



Dear Cde Steve Biko

Thato Mazwe Madibo

I write in a cloud of the deepest melancholy to you.

Not just the sadness that comes from losing a battle, but the sadness of the fact that a generation is slowly, irresistibly losing its political soul while thinking that it's free. I write during the season of youth consciousness, Youth Month, although the so-called “youth atmosphere” is hollow, broken, tattered, and for some reason disorganised in some way among the youth. The slogans remain. The hashtags remain. The attitude of opposition is intact. Nevertheless, the young intellectual raptors that once spanned South African politics seem to have been extinguished.

And yet this is not the worst part.

You schooled us to understand that "the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." However, today, the crisis is more complex: young people are no longer just oppressed on a material level, they are drained on a psychological level too. Today is a time of constant stimulation and constant distraction. The young talk a lot, but say little to each other. We meet virtually, but feel physically separate from people and politically separate from the larger world. We are digitally connected, but at the same time spiritually and socially disconnected.

The bond of community has been broken.

The students who once upended the moral structure of apartheid knew the secret of greatness—the power of politics was not just in electing or creating institutions. Politics was community. Politics was consciousness. Intellectual culture was traditionally built by politics. The youth debated under trees, under broken lights, discussed philosophy in the corridors, revolution in the libraries, Pan-Africanism in the residences, the future of the republic under the magnificent black consciousness in assemblies.

Today, peace has come to these places.

The university promotes anxiety for career building rather the intellect needed to become courageous. Citizenship is taught second, after the practices of the profession. Young people know employability first, and citizenship second. On the way to search for certificates, we leave consciousness behind. The critical language has been replaced by the language of the brand, algorithm, influencers and by performance politics. Acting without theory, mobilising without political education, being visible without being intellectually rich is becoming more 'aesthetic' than 'ideological'.

It isn't just that youth politics is weak.

It is dying.

And I emphasise this carefully since I do know about the structural violence that youth are faced with today. Unemployment suffocates millions. Entire households are made into pariahs by poverty. Despair has become the norm because of corruption. Ambition is curbed in the early stages by expense. However, material poverty isn't enough to account for the retreat of the intellect that we are witnessing. There is at the same time an absence of "political imagination".

Young people no longer think they can make a difference to the republic.

Those are the troubles that affect the world today.

You can hear through this letter Edward Elgar's Cello Concerto in E Minor, written after the First World War. The piece does not scream. It mourns. It resonates with meaning when civilizations are emotionally drained from destruction. It slips back and forth between keeping in mind, mourning, solitude and unresolved tension. Reading it over today, it comes across as a political statement because it's a real representation of the psychological intersection between so many young South African people, living through the lives that have been handed to them, not taking charge of their own realities.

The post-apartheid promise of the future was that everyone would be able to participate. Many of them ended up with the television sitting on their dining room table.

And now comes the next Local Government Election cycle.

But what is local democracy to a generation so far disaffected with politics? Municipal politics is no longer seen as being about democratic imagination, but about patronage, service delivery failure, dysfunction, corruption, factionalism and assassinations. Many youth no longer consider cities as tools of democratic participation. Their perception instead is as a place of competition on an elite level that is not necessarily experienced by ordinary people.

This is a bad idea for any republic.

When the youth literally step away from democratic life for a long period, the void is filled. It fills with cynicism, narrowly authoritarian temptations, misinformation, tribalism, nihilism or political apathy. A dictatorship or coup is not the only way for a democracy to perish. Such ideals have died a quiet death in part because younger generations have lost faith that the republic is theirs.

However, Cde Biko, I do not think that the fire is totally extinguished.

I still see young people desperately seeking meaning, dignity, a philosophy, the political vocabulary needed to make sense of the chaos. "Underneath the tiredness there is anger." Under the anger there's a desire to return. Underneath that there remains intellectual rejuvenation.

However, there must be honesty if there is to be rebirth.

We should not seek to retain our youth politics simply through a sense of 'nostalgia for 1976', 1985 or Fees Must Fall. Consciousness isn't maintained by memory. This generation needs to create their own set of norms for their new circumstances: "algorithmic manipulation", one would think, and a ubiquitous sense of "constitutional anxiety" due to "social fragmentation", "economic exclusion", "digital capitalism" or "democratic fatigue".

Youth Month can never just be a "time to remember" exercise. It has to be a confrontation! A confrontation with a republic that has become, an academy that has become, and youth that are becoming.

For what lies before us is not just a tragedy of unemployment. It is the languid diminishing of mind's courage.

And, if this is wasted away, then even freedom becomes administratively empty.

So I speak to you Cde Biko, and warn you, not with certainty, but with assertion. "First comes the young, and now they are still here."

Both politically, psychologically and intellectually,

Many are vanishing while others are going around in disguise.