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*Striving for free, fair and credible elections in 2009*

**PROMOTING POLITICAL TOLERANCE: EXPERIENCES  
FROM SELECTED COUNTRIES**

A presentation by

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## Introduction

Taking a tolerant stance is one of the more difficult tasks citizens face in a society. We are not born tolerant, but must learn to be tolerant<sup>1</sup>.

We recently witnessed the sentencing of an Iraqi journalist to three years' imprisonment after he threw his shoes at then-American President George W Bush during a press conference. He was found guilty on the crime of assaulting a foreign leader. Could this be a case of political intolerance: on the part of the journalist or the authorities?



How about the egg pelting incident involving former UK British Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, in an election campaign in 2001? Unlike George Bush, who dodged the shoes and simply left the matter to the Iraqi authorities to deal with, Prescott took the law in his own hands and punched the protester in the name of self-defence. Is the UK case one of political intolerance: on the part of the protester or the politician?

Looking at the two incidents above, it is extremely difficult to define what political tolerance is and is not. But having followed the public debate about the two incidents, one can safely conclude that the right answer depends on where one stands, ideologically speaking, on the issue at hand. To those opposed to America's occupation of Iraq, the shoe-throwing incident, just like egg-pelting, is justifiable. But those opposed to shoe or egg-throwing argue that such actions are manifestations of political intolerance and extremism. So, who is right and who is wrong?

While it is difficult to hold convergent views on the meaning of political intolerance in the context of the incidents raised above, there are well-established universal norms and principles to guide our attitude and stance on critical issues such as Apartheid, colonialism, racism, and sexism. It is therefore normal and acceptable for any society to express intolerance against such social ills and to "throw eggs and shoes" at whoever espouses such ideologies.

Against this background, this presentation will attempt to unpack the meaning of political tolerance, identify causes of political intolerance, and propose ways to combat intolerance in younger democracies, such as Namibia and others in Africa. This list of strategies to combat political intolerance is not expected to be conclusive, and thus this presentation will only seek to generate debate among Namibian political actors on improving the country's legal framework for elections in order to reduce incidents of political intolerance especially in preparation for the 2009 general elections.

## **Context**

The exercise of political tolerance and promoting a culture political pluralism are a cornerstone of democracy. For democracy to work well, citizens must be willing to tolerate the expression of a plurality of political opinions, including those different to their own. Democracy is unthinkable when only the dominant political discourse and views are heard.

Tight control or the monopoly of information by the dominant class of society stifles debate and undermines citizen's ability to influence government's decisions and policies. All ideas must therefore be allowed a place in the "*market place of ideas*"<sup>2</sup>. The best public policy should arise out of competition among divergent views and ideas that are expressed in a free and transparent public discourse. Writing about liberty, John Stuart Mill expands on the idea of the '*market place of ideas*' as follows:

*"...we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it"*<sup>3</sup>.

Raj Dahai, 2004, argues this point further by saying a democratic society needs pluralist formation of knowledge for citizens to participate effectively in the state, market and civil society and to attain empowerment<sup>4</sup>.

## **What is political tolerance, and what is political intolerance?**

According to Avery Patricia, 2001, political tolerance can be defined as "*the willingness to extend basic rights and civil liberties to persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own*"<sup>5</sup>. This is a central tenet of liberal democracy. Democracy must encourage a wide array of ideas, values and beliefs even those which may offend segments of the population, provided such rights and freedoms are guaranteed in the laws of the land. Democracy functions better when there is perfect harmony between the will of the majority and respect for the rights individuals and groups in the minority. Without safeguards for the free expression of divergent opinions, Patricia argues, we risk a "*tyranny of the majority*". In a free and open society, public deliberation should expose "bad" ideas instead of suppressing them.

The late ANC leader Chris Hani expanded on this notion by saying:

*“We as the ANC-led liberation alliance have nothing to fear and everything to gain from a climate of political tolerance. We do not fear open context and free debate with other organisations ... open debate can only serve to uncover the bankruptcy of our political opponents<sup>6</sup>.”*

President Hifikepunye Pohamba, 2009, contributes to this discourse by pointing out that political power (in Namibia) must be won or lost on the battle field of ideas, through the strength of persuasion<sup>7</sup>.

In simpler terms, political (and social) tolerance means accepting (accommodating, living and putting up with, and respecting) the views and ideas of others you do not agree with.

On the other hand, Fillemon Immanuel<sup>8</sup>, a Namibian scholar, defines political intolerance as the lack of respect, acceptance and accommodation for others in the events of exercising openly their rights and freedoms. Political intolerance obtains when a group or an individual is not willing to let others act, speak or think differently from the opinion or views held by such an individual or group. In this case, an individual or a group may be discriminated against simply because of their political beliefs or association. In many instances, violence and intimidation is the natural reaction of intolerant people to views they consider inconsistent with theirs.

Available literature indicates that societies with longstanding democratic traditions have higher levels of political tolerance compared to newer democracies. For example, a recent study by Diane Orces about political intolerance in the Americas showed that countries such as Canada, US, and Costa Rica displayed low level of political intolerance because of higher levels of democratic consolidation, compared to fledgling democracies, such as Panama, Bolivia, Honduras, and Ecuador. The study further revealed that democracy thrived better in a climate of political tolerance compared to one of intolerance<sup>9</sup>.

Closer home in Africa, the early democratisation process which accompanied decolonisation in the 1960s saw higher levels of political intolerance compared to the ‘second liberation’ in the 1980s. With nation-building and national unity as the national rallying cry during decolonisation, political dissent was considered an anathema to this urgent political goal. This led to the outlawing of opposition parties, gagging of the media, and centralisation of state power under totalitarian rule. Prince Mashele, 2009, summarises this experiences most succinctly when referring to Kenya during the Daniel Arab Moi era<sup>10</sup>. Everything was then tied to the ruling KANU party, and citizens were obliged to follow the footsteps of the leader under the philosophy of *Nyayo (footsteps)*: Moi himself was the *leader and pathfinder* and the rest of society the *followers*. Anybody who dared to differ faced two hard realities: you disappear or flee into exile. This period saw immense polarisation and conflicts as citizens jostled for power and resources, a situation which pitted Kenyans against each other mainly along ethnic and regional lines.

Even the democratisation process in the 1990s did not help to ameliorate the deep-rooted intolerance in Kenya. Those who felt marginalised and discriminated against

over land and economic opportunities, in the past, such as the *Luo* and the *Kalenjin*, saw democratisation and elections as an opportunity to redress such historical inequalities. The violent conflict which broke out in the aftermath of the 2006 Kenyan elections was a direct result of such deep rooted animosity between political and ethnic groups, and elections were thus only a trigger rather than the root cause of this conflict<sup>11</sup>.

## **Main causes political intolerance and their antidotes**

As stated earlier, taking a tolerant stance is one of the more difficult tasks people face: we are not born tolerant, but must learn to be tolerant.

People tend to be politically intolerant **when their interest is threatened or when they stand to lose benefits, powers and rights they (exclusively) enjoyed**. For example, Apartheid South Africa was intolerant of the ANC because of the belief that the ANC espoused ideologies, including communism, which were anathematic to the interest of white minority rule. Such intolerance was unleashed through the banning of the ANC; imprisoning its leaders and supporters; outlawing publicity material propagating the ANC's cause; and bombing ANC infrastructure in neighbouring countries and beyond. The use of violence was central to the South African government's combat strategy against the ANC. They fought tooth and nail to hold onto power up until they could resist no more and were forced to the negotiation table, thus paving the way for the country's democratisation in the early 1990s.

Yet similar incidents of intolerance involving IFP and ANC supporters marked South Africa's political landscape in the early 1990s and even threatened to derail the democratisation process. Political intolerance between the two parties was marked by numerous retaliation killings as each party declared certain areas as *no-go areas* to their opponents. Each party disrupted the other's political activities, threatened and intimidated their leaders and supporters.

A further cause of political intolerance is **bigotry** and **dogmatism**, i.e. "my views and beliefs are true and always right". It is common some political actors, especially the ruling elite, to believe their views, values, and aspirations are absolute or gospel truth which all must follow without question. This was the case in Kenya during the Moi era, when the leader's philosophy was the dominant discourse never to be questioned or criticized.

Similarly, among Southern Africa liberation movements which enjoy immense political dominance, there is tendency to want to "hegemonise" ideas, values, and the public discourse as a whole. Zackie Achmat, 2009, wrote on this issue saying that so often when leaders have been criticized, even legitimately so, "race" becomes a convenient tool to discredit the argument without proper consideration of its merits<sup>12</sup>. In this context, anybody who expresses divergent views from those held by the ruling elite is labelled and dismissed as "*racist, reactionary sell-out, agent of imperialism, idiot, political prostitute, cockroach, dog, traitor, or prophet of doom*". Could our language change to allow us to differ on issues without labelling each other, Achmat asked. We need to learn to differentiate between acknowledging a person's right to express dissident views and approving of the person's views.

Anything else will breed bigotry and arbitrary orthodoxy which in turn undermines the pluralist market of ideas which is critical for democracy to grow and deepen.

The **politics of the belly** is another cause of political intolerance. Where and when people in a party, government, or in society at large, seek to position themselves to be considered for plum jobs, lucrative tender, or for any political favour, they tend to do anything, and stop at nothing, to achieve their ulterior goals. They will badmouth and backstab friends and foes alike using any means at their disposal: from spreading false information via gossip and hoax e-mails to even plotting the “elimination” of whoever they dislike or disagree with.

Political intolerance abounds **when citizens feel the avenues for dialogue and constructive engagement are restricted or shut down**. Political pluralism and diversity requires an environment in which citizens engage with each other and with public institutions in a free and open manner. If such avenues are non-existent or limited, people become disenchanted with democracy and revert to undemocratic (sometimes violent) means to vent out their frustration and anger. In this context, free and open media serve as a useful tool for citizens to communicate their concerns to their elected leaders and for leaders to explain decisions and policies to their constituencies. Democracy requires a vibrant media that serves as the marketplace of ideas. The same applies to other democratic institutions such as parliament, political parties, and civil society. These institutions create useful avenues for citizen engagement with their elected representatives thus making democracy both representative and participatory.

A further cause of political intolerance is **citizen and political actors’ ignorance about the rules of engagement in a democracy**. More often than not, citizens do not understand the rules that underpin democracy. If democracy is about the free flow of information, free exchange of ideas among free and equal citizens, and if democracy guarantees free assembly, association, and engagement of people to influence the public discourse, then the question that arises is: why do some people consider it their right to say this area, village, or neighbourhood belongs to party A, or this is private land and we do not allow party politics here; or this our tribal land, and your party has no support in this area, go elsewhere to your tribesmen for them to vote for you? This situation shows there is a need to enlighten citizens, community and party leaders alike, to understand that for democracy to flourish the marketplace of ideas must also be seen to flourish.

Political intolerance also grows in **any environment where the rules of the democratic game are either non-existent, not clearly-defined, are simply not enforced, or are enforced unfairly**. For example, where electoral systems and processes are skewed in favour of one group or political party and to the disadvantage of others; where electoral institutions lack independence and impartiality, or resources to carry out their mandate without fear, favour or prejudices; where electoral rules and procedures tend to inhibit free and open electioneering, or undermine a levelled playing for all in an election; or bar aggrieved parties from seeking and obtaining justice from courts; and where no regular and inclusive opportunities exist to reform electoral law, surely political intolerance will grow and will burst forth into the open in one way or another, over time.

Political intolerance also results from **political parties and individuals who have lost national appeal and popularity and have now resorted to using the “tribal or ethnic card” for their political survival.** Such people would seek to mobilise political support along ethnic and regional lines. Although racialized and ethnicized parties or individuals may not *per se* be intolerant, the fact that they pursue narrow sectarian interests could put them on a collision course with the national interest, thus precipitating a situation of political intolerance. It is important to say that there is nothing wrong with the existence of racial or ethnic parties in general, but we must guard against the use of ethnic differences to mobilise political support because such accentuation of differences could cause ethnic polarisation and hatred which instead degenerate into violence. Rwanda and Burundi some ten years ago and Kenya recently are good cases in point to illustrate the danger of ethnic politics. However, as democracy grows and deepens, ethnic parties could prove useful in articulating ethnic interests which nationalist parties may tend to neglect. Such smaller parties could even be more effective vehicles for representative democracy especially when they come together to form electoral alliances or coalitions.

In response to the challenges posed to democracy by political intolerance, I present some antidotes to political intolerance:

- Creating **avenues for citizen engagement** with each other, their elected leaders, and society at large: a vibrant media, independent civil society, active political parties, and a representative parliament.
- Developing and strengthening the **code of conduct for political parties and candidates.** This goes with developing and sharpening early warning systems in order to identify potential areas where incidents of political intolerance are expected and mobilizing resources to counteract such incidents. In India for example, the election management body would work with the Police to identify individuals who are prone to instigate violence during elections, and have such individuals warned and put under surveillance. The rule of the game (or code of conduct) should include public undertaking by political parties to adhere to the code of conduct and to accept sanctions or penalties in the event of any violation. But such sanctions and penalties should have legal force for them to be an effective deterrence.
- **Elaborate civic education** to enlighten citizens about their rights and obligations in a democracy, especially promoting political tolerance. Research has revealed that the higher the level of education, the more tolerant of divergent views people are. This means it is essential to incorporate democracy education, including teaching on political tolerance, in the school curriculum.
- **Sound legal framework for electoral conduct:** better electoral systems, independent election administration; free and accessible voter registration; free and open competition among political parties to canvas votes; professional and transparent conduct of elections and the vote count; effective systems for resolving electoral disputes; regular and inclusive electoral law reform;
- In Namibia, political parties should be reminded that most of them were party to the **signing of the Namibian Constitution** which is the supreme law of the

land. This document sets the framework for our conduct in a democracy including the best ways to promoting political tolerance

- In the Constitution, our founding fathers/mothers acknowledge the threats of racism, colonialism, and Apartheid to Namibia's unity, nationhood and statehood, and go on to commit themselves never to tolerate these social ills, and never to deny any citizen including future generations, their hard won freedoms and rights as contemplated under Articles 17 and 21 of the Constitutions.
- The Constitution further refers to all Namibians as members of the human family who deserve to be treated with dignity, respect and tolerance, even in the face of divergences of views and values. This means our definition of the concept of "we" or "us" should be cast more widely to include those for long considered our political foes and "the others". It is time we embrace the 'Ubuntu' culture and become each other's keeper, rather than making wars over political differences.
- Every act of political intolerance affects our country's image abroad, and rightly or wrongly, every time an incident of political violence happens, we all suffer bad press, bad image, and our democracy is the ultimate loser, and not the individual who throws stones, disrupts others political meeting, intimidates others from voting, etc. President Hifikepunye Pohamba earlier this year reminded us about this point by saying: "*any act of political violence taints the image of our country and discredits our credentials as a peace loving country founded on the principles of multi-party democracy and the rule of law*"<sup>13</sup>
- So, we are in this together, and together we can protect our country and our democracy, including our hard won freedoms and rights.
- Democracy thrives when you protect my freedoms and rights and I yours.
- Yes, we can!

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