

EXCERPTED FROM

# Recovering Democracy in South Africa

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# Introduction

Freedom and democracy need to be understood as complex, far-reaching and potentially developing concepts. Freedom entails the removal of structural constraints that inhibit people from realising themselves in all areas of their lives. It includes the right to a healthy life and to live in surroundings where they are not harmed. It encompasses the right to adequate homes, the right to earn an adequate livelihood in an environment that does not endanger health or injure personhood. It incorporates the right to dignity and social justice. It embraces the right to gender equality, freedom of sexual orientation and being, the right to choose one's cultural or religious beliefs and to opt in and out of these as one may choose. Each of these rights requires an atmosphere free from all forms of violence.

This book is written in the belief that these and many other rights are essential for the well-being of any society. They are critical in building a South Africa that provides the opportunity for all to be creative, productive and free human beings.

In *Recovering Democracy*, I wrestle with, and try to capture, the sense that something is missing in the existence of many South Africans, something they thought was theirs, which is now under threat, slipping away or even no longer there. That 'something' is democracy. Democracy is a valuable quality or state of affairs that is needed for the realisation of the lives of South Africa's people. It is essential if we are to realise freedom in its fullest meaning. Hence, it must be recovered and the threats that it confronts must be warded off, or the setbacks it has suffered must be remedied.

Democracy, as well as freedom in general, represents a concept or understanding that is not fixed and definite. Democracy is

not a thing but a series of relationships that may alter over time, growing ever larger in scope as people invest more in it and imagine different results or outcomes to their freedom. Equally, the promise of democracy may be interpreted in more limited ways or suffer setbacks, as is the case now.

Consequently, in speaking of recovering democracy now, it may mean more than returning to the promise of 1994, protecting the Constitution from the various ways it has been undermined, and ending corruption, illegality and violence. It may also mean, if we become more actively involved in our own emancipation and more self-empowered, that we expect more from democracy, that we invest greater efforts in creative ways of building democracy and institutions that go beyond and augment what is found in the Constitution. It might also entail amendment to the Constitution itself if such changes enhance the liberties we currently enjoy.

The title of this book captures the restlessness with which the essays have been written. It refers to a democracy that has been under attack but is simultaneously worth struggling to recover and rebuild. The book has evolved out of a series of essays written over a decade, though mainly in 2014, and video interviews conducted with me mainly during 2014. In writing the articles I was very conscious of a feeling of distress, disempowerment, demoralisation, defeatism and disappointment, arising from a sense that the state of affairs prevailing in South Africa is not what many would like to see and that there is little that can be done to change this.

There are many who once worked for something different from the political conditions they now encounter, many who may not have engaged in political struggles to achieve democracy but were well disposed to living in and contributing to the development of a society at peace with itself, in which they would enjoy freedom and build amicable relations with their fellow citizens. Among many of these people there is a sense that the hope they cherished has been shattered.

As I wrote these articles or presented ideas in interviews, I

consciously spoke into this atmosphere of despair. I attempted to address what I imagined or had heard expressed by very many South Africans. I tried to provide an explanation for or an analysis of what was at play in current political developments. This was done in the belief that the first step towards changing a condition is to empower oneself with understanding. Thus, although this is not written as an academic book, it draws on what I have studied over some time and its goals are educative in a broad sense.

It shares insights or advances ideas for debate in order to move from passivity towards active engagement with the conditions we encounter. While speaking of educative goals, I do not write as if I have all the answers. Much of what I have said has been intended to open up rather than to close down discussion or provide the 'final word' on any of the issues involved.

While the book may be read in any sequence, there are some constant themes. They are part of the desire to build a culture of debate in a climate that has been depoliticised. One of the consequences of the current focus on personal enrichment and the battles for positions is that debate over political ideas and strategies has become less important or no longer bears on the primary agendas of the leading political actors. This is very different from the period of the struggle against apartheid when, even under highly repressive conditions, there was often extensive debate within the ANC and between the ANC, its allies and other political forces. One of the objectives of this book is to contribute to restoring a climate and culture of debate.

The book not only presents ways of understanding the crisis of the present, but argues that remedying the current attack on our democracy must entail the active involvement of people from all sections of our population, from diverse classes and strata. The aim must be to identify common perspectives, such as the need for clean government, the rule of law, meeting basic needs, constitutionalism and mutual respect. This commonality should lead to building a unity that may or may not take organisational form, and that could be a key element in restoring the democratic promise.

Freedom and democracy coexist with, and are generally understood to embrace, other material manifestations of freedom. However, the scope of the essays in *Recovering Democracy* focuses primarily on political democracy, for I see democratic rights as valuable in their own right and not merely of instrumental significance, as a means for achieving social and economic transformation. Democracy is important in and of itself. Without it, our ability to transform a society embedded in social inequality is almost negligible.