

Former President Thabo Mbeki and the racism debate in South Africa: through the rhetorical lens

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1. Introduction

Thabo Mbeki was elected President of the African National Congress (ANC) on 18 December 1997 at the ANC's 50th Congress, and that of South Africa on 14 June 1999. *In both these capacities, Mbeki's predecessor was Nelson Mandela – someone on whom a “saintly status had been conferred. While Mandela's presidency was predicated on nation-building and reconciliation, Mbeki's was, in large measure, underpinned by South Africa's socio-economic transformation. He believed that the greatest threat to attaining this goal was racism. Mbeki was therefore of the view that it had to be extirpated. As the country's President, he had to be at the forefront of this struggle. Racism then became a common thread that ran through Mbeki's speeches. He seemed to have grasped that – as Mamdani aptly puts it – “[i]f the country needed reconciliation, it also needed social justice”.*¹

This paper endeavours to give a rhetorical analysis of what, in my view, may be regarded as Mbeki's foundational speeches that quintessentially characterise the prevailing racism debate in South Africa. I will confine my analysis to Mbeki's speeches in his capacities as President of both the ANC and South Africa, and not delve into his views on racism prior and subsequent to these epochs.

Section 83 of South Africa's Constitution asserts that the President is the “Head of State and head of the national executive”. In addition, section 83(b) enjoins the President to “[...] uphold, defend and respect the Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic”, while section 83(c) entrusts the President with promoting “the unity of the nation and that which will advance the Republic”.² Part of the President's responsibilities to “uphold, defend and respect the Constitution” is, as per the founding provisions of the Constitution, to promote “non-racialism”.³ It may be contended that Mbeki demonstrated the appreciation of what was expected of him as President, in terms of the Constitution, as he paid

¹Mahmood Mamdani, “Foreword” in *The Thabo Mbeki I know*. Edited by Sifiso Ndlovu and Miranda Strydom (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2016): xx

²*The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996): 53.

³*The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, ibid*, 3.

particular attention to the creation of a non-racial South Africa. Rhetorically speaking, the arguments that he would advance as he sought to achieve this objective, through persuasion, would derive from the argument of authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*).⁴

2. Mbeki's acceptance speech as President of South Africa - 14 June 1999

The first reference to racism by Mbeki as President of South Africa can be traced back to his acceptance speech. On this occasion, Mbeki posited:⁵

And yet all of us are aware that our country continues to be divided along *racial* [my italics] and other lines and is, therefore, that much more difficult to unite around common objectives.

Constrained by the occasion – Mbeki was merely accepting his election as President – it sufficed for him to give his audience merely a glimpse of what would be central to his socio-economic transformation agenda. He could not be expected to expatiate on racism, but would do so at an opportune time (*kairos*).

3. Address at the Opening of Parliament - 25 June 1999

Mbeki accordingly elaborated on racism in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA). In this regard, Mbeki talked about, *inter alia*, building a caring society “[...] without regard to race [...]”.⁶ He also made reference to a system (apartheid) that had treated certain South Africans “[...] as sub-humans [...]”. In addition, Mbeki raised “[...] the need to end racial [...] imbalances within the Police Service”.⁷

Having recourse to the argument from authority, Mbeki cited the findings of the study conducted by the Coordination and Implementation Unit in the Office of the Deputy President that had confirmed “[...] the

⁴Chaim Perelman, *The realm of rhetoric* – Translation by Kluback W. Notre Dame (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982): 94.

⁵Thabo Mbeki, “Speech on accepting his election as President of the Republic of South Africa” (14 June 1999): <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=2561>. (Accessed 8 June 2016).

⁶Thabo Mbeki, “Address at the opening of Parliament (25 June 1999): <http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/docs/tm1999/tm062509.pdf>. (Accessed 13 June 2016).

⁷Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

correlation between poverty, crime and race”, with “[...] areas of high crime concentration [...] being “[...] black and poor areas of our country”.⁸ Mbeki delineated as he contended that all South Africans had to be treated equally and no race had to be treated as superior to others. Accordingly, he maintained:⁹

The promotion and protection of the cultural, linguistic and religious rights of all our people must occupy a central place in the work of Government.

[...] We consider the work of restoring the pride and identity of all our people of vital importance to the task of advancing the human dignity of all our citizens and ensuring the success of our efforts towards national reconciliation and nation building [*sic*].

We will work for the speedy implementation of the constitutional requirement to establish a Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Language, Cultural and Religious Rights.

[...] This will be an important contribution to the effort we must sustain to wipe out the legacies of *racism*[emphasis added] and sexism, which continue to afflict our society.

Probably, what was on Mbeki’s mind as he couched this argument was the imperative to give expression, using “the authority at [his] command”, to the preamble to South Africa’s Constitution which makes the following solemn undertaking:¹⁰

We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country;
and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.
We therefore [...] adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic, so as to –

Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on

⁸Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

⁹Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

¹⁰*The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996): 1.

democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

Racial discrimination, dating back to colonialism and culminating in its institutionalisation by the apartheid regime, propagated the false notion that the white race was superior to other races. One of the consequences of this sad and sorry state of affairs was racialized wealth inequality. The apartheid government exacerbated the situation by creating the so-called “bantustans” or homelands that were organised along ethnic lines. The infamous divide and rule strategy, in turn, led to some ethnic groups erroneously believing that they were superior to others.

The democratic dispensation therefore – as Mbeki believed and which is still believed by those South Africans who may be regarded as “progressive” – seeks to redress the “injustices of the past”. It also inculcates a culture which holds that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity”, as well as “improve the quality of life of all the citizens and free the potential of each person”.¹¹

4. Second National Institute for Economic Policy (NIEP) Oliver Tambo Lecture – 11 August 2000

Delivering the Second Oliver Tambo Lecture, organised by the NIEP, Mbeki took a swipe at the then leader of the Democratic Alliance¹², Tony Leon, for having challenged his (Mbeki’s) views on the HIV and AIDS pandemic.¹³ Prior to him focusing on the business of the day, Mbeki digressed and tore into Leon (argument *ad hominem*), asserting that the remarks that he had made had racial undertones as they exhibited “disdain and contempt for African solutions”.¹⁴ In this regard, Mbeki posited:¹⁵

According to the newspaper, the white politician accused the President of suffering from a “near obsession” with finding African solutions to every problem, even if, for instance, this

¹¹*The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, ibid.*

¹²The official opposition.

¹³“HIV/AIDS: Thabo Mbeki vs Tony Leon”, *Politicsweb* (2000): <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/hivaids-thabo-mbeki-vs-tony-leon>. (Accessed 15 June 2016).

¹⁴Thabo Mbeki, “Second National Institute for Economic Policy (NIEP) Oliver Tambo Lecture” (11 August 2000): <http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/pebble.asp?relid=2650>. (Accessed 15 June 2016).

¹⁵Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

meant flouting scientific facts about AIDS, in favour of “snake-oil cures and quackery.” [...]

Mbeki proceeded with deriding Leon (*schesis*) as he maintained:¹⁶

Our own absolute Milan [Tony Leon], the white politician, makes bold to speak openly of his disdain and contempt for African solutions to the challenges that face the peoples of the Continent.

According to him – who is a politician who practices his craft on the African continent – these solutions, because they are African, could not but consist of the pagan, savage, superstitious and unscientific responses typical of the African people, described by the white politician as resort to “snake-oil cures and quackery”.

Mbeki became more scathing as he intimated:¹⁷

By his statements, our own absolute Milan, the white politician, demonstrates that he is willing to enunciate an entrenched white racism that is a millennium old.

This racism has defined us who are African and black as primitive, pagan, slaves to the most irrational superstitions and inherently prone to brute violence. It has left us with the legacy that compels us to fight, in a continuing and difficult struggle, for the transformation of ours into a non-racial society.

Such crimes against humanity as slavery, colonialism and apartheid would never have occurred unless those who perpetrated them, knew it as a matter of fact that their victims were not as human as they.

It is evident that Mbeki had not taken kindly to what Leon had said. He therefore deemed it fit to digress (*ecbole*) with a view to fighting back, as it were.

It became commonplace, especially from the opposition parties, to accuse Mbeki of “playing the race card”. This was, so it was argued, a strategy on Mbeki’s part to mask the incompetence of his presidency.

¹⁶Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

¹⁷Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

Indeed, Durrheim, Mtose and Brown aver:¹⁸

Tony Leon, then leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), the official opposition, suggested that Mbeki's 'litany of racist caricatures bordered on the pornographic'. The DA health spokesperson, Ryan Coetzee, accused Mbeki of playing the race card, turning a health issue into a race issue and of refusing that rape was pervasive in the country and was partly responsible for the spread of AIDS.

5. Speech at the Opening Session of the National Conference on Racism – 30 August 2000

Notwithstanding the "race card" charge, Mbeki remained undeterred arguing that not enough progress had been made to induce the non-racial South Africa that the Constitution envisioned. His address to the Opening Session of the National Conference on Racism, held on 30 August 2000, bore testimony to this. Mbeki started off his speech by giving a synopsis of the views that had been expressed on racism at the time, arguing that from that exercise he had drawn a conclusion that racism was, indeed, a "contentious" subject. Mbeki pointed out:¹⁹

The public discussion that has taken place in our country in the last few months on the issue of racism, demonstrates the point unequivocally that in this area, *we are faced with one of the most contentious issues on our national agenda* [emphasis added].

Mbeki delineated:²⁰

Its discussion does not lead to the national feel-good atmosphere we all experience whenever our national sports teams score a victory over a foreign competitor or when other benign events occur that help us to forget the persisting racial divisions in our society.

¹⁸Kevin Durrheim, XoliswaMtose and Lindsay Brown, *Race trouble: Race, identity, and inequality in post-apartheid South Africa* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2011): 195.

¹⁹Thabo Mbeki, "Speech at the opening session of the national conference on racism" (30 August 2000): <http://www.racism.gov.za/substance/speeches/mbeki000830.htm>. (Accessed 20 June 2016).

²⁰Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

Arguments are advanced honestly that such a discussion, about racism, can only lead to the division of our country into mutually antagonistic racial camps.

It is also said that it might very well encourage racial conflict, destroying the progress we have achieved towards national reconciliation, towards the birth of a happy rainbow nation.

It stands to reason that dealing with racial discourse in South Africa was so vexed. There were both protagonists, as well as antagonists of the racism debate. Mbeki proceeded to present the arguments that were put forth by these dichotomous forces. Pertaining to the antagonists, Mbeki postulated:²¹

It has been argued that those who point to the persistence of racism in our country are themselves racist. Those who propagate affirmative action are accused of seeking to introduce reverse racism, or, more directly, of resort to anti-white racism.

Some assert that the description 'racist' is merely an epithet used by bad people to insult others, as well as a means of intimidating and silencing those who hold views critical of the government. Alternatively, it is said that the issue of racism is brought up by unscrupulous politicians, in an effort to mobilise black constituencies to support them. After all, so it is said, we ended apartheid and therefore racism, when we became a non-racial democracy in 1994.

Juxtaposing the aforementioned arguments with the views espoused by those who may be depicted as pro-racism debate, Mbeki told his interlocutors:²²

On the other hand, others within our society argue that those who are most vocal in seeking to suppress discussion on this issue are those who benefited from centuries of colonial and apartheid racial domination.

These will go on to say that the privileged do not want this discussion because they want to maintain their privileged

²¹Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

²²Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

positions at all costs.

It is also said that in order to achieve this result, the privileged work hard to convince both themselves as well as the rest of society, that what is being complained of does not, in fact, exist, except for isolated incidents.

This is categorised as the denial mode, in terms of which the dominant instruments of propaganda, which, by definition, are at the disposal of the privileged, are used to obstruct the recognition of reality.

The aggrieved will go further to argue that the privileged sectors of our society, accustomed to setting the national agenda, continue in the effort to set the national agenda, regardless of what the majority of our citizens might desire.

Of course, by this time, the latter have been empowered by the establishment of the democratic system to believe that they have the democratic right, openly and legitimately, to set this national agenda.

The point is also made that our process of national reconciliation has been somewhat of a charade. In this regard, it is said that only the victims of racism have responded to the call to forgive and to let bygones be bygones.

The charge is made that the perpetrators and beneficiaries of racial oppression have acted merely to defend their interests, refusing to extend their own hand towards the victim, in a true spirit of reconciliation.

The same can be said of the initial response of sections of the media to the decision of the Human Rights Commission to hold hearings on the issue of racism in the media.

As he presented arguments for and against – giving both sides of the story – on the race question in South Africa, Mbeki assumed the role of an educator. Instead of giving his standpoint on the subject matter, at least up to this point, Mbeki embarked on a journey of informing his audience of the prevailing views on racism. Commenting on the role of an educator, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out:²³

²³Chaïm Perelman & Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation* –

In education, whatever its object, it is assumed that if the speaker's discourse does not always express truths, that is, theses accepted by everyone, it will at least defend values that are not a matter of controversy in the group which commissioned him.

True to his conviction that one could not talk about "South Africanness" until and/or unless racism had been debated, Mbeki made six "propositions" as the premises of his argument²⁴:

First, the practice of racism is both anti-human and constitutes a gross violation of human rights.

Second: as it has been practised through the centuries, the black people have been the victims of racism rather than the perpetrators.

Accordingly, what we have to deal with is white, anti-black racism, while giving no quarter to any tendency towards black, anti-white racism, whether actual or potential, as well as anti-Semitism.

Third: racism is manifested in a variety of ways, these being the ideological, existing in the world of ideas, and the socio-economic, describing the social, political, economic and cultural power relations of domination of and discrimination against the victims of racism.

Fourth, for many centuries racism has been a fundamental defining feature of the relations between black and white, a directive principle informing the structuring of these relations.

Fifth, the legacy of racism is so deeply entrenched that no country anywhere in the world has succeeded to create a non-racial society. [...]

Translated by Jon Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1969): 53.

²⁴Thabo Mbeki, "Speech at the opening session of the national conference on racism" (30 August 2000): <http://www.racism.gov.za/substance/speeches/mbeki000830.htm>. (Accessed 20 June 2016).

Sixth: global experience stretching over a long period of time, demonstrates that the creation of a constitutional and legal framework for the suppression of racism is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to end this violation of human rights.

Commenting on the use of propositions in argumentation, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observe:²⁵

The premises in argument consist of propositions accepted by the hearers. When the hearers are not bound by the exact rules that compel them to recognize certain propositions, the whole structure raised by the speaker has no other basis than a factor of psychological nature, the adherence of the hearers. And more often than not, the speaker only presumes that his adherence exists. When his interlocutors disagree with the speaker's conclusions, they can, if they see fit, challenge the presumed agreement on the premises with a denial which will determine the whole argument at its base.

While the other "propositions" that Mbeki made might have been refutable, the first one, it may be argued, was less contentious. His interlocutors might have readily concurred with him that "racism is both anti-human and constitutes a gross violation of human rights". Mbeki did not therefore have to try harder to gain the adherence of his interlocutors. It might have been accepted as a "self-evident truth".

Conversely, Mbeki had to put a lot of effort into winning over his interlocutors, as regards the other "propositions". Notwithstanding this, some in Mbeki's audience would have taken comfort in the contention that racism was not peculiar to South Africa. The logical question would have been therefore what had been/was being done elsewhere to address the race issue. Were there lessons to be drawn from other parts of the world?

Employing the commonplace of antecedent and consequence, Mbeki attributed the skewed power relations with regard to the socio-economic conditions between black and white South Africans to racism which had come about thanks to colonialism and apartheid. This may be viewed as a fallacy that is rhetorically referred to as *the post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, which, when loosely translated, denotes "after this, therefore because of this".²⁶ This fallacy derives from the assumption that because

²⁵Chaïm Perelman & Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *ibid.* 104.

²⁶Edward P.J. Corbett & Robert J. Connors, *Classical rhetoric for the modern student* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 69.

there is a relationship between events, something happening after something else, there is also a causal relationship. It qualifies as what Corbett and Connors term “faulty causal generalisations”.²⁷

Mbeki opined that despite arguments by some that the transition to democracy had altered race relations in South Africa, in effect, the status quo persisted. He argued that what was required was for South Africans across racial lines to join hands in an effort to “defeat the demon of racism”. Adumbrating what needed to be done, Mbeki counselled his audience:²⁸

The first step we must take towards the realisation of this goal is the common recognition by all of us, black and white, that racism exists and that it is indeed a very serious problem, without whose solution it is idle to speak of a new South Africa.

Secondly, we must abandon the notion that the problem of racism has nothing to do with me and is the responsibility of another. We have to treat racism as a problem that challenges the black people. We must treat racism as a problem that challenges white people.

It is obvious that it makes no sense whatsoever to argue that the responsibility to end racism resides with the victims of racism.

Another step we have to take is to make the common determination that, precisely because this issue is so fundamental to our future, we have to ensure that it is discussed frankly, freely and openly. We must be ready to take the pain that will be an inevitable part of this open discourse.

None among us should seek to suppress this discussion. To suppress it is to guarantee the perpetuation of racism, with the destructive consequences of which all of us must surely be aware.

A closer examination of this passage makes one to deduce that Mbeki sought to create an environment conducive to deliberative rhetoric. He seemed to subscribe to the Kantian view that holds that humans are equal and autonomous beings capable of judgement.²⁹ Granting his interlocutors a blank cheque, as it were, created an impression that every

²⁷Edward P.J. Corbett & Robert J. Connors, *ibid.* 68-69.

²⁸Thabo Mbeki, *ibid.*

²⁹See James Rachels, *The elements of moral philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1986).

South African was qualified to speak about racism or that racism was everyone's business. This would have legitimised the discourse on racism and hopefully consensus would have been reached, even if it meant agreeing to disagree. Indeed, Habermas opines that consensus achieved in an inclusive discursive process is the ultimate legitimacy criterion of public decisions.³⁰

6. Conclusion

One could be forgiven for thinking that almost 22 years into South Africa's democracy, racism would be a thing of the past. Lo and behold, some recent racial incidents in the country unequivocally and poignantly point to the fact that South Africa still has some "unfinished business" to attend to. Racism has again reared its ugly head. While the country has anti-discriminatory laws on its statute book, it is evident that something extra is needed. The views that were held by Mbeki when he asserted, among other things, that racism was the "problem" that needed to be discussed "frankly, freely and openly" have therefore proven predictive. As Mbeki averred almost 16 years ago, South Africans cannot rest on their laurels and pretend that the "new South Africa" has been attained. Indeed, it seems that Tutu's "rainbow nation" remains elusive. Once again, all South Africans are being called upon to tackle – to borrow Mbeki's words – "the demon of racism" head-on.

~ Parliament of South Africa, Research, Portfolio Committee on Transport ~

³⁰Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge, Ma: The MIT Press, 1996): 110.