

QURAN ENCOURAGES EMBRACING OTHERS, NOT DIMINISHING THEM

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AT THE GRAND OPENING OF AHLUL BAIT (A.S) MOSQUE COMPLEX

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Let me begin by, in particular, thanking the esteemed Mowlana Aftab Haider for remembering me, and inviting me to this wonderful occasion. I am most grateful. We have been associated within the Muslim community for many years.

I want to begin by agreeing with Minister Nathi Mthethwa's speech (South Africa's national minister of Arts & Culture), and say that indeed we do have

a great nation as South Africans – one that we should be proud of - and there are many reasons for this.

I'm going to this evening talk about the constitution of our country. I then hope that what I will attempt to do is then talk about ourselves as Muslims, and the duties of being a South African today and having a constitution such as we do. The nature of duty that it imposes upon us as South Africans and as Muslims.

I will then conclude by posing a few challenges to us all, deriving I hope, from the logic that I will attempt to present as I weave these threads. So let me begin by saying that our constitution has a wonderful character to it. It unites a nation of many languages and of significant cultural, religious and socio-economic diversity.

There are so many distinguished guests here tonight and I recognize each and every one of you and I am most honored to be in your company.

THE IDEALS OF OUR CONSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

So we say that our constitution is one that is value-based. It is the supreme law of our land, and if you read it as I do from time to time, it says the following:

“It lays the foundation for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is protected equally by the law.”

This is our wonderful, aspirational content in our constitution. It embodies in its very essence, the concept of a just and caring society. Our constitution requires each and every one of us to understand and embrace one another, and to value our cultural differences, rather than to be afraid of them.

As South Africans, we come from an era where we were caused to find ways

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of diminishing each other. Our constitution espouses each and every one of us, whatever our background, whatever our ethnicity, whatever our race, whatever language we speak. It says we must embrace each other – we are one!

In many ways, it reflects the great book (the Holy Quran) that we attach ourselves to as Muslims, that we embrace others, we don't hate, that we respect others – wonderful sentences!

HUMAN DIGNITY IS THE BACKBONE OF OUR CONSTITUTION

We all agree as we sit engaging with each other, that every person deserves to be treated with respect, from the poorest of the poor to the most powerful in our society. One of the attributes we find in our constitution is the presence of the absolutely incredible words – HUMAN DIGNITY!

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There can be no greater thing than to restore to a person that has been denigrated, marginalized and rendered a nothing. If to that person, we restore (as our constitution aspires to) their human dignity, we have done a great thing!

It is not something that we give to a person because we believe ourselves generous ie. human dignity. It is part of the core of what a person is, and I am absolutely of the view that by some strange phenomenon, the constitution of South Africa reflected the values and principles we as Muslims believe in. By some strange phenomenon, and Alhamdu Lillah, that we are present here, because our essence is respect for human dignity. Our essence is respect for religions – ALL religions!

Our essence is to promote the interest of others. Our essence is not to be dominant. Our essence is not to oppress. Our essence is to build communities, and all of this lays in the heart of our constitution.

WE SHOULD BE DULY PROUD AS SOUTH AFRICANS

One of the interesting features of us as South Africans, despite these great instruments that we have, is that we tend to have a very negative sense of ourselves. We tend to be pessimistic. We tend to be negative. We tend to focus on the bad, rather than on the good. I think we have many good reasons to be proud of our people and our country.

Just imagine this for a moment. Imagine if Nelson Mandela could walk out of prison and said let's go to civil war. How terrible would that have been?! And many would have followed him. Many would have listened to his order. Instead, he came out and said let us have peace. Let's reconcile and let's build a new nation out of the ashes.

We, as South Africans, have secured the respect of the world for the manner in which we decided that we would undertake a peaceful transition from oppression to an increasingly maturing and robust democracy. The creativity, the innovation and the determination that we have from this objective has enabled South Africans to begin the process of solving what in many countries appears to be intractable problems. You see this attempt not only among politicians, but also among ourselves and parts of society.

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You see it among our artists. You see it within our religious communities. You see it in the way we engage with each other in terms of our language, promotion of multi-lingualism and the promotion of the cultures that are part of our society.

OUR DIVERSITY IS OUR NATIONAL TREASURE

Just imagine for a moment, if Donald Trump were to cast his eye into this mosque. He will get a big shock, because we are showing him that which he does not believe in. Look around you. Who is in this room? We come from many countries of the world. Women are here. We are many races. We speak many different languages. So as South Africans, we to a great degree have begun to reflect that which seems to many as impossible.

One of the guiding principles that we draw from our constitution is the recognition that diversity is a national asset, and not a national burden. You need all the ingredients together to ensure that diversity is a strength and not a burden, much like needing all the ingredients together to make a delicious meal, else it will be a terrible meal!

While being a part of the continent of Africa, we truly celebrate that we have a wonderful mix of people from the continent of Africa, as well as from Europe, East Asia, and many other parts of the world. We are proud to have 11 official languages, and we are committed to promoting their development. We are not yet doing as much as we should, but we are committed to such promotion.

HOW DO WE EMBRACE OUR PROUD LEGACY TO TACKLE OUR CHALLENGES?

I believe that this scenario of our constitution speaks to us as South Africans and sets us a set of tasks that we need to undertake. As Minister Mthethwa said, we are indeed a great nation but we also have many troubling features in our country. We have young people coming out of school and university who cannot find employment. Millions of young people feel they have no hope in our country. We are challenged to give them hope. We are challenged to give them opportunity.

I believe that opportunity for young people cannot lie in government

creating more public service jobs. I believe that opportunity lies in small and medium sized businesses being created in our country. And who better than us in creating such businesses? So what are we doing in terms of renewing the spirit of entrepreneurship in our young people, so that they have hope and have a belief that they can make a contribution to our society?

OUR CONSTITUTION ENSHRINES SOUTH AFRICA AS A COUNTRY FOR ALL

Our constitution recognizes equality. How do you celebrate equality if you are a woman at home who is physically abused every day? How do you celebrate equality if you are a young girl in a rural town whose parents say that you cannot go to school, and only the boy children will go to school? How do celebrate equality when you are a girl child and you are 13, and you are told you must get married to a 50 year old man? What do we do about equality? What do we do about the aspirations of our constitution so that these aspirations are the lived experience of every person in our country?

I challenge you that giving life to our constitution through our action is not something that we must pay attention to for South Africa only. As South Africans, we are the most free nation on the African continent. So how do

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we share our freedom with the rest of the African continent? Our freedom of religion, our freedom of culture, our equality of gender and other lines – how do we use this experience in order to share with the rest of the continent, the lessons we have acquired in just 2 decades of democracy?

What I believe our constitution does for us is tell us what must be addressed. It calls for us to build a South Africa which belongs to all who live in it – black and white. It calls on us as we practice our religion to ensure that we have lived the values of our religion.

OUR CONSTITUTIONAL FREEDOM SHOULD MAKE US THE BEST OF MUSLIMS

If I have a business and I employ workers within it and I am not paying them the minimum wage, I must know even if I am make Salaah as I should, I am not a good Muslim.

If I oppress my workers, no matter how much I can recite, no matter how many duas I have memorized, I cannot treat those who are not as well off as I am, who depend on me, and I treat them badly, I am not a good Muslim.

If my daughters are not safe in my home, and yet I am their father, and I recite well, I am faithful, I am at mosque, I am the closest to the Imam, in fact the Imam relies on me for advice, but at home, my daughters and my wife are not safe. When I come home, they cower in the corner of the room. I am not a good Muslim!

Women are talking to us, my dear brothers and sisters, every day, and drawing attention to us in this month of “no violence against women and children” to the fact that millions of women in our country do not feel safe in their homes. It is possible that among us here, all of us have built safe homes; our daughters feel safe, our wives are protected and cared for. How do change the millions of other men who continue to make women unsafe and unhappy in their homes.

So I am putting to you that we have this wonderful framework called the

constitution. We have this authoritative spiritual guide that has said to us, follow this path. And I am asking in practical terms, how do you live your life so that these instruments matter? How do you live your life, so that those who may not have the opportunities, who may not have the guidance, who may not have the support – how might they draw on you in order for their lives to be different?

ISLAM HAS A PROUD HERITAGE OF BEING A PRACTICAL RELIGION

I believe that the lessons all of us draw from our Prophet Muhammad (SAWA), and I am not by any means a religious scholar as Mowlana is, but I have the notion that our great Prophet (SAWA) did not leave these lessons for us to just read them. He left them for us to attempt to be an example in life, and Insha Allah, each one of us will take on that example. And we will make a Niyah, that whenever we have the opportunity to create a difference, wherever we have the opportunity to build on what our leaders have done.

Imam Haron, Dr Abdurahmaan, Sheikh Yusuf, and many other leaders. Nelson Mandela, Cissy Gool, Amina Cachalia, and so many who strove for a difference. If we can draw on their example, and as we live, and it might be

in a small way, maybe help someone just vet the contract that they have just been given by their employer to ensure it is written in a proper way, or help a young student who is not quite clued up on how to apply for a bursary or apply to a university, or help your worker who doesn't yet have housing to get on that housing list, and help them monitor as they go up that list.

Changing the world is a matter of small things but leaving the world the same is just a matter of neglect.

So as we celebrate today, this wonderful mosque and which is indeed beautiful, Alhamdu Lillah, I just think it is the most wonderful design. So as we celebrate, I ask us to embrace the ideals that lays within our constitution. To appropriate the principles that all of us have said we will willingly attach to, and to utilize these as a means of changing the lives of the people of South Africa, in our own small way.

I believe each of us can do this, and as we worship in this mosque, as we execute our duties, I ask you just to, from time to time, ask: Am I changing South Africa, as the constitution holds? I believe people who are gifted with the mosque of this kind, can do no less than make the world a very good place.

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Shukran for listening to me.

Assalaamu Alaykum wa Rahmatullahi wa Barakatu