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CAN SOUTH AFRICA MOVE BEYOND RACE?

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Introduction

Four years after South Africa's 'miracle transition' to democracy, the euphoria born in April 1994 has dissipated somewhat, and the 'rainbow' is fading at the edges. South Africa appears more racially charged now than at any time since democracy was achieved. Short on the heels of the racial fiasco at Vryburg High School, allegations of racial divisions within the South African Police Services, the conflict between white-led rugby and the government, and the Toks van der Linde incident in Australia, comes the senseless murder of baby Angelina. This begs the question: At what point can South Africa move beyond race?

The Colour Line in Comparison

WEB DuBois called 'the problem of the colour line' the pivotal question for the 20th century.¹ Evaluations about human worth and potential based on superficial characteristics such as colour or race continue to undermine democratic systems, impede development, waste human talent, create social problems, and bar the creation of just societies. With the end of DuBois's fateful century approaching, the *Comparative Human Relations Initiative* considered it opportune to launch an international 'conversation' on race issues, with the hope that better understanding will ensure that the next century does not inherit this taint. Consequently, the *Initiative* organised a series of international consultations² to examine inter-group relations in South Africa, Brazil and the United States to share information about strategies and policies to improve race relations.

As the issue of race relations could be explored through the comparison of any number of countries, the focus on South Africa, the US and

Brazil requires justification. Each of the respective countries:

- has a democratic form of government;
- is powerful regionally and globally;
- possess significant human and financial resources;
- has a diverse population;
- has sanctioned the enslavement of persons of African descent and/or denied such persons equal rights and treatment by operation of law;
- has a disproportionately large, poor and disadvantaged population of African descent; and
- faces the challenge of reducing inequalities and promoting better inter-group relations by creating and supporting policies and strategies that can more effectively and fairly allocate opportunities for all its people.

For all these similarities there are significant differences which make a comparative study enriching. Put simply, the three countries can be viewed on a continuum:

- Modern Brazil is at the one end, as the extreme case of no legal segregation, an image of 'racial democracy'.
- South Africa is at the other end, as having instituted and only recently ended the most pervasive and draconian form of legal racial domination.

The US occupies a position in-between the above two, but is closer to South Africa's position, with more regionalised and less pervasive but still significant segregation.

Considering the comparison in this way focuses the questions of what accounts for these differences and their implications for current or future relations and policy.

Beyond Race?

Dr. Frene Ginwala, Speaker of Parliament, opened the South African leg of the consultation by emphasising the timeous nature of a discussion on race for South Africa. Ginwala noted that she is surprised to find that many believe that centuries of racism were wiped away with the 1994 elections. 'Many white South Africans argue that we must move beyond race... [and that] to refer to race as a continuing feature in South Africa social, economic, political and cultural fabric is simply a new form of racism'. Clearly the 'previously advantaged' have failed abjectly to treat reconciliation as a two-way street that requires genuine structural transformation of the society. Black South Africans on the other hand resent the repeated assertion that apartheid is dead and are frustrated by the failure of their fellow citizens to understand its racial legacy. Increasingly one hears the criticism that black leaders have gone too far in tolerating white racism in the attempt to foster reconciliation.

South Africans have yet to arrive at a common appreciation of the extent to which race and racism still feature in our society. But, Ginwala points out, this is precisely what is needed. South Africans have little common experience on which to base a common understanding of the recent past. Many white South Africans are astonishingly ignorant about the systematic nature of apartheid, its sweeping impact on the lives of black South Africans and the methods that were used to maintain the system.

The consequence of this mass ignorance is serious. According to Shaun Johnson (*Independent Newspapers*), whites in general feel that, far from lagging behind, transformation in the country has been rampant, that they have borne the brunt of it and that they are being offered no place in post-apartheid South Africa. This alienation has discernible social effects. It contributes to racial polarisation and debases the much vaunted rainbow nation.

Yet, considering that racism was the 'water and sand' of the building blocks of our society, race will remain central in post-apartheid South Africa. As Ginwala concludes, the irony in the South African scenario is that the country cannot move beyond race without first focusing on race. The Brazilian option - to pretend that race will disappear as a factor simply if there is democracy - has been shown not to work. To achieve a non-racial South Africa first requires an honest assessment and appreciation of racism and its Siamese twin, inequality.

The Future of the Past: Dismantling Apartheid's Structural Inequalities

The post-apartheid government is faced with the enormous task of giving substance to the constitution's provisions for economic and social justice. South Africa ranks as one of the most unequal societies in the world (the highest 10% earning 47.3% of total income, while the lowest 10% earn 1.4%). The imperative of viewing the inequalities through the race prism is clear: if South Africa was broken up for analysis by race, the white country would rank 34th and the black country 138th on the United Nations' Human Development Index.³

Francis Wilson, Professor of Economics at the University of Cape Town, echoing Ginwala's words, insists that it takes more than the removal of apartheid laws to rectify the race imbalances. Racially focused policies are required to re-dress apartheid's structural inequalities.

Yet, this mammoth transformation task is constrained by:

- the exigencies that globalisation has placed on the South Africa economy;
- apartheid's 'scaffolding' - the remaining institutional and bureaucratic structures that implemented past policies;
- the investment discrepancy in human capital between black and white South Africans - while over 60% of whites have their matric, only 11% of blacks have achieved this level; and
- the disunity among the marginalised which precludes the poor from voicing their plight in a coherent way.⁴

While race has to be a pivotal reference point in any attempt to dismantle apartheid's inequalities,

Wilson points out that this does not only come in the form of affirmative action-type policies. He cites the National Water Bill as an measure that will re-prioritise South Africa's water resources to recognise the needs of the 'least' - for example the rural woman spending three hours to fetch water.

Disabling and Enabling Bureaucracy: The Role of Government to Reduce Racial Inequality and Promote Inclusion

Redressing South Africa's legacy of inequality requires a concerted review of its bureaucratic structures. The South African public sector was the key purveyor of apartheid, both implementing racial policy and maintaining those policies within its own bureaucratic structures. Thus, a central challenge now is to create a public sector that is legitimate and representative, and more pointedly, can contribute to the creation of a non-racial, democratic and more equitable society.

Numerous measures have been undertaken to transform the public sector, including severance packages, affirmative action and focused advertising campaigns. Yet, despite the overt political commitment to restructuring the public sector, the process has been impeded by various constraints:

- the 'sunset clause' stipulates that no person will be summarily removed in the new dispensation;
- severance packages are very costly;
- the skills lost with retrenchments are significant, since it is usually the best employees that leave the public sector first;
- Bantu education has resulted in a significant shortage of skilled black candidates;
- the public sector is competing with the better endowed private sector for a small percentage of skilled people;
- there is still a certain reluctance in some sectors of white management to pursue affirmative action; and
- some individuals are placed in positions for political reasons which reinforces negative stereotypes.

While the political imperatives of reflecting change

are self-evident, the practical implications could make haste very costly. Experiences thus far have shown that the government has to refine its transformation policies. Government has to be wary of unrealistic time frames.

Notably, it is not only the public sector that needs to be restructured. The private sector too has to keep in step with transformation. Yet, transformation is much more difficult here. The controversy surrounding the Employment Equity Bill clearly illustrates the difficulties of imposing political imperatives on the market. Yet, as both Bernard Anderson (US Assistant Secretary of Labour) and Jose Gregori (Human Rights Secretariat, Ministry of Justice, Brazilian Federal Government) emphasise, the state cannot shy away from its role in restructuring and redressing inequalities. The state is the prime agency responsible for implementing constitutional provisions to this end.

Can 'Truth Telling' Promote Reconciliation?

One of the key challenges for the new South Africa is the question of how to deal with its past. South Africa has chosen to go the cathartic route of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that seeks *confession, apology and rapprochement*. For nearly two-and-a-half years the TRC has sifted through testimony and statements from roughly 10,000 people victimised by apartheid-era violence. At the same time it has received more than 5,000 applications for amnesty from perpetrators. Yet the question remains, does truth telling lead to reconciliation?

Alex Boraine, Deputy Chairman of the TRC, argues eloquently (and even poignantly), that the TRC process is helping South Africa transcend its past. While stressing that the TRC is not the conclusive recipe for reconciliation, Boraine emphasises that truth telling is an important part of challenging apartheid myths and denials. The magnitude and horror of the system can no longer be denied. The personalised accounts of apartheid victims compels white South Africans to reconsider the past. In Antje Krog's words, the commission is about restoring memory. Boraine is convinced that this 'common memory' can serve as a sound foundation for reconciliation. He speaks of restorative truth that allows South Africans to embark on a journey of recovery based on a common understanding of the past. By dropping the Nuremberg-style retributive justice option, the TRC prevents polarisation. According to Boraine, the TRC allows South Africans from both sides to move beyond the past to a reconciled future.

Others, such as Mahmood Mamdani, professor of African Studies at the University of Cape Town, disagree. Mamdani maintains the TRC is nothing but a 'rescue mission for the beneficiaries of apartheid', not only by pardoning evildoers but by letting ordinary whites, who profited from apartheid, off the hook. He has grave doubts about whether truth telling promotes reconciliation. Citing Hannah Arendt, he maintains that 'men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish'. Mamdani sees South Africa's version of truth telling as disempowering as it allows the benefactors of apartheid to join the victims in outrage against the perpetrators and thus absolves them of blame. He believes that the TRC ends up fueling the demand for retributive justice as it seeks to dampen it.

While Mamdani's attack of the TRC is harsh, it does underline that words can only go so far. They can affirm dignity, can answer questions of what happened to their loved ones, but they do not reverse the effects of years of inequality. It is not enough to say you are sorry - any apology carries with it responsibility for reparation.

Conclusion

The South African society is very much at a watershed. Notwithstanding South Africa's relatively peaceful transition, the potential for racial conflict should not be underestimated as recent events have shown. South Africa cannot move beyond race yet. In fact, South Africa has to focus on race.

Mandela's hard-hitting speech in Mafikeng in December 1997 reinforces this point. Mandela declared that 'any notion that the revolution ended with the elections of 1994 is both false and dangerous the process of fundamental social transformation has not yet impacted seriously on the apartheid paradigm which affects all aspects of our lives'. What South Africa needs, over and above a common understanding of the past, is social transformation. White South Africans will need to come to terms with the details of history and to understand what their black compatriots mean when they bemoan the lack of fundamental transformation of society.

In Shaun Johnson's words 'What is being asked for from the white side of the South African fence is not a proposal for a solution - that must emerge from all - but a plausible gesture of participation, a practical indication of willingness to provide ideas and to join in the confrontation of the problem in the full knowledge that discomfort will be involved'.

What South Africa needs are cohesive forces that unite its people across race lines. Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance could be this force for change. As an inclusionary optimistic vision for South Africa on the cusp of the new millennium, the African Renaissance can be a vehicle for true transformation if it is embraced by all South Africans. But for that embrace to occur South Africans will need to face the full realities of their own society.

Endnotes

1. Marx AW, *Making Race and Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
2. Three international consultations were held: Atlanta (USA), April 1997; Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), September 1997; and Cape Town (South Africa), March 1998.
3. An estimated 65% of South Africa's adult population is illiterate. At least 12 million do not have access to drinkable water inside their dwelling or on site. 53% of the population live below the R301 a month poverty line. More than 2 million South Africans are nutritionally compromised - including 87% of all black children under 12 years. Over 9 million people live in informal shacks.
4. SANGOCO has initiated the *Speak out on Poverty Campaign* to give the 'silenced poor' an opportunity influence policy on education, land redistribution, and health provisions.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.