



**African Institutions, Intellectuals and Political  
Resiliency: Prospects  
and Implications for Africa's Futures**

By

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Prof P Lenka Bula, Director/Advisor: Office of the Principal and Vice-Chancellor

Honourable Mr Kgalema Motlanthe, Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa and other members of the Presidency present

Dr Matthew Phosa, Chairperson: Unisa Council and other Unisa council members present

Mrs Mandu Makhanya

Prof N Barney Pityana, former Vice Chancellor of Unisa and Mrs Pityana

Prof N Baijnath, Pro Vice Chancellor other members of Unisa extended Management present

Members of the Diplomatic Corps

His Worship, Councillor Kgosientso Ramokgopa, Executive Mayor of the City of Tshwane

Ambassador DS Khumalo, CEO: Thabo Mbeki Foundation and other members of the TMF present

Prof A Desai, Author of Book

Discussants: Prof TS Maluleke, Deputy Registrar, Unisa

Ms Puleng Segalo, Lecturer: College of Human Sciences, Unisa

Dr Mathole Motshekga, ANC Chief Whip

Dr Ahmed Kathrada, ANC Veteran – Rivonia Trialist

Former Cabinet Ministers present

Representatives of the Political parties present

Members of the Judiciary present

Bishop JT Seoka, President of the South African Council of Churches and other members of the Ecclesiastical Community present

Members of the Provincial Government present

Members of the Business Community present

Members Educational Institutions

Members of the South African Democratic Education Trust

Dr A Padayachee, CEO of Santrust and other Santrust Board members present

Members of Unisa SRC and other Unisa Students present

Members of the Media Fraternity

Distinguished guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

**Introduction**

The year 2012 marks the celebration of 100 years of the pursuance of liberation, justice, freedom and dignity of all peoples of South Africa, a journey and process that the former President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela correctly referred to as '*the long walk to freedom*'.

It is a year in which the oldest liberation movement in South Africa and on the African continent, the African National Congress, commemorates its founding, 100 years ago and reflects on the road it has travelled during each one of those hundred years. It is a year in which we honour the people who on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 1912, gathered in Mangaung and founded the South African Native Congress—the liberation movement known worldwide today as the African national Congress.

The pursuance of freedom and liberation of South Africa has a long history. The historical antecedents of this long journey are known to many of us. It is, however, important to ask, why has UNISA decided to interrogate the place of African institutions, intellectuals and political resiliency today? Why is the South Africa "long walk to freedom" articulated by Madiba an important area of study, analyses and research for a university such as UNISA? Why should universities be interested in the lessons deriving from liberation and political movements such as the ANC?

For us in the university, whose fundamental responsibility is to construct knowledge, understand the meaning of life and how people create meaning, and to unearth novel ideas, systems and processes which are beneficial for the development of societies, communities and ecologies, today's event is important in our calendar because it provides us an opportunity and invitation to search for lessons, limitations, challenges and prospects for the present and future.

We have organised this lecture today in order to create space for the university community and the broader south African public to discuss, debate and understand the contents, processes, systems, dreams and values which shaped African movements and institutions which have existed for as long as 100 years, such as the ANC. It is important for us to examine what shaped and undergirded the ANC and other liberation movements in South Africa and in the continent

which were engaged in the pursuance of freedom, liberation, human dignity and 'emancipation of Africa and South African peoples from colonialism and apartheid reign.

In particular, we would want to know what it is that differentiated the ANC from other South African and African liberation movements, and how that has been central to the 100 years of the ANC.

As Butler rightly points out

The African National Congress (ANC) was the key agent of South Africa's political transition. The liberation movement seem[ed] set to be the party of government for the foreseeable future. Its own intellectual frameworks and political processes- rather than the institutions of constitutional democracy- will forge the society's sense of collective purpose and make its key political and policy choices. The health of the ANC is therefore a crucial indicator of the state of the nation" (Butler in Buhlungu et al 2007:35)<sup>1</sup>.

UNISA's therefore, has a profound interest in undertaking research that seeks to understand the contributions of African initiated movements, institutions and ideas in order to draw resourceful lessons for Africa's development today and for the future. We are also interested in understanding the impacts and implications of African movements and institutions in the continent, how they shape ideas and perspectives about the present and dreams of the future, and what African intellectuals can do about these.

We are a university that prides itself to be the African university in the service of humanity and creation, interested in promoting research work and intellectual studies which take African discourses beyond the state and civil society polarity, but to elicit with clarity the concrete contemporary experiences of the African people in all their diversity and African agency and the efforts to carve constructive present and future.

Considerable research has, of course, already been undertaken about the journey towards our freedom, however, the implications of the journey to our

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Buhlungu S et al (eds). *State of the nation: South Africa 2007*. 2007:35.

freedom for the present and futures have not been fully explored. Not much sustained research has been done in the country to unravel how people organise their resistance using the own material, spiritual and traditional, as well as their organizational resources.

*African Intellectuals, Knowledge Systems and Africa's Futures* will thus seek to actively contribute to propelling and encouraging research, development and innovation which are in the main, relevant for Africa's development and for the global community. It aspires to concretize Unisa's Africanisation agenda for a contextually and globally relevant university in "the service of humanity." It is a program whose primary focus is the advancement of African intellectual discourses and scholarship and it is a program that foregrounds Africa's development. Let me restate this plainly and simply: we believe it is important to be active agents in the development of South Africa and the African continent, as well as to contribute toward the wellbeing of humanity in the in the world.

We believe that African universities ought not just to be "triumphantly universalistic and uncompromisingly foreign to local cultures, populations and predicaments."<sup>2</sup> We accede to the call by African intellectuals such as Zeleza, Mamdani, Mama, Olukoshi, Pityana, Odora Hoppers, Nyamnjoh and others who call on African universities and their leaders to ensure that our research agendas do not submit us to become "irrelevant ivory towers whose work; research and tuition do not even inform socio-political, economic, and environmental and public policies of our times."<sup>3</sup>

We are greatly honoured that our Honourable Deputy President, Mr Kgalema Motlanthe, could find time to engage the university community and the broader South African society on "*the African National Congress Centenary*" and the lessons it offers for the present and futures. UNISA Council, management, students, staff and all UNISA's stakeholders are proud to have you address us today as one of the leading democrats and the representatives of people who

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to the Works of Mahmood Mamdani

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the works of Francis Nyamnjoh

were active agents in the liberation movement, the workers and other social justice efforts toward the liberation of our country and its democratisation.

### **On the notion of Liberation movements, Political Resiliency and the Place of African Intellectuals and Institutions**

I now turn to the notion of liberation movements and political resiliency.

It is clear that any university seeking to understand Africa's contribution to knowledge systems and Africa's present and future would want to explore the meaning and the lessons from a millennium of existence of one of the august liberation movements in Africa, the ANC.

Scholars of political and social sciences do not speak in concert about what constitutes a liberation movement, or its definition. Instead, there are many divergent definitions they offer. I therefore want to confine myself to at least three ideas that encapsulate the definition of a liberation movement. These are organised movement aimed at a 'release of country from foreign occupation leading to the attainment of national independence'<sup>4</sup> "A national organization founded on the common experience of "indigenous" people who are willing to unite for the goal of national liberation;

Nzongola-Ntalaja defines as "a revolutionary political organization which mobilizes an oppressed people for purposes of overthrowing imperialist domination"<sup>5</sup>

Some of the fundamental tenets of liberation movements include their commitment to (a) anti colonial domination and oppression; (b) a process of decolonization, whether achieved peacefully through negotiations or forcefully through military action such as a war of a national liberation and (c) An organised movement which strives to win effective national independence in its crusade for emancipation.

One of the leading African Intellectuals, Thandika Mkandawire, it is important to understand that the central premise of most of the [liberation movements] or

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to G J Naldi and his reflections on Peace Keeping attempts by the Organisation of African Unity

<sup>5</sup> Refer to George Nzongola-Ntalaja's works and especially his article on the Challenges to State Building in Africa

nationalist struggles, even when they lacked a “state project”, were the struggle for independence, nation building, liberation and economic emancipation.<sup>6</sup>

The liberation movements did not just aim at the decolonisation processes but envisioned democratic dispensations without the retrogressive forces of tribalism. They had an agenda of economic development and material progress for their societies, hence the evolution of expressions such as the ANC aspiration of “a better life for all”.

“The founding fathers of Pan-Africanism”, and the ANC were keenly aware of the imperative of Africa’s plight to escape domination and humiliation, as well as techno economic backwardness, hence they promoted notions of self reliance, independence. They did not imbibe non-constructive discourses of development as “catching up” but promoted development in a holistic sense.

As Mkandawire asserts, “it is clear from nationalist historiography that development, the eradication of the ‘unholy trinity of ignorance, poverty and diseases’ was a central component of the nationalist agenda.” These were particularly important because colonialism and apartheid had failed to provide access to knowledge and other means that were available to solve these problems.

### **The Implications and Lessons for the Present and Future**

One of the important adjuncts of the liberation movement thus kept the spirit of hope for the emancipation of the people alive, even

The African National Congress cultivated the spirit of hope for the emancipation of the people alive. It had sustained itself and thus demonstrated itself to have become one of the resilient African institutions. These achievements need not be trivialised, but documented so that future generations can draw from them.

Let me therefore suggest that it is important for today is that the ANC and other liberation movements which are still active in the political domain today, whether as ruling parties, political opposition parties, or defunct parties, to sustain politically resilient movements and to cultivate the spirit and quest for freedom,

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<sup>6</sup>Refer to Mkandawire Thandika 2005 African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development Intellectuals. Dakar: CODESRIA

justice, human dignity and developments which it kept the hope of people throughout its long walk to freedom. The two decades of freedom and democratic dispensation reveal that our society and the broader continent need to deepen the agenda of reconciliation, overcoming violence and promoting peace, expressed eloquently in the words of the former President Nelson Mandela when he said, “Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.”<sup>7</sup>

It is important in this period to cultivate indigenous and organic intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense, whose knowledge, research and innovations will have a profound impact on the transformation of our society for the better.

### **Conclusion**

I would like to reiterate that it is essential for the South Africa state to bridge the gap which history exposes between African intellectuals and African institutions or socio-economic and political elite in order that there is support for universities and or African intellectuals, and their endeavours at research, development, community participation and innovations.

If the state or universities neglect the importance of the role of African intellectuals and or institutions and their contribution to development, it will compromise excellence and relevance which are the key hallmark of African universities and intellectuals. It is for this reason that we appeal to all of us to ensure that constructive intellectual’s discourses, knowledge and resilient African institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are engaged in order to deepen African development and ensure its sustenance. This thus calls for a concerted effort by all of us to create constructive intellectuals, knowledge systems and Africa’s sustainable futures.

I would like to encourage you all to engage in constructive discussions and deliberations today and to ensure that the constructive lessons drawn from the courage, intellect, tenacity and resilience of the African National Congress and

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to the Inaugural Speech of the former President Mandela



other liberation movements in the African continent and abroad, inspire your work and life today.

More so, I would like you to reiterate the importance of opportunities of learning together as a society. The Lecture by the Deputy President, His Honourable Mr Kgalema Motlanthe today signifies such an effort.

The launch of a book which documents some of the aspects of the quest for freedom during apartheid, especially by some political activists who were subjected to Robben Island prison today, is a testament to our commitment as a university that we will not let history vanish without documenting its lessons.

I want to express my sincere gratitude once again to the Deputy President for agreeing to deliver a lecture on the African National Centenary today and for allowing the broad South African public to intellectually engage him. I am also enchanted that not only did he agree to present his lecture and dialogue with us all, but he agreed to do this in ways that correlate with the university culture of allowing UNISA academics to respond and engage his presentation.

I therefore invite you to a festive of intellectual engagement, discussion and debate today.

In our African tradition, an esteemed leader has to have a signature tune before he speaks. In Sesotho we call it selelekela. Our signature tune today will constitute the launch of a book *Reading Revolution: Shakespeare on Robben Island* by Prof. Ashwin Desai which entails a poignant account of political prisoners' determination to become intellectually empowered behind the bars of the infamous Robben Island prison. These are stories of ordinary people living in the most extraordinary times. Describing the lived space of the Robben Island reading community, Desai shows how the struggle for liberation against apartheid became the hermeneutic key in reading endogenous and exogenous literary materials thus demonstrating the importance of reading and of education in any quest for emancipation and development.

It is imperative to know that, whereas the book we are about to launch documents some of the experiences of Robben island prisoners, that at that point, UNISA was one of the universities whose academics were fortunate

enough to participate in the intellectual development of many of the students on Robben island. The University was linked with students on the island through the regular exchange of assignments between lecturers and students. Academics who were committed to the liberation struggle for liberation would mark assignments with passion and in an endeavour to touch souls-even if only through the markers discourse. This is a history of accompaniment with the liberation struggle toward the “long walk to freedom”, that UNISA and the broader society need not forget. We need to uphold good and constructive legacies for the future of South Africa and Africa to flourish.

I would like to invite the author, Professor Ashwin Desai, to share some brief reflections about it and to present to the Deputy President.

Thank you.