

Famous last words of democracy in decline

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WHEN a society is in decline or ascent, its language tends to mirror its condition. There have been three distinct language epochs since 1994. The first was a period of optimism and hope. It gave birth to phrases such as “the rainbow nation”, and saw ideas such as “ubuntu” advocated as illustrative of the search for a new identity. We were “united in our diversity”; “freedom” was celebrated; and we spoke of “the future” as something glorious, soon to be realised. All the great constitutional ideals — “equality”, “democracy” and “human rights” — formed the building blocks of public debate.

The second was a technocratic age. As the state settled into its role, jargon and bureaucratic terminology came to the fore and with it many acronyms: Gear (Growth, Employment and Redistribution), Nepad (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) and Ipap (Industrial Policy Action Plan). This was the age of the machine.

It was ushered in on the back of the hope and optimism of the first democratic epoch. Ideas such as “the African Renaissance” and “transformation” held it together. But as it faded, other, more sinister, ideas that it had simultaneously produced — “cadre deployment”, for example — began to dominate for the wrong reasons.

As it drew to a close, the by-products of hegemonic control were left in its wake, as SA was introduced to a range of new, more ominous ideas: “factionalism”, “patronage” and “two-thirds majority”.

The third age, currently peaking, is of failure. Our contemporary language is peppered with ideas, phrases and words that speak of decline and destruction: “failed state”, “constitutional violation”, “demagoguery”, “judgment”, “commission of inquiry”, “qualified audit”, “apology”, “adverse finding”, “broken man”, “bailout”, “bankrupt”, “dysfunctional”, “fraud” and “protest”.

With them, the mechanisms necessary to document and object to the decline have had life breathed

into them: “open letter”, “charges”, “criminal record”, “case opened”, “ongoing investigation”, “decision pending”, “petition”, “transcript” and “disciplinary proceedings”.

It can be mesmerising, the extent of the deterioration. The media, for one, has learnt to revel in the depth and breadth of our collective descent. We are presented with “revelations” and “startling developments”.

Like a man digging frantically downwards into the dark, each shovel full of dirt an exciting step closer to the centre of the world and the molten lava that awaits. The increasing heat draws us like a moth to the flame.

BUT between each exposé and accountability lies the state. It deals in “excuses”, offers up “evasion”, “dodges accountability”, even “declines to answer”.

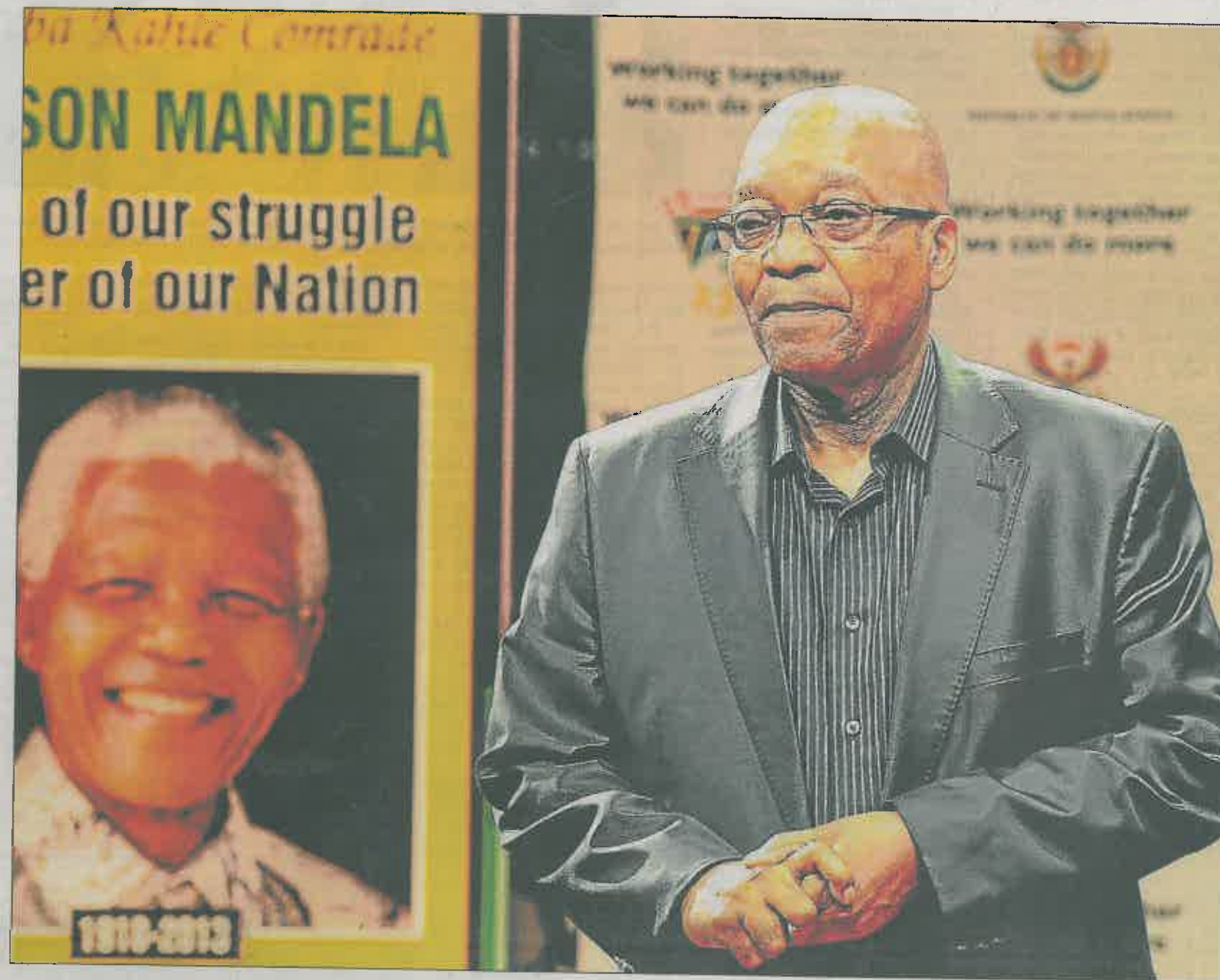
The consequence is that those words that, in another time or place, might have had inherent to them some democratic purpose, have been stripped of their meaning. “Accountability” rings hollow, and “transparency” is at best a glimpse behind the curtain. “Explanation”, “justification”, “rationale”: all these things have lost their potential power. They are allusions to an ideal, never realised yet constantly evoked. It’s a kind of farce.

Just as the technocratic age introduced us to problems, so the age of failure has brought with it a number of ideas relatively far more dangerous. There is talk of “revolution”, of “treason” and “sabotage”. “Patriotism” becomes a euphemism for control and excommunication. These are the kinds of ideas, if indulged, that fuel violence and death.

Time is always an interesting litmus test for language. The past and future are useful rhetorical devices that can be used to inspire and justify present behaviour.

The future has changed its nature in the past 20 years fundamentally. There was a time when it was the source of hope.

It elicited expectation and was imbued with idealism. Today, it is a ragged mess. The future is something we fear, not something



The first language epoch since 1994 was of optimism, the second of a technocratic age, and President Jacob Zuma now oversees a period of failure. Picture: SUPPLIED

we desire.

The past, too, has changed. There was a time when it was the source of inspiration; its violence and injustice used as a sounding board off which “progress” and “development” were regularly bounced — that such a horror had been overcome, the source of pride; that wrongdoing had been endured, a sign of tolerance and maturity. But today it is felt the cracks were too

covered over quickly. The pain was not properly acknowledged. It was all too convenient.

And so we now revisit the past daily, not as a benchmark for progress but as a bottomless well from which we might draw from and indulge suffering. The past has become a contemporary obsession and we agonise over ideas such as “recognition”, “acknowledgement”, “appreciation” and “understanding”.

The result is that there are few South Africans who live in the present. We are scattered across our timeline, trapped in a future we fear or a past that eats away at our soul.

THE great technocratic lexicon we were bestowed by the new democratic state when, at its most powerful, sought to define every

aspect of our life, has been systematically destroyed.

As it crumbles, a thousand ideas, each empty and powerless, seem to be crumbling too — “the executive”, the “NDP” (National Development Plan), “Parliament”, “parastatals”, and “service delivery”. Each one was once defined by influence, even awe and respect. Now they are tainted. They no longer induce reverence, just cynicism and doubt.

There are still symbols to which we attach hope and optimism. They are few and far between: “the public protector”, “the Constitutional Court”, and certain individuals. They have managed to endure the torture. In turn, we try to evoke ideals such as “equality” and “freedom” in a positive manner.

But really, they all are dwarfed by the prevalence of their counterparts.

The effect of this kind of decay on our language is rarely analysed. How does one build a healthy, democratic state when the language of democracy has been so fundamentally compromised?

On what basis do you engender a shared, common meaning when every word has had its heart wrenched out? To be sure, one should fear the alternative.

Failure cares nothing for denotation. And it brings with it connotations that can be all-consuming — “the other” and “the enemy” being two of the most dangerous examples.

IN TURN, trust is denuded, compassion rare, and tolerance infrequent. The only thing that unites is failure itself, your reaction to it — defined by fear or anger, or your part in it — defined by blame and denial. Certainly, it is today a uniting force and many have attached their political prospects to harnessing its power.

What will the next language epoch be? For all the range we have demonstrated, the one thing missing seems to be wisdom itself. Perhaps, that sort of language is only possible after an age of failure.

It is said that failure is a prerequisite for wisdom — that is, if one is capable of learning from it.

“Precedent”, “conviction”, “courage”, “insight”, “knowledge”, “best practice”, “prudence”, “responsibility”, and “perspective”. Imagine a public debate defined by these kinds of ideas. We have only ever experienced these fleetingly. The nightmare we are in the grip of is going to leave a lot of scars.

Of them, the restoration of the integrity of our democratic language is going to be one of the hardest things to overcome.