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Remarks by Former President Kgalema Motlanthe at the Inaugural National Foundation Dialogue Initiative, Parktown, Johannesburg

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Programme Director;
Chairperson of The National Foundations Dialogue Initiative, Ms Nomhle Canca;
Presidents F.W. De Klerk and Thabo Mbeki;
Former Deputy President of South Africa, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ncuka;
Representatives of Civil Society;
Distinguished Guests;
Comrades and Friends;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

First of all let me thank you all for this kind invitation on the occasion of the inaugural National Foundations Dialogue Initiative.

I am particularly indebted to Ms Nomhle Canca and her team for this ground-breaking initiative aimed at reigniting our collective imagination in the all-too-critical exercise of enhancing the quality of our democracy as a nation.

I am drawn to the conclusion that perhaps what set the organising team of this initiative apart from all of us who are equally concerned about the direction our country is heading was their inner impulse to grapple with this persistent national concern rather than succumb to bland indifference to action.

This kind of thought and action amounts to model citizenship that should reassure all of us that as South Africans we retain the inner flame of human agency; and that we can therefore reclaim the future for which generations before us have dedicated their lives at a great cost to themselves.

Ultimately calling the nation to action during historically signal moments like this boils down to self-reflexivity; an act synonymous with human praxis, and therefore manifesting the highest possible state of self-consciousness.

That sense of high national self-consciousness is a bulwark against extraneous threats to our shared

national vision.

Programme Director;

I was asked to look at the theme: 'Why does South Africa need a National Dialogue?' A Call to the Nation

This is a crucial theme in that it shakes up the slumbering complacency which has since the democratic breakthrough of 27 April 1994 set in among many of us.

Needless to say that such complacency on the part of the citizenry leads to corrosive undertow that eats away at the vitals of a society.

At the same time it is the kind of question that assumes even more importance in view of the historicity of the dialogic experience upon which South Africa in its current incarnation was conceived.

In consequence, a legitimate question that cries out for an honest answer would be, given the instrumentality of dialogue in re-imagining our new nation, what has since happened?

Related to that would be the question: Why has a discordant cacophony of noises emerged in our social space hardly two decades after CODESA?

In other words, why does South Africa need a national dialogue today, 23 years into democracy?

We are raising these questions not because the current jarring public discourse is necessarily undesirable. After all we should have neither prescriptions nor proscriptions for democratic encounter at a societal level. Except for unconstitutional register, there are no limits to permissible discourse, short of undermining freedom of speech.

What these questions aim to do is elevate the all-important issue of critical engagement not only among South Africans but between citizens and the government of the day.

Without this continued critical, high-level dialogic engagement among citizens and between the citizens and government a phenomenon known as democracy deficit furtively creeps in.

Democracy deficit therefore reflects the absence of a national culture of critical consciousness represented by multiplicity of ideas, debates, and a questioning attitude towards those elected to steer our nation.

At the heart of democracy deficit is the lack of accountability to the citizenry by those carrying the electoral mandate, thus hollowing out democracy of its essentials by reducing it to pro forma status.

Political life in such a state is such that the act of violating the constitution, the ultimate profanity against our very mode of existence, is reduced to the banal.

Under these conditions democracy is narrowed down to the mechanical exercise of voting. While the act of voting is a democratic expression, it is only meaningful if, along with a constellation of other practices, it is subordinated to both reflective and ethical considerations by society.

After all it is the electoral mandate given to public representatives which constitutes a platform on which those who hold political office are expected to deliver on their mandate, and, thereby, ameliorate the totality of our social, economic and political experience.

Necessarily, the spatial vacuum created by democracy deficit leads to a form of political theology whereby the only existing political discourse is the one sanctioned from on high. Averse to criticism, such anointed discourse commandeers moral high-ground on account of claims of history and therefore delegitimises any counter-discourse inimical to the abiding interests it represents.

In such a case political leadership sees itself as exempted from the norms and standards to which it perfunctorily and routinely subjects society at large. This will explain the prevalent culture of impunity that sees the violation of our constitution as an inconvenient but trifling matter.

Political leadership simply substitutes itself for the masses. It sees itself as standing over and above due process. This recalls the imperishable thought of Gerald Massey that '(T)hey must find it difficult, those who took authority as truth, rather than the truth as authority'.

Such aberrations as taking authority as truth only happen when the country's citizens withdraw into themselves without caring to listen to the hum of daily politics.

Programme Director;

Once again, the question that confronts us today as post-apartheid society is why does South Africa need a national dialogue?

My take is that the consequences of having none are too ghastly to contemplate in a post-apartheid, post-colonial setting where the deformity of our historically defined ethical character is all too real.

Unfortunately, we have, as ordinary South Africans, allowed this possibility to exist.

The construction of a new political reality for our country expressed through our world acclaimed constitution as the bedrock of our system of democracy may have very well lulled us into a false state of self-satisfaction.

Perhaps what we tend to forget in the excitement of the historical moment is that we are human, all-too human; which means that we are no exception to the all-too ubiquitous shortcomings that inhere in the human condition. Of course we have still been alive to the urgent task of advancing to our strategic goal; that is, to build a united, democratic, non-racial, non-sexist and just society; a task which we knew would be on-going across generations. Similarly, our focus to address the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality never fizzled out of our collective consciousness.

And yet our biggest oversight as a people lied in thinking that political leadership alone, on the strength of democratic mandate, would respond to these historical imperatives without falling prey to the temptations of power.

Our system of democracy itself was modelled on the central assumption that the ethically impeccable

leadership model represented by the figure of President Nelson Mandela would continue to be the pivot on which would revolve leadership as society steamed on into the future.

In such cases societies let down their guard until, as seems to be the case now, they are shaken out of their stupor by the turbulence of the historical process.

At times reaction during such seminal moments tends out to be too little too late. This is all the reason we should welcome the National Foundations Dialogue Initiative. It is a timely idea. Its momentousness resides in the realisation that something profoundly wrong is simmering in the very annals of our time.

Only those who chose not to would fail to appreciate the progressive degeneracy of the culture of our national politics along with the concomitant questions this poses for the cohesive vision predicative of our nation. This is how this gathering today becomes a National Call. It seeks to be a turning point in the way the people of our country relate to the political process.

It is only the beginning. We may see this as re-planting of the seeds that must with time sprout into life for all seasons. Their blossoming will be for ever a reminder that history should not repeat itself, lest we lapse into the same historical errors. The moral failings of our day cannot be allowed to calcify into irreversible reality. If we allowed this unwholesome character of our politics to continue while we wallow in silence history would never forgive our generation. We would have been complicit in an act of betrayal. We would have learnt nothing from history.

On this point about history, Frederick Douglas is worth indulging in for the lesson he drives home. Douglas contends the following:

‘What actually happened in the past does not really change, of course. But the questions we choose to ask of the past change, and thereby new interpretations emerge. This is what is meant by learning something new from or about the past. The questions change and thus yield new understandings. This is why as historians often say, each generation must write its own history.’ (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, An American Slave, Written by Himself P11)

The questions we ask of the past are as much relevant to the present, and that is how we learn from history. I am sure we will also appreciate that history writing is not only through pen and paper but our actions as common people, understanding the socio-historical essence of dialogue as a trans-generational imperative that shaped and continues to shape the soul of our nation.

I thank you for your kind attention

1 The National Foundations Dialogues Initiative (NFDI) is a programme of the following Foundations acting together: The Albert Luthuli Foundation, the Robert Sobukwe Trust, the Helen Suzman Foundation, the Desmond and Leah Tutu Legacy Foundation, the FW de Klerk Foundation, the Thabo Mbeki Foundation, Umlambo Foundation, and the Jakes Gerwel Foundation.