

Becoming a 21st Century Non-Racialist in South Africa

by Neeshan Balton



Neeshan Balton is the executive director of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation. He has been a community and political activist for the past 35 years with involvement ranging from teacher unionism, civic organising, youth activism and formal and underground ANC activism. He was an activist in the Transvaal Indian Congress and United Democratic Front.

Neeshan chairs the boards of SANCA/Nishtara Lenasia and Eastwave Community Radio in Lenasia. He also serves on the Board of the Gauteng growth and development agency.

He holds a MSC in Public Finance and Administration (University of London) and a BA and BED (Wits).

Abstract

This article highlights areas of work where new directions on the meaning and execution of non-racialism in post- apartheid South Africa are needed. As a visionary political concept which guided much of the liberation struggle during the latter part of the 20th century it now has to contend with being state policy as well as a constitutional principle. Its relevance to society today would require an ongoing examination of its meaning and applicability. The article also breaks non-racialism down into several manifestations and discusses each discretely and in relation to each other.

These include how non-racialism is used in public discourse today; how it features in electoral and party politics; how it should feature in the latter; how it relates to anti-racism and how this can make it into a structuring mechanism for civic activism; how it features in

our laws; and how it relates to our systems of governance as they regard race, both structurally and otherwise.

Non-racialism has been under immense scrutiny and criticism in recent times and its critics come from across the colour line. On the other hand almost all political, labour, faith, business and other civil society organisations (including the ASRI) would have non-racialism included somewhere in their vision and mission statements. Non-racialism is most importantly one of the foundational values of the constitution.

Ferial Haffajee writes that “non-racialism is so abused I can see why it has lost credibility. It has become an easy slogan for citizens who don’t want to engage in hard work. Many argue against employment equity because it’s against non-racialism!”¹

She writes that “non-racialism is a constitutional principle and an organising political practice. It is a philosophy that acknowledges the role of race in constructing the country, economy and social relations and then actively sets out to dismantle these relationships to eventually see and commune with each other beyond our racial identities.”²

Haffajee goes on to characterise non-racialism as embodying empowerment and equity policies, which the constitution makes provision for. For her, being non-racial means being able to grasp intergenerational impacts of apartheid and also doing something about it. Finally, being non-racial means holding a vision for the future of a diverse country that is able to see beyond the melanin levels of its diverse people.

Haffajee laments that “there is not a single national campaign, programme or policy that seeks to reach a 21st century understanding of what it means to be a non-racialist in South Africa. Wearing non-racialist colours now is like wearing an ill-fitting suit. It is pinned uncomfortably between white race-blindness and the blackness-is-currency.”³

I have quoted Haffajee at length because she has raised the most important issues for non-racialism today. Its appropriation by conservatives who argue that empowerment is contrary to non-racialism and by others who contend that non-racialism was merely a ploy by whites to maintain a stranglehold over the direction of the struggle. Their arguments further contend that the adherence to non-racialism blunted the struggle and resulted in a negotiated settlement and a constitution that restricted transformation and maintained white privilege. Haffajee hints at the subject for this paper – a 21st century understanding of what it means to be a non-racialist in South Africa.

It is to this which I now turn my attention for the rest of this paper.

¹ Haffajee, Ferial. (2015) *What if there were no whites in South Africa?* Picador Africa

² Ibid

³ Ibid

For the ANC being non-racial has come to mean ensuring that it still has support from non-Africans. A trend observed in some ANC dominated provinces and cities has been the way in which its provincial/city leaders get elected and the executive of the provincial/city cabinet is then constituted. It has been almost obligatory to have a White, Indian or Coloured South African included in the executive. The reserved quota has been two and no more than three. For its African membership, the cabinet are chosen to balance language and geographic considerations. It is hoped that this broad reflection will ensure that the cabinet will bring in the support of their respective constituencies and be used to show that the government is officially non-racial. In this context non-racial would mean having a reflection of the demographics of the population being represented in the highest decision making structures of the province (and the country). In so doing they hope, too, that they will be able to refute any accusations of failing to exhibit non-racialism.

21st century non-racialism must get us to a point where, as in the case of Cosatu at its formation, it was able to elect Jay Naidoo as its general secretary because of his leadership abilities and his commitment to the cause of the working class in South Africa. We will not breach the racial divides of our country by trying to assuage fears of racial dominance through only symbolic representivity.

I say this knowing that race is real for most South Africans. The recent South African reconciliation barometer confirmed once more that most South Africans continue to define themselves in race terms as well as language and ethnicity. A study into the attitudes of ANC members to non-racialism provided insights into the importance that non-African members attached to having somebody of “their race” as part of the leadership of the organisation. The absence of this was equated with the ANC not taking that particular group seriously. For some this is viewed as the only way to access attention for their specific geographic or group issue.

This reflects a deeper problem for non-racialism within the broader politics of South Africa. It points to the need for a break with mobilising, exploiting and manipulating racial identities, solidarities and resentments. This is applicable to all political parties, not just the ANC, but as standard bearers of non-racialism it is up to the ANC to provide exemplary leadership on this issue. As it has done on many occasions in its history, when it came to choosing between narrow and inclusive nationalism, it always chose the latter.

The 2016 Human Rights day events in Sharpeville serves as another indicator of what being a non-racialist in the 21st century might mean. It has become the norm for government and many commentators to complain about the lack of visibility of non-Africans at such national day events. This year as part of the first anti-racism week the Mandela and Kathrada Foundations, under the banner of the Anti-Racism Network, South Africa (ARNSA) engaged with organisations that had predominantly white memberships and supporters to urge them to take on the importance of being visible in Sharpeville on the 21st. The organisations engaged were from the Jewish, Portuguese, Greek, Italian and Afrikaner communities.

This drew directly from our struggle history. Most particularly when, in 1952, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo told a gathering of 200 sympathetic whites in Johannesburg they were concerned about their lack of participation in the Defiance Campaign and that they were afraid that this would create the view among black people that all whites approved of the policies of the Malan government.

The outcome of this engagement was a small but significant presence of white South Africans at the annual Human Rights day event in Sharpeville. For most it was the first time in the area and also their first encounters with the surviving victims of the massacre. What this points to is that non-racialism can refer to a type of activism and that commemorative events can be non-racial in form and content.

The speech delivered by Professor Klippies Kritzingler at the commemoration made the following salient points about how whites needed to tackle racism:

We as white South Africans need to say farewell to innocence, to stop denying that we designed, carried out or benefitted from – and in many ways still benefit from – this destructive legacy of racism. By saying farewell to false innocence, we become vulnerable and open, not presuming or demanding to be forgiven, but adopting a position from where a new relationship can begin.

To be equipped to play a role in the struggle against racism, we need to inform ourselves thoroughly on what happened, so that we do not underestimate the depth of the pain and humiliation that black communities suffered or the economic damage it caused. But we must not only go and collect this knowledge from the books in the libraries. It is even more important to listen to one another's stories; to hear what happened to black people from their own mouths, in face to face encounters.

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, I believe we need to say **farewell to arrogance**. The real problem with racism is that we white people arrogantly assume that we always know better, that our ways of thinking are more advanced, that our cultures are superior, that our languages are more sophisticated. And our false innocence and ignorance feed this arrogance, so that we can glibly tell black people to “get over it” or “move on” or “stop taking us back to the past.

Farewell to arrogance means to learn how to be silent, how to accept and respect black leadership, how to appreciate the wisdom inherent in African languages, cultures and religions. It will also mean losing our fear of one another, learning to speak African languages and identifying ourselves as Africans. I don't mean that we should arrogantly claim that we are Africans. I see myself as an African in all humility, on the basis of the invitation extended to me by leaders like our former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, but also Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe of the PAC, who said: “Everybody who owes his loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority we regard as an

African.” I accept that invitation, even though I know that there are people who would contest that. So I have to work hard and constructively together with my fellow Africans to give credibility to this humble claim.

To overcome racism in our own lives and communities demands all this from us, but it is not just all **hard work**. In the first place it is the normal life of people who love their neighbours as themselves. It is also a joyful homecoming and a surprising discovery of our common humanity. It is to enter into the riches and depth of African humanity.⁴

These are important starting points for a long overdue discussion on racism and non-racialism among White South Africans – anti-racism is central to realising the vision of non-racialism. 21st century non-racialists would thus articulate these sentiments and also engage people in the discussion around them. Specifically engaging with what the future of being white (in this case) in South Africa, in the context of deeply entrenched racism, should mean if we are to have a future together.

Non-racialists today must also reclaim and reconceptualise non-racialism around an understanding of structural racism. This will demonstrate that 1994 did not mark the end apartheid legacies. The struggles of university students have brought this issue to the fore and non-racialists are required to extend its scrutiny to all aspects of society. Achille Mbembe in a speech at an anti-racism workshop recently called for a systematic programme of identification of all areas of structural racism and programmes to dismantle them sector by sector.

Firoz Cachalia, in a 2012 Special Issue of *Politikon* on Non-Racialism in South Africa, calls on the democratic left to:

“advance a substantive conception of non-racialism linked with a deepening of democratic practices, a recognition of diversity and the elimination of unjust inequalities. Anti-essentialism opens new possibilities for pursuing such an egalitarian, non-racial project since it forces us to think critically about our political identities and discursive political practices. A non-racial politics that properly aims at getting beyond race must first begin by understanding why race still matters – but why it should not, in a formally non-racial constitutional democracy”.⁵

⁴ Professor Klippiess Krtizinger. *Speech delivered at the Human Rights day Commemoration*. Sharpeville. 21 March 2016

⁵ Cachalia, Firoz. (2012). Revisiting the National Question and Identity. *Politikon Special issue: Non-racialism in South Africa*. 39(1)

For Cachalia it is important that race essentialism is countered in the quest to achieve non-racialism. He asks “how should the constitution be understood in the light of the adoption of a non-racial constitution and the establishment of democratic institutions?” He argues that the constitution gives South Africans a symbolic framework, language and a set of concepts within which to tackle the “national question” in South Africa. He calls for the elaboration of the normative and substantive content of non-racialism by working from and within the constitution. Cachalia goes on to identify the spheres that non-racialism must extend its scope to: that citizenship, individual rights and associational freedom help to develop a non-racial politics of citizenship, equality and diversity.

Non-racial solidarity is another area where non-racialists can make an immense contribution to ensuring that the concept has relevance to South Africa today. A great missed opportunity for this was in the recent debates and discussions on a minimum wage in SA. This issue was left to the state, business and labour to debate with predictable positions being taken by all parties. A campaign in support of a minimum wage by South Africans across all races would similarly have served to give content to non-racialism today.

Signs of such work are however visible in many sectors of society ranging from the environment to relief work and was also visible during some of the student protests around fees.

A final area that 21st century non-racialists must grapple with is the continued use of racial categories in post-apartheid South Africa. Theo Goldberg is cited by Kelly Gillespie as questioning whether the work of decategorisation is a worthy strategy for fighting racism. He contends that the terminology of race is necessary to apprehend and dismantle racism and that the focus on decategorising it avoids dealing with the deep structural issues of racism.

In his book dedicated to this subject Gerhard Mare makes the case for why South Africa needs to move away from apartheid race classification. He argues that non-racialism amounts to a rejection of such categories and that such rejection will force society and the state to seek new ways to define the people of the country. He raises pertinent issues about the role of the state in fostering a non-racial consciousness.

Mare’s views are centred on the premise that non-racialism must start with the rejection of race and the belief in the existence of races. Mare and others write about the continued indignity experienced by many when they have to fill in forms which require that the race of the person is completed. This practice in schools forces teachers to identify children according to race even when children don’t ascribe to any notion of a race category.

From research done by the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (AKF) it is clear that this limited challenging of racial categories has had major implications in how public services are dispensed, especially for the poor across all races. Debates at universities about alternative

ways of categorising students for admission purposes was reaching a critical point before the recent round of student protests but it would seem these have stalled, for now.

This is an area of public debate that has not featured significantly in the discourse of non-racialism and one that must be on the non-racial agenda. I think that the calls for utopian thinking about what a non-racial society would look like is important to inform what its current strategies and tactics needs to be.

In conclusion, I believe in a notion of an inclusive society premised on equity and equality. In this context, non-racialism today must be expanded beyond its historical black/white dichotomy. Today's inclusiveness must deal with gender and sexual preference issues, as well as nationality. In this way it will speak to the issues of xenophobia as well. This belief brought us to our constitutional democracy. It has also brought us to a point where we need to recognise that non-racialism will never have a static definition but will always be work in progress in the quest for unity and equality.

References

Cachalia, Firoz. (2012). Revisiting the National Question and Identity. *Politikon Special issue: Non-racialism in South Africa*. 39(1).

Gillespie, Kelly (2010). Reclaiming non-racialism: reading the Threat of Race from South Africa. *Patterns of Prejudice, Special Issue: Symposium: Critical Reflections on David Theo Goldberg's The Threat Of Race*. 44(1). pp 61 – 75.

Haffajee, Ferial. (2015) *What if there were no whites in South Africa?* Picador Africa

Mare, Gerhard. (2014). *Declassified*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.