

LINKING CRIME AND MORALITY

Reviewing the Moral Regeneration Movement

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Politicians, religious leaders and social commentators have all spoken about a breakdown in morality in South Africa, with crime as the most commonly cited evidence. The moral regeneration initiative is one response to this crisis, emerging in parallel to countless other initiatives aimed at reducing crime, some of which have themselves contained explicit appeals to morals, values or ethics. A review of its origins and development shows that the moral regeneration initiative has suffered from a lack of clarity about both its mission and its strategy. The movement's attempts to build meaningful civil society participation in the campaign have also been a key challenge.

The 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) was the first policy initiative to explicitly link the issues of crime and morality. In its strategy to tackle crime, the NCPS consisted of four 'pillars' – each one "a particular arena of attack against the factors which create or facilitate criminal activity". One of these pillars focused on public values and education, with the intention of tackling "the prevailing moral climate within communities, the attitudes towards crime, and tolerance of crime".

The aims of the NCPS in respect of public values and education included "the development of strong community values and social pressure against criminality and activities which support criminality".¹ Although none of the NCPS programmes materialised in their envisaged form, many of its key messages were contained in subsequent publicity campaigns by the various national criminal justice departments, and by provincial governments.

Origins of the Moral Regeneration Movement

The origins of the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) date back to a meeting between then-president Nelson Mandela and key South African religious leaders in June 1997. At that meeting, Mandela spoke about the role of religion in nation-building and social transformation, and the need for religious institutions to work with the state. He also described the 'spiritual malaise' underpinning the crime problem:

Our hopes and dreams, at times, seem to be overcome by cynicism, self-centredness and fear. This spiritual malaise sows itself as a lack of good spirit, as pessimism, or lack of hope and faith. And from it emerge the problems of greed and cruelty, of laziness and egotism, of personal and family failure. It both helps fuel the problems of crime and corruption and hinders our efforts to deal with them.²

Mandela then called on the religious leaders to get actively involved in a campaign, which would subsequently become the moral regeneration initiative. At a moral summit in October 1998, he listed the kinds of crime problems the moral regeneration campaign should tackle:

The symptoms of our spiritual malaise are only too familiar. They include the extent of corruption both in the public and private sector, where office and positions of responsibility are treated as opportunities for self-enrichment; the corruption that occurs within our justice system; violence in interpersonal relations and families, in particular the shameful record of abuse of women and children; and the extent of tax evasion and refusal to pay for services used.³

One of the key sources of the moral regeneration initiative within the ANC was its commission for religious affairs; it was also linked to the concept of African Renaissance, which was strongly promoted by, and associated with Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki. After the 1999 election, with Mbeki as president and Jacob Zuma as deputy president, the moral regeneration initiative began to enjoy more formal attention from the presidency.

In dividing up political and administrative tasks between the president and deputy president in the early days of their term, Zuma was allocated responsibility for this initiative. Staff in the presidency describe this as a routine division of labour, with no great political significance. However, the subsequent allegations of corruption levelled against deputy president Zuma's financial advisor led to various questions and criticisms about his role in the moral regeneration initiative; often insinuating some political significance to his association with the campaign.

In fact, Zuma's role is that of political patron and 'front man', and only occasionally has he participated in behind-the-scenes work. The deputy president's office has some responsibility for political co-ordination of the moral regeneration work being done in government, but this too is a fairly arms-length relationship; especially since the

establishment of the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) with its own offices in Johannesburg.

'Campaign' approach to mobilise support

After a two-year hiatus in the moral regeneration initiative, the Mbeki government attempted to add impetus by convening two workshops with a broad range of political and religious leaders in 2000. The workshop reports contain no references to the NCPS or other anti-crime initiatives then under way which may have been relevant. Instead, the political 'campaign' approach to moral regeneration emerged strongly:

The best way of taking the message to the rest of the nation was through a national campaign. In the past, campaigns have worked well because they sensitised the nation to critical issues facing it ... It was agreed that the campaign for moral regeneration will consist of the following:

- setting up of a co-ordinating committee;
- negotiating with print and electronic media for regular input;
- starting dialogue with identified possible partners;
- promoting the campaign through a simple leaflet;
- organising a workshop for all government departments;
- organising a joint conference with religious communities;
- training of community facilitators.

This approach was similar to many other initiatives of its time, taking the methodology of the anti-apartheid struggle into a government-led initiative, with an emphasis on structures and process rather than on the content of the messages. What was envisaged was a mass mobilisation, harking back to the glory days of the liberation movement, to a time when a large majority of people and organisations could be united against a common enemy – in this case, moral malaise and criminality.

The moral regeneration 'campaign' had been conceptualised as an ever-expanding partnership between government and organised civil society, (especially faith-based organisations) who would

engage in campaigning and other activities to rebuild the social fabric of society and improve the moral fibre of the nation. (It was, however, never clear exactly what these activities should be, nor how they would rebuild morality).

Within the vision of a 'movement', there was a need for some sort of secretariat or organisational base for the moral regeneration initiative. It had been decided that this should no longer rest within government, but in civil society. (The architects of the moral regeneration campaign appear to have failed to recognise some of the profound changes that had affected civil society in post-apartheid South Africa.)

Child rape 'scourge' revives interest

In late 2001, a moral panic in the media about levels of child rape and sexual violence in South Africa revived interest in moral regeneration issues, and it was decided to launch a Moral Regeneration Movement in early 2002. This was done through the establishment of a Section 21 (not-for-profit) company which, although intended to be a non-governmental organisation, was funded by government.

The high profile launch of the Moral Regeneration Movement took place in April 2002, with over 1,000 people present from government, parliament, provincial legislatures, political parties, religious organisations, traditional structures, and NGOs. The speakers at the launch did not provide any guidance on exactly how 'the people' could get actively involved in moral regeneration, and this lack of clarity continued to be a key problem with the campaign.

Approximately a year was spent on setting up the organisation and generating a vision for its role; an extremely slow (and costly) process. The newly-formed MRM attempted to make clear its core messages, and focussed on the Constitution as a source of moral values – a shift from the earlier discourse of spirituality and religion, with less reference to crime.

In government, the department of arts and culture (DAC) was tasked with administration of moral

regeneration issues, including administering the grants to the MRM, and co-ordinating government-wide activity that could be seen as relevant to the initiative. The deputy president's office is described as the movement's political hub inside government, with DAC as the administrative hub. Apart from Zuma's ongoing public speaking about moral regeneration, little momentum was sustained around the initiative inside government departments in the period immediately after the MRM was launched. This stagnation may have been the result of a perception that the MRM – configured now as an NGO outside of government – would be taking responsibility for the campaign.

An issue which began to dog the moral regeneration initiative was the increasing public discussion (both in the media and in parliament) concerning allegations of corruption levelled at deputy president Zuma, associated with the prosecution of Shabir Shaik, his financial advisor. The corruption allegations were often raised as a contrast or challenge to Zuma's patronage of the moral regeneration campaign. As the trial of Shaik is currently under way, it remains to be seen whether any of the allegations will be sustained, and whether perceptions of corruption will adhere to Zuma or, by association, to the MRM.

The MRM's new vision

By mid-2004, the staff of the MRM, together with its trustees and a couple of its founding members, were engaged in a re-visioning exercise for the campaign. There was some acknowledgment that the MRM had not achieved enough in the first years of its existence. A great deal of energy had gone into grassroots mobilisation and facilitation – many awareness-raising workshops all over the country – but this type of work was hard to quantify and its impact even more difficult to demonstrate. Little had been achieved in the critical arena of public communication.

Problems were also identified related to leadership and co-ordination of the movement. The composition of the MRM's governing structures was revisited, and an 'expert-based Board' was created in place of the previous structures which had attempted to represent the range of sectors

participating in the campaign. An annual conference for the participants and affiliates of the MRM was proposed.

The new board of the MRM, in its presentation at the 2004 annual conference, recommended that the MRM office become more focused on advocacy work, and identified five areas for the organisation's future activities:

- building the MRM;
- leading public discourse on moral regeneration issues;
- developing a national consensus on positive values that should be embraced;
- promoting ethical behaviour congruent with these positive values;
- disseminating information on moral issues.⁴

This appears to be a new approach to the vexed question of civil society participation in the moral regeneration campaign. It is underpinned by an implicit acknowledgement that there is a need to advocate around moral regeneration, rather than assuming (as had been the case in earlier incarnations of the campaign) that there was organic public support for these issues.

Challenges facing the moral regeneration campaign

A key challenge is that of sustainability – whether the campaign can be sustained as a 'civil society initiative' in the absence of a popular, organic support base. The other related challenge is that of financial sustainability. The government grant to fund the establishment of the MRM was for an initial period of three years, to the end of March 2005. It is not, at this stage, clear whether further funds will be forthcoming.

The nature of the MRM's activities will also be a key determinant of its future sustainability. Simply acting as co-ordinator of efforts taking place elsewhere has been seen to be unsuccessful, not least because an external co-ordinating agency cannot instruct other organisations to act. (The attempts by the department of safety and security to 'co-ordinate' government-wide crime prevention efforts since 1996 are evidence of this problem.)

The movement also faces the problem of defining and identifying activities as morally regenerative. While

there is a potentially large 'feelgood factor' associated with moral regeneration – all manner of activities could be seen as part of the campaign – it will be extremely difficult to empirically demonstrate whether any of these activities actually enhance morality.

The moral regeneration campaign failed to ally itself with the government's 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy (although this may have been wise, given that the NCPS subsequently fell into disfavour).⁵ It has, however, engaged occasionally with other government anti-crime campaigns, notably against gender violence and child abuse.

The government sector's participation in the moral regeneration initiative appears to be regaining some momentum. It will be interesting to see how this is sustained in parallel to the MRM itself becoming a more focused advocacy and communication NGO. Already the relationship between the MRM office – itself an offspring of government – and some national government departments has been a little difficult. This relationship will surely be central in defining the campaign in the next period.

In terms of relationships outside of the government sector, the MRM has failed to engage meaningfully with the full range of NGOs doing crime prevention work relevant to its efforts, resulting in significant lost opportunities. This may be a result of the organisation's limited capacity and consequent failure to build effective networks.⁶ It could also be related to the campaign's own uncertainty and ambiguity about the role of NGOs and civil society.

The more mainstream crime prevention NGOs – for instance NICRO, RAPCAN and the Crime Prevention Alliance – may also be wary of engaging with the moral regeneration initiative because of perceptions that it is either a religious or spiritual initiative (or both), or closely allied to government.

Although no longer very religious in phrasing, the moral regeneration initiative is still associated with a religious initiative. Perhaps for that reason, it is still viewed with some unease by those who are uncomfortable with the language and practice of organised religion. Conversely, the moral

regeneration initiative may also have been borne out of a recognition that there is indeed an area of individual and social life beyond the material, which impacts on quality of life and the achievement of the government's election promise to deliver 'a better life for all'. As one of the South African experts on ethics put it:

In the heat of the resistance struggle I think a lot of us lost sight of the whole other side; of people's need for religion or spirituality.⁷

Conclusion

The development of the moral regeneration initiative in South Africa has seen the concept defined in terms of both crime prevention and nation-building. In some incarnations, moral regeneration has had a distinctly spiritual and religious tone; in others, a strong flavour of African nationalist ideology.

Remarkably, and probably only because of the tolerance for diversity that is South African, it has survived its own confusion and embraced a range of differing interest groups – conservative religious groups, some elements of the business community, political parties, government and intellectuals. What remains to be seen is whether a largely ideological campaign of this type will deliver any meaningful results in terms of strengthening social fabric and reducing crime.

This article is based on a forthcoming ISS monograph.

Endnotes

- 1 *The National Crime Prevention Strategy*, produced by an inter-departmental strategy team consisting of the departments of correctional services, defence, intelligence, justice, safety and security, and welfare, May 1996, pp 73-74.
- 2 N Mandela, From Liberation to Transformation, an address to religious leaders on 24 June 1997 in Johannesburg, in *Phakamani: Magazine of the ANC Commission for Religious Affairs*, p 9.
- 3 N Mandela, address at the opening of the Morals Summit, Johannesburg, 22 October 1998, <http://www.infor.gov.za/speeches/1998/98a22_0x2719811266.htm>
- 4 D Mosoma, presentation at the First National Conference of the MRM, 30 Nov–1 Dec 2004.
- 5 See E Pelser (ed), *Crime Prevention Partnerships*:

Lessons from Practice, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, 2002.

- 6 Z Mdhlahla, *Where are we now? A review of the status and work of the MRM*, report by CEO to the First National Conference of the MRM, 30 Nov 2004, p 8.
- 7 M Prozesky (ed), *Christianity amidst apartheid: selected perspectives on the church in South Africa*, London, Macmillan, 1990, cited in B Moore, *Black Theology Revisited*, Curriculum Studies, University of South Australia, <<http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/moore.htm>>