

Remarks by Songezo Zibi
RISE Mzansi National Leader

RISE Mzansi is investing in hope, in fresh ideas and new leaders

10 April 2024
Release: Immediate

Note to Editors: *The following remarks were delivered by **RISE Mzansi National Leader, Songezo Zibi**, at the Cape Town Press Club, hosted at the Kelvin Grove Club in Cape Town.*

Programme Director, Anthony Butler

Members of the Fourth Estate

Esteemed Guests

Some weeks ago, we hosted one of our street meetings in Alexandra, Joburg. A young man spoke of the dread he felt each morning. No work, no recreation, no options, no hope. Just a day filled with nothingness.

He related how he often stays in bed as long as he can so that he doesn't have to go and stand out on the street, where nothing hopeful will come his way. "Life becomes meaningless," he said. "Nobody cares because they don't see us. They don't know what we go through."

Earlier, a mother had shared her own frustration with her son's drug addiction. She feels she has failed her children – and the kids feel they have been failed by their parents too. Everyone feels powerless.

I wish I could tell you that the Alex experience was isolated, but I'm afraid I hear a version of this every time I visit a community in any of our nine provinces. These are the stories of families three generations to a single room, homes that have untreated sewage running down the street, that have no income whatsoever besides the social grants. This a reality that is as true for many people in Cape Town as it is in Joburg or eThekweni.

These are the stories of people who cannot wait - and must no longer wait – for the dignified life our Constitution promises.

Taking their political and life aspirations seriously is an ethical and compassionate imperative. It's a practical one too. South Africa is the most unequal country on earth. None of our children will thrive, or be safe, unless – as RISE Mzansi puts it – we bring about a safe, prosperous, equal and united South Africa within the next generation.

This requires smart policy choices. It requires effective, clean government. But most of all it requires new leaders, with the will and the vision; and the talent to make it happen.

These are leaders with the roots, the empathy and the commitment to give people hope again. So that they once more participate in our democracy; so that they can exercise their own agency. So that they can work at bettering their own lives and those of their communities.

This is what we have lost. This is what we need to reclaim.

In every home I visit, I ask my hosts when they last ate. I'm usually told that there is only one meal a day. This is said with resignation rather than complaint. Hunger has become just a fact of South African life – like no electricity during rolling blackouts, or, increasingly, no water.

How did we come to this?

I have given a lot of thought to why the old parties stay in power, in the face of this.

The first reason is that politics is broken. It has become transactive. People see politics as something that benefits politicians, not the people. And so they often refuse to vote if a down payment of sorts is not made: what can you give us if we give you your vote?

Increasingly, they just opt out. This means the old parties fight for a dwindling electorate, and benefit from grudge votes, or resigned votes, rather than a committed base.

The second reason is that there has been, truly, no viable alternative. People want leaders to know and understand their experience, and offer solutions coloured by empathy and compassion – and the willingness to genuinely listen. Solutions that bring people together across race and class rather than drive them apart. To date, that alternative has not existed.

The parties in the Multi-Party Coalition claim that they are going to “fix” South Africa. They are going to “rescue” it. I am struck, when I see these slogans, by the way they suggest that a Messiah will swoop in and sort things out. Ours is a participatory democracy, and messianic politics has long lost credibility.

Esteemed guests,

Is the Democratic Alliance really that Messiah, on the basis of its track record here in the Western Cape? Many people in Khayelitsha and Mitchells Plain disagree, which is why the DA is going to get something of a shock next month. But even if it is true, to a point, that service delivery is better in the Western Cape, it's the DA's attitude that is a total turn-off to majority of this country's population.

Under its current leadership at least, the DA is destined to be divisive and racialised, rather than truly non-racial and representative of all South Africans. The mere fact that it uses such language tells us why. It doesn't know how to pull people together, to motivate them to become part of the solution.

We need new leaders who come from communities themselves and who have legitimacy within them. Who treat these communities as constituencies, and represent their interests in parliament if elected, and report back to them with diligence. We need new leaders who ask the people what *they* need, rather than tell them what's good for them. Who use something other than shock tactics even to marshal their own support base.

It was to find these such leaders that I quit my corporate career two years ago and co-founded the Rivonia Circle. We held workshops across the country. We sat under trees, we listened.

RISE Mzansi developed organically out of this, and many of the people we met in the process are now our candidates. They are young people who see no home in the old parties. They are determined to make their own. They are passionate, committed, many are educated while others not so much, but all sensible.

One of them is the premier candidate for this province. People, believe me when I tell you this 35-year-old is going to president of South Africa one day! Please invite him to the Press Club. You will be blown away.

And yet John Steenhuisen calls Axolile Notywala – and by association, me, and everyone in RISE Mzansi – a “mercenary” for listening to voters unhappy with the DA government, and for offering an alternative. He has even said we are gangsters who are going to pillage this province.

You cannot say you believe in democracy but then cry foul when someone else tries to exercise it on what you deem to be your own turf! Leave aside the entitlement of this, the idea that no-one has the right to challenge a party in power.

John asks, why are they COMING to the Western Cape? Coming? From where?

This is the worst kind of *Swart Gevaar*! It is illiberal, it is divisive, and it further proof that the DA under Zille and Steenhuisen will *never* reach the black voters it needs if it is to govern South Africa. In fact, it's the reason why so many credible black leaders have left the DA; some of them have joined RISE.

Steenhuisen wants to know why we haven't joined his coalition. Well, he gave us the answer himself last weekend, when he spoke these words. This is why we have to stay out of the election campaign tent the DA has built. That said, there is nothing to stop us from working with the DA on the other side of the election, if we can find common ground.

But the DA will have to change its attitude. The way Steenhuisen talks reminds me of the way the apartheid regime called freedom fighters "terrorists". If fighting for democracy, a democracy where everyone has the right to dignity, equality and freedom, makes us "terrorists" or "mercenaries", we will take it. But the people to whom such freedom matter know who we are. We *are* a viable alternative. We are the future.

On the one side there is a ruling party that actually has its roots among the people, but has become so self-interested that it has become totally disconnected from these peoples' needs. And on the other side there is an opposition (or, in this province, a ruling party) that has alienated the majority of the voter base, and so will never be able to win the votes of people who have become disaffected with the ANC.

Little wonder that the so many voters – and particularly *young* voters – are seeking a Third Way. A small but significant number will be enticed by demagogic populism of the EFF and the MKP – in the latter case, driven by ethnic chauvinism too. I'm sure you will agree with me: we have to offer voters a constructive alternative to this kind of protest vote.

Let me dwell on one controversial issue in particular to make my point about this: *land*. For black people, land is spiritual. We bury our dead on our own family land, we perform rituals to tell our ancestors where we live.

When black people say they we want land justice, it's not because we hate white people or want to take everything. We are asking you to see our entire being. And if you don't listen, if you don't find a way of instituting viable land reform, you leave people desperate and angry, open to being hoodwinked by corrupt populists who just want power.

As an alternative, the "Third Way" RISE Mzansi offers is one that is strong and principled. We won't allow ourselves to be gaslit by political opponents who insinuate that we are populist radicals. But we won't bang on a drum about land restitution without careful planning about how to do this in a way that benefits us all.

Let me try and exemplify this by talking about my own village, in Mqanduli. Some of our land was expropriated in the 1960s, without compensation, and reallocated to people who were also moved from what became stock grazing land.

Do we walk around the village crying a river at our misfortune? Of course not. We understand that there is population growth. We understand that the old feudal systems have to give way to a more democratic allocation of space.

What bothers me more is the terrible way the authorities have squandered a resource claimed for the public good. Most of the plots lie derelict – because there is no reticulated water for irrigation; because there is no agricultural extension support to help people understand the effects of climate change; because able-bodied people don't stay in the rural areas to do the farming, given that there is nothing to keep them there. The point I am making is this: land reform and land justice have to be tied to informed and intelligent spatial planning and service delivery.

This is our anti-populist approach to the land reform that we all know must happen. I honestly don't understand how anyone could disagree.

We know it must happen because all of us surely understand a fundamental principle. If any of us are hungry, all of us suffer. We were raised on these values in our places of worship, our families and our communities. How have we come to forget it, when it comes to politics and power?

The way to reimbue our national politics with these values is through the principle of social solidarity. This is not rocket science. It's not news. In my village it's called *ubuntu*, and in the modern political economy it's called social democracy.

I want to assure you all that we have sound policies to build this social democracy. Yesterday, we released our policy on safety and security. Last week, we released a five-point policy aimed at helping single mothers, who head most South African households. Next week, we will attack hunger, then jobs. Of course jobs! Of course we must grow the economy! I know more than a few things about the economy. I understand this!

I'm not going to dwell, here, on our plans. They are all available to download, and we encourage debate around them, and a diversity of views. That's how we'll get the best solutions. The point I want to make here is that you can have the best growth policies in the world, but if you don't have the leadership to drive them, you are lost.

This has been the ANC's problem for years, and I would argue that it is the DA's problem too. The former is gutted out by cadre deployment and patronage. The latter is too detached, too arrogant, too entitled to legitimacy for the mere fact that the ANC has

become an abomination. It also lacks, the diversity of perspective that must drive governance in this country.

We at RISE Mzansi do not want to give an already-cynical electorate yet another long shopping list of promises. We want to show them how we do things differently. That we consult both the people and the experts. That we are evidence-based. That we are, above all else, accountable.

This is our Third Way, and we are convinced that it has traction. We are mapping a future for all South Africans across the inequality divide because we see hopelessness in all quarters; even among those – among many of you sitting in this room – who are not hungry and do have jobs. This hopelessness corrodes the soul, even when the stomach is full.

Certainly, those of us who are privileged can make ourselves more comfortable by opting out of the system: private schools, energy, healthcare, security. But we *know* that's not an answer for the future of our children, because of the way it creates even more inequality in our society.

And so, this is my offer to you today. Become part of a future where people see how lives can improve because they are engaged in their own destinies. Through representative politics, and beyond.

Against the transactional politics of the old parties, we are setting out to earn the trust of the electorate.

We are investing in hope, in fresh ideas and new leaders.

Whether we are part of a new government or on the opposition benches, we will carry on building this new movement - a truly multiracial and multigenerational coalition of South Africans, committed to the values of *Ubuntu* and social solidarity.

We know, powerfully, from our own work on the ground, that there is a hunger to work together, to contribute, to build, to grow. Hopelessness removes the motivation, though. We have to fight this hopelessness more than anything, starting now.

Ndiyabulela. Thank you.

ENDS...

Issued by:

Songezo Zibi
RISE Mzansi National Leader

Media queries:

Mabine Seabe
National Communication Director
084 677 7851