

Freedom in our Lifetime

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The adoption of the Freedom Charter by the Congress of the People was widely recognised both at home and abroad as an event of major political significance in the life of this country. In his message to the Congress of the People, Chief AJ Luthuli, the banned National President of the ANC, declared:

Why will this assembly be significant and unique? Its size, I hope, will make it unique. But above all its multi-racial nature and its noble objectives will make it unique because it will be the first time in the history of our multi-racial nation that its people from all walks of life will meet as equals, irrespective of race, colour and creed, to formulate a freedom charter for all people in the country.

The Congress of the People was the most spectacular and moving demonstration this country has ever seen; through it the people have given proof that they have the ability and the power to triumph over every obstacle and win the future of their dreams. Alfred Hutchinson, reporting on the Congress, coined the magnificent title A New World Unfolds ... which accurately summarised the political significance of that historic gathering.

The same theme was taken up by Liberation of September last year when, in its editorial comment, it predicted that the textbooks of the future would treat the Kliptown meeting as one of the most important landmarks in our history. John Hatch, the Public Relations Officer of the British Labour Party, in an article published in the New Statesman and Nation of 28 January 1956, under the title [The Real South African Opposition](#), conceded that some degree of success was achieved by the Congress movement when it approved the Charter. Finally, in his May Day message published in New Age Moses Kotane reviewed the political achievements of 1955 and came to the conclusion that the most outstanding one was the Congress of the People which produced the world-renowned document — the Freedom Charter — which serves as a beacon to the Congress Movement and an inspiration to the people of South Africa.

Few people will deny, therefore, that the adoption of the Charter is an event of major political significance in the life of this country. The intensive and nation-wide political campaigning that preceded it, the 2 844 elected delegates of the people that attended, the attention it attracted far and wide and the favourable comment it continues to receive at home and abroad from people of diverse political opinions and beliefs long after its adoption, are evidence of this fact.

Never before has any document or conference been so widely acclaimed and discussed by the democratic movement in South Africa. Never before has any document or conference constituted such a serious and formidable challenge to the racial and anti-popular policies of the country. For the first time in the history of our country the democratic forces irrespective of race, ideological conviction, party affiliation or religious belief have renounced and discarded racialism in all its ramifications, clearly defined their aims and objects and united in a common programme of action.

The Charter is more than a mere list of demands for democratic reforms. It is a revolutionary document precisely because the changes it envisages cannot be won without breaking up the economic and political set-up of present South Africa. To win the demands calls for the organisation,

launching and development of mass struggles on the widest scale. They will be won and consolidated only as a result of a nation-wide campaign of agitation; through stubborn and determined mass struggles to defeat the economic and political policies of the Nationalist government; by repulsing onslaughts on the living standards and liberties of the people.

The most vital task facing the democratic movement in this country is to unleash such struggles and to develop them on the basis of the concrete and immediate demands of the people from area to area. Only in this way can we build a powerful mass movement which is the only guarantee of ultimate victory in the struggle for democratic reforms. Only in this way will the democratic movement become a vital instrument for the winning of the democratic changes set out in the Charter.

Whilst the Charter proclaims democratic changes of a far-reaching nature, it is by no means a blueprint for a socialist state but a programme of the unification of various classes and groupings amongst the people on a democratic basis. Under socialism the workers hold state power. They and the peasants own the means of production, the land, the factories and the mills. All production is for use and not for profit. The Charter does not contemplate such profound economic and political changes. Its declaration *The People Shall Govern!* visualises the transfer of power not to any single social class but to all the people of this country, be they workers, peasants, professional men, or petty-bourgeoisie.

It is true that in demanding the nationalisation of the banks, the gold mines, and the land, the Charter strikes a fatal blow at the financial and gold-mining monopolies and farming interests that have for centuries plundered the country and condemned its people to servitude. But such a step is imperative because the realisation of the Charter is inconceivable, in fact impossible, unless and until these monopolies are smashed and the national wealth of the country turned over to the people. To destroy these monopolies means the termination of the exploitation of vast sections of the populace by mining kings and land barons and there will be a general rise in the living standards of the people. It is precisely because the Charter offers immense opportunities for an overall improvement in the material conditions of all classes and groups that it attracts such wide support.

But a mere appraisal of a document, however dynamic its provisions or content might be, is academic and valueless unless we consciously and conscientiously create the conditions necessary for its realisation. To be fruitful such appraisal must be closely linked up with the vital question of whether we have in South African society the requisite social forces that are capable of fighting for the realisation of the Charter and whether in fact these forces are being mobilised and conditioned for this principal task.

The democratic struggle in South Africa is conducted by an alliance of various classes and political groupings amongst the non-European people supported by white democrats, African, Coloured and Indian workers and peasants, traders and merchants, students and teachers, doctors and lawyers, and various other classes and groupings; all participate in the struggle against racial inequality and for full democratic rights. It was this alliance which launched the National Day of Protest on 26 June 1950. It was this alliance which unleashed the Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws on 26 June 1952. It is this same alliance that produced the Freedom Charter. In this alliance the democratic movement has the rudiments of a dynamic and militant mass movement and, provided the movement exploits the initial advantages on its side at the present moment, immense opportunities exist for the winning of the demands in the Charter within our lifetime..

The striking feature about the population of our country and its occupational distribution is the numerical preponderance of the non-Europeans over Europeans and the economic importance of the former group in the key industries. According to the 1951 population census the population of the

country consists of 2 643 000 Europeans as against 10 005 000 non Europeans, a numerical disparity which is bound to have a decisive bearing on the final outcome of the present struggle to smash the colour-bar. According to the 1953 Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa there were 46 700 Europeans employed by the gold mines and collieries at the end of 1952. The number of Africans and Coloureds employed on the mines for the same period was 452 702 a proportion of one European employee to nearly ten non-European employees. The racial composition of industrial employees in establishments with over ten employees during the period 1948-49 was as follows: Europeans 33%; Africans 51.5%; Asiatics 3% and Coloureds 12.5%. According to the same Year Book, during 1952 there were 297 476 Europeans employed on farms occupied by Europeans and 2 188 712 Africans and 636 065 other non-Europeans.

The figures reveal the preponderant importance of the non-European people in the economic life of the country and the key task of the movement is to stimulate and draw these forces into the struggle for democratic reforms. A significant step was taken in Johannesburg on 3 March 1955, when a new trade union centre — the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU)—was formed with delegates from 34 unions with a total membership of close on 42 000 and when, for the first time in the history of trade unionism in south Africa, African, Coloured, European and Indian workers united for a fighting policy on the basis of absolute equality. With 42 000 organised workers on our side and fighting under the flag of a trade union centre that has completely renounced racialism and committed itself to a militant and uncompromising policy, it remains for us to redouble our efforts and carry our message to every factory and mill throughout the country. The message of the new centre is bound to attract the support of the majority of the workers for they have no interest whatsoever in the countrys policy of racial discrimination. The workers are the principal force upon which the democratic movement should rely, but to repel the savage onslaughts of the Nationalist government and to develop the fight for democratic rights, it is necessary that the other classes and groupings be joined. Support and assistance must be sought and secured from the 452 702 African and Coloured mineworkers, from the 2 834 777 non-European labourers employed on European farms and from the millions of peasants that occupy the so-called Native Reserves of the Union. The cruel and inhuman manner with which they are treated, their dreadful poverty and economic misery, make them potential allies of the democratic movement. The non-European traders and businessmen are also potential allies, for in hardly any other country in the world has the ruling class made conditions so extremely difficult for the rise of a non-European middle class as in South Africa . The law of the country prohibits non-Europeans from owning or possessing minerals. Their right to own and,occupy land is very much restricted and circumscribed and it is virtually impossible for them to own factories and mills. Therefore they are vitally interested in the liberation of the non-European people, for it is only by destroying white supremacy and through the emancipation of the non-Europeans that they can prosper and develop as a class. To each of these classes and groups the struggle for democratic rights offers definite advantages. To every one of them the realisation of the demands embodied in the Charter would open a new career and vast opportunities for development and prosperity. These are the social forces whose alliance and unity will enable the democratic movement to vanquish the forces of reaction and win the democratic changes Envisaged in the Charter. In the present political situation in South Africa when the Nationalist government has gone all out to smash the peoples political organisation and the trade union movement through the Suppression of Communism Act and its anti-trade union legislation, it becomes important to call upon and to stimulate every class to wage its own battles. It becomes even more important that all democratic

forces be united and the opportunities for such a united front are growing every day. On 3 March 1955 a non-colour-bar trade union centre is formed. On June 26 the same year in the most spectacular and moving demonstration this country has ever seen, 2 844 delegates of the people adopt the Charter, and four months thereafter more than 1 000 women of all races stage a protest march to put their demands to the government — all this in the course of one year.

The rise of the Congress movement and the powerful impact it exerts on the political scene in the country is due precisely to the fact that it has consistently followed and acted on the vital policy of democratic unity. It is precisely because of the same reason that the Congress movement is rapidly becoming the real voice of South Africa. If this united front is strengthened and developed the Freedom Charter will be transformed into a living instrument and we shall vanquish all opposition and win the South Africa of our dreams during our lifetime.

Nelson Mandela

P.S.

* <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=2603>