

Learning the lessons of eastern Europe

The group of South Africans who recently visited Eastern Europe under the leadership of Idasa had many differences of political affiliation and background. However, all accepted that we came from a deeply divided society committed to the transition to a new democracy.

It was with this in mind that we listened attentively to a wide cross-section of people in the former East and West Germany. The striving for unity in that divided society had many lessons for us. In the same way the visit to Czechoslovakia and Hungary gave us a first-hand opportunity to see two adjoining countries with many similarities, but also major differences, in their transition towards democracy.

The experience of Hungary is probably closer to that of South Africa than Czechoslovakia. Firstly because the liberalisation process in that country started back in 1968 and, despite communist rule, it allowed experiments in the economy and enabled people to travel and study abroad, bringing back new ideas and new thinking. In the same way, despite the repression of apartheid, there has always existed a liberal party in parliament, we have always had human rights groups and travel was always possible for a large number of South Africans who could return with insights of freer societies beyond our borders.

There are three distinct areas of change in Hungary which have lessons for South Africa. Firstly, on the political level, a feature of the dramatic changes in Hungary since 1989 was that it was a change from the top. There can be no denying that there has been a shift towards a popular democracy, but the changes were brought about largely by a small group at the top and, in the end, saw a change from one elite to another elite.

In South Africa we must try and avoid top-down change with little or no involvement of ordinary people. For this reason it is extremely important that Codesa II is not postponed because at least there the debates are public and South Africans in general have a far better opportunity to understand and appreciate the different positions taken by different parties.

The second area of change in Hungary is in the economic field. Hungary is experiencing very similar difficulties to those of South Africa in that economic change has not kept pace with political change. The inheritance from their past, in terms of state ownership, bureaucracy, lack of initiative and planned economy, have all left their mark. Prices have increased and wage levels have not been able to match these because of low productivity. From a society of full employment, there is now growing unemployment, reaching eight percent. It is estimated that in the next few months the number of unemployed will reach more than 800 000. Coupled with this there is very little foreign investment and their former markets in the East have simply disappeared. The consequence is that many ordinary Hungarians cannot see economic improvements tied with a shift towards greater political freedom. While most politicians and economists feel that the problem is manageable, they are concerned that unless there is a proper safety net for those who are now unemployed, and unless there is rapid economic growth, political stability could be threatened.

This scenario is all too familiar to South Africans and we were reminded again that unless there is corresponding economic improvement of those who have been deprived for so long, it will be extremely difficult to achieve political stability. With the risk of political instability comes greater dissatisfaction on the ground and that, in turn, is a cycle which contributes very largely to the climate of violence in South Africa. It is simply not good enough to spend a disproportionate amount of time on arguing about the niceties of a constitution whilst ignoring fundamental social and economic problems.

The third area of change which is taking place in formerly East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary is in the sociological area. There is a consensus among many with whom we spoke that one of the consequences of repression is the diminishing of civil society. What is needed in Eastern Europe right now, according to many commentators, is the rebuilding of a civil society and groups of people who will risk, will criticise, will be responsible and will hold the politicians to account.

The newly emerging democracy in Eastern Europe is a tender and fragile plant and needs to be nourished by grassroots organisations which constantly hold on to the fundamental values of freedom, free speech, tolerance and access for ordinary citizens to the political and economic process.

There are many lessons that South Africa can learn from developments in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and elsewhere. There are, however, these three fundamental truths which need to be underlined: firstly, in terms of the transition towards democracy, the process as well as the goals should be democratic. This means the maximum involvement of people at all levels rather than an elite at the top. Further, there is no time to waste. We cannot afford the luxury of grandstanding, of point-scoring and of accusation and counter-accusation. Political leaders of all parties need to be reminded that they are in the final analysis servants of the people and therefore should serve their best interests. Right now South Africa's best interests lie in a resolution of conflict, the swift movement towards political choices and involvement in the political process.

Secondly, it should be underlined again and again that the best constitution in the world cannot survive civil unrest brought about by deep-seated poverty, grievances and unfulfilled expectations. Economic development and progress must go hand in hand with political change.

Thirdly, in the same way that politicians have an enormous responsibility in the period of transition, so too have community leaders, lawyers, journalists, churches and independent institutes to emphasise and uphold the fundamental human values so that in this time of rapid change South Africa does not make the mistake of simply exchanging one elite group for another and one form of nationalism for another. In South Africa, as in eastern Europe, democracy is fragile and must be nurtured at every level of society.

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