

[Opinion / Columnists](#)

## EXERCISE OF POWER

# NEVA MAKGETLA: There are practical ways to slow the onset of hubris

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In the words of Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

If you've ever worked in a large organisation, inside government or out, you have seen leaders start out humble, open and honest, and end up abusive, arrogant and arbitrary.

Often their subordinates are left thinking they must have misread these leaders from the start. But power itself changes people, and rarely for the better. The change starts with protocol, which makes it harder to tell leaders the truth.

Consider the seemingly innocuous use of titles rather than names. Even long-standing acquaintances must be called minister or GS. In government, protocol requires little shrines by the entrance, with images of the current gods arrayed in a pantheon, often above offerings of flowers.

How many individuals will still see themselves as fallible when continually reminded of their exalted status? That, in turn, reinforces the leaders' belief in their own infallibility.

The effects emerge in subtle ways as well as large ones. For instance, powerful people tend to talk too long. If everyone around you feels they must appear to listen attentively, you naturally start to believe that your every word is priceless.

The next step is when powerful people begin to pick advisers who always agree, who act as a shield against any evidence or discussion of mistakes. This praetorian guard helps convince leaders that, when programmes don't achieve the hoped-for results, it's either inevitable or due to others' shortcomings.

It becomes easy to think: our people still live in poverty while others have luxuries, despite all of our efforts — but still, their lives have improved a lot, and all that hard work cannot have been in vain (and many powerful people work 12-hour days). It's easy to conclude that the problem is communications, not policy. Call in the spin doctors!

This thinking leads logically to the final step: the belief that anyone who disagrees with you is misguided or malicious.

In SA, those who drafted the Constitution saw these risks. In addition to elections, they tried to build in clear limits to power, including:

- Insulating the security forces from partisan interference;
- Freedom of organisation and speech as well as the press;
- A host of oversight bodies, especially the courts, the public protector and the chapter 9 institutions; and
- Requiring evidence-based decision making and consultation.

It's no accident that all of these systems have been assailed and where possible suborned by the powerful. Nonetheless, they made a huge contribution to the latest democratic transition.

In the light of pervasive problems of the past few years, however, we have to ask how they could be strengthened.

A critical shortcoming is that cabinet appointments are the sole prerogative of the president. This reinforces patronage while undermining accountability.

If your position depends on the boss's goodwill, it's hard to maintain a critical and independent stance.

And it's always tempting to appoint someone because of their constituency rather than their competence.

Leaving cabinet positions to the president alone is not an international norm. In the US, for instance, cabinet appointments need senate ratification. In China, the National People's Congress approves nominations to the State Council.

To manage power better, however, also requires that both subordinates and society make a stronger distinction between leaders' two roles: as organisational representatives and as executive officers. Overdoing respect ends up corrupting the manager. For a start, can we start requiring that they use their names, not their titles, in ordinary

discourse?

- *Makgetla is a senior researcher with Trade & Industrial Policy Strategies.*