

Why is **Political Tolerance** an important element of a democratic political culture and what are the obstacles to **Political Tolerance** in South Africa?

What is political tolerance? Political tolerance is the willingness to extend basic rights and civil liberties to persons and groups whose viewpoints differ from one's own. Being patient and tolerant of other peoples political perspectives and viewpoints. It is one of the central principles of a liberal democracy. The individual rights and freedoms that a culture of political tolerance affords its citizens encourages people to think for themselves without being afraid of intimidation, even if their opinions offend sections of the population. In South Africa the expression of those beliefs is protected by one of our core democratic tools, the Constitution. By allowing people to freely voice their political opinions, political tolerance also exposes those political ideas to criticism. Instead, if they were suppressed the majority of the population would not be able to give their evaluation on the ideas.

Unfortunately we as humans are not born absolutely tolerant, but must learn to be tolerant. In a non-political context, when we are younger and play a game with other children who play it differently to us, depending on what we are taught, we will be tolerant of the other child. Therefore, in our youth, it is a very important time for the development of political tolerance, and the role of socialisation becomes apparent.

Political tolerance is an important element of democratic political culture. In order for a country to be totally democratic, it is essential that the citizens feel free to express their political viewpoints without the fear of recrimination. In South Africa, political tolerance was integral to the progress of our fledgling democracy. "...the willingness of citizens to put up with their political opponents, to allow... unfettered political competition among all who seek political power through peaceful means is essential if democracy is to prevail" (Gibson and Gouws, 2002).

It was said in the opening statement at the symposium on 'Political Tolerance in South Africa: role of opinion-makers and the media,' that "... the core values that underpin the whole structure in a multi-party democracy, very specifically, the central concept and practice of political tolerance with all they entail in terms of mutual respect, respect for the political views and opinions of others, the right to agree and to disagree, the duty to allow political opponents the right to speak, associate and organize freely. They involve of necessity the obligation to partake in the social compact in full harmony with others and to work towards the common good" (Internet 2).

For the democratic political culture of South Africa to change, the positions of Governmental Institutions, the Constitution, leaders and Non-governmental Organisations have to reflect a growing political tolerance in the country.

In South Africa, our new constitution embeds the right to freedom of speech, thought and affiliation, conscience and belief, making political tolerance a part of our legal procedure. Although the Constitution does not mention Political Tolerance specifically, it protects it by affording us the freedom to express any beliefs we have without being discriminated against. It also protects any political opposition that challenges the majority, and wants to contend for political power.

Governmental Institutions in South Africa also reflect the growing political tolerance. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a good example where a positive democratic political culture was encouraged. " Institutions of majority rule have already

been established, and a new constitution enshrines the right to compete for political power...” (Gibson and Gouws, 2002).

Examples of political tolerance abound in South Africa. One that stands out for me, is the acceptance and forgiveness of the black people towards the white and specifically Afrikaans South Africans. The Voortrekker Monument that stands as a symbol of the past in South Africa, a bastion for Afrikaners, still stands overlooking Pretoria. Reminding thousands of people of the dark and exclusive days of Apartheid.

“Built in the late 1930's, the imposing fortress-like stone structure that makes up the Voortrekker Monument sits atop Pretoria's highest hill. Its original purpose was to commemorate the movement, called the Great Trek, which took place in the late 1830's. Later, the monument, became an oppressive icon of one culture's domination over another. That was in the late 1940's when the Afrikaans-dominated National Party gained control of the government and instituted the legal separation of the races known as apartheid. Even on the eve of South Africa's first multiracial election in 1994, the monument and a large amphitheatre nearby were the scene of rallies of extremist Afrikaners opposed to extending equal citizenship rights to blacks” (Internet, 1).

While the monument still looms in stony silence, Nelson Mandela and now Thabo Mbeki lead a nation of united South Africans where the values of political tolerance and reconciliation are held high.

The South African leaders have also done our democratic political culture a favour by being so openly politically tolerant of one another. Nelson Mandela is well known for his tolerance and forgiveness of those who persecuted him for so long. Even FW De Klerk is a model for political tolerance, making the changes he did, and freeing Nelson Mandela from detainment. The leaders of a country are important to inspire people to mirror their example.

However, as well as having a positive effect on political tolerance, the political culture of a country can also negatively impact the development thereof. “ ...to what degree does

the political culture of South Africa- the beliefs, values and attitudes toward politics held by ordinary people- impede or promote the development of democratic institutions and processes and the consolidation of democratic reform?" (Gibson and Gouws, 2002).

Political Tolerance in South Africa is also very important because, " tolerance is more indispensable in heterogeneous societies than in homogenous societies because in societies with deep divisions, the potential for conflict is so much greater" (Gibson and Gouws, 2002).

Alongside the examples of a growing political tolerance in South Africa, there are also examples of issues that might dampen the process of political tolerance. Democracies do not "... profit from widespread illiteracy among the mass public. Democracies require a certain amount of wealth in society, and at least some minimal degree of equality in the distribution of that wealth. Democracies often fail when confronted with rigid, historical cleavages in society, and racial and ethnic cleavages are some of the most difficult to put aside and overcome" (Gibson and Gouws, 2002).

The issues of past violence and separation in South Africa also work to undo the progress of our political culture and therefore political tolerance. "few democracies in the world have suffered from more political violence than South Africa, and the violence has not been confined to the violence of the state against its citizens. Hatred and distrust are in no short supply in South Africa" (Gibson and Gouws, 2002). Distrust is a big impediment to political tolerance in South Africa.

The political tolerance of the youth is also important in gauging the growth of our political culture. "While very little is known about levels of tolerance among students at tertiary institutions a youth study carried out in 1993 by the Human Sciences Research Council has shown high levels of intolerance among youths of all race groups. Studies on tolerance... have found high levels of intolerance but the aetiology of intolerance has not been clear (i.e. what is causing high levels of intolerance). We can argue that the politicisation of the South African population under apartheid through diverse ideologies

and party identification has contributed to high levels of threat. Studies of political tolerance have shown that there is a relationship between threat and political intolerance” (Riggle and Gouws, 2003).

Political Tolerance has been shown to be important in the development of South Africa as a successful democracy. Political tolerance is necessary for the freedoms our constitution awards us to be expressed. Political Tolerance also contributes to the democratic political culture South Africa is striving towards. There are obstacles that stand in our way of a successful democratic political culture, and that threaten to break down what we have all worked so hard to build up.

## **Bibliography**

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