The politics of transition and the quest for transformation in South Africa

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Abstract: **This article investigates the adversaries of political transition in South Africa. The purpose of the article was to examine the violent episodes of transition between 1990 and 1994, with focus on the tenacity displayed by both the ANC and the National Party in achieving peaceful democracy In South Africa; branding this tenacity and all its challenges as the 'politics of transition'. The article then shifts its gaze beyond the role of the TRC and its failures, towards the questions of transformation that are currently unfolding in the political dispensation. Accordingly, the article then explores, critically, the major assumptions underlying the capacity of the social and political discourses, in effectively shaping the direction of these questions. Lastly, reflecting with emphasis on the impact of the global community in the attainment of democracy in South Africa.**

Keywords: **Politics, Violence, Transition, Democracy, Transformation, South Africa.**

BACKGROUND

The future of South Africa was birthed by a series of negotiations, which required compromise to be made in order for both parties to secure their interests. The African National Congress (ANC) led by the legendary Nelson Mandela was convinced that the political climate of the time needed such negotiations to be had, in order for South Africa to overcome its political unrest. The leading actors of negotiations from both the National Party government and the ANC were very keen on mobilizing support from their respective constituencies, in pursuance of their primary objective to build an inclusive South Africa; free from its predatory determinants of the past. This would not be possible unless the process also avoided mass activity, that is, involvement of those who might wish to see substantial transformations that would fundamentally change their lives (Suttner, 2004: 757).

By their very nature, these negotiations were conducted in an elitist and hierarchical manner; a fact which saw these key political negotiators isolating the voices of the very constituencies they stand for. During the process of these negotiations, the authority of decision-making heavily rested with these leaders, who formulated suspicious agreements that sometimes went against the will of the masses of their respective camps. Such agreements failed to translate these gains and promises into economic and social outcomes that can solidify a durable social contract – between the South African state and its people – that can facilitate a positive, enduring peace (McCandless, 2018: 5). These leaders took it upon themselves to charter a vision of a new South Africa, at the expense of exclusively monopolizing this process; the ordinary citizens did not influence the direction in which the country was heading towards. Decisions were made and/or imposed from above by controlling elite who privately negotiate with their opponents (Van der Merwe et alr, 1991: 38). Hence there were occasional incidents that escalated internal disparities within both sides, because many stood distantly opposed to the idea of compromise. Accordingly, white racist conservatives and black radical nationalists challenged these negotiations, to a point where they launched disruptions to their proceedings.

Right wing organizations who disagreed with the prospect of negotiations organized violent attacks in some parts of the country. This led to a symbolic escalation of what many expected to be a civil war in and around the country. It is the very prospect of negotiations and the associated loosening of the shackles of political control in South Africa which defines the forms, intensity and extent of political violence in 1990 (Simpson, Mokwena and Segal, 1992). Extreme right wingers like the AWB (Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging) and BWB (Boere Weerstandsbeweging) and their affiliated armed wings such as *Ystergarde* (Iron Guard) and *Boere Republikeinse Leër* (BRL), resisted regime change through militant approach which

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mounted racial tension. The justification behind the militant resistance by Afrikaner groups was to prevent South Africa from becoming a communist state under the future government of the African National Congress. It was to destabilise the upcoming elections and preserve the status quo of Apartheid. Radical mobilisation of radical white right-wing groupings dominated the comparatively fleeting period of the constitutional transformation in South African society during the 1990s (Shamase, 2019: 89).

The three meetings that Nelson Mandela and De Klerk held between 1990 and 1991 (the Groote Schuur Minute, the Pretoria Minute, and the National Peace Accord which involved the ANC and the government) were very crucial in paving the way towards formal negotiations in CODESA in December of 1991. They set the tone for what was to be known as the national negotiations, an original approach to South African politics. This approach is the *politics* of transition—a period which marked the beginning of a process that ushered the country into democracy; a complete turning point to South African political relations. The maturity phase of transition was the period of democracy through compromise, culminating in the inclusive elections of 1994 (Seo, 2008: 17). It is in this type of politics that the entire fate of South Africa was loosely hanging; it became clear that South Africa could only find its collective momentum of self-reinvention through the process of mutual understanding.

Violence as adversity to political change from 1990 to 1994

Right wing groups were on an attacking spree in some parts of the country, they waged an armed insurgency against black people. Accordingly, several pre-election bombing incidents took place in and around black townships which later resulted in the arrest of many AWB members. During this time, things were fast getting out of hand and the country was at the brink of civil war. Four AWB members were convicted of a few such acts, including robbery with aggravating circumstances, explosions and attacks on power stations in the former Transvaal during 1992 and 1993 (TRC Final Report, 1998: 661).

These attacks were a sign of anger that was to cause as much carnage as possible leading up to the elections. They were a campaign of aggression composed at the encounter with a political determination to gradually dismantle Apartheid and its pillars. This heightened form of violence by the Right-wingers came as a target to disorganize the government's collaborative goal of putting an end to the system of Apartheid and replace it with black majority rule. It reflected the enraged section of the white population's disillusionment with the politics of compromise, in defence of white supremacy. The inconvenient truth in this campaign is that this percipient to 'all-out war' in South Africa did not come from the 'Black' liberation movements, it came from a 'White' supremacy movement (Dickens, 2018). Indeed, there were black liberation movements who applied violence as their political strategy of responding to the urgent demand of uprooting the system of Apartheid. Such movements of resistance, together with their armed wings, were involved in the hit-and-run raids, expressing their readiness to confront their common opposition.

November has also seen a new spate of blatant Rightwing attacks, especially in the Northern Transvaal. In one incident in Louis Trichardt, several children on a Sunday school picnic were attacked by Rightwingers (IBI, 2012: 2). These unfolding incidents added more pressure to the structure of race relations that was already weak to hold the country together, let alone to hold itself. They jeopardized the possibility of South Africa becoming a favourable environment for the negotiations to take place. Despite these cases of resistance, scores of individuals both from the undemocratic government of the National Party and the African National Congress embodied the significance of these negotiations in carving out a new future for South Africa. They showed deep conviction to the politics of transition. However, there were also white people who remained sceptical about what the future entails for them after the collapse of Apartheid; whether they will be subjected to reverse racism or will suffer the consequence of their racism. They just could not reconcile the logic of the politics of transition and what could come out of them. This scepticism was often expressed by their opposition of De Klerk's ambitions of negotiating with the African National Congress. Those whites who opposed Mr. de Klerk tended to be Afrikaans-speakers from blue-collar or rural backgrounds who feared the consequences of black equality (Wren, 1992).

What the conservative initiators of violent campaigns did not realize was that their government had no choice but to opt for negotiations. The wheel of freedom had already turned in South Africa and the Apartheid government could not resist its impact any longer. Negotiations have come about because, despite the government's attempts to undermine us, they know that we are an important force in this country (Hani, 1991). Tensions further worsened after the assassination of Chris Hani, the leader of the Communist Party, on 10 April in 1993. Chris Hani's death heightened racial tension in South

Africa; it caused nationwide instability which threatened the potentiality of racial integration. The deterioration of the condition needed the voice of a charismatic leader whose wisdom would intervene in making the country peaceful; the leader who perfectly matched the standard of such requirements was none other than Nelson Mandela. The African National Congress president Nelson Mandela addressed South Africans at once after the assassination of Chris Hani, on 10 April 1993. He had spoken words of encouragement which motivated South Africans, at all social levels, to serve in the cause of pursuing a non-violent and inclusive South Africa. This was the atmosphere in which the South African transition process was negotiated, and it has impacted how the transition process has since played out (Jaichand, 2017: 22).

Demystifying the truth behind the decision of electing Nelson Mandela as the President of the African National Congress in 1992

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, outside South Africa Mandela's popularity was fast outgrowing the popularity of any other leader in South Africa; it was slowly outgrowing the popularity of the African National Congress. Consequently, a narrative of liberating South Africa was closely married to the narrative of freeing Nelson Mandela. This made it possible for Nelson Mandela to be the face and symbol of the South African liberation struggle, as a result of the free Mandela campaigns which took place in various parts of the world. Accordingly, although the final decision of electing Mandela as the president of the ANC in 1992 at the national congress, after serving as a Deputy President from 2 April 1990, came from the ANC; such a decision was largely influenced by the external forces which played a crucial role in mounting pressure against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. This was a strategic move by the African National Congress to fully supplement its legitimacy with his global popularity, to firmly resonate in the hearts of South African masses. Nelson Mandela was the product of the global community in as much as he was the product of the ANC.

The critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and its method of forging integration

This commission's mandate was to work on cases of human rights violations which took place between 1960 and 1994. The TRC exercised its powers by granting amnesty to individuals who came forward and testified with depth of honesty and sincerity, about their involvement in political events of human rights violations. Consequently, amnesty became the central theme of forging national unity in South Africa; it was its emblem of building healthy race relations. However, the TRC's attempt to advocate for the existence of reconciliation did not have much effect because the country was at the height of racial divide. People of diverse racial origins were preoccupied with ideas of insecurities which forced them to remain isolated from other groups; they were deeply entrenched in the comfort of racial exclusivity, which posed a threat to such reconciliation.

Black people were not certain about the possible meaning behind reconciliation; their determination was still clouded with doubt. The logic of reconciliation implies equality; accordingly, white people could not reconcile the thought of being equal to black people, to many white South Africans this was a sign of insult not only on the Apartheid regime but also to 'whiteness' as a symbol of power. Based on this lack of social cohesion, the project of reconciliation was a distant reality. Critics of the TRC stress that the process didn't contribute significantly to reconciliation, since there was already evidence of impending reconciliation between the races, as well as continued racial isolation (Besada, 2007: 7).

The transition to democracy in South Africa was a dawn for the new framework of racial unification, which was curated by the visionaries of peace and non-violence such as Desmond Tutu. Their aim was not to make the TRC a radical platform of vengeance, but ethical sessions of confession which captured the gripping events of Apartheid. Despite this, the TRC's method of formulating the country's centre of unity was at the expense of overlooking some significant stages, which had to do with enforcing effective accountability in relation to the crimes of the past. A commission such as the TRC was much needed in a society such as South Africa, but it's coming into existence was rather premature; because, it performed a task that was supposed to be a follow up to other significant processes which intended to deal precisely with the very unpunished crime of the existence of Apartheid.

In South Africa there has never been any rational attempt to formulate a compelling case against the existence of the system of Apartheid because that in itself is a crime, and the TRC was far less capable in taking up such a grand role. Contrary to this, it was focusing more on individual accounts. Its approach did not have the required weight of influence and long-term vision, in order to deal with the universality of Apartheid impact in South Africa. You can never have national reconciliation without first having national accountability, and if you do, the former would remain ineffective.

The TRC had obviously a remarkable role to play in building a new South Africa, this was particularly important because there was no common spirit of unity among South Africans, because of the Apartheid's policies of segregation which instilled disunity. A common purpose had to be built so that South Africans, together, could construct the new society based on values underlying democracy, social justice and human rights (Seedat and February, 2011: 115).

The nature of transformation in the Post-Apartheid South Africa

The true transcendence of Apartheid could only be imagined through a national agenda to transform the very nature of social conduct in South Africa. This required that the new dawn be carried out in the discourse of inclusive democracy, which promotes racial equality and fair distribution of wealth. A discourse which successfully introduced a form of reconciliation framework that tried to undo the deep-seated racial hostility, by mending the historical division between South Africans of diverse racial heritage; in order for South Africa to move beyond its dark history. For all this to have taken place the country needed a nationwide confrontational engagement with its evil deeds, by redressing all systematic injustices entrenched in all aspects of society. The various initiatives after 1994 to "heal the nation" by necessity had to address all aspects of society and needed the concerted efforts of government, the public and private sectors, and civil society (Lategan, 2015: 97). The newly elected democratic government presented itself as being committed in developing initiatives which were focusing on unburdening South Africans of the horrific nightmare of both the Apartheid experience and legacy.

However, in practice, the transitional politics in South Africa has not tailor-made any programmatic reforms which there are to guide the processes of national transformation, in relation to the current attempt to democratize the social landscape; more so with a short-sighted political vision of the future which only caters for inadequate reforms. Hence, among other things, it becomes extremely difficult for the society at large to effectively penetrate through the mantle of identity politics. Because the latter is a systematic reflection of the South African reality, it is the absolute version of itself. Consequently, this ineffectiveness has increasingly spawned the birth of nationwide debates which are neither focusing on mapping out the perfect political strategies, that can be employed for achieving the task of a long-delayed transformation. Nor are they inspired by the vision for a popular mobilization. But are occasions towards narrowly intellectualizing and fantasizing about the liberal oriented political dispensation which values pluralist social formation, without undertaking any commitment to the requirements of an egalitarian society.

And what these reveals, is emblematic of the stubborn tradition of maintaining the status quo, which has accelerated the unproductivity of the promises of democracy. Promises which if fully implemented can be strong enough to overturn the ugly reality of inequality that currently plagues South Africa; a reality which has its origins from Apartheid. The needed political vision to fully apprehend the necessity of transformation at its entirety, can only take place once politics start functioning as a point of intersection between past and present; an intersection which will act as an instrumental territory worthy of moderating and authorizing the goals of democracy. This speaks to the need for a political transformation that would usher South Africa towards a new beginning, which would extensively strengthen the ties of integration and reconciliation.

A widely shared notion is that the ideal behind exterminating the legacy of Apartheid permanently depends on the implementation of radical reforms, which will reverse the antinomies of inequality and economic subjection that many South Africans are still subjected to. This notion cannot be entirely untrue. In representing the agenda of the national transformation, the current government needs to strategically formulate, with its policies, a condition which will directly influence the creation of a horizontal structure of economic development accessible to all South Africans, regardless of their skin colour. This will do much to boost the confidence of race relations and its dying brand of '*Rainbow Nation*'. This, however, cannot happen through the government's expression of leniency towards breaking down the vestigial remains of the Apartheid structure, which still dictates access to certain privileges for white people. And this is exactly where our government has failed to intervene; it has failed to eradicate the continuation of this oppressive cult of economic dependency of the majority on the minority section of the population.

This deepening dependency was politically engineered by its predecessor as its project of white empowerment. Many view this failure as a deviation from the promises of democracy, promises of fulfilling the people's demand for real transformation. This deviation has plunged our democracy into ruins by disconnecting it from its primary aims. As a result, in practice the logic of its framework became far removed from the goal of redressing the persistent injustices and inequalities which are a direct property of our history. The foundation of the South African politics is inherently centered on identity whether directly or indirectly; race is an inseparable feature of its nature. Beyond any other subject of

discussion in the political and transformational discourse lays the politics of identity. Because South Africa is a nation whose historical reputation has been racially motivated, a legacy inherited by the present era in its attempt to reverse such a reputational stain.

Such problematic transformational complexities require a wilful commitment from those who are sitting behind the wheel of power, to invite the citizens to a serious labour where they are expected to work hand-in-hand towards restructuring and reconstructing society; in improving the condition of those who are in the position of disadvantage. It is time to read and write less, and instead plunge in to that world (Radice, 2015: 289). Indeed, investing our deepest energies on this mission will (re)define the meaning of our democracy's destiny and propel us into living-up to the standard of a just society.

This has the ability of renewing the fabric of the South African politics, into becoming a social vehicle for the installation of authentic social progress. Thus far, they have not shown any signs whatsoever of being able to produce a sustainable and exploratory approach which will navigate our quest for national transformation. Moreover, it is a serious offense to even expect the current political conduct to stage any progressive dialogue of undoing the achievements of Apartheid, if it continues to project itself as an unprogressively tool for change. The practicality of the criticism I level against the visible paralysis of transformation is a strong proposition of a kind of development where politics are at the centre of action.

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