

Event Report: Annual FW de Klerk Conference 2016

Topic: The Future of Multiculturalism in South Africa

By Hannah Gauss

The annual conference, jointly hosted by the FW de Klerk Foundation and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, took place in commemoration of former president FW de Klerk’s historic speech before parliament on 2nd February 1990 that paved the way for South Africa’s democratic transition. In the light of growing deteriorating intercommunity relations the conference sought to address challenges of multiculturalism in South Africa and its future implications.

The central role in promoting multiculturalism and protecting minorities plays the South African Constitution. It considers cultural liberty as a human right and ensures equality and justice among society. Justice Albie Sachs, former Constitutional Judge under the Mandela Presidency who was instrumental in drafting the Bill of Rights, emphasises that this does not only mean cooperation among different cultural and religious groups but the respect and embrace of diversity. Sachs noted that in order to preserve multiculturalism the values of the constitution – unity in diversity – must be translated into all existing institutions, he continued.

The central institution that should reflect these values is the South African education system. The right to language – the right to be taught in one of the eleven official South African languages – is a core principle the ANC campaigned on in 1994. Twenty-one years later the reality in South Africa’s education system seems dire. FW de Klerk concludes that the “cultural and language rights that we negotiated into the 1996 Constitution [...] have been ignored or diluted”. English is the de facto medium of teaching, placing African languages in a disadvantaged position. Similarly, Afrikaans education institutions such as the University of Stellenbosch are under pressure to transform and confirm to a mono-lingual institution. The disconnection between the languages spoken by communities and the language used as educational medium is great on the African continent. This has various negative consequences as Dr Fernand de Varennes, leading academic on language and minority rights highlights. For one, African countries are among nations with the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. Francophone and Anglophone languages as medium of education leads to poor academic performances and reduces the number of highly trained workers. Dr de Varennes points out that countries that invest in multilingual education in fact invest in economic growth. Learners that are taught in their mother tongue perform academically better, enjoy a better education and hence are able to better contribute to a nation’s economic growth. This disproves, so argues de Varennes, the leading misconception that education in different languages is too cost-intensive. In the long run, countries like South Africa with eleven official languages are holding great cultural assets. This means that multilingual education is directly linked to the wellbeing of a nation’s economy. He concludes by advising South Africa to re-think its current policies.

A single-dominating language in the education system also proves to be in contradiction to the constitutional values of equality and national unity. In South Africa this means that a minority enjoys privileged access to resources that the majority of South Africans is excluded from. The

Constitution was written in such a way, so Justice Sachs that African languages would be promoted and their fair representation within different institutions ensured. The rise of social movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and Open Stellenbosch indicate that the translation of the Constitution’s principles has failed as expectation and social reality are increasingly growing apart. This cannot be taken lightly, warns FW de Klerk. The mismanagement of cultural relations and growing dissatisfaction of a majority are breeding ground for conflict as minorities are in continuous competition for the recognition of their rights. Flip Buys, the Chief Executive Officer of *Solidarity* emphasises that citizens quickly will feel betrayed by democracy, especially when they are holding voting rights but no voting power. This is for instance the case in the coloured community. Rhoda Kadalie, Executive Director of the Impumelelo Social Innovations Centre, explains that the ANC’s ideology undermines coloured identities in post-apartheid South Africa by creating a ‘hierarchy of oppression’ – the notion that black people suffered more extensively under apartheid than coloured’s. This narrative excludes the experience of oppression and discrimination by the coloured community. The ANC, so Kadalie, regards the entire coloured community as a conform entity that becomes only important during election periods. The ANC rallies along racial lines and targets the ‘coloured vote’ to ensure its majority vote. Outside of the election period there is no recognition of equality, she emphasises. This is a clear failure of leadership to recognise the diversity of South Africa’s society. As Dr Mathew Phosa, a South African attorney and politician, states “I want a leadership with ethics and honour and a society where all cultures and languages are respected and every community has the freedom to practice their cultures without fear of retribution [...] We don’t deserve the divided nation that we have become.”

It appears that South Africa’s communal relations are once again in need for better dialogue to grant equality and justice. Despite these shortcomings the conference highlighted that South Africa remains a forerunner on constitutional values of multiculturalism, and freedom of religion in particular. The practice of different religious traditions and beliefs remains one of the most accepted among South Africans. To strengthen this development the FW de Klerk Foundation decided to open a new Centre for Unity in Diversity. The new centre will operate alongside the Centre for Constitutional Right to ensure the people’s rights to equality as well as to monitor any developments that could harm national unity. Monoculturalism – a single dominating culture in society – so de Klerk has come to an end. Globalisation and resulting migration interlink the world and expose them to diverse cultures – two third of all nations worldwide show diverse, multicultural settings. “The age of the single culture, single language state is over”. The navigation of different cultures in close proximity is a topic not only South Africa is dealing with but a global phenomenon as the current refugee crisis in Europe demonstrates.