Event Feedback:

What is the State of the Nation?

On the 19th February 2015, the Citizen newspaper, in partnership with the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA), the SARChI Chair for African Diplomacy and Foreign Policy, and the UJ Library held a public lecture at the University of Johannesburg dissecting the President’s state of the nation address.

The event was well attended by members of academia, civil society, and the diplomatic corps. The panel comprised of Professor Somadoda Fikeni (UNISA), David Maimela (MISTRA) and Aubrey Matshiqi (Helen Suzman Foundation) providing insight into, not only the president’s address, but South Africa’s current socio-political environment. The key points drawn out by the discussion included concern for the weakening of democratic institutions, questions of leadership, state discourse and the need for a developmental state amongst others.

In his discussion Professor Fikeni bemoaned that South Africa is steadily “drifting to a neo-patrimonial state”. Politics in the country is now dominated by factionalism, which is endemic to all political parties, and has focused internal political discourse on the protection of its leadership. This internal state of affairs has spilled over to public institutions and has seen the erosion of checks and balances. Another development, in the post-2008 era, has been the rise of securicrats. This has meant that without explicit instruction from the head of state, issues are dealt with using more force than is necessary. A perfect example is the level of force used in Parliament to eject the EFF.
With regards to the state of the nation, outside of the known political structure, Prof Fikeni questioned whether there has been real transformation since the ushering in of the democratic dispensation in 1994, or whether the black elite have been assimilated into the prevailing power structure. Another major issue is the large-scale corruption that has taken on a racial dimension. For instance, corruption by white capital is reported differently to apparent corruption by black business. To add to this, there appears to be a patronage network that colours business relations and diminishes political discourse.

In terms of the role of universities in addressing the challenges facing the country, Fikeni notes that since the 1990s, the role of academic institutions has moved from thought leadership to developing a workforce for industry. Furthermore, black intelligentsia has been largely silent. This challenge needs robust public discourse. He calls for academics to be more activist in their approach rather than just being technical. As a signal to the return of thought leadership on the part of UNISA, he mentions the Memorandum of Understanding that was signed between UNISA and the African Union (AU). The intention of this is agreement is to take ownership of African knowledge production and informing policy-making on the continent.

David Maimela lamented the fact that President Zuma’s state of the nation address was colourless and missed the key issues of racism and xenophobia. However, Maimela posited that rather than xenophobia in the country, there is an inter-class war between black South Africans and foreign nationals. He further argued that apartheid was successful in creating the class system where there is still no sincere black middle class. He recommended emphasizing a developmental state and reducing the deficiency of leadership that is currently surfacing in the political sphere. Maimela also noted that two promises of an inclusive democracy have failed to come to fruition: Human rights and true freedom; and, the developmental state. There appears to be elements of a developmental state but South Africa has failed to actualize this dream. Part of the issue is the lack of bold leadership.

Aubrey Matshiqi provided and optimistic account of the state of the nation. He noted that the state of the nation and the SONA presentation are two different things. SONA is not the place to go for the actual state of the nation. You have to look at the state of the discourse of that nation. South African commentators are in a state of hysterical pessimism with many acting as echo-chambers; where things are repeated unthinkingly. That is what happens with discourse on the State of the Nation; it can be described as an Orwellian manipulation of what we see. The state broadcaster and political parties can be accused of perpetuating this.

Matshiqi argued that there is a tendency to only speak truth to the power of the ANC. Yet, we also need to speak truth to the power of money, political influencers, civil society and
the media. All forms of power have to be critiqued. The South African economy is still
governed by colonial logic: South Africa is not seen as a place to develop but rather a place
to extract value. The cultural majority (who are the numerical minority) dominate the
economy and control the echo-chambers. The fact that the signal jamming could be taken
to be court is illustrative of the iconic Constitution.

Prof Landsberg noted that while Thabo Mbeki was recalled (2008), as he lost control over
the party, he did not lose control over the state; he was a centralizer. Zuma has, however,
lost control of the state but has not lost control of the party. The state is currently on
‘autopilot’ because of the current focus on survival within the ruling party. Second, South
Africa is a deeply traumatized state. It continues to face the triple challenges of poverty,
inequality and unemployment and has a highly factionalized society.

Prof Landsberg pointed out that South Africa continues to proclaim its position as a
developmental state, but challenges remain with continued cadre deployment coupled with
inadequate training. However, it must be noted, that cadre deployment is not an ANC
phenomena and it has a long history in the country. Before the ANC can hope to
have consensus with opposition parties it has to deal with its own issues. Currently, the
ANC is deeply fractured; Zuma presides over more splits in the party than any previous
ANC leader.

*Summary proceedings report compiled by Odilile Ayodele and Gugulethu Nkosi*

*20 February 2015*