Speech at a Farewell Banquet in his Honour Hosted by President Thabo Mbeki
16 June 1999

Pretoria

President Mbeki
Your Majesties
Your Royal Highnesses
Excellencies
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen.

When we chose the date of South Africa's second democratic elections, we were guided by many practical and legal considerations. It was however a matter of chance that it fell on a date which dictated that we should inaugurate our new President on our national Youth Day.

And yet no occasion could be more appropriate than this day on which we commemorate struggle and sacrifice in the name of human dignity; this day on which we also celebrate the renewal of our society and its aspirations, in our youth and in the succession of generations.

Nor, if it had been mine to wish, could I have asked for a better day for this leave-taking that you have granted me.

Five years ago the world welcomed South Africa to the community of free nations. Leaders of the international community joined us here in Pretoria in the dawn of our freedom.

Together with the peoples of the world we celebrated a victory that belonged to the world. It was a victory that flowed from, and affirmed, a shared commitment to our common humanity.

South Africans from every sector had reached out across the divisions of centuries, and averted a blood-bath which most observers believed inevitable. So much so that our smooth transition was hailed widely as a miracle.

Little did we think that five years later we would again gather in Pretoria, with reason to celebrate South African democracy again.
Conventional wisdom assured us that second democratic elections are but second-grade affairs, as the so-called normality of political apathy sets in.

And yet the winding queues of patient voters that in 1994 symbolised the determination of South Africa's people to govern themselves, reappeared in 1999, symbolising their determination to continue doing so after five testing years of transition and struggle for change.

Our people have therefore confounded the prophets of doom and the sceptics, not once but twice. And we are confident that they will do it over and over again.

For my part, I would want to say how privileged I feel to have participated in the achievements of our nation during the past five years. I have been humbled to have been honoured, as their representative, in the name of the principles for which our people stood. It has been an inspiration to serve a nation that has helped renew the world's hope that all conflicts, no matter how intractable, are capable of peaceful resolution.

I say this with special pride in the presence of so many Heads of State and Government from countries whose peoples stood with us. We are proud to affirm the health of our democracy before leaders of regional, continental and international organisations which have assisted us: in our struggle for liberation; in our transition to democracy; and in our first faltering steps on the path of reconstruction and development.

It is also a matter of great pride that the international community is represented in such strength to join us in welcoming our new President, Thabo Mbeki.

Your presence, like the mandate of our people, speaks more loudly than any words of mine, of the stature and the promise of the man who has been elected to be at the head of the new generation of leaders who will lead South Africa into the next century.

You will know that much of what we have achieved has been because the day-to-day governing of our country has for the past three years been largely in his hands.

If our peaceful transition has been the achievement of our whole nation, then we dare not forget that the liberation movement in all its formations was in the first place responsible for freeing all of South Africa from an oppressive system.

We think of those generations of South Africans who sustained their vision of a humane society under the most difficult circumstances, so that we should be free. From them we inherited our dedication to building the unity of our nation out of its diversity; and an approach which seeks to emerge from every situation more united than before. They were also part of a broader movement for freedom and justice in Southern Africa, in Africa and wherever people were oppressed and poor.
Today a worthy son of Albert Luthuli and Oliver Tambo takes his place amongst the new generation of leaders. It is not merely the passing of the baton from one President to another, a transition from the so-called Mandela era to the Mbeki era, but indeed a significant changing of generations. This makes the choice of Youth Day for this installation even more meaningful.

The task of this generation is to help make a reality of our long-cherished dreams of peace, equity and development within and amongst the nations and regions of the world. Their challenge is to deal with the plight of the developing nations and the poor, above all in Africa.

South Africa has elected a President who is equal to the challenges we face: whether it is as a country seeking to strengthen the unity it is building and to speed up the change it is achieving; as a region in reconstruction; as a continent renewing itself; or as part of an interdependent and globalising world.

And so it is that on this day, we say U'amkelekile Mbeki Welcome to President Thabo Mbeki and Zanele Mbeki

Master of Ceremonies;

The warmth I have experienced today, and indeed wherever I have been inside and outside our country during the past months, leads me to welcome the new status I have occupied since this morning.

For you do make me feel at home: as part of an international community of men and women who have chosen the world as the theatre of their operations in pursuit of justice; and as an ordinary citizen of a nation that has won the world's admiration not by prowess in war but by the dedication of its people of every background to celebrate their humanity.

It is no easy thing to rest while millions still bear the burden of poverty and insecurity. But my days will be filled with contentment to the extent that hands are joined across social divides and national boundaries, between continents and over oceans, to give effect to that common humanity in whose name we have together made the long walk to where we are today.

Though I shall not be seen as much as I have been, I shall be amongst you and with you as we enter the African century; working together to make a reality of our hopes for a better world.

I thank you.

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