

# Coloureds: The key to Western Cape elections and integration into Africa

By **Tony Ehrenreich**

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## The national question and the question of race

Key moments in the struggle against apartheid were marked by people crossing racial divisions to give life to the vision of a unitary non-racial South Africa. We remember the United Democratic Front of the 1980s, the Congress movement and Women's March of the '50s, and the national popular engagements of the Freedom Charter, the RDP and the Constitution. Yet for all the gains made since 1994, the ANC government – and the rest of society – has been largely unable to sustain non-racialism. Even with a growing black middle class and more social integration, race still matters when it comes to access to the means of life, to employment, land and capital. Efforts to redress the history of racial injustice have led to unedifying acts of self-enrichment and entitlement. An exclusive particularist kind of nationalism begins to raise its ugly head. Solidarity with others seems just a quaint notion, and the strength it brings is forgotten.

With this piece by Tony Ehrenreich, New Agenda would like to open up a discussion of identity and race. From this perspective, the distinctive demographics of the Western Cape are both challenging and intriguing. Will poor and working-class African and coloured communities continue to be set against each other? Or could this give rise to a new inclusive vision of national liberation?

*I am a coloured. I was part of the black oppressed group and I am an African. My political choices are key in defining the direction that the Western Cape takes in relation to being part of South Africa and the African continent.*



Tony Ehrenreich

## WE ARE COLOURED

The Western Cape is made up of 50 percent coloureds, which defines both a cultural and a racial identity. In South Africa, we historically define ourselves as racially distinct groups, even though we know that neither whites nor blacks are absolutely homogenous groups. Neither are coloureds a homogenous group, with the exact same cultural practices displayed by all. Today's coloured group arises from various configurations among the first inhabitants of South Africa and so differs from person to person who still forms part of this broader group. There is no agreed-



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to set definition of people who identify as coloured in South Africa, especially in light of the blurring of lines between tribes.

But the group defined as coloured (for lack of a better word now) has a very specific and defined origin. Coloured could be defined as the accumulation of people who – before 1834 – found themselves working as slaves in South Africa, when the traditional Xhosa communities refused to work for the colonialist. The slaves were Malaysian and South and East Indian, along with the indigenous tribes of the Baster, San and Khoi, and then came the intermingling with Dutch and British colonialists. The slaves were a highly skilled group of people who essentially built the Cape we know today. So this group emerged long before the apartheid state defined people as coloureds, and their identity and culture is a constantly emerging development, as people strive to give meaning to their lives and codify their values and cultural practices.

Their cultural practices were Malaysian, infused with the San and the Khoi and others affected by colonialism. This construction of an identity out of the various cultural elements and features of the merging group, broadly known as creolisation, is not an unusual phenomenon. It is a feature of identification in Africa and other continents.

Many coloureds share some common features, like the 21st birthday “*Bashew’s tafel*” and the *bobotie* meals, as well as the incredible work ethic of artisans and an entrepreneurial and industrious spirit. This emerging identity has to be engaged and specifically codified so that future generations have a sense of history and legacy that they can relate to. In part this will help them to respond to the sense of social fragmentation under way in a large section of our communities, as well giving hope and direction to our lineage. This would respond to the deep desire in a large section of the coloured community for self-identification as a distinct group, as coloured. So, instead of trying to destroy how people see themselves, telling them that they are ignorant for seeing themselves as coloureds, it is time to re-examine what it is to be identified as coloured, through a broader sweep of history that takes us right back to the 17th century.

Identity is a broad concept that includes racial, cultural, social and political elements. For a long time, coloured identity was predominantly defined by race, as previously we were seen as “less than white, but more than black”, with a focus on the texture of our hair to the shape of our noses. We are not only on the side of black or on the side of white, as coloured we are, and are becoming through this emerging identity. Ours is a separate but not a lesser identity. We have liberated ourselves from the stigmatisation of “mixed race”, from a racist time when race mixture was denigrated.



In the process of undoing the past, restoring the social fabric today and charting a way into the future, South Africa must show the same accommodation to coloureds as was shown to whites. We must also be really careful not to let coloureds feel alienated from the new South Africa and fearful of the new government.

## WE ARE AFRICAN

We are part of the African continent with our common sense of humanity and our dreams of being a rainbow nation. But this cannot come about by erasing the differences we have or asserting that one is better than the other. The new normality is diversity, complexity, integration and an active sense of undoing the wounds of our past and bringing our people together as one.

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equity case in correctional services must see the government saying clearly that coloureds are a designated group and must be advanced in terms of the provincial demographics. That was the political promise in 1994.

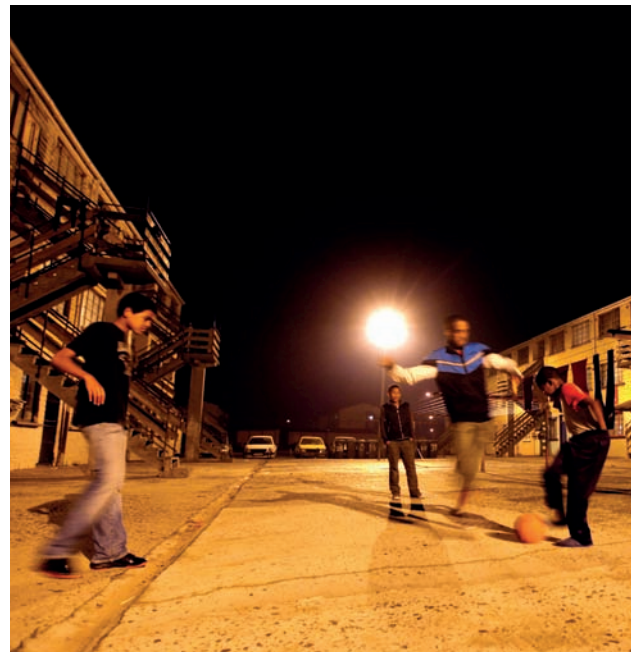
In the unfolding institutionalisation of apartheid, the National Party declared the Western Cape a preferential area for coloured employment. This led to many coloureds being complicit in the marginalisation of blacks in the Western Cape and they started disassociating from anything African. The coloured community began to identify largely with their foreign roots and their European ancestors, and they saw the African franchise of 1994 as a threat to their special place of privilege. Many coloureds have sided with sections of the white community that wanted to defend generational advantages given under apartheid.

Coloureds are part of this country and this continent; they must play their role in pursuit of their own interest, as part of the whole.

The section of the coloured community that was progressive and fought against apartheid in the democratic movement also fought against racial oppression, and identified themselves as black and as part of the oppressed majority. This was the dominant discourse among legitimate coloured leaders, who were not collaborators. But in some strange way, this characterisation of the struggle pushed many coloureds into the camp of the defenders of apartheid privilege. That is why many coloureds voted against the party of Mandela in 1994 – even before the ANC made some of the mistakes that some coloureds use to justify their views today.

### A HOME FOR ALL

This history still informs a big part of the political agendas that are unfolding in the Western Cape. Some parties talk up the fears of the new government and promote the sense of separation from things African that many coloureds still feel today. We must, however, realise that we are in Africa and we must be part of the project of building a home for all that extends prosperity to all. This agenda of defending the generational advantages of apartheid serves the interest of those who are not really committed to the values of a new South Africa. This route of cynicism and separation also feeds into



the historical hostility of apartheid and does not present a sustainable route with which to realise our ambitions for a united South Africa. Some people may be able to run overseas when things blow up because of the refusal to share South Africa fairly, but the rest of us must build a sustainable home for all.

Coloureds are part of this country and this continent; they must play their role in pursuit of their own interest, as part of the whole. Coloureds are not some disaffected interest group that needs to defend apartheid privileges by undermining democracy. The future is only served honestly when we engage in a manner that serves our interests, while mindful of the racial injury of apartheid that still permeates all aspects of South African life. It is absolutely essential that coloureds work together with blacks, whites and all other race groups to advance a more fair and just South Africa. So, vote for whichever party you want to – but don't vote against a united, fair and equal South Africa that seeks to undo the terrible legacies of apartheid.

