

# Follow the leader?

Despite decades of colonialism, land dispossession, apartheid exploitation, and protracted armed struggle, South Africans are willing to talk to each other; negotiation is a hallmark of our post-apartheid society. Now that's being put to the test. The National Dialogue was mandated to confront the intractable triple crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality, but it faces another challenge from deep within the party that created it. TONY EHRENREICH asks if the ANC leadership, crippled by corruption and greed, is still up to negotiating a way to a better future

Photo: Wikimedia

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South Africa's history is marked by repeated clashes between contesting groups, and this goes back to the earliest times. This is not unusual. The world at large, but especially countries that have experienced colonialism and other forms of oppressive government, have repeatedly resorted to violence in the face of intractable conflict, most often over the distribution of their resources. What is unusual about South Africans is that they can also talk to each other. At key points in our national struggles we have talked to avoid violence. And sometimes this has worked.

The defeat of apartheid required the most advanced tactics and weaponry humans are capable of, and South Africans forged and have perfected dialogue and negotiation as a means to peaceful resolution.

This was probably first manifested in the structures negotiating a relative peace in Natal in the 1980s between the ANC and the apartheid proxies in the form of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) with the support of the South African Defence Force.<sup>1</sup>

The early 1990s saw a series of unprecedented bilateral and multi-party negotiations, the 'talks about talks', which produced the 1991 National Peace Accord. These negotiations delivered the Groote Schuur Minute and the Pretoria Minute and laid the foundation for the success of the 1991-1992 multi-party Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), which led to the 1994 elections and the subsequent drafting of the Constitution.

The principle of engagement was captured in the expression of participatory democracy, which included the social dialogue formalised in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) on key areas of social policy. NEDLAC in turn led to the 2003 [Growth and Development Summit](#) as well as the response to the 2008 financial crisis. NEDLAC also played a critical role in the COVID response in South Africa.

Which brings us to today. South Africa's history and culture of social dialogue is once again being explored as a way to get around the crisis in society that is evident in persistent low growth, deepening inequality, and extreme levels of unemployment and poverty. The first National Dialogue convention was in August 2025, with representation across government, business, and civil society. Its aim was to craft a pathway towards a new social compact and create a shared vision for the country.



*Celebrating South Africa's first democratic government.  
Photo: South African History Online*

### **Why a new National Dialogue?**

The National Dialogue is a response to the huge social challenges and ever increasing divisions in society. Its aim is to tackle the three main social crises – unemployment, poverty, and inequality – which represent a challenge to stability in our society. The current rate of unemployment is around 40% depending on the definition used. Levels of poverty have increased and the Gini Coefficient for South Africa, which measures inequality, remains the highest in the world.

Whilst these indicators are worrying, they must however be seen in conjunction with the delivery of four million houses since 1994; the extension of water connections to reach 90% of society; and the roll-out of electrical power to 92% of the population. It is important to list these achievements as there is a tendency to focus on all the negative indicators.

The reason for the focus on negative areas of development in South Africa is to undermine the liberation struggle and question the ANC's ability to bring about fundamental change. However, it has to be said that ANC members who have behaved atrociously through corruption and their extravagant lifestyles are one of the main reasons for the lack of trust in political institutions we see today, and the fragility of the political project has been revealed by the ease with which government leaders are compromised through financial exposure. The arms deal or the Mercedes Benz discount are just two of the many examples that reveal a lack of revolutionary morality.<sup>2</sup> The elites in South Africa have united across racial lines and have been exposed by their conduct; they have shown no indications of being a "patriotic bourgeoisie".<sup>3</sup>



The Zondo commission of inquiry revealed many areas of corruption in the public and related services. Collaboration between Black and White elites emerged as the drivers of corruption. The private sector has also seen huge corruption through collusion around the prices of bread, chicken, steel, the construction of stadiums for the 2010 FIFA World Cup and of course Steinhoff.<sup>4</sup> The Competition Commission is also revealing many areas of price setting that may be problematic; we can see the costs of banking services and data coming down due to Competition Commission investigations. Nevertheless, the system is corrupt with theft taking place at a grand scale across society.

This blatant enrichment is revealed in the number of Lamborghinis or the likes parked at the mansions in Sandton and elsewhere in South Africa's exclusive suburbs that far exceed the income levels of many leaders. Extremely high salaries in many institutions are found alongside the low wages in a number of sectors of society. These are the practices that society accepts and condones. When the political leadership shows a deficit in ethical conduct it is no wonder that construction mafias run riot or gangs take over legitimate industries in many communities. We have created the conditions for this grand looting by allowing politicians too much power and the space to ignore the needs of the electorate, set out in party policies.



*Hunger and poverty cannot be forever ignored: Homes in the Karoo.  
Photo: Stephanie Paula Borchardt*



## **How dialogue benefits South Africa**

The history of social dialogue in South Africa is a good example of how intractable conflicts can be peacefully resolved. Negotiation is a far better vehicle than open and destructive conflict, which destroys a country and sets its development prospects back by many years. The danger, however, is if the social dialogue takes shortcuts; if it does not resolve the essential contradictions in society it becomes a mechanism to align elite interests. CODESA and related dialogues set an important foundation to change the ownership patterns and the dominance of the grand theft of apartheid actors. The sad thing is that in spite of the amazing changes that followed the transition of South Africa from a crime against humanity to a modern industrial democracy after 1994, we failed to create a united common vision to take the country forward in which everyone's interests would be served.

Instead of focusing our energies on restructuring the economy and society, many of our leaders started collaborating with the apartheid thieves to enrich themselves. They joined numerous boards of directors to rack up board fees, whilst condoning the practices of those companies. Often the Black board members were given shares in the company that were worth more than the shares given to the workers who built up these companies under conditions of massive exploitation. These should have been the clearest signs that our Black political elites have given up on the Freedom Charter and are not representing the interests of the poor masses who vote for the ANC.

This led to the social distance in our society that existed previously between beneficiaries and victims of apartheid developing into the growing gap between the masses and the revolutionaries who are embracing elite lifestyles. The new parliamentarians joined Parliament at the same salary scales as the apartheid parliamentarians. They also very soon started moving into previously Whites-only areas, effectively forsaking the townships, which needed resources and restoration. They also started sending their children to former model C schools<sup>5</sup> leaving township schools overcrowded and under-resourced. They joined medical aids that cost more monthly than the wages of Black workers in the service sector. Parliamentarians and their families started attending private hospitals, even as they voted to starve public hospitals of funding, while giving R20 billion rand in tax rebates to medical aid members. Parliamentary villages and ministerial residences were also insulated from crime through special private security provisions. Social distance has now become "democratically" defined in terms of income levels and it



is no longer only colour determining the new discrimination gap. This effectively means that the democratic dividend or the benefit of democratic change has gone to the apartheid thieves.

Where corporate tax was close to 50% in 1994, it was cut to around 30% in 2024. This is the clearest indication that capital in South Africa was happy to fund the grand theft of apartheid, but has not been prepared to fund the reconstruction needed following apartheid. The cut in taxes along with a relative investment strike undermines the prospects of success of the democratic state by restricting growth of the economy. This was in part to extract concessions from the democratic state, but also to undermine its legitimacy to effect real systemic change. A weakened state cannot drive the fundamental change needed to realise the Freedom Charter, so it stumbles along at mediocre growth rates that cannot absorb the army of unemployed or avert the social challenges that are unfolding.

This weakening of the state has allowed the right wing to challenge every progressive reform, and exploit and expose every division; race groups are weaponised, claims of firstism have emerged, and we experience interference in domestic politics from right-wing global alliances, like the US and Israel.



*On strike.*

*Photo: South African History Online*



*The political establishment in South Africa has a credibility crisis of its own making.... The ANC as the liberation party should bear much of the blame for the decline in public institutional trust.*

All of this is designed to weaken the state and foster divisions internally. Of course the governing ANC has not covered itself in glory, as corruption and extravagance are exposed at all levels of society.

**Setting up new dialogue structures**

The setting up of new National Dialogue structures reveals the challenge that the decline in social partners' credibility has brought to the fore. The existing institutions have become an insider club, and are not seen as the legitimate representatives of the social partners. While NEDLAC is playing an important role in assisting with developing National Dialogue engagements and protocols, its preparatory committees are forums made up of significant social representatives that supplement the established "social partners" – government, labour, business, and community organisations. The setting up of new structures is in part because of the lack of credibility of existing social institutions.

The political establishment in South Africa has a credibility crisis of its own making, with the ANC being marred by corruption scandals and not acting decisively to confront and arrest the practice. The ANC as the liberation party should bear much of the blame for the decline in public institutional trust. The Alliance partners of the ANC were not able to confront the decline in revolutionary morality in the Party with many, such as COSATU, having their own credibility challenges linked to corruption and mismanagement and non-service to constituencies.

The South African Communist Party (SACP) itself has had members in government involved in corruption and nepotism under its watch. The South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) has also been plagued by internal strife and lack of effective leadership. All of this has resulted in a decline in trust and participation in electoral politics. The Democratic Alliance (DA) has been ineffective, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MKP) are proposing a more radical response to challenges, and the other parties are largely represented by low numbers and funded by right-wing agendas. This



decline in electoral support is in itself a threat to the very essence of our democracy and has resulted in a rise in extra-parliamentary protest.

Broadening the parties in the cabinet through the Government of National Unity is an attempt to fix the legitimacy crisis that party politics have in South Africa. It brought in parties that have insignificant support and are acting counter to the Constitution. This National Dialogue can in part establish some key principles that should be responded to at all levels of society.

### **The process going forward**

The first convention was held in August 2025, after lengthy discussions with a number of foundations over previous years. The next steps are:

- From March 2026: Citizens' dialogues, including 1,300 ward-based dialogues;
- April-May 2026: District dialogues;
- May 2026: Thematic and sector dialogues;
- The second National Convention is planned for later in 2026.

The credibility of the National Dialogue rests in large part on the ability of the process to include a broad range of societal players and agree on the way forward. This represents a radical departure from the previous conventions in South Africa, which left execution to political players in Parliament. What is clear is that a Parliament that has lifted representatives into a middle class lifestyle will not be as focused on the challenges of working class communities when it comes to looking at policy.

The main motor force of change in South Africa in the 1980s was the working class; it led protest-built organisations and experienced the most severe effects of apartheid brutality and the legacy of underdevelopment. Of course it was well supported by an alliance of progressives that included a cross section of society and capital that could not function effectively under apartheid.

The right wing in South Africa has opposed most progressive policies designed to undo the legacy of apartheid. The reality is that White and Black capitalist interests have converged in Parliament and the business sector so we are unable to reverse the grand theft of apartheid raw materials. Together they are driving an agenda to restructure state-owned enterprises to provide their logistical services to a modern industrial democracy whilst creating the conditions for the privatisation of large sections of the economy. They are the most important motor forces directing change in the economy and society at this time.



The National Dialogue represents an opportunity to confront the political failures that the government has brought about. It creates an opportunity for the progressives in society to unite and drive an agenda of fundamental change that serves a much more equitable and just society. Failure to take this opportunity to redirect South Africa from the disastrous path we are on will see this country explode in violence as the poorer sections of society refuse to live a life of daily hardship whilst they see the conspicuous consumption of the economic and political elites. The path South Africa is currently on is unsustainable and will lead to a radical rupture in society. The National Dialogue is a moment to reset, but it is not being afforded the importance it should have and the urgency required.



*Drama and debate at the National Dialogue convention, August 2025.  
Photo: Unisa*



## REFERENCES

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Operation Marion' involved the training of an offensive para-military unit of IFP supporters by the South African Defence Force. See Para 236 onwards at <https://omalley.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/site/q/03lv02424/04lv03275/05lv0336/06lv03337/07lv03338.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> These early manifestations of corruption involving ANC leaders and business people have been comprehensively documented in Holden and Van Vuuren (2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Former President Thabo Mbeki posed the question in 1999: "...how do we promote the formation of a black bourgeoisie that will itself be committed and contribute to black economic empowerment?" Speech at the annual national conference of the Black Management Forum in Kempton Park, 20 November 1999  
<https://dirco1.azurewebsites.net/docs/speeches/1999/mbek1120.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> The massive multinational retail holding company, Steinhoff International, collapsed following a major accounting scandal in December 2017. This ranks as one of South Africa's largest corporate failures. Jayendra Naidoo, a former trade union leader who was the founding executive director of NEDLAC became a wealthy businessman and investor. As such, he was a member of the Steinhoff International Supervisory Board at the time of this scandal.
- <sup>5</sup> Under apartheid, 'Model C schools' were Whites-only public schools. In 1990 they were semi-privatised, giving their governing bodies control over admissions and other matters, as racial bars were abolished. Some schools found ways to exclude applicants from lower-income Black families and make sure these remain elite schools, which were still funded by the state. See Kruger (2025).

## BIOGRAPHY

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*He writes here in his personal capacity.*



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