

YACOOB ABBA OMAR: National dialogue and social compact not flipsides of coin

In the lead-up to the 2024 elections two concepts seemed to have become joined at the hip: a national dialogue and the notion of social compacting.

Former president Thabo Mbeki asserted that the ANC did not have the answer to all SA's problems and that a national dialogue was needed after the May 29 elections. "The people of SA must participate in a process of determining the future of this country," Mbeki said.

Since then, the foundations of Thabo Mbeki, Steve Biko, Ahmed Kathrada, Robert Sobukwe and OR Tambo issued a joint statement calling on "the people of SA to join in a national dialogue to reorientate the direction of our nation".

The Afrikaner Leadership Network is already questioning the inclusiveness of this process, which it reminds us was meant to have been civil society's way of making inputs into the unity government.

SA has a rich experience of what's referred to as social compacting. This has included the writing of the democratic constitution in the 1990s, the Jobs Summit of 1998, the Growth & Development summit of 2003, the 2020 response to the Covid pandemic, and the drafting of the Economic Recovery & Reconstruction Plan.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has been calling for a compact throughout his presidency. In his 2019 inauguration speech he said: "Let us forge a compact — not merely as business and labour, not as those who govern and those who are governed — but as citizens and patriots of this great nation".

SA's social compacting experiences have underlined the importance of having the key role players and decisionmakers around the negotiating table. In Ireland, the social compacting initiatives that led to its economic miracle and earned it the title of "Celtic Tiger" featured trade unions, employer organisations and several civic associations bargaining hard to reach wage agreements.

Rwanda has built a social compact around the pillars of democratic reform, truth, justice and reconciliation, and socioeconomic development. The social compact of Mauritius is based on public-private signalling through rapprochement between the government and big business; a peak association that organised the business class across that island's ethnic groups and sectors; and multiple formal and informal arenas for consultation with labour and civil society.

Since 2012 the Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (Mistra) has played a seminal role in identifying the principles on which social compacting should be based. It has emphasised that international examples are all based on economic growth and jobs, with governments able to play a critical role in shaping the structure of the market economy. Also, compacts should provide both carrots and sticks for the equitable distribution of the fruits of the market economy.

Our research identified some practices to be avoided when negotiating a social compact. These include that interlocutors should avoid going for their maximum positions; that participants should not be attached to ideological positions and instead argue on the efficacy of their proposals; that organisations and parties should

communicate compromises to their constituencies; and that inconsistencies and lack of continuity of the delegations representing the different sectors should be avoided.

Some of the thorny issues to be addressed are the representation of the army of unemployed and whether the social partners in the National Economic Development & Labour Council — labour, business and community — are truly representative of their constituencies.

Mistra's advice has been that all parties to the negotiations should place the interests of the nation first and accept that ongoing conflict is in nobody's long-term interests. Furthermore, institutions are needed to act as a platform for the negotiations as well as to monitor the implementation of the compact.

The government could base the process on the three priorities of the government of national unity announced by Ramaphosa during his opening of parliament address on July 18: drive inclusive growth and job creation; reduce poverty and tackle the high cost of living; and build a capable, ethical and developmental state.

These could also be the key discussion points of the national dialogue, ensuring that the wide swathe of organisations it intends to assemble can make direct input into the social compact.

Source: Yacoob Abba Omar -

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