

When laughter may be the wrong medicine

Recent news reports have been full of leading government officials' crazy antics. But it's not funny anymore.

When all you want to do is cry for your beloved country, sometimes it's also fine to laugh, I guess. After all, this is South Africa, where there are plenty of things to laugh about, especially because the political leadership has seemingly become a never-ending comedy show of sorts.

Recently the main act was the stand-off between **suspended Hawks boss Berning Ntlemenza** and **police minister Fikile Mbalula**. Ntlemenza, to Mbalula's horror, defied a court order and the minister's stern directive by showing up at the Hawks' offices. The court went on to dismiss Ntlemenza's application for leave to appeal against an earlier setting aside of his appointment.

According to Mbalula's version of events as expressed in a press conference on 25 April, the Hawks boss had apparently gate-crashed a management meeting of the crime-fighting unit and "ordered the head of supply chain to give him a car, which is now roaming around the streets of Pretoria, or wherever he is this afternoon. He also has a cellphone of government in his possession..."

Simply put, Ntlemenza went rogue and the internet went crazy – with laughter. Soon after the press briefing, hilarious memes flooded social media poking fun at "the search for Ntlemenza who absconded with state property". It was all very entertaining. But Mbalula warned – "this is not just a banana republic".

No?

The situation reached new levels of absurdity when Mbalula instructed the acting national police commissioner to find the state property Ntlemenza went AWOL with and return it. This is the same police commissioner who himself is mired in controversy, facing allegations of corruption and defeating the ends of justice.

The stand-off had all the elements of a low-budget Hollywood movie – a rogue cop, a "manhunt", the whiff of dirty cops and a seemingly trigger-happy police minister. But let us not be fooled by the term "low-budget" – this level of incompetence costs many South Africans dearly.

Crime not a priority

Last year SA was ranked the 10th most violent and 19th most unsafe country in the world in the Global Peace Index. The index estimates the cost for containing this violence (read crime) at about R989bn a year – an amount the country cannot afford given shrinking state coffers and growing investor uncertainty.

This ranking is underscored by findings from Statistics SA and other bodies that many South Africans do not feel safe in their homes. But the numbers hide the horror and



Fikile Mbalula
Minister of police



Berning Ntlemenza
Suspended Hawks boss

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Hlaudi Motsoeneng
Former chief operating officer of the SABC

trauma experienced by many of the country's people – for example when children fall victim to stray bullets on their way to school in gang-infested communities. In such a climate it is reasonable to expect that restoring citizens' trust and confidence in law enforcement agencies would be a top priority and that every effort should be made to fight this scourge.

On 25 April, Mbalula also presented his strategic plans to the South African Police Service, but this was dwarfed by a spectacle that once again saw law enforcement leadership plummeting to the all-familiar depths of mediocrity. It is no wonder then that most South Africans don't respect the law while ridiculing those who are tasked with enforcing it.

Setting a precedent

In the last week of April it was Mbalula's comedy of errors. The week before – on 19 April – the spotlight was on embattled **former SABC chief operating officer Hlaudi Motsoeneng** and his bizarre press conference. Word is that Motsoeneng may be heading for a seat in Parliament

after the courts found he couldn't hold any executive office at the public broadcaster. As many shocked South Africans followed the press conference in horror, the internet again went crazy, poking fun at the man who refers to himself in the third person.

Motsoeneng's colourful statements are indeed funny to listen to. As is Mbalula's. The ultimate cracker, however, is the fact that some South Africans are still shocked at the level of this brazen, unapologetic lack of integrity in political leadership and the finger-pointing that comes with it.

Mbalula is a case in point – he was clearly horrified by the lengths the Hawks boss would go to to stay in office. But what can one expect if his appointment – and others – was mired in controversy?

Former police minister Nathi Nhleko appointed him without following proper procedures as required by law. **Motsoeneng held on to his post even after it was found that he does not have a matric certificate and after the Public Protector released a damning report on his actions.** So these people can be forgiven for their impunity because they were made to believe from the outset that such behaviour is acceptable.

The precedent for poor leadership, devoid of integrity, has been firmly established from the country's first citizen all the way down to the ordinary South African bribing a traffic cop to get out of a speeding fine. ■

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