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Celebrating the First Decade of Democracy in South Africa (1994-2004): An Inter-religious Perspective

ABSTRACT

In this article, apartheid is singled out as a scourge that has afflicted South Africans for four-and-half decades. Against this backdrop, the struggles of the people of South Africa, particularly of the churches and the religious communities as a whole, are portrayed and analysed. With the attainment of freedom and democracy in 1994, the ANC led government enacted pieces of legislation, the aim of which was to deepen and broaden democracy, thereby transforming the society beyond recognition of how it was before 1994. Celebrating the first ten years of freedom and democracy, the people of South Africa were taking stock of what has been achieved and not achieved and bracing themselves for the challenges that are facing them into the second decade of democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Racial injustices against blacks in South Africa by the colonisers dates back to 1652. This phenomenon of oppression, dispossession and exploitation was firmly entrenched in 1948 when the apartheid government took office. But since the un-banning of political organisations that resisted apartheid and fought for the national political liberation in 1990 and with the release of political leaders such as Nelson Mandela and particularly with the attainment of democracy in 1994, serious attempts have been made to address these historically racial injustices.

In 2004, South Africa's democracy finished its tenth year and celebrations were held throughout the country and abroad. The ANC led government gave a report on what it has done in the exercise of power that the majority of South Africa's people have entrusted to it, details of which will be provided later. Our third general elections were conducted on 14 April 2004 and the African National Congress won the elections attaining almost 70% of the votes. The ANC even won victory in the two provinces that have eluded them in the past ten years namely, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. Thabo Mbeki was sworn in for a second term on the 27 April 2004 as president of the Republic of South Africa.

2. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST APARTHEID

2.1 The Churches

Theology and the spirituality of the struggle was developed in South Africa by the churches, especially by those who were members of the South African Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church as well as other faiths such as Judaism and Islam. Individuals also in their private capacities and other organisations worked fearlessly for justice. For brevity, I will restrict my study to the activities of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) formally known as the Christian

Council of South Africa before 1960 (cf. de Gruchy 1979, Villa-Vicencio & de Gruchy 1985, Villa-Vicencio 1986 & 1988)

The Cottesloe Conference which was prompted by the aftermath of Sharpeville set the scene for a showdown with the apartheid government. Apartheid was for the first time confronted as a race issue. The Afrikaans speaking churches such as the Nederduits Hervormde Kerk and Dutch Reformed Church withdrew from the ecumenical body in protest. Following the Cottesloe Statement, a prophetic message was issued in 1968 by the SACC entitled, “A message to the people of South Africa”. This message offered a more theological and bold rejection of apartheid and racism. In a summary form (see Villa-Vicencio 1986:214), the message was that apartheid was condemned as a false gospel that worked against the teachings of Christ on love and against the Holy Spirit’s work of reconciliation.

As the struggle intensified, so did the brutality of the police state against the agents of change with the introduction of successive states of emergency between 1984 and 1990. In September 1985, a group of concerned theologians in South Africa, known as the Kairos theologians, meditated on the escalating confrontation between the government and the oppressed. According to them, the moment of truth had arrived: If blacks wanted liberation, it would not be given to them, they had to seize it and wrestle it from the whites. Hard on the heels of the Kairos Document was the publication of the Road to Damascus Document in 1989. The Road to Damascus Road Document insisted that repentance should be linked to restitution, otherwise genuine reconciliation would not be possible.

The 1974 SACC annual conference held in Hammanskraal deliberated on the question of conscientious objection to military conscription, among other issues such as economic sanctions against the country, which then was compulsory for all white males. South African Christians were called upon to refuse to serve in the army and churches were also urged to review the basis on which they appointed chaplains to the army. The government reacted to the call by introducing a Defence Further Amendment Bill, section 121(c) of 1977 Act to curb the activities of the advocates of conscientious objection.

Some theologians, especially the Kairos ones, called for the overthrow of the white regime since, according to them, it had lost its moral and theological legitimacy to govern, if it ever had that legitimacy. The Church in fact prayed for the downfall of the government and collaborated with some of the forces which were bent on removing it from power; no wonder that some embraced the aims and ideals of the Programme to Combat Racism, a WCC generated document which supported financially the activities of the liberation movements of Southern Africa (Mbali 1987).

2.2 The Inter-Religious Movement

Since ethnic groups in South Africa were separated through the Group Areas Act under apartheid, it had not been easy to organise inter-religious encounters. Asians who were and are predominantly Muslim and Hindu lived in their designated areas and so were blacks, who were and still are overwhelmingly Christian. Interestingly, black and white Christians were discouraged from worshipping together.

In spite of those political obstacles, some religious persons representing some of the major religions came together to form the South African Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP-SA) in 1984 according to Lubbe(1994). For the first time in the inter-religious encounter in South Africa, about thirty Hindus, Muslims, and Christians met from 27-29 May, 1988 to explore possibilities of cooperation in the struggle against apartheid and the theme was, *Believers in the struggle for justice and peace*. It was discovered that they shared a common revulsion against apartheid from their faith perspectives and they agreed on common strategies to fight for national liberation (Kritzinger 1988).

Another important milestone in the life of the WCRP-SA was the national conference held in December 1990 (Kritzinger 1990). More than two hundred representatives of all the major religious communities in South Africa attended. Among the most important decisions taken at the conference was the mandate given to the WCRP-SA to initiate a process to evolve a charter of religious rights and responsibilities, issue a challenge to religious communities to be self-critical on their teachings and praxis concerning women, and to interrogate the government's policy of religious education in public schools. Not only Christianity should be taught in public schools, but other religions as well should be taught and the teaching should be done in the spirit of active appreciation of all the religious traditions and belief systems in South Africa. In 1992 the Charter on Religious Rights and Responsibilities was adopted. The proposed clause on religious freedom reads in part:

1. *All persons are entitled:*
 - 1.1 *to freedom of conscience,*
 - 1.2 *to profess, practise, and propagate any religion or no religion,*
 - 1.3 *to change their religious allegiance*
2. *Every religious community and/or member thereof shall enjoy the right:*
 - 2.1 *to establish, maintain, and to manage religious institutions;*
 - 2.2 *to have their particular system of family law recognised by the state;*
 - 2.3 *to criticise and challenge all social and political structures and policies in terms of the teachings of their religion.*

3. ATTAINMENT OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

When it became clear to the apartheid government that survival of whites depended on the freedom of blacks, President F W de Klerk announced in Parliament on 2 February 1990 that outlawed political organisations such as the African National Congress, the Pan Africanist Congress and the South African Communist Party would be unbanned. Of great national and international consequence was that Nelson Mandela would unconditionally be a free person on 11 February 1990.

Once prisoners had been released and exiles had returned home, serious talks started between the government and the liberation movements leading to multiparty talks known as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). With negotiations being conducted at a frustratingly slow pace and at times breaking down and being restarted, an agreement was reached in principle to install a five -year Government of National Unity (GNU) in which all parties polling five percent and over in the envisaged general elections would proportionally be represented in government and cabinet. The establishment of the Transitional Executive Council would ensure and supervise arrangement for the first democratically conducted elections in the country, which took place in April 1994. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first democratically elected head of State in May 1994.

Two most important tasks of Mandela's government was to write a new Constitution and enact laws that would redress the historical imbalances of the past.

The inauguration of the Government of National Unity on 10 May 1994 was done in accordance with the provisions of the interim Constitution of which the chief aim was to deracialise South Africa (Basson 1994).

(a) The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993 (Act 209 of 1993)

With the constitutional agreements reached among the political parties and other stakeholders the abovementioned Constitution would be written as an interim measure that would hold together a government of national unity after the first democratic elections of April 1994.

(b) The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996)

This is definitely a refined version of the abovementioned interim Constitution. In section 2 on the supremacy of the Constitution it is stated: This Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic; law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and the obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled.

(c) Land Restitution and Reform Laws Amendment, 1997 (Act 63 of 1997)

The government took seriously the issue of black land dispossession by colonisers. To this end, the Act was enacted: To provide for restitution of rights in the land to persons or communities dispossessed of such right after 19 June 1913 as a result of past racially discriminatory laws of practices.

(d) Labour Relations Act 1995 1(Act 66 of 1995)

Although slavery was abolished in South Africa in the early 1830s, blacks have been working under harsh conditions and earning slave wages. The promulgation of the Act was to correct and change the status quo. Farm workers, domestic servants and public sector workers, as well as several other subcategories of employees, are protected under the Act. However, excluded by the Act are members of National Defence Force, National Intelligence Agency, and South African Secret Services as well as certain categories that provide essential services.

Strengthening the arm of this Act was the enactment of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 1997 (Act 75 of 1997) which "...give effect to the right to fair labour practices referred to in section 23(1) of the Constitution by establishing and making provision for the regulation of basic conditions of employment...". Of utmost importance is the outlawing of employment of children and forced labour.

(e) Employment Equity Act 1998 (55 of 1998)

Central to the legislation is the issue of affirmative action outlined in chapter 3 of which its measures are as follows:

Affirmative action measures are measures designed to ensure that suitably qualified people from designated groups have equal employment opportunities and are equitably represented in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce of designated employer.

(f) Broad- Based Black Economic Empowerment Act 2003 (53 of 2003)

Among other functions of this Act is "To establish a legislative framework for promotion of black economic empowerment; to empower the Minister to issue codes of good practice and to publish transformation charters...;

(g) Unemployment Insurance Amendment Act 2003 (32 of 2003)

Domestic and farm workers were not adequately covered by the Labour Relations Act in terms of basic wages and other benefits. This Act addresses these issues. Otherwise before the promulgation of the above mentioned Act together with the Skills Development Amendment Act ,2003 (no 31 of 2003), which encourages learner-ships, employers of such categories of workers could hire and fire and pay their workers whatever they wished. But now these workers should get benefits such as unemployment insurance including pensions.

(h) Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, 1995 (Act 34 of 1995)

One of the most important pieces of legislation passed in parliament in building a new society was the enactment of the above mentioned Act, popularly known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission whose aim was to promote healing and reconciliation between perpetrators and

victims of political violence committed between 1 March 1960 and 8 October 1990. Successes and failures of this exercise are contained in the Commission's interim report of 1998 and the final report of 2003. But the overall objectives have been realised. People such as Gideon Nieuwoudt, for example who were refused amnesty are being prosecuted for their apartheid era crimes and atrocities.

4. ELECTION PROMISES

When Nelson Mandela appealed to South Africa to vote for the ANC during the 1994 general elections, he promised them a South Africa in which people will live in peace and with equal opportunities in a document entitled "A Better life for All". A policy document was produced known as "Reconstruction and Development Programme" (RDP 1994) in which means and ways are outlined by which the ANC was together with its alliance partners would realise its vision. To demonstrate that the ANC was serious about poverty alleviation, empowerment and indeed transformation of the society, when it formed government, a cabinet minister without portfolio later was appointed to facilitate and minister the programme.

The pieces of legislation including the country's Constitution discussed above indicate that the State through the ANC dominated government of national unity was seriously concerned about inequalities and injustices of the past. Labour that comprises the majority of blacks has relatively been empowered whilst at the same time the fears of big business have been sufficiently allayed. The ANC promised to create 500 000 jobs and build a million houses during its term in office, but unfortunately the promises especially on poverty alleviation were not accurately costed. The poverty crises has deepened over the years. To illustrate the seriousness of the situation, Gumede (2005:78) say the following, "In 1994, South Africa's national debt stood at R190 billion. By March 1999, it had ballooned to R376 billion".

The ANC's goals in their second term in power have not been reached mainly because it has reneged on two crucial fundamental policies namely, nationalisation and market protectionism

(a) Nationalisation

It has been the policy of the ANC and its alliance partners to nationalise State assets and property and thereby regulate the distribution of wealth among the people. The Freedom Charter says (Nolan 1988:222),

The national wealth of our country, the heritage of all South Africans, shall be restored to the people; the mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people...

Nelson Mandela reiterated this policy in his first speech after his release from prison on the 11 February 1990 at the Bishops' court, Cape Town. In his preface to the RDP document (1994) Mandela says, "In preparing the document, and taking it forward, we are building on tradition of the Freedom Charter".

During his 1996 travels abroad especially in Europe and the USA, Mandela announced a policy change that dismayed and shocked the ANC alliance partners notably the Congress of the South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the SACP namely that the ANC led government would abandon nationalisation and embrace privatisation. Key State assets such as railways, airways and telecommunications and parastatals such as Eskom, Iscor, Sasol and Telkom would be privatised. Once privatised, these corporations adopted policies such rationalisation, right sizing and downsizing which actually are euphemisms for retrenchment. No wonder that 1994 to 1998 saw job losses of up to 500 000. This year, five million out of an estimated forty million South Africans are unemployed and lot more are under-employed.

(b) Market protectionism

Directly linked to privatisation is the concept of globalisation. The ANC promised South Africans protection against unfair trading and commercial competition from outside. The Freedom Charter Nolan (1988:22) says, "All people shall have equal rights to trade rights to trade where they choose, to manufacture and to enter all trades, crafts and profession."

But how will this dream be realised if South Africa in its democratic infancy is already opened to world markets? George Soros caused economic sorrows in 1992 when bashed the bank of England and caused the Chancellor of the Exchequer to lose his job (Blow 1998:2). We witnessed towards the end of 1997 the fall of so called Asian tigers such as Malaysia and Thailand, the Asian economic giants regarded as success stories by the IMF and the West. South Africa seems to have bought into this "success story" myth. Virtually anybody from anywhere can buy property in South Africa. As airways such as Fly Star and Sun Air went in liquidation, outside companies have moved in to buy them. An instrument being used to apply both privatisation and globalisation was the macro-economic strategy known as "Growth, Employment and Redistribution" (GEAR) adopted by the government in June 1996. Bullard (1998:19) writes, "SA went to market and cried all the way home", and Vally (1999:15) also is unambiguous, when he says, "We live in the shadow of Gear which, far from transforming society, it widens the rich-poor gap."

In his address to the nation when opening Parliament on February 6 2004 Mr Mbeki did admit that poverty had deepened and millions were unemployed, but promised that conditions would improve. Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel when delivering his 2004/5 budget speech on the 18th February, also indicated the successes and failures of the past ten years and challenges that faced government in the future. He indicated for example, that the government has been able to reduce the 1992/3 deficit of 9% to 3.1% and that the apartheid debt has been reduced quite considerably. According to critics from the civil society and non-governmental organisations including the churches however, social deficit has increased to unacceptable level and they challenged the government, in the next ten years, to concentrate on social and welfare provision.

5. SIGNS OF HOPE

In spite of the problems indicated above, there are still many reasons to celebrate our ten years of democracy, especially if the government is prepared to learn from the constructive criticisms and critique given so far.

- (i) South Africa is a democracy at last and we must protect and nurture it by respecting the Constitution.
- (ii) South Africa belongs to all who live in it. Land Restitution and Reform Laws Act has succeeded in restoring land to some of its original owners who lost it from 1913, or given compensation to victims of uprooting. (But the government should stretch this 1913 limitation back to 1652)
- (iii) Labour Relations Act and other Acts have strengthened the workers' power base, and increased their ownership of labour; the exploitation of farm workers and domestic workers is no longer tolerated.
- (iv) Employment Equity Act has addressed the question of groups who have been historically marginalised in the workplace such as blacks and women by legislating for affirmative action measures. Giant black and women empowerment corporations and projects have been established.
- (v) South Africa must pressure the international community to write off the apartheid debt. It is not only a theological imperative to do so but also a moral imperative. Apartheid debt is blood money.

6. SOUTH AFRICA'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE SINCE 1994

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996) is regarded as one of the best in the world and the chapter on the bill of rights reflects almost all that the WCRP-SA has proposed in its religious charter. Although no major inter-religious conferences have been held in South Africa in the last ten years, with the exception of the World Parliament of Religions conference held in Cape Town in 1999, the ethos of the inter-religious movement has been expressed and concretised in activities such as the Religious Leaders for Electoral Justice which monitored and observed South Africa's first democratically conducted elections in 1994, and the National Forum for Religious Leaders which meets with the state president about twice a year. This Forum has been responsible for organising inter-religious prayers at national functions such as those of the inauguration of presidents Mandela and Mbeki respectively. I am rather sceptical about these post-apartheid inter-religious endeavours including the South African Council of Churches because they seem to have lost their prophetic thrust. They may for example talk with the government about poverty, crime and moral degeneration, but hardly about the causes of such ills. Is the government's macro-economic policy perhaps to blame for lack of jobs and shedding of those that were in existence before? Why is the religious community not confronting the government about its microeconomics policy? They are more of government praise singers than are its critics. The fact that these efforts have been initiated by the religious desk of the African National Congress and led by people such as Rev Cedric Mayson, an ANC stalwart, does not make a good case for the inter-religious ethos since 1994.

However, as a result of the pressure from the religious leaders, two important public institutions have radically changed their policies namely, the public schools and the South African broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Before the introduction of democracy in South Africa, this national broadcaster aired predominantly Christian programmes. Through the SABC's policy document adopted in September 2003, almost all religions have equal airtime on a proportional basis. In that way, South Africans have begun to engender a culture of religious and cultural tolerance, and most importantly, a culture of appreciation of one another's value and religious systems. Religious devotions in public schools were Christian but through a policy document on Religion and education adopted in September 2003, the situation has changed. Devotions have either been stopped or they have been replaced by inter-religious ones and the teaching of religion is no longer geared at converting others to one's religion.

There is one important recent development in the inter-religious sphere that needs to be mentioned (Challenge Oct 2005:8). About seventy religious people, consisting of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Bahai's were convened by the South African Council of Churches. Some of the topics discussed were biodiversity, nuclear energy, climate change, ethics and economics, genetically modified organism (GMOs), environmental education, and a theology for earth-keeping. At the end of the conference an institute was launched, called "The South African Faith Communities Environment Institute" (SAFCEI).

The "institute's" mission reads, "We are an institute of people of many faiths, united in our diversity through our common commitment to earth keeping. Our aim is to support the faith communities in fulfilling their environmental and socio-economic responsibility" (Challenge 2005:8).

The institute would cooperate with existing organisations that work in the area of the stewardship of creation.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Many of the people who were active during the struggle for liberation have either retired, or have occupied themselves with some projects nationally and internationally. Some of them, including prominent and eminent religious leaders are serving in government in various capacities. Although

they are contributing significantly to the reconstruction of the country and reconciliation of the country's people, the role of religion has nonetheless been seriously compromised. This is sad considering that the agenda for religion in South Africa is long and contains serious issues that need to be tackled with government, Africa and the world as a whole. Few examples should suffice. Globalisation and its agents such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organisation is getting away with murder, literally speaking. The plight of the poor and the government's neo-liberal socio-economic policies pose challenges for the inter-religious ethos in South Africa. Patriarchy that characterises all religious praxis and culture needs to be interrogated if women were to be liberated and empowered. Health related matters such as HIV and Aids cannot be adequately and effectively addressed by religions separately. Child abuse and domestic violence in general have reached alarming proportions in all cultures and religious communities. Peace-building in Africa is a *sine qua non* for development and the continent's religions must work together beyond orthodoxy, and to cooperate with the African Union in the quest for a prosperous Africa. These are some of the pressing issues and concerns which the religious communities could tackle together for the realization of God's reign in South Africa and the continent as a whole.

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