

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

Politicians, religious leaders, and social commentators have all spoken about a breakdown in morality in South Africa, with crime as the most commonly cited evidence. The moral regeneration initiative is one response to this crisis, emerging in parallel to countless other initiatives aimed at reducing crime, some of which have themselves contained explicit appeals to morals, values or ethics. In its strategy to tackle crime, the 1996 National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) consisted of four ‘pillars’ – each one ‘a particular arena of attack against the factors which create or facilitate criminal activity’. One of these ‘pillars’ focused on public values and education, with the intention of tackling “the prevailing moral climate within communities, the attitudes towards crime, and the tolerance towards crime”.

The origins of the moral regeneration initiative date back to a meeting between then-President Nelson Mandela and key South African religious leaders in June 1997. At that meeting, Mandela described the ‘spiritual malaise’ underpinning the crime problem as “a lack of good spirit, as pessimism, or lack of hope and faith. And from it emerge the problems of greed and cruelty, of laziness and egotism, of personal and family failure. It both helps fuel the problems of crime and corruption and hinders our efforts to deal with them”. Mandela then called on the religious leaders to get actively involved in a campaign, subsequently to become the moral regeneration initiative.

One of the key sources of the moral regeneration initiative within the ANC was its Commission for Religious Affairs; the other was the concept of the African Renaissance, which was strongly promoted by, and associated with, Mandela’s successor, Thabo Mbeki. Subsequent to the 1999 election, with Mbeki as president and Jacob Zuma as deputy president, the moral regeneration initiative began to enjoy more formal attention from the Presidency. Zuma was allocated responsibility for this initiative, with his role being that of political patron and ‘front man’.

After a two-year lull in the moral regeneration initiative, the Mbeki government attempted to add impetus by convening two workshops with a broad range of

political and religious leaders in 2000. The workshop reports contain no references to the NCPS or other initiatives then underway, which may have been relevant to moral regeneration; and the approach taken was that moral regeneration should be a political ‘campaign’. This approach was similar to many other initiatives of its time, taking the methodology of the anti-apartheid organisations into a government-led initiative, with an emphasis on structures and process rather than on the content of the messages. What was envisaged was a mass mobilisation, harking back to the glory days of the liberation struggle, to a time when a large majority of people and organisations could be united against a common enemy – in this case, moral malaise and criminality.

In late 2001, a moral panic in the media about levels of child rape and sexual violence in South Africa revived interest in issues of moral regeneration, and it was decided to launch a Moral Regeneration ‘*Movement*’ in early 2002. This was done through the establishment of a Section 21 (not-for-profit) company—an NGO—which was funded by government.

The high-profile launch of the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) took place in April 2002, with over a thousand people from government, parliament, provincial legislatures, political parties, religious organisations, traditional structures, and NGOs present. The speakers at the launch did not provide any guidance on exactly *how* ‘the people’ could get actively involved in moral regeneration, and this lack of clarity continued to be a key problem with the campaign. Approximately a year was spent on setting up the organisation and generating a vision of its role. The newly-formed MRM attempted to make clear its core messages, focusing on the South African Constitution as the source of moral values – a shift away from earlier discourses of spirituality or religion, with far less reference to crime.

An issue which began to dog the moral regeneration initiative was the increasing public discussion (both in media and in parliament) concerning allegations of corruption levelled at Deputy President Zuma, associated with the prosecution of Shabir Shaik, his financial advisor. The corruption allegations were often raised as a contrast or challenge to Zuma’s patronage of the moral regeneration campaign. As the trial of Shaik is currently underway, it remains to be seen whether any allegations will be sustained, and whether perceptions of corruption will adhere to Deputy President Zuma or, by association, to the MRM.

By mid-2004 the MRM was engaged in a re-visioning exercise for the campaign, acknowledging that not enough had been achieved in its first years. A great deal of energy had gone into grassroots mobilisation and facilitation work—many awareness-raising workshops were held all over the country—but the grassroots advocacy work was hard to quantify and its impact hard to demonstrate. Little had been achieved in the critical arena of public communication. Problems related to leadership and co-ordination resulted in the governing structures of the MRM being revisited, and an ‘expert-based board’ was created in place of the previous structures which had attempted to represent a range of interested ‘sectors’. A large annual conference was planned for the participants and affiliates of the MRM.

The new board of the MRM, in its presentation at the 2004 First Annual Conference, recommended that the MRM office become more focused on *advocacy* work, and identified five focus areas for the organisation’s future activities:

- Building the MRM;
- Leading public discourse on moral regeneration issues;
- Developing a national consensus on positive values that should be embraced;
- Promoting ethical behaviour congruent with these positive values; and
- Disseminating information on moral issues.

This appears to be a new approach to the vexed question of civil society participation in the moral regeneration campaign. It is underpinned by an implicit acknowledgement that there is a need to *advocate* around the moral regeneration issues, rather than assuming (as had been the case in earlier incarnations of the campaign) that there was organic public support for these issues.

A key challenge is that of sustainability – whether this campaign can be sustained as a ‘civil society initiative’ in the absence of a popular, organic support base, and, related, financial sustainability. The government grant to fund the establishment of the MRM was for an initial period of three years, to the end of March 2005; and it is not, at this stage, clear whether further funds will be forthcoming. If there were a significant ‘movement’ or ‘campaign’ evident, perhaps government funding would be easier to obtain.

The nature of the MRM’s activities will also be a key determinant of its future sustainability. Simply acting as co-ordinator of efforts taking place elsewhere has been seen to be unsuccessful, not least because an external co-ordinating

agency cannot *instruct* other organisations to act. The movement also faces the problem of defining and identifying activities as morally regenerative - it will be extremely difficult to empirically demonstrate that its activities actually enhance morality.

The government sector within the moral regeneration initiative appears to be regaining some momentum, and it will be interesting to see how this is sustained in parallel to the MRM itself becoming a more focused advocacy and communication organisation. Already the relationship between the MRM office and the national government departments has been a little difficult; this relationship will surely be one of the most interesting dynamics of the campaign in the next period.

Although no longer very religious in phrasing, the moral regeneration initiative is still associated with a religious initiative; and perhaps for that reason still viewed with some discomfort by those who are uncomfortable with the language and practice of organised religion. Conversely, however, the moral regeneration initiative may also have been borne out of a recognition that there is indeed an area of individual and social life beyond the material, which impacts on quality of life and the achievement of the government’s election promise to deliver ‘a better life for all’.

The moral regeneration campaign failed to ally itself with the 1996 NCPS (although this may have been wise, given that the NCPS subsequently fell into disfavour), but has engaged occasionally with other government anti-crime campaigns, notably against gender violence and child abuse. However, the MRM has also failed to engage significantly with the range of other NGOs doing crime prevention work that could be relevant to its efforts, resulting in significant lost opportunities.

The development of the moral regeneration initiative in South Africa has seen the concept defined in terms of both crime prevention and nation-building. In some incarnations, moral regeneration has had a distinctly spiritual and religious tone; in others, a strong flavour of African nationalist ideology. Remarkably, and probably only because of the tolerance for diversity that is South African, it has survived its own confusion and embraced a range of differing interest groups – conservative religious groups, some elements of the business community, political parties, government and intellectuals. What remains to be seen is whether a largely ideological campaign of this type will deliver any meaningful results in terms of strengthening social fabric and reducing crime.