

NEVA MAKGETLA: The moral panic around corruption

Untested accusations and emphasis on punishment can lead to harassment of the innocent

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Standing watch: A police security detail guards the entrance to the Phala Phala game farm near Bela Bela. File photo: SUNDAY TIMES/ALAISTER RUSSELL

The Section 89 panel's report on the Phala Phala theft epitomises SA's moral panic about corruption. As in most moral panics, the identified evil is real, but the reaction is overheated rhetoric, exaggerated virtue-signalling, untested accusations and an emphasis on punishment, rather than a problem-solving discourse rooted in evidence.

Moral panics notoriously lead to harassment of the innocent — think QAnon, the

criminalisation of dagga and satanic panics. A politicised reaction to corruption also risks undermining governance and, with it, the chance of using collective action through the democratic state to solve the real challenges facing SA — above all, the deeply exclusionary and unsustainable economic system.

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The Section 89 report argues that “a president who transgresses the political bounds of his office could pose a fundamental threat not only to the separation of powers but also to the foundation of our constitutional democracy”. Contrast the actual charges here: that he asked his security detail to deal with a theft and that he earned income from his farm — something he declared when he took office. It is hard to see how these actions fundamentally threaten our democracy. No ordinary person would read them as corrupt, since they abused neither public money nor power.

The implied (false) equivalence is to state capture. But state capture involved the misappropriation of billions in public money, resources that should have gone to build up SA’s infrastructure, create employment and improve conditions for our people. Obviously we all want to know more about why Ramaphosa’s managers kept so much cash at Phala Phala. But we already know whatever shenanigans there may have been did not open the vaults of the state to looting on a mass scale.

The panel itself concluded that it didn’t know enough about the cash at Phala Phala to reach any conclusions. The sensible thing, then, would have been to recommend that parliament wait for the completion of the expert investigations already under way. This is especially important because, unlike the US Congress, parliament does not have staff in place to undertake its own forensic inquiry.

By definition, moral panics get in the way of sense. In this vein, instead of a systematic discussion of whether the charges warrant impeachment, the report provides waves of overreach and fantasy. Some are laugh-out-loud funny. For instance, paragraphs 117 and 118 of the report indulge in a detailed discussion of (imaginary) efforts to hide a large amount of money in an (imaginary) couch. Note: the authors should consider the possibility of zip cushions.

Similarly, the report's main evidence that the president personally manages the farm is that he called himself a farmer in a speech in Limpopo. Did the panel expect him to proclaim that "as a full-time politician based in Gauteng, I am fully in tune with the concerns of rural voters"?

Indulging in virtue-signalling and emotion may be pleasurable, but it is risky. If any trivial transgression can trigger impeachment, effective governance becomes impossible and popular elections meaningless. That is why the constitution permits impeachment only for serious charges. So the first question we need to ask the panel is: really? You think owning a farm and reporting a theft to the wrong police unit warrants impeachment?

More fundamentally, continual mudslinging and whataboutism build scepticism of collective action. Instead of elections based on policy proposals, we are seeing campaigns centred almost exclusively on (often unproven) allegations of corruption. That militates against effective public strategies to reconstruct the economy and improve services. When did we last have a measured debate on land reform? The education system? Industrial policy?

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The panel's report doesn't justify an impeachment process. But it should be a wake-

up call. We need to stop using corruption as a weapon in political infighting and instead take more vigorous and practical steps to prevent it. That means turning away from rhetoric and towards strategic, evidence-based interventions.

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