

SA must buy into a new social contract

Ramaphosa's appeal to a common nationhood has nothing to do with selling out, write Vukani Mbhele and Kiru Naidoo

WE ARE one South African nation. Diverse but one, President Cyril Ramaphosa was emphatic about reminding us of that in the very first line of the State of the Nation address (Sona) set us on the road to reconciliation and nation building.

In the intervening years, for reasons we must all confess culpability, we again pulled apart. Let's not be misunderstood. South African society has deep clefts. Race and class lie at the heart of privilege and poverty.

To appeal to a common nationhood neither ignores nor diminishes the devastation of more than 350 years of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, land dispossession, indenture and other forms of labour bondage, unfettered capitalism, corruption, violence and apartheid. In the choice between political posturing and getting to work, Ramaphosa has fired up a new energy.

In gathering these thoughts, we were not prompted by the Sona.

It came as we shared a cup of coffee the morning before. Our conversation revolved around a picture of the president jogging on the promenade in Cape Town. It distressed us that some of our comrades had taken to social media to vent.

Among the views was that the pictures with white comrades were a demonstration of Ramaphosa selling out to white monopoly capital.

Given our nation's dominant history of dispossession and racist violence as well as the raw wounds of recent political events, that knee-jerk reaction is predictable, but it must not be permissible.

Those views come in the main from informed and comfortable people, well placed and influential people. To let those reckless and dangerous views slide reduces us to a contemptuous and self-hating people.

To reduce our white comrades to enemies is erroneous and unjust.

As our untouchable coffee cooled in the Durban humidity, another uncomfortable word popped into the conversation – minorities.

For ease of gathering these thoughts, we will use the word loosely as emerging from the four-nation thesis conceived by the ANC and its allies in the 1940s.

Those were the early years of forging non-racialism as our diverse communities took to the trenches of the Struggle side by side.

There was no alternative narrative.

We historically organised in opposition to racist oppression as Africans, coloureds, white democrats and Indians.

The 1955 Freedom Charter took us a step closer to each other when it declared: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white." Working together across artificial racial barriers has an earlier

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history especially in the communist and worker movement, but that is a subject for another time.

At this juncture, it is prudent to recognise that the ANC provided the leadership for unity among our people.

When the ANC was founded in 1912, unity was its central message.

Under the banner of African nationalism, it brought diverse ethnicities together to confront the racist state as a single, united force.

Keep in mind that their majesties, the monarchs of Basutoland and Swaziland, were among the drivers of this concept of

unity.

The shape and form of that unity evolved as political conditions changed. Democrats in the minority communities reached towards the ANC, recognising it as the leader of society.

The ANC's attraction as early as the 1950s was that it posited one person, one vote. The ANC further mobilised support internationally, mainly in the West, against white domination.

This found resonance and expressed itself in the form of the anti-apartheid movement. Well into the 1980s, white liberal parties were still toying with the idea of a race-quali-

fied franchise. This history is instructive in that it demonstrates that Ramaphosa, in preaching and acting out unity, is simply articulating a position of generations of leadership before him.

Those who want to divide us by taking pot shots at the picture of his morning jog are simultaneously creating a distance from white people, and erroneously presenting black people as hating.

That must have Verwoerd chuckling in his grave. To move our country forward, symbolic gestures like the morning jog can have an enormously positive impact on our national consciousness. Having a president who is acceptable across racial lines is a sign that the ANC-led government is relevant, and a non-racial society is a possibility.

To quote Madiba: "It is necessary to heal the wounds of the past if you are going to build your country and to have unity. I am working with people who fought me very bitterly before the elections. It was my responsibility as the man who is leading the majority party, my responsibility to heal the wounds of the past and to work with people who were my opponents."

Ramaphosa has not sold anyone out. His Sona ably demonstrates that he wants us to buy into a new social contract. It is a powerful appeal to patriotism, volunteerism and the endless possibilities for the progress of all our people if we unite and work together.

In 1994, Madiba led us in appreciating that we were "one nation, many cultures". In the intervening years, our three other presidents carved new trajectories for our country. Ramaphosa is building on all of that.

The Sona has demonstrated that radical economic transformation is as firmly on the agenda as the appeal for unity. Let us believe that a new dawn is possible. Let us rally to the front line and seize the moment to move our country forward.

● Mbhele and Naidoo are heads of communication in the KZN departments of Social Development and Public Works respectively. They write in their personal capacities.



Cyril Ramaphosa, front right, is cheered after being elected president in Parliament, last week.
PICTURE: MIKE HUTCHINGS, POOL VIA AP