



Monday, 20 March 2023

LET US SAFEGUARD THE HARD-WON FREEDOMS IN OUR BILL OF RIGHTS

Dear Fellow South African,

One hundred years ago, in May 1923, the first bill of rights in South Africa's history was adopted by the African National Congress. It had no legal standing at the time, but it clearly expressed the desire for the equal rights of all people to be recognised and guaranteed.

After many decades of bitter struggle, these freedoms were enshrined in the Bill of Rights of our democratic Constitution. Therefore, as we gather tomorrow to celebrate Human Rights Day, we should recall that the rights we enjoy today are the result of great sacrifices. Many people were imprisoned, many were driven into exile and many lost their lives so that our basic human rights are protected and upheld.

Given our country's repressive past, some of the most valued of those rights are the rights to freedom of expression and association. Our Constitution guarantees every person "the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions".

Particularly as we remember the events of 21 March 1960, when 69 peaceful protestors in Sharpeville were killed by the apartheid police, we need to be resolute in our defence of the right to peaceful protest.

But we should be clear that the right to protest does not give anyone the right to harass, intimidate or threaten anyone else. It does not give anyone the right to damage property or cause harm to any person.

One person's right to protest should in no way infringe on any other person's right to life and dignity. It should not impede their freedom of movement and association, or their right to engage in their trade or profession without hindrance.

The Constitution is clear that the state must "respect, protect, promote and fulfil" all the freedoms contained in the Bill of Rights. Therefore, just as the state has a duty to uphold the right to peaceful protest, it has a responsibility to prevent any attempt to violate any of the other rights in the Constitution.

It is well within the right of any person or organisation to call on fellow South Africans to freely join in acts of protest. But no-one should be forced, threatened or intimidated into joining that protest.

In fulfilment of its constitutional responsibility to protect the rights of all people, government will always have measures in place to ensure that everyone who wants to go to work, travel for leisure and conduct business can do so in a safe and secure environment. These measures include the deployment of our security personnel across the country to ensure that law is observed.

The rights that are enshrined in our Constitution cannot be taken for granted. Too many lives have been lost and too many people have suffered so that we may all be protected by a Bill of Rights that applies to all laws and that is the cornerstone of our democracy.

A century after the first bill of rights was adopted in this country, every person in South Africa can now enjoy these freedoms. As this government, we will not allow anyone or any group to take these freedoms away from them.

With best regards,

Cyril Ramaphosa





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