

Is the Thabo Mbeki Foundation's document a turning point to true non-racialism in South Africa?

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The leaked 30-page document of the Thabo Mbeki Foundation (TMF) caused a storm on social media, within African National Congress (ANC) circles and other political and civic organisations. It is not difficult to understand why. In a time when President Cyril Ramaphosa supporters and the Zuma-ites are still at odds, the Foundation of a former ANC and country president takes a strong view against one of his party's important recent decisions - expropriation without compensation (EWC). The TMF believes that EWC is possible without an amendment of Section 25, but the emphasis of the document is on the fact that the process is race-based. The key issue is that of how this recent ANC decision impacts the national question and scuppers attempts at building a non-racial society. It touches a nerve by stating that the ANC had departed from non-racialism by taking the decision on EWC and criticises Zuma directly because he effectively turned the ANC into a "black party". The view of the TMF is that as a result of this, the ANC can no longer be seen as representative of all South Africans. Harsh words from loyal ANC supporters, in a difficult time for the party...

Although the TMF's point of departure in the document is EWC (and although this has already been examined in a previous article of the Foundation), this article focuses on another aspect. The TMF's problem is not located primarily in expropriation or lack of compensation, but more fundamentally: the nature, essence and task of the ANC. The document states that the ANC, even prior to 1994, had been the "parliament of the people" and that it had made a specific choice to be non-racial, amongst others by opposing groups that sought to put race first (this led to the historic split and the formation of the PAC). Non-racialism as a principle and ideal was, according to the TMF, always the ANC's point of departure. This is borne out by the words of the Freedom Charter "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white". There were indeed over the years a number of prominent white, coloured and Indian leaders in the ANC, for example Braam Fischer, Joe Slovo, Beyers Naude, Jay Naidoo and Trevor Manuel. The Constitution of the country, of which the ANC had been co-creators, also emphasises non-racialism as a principle.

But it is apparent that something had gone awry with the process of creating a non-racial country. Numerous commentators (the Foundation included) have for a number of years pointed out that the ANC government, particularly under Zuma's administration, has been rapidly re-racialising the discourse and policy content. This is happening in the form of unbalanced affirmative action (AA), employment equity (EE), black economic empowerment (BEE) policies - all under the umbrella of "transformation". Through the racial point of departure of this legislation, a hierarchy of disadvantage has been created. To remedy this disadvantage (so the argument goes), one has no option but to work with race. The consequence of this was the racial-based formula of 80-9-9-2 - according to which all institutions in South Africa should reflect the national race demography of 80% Africans, 9% white, 9% coloured and 2% Indian South Africans.

The debates around #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall were largely characterised by a dualism in which it appeared as if black South Africans stated that white South Africans were not welcome in their discussions - because they needed safe (and by definition black) spaces. Some academics were even of the opinion that white people should *sit quietly* in some *corner*, leaving the solution of the country's problems to black South Africans. Numerous students, who did not identify with this dualistic approach, were confronted with this racial intolerance at universities, in both classrooms and residences. This, and other factors, led to the situation where some white, coloured and Indian South Africans had to accept that they, in this debate, were not worthy of engaging the issues as

equals but as lesser, with no choice but to accept the situation. This was worsened by the black nationalist Zuma, who called on “black parties” in Parliament (of which he viewed the ANC as the most important) to oppose “white parties” (the DA included) on EWC and other matters such as state capture and white monopoly capital.

Next came EWC - and it is being propagated and defended basically on racial grounds. EWC has now been indicated by the TMF as the last straw that (eventually!) broke the back of the camel of non-racialism. In all fairness, it must be mentioned here that when the Steve Biko Foundation did not want to participate in the National Foundations Dialogue Initiative (NFDI) because of the presence of the FW de Klerk Foundation (FWDKF) and the Helen Suzman Foundation (HSF), the TMF resisted in terms of the principle of non-racialism. Former President Mbeki said that if Former President De Klerk was forced to withdraw, he himself would also withdraw because of the principle of non-racialism. The TMF is saying “stop the bus”, with EWC’s racial cornerstone you have gone too far, and this impacts negatively on the essence of the ANC as the people’s parliament, while enhancing and solidifying racial hierarchy.

In addition to the issues highlighted by the TMF, there are additional reasons why we are now in a state of increased racialisation. The first problem is the ANC’s policy documents that have always mentioned that the so-called “motive forces” (for the National Democratic Revolution) are “blacks in general and Africans in particular” and that this group should therefore be the beneficiaries of the revolution. This is exactly what is being implemented with “transformation” - and this is not reconcilable with non-racialism. The second problem is that in the ANC policy documents white South Africans are described as “colonialists of a special kind”. Former President Mbeki pointed this out in the early 2000’s and possibly did not intend it to reflect negatively at the time - just as the TMF document underlines the permanency of white South Africans in the country. The fact is however, that “colonials of a special kind” over recent years acquired a strongly negative connotation. “One settler, one bullet” and the song “Kill the Boer” are ongoing proof of this. These sentiments cannot be reconciled with any form of non-racialism. The third problem is that the ANC government has not been successful in delivering economic growth and service delivery, to normalise education and to alleviate poverty. Instead of addressing this problem and its consequences over 24 years of democratic rule, scapegoats are sought, including white people and businesses, supposedly because they don’t want to “transform”. To pass the blame to white South Africans for the slow progress of the country plays into the hands of those who view non-racialism as a liability.

The deduction must therefore be made that there have for a long time been two lines of thought on non-racialism within the ANC. The debate around EWC has exposed this mostly unseen fault line. The question remains as to whether the document of the TMF will have a positive impact on the debate around non-racialism, firstly within the ANC and secondly within broader society. It is possibly too early to say that we have reached a turning point in the way the ANC views non-racialism. The convictions of the Africanists and popularists are still too strong for this; and self-interest in terms of transformation and BEE also continue to weigh strongly. Perhaps - just perhaps - a small crack in the armour of the racial drivers in the ANC has appeared, towards a more inclusive non-racialism and one can hope for a South Africa where everyone can take it for granted that they will not be discriminated against on the basis of their race and where race would not determine one’s future, but opportunities and hard work.

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