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NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND NATION BUILDING: REFLECTIONS ON THE TRC IN POST APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

National reconciliation is a precondition to nation building in any situation where hostility, violence and war have divided the people, made them enemies and distrust and misunderstanding prevails. The various groups making up the population of that country must accept that the past needs to be forgotten in order to reconstruct their future. Reconciliation provides the way forward for people who must stay together as a nation and develop common ties, which bind them together as a nation. The essence of reconciliation is to make it possible for such people to reconstitute themselves into a virile team with robust nationalism, desire, confidence, and common national objectives both within the domestic and external environments, which they wish to pursue.

To get to that stage old feelings of bitterness, hate, lack of confidence or need for each other must disappear. New unifying values must be put in place. In short there must be a complete spirit of forgiveness and revival of basic human values, dignity of the human person and dignity for all peoples making up the population of that country. There must be a desire to develop the human potential and material resources not only for a better future but also for survival in the international state system, which is anarchical and competitive in character.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa was set up to serve as a facilitator of this spirit after decades of racial antagonism, hatred, division, human degradation, exploitation, social and moral decay. It signifies a desire for all peoples of South Africa to remain together, united and free with ambition to work together as one nation and one destiny. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission shows that the people

of South Africa are ready to forget the past forgive each other and look ahead to a better future. But they must know what they are forgetting, forgiving and to write their national history correctly for future generations.

Reconciliation brings with it contrite hearts, readiness and determination for those who wronged others to turn a new leaf and for those wronged to be able to forget and forgive for the sake of ushering in a new prosperous future. Confession of our sins is the basis for the forgiveness God grants us. Confession of the sins of apartheid is the basis on which reconciliation in South Africa must be attained. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on whether or not the reconciliatory spirit ushered in by the TRC can motivate true nationalism and nation building.

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND NATION BUILDING

Nation building is about people, their social and physical environment. It is about development of the human potential and material resources to the maximum for the good of every citizen. Nation building is about creating a new political culture, which unifies all different population groups, fosters formulation of common values shared by all and facilitates the development of true and unbreakable spirit of national consciousness or patriotism. Nation building is a long process. It requires dedication, sacrifice and unity of purpose. This cannot be done if people are divided, harboring feelings of hatred, mistrust and alienated from each other. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission started a long process of nation building, which is going to take many years to complete.

South Africa is not the only country in Africa, which needs to reconcile its peoples for the sake of nation building. Countries like Rwanda, Burundi, Congo Democratic Republic, Somalia, Mozambique, Angola, Uganda, Sudan to mention but a few requires reconciling their peoples just as much as South Africa. But none of these countries has ever perceived the idea of a TRC. This makes South Africa unique not only in Africa but also in the world as a whole. Why did South Africa come up with the idea of a TRC? This is a question, which needs to be answered.

In attempting to answer this question one needs to briefly look at South Africa's unique history. South Africa was the first British colony in Africa to attain statehood,

which came in 1910. It was also the first and only colony whose statehood was given to a minority white settler community totally excluding the indigenous black majority and other racial minorities. South Africa was the only African State confronted with an extreme form of white nationalism which disenfranchised all coloured people, stripped them of their citizenship, alienated land from them and denied them of basic human rights for almost half a century.

During all this time the apartheid regime maintained itself through repression, hard legislation, hanging of political opponents and imprisonment. Many people went into exile and took up arms to fight for freedom. The liberation of South Africa from apartheid and establishment of democratic government became a world issue. The entire African continent was at war with apartheid, receiving training and equipping liberation fighters. The United Nations had occasion to declare apartheid a crime against humanity and economic sanctions were imposed on the apartheid regime in South Africa. To this was added political, economic and social isolation. South Africa could not participate in Olympic games or African games. She was expelled from the Commonwealth and any nation that tried to break this isolation faced harsh international criticism.

South African defiance of the international community made matters worse for her as a country and for the relations between white and black inside the country. Intensive pressure from within and without pushed the apartheid regime into taking desperate criminal measures to maintain itself. These included increased executions, torture in prison and police cells, long jail terms for convicted political activists and open massacres such as the Sharpville Massacre of 1964. South Africa started on a policy of destabilizing neighboring states, which supported those trying to overthrow its white extremist regime. Countries like Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique and later on Zimbabwe had rough times with South Africa. At the end of it all bitterness, hate, condemnation, extreme alienation between white and black, impoverishment and degradation of black people, hunger, misery, sickness, illiteracy and socially depleted non white society remained to tell the sad tale of apartheid. A background like that could not be a foundation for nationalism and unity, which the country needed after the turn of events in April 1994.

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AS THE GATEWAY TO THE FUTURE

Nation building is a new but extremely important concept in political development literature. In essence it refers to new states lacking political unity, national identity, common values to be pursued by their people and yet anxious to accelerate their economic and political development. Such nations are aware of their backwardness economically, socially and politically. In most cases the majority of the people are illiterate, possess new skills, they are poor and sick. Hunger and malnutrition especially amongst children, poor transport facilities and absence of basic modern amenities are rampant everywhere. In such circumstances the overriding need is to create virile national spirit and legitimate, capable and committed leadership to foster nation building.

Nation building entails establishment of viable political institutions such as political parties, state organs like legislatures, executives, judicial systems, robust civil services free from corruption and systems of state security. Development planning and execution of plans made is only possible if such institutions are in place and operating efficiently. Economic use of scarce resources to maximize benefits follows from this. It is also important for citizens of those states to know themselves, perceive their national interests collectively and peacefully.

In this respect the TRC offers the gate to nation building in South Africa. In essence the TRC aims at getting the true facts of events that happened under apartheid which were top secrets hidden away from black and other coloured South Africans. The people who were victimized need to know who did what, how and why. It is a test of the feelings of members of the white community who drove the apartheid machine forward all those years. Are they ready to tell the truth? Do they regret what they did and truly confess their guilt to the people they offended? Voluntary confession and asking for forgiveness is a sign penitent or relenting hearts ready to amend their old ways and join the people they tortured in constructing a new future.

To the black and other coloured South Africans the TRC poses one question i.e. if you are told the truth and forgiveness is asked from you, are you ready to give it for the sake of your country? From the outset the answer appeared to be yes we are ready to forgive them for the sake of our country but we must know what and whom we are

forgiving. Those confessing their guilt to join us so that we integrate ourselves into nation with one destiny and start a new spirit of cooperating and not antagonistic relations must also convince us that there is a change of heart and desire.

The ANC, PAC, and other groups in exile succeeded in delegitimising the South African State in international forums and building up anti government support inside the country. Trade unions like the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the formation of the United Democratic Movement (UDF) with its slogan "Apartheid Divides UDF Unites" became the leaders of protest politics and consequently became prime targets of state repression. [1]

The process of reconciliation, however, appears to have been set in motion by FW De Klerk then State President in his opening speech to parliament on 2nd February 1990. De Klerk announced the unbanning of the ANC and other popular opposition parties and invited them to join hands with his National Party in a negotiation process to determine a future national constitution. By this gesture De Klerk was announcing the end of apartheid and politics of confrontation and hatred. He began a process of reconciliation between warring parties and admission that a new era was coming to the country which required all citizens to work together, resolve political liberty and human rights to everyone as a precondition to reconstructing the future. [2]

All political parties involved and people as a whole accepted De Klerk's invitation in principle but a lot remained to be done. Was he sincere? Were the whites ready to share power with blacks that they had despised and hated for so long? Was it possible for them to undergo a complete revolutionary mind change? In a similar vein the same questions hang on black and coloured people. Could they revolutionize their minds and see white people who had tormented them for long as their friends, colleagues and partners in

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[1] Jeff McCarthy, 'Local and Regional government: from rigidity to crisis to flux' in David, M, Smith Ed, The Apartheid city and Beyond Urbanisation and Social Change in South Africa. London. Witwatersrand University Press 1992 pp. 33

[2] Ibid. P 34

progress? The TRC was the method government adapted to set people on the road to progress.

WHAT REMAINS TO BE DONE?

Apartheid was a carefully conceived and formulated policy aimed at establishing and maintaining white domination over the black majority. It was a taught doctrine taught to all people particularly white schools. Its aim was to protect 'White South Africa' against 'native danger'. Mr. J.G. Strydom, then leader of the National Party in Transvaal, expatiated on The Native Policy Debate in parliament thus:

> The European had hitherto been able to maintain himself in South Africa because he was economically and culturally superior to the native. If the government went out of its way to civilise and uplift the native in an unnatural manner the white man would not be able to maintain his superiority. We are slowly but surely committing suicide[3]

This quotation illustrates white peoples fear of the black majority and it is this fear, which was the genesis of apartheid. Strydom went further to say that the whites must be fair to the native and must not oppress him since this was not in accordance with their nature or civilization but they must not devote their own energy and resources to developing the native unnaturally. He concluded that it was the duty of the white population to make South Africa safe for its descendents and not to tread the dangerous path of sickly, sentimental negrophilism. [4]

This sums up the philosophy of apartheid. White superiority; separate development, educational and economic backwardness so that blacks people cannot compete with whites. Black people had to be denied of franchise as the only sure way of keeping the government and South Africa white and preserved for white descendents.

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[3] Quoted from Alfred, Hoernle, R.F, South African Native Policy and The Liberal Spirit. Johannesburg: Witwatersand University Press, 1945, p 1.
[4] Ibid.

The techniques used to achieve this included no education or substandard education available only to a small percentage of black children and coloureds. Economic advancement was tied to education. Natives were not allowed to live the same standard as their white boss, social inferiority was emphasised and no intermarriages were to be allowed. All instruments of force army, police, prisons and judiciary were to be exclusively white.

For almost half a century this was the status of affairs. Black people were exploited without land or means of independent existence except through selling their unskilled labour cheaply to their white superiors. Several generations of whites and blacks went through this system. The result was to implant the idea of black inferiority firmly in the minds of whites and bitterness and hate in the minds of blacks. The process of reconciliation currently underway is meant to blot out this sad picture so that a new nation can grow out of it.

What remains to be done is cultural convergence. This is a process of change through which heterogeneous features in the cultures geographically separated people grow more and more alike with the passage of time until they reach a relatively high degree of similarity or identity without any historical fact like diffusion. Although white people and blacks have lived together for more than three centuries they have lived apart. It is just now that the process of bringing them together has begun. [5]

A NEW POLITICAL CULTURE FOR SOUTH AFRICA?

Political culture can be defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behaviour in the political system. It covers both the political ideals and operating norms of a polity. Political culture is the manifestations in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimensions of politics. Political culture is the product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system. It is rooted in public events and private

[5] Julius, Gould and William, L, Kolb Eds. A Dictionary of the Social Sciences. NY: UNESCO: The Free Press 1964, p 159.

experiences associated with political ideology, national ethos and spirit, and national political psychology. [6]

Since the new South Africa is only a few years old it cannot be expected to have fully developed operational political culture. Political culture evolves through time of living and interacting together. What one can say now is that the process of evolving for South Africa has began. After a considerable future period there will be such a culture in which all people can see and identify their best selves.

CONCLUSION

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was not expected to achieve reconciliation. It was expected to start the process of reconciliation. This it has achieved. Reconciliation is a long process, which is likely to take many years to achieve. Many of the factors ushered in to establish and maintain apartheid in being such as educational and economic disparities will have to be reversed or addressed before full reconciliation is achieved. But it was a worthwhile move. It set the country on the right course for nation building.

[6] See David, L, Sills ed. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences Vols. 11-12. NY and London: Macmillan Co and Free Press 1968

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