

SACBC STATEMENT ON THE REPUBLIC DAY CELEBRATIONS (1/5/81)

The administrative board of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference confirms its attitude to the Republic Day celebrations. The Catholic Church in the Republic is not participating in the official celebration marking the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the Republic. We use the opportunity to remind our people that we must pray fervently and earnestly at all times, but particularly in these days for our country so that peace, love and justice may be realised for all the people who constitute the South African community. We must be sensitive to the legitimate needs and aspirations of each and every one of the people of the Republic.

We believe that the vast majority of the people see no cause for celebration since they are deprived and oppressed in the land of their birth and have no meaningful say in the government of the country and in the decisions that effect them so closely and intimately in their human dignity.

We believe that as their spiritual leaders, we must associate ourselves with them. We reiterate our appeals for a dispensation in which discrimination has been eliminated. Reflecting on our dutiful love of our country and all its people, we pray for the realisation of the Christian vision in which love, compassion, forbearance, reconciliation and justice are the motivating force in the common life to which the Providence of God has brought us in this commonweal of South Africa.

We recall the words of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: "By this shall men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another (cf. John 14:15)". A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you (cf. John 15:12)".

The meaning of a republic

A republic is "a form of government without a monarch, in which the supreme power is vested in representatives elected by the people" (Chambers dictionary). How does the Republic of South Africa measure up to this definition?

In 1960 after Dr. Verwoerd, the then Prime Minister, walked out of the Commonwealth Conference in London, white South African voters took part in a referendum of whom 850 458 voted for a republic while 775 878, almost 48 per cent, voted against it. Only white voters were consulted. The Republic of South Africa can therefore not be regarded as a legitimate expression of the will of the people of South Africa.

The legitimacy of the Republic was contested right from the beginning. A general strike was called for May 29 to 31 1961 and large numbers of black workers responded by staying away from work those days.

A brief survey of significant events since 1961

Repressive legislation

In order to contain the opposition and remain in power, the republican government has had to introduce scores of repressive security laws during the past twenty years. The International Security Act in terms of which many black and some white leaders have been banned or have been kept in preventive detention without trial and the Terrorism Act which entitled the police to arrest political dissidents and to keep them in solitary confinement indefinitely and under which several people have died, are two of the most repressive acts. During 1980, for example, 956 people were detained without trial.

Labour unrest

In 1973 in Durban, workers began to assert their power as 98 378 workers went on strike. Since that time, strikes have continued unabated. Workers have begun to understand the power of unity and solidarity in demanding their rightful share in the economic prosperity of the country, improved working conditions and the rights of union membership and representation.

School boycotts

In 1976 and 1977 black students demonstrating against their inferior education system were repressed violently on the Reef, in Cape Town and in Port Elizabeth and hundreds lost their lives.

In 1981 school boycotts occurred nationwide and in all major centres. One of the grievances was the unequal allotment of resources. Since 1961 per capita expenditure gaps between blacks and whites have increased. For every white school pupil in 1980, R724 was spent and R71,28 on education of black pupils in "white areas". The R71,28 is halved if all black children of school going age are taken into account.

Eighteen organisations banned 1977

The urgent need for change in the country's social structure, which became so evident in 1976 and 1977 went unheeded by the government. Instead 17 black organisations and one multiracial ecumenical organisation, which had been working for a just democratic society were banned.

Since 1977, when the first homeland, the Transkei became "independent", the citizenship rights of the black South Africans have been steadily eroded. When the Ciskei becomes "independent" in December 1981, all Xhosa-speaking South Africans, together with Tswanas and Vendas, will have lost their rights as South Africans. The gradual removal of the rights of citizenship from the majority of South Africans is the most notorious feat achieved by the nationalist government since 1961 and it is a process, which will continue until all the homelands gain their "independents".

The homeland policy has necessitated physical removal and resulting traumatising of one-and-a-half million people in order to consolidate the homelands. Thirty-five per cent of the population has been squeezed onto 13 percent of the total landscape. This has resulted in intense overcrowding, poverty and unemployment. In fact the main export and resource of revenue of all the homelands is migrant labour.

By means of the homelands policy, ethnic divisions have been exploited and intensified in an attempt to prevent the growth of African solidarity.

The President's Council, which came into existence in 1980 and from which blacks have been excluded, is a further attempt to divide the South African population by trying to cut off Indian and "Coloured" South Africans from the African population.

The most dangerous development during the years since Republic, is that of the civil war, as thousands of young South African men are drawn into the South African Defence Force to fight against their fellow South Africans who have chosen to join the guerrilla liberation army. Many lives have already been lost in this civil war and many more will be lost before the nationalist government agrees to a negotiated settlement.

Reaffirmation of previous statements

We affirm what the bishops have stated in the past:

Realising that South Africa has entered a critical phase in the rejection by the majority of its people of a social and political system of oppression, we add our corporate voice as leaders of the Catholic Church in this country to the cry for a radical revision of the system. People starved of freedom, deprived of their just rights and humiliated in their personal and corporate dignity will not rest until a proper balance of justice is achieved. We affirm that in this we are on the side of the oppressed and, as we have committed ourselves to working within our Church for a clearer expression of solidarity with the poor and deprived, so we commit ourselves equally to working for peace through justice in fraternal collaboration with all other churches, agencies and persons dedicated to this cause. We again profess our conviction, so often repeated, that the only solution of our racial tensions consists in conceding full citizenship and human rights to all persons in the Republic, not by choice on the false grounds of colour, but on the grounds of the common humanity of all people, taught by the Lord Jesus Christ.

During the past two decades the oppression and misery of the majority of South Africans has increased. As leaders of a Church whose membership is 84 percent black, we call on all Catholics not to celebrate Republic Day but instead to consider seriously how best to act in 1981 and the years following, to bring about a more Christian society in which civil and human rights can be enjoyed by all.