

# Against The Tide

By: Steven Friedman 



## USING DEMOCRACY TO KILL IT

If you are hoping to bring down democracy in this country, you have just been reminded how the voices we hear in the national debate will help you to do it.

The past few days have shown how a public debate which sounds fiercely democratic can make a democracy ripe for destruction.

In response to the allegations of General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, the President has appointed an inquiry, headed by outgoing deputy chief justice Mbuyiseli Madlanga, which must produce its first report in three months. The police minister accused by Mkhwanazi, Senzo Mchunu, has been placed on special leave.

This would, in just about any other country, be hailed as a sign of democracy's health. In most other countries, allegations that people in high places were working with criminals would face heated denials and attempts to discredit the accuser. Only when public pressure became too strong to ignore would an inquiry be appointed. In many countries, even then those in power would choose their loyalists to do the inquiring, not to leave it to an independent judge.

Here, it was denounced, in a torrent of familiar cliché, as an attempted cover-up. Opposition parties and pundits accused the president of 'playing for time' by appointing a commission – we were told repeatedly that commissions are always wasteful and that what they recommend is always ignored. Others insisted that Mchunu was being protected because he was not fired.

## General Belief

This chorus made sense only if we assume that what Mkhwanazi claimed was obviously true.

But, as this column noted last week, he has produced hardly any evidence to back up his claims and we don't even know who all the people he is accusing are, let alone what evidence he has against them.

Despite this, cheer-leading for him reached heights of absurdity. In Durban, political parties and NGOs staged a 'Hands Off Mkhwanazi' march even though no-one has showed the slightest interest in placing their hands on him. In many other countries, he would have been maligned or suspended. Here the only official response has been an undertaking by the just appointed acting minister, Firoz Cachalia, to meet him. So he is being 'protected' from a threat which does not exist.

If claims are serious but untested, how do you test them unless you ask a judge to investigate them? And why not appoint a commission when, while it is now compulsory to insist that commissions are a waste of time, the evidence shows that some of them are anything but that?

As one example, we constantly hear that the Zondo Commission has been ignored. But an analysis this week pointed out that, in response to its recommendations, 47 people, many of them prominent figures, and 21 companies, have been charged with crimes. More than R5 billion of public money has been restored to the public coffers and the SA Revenue Service has recovered almost that amount from culprits.

We could simply dismiss all this as another sign of a public debate in which posturing, groupthink and an addiction to cliché substitute for evidence and logic. But it holds huge dangers.

A moment's thought should tell us what the debate has been signalling these past few days.

The chorus is telling us that, if anyone prominent in public life accuses a minister or a senior official of wrong-doing, they will be believed. Not only do they not need to produce evidence. Any attempt to test their claim will be met by a torrent of abuse. In these cases, the accuser is always right and the accuser always wrong.

This sends a clear message to anyone in public life who wants to get a minister or official out of the way: Accuse them of something serious and wait for the choir of indignation to rally behind you. You might not even need to bother about fabricating evidence because you will not be asked for any.

Of course, this is a problem in itself. It can ensure great injustices and can also deprive public life of people it needs. But here and now, it can also threaten democracy's survival.

## Undoing Democracy

Democracy in this country is in better shape than in many of the Western countries who used to enjoy lecturing us about the wonders of their political systems. But it is also fragile because there is a strong anti-democratic strain in politics here.

There are many signs of this – enthusiasm for 'strong leaders' rather than democratic decisions, bigotry at people born on the 'wrong' side of a border, demands for 'tough action' against crime which would end the rule of law and constant claims that democracy is something which liberal elites foist on the people.

Crucially, this opposition is not expressed only in chats online. Some political parties are now openly campaigning against democracy. The most notable example is the MK Party, which wants the constitution abolished. Some other parties' positions are less clear but their commitment to democracy cannot be taken for granted.

These parties do not need to win an election to get into government. All they need do is to ensure that the balance of power within the ANC shifts from those who do not want to govern with them to those who do.

We can also take it for granted that some people in the security services would prefer democracy to end and are doing whatever they can to help those who are working to end it. They may be one of the reasons for the 2021 violence in KZN.

If democracy's opponents were listening this week, they must have worked out what they must do – figure out which ministers and public officials stand in your way and accuse of them of wrong-doing. Political parties who claim to be democratic, including the second largest party in the country, will latch onto your claims and, cheered on by pundits and the media, do their best to drive your target out of office.

A carefully crafted campaign using this knowledge could change the ANC leadership, ensure that people who are happy to govern with non-democrats are in charge, and so shift power to those who want democracy's end.

At that stage, those who now so loudly exercise their democratic rights by backing any attack on anyone in government would find that they no longer have any rights to exercise. They would be forced to cheer the government or remain silent. It would, of course, be too late to win back the democracy they helped to destroy.

None of this is idle speculation. Democracy's opponents know this and they have used the tactic before. Events this week would have told them that what they need to do is work harder at what they have already been doing.

At the root of the problem lies a national debate in which major political parties as well as media and pundits cannot tell the difference between insisting that governments or politicians justify what they do and show that they are serving the people and assuming that nothing government or politicians do can ever be justified.

Citizens who are sceptical about government make democracy work. Those who denounce it whatever it does open the way to forces who want its downfall.

