

My attempt to define Non-racialism in a South African context for an American audience

Lauren Kientz, March 3, 2011

When Nelson Mandela first met Ahmed Kathrada, who later became a close friend and even closer advisor, he did not trust the younger man. Kathrada was an Indian and a Communist and Mandela did not believe that the anti-apartheid struggle should include either group. Kathrada's dedication to the cause, coupled with the passion and perseverance of many other activists of many races, changed Mandela's mind. Through his relationship with Kathrada and others, Mandela accepted the African National Congress (ANC)'s dedication to "non-racialism"—the welcoming of all people under the umbrella of the anti-apartheid struggle. Anyone who was willing to oppose the racism (or racialism) and oppression of the apartheid regime could join.

An advocate of non-racialism has already visited our campus. Eddie Daniels, fellow political prisoner and friend of Kathrada and Mandela's, spoke to classes at the University of Kentucky last semester and K-12 schools in the surrounding districts. When students asked what he meant by the term, he explained that he had had white friends who died for the cause. Students were further flummoxed when the peach skinned man with gray, straight hair pronounced that he was "black." He explained that while he had black African ancestors, he could have applied for a "white" id, but he rejected the privilege that accompanied that white id until all people could have access to them. He left students still confused, but thinking through their own relationship to their race and what they would have done in his situation.

South African is a new world, though, since black, white, Indian, and "Coloured" people fought apartheid together. In 1994, South Africa became ruled by a democratic majority and represented primarily by members of the ANC. How will the philosophy of non-racialism adapt to this new reality? If there is no longer an apartheid regime to fight together, then what binds people? Kathrada and others suggest that it is the building of the new democracy. Anyone, of any race, who is willing to join in improving South Africa is welcome. Some South African leaders have continued to advocate "non-racialism" while others argue that whites were privileged for centuries and it is time for Africans to rule.

When Americans hear "non-racialism," they tend to think it means not recognizing race and the controversy that has followed the term "post-racial." Many media outlets heralded the end of racism (or was that race?) in the United States following Barack Obama's inauguration. Some feel that a country that can elect a black man president has overcome its dark history of racism, while others feel that having a black president does not instantly ameliorate the continued legacy and reality of racism, represented particularly in poverty and incarceration rates. South Africa is facing a similar conversation right now. How does the legacy of apartheid continue to influence the structures of South African society? Is it necessary to take race into consideration when attempting to improve life for all South Africans? How does the "Rainbow Nation"—a fond nickname for South Africa—build a single national South African identity and loyalty while also nurturing the many different linguistic and cultural groups that make the nation strong and unique? The United States has considered "multiculturalism" as one

answer for our question of fostering “unity in diversity.” Many in South Africa are trying to develop a rigorous idea of “non-racialism” for their version of that question.