

How church members can keep politicians accountable

Phew, we survived another election!

Looking back on last week, how should we evaluate the election and the political process?

Evaluating the performance of politicians, we need to remember it is all about real people and real needs. It is about a meaningful, fulfilled life. It is about education, safety, clean water, good roads, effective transport, and jobs.

God is concerned about the flourishing of human life.

The Church is concerned about the welfare and future of all South Africans, especially the vulnerable and those caught in the claws of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

In what has been identified as one of the most unequal societies in the world, access to the economy is of huge importance. Is one suitably educated, empowered with knowledge and skills in order to provide for one's own needs?

What we need to ask ourselves is whether the election furthered these goals.

During the electioneering one senses our society has yet to mature politically.

The project of a democratic, free South Africa needs all citizens to feel responsible for each other's welfare. We all contribute to the common good, although the gifts we bring differ hugely.

Some offer employment. Others skills and time in exchange for a living wage. Some pay taxes and others benefit from tax money well invested in quality education, infrastructure, safety and security. However, it seems that electioneering parties spend way too much energy on identity politics, urging us to vote based on the group we belong to.

Fellow South Africans are made out to be the demons we need to be freed of. Fear of others sway our vote.

Politicians need to grow up.

Elections are about political accountability for a policy framework and service-delivery. A just society where all interests are balanced in order to improve life is the goal.

The lack of political efficiency has huge implications. The low voter turnout is of huge concern, as it compounds an already serious decline of voter registration.

South Africans are getting more disillusioned with the political process. We are becoming like other societies where cynicism about politics reigns. This is bad news for the social cohesion the new South Africa needs.

In the build-up to the election we've seen destructive protests about service delivery. This is a symptom of an unresponsive political process and state. People feel the government and its politicians - once voted into power - does not heed their interest.

We should debate and implement the best policies and practises to overcome historic inequality, not struggle to establish the credibility of political process.

The church has a prophetic role to play to hold politicians accountable to a better future for all.

Narrow party-political interest is destructive, must be pointed out and resisted. Constructive responsiveness is needed.

The Church must point out the glaring lack of institutional empathy with the daily struggle of many South Africans. We need to confront government with its lack of accountability.

Shall the Church join the people in the streets, focusing their protests, combating destructive behaviour, helping to demand effective systemic interventions?

What society needs is good education, teachers who turn up for work, criminal gangs who are disbanded, police who are not corrupted, and diligent municipal workers who keep the streets free of sewerage. Those are the political deliverables we should point out and demand.

Talking about accountability: do you know who represents you in Parliament? Can you name a specific person – your local MP for example?

Probably not – because our electoral system needs a serious overhaul in order to promote accountability and delivery.

We vote for a list of politicians. Once voted into power the political party control those who are supposed to represent us. They are being instructed not by our needs and welfare, but by the fluctuating needs and fortunes of the specific political party.

This serious flaw means many a voter's cross is bought by grants and promises. This is not ultimately what they need.

Children need education and training in order to get a job or start a business. Citizens beneath the poverty line needs basic jobs and further training.

South Africa spends hugely on education with very little to show for it. The system is almost setup to keep people in poverty. Is it easier to buy votes with grants than to open real opportunities for people?

Obviously, there are limits to what the Church can do. Perhaps our most important work is to help grow a strong civic society with a multitude of role-players who can shape and steer political responsibility in the right directions.

Perhaps the over-politicised society to which the free reign of wheedling politicians with empty promises testifies, is the big problem. Politicians have taken over the whole public space. They control a public discourse that furthers only their interests.

Oh, may the circus end. It is time to take public space back.

It is time for political accountability, for institutional empathy and for effective interventions to improve life in our beautiful land. The church has the moral authority to demand that this is what the politicians deliver.

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