

This article was written in January 2017 by the late Oupa Lehulere, who often spoke at LALIT events, and is still relevant to understanding South Africa and post-colonial society in general.

The Long Shadow of the de klerk Regime

February 1990 stands out as the most important month in South Africa's history. This month divides South Africa's history into two parts. The first, 1652 to 1990, represents the period of institutionalised racism and political oppression of black and indigenous people. The second period, 1990 to the present, represents a period of political freedom and self-determination of black people in South Africa. Now, 27 years into the new era, large sections of the black population are asking questions about the real meaning of the freedom that was ushered in in February 1990.

The source of these questions is the persistence of poverty among large sections of the black working class 27 years after freedom. For the black middle class there is growing disillusionment about this class' inability to break into ownership of the 'commanding heights' of the economy, and its failure to even make progress as professionals. Many in this class are coming face to face with the entrenched economic and social power of white capitalists and the white middle class. In general, it became clear that political freedom on its own is not able to lead to improved living standards for the majority. For sections of the black middle class, it is clear that political freedom does not lead to ownership of large capitalist enterprises.

We therefore have to ask why is it that South African society is organised in ways that continue to block the realisation of the aspirations of the majority for a better life?

Our understanding of the current tensions and problems of South African society has to put at its centre the speech delivered by President FW de Klerk before the South African parliament on 2 February 1990. It is this speech that has defined the nature of South African society for the last 27 years. It is therefore important for us to look at how de Klerk defined the terms of the transition, and to what extent the world we live has turned out the way he set it out to be.

i. De Klerk's terms of the transition, and what he has achieved

In his speech on 2 February de Klerk set out a range of issues that defined the nature of the transition. These were:

- i. How the negotiations for the new South Africa were going to proceed?
- ii. What kind of constitution would South Africa have?
- iii. What kind of economy would South Africa have?

i. Negotiations

De Klerk's main concern with the negotiations was that the National Party and the ruling capitalist class it represented should ensure that there is no radical break with apartheid. Firstly, de Klerk ensured continuity with the past by insisting that any agreement reached at the negotiating table had to be agreed to and ratified by the South African apartheid parliament. As he said, "I hope this... Parliament will play a constructive part in both the prelude to negotiations and the negotiations process itself..." Furthermore, de Klerk made sure that all the leaders of parties and Bantustan governments that supported apartheid would play an important role in the negotiations. Although the Pan-Africanist Congress objected strongly to the negotiations being finally ratified by the apartheid parliament, de Klerk's views were finally accepted by all other parties (the PAC walked out of the Codesa negotiations because of this issue). In addition, de Klerk ensured that the new South Africa would also be ratified by the white electorate. In March 1992 de Klerk called a referendum of white South Africans where they were asked to vote for or against the ending of apartheid.

The second major achievement of the de Klerk regime was to ensure that all the black parties and Bantustan governments were given a place in the negotiations process and that their interests were secured in the new South Africa. The National Party government had relied on Bantustan governments and black local authorities in urban areas to control the black population in the rural and urban areas. As a result of their role these Bantustan governments became very repressive, and were hated by the black majority. Most of these governments were led by discredited chiefs who had been installed by the apartheid government. De Klerk ensured that the institution of chieftaincy, and the power of the chief in rural areas would be restored and protected by the new constitution of South Africa. The success of de Klerk policy in this regard can be seen in the many battles that progressive organisations and people have to fight to push back the growing power of the chiefs and traditional leaders in the new South Africa. Even today, there are ongoing fights over traditional courts, the attempts at land grabbing by chiefs, and the erosion of democratic rights of rural people through various acts of parliament. De Klerk managed to entrench tribalism in the South African political landscape, even though the eradication of tribalism was one of the principles that guided African nationalism for many decades.

ii. A constitution for the new South Africa

One of the key issues in the negotiations process was that of who was going to write a constitution for the new South Africa. All organisations within the liberation movement agreed that the new constitution has to be written by a body elected by the majority of the people. For a while this issue threatened to stall or even derail the negotiations. The liberation movement demanded the election of a democratically elected Constituent Assembly to write the constitution, and the de Klerk regime wanted the constitution to be negotiated between the liberation movements on the one hand, and apartheid government and its supporters on the other hand. In his speech de Klerk made it clear that the constitutional principles of the National Party (NP) would not be compromised, and these included the protection of 'group' rights, 'cultural rights' of minorities, the political role of traditional leaders and chiefs, a judiciary that can act as a 'check and balance' against a majority government, and so on.

In the standoff that followed the ANC capitulated, and de Klerk was able to write all the key elements of the constitution before a democratically elected body could write the constitution. The negotiators of the ANC and the NP agreed on 34 constitutional principles that would bind anybody that drafts the constitution after apartheid. These 'principles' incorporated various issues that the de Klerk government insisted are needed to protect 'minorities' in a post-apartheid South Africa. The 'minorities' de Klerk was worried about are property owners, white people (called cultural and linguistic minorities), the traditional leaders and so on. Through the constitutional principles de Klerk also managed to entrench the independence of the Reserve Bank, something that was an economic policy question and not a constitutional issue. The independence of the Reserve Bank ensured the continuing influence of big business over an important instrument of economic policy.

De Klerk had succeeded in writing the constitution of the new South Africa before a democratically elected parliament could write such a constitution.

iii. An economic policy for the new South Africa

While many people celebrated and welcomed the unbanning of the liberation movement, de Klerk made it clear that the reforms he was introducing "should not be interpreted as a deviation from the Government's principles, [and]... against our economic policy..." According to the speech, South Africa had to make "structural changes to its economy" such as those made by governments of USA and Britain (Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher). He said "the government's basic point ... is to reduce the role of the public sector in the economy and to give the private sector (and market forces) maximum opportunity for optimal performance."

It is in this area of economic policy that de Klerk's long shadow is darkest. After 27 years of his speech, every element of the policy he spelt out has been faithfully followed by successive administrations of the ANC. De Klerk spelt out the core and details of speeches that were to be made by all the Finance Ministers in the new South Africa for 23 years: Derek Keys, Chris Liebenberg, Trevor Manuel, Pravin Gordhan, Nhlanhla Nene, and again Pravin Gordhan. Nothing they have said or written in their February speeches has deviated from the agenda set out by de Klerk. The issues de Klerk set out include inflation targeting, tax reform, forced savings, fiscal discipline, export-led industrialisation, privatisation, deregulation, structural adjustment, and so on. As de Klerk said, "[we will achieve our economic objective]... by restricting capital expenditure in parastatal institutions, privatisation, deregulation and curtailing government expenditure". Today, 23 years later, the load shedding, the collapse of the rail infrastructure, low investment in just about all parastatals, curtailed government expenditure, are facts.

Beyond setting the neoliberal agenda at home, de Klerk was also clear that Southern Africa and indeed Africa was now open for business. As he said, "Southern Africa now has an historical opportunity to set aside its conflicts and ideological differences and draw up a joint programme of reconstruction." This is because, "indications are that the countries of Eastern and Central Europe will receive..." more investment, and for de Klerk it was clear that South Africa will now be able to fill this investment gap in Africa. Today South Africa is one of the largest investors in the African continent.

From this discussion it is clear that de Klerk succeeded in shaping post-apartheid South Africa in deep and fundamental ways. This largely explains why so many black South Africans feel that their dreams are unrealised, and it also explains why there is so much confidence among white racists that their positions of power are untouchable.

For many black people, both working class people and the middle class, the question that is asked is how was it possible that we could achieve political freedom and fail to achieve economic and social freedom. To understand this, we need to look the context in which the unbanning of liberation movements happened, and to examine how that context gave de Klerk an upper hand in the struggles that took place during the transition to the new South Africa.

a. The collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe

For decades the liberation movements had been supported by governments in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. Between 1980 and 1989 these governments collapsed or changed their social and economic policies, and by 1989 the liberation movements had no major powers supporting them. In his speech de Klerk saw this as an opportunity to dictate the nature of the transition. He said "the events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe... weaken the capability of the organisations which were previously supported strongly from those quarters". As a result, said de Klerk, "there have been important shifts in emphasis in the ... points of view of the most important... [liberation movements... including] a preference for peaceful solutions". The first source of de Klerk's strong position was that the liberation movements had been abandoned by their allies, or these allies were no longer in a position to support an armed overthrow of the apartheid regime.

b. The ANC in a weak organisational and political position

Throughout the period of heightened internal resistance to apartheid the ANC struggled to create a strong organisational infrastructure in the country. This weakness meant the ANC was always chasing and lagging behind the development of the struggle in the country. As a result of this weak organisation the military organisations of the liberation movements (MK and APLA) could not pose a serious military threat to the South African Defence Force (SADF). They were able to carry out attacks here and there, but they could not defeat the SADF. By the time of the 1990 speech, the military bases of the ANC had been pushed far away from the borders of South Africa and were now located in Uganda. Many countries in the region had been forced to move ANC camps out of their countries.

c. Repression against working class organisations in South Africa

During the liberation struggle the most important part was played by ordinary workers, residents of townships, and students in schools and universities. It was these groups that challenged big capitalist companies, the local authorities and the national government in militant struggles. The de Klerk regime devoted the period between 1990 and 1994 to violently repressing working class communities and working class organisations. Following the unbanning of liberation movements in 1990, there was an upsurge in mobilisation and resistance in townships across South Africa.

In this period, 1990 to 1994, about 14,000 people were killed in politically related violence. These killings took place through police shootings during marches, shooting of communities while sleeping, killings on trains in Gauteng, and assassinations of activists and community leaders. The political killings during this period was like having 210 people killed month for 4 years, or having 8 Marikana massacres every month for 4 years. At Marikana 34 miners were killed by police. In the months of July and August in 1993, community members and workers were killed at a rate of 20 Marikana massacres per month.

d. Political and ideological disorganisation of the ANC

Lastly, the de Klerk regime was able to win the battle for the transition because of the political and ideological disorganisation of the liberation movement in that period. The ANC was unable to provide leadership in the struggle against the killings of community members. De Klerk understood that with the change in the international situation and the military weakness of the ANC he could launch an offensive and the ANC (and PAC) would not be able to respond. The ANC, caught in this trap, could not directly confront the de Klerk regime, so it told communities that it was not the state that was killing them but a “third force” of unknown people. In the political negotiations, the ANC moved between radical statements and capitulations to de Klerk. While knowing that it was losing the negotiations battles, the ANC told its constituency that it was winning, and created an impression that MK could confront the SADF to force a seizure of power if de Klerk did not agree to its radical demands.

In addition to all this, the ANC adopted the ideological positions of the de Klerk government. By 1993 the ANC had adopted the views of de Klerk and big business on the economy, and these became official ANC policy by 1996.

De Klerk’s speech in 1990 will go down in history as probably the most important speech ever made by a South African president. In this speech de Klerk set out the terms on which the new South Africa was going to be built. 27 years after his speech, South Africa sits with the legacy of the vision he mapped out in 1990. It is a legacy of tribalism, of the closing of democratic spaces, of systemic and enduring poverty, of unemployment, of the collapse of health and education systems, of non-functioning cities and townships, of rising xenophobia, and of the general social and economic crisis. The bearer of this legacy has been the party of liberation, the African National Congress. The ghost of de Klerk haunts South Africa to this day.