

POLITICAL TRUST, RECONCILIATION AND DEMOCRACY

-By Ntombovuyo Linda



Ntombovuyo is an ASRI Research Associate. She was previously a Research Assistant at the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, as well as a Project Analyst at the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies. She has published various papers relating to issues in Sub Saharan Africa viz, “Crisis States in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe”, “The Place and Potential of the Youth in Governance”, “Governance within Higher Education”, “The Nature of the South African Immigration System”. Ntombovuyo was a fellow of the ASRI Future Leaders 2017 cohort, and she’s completing her Masters

in Political Science at the University of Witwatersrand. She obtained her BA Honors in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Johannesburg and a BA Public Administration and Political Science degree at the Nelson Mandela University.

Abstract

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation’s (IJR) South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) has measured reconciliation in South Africa through public opinion surveying since 2003. For the past 15 years, the SARB has served as a driver for public debate on reconciliation and developing post-conflict discourse. Given the unequal and unjust economic and political power relations which characterise contemporary South Africa lowering levels of political trust can hinder meaningful reconciliation. Reconciliation, therefore, also has an important governance imperative, and is central to conflict resolution and social transformation. It is about finding creative and meaningful approaches to bring people together and closing the gaps of social divisions in societies with a conflict past. This article examines the relationship between reconciliation and political trust in South Africa in light of the IJR's SARB 2017.

INTRODUCTION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation's (IJR) South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) aims to identify progress as well as key areas that hamper peacekeeping and reconciliation in South Africa. It has measured reconciliation in South Africa through public opinion surveying since 2003. For the past 15 years, the SARB has served as a driver for public debate on reconciliation and developing post-conflict discourse. The 2017 report highlighted some interesting data regarding nation building as it relates to identity politics and social division, the evolution of reconciliation processes and perceptions of change in post-apartheid South Africa, racialized power relations and socio-economic access, and the nature of the country's democratic culture.

The findings of the SARB encourage South Africans to confront the violent history of our past and the subsequent inescapable apartheid legacies, particularly the enduring structural oppression evident in the lived experiences of many South Africans. One of the consequences of a divided society, with unequal and unjust economic and political power relations such as ours, is that the polity can become affected negatively by the levels of political trust, which can hinder meaningful reconciliation. Reconciliation, therefore, also has an important governance imperative. Thus, this article examines the relationship between reconciliation and political trust.

WHAT IS RECONCILIATION?

First, it is important to note that there are various definitions of reconciliation and contestation about what it constitutes. The source of complexity is that the process of reconciliation happens in many contexts – for example, between offender and victim, between communities or nations, and even between the state and its citizens. The SARB

indicates that 44.8% of South Africans feel that “forgiveness” constitutes reconciliation, followed by 33.6% who attached the concept to the need to “move on” (SARB, 2017). Reconciliation, of course, means much more than forgiveness. It is a comprehensive process which includes the search for truth, justice, healing and peace. In the South African context., that includes understanding what happened during apartheid and demanding that the conditions which gave rise to the dehumanization, exclusion, marginalization, oppression and exploitation of the black majority by the white minority – and the consequent conflict that ensued – change. This change implies the need to trust that such a crime against humanity never happens again, but also that those historical wrongs are corrected. Thus, reconciliation in this context necessitates an engagement with the past so as to acknowledge, remember, and learn from it.

Broadly speaking, reconciliation refers to the restoration of amicable relations, or the effort to make divergent views or beliefs compatible with one another (*The Oxford Dictionary*, 2018). The genealogy of the term and its use in South Africa is also strongly rooted in a religious context. In the Christian tradition, it is used to describe the broken relationship between God and mankind due to sin, with Jesus re-establishing unity between them through the sacrifice of his life. From a statecraft and peacebuilding perspective, reconciliation can be defined as part of a conflict transformation process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future, “where harm is repaired in such a way that trust can be established again” (Nordquist, 2006: 21). Here, Nordquist argues that “harm” is a consequence of both legal injustices, as well as of violations of human dignity that may not be covered by law. “Repaired” refers to a variety of justice-seeking processes to address a conflict past such as symbolic acts, truth telling, material reparation, legal justice, and common mourning. “Trust” is a key word in this definition; it reveals that reconciliation is a relationship-building process. In deep-rooted conflicts where the parties are not simply disputing over material interests

but are suffering from damaged social relationships, rebuilding trust is central for conflict resolution and transformation.

Why Reconciliation is Important for Democratic Nation-Building

Violence, fear and hatred during war result in the modernization of old myths and stereotypes to explain one's own or some other groups behaviour and thereby justify whatever gruesome atrocities are committed. After the war, the societal and cultural fabric is drenched with these beliefs. They can be seen in how history is described, how the language is used, in education, the media, theatre, etc. In order to live in peace, these beliefs must be questioned and transformed (Brouneus, 2007: 13).

Indeed, the transformation of stereotyped beliefs is a crucial objective of many reconciliation initiatives. Politically, reconciliation establishes the framework for new types of socio-political relationships and identities (Chapman, 2002: 1), centering on positive citizenship relations crucial for the long-term survival of democracy, particularly after violence. To this end, Bloomfield (2003: 168) argues that “unreconciled relationships, those built on distrust, suspicion, fear, accusation... will effectively and eventually destroy any political system based on respect for human rights and democratic structures”. Therefore, in all stages of democratic nation-building, the past must be addressed in order to reach a sustainable future. Processes of reconciliation are designed to enable and cultivate cooperative interpersonal and civic relationships in order to have an enduring democratic system. This is the basic reason why every post-conflict democracy has to engage in a process of reconciliation.

POLITICAL TRUST, RECONCILIATION AND DEMOCRACY

Throughout the SARB this notion of “trust” features as a cross-cutting variable, relating to its central role in cultivating effective democratic and participatory governance (Fakir, 2009). Since democracy requires citizens to trust one another as well as the institutions and leaders of their country, the SARB measures both interpersonal trust between citizens, and citizen trust in the state (confidence in public institutions and political leadership). The report reveals that 30% of South Africans do not trust people from other race groups, whilst 40% indicated that they “somewhat” trust people from other race groups (SARB, 2017). These identity pressures not only hold an unpredictable potential to implode into conflict, social unrest and economic decline, but simultaneously affect citizens’ trust in government as public frustration escalates. These levels of trust offer a reflection of the extent to which citizens feel excluded from or included in the system, and connected to or disconnected from one another and therefore, is an important indicator for reconciliation.

Trust is the assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something; or one in which confidence is placed. More specifically, political trust, is generally defined as citizens’ confidence in political institutions. The question is: how do citizens gain this confidence in public institutions? How do they decide when states deserve trust and allegiance? Predictability, value exchange, and reciprocity are key indicators for measuring trust between various actors. Predictability in this instance is important because it offers citizens the security of or the opportunity to prepare for what they think will happen next. Interaction between people is based around exchange, which is the basis for all relationships; civic relationships are no exception. This principle of reciprocity means giving something now with an expectation that it will be repaid, possibly in some unspecified way at some unspecified time in the future. For example, citizens pay taxes to have public services rendered to them in return.

Rational choice studies have focused on the levels of political trust in societies as a consequence of the behaviour of governments. David Easton's (1965) classic "system theory" of politics argues that the legitimacy of democratic political systems depends on how much citizens trust their governments to do "what is right most of the time". In theory, this implies that political trust links people to the institutions that represent them, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of a democratic government. As suggested before, trust in institutions, leadership and fellow citizens are critical components of a vibrant democratic political culture. John Locke's theory of the *social contract* was also deeply centered on the concept of "trust", which is concerned with the consent or the will of the people. In his view a government can remain in power and be strong so long as it enjoys the support of the people or governs according to the will of the people. If the government fails to protect the life, liberty and property the people, the people have the right to remove it and appoint a new government. Locke also proposed the idea of natural rights, arguing that liberty and property are the rights of every individual and therefore are inalienable. The basic duty of the state is to protect these rights. This means that political trust is about performance; it is informed by the image and performance of political actors and processes, but also by partisan loyalties, and to some extent citizens' personal political attitudes and experiences of political life.

The Personal is Political

More recently it has been debated whether or not indicators of social capital also have an impact on political trust. Research indicates a modestly strong relationship between interpersonal trust and trust in the form of government (Fennema and Tillie, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Kaase (1999) delves deeper into this relationship confirming what social capital theorists would expect, that generalized trust and political activity are strongly and positively related. According to Kaase (1999: 17) high levels of interpersonal trust are

associated with widening one's political repertoire. The main argument here is that citizens who trust each other may have a positive incentive to organize and participate in collective political action and activity. More recently, Nickerson (2008: 54) finds evidence that the inclination to vote may increase when one has a higher degree of trust, intimacy, and social interactions with other voters. One view argues that because political institutions determine the framework in which individuals interact, the quality of institutions will largely determine the extent to which social trust is likely to flourish in a particular context. For example, Rothstein (2011) argues that people's perceptions of the fairness and efficacy of political institutions are critical determinants of interpersonal trust. If people believe that the institutions are fair and effective in punishing dishonest, exploitative behaviour, they are more likely to trust others. The logic behind this relationship is that fair and effective institutions create a disincentive to engage in dishonest, unlawful behaviour because individuals engaging in such behaviour are likely to be punished.

DECLINING LEVELS OF POLITICAL TRUST: GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Globally confidence in public institutions is in decline (Edelman, 2017). The Edelman Trust Barometer 2017 reveals that in two-thirds of the countries surveyed citizens have low levels of trust in their public institutions, offering insight into a crisis in political trust. The SARB (2017) confirms the case in South Africa, indicating that confidence recorded in public institutions and national leadership has been low and a comparison over time points to a process of systematic erosion of that trust. Edelman (2017) argues that the decreasing levels of trust could suggest that "basic assumptions of fairness, shared values and equal opportunity are no longer taken for granted," demonstrating how political behaviour and expectations of citizens change over generations. With higher levels of education among the public, greater levels of affluence, and greater access to

information, contemporary citizens may well expect a more direct say in what government does, and have less interest in traditional modes of representation.

Political History and Culture

Traditional explanations of the levels of trust in government emphasize the role of the political history and culture of countries. That is, trust in government may be rooted in deep-seated past events. Perhaps this may be true for South Africa, as the manifestation of apartheid legacies in human and social neglect appear to be enduring, compounding the pressures on the already fragile relationship between the state and its citizens. That is why the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was as much about investigating individual victims' cases so as to facilitate their personal healing as it was about recovering the truth about systematic human rights abuse within state institutions (as part of an initiative to transform these institutions). The reconciliation process was not simply about whether prosecutions took place, but rather what measures were possible to transform and build public confidence in state institutions in response to the historically rooted legacy of public mistrust of these institutions.

While South Africa has made undeniable progress in a number of critical areas, such as establishing solid democratic institutions, extending welfare and basic services to the most vulnerable (which includes access to health and education) as well as stabilizing the economy since 1994, the country continues to be burdened by imbalances, disparities, distortions and a number of related paradoxes, particularly in the area of state service provision and state functioning.

The SARB (2017) reveals that inequality has prevailed as the greatest source of social division in the country over the past 15 years. This is due to the fact that the economy in

South Africa demonstrates inconsistencies between economic diversification and self-reliance, and re-distributionary weaknesses and gaping disparities in the quality of life of the people in the “first economy” and the poverty and lack of economic empowerment of people living in the “second economy”. This is compounded by the fact that the inequalities are significantly racialized, with slowly changing dynamics consequent to the changing social structure. High levels of structural unemployment have also brought into focus how people’s socio-economic rights do not reconcile with their day-to-day reality. Furthermore, a lasting characteristic of South African society is the ethnic and racial diversity, which offers both opportunities and challenges in the development process as it is both a source of social tension and modernisation. The TRC was intended for this precise reason – to not only confront the accumulated pain from three centuries of the oppression of black people, but to concurrently find innovative ways of managing diversity. However, as a nation-building mechanism, some have argued that the TRC did not live up to these expectations, as divisions along the lines of race and class continue to amplify (which has implications on interpersonal trust between citizens).

Corruption, Cynicism, and Populism

One of the explanations for the current state of citizen orientations toward government and politics is corruption, which constitutes a severe threat to political trust in political institutions. The availability of political information has made people more aware of what their governments do. In previous generations, citizens may have been socialized to have a sense of blind loyalty to their party and government, and a willingness to participate flowing from a sense of civic duty. But the increasing role of mass media in everyday life has made it harder for governments to hide their ways of working, but also their failures and ‘dirty laundry’. A consequence of this increased popular scrutiny of the workings of governments, may well be a reduction in citizens’ confidence in political institutions.

Perceptions of corruption – and actual corruption – are also important as they possibly affect trust by conditioning attitudes about the responsiveness of government. After all, one of the principles underpinning a democratic political system is the presumption that governments are accountable to citizens. As such, the abuse of public power entrusted to elected government officials undermines these procedures of accountability, and corruption systematically erodes democratic principles and the faith of citizens in the political process.

As a result, disaffected citizens are likely to withdraw from electoral processes, or they may even resort to less legitimate means of protest as they seek more radical changes in the system. South Africa has witnessed a steady decline in voter participation since 1994. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) the turnout of registered voters in the 2014 elections was 73%. This represents a decline of 4% on the last two elections' turnouts of 77%. When turnout is examined as a proportion of the eligible voting-age population turnout over 20 years, the figures confirm a decline in participation from 86% in 1994 to 72% in 1999 and 58% in 2004. Only in 2009 was there a slight rise to 60%, but this was again followed by a drop to 57% in the 2014 elections (ISS, 2014). It appears that there is an increasing number of eligible South African voters who do participate in the formal election processes.

As this cynicism with political systems (together with rising despondency about the future) become more apparent from various groups worldwide, it enables a platform for many people to be predisposed to insights offered by populist movements. This could be because the broad ideas on the drivers of populism all seem to link to a dissatisfaction, particularly with respect to the economy. This idea is closely linked to “relative deprivation” theory which posits that people rebel as a result of a sense of relative deprivation, defined in terms of perceived entitlement or expectation (Gurr, 1970). Relative deprivation further explains that unfulfilled expectations cause anger,

frustration, and resentment that manifest themselves in protests, violence, and other forms of political actions. Unfulfilled expectations in South Africa have also seen an emergence of populist rhetoric.

Although, populism cannot be neatly fitted into the conventional frameworks of political analysis, since it may be right-wing or left-wing, or neither. It can be understood as a distinctive form of political rhetoric that sees virtue and political legitimacy residing in the “people”. It sees dominant elites as corrupt, and asserts that political goals are best achieved by means of a direct relationship between government and the people, rather than being mediated by existing political institutions (Dikeni, 2017). The dominant form of populism that exists in present day South Africa is that of a revolutionary populism. Revolutionary populism is the idealization of people and their collective traditions by intellectuals who reject elitism and progress, which leads them to reject political institutions in favour of the seizure of power by the people, or in favour of charismatic leaders who claim to represent the people (Canovan, 1981). Examples in South Africa would include political parties and advocacy groups such as the Economic Freedom fighters (EFF), the Decolonization Foundation, Black First Land first (BLF), Black Management Forum (BMF), and Afri-Forum, among others.

CONCLUSION

From a peacebuilding point of view, reconciliation can be examined from three perspectives: (1) the spheres of relationships (concerning identity, values, attitudes and behaviour); (2) the substantive components of reconciliation (justice, truth, healing and security); and (3) the social levels of reconciliation (national, community and individual). From this holistic understanding of reconciliation, it can be seen to play both an important government and civic-relations role. Therefore, reconciliation is central to

conflict resolution and social transformation. It is about finding creative and meaningful approaches to bring people together and closing the gaps of social divisions in societies with a conflict past. Such social divisions include, the construction of difference through identity, inequality, unjust power relations, intolerance, etc. Governments have a central role to play in facilitating the reconciliation process through strong adherence to the principles of social justice as well as through strong public institutions. Simply put, reconciliation is a relationship-building process across different levels in a given society, and because of this trust features commonly as part of its process. In this sense the idea of trust is more centered on socio-political relationships and therefore it is about confidence in public institutions, political leadership and trust between citizens. Essentially, this means that political trust is informed by the performance and behaviour of governments and leaders and how accountable they are to the system. The declining levels of political trust globally suggest a number of things, including that citizens' expectations of governments are changing as politics and economics evolve and governments transition over time. The declining levels of political trust in South Africa are due to a number of reasons, including the nature of the political history and political culture as well as corruption and cynicism.

- Bloomfield, D. 2003. "Conclusion," in: Bloomfield, Barnes and Huysse (eds.): *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*. Stockholm, IDEA.
- Brouneus, K. "Reconciliation and Development", Study Prepared for Workshop 8 'Reconciliation,' International Conference, Building a Future on Peace and Justice, Nuremberg, 25-27 June 2007, 12.
- Chapman, A.R. 2002. "Approaches to Studying Reconciliation". Presentation to the Conference on Empirical Approaches to Studying Truth Commissions. Stellenbosch, South Africa, November.
- Dikeni, L. 2017. Populism and Nationalism: Implications for South Africa. *The Journal of the Helen Suzman Foundation*, (80), August.
- Easton, D. 1965. A systems analysis of political life. New York: Wiley.
- Edelman, R. 2017. An Implosion of Trust. Edelman Trust Barometer 2017, Annual Global Study, Executive Summary. Available at <https://www.edelman.com/executive-summary>
- Fakir, E. 2009. Politics, state and society in South Africa: Between leadership, trust and technocrats. Development Planning Division Working Paper Series No.1, DBSA, Midrand.
- Fennema, M. & Tillie, J. (2001). Political Participation and Political Trust in Amsterdam. Civic Communities and Ethnic Networks. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 25 (4): 703–726.
- Gurr, T. R. 1970. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Institute for Security Studies. 2014. *Voter participation in South African elections 2014*. [Online]. https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/PolBrief61_Aug14.pdf [Accessed 07 October 2018].
- Kaase, M. (1999). Interpersonal Trust, Political Trust and Non-institutionalised Political Participation in Western Europe. *West European Politics*, 22(3): 1–21.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary*. 2018. [Online]. Available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trust> [Accessed 05 October 2018].
- Nordquist, K. 2006. *Reconciliation as a Political Concept*. Research Report 34, Centro de Estudios Politicos, Universidad del Rosario, Bogotá, Colombia.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rothstein, B. (2011). *The Quality of Government. Corruption, Social Trust and Inequality in International Perspective*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- The Oxford Dictionary*. 2018. [Online]. Available at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/reconciliation> [Accessed 02 October 2018].