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The state of race relations in post-apartheid South Africa

Xolela Mangcu

Nelson Mandela and the discourse of reconciliation

South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy has been hailed as one of the great stories of the twentieth century. Such was the exhilaration at the dawn of democracy in 1994 that the transition was described by Archbishop Tutu and others as 'a miracle'. Tutu also dubbed the new society 'the rainbow nation', a metaphor so powerful that it continues to inform the collective imagination and give psychological sustenance to an evolving democratic regime.

In the first years of the transition, both Archbishop Tutu and President Mandela came to embody the concept of racial reconciliation. Mandela's capacity for defusing tensions was displayed in the aftermath of the murder of Chris Hani by a Polish immigrant associated with the Afrikaner right wing. It was not so much that Mandela appealed for calm, but the manner in which he did so. He went on national television stating that 'a white man full of prejudice and hate came to our country and committed a deed so foul that our whole nation teeters on the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we may know, and bring justice to this assassin' (Sampson 1999: 469). Again, Mandela's *leitmotif* was that of a black and white community united against evil.

In his public speeches at the time, Mandela kept on differentiating between the politics of the heart and the politics of reason. He suggested that his reconciliatory approach stemmed from a realisation that the ANC had not won the military struggle and that it had to find ways to neutralise white opposition. Speaking about Mandela's approach to the negotiations process, his long-time colleague, Ahmed Kathrada, stated that the aim of the armed struggle was never to overthrow militarily the South African government. It was a bargaining tactic to bring about a negotiated settlement and he complimented Mandela for preventing an eventual bloodbath:

> With regard to overdoing reconciliation, Mandela always reminds us of the realities. He points to the few weeks preceding the 1994 election. There were preparations by the white right wing. The generals later took him into greater confidence, and gave him details of their plans to disrupt the 1994 elections. There would have been widespread bloodshed and violence. Being a realistic person, he had decided long ago that reconciliation was the course to take. Within the ANC and its national executive there was never a serious questioning of this approach. (*Business Day* 15.06.99)

It was for this reason of reassuring the white community that Mandela put his weight behind the controversial 'sunset clause' proposed by ANC and SACP veteran Joe Slovo. The idea was that the new government would guarantee security of job tenure for senior civil servants and security officials for five years into the new democracy. Like Mandela, Slovo reasoned that because the ANC had not won an overwhelming victory, white recalcitrants within the army and the civil service could still undermine the new government. It was therefore considered strategic to woo them onto the side of the new government by retaining them in their positions. This proposal caused a great deal of consternation in ANC ranks, with Pallo Jordan, for example, openly disagreeing with Slovo. With Mandela's backing, Slovo won the day. Ironically, Mandela would later complain about a lack of co-operation from white civil servants who were frustrating his government's development programmes.

As he cast his vote in the country's first fully democratic election, Mandela turned to the theme of racial reconciliation. He went back to the speech he gave at the Rivonia Trial before being sentenced to life imprisonment: 'I again repeat that I have throughout my life, as I pointed out in the Rivonia Trial, fought very firmly against white domination. I have fought very firmly against black domination.' He listed some of the major developmental challenges facing the new government and then said 'But we are also concerned about the minorities in the country – especially the white minority. We are concerned about giving confidence and security to those who are worried that by these changes they are now going to be in a disadvantaged position' (Mandela 1994).

The negotiations process produced a government of national unity with a place in it for the NP, and with its last leader, former State President FW de Klerk, serving as Mandela's second Deputy President. Early in his term President Mandela reached out to former opponents, visiting the racially-exclusive Orania to take tea with the widow of the architect of apartheid, Dr Hendrik

Verwoerd. He reached out to Percy Yutar, the prosecutor who led the case which resulted in his long-term imprisonment on Robben Island. He even appointed a former prison guard as part of his security brief. In perhaps his most public of reconciliation gestures, he donned a Springbok rugby jersey in support of the nearly all-white national rugby team in the final of the Rugby World Cup in 1995.

Tools of reconciliation: the 'sunset clause' and the TRC

In January 1996 President Mandela launched the TRC under the leadership of that other icon of racial reconciliation, Archbishop Demond Tutu. Its brief was, *inter alia*, to promote racial reconciliation. One of the key features of the TRC process was the possibility of amnesty for all those who came forward to tell the truth about human rights' violations they had committed, as long as those violations had occurred in pursuit of political objectives. The commission was also mandated to provide financial reparations for the victims of such violations. Some prominent political families, including those of Steve Biko and Griffiths and Victoria Mxenge, opposed the amnesty clause of the TRC's enabling legislation, the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act*, arguing that it deprived them of their constitutional rights to justice through a court of law. They took the matter as far as the Constitutional Court but lost.

The first phase of the TRC process ended in October 1998 in some controversy with the release of the first five volumes of its final report. The ANC made its unhappiness with the TRC's findings clear, accusing the commission of drawing a moral equivalence between the liberation movement and the apartheid state. Earlier in August 1996, Thabo Mbeki (then ANC Deputy President) had argued that ANC members need not apply for amnesty on the grounds that its just war could not be equated with apartheid, leading TRC chair Archbishop Tutu to threaten to resign if the ANC did not participate in the amnesty process. While there can be no gainsaying the TRC's achievements in uncovering truths about the past, it cannot be said to have brought about reconciliation. That was perhaps too tall an order to have expected from a temporary institution.

In order for reconciliation to be achieved it also has to take on other more practical dimensions through real improvements in people's lives. As the distinguished African writer Chinua Achebe noted in a television interview on

the SABC in 2002, the disappearance of an historical era like apartheid does not mean the disappearance of the problems that came with it. This reflected a feeling in black political circles that the white community had not reciprocated the gestures of goodwill extended to them by former President Mandela. Mandela himself, in the course of his term of office, began to shift towards a more critical posture, even questioning the wisdom of the 'sunset clauses'. In a speech to the ANC Congress in Mafikeng in 1997, he lambasted the lack of co-operation and reciprocity from his white counterparts. Some suggested the speech had the imprint of Deputy President Thabo Mbeki all over it. Whoever the author was, the speech burst the bubble of the racial honeymoon. Newspapers and commentators around the world reacted with shock at what they variously described as Mandela's 'attack', 'invective' or 'diatribe' against whites. Their choice of words was revealing, indicating how the white world at large had grown comfortable with the mood of reconciliation. Any criticism of their continued privilege was experienced as a form of assault. Both Mandela's legacy and the inevitability of a politics of reckoning was captured by Mandela's biographer, Anthony Sampson, thus:

> In his first months as president he enjoyed a brilliant honeymoon, particularly with white South Africans, to whom this tolerant old man came as a wondrous relief ... at the end of the first hundred days in office the *Financial Times* could find no whites who had a bad word for him. It was a normality which carried its own dangers, as black militants saw the revolution betrayed, and younger ANC leaders, including Thabo Mbeki, knew they must make reforms which would offend the whites. (Sampson 1999: 504)

The Mbeki era: towards a new black radicalism

The assumption of the presidency by Thabo Mbeki signaled a more radical Africanist approach to national politics. This was heralded by his embrace of the concept of an African Renaissance, something which in the early days of his administration became a point of tension, with some black academics like Thobeka Mda questioning whether whites were indeed Africans. As noted above, Mbeki's attitude to the TRC was also very different to that of Mandela's. In contrast to the latter's unqualified acceptance of the TRC's final report, Mbeki, in his capacity as ANC chairman, resorted to the courts to try to prevent

the TRC from releasing its report, which included some negative findings on the ANC. The court ruled against the organisation. But what this indicated was that Mbeki was moving towards a conception of reconciliation as transformation not absolution. As if to deliberately shake the comfortable assumptions of racial reconciliation of the Mandela era, Mbeki increasingly spoke of the continued threats posed by racism to South Africa's democracy. Asked on American television in July 1996 about the drop in the number of whites (from 70 per cent to about 34 per cent)who believed that race relations were good, Mbeki attributed that to the imperatives of change. He argued that one cannot just approach the process of transformation at the political level without addressing economic imbalances, and he continued: 'I would imagine that you would find whites who would be fearful of that kind of change' (http/www.pbs.org).

Speaking at the national conference held in preparation for the World Conference on Racism in 2001, Mbeki called on whites to become part of the movement against the continued existence of racism. He argued that 'despite our collective intentions, racism continues to be our bedfellow.' Mbeki has also made a practice of using his annual 'State of the Nation' address to Parliament to remind South Africans of the pernicious system of apartheid, and to use that as a benchmark for measuring social progress. In one of the most dramatic illustrations of the continued existence of racism, in his 2002 address Mbeki quoted an e-mail from an engineer who spoke about how the 'kaffirs had messed up the country.' The author spoke of black bastards and eerily complained that AIDS was not working fast enough to wipe out the black population. Mbeki concluded that:

> our successes in the struggle to move our country from apartheid to democracy have led many in our country to reach the premature conclusion that racism in South Africa is dead. This is despite the obvious and naked fact that to this day and unavoidably, the racial divisions, inequalities and prejudices of the past continue to characterise our society.

Responding to the speech, opposition members criticised the President for generalising from one incident to draw inferences about the general prevalence of racism in the country.

Mbeki's 2001 'State of the Nation' address had been more conciliatory. He called for 'unity in action for change' in the struggle to combat racism. He specifically mentioned white South Africans like Carl Niehaus who had

owned up to the past and the responsibilities which white privilege had brought with it. He specifically made mention of schools and white farmers who had volunteered their time to work in black communities. In more practical terms, Mbeki's government became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Crime of Apartheid, and Parliament passed legislation that made racial discrimination a crime. The legislation also actively promoted racial equality in the workplace.

The Mbeki presidency has thus been less concerned with appeasing whites than with redefining the terms of reconciliation towards the issues of transformation. If the earlier period of reconciliation was marked by what O'Meara described as 'a moment of absolution', the Mbeki approach has been characterised by calls for greater white responsibility.

The African nationalist/non-racialism debate

Mbeki's approach to race relations has occasioned an argument that he has been responsible for increasing racial hostility in the country. I differ with that assessment simply because whoever had taken power after the 'racial honeymoon' would, in the words of Sampson cited earlier, have had to 'burst that bubble' in confronting the vast disparities inherited from the apartheid era. But it is also important to locate the debate on Mbeki's approach to race within the context of the current race debate within the ANC. The role of whites has come up intermittently in the history of the ANC, and on occasions has led to splits within the organisation. One example was the breakaway of the PAC in 1959, another the expulsion of Tennyson Makiwane and the so-called 'gang of eight' from the ANC in 1975 for their opposition to the opening up of ANC membership to non-Africans (Ndebele 2002).

What these tensions, revolving around the shift away from an exclusive concept of nationalism to a more inclusive one, bore out was that, contrary to a widespread view (see Bernstein 1991; Frederikse 1990), non-racialism was a relatively late development in the history of the ANC, and it only came into full bloom in the late 1970s and 1980s (Ndebele 2002). This ascendancy of non-racialism brought to the fore a number of whites as equal and influential members of the ANC's leadership. For example, at the 1985 Kabwe conference of the ANC, Joe Slovo and Ronnie Kasrils were elected to the NEC. Likewise, inside South Africa throughout the 1980s and early 1990s non-racialism was the dominant philosophy of the ANC's internal allies, the UDF and the trade

union movement. These structures provided the organisational base of Mandela's *leitmotif* of non-racialist politics.

However, by 2000 the old battles between black nationalists and white liberals had resurfaced within the ANC, and in society more broadly. Perhaps taking their cue from Mbeki's more radical variant of Africanism, the SAHRC, under the leadership of former black consciousness activist Barney Pityana, launched an inquiry into racism in the media – perhaps one of the most publicly-contested arguments about race in the post-Mandela era. This exercise exposed South Africa's racial fault lines. Black editors supported the SAHRC's enquiry, while white editors, with few exceptions, opposed it as a witch-hunt and a threat to freedom of speech. Months earlier, Barney Pityana had, on public television, accused a prominent jurist, Dennis Davis, of being a racist. At about the same time, at the liberal-inclined Witwatersrand University (Wits), Deputy Vice Chancellor William Makgoba was embroiled in a struggle for the position of Vice Chancellor. The stakes were high as Makgoba repeatedly spoke of an Africanist vision for Wits. This did not go down well with some of the senior staff at the institution. The Makgoba affair became one of the ugliest incidents of racial conflict with accusations going back and forth between Makgoba's largely black supporters and his largely white opponents, led by history professor Charles van Onselen. The latter alleged that Makgoba had embellished his curriculum vitae (CV). Blacks, on the other hand, pointed to Makgoba's academic reputation and argued that the issue of the CV was merely being used as a ruse to stop a black person from taking over the institution. In a symbolic gesture of support at the time, Mbeki wrote the foreword to Makgoba's autobiography.

The racism debate extended to other domains of public life, including the sports field, where South African rugby and cricket teams continued to be mostly white in composition, leading to the government calling for racial quotas in the selection of provincial and national rugby squads. The symbolism of Mandela walking onto the pitch donned in a Springbok rugby shirt in 1995 had been replaced in five short years with calls for the racial transformation of the national team. Blacks argued that Mandela had gone out on a limb for rugby, and yet there had been no reciprocity from the white rugby fraternity. In cricket, there was controversy when the president of the game's governing body overruled his selection panel and replaced a white player with a young coloured player, Justin Ontong, in the test team to take on world champions Australia. Months later the self-same board, however,

announced an end to racial quotas in the selection of the national team, but backed down in the face of an attack by Sports Minister, Ngconde Balfour.

Such racial fault lines have also played themselves out in the schools and in the criminal justice system. In Vryburg in the mid-1990s, a black high school student, Andrew Babeile, was sentenced to a prison term for stabbing a white schoolmate whom he argued was being racist towards him. Yet, when white schoolboys at Bryanston High School attacked a black fellow pupil and damaged his eye, they were simply suspended and no charges were laid against them. These cases gave further credence to perceptions that the criminal justice system was still racially biased. Other incidents of racial violence include that of a white farmer who shot and killed a black baby on his mother's back because they were trespassing on his property; the white man who pulled a black man to death tied to the back of a van; and the group of white rugby players who beat Tsepo Matshoga to death. Most recently a group of Afrikaner right wingers belonging to an organisation known as the *Boeremag* were arrested for planting a series of bombs that rocked Soweto, killing one individual and disrupting public transportation in the township.

To be sure, there have also been racial incidents including black attacks on white farmers. Initially, these were politically motivated attacks associated with the military wing of the PAC. However, over time, these attacks seem to have become increasingly criminal in nature, with the PAC and farmers' groups sometimes forming joint patrols on farms.

Confronting denial

A high-water mark of the Mbeki presidency's anti-racism drive was the selection of South Africa as the site for a United Nations Conference Against Racism. This took place in 2001, but was preceded by a national conference on racism where leading black thinkers such as Barney Pityana, Patricia Williams and Pallo Jordan spoke. Jordan spoke directly to what he described as the problem of denial afflicting white society in the post-apartheid transition: 'Most white people say they are not responsible for apartheid. But they put the (whites only) Nationalist Party into government in 1948 and returned it to power again and again with a bigger majority until the late 1980s' (Racism Conference 31.09.2000). The issue of denial has increasingly become part of the discourse on race relations, with blacks seeking greater public acknowledgement of white complicity in apartheid. Some whites, organised under the

auspices of the 'Home To All Campaign', signed a statement acknowledging the benefits they had derived from apartheid, even as they had battled with the Government in their own lives. These whites included struggle veterans such as Carl Niehaus, jailed for 15 years; Albie Sachs, who lost an arm and eye in an assassination attempt by a South African security police hit squad; and veteran anti-apartheid campaigner, Beyers Naude. The campaigners did not, however, collect a large number of signatures, an indication perhaps of lethargy or apathy in the political culture of whites. Or perhaps it reflected a refusal in the white community to accept any responsibility for South Africa's recent past. Many white politicians lamented the focus on the past with programmes such as affirmative action being presented as reverse racism.

Such responses stem from the formulaic, symmetric formulations of racism in South Africa. Peller (1995) has examined the genealogy of the concept of non-racial integration within the history of enlightenment universalism of the eighteenth century. In this history, racism is seen as an irrational prejudice which manifests itself through discrimination based on an arbitrary quality – such as skin colour. And because any individual is capable of irrationality, reverse racism is also possible. Black calls for affirmative action are in that sense then seen as being as irrational as, for example, Verwoerd's suggestion that blacks are inferior to whites. They are simply the other side of the same Verwoerdian coin. To be sure, a number of white people have sought to transcend the limits of liberalism by reaching out to black communities in a non-patronising manner. In a newspaper article entitled 'White racists raise your hands', Carl Niehaus, former ANC MP and then-Ambassador to the Netherlands, urged white people to show humility and admit that they come from a racist past in which they benefited on the backs of blacks:

> the underlying implications of the lack of preparedness to accept, and confront oneself with, the full evil of and depravity of apartheid has become a stumbling block for continued transformation in South Africa. As long as the deep and unmitigated racism that was the heart and essence of apartheid is denied by a substantial part of the white community, it will become impossible for them to become part of the new South Africa. (*City Press* 02.10.02)

Despite such appeals it is still not clear which way the tide of white political culture will ultimately go – towards a greater appreciation of playing a more active role in ameliorating the historic injustices of apartheid in their name, or towards more absolution for the past.

The race factor in white politics

One of the earliest cracks in the rainbow imagery of the new democratic dispensation was provided by the NP's decision to leave the GNU. This was not necessarily an intentional attempt to break the spirit of racial reconciliation. After all, the NP did what most coalition partners do when they are uncomfortable with the policies of the majority party. However, the break had the effect of signaling a further racialisation of South African politics. For one thing, the withdrawal led to a sharp fall in share values on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, as well as a drop in the currency value of the Rand. This reflected the racial biases of the global financial community. Much the same thing had happened when Trevor Manuel became the first black Finance Minister in South African history.

In opposition, the NP seized on the issue of crime as the major public policy challenge facing the country. In everyday discourse blacks saw in this an attempt to depict black people as criminals and whites as the sudden victims of a lack of protection under the new black government. The message of crime reverberated around the world in newspaper headlines and television footage. Black people complained that they had been terrorised by criminals for ages without anyone as much as raising a voice about that, and that in the new era they still constituted the majority victims of crime. And yet the issue was represented as an onslaught on white South Africa.

No sooner had the NP entered the opposition space than it received a challenge for that space from the predominantly English-speaking liberal DP. The DP has its origins in the Progressive Party, which was formed in 1959 as a breakaway from the then official opposition party, the United Party. It later became the Progressive Federal Party. It established its credentials as a parliamentary opposition to the NP, first through the sole representation of Helen Suzman, and later under the charismatic leadership of Frederik van Zyl Slabbert.

The post-apartheid DP was under the leadership of Tony Leon. His ambition was for the DP to emerge as the official opposition after the second national elections in 1999. Leon argued that the DP had not sullied itself by going into the GNU. It had remained an independent and fierce critic of the government, and that was exactly the kind of opposition the ANC needed to confront. This hard-edged, confrontational style provided the essence of the DP's so-called 'fight back' campaign against the ANC. Leon's strident and uncompromising politics worked. It attracted white voters disillusioned with the NP's dalliance

with the ANC. They, as well as other liberals and conservative Afrikaners, joined the DP and turned it into South Africa's official opposition. Leon was unapologetic about the right-wing inflow into the DP. In an interview in July 1998 with the conservative *Focus* magazine, mouthpiece of the Helen Suzman Foundation, Leon described whites as a minority that was now being excluded under the new democracy. His party's strategy was to exploit the *gatvol* factor among these 'excluded' minorities, and then reach out to black voters.

The strategy worked. In the 1999 elections, the NNP suffered a tremendous setback, with its share of the vote dropping from 20 per cent in 1994 to seven per cent, while the DP's jumped from 1,7 per cent in 1994 to ten per cent. These gains notwithstanding, the ruling ANC still obtained a massive 66 per cent of the vote. With numbers so lopsided in favour of the ANC, it quickly became clear to the opposition that the best strategy was to come together, especially around municipal elections. To this end, the DP and NNP coalesced into the DA. The strategy worked to a degree and in the 2000 municipal elections the DA gathered about 25 per cent of the total vote. The ANC described the new alliance as a racist ploy to fight a black government at all costs, even labelling the DA's black chairman, Joe Seremane, as yet another bantustan leader (ANC statement 26.06.2000).

This accusation against Seremane was a reflection of what by 2001 was becoming a worrying trend within the governing party and within the debate on race. Increasingly, white critics of the government were being labelled as racists, and black critics as reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries. This name-calling happened particularly around the questioning of government's policies on HIV/AIDS and Zimbabwe. Even Jeremy Cronin, a longstanding member of the liberation movement who expressed some critical comments in an interview with an Irish journalist, was accused by ANC leaders of presenting himself as a white knight out to save the blacks in the ANC. He was eventually forced into an humiliating apology. Likewise, the respected black academic and immunologist Professor William Makgoba, whom Mbeki had backed in the leadership fight at Wits, was rebuked and harassed for his questioning of the HIV/AIDS dissidents who were advising government on its AIDS policy. Delivering The ZK Matthews Lecture at the University of Fort Hare on 12 October 2001, President Mbeki, in what was seen as an allusion to his HIV/AIDS stance, criticised those who sought to depict black people as germ carriers:

> And thus does it happen that others who consider themselves to be our leaders take to the streets carrying their placards, to demand that because we are germ carriers, and human beings of a lower order that cannot subject its passions to reason, we must perforce adopt strange opinions, to save a depraved and diseased people from perishing from self-inflicted disease.

What had started as a legitimate questioning of the racial assumptions of the reconciliation process had, by 2001, seemingly degenerated into a game of racial name-calling.

Conclusion: the limits of the reconciliation discourse

The post-apartheid discourse of racial reconciliation was perhaps necessary for the stable transition to democracy. Mandela's overtures and assurances to the white community worked insofar as they averted a white backlash, whether in the form of right-wing military revolt or just sheer lack of co-operation with the new regime. In that respect, South Africa has avoided the fate of some other settler-type colonies where the white colonists went so far as to rip out telephones and remove light bulbs before leaving for their mother countries. Even though a significant number of skilled white and Indian South Africans have emigrated since 1994, the great majority of non-African South Africans have stayed. The theme of reconciliation has also helped draw the favourable attention of the international community in a period when other societies in transition, such as some of those of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European bloc, were in chaos and engulfed in bloody conflict.

This politics of reconciliation is deeply lodged within the dominant motif of the ANC's politics, a motif that centres on the inclusion and accommodation of peoples of all races. It is of no small significance that the opening line of the ANC's most important policy document, the Freedom Charter, reads 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it black and white.' However, the ANC has never articulated the detailed terms of this political inclusiveness. O'Meara's description of Mandela's inaugural speech as 'a moment of absolution and unity the likes of which the country had not known since the first white settlement at the Cape 342 years ago' (1996: 414) is in that sense very apt. Even though Mandela himself became exasperated by the lack of co-operation and reciprocity from the white community, he remained true to his conception of reconciliation as reaching out to the white population.

Mbeki's departure from that model has had its pros and cons. He has tried to define or redefine the terms of reconciliation. The effect, however, has been that many whites regard this as a form of reverse racism. But, as Sampson noted in his biography of Nelson Mandela, this was an inevitable step in holding whites to account for the country's past history. However, Mbeki's otherwise legitimate transformative approach to reconciliation has been marred by the use of race as a shield against criticism. The challenge going forward is to come back to the very necessary issue of racial transformation without resorting to racial name-calling of opponents, black or white. Whether the NNP is the partner for putting the issues of race on the agenda or whether this is yet another case of 'a marriage made in hell' is still unclear. It will become clearer with time. As for the DA, it is interesting to note that it has shifted its rhetoric from the 'fight back' mode and now presents itself as a party for all the people. What its future role in race relations will be is uncertain.

The issue of racial reconciliation is still an open and vexed one, made more so by the struggle for power at various levels of government and the shifting nature of coalition politics. In some ways it could be argued that these struggles for political power with their cross-racial alliances are resulting in a lessening of racial tensions as individuals and political parties form coalitions around common issues. But race is also being used at times to buttress those in power and to mobilise sectarian interests. It remains an open question as to which way the absolutely necessary discourse on race and racism in South Africa will go in the years ahead.

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