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Address by Former President Kgalema Motlanthe at the 25th Anniversary of Former President FW de Klerk's 2 February 1990 Speech

2 February 2015

Programme Director;
President FW de Klerk;
The Chairperson of the FW de Klerk Foundation, Dr Theuns Eloff and the FW de Klerk Foundation;
The Diplomatic Corps;
Distinguished Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the honour to address this seminal event: 'the 25 Years since 2 February 1990, a Quarter Century of Building and Defending Non-Racial Constitutional Democracy'.

Historically, 2 February 1990 was a moment of profundity. In like manner, 2 February 2015, is an occasion surcharged with historical significance.

It is now common course that the speech President FW de Klerk delivered on that fateful day passed into history as one of the landmark addresses that presaged a new historical period, perhaps not only for our country but also for the continent of Africa and the world at large.

Apartheid was not just a South African problem. It was in essence a stain on humanity at large. It was a social system that gave a bad name to the very notion of being human. It was for this reason that the United Nations called it "a crime against humanity". The delivery of this epoch-making speech therefore sounded the death knell to the last vestige of European colonialism anywhere on the African continent. In effect it unveiled a truly post-colonial era.

This is the speech that set the late President Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners free, unbanned political organisations and, thereby, unleashed propitious conditions for a new dawn.

Few have been occasions in the ever evolving, jumbled human story known as history where a society changed from one form to another with such a demonstrable measure of success.

This is not to romanticise our history of transition from apartheid to democracy. It was a deeply painful and difficult moment.

That much is true. When political observers labeled this epochal event 'the South African miracle' they were impelled into this metaphysical overdrive by the realisation that our peculiar experience had disproved the widely expected South African apocalypse.



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It was indeed a one of a kind political experience. Those with an Apollonian cast would put this down to the actions of men and women of vision; men and women who rationalised that we either swim together or sink together.

I would submit that no matter how historiography looks at this sensitive stage in South Africa's history, the historical consensus will always be that President De Klerk measured up to historical exigency. On this point the historical record will not falter.

It was through accepting the doctrine of historical necessity that President De Klerk was able to unlock new vistas. It was, as Denis Diderot would say, "different times, different circumstances, a different philosophy".

The late President Mandela was prompted by the same realisation when he called President De Klerk "a man of integrity".

Against this background, let me use the remainder of this address to share my observations about post-apartheid South Africa, 20 years on. In this regard, I propose to look at the past 20 years of our system of democracy through the interpretative framework of the CODESA model.

In letter and in spirit, our current Constitution is the outcome of CODESA. Further, intellectually and politically, it is a reflection of the driving impulse of CODESA. In turn, our Constitution sets out the parameters within which we can advance society to higher levels of development, materially and philosophically.

I will therefore maintain that if we all look back to this political model that guided our collective action through the turbulence of the early 1990s, we will rediscover this compass we so need to find our way. Perhaps the persistent difficulties engulfing our country at this point signal our digression from this model rather than its failure to see us through.

Before I proceed and by way of background, I need to remind us that history is a continuum; one cannot make sense of the present without understanding its formative past. Scholar Sampie Terreblanche is correct in his 'History of Inequality in South Africa', when he argues that "we are at the end of one epoch and the beginning of a new one, but the old will cast an ugly shadow over the new for a long time to come. We cannot build the new epoch without a clear understanding of the old." This observation is a true reflection of the historical process.

Within this historical context, our shared socio-political space is an existential reality which throws up serious imperatives.

Our theme today, 'the 25 Years since 2 February 1990, a Quarter Century of Building and Defending Non-Racial Constitutional Democracy', makes much more sense if seen in this way.



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In substance, succeeding in defending our system of non-racial constitutional democracy depended and will continue to depend on our honest confrontation with this historical framework.

From the viewpoint of our Constitution, the cornerstone of a new nation, there is no doubt that we are congealing into one nation. The preamble to the Constitution of our country spells out clearly the essence of post-apartheid South Africa. It says that:

“We the people of South Africa, Recognise the injustices of the past; Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; And believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.”

For us in South Africa this Constitution is a living document. As the preamble shows, it also reflects historical consciousness which provides a conceptual framework at once to understand and act upon inherited social reality.

It cannot be denied that the figure of Nelson Mandela epitomised this new consciousness of a new nation founded on a common destiny. It would be unnecessary to catalogue mounting instances where his unique personal interpretation of the notion of non-racialism and national unity imbued our nation with a renewed hope.

He did not stop there. Among the greatest contributions President Mandela made to our nascent nation was demonstrating a firm belief in our judicial system, to which he was ever prepared to subject himself when necessary, upholding the independence of the media as well as the separation of powers between the executive, parliament and the judiciary.

Without fail, he made it a point of honour to uphold the core values of our Constitution. We are all the richer for this noble legacy. Thus inspired, we are now 20 years into democracy. We have managed to turn the corner, decisively advancing towards a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and just future.

Despite these encouraging advances, I would argue that among the flaring congenial afflictions in our shared democratic space as mentioned above is the history of social inequality.

The international NGO Oxfam hit the nail on the head in its latest report on South Africa in stating that “In South Africa, inequality is greater today than at the end of apartheid.” “Extreme inequality corrupts politics, hinders economic growth and stifles social mobility. It fuels crime and even violent conflict. It squanders talent, thwarts potential and undermines the foundations of society.”

Even the larger than life legacy of Mandela could not do away with what is rather commonly called the legacy of apartheid.



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Partly because of ethnic and racial historical conditioning, partly stemming from mistakes of the democratically elected government and partly fuelled by the economic pinch, the issues of righting the economic wrongs of the past are among the most polarising in modern day South Africa.

While trying to change people's social attitudes through exemplary leadership of figures such as former President Mandela is desirable, the true test of national unity lies in perceptions of justice in the economic domain.

People are more amenable to the discourse of high ideals such as non-racialism and national unity when their stomachs are full. They are likely to agree that we have a shared future if they have gainful employment, are able to feed, clothe, shelter and educate their children, and cannot conceivably ascribe their bleak personal conditions to perceptions of group discrimination.

In other words issues of fairness, justice and equality ring hollow when not rooted in improved economic prospects in the lives of individuals. Matters are compounded if such a credibility gap between the discourse of high-mindedness and the grim social existence is taking place in a society with deep historical roots of racial and ethnic self-consciousness.

After all the history of South Africa is the history of racial and ethnic deprivation. To speak of colonialism and apartheid is effectively to speak of an unfair system in the production, distribution and consumption of resources.

All else was of no account in and of itself, to the extent that social pathologies such as discrimination originated in and drew sustenance from the economic base. That is the nub of the historical matter.

While after the democratic breakthrough of April 1994 many South Africans have been rallied around the vision of unity, one nation and a shared future, the corresponding economic domain has not been able to sufficiently support this emergent consciousness. Unity and social cohesion are like trees; they need roots to grow and be strong. They are embedded in social justice.

Necessarily, addressing apartheid legacy meant tough choices. Worse, the attempt at uprooting apartheid legacy is happening within limited economic scope. Social change in South Africa has to contend with a global economic environment where the agenda of the developing world and the poor in general for a humane, just and equitable world is under mounting pressure.

Attempts at redistributive justice are framed by unfavourable global economic conditions that make it ever more difficult to fully realise aims of the programme for social change. Corrective measures under conditions of globalisation are like a seed sowed in a barren soil. Regrettably, under such conditions ethnic and racial consciousness is likely to be heightened; in turn putting a strain on CODESA's mobilising vision.



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In consequence some communities begin to feel hard done by. Where ethnic and racial discrimination has historical essence within living memory, perceptions of group marginalisation provide ideal conditions for ethnic and racial entrepreneurship to foment inter-ethnic and inter-racial animosity.

At the same time, despite race still being the issue at a deeper social level, social class is also beginning to shape the contours of our social landscape.

On the working class front, the fact that inter-racial mistrust and lack of racial solidarity is arguably continuing to eclipse class solidarity as seen through the prism of the divided South African trade union movement may be a measure of the extent to which we are still frozen in Professor Terreblanche's shadow of the past.

Our language use to describe our social surroundings supports Professor Terreblanche's contention about the imprisonment of the past. In this connection I would argue that it is incorrect to refer to the current government as 'a black government'. I would submit that a government elected in a non-racial constitutional democracy cannot be colour-coded.

This would therefore disqualify the characterisation of the current government as 'black'. In essence, this is a democratic government.

With this explanation in mind it is clear that labeling a government black or even white may very well say more about our thinking than anything we are trying to express. The result is a misinformed and misleading discourse, which often entrenches stereotypes, fuelling feelings of alienation.

In this connection, if there is one social space that provides a useful index of racial relations in the country, it is social media. In the recent past, the social media space has seen torrential racial abuses across the social spectrum, openly advocating the biological, historical, economic and social utility of the construct of race as the organising principle in human affairs.

Most disheartening about this manifestation of open racial hostilities is their debilitating effects on what we are trying to build, a nation united in diversity. In a constitutional democracy boundaries for free, open, fearless and robust expression are indeed very broad, but do not accommodate racial insults and incitement to racial violence. To the contrary, such acts are against the letter and spirit of the Constitution.

Against the background of centuries of dehumanisation, racial insults are particularly painful. Nonetheless, if there were to be a redeeming aspect of this national concern it would be that it serves as a barometer about the state of social cohesion and national unity, pivotal elements of the formula for defending our system of non-racial, constitutional democracy.



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This development is a sad state of affairs that should goad us to ask ourselves as to what could have gone wrong in the rainbow nation inspired by the magnanimous legacy of former President Nelson Mandela. It makes us think hard and deeply about the key issues of compromise, national reconciliation and the shared future our constitution envisages.

One clearly observable aspect of this cyberspace racism is that most of the bloggers appear to be young people, who may not have been there during apartheid. Equally disturbing is that this section of society is an important if not critical part of mainstream society. It is not a lunatic fringe.

How then can we account for this level of racism? Could it be from our past? Could it stem from the present conditions? Could it be the institutions of socialisation? Whatever our thinking about this development, the point is that social media racism provides us with a rare window into the soul of post-apartheid South Africa. And, unfortunately, it does not look like a restful soul.

The question confronting us as right thinking South Africans is what this means for the future. No society can survive for any long period of time without addressing such fundamental national questions. I cannot claim to know the cause of racial polarisation outside the historical framework.

Yet, I am aware, as history would show, that among the social agents that shape how nations see themselves is education. My take is that we may need to take a closer look at the philosophical assumptions of our education system.

We know that throughout history, for better or for worse, education has served to shape the human personality. During apartheid education served to entrench the essence of race, presenting racialism as a principle of natural common sense.

It follows that education can be put at the service of national unity. Through education a generation of informed, auto-critical, critical, internationalist, humanist and non-racial South Africans is possible.

Further, there is also a practical, economic side to education to which all of us have to turn our attention. Despite 20 years into democracy, our education system has not always been able to produce a generation equal to the modern economic imperatives. I would argue that such is the importance of education in this sense that it cannot be deemed the responsibility of government alone.

Equally, problems in the area of education for any community in South Africa are ultimately a concern for the whole of South Africa. This is one of the imperatives thrown up by the fact of our sharing a common social-political space referred to earlier. It simply cannot be anyhow.



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When the preamble to our Constitution says “We the people of South Africa, Recognise the injustices of the past...” it implies that all South Africans are therefore prepared to lend a hand in addressing such past injustices. This is also a call for all us to strive for excellence, and to help each other to this end.

Once again education, specifically the legacy of Bantu Education, remains an aspect of the shadow of the past. With the best of intentions, we cannot simplistically dismiss the effects of a system of education designed to undermine national development. Lamenting the evils of Bantu Education, the South African anti-apartheid activist Hilda Bernstein argued back in 1970 that:

“Today’s world requires a highly developed system of education for the mastery of technology, for comprehension of the life around us, for participation. The advanced, industrialised countries are constantly expanding their education services, particularly university and higher technological education without which their manpower becomes obsolete”.

This view about education and national development was as true then as it is now. With a more determined, concerted effort among all social partners targeted at such critical areas as teacher training we can turn the tide, producing graduates that make their skills count in economic growth and development. Needless to say with an expanding national skills base, a growing economy and the capacity to meet the continuing developmental needs of the country, we are correspondingly able to deliver blows to inequality in its historical sense, to whittle it down to socially meaningless levels.

The American writer Horace Mann reminds all of us that “education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equaliser of the conditions of man.”

On its part government is saddled with the moral duty not to fail the aspirations of millions of South Africans who look to it for a better life. It has to deliver social justice to all South Africans within the limited resources it has.

On this account, it was heartening to note the contents of the 2014 World Bank Report on the country’s progress regarding some of the pressing economic issues. Among others the reports states that:

- 3.6 million South Africans have been rescued from poverty and income inequality has been reduced by one-quarter through the use of taxes and social grants in 2010/11;
- South Africa has had more success in using fiscal policy tools to reduce inequality and poverty than 11 peer countries;
- More inclusive economic growth and better jobs will be required to complement fiscal policy if South Africa is to overcome its high levels of poverty and inequality.



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Such positive indices of development are encouraging. What is concerning is the continuing spectre of corruption over all levels of society. Both private and public sectors are enmeshed in a persistent culture of corruption that robs society of its full development potential.

From the viewpoint of the public sector it really boils down to a crime against the poor.

Corruption has also proven an apple of discord in many ways. Unfortunately, because of historically constituted identities, we tend to talk at cross-purposes on this serious matter. In the ensuing grating cacophony, those well-meaning South Africans who would take to pieces any corrupt government become victims of this national irrationality. Their level-headedness is swamped up in the clutter. With that society loses an opportunity to have a necessary conversation that helps expand anti-corruption frontiers across society.

At the same time, in South Africa, where democracy is evolving against the background of inequality, we should also be careful that history does not triumph over democracy. As with challenges in education and numerous aspects of national life, not all of us have equal access to the benefits of a democratic experience.

Consequently, history may favour those who enter the present already fully armed with economic, educational and political means. A balance has to be struck without neither compromising the tenets of democracy nor turning a blind eye to the perversions of history.

It could help us a great deal if in addition our national conversation expands to include focus on developing a national culture of norms and standards, to embrace excellence as a matter of national pride. Grappling with the difficulties of history is not incompatible with striving for excellence in all our efforts. On the contrary, a national culture of excellence is among the key requirements for human progress.

The version of society hammered out at CODESA moved from the position that South Africa belongs to all, united in diversity. Democratic experience itself dictates that all the people of the land be robustly vocal in the running of the affairs of their nation.

Historical sensitivities must not make us think that to blame the ills of the past is to demonise the white section of the population. Apartheid was a system, a philosophy that bequeathed us both tangible and intangible legacy. To blame apartheid does not mean demonising white people as people. No less a figure than President Mandela himself made this clear, distinguishing between white people and the system of racism in one of his court appearances. Of this Mandela elucidates:

“I might also mention that in the course of this application I am frequently going to refer to the white man and to white people. I want at once to make it clear that I am not a racist and do not support racialism of any kind, because to me racialism is a barbaric thing, whether it comes from a black man or a white man.”



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Referring to the fact of an all-white court that was trying him, Mandela continues to argue that “somehow this atmosphere recalls to mind the inhuman injustice caused to my people outside the courtroom by this same white domination”.

With this in mind I wish to reiterate the call on all white South Africans in business and white people in general to shed their sense of guilt and rather commit themselves to our common future with more gusto.

The year 1994 freed all of us, the oppressor and the oppressed. The freedom we are enjoying today is not relative. By definition freedom is a universal right; it is not conditional or subjective. What matters should be the responsibility with which freedom has burdened all of us to contribute to the attainment of our defining vision in proportion as we can.

Similarly, we need not fall into the trap that to criticise a democratically elected government amounts to casting racial aspersions on black people. We have already disavowed the misnomer of a black government, for this runs counter to the vision of thousands of South Africans who struggled for a free and democratic South Africa. In view of all these historical and post-apartheid social discontents, and drawing inspiration from the spirit of CODESA, I wish to urge all of us to define a national course behind which we can continue to rally society.

This national course is but a crystallisation of the CODESA vision, only adapted to realities of a society that has evolved for 20 years into democracy.

What does it mean to be a South African today? Taking refuge in the comfort of ethno-nationalism is a lost course, an illusion with no future traction. What is needed is an all-inclusive nationalism that works for national unity, social cohesion, economic progress and an inclusive distribution pattern of economic gains even as it addresses the injustices of the past.

We have also learnt with great pain that in history groups that feel excluded will with time experience cognitive dissonance that may lead them to swim against the tide. Inclusive nationalism which gives all South Africans a stake in our nation lies at the heart of the CODESA spirit, and defines the essence of post-apartheid South African-ness.

Modern day South Africa is an outcome of a compromise.

Compromise unlocks the possibility for progress. I am of the mind that inherent to the consensus made then was that all political partners would continue in the spirit of compromise, giving what they have to oil the machinery of social progress.

All of us are equally entitled by our system of democracy to enhance the notion of a multi-vocal society. Failure to carry out this task is equivalent to a betrayal of our Constitution and the historical guiding spirit behind it.



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Equally ineluctable is the fact of our inter-dependence, our indissoluble future. That we need each other is not a choice but a historical injunction.

Ultimately, our loyalty should be to the Constitution as our primary reality, the supreme law of the land, a singularly cardinal document from a secularist point of view.

Above all, it is also necessary to accept that at a certain level there is a need to shed historical identity where in its historical form it becomes deadweight on the present. Some call such an act evolution, some development, some change, and others progress.

Albert Einstein had this in mind when he said that “I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be.”

Thank you for your kind attention.