

# **Racism in South Africa Ten Years After Apartheid**

## **Interview with**

**Prof. Alfred Tokollo Moleah,  
South African Ambassador to Vienna\***

*Apartheid was about the geographical separation of people defined through laws. As these laws do not exist anymore, the question arises to what extent South Africa, ten years after the end of Apartheid, found a „common space“ as a nation?*

In the first place your opening statement that Apartheid was defined by geographical spaces is a rather narrow view of Apartheid. Apartheid was much broader, it entailed much more than simply separation in terms of space. But your specific question: How have South Africans after the end of apartheid been able to share space? You know that the laws that defined Apartheid in terms of geographical separation no longer exist, the Group Areas Act, the Land Act of 1913 and its amendments, now people are free to go anywhere, to live anywhere, where they can afford to live, so the space restrictions are no longer in place, but the historical reality of Apartheid in South Africa continues. You find that residence is still highly segregated and Africans don't go into certain areas out of habit not to go into those areas.

And also economics come to play a much larger role. If you go even to a McDonalds, which in the western world is one of the cheapest eateries that one can encounter, in South Africa McDonalds is largely in white suburbs. And if you go to McDonalds you find that 92 to 95 percent of the clientèle is white. It is an economic issue. Ten years is a very short time. Apartheid existed much, much longer and before Apartheid there was Colonialism, there was Colour Bar, all kinds of segregatory devices in place. So we

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\* The interview was carried out and edited by Birgit Englert. Concept and questions were developed together with Bea Gomes. The interview itself was made together with Veronika Bilger.

cannot expect a complete transformation in ten years. This is not to say that nothing has changed. Quite a bit has changed, but a whole lot more needs to be changed.

And if you go into the [white] suburbs of Johannesburg or Cape Town or wherever, you find that they are still highly segregated and it is the exceptional African who is living in those suburbs. It is people like myself and a few others who have managed to overcome Apartheid through a variety of means. In my particular case I went to school. Then I left South Africa and went to more school[s] and lived in America for quite some time. I then went back to South Africa and was able to deal at the level at which I am dealing. But for the ordinary African life is still very much segregated, townships are still there and the white areas are still white areas.

*When I (B.E.) was in South Africa in June 2003 I spent a day with the 11-year-old daughter of a friend's family, the mother being a black and the father being a white South African. She told me about her personal experiences with first attending a black school in a rural area and then being moved to a white school in Pretoria. In both schools she found herself very much excluded by her classmates as she was considered either too black or too white. Actually you have already started to talk about this, but I would like to know a bit more about to what extent racism is being debated in South Africa today? It certainly is a reality as well as segregation, but to what extent are people talking about these issues - on the academic level, in the media, in the streets?*

Racism is still a fact of life in South Africa. The reasons are the same as previously stated. Apartheid and what preceded Apartheid existed for a very long time and ten years is a very short time. And I do not quite agree with your 11-year-old friend. When you experience racism in South Africa, it comes mostly from Non-Africans. Africans are much more accepting. It comes from Whites in particular, from Indians and from Coloureds. Africans are much more accepting. Because in the African sense it is not so much the colour of the skin that determines a person's identity, it is culture, especially language. If a person speaks Zulu, Xhosa or whatever and behaves like an African, then the person is an African.

If the person spoke the language she would not be discriminated. I mean, remark would be made but it would not be a consistent pattern of discrimination. For example I can go to an African area with you and in

introducing you I can say, „Oyakhuluma, ugumuntu” / „She speaks our language, she is part of us” and you will be accepted because of the language thing and they will say „Oh, she is one of us!”

*How do you think this relates to the „new Xenophobia” in the form of violence against foreigners and refugees which has risen in South Africa after Apartheid?*

I really don't agree with the description especially of Xenophobia. A whole lot of other factors come in. My understanding of Xenophobia is a strong dislike of strangers, all strangers, on the basis of their strangeness. But let me build a scenario here - which is real. Two guys are in a train, they have been looking for a job for nine month, they cannot find a job, their families are starving, their clothes are torn and so on. And then, there are two foreigners in a car, in a coach. And one guy says, man, I am getting sick and tired of looking for a job, I just can't find anything, and his friend says, because of those guys they are willing to accept lower wages and they work much harder than you and they don't ask questions. And the guy loses his head and starts assaulting these people. Is it a case of xenophobia? I don't think it is so. It's economic - he sees them as a reason for his inability to find a job. It's not an abstract question. Malawians, Mozambicans and others are able to find jobs much quicker than South Africans. They accept lower wages, they never join COSATU, the labour union, and they can work on Saturdays and Sundays whereas South Africans are going to raise questions: when I work on Saturday, what are you going to pay me? Time-and-a-half or double pay? And the Malawian does not. These people are also highly exploited. The farmers in the north, in Limpopo, pay them 20 Rands per week, then they deduct for food, they deduct for other things, the guy is lucky to get 5 Rand, but it is still much better than what his situation would have been in Mozambique or in Angola where he could not even have food. It is not the best food that the farmer gives him but, at least, it is food.

So the whole question of Xenophobia is misleading. In fact, South Africans are extremely tolerant of foreigners - you know, it is a question of cultural expression. How does a person speak? Does a person act as one of us? And if that is the case the person is accepted.

There are also a few whites who crossed the line, even under Apartheid. I remember as a young person growing up in Sophiatown, we had a white

woman who lived in Sophiatown and she was just accepted. I mean, people at the lower end of the scale seldom have the intention or even the ability to discriminate. The person from the upper ranks can always go down and be accepted. But the person from the lower ranks cannot go up.

*To what extent would you say that racism is actually being debated in South Africa?*

It is not really being debated. There is not much talk of racism. Our president, Thabo Mbeki, speaks of racism from time to time and whenever he does they jump on him, and say oh, there he is playing the race card, racism doesn't exist anymore. And South African whites in particular are in a very deep state of denial. I will give you an example.

I was investigating school possibilities for my children. I have children who are in the American International School and we are to go back to South Africa in about a year. So I am looking at some schools. My son wants to go to a school called Crawford. He has three friends who go to Crawford and he wants to go to Crawford too. So I took him to Crawford. I asked the lady at Crawford, „what is the racial mixture of your school, what are the racial demographics of your school?“ She said, „oh no, no, no, we don't pay attention to race.“ I said, „lady, I beg to differ. Less than ten years after Apartheid you don't pay attention to race? Race is a fact of life in South Africa. And do you know why I ask you the question? Because I looked at the students, I did not see any black students.“ Now if you don't keep count of the racial make-up of your school, how are you going to change it? Because at the moment it needs changing. But at Crawford they do not reject blacks because they are black, it is an economic thing. It is the second highest or most expensive school in the region, and many Africans cannot afford it! She, she was very kind, in almost accepting my children on the spot, as „foreigners“ though! I said, „wait a minute, they are not foreigners, they are South Africans!“ – „Yes, but we will treat them as foreigners.“ [Laughs]. I was raising the question of Afrikaans, my children do not speak Afrikaans. And she was saying, „in their case, we will accept German instead of Afrikaans.“ [Laughs].

*While the schools now accept black students, they do not do anything to make it easier for them to enrol there?*

Exactly, and this is denial! They should have an affirmative action programme - to recruit black students, give them scholarships and integrate. This is what happened in the United States! Harvard, Yale, Princeton – black students could not afford to go to these places. They established scholarship programmes, recruited them from the inner city. And South Africa is in a state of denial! Another very expensive schools is St. Stithians. I think their black enrolment is something like 2 percent. Again it is an economic issue. St. Stithians is easily the most expensive school in the whole area. It is 30,000 Rand, you know. But they have to go out and recruit them, otherwise they will remain a Lillywhite. I asked my Secretary to look at the St. Stithians website, and she came back to me and said, are you sure that is the school you wanted me to look at? I said, yeah, why? She said, they have some pictures but I did not see any black students. [Laughs]. It is an economic thing.

*Do you know about the situation at University?*

Yeah, I know. I was Vice Chancellor and Rector of the University of Transkei for four-and-a-half years. The situation is changing at the universities. But if you go to the so-called black universities, they are still predominantly black. I was Rector in the Transkei, and there was talk of us establishing exchange programmes with Grahamstown, Rhodes University. Now I can come up with 200 reasons why a student from Transkei would want to go to Rhodes University. I cannot come up with a single reason why a student from Rhodes would want to come to Transkei. It is a much more inferior institution, the amenities are far from good, the food even is not the same, everything is just not the same. So you still have this difference. I have been advocating that the government should face up to this issue, but for political reasons they are not facing up to it.

Now they have come up with a whole system of measures and so on, which I think is a piece and bunch of rubbish. Many of those black institutions are Apartheid creations and should be closed down and reopened as something else. You really cannot transform them. I was teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia, in the United States and came and became Rector at the

University of Transkei. I was in a constant state of shock, my experience did not prepare me at all. I mean simple things. Like, I started walking around and I saw this building which had a big label on it: „Library“. So I went in. I found students all over the place, talking, laughing and everything. So I said to one girl, „where is the library?“ - „This is it, you are in it!“ I said, „yeah, I saw the sign, that this is the library, but where is the place with books?“ She said „Oh, books? They are at the second floor!“ [Laughs]

But the traditionally white schools are now integrating. Wits - which is one of the best in Johannesburg recently appointed their first African rector, this was done last year, Pretoria still doesn't have a black rector. Natal appointed their first black rector, Willie Makgoba, two years ago. Cape Town appointed a black rector, Mampela, a women, she is now with the World Bank - so they are integrating.

But the other phenomenon that is happening in South Africa, is that the class reality is coming more and more to the fore. When you look at the Cape Towns and Pretorias and Wits and so on, it is children of the new African middle-class and not children of the poor who are entering university. So there is a difference that is being created within the African communities which is class-based.

I keep on telling my children everyday, you know, you are not typically South Africans and do not get your friends to think this is how South Africa is, there is another part of South Africa that you have to be concerned with. But I am just raising it as an intellectual issue because we really cannot be concerned because we don't know that other part. They do not go to the townships and so on. I was away for a long time, I hardly have relatives. The ones who are my relatives, I do not know them. So my children do not know any of those people, and they live in a very artificial and restricted world of my friends and associates which is not part of the reality of South Africa.

*I would like to come back to the affirmative action programme, which you mentioned before. Now we mentioned it in the context of schools, but to what extent are affirmative action programmes being carried out in various parts of society in South Africa. Are there other examples?*

The government has been trying to address the legacy of our past through a variety of programmes. The most current and most talked about one at the

moment is what is called Black Economic Employment, BEE. It is a fact that the South African economy is still 95 percent plus in white hands. In the mining area, about all the mining enterprises are white. The land distribution is extremely skewed.

When you say farmer in South Africa, you are talking about a white farmer. The same applies to every facet of South African life. So the government is trying hard to address these issues. The government is very concerned with Africans being in all levels of management. Many of these companies opened up, hired a few blacks, but they are not in a managerial sector. And they are not part of policymaking. Now the government is taking a very strong stand on this. It is very difficult, if you exclude expropriation, and the government has wisely decided that they would not expropriate. They would march, they would move things in the direction, and this is why what is being done is a very slow process. The most difficult, obviously difficult aspect is in land distribution.

*What compromises does the South African government have to make with regard to land reform?*

We are basing our land redistribution on the basis of the principle of willing buyer, willing seller. Now when Mr. Klaas Van der Merve agrees to sell his farm, what he normally wants to do is sell it for twice what it is worth to get the most. And the government is now going against it, because it's just not moving. They have recently passed a law where the government can, although not expropriate, but force Mr. Klaas Van der Merve to sell - at a market-determined price, at an independent assessment of how much his farm is worth. We do not know how this is going to work out but it is a means of moving things forward because the government is determined that by the year 2015 at least 30% of the land must be in African hands. But at the slow rate that the process has been going, it will not be realised in time. So every day we are rethinking our approaches. We do not want a Zimbabwe situation.

Zimbabwe argues differently, but we all know that the main compulsion for this policy was political. And we do not want to take it there, we want to keep it strictly at the economic level. It is not easy, but we hopefully will find a way. We do not want to bring about change at the cost of destroying what we have. South Africa has attributes, Johannesburg is very different

from other African cities and we want to maintain the positive sides of South Africa. If it will take us a little longer to bring about certain changes, that is what we are willing to do and we hope and put trust in our people who continue to be understanding. We will not burn down the boat because it is rat-infested, we want to kill the rats without destroying the boat. It is not easy but that is what we are determined to do.

*It is quite a balance act for South African politicians as there is demand for more radical steps to be taken from the black people in the communal areas?*

Yes, but it is not an overwhelming demand. We have the *Landless Peoples Movement*, which is advocating a more radical redistribution. In fact what they have threatened recently is that when elections are held in South Africa on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, they will embark on a programme of land occupation. The government has made it very clear that, should they embark on such a programme, they will be arrested and prosecuted. It would not be allowed. We just cannot have it. They are not a massive group, they can be handled. What they are threatening now is what they threatened about a month ago. But it will not be allowed. And also Zimbabwe is finding out. We do not have to experiment to find out that a land occupier is not necessarily a farmer and that land in modern economy is a productive asset, it must produce. In Zimbabwe, part of the problem that they are now having, is that the former white owned farms are not producing. We just cannot have this kind of situation. Also, in Zimbabwe they have allotted the best farms to their political cronies.

I live on a small holding. I have a small plot of land. 11½ acres, next to Johannesburg Lanseria airport. In my neighbourhood, I am the only black owner - which is not right, there should be more. It is a crying injustice, you know it is a result of land dispossession, the Land Act of 1913. There are many black people there, but they are all tenants because a whole lot of small landholders in the Lanseria area, as well as in other areas, have resorted to what is now called in South Africa as shack-farming.

You have a piece of land you allow people to come and build their shacks there and you charge them rent. And you can get 20, 30 of them and they pay you something like 50 Rand per month or 20 Rand per month, so you do not have to grow anything. There are many blacks in the neighbourhood,



I see them all the time but they do not own anything. We are the only black owners. It is again the same issue....

*A very interesting aspect of the land question in South Africa is the new Communal Land Rights Bill, which shifts the authority over land distribution back to the traditional leaders. This was one of the main points that was criticised by the women's movement in South Africa because this is very likely to increase the discrimination of women when it comes to land allocation.*

There we have a big problem. Traditional leaders are highly opposed to any move that will deprive them of any authority over land, and I do not know why the government is hesitating. I think the traditional leaders should now be confronted. I mean, the majority of them are extremely corrupt - and really, when you look into the future there is no room for them. We should systematically get rid of them, and I do not think they have that much support and they can be moved against. And for South Africa our golden opportunity is now. We have one political party now, the ANC, which is unchallengeable, our elections are going to be held on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April. We know exactly who is going to win and we know exactly who is going to be the next President.<sup>42</sup> And we should translate that into forceful political action and deal with very thorny issues. I do not know why there is this hesitation, there should not be any. It is a real opportunity that we must fully use and take advantage of.

*As you will remember, at the South Africa Day at the department of African Studies, we watched the film, „Apartheid's Last Stand". What I (B.E.) found especially interesting in this film was the discussion about the statement of former President Nelson Mandela who said „while we can forgive we cannot forget". People who were interviewed in the film said that for them it was an impossibility to forgive. To what extent do you think this has been a constraint, this difficulty to forgive?*

In spite of the subjective position of most people that they will not forget - in practical terms they have forgiven and are forgiving. In South Africa, we do

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<sup>42</sup> The interview with Ambassador Moleah was held on March 12, 2004. At the elections on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April Thabo Mbeki was reelected as the President of the Republic of South Africa.

not have a situation where Africans are against white people, we do not. Yeah, the injustices and personal assaults that have been perpetrated in the past, of course, are remembered - but are they being passed down to the children? No, they are not. In the next generation and the generation thereafter that memory will have faded completely. I have a whole lot of bitter memories of how I was personally treated during Apartheid, but my children are not sharing in that.

*To what extent do you see this also as a result of the Truth And Reconciliation Commission? Did this play an important role in this process?*

Not any, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission did not affect ordinary people at all, they were not even aware of it - it was an attempt to cleanse South Africa of its past. Many Whites hardly participated.

*What do you see as the main factor then?*

It is just the nature of the South African people! And they also understand that burning down the boat in order to kill the rats in it is not a very good thing to do and the political leadership has been emphasising this point. And really, it should also be accepted that the white South African has tried very hard to reconcile himself/herself to the changed conditions. I was away from South Africa for a very long time. And I went back in 1990. And I just could not believe how the white South African now was. I remember, I was in Pretoria, - I was born in Johannesburg – and I avoided going to Pretoria, having been to Pretoria once. Pretoria was a city of Afrikaanerdom - you just did not go to Pretoria unless you happened to live there. So I was there and was trying to find direction, so I stopped the car and asked the guy on the sidewalk if he could give me directions and he was trying to – the passer-byes stopped and when they found out that I was trying to get to some place– ALL volunteered – I mean I just could not believe it, I mean this is Pretoria! And then we were going from Pretoria to Mafikeng and we had to go to Zeerust, my wife is from Kwa-Zulu Natal. I said to her this is now Zeerust, it is a very right-wing Afrikaner town. And when I looked at my watch I realised that when we got to Mafikeng it would be a little too late, so let me get some drinks, I went into a bottle store. There was an older lady and what seemed to be her daughter, a younger one. And both in

unison said, „Good afternoon, Sir, can we help you?“ I was completely shocked, I said „oh, my God please, this is not Zeerust?“ [Laughs] The whites in South Africa have really come a long, long way. If you remember as I do, how they used to be. So, it is on all sides, it is on all sides.

*Is there any special event or how is South Africa going to celebrate or already celebrating 10 years after Apartheid?*

Within the country, celebration is going to be extremely big. Our national day is the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, and also it will be inauguration day when our president will be inaugurated for a second term. So it is going to be a very big celebratory event. And all missions, including this, have been charged with celebrating wherever they are.

In Austria, we have maybe about twelve events which we plan to take place. „Gumboots“ already took place in October, the „Syringa Tree“ in January. Then there was „Kat and the Kings“ at the Vienna’s English Theatre in March. Another big event is „UShaka“, the South African oratorio which is a mixture of South African poetry and songs and so on and western classical music which will take place at the Musikverein in May. The aim really is to raise the consciousness of the ordinary Viennese about South Africa. We are also going to rent a tram in Ringstraße, which will have a big banner about 10 years of celebration of freedom and democracy. We act from the premise that the cultural exchanges are the most important instruments to utilise in a people to people approach, in a people to people understanding, in a people to people appreciation. This is what we hope we will accomplish. We do not see it as a South African event only. It is primarily a South African event but we are also extremely cognisant of the fact that the South African people, notwithstanding their heroic fight against Apartheid - by themselves would not have brought about the changes that occurred. When it occurred, it was because of international support. Part of our 10 year celebration is to say to our friends and colleagues and fellow strugglers, thank you very much for standing with us in our hour of darkness and we hope that you will stand with us as we are going into the second decade.

As a country, we are quite encouraged by what has happened in the first 10 years and we look forward with great hope and enthusiasm for the second

ten years, yeah. Our start has been extremely good if we may say so, and I tell people that this is not a measurement but there isn't a single African country that one can point to which has accomplished so much in their first ten years as South Africa has done. We still have a whole lot to accomplish. But a promising beginning has been made. Schooling has now penetrated the most rural parts of South Africa, which is a good investment and a great hope for the future. Roads have been built in the rural areas. Water, fresh clean water has been provided to millions of people. Electricity has spread all over the place, communication has spread all over the place. Many good things have been done to secure the future - and I am sure that the future will be secured. We are very hopeful.