

# Separating facts from fifth columnists

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Whether or not President Zuma has or hasn't decided to punish general Bheki Cele by appointing him ambassador to Canada, this issue is indicative of what the media can expect as the ANC leadership race hots up.

It seems to me that either those impeccable sources feeding information about the police commissioner are right, and the presidency is lying about Zuma not having made a decision yet, or that those sources are up to no good.

## **Disunited, we lie**

In the past, it hasn't been all that difficult for our mass media to work out whether or not the information they were being fed was either from within cabinet or from people very close to cabinet and its ministers, because the ANC was pretty much united.

But, in recent years it has become as obviously as a pimple on a parson's nose that all is not well within the higher echelons of the ANC, not to mention the rank and file.

Which means that as the race for the next president of the organisation starts hotting up, it is to be expected that one-upmanship, point-scoring and reputation-bashing will become the order of the day. It happens in every democracy.

## **Undemocratic democracy**

And the more democratic the democracy, the nastier the underhand tactics seem to get. The US, Britain and Europe have pretty much demonstrated that.

So, our mass media will have to be careful about just accepting that information they are given in confidence by someone close to a minister, or even from a minister directly, is in fact the real McCoy and not just mischief-making.

It is not going to be easy for any editor in the next year or so, because they dare not name sources, otherwise all their sources will instantly dry up.

## **Hey, remember that?**

Perhaps, though, this is the time for the news media to take themselves out of the firing line by going back to one of the most basic tenets of journalism and that is to get both sides of the story before publishing it.

It seems to have become a habit in the past few years for media to put out a one-sided story, only to see a vociferous rebuttal from the other side coming out the next day. I believe that this is one of the prime reasons why Government has been accusing the media of misbehaviour.

### **On being 'peccable'**

I know it is hard these days to get two sides of a story together, particularly when one side really doesn't want to give its point of view in the belief that the story won't actually see the light of day. But, in the next year, editors are going to have to find some way of ensuring that the information they get from their "impeccable sources" is actually 'peccable'.

It often looks like the mass media in this country are unaware that they are being led by the nose. And the tragedy is that those who get away with leading the media by the nose are often those who shout loudest about the need to impose curbs on the media.

I get the feeling that, not only are the messengers being shot, but they are being very conveniently set up in advance by the shooters.

News gathering in South Africa today is not simple by any means. It requires not only astute newshounds but wide-awake politico-forensic scientists as well.

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