

Address by Speaker Baleka Mbete (MP) on the occasion of the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC), 20 Year Anniversary: National Conference on Racism, Gallagher Estate, Midrand South Africa, 14 March 2016.

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Chairpersons and Commissioners of Institutions Supporting
Democracy

Members of Parliament

Members of Civil Society and the Media

Distinguished Guests

I am honoured to be part of this critical engagement on an issue that affects each one of us not only in South Africa, but indeed the rest of the world.

It is now 15 years since the last conference on racism and racial inequality was held in South Africa, which in its Declaration recognised that-

No country is free of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, and that all countries face challenges to eliminate discrimination.

As a nation, we are also commemorating the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution this year. At the adoption of the Constitution, President, Nelson Mandela, described the kind of society, South Africans were striving to build, and I quote:

“The Constitution was our own humble contribution to democracy and the culture of human rights worldwide; and it is our pledge to humanity that nothing will steer us from this cause. ...We have a commitment and a mandate from the overwhelming majority of our people in this country to transform South Africa from an apartheid state to a non-racial state, to address the question of joblessness and homelessness, to build all the facilities that have been enjoyed for centuries by a tiny minority. We want men and women who are committed to our mandate, but who can rise above their ethnic groups and think in terms of South Africa as a whole.”

On behalf of the South African Parliament, I also wish to pay tribute to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), who has for the last 20 years judiciously carried out its constitutional mandate and safeguarded the Bill of Rights, without fear, favour or prejudice.

The SAHRC notes in its rationale for this conference that:

“Over the past 20 years, race-related complaints received by the South African Human Rights Commission consistently represent the single largest proportion of alleged violations of the right to equality. In addition, the Commission’s field work, reveal that inequality and discrimination remain the most difficult issues posing serious threat to national building, social cohesion, racial healing and reconciliation in South Africa”.

Thus, this engagement and many others to follow on racism are crucial if we are to consider our responsibilities in the context of the Constitution.

In a global economy in which every nation needs to be at its best, reconciliation to racism or dysfunction will be disastrous for its success.

To invoke the words of Dr Martin Luther King: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”

Put simply this implies that whatever affects one of us directly, affects all of us indirectly. We therefore cannot afford to gloss over our differences as a multicultural society and the legacy of our history of segregation which is still evident in our society. Our homes, schools, churches and workplaces continue to bear testimony to this.

I hasten to add, that we do not want to fuel the flames of the past. But how can we ever move beyond it without talking about it? Therefore, the question of racism must invariably remain on the public agenda so that all of us can engage with it in public fora, in parliament, the workplace, the media, churches and mosques, universities and schools so that we guard this country against any form of divisions.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Our experience over the last 22 years informs us that Democracy is a process and in this regard, our country is a constant work of progress. What makes us exceptional, and unique, is that we have fought wars, passed progressive laws, transformed systems, organised unions, staged protests, and launched mighty movements to transform our country, to bring the promise of the Freedom Charter and the Constitution, to life.

However, if we are to drive this nation forward on an inclusive basis, then it is imperative that we talk about those challenges that present, and which if left unattended may taint the very achievements we are so proud of.

Unity and Social Cohesion

Our history and the experiences of other countries show that unity and social cohesion are necessary to meet social and economic objectives.

The preamble of the Constitution captures this balance best. It recognises the obligation of the state to reverse the effects of apartheid, in a context where all citizens feel part of the country and its developmental programme. However, maintaining this balance requires the confluence of several factors, all of which is not under government's control.

The 2008 economic crisis, and the unfolding economic crisis are undeniable factors that slows our own economic growth and inevitably sharpens tensions in a competition for resources.

Inequality

Inequality is prime among the challenges that confront us. The achievement of equality is a founding value of our Constitution, and the most prominent organising principle of our democracy. Yet, several socio-economic markers suggest that we are one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Perhaps one of the biggest obstacles to overcome as we grapple with the challenge of sustaining our constitutional

democracy is the sense that the circumstances of parents still serve as too great a determinant of the opportunities available to their children. And that in the main, these circumstances are a direct product of our history. So, in large measure, the landscape of opportunities still reflects the apartheid contours.

This is not to deny the fact that opportunities for the advancement of the historically disadvantaged such as blacks, women, people with disabilities which was not possible under apartheid, now exist. We must also recognise the statutory and institutional mechanisms created to advance the interests of "persons or categories of persons, disadvantaged by unfair discrimination."

All of which has resulted in the advancement of significant numbers of historically disadvantaged people. But for the majority, those opportunities still remain out of reach.

The trends over the past twenty two years are quite disturbing. In 1995, the poorest 40 percent of the population received about 6 percent of national income. Today, that figure has dipped below 6 percent notwithstanding a massive expansion of social grants.

The challenge of rising inequality however cannot simply be placed at the door of government alone. It is incumbent on all of us to support and implement as the National Development Plan (NDP) suggests a *“Social compact to strengthen the alignment between growth, development and nation-building”*. We must insist that our economic growth path de-racializes the economy and makes a fundamental break with ownership patterns of the past. This must also include the acceleration of the allocation of land.

Unless, we do so, reconciliation will remain shallow- and a dream deferred.

Ladies and gentlemen

Common Purpose

The second decade of our democracy, calls upon all of us to once again affirm the enduring national consensus of the constitution, and the bold measures of our National Development Plan (NDP), to accelerate inclusive development for our people.

Racism which is a complex issue, also requires a joint national effort between, government, political parties, national human rights institutions, civil society, the media and private sector to

reconcile our nation and improve its well-being. All of us must identify ways and means in which we can contribute towards a common purpose, social cohesion and nation-building.

Government must harness the experience of civil society to assist in developing and implementing laws, regulations, policies and actions directed at the prevention of discrimination.

We must insist on the private sector reflecting commitment to the observance of basic human rights and demonstrate a non-racist approach to employment issues.

The Media is a critical stakeholder in building an informed, educated and conscious society- and I hasten to add, in holding government to account. They must draw attention to all forms of discrimination, whilst putting these occurrences into the right context.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The Role of Parliament

As a nation we need to move the public discourse from the blame or grievance cycle in which it has become stuck, and which lately is playing itself out in our Parliament, to amity or reconciliation.

As the Speaker of the National Assembly, I wish to submit that our people must insist from us and from each other a modicum of civility, as the condition of serving you. It is within the chamber and committee rooms of parliament, where we as elected representatives of the people must show leadership and find each other.

This is something that all of us as South Africans have to insist from each other. We can't move forward if all we do is tear each other down.

Lastly, Ladies and gentlemen

South Africa is mandated in terms of the Durban Declaration of 2001, to produce a National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Not only must we ensure the implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), all of us especially Parliament has to ensure that the NAP is implemented at both public and private level.

If we accept that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny-

We must as well accept that I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be.

Let us not become complacent and reconcile ourselves to racism, sexism and economic exclusion, when we are so much more.

I am very hopeful that this Conference will produce a path that will further augment the firm foundations which has been laid by the courageous people of this country.

I thank you.

