

F Esack Interview

FE – F Esack

JS – Jonny Selemani

JS: The first question is what is your understanding of non-racialism?

FE: Right, the first is the understanding of non-racialism by itself, and the second is in relation to other concepts that at some stage competed with non-racialism in the South African concepts. First to deal with two other concepts that competed with this concept. The one was the concept of multi-racialism, which was a later apartheid adaptation of the absolute separation of people on the basis of ethnicity. So multi-racialism came along and said that ok there are different races, they are all of equal value, we must find ways of getting these different races to live together as races. So on the right of the concept of non-racialism was this concept of multi-racialism. On the left of non-racialism, was another concept, the concept of anti-racialism. And this was a concept that was supported by the African National Congress, and ABUSIA. And people like Neville Alexander, the Cape Action League. And their basic position was that South Africa is a deeply racist society and that the term non-racialism did not encapsulate the urgency of the struggle against racism. So their key word was the word anti-racism. So often when you see the subheading anti-racism in documents for organisations and so on, often it encompasses what is encircled inside the ANC was called the far left. So in the middle of these was the concept of non-racialism, which was one of the key terms used by people referred to as the Congressites or the Charterists, the UDF and the ANC. And this was the tendency to which I had aligned myself. Even this term had evolved.

Earlier in the congress tradition, it was a clear acknowledgment of that, apartheid and colonialism had in fact succeeded in creating 4 major separate national or ethnic groups in South Africa, the coloreds, the Indians, the blacks and the whites. But having recognized this, how does one bring all of these entities together to work for a society where in these barriers, would eventually be completely broken down. But the problem was, and the ANC was really criticized for this, it continued to move from the assumption that there were 4 groups. So within the ANC you had groups that catered specifically for Indian people, the Natal Indian Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress. Earlier on, you had the Congress of the Democrats, that catered for the white left, and the ANC itself was just for black people, there was also the Colored People's Congress. With the emergence of the UDF, there was a lot of debate about the revival of these organisations. The colored people opted to not revive the CPC. There was a vague attempt to revive the Congress of the Democrats, that attempt didn't go very far, in part because there were a number of other purely white issues you could mobilize people around, like transcription for example. The branches of the UDF were by their nature, racial, because the places where people lived were determined by race. So the UDF branch in observatory was predominantly white, for example. It was only really in the Indian Congresses that they felt that they still had enough of a historical memory to revive it, so the TIC and the NIC was revived within the UDF. So non-racialism was then invoked as an ideal. But the racialist, and divided structure in the country was assumed as a given by many leaders within the congress movement. So you then had all these constituencies, forged

together in a commitment to creating a non-racial society, but also completely weaving their activities together. SO the fact that these were separate organisations didn't mean that they were racial organisations, the ideal of non-racialism was very upfront in all of these organisations. Organizing along racial lines was simply a strategy, for which the UDF was criticized no end, because how do you adopt something that is on the surface against the principles, but you adopt that as your strategy to get towards your principle? So non-racialism was part of the vision towards this new society we wanted to create. On the whole for us in the UDF, we invoked it as a counter slogan to apartheid. That apartheid had racially divided out people, and that our struggle was for a non-racial society. Of course before the emergence of the UDF, non-racialism wasn't, in the late 60s and early 70s, it wasn't the cry of the liberation struggle movements, the ANC and its sister organisations had gone into a bit of a hiatus and during the period of black consciousness, there was little talk of non-racialism. It was BC, was the thing. But the idea of non-racialism, there were two ideas that were central to our struggle. The one was the idea of attaining a non-racial society. The other was the idea of attaining an undivided society. So these two ideas were in some ways linked. It was much later when the third idea was fused with this, the idea of a non-sexist society. And by the way, perhaps I more than anyone else, had contributed to the insertion of this non-sexist bit into these three pillars of what we then imagines our nation to be. So that is some of the background about how the term non-racialism evolved. It was at its strongest during the time of the UDF. Many colored people and white people imagined it as a way of giving themselves dignity, equal footing with whites in South Africa. I don't think that many of them in theory, it also meant an equal footing with black people. But many of those people in a post apartheid South Africa, this was never articulated. You speak about a non-racial society, you don't say I really want to be equal with those whites, I don't want to be equal with those blacks. The idea was that all of us were going to be equal, but in that quest, you don't figure out the other dynamics that come afterwards. That when there is a black guy in line for a job and I'm also in line for a job, and both of us are equally qualified, that redressal of the past may mean that that black guy is going to get the job. So we articulated it as a struggle for non-racialism, underneath all of that were discourses that weren't articulated. One of those discourses was, what does affirmative action mean? When some of those black people were more privileged than others, when Indian people were more privileged, when colored people were more privileged than black people, all of us were just blacks. The whites knew that they were privileged, how do you deal with this? So after the end of apartheid, the concept of non-racialism began to fray. Many colored people and Indian people didn't find what they were really wanting. They said they wanted non-racialism, but they didn't find what they were really wanting, in part because when people were saying they were fighting for liberation, they were fighting for their own liberation, not the liberation of the country. So Indians wanted to improve things for themselves, coloreds wanted to improve things for themselves. So that was the disillusionments then of non-racialism. So initially, the struggle was for human rights. Then the other things that happened was that in theory, BEE, had the theoretical basis of affirming all of the historically disadvantaged communities. At some stage it became quite clear that there was a disproportion of Indians and Coloreds in the civil service, and people then started talking about real blacks, which of course further advantaged coloreds and Indians. SO now there is a much more unashamed articulation of privileging real blacks. And I don't think this is connected so much with the very genuine grievances and poverty that exists in black townships, and the need to address that. I think the concern of the new crowd is far more, the question of tenders, and that the old Indian

businessmen with their expertise and experience have continued to outperform many of these young black entrepreneurs, so there is a lot of resentment, and there is a sense that there is a lot of money to be made from government, and we're not getting it. So a lot of BEE, I'm talking about the Malema's and so on, a lot of these folks, I don't think they are genuinely moved by the concern so the black working class, but they have now really upped the racial concerns of the language, and it is now all about the black Africans. So the shift from the term black to the term Africans, for BEE purposes, but more specifically for a particular class of politically powerful and loud, that class has now meant a further alienation of the colored people and the Indian people.

Then there is one final thing, the Western Cape. The Western Cape has been marred by a huge amount of infighting within the ANC, which has significantly weakened the ANC. And because of that, the DA has been consistently able to push up its numbers in the Western Cape. And this then further creates bridges, not bridges, gulfs, between the colored and the white people, who despite all that they have gone through, votes for the DA. So now these colored people must be punished for voting for the DA, there is that sense of resentment, because now the whole country is taken over by the ANC except the Western Cape. And the DA on the whole seems to be doing a very good job of running that province. Ok, so it's white skills, its old colored skills and so on, and so that is a huge problem. So all in all, the state of non-racialism in our country at the moment is badly framed and under threat. For some inevitable reasons, But I think that largely for the old leadership, the visionary crowd of the ANC, increasingly you find them silent, in the face of the more populist, sometimes blatantly racist views that come from inside elements of the youth league. And it doesn't help that the communist league that has a far more principled position on questions of non-racialism, that they are silent.

JS: Thank you, you did a very nice overview of things. There is something you mentioned, that the idea of non-racialism and what it has currently being translated to, to personal interests, it has now become a threat to the idea of non-racialism. You also brought up the idea that the ANC is not saying much about what is going on with the current situation. So my one question is to you, for us to achieve that, what do you think we could do to move towards a non-racialist society, in the current state of South Africa?

EF: What could we do to give non-racialism a better chance? What's your next question?

JS: I've come across a few arguments about non-racialism becoming redefined, you know from a political struggle towards more of an economic struggle. Does non-racialism still have a footing you know, now that we are moving towards a more economic struggle. So does it still hold a footing?

FE: Ok. As for your next question, I think that the economic redress is far more important than racial redress. And at the same time, the ideal of a non-racial society is an absolutely necessary ideal. I live in Braamfontein now, I am the only colored person living in my 12 storey apartment. I've never seen colored people there over weekends. And I am just astounded at how my own life is being enriched by my encounter with people from so many other cultures. The other is that if I don't know these people, I only live in ignorance and in fear. So you start off with ignorance and fear, the next moment you end up with racism, you end up with xenophobia, with tribalism, and racial wars. Because people don't know

each other. And there is no fusion of our cultures, there is no conversation across the lines, we all live in our racially separate areas, you have worker disputes and instead of addressing these as worker disputes, you say this guys black, that's why he doesn't like me, or she's white, what else would you expect from the white bosses?

So if the race issue is not resolved, on the one hand, and on the other hand if we continue to live with our racial identities, it impoverishes people and it also creates the seeds for all sorts of divisions which God alone knows where they lead to. But of course a racist can also shape and reshape. I mean in South Africa, the Afrikaners and the English were separate racist, and then they forged to become a white race. So we now here in South Africa, South Africans can also unite against the Congolese, the Nigerians, racism isn't just black and white. In our own history, the Xhosa people and different tribes among them may have identified themselves as separate races, and then after a while a South African black nation gets formed. So the problem of race never goes away, it is one that must continuously remain on our radar, because it is always changing. Now in the same way that the Afrikaners and the English had to deal with the 'problem' of the blacks. So even if all races in South Africa were united, then racism would still manifest in other ways, particularly given the demography of our country, that has attracted vast numbers of foreigners into it. I think you can understand where I am going with this. We can't say we have sorted out our problems, because while you were sleeping the problem has changed. And it's important in your work, jonny, that you don't think of non-racialism and the problem of non-racialism as just former South African thing, far too many things have changed around us, and you must bring in this awareness of the new South Africans in our midst.

JS: Yes you know, with the youth today, we are not aware of these things, a lot of us may say that nothing has changed because we were not aware of how different things were in the past. And with this new relationships, with race.