

Hlengiwe Mkhize | We must draw on our past to defeat the challenges we face now

24 Mar
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news24

*South Africa is committed to ensuring not only 50/50 parity in leadership, but ensuring an environment conducive to gender equality, writes **Hlengiwe Mkhize**.*

South Africa observed Human Rights Day on 21 March 2021. The theme for this year's Human Rights Month is The Year of Charlotte Maxeke: Promoting Human Rights in the age of Covid-19.

On Sunday, we recognized the sacrifices of countless South Africans to overturn apartheid.

We remember in particular the 69 people killed and 180 wounded during a peaceful protest against the pass laws which sought to denigrate citizens to second class workers.

This year is the 150th anniversary of Charlotte Maxeke. She was a leader and a struggle veteran and so much more. Mme Charlotte Maxeke was a woman activist who endured not only the oppressive colonial government, but also the exclusion of women from participating in politics.

On Sunday, I was invited to speak at an event to commemorate and celebrate the bicentennial of the 25th March Greek Independence Day. As I prepared to speak at this event, I could not help but draw parallels between South Africa's struggle against apartheid, and the Greek's struggle under the Ottoman occupation.

The struggles waged by South Africans from colonial times are recognized and remembered under Human Rights Day. There are similarities between the revolutions waged by the Greeks during the 400 years of the Ottoman occupation.

Mother of democracy

Exactly 200 years ago, under the war cry Freedom or Death, the oppressed rose against the oppressors and claimed back the land of their forefathers. So dramatic was the Greek revolution that many other Balkan nations were encouraged to rise against the shackles of the Ottomans and modern Eastern Europe was born.

It is no strange fact then, that the Greeks and Cypriots have long been supporters of the peoples' struggles against apartheid and our colonial past. Refuge and assistance was provided by these two nations who understood the value of a free and just society. Former president Nelson Mandela expressed this in a succinct manner when he said: "Greece is the mother of democracy and South Africa is her youngest daughter."

Racial segregation and white supremacy had become central aspects of South African policy long before apartheid began. The controversial 1913 Land Act, passed three years after South Africa gained its independence, marked the beginning of territorial segregation by forcing black Africans to live in reserves.

For South Africans, land is synonymous with identity.

So as the government proceeds with the Expropriation Bill, established to redress the Expropriation Act 63 of 1975, we are confident equity and just access to resources will be addressed under this bill. More so, provisions have been made under this bill to ensure that women benefit from 50% of land expropriation. This provision ensures that women, young women, and women with disabilities are compensated for South Africa's deeply misogynistic past.

Tata Madiba was a long-time friend of advocate George Bizos, a giant of South African history and of global struggles.

Bizos always stood by those who were persecuted for resisting the apartheid regime. Speaking about his commitment, Madiba said: "He was really devoted to the cause... When he appeared for us, he did not do so as a man who is appearing for strangers, he did so as his contribution to a great cause to which we were all committed."

The revolution was also a feat for human rights.

We see echoes between the struggles of South Africans and those of the Hellenes such as the women who alongside their husbands, fathers and sons partook in the liberation struggle and the heroines of Zalongou who defied the Turks and sacrificed their lives to give the revolution the momentum it needed.

The Hellenic community is an ally of this government.

Our alliances with the Hellenic people, and the alliances they build with communities is an example of social cohesion and community development the rest of South Africa can learn from.

50/50 parity in leadership

As women of the world currently participate at the 65th Commission for the Status of Women, we are reminded of our roll in the global community, to ensure that alliances

lead to development of our people, because there can be no celebration of success if even one person is marginalized or oppressed.

In his tenure as chairperson of the African Union, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared this the decade of financial inclusion and economic empowerment of women. South Africa is committed to ensuring not only 50/50 parity in leadership, but ensuring an environment conducive to gender equality.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has reversed some of our hard-fought gains and as a result, women and girls are further exposed to violations of their human dignity due to gender-based violence, unemployment and poverty. As we seek to rebuild, we need to ensure that those on the periphery are pulled into the centre with a sense of agency so as to allow them to shape their future.

As South Africa observes Human Rights Month we find ourselves in an unprecedented time when the world and South Africa is learning to live with Covid-19. We must also deal with our grief in mourning the lives of the more than 50 000 South Africans who have died.

Our history and experiences must motivate us to do better, to build better, and to foster greater alliances for the participation of women, youth and persons with disabilities in everyday life.

We must draw on our past and our collective strengths to be able to defeat the challenges that continue to come our way. We must endure and we must overcome, for the benefit of those who come after us.

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