

# Sixty Years after the Freedom Charter

The background of the title is a close-up, slightly blurred image of the South African flag, showing the green, white, blue, yellow, black, and red sections. The flag is set against a warm, orange-to-yellow gradient background that suggests a sunrise or sunset.

Can the Freedom Charter be used to make it possible for the oppressed anywhere, to dream and speak of their freedom and to make it a reality?

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By Mongane Wally Serote

One of the most gallant battles, which must forever be an inspiration for all those South Africans who defend multiracialism, gender equity and democracy in our country, is the battle fought by the Khoe and the San against the invading Portuguese, who landed on the south western shores of our country in 1492. South African patriots must reclaim that victory as the foundation upon which the spirit of the Freedom Charter and the African Renaissance was to be built.

The Khoe and the San faced the mighty army of the Portuguese, who were armed with bayonets, guns, cannons and other weapons of war. Given the fact that the Portuguese had gained vast experience in the many other adventures which they had embarked upon in other continents, intending to settle and to implement the Slave trade and colonialism, a great victory was achieved for the oppressed of the world. The Khoe and the San, armed with knobkieries, spears, and bows and arrows, skilled in indigenous guerrilla warfare, scuttled and defeated the Portuguese, who, tails between their legs, had to run back to Portugal for reinforcement. The spirit of no surrender had been engraved in the minds and blood of the coming generations of South Africans.

A new era of struggle, signalled by the beheading of Inkosi Bambhata, and inspired by the wars of resistance which the indigenous people of South Africa had engaged in, from a divided and weak position, against the Dutch and the British, was embarked upon. The weaknesses among the indigenous people, our ancestors, including some who collaborated with the settlers, resulted in the colonisation of our country, and the near enslavement of the indigenous people, by both the British and the Boers. Lessons were learnt from these protracted onslaughts by the settlers. These lessons persuaded the indigenous people to correct some of their weaknesses. They united, they studied both the manner in which the settlers fought, and the institutions they created to govern them, their languages and their culture, and embarked on processes of developing greater unity among themselves.

They founded the media to communicate among themselves and even with the settlers across the land. They combined voices of *Imvo* and *Izwi*, the newspapers founded by the new leaders in African politics, which had a far reach, stretching throughout Southern Africa. These discussions and debates about the state of Africans within the state of affairs as put forward by the settlers – a maturing and ripening antagonistic contradiction – would qualitatively strengthen the African voice, and sharpen methods to strengthen, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the opposition to colonialisation. There emerged, from

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all these efforts, the launch of the South African National Native Congress in the late nineteenth century. This was the predecessor of the African National Congress (ANC) which was launched in 1912.

The gathering of 2800 people from all walks of life, from across South Africa, from large and small villages, from large and small townships, from dorpies and suburbs, in Kliptown in 1955 was another qualitative leap for the struggle. This historic event had been preceded by the Defiance Campaign and the M-plan, both of which were to be the foundation upon which the new forms of struggle would be based. The divided and weak position of the patriotic forces had been overcome, and a road map for the rebirth of an African nation, the South Africans, had been drafted: it was called *The Freedom Charter!*

Some of the pillars of the Freedom Charter read:

*...The people shall govern!  
The people shall share in the country's wealth!  
All shall be equal before the law!  
All shall enjoy equal human rights!  
The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!  
There shall be houses, security and comfort!...*

Thus the voice of the people reverberated in the corridors of history. The Freedom Charter was also the basis upon which the culture of Mass Action against oppression and exploitation was based; the M-plan, a tactic used by the ANC to mobilise the masses, was also a preparatory move towards establishing the underground networks which were to be the anchor of all other forms of struggle. By 1961, the people who had been in struggle against the antagonistic contradiction manifested through oppression, exploitation and violence founded Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) to defend the spirit and letter of the Freedom Charter. As the saying goes: ‘History repeats itself’. The struggle had returned to 1492, in a different form.

The different terrain of struggle had to be understood, as well as the new subjective realities. By 1952 the people had spoken, the road they wished to travel no matter the odds, was mapped out, and the motive force to engage the processes to resolve the antagonistic contradiction had been mobilised. As Govan Mbeki put it, the impact of the Defiance Campaign was:

*Firstly it gave an opportunity to the rank and file of the ANC membership to be involved in a political way in a struggle against oppression... Secondly the people realised that the way to freedom passed through jail. Thirdly the campaign inculcated the idea and spirit of sacrifice of personal interests for public good. Fourthly, out of the campaign came out a disciplined volunteer corps of men and women who gave unstintingly of their time and energy without remuneration in order to build and strengthen the ANC... And finally, the defiance campaign put an end to the era of deputations and pleading with Government.*

By 1960 leaders were jailed, and some were in exile, some in the

underground networks while others were sent for military training. Tens of thousands of ordinary people in the world were mobilised, and were mobilising themselves, in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. And the West European and US administrations were to assist us in building a more powerful solidarity movement as an unintended consequence of their support for the Apartheid regime.

The antagonistic contradiction between the People of South Africa and the Apartheid regime had deepened. The liberation movement held on to the Freedom Charter. While the returning and trained guerrillas became armed cadres, trained in progressive politics, the Freedom Charter was the basic and non-negotiable point of reference for them, for the liberation of their country. They were also nurtured to honour and emulate the pre-colonial leaders like Makhandla, Hintsas, Sekhukhune, Cetshwayo, Moshoeshe and Bambatha, the great fighters who resisted colonialism in battle and with force. The struggle was also to free the leaders, who were nurtured and tempered in struggle, some of whom were now in jail: Mandela, Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Dennis Goldberg, Ahmed Kathrada, Braam Fischer, Andrew Mlangeni, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Dorothy Nyembe... .

At this current hour, having traversed twenty one years into democracy, our country is obviously at a cross-road.

Different parts of the nation put the constitution of our country, which is the deep elaboration of the of the Freedom Charter, to the highest test, through diverse actions: the social and delivery protests; the labour strikes and demonstrations; and through other sections of the populace taking government to court on a variety of issues, some serious and some less so. Furthermore, disruptive protests inside Parliament are also taking place. Are we once more repeating history? We tested the Freedom Charter and that testing, in that time, 1956, resulted in one of the longest trials in our country, the Treason Trial, and then matured into detentions, deaths in detention, bannings and banishments, torture, long-term imprisonments and a host of other atrocities.

It is important to note that we are still engaged in resolving the complex antagonistic contradiction of our country. We essentially resolved the political element to usher in a free, just, stable, peaceful and secure nation. However, we still have the past. And that still subjugates, oppresses and exploits our people, and also dehumanises sections of the population.

The conundrum is: which motive forces among our people stand for multiracialism, gender equity and democracy, and which for Apartheid and exploitation? That is the question. We have arrived once more in that historical moment, when we must ask the historical question: What must be done?

Is it possible to be objective and

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to try to understand the men and women, the fire eaters for freedom who sacrificed everything, so that the Freedom Charter could be the agenda for Freedom for all South Africans? The Freedom Charter expresses everything which every South African must cherish deep in their minds, and hold dear to their hearts and close to their spirituality. It is unprecedented in our Country for it expresses a collective consciousness of a people, and expresses their commitment to actions which must impact on the life of a nation to resolve an antagonistic contradiction of bloody proportions and consequences. The pioneers, Luthuli, Sisulu, Tambo, Mandela, Mbeki, Kotane, Marks, Fischer, Dadoo, Florence Mphosho, Kate Molale, Ruth Mompati, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen

Joseph, Rrahima Moosa... were the torch bearers of an unique and eternal moment.

I am not only calling for the understanding of these men and women, I am also stating that the Freedom Charter is a heritage of this country which must be accessible, which must be there in the open, to talk to all the people and enshrine their rare and fine aspirations as they faced all the odds, to accomplish it as a political reference. Their forward looking vision of a future of many generations of South Africans is now written on the wall, proclaiming South Africa as a nation among nations of the continent and the world.

The Freedom Charter is the anchor of Freedom which has shaped and laid a foundation for a nation to emerge. This nation, which is part and parcel of other African countries, enters the family of nations even beyond our continent. It, on behalf of Africa, enters the world to contribute to the human experience. It does so because of its total and unique experience which is inherent in the Freedom Charter, making this tool an international tool which must be celebrated as a contribution to freedom in the whole world. Can that be done, as a collective spiritual commitment of South Africans, on behalf of Africa and as an international beacon? Can the Freedom Charter be used to make it possible for the oppressed anywhere, to dream and speak of their freedom and to make it a reality?

From 1492 onwards, to the nineteen nineties, while the mass struggle rose and ebbed and rose and ebbed, the imposition of oppression, exploitation and subjugation of black people were brutally, ruthlessly and violently reinforced through legislation and violence. That oppression, which was intended to be a means for maximum exploitation of black people, was also a tool to deny democratic rights, freedom of speech, justice and the enjoyment of the diversity of our country. The total rejection of this is expressed in the "...shalls..." in the freedom Charter. The denial of freedom for all South Africans was negated by the Freedom Charter. The laws representing those denials were repealed and replaced



with inclusive policies and legislations, in line with the new constitution of the country.

Let me tell you a graphic story which illustrates this. I come from Alexandra. Alexandra was, in the spirit of the village, structured as a community; it was a tightly knit community, cushioned in the ways of the village but in an urban area, 18 miles from the city centre. In one yard in Alexandra, there would be perhaps ten or twelve or more families. There was the main family, the property owner, then, the tenants. Meetings about how to live with each other were now and then held. Stories were now then told as elder men sat and shared beer, after the formal discussions which were chaired by the landlord. Security tasks, water conservation, cleanliness of the yard, discipline and other chores were discussed and responsibilities allocated. Fund-raising would have been done for this or that in the yard.

I recall hearing, as a little boy, Rre Poee, talking about his life story. He was from Thabazimbi. He worked for a boer there, who did constructions for other boer farmers. The ritual in the morning as they prepared to leave, was that Rre Poee would clean the car, pack the tools: picks, shovels, rakes and things like that. He would then wait for the “baas” so that they can then leave for work for the day. The “baas” had laid down the law that, Rre Poee would enter the boot where he had packed the tools, sit there. Then the boot would be closed. Rre Poee would sit there inside the closed boot together with the tools until they reached their destination. Rre Poee would come out of the boot, soaked wet with sweat, dizzy and clamouring for breath. He would recover, and then he would begin to work. Part of his pay was the little shack he had built in the “baas’s” farm plus one pound a month.

Rre Poee ran away from the farm one day and came to Alexandra. In my view, he ran from the pan into the fire. When Rre Poee died, eventually, he was alone, in his room in our yard, with his family faraway in Sekhukhune. What a life!

This man, a father and a husband, had had no peace in his life. He was not only oppressed and exploited, he

went through a process of systematic dehumanisation all his life. He had been a shepherd, coming from a peasant family. He understood farming methods. He then became a labourer employed by the Baas. He then became a domestic servant...“I was expected to wash white women’s panties...” he used to say. Before he decided to be an entrepreneur, he had been in menial job after menial job. He left the “...white women pantie...” place. When he died, he was trying to sell flower seedlings to the white people, riding a bicycle, for miles on end in the white suburbs – Bramley, Rosebank, Parktown and so on – and in the process, he had to avoid being arrested for an invalid pass. A section

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in his pass stated that he could not be employed in an urban area.

When he died, he was about seventy-five years old. He had endured forced removals in the areas where he was born. A long and protracted forced removal was being enforced in Alexandra, beginning the fifties, and in the seventies, Alexandra began to show the cracks of disintegration of individuals, families, community, heritage, culture and it seemed the spirit of the place was in despair. The one time elders of the place became very old and one by one they began to let go... . In 1994, even as Rre Poee had already passed, his peers who were still alive were vindicated. It must have been them who came in their millions to vote before they too would let go... . The inclusivity of the Freedom Charter empowered all to hold on to and use

the political power which is enshrined in it to participate in the changing of the circumstances of the people.

While the “baas” element of the nation hides and lives the life of the chameleon, the truth is, it is aware that there is no space for it in a multiracial, gender equal and democratic South Africa. The Democratic system is a dictatorship against warped and unjust intentions.

The Pan Africanist Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement have expressed, in their own spirit, minds, words and being as Movements, what their aspirations for the future of South Africa must be. In their own right, they fought against oppression, exploitation and the dehumanisation of black people. They, like the ANC, aspire for the regeneration, reclamation, rebirth, reawakening, recreation and reconstruction of our country within the context of the African Continent, and we all envision the Union of the African Continent. These aspirations are in no way contradictory to multi-racialism, gender equity and democracy. The Parliament of South Africa is a multiracial institution and it is culturally, spiritually and politically diverse. The Constitution is our supreme law.

As an instrument, the Freedom Charter is a legacy for the South African people. In place now, in the same spirit, informed and inspired by the Freedom Charter, is the Constitution of South Africa. The Constitution is now the instrument through which the freedoms of sections of our nation must be defined, with the objectives which the Freedom Charter stated so clearly: to on the one hand affirm the uniqueness of the different sectors of our nation; on the other, to become the basis upon which the great nation of the South African people must be born and must emerge.

Because the constitution dictates and creates checks and balances related to the lives, being and history of the citizens of the country, that constitution must be defended. It must be defended in the first instance by all the South Africans. The government must also put into place institutions capable of defending it.

Does the constitution engage the issues related to the fact that the majority

of the people in this country, who are black, have been underdeveloped, consciously and deliberately by the Apartheid state? And that is why I have had to go into detail about Rre Pooe! Besides defending and protecting the diversity of a growing nation called South Africans, are there enough balances in the constitution to ensure that different sections can really understand each other? Apart from the black the majority, other parts of the diversity still have to have a fuller and deeper understanding of the unintended and unconscious, as well as the deliberate and conscious effects and impact of racism, apartheid and labour exploitation on that majority part of the diversity.

The hue of this diversity was not only excluded, but short of being rendered extinct, it was sustained for the sustenance of other hues of the national diversity. This not intentional unawareness forever raises its head. The Freedom Charter calls for inclusive participation to overcome this, which can become a trigger for racial misunderstanding. After all, the Freedom Charter was founded through sweat, suffering and death. It was founded, by all means necessary, to enshrine inclusivity in our nation.

Otherwise, what actions have been taken, by whom, how and where, to ensure that the "...shalls..." in the Freedom Charter have not only been addressed, but that their history and their reality is not only studied by all, but that all are committed to their being implemented and to their becoming a reality?

The "...shalls..." in the Freedom Charter were inspired by the understanding and realisation that even against the greatest odds, the inhabitants of those dungeons still claimed their being human and humane. Suddenly it was said: the Freedom Charter has been achieved! That is the meaning of Freedom! That is what the constitution meant when the democratic Parliament received it on behalf of the Nation. In the meantime, the truth is how must we make the constitution walk the streets? Is it at present, being taught to walk the streets?

This was a contradiction in terms, but still, a reality guiding the struggle for

freedom, which in part, is forever even today, still being addressed by the "...shalls..." of the Freedom Charter. That is why, in my view, we could arrive at the exploration of reconciliation, even as we missed its central point.

The Reconciliation which was pronounced, at Codesa and later enacted, cannot be limited to a reconciliation sought between White and Black South Africans only. Reconciliation should also have meant that, from a multiracial viewpoint South Africans would claim the Africanness of South Africa.

"...South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white..." That is not and cannot be an idle notion. Does it inform reconciliation, but does that mean that the interpretation must be confined to that meaning only? The "...shalls..." of the Freedom Charter enforce the total opening up of the

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South African Nation, and the history of this Charter emanates from negating tribalism. The "...shalls..." of the Freedom Charter confirm gender equity through its insistence on inclusivity which also implies the openness of the family, which cannot remain being torn apart, as it was by the Apartheid system which deliberately targeted it for destruction. That destruction would ensure that blacks are subjugated. That subjugation would ensure that blacks would become cultureless and thus more easily exploitable.

Lastly, the "...shalls..." in the Charter affirm the Africanness of Africans and of South Africa. The five categories of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) – namely social issues, institutions, technology, bio-diversity and liberatory processes – are the basis for the re-emergence of the South African African discourse, which remains fundamental to the inclusive multiracial and diverse culture of our nation.

IKS will and must emancipate the African voice. It is that voice, which will negate our having to be professional students of the West. The African voice must be emancipated in South Africa. For as long as when it emerges, it is pounded and crushed against all kinds of guises and eventually muted, no voice can speak for Africans and therefore the fundamental principles of the Freedom Charter will be completely and absolutely violated. Inclusivity will have failed.

There are too many biased and prejudiced views of African Culture. It is a prejudice to speak of tradition and custom, even as it is also, African intellectuals who insist on that terminology when referring to African Culture. Where else in the world is that terminology used which anthropologists, who see the "dark continent" when they visualise that which is not white or Western? Speaking of African Culture, in the democratic dispensation of our country, has almost become tantamount to oppression of women, backwardness, child abuse and tribalism.

There is no doubt in my mind that there are issues which need to be discarded in African Culture, as is also the case even with the so called civilised west. Because many cannot even contemplate that there are things to be discarded from western culture, its sun is setting. That is one discussion. In this African bath like in any other human bath which contains dirty water, there is a baby in it. That is another discussion.

I agree also, that there is a need to use the constitution, there is a need to be scholarly, there is a need also to be objective and not to be romantic as this process of rebirthing and regenerating the African discourse is engaged. I am the first to know that there is scholarly and scholarly, that there is objectivity and objectivity... . All that process, of the renaissance of Africa, must not negate the Freedom Charter, or seek to be integrated into and not transform or disguise eurocentrism as the ultimate truth of human life. The scholars, African scholars, multiracial as they must be, must be the defenders of diversity. The Freedom Charter is the unprecedented pioneer of inclusivity! ■