

# South Africa is a medieval state,

*by Ghaleb Cachalia*

South Africa is a medieval state. It is characterised by staggering inequality where massive poverty coexists with gross wealth. Corporate and personal greed is the mantra of most of the stars in this glittering and relatively new constellation. Superstition abounds. Corruption is endemic.

Power mongering for financial gain is the calling card of a political party that has lost its soul.

Once fiery unions have now been co-opted into the ruling clique. Even where policy is well-intentioned, systemic corruption of its very implementation ensures comic and often tragic results. All of this while unemployment rates beggar belief and the majority are mired in poverty.

It's hardly surprising the dispossessed and marginalised gathered on mountains that harbour the world's most precious metals, strengthened by the mumbo-jumbo of muti-men and motley sangoma spells, sharpening spears and pangas, readying themselves for an assault on the powers that be. Having ritually disembowelled opponents in a cleansing ritual in the run-up to the tragedy, the stage was set for mayhem.

No one had the foresight to communicate, engage, cajole, appease or do whatever it would have taken to avert the debacle. Hardly surprising that the police – largely corrupt, ill-led and trigger-happy – then fired live volleys into the approaching hordes. The newly appointed commissioner of police, without any background in policing, announced after the fact that she sanctioned the police response.

Any attempt at negotiation or even a measured response based on non-lethal crowd control appeared to be singularly absent. Days after the event, allegations abounded about police torture and continued harassment of miners.

The mining corporation was caught in a communication crisis. What could they say in the face of a disparity in salaries that remunerates those who risk life and limb on the rockface, earning R5 000 per month or thereabouts, and senior executives who earn in the region of R800 000 per month.

Clearly, the hugely bloated salaries paid to the directors of HR, PR, risk management, safety and health, and allied portfolios were wasted given their collective failure to deal with a tragedy in the making.

Hardly surprising, then, that the government – embroiled in its own power battles and corrupt management that evaluates, sanctions and awards tenders and deals on the basis of how much is in the margins for the party and the individuals concerned – was caught napping as they ignored the warning signs that led to the Marikana mayhem.

Where were the union leaders? Where were the canny bargaining and negotiation skills of old?

Instead, we saw rival unions vying for membership and engaging in internecine strife while swathes of union leaders, now hand-in-glove with the government, play for bigger stakes involving control and money while the rank and file membership is consigned to relative penury.

There's more to this boiling cauldron of madness: former struggle heroes (even ex-unionists) now own chunks, and sit on the boards, of the very same corporations that fiddled while aggrieved workers plotted Armageddon.

What is clear, though, is class lines are being redefined and those who claimed the mantle of leadership from the downtrodden, disposed and working classes have now forfeited their ceremonial garb. The emperor and his courtiers have no clothes.

This plays out against a backdrop of poverty, unemployment, scant delivery of services and a disaffected youth led by portly and aging opportunists who espouse to wrest power, control and the machinations of the money machine from incumbents.

I wish it were not so but, alas, this medieval madness appears to be here to stay. While the armchair agonisers lament the status quo over another cognac, a tipping point has been reached. It's just a matter of time and it will get uglier.

Meanwhile, the commission of inquiry will investigate and report on the massacre, the role of the unions, the mining house, the police and the government. What is needed, though, is a commission of inquiry into the state of the nation, but that would upset the proverbial apple cart in the marketplace of this medieval kingdom.

Then we would need bold, appropriate and non-self-serving action to avert a revolution. It would be apt to recall the rallying cries of two famous revolutions as quoted in a recent article in The Spectator – one at the beginning of the last century and another at the start of this century – Russia 1917 and modern-day Egypt: “bread, peace and land” and “bread, dignity and social justice”.

The political, labour and corporate emperors of our medieval kingdom could do worse than remember the lessons from these. The Spectator article quotes another saying: “When the masses have nothing to lose, they lose it.” Best we all take heed.

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