

President Mbeki's Letter to Cabinet

September 24, 2008

Dear Colleagues,

To all Members of the National Executive.

As you know, tomorrow, September 25, the National Assembly will elect the next President of the Republic of South Africa, who will also swear his or her Oath of Office on the same day.

By law, I will therefore cease to be President of the Republic with effect from midnight today.

I thought I should send you this letter as one of my last communications to you as Head of our country's National Executive.

First of all I would like to thank you for having agreed to serve in the National Executive when you were requested to do so.

This demonstrated your selfless commitment to serve the people of South Africa, which told me that I was indeed very privileged to have the possibility to work as part of such a collective of South African patriots.

All of us, together, have always understood that as members of the National Executive, we carry the heavy responsibility to stand in the front ranks of the national forces charged with the historic task to achieve the goals of the national democratic revolution.

All of us know that, by definition, all revolutions are not, to quote Nelson Mandela, an "easy walk to freedom". Accordingly, our own continuing revolution has also not been, is not, and will not be an easy walk to freedom.

It will constantly test and pose a challenge to everybody, including ourselves, to prove through our deeds, rather than our words, that we are true revolutionaries.

This will demand that we demonstrate that we are able and willing to walk the long and hard road to freedom, always conscious of our obligation to serve the people, rather than promote our personal interests.

As tried and tested combatants for the victory and consolidation of our democratic revolution, you have had no need for an instructor to educate you about the challenges we would face, and face, to achieve the objectives of the revolution.

Your decision to serve in the National Executive has therefore meant that you are willing to walk a hard road that would necessarily demand personal sacrifices.

It is for this reason that I have thanked you for your conscious and voluntary agreement to join the National Executive.

In this regard I must emphasise the fact that the charge given to the National Executive during the years of our freedom, since 1994, mandated by the people through democratic elections, has been to pursue the goal of the revolutionary transformation of our country.

I make this observation in part to pay tribute to you for the loyal and principled manner in which you have consistently and consciously approached your responsibilities as revolutionary democrats.

I also make it to thank you for the contribution you have made towards the achievement of the revolutionary goals of the democratic revolution.

15 years ago now, on the eve of the victory of the democratic revolution, the movement to which I belong took various decisions about the immediate tasks of this revolution. These were encapsulated in two important documents, these being:

"Ready to Govern"; and the, "Reconstruction and Development Programme".

Repeatedly, over the years, we have summarised the strategic focus of these documents, and therefore the democratic revolution, as:

- the creation of a non-racial society;
- the creation of a non-sexist society;
- the entrenchment and defence of the democratic order, as reflected in our National Constitution;
- the restructuring, modernisation and development of our economy to create a prosperous society, characterised by the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment, and a shared prosperity;
- the implementation of social policies consistent with the preceding goals;
- the transformation of the state machinery to ensure that we build a developmental state; and,
- the Renaissance of Africa and the building of a better world, focused on the challenge to defeat global poverty, underdevelopment and inequality.

Over the years, since 1994, the objectives of the movement to which most of us belong have served as the centrepiece of the Election Manifestoes on whose basis the people of our country mandated the ANC to assume the honoured position of the ruling party of South Africa.

With immense pride, I would like to convey to you my firm conviction, empirically demonstrated by life itself, that you have indeed honoured your responsibilities to our country and nation, as mandated by the people in the 1994, 1999 and 2004 General Elections.

If need be, it would not be difficult to detail the factual accuracy of this statement. Neither would it be difficult to demonstrate the appreciation of the overwhelming majority of the masses of our people for what has been done to improve the quality of their lives.

Apart from the ever-increasing levels of approval stated by the people in all the General and Municipal Elections after 1994, I have experienced this popular sentiment personally in the many Community Izimbizo we have convened in all parts of our country, both urban and rural.

The fundamental message I would like to communicate to you in this regard is that you have indeed discharged your revolutionary obligation further to advance the goals of the national democratic revolution.

At the same time, I am certain that during the years we have served as members of the National Executive we have made mistakes. I am equally convinced that the only way we could have avoided these mistakes would have been if we had done nothing to strive to achieve the fundamental social transformation of our country.

In this context, as revolutionaries, we must at all times remain open to criticism and self-criticism, precisely to ensure that we identify whatever mistakes might have occurred and correct these.

At the same time, I am aware of the reality that there are some in our country who are convinced that such mistakes as we might have made, as well as the reality that in 15 years we have not eradicated a 350-year legacy of colonialism, as we could not, derive from our strategic commitment to a reactionary, neo-liberal perspective and programme.

In addition, it is also clear that there are different views in our country with regard to the assessment of the objective national and international circumstances within which we have sought to achieve the goals of the democratic revolution.

Some claim that we have deliberately overestimated the constraints posed by this objective reality, precisely to justify our failure to undertake what they consider to be an imperative obligation to implement what they regard as a more revolutionary and appropriate programme for the fundamental social transformation of our country.

Further to complicate the challenges with which we have had to contend, the matters that have been raised by some of our opponents have required that we engage a discourse that relates to intellectual paradigms relating to philosophy, ideology and politics.

All this, including the practical politics to which we necessarily had to respond, has imposed on the National Executive the obligation to consider and respond correctly to the dialectical relationship between the two phenomena of human existence, the objective and the subjective.

Confronted by the reality that as Government we must govern, and therefore take decisions that have a national, structural and long-term impact, we have consequently had the task to relate the subjective to the objective, to find the necessary relationship between theory and practice.

During our years as members of the National Executive we have discussed all these matters, which relate to the fundamental and critically important issue of the strategy and tactics of the democratic revolution.

I remain convinced that on all occasions we have addressed these matters in an open, honest and objective manner, always informed by our fundamental understanding of the nature and goals of our national democratic revolution.

Among other things, in the end, this has found expression in various documents we have adopted, which have, without let or hindrance, sought honestly to review the performance of the Government in which all of us have been honoured to serve, centred on the impact its policies and programmes have had on our society.

By decision of the ruling party, the ANC, acting within its rights, the current government I have been privileged to lead has been obliged to end its tenure a few months ahead of its popularly mandated term.

In the interest of the masses of our people and country, personally I accepted this eventuality without resistance or rancour, and acted upon it accordingly. I trust that all of us, members of the National Executive, will respond in similar fashion.

At the same time, as we bid farewell to one another as members of the elected 2004-2009 National Executive, we must do so with our heads held high.

We must adopt this posture not out of any sense of arrogance or self-satisfaction.

We must do so, as I suggest, because we can honestly say that we did the utmost, to the best of our ability, as a united collective:

- to advance the goals of the democratic revolution;
- to accelerate the advance towards the achievement of the goal of a better life for our people;
- to pursue the objective of the fundamental reconstruction and development of our country;
- to honour the mandate, and respect the expectations of the masses of our people; and,
- to meet our obligations to the peoples of Africa and the rest of the world.

I am proud without reservation of what you have done to achieve these historic achievements. I am proud of the manner in which you have functioned, in the context of the intricacies of our democratic and constitutional governance system, to do the detailed work which constitutes the daily fare of our Ministries and Departments.

As you lead your lives in the aftermath of the early termination of the term of the life of the 2004-2009 National Executive, and with all due humility, I plead that in addition to what I have already said in this letter, you should do everything you can, constantly to:

- affirm your personal integrity, refusing to succumb to the expedient;
- assert your commitment to principle, rejecting opportunism and cowardice;
- reaffirm your commitment selflessly to serve the people, determined to spurn all temptations to self-enrichment, self-promotion and protection of material personal benefit, at the expense of the people;
- remain loyal to the values of truthfulness and honesty; and,
- respect the views and esteem of the masses of our people.

I make these comments, at this particular moment, to reemphasise the value system that has informed all of us as we served in the National Executive, concerning our quality as individuals charged with the responsibility to play a leading role as revolutionary activists of the democratic revolution.

In this regard and in the end, the ultimate motive power that would inform and has informed our behaviour as individuals are our conscience and self-respect, individually.

I am absolutely certain that at this particular moment in the history of our country, the masses of our people need the unequivocal assurance, demonstrated practically, that they continue to be blessed with the kind of ethical leadership they have seen serving in our country's National Executive during the last fourteen-and-half years.

Surely, as we sought to achieve what Nelson Mandela described as "the RDP of the soul", as well as implement the Moral Regeneration Programme, we have known that we must lead by example, serving as role models in terms of the morality and value system we have urged our people to respect!

I thank you most sincerely for the comradely manner in which we have worked together in the National Executive, the openness of our debates, the friendship among ourselves we have enjoyed, and your firm commitment to the realisation of the goals which our history and reality have dictated.

I wish you success in all your future endeavours, convinced that you constitute a corps of patriots on whom the masses of our people can continue to count as their reliable and selfless leaders, regardless of whether you occupy positions in organs of state or you do not.

You, an outstanding and immensely talented collective of patriots, have, during the years we have worked together, placed and demonstrated confidence in me as the leader of the National Executive.

Please accept my humble thanks to you for this, as well as my apology that it is only now, as I leave Government, that I convey this sentiment to you. However, in this context, I would like to assure you that I am fully conscious of my responsibility to you, at all times to honour your confidence and respect.

This has told me that I owe an obligation to you and the masses of our people at all times to remain loyal to the morality of our revolution.

It has told me that I must always strive to serve the people.

It has told me never to betray those who are my comrades-in-arms, committed to achieve agreed common objectives.

It has told me never to dishonour the revolutionary democratic cause, by allowing my personal desires to assume precedence over the interests of the masses of the people.

As we part, I would like to assure you that I am determined to respect and act in accordance with the value system I have just described.

Today is Heritage Day. It may therefore be appropriate that today this outstanding collective of South Africans, the National Executive, should make a commitment to hand to our people, as part of their heritage, a tradition of honest government which is firmly opposed to corruption, duplicity and disrespect for principle.

I trust that, in time, history will hand down the judgement that when we, as our country's National Executive, were given the opportunity, we lived up to the expectations of the masses of our long-suffering people to serve them as honest and selfless leaders - men and women of conscience.

Please convey my humble thanks to your families that they released you to enable you to perform the outstanding public service for which I sincerely thank you.

I bid you a fond farewell as a member of the National Executive.

Because we are, or have become comrades, friends and partners in the pursuit of a common cause, I trust that it will be possible for us informally to continue talking to each other and one another, concerned, still, together to serve the peoples of South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world.

Yours sincerely,
Thabo Mbeki.