



CONVERSATIONS@DIAKONIA
SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL CLIMATE: PROSPECTS FOR THE
FUTURE
ADDRESS BY LUKHONA MNGUNI

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DENIS HURLEY HALL

Chairperson of the Diakonia Council of Churches, Rev. Ian Booth;
Executive Director, Ms Nomabelu Mvambo-Dandala and your colleagues;
Leaders in the various strata of our society.

Guests, ladies and gentlemen, I greet you all.

We gather here 10 days before Oliver Reginald Tambo's birthday. He would be turning 100 years were he still alive. Rightfully so, the government called upon all of us to celebrate his centenary this year. The course of our liberation and in particular that of the African National Congress was anchored in the leadership of Tambo who served first as Acting President and then President of the ANC from 1967 when incumbent President Chief Albert Luthuli died until 1991 when the ANC held its first conference after the unbanning of political movements. Oliver Tambo became Secretary-General of the ANC in 1955 at the age of 38, an unimaginable occurrence in today's ANC politics of contestation among the aged. Tambo died on the 24 April 1993, two weeks after the assassination of Chris Hani, just only a year to the birth of a new democratic South Africa. These leaders whose footprints are engraved in the history of our anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, like many other activists who fought for South Africa's political freedom, never lived to see the breakthrough finally arrive. We remain privileged to know the vision they had for this country through the many speeches and writings they left for us to inherit.

The liberation vision as expressed by the ANC's then National Executive Committee (NEC) to its annual conference of 1955 was in the form of a summation of the Freedom Charter that had been adopted in 1955. The NEC stated that "the Charter is no patchwork of demands, no jumble of reforms. The ten clauses of the Charter cover all the aspects of the lives of the people. The Charter exposes the fraud of racialism and of minority government. It demands equal rights before the law, work and security for all, the opening of doors of learning and culture for all. It demands that our brothers in the Protectorates shall be free to decide for themselves their own future; it proclaims the oneness of our aims for peace and friendship with our brothers in Africa and elsewhere in the world." This NEC statement emphasised with great precision that the summation of the Freedom Charter was "the pattern of the new South Africa which must make a complete break with the present unjust system".

Have we made this complete break with the unjust system of the past? Are we still hooked in the tentacles of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid? More aptly asked, have we given value to the freedom we celebrate?

Understanding the nature of climate

Today I am asked to reflect on *South Africa's socio-political climate: prospects for the future*. Perhaps, it is important to understand what we mean by climate, firstly from the weather perspective. Wikipedia came to my rescue. Climate is defined as “the statistics of weather over long periods of time. It is measured by assessing the patterns of variation in temperature, humidity, atmospheric pressure, wind, precipitation, atmospheric particle count and other meteorological variables in a given region over long periods of time.” Long-term research on climate studies shows quite evidently that climate change is upon us and this conversation is couched under the popular term – global warming. For the longest time, humanity believed that climate changes only due to natural causes that are free of human action.

However, the evolved conversation is anchored on a debate that firmly focuses on human activity, calling for countries across the world to make commitments to enact policies that regulate their carbon emissions across industries. Carbon dioxide is part of greenhouse gases that give rise to global warming, but carbon emissions are most responsible – call them chief agents of climate change. NASA states that “carbon dioxide is a minor but very important component of the atmosphere, it is released through natural processes such as respiration and volcano eruptions and through human activities such as deforestation, land use changes, and burning fossil fuels. Humans have increased atmospheric CO₂ concentration by more than a third since the Industrial Revolution began. This is the most important long-lived "forcing" of climate change.”

In this climate change discourse there are sceptics who are naysayers influenced at times by lack of knowledge, material benefit in industries that are high emitters of carbon or a dogmatic fixation to a school of thought. All these three principal reasons for being climate change sceptics are perilous in nature. What for me is probably the most important question is: Have we done so much damage that global warming is now irreversible or there is room to improve? The answer probably is: if future generations are yet to inherit this world we might as well try our level best not to do more damage than we already have.

On the 10th of this month, Karima Brown posted an update on her Facebook that said “the storm in KZN foretells of things to come. Of court battles and such. It's on.” She must have been referring to the state of politics within the ruling party, where the centre of the party is no longer holding, with the National Executive Committee disabled from giving authoritative leadership that is fair and just. Members now seek recourse and refuge in the courts to adjudicate on what are internal political battles that can be resolved through the reestablishment of virtuous politics. What Karima Brown must have been saying is that there is a political storm fast approaching. Does our socio-political climate indicate this? We have already learned that we need to be historical and longitudinal in our analysis in order to arrive at a fair judgment on the state of climate. Thus, we must probe past events to arrive at a determination about South Africa's socio-political climate today.

The chief agent of socio-political climate change in contemporary South Africa is the ANC. It is for this reason that much of my talk will keep touching on the ANC, its prominence is pervasive. The ANC's presence in the country's political landscape is highly dominant and was on the rise from the 1994 elections until 2009 elections. Since then, the party has been experiencing electoral decline that shockingly, in August 2016, culminated in the party losing a decisive majority in four metropolitan municipalities; Tshwane, Johannesburg, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay. When some trumpeted that the ANC would be in power until Jesus comes, they could never have imagined such a reality. Of course that very statement was undemocratic. In a multiparty democracy, it is not only imaginable but desirable for power to change hands and see high political competition built on tolerance for dissent as that multiplies the set of ideas to move the country forward. As far back as March 2005, then COSATU Secretary-General Zwelinzima Vavi uttered these words, "Any effort to stop Jacob Zuma from becoming president would be like "trying to fight against the big wave of the tsunami". When Zuma finally emerged as president in the Polokwane Conference of 2007, his supporters reiterated "Zuma is an unstoppable tsunami". I doubt they imagined the scale and magnitude of this tsunami. Perhaps, they thought that this tsunami derives its powers from their support and they could be able to tame and control it. Clearly not. Much like with the effects of global warming, we must just live with the consequences as our past actions that have led us to this environmental catastrophe are irreversible. We can only bank on our future actions. Is it too late? Perhaps we are to be hit by many political storms before we realise the magnitude of our past mistakes.

How did we invite a political tsunami into our shores?

As with climate change discussions, there were naysayers influenced at times by lack of knowledge on how to read politics and see through political wolves in sheep skin. There were those who were chasing material benefit through proximity to state resources as they would be strategically placed if they supported the tsunami. Some adopted a dogmatic fixation with their dislike for Thabo Mbeki and his leadership leading them to place ahead their feelings beyond rationality, hoping that they would be able to tame the tsunami not to be devastating and control it not to last beyond one term and now some are busy trying to control it not to last beyond a second term. These miscalculations were only made possible by the suspension of reason, compromising principles and prioritising narrow factional agendas that placed party politics above the public good. People knowingly took a gamble by championing an undeserving candidate to the top seat – one that should be most sacred in a constitutional democracy and entrusted to the most deserving of people. Only the best among us should occupy that seat. Instead, many used their shortcomings as a standard of judgment for entry to the job of the president. It was as if the reasoning was that the one who is a sum total of our shortcomings must lead us; so that we may continue to be weak, deliberately fallible, corrupt, inept, unprofessional, nepotistic etc. without consequences, without accountability and with absolutely no harm to ourselves for the damage we would do to the country.

Very quickly after the rise of the tsunami, the clouds of a political storm began to gather at a distant horizon. In the last few years the clouds have been visibly upon us, with sounds of thunder heavily drumming over us indicating the magnitude of the political tsunami that is about to wreak havoc in our country. Some people believe

that we are past the worst, I believe it will be some time before the end, especially if society continues to respond with passivity as it has thus far. The first problem when wanting to take political action are the naysayers who downplay the crisis, thus dividing public opinion to the point of having the majority siding with those who commit wrong to society. In October 2008 former president Thabo Mbeki wrote a public letter to president Jacob Zuma warning him about the rise of a personality cult in the ANC. In that letter Mbeki mentioned many leaders he had worked with in the liberation struggle, the likes of Mark Shope, Leslie Massina, Duma Nokwe, Moses Mabhida, Frances Baard, Lilian Ngoyi, Walter Sisulu, Gertrude Shope, Govan Mbeki, Julius Nyerere, Ruth Matseoane, Sam Nujoma, Fish Keitsing, Kate Molale, Ahmed Kathrada, Mpho Motsamai, Bram and Molly Fischer and many others. He then stated that he had mentioned these leaders to “make essential and crucial points, central to the value system of our movement and struggle, that none of these heroes or heroines ever sought adulation in any manner that would turn them into cult figures. They never did anything, nor did we act in any way as we grew up in the liberation movement, which would result in our movement being enslaved in the cult of the individual.” In short, Mbeki was reaffirming the decades’ long belief that no one individual is above the ANC.

Fikile Mbalula wrote to Mbeki in April 2009 with the greatest and most stinging venom, accusing Mbeki of betraying the ANC in how he had managed the whole issue of corruption and fraud charges around Zuma. According to him Mbeki had used “actions of conniving, manipulating people and advancing politics of patronage.” Mbalula told Mbeki that “Mandela handed you a vibrant and united ANC, yet at the twilight of your Presidency, you chose to betray everything that Mandela and those that came before him stood for, struggled for, and laid down their lives for. In a moment of intoxication with power, you forgot Madiba’s wise counsel and allowed our glorious movement to stumble on the edge of an abyss.” If indeed then the ANC was stumbling on the edge of an abyss, it has now arrived at the abyss. Mbalula’s words were almost premised on a belief that under Jacob Zuma there would be changing fortunes for the ANC in how it will be managed and how state institutions will be used for the advancement of people’s power and prosperity. Either he was wrong or he deliberately misled the public knowing full well the individual he was supporting in Zuma.

In 2014 I came to the unfortunate conclusion that Zuma had become bigger than the ANC. In an article I wrote I charged that:

“Whilst it remains true that organisations can outlive individuals, it is also true that individuals are responsible for the demise of organisations. Zuma has presided over a weakening ANC. The ANC has weakened intellectually, politically and morally. It has become a party for wealth accumulation instead of a tool to politically educate society and govern it with distinct integrity. Hangers on of history want us to believe that there remains nobility in the doings of the present day ANC comparable to those of selfless service during the dark days of struggle.

There are members of the ANC that have noble intentions, that want to see the country governed properly, that want to see the ANC regain its moral and credibility standing in society. These members are shut out and marginalised because the current ruling elite of the party is an antithesis of that. The broad membership of the ANC does not have control over this state of affairs, even if they may be delusional to believe otherwise.”

It is this loss of control by the broad membership over its organisation that has further fermented the socio-political crisis that confronts South Africa. In 2012 Reuel Khoza had concisely captured the problem that was confronting South Africa. Writing in Nedbank's annual report as its chairman he remarked, "Our political leadership's moral quotient is degenerating and we are fast losing the checks and balances that are necessary to prevent a recurrence of the past. We have a duty to build and develop this nation and to call to book the putative leaders who, due to sheer incapacity to deal with the complexity of 21st century governance and leadership, cannot lead."

"South Africa is widely recognised for its liberal and enlightened Constitution, yet we observe the emergence of a strange breed of leaders who are determined to undermine the rule of law and override the Constitution." It was Gwede Mantashe and Blade Nzimande who responded with great venom towards Khoza. Mantashe said "Any view expressed in the Nedbank annual report is based, at best, on the sympathy one has with those who throw stones at the ANC." The Secretary-General of the ANC in 2012 must have felt that these stones thrown at the ANC were unwarranted because he belonged in the majority faction. Nzimande charged that "Khoza's comments were built on the "media-backed liberal offensive" to discredit the ANC's leadership, targeting particularly President Jacob Zuma." It would be these types of criticisms by the likes of Khoza and others that made Nzimande to even call for a piece of legislation that would protect the president from insults.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu had just in 2011 sent a passionate and heartfelt warning to the leadership of the ANC after the government had refused the Dalai Lama a visa to attend Tutu's birthday celebrations. The Arch said, "Mr. Zuma, you and your Government don't represent me. You represent your own interest and I am warning you. I really am warning you out of love. I'm warning you like I warned the Nationalists. I am warning you. One day, we will start praying for the defeat of the ANC Government. You are disgraceful. I want to warn you. You are behaving in a way that is totally at variance with the things for which we stood. I am warning you. I am warning you that we will pray as we prayed for the downfall of the Apartheid Government. We will pray for the downfall of a Government that misrepresents us. You have got a huge majority. That's nothing. The Nationalists had a huge majority that was increasing. They bit the dust. Watch out, ANC Government. Watch out. Watch out. Watch out." Tutu's forthrightness with the truth had earned him these comments from Bheki Cele in July 2011, "Tutu must go home and shut up. He must remember one thing: He must follow Jesus and Jesus advises all of us. He is not a vice-Jesus Christ, he is not a deputy Jesus Christ." Cele had previously attacked Desmond Tutu in 2006 while speaking to a crowd of Zuma supporters outside the Pietermaritzburg High Court. The crowd, organised among others by then ANC KwaZulu-Natal's secretary Senzo Mchunu, was out to show support to Zuma during his application to have his corruption case thrown out of court.

Why have I been at pains to recount these contemporary history events? We cannot arrive at the diagnosis of present day South Africa's socio-political climate without undertaking a thorough reading of past events, understanding challenges confronted and opportunities missed to rectify the challenges. Today, our democracy is in crisis. In the three arms of the state it is only the judiciary that is holding ground and playing its role meaningfully, as envisaged in our constitution. An imminent threat is the possibility to have the judiciary politicised by having issues that should be resolved in

the arena of politics relentlessly taken to court because of the dysfunctional nature of our political space, be it within political parties or in institutions such as parliament. Already, we hear this discourse that politicises the courts through such remarks as “judicial overreach” and “lawfare”. Thus, even if the courts are making rulings grounded in law, the popular narrative in the public is driven by attempts to accuse the courts of being politically biased and serving the interests of an opposition that is already accused of lawfare and forcing to govern through the courts. A missed point here is that if the governing party were holding the executive accountable in parliament some of these court cases would be unnecessary. Instead of accepting responsibility for its shortcomings, the leadership of the ruling party plays victim and begins to find a villain in our courts. This is a toxic emergence that must be nipped in the bud by society confirming the role of our courts and encouraging that the arena of politics be restored to its rightful place.

The legislature and the executive have been co-opted into our present day’s political syndicate operations, by virtue of the ANC’s overwhelming presence in these institutions. In turn, the ANC has been hijacked by the political syndicate led by the president and the Guptas. They stripped the ANC of its central authority as the political leader of society by removing power from Luthuli House to Saxonwold where the Gupta compound is found. In today’s language we call this state capture. We might be impugning the integrity of this concept. State capture is not inherently bad. What can be bad are the motives that drive state capture. As a concept, politics is about capturing state power in order to implement a positive and emancipatory developmental vision. The Public Protector recognised this injustice committed to the concept of state capture and instead chose to title her report *State OF Capture*. What has been captured? The political project has been hijacked, captured and redefined to serve a clique of people that have turned our state coffers into a zama-zama scheme. Imagine a pyramid scheme, at first there are many people that benefit, they throw in a lot of money expecting greater returns. Slowly, people get caught that they are part of the pyramid scheme, in a mad rush some people try to disassociate with the actions of those that remain in charge. Those at the top of the zama-zama scheme are always coining the money until it is time they realise they are about to get caught upon which they fold the operations and flee as fugitives from justice into lands unknown. This is how things are most likely to end for those running the current political syndicate. Let us be bold to state that the socio-political climate in South Africa points to a crisis that is political in nature and leadership in particular.

The problem of our time

If we understand climate as “the prevailing trend of public opinion or of another aspect of life” we then realise that currently in South Africa we have a public opinion of saints and sinners. Among those who are saints today we count the likes of Vavi, Cele, Mchunu, Ramphosa, Sisulu, Mantashe, Nzimande, Zweli Mkhize, Jeff Radebe, Matthews Phosa and many others who ushered in the political tsunami that is wreaking havoc in our political landscape. These saints have earned their title not because they have repented but because they appear to have committed less sin by breaking away from what is viewed as the biggest sinner. Of course the community of faith that Diakonia associates with sees all sins as being equal and all sinners are called upon to repent and change course of their ways. It is always possible that some

people will pretend to have repented, only to gain access, through performed righteousness, to state resources and serve the interests of their own friends, family and allied comrades. This time needs us to exercise the greatest public scrutiny on these new found saints.

Most of these leaders who now want to lead the ANC supported president Zuma, some hoping to use him to relaunch their political careers that had vanished. Cyril Ramaphosa must have been a willing participant in Mangaung when he was made deputy president, knowing full well that he was being used by Zuma to have someone next to him who is palatable to the markets. Ramaphosa must have used Zuma hoping to relaunch his political career and fulfil longstanding ambitions of desiring to become president of South Africa. Those ambitions had been dashed when Mbeki became Mandela's Deputy President. Of course in light of the formation of the new elites in post-apartheid South Africa we must ask the necessary question on whether or not a Ramaphosa president would not be an instance of "out with the Guptas and in with the Motsepes". Ramaphosa is in the top 15 richest people in South Africa, according to Forbes. Patrice Motsepe, the richest black person in the country, is Ramaphosa's brother-in-law. Jeff Radebe, another of today's saints in the ANC, is also Motsepe's brother-in-law. The making of elites is often around complex familial ties and these elites tend to influence the operations of the state through having trusted people in key positions of power in government in order to influence the regulatory frameworks of certain industries they are to do business in. We must then ask how we see the Motsepe family and avoid having the replacement of white elites with black elites that will still hold economic wealth for the preserve and benefit of a few in society – continuing our levels of inequality.

Over the past weekend Gwede Mantashe captured very well the problem with the saints vs. sinners debate. He was responding to Lindiwe Sisulu who had accused him of failing to keep the ANC intact. Mantashe said, "We have six NEC members who all want to be president. It is the same NEC that should have held the ANC intact, but all are contesting each other." In simple terms, from the current leadership, Mantashe is saying, none is better than the other when for the longest time they have been taking collective responsibility protecting the president and other decisions of the NEC that have torn the ANC apart and weakened it as a political force. In Mantashe's remarks we can conclude that those who have been responsible for tearing up the ANC cannot be trusted with such an arduous task of rebuilding the movement. In this moment we reach a conclusion that South Africa's socio-political climate has been visited by a tsunami and the chief agent of this political climate change is the ANC itself in its entirety. For this reason, the continued emission (growth) of the ANC has become undesirable for the road ahead.

Are we ready to imagine a South Africa beyond the ANC in power?

Perilous politics of the ANC have defocused national discourse from pertinent development issues. We should be occupied by innovative discussions that centre people and find solutions to the various challenges of poverty, unemployment, poor education, violence, underdevelopment and economic deprivation that confronts them. Economically we are faced with a crisis. Underperforming state owned enterprises that are unable to repay their loans without government scrambling around

as the guarantor are a major threat that could trigger an economic downgrade into junk status at any moment if our creditors demand repayments en masse. Our public debt has increased as a percentage of GDP from 27.8% in 2008 to about 52% as we gather here in 2017, it has almost doubled in 10 years. We have been living beyond our means. This growing public debt coupled with a leadership that lacks vision and foresight to put us on a recovery path could act as an albatross that undermines prospects for a better life for all in years to come. We may have to see ourselves having to cut down on social spending to service this debt, meaning delivering even worse public goods than we do today. Education, health, water and sanitation, housing, all key fundamental human rights along with social security are at risk as our economy continues to struggle with little prospects for high growth coupled with a rising unemployment crisis. The perilous socio-political climate that we are caught up in makes it impossible for us to imagine a way out of this myriad of issues that could lead to social implosion, reversing years of what we thought was freedom but has not been given adequate meaning.

In times of such uncertainty, it is when dictatorial regimes tend to emerge under the guise of unifying the country. I have genuine fear that we might not have elections in 2019 if the president chooses not to call the elections and unilaterally prolongs his stay in power, especially if his preferred candidate loses in the upcoming ANC national conference. That is if that conference itself sits and produces a credible outcome. I am also uncertain that our legal framework would be capable to deal with such defiance from the president. How do we anticipate such possible devastations and act to prevent them now, when we still have time? Dictators across the world tend to live comfortably in the midst of poverty.

We must fight to rebuild this country today for the sake of humanity, to prevent another crime against humanity from occurring in our shores. Any political system that would lead to mass migration is a threat to humanity as that destitution would be worse than the current state wherein 55.5% of our population was said to be in poverty by 2015, living under R992 per person per month. According to Stats South Africa this means about 30.4-million South Africans were living in poverty in 2015.

Much like with the global warming debacle, the reason why it is difficult to find a common course of action is because the elites are not in agreement about the nature of the crisis and the remedy necessary. I propose that the time to look beyond the ANC in South Africa's political landscape has arrived. The present day ANC has demonstrated an inability to listen to veterans; it has an allergic reaction to the truth from religious leaders; it has long cast thinkers and intellectuals to the shadows and it has defined civil society and popular movements fighting for social justice as entities possibly leading a colour revolution sponsored by foreign powers. However, our elites in politics, business, civil society, religious institutions, academia and elsewhere are not in agreement on this point. While they continue to fight over this the country remains in ruins and edges closer to irreversible crisis.

People have made an intellectual realisation that the ANC as a political project has reached a cul-da-sec. Emotionally they struggle to make this break and it is this irrational loyalty that serves as a base for the ANC to continue its politics in scavenging. In society, the majority of black people were politically demobilised as far back as 1994 when "one of our own" took over, we retreated to our homes to

enjoy the fruits of freedom as our leaders would give us the best life envisaged. Little did we know that this would lead to great social distance and eventually lead to a trust deficit between leaders and society as leaders abused the trust placed in them by people. People now need to regather themselves and fight back for their country.

What should be the role of the church? Rev. Dr. Mvume Dandala put it aptly in his opening remarks in May 2014 at the opening of the Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary Review Meeting. He said,

“Historical writer after historical writer recognises the undisputable role that the Christian Church played in the formation of these titans [who changed the course of history towards liberation]. (cf. Andre Odendaal – The Founders - The Origins of the ANC and the struggle for Democracy in South Africa; jacana Media 2012) For the church to play this role requires a twin role: viz. that of producing Church leaders who will lead a church that is an asset to the future of the nation and secondly to produce men and women whose passion for a society that embraces the virtues of justice and righteousness knows no bounds. This process must forge these men and women in a furnace of formation that will leave them with such inner power as will not bend in the face of pressure to deviate from these values and virtues. Project nation building is unremitting in its demands for clarity of vision of what the “promised land” must be, for strength of will to pursue that vision and for capacity for bold and creative leadership that is the hallmark of those with the task of bringing the vision of the promised land to fruition.”

These leaders exist in our society but not in a critical mass. Let us continue to build such leaders that will advance the cause of social justice, for the emancipation of all people in our country.

I thank you,