

Address of the President of the ANC and the Republic, Thabo Mbeki, at the 7th National Congress of COSATU

Gallagher Estate, 18 September 2000

Comrade
Comrades leaders of COSATU and the affiliated Chairperson,
Delegates: unions,

I bring you the greetings of the leadership and the membership of the African National Congress. We wish this important National Congress of COSATU success.

We are in our seventh year of the emancipation of our country from apartheid rule. As confirmation of the permanence of the victory of the democratic revolution, later this year we will be holding our second national local government elections.

During this seventh year of freedom we can say, without hesitation, that we have made advances on many fronts in our continuing struggle for the reconstruction and development of our country.

The first of these advances is the defence and further entrenchment of the democratic system itself. This includes the virtual elimination of the resort to violence and force in the process of the contest for political power.

There are some people in our country today who present themselves as being better democrats than you who belong to our historic Congress Movement.

Yet, they were nowhere to be seen when heroes and heroines of this movement sacrificed their lives, served jail sentences and were driven into banishment and exile because they dared to struggle for democracy.

They were nowhere to be seen as we struggled to end the third force violence that claimed so many lives, as we worked to forestall the outbreak of a civil war.

This would have been imposed on our country by those sections among the former ruling group who could not imagine themselves living under a system of democratic and non-racial majority rule.

Today, these newly born democrats have taken it as their special responsibility to define for all of us what democracy is and how a democratically elected government should govern.

They tell us that unless they reduce our strength and popularity among the people, democracy will be threatened. They say that a strong ANC and a strong Alliance, the very forces that led the fight for a democratic South Africa, put the democratic system in our country in grave danger.

You will remember that in the run-up to the 1999 election, they made a lot of noise about how it was very necessary for them to ensure that we do not get a two-thirds majority. They argued that this was in the interest of democracy.

This meant that as democrats, we ourselves should work hard to make sure that not too many of our people should vote for the ANC because big support for us would constitute a threat to the very democracy for which we ourselves had fought for many decades.

They argued then and continue to do so today that the best guarantee for democracy was that they should get more support from the people so that they become a strong opposition.

They had to be strong as an opposition because they were the best guarantors of democracy in our country while we, if we became too strong, would introduce dictatorship and take away the democratic rights of the people.

But as we know, the people refused to listen to this nonsensical campaign and once again showed their confidence in their movement by voting overwhelmingly for the ANC.

When the National Executive Committee of the ANC carried out the decision of our National Conference to choose in a particular way the comrades who would run as our candidate-Premiers, our opponents said this was yet another threat to democracy.

What, in fact, was the truth! The truth is that what they wanted to see was a situation in which the ANC in the provinces would tear itself apart, divide itself, and render itself ineffective as comrades fought one another for the privilege of serving as Premiers in our provinces.

And when the National Executive Committee of the ANC has acted to strengthen the organisation in the provinces, with the full support of both the provincial leadership and membership, once again our opponents have made noise that this was a threat to democracy and should be condemned.

You also know, comrades, that our opponents also make many repeated demands that the Alliance should be broken up and closed down. At other times they say they look forward to a situation in which we, members of the Alliance, would turn against ourselves.

Because the people have refused to give them the strength they seek, they look forward to a situation in which we ourselves become the strongest opposition to ourselves.

In a very open manner, they call on all of us to fight one another claiming that this is in the interest of democracy. Where anyone of us expresses a legitimate opinion different from another comrade, they celebrate because they think that the mother of all battles among ourselves has started.

They want us to become a house divided against itself, concentrating on a campaign to weaken and destroy one another. They want us totally to forget those who are opposed to the transformation of our country, leaving these forces of opposition in peace, with the space to take advantage of our internal fights to strengthen themselves.

It is clear why our opponents fight so hard to weaken us and to strengthen themselves.

These forces of privilege want to be strong so that they can determine the national agenda, a national agenda that will determine the future of our country and people.

They want us to be weak so that we are unable to discharge our responsibilities with regard to the pursuit of the national democratic revolution, so that we are unable to bring about the fundamental social transformation of our country.

The issue therefore of what South Africa will be tomorrow is of the greatest importance to all of us and to the masses of our people.

These masses want to see an end to racism. They want to see an end to the situation in which our country is divided into two nations, one well-off and white and the other poor and black.

They want to see an end to the racism many people continue to suffer, including many farm workers.

They want to see an end to sexism. They do not want black women in the rural areas for ever described as the poorest of the poor, with no education, no work, not enough food, no clean water, no electricity and no roads and difficult access to health services.

They do not want to see a situation in which the women continue to be raped and abused and treated as unequal members of society.

The legacy of these past policies remains one of the central challenges facing all of us. In 1995, Africans accounted for 92% of all adults above 20 years who had had no access to formal education. The corresponding figure for Whites was 0,2%.

We have made advances in creating universal access to education and ensured that every child of school going age shall never be denied this fundamental right.

As part of our efforts to ensure that all children, especially those from poor families, are able to learn unobstructed by the pain of hunger, we have made the school feeding system a necessary aspect of the education process.

This is notwithstanding the criminal behaviour of some in our society, who have lost their souls, and have been caught stealing from these hungry children. Fortunately, we have, to a large extent, put in place mechanisms to protect these children and deal severely with these thieves.

We have experienced consistent, though insufficient, levels of growth in our economy. We had to make fundamental and necessary changes to the economy.

In all situations where you restructure the economy, growth rates will be lower in the early stages. This is what our economy has been experiencing in the past few years. Some of the comrades here call it a theory of life after death. We would rather think of it as a process that ensures life because the alternative was about to be death.

These were the necessary changes and we believe that we have now turned the corner and will sooner rather than later realise the positive outcomes of these economic adjustments.

It is worth noting in this regard that despite the difficulties of our transformation process, including the challenges on the economic front, our Alliance has, contrary to self-fulfilling prophecies, been durable and although we have our own ups and downs, the objectives of our revolution have always made us more cohesive and focussed.

Comrade Chairperson,

All the programmes that the democratic government has undertaken, are aimed at empowering and bringing a better life to those South Africans whose lives had for many years before 1994 been defined by poverty, marginalisation, and life circumstances that forever made them prone to diseases and premature deaths.

Of course there are a number of challenges that remain. The transformation of our society to a truly non-racial, non-sexist and democratic one still faces strong challenges from these forces that have benefited from apartheid.

The recently held Anti-Racism Conference enjoins all of us to intensify the struggle against racism that still affects every facet of our fellow citizens' lives; black or white.

Again, those who present themselves as being better democrats than all of us who sacrificed so much for this democracy, are urging us to ignore the legacy and continuation of this racism.

Whenever we articulate our pain and call for the need to bring an end to the racist trauma, the charge from the beneficiaries of these racist policies of the past is that we who are victims have now become the new racists.

Again, whenever we refer to this legacy we are told that we have been in power for seven years; we should have changed the legacy of 300 years of a racist system in six years.

It is a matter of concern that some among us have started to adopt this same language of the beneficiaries of the past.

These beneficiaries hold themselves out to be the real custodians of democracy. They now speak the language of human rights for all.

We who were prepared to lay down our lives in defence of human rights must ask some questions of them.

How committed are they to the creation of a non-racial and non-sexist society when they strongly oppose the corrective measures we seek to take to realise this objective.

How can they speak of equality for all but refuse to participate in the deracialisation of our living areas, citing a decline in property values as a reason to stop the enjoyment of this human right by millions of our people.

Can they truly speak of a commitment to the ideal of job creation while they, the custodians of the bulk of capital in this country, seek to transfer the responsibility for job creation to the State. They respond in the same manner when challenged to address the unacceptable levels of poverty in this society.

Are these the real custodians of democracy, when the eviction and maltreatment of farm workers is met with a deafening silence on their part.

Their opposition to the creation of a legal environment within which farm workers could enjoy some security of tenure continues.

Their silence would only be broken when they condemn the victims of their past policies for the state of decay in black areas, after a tourist visit to such areas.

We who live in those decaying areas know that the rotting did not start in 1994. The reconstruction started in 1994. The mass of our people confirmed that we are on a right tract of transformation when they returned the ANC with a bigger majority in the last elections.

Chairperson

There has been a consistent attempt by this new democrats to define as democrats as those who speak out against the current government.

In trying to define a role for the trade union movement, we must never forget that there are forces for change; and then there are reactionary forces, bent on retaining at all costs the privileges and power acquired under apartheid.

Whatever the differences between the trade union movement and the government, be they real or imagined, both remain part of the forces for progressive change. Accordingly what tasks do we as the progressive forces face today.

We would all agree that the first and most important task is to strengthen each of the Alliance partners and to strengthen the Alliance itself.

The other important task is to have a clear understanding of the tasks of the national democratic revolution and the context within which this revolution is unfolding. This includes the process of globalisation and the behaviour of capital within that process.

In this context, we need to understand the forces that are opposed to this democratic revolution and the means they use in this regard.

If we asked ourselves the question, have we won the struggle against racism, the answer would be no.

If we asked ourselves the question, have we won the struggle against sexism the answer would be no.

If we asked ourselves the question, have we won the struggle against poverty, ignorance and disease, the answer would be no.

If we asked ourselves the question, have we won the struggle for the renaissance of the African continent, the answer would be no.

If we asked ourselves the question, can any member of the Alliance working on its own, win on any of these fronts, the answer would be no.

If we asked ourselves the question again, can a divided Alliance win on any of these fronts, the answer would be no.

Accordingly, the revolutionary tasks ahead of us are very clear. The challenge facing us is to respond to them like revolutionaries. I am convinced that this is what the seventh national congress of COSATU will do.

I thank you.

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