



## **The Role of the Church in the Upcoming Elections: *Visibility and Presence***

**Vuyani Vellem (Dr)**

**Deputy General Secretary South African Council of Churches**

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### **Abstract**

The paper generally seeks to raise philosophical and theoretical implications of the church's participation in public life in relation specifically to the upcoming elections of 2009. In traditional theology there is metaphor of 'church visible and church invisible' which this paper employs subversively to coin a metaphor of 'invisible visibility and visible invisibility' to probe the visibility and absence of the church in our volatile season of elections. The paper employs the metaphor to probe the redemptive, unifying and dignifying potential of the church in public life whose 'absence' has been a subject of debate for some time .

### **Salutations**

Let me first salute the leadership of our sister ecumenical body Diakonia and its leadership. My special thanks to the Executive Director Mrs Mvambo-Dandala and the Chairperson of the IEC Dr Bam for the special honour they have bestowed on me to come and deliver this address.

Cardinal Napier, Guests, Sisters and Brothers:

Allow me to take this opportunity and bring you greetings from the SACC's General Secretariat and the Praesidium, especially Prof Tinyiko Maluleke who 'commanded' me

to honour this invitation almost twenty four hours ago without allowing me any options! I almost am about to give an extemporaneous talk this morning. In obedience to 'command,' 'invitation,' 'honour,' 'privilege,' 'calling'- let me humbly submit that I will not attempt to put my feet in Dr Brigalia Bam's shoes. Even if I wanted to there is very little 'femininity in my physique and her motherly features in my being apart from the invisible genes I certainly inherited from my mother!

I am however, a conscious believer in gender equality and am certain that Dr Bam was poised to do better in advancing, representing and articulating that important discourse in relation to the task at hand.

Dr Bam has requested me to humbly tender her apology and acknowledges that she made a promise she regrettably failed to keep. As we now speak she is making a presentation to the African leaders designated the 'Group of the Wise' who have visited the country to assess the situation in our precarious season of elections. Her heart is with us. Ladies and gentlemen, in the name our Lord and Saviour I salute you all.

I purpose in this paper to problematise the visible invisibility and invisible visibility of the church in public life today. I will attempt to be provocative by metaphorically evoking 'mists, myths and mirages' that need to be unveiled, demystified and clarified for the church to regain its visibility in what others have dubbed the second transition, and the church's role in the upcoming election. I will briefly answer these questions by intimating the SACC's *Imvuselelo* campaign and its theological covenant about to be unveiled. Hopefully these will add some value in our quest for the visible role of the church in the upcoming elections.

## Visible invisibility and invisible Visibility of the Church

The visible invisibility and invisible visibility<sup>1</sup> of the church in the coming elections and beyond the election date is a serious matter of concern for me. The coming elections seem countenanced to be different, momentous, historic and epochal! “These elections mark an important milestone in the life of our young democracy” the caption in the invitation of this event reads.

It goes further to say, “however in a land filled with rich diversity which should be celebrated and embraced, we are still haunted by division, mistrust and an awful tendency to resolve differences through violence.” After the announcement of the 2009 election date by President Motlanthe, the South African Council of Churches added its voice and released a statement which reads, in relation to our topic:

While we welcome the official declaration of the election date, the SACC is profoundly concerned about political intolerance, intimidation and the potential for violence that will mar our proud and short history of democratic elections ( 13 Feb 2009.)

There seems to be a tacit consensus between these two organizations that all the noble values, promises and dreams of our democracy are waning due to “an awful tendency to resolve difference through violence” or “the potential for violence to mar our proud and short history of democratic elections.” Indeed if violence is blurring our vision, dreams and hopes of our democratic processes, the need to unmask this violence is the greatest challenge to the church in public life today. There are many forms of violence –visible and invisible -the most dangerous perhaps being the invisible, marauding violence of economic deprivation. These visible and invisible forms of violence are at the core of the challenge to the church’s visibility *en route* to the polls in 2009 and beyond. Maluleke (2008) suggests a number of reasons ‘why the church is nowhere to be seen.’ Let me

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<sup>1</sup> Read Mosala’s notion of ‘absent presences and present absences’ to interpret the paradox .

simply enumerate a few of these reasons by way of illustration, without delving much into explaining them. The thesis is, however important to keep in mind.

Maluleke argues among others that Apartheid was a unifying force in the past, and the end of the Cold War fragmented ecumenical solidarity. Maluleke further probes if the church has not been too close to government and whether church leadership is now part of the new elite.

Maluleke goes on to assert that the church is invisible as it is ostensibly out maneuvered by Government and politicians, having lost its hegemony and a host of experienced and proven leaders. If these and other reasons that have been suggested by Maluleke and others who have lamented the invisibility of the church, in the marauding threat of violence *en route* to the 2009 elections on the 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2009, how visible or invisible is the church in the current violence. How visible is the church in invisible forms of violence and invisible in visible forms of violence? Do we recall the following words?

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Men do not light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket. They set it on a stand where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way our light must shine before men so that they see goodness in your acts and give praise to your heavenly Father (Matt 5: 14 – 16).

I am not preaching, please do not be afraid. But I am not afraid too of my public display of ‘foolishness’ that is wisdom in Christ! The somewhat imperative statement: “You are the light of the world” pitched in the Beatitudes - Jesus’ “manifesto”, is so telling when we take note of the fact that it was uttered in the context of empire. Empires mystify, survive on myths and misty visions. This premise constitutes the basis for my inclination and approach of the topic you have assigned me, which I have slanted in this manner: *The Role of the Church in the Upcoming Elections: Visibility and Presence*. The Greek word translated blessed, in the Beatitudes signifies deeper joy – joy in the soul, or soulful joy – joy in the chamber of faith, the soul. It is joy of the soul akin to one attainable

through our goal for reconstruction and development of the soul. It is fiery enthusiasm, joy, happiness and contentment - life in death in the context of empire.<sup>2</sup>

The visibly invisible church under the imperial ‘bushel basket,’ the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ declare, should be set atop and set on a stand for light to shine in God’s household. Visibility and presence are not an option, but the character and identity of the church whose blessings are intrinsic and inseparable from ‘the light set on a stand’ through the subversive mission of Jesus Christ in the midst of a mystifying, myth construing, death-dealing empire.

Let me now throw a pebble into the waters that are not transparent in search for the visibility of the church.

## **Mirages, Mists and Myths on the Way to Elections**

If Maluleke’s premises for the absence of the church in public life are anything to go by, let us build on them to demystify the mirages, mists and myths that continue to impede the church’s presence and visibility in public life. I have deliberately chosen to be daring and provocative in some of the cases and examples I have chose.

### ***The mirages, mists and myths of church and politics***

Chief Albert Luthuli, a Nobel Peace laureate and former President of the ANC once said:

As Christians we need moral courage re-inforced by love, patience, tolerance, and tact, in educating and persuading fellow-citizens within and without the Church to accept and support the Christian approach to the complex and vital issues that face us. In the modern pressure-group State it is incumbent upon Christians as individuals or as groups

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<sup>2</sup> Read the famous liberation view of the Gospel “blessed are the poor.”

to participate in political activities in order to ensure that political and other national issues are considered and settled in the light of fundamental Christian principles.

Through the Church Christians should be the guardians of the ethical principles on which society must be built. Any indifference on their part in this regard would lay them open to a charge of disloyalty to our Master. My plea here is that we as Christians should not shirk our responsibility, but should consciously and courageously assert what we believe to be a Christian solution to national questions.

Recently, Dr Mvume Dandala, a former President of the South African Council of Churches, an ecumenical giant - was on national television accepting nomination to be the face of Cope in the upcoming elections. In his acceptance speech he said that this country cannot be allowed to go in a downward spiral, 'there are people in South Africa.' Prof Russel Botman himself a former president of the South African Council of Churches has recently declined the nomination for the premiership of the Western Cape Province. Earlier, the Rev Frank Chikane also declined the nomination by Cope for the position of Premier in Gauteng. I can be daring! I am certain that is what you are saying, what is he going to say now? But the current President of the ANC is a pastor. The leader of the ACDP is a pastor and his party bears the name Christian! Not merely what they say, but what they signify for the church's role needs to be demystified.

Does the presence and visibility of former church leaders in politics necessarily expand the political sphere to include faith and religion? Does an appeal by a lay person, a colossal political leader to the citizens to embrace Christian convictions necessarily expand the political sphere to include faith convictions? The reverse of these questions is equally true. Does Christian faith become essentially expanded to include politics when Christian leaders move into politics and when political leaders appeal to Christian values? Are these some of the questions that haunt the minds of the ordinary people out there on the ground? 'the church in the bushel basket under the table?' I think so. But more so these questions remain redolent with mirages, mists, and myths for as long as their not clarified. I will attempt two answers.

First, from a Christian perspective, notwithstanding the well-known history of the participation of the church in the struggle for liberation, there is a strong resonance between the vision of democracy and the vision of the Kingdom of God or Reign of God. Furthermore, Christian teachings on Trinity, Creation and God's Household, do not exclude any sphere of life from the influence and rules of faith. Thus Christianity perceives the whole of the constellation of creation as interconnected and Christian life as a holistic participation in all spheres of life. Christianity has a role in politics.

One Dutch theologian, H. M. Kuitert (1986) wrote a book with a catchy title: "everything is politics, but politics is not everything." It is this important dictum that shapes the non-partisan participation of the Church and the ecumenical movement in politics. The church will continue to pray and hold in esteem all political leaders including clergy who have moved into politics without yielding and surrendering 'everything' about our faith into their hands and the political sphere. While everything about the visibility of the church in the struggle for liberation might be carried into politics, especially by theologians and clergy, politics is not everything about our visibility and the struggle for liberation. The myths of the relationship between the church and politics we must demythologize at all times. The mirages that elusively reflect the church's presence and visibility resulting from the movement of clergy into politics are not wells we must drink from.

Second and flowing from the sentiments above, in a pluralist context, it must be understood that what religion claims is not to be a 'mother of morality' (Koopman 2008:36). Let us recall what Luthuli said above about the church being a guardian of morality. The church is not the 'mother of morality.' Koopman explains that religion and by this very reason the church, 'protects, feeds and facilitates' morality (2008:36). Even though religion, and therefore church, provides 'a meaning-giving framework' and a motivation for morality and ethics, religion and thus the church, does not claim to bring

into being morality. Religion or the church does however contribute to the content of morality in a unique way. The church feeds light in morality – the church is a protective light of morality and a facilitative light of morality.

### **Mists, mirages and myths of the Second Transition?**

The notion of the ‘second transition’ has been brought into public life particularly after the Polokwane Conference. We have already alluded to the fact that these coming elections will be somehow different in many respects. The notion of the second transition supports the view in one way or another. Arguably, the first transition heralded as a miracle, the second transition is clearly misty, mythical and elusive as a mirage. If the dreams of the miraculous first transition were ‘deferred, and detached’ (Gevisser), rendered ‘unfit’ (Sureth), and the promise of democracy on the brink (Mangcu), the second transition maybe renders the dreams of the second transition misty, mythic, elusive and violent. If the church was outsmarted and out-manuevered in the first transition, now the church might be misty and mythic and drowned in the mirage of political promises in the second transition – but it might invisibly visible in violence.

There are worrying signs attributed to the second transition. South Africa was portrayed as different from other African countries. Mamdani in his *Citizen and Subject* argued that it was a mistake if not a myth to perceive South Africa in that way. One of his powerful arguments is that the adoption of the human rights language mystified the discourse of justice. The point is the –big-brother image of South Africa is a myth. Today there are envoys from the AU like in many African countries to ascertain free and fair elections. Violent irruptions against the strangers in our land eloquently speak to the dangerous myth of South Africa being imaged as different from other countries. Now, like other countries in Africa we shall apply for visas to enter the United Kingdom. There is a mist that covers the glorious days of our ‘miraculously’ born rainbow nation as stories of

racism, sexism, violent anger and bitterness abound. The wreckage of the ruling party which carried the symbol of liberation mystifies the dreams of our liberation as those who led us to forgive are now enemies ill-equipped to forgive one another. The myth of neo-liberal capitalism and neo-liberal globalization dominant in the first transition and mystifying the gap between the rich and poor, now suddenly opens up the second transition to its grandest collapse. The dreams of the very poor with massive job losses at the thresholds of their doors continue to be shattered, deferred, detached and on the brink of collapse. Where is the church? Where is the church visible on the way to the coming elections of the 2009 – the second transition?

### ***Imvuselelo* and Covenant for elections: Visibility and Presence**

After the foregoing gloomy picture let me suggest that we revisit our foundations. The South African Council of Churches calls upon all its member churches to stage an *Imvuselelo* to pray for the coming elections. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2009 at Regina Mundi a national *Imvuselelo* will be held to unveil the covenant for elections in 2009 – an equivalent of a manifesto to reclaim the visibility of the Church in this era.

*Imvuselelo* is essentially a reclamation, rejuvenation and revival of the liturgical tools of the church from its domestication by power and money. *Imvuselelo* is a subversive stance to reject the separation of our political dreams of liberation from our spiritual dreams of liberation. *Imvuselelo* is essentially to snatch out the lamp from the bushel basket and to set it up atop on the stand for the church to shine in God's household. *Imvuselelo* resists the equation of liberation to political liberation. **The** Covenant of the SACC is entitled: "A Public Covenant for Life Giving Democracy: A Call to the People of South Africa. It is based on the Gospel of John: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). While we recognise that democracy is a system and cannot in itself give life, as a vision that is closest to the life promises of the reign of God

it must be undergirded by the life-giving values of the reign of God through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

In partnership with the IEC, together with our ecumenical partners, Diakonia and civil society partners, and as part of the *Imvuselelo* of the church in South Africa we affirm all the work that is already being done. We encourage the good work and we will invigorate our visibility on our way to the coming elections. In hot-spots and non-hotspots alike the church will be present and visible in mediations, observations, assessment dialogue groups, voter education and among the ordinary South Africans, God being our helper. The church will speak out against politics of disgrace in the electioneering campaigns. Grasped by the vision of Isaiah in which God changes a mirage into a pool, the church with imanyanos, amadoda, guilds will be visible and transform the mirage into a pool in these elections.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

A few years ago in Ghana, Mercy Amba Oduyoye responding to a question: what is the hope of Africa she said among others, South Africa is our hope. We are not different but a shining light of hope different to our continent. The upcoming elections are call for the gospel light to feed, protect and facilitate hope among the poorest of the poor and the continent of Africa. We cannot but shine with blessedness in our souls, the chamber of our faith if we carry this mandate well.

The call for the presence and the visibility of the church is to affirm scripture and liberation. It is a call to re-affirm God as God from idolatry, the tyranny of human power. The visible role of the church in public life is the claim to the church's political task from the anarchy of human ambitions. Be visible!

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Delivered on 26 February 2009 at Durban.

Presented to Church leaders and the Ecumenical Movement of KwaZulu-Natal – hosted by Diakonia Council of Churches.