed to serve. As liberated citizens, we all potentially have the making of a Nelson Mandela and a Hendrik Verwoerd in us; who we become is not from our environment, but the choices we make freely.

Thirdly, freedom is not only about constitutional freedom. If I don't feel free, notwithstanding objective freedom, I am not free. This may sound irrational, but the unconscious is a powerful part of the mind that controls our thinking and actions more than we often realise. Popular calls from politicians to suppress or deny one's conscience are an indictment of freedom. We have the freedom to make our own decisions and liability to do so responsibly.

We can choose to be enslaved by his-

tory but we have freedom now, freedom to choose to do the right thing, freedom not to suppress our conscience in support of corrupt leadership.

But we do not have the freedom not to be responsible, because “freedom can never be taken for granted” (Mandela).

Being free from oppression and having free choice is wonderful, but it is a delicate and fragile gift that we must cherish, nurture and safeguard for generations to come.

If we don't preserve it with responsibility, it will drop inconveniently to the floor of despotic anarchy, shattering into thousands of pieces, never to be whole again.

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