

A justifiable sense of *déjà vu* for SA's mass media

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Anyone who worked in South African media from the 1960s until 1990, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, could be forgiven for feeling an ugly, disturbing sense of *déjà vu* today.

We have an SABC that is very obviously controlled by the governing party and the National Assembly, and a Cabinet that is rapidly sinking into an abyss of paranoia and despotism.

Of course, one cannot and should not make the mistake of comparing the ANC to the National Party of apartheid infamy. That would be grossly unfair.

But one can certainly compare the mass media environment today with that which prevailed during the years of apartheid.

In those years, the largely English language private sector media were forced to break any number of rules that governed reportage under normal circumstances because circumstances were far from normal.

Rise of the 'struggle media'

Newspapers such as *The Star* and its Argus Group sister titles, along with the *Weekly Mail*, *New Nation*, *Sunday Times*, *Rand Daily Mail* and Radio 702, became 'struggle media' in every sense of the word. They desperately tried to tell the world, in spite of government-imposed media restrictions, what was going on in South Africa.

It was all justifiable.

Now, it seems, the same thing is happening all over again, 20 years into our democracy.

Last week's debacle in parliament, instigated by the EFF, has led to the speaker and police threatening draconian crackdowns on any members of parliament who dare misbehave.

Ironically, while that lone voice of parliamentary opposition in the apartheid years, Helen Suzman, didn't behave in quite as dramatic a manner as the EFF, she and much of South Africa felt the same sense of intense frustration when perfectly legitimate questions were sidelined or just simply avoided, by the majority party.

Echoes of the past

Whatever one might think of the EFF, the question they put to the President last week was not only legitimate but constitutionally required a direct answer.

The way in which the ANC in and outside of parliament reacted was eerily reminiscent of the heavy-handed approach National Party members and ministers dished out to the opposition.

Then, at the same time, the public protector's letter to the president, asking precisely the same question that the EFF had put to the president, was leaked to the media.

Again, the ANC's response was reminiscent of the apartheid era ruling party with its wild, defensive, accusations, and illogical finger pointing. And, far worse, than the National Party government ever managed, they attacked a state institution that was simply doing the job the Constitution and ruling party had required of it right from the start.

And so, most of the private sector media - newspapers, radio and television - have been unapologetic in lambasting the governing party with the same intensity and courage that they showed during the darkest of the apartheid years.

Shooting the messenger

Of course, the ANC blames the media, in spite of the fact that in just about every case of corruption and political skulduggery exposed by the media happened only because ANC insiders leaked information.

It is quite clear that the ANC of today is deeply divided right up to Cabinet level. How, one has to ask, is so much closely guarded confidential information leaked so readily and quickly to the media?

In fact, it has become very much part of politics these days; if you don't agree with what a cabinet colleague, the caucus or a regional committee member has to say, especially if you are outvoted, then you leak it to the media.

To a large extent, the pressure to which the ANC is being subjected by most mass media today is of their own making.

Breathtaking arrogance

Divisions within the party along with illogical and ill-advised knee-jerk statements by leading members is turning the ANC into its own worst enemy.

It is actually breathtaking that a party that has such a great majority feels it has to become so single-mindedly defensive and never, ever, admit to being wrong.

As in the past, the 'opposition' media will certainly come under a lot more pressure by the ANC in terms of muzzling legislation. And pro-ANC media such as the SABC will continue to become more and more protective, biased, blind and bumptious.

I remember, in the middle '60s, interviewing Helen Suzman, who said that what she found most remarkable was the belief by the National Party that they could continue to impose apartheid *ad infinitum*. Anyone with even the most modest IQ should surely realise that a minority simply cannot oppress a massive majority forever.

Delusional

A few years later, interviewing Rhodesian Prime Minister, Ian Smith, I mentioned to him the conversation I'd had with Suzman. Surely, I asked, he could not possibly believe that a tiny minority of whites could rule over a huge majority of blacks forever. He repeated his often quoted "not in my lifetime" response.

Needless to say, both the National Party and Ian Smith's government found out within a few decades that their dreams of

imposing their will over the masses forever were actually just pipe dreams and nothing more.

I believe that most journalists, who worked in the South African media from the 1960s to 1990s, will today probably experience that same old feeling. That the ANC, in spite of saying they will rule until Jesus Christ comes back, will find that once the defensive paranoia sets in, their dreams will end in tears.

Unless they change their tune and start accepting that what they are doing now is laying siege to the very democracy they played such an enormous part in creating.

Meanwhile, mass media *déjà vu* continues. Justifiably, I reckon.

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