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TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER - CELEBRATING THE ROOTS OF OUR GREAT NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

By FW de Klerk

27 April will mark the 25th anniversary of the transformation of South Africa from centuries of white minority rule to rule by the majority of all the people of the country. All over South Africa people lined up patiently to exercise their right to vote for the government of their choice - most of them for the first time in their lives. It was, perhaps, the greatest day in the long and conflicted history of the great variety of peoples who were arbitrarily brought together 84 years earlier in the Union of South Africa. It is now quite rightly celebrated as Freedom Day - and as South Africa's national day.

At the time it was regarded throughout the world and in South Africa itself as our greatest achievement. It was viewed as the culmination of one of the most remarkable and successful conflict resolution processes - not only in the history of southern Africa - but also in the recent history of the world. And yet this great coming together of all our people is gradually being airbrushed out of our history and is being replaced by a triumphalist narrative that 27 April marked little more than the ANC's revolutionary victory over a defeated and discredited enemy.

The roots of our transformation process were quite different. Only a few years before 1994 the world and most South Africans feared that the country was trundling inexorably toward a catastrophic race war. And then suddenly, at the end of the 1980s, the situation in southern Africa began to show signs of promise:

- All the principal parties came to accept that there could be no armed solution to the problems of the country. A continuation of the downward spiral of resistance and repression would inevitably lead to the destruction of the economy and prospects for a better future for everyone. One of the first leaders to realise this - from his cell at Pollsmoor Prison - was Nelson Mandela - who opened a tenuous line of communication to the government of PW Botha.
- Another major factor was the successful implementation of the UN independence plan for Namibia in conjunction with the withdrawal of Cuban forces from neighboring Angola.
- The collapse of the Soviet Union - symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 - removed another great obstacle to negotiations in the minds of the National Party government and opened the door to the early commencement of constitutional talks.
- Perhaps the most important factor was the growing desire within all our communities for a just and workable solution to the problems of the country - and the realisation that we would all have to work together to achieve a better future for ourselves and for all our children.



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And so, representatives of all the significant parties came together in December 1991 at CODESA - the Congress for a Democratic South Africa. They did so on the basis of a historic Declaration of Intent whose first purpose was:

“to bring about an undivided South Africa with one nation sharing a common citizenship, patriotism and loyalty, pursuing amidst our diversity, freedom, equality and security for all irrespective of race, colour, sex or creed; a country free from apartheid or any other form of discrimination or domination.”

During the next two years the negotiating parties succeeded in reaching agreement on an Interim Constitution that embodied all the goals that had been included in the Declaration of Intent. They did so despite numerous crises caused by faceless violence; assassinations, deadlocks, walkouts and boycotts.

We were able to achieve success because we all accepted the need to take into account the reasonable concerns and interests of all our communities and to make sometimes painful compromises to reach lasting agreements.

The core elements of the Declaration of Intent and the Interim Constitution were later distilled in the foundational values in section one of our present Constitution. Every South African should know them by heart. They include *“human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and freedoms; non-racialism and non-sexism; supremacy of the Constitution and the rule of law”; and a genuine “multi-party system of democratic government to ensure accountability, responsiveness and openness.”*

In the intervening years we have achieved only partial success in making the foundational values a reality in the lives of most South Africans:

- human dignity continues to elude millions of South Africans without proper education, employment and social services;
- although we have achieved equality in the eyes of the law, we remain one of the most unequal societies in the world when it comes to equality of outcomes;
- we have made good progress in advancing some human rights and freedoms and in promoting non-sexism - but we have done little or nothing to promote language and cultural rights;
- sadly, we can no longer be regarded as a non-racial society: race relations are increasingly frayed; the government routinely propagates negative racial stereotypes - and the prospects of many South Africans are still determined by their race;
- the supremacy of the Constitution and the Rule of Law are, on the whole, still upheld by strong and fearless courts except, sometimes, on matters affecting minority rights;
- as we approach our sixth National Elections since 1994, we remain a functioning multi-party democracy - although recent developments have raised serious questions regarding the accountability, responsiveness and openness of our governmental institutions.



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Now, 25 years after the founding of our new non-racial democracy, there are fears that some of the premises on which our new society was based are in danger of unravelling:

- there are some, within the ruling Alliance, who mistakenly believe that core elements of our negotiated national accord can be dispensed with, now that the 'balance of forces' has changed;
- our economy is under enormous pressure - much of it caused by rampant corruption, the implementation of inappropriate race-based policies, and doubts concerning the government's commitment to property rights;
- we urgently need to take effective action to promote economic growth, to improve our education system, to provide more effective social services and to tackle unemployment.

We will be able to achieve success only if we return to the approaches that enabled us to achieve agreement 25 years ago. We should all endorse the ANC's call for us to 'work together' - but this requires that:

- we must consult and listen to one another;
- we must once again take into account the reasonable concerns and interests of all our communities and all sections of our population;
- we must strive for genuine non-racialism and must oppose new forms of unfair discrimination and racial domination from any quarter;
- we must develop practical and effective policies based on the best examples of successful economies throughout the world.

Despite all this, South Africa today is a much better place than it was 25 years ago.

All of us should now redouble our efforts to achieve the vision that we articulated in the founding values of our Constitution. In so doing we should not forget what we were able to achieve during our great transformation process when for a magical moment we all worked together to build a new and better society.