

The Politic of Human Dignity

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The meaning of dignity is often misunderstood. Many people only think of dignity in relation to the economic status of those who are better off. This is understood to mean that a person with no money is taken as a person whose life and voice does not count and is therefore a person with no dignity. It is also understood that a person with money does count and is therefore a person with dignity. But no amount of money can buy dignity.

Money can buy many things. With money you can live in a house that will not be demolished without warning, that does not leak in the rain, that has water, toilets and electricity. With money you can even give your children their own rooms. With money you can buy your children education and know that if they fall sick or meet with an accident they will be well looked after.

But money does not buy dignity because to be a person with dignity you must recognise the dignity of others. No person is a complete person on their own, that is without others. In isiZulu we say "umuntu ungumuntu ngabantu". This means that a person is a person because of other people. Rich people are always demanding that other people show respect to them just because they are rich. They are always forcing us to show respect to them. The politicians are the same. But there is no dignity in forcing other people to show respect to you. There is dignity in respecting the humanity of others and in being respected back.

As poor people we do not live in dignified conditions. In fact when it rains we live like pigs in the mud. Our shacks are always burning. We do not have toilets. We are disrespected by politicians and, when we have work, we are disrespected at work. Security guards and domestic workers are often treated as if we are not fully human. Sometimes we are also disrespected by NGOs, academics and other people that think that they have a right to lead the struggles of the poor and who get very angry when we explain that for us solidarity must be based on talking to us and not for us and thinking and deciding with us and not for us.

But poor as we are we achieve our own dignity. Some people achieve dignity in their churches. Some achieve dignity through culture, in something like a choir. And we achieve dignity in the togetherness of our struggle. Our struggle is a space of dignity. Here we can express our suffering, we can think together and we can support each other. Our struggle is also a tool to fight for a world in which our dignity, and the dignity of all people, is recognised. Our struggle gives us dignity now and it also aims to create a work in which land, wealth and political power are shared amongst the people. S'bu Zikode first called this a living communism, a communism that is fully in the hands of the people. Therefore our struggle is based on the idea that defending our dignity now is the best way to create a world that respects everyone's dignity in the future.

Our struggle is a living politic. It is a politic that everyone can understand and which is owned and shaped by the people. It is rooted in our lives as we live them everyday. We do not see politics as something that should be left to political experts or dominated by political experts.

Before Abahlali baseMjondolo was formed the shack dwellers in South Africa were considered by government and some other people in our society, people in NGOs, universities and the media, to be the undeserving poor. This claim came as the result of the perception that the poor are lazy, uneducated and people who do not think and therefore do not count the same as other human beings. The general public, civil society and the media could not defend the poor against this indignity. The media had little or nothing to report on anything that surrounds shack dwellers, be it good or bad, that considered us as human beings or citizens. We were mostly seen as a threat to society – as a problem to be controlled. When shacks were on fire radios and televisions would not air or broadcast this. On the other side the state would refuse any provision of basic services to the shack settlements or to engage us as citizens. We were always considered as people who cannot think for ourselves. Someone from somewhere else would always be hired and paid to think for us, to represent us and to take decisions on our behalf. This was the state mentality towards the poor. It was also the mentality of most NGOs and of most of civil society. It has also been the mentality of what we have called the regressive left – that part of the left that thinks that its job is to think for the poor rather than with the poor and that tries by all means, including calling us criminals and supporting state propaganda and repression, to ruin what it cannot rule.

The rights that we have on paper were always refused in reality. This included our rights as citizens, our rights to the cities and our rights to respect and dignity. Whenever we asked for our rights to be respected, for our humanity to be recognised, we were presented as troublemakers, as people that were being used by others, or as criminals. Our request to participate in the discussions about our own lives was taken as a threat. It is important that everyone understands that in this regard civil society and the left was often no different to the state.

Abahlali has been organising and mobilising to build the power of the poor from below. We do not organise people. We organise ourselves. When people want to join our movement we explain that they must organise themselves and that we will struggle with them and not for them. We ask them to think about this seriously, to discuss it with their neighbours and, if they accept that we will only struggle with them and not for them, then we welcome them into the movement. It can take a long time to join our movement. You must understand it well and you must be serious.

We do not support any political parties or vote in elections. Politicians are always using the people's suffering and struggles as ladders to build their own power. We have therefore decided that we will not keep on giving our power away. We build our own power in our communities and encourage people to also build their own power where they work, study and pray. Where possible we govern our own communities ourselves.

Our struggle started when we rejected the authority of the ward councillors and decided to represent ourselves. Today a new struggle is starting as workers on the mines reject the authority of the trade unions and represent themselves. We are hoping that the struggles in the shacks and on the mines and in other work places can come together.

But struggle is very dangerous. As the poor, in the shacks and working in the mines, we are not allowed to think and act for ourselves. It is seen as criminal, even as treason.

We have learnt that this order is one that cannot respect our humanity. In fact this order is based on our exploitation and exclusion. This order is designed to oppress us. Therefore we have understood that, as Mnikelo Ndabankulu first said, it is good to be out of order. We are not loyal to this order. We are loyal to our human dignity and to the human dignity of others and when that requires us to be out of order we are prepared to be out of order.

We have dedicated a lot of our energy in building a University of Abahlali where we can discuss and learn together. Here we educate ourselves to refuse to be co-opted into a system that promotes the indignity of others. We educate ourselves to refuse to be shaken by the politic of fear created by the political parties and the police. In 2009 our movement was attacked in Kennedy Road and in Pemary Ridge. Many of us lost everything and had to flee. Some of us had to go underground. This attack was aimed at destroying our movement. A senior politician by the name of Willes Mchunu said that a decision had been taken to 'disband' our movement. However we are still here. We continue to exist and to struggle in the province where warlordism and assassination is the order of the day. We continue to try to make sure that the poor remain permanently organised and strong. This has helped us to build a strong voice for the movement. As a result of the power that we have built from the ground up we have been able to speak for ourselves in many spaces that were previously barred to us. For us it is important that, just as we occupy land in the cities, we must also occupy our own space in all discussions. This is the only way that we can take our struggle out of the shacks and into spaces from which the poor have been excluded. Of course this requires us to break the protocols that maintain power in certain circles by depriving others an equal chance to participate in these circles.

Today, as a result of our struggle and the struggles of other poor people, we see a slow shift away from seeing shack settlements as something to be bulldozed without any sense that there are human lives in these places. There is now recognition that there are human lives in the shacks. We have stopped evictions in many settlements. In some settlements we have won agreements to upgrade these settlements with proper services and houses instead of forcibly removing people to the human dumping grounds called transit camps. Basic services such as water and sanitation, refuse collection, road access, electricity etc which were being denied to us are now being rolled out. In Durban the eThekweni Municipality long had a policy that forbids electrification of any shack settlement in the city. The result of this is constant fires. Today this killer electricity policy is under review and a pilot project to roll electricity in some four settlements has begun. To survive day by day these services are needed and they are important steps on the road to winning material conditions that accord with human dignity. To talk about an equal and a just society without land, houses and services for all is bizarre. This progress has come through the years of struggle and the power of the organized poor. Of course we still have a very long road to go. And with state repression getting worse all the time that road is a dangerous one.

As repression gets worse solidarity becomes more and more important. We see the role of NGOs and progressive forces being to support and strengthen the work of what we call our amabhuto and the NGOs call social movements - to work with our movements in a way that respects our autonomy. We urge the NGOs to be responsive and to learn from those who are struggling about the best way to support them without assuming that we need to be given political direction or creating the dependency syndrome. In order to do so you will have to familiarise with the practices of the movements. War on Want and the Church Land Programme are some of the very few organisations that have demonstrated this culture over years. They have had to revisit their strategic planning and to remove the red tape that prevented them from being able to offer effective support when comrades are in jail and in need of lawyers, bail money or facing death threats and in need of safe homes. They have not wasted our time with donor requirements and protocols that sometimes undermine and compromise our struggles. They have never tried to impose their own agendas on our struggles. They have understood that the struggle for human dignity is often criminalised. They have understood that they oppressed have every right to lead their own struggles.

We know that here in Britain the working class and the poor are being made to pay the price for the greed of the rich. We know that you are under attack from a government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. We know that you are resisting. We are in solidarity with you and with your struggles. If there are ways that we can support you please let us know. You are all welcome to visit us in South Africa. There are some ways in which are struggles are very different. But we face a common enemy in the form of the system that is known as capitalism.