



South Africa's great expectations are justified

Mail & Guardian opinion article

26 January – 1 February 2018

The winds of change are blowing in South Africa following the election last month of Cyril Ramaphosa as president of the ANC. There is a renewed sense of hope in our society and greater expectations again, similar to the levels we experienced in the 1990s.

Significant discontent across society provides an opportunity for significant changes and great expectations are justified.

However, there is more that needs clarity. So-called radical socioeconomic transformation needs to be further unpacked, for example, so that we fully understand how government intends to proceed with this programme.

It is important that government fully understands how and why we have found ourselves in the position we are in. It is problematic, for instance, that we blame the global recession of the past for our economic woes when we have been mismanaging a fragile economy that was never meant to serve the whole of our society.

Equally, it is problematic that government insists that the National Development Plan (NDP) and Vision 2030 are sound and should be the basis for our development efforts.

It is also a problem that we have become too inward looking and that the Africa agenda is no longer given priority. I have argued for communalism for Africa as a whole, but in the meantime South Africa should be vigorously pursuing an egalitarian society. The time is right for both theory and praxis aimed at ensuring that we graduate from the first stage to the second and maybe the final stage of the political transition. And the ANC, as leader of society, must lead the plan for fully transforming our society.

We should not think solely of South Africa but the entire continent of Africa and then the issues of national identity and such will not arise – there will be an African identity and an African nation. We are still in early days, but a groundswell of forces are gaining momentum for a united Africa. The countries of Africa — not nations, for our countries can never be nations — are colonial constructs that never meant to serve us as the peoples of Africa.

The big task ahead is the defeat of imperialism and, for now, the important task is mobilisation against neocolonialism. It is in this context that Africa must be brought back on to the agenda in South Africa. This is one area that Ramaphosa needs to be alive to and his administration needs to reprioritise the continent and our position within it.

It should also be acknowledged that there are many important issues we have not confronted. The role of language in development and the critical importance of culture are amongst the two crucial areas that have largely been ignored since 1994.

A fundamental issue is that we did not have a clear plan regarding the transformation of social relations and development. The ANC's Ready to Govern document was an attempt at a plan, but it was too much about what government was going to do come 1994. The Constitution is understandably too broad and it ignores important aspects of the Africans' Claims document (which was adopted at ANC's 16 December 1943 Conference as a response to the 14 August 1941 Atlantic Charter) because it is largely informed by the Freedom Charter. There are many theories or ideas that inform the approach to socio-economic development in democratic South Africa which require revisiting. The Colonialism of a Special Type perspective is one of the theories that, as argued in a book I published in 2016, might not have applied in our context; that South Africa was/is essentially a settler colony and not colonialism of a special type.

The National Democratic Revolution, an adaptation from Marxism, remains the only convincing theorisation about how we can take our society forward. The plan I am thinking of should elaborate the processes involved in the pursuit of a socialist (and maybe communist) South Africa.

Ramaphosa's New Deal, though a step in the right direction, is not enough for the task at hand. Similarly, the NDP is insufficient.

Another critical matter that also needs to be part of the plan for the renewal of our society is the challenge of a common national identity. This is critical because reconciliation is linked to development and also to freedom and justice. South Africans of all colours have to co-exist in the meantime.

Regarding reconciliation, despite numerous attempts since 1994 to achieve catharsis from the ills of the past, a lack of honest and remorseful acknowledgement of the ramifications of apartheid colonialism, as well as racist and white supremacist acts, will continue to spur revolutionary pressures from the previously disadvantaged groups.

The social compact that many have argued for must also thoroughly deal with cohesion in society. The plan that I am arguing for has to be comprehensive in a sense that it must answer the question pertaining to the future of our country, and especially confront the issue of empowering our communities to doing what our communities value.

Government must not preoccupy itself with "developing" certain sectors of our society, as the ANC's January 8 Statement suggests. Rather than developing women, as an

example, necessary conditions must be in place for women to be empowered accordingly. If anything, government should prioritise public sector reforms.

The road is long, rough and will also be painful at some point. In the main, because South Africa has not directly addressed the historical injustice of apartheid colonialism, the task at hand is daunting but not impossible. The timing is right and the starting point should be to take stock of the work done since 1994 and to assess what more needs to be done in the months and years ahead.