

A TRADITION OF ACTIVISM BY NOZIZWE MADLALA-ROUTLEDGE

**Centre for Civil Society
Harold Wolpe Lecture Series
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I am grateful and humbled at this opportunity to speak with you young people today as part of the Harold Wolpe Lecture series. Wolpe was active in student politics and joined the SACP. As a lawyer, he defended liberation struggle heroes like Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Lillian Ngoyi and Duma Nokwe. Wolpe was arrested and jailed a number of times before his daring escape from prison. To me, Harold Wolpe represents the caliber of activist that we need today. He was selfless and unafraid; he was prepared to speak truth to power.

Many of you, I suspect, would have been too young to understand, at that moment in 1994, how our democracy was won. But whilst I have got your attention, I want to take you even further back for you to have a sense of why and how we built our movement.

Today, we call the African National Congress a political party. In our constitutional democracy this makes complete sense. For many of us, steeped in its traditions, the ANC is still a movement. I would argue that we still need to conceive of the ANC as a movement, because many communities of all different colours, all over this country, are still suffering the effects of apartheid. The structural inequalities designed and enforced by the Nationalist Party from 1949 to 1994 still haunt us and keep our communities in the throes of poverty.

We are now 13 years into our democracy. The apartheid state has been dismantled and replaced by a government elected by all our people. The end of that narrative has left our government with a whole series of challenges – social, economic and political. While some argue that 13 years is a short time during which to have corrected the legacy of 300 years of colonial and apartheid rule, for people who have no homes, no job and no hope, 13 years is a very long time.

As we seek to understand how to effectively improve the lives of our people, civil society needs to define how we relate to a democratically elected government. Our understanding and responses to the contestations occurring in our society can be much enhanced if we take the time to examine our defining methods and traditions of struggle.

Our province of KwaZulu Natal has been, and continues to be, marked by historic tension between our African and Indian communities. An audience of young, intelligent and critically-thinking minds like yours will be aware that these tensions have been molded and stoked by the racist governments of old, and that the structural inequalities which persist today, continue to add fuel to that fire.

Professor Kader Asmal, an ANC MP and veteran Charterist, wrote in the ANC on-line that “This year marks the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration of Cooperation between the ANC and the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses.” Recognised as an “historic milestone” by the ANC, the Three Doctors Pact, as it

came to be known, was named after its three signatories, Dr Alfred B Xuma (ANC), Dr Monty Naicker (NIC) and Dr Yusuf Dadoo (TIC). Invested in their respective communities, these organizations were able to come together and speak with one voice for the oppressed and marginalized – with the clear understanding that united they were stronger. As a basic, cooperation in struggle continued with our organizations for many decades, but more so cross-membership ensured that these organizations were built internally and externally.

To quote Professor Asmal again, “In historical terms, it must be one of the first occasions when a minority made common cause with a majority, not to seek concessions for itself, but freedom for all”. As we go forward, it is important to understand the context of this bold and innovative pact. It was at a time when the newly formed apartheid regime was implementing a policy of ‘divide and rule’. At the same time, the 1949 riots were wrenching the Indian and African communities apart, or pitting them against each other.

So now that apartheid is over, we sit on the same buses, our children attend the same schools, we lie next to each other in the same hospital wards and we visit any beach we like. This may have given us more choices (in all of the above) but if our resource base is the same, if not lower, then we are now competing for the same services and you may well ask, if those services are good enough and plentiful enough.

This is why I am arguing that the notion of a movement is still relevant. As you know, the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses no longer exist – we all sit under the umbrella of the ANC now. But in this post-apartheid, post-colonial... BEE world in which we live, many other people sit under that umbrella – and it seems that many of them don’t know the meaning of non-racialism and don’t know that the Freedom Charter was built by other Charters before it – laying its foundations.

It is important that we not view the Freedom Charter as a disused Bible. It is up to you young people to reclaim that vision of a society based on human dignity which was the inspiration for millions to struggle for social justice and human rights. It envisioned an inclusive society where peaceful and productive coexistence would be the norm. And it inspired generations of young intellectuals to make great sacrifices to join the fight to rid us of apartheid and work towards a better society.

In this regard I am reminded of one of the outstanding intellectuals of the 1976 generation, Jabulani Nxumalo (popularly known as Comrade Mzala). He died in 1989 at the age of 45 in London. In his short lifetime he was something of a legend among the exile South African community for his enthusiasm for intellectual debate and bravery in repeatedly returning to South Africa with Umkhonto We Sizwe. Writing under many pseudonyms Comrade Mzala was a keen debater – when no-one would respond to his contributions he would write for the next issue of a publication under another name! A typical example is his famous essay “Cooking the Rice inside the Pot” which he wrote under Mzala, but when no-one responded he wrote “Preparing the Fire before Cooking the Rice inside the Pot”!

Mzala loved evoking descriptive imagery in his writing. On this occasion when saying that the rice must cook inside the pot, what he meant was that the struggle should be fought primarily within the country, as opposed to internationally. Within our movement this metaphor has been used to illustrate many different moments of struggle. For our purposes here, perhaps what we can say is that the perfectly cooked rice is the society we want, and in order for that rice to be perfectly cooked, we all have to do our part to light the fire, to keep the temperature right and to ensure

that the right ingredients go into the pot. The African National Congress, elected by the majority today, and probably for the foreseeable future, is consequently, the pot. For any of you who have cooked rice before, you will know that it is easy to spoil it - take your eye off it for too long and it will overcook or throw the water out too quickly and it is underdone. My point is really simple, if you want to see the rice perfectly cooked, you cannot avoid the pot.

Standing on the sidelines and toyi-toying will not help that rice cook properly. And neither will leaving the tasks to anyone else. There are many important tasks associated with cooking the rice, and I don't want to overkill the metaphor! Most recently, it seems I have got myself in trouble for saying that the rice is not looking good. I am sorry for the trouble, but my hope is that we use this as an opportunity to improve the cooking of the rice. I am struggling to leave the metaphor of the rice aside, because it helps being misquoted by the press! So perhaps I can quote Jeremy Cronin on the Mzala and Francis Meli debate in the African Communist, 1988, on this issue "He is prepared to engage critically (but constructively) with his senior in the movement, and his loyalty and respect for the ANC does not lead him into believing that his organization is above all criticism." As a movement we have always afforded the space for critical engagement – and that has not changed, and must not change.

In November last year I paid tribute to Zackie Achmat and the Treatment Action Campaign at a debate on AIDS treatment, organized by the University of Cape Town. Next year the Treatment Action Campaign will mark 10 years since its founding: ten years since the rape and murder of Gugu Dlamini and the decision by of a small group of people to campaign for life, dignity and equality for HIV positive South Africans.

Over the years the TAC has campaigned for and impacted upon the adoption of a progressive legislative framework protecting HIV positive citizens, national distribution of condoms to improve prevention, the roll-out of mother to child transmission prevention and the subsequent decision to provide treatment to all AIDS sufferers. Now we have a national strategic plan, a groundbreaking document, which aims to halve HIV infections in five years and provide medicines to 80% of those that need them, and TAC leaders sit with Government ministers on the South African National Aids Council. If you want to know how to cook rice in a pot – that's how.

Now I want to stop talking and I want to hear your thoughts and concerns.