

Ramaphosa's Vision 2030 and transformation

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COMMENT



In the conclusion of his state-of-the-nation address, Cyril Ramaphosa presents a wonderful image of what he hopes South Africa can become: a country where bullet trains pass through Johannesburg as they travel from Cape Town to Musina; a high-tech economy where advances in e-health, robotics and remote medicine are applied through National Health Insurance; and a South Africa that doesn't simply export its raw materials but is a manufacturing hub for key components used in electronics, automobiles and computers.

"We must be a country that can feed itself and that harnesses the latest advances in smart agriculture. I dream of a South Africa where the first entirely new city built in the democratic era rises, with skyscrapers, schools, universities, hospitals and factories," he said, before asking: "Has the time not arrived for us to be bold and reach beyond ourselves and do what may seem impossible?"

He finished his talk by reading a piece by Nigerian poet and novelist Ben Okri. "... *You can't remake the world without remaking yourself. Each new era begins within. It is an inward event with unsuspected possibilities for inner liberation ...*" reads one short piece of Okri's poem.

Transformation is a powerful word that has come to be a divisive one in our country, particularly when accompanied by the words 'radical' and 'economic'. The phrase 'radical economic transformation' was not used by Ramaphosa. The word 'radical' was not used at all, while 'economic' appeared 21 times peppered throughout the speech. He used the word 'transformation' three times and only once coupled with economic transformation.

Conceptually, transformation is about 'becoming something brand new', which should be a wonderful notion for everyone. Unfortunately however, all over the world, we are stubbornly trapped into intransigent positions, which we defend to the hilt. We are not only resistant to transformation, we are terrified of it, unless it directly relates to our narrow interests.

This makes it easy for reactionaries to garner support around single issue soundbites such as radical economic transformation; land expropriation without compensation; black economic empowerment; Brexit in the UK; and Donald Trump's 'crooked Hilary' and 'fake news' catch phrases. The end result is a world of divided nations with different vested interests pulling in different directions, or worse, simply disrupting any real progress. We find ourselves increasingly

suspicious of the other side and lacking in the will to even try to engage on issues with any positive intent.

Exacerbating the lack of trust is blatant graft and corruption, which becomes impossible to root out due to the widespread practice by those in power of awarding jobs and other advantages to their compromised or unqualified friends, family or like-minded faction members. I am amazed at how acceptable it is for Donald Trump's unelected family members to be granted such powerful positions in one of the most democratic countries in the world.

Several phrases in Cyril Ramaphosa's SONA speech suggest he fully understands how these issues are holding South Africa back. "We are committed to building an ethical state in which there is no place for corruption, patronage, rent-seeking and plundering of public money. We want a corps of skilled and professional public servants of the highest moral standards – and dedicated to the public good..." he said, adding "But there is still much more work to do."

Indeed!

"If we are to achieve the South Africa we want, we need a new social compact," said Ramaphosa. This is an amazingly old theory of philosophy that goes back to 18th century Europe and the Age of Enlightenment. The social compact questions the legitimacy of state authority over the individual and asks why a rational individual would voluntarily consent to give up his or her natural freedom to obtain the benefits of political order.

"We need to forge durable partnerships between government, business, labour, communities and civil society," and "this places a responsibility on each of us and all of us," and "Government must create an enabling environment, use public resources wisely and invest in developing the country's human potential," are some of the sentences Ramaphosa used to explain what he meant.

In summary, he pointed out that this social compact requires a contribution from everyone and it will also need sacrifices and trade-offs. "It is upon the conduct of each that the fate of all depends. As we enter the last decade of Vision 2030, let us even more clearly define the South Africa we want and agree on the concrete actions we need to achieve them."

Your sentiments, I support Mr President, but it's not going to be easy. We will all need to help, first by transforming from within so as to enable us to see what is in everyone's interests rather than remaining locked in divisiveness. □

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