

NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS
TRANSVAAL INDIAN CONGRESS
ADDRESS TO CODESA BY GEORGE SEWPERSHAD
PRESIDENT OF THE NATAL INDIAN CONGRESS
20 DECEMBER 1991

THE HONOURABLE CHIEF JUSTICE,

Religious Leaders,

The Chairpersons,

distinguished representatives of the United Nations,

the Organisation of African Unity,

the Non-Aligned Movement,

the Commonwealth,

the European Community,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps and fellow South Africans,

As we commence the first meeting of the Convention for a

democratic South Africa (CODESA) we are all, no doubt,

acutely aware of our historic responsibilities. We

are also aware that the process we launch today is

pregnant with possibilities for a democratic future for

all South Africans.

The Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses are very
conscious of the expectations of millions of our people
and the world at large. Our people await a constructive

and swift outcome . An outcome that is emphatically democratic and measurable in:

- * genuine and lasting peace in our country.
- * political empowerment through an equal vote on a common voter's role for every person over the age of 18
- * a significant improvement in the living and working conditions of the majority that lives in abject poverty
- * the total removal of all aspects of apartheid - political, economic and social; and
- * Economic empowerment through various forms of affirmative action in order to correct decades of discrimination and inequality.

The South African tragedy has gone on long enough. Too many communities have been uprooted and destroyed by apartheid laws. Generations of our children have had their future distorted by apartheid education. Many generations of Indian, Coloured and African businesspersons have had their entrepreneurship stifled for decades. Today millions of capable adults spend much of their lives without work and without a chance to work. Thousands of pensioners subsist on meagre and discriminatory pensions.

History and our people charge us with a clear mission: rid us of apartheid, its inhumanity and suffering; put in its place a democratic, non-racial, non-sexist, and undivided South Africa. We cannot fail them least of all delay this process one day longer than necessary.

We in the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses come to CODESA with a proud history of resistance against racism, and inhuman laws and we have struggled for establishment of a non-racial

democracy in our country. Since Mahatma Gandhi founded the NIC in 1894 we have opposed Government attempts to create division and alienation. In alliance with the African National Congress we have taken positive steps to build unity and harmony among all South Africans. To this end we have:

- * been involved in the struggles led by Mahatma Gandhi from 1906 to 1914;
- * opposed land deprivation and a racial voter's roll in the 1946 Passive Resistance Campaign;
- * laid the basis of unity between Indian and African people in the Dadoo - Xuma- Naicker Pact of 1947;
- * participated in developing a new vision for South Africa enshrined in the Freedom Charter adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955;
- * continued this tradition of non-racial unity in launching the UDF in 1983 and opposed Government

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Nationalist ranks through the racist LAC's, SAIC and the Tricameral constitution; and,

* correctly predicted that the exclusion of African people in any constitution would be a recipe for violence and disaster.

As the pioneer liberation organisation in South Africa, we enter CODESA with dedication and commitment for which our members have for almost a century paid a high price in prisons, banishment and bannings. Today the Gandhian demand for a non-racial, common voter's roll finds resonance throughout South Africa.

History will and must record that it was the struggle of all the people of South Africa over many decades that has facilitated our coming together at this Convention. Over the next two days it is, we believe, our task to take the first steps to irreversibility in the negotiations process. It is our view that this point has yet to be reached.

There is widespread mistrust today because of a perception that the state reneged on the Pretoria and Groote Schuur Minutes. There is equal concern over the succession of disclosures about secret Government funding of organisations aimed at undermining the genuine democratic

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process in South Africa.

Regretably the past 18 months have reinforced the perception by the majority of the people of South Africa that those in Government, while commanding both power and legal capacity, do not have the will to create the climate for free political activity in South Africa.

In particular, the people of SA await an explanation for:-

- a) the government's refusal to release all remaining political prisoners, like Robert McBride and others.
- b) the large number of South Africans still remaining in exile;
- c) the continuation of the government's covert operations, structures and funding, notwithstanding assurances to the contrary;
- d) the apparent refusal of the State to rid us of the scourge of violence; and, the
- e) Government's opposition to an elected Constituent Assembly.

There is no doubt in the minds of South Africans that this government cannot lead us to a democratic future and until a Government of National Unity is put in place, the ravages of apartheid will continue. This government has been given an adequate opportunity to demonstrate its

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often stated commitment to change. Little has been done to fundamentally remedy the situation.

Only a Sovereign Interim Government followed by the election of a democratic Constituent Assembly, that offers the possibility of a new era of peace and a meaningful improvement in the material conditions of the millions of impoverished people in our country. This is the only assurance that the constitution - making process itself will be democratic, and enjoy popular legitimacy.

The people of South Africa have been excluded from the Constitutional Process for many centuries. CODESA has a vital responsibility to now create the conditions for the participation of all South Africans in the constitution making process. Accordingly a democratically-elected Constituent Assembly must draft the new democratic Constitution for South Africa.

Our vision for a democratic South Africa is underpinned by these fundamentals:

1. The people must govern. We must not be judged by history of having deprived our people of this universally accepted right.
2. Our people have striven for an undivided South Africa. Fragmentation of our land in any form or guise will be

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a travesty of justice.

3. The future economy must overcome the chasm we see today between the few rich and the many poor. The unemployed, homeless, landless must have their needs addressed with success.
4. We therefore subscribe to the following Constitutional principles on which the new Constitution will be founded:
 - a) An undivided, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist state.
 - b) a multi-party democracy
 - c) an electoral system based on proportional representation
 - d) universally accepted human rights, freedoms and civil liberties protected under a Bill of Rights.
 - e) Equality of all before the law.
 - f) An independent, non-racial judiciary.

THE QUESTION OF MINORITIES

THE NATAL AND TRANSVAAL INDIAN CONGRESSES RECOGNISE THE CULTURAL DIVERSITIES OF SOUTH AFRICANS. WE BELIEVE THAT THIS DIVERSITY ENRICHES THE CULTURE OF OUR ENTIRE NATION. WE HAVE AN UNSHAKEABLE BELIEF IN THE INALIENABLE RIGHT OF ALL THE PEOPLE OF OUR COUNTRY TO FREELY EXPRESS AND PRACTISE THEIR BELIEFS, RELIGIONS, TRADITIONS, LANGUAGES AND CULTURES. THESE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE RIGHTS

SHOULD BE GUARANTEED THROUGH AN ENFORCEABLE BILL OF RIGHTS.

AT THE SAME TIME WE ARE ACUTELY AWARE THAT THE APARTHEID GOVERNMENT HISTORICALLY MANIPULATED THIS ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY FOR NARROW POLITICAL ENDS. AS A RESULT THE VARIED CULTURES OF OUR PEOPLE HAVE EITHER BEEN STIFLED OR PERVERTED TO SUIT THE POLITICAL INTERESTS OF THE RULING MINORITY. OVER THE YEARS INDIAN SOUTH AFRICANS IN PARTICULAR HAVE SUFFERED AS VICTIMS OF ETHNIC MANIPULATION, RESULTING IN TRAGIC INCIDENTS SUCH AS THE 1949 RIOTS AND THE 1985 INANDA VIOLENCE.

WHILE THE POLICY OF APARTHEID AND ETHNIC CO-OPTION WAS DESIGNED TO DIVIDE THE BLACK COMMUNITIES ON RACIAL AND ETHNIC LINES, WE IN THE CONGRESS MOVEMENT, HAVE SUCCEEDED IN BUILDING A STRONG NON-RACIAL AND MULTI-CULTURAL UNITY. HISTORICALLY WE HAVE REJECTED ON PRINCIPLE THE BELIEF THAT ETHNIC RACIAL MINORITIES SHOULD BE GIVEN SPECIAL POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL PRIVILEGES. THIS WOULD BE INCONSISTENT WITH OUR BASIC COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVE EQUALITY FOR ALL CITIZENS. IT IS THIS THAT EXPLAINS OUR PRINCIPLED OPPOSITION TO THE ASIATIC LAND TENURE AND INDIAN REPRESENTATION ACT OF 1946 AND THE 1983 NATIONAL PARTY CONSTITUTION WHICH PUT ONTO PLACE THE ETHNICALLY STRUCTURED TRI-CAMERAL PARLIAMENT. THE LOGICAL OPTION FOR

THE PROPONENTS OF MINORITY POLITICAL RIGHTS WOULD BE THE CREATION OF FRAGMENTED, POVERTY STRICKEN, ETHNIC STATES AS OPPOSED TO A NON-RACIAL AND UNITED SOUTH AFRICA.

IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, MINORITY FEARS WILL ONLY DISAPPEAR ONCE A TRULY NON-RACIAL, MULTI-CULTURAL AND DEMOCRATIC STATE IS BORN.

THIS WILL MEAN AN END TO THE CULTURE OF DISTRUST AND STRIFE BORN OF THE STATUTORY PROTECTION OF WHITE MINORITY RIGHTS AT THE EXPENSE OF THE BASIC RIGHTS OF THE MAJORITY. OUR COUNTRY IS ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW ORDER. CODESA REPRESENTS THE HOPE AND THE ASPIRATIONS OF OUR PEOPLE TO FINALLY RESTORE THEIR DIGNITY AND HUMANITY. OUR PEOPLE ARE TIRED OF VIOLENCE, DIVISION, AND MISTRUST. THE POLITICAL FORCES REPRESENTED HERE HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY TO BUILD TRUST AND CREATE A PROCESS WHICH CAN CATEGORICALLY LEAVE OUR GRUESOME PAST BEHIND.

WE IN THE NATAL AND TRANSVAAL INDIAN CONGRESSES COMMIT OURSELVES TO THIS PROCESS IN THE HOPE THAT WE CAN COLLECTIVELY LAY THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A NON-RACIAL, NON - SEXIST, UNDIVIDED, DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA.