

# **“Activism for Democracy”**

by Professor Fatima Meer

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## **INTRODUCTION BY DENNIS BRUTUS**

Fatima Meer. She's been in the struggle a long time. She's made many important contributions to the struggle in the past. Even now, she's an activist, someone full of ideas, who cares passionately about the struggle, and is anxious to share her ideas. She has the ability to inspire, to move them to action. She can see the South African struggle as part of a global struggle. She presents the image that what we do in Durban is part of a much larger struggle. There are many who are homeless, who cannot afford education, who live on land that is poisoned, next to polluted rivers. In all of that she has a sense that what we are enduring in South Africa is part of a larger struggle.

Even when she was a student in the 1940s, she organised the Student Passive Resistance Committee. She found time to get a masters degree here. She was a women's leader. In the 1970s she was a supporter of the Black Consciousness Movement, which made an important impact on the country's political consciousness. She worked with Steve Biko. She helped to start schools and colleges and craft centres. She is a great scholar who has written roughly forty books. She has worked on the contributions to struggles by Mahatma Gandhi. She's been in the struggle a long time.

Let me add one or two personal notes. We had a major event here in Durban called the World Conference Against Racism. There were people trying to use that event to suggest we have a post-apartheid, democratic South Africa in which education, housing and jobs were available to all. The world was told a lie. In fact the residue of apartheid was still with us. Some of us who were inheriting power were preserving that residue. People including many who are here in this very hall said, 'We must expose that lie!' We must challenge that, and get out in the streets. We made a statement that went around the world: 'We will not be deceived.' We raised the question of reparations, and of the cancellation of the debt, whereby monies that could be used for social services were instead being used to pay the banks.

I worked with Fatima Meer and I thank her for the inspiration and encouragement she gave at that time. We started a movement called Jubilee South Africa. Fatima and I worked with Jubilee from the beginning. We reached to other parts of Africa and across the world. Unfortunately because of local internal conflicts, Jubilee is not as strong as it used to be. I hope we can rebuild it into the kind of powerful movement it was. We want the cancellation of debt, and we want reparations for the damage inflicted on us.

We owe Fatima a special vote of thanks for all that she has done. She has been an inspiration, and helped people find ways to be active themselves. She is what we

might call an Eastern Star, a brilliant personality who has inspired others and led them to activism. This is so wonderful about her even now, that she's presenting fresh ideas, fresh challenges, inviting people to think about how to take the struggle forward.

## **FATIMA MEER**

Amandla!

I am so inspired by your enthusiasm.

Democracy means equality. Now South Africa is assessed today as one of the most unequal large societies in the world, second only to Brazil. So we don't have equality and we don't have democracy.

Those who are ruling us have usurped power. They are incapable of establishing equality or democracy. Who then will establish this democracy?

You will find two communities in the world today, divided against each other. To have equality we must have community. But one is the community of governments and the capitalists of the world.

The other community, outside, that will appropriate the power and resources of our universe is civil society, that is ourselves.

But many of us have been converted into vote banks and consumers for the other community. We have to bond together. The people united are a people victorious. This is something we must bear in mind.

We have hundreds of organisations throughout the country, maybe even thousands. What we lack is the coordination of these organisations, so that we can form a South African Social Forum to connect to the World Social Forum. I want you all to think about this. We have to plan a conference to found this organisation.

We must strengthen ourselves against those who would appropriate the resources of the world. South Africa is a microcosm of the world. The world is divided and so is South Africa. We take upon ourselves liberation from apartheid. Previously discrimination was based on colour, now it is based on class. The poor are blamed. There are all sorts of myths that radiate all over the place, because the media is not in our hands. The media tries to influence our minds, and to think of ourselves as less than we really are.

It is up to us to liberate ourselves. They are not going to give it to us. As a young girl I learned, freedom is not presented to you on a platter. I repeat that to you again.

We have to struggle for it, we have to fight for it. Now you found those who have usurped power in South Africa and the world, like the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisations. All these organisations are structured to exploit us and the rest of the world. We lived throughout colonisation, a pernicious system. It transferred the resources of Africa, Latin America and Asia to Europe and North America. They transferred populations they wanted, as slaves and indentured labour.

Replacing that colonisation is a new form of domination, ravaging and destroying the world, which they call globalisation. Globalisation has also done an artificial division

of the world into the North and South. We are the people of the South. We are being plundered and destroyed daily.

We have to stand up against it and fight. Now, the usurpers of the world could not tolerate a moral order. They have discarded religion in the sense of a moral order. We are a two dimensional humanity: body and soul, material and spirit.

They have completely destroyed the idea of the spirit or soul. That does not interest them. It does not consume and they cannot profit through that part of humanity. They negate the spirit completely. They concentrate on science and technology. They develop these in order to increase their exploitation of our world and our universe.

This is the great challenge that faces all of us. It is a challenge we must accept with open hands and open hearts. It is only through our unity that we will be able to conquer.

The activism of civil society is not something that has started now. It started in the 19th century, and Gandhi developed the strategy of Satyagraha, the struggle for truth.

When we confront the usurpers, we do so through our unity. Once we unite we create a force, an energy, which is able to confront even nuclear power, which they monopolise. They will not share it with us, but will use it to destroy everyone.

The challenge we face is enormous, and here in KwaZulu-Natal, and here in Durban, and probably in the very near future, we will establish a South African Social Forum, and a World Social Forum, which has already held so many successful summits and meetings.

This is the message I want to leave you tonight, and I want it to live with you, until we establish a South African Social Forum.

One word about Dennis Brutus. He is a former Robben Island prisoner who has escaped from prison. You can imagine how dapper and courageous he must have been! With Dennis on our side, we shall overcome. We have nothing to fear. Dennis is a poet, and you will have an opportunity to listen to his poetry.

I want to end with a personal note about Harold Wolpe, so he doesn't just remain a name for you. When I was a first year student at the Witwatersrand University for social science. I had to do a subject, statistics, which I found very difficult, as I was a dunce in maths. I went to Harold Wolpe and he gave me [...] He's not here today and there is no way in which he can listen to my gratitude and thanks. He was a great comrade in those days, and I learned a great deal from him. It is therefore a great honour to begin the 2007 lecture series with my words, ideas and passion.

Amandla!

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Virginia Setshedi from FXI: What is your view of the existing organisation, which is not called the South African Social Forum, but is struggling to bring together these organisations, including in Nairobi last month with a huge delegation from South Africa: the Social Movements Indaba?

Samson Kale: I want to say to Fatima Meer and Dennis Brutus, we love you for the great work you have done. I want to say something about Trevor Manuel who read his fine budget – when it came to poor people, the pensioners and those with social grants, it was a disgrace, a R50 increase. I think the pensioners should stand up, and let us ask Fatima Meer, what should be done.

Fatima Meer: A pittance. What do we do about this pittance? On the one hand there was Trevor Manuel in his light blue suit, ebullient as ever, and all we heard was about billions and billions of Rands that we had helped to save. And then there was this pittance. We have to raise our voices and tell him that is not good enough. Throughout his speech he talked of equality – but what is that? What can pensioners buy with this R50, which is not even enough to cover inflation on so many things. There was so much self-congratulation in that house of parliament, and everyone congratulated him. But the sensible parts of the budget were communicated to him by civil society. The pensioner issue must be communicated very strongly. The government should not be allowed to congratulate itself. As far as the Social Movements Indaba is concerned, I would hope they would partner with all our movements to form a Social Forum. Unity is what we are aiming for, not division. Let us organize together, and whatever the Indaba wants to be done, must be done. We are suggesting a South African Social Forums because there are forums in about 18 other forums. We want to strengthen the unity by working together, so the Indaba is part of our Indaba. Otherwise we must be prepared to be conquered ourselves.

Liev Shange, an activist with the Democratic Socialist movement, and a student here. I may have misheard Fatima, but one of the most important things I heard Fatima say is that all these organisations must unite across the world, but does that mean with capitalists and governments. I don't see how we can unite with oppressors.

Alistair. You spoke a lot about unity. There are so many NGOs and organisations that are fighting against each other. How can we unite each other?

Mrs Peromal. On the TV news and everywhere, people here about crime, crime, crime – all the time. If you try to do something about in a dignified manner, you find the top officials are corrupt. But we are struggling against drug lords and shebeens, poisoning our youth. What are we to do?

Fatima Meer: I am sorry I confused you. No, these are oppositional forces: civil society on the one hand, and the governments and the capitalists on the other. My unity is focused on civil society, on the unity of many community organisations we have on the ground. If there are differences between these organisations and conflict between them, then at the conference we can sort what these differences are. If the conflicts are of such proportion that we cannot iron them out, it will give an opportunity to understand each other. As I said, if we do not muster our power, we will be destroyed, and the world will be destroyed. We are the conservers of the world's moral order. We cannot live without a moral order, we have to have values. We have to resurrect them in order that we have justice and freedom. This is something that is not difficult to do. It was community organisations that founded the last bastion against apartheid, the United Democratic Front. The congress of the People was authored by similar organisations, coming together, as was the Freedom Charter, which was the basis of our constitution. Civil society won so much in the past, and why can we not do so in the present? We will work out our differences in a conference.

The last question is not so much about crime as about corruption in government. We have to unite and fight against it. This corruption survives on monies that we put into

government. It survives on our votes and our power. We have to work out ways and means of destroying this corruption. Unfortunately the government itself is not taking sufficient action against corruption within its midst. We the people will have to do so. We will have to get together our power through unity. Crime is a factor in our communities, and many have organised forums against drug abuse and so on. This is something we have to discuss, which we can do when we meet together as community organisations.

The challenges before us are enormous. If we accept the responsibility of organising democracy in our country, we have to work out solutions collectively. We have the intellectual capacity. More important we are motivated. We as civil society are also the repository of the moral order. Together we will overcome. Let us work towards that!

Sandile Mchunu from Abasha: We the poor have been silenced by these rich people through the media. How can we use the media against them?

Andile from Abasha: What can be done to revive our religious aspects of a moral order?

Shadrah Mohammed: It is difficult to see what the media can do, as the government is shutting journalists out of information challenges. I find the proposal by this government to sell policy access to businesses from between R3000 and R60 000 to be outrageous. What do we do with such a government?

Fatima Meer: What I find satisfying here is that there is already consensus between myself and many of the people who raised questions. Here is the basis for working together. The issues you raise are the ones we have to discuss, and we will do so in the convening conference of the South African Social Forum, which will also be a forum of the Indaba movement. Together we will raise these issues again and try to come up with solutions. We have enough intelligence and passion to do so. These are the resources with which we will work. Thank you very much for this discussion, and may we meet again quite soon.

Donald Ramela: from Freedom of Expression Institution and I'm also an activist in the Anti-Privatisation Forum. Thanks for the lecture Professor Meer. The kind of lessons that you gave us, from the liberation struggle and now, when we compare the two, they are important. Today we've got multifaceted struggles and we're battling to identify these. Struggles against homelessness, joblessness, HIV/AIDS, the list is endless. The majority of people are not working. During the liberation struggle more people were working and there was more stability. Those of us fighting the last battle, the system is tough, the government is unforgiving. We are stigmatised, called popcorns and ultra-left and so many other things. It is so tough, Professor. And we are battling around the question of ideology. In this hall, many people understand what you are saying. But there are so many people outside who can't understand.

Olia Bade: I'm from the university. People are looking for unity, but also leadership, someone who can unite all these organisations, very much like the struggle against apartheid. The struggle was centred around Nelson Mandela who became the icon of unity. So my question to you is whether it is possible within the current civil society that there are people who can be identified?

Fatima: The organisations throw up leaders themselves. Once we are together we will find them uniting. Of course there are leaders and we have to recognize them. But let us not feel hopeless before the battle. Let us go in hope and win the war!