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COMMENTS OF THE PATRON OF THE TMF, THABO MBEKI, AT THE NATIONAL FOUNDATIONS DIALOGUE INITIATIVE (NFDI): JOHANNESBURG, 5 MAY, 2017.

Programme Director,
Fellow participants at this first sitting of the National Dialogue:

First of all I would like sincerely to thank and salute all of you for being here and therefore for responding positively to the invitation of our diverse National Foundations to participate in and endorse the National Dialogue Initiative.

If I was asked the question why I am here as a participant at the start of our National Dialogue, I would say:

I have come here to support the demand – Let the People Speak!

Looking at who is present here today in this hall, I am very glad to say that today we have an excellent representative cross-section of eminent South Africans who have every claim to be recognised as truly legitimate representatives of the people I assert must speak.

The reality of our national situation is that literally and everyday millions of our people throughout the country are and have been engaging one another for some years already in an intense discussion about the State of our Nation!

This discussion includes absolutely everybody, women and men; the old and the young, including children; the rural and urban populations; black and white; business people and workers; religious people of all faiths; artistes and sportspeople; writers; professionals and politicians; civil servants in all three spheres of government; traditional leaders and healers; non-governmental and community based organisations; the media in all its formations; in short, absolutely every segment and echelon of our society.

The reason for this very pervasive and truly inclusive, but as yet fragmented national discussion is that our people as a whole feel and know this intensely and personally, that there is much that is not right about what is happening or not happening in our young democracy.

Through very costly struggles waged over many centuries, the indigenous majority in our country,

informed by a traditional African humane belief system, constantly pursued the objective to build a society which would make all our people to feel proudly South African.

The new society could be presented as the rose, a beautiful and much loved flower throughout the world.

In modern times, our abiding African traditional humane belief system in favour of a people-centred society found expression in the aspiration stated as – South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white!

And yet that moving prayer has failed to give birth to the rose, according to which the right to belong to a common home has not, as yet, translated into a truly equitably shared matrimony.

Late in the eighteenth century the outstanding English poet, William Blake, published the short poem, 'The Sick Rose'.

The first line of this poem says:

“O Rose thou art sick...”

And so it is that the rose our people planted as represented by the victory of 1994 is indeed sick!

Practically it is impossible for anybody in our country publicly to argue against this reality of national sickness in our politics and our economy and in the context of our social and national cohesion.

Nevertheless there are various views about how our country should respond to this sickness.

Much of what comes across as the national view, as communicated by the mass media, are the opinions of the national elite, the people who occupy leading positions in all our various social sectors and echelons, including people such as myself.

This means that in large measure the independent voice of millions of ordinary South Africans is excluded from the visible, audible and vigorous national discussion accessible to all, which is and has actually been taking place.

After serious reflection, proceeding from their different positions, our National Foundations have concluded that our country is immersed in a general and worsening crisis which impacts and will continue to impact negatively on our country and the rest of our Continent, Africa.

This is by no means to deny the significant progress in many areas we have achieved during the years since 1994.

Nevertheless, responding to our current reality, our Foundations took the decisions that:

- Something has to be done as urgently as possible to address this general and worsening crisis;
- This response must include the involvement of our people as a whole, to enable these masses to exercise their right to determine their destiny;

- it was and is therefore important to put in place a true National Dialogue which would practically involve these masses in all their echelons, thus to insert their views into the national discussion in an organised and concerted manner;
- ultimately produce a Document which would reflect a true National Consensus about what should be done to end and extricate our country from its general and worsening crisis;
- This Document should respect the spirit of our Constitution, whatever the Amendments it might propose;
- this Document would once more commit the masses of our people, as happened after the 1994 Elections and after the adoption of our Constitution in 1996, consciously and actively to support and promote the objectives it would state; and,
- the Document would suggest that all State and other relevant institutions should act in a manner which consistently and honestly respects and promotes the popularly-developed objectives and vision stated in the Document.

In summary, our National Foundations have sponsored the National Dialogue Initiative inspired to encourage the achievement of the objective:

Let the People Speak!

And so it must and will be that the National Foundations Dialogue Initiative creates the possibility such that - The People Speak out freely in our Democratic and Constitutional Space, without let or hindrance, to help Determine their Destiny!

Some among us thought that our country should engage in a National Dialogue three years ago in 2014, as we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the birth of our democracy.

In this regard we were sensitive that this National Dialogue would have to start after that year's General Election.

I draw attention to this because we held the view, a view I still support, that the National Dialogue should not fall victim to the partisan political contest which necessarily characterises General Elections.

Though it is now three years later than 2014, all the National Foundations which have called for a National Dialogue are very happy that at last we have met here today to begin the National Dialogue.

Indeed these last three years have confirmed the vital importance and urgency of this National Dialogue.

We are happy that we have convened here today because we believe that it is critically important that our people as a whole must engage one another in a Dialogue to discuss - what it was we expected of our country as we ushered in our democracy, what progress we have made in this regard, which aspirations we have not achieved, and what should be done to accelerate the process towards the realisation of those aspirations!

All of us will recall the enormous effort which went into the negotiation and finalisation of our Constitution in 1996.

Of special importance in this regard was the very successful effort the Constitutional Assembly made to involve great numbers of our citizens in the process of defining what kind of South Africa they want, as would be defined in the Constitution.

We will also recall that at the end the Constitution was adopted unanimously by the elected representatives who sat as the Constitutional Assembly.

Accordingly I think that all of us will agree that our magnificent Constitution is the only document in our country which is a universally agreed National Compact which represents the will of our people as a whole.

For this reason I believe that the Constitution should occupy a central place in our National Dialogue.

In this context I must underline the importance of what our people agreed about our Constitution when they inserted in this Constitution the provision that:

“This Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic; law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and the obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled.”

It was therefore the express view of the people as a whole that ours must be a Constitutional Democracy, not a prescription handed down to us by the Constitutional Court!

This means that anybody or institution who or which acts in a manner inconsistent with or in violation of any of the provisions in the Constitution is repudiating the will of the people.

Surely all of us will agree that there can never be any person or institution in the new South Africa whose actions would be more authoritative or supreme than the voice of the people, as happened during the centuries of colonialism and apartheid when the then varying South African State Systems were based exactly on the prescription and practice that the views of the people as a whole must be excluded and suppressed!

Accordingly, given the protracted struggle and the processes which led to the adoption of our Constitution in 1996, the starting point of the National Dialogue must be the objectives our country as a whole set itself in that Constitution.

I refer here especially to what the Constitution contains in its Preamble, its Founding Principles and the Bill of Rights.

Let me state only a few of the national objectives contained in these sections of our Constitution.

In its Preamble the Constitution says that among its objectives are the tasks:

“(To) Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; (and),

“Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person...”

Among the Founding Provisions we find that our democratic state is founded, among others, on:

“non-racialism and non-sexism.”

In the Bill of Rights, which the Constitution says “applies to all law, and binds the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and all organs of state”, we will see that:

“The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth, (and, similarly),

“No person may unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds (of the same kind.)”

The Bill of Rights also prescribes that:

“Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.”

It goes further to say:

“All spheres of government and all organs of state within each sphere must - secure the well-being of the people of the Republic.”

I have cited these tasks stated in our Constitution without comment, with the only objective to emphasise the challenge with regard to some of the important matters which the National Dialogue must seek to understand and address and about which it must advance proposals with regard to the way forward.

I am indeed very pleased that all of you, fellow compatriots, who are here today, have gathered here to help create the possibility for The People to Speak and make proposals about what is to be done to extricate our country from its general and destructive crisis.

Thank you.

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.