



Cause for celebration as era of shame ends

SOUTH AFRICA stands on the threshold of a momentous election, an event that inspires both trepidation and hope.

The killing fields of Natal/KwaZulu inevitably have brought about a mood that most South Africans find sombre, even fearful. It would be foolhardy to dismiss the massive problems facing not only the security forces but also the many international observers and thousands of volunteers who will be staffing polling stations in the two days of elections. It would be equally foolish to try to persuade all South Africans that there is no cause for fear or even alarm. The mood is serious and there is a great deal of concern.

But an examination of the situation will show, I think, that in the midst of apprehension there is cause for celebration.

In the first place, the celebration of the country's first democratic election marks our progression to a totally new era. This is not a time of abnormality. We are actually returning to a normal situation, as the concept is understood in the international community, in which individual rights and fairness prevail. This shift towards a normal society is marked by the knowledge that all South Africans will be able to participate in this election; that there is no place for spectators (unless they themselves choose this); and that each vote holds equal value.

The election will not solve the many serious problems facing South Africa, but it is a start and is therefore cause for celebration.

In the second place, this election points to inclusivity rather than the pattern of exclusivity which has dominated South Africa for more than 300 years. In the past the majority of the people were neither considered nor consulted. Now, for the very first time, all South Africans assume full citizenship with equal rights and responsibilities.

This inclusivity holds the promise of creating the links that establish one nation. We no longer have to endure the divisions that have haunted us for so long. There now exists an opportunity for people to come together on the basis of equality and a genuine sharing in privileges and opportunities. As important, we come together on the basis of the shared responsibility which is what citizenship is all about.

Thirdly, this election marks the end of the dark years of apartheid, a time of denial and damage, a shameful past marked by heartache, mass removals, homelessness, discrimination and death. We turn the page and start afresh.

Of course we will still experience the legacy of the

apartheid years. It will take at least a generation before the damage is repaired. It will not be easy to deal with the backlog of housing. It will not be a simple matter to provide decent health care for all South Africans. Above all, it will not be possible to put in place – with ease and in the short term – a system of education offering maximum opportunity for all South Africa's children. Nevertheless, this election marks the end of a shameful period in South Africa's history – and this is cause for celebration.

In the fourth place, this election marks the start of a new era in which the total human resources of our country can be harvested to build a common society. For the first time, every South African counts.

We have depended on the resources of a small minority for a terribly long time. We have deliberately refused to take account of the masses of people who could have been brought into the economy, assisted in vital economic growth and built a nation capable of competing on even terms with most of the world. This has now changed. It is only the beginning, but it is a beginning, and this is cause for celebration.

IN THE fifth place, this election marks the beginning of the construction of a decent society, one governed under the rule of law and a bill of rights, with core democratic values as the measure of acceptability. The repression and oppression of the *ancien regime* gives way to the beginning of justice – and this is cause for celebration.

In the sixth place, the election signals the occasion for finally abandoning the addiction to a purely anti-apartheid stance. Instead there is an opportunity to be *for* something – to be *for* the building of a new society. This is the time to stop being negative and start being positive.

It is not a time to stockpile goods. It is not a time to succumb to paralysis. It is not a time to throw up your hands in supposed helplessness and then blame circumstances. It is not the time to look with longing at Europe, Australia or some other distant shore. It is a time to focus on the new possibilities and new opportunities opening up in South Africa. It is a time to be creative and even joyful. It is time for hope and for celebration.

If this election is not a time for dancing in the streets, it is at least a time of thankfulness that the long night of shame is over and the new dawn of decency and justice is beginning.

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