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Continuing the miracle into South Africa's second decade

30/01/2005

Setting the National Agenda for the Next Decade

By FW de Klerk

Archbishop Tutu's Nelson Mandela Lecture in November last year continues to reverberate in the national political debate. Apart from the initial sharp rebuttal that it elicited from President Mbeki the lecture has now spurred the ANC to publish a multi-part 'Sociology of the Public Discourse in Democratic South Africa' in its online journal 'ANC Today'.

The ANC's analysis and its view of the road ahead makes for chilling reading. It believes that an unidentified white "elite", assisted by some prominent black South Africans, is determined to dictate the national agenda. As part of its strategy, this "elite" has decided to confer the "icon" status on prominent black South Africans, like Archbishop Tutu, because they are sensitive and sympathetic to "white fears". The "elite" will also do everything possible to silence the voices of its opponents and will attempt to win support by manipulating perceptions and obfuscating facts.

In its analysis, the ANC uses aggressive terminology that cannot be easily reconciled with President Mbeki's conciliatory message at the end of 2004. It sees a looming 'struggle' that will be 'as demanding and bruising' as the struggle for a democratic and non-racial South Africa – although 'it will not be fought with guns, bans, harassment by state organs' as had happened during the apartheid years. It believes that this "historic political and ideological confrontation" will determine "what our country will look like at the end of its Second Decade of Liberation."

According to ANC doctrine, this 'second decade of liberation' will focus primarily on the transformation of economic and social relationships. The main vehicle for this process is black economic empowerment which has as one of its goals the redressing of "the imbalances of the past by seeking to substantially and equitably transfer and confer the ownership, management and control of South Africa's financial and economic resources to the majority of its citizens." BEE's guiding objective is the concept of 'representivity' which, in essence, requires that all South Africa's communities should be represented at all levels of ownership, control, management and employment in the public and private sectors in accordance with the proportions that they represent in the population as a whole. The ANC believes that South Africa will not be a truly 'non-racial society' until the goal of representivity has been substantially achieved – and that until then, affirmative action will be needed to redress the imbalances created by apartheid.

I find it quite remarkable that the reaction to all this has been so sparse and muted. The transformation of South Africa's economic and social relations clearly has major implications for white South Africans – and for Coloured and Indian South Africans as well – since they are also often on the wrong side of the representivity equation. In particular, it is difficult to see how 'the ownership of South Africa's financial and economic resources' can be transferred to the majority 'equitably' and without violating the property guarantees in the constitution – and a number of other basic rights and freedoms as well. Also, because of the difficulties involved in achieving representivity, white South Africans face

the prospect that they and their children will be subjected to affirmative action virtually forever. This, no doubt, is what the ANC had in mind when it referred to 'white fears' in its analysis in 'ANC Today'.

The first decade of the new South Africa - encompassing our democratic transformation - worked surprisingly well - primarily because it was the result of lengthy, strenuous and inclusive negotiations. By contrast, the principles and approaches underlying the ANC's agenda for the second decade represent the programme of the ANC alone.

There is clearly a need for frank and fundamental discussions between the government and representatives of minority communities on the principles and approaches underlying social and economic transformation. Such discussions should not be seen as a 'struggle' from which one party would emerge as the victor and the others as the vanquished. The goal, on the contrary, should be a co-operative process that will enable all those involved to work together to achieve common national goals consistent with the ideals in our constitution.

Unfortunately, the ANC appears to be reluctant to accept such a process. In December last year President Mbeki dismissed Archbishop Tutu's call for 'rational discussion' leading to the development of a consensus on transformation issues. He insisted that only the ANC could set the national agenda - and that the setting of the national agenda was an arena of struggle rather than negotiation. In his weekly letter in 'ANC Today' on 7 January 2005, President Mbeki questioned the sincerity of whites who professed to support change. According to the President, although 'absolutely everybody' was 'in favour of change' and continued 'to sing sweet songs about what needed to be done to bring about change, objectively, they were opposed to change'.

I fundamentally disagree with this observation and with the idea that there is a shadowy 'white elite' that rejects fundamental change. The truth is that most white South Africans - including the great majority of business, religious and community leaders - support the need for balanced economic and social transformation and are willing and eager to make a contribution to the creation of a more just and equitable society. Many are already doing so in an admirable manner. However, as the community that is expected to make the greatest sacrifices as a result of BEE, they have reasonable concerns, questions and proposals. They would like to know where, exactly, they and their children fit into the ANC's vision of the future and how transformation will affect their jobs, their property, their businesses and the education and employment prospects of their children. Many Coloured and Indian South Africans share the same concerns. Raising these concerns does not constitute the manipulation of perceptions or the obfuscation of facts. Neither does it imply the rejection of change or a plot to hijack the national agenda. On the contrary, the active support of reasonable, patriotic and productive white South Africans - and their concerned counterparts in other minority communities - would greatly facilitate the attainment of President Mbeki's transformation objectives. He should accordingly regard them as potential allies in the process of building a fairer and more representative society rather than as adversaries. He should be talking to them about our shared future - rather than castigating them continually about our divided past.

At the beginning of January, President Mbeki told the Sudanese National Assembly that neither South Africa nor Sudan had yet been able to establish societies acceptable to all their people. Both countries still had "to work out what sort of societies they wanted to build amid dynamics of diversity and filled with tensions and antagonisms".

I was under the impression that we South Africans had reached a clear national consensus on the sort of society that we want in the 1996 constitution. The constitution stresses the need for transformation and achievement of a decent life for all our people. But it also clearly guarantees the full spectrum of rights, including those that are of the greatest concern to minorities.

Surely the national agenda should centre on how we pursue the goals and ideals contained in the constitution. And surely we need to work together to achieve these goals and ideals rather than to become involved in the kind of bruising and divisive “political and ideological confrontation” that the ANC evidently envisages.

This article was originally published in a number of South African newspapers on 30 January 2005.