



Centre for  
**UNITY IN  
DIVERSITY**

## **SOCIAL COHESION IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA**

*By Ms Zohra Dawood: Director, Centre for Unity in Diversity*

As South Africans mourn the death of a great leader in Ahmed Kathrada, the broadest consensus on both social media and the mainstream, was one that expressed bereavement for a towering man who had lived through the worst of times and the best of times but died a sad man. Why was this so, we ask? Ahmed Kathrada's poignant letter to the President summed up his and the views of millions of South Africans. We expected more, we expected better and are now bereft.

It was a poignant start to the Centre for Unity in Diversity's Roundtable Series - held on 28 March in Cape Town - to pause and reflect on a great man's legacy as we gathered to reflect on our first theme for the year, "Social Cohesion in Contemporary South Africa". The Roundtable Series is crafted to stimulate discussion and debate on core issues that flow from the constitutional premise, "United in our Diversity", captured in the Preamble.

Ahmed Kathrada was a great advocate for the values embedded in our Constitution and was an active proponent of the need to, "promote and develop peace, friendship, humanity, tolerance and national unity amongst cultural, religious and linguistic communities on the basis of equality, non-discrimination and free association", a sentiment so well captured by the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities. That our country is under pressure to respect our multi-racial, multi-cultural and diverse society is not in doubt. The imperative is to address these challenges to our constitutional democracy and the Bill of Rights and strive to reinforce our commitment to human dignity, equality and freedom.

These conversations are by no means easy or comfortable ones, but as a nation we have stared into the abyss and drew back based on a shared pledge to be better and bolder in the task of nation-building.

The discussions on "Social Cohesion in Contemporary South Africa" reflected a diverse range of speakers and participants, with reflections traversing symbolism, the economy and an input from a religious leader.

Some of the key themes that were raised (and which require a far more considered response):

1. Economic inclusion and social cohesion
2. Trust as a key pillar for social cohesion
3. Inequality and social inclusion (what is the sequencing)
4. Language as power and its impact on social cohesion
5. Education and social cohesion (reference to the education system)



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A challenge that was expressed in the meeting - and that needs careful consideration - is how do we measure progress in this journey to achieve a better, more tolerant and humane society.

The complexities of understanding and in the words of a participant, “operationalising” social cohesion are a work in progress, with the Constitution as vital guide and protection. The luxury of ignoring the imperative to protect and promote social cohesion is not one we have, as we witness the shifting of small and large tectonic plates in South Africa currently.

The Roundtable Series is open to the public and will be advertised on our website.