POLITICS OF RACE & MULTICULTURALISM

"A supreme irony asserts itself in post-apartheid South Africa: the funeral of formal apartheid has been accompanied by the increasing legitimacy of ethno-racialism. An anti-apartheid government that extols a colour-blind non-racialism as its core ideology is nonetheless confronted with renewed ethnic consciousness. The struggle against ethnicising apartheid was to herald a "raceless" society. Its alleged triumph has to come to terms not only with the historical legacy of racial indoctrination but also with renewed ethno-racial claims for differential entitlement." ¹

As you all know, before 1994 South Africa was internationally notorious for apartheid. Declared a crime against humanity by the United Nations, this state-sponsored system of racial domination excluded the majority of its citizens from the state's resources. ² Intent on shedding the past, South Africans united around the slogan "forward to a non-racial non-sexist democracy". And on the 27th April 1994 determined to embrace the new democratic order, South Africans celebrated their liberation as the "rainbow nation" of God! (an appellation coined by Archbishop Tutu and readily adopted by all).

¹ Now that we are free, p. 116
² Of SA's 43 million people, 4,5 m are white; 3,8m are coloured, 1,1m are Asian (most Indian) in origin. The majority is black.
Seven years into our new democracy the prognosis for a society free from racial conflict seems remoter today than it seemed under President Mandela's rule. While Mandela focused on a healing nation, President Mbeki consistently speaks of South Africa as "two nations" to castigate whites for the widening gulf between the rich and poor, rich meaning white, and poor referring to the majority of blacks who bear the brunt of homelessness, inferior education and unemployment. Under such circumstances, the easiest trick in the book to deflect attention from more urgent development concerns is to racialise politics.

In every state of the nation address, at every political rally, President Mbeki gives primacy to the struggle against racism over more urgent development priorities. His unstinting support for the Human Rights Commission's (HRC) government-inspired anti-racism programme is a case in point. As a statutory body, independent of government, the HRC should be driving its own national plan of action. It has however failed to come up with a credible plan of action and has decided instead to push the government's agenda to legitimise its own existence.

The easiest way to educate the public against racial discrimination is to take test cases to court and to set legal precedents as an instant lesson against racism. Instead, the HRC has indulged in unconstitutional tactics to coerce institutions to support their anti-racism campaign. The first such display, that backfired horribly on the HRC, was the serving of subpoenas on media editors for charges of subliminal racism, a complaint brought to the HRC by the Black Lawyer's Association (political handmaiden of the ruling party). Despite the adverse publicity the HRC received nationally and internationally, the ANC continued to support and defend them as exemplified in a parliamentary debate at the time. It also signaled to the world the extent to which the government was prepared to go in their campaign to intimidate a free and independent press and support the HRC's witch-hunt against individual journalists in the media.

A racially divided media has also done its fair share in aiding and abetting the state's political agenda by their incessant labeling of any crime against blacks as hate crimes. While many of these crimes are purely criminal in intent and affect all citizens equally regardless of race, the state continues to racialise crimes causing further division. Race crimes do occur and should be dealt with as such in accordance with the law. The systematic murders against farmers, however, have not received similar attention even though
studies indicate that the murders are politically motivated. Adding fuel to the fire, the president has consistently appealed to whites to apologise for the sins of the past undermining his own government's negotiated settlement and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in fostering reconciliation. Subsequently, the "Home for All Campaign" was initiated by a few whites calling on fellow whites to apologise for having benefited from apartheid. This campaign backfired unexpectedly as debates for and against exploded in the media. If anything, this campaign was extremely divisive, and did very little to unite the nation.

Contrary to a survey conducted in 1993 and 1994 that indicated that the public was more concerned about unemployment, the economy, and violence than with racism, the never-ending attention to racism has provoked strong feelings among South Africans. The invitation to host the United Nations Conference on Racism in August in Durban at an estimated cost of R100 million, has become a matter of great concern to the public given that a limited amount of money is allocated to AIDS prevention. This Conference is a sequel to the National Conference on Racism convened by the HRC two years ago that also cost the taxpayers a lot of money. The logic of spending money on conferences that yield very little materially has annoyed the public immensely. One would have thought that in a country where over 4.7 million people are infected with HIV/AIDS, where healthcare is rapidly deteriorating and where more than 25% of the population is unemployed, that the focus on racism would be of secondary importance.

Race relations today, with a few exceptions, are relatively good in spite of our racist past. Mandela has done much to foster reconciliation between the ethno-racial groupings in SA. He has taken white business bosses across the country entreating them to invest in the development of the country. Millions of Rands have subsequently been donated by big business to build schools and clinics in the rural areas. There is an enormous amount of goodwill among citizens across racial gulfs as exemplified by the many good development projects that exist across the country.

Racism does exist and the racists will always be among us. To hold up one sector as more racist than another is to exacerbate the problem. The assumption that blacks cannot be racist has also bedevilled race relations even further. The recipe for successful anti-racism education however is to

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3 Since 1997 2922 farmers have been attacked and 512 have been murdered with very cases having been solved or given high priority.
legislate and prosecute where racial discrimination occurs. Using it as a 
mobilising tool to garner votes is destructive and can be very counter-
productive to nation-building as demonstrated in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, India 
and many other countries.

On the question of race/racism, government speaks with forked tongue. The 
calls for "nation-building" by the President and his party are simultaneously 
dermined by their constant racialisation of those who dare to criticise. The 
official opposition is incessantly held up as a party protecting white interests 
and privilege when race often has nothing to do with their criticism of 
government. Accusations of racism are also used to silence dissent and 
independent thought. When blacks criticise government, they are simply 
dismissed as disloyal and traitors. The defective implementation of 
affirmative action has benefited just a small black elite resulting in all kinds 
of backlashes from different groupings. Professionals from minority groups 
are emigrating in vast numbers simply because they feel that they nor their 
children stand a fair chance of getting decent jobs in a country where 
employment equity simply means employment for blacks and women 
merely on the basis of race and not competence as well. And so when 
coloured people of the Western Cape voted overwhelmingly for the 
opposition party in the last election, they did so simply to protest their 
exclusion from the government's project of nation building. For exercising 
their vote, coloured people were once again labeled racist and anti-African. 
Pathologised by politicians as schizophrenic for not having been white 
Enough in the past and not black enough for the present government they 
have been accused of political treachery. One such politician even threatened 
to deny services to coloureds and Indians for voting for other parties.

All of these accusations do not adequately explain the voting behaviour of 
people who are consistently categorised as marginal to South African 
politics. Conferences have been held and reams of soul-searching papers 
have been written to try and explain this phenomenon. In the absence of 
sound anthropological research, allow me to summarise some of the views 
of our sociologists in this regard.

Wilmot James a leading sociologist in our country rejects the assertion that 
coloureds are pro-white because of some shared affinity with whites and 
racist towards Africans. According to him coloured people are "no more and 
no less racist than any other South Africans". He claims that their vote was 
issue-driven and not based on loyalty to any party. Those who label
coloureds and Indians as traitors do not distinguish between loyalty towards a democratic state (considered an act of sedition if undermined) and loyalty towards a political party (a constitutional right). He concludes that to talk of the coloured people as an intact ethno-racial group with its own identity in terms of biology, language, culture and so on is to repeat the mistake of the apartheid masters. Coloured people in microcosm are as heterogeneous as the South African nation in its entirety and their vote can be explained in those terms.

Jeremy Seekings a sociologist from the University of Cape Town concurs with this view. Using the results from a range of opinion polls he suggests that the coloured vote during the transition period is not unlike voting behaviour in former Central and East-European countries. The working class voters support for the National Party, and the support of the educated elite for the African National Congress merely reflect historical and cultural patterns of voting behaviour during periods of political transition. As a minority group that feels marginalised it did not have the opportunity like white and black people to be socialised into party identification and that time will tell if this will change in future.

Herman Giliomee's politically incorrect interpretation needs some attention because it attempts a more nuanced explanation of events before and after the election. He argues that since coloured people benefited from state resources under the tricameral parliament of 1983, their support for the National Party came as no surprise:  

"[It] is clear that they made major social and economic advances during these years under NP rule. Far from being a sham, the tricameral parliament for whites, coloured people and Indians built a significant number of houses and schools and improved pensions for these groups - and for coloured in particular."  

He further notes that the infant mortality and life expectancy rates of coloured people under National Party rule suggest that they were beneficiaries of apartheid more than was evidenced for blacks during the same period. Giliomee asserts that "in elections, although people bear their particular economic and class concerns in mind, they usually look through

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4 This was an attempt by the apartheid state to co-opt non-blacks into government.
5 Now that we are Free, p. 96.
6 Ibid, p.97.
an ethnic or community prism when choosing a party to advance their interests’ hence the term ‘the coloured vote’ regardless of the class differences within that group.

Clearly, what is needed is a more thorough analysis of the cultural, historical and political discourses of minority groups to explain voting patterns. I suspect that such a study will reveal a more sophisticated understanding of why people vote the way that they do. Nevertheless, it seems clear from current events in SA that the uses of terms such as non-racialism, rainbowism, and multi-culturalism have not had the unifying effect on the public as politicians had hoped. The use of this terminology by the ruling party tends to neutralise any sense of cultural and ethnic identification people appropriate to assert who they are in a free and open society. Adam and Moodley warned early on in our new democracy that:

"South African non-racialism should not mean indifference to the culture and values of the majority: a culture-neutral South African State would lose its meaning for Africans. But neither can South Africa impose majority symbols of values on skeptical minorities. Nation-building in the exclusive image of the majority (Africanisation) would alienate minorities and conjure up images of cultural totalitarianism." 7

Giliomee concurs with this sentiment:

"Imperialistic non-racialism fosters and conceals the African demand for power and control of the widest range of political and social institutions. It is at the same time a rejection of any mobilisation by ethnic minorities or communities to advance their own ethnic or communal claims and interests. It is Jacobin in that it is prepared to use state resources, particularly in the fields of education, communication and language policy, to weaken ethnic or communal affiliations in order to create space for the new non-racial (read African-led, non-ethnic) nation to be born." 8

The instrument used to achieve this imperialism is an affirmative action policy that favours Africans above all other previously disadvantaged groups

7 ibid, p 111.
8 Ibid, p 95.
such as the Indians and coloureds. Unfortunately in the new SA the hierarchy of oppression determines the differential slicing of the cake. And so, what we see is the deployment of ANC cadres occupying leading positions within the state, the private sector, the parliamentary statutory commissions and parastatal institutions. The demand that all organisations reflect the national demographics of the country ensures an African dominance that is tantamount to an African preferential policy regardless. It comes as no surprise therefore when the much-invoked notion of Africanisation is seen as exclusive to Africans and despised by other minority groups.

"Non-racialism", "africanisation" and "nation-building" as used by the ruling party tend to gloss over the realities of race, class, ethnic, gender and regional divisions. This comes to the fore especially at celebrations of political holidays where the cultural and ethnic symbols of the majority become the point of reference. Rarely are the names of heroes from other ethno-racial groups invoked in public celebrations evoking a lot of resentment from minority groups against the ruling elite. And so it comes as no surprise when Coloured and Indian people overwhelmingly voted against the ruling party in the 1999 elections. So, instead of unifying the nation, these terms tend to perpetuate ethno-racial divisions.

A caveat by Stuart Hall is worth noting:

"When we constitute an identity which leaves some voices more marginal and leaves some voices out, that which is excluded almost always picks itself up off the floor, gets itself together, and walks around to the back door, breaks a window and comes back in. It comes back in to trouble the fixed, settled, well-ordered structure of who-is-in and who-is-out. Be careful that in that moment of constituting the us we don't forget to hear the them. Who is the them being left out? Who is in the margin? Who is excluded? The excluded are'nt going to be excluded all the time! They are going to come back and trouble the way in which we are trying to organise and classify the world."  

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9 Black was an inclusive terms appropriated by all formerly oppressed groups, ie. Coloureds, Indians and Africans.
How does SA proceed with a “nation-building” that is inclusive of all the different sectors of our society?

Should we adopt a policy of multiculturalism that officially recognises all ethno-racial and cultural groups as equal in place of enforced nation-building that underplays ethnic and cultural particularities?

Is a multiculturalism that extends equality of opportunity to all through education, health care, employment, etc possible in SA in place of a system of differential apportioning of resources on the basis of ethno-racial and group ranking?

The tendency to reject concepts like Africanisation, non-racialism, nation-building as a unifying force is strongest when it is used to advantage the majority of Africans over every other minority group through affirmative action that is differentially applied. Secondly, non-nationalistic minorities know from the history of post-independent countries that those formerly oppressed make bad democrats, hence the tendency to distrust totalising concepts such as africanisation and non-racialism. The adoption of such concepts goes hand in hand with the tendency to centralise power and to erode parliamentary oversight over the executive. The skepticism therefore that our constitutional democracy and individual rights will guarantee equality is strong. Somehow "the appeal and gratification that a mobilised imagined community affords" seems to be the only solution to equal participation in the political economy of South Africa, hence voting takes place along ethno-racial lines.

Adam & Moodley suggest that a possible answer to a more equitable distribution of the state's resources lie in the de-nationalisation of the state. State-building instead of nation-building could inspire the development of a non-nation nation. Through an organised system of federalism and decentralisation ethno-racial and cultural diversity are likely to be accommodated more fairly and justly than in a centralised state. The policy document of the United Nations third "World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance" reinforces this view. It recommends that if all groups are to feel a sense of belonging, representation, and a shared interest in the decision-making process then it is imperative to follow the guidelines spelt out below.
1. A system of proportional representation, party coalitions, decentralisation, reserved seats for minorities, are all arrangements that will ensure the fair representation of ethno-racial and cultural groups in parliament and government.

2. The elimination of racial discrimination requires a competent, neutral, responsive and accountable law enforcement agencies. A racially biased criminal justice system and police force, that gives preferential treatment to certain individuals, is counter-productive and may exacerbate race relations instead of improving them.

3. Statutory bodies such as human rights commissions, commissions for racial equality and so on should be independent in the monitoring racial discrimination to ensure justice and fairness. Unless such bodies are given search and seizure powers they will remain mediating bodies with limited power.

South Africa as a signatory to this document is guilty on all scores and should heed its own advice. South Africa’s local authorities are extremely underdeveloped and they find it very difficult to deal with a centralised state that tends to punish them for being governed by a party other than the ruling party. The criminal justice system in SA is wracked by allegations of corruption and racism. Unless law enforcement agencies are impartial and just, they will cease to be effective if perceived to be partial and inept. Thirdly, the statutory bodies provided for in the Constitution have firmly been co-opted by the government and have no credibility as independent autonomous institutions, hence their ability to monitor human rights violations has become highly suspect with the public.

Unless government takes these recommendations seriously, all the political dust kicked up by President Mbeki about racial concerns is nothing but a threat to turn racist rage to his advantage when the need arises. This is exactly what Mugabe does.
REFERENCES


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3. “The Devil Who Keeps Promises” by Wilmot James


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