

What's happening to Mandela's children?

The generation of post-apartheid youth is widely seen as something of a disappointment, laments FAITH RAKATE in this opinion article about her generation's lack of interest in politics, their consumerism, their 'lack of moral fibre' and their crass materialism.

SO MUCH HAD BEEN EXPECTED of 'Mandela's children'. They were designated to follow in the footsteps of earlier generations of revolutionary youth. They should be leading the democratic movement; they should be defending the gains of the revolution and, with their energy and efforts, they should be accelerating development.

So what has happened? Instead of grasping the torch of freedom and charging into the future, the youth have either sat around or headed off to the mall. Negative perceptions around the youth are building momentum. It is commonly assumed they are behind the endemic violence, the unruly behaviour and the lack of discipline that characterises life 13 years after the advent of democracy.

The presidential succession saga has thrown the youth onto the centre-stage of public and intellectual debate. Prominent ANC politicians have appealed to the youth for their political support, but few of these politicians clearly spell out the place of the youth in leadership other than as followers or pawns in the political game.

In addition, it has commonly been argued that the lack of accountability in South Africa's political system has inevitably led to

diminishing levels of public participation, especially among the youth. The political system, as democratic and equitable as it is, has nonetheless been designed in a way that creates apathy among the young. Whose fault is it then when the youth grow bored?

Politicians urge militant action, but fail to provide any avenues for progress within their own parties or any means for ordinary people to genuinely influence policy. Parents urge careerism and affluence at a time when there are very few jobs to be found. Veterans bemoan the youth's attraction to materialism, but they themselves condone or participate in the creation of a multi-media platform from which a massive multiple promotion of consumerism has been waged. In this campaign, the media has almost exclusively targeted the emerging middle class youth.

Parents themselves are often poor role models while some struggle heroes are engaged in a vulgar bid to accumulate as much money as possible. What signal does that send out?

The youth in South Africa are currently faced by enormous challenges just to survive, let alone to excel. Unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, early pregnancies, involvement

in crime both as perpetrators and victims, and the daunting threat of the HIV and AIDS pandemic all pose the severest of tests.

The relentless urging of the corporate world and of the youth's own parents to accumulate wealth and to consume lavishly is beginning to reap what it has sown: a youth generation that lacks vibrancy, dynamism and altruistic values. Worse than that, when reality sets in, the impossible expectations imposed by peers and families will lead almost inevitably to diminished self-worth, depression, alcohol and drug abuse and perhaps criminality and prostitution. It is a vicious cycle, the creators of which refuse to acknowledge their own complicity. Instead they blame the youth for the very features that characterise them and which are necessary for the passage to maturity.

In many ways, the post-apartheid youth of today contrast sharply with their revolutionary predecessors. In many other ways, they are exactly the same. ●

Faith Rakate is a master's intern in the HSRC's Democracy and Governance research programme.



HSRC review

www.hsrc.ac.za

5 VOLUME No. 04 | NOV 2007

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP
Gone and forgotten?

