

Is Intolerance On The Rise In Namibia?

I AM referring to the prevailing spirit of intolerance where people who have different views and perceptions from those in power, are stigmatised as being against the Government.

But the question is whether, when the Namibian people were fighting for justice and free speech, was the idea to attain this freedom and then allow only a select few to enjoy it?

Was the bloody battle between the Namas under Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi and the German forces under Leutwein in 1894 meant to benefit the Namas only once they got what they wanted? Similarly, was the execution of Mbanderu chief Kahimemua Nguvauva

at Okahandja in 1896 for resisting German colonisation meaningless, or were his actions meant to benefit only his own tribe?

Was the forced relocation of residents of the Old Location to Katutura which resulted in bloodshed not a sign of people who were looking for the right for freedom of speech?

I don't think all these, and other sacrifices, were meant for nothing. Lives have been lost through decades of oppression and the denial of basic human rights such as freedom of speech. With the attainment of independence in 1990, a new light of hope went on in Namibia. Namibians spoke with confidence

about what the future had in store.

But I don't think this has materialised, especially when it comes to freedom of speech. It is becoming clearer daily that when you dare to express your opinion publicly you must do so with certain limitations or else you become a target of some individuals within the society who think they have the supreme right to suppress the feelings and opinions of others.

They go to the extent of calling people names, they become ruthless and irresponsible in their attacks, and yet when they speak they caution others to realise that freedom of speech has limitations. This is a contradiction,

since they don't appear to apply those limitations to themselves.

Namibia seems to be divided in two on this issue - on the one hand those who give themselves the right to free expression without prejudice, and others who are denied free and unconditional expression because their views differ, whether they are legitimate or not.

Thus to me the cycle of oppression is not yet over and I would term this reverse oppression exercised by the very same people who were entrusted with protecting and defending the rights of the inhabitants.

There are some practical examples of this. During the launch of the

book, *The Wall Of Silence*, those who welcomed the book were labelled as being enemies of the state. The dust still hasn't settled over the planned CCN conference on reconciliation as those spearheading the campaign are seen as having their own 'hidden agendas' against the state.

The gay issue has once again been taken out of all proportion, with one newspaper defending Swapo and the President as having made use of their freedom of speech. The San community of Etosha and the protest by the Himbas were legitimate cases, which have again been taken out of proportion by those who view them as having hidden agendas against the

state. Again in these cases the media are labelled as biased and accused of being owned by foreigners.

One wonders, what foreigners? Now does it mean that if your view differs from the government that you have a hidden agenda?

Does this imply we must all hold the same views? Does legitimate criticism not have a place in Namibia?

The Namibian people, irrespective of what roles they played in the liberation struggle, have been tested by conflict, crisis and turbulent change, and yet we survived. We have eliminated apartheid and assured ourselves the exercise of the fundamental right of self-determination.

Thus at this time we must create new opportunities for peace, development, democracy and co-operation. The speed and extent of the change depends on the co-operation of citizens. We must disagree to agree and

when we confront issues of national interest we must do so with coolness and detachment.

We must know Namibia needs all of us, though we are in different places at different times. Hate speech must come to an end. We must realise no one is above the law in this country, and we must be prepared to listen to the views of others even if we don't like what they are saying. A culture of tolerance is needed in Namibia.

If we start to divide the nation into two camps, not only are we distorting our own history of liberation, but we are hurting the memories of those who fought and died so that when we became free all Namibians, irrespective of political or social status, could enjoy what they were previously denied, among these, freedom of speech.

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