

Populism versus constitutionalism in South Africa: Engaging public theology through dialogue



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South African politics has taken a different turn since the dawn of the democratic era in 1994. After 28 years of democracy, there has been some populists' and constitutionalists' tension in democratic South Africa. The Mandela and Mbeki presidencies are marked for constitutionalism, while the Zuma tenure of nine years is marked as the era of populism. The constitutional republic already experiences the tension between the politics of the populists and of the constitutionalists. This article aims to identify and analyse the concepts of populism and constitutionalism and invites public theology to dialogue with these political ideologies in order to bring harmonious coexistence in democratic South Africa. Through the literature study and latest press release statements, incidents and concepts were discovered to give definitions and the analyses of populism, constitutionalism, and public theology. Public theology is chosen against political theology, due to the emphasis of dialogue as a manner of making theological statements. It is realised that populists are full of charisma, and they use this to charm the masses, offering them promises of prosperity and peace, while in fact they regard themselves as the masses, as they are the sole representatives of the people. They carry the agenda of entitlement. On the other hand, the research finds that constitutionalists apply rationality to constitutional dictates in order to govern for democratic stability in society. They would like to see the state where the rule of law guarantees citizens' safety and security and economic prosperity. By reading this article one finds that this research emphasises that public theology through its dialogical nature, prophetic calling, anthropological centrality, engaging methodology, is inherently missional in the politically chaotic world. As a discipline, public theology is intradisciplinary, therefore engages other theological fields, including natural and social disciplines in order to reinforce its missional character. The conclusion is that public theology should be at the forefront, inviting politicians from different spectrums and convictions to the table of dialogue. Dialogue paves the way towards understanding, synergy, and trust. Theo-political interactions are crucial towards justice formation, which builds societal harmony and peaceful coexistence. Political tensions in South Africa offer public theology a golden opportunity to assert itself in civil affairs, and makes its voice audible in the marketplace.

Contribution: The interdisciplinary approach in this article contributes towards the importance of a relationship between the political studies and theology. Legal studies, history, and current affairs enrich the theological role in public affairs. Populism and constitutionalism are political ideologies in tension, and public theology through dialogue, contributes towards peaceful life in a democratic state.

Keywords: populism; populists; constitutionalists; constitution; constitutionalism; democracy; public theology; dialogue.

Introduction

South Africa is a country that has evolved through indigeneity, colonialism, apartheid and democracy. It went through all these experiences and remained resilient and in diverse ways, experienced near-fatal events that were politically and religiously motivated. The focus of this article is more on the South African democratic dispensation that has been evolving since 1994. This era has seen the country leaning politically in the hands of either populists or constitutionalists. Mandela and Mbeki were known for constitutional leanings, while Zuma is known for populism – his era dubbed: 'nine wasted years'.¹ In a nutshell, from Nelson Mandela's to Cyril Ramaphosa's eras, there has been socio-political oscillations where uncertainties bred bleakness of the future, and the citizenry's trust level in government is swinging back and forth and side-by-side. Two ideologies continue to play dominant roles in the political space. Added to these ideologies, there is a public

1. <https://businessstech.co.za/news/government/298278/what-south-africa-lost-in-the-9-wasted-years-under-zuma/> (Accessed 13 April 2022).

Note: Special Collection: Public Theology.

theology that is called upon to play sanity and calmness into the situation. The three ideologies (populism, constitutionalism and public theology) are defined fully from a literature point of view. A conclusion is made on the critical role of public theology through dialogue in order to normalise the tensions.

Populism in its core

Populism as an ideology is often associated with charisma, where populists are vocal in expressing their subjective ideas. The current populists include the likes of Donald Trump of the United States of America, Victor Orbán of Hungary, and on our doorsteps, the former President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma. Sometimes populism is associated with conservatism on the religio-political spectrum. 'It occurs mainly on the right side of the political spectrum, often with conservative religious connotations' (Von Sinner & Gabatz 2021:349). The rationale behind the emergence of populism in politics, stems from popular dissatisfaction, generated by political systems. In many instances these dissatisfactions emanate from the policies, when the ruling elite increasingly demonstrate passivity towards the concerns of their constituencies. These policies are viewed by populists as tools that 'serve the elites rather than the ordinary citizen' (Berman 2018).

Since populists are full of charisma, they attract crowds through their quotable abilities, uttering emotive statements that appeal to the inner yearning of the populace. Populists such as Donald Trump constantly utter nationalist mobilisation statements based on some form of prejudice such as racism, xenophobia, ultra-nationalism and fascism. This kind of environment fertilises the soil for dictatorial power, suppression of the opposition, systemic corruption, and the expansion of peasantry. In their expressions, a listener can trace some degrees of affection, passion, and motivation. They excel with exploiting people's political ambitions. Their relationship with their followers is always inconclusive, and in some cases, contradictory. Their political stances can change overnight, or per prevailing circumstances. They lure the masses by democratic declarations, pertaining to political power belonging to the people. Their populist idealisation is that *unity is strength*, while they resent the elite labelling them as 'corrupt, incompetent, and disconnected from the everyday life of ordinary people' (Von Sinner & Gabatz 2021:350). They intrinsically entrenched themselves as the legitimate representatives of the people, and that they run with the people's mandate.

Populists believe that they alone represent the 'will of the people' and that any political opponent represents not a party of the loyal opposition with a competing view of the collective good, but membership in the 'corrupt elite' (Liddiard 2019:4).

In other words, as Nokhrin (2021) captures it, the populists are of the opinion that the political elite are illegal. They use their platforms to berate the political elites as selfish consumers who disregard the needs of the grassroots populace. This is also stressed by Diamond (2017:3), that they

condemn 'the corrupt dominance of established elites, whose interests do not align with the majority of the people'. As stated in Sinn and Harasta (2019), populism is:

An anti-elitist political ideology, sentiment, and movement that contrasts the interests of the 'pure people', often presented as oppressed and innocent, with the oppressive, corrupt elite and its foreign allies. (p. 93)

It is also confirmed by Shils (1956:97), that populism prevails when 'the will of the people enjoys top priority in the face of any other principle, right, and institutional standard'.

In their attempts to promote democracy, populists always create spaces and means to legitimise their political ideologies, positions, undertakings, decisions, methodologies and actions through the people. They rally around declaring that they are fulfilling the mandate of the people. The voices of the popular masses (*vox populi*) on the ground is equated with democracy. They resort to plebiscites and referendums as a democratic principle to enhance their power to rule. Todorov (2008) is correct that:

While such strategies have succeeded in many cases, they have often ended in some form of 'mobocracy', in which the mob rules directly, without any constraints, on any matter, including legal matters. (p. 2)

On many occasions, populists come into power out of the time of crises. That is why they resort to calling themselves revolutionaries. Their notion as revolutionaries is highlighted by Kahn (2012:143) that 'they bring down the old in the name of justice, they construct a new order informed by justice'. As we have seen in the current South African political space, the so-called revolutionaries, calling themselves Radical Economic Transformation (RET), who are populists, believe in their own virtues whereby lawlessness is justified as pursuit for justice. The unfortunate situation about RET is that it is still 'at a conceptual level, let alone its implementation' (Malefane 2020:144), so it cannot be used by the populists who claim to drive it or use it as a roadmap for economic resuscitation, or moral regeneration. This is demonstrated by disruptions of legislative procedures, kicking dust when there is a signal activity of corruption exposure, or blasphemous utterances that pervade natural justice to those deserving it, et cetera. Their charisma and eloquence dawdle them through to the pinnacle of power or influence. Riding on the saddle of power, is regarded as an opportunity to guarantee the acolytes some justice denied during the previous regime. Central to the rationale of this school of thought, is that these populists are a faction that has no regard for constitutional niceties.

In South Africa, sociologically and theologically speaking, there is a high number of citizens who are poor, marginalised, and to some extent, oppressed. The populist's voice will always appeal to these marginalised members of society. Thabo Mbeki was the last constitutionalist to lead the nation. Populists are, contrary to their claims, always not constitutionalists. Their embrace of constitution does not

stop them from 'occasionally attempting to exploit historical grudges' (Ancen & Whitfield 2021:159). They blame history for their perils or failures. South African political space migrated from a constitutional state towards a populist state since 2007, when the African National Congress (ANC) Conference in Polokwane voted out the strong constitutionalist, Thabo Mbeki, and replaced him with the strong populist, Jacob Zuma. Basson and Du Toit (2017) make a good comparison between the two leaders:

Zuma wasn't like Mbeki at all. Where Mbeki was aloof, Zuma was personable; where Mbeki was distant, Zuma was warm; and where Mbeki was dismissive, Zuma was inclusive. (pp. 17–18)

Mbeki was very anti-populist and many of them were sidelined or thrown at the political peripheries of national political mechanisms. Good examples to cite here, are the likes of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Ace Magashule, and to a certain extent the then ANC Youth Leader, Julius Malema. Then there emerged a populist era out of the ANC National Conference in Polokwane held in 2007). This conference ushered in the populist era, dubbed 'nine wasted years' under Jacob Zuma. This era leashed and enhanced proliferations and factionalisms within the ruling party. Around 2005, hoax-emails did the rounds trying to discredit him (Zuma); during one of the interviews, he exclaimed that 'it was his concern for the masses and the poor that prompted his political enemies to try to deny him the ANC leadership and the presidency' (Pauw 2017:74). In one of his political populist's utterances at his inauguration as the President of the Republic, he said: 'This is a moment of renewal. I will devote myself to the well-being of the Republic and all of its people' (Pauw 2017:76). The new party leader, a real populist, Jacob Zuma, became well entrenched in his dance moves, political cartels, religious associations with the African Independent Churches, cutting and chopping the Executive (cabinet) willy-nilly, *cronifying* the State Owned Enterprises (SOE), expanding *polygamia* hence increasing the presidential budget for his elephantine family sustenance, and making utterances that the ANC is a broader church and will be in power until Jesus returns. As a result, it will self-correct where it has erred and will be back to its founding principles. He restored all the populists that Mbeki has sidelined, and the den of iniquitous politicians marked with corruption was dug deeper and entrenched. The picture continues to be clear that the 'corruption by politicians, officials and private business is subverting the National Democratic Revolution' (Malefane 2020:133). These populists were reprobates who did not see anything wrong with the escalating corruption, since they were corrupt themselves. As Maseko (2021) points out: the 'climate in ANC became toxic' (p. 115). The principled leaders suffered enormously as they were sidelined and shown the door without any shame or remorse by power mongers on the saddles of power. Typical of populists, Zuma and his officials made public statements that their ascendancy to power will restore people's dignity and rights. This was not surprising because populists according to Liddiard (2019):

[O]ffer the promise of renewing democracy, bringing new actors and policies into the political system. But they also claim that their

constituency represents all of 'the people' rather than a portion of a diverse electorate, and – seeking to institutionally lock in their temporary political advantage – they frequently abuse the power of government to suppress their opponents. (p. 1)

Inevitably, as attested by history, populists emerge as economic sharks, swindlers, political demagogues (Anderson 2016:107), autocrats, and strivers towards aristocracy whereby they are positioned at the pinnacle of the societal pyramid, enabling them to become beneficiaries of many, if not all economic transactions. They keep emerging evolutionarily and revolutionarily, as we have seen with the emergence of the left-wing populists, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Their arrival on the South African political space enhanced populism in South Africa, according to Mbete (2014), when they:

- [B]ecome the third-largest party in the legislature, with 11 percent of the seats. EFF's electoral success has come as it campaigned against the economic policy convergence of both the ruling African National Congress and the opposition Democratic Alliance, and as the party focused on working class black Africans as the 'pure people' against both white capitalists and the elite ANC leadership. (p. 41)

Once they occupy the political platform, they make their presence felt by deploying uncivil speeches and concentrate on fake news to create truth. As we have seen in South African parliament, the arrival of the EFF echoed dissenting voices, by constituting the new order such as red overalls, and interruptions on calling for 'points of order', even when not necessary. They question traditional consensus on handling politics and the economic management and principles of liberal democracies.

The voices of populist politicians echo diversely, though their messages contain the same content. Their central message is to change the *status quo* and usher in a new era of prosperity, security, and transparency. They question bilateral trade agreements, colonial impacts, deny historical inevitabilities, and transformational processes. They draw from the same range of sources: the economics of those feeling 'left behind', the sociology of those worried about the 'changing faces of the nation', or the politics of those who want to 'take back control' (Schmidt 2019:2)

Populist politicians increase democracy's representivity to a certain degree but tend to undermine accountability. They lack interest in ethical governance and tend to shift policy making to external forces. A good example in South Africa, is the state capture, where government decisions were influenced or dictated by the Gupta family. Indeed, Liddiard (2019:5) confirms, this 'Populist politicians may be particularly susceptible to foreign influence and adopting foreign actors' preferred policies. Liddiard (2019) continues to point this out that:

[P]opulists in power have frequently strengthened the power of the executive over the legislature while polarizing the electorate

into exclusionary groups and coopting or suppressing civil society. (p. 3)

This was clearly demonstrated when Zuma changed the executive haphazardly without considering the legislative input and the people on the grassroots. When he couldn't get his way, 'he bypassed the treasury and fired people who stood in his way and replaced them with compliant toadies' (Ancer & Whitfield 2021:123). No consultation, even with the inner circle of his executive was his norm. In normal circumstances, no leader can make radical decisions by using a piece of legislation in the constitution. A wise leader consults participatively in order to gain consensus and to receive a sense of confidence in decision-making. Words of wisdom from one principled politician, Pravin Gordhan, who suffered emotionally under Zuma's administration, uttered these words at Kathrada's memorial service:

Practicing democracy means that in every situation one finds oneself, one remembers the democratic values of consultation, of listening to different views and tolerating different views even if we do disagree. (Ancer & Whitfield 2021:146)

One fundamental problem of populism is the focus on patrimonial politicians – the personality cult at the expense of procedures, policies, and processes of the party they claim to lead. A leader becomes untouchable and unquestionable. His decisions become a norm and the 'law of the Persians and Medes not to be revoked' (Es 1:19–21). This is exacerbated by the populists' disregard of accountability. Zuma became famous for frequent executive cabinet reshuffles to the surprise of those within the inner circle and the legislature in general. The people on the cutting edges of society, the ordinary electorate were left to fan for themselves at the receiving end of the stick. Of course, typical of the populist, he appealed to the piece of legislature that empowers the President of the Republic to hire and fire the executive members (Chapter 5, Sections 84 and 91 of South African Constitution). This piece of law was used to entrench his populist ideals. This undoubtedly proves that populists 'lack traits associated with aptitude for politics and good governance' (Liddiard 2019:4). The legislative institutional power was blunted to check abuses of executive powers that constantly undermined democracy. The legislature was left numb and immobilised watching with horror the country having three Ministers of Finance in one week, affecting the rand-dollar exchange rate negatively, something that Zuma never seen anything wrong with. He claimed even in parliament that the markets had always been critical, so this was not a new thing.

In a nutshell, populists, as we have seen in the democratic South Africa, and as highlighted by Diamond (2017:7–8), demonise the opposition, labelling them as unpatriotic or as a discredited establishment of apartheid regime, and are out of touch with the true people. They also believe that those who disagree with them are the misguided elements, 'political infidels to be either converted or defeated at all costs' (Ashford & Greesen in Kaemingk 2021:124). The so-

called 'nine wasted years' of Zuma's regime shows that the populists undermine the independence of judiciary, always criticising the judges who critique political actions that are not constitutionally aligned. They always appoint judges who will favour them. A good example is the National Prosecuting Authority's (NPA) instability under Zuma, when one considers careers of Mokotedi Mpshe, Mendy Simelane, Nomgcobo Jiba, Mxolisi Nxasana, Shawn Abrahams and others who were fired for either promoting constitutional sacrosanctity or failing to tow the line. The independence of the media suffers under the critical radar of populists, as the journalists are always criticised as partisan, unprofessional, and biased towards opposition politics. Media houses and companies are given to the business elites, who are the political loyalists, or are party-linked political cronies. The monopoly of the National Broadcaster is always politicised, as evidenced by the fluid South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) boards and the Chief Operating Officers, who all become the political appointees with specific tasks of promoting the ruling party agenda. The private sector (business and non-profit) becomes politicised and moved towards politically associated spectrum of political manipulation. The fiscus becomes vulnerable to political associations when political heads make fiscal decisions. This is something that Maseko (2021) struggled with when he was a Chief Director in government departments.

Constitutionalism in action

The current South African constitution works towards progressive transformation of the state and the society, towards the 'democratic state with a supreme constitution and granting fundamental rights and freedom to all citizens' (Teshome 2011). Some populists utter this sentiment without following the constitutional decrees as expected to. Although South Africa attained democratic dispensation and adopted democratic constitution in 1996, it has been faced with a challenge of entrenching constitutionalism. Like other Southern African countries, 'sometimes giving a paradox of constitutions without constitutionalism' (Mzikamanda 2011:1). A constitution is the supreme law of the state, stating the character, conception, and principles to shape the nationhood and the statehood of the country. It is the foundational set of rules, built or established embodying the rights of people in the state. It spells 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.

The constitutionality of the constitution is, when the laws of the land draw their validity from the constitution. Therefore, as Mzikamanda (2011) expresses it:

[A]ll governmental action, executive, legislative or judicial, must draw their validity from the constitution, otherwise they will be unconstitutional and declared invalid. (p. 3)

Further, constitutionalism refers to the operations of the government based on or dictated by the constitution. Constitutionalism encapsulates limited but open, transparent and accountable government, by representing or reflecting the will of the people. It is a guiding principle that limits the powers of those who ignore the parameters set by the constitution, by overstepping the constitutionality of the laws of the land. It is through constitutionalism, that governmental powers are limited beyond theory and praxis (Barnett 2000:358). This is based on the historical background given by the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

[G]overnment can and should be legally limited in its powers, and that its authority or legitimacy depends on it observing these limitations.

Bazew (2009:358) asserts that constitutionalism is a 'belief in constitutional government'. But she asks fundamental questions related to this statement: Does it refer to a government with a constitution, or government established according to a constitution, or a government acting according to a constitution? To answer these fundamental question, one can say, in the words of Barnett (2000), that constitutionalism is:

[The] doctrine that governs the legitimacy of government action, and ... implies something far more important than the idea of legality that requires official conduct to be in accordance with pre-fixed legal rules. (p. 13)

According to Bazew (2009:358), constitutionalism checks the legitimacy of the government's actions and the behaviours and legitimacies of government officials – whether they 'conduct their public duties in accordance with laws pre-fixed/pre-determined in advance'. Therefore, possessing a constitution does not guarantee constitutionalism. For the state to have a constitution does not mean that it can practice constitutionalism. This was clearly demonstrated during the 'nine wasted years'. That is why constitutionalism is far more important than a constitution (Bazew 2009:358).

In the democratic South Africa, the citizens expect their government to operate as their own servants. They voted them into power to serve them in reaching their needs, especially in the local government structures. The government is voted into power through the ballot box for the benefit of the electorate. They consequently expect performance and service delivery, to the satisfaction of the electorate. Accountability to the public is non-negotiable. Unfortunately, this does not always surface in the South African political space. Service delivery suffers at the expense of political gullibility, where corruption is the root of all causes of poor service delivery to the people. Government officials are constitutionally in power but are practically non-performing.

For almost three decades, the democratic South Africa is still writhing in pains of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. The constitutionalists and the populists are in power for different reasons. While the constitutionalists would like to see the state where the rule of law guarantees citizens' safety and security and economic prosperity, the populists carry the

agenda of entitlement. They are of the opinion that the masses should be lifted from the sea of poverty, while in fact they regard themselves as the masses, since they are the sole representatives of the people. One constantly hears of how they were engaged in a liberation struggle outside the national borders. For them, freedom or ascendancy to power is a pay-back time. This demonstrates how the populists can quickly become political elites. They develop authoritarian tendencies, that unseat democracies and replace them with autocracies.

One of the major threats to South African constitutionalism is excessive lawlessness, exacerbated by the excessive powers on the President, with no checks and balances to ensure ethical procedures in the appointment of the members of the executive. These powers are stipulated in Chapter 5, Sections 84 and 91 of the South African Constitution. Entrenched by populist ideals, and empowered by this constitutional legislation, Jacob Zuma erratically changed the executive willy-nilly with no consideration of the impact on the economy. His actions proved the point that 'disregard to societal values and norms are other consequences of constitution without constitutionalism' (Olasunkanmi 2018:3). This leads to conclusion that good prospect of constitutionalism does not guarantee constitutional procedures, governance or democracy. To further strengthen this notion, one can agree that 'the former Apartheid regime of South Africa had a constitution without constitutionalism' (Olasunkanmi 2018:2). Many dictators are in power, holding the constitution in their hands. Corruption, nepotism, partisanship, and fascism all happen in the states where there is a constitution in place. Towards the end of the 'nine wasted years', one could easily observe that constitutionalism is a powerful deterrent to potential dictatorship or tyranny.

Olasunkanmi (2018) observes rightly:

The absence of constitutionalism in our constitution gives room for endemic corruption or profiteering by the ruling elites and resistance to transparency, accountability and political representations. (p. 2)

This is demonstrated by the President's denial of the expenditure on his personal home (Nkandla), overriding the constitution and code of conduct, lying under oath, and refusing to abide by the Public Protector's remedial recommendations. As a result, the populace, especially the electorate loses confidence in the state apparatus or machinery.

Public theology's sensibilities through dialogue

Public theology is public, and never private. It is not theology when it burrows itself in the sand. Theology is open and public, as it operates from and within contexts. That is why Vanhoozer and Strachan (2015:17) express the fact that public theology is above all else:

[A] reaction against the tendency to privatize the faith, restricting it to the question of an individual's salvation. (p. 17)

The South African secular state recognises the role of religion in moral and ethical formation of livelihood, though in many ways, the religious voice is muted, and it becomes inaudible. This is also confirmed by Kusmierz (2016) that:

South African theologians have not questioned the assumption that theology has a distinct contribution to make to the shaping of a democratic society, nor have they challenged the claim that theology shares a special responsibility to engage therein. (p. 162)

Regardless of this muting, the theological voice echoes through the decadent culture of the nation, with the intention of bringing moral sanity where autocracy violates human dignity and respect. When populists charm the masses towards decadency, and the constitutionalists use pieces of legislation to oppress the citizens, public theology surfaces itself as a prophetic voice, either to conscientise or to apprise. This is when it presents itself, as a discipline, as *missio Dei*, serving 'God's creative and redemptive mission to the world' (Jenkins in Stackhouse 2003). It is when public theologians attempt public dialogue, and 'assume the posture of prophetic critique and forceful rebuttal' (Kaemingk 2021:13). The philosopher, G.K Chesterton (2009:37) speaks to this effect, that 'theology rebukes certain thoughts by calling them blasphemous'. This locates public theology in the space of being 'confessional and evangelical' (ed. Jacob 2020:35). It shares the gospel and proclaims the good news. Its heart remains that 'justice is the calling to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God' (Schweiker in Stackhouse, Dearborn & Paeth 2000:27).

Public theology is dialogical. It uses dialogue to make it heard and proposes solutions of forging ahead during constitutional violations or crises. It is therefore necessary for public theologians to be conversant with the constitutional contents, in order to address leadership, ethical menaces of abusing their powers to oppress the citizens. Dialogue involves proclamation, which might be confrontational or resistive. After all, 'proclamation of truth was fundamental to the birth and the sustainability of the church' (Meylahn 2012:37), as she defended truths concerning morality and ethics. It is for this reason that the proposal of this article is, that public theology should invite politicians – populists or constitutionalists – to the table of dialogue. As a theological discipline, public theology should be open and responsive to conversations with people in power, so that through these conversations both camps should be informed, enlightened and drawn closer to ethical expectations and deliveries to the people on the receiving end of social justice. This engagement is crucial for the healing of the land, as it does not come through monologue, but dialogue made up of dialogists from different perspectives. These deliberations are what Ottati (in Lovin & Mauldin 2017:133) calls *collaborative sensibilities*. These are conversations about addressing the plight of humanity perpetrated by the political agenda, that is either autocratic or despotic, leaving the citizens under pressure and oppression in all spheres of life.

Public theology is prophetic. There is no prophetic theology without dialogue. Since public theology is not private, it is proclamational in the public square. Theological utterances are oral and audible. The spokespersons of God from the Old Testament prophets to Christ, and the New Testament apostles were proclamational in public squares. Even the enclosures such as prisons, synagogues, royal palaces, or a temple, became a public square where theology was proclaimed, expounded or explained. Jesus' ministry was mainly in public, in the context where people could be found. Jesus was a public figure, proclaiming truth in public, so public theology should not be cordoned off from the public square or socio-political life of the people. Public theology cannot therefore be deaf or blinded to the people's cries for social justice. As a prophetic theology, public theology is audible through a prophet, who is a public theologian, who according to Nolan (2009:89), 'speaks out, speaks before, and speaks for'. Moltmann (1999:5) is correct that it is a 'public, critical and prophetic complaint to God'. It is the right thing to do to be involved in public matters as theologians, without compromising our faith. Loyalty to God and his Word continue to be the guiding principles, when in dialogue on the public square. Its presence and contribution to public affairs is basically to 'provide a theistic perspective' (Jayasooria in ed. Jacob 2020:219). Disinterest in public affairs as a theologian, is not theological at all (Nyenembe 2021:38–39). This fact is also captured by Schweiker (in Stackhouse, Dearborn & Paeth 2000):

Any cultural force or social institution that nullifies our sense of the reality of justice and mercy is, practically speaking, atheistic and, theoretically stated, nihilistic. (p. 33)

Our democratic convictions are expressed in public arenas, where we meet the autocrats, whether they are the populists or constitutionalists. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, public theologians should be 'a prophetic critique of popular ideology that hoped for a speedy restorations' (VanGemeran 1990:322). Jeremiah (6:14) the Prophet can be cited by public theologians when he uttered:

They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace.

This public theologian's intervention will squash political revolutionaries who charmingly promise the masses the speedy recovery of economy, or a speedy restoration of democracy including the constitutional republic.

Public theology is anthropological. Every political theory (populist or constitutionalist) 'assumes an anthropology and every anthropology underwrites some political trajectory' (Smith 2008:6). Anthropological nuances in this means, that public theology is not an isolationist discipline. Just as much as there is a wide interdisciplinarity in all natural and social sciences, public theology involves other non-theological disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology, et cetera. Intradisciplinarity is also inevitable, as all branches of theology are invited to make some sensible

proposals in addressing human *dipharagoba* [calamities]. This calls for a change of approach as mentions by Cha (2019):

[F]rom subjectivity to relationality in theological anthropology and in views of the Trinity has been suggested as if relationality were the real and major essence of humans and the trinitarian God. (p. 102)

This truth is expressed by Chesterton (2009:67), namely that 'thinking in isolation and with pride ends in being an idiot'.

Even within theological circumference, public theology is the message carried by people, especially Christians as messengers. 'The messenger is an embodiment of the message' (Jayasooria in ed. Jacob 2020:231). Public theology goes beyond the pastor as a theo-practitioner. It is practiced by Christians, since Christians 'are engaged in the reconstruction of the contemporary world on the solid foundations of life-giving values' (Michael 2020:137). It is Christians who are caught in some complexities of life. They 'navigate the dynamic arenas of politics and health care, media and the marketplace, race and culture' (Kaemingk 2021:1). There is no public theology without theologians, 'every theologian is in some sense a public theologian' (Vanhoozer & Strachan 2015:15). Although the pastor is a public theologian, the bulk of public theology is in the hands of ordinary believers. People, especially Christians, are prophets not as a positional polity, but as a ministry calling and spiritual discipline. Again Nolan (2009) extends this, that:

[T]hese prophets 'speak out because they are boldly critical of their world, they speak before because they foresee the future; they speak for because they speak for God as God's messengers. (p. 89)

Public theology is an engaging discipline. It is a discipline that engages 'beyond the confines of the church' (ed. Jacob 2020:29). It conveys the notion of Christian engagement with public issues. It is therefore a publicly informed discourse about public issues. It is a contribution towards public discussions, which implies engaging with those within and without the *ecclesial* circles. Discourses are inclusive of areas such as politics, economics, social and natural spheres of humanity. Breitenberg (2003) is correct that public theology:

[I]s descriptive, evaluative, and normative with respect to the broader culture and society, as well as their institutions and interactions, in ways that social and public ethics often are not. (p. 66)

This theology sets us on the path 'for a release from our empty religiosity for an effective engagement in God's world' (ed. Jacob 2020:35). As an engaging discipline, it immerses itself as a prophetic voice, addressing the corrupt practices in the high echelons of society, especially politics. It is here to 'redeem politics from the curse of irresponsible and unethical vanity, to that of accountable concern' (Ailawadi in Jacob 2020:123). The South African society is ubiquitous with imbalances. It is societies of victims and victors, the embraced and the marginalised, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the poor and the rich, and the list can go on forever. Politicians

are insouciant by these imbalances. Theologians are to a certain degree immobilised and had become numb to people's victimisation amidst the culture of human rights abuses. This situation calls for public theology's sensibility, to engage politicians, whether populists or constitutionalists, in the hope to convince them to do something drastic for the victims of political self-aggrandisement. This can even mean 'influencing the exercise of state power' (Gammon in Ahern, Clark, Heyer & Johnston 2016:68), which means theologians should go to the top politicians, not to condemn, but to engage dialogically and prophetically for the quality of life in the state.

The unfortunate state in South Africa that limits dialogical engagement with politicians, is the proliferation and polarisation of the ecclesiastical voice. The church is theologically divided on issues of church-politics interactions. Some believe in total separation of church and state, while others believe that one of the two entities are above the other (the state above the church, or the church above the state). Still others are for the idea that the church is the moral conscience of the state, that is the church should give guidance regarding moral or ethical issues. Ecumenical formations with different agendas are mushrooming, especially during the time of a pandemic. All ecclesial mainstreams view the current political landscape differently. Some from African Independent Churches and Neo-Pentecostal churches, view Jacob Zuma as an angel, hence constantly surrendering their pulpits for his populist rhetorics and organising night vigils at his Nkandla homestead on the eves of his court appearances. On the other hand, some view him as a political error and a constitutional delinquent. For instance, the South African Council of Churches, Evangelical Alliance, and South African Catholic Bishops Conference constantly expressed concerns about his alleged corrupt activities, and lately by his court defiance innuendos. Many African Independent Churches, especially those of Apostolic, Zionist, and Neo-Pentecostal leniencies, take pleasure in hosting corrupt politicians, sharing the stage and pulpits with them, not realising that these populists use their visits as a charm to the public. This normally happens when elections are around the corner. As these different ecumenical voices interface and interact with politicians, one needs to bear in mind that 'both religious and secular are ideologically constructed and intertwined with one another through different political agendas' (Fernando 2021:183). The politician will lean towards a dominant system, which is determined by the political proclivities convicted of, or inherent logic of his or her religious rootedness. These politicians exploit these church leaders' theological illiteracy and unlettered doctrinal insight, that the prophet and the king never dine around the same table. In that occasion, the vulnerable voice to be compromised, is the prophetic one.

This fragmented prophetic voice disables the power of dialogue between public theologians and politicians. The perpetrator of human rights abuses (politician) hears these fragmented voices, and humanly justify associating positively

with voices that affirm his or her actions. This calls for public theologians' engagement, by 'discerning how to participate faithfully in the mission of Christ in novel and rapidly changing situations' (Volf & McAnnally-Linz 2016:24).

Public theology is missional. It is a theology whereby practitioners (Christians and theologians) opt to live as God's people in this chaotic world, and to carry out the message of God's kingdom in that world. This is the missional living that displays character and actions that are consonant with the gospel message they preach. The missional living is rooted in the *missio Dei* [the mission of God]. This is the exhibition of the triune God in world affairs. It is when God wants to reveal himself as God in the fallen world. Public theology is missional in a sense that it is carrying and conveying the character and the message of God to the world, where people are the victims of populists' charms and constitutional oppressions. Public theology is a discipline or a divine movement, carrying the message with 'the kingdom values of Jesus as the focal binding point' (Michael 2020:136). It becomes missional through its endeavours of facilitating theological responses, and contributions for socio-political and cultural transformations. It articulates its missionality through 'ethical responsibility, as it participates in social discourse of the political, economic structure of the world' (Chung 2017:1). Furthermore, its missionality is expressed through reconciliatory endeavours, when it aims to close the gaps between the politicians and the victims, and these victims are also part of the masses, that are also within the religious circle.

The public space can be eccentric for theology. Spatial occupation of the prophet and politician creates a strange space or atmosphere – a foreign territory that needs the voice of God, for both are the occupants of the space, though in or at different levels. It is like entering a foreign culture, where ungodliness and wickedness dominate the atmosphere. As a result, the space creates opportunities for the missional role of public theology. The space is outlandish, therefore in need of the voice of public theology, hence Resane (2019:4) says: 'the days of silence in the face of injustice are over'. So, the public theologians in zeal to engage politicians, though viewed with suspicion, provide some channels to 'regain a public voice in our pluralistic culture' (Thiemann 1991:19), where human rights are violated to destroy human dignity.

Conclusion

There are two spectrums of politicians, operating within the same space with public theologians. These are the populists and constitutionalists, with the third tier that needs to enter the fray by initiating dialogue. These are the public theologians. These three dialogical partners need each other in order to foster harmonious coexistence in the society. The argument in this article is that politicians (populists and constitutionalists) are at loggerhead with each other.

While populists charm the people by promising them an alternative life of prosperity and peace, the constitutionalists appeal to rationality and try to implement the law as dictated

by the constitution. At the same time, public theology enters the stage through dialogue, playing its prophetic role by putting people at the centre and becoming missional, that is bringing the voice of God to calm the chaotic world where political ideologies are clashing.

Public theology should be at the fore front, inviting politicians from different spectrums and convictions to the table of dialogue. Dialogue paves the way towards understanding, synergy, and trust. Theo-political interactions are crucial towards justice formation, which builds societal harmony and peaceful coexistence.

The bottom line is that the current South Africa is struggling to swing back to constitutionalism, but populism's roots are deeper than any imagination. The struggle of separation of powers and constitutional democracy continues to recalibrate. The synchronisation processes amidst ideological factionalisms and proliferations, seem to be an insurmountable mountain; an elephant in a room, growing bigger than the room all the time.

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