

Until freedom, fairness, opportunity, and empowerment is realised, we cannot meaningfully and truthfully say that black lives matter

By Zakhele Mbhele MP – DA Shadow Minister of Small Business Development

It should go without saying, as a principled stance in a human rights-centred society that *all* lives do matter.

That being established, it should also not be a matter of intellectual difficulty to understand that, in the same way, that "Save the Rhinos" does not mean that other animals do *not* matter but is drawing attention to a specific challenge concerning ecological conservation, so it is that the Black Lives Matter movement is about highlighting the longstanding, chronic and systemic abuses perpetrated specifically against African-American communities in the United States.

But, Chairperson, that leads us to two crucial issues: firstly, we must remain aware that the BLM movement arose in a uniquely American context where black people are a demographic minority, and the challenge of racialised economic inequalities there is specifically a legacy of chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation.

Therefore, the discourse and premise of BLM does not neatly translate to the South African context where we have a black African majority and where while we suffered the inhumanity of colonialism and apartheid, it was not of the nature and severity of the African American experience.

We thus cannot simply import it wholesale without critical engagement and simply following the same line of rhetoric and manner of protest, hook, line and sinker.

Secondly, we must interrogate whether, when we say black lives matter, are we talking about all black lives? Are we including black LGBT lives, for example, that are the target of homophobic and transphobic victimisation and violence? Are we including black rural lives that are vulnerable to farm attacks and other violent crimes as a result of the under-resourced, under-staffed, under-trained, and under-equipped police service in rural areas?

And are we including the lives of the chronically unemployed, who we know are overwhelmingly black, and are in desperate need of economic opportunities that have been destroyed for years by corruption, growth-killing policies, poor service delivery, and mismanagement in our bloated and incapable state?

As long as corruption steals food parcels and social welfare grants from the intended beneficiaries, it cannot meaningfully be said that black lives matter.

As long as police brutality is perpetrated against black bodies, it cannot meaningfully be said that black matters.

As long as children in our poorest communities are deprived of quality education to give them the best chance of a brighter future, it cannot meaningfully be said that black lives matter.

As long as patients in public hospitals have to sleep on dirty floors in the corridors because there aren't enough beds, don't get fed because healthcare facilities are mismanaged, get chewed on by rats because hospitals aren't clean and they have to fight over oxygen tanks because of

incompetence, all in the middle of a global pandemic, it cannot meaningfully be said that black lives matter.

The simple truth is that the only way to dismantle the structural vulnerability and state of victimhood to which the majority of black people in South Africa are subject, is by implementing good governance to build a capable state with no corruption or mismanagement, improved service delivery and growth and development that results in shared prosperity. On this count, ANC governments have fallen far short of the mark, while DA governments are consistently top performers by most indicators of governance and delivery.

Colonialism and apartheid operated to devalue black lives through economic dispossession, stripping black people of assets and capital, and depriving them of opportunities, and therefore redressing our shameful past to facilitate free and empowered black livelihoods is the work of facilitating expanded capital ownership, and creating and broadening opportunities in order to remove the prevailing material conditions of poverty that are the legacy of racial oppression.

Until that freedom, fairness, opportunity, and empowerment is demonstrated and concretely realised, in both words *and* action, rhetoric *and* implementation, we cannot meaningfully and truthfully say that black lives matter.