



Monday, 31 May 2021

Dear Fellow South African,

Today is the anniversary of an event in our history that most South Africans would rather not remember.

Sixty years ago, on 31 May 1961, apartheid South Africa became a republic, cutting its ties with the British Empire. But while a 'republic' is generally defined as state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, this was not the case in South Africa.

The Constitution of the apartheid republic pledged allegiance to God, "who gathered our forebears together from many lands and gave them this as their own."

It was a Constitution written by and for a racial minority, and it used faith to justify tyranny. It outlined the administration of government, providing that only white people were eligible to vote and serve as public representatives. It contained no Bill of Rights.

The country's majority was relegated to a footnote towards the end of its 121 provisions, in a section titled 'Administration of Bantu Affairs, etc.'

In a televised message from the Prime Minister's residence, now known as Mahlamba Ndlopfu, Prime Minister HF Verwoerd said: "We seek the gradual development of each of our groups in a certain direction. Here the solution is openly sought by retaining the white man's guiding hand."

"We are very happy to be a united people," he declared to the world. But the reality was that we were not a united people.

We were inhabitants of a country where one's rights, prospects and life expectancy was determined by one's race. For two decades, the Republic of South Africa Constitution Act of 1961 was the legal impetus for the repression of nearly ninety per cent of the South African population. It provided legal cover for discrimination, dispossession and exploitation.

This unhappy anniversary takes place in the same month that we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the adoption by the Constitutional Assembly of our new democratic Constitution, which became the birth certificate of a real united nation.

Now we have one law for one nation. Together, we have chosen for ourselves a system of government that gives true meaning to the concept of a republic.

We have said that in our democratic republic, everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law.

South Africa today is a country where the administration of justice is vested in independent courts and a judiciary that is subject only to the Constitution. We live in a country where everyone has the right to approach the courts for the fulfillment of their rights.

We live in a country where communities can stake a legal claim on land they were forcefully moved from, and where individuals or families are protected against arbitrary eviction from their homes.

We live in a country where everyone is permitted to freely practice their culture and traditions. It is a country where anyone can freely protest in support of social, political and other causes anywhere.

Our constitutional dispensation is premised on accountable government, where the Executive is answerable to the people and where Parliament is representative of the people.

It is a country where the law applies equally to any citizen. We now have a government of the people, for the people, and by the people.

We share a common responsibility, as both the state and citizens, to respect, protect, promote and fulfill the Bill of Rights.

As elected officials we have a responsibility to uphold our oaths of office, and to not steal from the state, engage in corruption, or mismanage resources meant for the benefit of our citizens.

When the apartheid regime triumphantly paraded its racist constitution to the world 60 years ago, it had misplaced confidence that it would endure.

In an unanswered letter to Verwoerd a month before the Republic was declared, Nelson Mandela affirmed the liberation movement's rejection of the forcibly imposed white republic. He said that no constitution or form of government decided without the participation of the African people would enjoy moral validity.

Indeed no system that entrenches the systematic denial of people's rights can be sustained. Though it would be over three decades before the demands of the liberation movement were met, we eventually won our freedom.

In relegating the apartheid constitution to the dustbin of history, we committed ourselves to a new constitution and a new set of values.

When I addressed the Constitutional Assembly 25 years ago, I said our Constitution must become more than words on a page; it must become a reality in the lives of our people. Unless we do so, this progressive and revolutionary document will be rendered irrelevant and meaningless.

We have long decided what kind of society we want to be. It is a society rooted in human dignity, equality, freedom and non-discrimination.

For a quarter of a century we have worked to build such a society. We have made undeniable progress, but we still have many challenges and there is much work still to be done.

As we mark the anniversary of the adoption of our democratic Constitution, let us remember what a decisive break it was with the system underpinned by racism, exploitation, dispossession and oppression that had come before. Let us also remember that it is up to us to make the vision contained in our Constitution a reality.

For it is only by ensuring that all South Africans are able to freely and fully exercise their constitutional rights, that we will truly become a united people.

With best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.