

LESSONS WE MUST ALL LEARN FROM THE GUPTAS AIRPLANE SAGA

Comment by Ray McCauley:

IT NEVER rains but pours for the Gupta brothers. Fresh from feeling the ire of South Africans, which I suspect they had hitherto underestimated, for the controversial landing of their private jet at Waterkloof Air Force Base, they now face a barrage of scandalous fresh allegations which include them trying to get diplomatic passports and using the president's name to get their way with government officials.

Almost all the Sunday newspapers and yesterday had one or the other story about the Guptas. I wish I could buy into the conspiracy theories about local media running a campaign against them because of rivalries in the media industry. But I have listened to radio shows, read letters to editors and seen social media ever since the Waterkloof scandal broke. It is ordinary South African citizens, not local media moguls, who are outraged.

I have listened to the ANC's Gwede Mantashe, Cosatu's Zwelinzima Vavi, the SACP's Blade Nzimande, the opposition and some government ministers. All are angry. What is emerging from their pronouncements is a message that says to the Guptas: this is where we draw the line, this far and no further.

If the Gupta brothers do not get the message, they never will. It is cold comfort that last week they issued a belated statement apologizing for the inconvenience and embarrassment the controversial landing of their jet at an air force base, full of their wedding guests, has caused South Africa. But I doubt if they understand just how deep among South Africans the hurt goes. To describe what they did as a humiliation of our country is an understatement.

We are a proud nation and a leading one in Africa. The disregard of our country's protocol and the treatment of one of the republic's National Key Points as the playground of foreign civilians coming to a private wedding is the height of diplomatic disrespect.

But what are the lessons from this sordid affair?

Let us start at the top. I was heartened to read that President Jacob Zuma was angry when he heard about this incident. But South Africans want to hear him, as their president, speak on this matter. There is a sense and anxiety among South Africans that says: "Mr. President, do you feel us on this matter? Are you with us in our anger?" Hopefully, the president will pronounce himself at the end of the government instituted inquiry.

Still on the president, Mr. Zuma is a humble and kind man; it is commendable traits his character, I suspect, that gives rise to people getting closer to him and using his name in vain. We will not prescribe who his friends should be but this country has a painful lesson of how one of its shining stars with impressive struggle and diplomatic credentials associated with dubious characters and ended up with a destroyed career, a tarnished reputation, traumatized friends and family, and a jail sentence.

The president himself and those who control access to him have a tremendous responsibility in vetting who gets close to him and for what purpose. We are still traumatized by what happened to former National Police Commissioner Jackie Selebi.

The other lesson relates to government officials. A few of them today have been suspended and are on the verge of losing their jobs should they be found to have played a role in this sorry saga. It may be that they thought given the relationship the Guptas have with the president, their landing at an army base is something he would have given a nod to. Never second-guess your political principal. If anything, get whatever instruction, especially of this nature, in

writing. Most critically, understand that you serve the republic and not private families, however proximate they are to power.

And to the Guptas, We welcome in our country but, please do not take the hospitality of South Africans for granted. In granting you citizenship and the right to do business in their country, they were by no means implying you can do as you please with their national assets and leaders. A little bit of modesty and restraint will help a great deal if you want your stay in South Africa to be pleasant. I am sure when you chose to settle in this country it was not your intention to make unpleasant headlines. Introspect yourselves and check if your conduct has not given rise to what, I am afraid, is becoming a negative disposition towards yourselves.

Lastly, to those of our leaders who are in the habit of meekly responding to business people when they summon them to their private residences to give you instructions or to lobby you, please stop it. If it does not hurt your pride, it hurts ours – the people who put you in power.

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