

Looking at others to understand ourselves better

What must South Africans make of the Eskom debacle, service delivery protests, the seemingly never-ending e-toll dispute and the infighting at SARS and the SAPS/Hawks? Is it all just because of one man, Jacob Zuma, or is there more than that going on?

Looking at American political scientist Francis Fukuyama's recent tome *Political Order and Political Decay* (2014), it becomes clear that we are part of a universal pattern.

Political development

In this exhaustive overview of how modern states come into being, Fukuyama comes to the conclusion that modern statehood is the product of a process of political development that comprises three things, namely

- rule of law,
- democratic accountability and
- an effective state.

One could say these elements constitute a golden triangle.

All this may sound like common sense and stating the obvious, except that many (dare I say most) countries do not achieve it. Think of the whole South America, the African continent, the Middle East, Euro Asia, the BRICS countries ... how many countries can you mention that have built the golden triangle?

Fukuyama points out that India has an adequate democracy and the rule of law, but it suffers from a failure of the state – for example the failure to deliver basic services like education in rural areas. India meets two of the three criteria but not the third one. The triangle is missing one side.

Nigeria on the other hand now has a functioning democracy, but the rule of law is scant and the state is weak – as we see with the Boko Haram incursions and the inability of the Nigerian government to deal with it. Here one could say two sides of the triangle are missing – effectively no triangle or no modern state.

SA has a modern constitution and vibrant democracy, but Eskom, service delivery protests, and the shenanigans at SARS, the Hawks and NPA tell us we do not have an effective state. So how can one be built?

Unpromising beginnings

From his comprehensive review Fukuyama concludes that all modern states started off as “patrimonial states”. These are states where the government is staffed with friends and family of the ruler or with members of the ruling elite. These are also states where there is little effort to treat citizens impersonally on the basis of universally applied rules. Favouritism based on kinship, class, race, and so on plays the much bigger role. In fact, a professional civil service who applied rules impersonally and treat citizens the same is not the natural state of affairs, favouritism is.

From these unpromising beginnings a modern state can only develop over time. Fukuyama traverses the history of ancient China, Germany, Japan, Greece, Italy, the US and UK and many other countries and concludes that some have succeeded in building effective states and some (he quotes Greece and Southern Italy) fail to do so at all.

The point is it is a journey, it happens over a period of time and the outcome is uncertain.

Fukuyama identifies two ways in which countries develop from patrimonial to modern states: war and political reform.

War

The urgency of war requires efficiency and speedy results. Building efficient war machines requires meritocracy, superb organisation and optimisation – hence efficient states. There is a downside, however: lack of democratic accountability can result in these efficient bureaucracies becoming so powerful that it leads to war and destruction.

Not all countries at war build effective states; in fact many countries at war are failed or failing states. Ancient China, Germany and Japan, however, built highly effective states via war. This option is, thankfully, not open to South Africa.

Political reform

A second route to state modernisation is through a process of peaceful political reform driven by a coalition of social groups who want efficient and non- corrupt government.

Economic growth brings with it the division of labour. This creates new social groups which one will not find in a society based on agriculture. Think trade unions, business chambers, industrialists, professions, a middle class and so on. The TV series *Downton Abbey* amuses us by depicting how England's landed gentry looked down upon lawyers and merchants at the turn of the previous century new social groups appearing in society. These groups want a political say, so they push for political change. This is essentially the route travelled by the UK and US.

The US, however, took a more tortuous route than the UK. In the US, the vote was given to all (White men) before a strong state was built. This resulted in politics being used to trade votes and political support. Fukuyama calls this "clientelism", which is not at all conducive to state efficiency and modern government.

It took the Progressive movement, of which Terry Roosevelt (president from 1901 to 1909) was a vociferous voice and investigative journalists working for legendary publications like McClure's Magazine (1893 to 1929), to bring the political momentum that brought a shift towards an impersonal, more even-handed government.. Without that the US would not be the effective state it has become.

Where to SA?

Where does all this history and theoretical musings leave SA?

First, we have always been a very patrimonial society. Members of the ruling elite dominated staffing of government and citizens were certainly not treated on the basis of universally applicable rules. Precisely the characteristics Fukuyama describes as the point where all modern states started.

1994 was an important break from that pattern, but with cadre deployment; the appointment of friends and family, particularly at local government level; and a blurred distinction between political heads and civil servants, there is still

a lot of patrimonialism in our society. In fact, some would argue SA is now experiencing a form of re-patrimonialism, similar to what we saw after 1948. That may very well be the case and in both instances would be for the same reason – the view that one shares government resources with those closest to you.

I would suggest SA has moved on somewhat and is now what is described as a neo-patrimonial state. A state where the institutions of a modern democracy have developed but government is also “a matter of sharing state resources with friends and family”.

Push back

Secondly, the very angry reactions across society to the Eskom crisis; the service delivery protests; the successful court challenges to executive decisions; and the existence of civil society organisations that challenge various decisions of the state constitute clear evidence society is not quietly accepting the neo-patrimonial status quo.

People do not like an ineffective state and “tenderpreneurs” have become a swear category. Citizens will keep pushing and challenging. A lot of this pushing and challenging is taking place inside the ANC, as we heard from reports from the recent *lekgotla*. The best thing that comes out of the Eskom debacle is that it reinforces the push back.

A real breakthrough will occur when voters start holding people accountable for patrimonial behaviour. It will be interesting to watch the EFF’s impact in this space.

Admin reform

Fourthly, the push back is also spawning admin reform.

The new tender regime of Treasury will kick in later this year bringing Amazon type technology to government procurement, reversing some of the decentralisation decisions on tenders and making procurement more transparent.

Legislation has also been adopted to set minimum qualifications for financial managers at local governments. Pity the poor financial managers who will have to stare the patrimonialists down – some will no doubt be murdered.

Some provinces are also taking steps to sharpen their tender processes and root out corruption.

It is a fight

Lastly, like the US during the Progressive era, moving away from a patrimonial to a modern mind-set is a fight and a long haul. It takes time for new ideas to evolve and get sufficient traction to be broadly shared. In the US it spanned 3 presidents and 20 years. Then there was a backlash again. Yet in the end the backlash was overcome and the US advanced.

This journey requires strong political leadership from leaders who themselves are not in the patrimonial mind-set.

So What?

- It is clear that SA is on an evolutionary path in moving from a patrimonial to a modern state. 1994 was an important step in that evolution and the country is now probably in a neo-patrimonial phase.
- However, we have no guarantee that the evolution will succeed and that we will build a modern state. We may end up like Greece or Southern Italy, India or Argentina. Flourishing democracies, weak states.
- There is a very strong push back against patrimonial thinking and behaviour, finding expression in administrative reform.