Theoretically, elections are the systems put in place to democratically give mandate to those elected to govern. However, in reality, elections are more than that. They are periods of heated political contestation. Thus, politics as an art gives further meaning to elections as popularly observed and understood by political parties, politicians and the electorate. Politicians infuse into electoral processes heated debates which at times have the potential to polarise society. The more desperate politicians are for votes, the more likely they are to end up making statements that polarise society.

Is it possible to conduct electoral processes without polarising society? By definition, democracy seeks to give effect to avoiding polarisation. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and its Code of Conduct for all political parties is, for instance, structured in ways that ensure impartiality and therefore the credibility of the electoral process. Similarly, other state institutions such as the police, the judiciary and other organs of the state must be imbued with the same principle of impartiality when dealing with differences brought before them.

South Africa has created a well-oiled state machine, premised on the doctrine of the separation of powers between the three arms of the state – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Many other state organs such as chapter nine institutions have been established to ensure justice and equality before the law. Political parties in South Africa can mobilise political support with the full knowledge that the rules of electoral process will be fair and that any differences arising will similarly be adjudicated fairly by the IEC or our courts.

However, as in every other democracy, these institutional frameworks do not necessarily guarantee non-polarisation. Part of the reason that polarisation occasionally rears its ugly head is because of the fault lines of the pre-1994 conflicts. Apartheid-inspired conflicts were not just driven by exclusive political rights to partake in the affairs of the country, but also by how that led to the serious economic marginalisation of the majority while enriching the minority. That the majority-minority divide was shaped not just along class but, very importantly, along racial lines has made race a highly polarising issue.

This is why the ‘national question’ remains high on the agenda of the ANC – not just the class struggle, as is relevant around the world, but importantly the racial inequalities that threaten even the very constitutional democracy we pride ourselves on. The law means nothing when society is polarised and conflict is emotionally driven by racial antagonism.

Another polarising aspect is that of gender relations. Because gender and race are physical identities that explain the contours of exploitation, these in turn inspire deep emotions that can spill over in the electoral process and polarise society. Racial and gender inequalities have been engineered over centuries of colonialism and decades of apartheid rule. The ANC government has made efforts to reverse the racial and gender disparities in society, but the backlogs are still evidently huge. The representation of these backlogs as though they have been created by the ruling party is simply a lie! Society becomes polarised when lies and innuendos become part of political rhetoric.

Elections have polarised many countries to the point of descending into civil conflicts. The African continent has many such examples. At times, some leaders have questioned the legitimacy of the electoral process. Allegations of biases by the electoral bodies, vote rigging and much more abound when society has been polarised.

To avoid polarisation, it is important that political parties and public commentators are made aware that, for the electoral process to enjoy legitimacy, no one should say or do things that may undermine the dignity of any individual or any group of people.
Key in this is to observe the letter and spirit of the Constitution in all political conduct. By virtue of their socio-political disposition, leaders have the ability to pull the trigger that polarises society by sensationalising perspectives in ways that go against the spirit of free and fair elections. Similarly, public commentators as well as so-called ‘influencers’ have the potential to incite polarisation in many ways.

In spite of the good constitutional systems in place, politicians, commentators, analysts and celebrities all have the power to polarise society because people look to them for guidance on how to approach various social, economic and political questions and challenges. That is why a higher level of responsibility is required from such public figures, in order to ensure that the electoral process is without polarisation.

Conclusively, various factors come to bear on whether elections will be polarising or not. Collaborating factors which help to ensure successful elections include a sound constitutional state, with various institutions such as the IEC, judiciary and police working together for the same objectives of peace and stability. This success is also dependent on the roles of political parties and the media working in disciplined ways by observing the electoral Code of Conduct as if it were the rule of law. When these factors work against each other, polarisation follows.

It is also important that the fault lines of political differences are not structured along racial, gender-based or ethnic divides, because these are issues that tend to provoke emotional reactions or posturing, and which in essence indicate a polarised society.

The Hutu and Tutsi conflict in the Great Lakes region, the breakup of the Soviet Union into its default republics, fascism, apartheid and many other conflicts have been waged on fault lines upon which it is dangerous to advance a political course. This is why the African National Congress regards the resolution of the ‘national question’ as urgent, so that, going into the future, we have no basis to fear racial, gender-based or ethnic polarisation.

Economic deprivation remains the daily reality of our people, who were on the receiving end of colonial and apartheid rule. To effectively eradicate polarisation, we must deal with the fundamental issue of economic marginalisation. In each election South Africans vote with the hope that this fundamental problem will be dealt with conclusively. Regardless of which party wins the election, the campaigning and outcomes of that election will not resolve the national grievance if it does not deal with the basis of polarisation of our society, namely, debilitating inequality.

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