

Nominal Elections in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

Viriri Shava*

*This paper is a belletristic study of the close correlation between literature and politics. Taking Shakespeare's **Julius Caesar** as a point of departure, the paper seeks to interrogate the play's portrayal of nominal reelectioneering in Roman politics. By dint of its depiction of speech-making, campaigning and rhetorical canvassing for support, the play explores variant strands of political thinking in the market place, underground and at the Capitol. The study argues that, all this political dynamism occurs in a manner that is reminiscent of the preparation and execution of a latter day electoral process. The article concludes by looking at the legacy of the import of **Julius Caesar** to contemporary politics, in terms of issues that have gained currency in present day political debate and practice, such as democracy, political pluralism and electoral procedures.*

Introduction

The concept of elections is normally associated with the socio-political life of a people. It usually occurs at various levels of social organisation such as clubs, unions, movements and governments. Invariably, elections set out to methodize, systematize and regularise the running and management of these social organisations. At the level of political administration, elections constitute a process whereby a government is chosen by the people. Generally, elections take place at regular intervals under the rules of a constitution and allow all adults (usually those over the age of 18) to vote in secret for candidates or political parties. The votes are counted in the presence of the contending parties and the candidates or parties with the largest number of votes form the new government, while those with fewer votes form the opposition (Alasdair McWhirter *et al* 1996: 268). There are, nevertheless, less traditional and more complex ways of forming government today but the paradigm adumbrated above applies to the play under discussion.

* Dr. Viriri Shava is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, National University of Lesotho.

While *Julius Caesar* approximates the electoral process described above, there are no real elections recorded in the play as we comprehend the scenario today. For instance, there is no casting and counting of votes to determine who wins and loses in an electoral environment. But, the political proceedings that obtain roughly correspond to all that is connoted in the meaning of the concept of elections. *Julius Caesar* contains a built-in quest for political alternatives. The play is a clarion call for change from what political observers and activists view as a one-man dictatorship to a people's democracy. Rome is portrayed as a nation that is polarized between monarchism and republicanism.

Although one faction is so enamoured with the monarchial ideal, Rome itself is presently a Republic, the last king, Tarquin the Proud, having been constitutionally ousted. It is Julius Caesar and his cronies such as Antony, Octavius and Lepidus who subscribe to the monarchial ideal. This ideal embodies a one-man authoritarianism that assumes the fallibility of ordinary human beings and demands that they submit for their own good and that of the state to a higher and better power than individuals can muster to govern themselves (Rackin, 1985:33).

Brutus' faction, on the contrary, wants Rome to remain a Republic. This faction has a mixed bag of supporters ranging from the envious Cassius to authentic republicans such as Brutus himself, Casca, Cinna, Trebonius, Decius, Mettelus and other conspirators. These people, especially Brutus, believe in a republican ideal based on the assumption that every citizen has equal freedom and dignity (Rackin 1985:33).

In between these polarized factions, there is a fickle mob which keeps on being swayed hither and thither as the key political contenders canvass for support. The mob, which in the context of the discussion may be said to represent the contemporary electorate, is consistently manipulated in terms of its activities, feelings and political predilections.

It is within this framework of power politics that the application of the concept of elections is construed in the discussion. From its beginning to the end, *Julius Caesar* is characterized by speech - making and nominal electioneering. There is a relentless effort, in the play, to bring about the best form of government in Rome. Although the word "elections" is never mentioned, what

comes before and after Caesar's funeral scene and what transpires at the scene itself is tantamount to the happenings of a latter-day electoral process.

Rome at the crossroads

Julius Caesar has a dual nomenclature. It is both a history play and a tragedy. Shakespeare wrote two kinds of history plays: English history plays and Roman history plays. *Julius Caesar* belongs to the latter. According to Peck and Coyle (1985:6), history plays present famous historical figures at moments of crisis in their lives. The word "crisis" here signifies periods which require the taking of decisions and choices and in the case of *Julius Caesar*, the decisions and choices are to be taken by both patrician individuals and plebeian masses. As a tragedy, *Julius Caesar* epitomizes the criteria of Shakespearean tragedy synthesized by Bradley which foregrounds the exploration of the tragic fall of a man with enormous potential for good brought to an evil end through some weakness in his own temperament, coupled with the implication of man's nobility and worth even when thus driven to self-destruction (Taylor, 1967:2). Besides being a man of thoughtful disposition and good intentions, Shakespeare's tragic hero is normally caught up in a current of violent political action. The reference to "violent political action" insinuates an atmosphere of political polarisation mentioned in the introduction to the discussion.

It is, however, instructive to note that the attributes of history and tragedy briefly examined above contribute towards concretizing the element of electioneering in the play. They help establish an ambiance of seriousness, anxiety, polarity and criticalness where political choices and decisions are to be made.

Although *Julius Caesar* opens with the triumphalism and victoriousness of Caesar's return from his military conquests, it soon becomes apparent that Rome is on the brink of political dissent. The speeches made by the two tribunes, Marullus and Flavius, clearly demonstrate the latent divisions in the politics of the city state. It is glaring that the political loyalties of the two tribunes do not lie with Caesar but with the defeated Pompey and his two sons. As Marullus puts it:

*Wherefore rejoice? What conquest brings he home?
What tributaries follow him to Rome*

*To grace in captive bonds his chariot wheels?
You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!
O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome.
Knew you not Pompey? Many a time and oft
Have you climbed up to walls and battlements,
To towers and windows; yea, to chimney tops
Your infants in yours arms, and there have sat
The live-long day, with patient expectation,
To see great Pompey pass the streets of 'Rome;
And when you saw his chariot but appear,
Have you not made an universal shout,
That Tiber trembled underneath her banks
To hear the replication of your sounds
Made in her concave shores?
And do you now put on your best attire?
And do you now cull out a holiday?
And do you now strew flowers in his way
That comes in triumph over Pompey's blood?
Be gone!
Run to your houses, fall upon your knees,
Pray to the gods to intermit the plague
That needs must light on this ingratitude.*

This brand of speech-making does not only set out to politicise and indoctrinate the plebeians, but also patently invokes and apportions political alignment. The speech goes on to infect a note of discord in a day of victory by sowing the first seed of subsequent tension in the play (Peck and Coyle, 1985: 43).

Marullus and Flavius continue to exhibit their political preference by ordering the workers to disperse and to go about removing decorations of victory and rejoicing from Caesar's statues. Predictably, Caesar responds to the tribunes' actions but he unfortunately goes overboard by sanctioning their death. The one-man dictatorship, unlike the republicanism espoused by the conspirators, is authoritarian and murderous. More important, however, the episode of the tribunes and the workers, shows part of the build-up of events from the beginning of the action of the play to the actual nominal electioneering which forms the climax of the drama.

This political build-up is given further impetus by the machinations between Brutus and the conspirators. Brutus himself is a close friend of Caesar but he belongs to a family of radical republicans who have played a significant role in attempting to extirpate monarchism in Rome. Brutus fervently believes that Caesar has become inordinately

powerful and he is afraid that Caesar may reverse the trajectory of history and make himself a dictatorial king:

*He would be crowned.
How that might change his nature, there's the question.
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
And that craves wary walking. Crown him that,
And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power,...*

Brutus' sentiments are shared by Cassius whose political suspicions against Caesar are, nevertheless, tinged with envy, rivalry and downright jealousy. The imagery and symbolism with which Cassius describes Caesar's current political status graphically demonstrate the magnitude of the latter's power:

*Why man, he doth bstride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.*

The machinations between Brutus and Cassius form the nucleus of the faction of the conspirators. Although the idea of forming this dissenting cluster of political mavericks is hatched by the politically shrewd and pragmatic Cassius, Brutus could well have initiated the notion. As a nobleman who puts the interests of Rome before anything else, Brutus finds Caesar's ambitious and politically debilitating regime disconcerting. With time, the camp of the conspirators grows in number to form a credible and formidable power bloc. The camp is composed of intellectuals, political tacticians and other esteemed patricians.

On the surface, the other political faction seems to be a one-man show. Before the action of the play moves to the Capitol, the faction looks supremely strong and almost impregnable. This is because of the personality of Caesar which gives the fallacious impression of being unassailable, invincible, infallible, immortal and supernatural. Indeed Caesar describes himself as larger than life and as a kind of demi god:

*I could be well moved, if I were as you;
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me.
But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.
The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks,
They are all fire, and every one doth shine;
But there's but one in all doth hold his place.
So in the world; 'tis furnished well with men,
And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshaked of motion; and that I am he,
Let me a little show it, even in this,
That I was constant Cimber should be banished,
And constant do remain to keep him so.*

It is ironic that, at this stage in the development of the play, the people who appear to be on Caesar's side do not compare favourably with those in the camp of the conspirators. In terms of intelligence, political experience and respectability, Caesar's followers are depicted as marginal, invisible and mere fellow travellers. Mark Antony, for instance, is delineated as an obsequious, subservient character in pursuit of nugatory (in the context of the play) engagements such as sport, music and a keen zeal for good living. Yet, this portrayal of Caesar's followers is altogether deceptive. The funeral scene rips off the veneer in Roman politics and exposes the crudity underneath. Not only does the scene mark the watershed of the concept of nominal elections, it also creates a second wave in the structural and thematic development of the play, without which the play would come to an abrupt ending.

Pyrrhic Victory and the Demise of Roman Republicanism at the Capitol

As the Roman nation converges at the Capitol, there are both covert and overt political preparations, mobilizations, manoeuvres and general activity reminiscent of what happens at a present day rally. There is open campaigning and political back biting as the conspirators aspire to gain the upper hand. Characters like Artemidorus and some senators attempt to forestall the conspiracy against Caesar but their moves are shrewdly foiled. So Caesar is finally assassinated and individual politicians and the mob temporarily become

freer and more uninhibited to express their political inclinations. Evidently, by assassinating Caesar, Brutus and the other conspirators are victorious at the Capitol but the victory is ephemeral, and subsequently turns out to be pyrrhic.

The campaigning and nominal electioneering mentioned earlier find their most explicit expression in the speeches delivered by Brutus and Antony at Caesar's funeral. Both speeches are addressed at the mob and are partisan and tendentious in style and content. It is clear from the manner the speeches are delivered that the speakers consciously set out to solicit political support. Brutus' oration, for instance, is in prose and is calculated to appeal to the mob's reason and sense of altruism:

If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say, that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then, that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honour him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him. There is tears for his love: joy for this fortune: honour for his valour: and death for his ambition. Who is here so base that would be a bondman? If any, speak, for him have I offended. Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If any, speak, for him have I offended. Who is here so vile that will not love his country? If any, speak, for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

Brutus' adept use of rhetorical questions and well-worded contextual opposites achieve their intended purpose. The mob quickly shows its support for Brutus and the morality behind the assassination of Caesar is overlooked. As Brutus leaves the podium, he is completely convinced that the mob is on his side.

No sooner has Brutus and the other conspirators disappeared than the plebeians begun to parade their fickleness. Antony comes to deliver his funeral oration well prepared. Like a teacher in a classroom, he employs Caesar's body, cloak and the will left for the plebeians as demonstrative apparatus. Unlike Brutus' speech, Antony's oration is couched in verse, a device intended to evoke emotion. The oration also makes extensive use of emotive rhetoric, logic, irony, sarcasm and populism. The opening lines of the oration bear testimony to Antony's masterful handling of a political crowd:

*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
The evil that men do lives after them;
The good is oft interred with their bones,
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious.
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
and grievously hath Caesar answered it.
Here, under leave of Brutus, and the rest, -
For Brutus is an honourable man,
So are they all; all honourable men, -
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
He was my friend, faithful, and just to me;
But Brutus is an honourable man.
He hath brought many captives home to Rome,
Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept.
Ambition should be made of sterner stuff,
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
and Brutus is an honourable man
You all did see that, on the Lupercal,
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?*

On seeing Caesar's perforated body and on hearing about the will which Caesar has left for them, the mob forgets about Brutus' patriotic speech and aligns itself with Antony. The plebeians' support for Antony manifests itself in the form of blind violence against the conspirators. The conspirators themselves are indiscriminately murdered and Rome is plunged into a civil war.

The impact of the funeral orations at the Capitol demonstrates the power of choice (whether enlightened or ignorant) in political campaigning. The plebeians are neither coerced nor blackmailed to support either Brutus or Antony. The orations given are, as it were, political manifestos to which the mob responds. Brutus and Antony represent different political ideologies between which the mob has to make a choice and, like in a latter-day electoral process, the plebeians are free agents in the choice they make. Ultimately, the mob chooses Antony, quite oblivious to what the future holds for them.

A close reading of what happens after the debacle at the Capitol shows that the choice of Antony as the new leader of Rome is not the wisest thing to have done. The future is fraught with instability, insecurity and uncertainty. While Antony pretends to be deeply moved by Caesar's death, politically he is all out to feather his own nest. After the defeat of the conspirators, Antony makes himself leader of the triumvirate that now rules Rome. The other triumvirs being Octavius and Lepidus. Antony's political ambition is further underscored by the way he marginalises Lepidus in the triumvirate. Real power resides with Antony and Octavius.

Unlike Brutus who has the interests of Rome at heart, Antony is manipulative, opportunistic, selfish, exploitative and brutal. After the defeat of the republicans, Rome continues to be governed as a monarchial dictatorship, but Antony proves to be more brutal than Caesar. At the close of the civil war, a death list is drawn and all the senators who had subscribed to the politics of the conspirators are liquidated. The mob, which Antony manipulates for his own political aggrandizement, is denied the benefits of the will Caesar has left for them. The money is misappropriated and one wonders whether the plebeians ever enjoy the amenities bequeathed to them.

In the final analysis, the victory enjoyed by the conspirators at the Capitol turns out to be transitory and pyrrhic. Caesar dies but his influence and glory continue to be felt throughout the play. Different characters invoke his magical name in different kinds of crises. The conspirators themselves ultimately die one by one. Brutus and Cassius commit suicide and with the death of Brutus, the hope of creating a republican political system is doomed to failure. Rome is ruled by a man far more ambitious, greedy autocratic and brutal than Caesar.

Conclusion

As a history play, *Julius Caesar* has lessons to teach. The play was first published as far back as 1623, yet, among other concerns, *Julius Caesar* deals with aspects which are directly germane to contemporary politics. The play is pertinent to our grasp and appreciation of multi-party politics and elections. The ideologies of monarchism and republicanism explored in the play have a bearing on contemporary systems of government like democracy. Democracy itself has become a buzz word throughout the world. The late 1980's and 1990s in general have witnessed the soaring significance and popularity of democratic elections. The collapse of the Eastern bloc, for example, was immediately followed by the advent of governments believed to have been democratically elected. In Africa, many countries that had previously been governed as colonial dictatorships, *de facto* one party states and executive monarchies saw, in their political systems, the emergence of a plethora of political parties, purportedly at liberty to participate in democratic elections. Such countries were Mali, Kenya, the

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Lesotho, the Central African Republic, Zambia, Ethiopia, South Africa and Uganda. South Africa, of course, forms the pinnacle of this political process while Uganda offers a unique index of a country run devoid of party lines.

The achievement of authentic democracy, however, can prove to be elusive. One person's democracy can be another person's totalitarianism. Judging by what occurs at the Roman Capitol, democratic elections, if they are not properly prepared for and well administered may yield bogus and disturbing results that can easily plunge a whole nation into political anarchy and instability. Of course, unlike the enlightened electorate of our own time, the plebeians in *Julius Caesar* are not that politically conscientized and their characteristic fickleness could perhaps be ascribed to their ignorance to know what they want. It is partially this apparent electoral ignorance and the absence of formal political infrastructure in the Roman electoral process which, I believe, make the elections in *Julius Caesar* nominal.

Julius Caesar's most poignant didacticism hinges upon issues of power politics. These issues range from muzzlement of political opposition, through political usurpation, to political instability. The concerns, however, should be viewed within the framework of nominal elections, especially with reference to the political debacle at the Capitol. Needless to say that, the issues themselves are so commonly related to contemporary politics that they need no special commentary here. The concerns speak for themselves.

Withal, *Julius Caesar* is an instructive, educative and edifying play of perennial significance. It may have been published far away from us, in England, as far back as 1623, but the concerns it raises are a living experience and are immediately topical to our own political landscape in present day Africa and indeed in other parts of the world.

Select Bibliography

Holme, H. M. (ed.). Julius Caesar. (Hong Kong: Longman, 1985).

McWhirter, Alasdair (ed.). Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Essential Knowledge. (Cape Town: Reader's Digest Association, 1996).

Peck, John at al. How to Study A Shakespeare Play. (London: Macmillan, 1985).

Rackin, Phylis. Shakespeare's Tragedies. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1985).

Taylor, H.S. Notes on Literature. (London: The British Council, 1967).



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons
Attribution – NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 License.

To view a copy of the license please see:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

This is a download from the BLDS Digital Library on OpenDocs
<http://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/>