

# Reflections on the political situation in South Africa

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Mr Sewpersadh has been involved in South African politics for many years. In 1971 he played an important part in reviving the Natal Indian Congress. Between 1973 and 1978 he served out a banning order.

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At the outset I would like to thank NUSAS for the invitation to speak. My talk will centre around "Reflections on the political situation in South Africa."

As human beings we cannot merely choose to live. As individuals we must choose to live a life which contributes to progress of society as a whole. I think that there is a difference between the human being and the individual. The individual is a local entity belonging to a particular race/religion/culture. The human being is not a local entity. He is everywhere. If the individual merely acts in a particular corner of the vast field of life then his action is unrelated to the whole. As human beings we are part of the whole ... and the whole is society. In South Africa the most important thing at the moment is politics. There can be no doubt that the movement known as the Congress Alliance has played the major role in taking South Africa towards a democratic society. The massive influence of this movement derives from the fact that it had its roots in the feelings and the needs of the people and was inspired by the aspirations of democrats of all races. In 1955 at the Congress of the People held at Kliptown, the aims of the Alliance were clearly spelt out in the Freedom Charter: the most significant document in the Black People's struggle for freedom. The significance of this document stems from its democratic principles and non-racial character as shown in the following points:

1. SA belongs to all who live in it, Black and White, and no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.
2. A democratic state based on the will of the people can secure to all their birthright without distinction of race, sex, colour or creed.

The Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter was the result of some 50 years of experience in the struggle for democracy. In the course of this long struggle, the methods employed by the organisations in the Alliance underwent radical changes. The ANC (which spearheaded the Alliance) was, when formed in 1912, an organization which merely made representations to the authorities to redress certain grievances of the people. By the 1940's, the ANC was transformed into an organization which was organizing and leading masses of people in political action. The 40's also saw significant changes in the South African Indian Congress: previously this organization was controlled by wealthy businessmen who were interested in furthering the interests of the business class. This organization was taken over by people like Dr Warren Dadoo and Dr G M Naika who realised that only by gaining mass support was it

possible to usher in the era of full democratic rights for all. In 1946 this organization launched the famous Passive Resistance Campaign against the Asiatic Land Tenure Act and the Indian Representation Act. This campaign was based on civil disobedience and masses of people voluntarily courted imprisonment. The campaign attracted international attention to the evil of Apartheid and clearly demonstrated that the Congress drew its strength and relevance from the people. A major development took place in 1947 when the Dadoo-Naika-Kuma pact was signed and cemented unity between the ANC and the SAIC. This unity led to the launching of the famous Defiance Campaign of 1952. People in unprecedented numbers demonstrated their support of Congress policy and their unbending resolve to liberate themselves from oppression by participating in massive campaigns against vicious Pass Laws, Group Areas Act and other laws designed to entrench Apartheid.

Over 8 000(?) courted imprisonment. Congress had made Blacks realize that only by engaging in democratic struggle for freedom could they give meaning to their lives, and that sacrifices were necessary to end the sufferings thrust upon them by a wicked regime of racialists. Such was the impact of the Defiance Campaign on South African democrats that within the next few years both the South African Congress of democrats (whites) and the South African Coloured Peoples Congress became part of the Congress Alliance. Shortly after, the SA Congress of Trade Unions became the fifth member of this Alliance. The aim of the Congress Alliance was clear and unequivocal : to wage intensive and unrelenting struggle against all forms of repression. From 1955 this movement grew from strength to strength. By organizing campaigns for higher wages for the workers and against unjust laws, the Congress movement by 1960 had its roots in all parts of South Africa. The massive support for Congress was a clear threat to the government. It reacted by banning most of the organizations that formed part of the Alliance. Today only the SAIC is unbanned.

While it is possible to ban organizations and individuals, it is totally impossible to ban ideas and ideals. It is also impossible to ban the spirit of liberty from moving people to action as it has throughout the centuries of human endeavour. The banning of these organizations was a setback and not a defeat; for victory can only go to those who strive for justice. Most of the organizations of the Alliance have been banned but not forgotten. It is essential for us to try and grasp the reasons for the Congress Alliance becoming such a major influence on South African politics. The following points appear to be of major significance:

1. its non-racial character - the movement consisted of people of all races and it worked among people of all races.
2. it was opposed to Apartheid in any form and totally rejected Separate Development.
3. it worked among the people and organized its campaigns on the basis of their immediate and long-term needs.

By 1960 there could be no doubting the determination of the Black people to move onwards and towards freedom. It was clear that no amount of repression and violence was going to succeed in keeping the government in power. New methods of repression were required to meet the changing circumstances. The struggle was now for the minds of men. It was imperative for the government to destroy the concepts of waging a struggle on the basis of non-racialism. This led to the vicious concepts of Separate Development.



Besides dividing Blacks, Separate Development institutions create leaders chosen by the government. Separate Development also gives the government the opportunity of creating the impression that it is relaxing its harshness. While banning and imprisoning leaders who have roots among the people, the government gives full freedom of speech to people in Separate Development institutions. The mass media like the press and TV, are used to create the impression that leaders in these institutions are the real representatives of the people. They are given complete freedom on the one hand to build up support, while those opposed to Separate Development institutions are banned, raided and persecuted on the other.

The freedom given to people in Separate Development institutions covers up the repression meted out to those opposed to these institutions. Support for these institutions can only mean support for the government. The policy of Separate Development cannot by itself placate a sufficient number of people to keep the rulers in power. It has become unavoidable for the ruling class to create a black middle class and to obtain the collaboration of this class against the workers. While the past thirty years of Apartheid have forced the majority of the black middle class closer to the workers, today the regime is making a deliberate effort to drive a wedge between them. Throughout history the middle class has played a major role in liberating peoples from oppressive regimes. It will be a major victory for the government if this class is either sucked into its oppressive system or neutralised.

The policy of Separate Development institutions is in some respects intertwined with the policy of consciously creating a black middle class that will act as a buffer between the government and the workers. In some cases these institutions provide political platforms that are used to further the interests of the business class. The same applies to the new constitutional proposals offering separate ethnic parliaments and cabinets to the Indian and Coloured people. This scheme is designed to attract the Coloured and Indian middle class to the side of the rulers by giving them the appearance of status and influence in the power structure. The aim is through them, to confuse the Coloured and Indian workers and entice them away from a common struggle with the African people. Tactics like the Separate Development policy and the creation of a middle class of blacks, which are designed to co-opt a large section of the blacks into the government system, has not succeeded in liquidating the demands for full freedom. Vast masses of people, especially the working class, have derived no benefit from these Separate Development institutions.

The march of events in Angola and Mozambique, and other parts of Southern Africa, is catching up with South Africa. The important changes of the past fifteen years in the economy are leading to continuing demands on the part of the people. In the face of this changing situation, the rulers are forced to create the impression that things are no longer as before and that significant changes are being made or will soon come. There is an endless stream of statements from those in power that the government is considering relaxing its power to accommodate the demands of the oppressed. Newspapers do not hesitate to take up these things. These statements of the changes that are coming lead one to believe that sometimes words are the great bearer of reality. These changes that are talked about go nowhere near meeting the real demands of the people. They merely centre around matters like allowing blacks in hotels and theatres. These changes do not affect the masses of people as they cannot afford to go to these places.

In the face of these methods of repression on the one hand, and creating the impression of change on the other, and creating divisions through the policy of Separate Development, we have to decide how to make our contribution towards making a reality of democracy. While the past has gone, it is at the same time with us still. We have many lessons to learn from the past struggles waged by the people. We have seen that only a movement that works on a non-racial basis can mobilize massive support to bring about the necessary changes in South Africa. Organizations working on a racial basis are ineffective. In fact, by dividing the people they serve the same purpose as Separate Development institutions. The uniting of the activities of all sections of the progressive forces into one co-ordinated movement, is the most sensible way to face the complex changes of the time. The times require unity and action among democratic forces of all races in the country. Divisions can only lead to weakness. Weakness on our part means strength for the government. The resources of all sections of the progressives should be used for our common objective on the basis of united action. The starting point must be the rejection of all forms of Apartheid and Separate Development. It is essential that the idea of unity of all people be stressed from now on. Only on this basis can a strong and enduring foundation be laid for a united struggle for democracy. Only on this basis can the resources of all races be blended into one dynamic and ever-growing movement. No matter what the champions of participation in separate development institutions may say, it cannot be denied that these institutions in the long run perpetuate racial divisions. In a complex and fluid situation, differences induced cannot be avoided. It will not be possible for all of us to agree on all matters. In areas like agreement however, activity should be planned jointly.

It is essential at all times to bear in mind that a fluid political movement cannot be based merely on ideas formed in the human mind. Our tactics must be based in the economic and social praxis prevailing in the time and place. For this it is necessary to try and understand the feelings and immediate needs of the people. It is essential to stress that concepts of democracy and liberty are not just hazy, mystical concepts that are resorted to by radicals and agitators to pass the time. The lack of democracy can be seen in concrete form in low wages, unemployment, lack of proper housing, and in many other ways. It is also necessary to make clear that our indulgence in politics does not grow from the fact that we are anti-anyone. Our participation in politics is the result of our being pro-Human Beings who are concerned with the whole of society. Fragmentation of society can only lead to conflict and violence. Racial conflict is to a large extent the result of fear of the unknown. Because people have not taken the trouble to know about people of other races, they feel that it would be undesirable to live on an equal basis with them. It will help us a great deal if we try and remove some of the ignorance about races and try and transform the unknown into the known. There are quite obviously superficial differences between the races, but psychologically/inwardly every human being wherever he is, is the same. Though one may have a white skin, and another a brown or black skin, be affluent or poor, inwardly and deep down we are all the same. A widespread understanding of this fact may be the beginning of better days to come.