

## ADDRESS BY DEPUTY PRESIDENT TM MBEKI, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE FORUM OF BLACK JOURNALISTS

24 JANUARY 1997

1. Master of Ceremonies,  
We thank you for the opportunity you have given us to participate in this important event and are pleased to convey our sincere congratulations on the occasion of the launch of your forum.
2. It is an occasion on which we must recall the sacrifices made by media workers in general and journalists in particular, as well as the broad democratic movement in the struggle to achieve press freedom and freedom of expression.
3. We are certain that the Forum of Black Journalists will play an important role in our national life with regard to matters that relate to the press and the wider issue of reconstruction and development.
4. Such matters will include issues such as press freedom, role of the media, the quality of journalism, media ownership and media diversity.
5. The historic changes which have occurred in this country since 1994 are premised on two national objectives; reconciliation and transformation.
6. Given the nature of the society we come from, reconciliation and transformation are, of necessity, two sides of the same continuum - national emancipation.
7. We need to be reminded of the national agenda. It includes not only reconciliation and nation building. It entails also, as an integral part of that reconciliation and nation building, the fundamental transformation of our society.
8. Indeed, the most pertinent question that can be posed at the birth of such a forum is; what role should it play in the current phase of our democratic transformation. What is certain is that your forum occupies that social space which can be found between the family unit and the state in which citizens can initiate independent action with the aim of promoting the well-being of society as a whole. It is the space commonly called civil society.
9. Put in a broader sense, the real question is; what should be the place and role of professional organs of civil society *vis-a-vis* the task of consolidating democracy as well as transforming our country? A well-organised, integrated and vibrant civil society is one of the pre-conditions for the success of the struggle for the broadening and deepening of political, social and economic democratisation of our country.
10. Clearly, the establishment of democratic institutions of government and state is not enough, not only in expanding democracy, but also in ensuring a more efficient service machinery to the people. Organs of civil society have got an important role to play in this regard.
11. The answer to this question, however, must derive from a correct understanding and appreciation of the main characteristics of the current phase of democratisation and transformation.
12. For example, given the daunting task of emancipating our people, we believe that it is inadequate to perceive of the role of the Forum of Black Journalists simply as to keep in check the power of government, or to hold the leadership accountable. Surely, that is only part of the role.
13. We believe that it is wrong to see the chief virtue of democratic organs of civil society as an organised counterweight to the democratic state.
14. Our emphasis on the need for democratisation and transformation, arises out of the fact that, for some time to come, our society will continue to live with many legacies of Apartheid and colonial domination, against which we must continue to mobilise all the forces of democracy.
15. So it cannot be that organs of civil society which are interested in our social emancipation can only find comfort in pointing out the excesses and misdeeds of the democratic government as though our country has become totally free of political and ideological tendencies which would like to dilute the content of transformation, or political and ideological forces which are opposed to the objective of the national democratic struggle.
16. Furthermore, we should appreciate the fact that if organs of civil society can be utilised to oppose Apartheid and colonial rule, they can by the same token, wittingly or unwittingly, be manipulated or positioned in such a way that the ultimate effect of their operation serves to frustrate the people's march towards the total emancipation of our society.

17. The point we are trying to drive home is that democratic organs of civil society, of necessity, ought to define their place and role in relation to the task of emancipating our people.
18. That place and role should be alive to the fact that democratic political associations, political movements and political parties also have the capacity to foster many aspects of civil life. So many areas of collective action can be identified with the aim of broadening the front for social emancipation. For example, the government has set aside a week in the month of March for the distribution and explanation of the Constitution of the country to the people. Forums like yours ought to be asking themselves what their contribution shall be in taking that Constitution to the greatest number of our people in the languages best understood by the people.
19. We have set ourselves the goal of the creation of a non-racial society. The creation of such a society is a fundamental prerequisite of national reconciliation and nation building.
20. Objectives such as affirmative action, EMPOWERMENT, representativity and the deracialisation of our society must continue to be at the centre of the activities not only of government but also organisations like the Forum of Black Journalists.
21. The Forum of Black Journalists has a critical role to play in this regard. It has a responsibility to continue to engage the question of what we as a country should do to promote the aspirations of the marginalised.
22. We have the responsibility to tell the people the truth. Part of that truth is that we are set on the path towards the transformation of our country. Deviation from that path would constitute a betrayal of the interests and aspirations of all our people, both black and white.
23. At our last discussion with members of the Forum of Black Journalists we identified training and professionalism as the main challenges facing journalists.
24. Today, those challenges still remain. The increasing juniorisation of newsrooms is cause for concern. Media organisations like the FBJ need to locate the training of media workers high up in your agenda.
25. The FBJ needs to engage other media organisations like MWASA, SAUJ and the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) in developing a national training agenda. Such a training agenda should include training in investigative journalism and management skills.
26. Such engagement should also be extended to organisations both in Southern Africa and Africa.
27. Various organs of government have been established in the past 33 months. Among these was the appointment of a task group to investigate government communications. We are happy to report that COMTASK has completed its work and has submitted its final report to us.
28. COMTASK made several critical recommendations regarding the restructuring of government communications which we are presently considering.
29. Part of the inquiry conducted by COMTASK include the relationship between the government and the media. I raise the COMTASK report in the context of reaching some agreement among ourselves to discuss matters affecting the media without this earning those not working in the media your wrath as enemies of press freedom.
30. On the matter of press freedom, it is our firm view that no forces or institutions exist within our society which have the strength or power significantly to compromise such freedoms as well as those of expression. The combination of organised popular opinion and the legal and constitutional framework would prove too strong for any threat to these freedoms to succeed.
31. We meet tonight to celebrate the establishment of the Forum for Black Journalists. We congratulate you on this important initiative and wish the Forum for Black Journalists success.