

Independence of black intellectuals at stake

BEYOND the literality of events leading to the protest by ANC-aligned labour and student organisations at the University of South Africa (Unisa) and their call for the resignation of Barney Pityana, the vice-chancellor, lies a more serious question about the independence of intellectuals in this country – the independence to make pronouncements on “truthful” facts, findings and related opinion.

The question is whether scholars should anticipate the preponderance of subtly imposed censorships by the alliance partners of the ruling party after the 2009 elections. In as much as there is academic freedom and constitutionally protected rights to “own opinion”, not all constitutionally entrenched liberties necessarily translate into the mundane daily routine of democratic practices.

The question about the independence of intellectuals is even more pertinent for scholars based in government-funded institutions, such as science councils and universities. How far can they go in expressing views that may seem consonant with the ideas of particular political formations regarded by the ruling party and its allies as opponents bent on a “reactionary agenda”?



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This is a matter for concern given that the character of dominant forces in the ruling party influence the character of the state.

Are we going to reach a point in our democracy where scholars have to choose either to make intellectual-sounding rationalisations of deficiencies in the ruling party and the state or just shut up? In a number of respects Pityana's case bears the dynamics of this scenario.

Management difficulties within the university were

conveniently invoked to deal with a major political issue – Pityana's independence as a black scholar; his inability to mince words when speaking “truth to power”.

Besides Pityana's perceived sympathies for the Congress of the People (COPE) or his speech at the December national convention leading to the formation of COPE, there is a more pervasive threat symbolised by his bold independence – he is a member of the black intellectual section in our political society which is seen by sections of the populist crowd as escaping the grip of the “revolutionary movement”.

The willingness or lack of it among black intellectuals to toe the party line has implications for the alliance's agenda for a long historical occupancy of power. This agenda is seemingly threatened by the exposure of the deficits of a democratic track record.

It is an agenda that has become rather too sensitive to critical engagement; an agenda that has become fearful of how different political forces may come together to create a new terrain in which a different democratic politics – a “post-post-independence politics” – may form in South Africa.

The Pityana matter represents an interesting intersec-

tion of institutional imperatives and thinly veiled party politics in ways that have implications for the independence of intellectuals in such institutions.

Pityana's public utterances last year, epitomised by his speech at the December COPE convention must have disturbed ANC-aligned forces at Unisa. But technical matters suggesting inadequate performance of his executive functions needed to be invoked and magnified in order to find grounds for getting at him.

This is the time for intellectuals to be more bold and honest. The most distinguishing aspect of the intellectual “calling” is the pursuit of truth in all its forms. The support that intellectuals may lend to any particular cause should be incidental to a pursuit which stands beyond ordinariness.

Real intellectuals submit to no orthodoxy, given their particular relationship to truth. They may be based in an institution but they are not of the institution; they may choose to vote for a particular political party but they are not of the party. Their independence is essential to their identity.

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