

# The moral agency of civil society in post-election South Africa



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**Dates:**

Received: 30 Jul. 2024  
Accepted: 30 Sept. 2024  
Published: 15 Nov. 2024

**How to cite this article:**

Vorster, J.M., 2024, 'The moral agency of civil society in post-election South Africa', *In die Skriflig* 58(1), a3116. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v58i1.3116>

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With the dawn of the new post-election Government of National Unity (GNU) in South Africa, this article ventures some ideas on the possible contribution of civil society to this new dispensation with the aim of turning the tide of moral decay and to set the course to hope and the development of a community of character. The research approaches the topic from a Reformed theological-ethical paradigm and considers social ethics within the context of the kingdom of God as the determinant of Christian social ethics. The study explores the possibility that the upcoming civil society could contribute to the much-needed moral ethos of South Africa by means of cooperation, confrontation, complimentary action, and co-option with respect to the state machinery in the GNU. The central theoretical argument of this research is that the incumbent civil society in South Africa – as one of the pillars of the constitutional democracy – can play an important role in the reinvention of a sound moral ethos as a moral agent over and against the GNU. To prove this hypothesis, the article discusses and submits the following areas of social involvement by civil society as proposals for further reflection: reviving morality, fostering moral leadership, being the voice of the poor, exposing corruption, shadowing public education, fighting crime, furthering constitutionalism, and promoting national dialogue.

**Contribution:** The research indicates that civil society in South Africa has renewed potential to act as a powerful and effective moral agent in the country by using the spaces provided by the new post-election GNU. It can play a prominent role in rebuilding the moral ethos, social cohesion, and welfare of the community.

**Keywords:** civil society; Government of National Unity; GNU; moral agency; poverty in South Africa; corruption in South Africa; leadership in South Africa; education in South Africa; national dialogue in South Africa; churches in South Africa; civic talk.

## Introduction

In 1994, South African citizens bid farewell to three and a half centuries of colonialism that had trampled on the rights and freedoms of indigenous communities. The emergence of a new democratic dispensation liberated most South Africans from the chains and hopelessness of apartheid and its oppressive laws. The constitutional democracy was greeted with an abundance of joy and hope. The vision of a new South Africa rekindled the prospect of a better future marked by peace and prosperity. A new ethic dawned with a constitution that enshrined human dignity and human rights, equality, freedom, and the highest moral codes for civil life. This new era was successfully driven by dedicated leadership, with Nelson Mandela at the forefront guiding South Africa towards his vision.

One of the salient features of the new dispensation is the ability to have free and fair elections. The seventh of these elections took place on 28 May 2024. The people spoke, but the 1994 optimism of hope and joy have since been muted by a few decades of rapid moral decline. Hope for the future has shifted to fear, or at least mixed expectations. Gumede (2021:1) laments the decline in public morality in a disheartening research document. He argues that 'social good moral values' have been corrupted in many instances. These are the values of accountability, responsibility, fairness, care for the poor and marginalised, respect for the law, economic integrity, and above all, the dedicated delivery of services. Corruption has become commonplace, not only in the public sector but also in private and religious institutions. The agents of corruption include elected state officials, some religious leaders and high-ranking corporate personalities. They justify their corrupt misuse of law and public funds through racial reasoning or by blaming indigenous cultures. As corruption spreads, it contaminates even more people in leadership positions, fostering a 'if they can do it without consequences, we could also'. This bleak analysis by Gumede (2021) is precise. South Africa

has become a society with eroded public morality and devoid of effective accountability structures. In the recent election, the electorate punished the ruling African National Congress (ANC) for the deteriorating state of the country. Politicians attempted to find a new avenue by forming a Government of National Unity (GNU). Only time will tell whether this new political dispensation will result in moral revival.

With the advent of this new public administration, this article focuses on the potential contribution of civil society in South Africa to turning the tide of moral decay and steering the country towards becoming a community of character. The research approaches the topic from a Reformed theological-ethical paradigm, considering social ethics within the context of the Kingdom of God as central to Christian social ethics.<sup>1</sup> Pessi and Gröndland (2012:353) and Welker (2017:2) remind us of the modern North-European and Nordic democracies, which consist of three key players that keep each other intact, balance the execution of power, and create shared spaces for social action: the state, the markets, and civil society. These three entities could also be regarded as the leading role players in setting moral standards and shaping moral reasoning. They influence each other and also contribute to the moral character of a citizenry within their respective spheres. Borgman, Van den Brink and Dekker (2016:394) explain how this positive interaction has improved the moral fibre of the Dutch society for the better over the recent decades in their plea for a reinvention of civil society. Although South Africans are not yet at the level of the much older European democracies, civil society in this country has become a significant force in community development and the setting of moral standards (Kuye & Nhlape 2011:99). Numerous court cases and civil protests by non-governmental institutions over the past decades prove that civil society has emerged as a foremost role player in combating public maladministration and moral decay. Without the social action of these organisations, governmental failures would have been far worse.

It has thus become clear that political leadership alone is not fit to serve the cause of moral reasoning and revival in South Africa today. Other agents, such as civil society, must step in. What can civil society do? This is the central question of this article. Pabari et al. (2020:3) in their extensive empirical study on the role of civil society vis-à-vis the state in most countries, identify the following four modes of action:

- Cooperative action – likely to exist when goals and strategies align.

1. Over the years, Reformed theological ethics has regarded morality on the social terrain as a very important aspect of Christian moral agency. In modern times, the moral agency of civil society has become a much researched phenomenon in Reformed theological ethics. This development is evident, inter alia, from a recent publication of the Institute for Theological and Interdisciplinary Research (Heidelberg, Germany) (Welker, Koopman & Vorster 2017). In this publication this author discusses the relevance of the theology of the Kingdom of God for ecclesiology, social spheres and social ethics, and applies these perspectives to the moral agency of civil society. The publication made use of the biblical idea of the Kingdom to delineate Christian moral action in the public domain. Following the discussion of the biblical and theological tenets of the concept, the publication asserts that, "The biblical concept of the kingdom of God offers a feasible theological paradigm for constructive civil action by churches and Christians to participate as transmitters of the morality of the reign of Christ into society" (Vorster 2017:28). The present article follows this pattern of reasoning and the paradigm of the Kingdom-ethics and will not engage in additional theological analysis.

- Confrontational action – goals and strategies are diverge, and actors perceive each other as threats.
- Complementary action – goals are similar, but strategies differ.
- Co-optive action – when strategies align, but goals differ.

The aim of this article is to explore the potential contribution of an emerging civil society to the much-needed moral ethos of South Africa based on the modes mentioned above. Specifically, civil society can either cooperate with the state machinery in some respects or challenge the morally destructive impulses of state agents in the South African psyche by means of confrontation. The central theoretical argument of this research is that South Africa's incumbent civil society – as one of the pillars of its constitutional democracy – can play a vital role in the reinvention of a sound moral ethos, acting both as a guide and a corrective force to the state as a moral agent. The newly formed GNU should include in a national debate the noble contributions of this increasingly influential civil society. To support this hypothesis, several areas of civil society's social involvement are discussed and submitted as proposals for further reflection. Firstly, the role of civil society in the quest for moral leadership is considered.<sup>2</sup>

## Reviving morality in the political domain

Contrary to democracies in Europe and elsewhere, the South African democracy is still young and must find its moral compass after several centuries of colonial abuses, hostilities, and apartheid. The country entered the scene of true democracy with a significant backlog in social fibre and altruistic morality. The seven free and fair general elections are bright stars in community development and bode well for the future. The same is true for the peaceful co-existence and the general trend of the community to promote peace, reconciliation, and human dignity after years of racial strife. However, these stars are dimmed by pockets of racism, violence, corruption, and explosions of criminality and malignant behaviours.

The country needs a moral compass – a broad directive to show the way to the common good. Democracy alone cannot provide and facilitate the moral framework necessary to build a nation. The public sphere alone is not equipped to develop such a framework; it needs other role players to assist. Of course, one can refer to the moral agency of education and training, religion, art, the public media, and the activities in many other social spheres. But what does

2. In a recent book, this author (see Vorster 2023) reflected on the question: How could we in present-day South Africa discover our personal and social morality and promote sound moral agency? Can we, amid all the distrust in political leadership and economic planning, find a moral compass again – the compass that could lead us to an honest, responsible, and humane society where the plight of the poor and the marginalised is successfully and sustainably addressed and where we can bring to bear high moral standards in all spheres of life? Today, we are in dire need of a moral compass that could lead us to mutual trust, respect for each other, a flourishing life, and a bright future for our children and the next generations. In the mentioned publication, I venture some answers in our search for a compass to guide us in finding a new culture of morality, decency, and respectability in South Africa. This article takes the argument further and focuses particularly on the relevance of civil society for the contemporary GNU.

moral agency entail in essence? In this respect, Borgman et al. (2016:405) raise a valuable argument when they point to the value of 'civic talk'. Civic talk, in their words, is 'language that links the everyday experience of people with the social values and public ideals'. The everyday experience is the domain of civil society, and it is indeed this moral agent that is in an excellent position to promote civic talk and to equip others to share in this experience. Civic talk means that a social institution must expand its focus beyond its particular defined scope. For example, trade unions should not only facilitate and deal with the rights and welfare of their members but should also promote the values of honest and responsible labour. They should promote the responsibility of their members to treat their families with love and respect and show regard for the life and property of others. The media should not only focus on informing but also on educating. Additionally, a civil society promoting a specific ethos and culture in a multilingual and multicultural country such as South Africa, must be sensitive to the rights and preferences of others. Activism for a particular ideal must also honour the ideals of others.

When dealing with 'civic talk', the task of churches must be addressed, because churches are excellent agents of moral revival. The debate about whether the church belongs to the public, civil, or private domain is an age-old debate in virtually all the major Christian traditions (Pessi & Gröndland 2011:354). Different regions and countries have different views and practices regarding the relationship between state, church, and civil society. But despite these traditional differences, the church remains a major actor in the social terrain, both on the broad stage as the universal church and in local communities in the form of local parishes. De Freitas (2005) advises:

[T]hat cognisance must be taken of the Constitutional Court's recognition of the integral role that religion plays in the public sphere. By implication, therefore, the churches should be recognised as important participants in public matters. (p. 40)

This reality presents itself wherever the church functions. Furthermore, 'civic talk' is the bread and butter of every parish because the Christian religion is about faith, love, and the life flowing from faith and love. In the words of Pessi and Gröndland (2011:360), churches can question 'the claims of states and markets to function without extrinsic functioning instead only according to their own intrinsic functional norms and immoral self-regulating mechanisms'.

The testimony of a church is essentially 'civic talk' to people from all walks of life. They are fathers, mothers, children, labourers, academics, teachers, economists, politicians, and many other positions and professions. They can teach the moral alternatives in the decrepit immoral spaces they encounter in daily life and can influence morality in every sphere of life. Some churches in South Africa were very prominent in the struggle against apartheid, and it was eventually the Christian message of reconciliation that overcame the burdens of division and distrust. Simpson

(2015:253 ff.) explains in a thorough study how the South African Council of Churches struggled against apartheid and became a buffer for church groups to do the same. This body promoted activism and an ideology of liberation, providing physical spaces for other role players as a platform for ecclesiastical leadership to voice their concerns. However, Simpson (2015:260) indicates that in the post-apartheid period, the churches have lost their influence. He attributes this loss to denominationalism and the decline of the broad ecumenical structures. Kumalo (2014:226) identifies the same tendency in the post-liberation era and maintains that the Christian church, comprising African traditions, mainline churches, and ecumenical bodies, has been conspicuously silent on political issues and involvement. Mofokane and Botha (2019:89) argue that Christianity in South Africa has moved into a recess regarding its prophetic calling. Bentley (2013:261, 264) echoes the concern of many scholars nowadays, who lament the pietism and resulting 'quietism' of churches and church leaders when facing moral decay. It seems that a theology of spirituality and holiness dominates the testimony of churches today to such an extent that the prophetic voice and public role of churches receive little attention. In the past, churches were frontrunners in activism and protests against public structures that underlaid human suffering, but they have become silent bystanders as the current corruption, violence, criminality, and human suffering stir the quest for moral revival. Certain church leaders still address the moral ills in public statements, but what is missing is the civic talk from the pulpit in the local parish. It is by teaching and preaching in the parish, at the grassroots level of society, where people should be convinced, inspired, equipped, and motivated to lay out the core principles of moral revival. Civic talk in preaching and teaching strengthens the family as a moral agent, steers children away from drug addiction and gangsterism, convinces teachers, medical personnel, public leaders, workers, and others to build a moral compass in their lines of work and social relations. Every local parish could act as a power station generating civic talk that can then be relayed to all other social spaces. To do this, churches in South Africa must salvage their lost prophetic voice and speak up again. The 'civic talk' in local parishes could ignite 'civic talk' in civil society and eventually trickle down to all spheres of public life.

## The quest for moral leadership

In the South African domain, religious and political leadership was traditionally regarded as the most important driver of public morality. Religious leaders and public figures in the political realm were honoured and sometimes idolised as the leaders of the nation. This trend emerged during colonial times and grew among both the indigenous peoples and the remnants of the early colonists. With the dawn of democracy 30 years ago, the adoration of religious and political leaders did not diminish. Figures like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are still regarded as icons that represented the ideal of a new common good in an all-encompassing democracy. They not only introduced a new



political order but created a new kind of public morality driven by high moral ideals such as human dignity, non-racialism, reconciliation, and care. They became symbols of the public good and inspired the community to embrace the new moral imagination of a kind and caring nation.

Although religious and political leadership is still valued as a driver of public morality, one can discern the public's emerging disappointment in the ability of the current generation of political leadership to build on the foundation of the public moral ideals inherited from the Mandela era. The latest report of the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (2023) in their South African Reconciliation Barometer reveals that the levels of trust in political leaders have reached an ebb tide in recent years. The report concludes:

[I]n a revealing turn of public opinion, the latest South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) shows a significant rise in distrust towards the country's leadership, with many South Africans expressing scepticism about the integrity and effectiveness of those at the helm of governance. A stunning 79% of South Africans believe that leaders cannot be trusted to do what is right – four times more than 20 years ago. (p. 1)

To a large extent, political leaders are distrusted, viewed as corrupt, incompetent, power abusers, immoral, and unable to fulfil empty promises (Kgatle 2018). While political leaders are active agents influencing public opinion, they are by default either constructive or destructive to public morality. Leaders such as Mandela and Mbeki inspired followers to nurture the common good, and their own conduct was worthy of emulation. On the other hand, the Zuma administration, characterised by state capture and corruption, unleashed a wave of morally destructive conduct penetrating deep into the public sector and swept more and more officials into a swamp of corruption and lack of accountability. According to Kuye and Nhlape (2011:91), civil society in the past was not very effective in the development of moral leadership because the South African government's commitment to civil society compromised the latter too much, aligning them with state ventures. To be effective, civil society should be sovereign in its own sphere and position itself as an independent agent between the state and the market.

Two areas where civil society could address the moral void in leadership are through leadership training and exemplary leadership. In a recent Swedish study, Altermark, Johansson and Statton (2023:1) assessed several Swedish studies and indicated that civil society leadership training programmes are a new phenomenon that is often overlooked by civil society scholarship, despite being linked to the professionalisation of the sector. Civil society in South Africa can follow this example by training leaders, not only within the parameters of what civil societies need for their own purposes, but also for what the country at large needs for good governance and moral development. Leadership training in the form of programmes for the youth run by, for example, trade unions, interest groups such as cultural associations, religious organisations, academic societies,

churches, foundations, and other forms of community associations, could render a service to the country by training future leaders. Many well-defined and effective programmes have been developed, as the study of Altermark, Johansson and Statton (2023) proves. Leadership training is more than offering people the skills to fulfil their obligations in politics, the labour field, or managing a business. It must incorporate training in social ethics conducive to all forms of leadership. Philosophical, sociological, and theological courses at universities could assist civil society with moral frameworks and well-argued, applicable moral codes necessary for moral leadership. Civil society in South Africa has all the necessary instruments for responsible and beneficial leadership training, but what is needed is vision, cooperation, and implementation.

Exemplary leadership is another valuable catalyst for the process of moral leadership in South Africa. Exemplary leadership entails setting practical and feasible examples of how leaders should and must conduct themselves morally. As mentioned earlier, the perennial corruption and mismanagement of public officials have spilled over into the private sector in some cases. Fraud and embezzlement have left their marks on some private financial institutions in the form of questionable business practices, self-enriching schemes to the detriment of naïve investors, and outright theft of assets. On the other hand, some well-organised and purpose-driven civil societies have been setting good examples of moral leadership and have captured the attention of the populace. They demonstrate what can be achieved through exemplary leadership. In this respect the good work of the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (OUTA), the Treatment Action Campaign, the trade union Solidarity, and the foundations of Mandela, Tutu, De Klerk, and Ahmed Kathrada can be commended. They prove that the exemplary leadership of civil society can inspire prospective leaders and create a widespread compulsion to manifest moral leadership in South Africa. Another important precondition for the moral agency of civil society is its constant devotion to the plight of the poor.

## Being the voice of the poor

The biggest problem in South Africa remains poverty and inequality, because a large part of the population is excluded from economic growth and development. Bittar (2020) provides detailed and well-argued analysis of the root causes, causes and manifestations of poverty in South Africa in his assessment of the Borgen Project. Despite the administration's development plans and affirmative policies over the last 30 years, poverty and inequality remain enduring obstacles to much-needed manifestation of human dignity and the flourishing of many people. However, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 seems to be an exception. The GNU considers the NDP a workable and suitable blueprint for eradicating the large pockets of poverty and bringing about much greater and lasting equality in the economy at large and specifically in the workplace. In my opinion, the NDP has been largely inhibited by the much

publicised and well-known disastrous lack of service delivery in the living spaces of the poor, and deficient political management has brought the plan to a virtual cessation. Still, the NDP can be welcomed as an honest attempt to address poverty and inequality because it includes all the necessary elements to deal with the problem.

Kuye and Nhlape (2011:102) indicated that civil society has played an increasingly important role in alleviating poverty. The progression was hampered by the period of state capture, but the emergence of the GNU following the 2024 national elections could revive the process. Civil society has both the experience and the willingness to take hands with the new government to fully implement the NDP. Given the inhumane effects of poverty, a serious attempt by the GNU and civil society to succeed with the NDP must be seen as a crucial first step towards justice, development, and peace. To achieve this goal, the GNU must be trustworthy, civil society must trust the government, and government officials must be open to the expertise offered by civil institutions.

Firstly, civil society can be extremely valuable in shaping the conscience of the community regarding the plight of the poor. Poor people can become a 'normal' trait of a community when people are not constantly reminded of the immorality of maintaining policies and instruments that perpetuate poverty. In this respect, churches are also well-equipped and well-positioned to keep the problem in the public eye and appeal to the consciences of all people to take the plight of the poor seriously and to develop the skills of mercy and care (Burrows & Cilliers 2018:381).

Secondly, the role of civil society in advocacy for the proven abilities of a market-driven economy to alleviate poverty within the ambit of a social democracy is crucial. Since the emergence of the democratic dispensation in 1994, economic policies oscillated between favouring market-friendly approaches (Mandela, Mbeki, and Motlanthe) and emphasising the state as the sole economic driver (Zuma). The former phase resulted in economic discipline and sensitivity for market forces leading to moderate economy growth and the emergence of a black middle class. The latter, however, resulted in numerous cabinet reshuffles, a huge bureaucracy, and eventually state capture and rampant corruption. The result was the creation of a pocket of a rich black elite and widened the inequality gap between rich and poor. The socialism of the Zuma government and the destructive elements' constant hindrance of the difficult transition from this socialism to a free market during the first Ramaphosa term, inhibited the release of crucial free-market forces to address poverty. The implementation of a much-needed social democracy was obstructed by the influence of hard-line socialists in the ANC government leadership, remnants of the previous state-capture instruments, corrupt leaders protecting their gains, and the incompetence of officials expected to apply the social-democratic policies.

The historic argument about the feasibility of the free market versus the strong state idea of socialism and vice versa is

not applicable to South Africa anymore. The history of colonialism, the forced distribution of land, migrant labour and systematic discrimination, and the resulting inequality, made the application of full-blown market-driven economic policies impossible. This might be the system of the future, but at present, the most responsible and feasible way forward is for the state to structure a growing economy by redressing policies and prioritising the plight of the poor through social grants and wealth redistribution. Systemic discrimination and mechanisms resulting in unfair and unequal economic activity can only be rectified by deep-rooted systemic changes. We are reminded of this by the thorough studies of Terreblanche (2002, 2014) in the aftermath of apartheid. Deep-rooted change implies the creation and practical application of new mechanisms and instruments, not merely the replacement of old discriminatory structures with new ones. While the state should continue with economic reforms and prioritising the poor, the markets must be enabled to create wealth and prosperity for all. The state and the markets must find a workable synergy and civil society should be an active agent in promoting and realising such a beneficial relationship.

The new GNU bodes well for such a synergy, and civil society must collaborate and act as a potent catalyst in this regard. A participating civil society, with its proven expertise in finance and economics can play an important role by constantly evaluating the execution of government policies to establish whether these policies align with market-friendly and publicly beneficial principles. Constant policy evaluation by a high standing and well-equipped moral agent, alongside the presentation and reception of well-meant criticism and encouragement could become a welcome and valued virtue of the new GNU. To achieve this symbiosis, the government and civil society should agree on intent within a sphere of mutual trust and goodwill. Furthermore, the free market can attract more much-needed investments from macro-corporations and other investors abroad. To attain this goal, the GNU and an accompanying civil society must restore international community's trust in the intentions of this body to establish clean and market-friendly governance. While the free market can alleviate poverty by energising economic growth, the government can alleviate poverty by investing heavily in infrastructure. In this way, Ramaphosa's wish to create more jobs using the free market as expressed in his address at the opening of Parliament in 2022, could be realised (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa 2022). The new GNU provides ample space for civil society to act as the voice of the poor.

## Exposing corruption and mismanagement

The perennial corruption and mismanagement in both the public and private sectors in South Africa has become one of the most discussed topics in political and social ethics. The findings of the Zondo Commission on state capture indicated how severe corruption enriched a few individuals and inhibited economic growth and the execution of

development programmes. Poor service delivery due to endemic corruption plagued poor communities especially, depriving them of the most essential services (see Government of South Africa 2024). Any proposed development programme will be of no avail if the wave of corruption is not stopped. Efforts to stop this wave will make or break the new GNU and the credibility of civil society as an acceptable moral agent in the moral renewal of the South African society.

Civil society can assist in the struggle against corruption. What Resane (2024:5) proposes regarding efforts against bribery is also valid for the battle against all forms of corruption. Civil society can address corruption in three ways. Firstly, it must deal with corruption within its own ranks and in the domain of business. They can hardly criticise state organs and public institutions about corruption if they tolerate corruption within their own spheres and remain silent about corruption in the private sector. Civil society and the private sector must rectify themselves before addressing the public sector about corruption and fraud. Secondly, they can inspire the new GNU to act against all the perpetrators identified by the various reports and findings of the Zondo Commission. Up to now, the ANC in government has failed to act against its own supporters and members and was hesitant to bring influential political figures to justice. The new GNU must overcome the sentiments of the ANC and act in the interest of all South Africans. Furthermore, by harbouring corrupt officials in the new government, the GNU will undermine its own credibility. Through constant critical dialogue, as De Wet (2015:9) suggests, civil society can inspire and assist the GNU in taking legal action against all the mentioned perpetrators. Thirdly, and most importantly, civil society could act as the watchdog over corruption in both the public and private sectors. In our modern age of refined technology, corruption can escape attention and go 'underground' undetected. Civil society has the means and techniques to reveal obscured corruption and should do so.

## Shadowing public education

Civil society in South Africa has made a significant impact on education through private schools and tertiary education. The contribution of these institutions is visible to all. Public education in South Africa, however, has not performed well compared to education in similar developing countries. Throughput rates are low, standards are not competitive and, above all, public education in South Africa is arguably the most prominent showcase of the remaining racial inequality. Van den Berg and Hofmeyr (2015) depicted this inequality in a well-argued report in 2015, and since then, the situation has not improved satisfactorily. Inadequate public education hinders development in many other social spheres and perpetuates racial inequality in the economy at large. Civil society, among others, has the capacity to address some of these deficiencies. By adopting a co-operative model of civil society engagement, the benefits of private education could be extended to the public education sector. In the past,

too much emphasis was placed on a confrontational model where private and public education challenged each other.

Instead of confrontation and unhealthy competition, civil society can shadow public education and highlight the deficiencies in infrastructure, policies, financing, and quality. The successes of the private education system in overcoming racial inequality can serve as an example to help public education bridge the gap. To avoid the past alienation of the public sphere from the private sector, the shadowing should not be done with an attitude of confrontation but rather through cooperation and co-option. Although strategies may differ and outcomes may be defined inversely, co-option and cooperation can create collaboration in planning, policy execution, educators' training, and financial models. The private education sector has gained expertise in this field by modelling its own enterprises on modern global tendencies in education and these can enrich public education.

## Blowing the whistle on crime

Crime in South Africa remains one of the most prominent issues, and there is no indication that the rising levels of crime, especially violent crime, have subsided. Murder, mass shootings, mob justice, taxi violence, domestic violence, violence against women, financial abuses, illegal immigration and mining, and other forms of crime are still prevalent (South African Police 2024). All communities suffer under this huge burden of crime, but poor communities in townships especially bear the brunt.

Crime is, first and foremost, a moral issue. Wherever people's dignity, security and property rights are not respected, crime will flourish. Therefore, the first line of defence against crime should be moral revival, and what was said earlier in this article about the role of civil society in moral revival is particularly relevant when dealing with crime. Issues such as strengthening the moral fibre of families, civic talk within churches, moral education in schools and national dialogue about human dignity, equality, and respect for human rights are all potent tools in the struggle against crime.

It is also crucial that the South African community does not become so desensitised to about crime that they view it as a nuisance and an irreversible trait of modern South Africa that must be tolerated. The only response then becomes investing in more and more security, building fences, staying off the streets, investing in security firms and measures, and blaming the crime solely on poverty. When driving on a road and encountering a sign that says, 'high crime spot', one gets the sense that the community is merely acknowledging the problem but not addressing it. Civil society has a huge role to play in countering this attitude. We cannot continue building fences, appointing security guards, and investing in expensive security systems. The crime rate must decrease, and South Africa should become a safe place for its people. Civil society can strengthen the hand of the new GNU by being the persistent whistleblower on the high crime rate,



incompetence in policing and jurisprudence, and the lack of intervention where crime escalates. Furthermore, civil society has the expertise to provide much-needed scientifically proven material that the GNU could use in its efforts to reduce the high tide of crime in South Africa and direct the population towards crime sensitivity and prevention.

## Furthering constitutionalism

The post-election government of South Africa can be divided into two main groups: the pro-constitution group and the anti-constitution group. The GNU was established on the ideological basis of adhering to and protecting of the constitutional values of the present constitution, while the opposing group consisting of the new Mkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) organises itself around the ideological notion that the 1996 Constitution should be repealed and replaced with one furthering a strong state and a socialist economy. The difference between these two movements is deep-rooted. In his juxtaposition of constitutionalism and populism, Resane (2022) remarks that a constitution:

[S]pells out the mechanisms through which the state organs should operate, whether it is the departments, or all entities owned by the state. A constitution is a soul of the nation, as a country without a constitution, or where a constitution is overlooked, is a failed state. It is there to protect the freedom of the citizens and ensuring the rootedness and identity of the citizenry. (p. 6)

The 1996 Constitution of South Africa is a modern constitution with the rule of law, a bill of fundamental rights, and a constitutional court as the highest authority. Since the inception of this constitution, the Constitutional Court has made several important rulings to curb power abuses as well as the violation of human rights by state instruments and to protect the rights of the populace and promote the values of human dignity, equality, and freedom. Although Alley and Boonzaier (2022:318) identify various inefficiencies in the Constitutional Court's operations, they refer to numerous exponents who are of the opinion that the South African Constitutional Court is held in high esteem, both nationally and internationally.

Constitutionalism has proved the most suitable means to address with the realities of South Africa's long history of colonialism and oppression. Irrespective of certain growing pains, such as those identified by Alley and Boonzaier (2022:341), this mode of governance has enhanced peace, justice, and reconciliation and, above all, has maintained the political environment's integrity. Civil society should actively support the GNU's goal to safeguard the constitution and promote constitutionalism as opposed to the potential for power abuses, state capture, and dictatorial rule that may arise if the anti-constitutional political groups gain influence. It is indeed constitutionalism that positions civil society as a moral role player for the benefit of all. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court is the most vital instrument that civil society can use to defend the society

against injustices that might occur within the domain of political rule. Long-term constitutionalism will reach its full potential only when civil society is co-opted by and cooperates with the state to excavate this potential. The protection and implementation of constitutionalism can therefore be regarded as an essential ingredient of the moral agency of civil society in South Africa today.

## Creating spaces for national dialogue

On 01 May 2024, former state president, Thabo Mbeki, 'diagnosed what has paralysed the ANC-led state since 1994 and proposed an inclusive dialogue with civil society organisations, politicians, businesses, labour and others to discuss a way forward' (Nonyukela 2024:1). He maintains that the ANC-led government cannot solve the South Africa's many problems on its own. His call is to the point because, after three decades of uninterrupted ANC rule from a position of strength, the country's progress has come to a virtual standstill, and politics have devolved into factionalism fights and a lack of visionary prospects. What is significant in his proposal is the emphasis on including civil society in this national dialogue.

Over the past 20 years, dialogues in South Africa have been limited to political players, with the ANC as the senior partner, or to be more precise, the 'Big Brother', who will tolerate and participate in a dialogue only as long as it does not infringe on its own standing and power. Smaller political parties and other potential role players, such as civil societies, had no real influence and were unable to bring about notable change. However, the emergence of the GNU has fundamentally altered this situation. Many political parties are now involved in all spheres of governance and this new reality raises hope. But more can be done, and considering Mbeki's proposal, civil society must be part of the national dialogue due to its deep roots in all layers of the populace, its proven expertise, and its non-political stance in defining South Africa's problems. Moreover, civil society might even take the lead in conduction the national dialogue because it is well equipped to expand the agenda beyond political issues and is not as compromised as political agents adhering to a political ideology. Civil society will indeed render a great service to the country by driving and accomplishing the idea of a national dialogue, setting a comprehensive agenda, creating spaces outside the political domain, but including potential political solutions, and overcoming the pitfalls of factionalism, tribalism, selfish expectations, religious intolerance, and personal political ambitions.

## Conclusion

The proposals ventured in this article serve as an introduction to a much larger and more intensive debate with well-informed and equipped participants. This author hopes that a debate will emerge regarding the moral agency of civil society in the new stage of South Africa's political and social history heralded by the GNU and parallel processes. This author is convinced that civil society now has the opportunity to add

value to the national project aimed at reconciliation, job creation, moral revival, economic growth, and the development of all the vital ingredients for a community of character, with the prospect of a flourishing life for all. Through cooperation wherever possible, confrontation when necessary, complementary action when needed, and co-option where required, civil society could assist the GNU in redirecting the course of the country towards a better future. Such involvement may also restore the era of hope experienced in 1994 for today's despondent South African citizenry.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, J.M.V., serves as an editorial board member (Editor-in-Chief) of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this manuscript. The author has no other competing interests to declare.

### Author's contribution

J.M.V. is the sole author of this research article.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

### Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

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