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**Wounded SA needs healing**

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*INLSA*

SAD INDICTMENT: People protest outside the Roodepoort Magistrates Court during an appearance of the seven accused in the case of the gang rape of a Soweto teen recently. Picture: Mujahid Safodien

No person or group of people owns our freedom. That must be clear. Our freedom belongs to the citizens of this country, collectively. So, we are all free to do or say whatever we want – within the rules, of course.

But for those of us who were physically and practically involved in the Struggle, who were harassed by the forces of the regime, arrested and imprisoned, who saw comrades maimed or killed, it hurts to see or hear people doing or saying things that seek to devalue that freedom. While accepting intellectually that there would always be “angels” and “devils” in every society, at an emotional level you still get bruised. This happens because involvement in the Struggle was not just an ideological, political and organisational thing, but also an emotional investment.

It was during the emotionally and morally draining recent past, when the nation was grappling with the gang rape of a 17-year-old mentally disabled girl by several men and boys, and the revelations of the rape of a mentally handicapped boy by a 17-year-old girl, allegedly aided and abetted by her older sister, that a woman remarked: “This freedom is just pearls before swine.”

She said this after listening to a man talking about a phenomenon where well-heeled women around Polokwane reportedly pick up street boys in their luxury cars, take them to their big houses, order them to take a bath, feed them, sleep with them, give them money and let them go. He described it as sophisticated rape. It was the first time I heard the story and I have absolutely no idea about its veracity.

Anyway, we have heard so much about rape in recent days that we are all seething with anger and numb with horror and shame. In addition to the ones already mentioned, there is the heart-wrenching story of the little girl in KwaZulu-Natal who was raped, throttled and had her eye gouged out by a 15-year-old neighbour. As if that was not enough, we got reports of another primary school girl and her brother who were raped by their teacher in the Eastern Cape.

These just add to the other horrors we have had to contend with earlier relating to acts in Welkom where a young man was murdered in a graveyard, skinned, dismembered and some of his body parts stored in a refrigerator. Not to forget another incident in Joburg where girls were invited to a koppie by boys, doused with petrol and set alight. One of the girls died.

What is the import of all these? Do they mean that we do not deserve the democracy we fought for, and that those of us who made sacrifices did so in vain? Pearls before swine?

It is clear that we are a society that performs far below the potential offered by the constitution, legal arrangements and the resources at our disposal. Our constitutional arrangements ought to free us to soar in different spheres of human endeavour, but we are very mediocre in most fields.

We do not respect one another’s human rights as the constitution enjoins us to. Despite our triumph over racial discrimination, instances of racial bigotry still abound. Gender violence is at frightening levels.

Our budget allocations to education and health are above average, yet both systems are broken. Countries with more modest resources do much better in these areas. The same scenario plays out in other areas of our lives, such as municipal services and the criminal justice system.

It would seem that our biggest problem lies in the psychological and moral realms. We are a broken society, or a “wounded” one, as Dr Mamphela Ramphele often says.

There is a sense that the new progressive constitution was “imposed” on this broken society without any attempt whatsoever to “teach” people what its implications are.

Considering that this country, in its many centuries of existence, had never been a democracy, it is perhaps astonishing that we did not do even worse. Ours has been a country of wars, oppression, cruelty and strife for many generations. Before 1994, none of us had lived in a democracy, except the few who might have stayed in foreign democratic countries.

It seems we should have taken time to heal our society of the sickness of the past at the same time as we educate one another about the rights and obligations of the new dispensation. We should have civic education programmes in our schools, churches, unions and other such forums that exist in our society.

With centuries of socialisation of a particular nature, many people in our country, even those who intellectually understand the constitution, do not know what their roles and patterns of behaviour are in the new order. This then breeds conflict in our interpersonal relations.

But pearls before swine? No! Everybody, despite their imperfections, deserves freedom.

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