

Democracy Development Programme (DDP) Political Forum

Tuesday, 1 April 2008

Elangeni Hotel, Durban

Topic: The Meaning of Race in Democratic South Africa

Presenter: Dr. Steven Friedman

Executive Summary

The purpose of the debate was to revive public engagement with the politics of race, focusing particularly on how people conceive race in post-apartheid democratic South Africa. The forum was well attended by representatives of a broad swathe of civil society interest groups, political organisations and government officials, including the Civil Society Advocacy Programme, the Provincial Planning & Development Commission, the Institute for Quality Training, NEPTOSA, the ANC, DA, UDM, the SA Human Rights Commission, the KZN legislature, the EThekweni Municipality, etc.

The topic engendered the following key questions: What are the changing meanings of race in a democratic order? How do they impinge on the meaning of “non-racialism” as a founding value of our democratic constitution? What is the notion of citizenship that is being legitimated by “non-racialism”?

The main theme of Dr. Steven Friedman’s presentation was that race is alive and omnipresent in post-apartheid democratic South Africa. His contention was that it is unimaginable for an automatic disappearance of race to occur in a society with deeply ingrained racial attitudes. These attitudes are expressed either in a lexicon of racial domination or reaction to it, and resonate through the political, social, economic and cultural spheres of our society. Examples include cynical perceptions harboured by members of the white community about the capacity of a black political regime to govern; racial undertones often transmitted from the conservative sections of business, as well as some racially charged policy responses by those in power, such as the President’s views on HIV and AIDS, the government’s BEE empowerment policy, etc.

Consequently, how these attitudes affect the meaning of “non-racialism” was the subject of Dr. Friedman’s address. For Dr. Friedman “non-racialism” is an ideal to aspire to. Whilst it has negated institutional political domination through affirming the right to equal political rights for citizens of all racial groups, its capacity to obliterate racial attitudes outside the formal institutional environment is less explicit. He asserted that a decisive response to racism has to be anchored in practical programmes to reduce the scourge of deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities - perpetrated by the apartheid system of separate development – which continues to ravage the lives of South Africa’s poor masses.

The presentation generated a lively debate which produced a rich spectrum of views. Some of the dominant views advanced articulated a need to approach the race debate both in the oppressive and cultural meanings that race mask. This more nuanced understanding which was generated implies that the debate needs to transcend the traditional black/white racial dichotomy. This suggests that the debate needs to more explicitly account for the related dynamics of race, class and gender. Further considerations require building practical meaning into what “non-racialism” means and this implies that there ought to be a multi-pronged response to the political, cultural and socio-economic inequalities that have dramatically shaped this debate.

Participants were unanimous that much more discussion is required to dissect and unravel the broader remit of vexing issues embedded in the race debate. DDP undertook to further the debate through its range of thematic programmes and public advocacy activities, drawing inputs from a wide network of grass roots organisations, activists, etc.
