

178. Mushroom Leadership

There are many different styles of Leadership. In 1978, I read a parable in a Hong Kong newspaper that caught my attention and I have used it many times since in talking about leadership. At that time the Soviet Union had been led by only four General Secretaries, or Presidents, who held the positions for a significant time: Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The story went like this.

The Soviet Union could be compared to a train rolling across Siberia. In the days of Lenin, the train (the country) was running out of steam (resources). So Lenin got up and gave an inspirational address urging all to work harder and be more productive – and the train started rolling again. In the days of Stalin, once again the train was grinding to halt. So Stalin ordered that half the passengers be shot to lighten the load – and *'tell the other half that they will be shot if they don't push hard'*. Once again, the train started rolling.

In the days of Khrushchev, resources were again in short supply and the train again came to a halt as there was no track in front of it. The solution of Khrushchev was to order his soldiers to tear up the tracks behind them and re-lay them in front - which they did - and once again the train started rolling. In the days of Brezhnev, once again the train ground to a halt. So what did Brezhnev order? *'Close the windows, put up the shutters and shake like hell and make-believe the train is rolling'*.

That is where the story ended. My addendum was that along came Gorbachev who told the people to open the windows, look at the reality and recognise what must be done to become prosperous. Leaders sometimes find 'pretend solutions' to hide the reality. A shorter version of the Brezhnev style is sometimes stated this way: *'Treat the people like mushrooms: that is, feed them manure and keep them in the dark.'*

Here in South Sudan we are increasingly being kept in the dark. The number of Newspapers has been greatly reduced. Access to news websites such as Radio Tamazuj and Sudan Tribune is now being blocked. Further, I read somewhere that at least 20 foreign journalists have been refused visas to enter South Sudan. So reports of fighting are fewer and, inevitably, when there are reports, each side will claim they are peace-loving but were only defending themselves when they came under attack by the opposing side. This is not the way forward. Budgets are passed without any certainty that funds will be available. This is not facing reality. Many people with Government jobs are left unpaid and for almost every service, there is an official fee for which a receipt is issued plus a *'personal service charge'* and no receipt.

One priest friend got himself into a situation of some threat recently arguing with a boda boda (motor bike taxi) rider. He thought the man told him the ride would cost SSP200 but after their short trip the rider demanded SSP400. The dispute went for a heated hour. National Security were called in, but this priest thinks he was saved because he is 'abuna' (local Arabic for 'priest'). I said to him, *'All that for barely more than USD 1'* (currently USD 1 = SSP 173). His response, *'It was the principle of the matter'* I am sorry to say it is more sensible to be pragmatic here rather than principled. It is simply not worth causing upset over small sums even if it is technically corruption and graft. One has to live with the reality that this is the only way some of the people get any income. There is also the danger that some might resort to a Stalinist model of authority!

So the country appears a little more stable at present; but I don't really know. I have been recently in Juba, Wau, Yambio and Riimenze and all seemed quiet enough - but many IDPs remain in protection sites and are too fearful to return to their homes. Unlike mushrooms, they have feelings and experience terrible insecurity. We pray for fresh air and light in South Sudan. – Br Bill