

30. The Freedom Charter explained

The Freedom Charter was drawn up after about 10000 meetings with the people of South Africa. It is special because it was not drawn up by a small group of visionaries seeking to impose their ideals. It is an authentic reflection of the views of the mass of the people who wrote down and submitted their wishes for the future of their country to the organisers of the “Call to the Congress of the People.”

The stirring preamble to the Charter: *We, the People of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people....* sets out the vision of a non-racial society.

In ten clauses the basic freedoms required for an inclusive society are stated. They are the opposite in every way to the exclusivity of apartheid racism and rule out the inhuman policies enforced under apartheid.

To summarise the Charter states:

The People Shall Govern! All the people must be free to elect their representatives, and not just the white minority.

When implemented the social, political and economic lives of the people would begin to be dramatically changed. All references to race as the basis for granting rights or refusing them would be removed from all the laws. That would ensure that **All National Groups Shall have Equal Rights!** Unless all could have equal rights how could there be equality?

To overcome extremes of poverty people would have to be included in the economy. Thus the demand **The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!** This was controversial. Did it mean nationalisation of all means of production and the elimination of all private property, for example? Are there other ways to ensure greater equality of economic opportunity? The future would show what possibilities would exist.

The colonial conquest and appropriation of the land by the settlers is a burning issue among the African people who demanded that **the Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!** Because they were prohibited from owning land Africans were low-paid agricultural

workers, share croppers or subsistence farmers. It was left open for debate and future developments to give content to this demand: distribution of state owned land, state farms or cooperative farms, or expropriation and redistribution of the land?

The South African legal system treated people of different races with great inequality and so Black South Africans and Africans in particular demanded that **All Shall be Equal before the Law!** This and the next clause are logical consequences of equal political, social and economic rights. Judges and presiding officers often presumed black people to be guilty before they had even heard the evidence because a white policeman had charged them and that was sufficient. There were also special laws affecting each national group to the detriment of African people in particular.

Most hated were the Pass Laws that controlled the movements of Africans, what work they could do and where they could live were the most notorious. Such laws had to be scrapped so that **All Shall Enjoy Equal Human Rights** to organise, to publish, to meet, to form political parties and the like.

Equality required the right to earn a living and be included in the economy requiring that **There Shall be Work and Security!** The racist economic system excluded Africans from the work place except for those they wanted to work as cheap labour in the mines, on farms, in industry and often in menial work. People should have the right to social security payments for the elderly, the infirm and incapacitated would have to be paid to all in need and not only to the white minority.

Education is essential in a modern society and therefore **The Doors of Learning and Culture shall be Opened!** Equal rights to education for all are necessary and not unequal education systems for each race group as under apartheid. Without education the other rights to learn and earn and develop one's human abilities would not be achieved. That meant also that all languages and cultures must be treated with respect because that is a pre-condition for restoring the dignity of all the people.

Urban slums and rural poverty would have to be overcome to realise the demand that **There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!** The enormous inequalities inherent in apartheid that compelled millions to live in abject squalor have to be overcome so

that the mass of the people would not have to live in the degrading conditions of informal settlements or shanty towns. Mainly Africans were frequently subjected to arbitrary police raids and imprisonment. That would have to stop.

There Shall be Peace and Friendship! Our people wanted to live in harmony, based on mutual respect and dignity and an end to the domination of neighbouring states by apartheid South Africa.

The final words of the Freedom Charter call on the people to commit themselves to achieving the demands set out therein.:

Let all people who love their people and their country now say, as we say here:

**THESE FREEDOMS WE WILL FIGHT FOR, SIDE BY SIDE,
THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES, UNTIL WE HAVE WON OUR
LIBERTY.**