

FREEDOM COMES WITH RESPONSIBILITY

Comment by Pastor Ray,

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Today we end the celebration of Freedom Month and are three days into the last year beginning our journey towards 20 Years of Freedom and Democracy. This milestone will be an opportunity for all of us, black and white, to consolidate the achievements we have so far attained as a nation and to coalesce around a common vision.

I do suspect there will be lots of studies by government, think-tanks and academic institutions reflecting on the successes and fault lines of the past twenty years. We should anticipate them with keenness. But before we arrive at that juncture, I thought it appropriate - seeing today marks the end of Freedom Month - to reflect on what freedom means and what obligations it imposes on us.

It cannot be denied that today, freedom stands unchallenged as the supreme goal and value of the civilized world. Many around the world were prepared, by their words and deeds, to die for freedom. In South Africa, our own Nelson Mandela, speaking from the dock at the opening of his trial on charges of sabotage in Pretoria, April 20 1964 said freedom was an ideal for which he was prepared to die.

Indeed many of our fellow citizens paid the ultimate prize for us to enjoy the freedom we do have today. Their sacrifices place on the responsibility to deeply reflect on what they fought for and whether they would be happy with some of the things that are happening in our democratic dispensation. Would Chris Hani, for example, be happy with the lack of service delivery we see in some of our disadvantaged communities? Would he be happy with public servants who treat the poor with disdain and pilfer state coffers? I doubt it.

However, he would be happy, just like we all should be, with the progress we have made in the delivery of basic amenities to all our citizens and with the transformation of the public service. But he wouldn't be happy with aspects where we have fallen short of freedom's promise. Equally, we shouldn't be.

When there are children who are still in mud schools and lack basic facilities like toilets, we shouldn't be happy. When there are workers who are still exploited by employers, we shouldn't be happy. When income gap between the rich and the poor remain among the highest in the world, we shouldn't be happy. When there are still citizens who go to bed hungry, we shouldn't be happy. When there are children who are still being abused, we shouldn't be happy. When there is still police brutality we shouldn't be happy and when there is still corruption we shouldn't be happy.

But all the above, I submit, are manifestations of the leftover ways of thinking that held this country bondage in the past. The kind of thinking that breeds the social ills described above can still thwart the promise of our freedom. We have yet to fully comprehend the damage on people that was caused by a system that told them what to do, when to do it, how to do it and where to do it.

When the hour of freedom struck on 27 April 1994 many of us could not handle it. Today, many still can't. You see, freedom comes with certain responsibilities. For example, a truly liberated person does not wait for the master to tell him when and how to deliver textbooks to school children. However, a person who lives in freedom land but with an oppressed mentality may still need the oppressor to tell him/her what to do, when and how.

This is the one area of our freedom where I feel we have not paid particular attention: liberation of the mind and the responsibility that comes with freedom. Slave owners are responsible for the welfare of their slaves - and we know what a shoddy job they do of it. Liberated people are responsible for their own destiny.

If we are going to reap the fruit of our freedom and build South Africa into the great nation it can become, it is going to take liberated minds and leaders and citizens who are prepared to take responsibility. The responsibility to manage our freedom and to build South Africa cannot be transferred to anyone. It is as much a collective as it is an individual responsibility.

Experts in business say whatever you mismanage, you will lose. Politicians, businesses, civil servants, religious leaders, leaders of families, schools and other social institutions who have been given the freedom and responsibility to lead must take heed of this warning.

So, as we close Freedom Month, let us pause and reflect on how we are managing our freedom, both as a nation and as individual citizens.

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