

Address by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe during the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation Lecture

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Programme director;
Comrade Ahmed Mohammed Kathrada;
Aunt Sophie de Bruin;
Comrade Barbara Hogan;
Comrade Laloo Chiba
Professor Jonathan Jansen;
Comrades; and
Ladies and gentlemen:

It is a great honour to deliver the first Ahmed Kathrada Foundation lecture here this evening.

Kathy has been a friend, a comrade, a confidante, a mentor and a leader to me for much of my adult life.

His warmth, friendship and wise counsel have inspired me and given me strength in my own struggles both against Apartheid and in helping to build a united, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa.

Therefore, I would be remiss if I did not express my heartfelt gratitude to the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation for instituting this annual lecture in Comrade Kathy's honour.

Historically, the footprints of Ahmed Mohammed Kathrada can be found in almost every major struggle in our country, from 1946 to the time of his incarceration in 1963 and beyond.

His presence is there throughout the most critical period of the evolution of non-racialism in our movement.

I am convinced that at this point in our history our nation needs this sort of engagement, which has the potential to reignite our consciousness about our foundational values as a nation.

Chief among these values is non-racialism, the primary reality of our past, our present and our future.

As we know our nationhood was forged in the furnace of the past.

As South Africans we are composed of people who originate from many parts of the world who have brought with them values and cultures that have over the years been blended into a rich tapestry of diversity.

Moreover, as fortune would have it, this inaugural Ahmed Kathrada Foundation lecture occurs in the year that marks the 150th Anniversary of the arrival of the Indian indentured labourers in South Africa.

This anniversary is yet another watershed moment in our evolving history, for the picture of our past as a country would be incomplete without this remarkable chapter.

The arrival of the Indian indentured labourers on our shores was in its own right a historical act that would fit into, impact on and be influenced by the overarching, developing South African story.

Often South Africa fails to observe the milestones of its history as evidenced by the failure to adequately mark the centenary of the Union of South Africa this year and the 150th Anniversary of the arrival of the Indian indentured labourers.

Yet these are important milestones in the formation of our nation.

Fully observing such historical events is an appreciation of where we come from as a people.

Chairperson,

A case can be plausibly made that the seeds of a non-racial society were planted, although unintentionally, by colonial conditions among the oppressed even prior to the formal formation of the ANC in 1912.

Firstly, when Africans were introduced to missionary education, they were simultaneously exposed to the central concepts of Christianity, such as 'the brotherhood of man', that 'man was created equal' and that 'we are all equal in the eyes of God'.

Interestingly, these precepts resonated with the African values of communalism.

These key tenets of Christianity were to play a pivotal role in the evolving universal outlook among educated Africans who would seek a place at the same table as the white man, only to be rebuffed on the basis of the colour of their skin.

These inherent contradictions, including social discrimination, economic exploitation and political oppression, would arouse the political yet moderate consciousness among men who would subsequently, and on account of these Christian precepts, seek to form an organisation to fight for their rights.

Impelled by this normative view of society, they would lead a charge for the creation of a society that reflected these lofty Christian ideals.

Some historians have even branded this phase of the ANC led struggle accommodationist and elitist in that it never sought to dismantle the institutions of society.

At this stage the ANC's stated vision was to form a society that would consider Africans as equals, under universal suffrage.

Equally notable is the trail of inter-racial solidarity as represented by co-operation between the ANC and the African People's Organisation (APO), formed in 1902 under the leadership of Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman, which mobilised mainly among Coloured communities.

Although non-racialism did not start off as a fundamental principle of the South African Native National Congress, as the ANC was called then, one can contend that even then these congenial conditions fertilised the soil from which it would later sprout.

Subsequently, the momentum towards non-racialism would gather more speed, fuelled by a shared concern among the oppressed about the increasingly insufferable living conditions.

The importance of inter-racial unity in the face of oppression was thus first stressed by South Africans in 1927 at the International Congress against Imperialism in Brussels.

The South African delegation, consisting of Josiah Gumede, former President of the ANC, James la Guma, a Coloured leader in the Communist Party, and Dan Colrairie, a white trade unionist, drafted the historic 'Thesis for the Defence against Imperialism in South Africa'.

This thesis insisted that unity of all workers and oppressed people in South Africa, irrespective of race, colour or creed, was vital for the struggle against British imperialism.

Chairperson,

By way of analogy, the development of non-racialism in our country assumed the metaphor of a river to which numerous tributaries made continuous contributions, in proportion to which the river expanded as it meandered through the landscape of history.

Apart from the ANC, some of these many tributaries included the All African Convention, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured People's Organisation, the Congress of Democrats and the South African Congress of Trade Unions, up to the point of the Congress of the People in Kliptown in 1955.

To this extent we should understand the notion of the river as that version of the liberation movement energised by the vision of a non-racial future, which, beyond 1955, went on to benefit from many other new tributaries attracted to the same vision.

To extend this metaphor further, one can conceive of the Freedom Charter as the sea into which this huge river decanted.

The Congress Movement spelt out clearly its vision for a future South Africa, a South Africa in which all people had a place.

When that visionary clause that says: 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white', was penned, it manifested a historical momentum in the same way that it prefigured the 1994 democratic dispensation.

That clause was a step on a journey that began years before and that eventually culminated in the Constitution of South Africa, which says:

"We the People of South Africa believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity".

As it posited the principle of non-racialism, the Freedom Charter offered an alternative thematic agenda against the prevailing dominant system of white supremacy.

From the adoption of the Freedom Charter, South Africa epitomised internal struggle between these two poles, with the Freedom Charter finally being vindicated by history.

It offered an alternative worldview to South Africans even as it undercut the neo-Fascist apartheid system that had till then succeeded in destroying any semblance of unity, from sports to education.

For this we must thank the generation of Comrade Ahmed Kathrada, who exhibited the clearest understanding of the essential character of the South Africa we enjoy today.

Against exacting conditions, they held aloft the flame that illuminated the decades that followed from the 1950s till 1994.

Driving this cosmic consciousness defined by progressive humanism and propelled by exalted ethics, this generation, to which Comrade Kathrada belongs, counted among its ranks such struggle luminaries as Bram Fischer, Jimmy Gomas, Moses Kotane, Chief Albert Luthuli and Yusuf Dadoo, to name but a few.

Thus, inspired by Kathy's generation, we have come a long way riding out the tempest for us to give in to the toxic air of despondency, especially when the unity of our people is no longer a matter of chance but choice.

Chairperson,

At this point it is also important to reflect on the impact of the South African Communist Party (SACP), earlier known as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in imprinting a non-racial consciousness on the face of our history.

Looking back at the origins of the SACP, whose predecessor was the International Socialist League (ISL), we arrive at the realisation that even early on we had much that drew us together.

For instance, immigrants from Eastern and Western Europe played a key role in the formation of the ISL.

Their cosmopolitan character and in some instances religious, racial and political persecution in their countries of origin had orientated them to new humanism and so most of them disregarded consideration of race as a qualification for equality.

In equal measure, they arrived to receptive hands from African Ubuntu/Botho, and had black membership with whom they built the party.

Like them we today should realise that South Africa is in effect a microcosm of the world, a multicultural entity comprising a multiplicity of the world's people.

This in itself serves as an endorsement for the consolidation of our unique South African character.

So it would indeed be a fallacy to speak of the ANC and non-racialism without a consideration of the role of communists in helping nudge our movement towards an irreversible non-racial future.

Today's Alliance that includes the SACP is an expression of this historical cross-fertilisation that helped the ANC expand its vision beyond the seductive trappings of narrow nationalism to lead a liberation movement based on universal principles.

The solidifying of these relations derived from the adoption of the Black Republic Thesis by the Second International in 1929, when the Communist Party took the view that there could be no path to Socialism without a democratic dispensation as a bridgehead.

Impliedly, the envisaged South Africa would be based on a non-racial democracy.

Given the Communist Party's non-racial credentials, once it threw its lot with the ANC the die was cast on the non-racial front, and our history would never be the same again.

It is crucial to comprehend this angle of the development of our non-racialism, since it would lay the basis for an unbreakable momentum that would overflow physical borders to take a permanent shape during the days of exile.

The exile years sustained non-racialism precisely because it was understood by the leadership that there was no alternative for South Africa.

Programme director,

The Dadoo-Xuma-Naicker Pact of 1947 was one of the first formal collaborations by the ANC and both Indian Congresses, expressing the unity of the oppressed, Africans and Indians, working together to fight a common enemy.

It is the kind of pact that one wonders if it should not be reinvigorated in an expanded form, so that its force is rehabilitated to continue to guide us during these trying times.

Would it not be useful to find modern forms of pledging ourselves to work even harder as South Africans for the cementing of our non-racial character, in all aspects of our lives, including the economic sphere?

Ladies and gentlemen,

Apart from its mobilisation in the African communities, the United Democratic Front in the 1980s succeeded in mass mobilisation among the Coloured, White and Indian communities on a scale never seen in the country before, not even in the hey-days of the 1950s and 1960s.

This development however, was not a mystery to history. It was the result of decades of efforts to entrench non-racial awareness in the firmament of that part of our nation that was waging a struggle for freedom.

Most of the young militants in the Indian communities who took up the cudgels for freedom were the generation following in the footsteps of leaders such as Maulvi Cachalia, Nana Sita, Yusuf Dadoo and Monty Naicker.

They had imbibed the theory of struggle at the knees of these stalwarts, which enabled them to grasp the political dynamics of our country and the key principles of our struggle, including the principle of non-racialism.

Therefore it was no coincidence that this generation played a key role in the activities of the UDF.

During the states of emergency in the 1980s, many jails were filled with thousands of activists of all races and sexes, from all walks of life.

These detentions did not crush the spirit of resistance, and mass mobilisation continued unabated throughout the country.

Once again these conditions of oppression affirmed our non-racial outlook and brightened the prospects of our non-racial future.

It was an inspiring revolution which in turn inspired many freedom loving people around the world.

The question now is: is this momentum for a non-racial society losing steam?

By way of explanation, I would like to explore a few developments which I think are accountable for the apparent dimming of this non-racial aspiration.

Firstly, I would like to contend that it is one thing to mobilise humanity behind a cause so inspiring as freedom; and quite another to maintain that level of mobilisation once the cause has been achieved.

The moral universe that framed our outlook towards life, which moral universe was in turn based on a clearly articulated vision of society as expressed by the ANC, was, ironically, dimmed by the refraction of the rays of the new dawn of freedom.

Invariably, in a new political dispensation, unexpected dynamics emerged to claim a substantial amount of our attention, and thus, in a way, de-focused us from some of the key issues making up the thread from our past.

Perhaps in revelling in the newly found euphoria of our victory over apartheid we de-accelerated the momentum by default, much to the dismay of some of those observing our history with a particularly keen attention.

As in the anti-apartheid struggle, sustaining such a critical vision presupposes conscious effort, and subjective intervention.

Could this turn of events be the result of under-theorising the challenges embedded in the democratic dispensation, and thus robbing ourselves of an opportunity to revitalise our energies entering into an era of

governance, an era made up of totally new imperatives?

Among us, some of our most eloquent champions of this vision of non-racialism may have been absorbed into the new institutions of democracy, thus turning their attention to new challenges.

Some may have been lost to old age and other social commitments which in the past receded in importance in the face of a moral struggle for freedom.

Attendant to this loss is the inability to train our young into these life-long ideals through political education and socialisation, thus breaking the momentum, instead of injecting it with new energies from the up and coming generation.

Before the 1994 democratic breakthrough the liberation movement was a socialising agency for its young, providing foundations for political thought and conception through critical exchange of ideas.

This in turn created a cohesive vision that helped provide a regulative character for the cadres of the Congress Movement so that they remained loyal and committed to the struggle for the set objectives.

This tradition was also lost to the democratic era, with all its negative implications for continuation and self-renewal.

This lack of continuation and the resultant poverty of theory born of dwindling consciousness may have had the effects of social and political alienation among our national minorities and the largely poverty-stricken segment of the African youth.

The expanding floor of economic opportunities that was supposed to cover all the people of our country may be turning out to be but a tantalising mirage to many youth still trying to scramble out of the mire of Bantu Education, whose debilitating effects are far reaching even after a decade and a half of democracy.

And yet anything less than policies with measurable impact on changing the lives of the historically disadvantaged groups, especially Africans, will not only be a-historical but a betrayal of history.

This is the dilemma in the post-apartheid South Africa. It is further compounded by the intersection between class and the accumulated disabilities with racial manifestations.

In a country whose majority of the citizens are mired in economic depression, these contradictions serve to worsen perceptions of group victimhood.

At the same time, owing to lack of political understanding and thus appreciation of our history, some of government policies may very well be misconstrued, sometimes as racially unfair.

This miscomprehension of our historical task as a democratic government leads to ripe conditions for antithetical forces such as ethnic and racial entrepreneurs to ply their devious trade, for their own self-serving agenda.

The aggregate effect of this scenario is not only further alienation but the cultivation of resentment to the new dispensation and perception of group victimhood.

Hence to some of our fellow South Africans the flame seems to be flickering feebly, with darkness eclipsing light.

And yet the struggle between this perceived flickering light and darkness is not going to end in despair for us.

Despite these challenges we have no reason to lose hope. Our struggle history envelopes an enduring force capable of providing us with our unique character as South Africans.

In pursuit of this larger vision that enabled the glorious generation of Comrade Kathrada to transcend artificial barriers, we should trudge on in service to the South African-centered vision.

This flame we have inherited from them should grow into a floodlight that forever chases away darkness and its contents, including anxiety, fear and uncertainty.

Within the context of the ANC, our collective responsibility is to keep championing a central vision of building a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa.

In this way this central vision marks out the parameters of progressive discourse that says we South Africans are one people with one destiny.

We should be careful not to encourage democracy deficit where other sections of society disengage from this

South African-centered enterprise of building a non-racial future.

If we allow disillusionment to set in, we do not only betray a proud heritage but unwittingly give ground to political disorders such as majoritarianism.

Crudities such as majoritarianism thrive in conditions where advocacy of our heritage is devitalised.

Drawing back into our respective cocoons atomises our nation into disparate units that work against each other and unravel the historical fabric that holds our society together.

However, we should also be careful not to be intimidated by the normal noise of democracy. Diverse and sometimes noisy public discourse often signals a healthy body politic. We are an activist nation, and not a passive and quiet people.

At the same time, we should realise that in the cut and thrust of democratic engagement no idea is sacrosanct, no matter how prestigious the social segment it originates from may be.

Similarly, not even using a language with facility in our public pronouncements can be a guarantee of the infallibility of our thoughts.

As the poet Brecht memorably puts it:

'The writer gives us a beautiful mountain to read; what he says, for money, is well said. What he does not say for nothing, would have been the truth.'

Having said this, let me hasten to say that in a democracy it is not necessarily a bad thing to spend one's life in search of a cause, including a cause that is purportedly in defence of democracy.

Chairperson,

The generation of Comrade Kathrada spent the better part of its youth waging the struggle against racialism.

I contend that we continue with this great spirit in the course of fighting against poverty and inequality.

South Africa today is blighted by the greatest economic inequality in the world.

Economic inequality seems to have assumed a subtle apartheid guise, thus threatening to undo our democratic gains.

I suggest that we all adopt this fight against economic inequality as a permanent cause, knowing that it is an indispensable requirement for the concrete expression of non-racialism.

In this continued struggle we should use the flame we have inherited from the past.

Comrade Kathy represents this great historical symbolism that infuses oxygen into our common humanity and keeps us going.

We are indeed grateful to have in our midst a leader such as Comrade Kathrada, in whose heart the flame of non-racialism still glows; a flame we can use to ignite many other torches and nourish them into one ball of fire.

Chairperson,

I think these are some of the key challenges that confront the progressive forces in society head on.

As an organisation, the ANC has to take stock of these undercurrents that are potentially disruptive to the project of a united, non-racial, non-sexist, just and democratic society which underlines its entire existence.

Non-racialism is not an abstract philosophical undertaking; it is part of the historical account of our struggle for social justice.

Because of this, we must not only continue to raise the flag of non-racialism but we must also constantly refine the definition, so that the evolution of the nature of non-racialism is non-ending.

Lastly, let me take this opportunity to wish the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation well in its efforts to continue to illuminate the path to a truly non-racial society.

The situation outlined above regarding the challenges faced by this phase of our democratic dispensation makes the work of this foundation all the more crucial.

We are not yet there, but we are close. The struggle for a non-racial society continues. I cannot think of a more suitable icon of our struggle to bear the name of a foundation solely dedicated to the advancement of non-racialism, than Comrade Kathrada.

Thank you.