

## Democracy is More than Just Elections

'Democracy is more than just elections' was the topic of the Dr Brigalia Bam Inaugural Institutional Public Lecture held at Nelson Mandela University's South Campus auditorium on 25 August 2023.

Born in 1933, Dr Brigalia Ntombemhlope Bam is a teacher, social worker, church leader, activist, feminist and wise elder. At the age of 90 she has experienced the decades of pre- and post-democracy and been integral to South Africa's democratic election process. She served as a commissioner of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for the first democratic elections in 1994 and as IEC Chairperson from 1999 to 2011.

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Addressing a capacity audience of academics, citizens and learners from several schools in the Nelson Mandela Metro, Dr Bam said: "Democracy is not only about voting, it is about achieving equality, putting food on the table, getting a good education, a decent job, feeling safe ... it means different things to different people but its aim is to serve the people of South Africa, not to empower political parties and get jobs for some people who have no community commitment, which is what has happened."

She explained this has led to many South Africans becoming disillusioned with elections. "This is borne out by the worrying decrease in voter turnout, including the low number of voters in local government elections and the national elections of 2019," says Dr Bam.

"For a young democracy, coming from a violent past like ours, a low voter turnout ought to concern all of us, as it would seem to suggest that the majority of our people, especially the young, have given up on politics and voting as a tool for transformational change. And when people lose faith in politics, violence often follows, as we are witnessing countrywide."

A resounding question posed during the inaugural is how to bridge the gap between government window-dressing and actually serving the people of South Africa. The example raised was the BRICS visit when everything in Johannesburg suddenly started working perfectly for the duration of the international politicians' stay.

"We must ask ourselves why a functioning environment is not a constant norm for all citizens?" said Dr Bam. "We must also ask ourselves whether the coalitions in our municipalities serve the interests of our people or the political parties? How is it that a party that polled amongst the lowest in the local government elections in Johannesburg in 2021, ends up being entrusted with the mayoralty? Is this an

expression of popular will? Or does this reflect the cynical manoeuvring for power by the bigger parties? Does such a situation enhance belief in our democracy or contribute to the widespread malaise and alienation?"

Dr Bam's hope is that through the Brigalia Bam Foundation and the archive in her name that Mandela University has created, "we have created a space where the dialogue about the issues of democracy can be renewed; where as members of civil society we can revive our spiritual energies to bring about change for all of us." She urged young people in particular to re-invigorate themselves: "In Zulu we say 'ukuzihlaziya', or, as we say in the church movement, 'imvuselelo' – it means the great awakening or reawakening."

Recalling the 1994 elections, Dr Bam said a record number of women voted, including from the rural areas. "They made their way to the polling stations, queueing from dawn. They so badly wanted freedom and democracy, everyone did, and we set up polling stations in areas so remote you wondered how they even got a brick there. With the help of the churches and the South African Council of Churches we set up voting stations everywhere."

She added that to progress our democracy we need women who care about our communities to take up positions of political leadership. She referred to Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka who served in our country's first democratic parliament, in a number of ministerial roles thereafter and as Deputy President in 2005. She has devoted her life to transforming the lives of the poor and for driving transformation for women and girls through her leadership role in the United Nations.

Dr Mlambo-Ngcuka spoke at the inaugural, and was critical about the BRICS leadership: "I looked at the line-up of men representing us, and thought 'what mediocrity is this, how is it possible that the world has been relegated to these men? Where are the women?'. She added that the representation of women in political leadership remains a key issue and said that universities play an important part in this. "Strong women leadership is nurtured at universities and we need to see these women taking up top leadership positions.

"We are all participants in the building of our democracy, we elect our leaders and we have to think very hard when we elect them because these are the people we are mandating to make sure that our country gets better. If we do not choose the right people it will come back to haunt us."

Dr Bam added that we only need to look at people's actions to know where their hearts lie. She said a woman like Dr Mlambo-Ngcuka inherited her values from her mother and father whom Dr Bam knew: "Phumzile's mother had more projects in her community through the church than anyone else and her father was the greatest educationist and a school principal. We need to encourage the values of sharing and

respecting others, of playing our part in creating a better, kinder, safer, more just society. This is how we build our democracy.”

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