
Acceptance Speech by Dr Mavuso Msimang
On Receiving an Honorary Doctorate from Wits University
The Freedom Charter @70: The Unfinished Business
Johannesburg 15 July 2025

Vice-Chancellor, members of the university council, distinguished faculty, students, guests, and fellow South Africans—

Good Day

It is with great humility and sincere gratitude that I accept this honorary doctorate from Wits University. I thank you not only for the recognition, but also for the opportunity to reflect publicly on matters of profound national importance—at a time in our history when honest reflection, uncommon as it is, is urgently required.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Freedom Charter, the foundational document of South Africa's democracy. It was drafted by ordinary South Africans, black and white, from all walks of life, over a two-day period, on the 25th and the 26th of June 1955, in Kliptown.

Born of hope, resistance, and moral clarity, the Charter proclaimed the type of society South Africans wished to build, once the tyranny of the apartheid government had been dismantled. It envisioned political freedom which would make it possible for the person in the street and, indeed, the one walking on the countryside footpath, to realise social and economic justice, equality before the law, and reclaim their grossly abused dignity.

Those who gathered in Kliptown had no illusions. They knew that the road to freedom would be long and treacherous. But they believed that one day the principles in that Charter would guide the birth of a new nation. And that the totality of those values would one day find their way into a democratic Constitution.

Holding A Mirror to our Conscience

Seventy years later, let us ask ourselves this question: **To what extent have the declarations of the Freedom Charter been fulfilled? Where there has been failure, what caused it?**

The drafters of the Freedom Charter set out **ten objectives** they said should be fulfilled on the road to, and after the achievement of freedom. I have taken the liberty of rating our performance to-date on a scale of 1-5. I can only provide highlights given understandable time constraints.

Here goes. The Freedom Charter declared:

- **The People Shall Govern!**

The road to 27 April, 1994, our freedom day, was, indeed, protracted. It was **hazardous and demanded enormous sacrifices, including supreme sacrifices. Thirty-six (36) political prisoners were condemned to death between 1985 and 1987. In 1990 around 70 political prisoners were still on death row. Approximately 134 political prisoners were executed from 1960s to the 1980s. Over 5,000 served stiff prison terms, including life sentences, on Robben Island, while a higher number was put away in other gaols. That is to say nothing about a myriad of activities that carried different levels of risk. Such was the determination of the people to win freedom. My performance rating is a firm [5,0]**

- **All National Groups Shall Have Equal Rights!**

Based on the quality and inclusivity of the South African Constitution that was legislated in 1996, the rating is **[5]**

- **The People Shall Share In The Country's Wealth!**

Suffice it to say that, according to the most recent data places our Gini coefficient at 0,67, the worst inequality on earth. Black South Africans experience the highest rates of poverty. And although poverty affects all race to some extent, the disparities are stark. A total of 64% of Africans are poor; 41% for Coloureds; 6% for Indian or Asian, 6%; and about 1% of whites live in poverty. The rating is **[1]**

- **All Shall Be Equal Before The Law!**

A good all-embracing Constitution, but justice for the average citizen is unaffordable. Rating is **[4,0]**

- **All Shall Have Equal Rights!**

Again thanks to the Constitution and its Bill of Rights [5]

- **The Land Shall Be Shared Among Those Who Work It!**

We have no agrarian strategy worth the name. The number of young people in agricultural colleges and universities is miniscule, mocking the frequently made call for the return of the land. Rural life is so harsh that many people constantly trek to live in the informal settlement that dot the landscape in and around urban areas, from where going in search of elusive job opportunities. [2]

- **The Doors Of Learning Shall Be Opened!**

Basic education in public schools has been in dire need of an overhaul, for over twenty years at least. Enough research has been done to warrant no further arguments. At the current rate, the future governance of South Africa will be determined by the rich, mainly by those who have been exposed to private education [1]

- **There Shall Be Work And Security!**

Unemployment rates during the 1st quarter of 2025: 32,9%; youth (15-24) unemployment 62,4% There is no effective strategy for small business development, the acknowledged job creator. [1]

- **There Shall Be Houses, Security And Comfort!**

There are about 1,4 million households living in informal settlements in the country. Around Joburg city there are 180 informal settlements. Durban has 588. These settlements have inadequate infrastructure. They are overcrowded, lack sanitation, clean water, etc. There is up to 72% unemployment in these places. [2]

- **There Shall Be Peace And Friendship!**

By this the charter meant respecting the rights and sovereignty of all nations, and striving to maintain world peace. I think the fact that

South Africa has not tried to overrun Lesotho, Botswana and Eswatini, we are doing very well. South Africa has within its borders more Basotho, Batswana, and Swazis, than are found, respectively, in each of the three countries. The Southern African Customs has no trade barriers and have one external tariff. More importantly, South Africa has held the line on Palestine. It is unfortunate that issues based on considerations other than the desperate plight of a people divide our society. How can anyone not see genocide when it we see it everyday on our television screens? [5]

The verdict: Leadership failure

In the 29 May 2024 general elections, the electorate, meaning those who still bothered to go to polling stations to cast their ballots, delivered a devastating judgment on the ANC's leadership of the country. This happened to a party that was once the standard-bearer of the freedom struggle; a movement that birthed the Freedom Charter; that produced two Nobel Prize winners, Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela.

An ANC that gave South Africa an outstanding leader in the person of Oliver Kaizana Tambo who kept the flames of the struggle burning in difficult exile conditions; a man who was at once brilliant and effortlessly humble, There was also the unassuming mentor of giants, Walter Sisulu. And there was a multitudes of conscientious ANC members who considered politics to be a space of sacrifice and service to the people – people in whose midst they lived.

Complacency and arrogance, cardinal sins of incumbenc, and complicity in wrongdoing - these negative attributes have cost this more than a century-old organisation its once highly-prized respect and moral authority. Today, corruption is no longer an occasional blemish but a systemic crisis. For over fifteen years, the cry for the renewal of the ANC has been akin to that of a discordant record, all but broken.

Coalition Governance: Turning a Crisis into an Opportunity

The 40 percent the ANC received in last year's national election was a clear message from communities tired of living under the terror of murderous criminals, in a country with one of the highest rates of femicide; where over

60 percent of young people are jobless; where piped water that once flowed at the opening of a tap, now comes in dribs and drabs, in erratic spurts, or just doesn't. In the absence of light we are frequently in the dark, and the nation's energy is sapped. When people try to source their energy from the sun in order to relieve an overburdened grid, cynical Eskom and parasitic city authorities collusively impose a punitive levy.

For the ANC to stay in government, it had to seek the cooperation of other parties. There are those of us thought a coalition government comprising the ANC (40%), the DA (22%) and the IFP (8%) would have constituted a more stable arrangement. These parties' combined parliamentary votes would have given them a comfortable two-thirds majority; provided essential investor confidence to help grow a stagnant economy and bail out millions of unemployed people.

What we now have is called the GNU, a trifle unwieldy with ten parties. It nevertheless has the mandate to govern the country, and can do so. If the ANC and the Democratic Alliance appreciated the responsibility they have towards the nation, they would shed their adolescent behaviour and seize the moment to turn around over twenty years of a downward economic development spiral.

Truth to tell, the so-called divergent ideological policies and strategies of the two parties are not the issue. They are not at the centre of the recurring scraps between the two parties. In February, 2016 already, the ANC government launched its Black Industrialist Programme. That, to me doesn't look like a socialist strategy to me. Now, the DA. Surely, they should know that a mere 30 years of trying to economically empower black people and level the playing field - even if the programme had not been riddled with corruption - would not have been sufficient to redress the wealth imbalance built up in favour of its white constituency during 350 years of white privilege. All that said, if the Government of National Unity put its mind and heart to it, can make South Africa work.

To the Youth, and to the Future

To the students gathered here tonight—you are the heirs of the Freedom Charter. Yours is the task of restoring its spirit in a digital, globalised world. You must insist on ethical leadership, you must

challenge injustice in whatever form it appears, and you must never accept mediocrity as the norm. A luta continua!

In Closing

I accept this honorary doctorate not as a reward, but as a charge. A reminder that we must never grow comfortable with the distance between what is and what ought to be.

Let us not squander the moment this moment. Let us not allow pettiness and pride to win the day. We owe the people more than that. We owe history more than that.

Let us rise!

Thank you.