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# Public relations (PR) in nation-building: An exploration of the South African presidential discourse

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### ABSTRACT

This research explored public relations strategies employed in the presidential discourses for building relationships among South Africans in a democracy. This was done through analyzing political discourses of the three South African Presidents since 1994–2009 of Mandela, Mbeki and Zuma. A comparative discourse analysis was used to examine five important dimensions in political discourses concerning nation-building. Different themes were identified: relationship managing, democracy, national identity, and national development. Additionally, an exploratory discourse analysis was conducted to further investigate the characteristics of the presidential political discourses on nation-building. These analyses in the present research provide contributions to foster cooperation, developing a common national identity agenda and social cohesion using political campaign strategies, particularly for government, policymakers and public relations practitioners (PRP's), government communication practitioners, who strive to build a better relationship between government and the public.

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## 1. Introduction

In South Africa's post-apartheid history, the African National Congress-led government has undertaken a distinct nation-building program in pursuit of a truly united, democratic and prosperous South Africa (ANC, 2007). The unification of all South African is an important national policy of the government.

South Africa's transition to democracy was characterized by numerous attempts to de-racialize and bring together a diverse society which, had lived through many years of forced segregation and racial antagonism. Part of this transition involved writing a new Constitution, and engaging in endeavours such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Conference on Racism in 2000 and the World Conference against Racism and Xenophobia in 2001. These national projects were aimed at promoting an awareness of the atrocities that occurred under apartheid, in an attempt to ensure that the events would neither be forgotten nor repeated (ANC, 2007).

On a smaller scale, laws were introduced in various sectors of society, such as education and industry, with the intention of promoting equality for all and creating an atmosphere of tolerance and non-discrimination. The situation calls for continuous analysis and examination of the course of events rather than despair. It is only through vigorous steps that necessary adjustments could be made and realistic action taken in the crafting of effective paths to national unity and development for the benefit of all South Africans.

Britten (2005) asserts that the day before the presidential inauguration of 1994, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu made an ebullient speech which he ended with these words, "we of many cultures, languages and races are become one

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nation. We are the rainbow people of God” (Tutu, 1994, p. 261). Tutu’s words encapsulate an approach to nation-building that held sway in South Africa following the 1994 elections. When the new South Africa was born on the 27th April 1994, South Africans began the difficult process of reconstructing the political, economic and social frameworks of a country long plagued by division, violence and discrimination.

However, the dedicated commitment with which Mandela and the Government of National Unity assumed this challenge highlights the importance of national unity as a central goal in the state’s post-apartheid nation-building program. At his 1994 inaugural speech in Pretoria, Nelson Mandela stated that, “the moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come we must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation-building, for the birth of a new world” (Mandela, 1994, p. 2). Since then, South Africa’s ANC-led government has sought to enhance unity and cooperation through their nation-building program and has consciously worked for the construction of a new, broad, united national identity among its citizens.

On the one hand, in 1998, then Deputy-President Thabo Mbeki warned that South Africa remained a country of two nations, divided by both wealth and race (Mbeki, 1998). Far from an “unfortunate historical phenomenon”, racism remains a powerful basis for discrimination and disparity throughout South African society (Mbeki, 1998, p. 5). In many regards, economic inequalities have worsened in the early 21st century, accompanied by a widespread rise in crime and violence. In 2008, the country witnessed an atrocious wave of xenophobic violence, largely against foreign Africans. Later that year, the ruling ANC party suffered the defection of some of its members who formed a new political party, Congress of the People (COPE), in the wake of political controversies leading up to the 2009 general election.

In 2013, there is an emergence of two new political parties namely; Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Agang South Africa. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is a South African political party started by expelled former African National Congress (ANC) Youth League president Julius Malema, and his allies. Malema has been announced as “commander in chief” of the EFF, heading the “Central Command Team” which serves as the central structure of the party (Mail & Guardian, 05 September, 2013).

Agang South Africa is a South African political party, formed by anti-apartheid activist Mamphela Ramphele on 18 February 2013. The party encourages reforms towards direct governance, striving to “build a stronger democracy in which citizens will be at the centre of public life”; and intends to challenge the governing African National Congress in the 2014 general election (Daily Maverick, 28 February, 2013). Thus, South Africa today seems to remain very much a divided country economically, politically and socially.

On the other hand, nation-building is reflected in a two-pronged approach, coupling political and socio-economic transformation with the social-psychological aspect of forging a broad and inclusive national consciousness. In this process the role of communication in nation-building and national identity formation is critical. Deutsch (1963a), a leading historical scholar of the 1960s on nation-building, believes that individuals and small groups become a nation when various mediums allow people to share common social communication habits. Deutsch continues to argue that communication is a medium that creates the potential for members of a nation such as the South African one to transmit information to each other for new purposes.

Deutsch’s (1963a) understanding of communication is the concept of patterns for teamwork or integration. This is therefore in relation to the concept of unity in diversity as it is termed in South Africa. According to Thomas (1997, p. 5), “the right to communication is central to the maintenance of national identity over time”.

However, almost twenty years later, the notion of a broad united South African identity shared by the majority of citizens remains elusive. Rather than a singular national identity, race labels of “Black,” “Coloured,” “Indian” and “White,” as well as ethnicity such as “Afrikaans,” “Xhosa” and “Zulu” continue to define, at least in part, the identity of many. As with any state possessing such rich cultural diversity, this multitude of personal identifications presents challenges for social cohesion within South Africa. This study examined the contribution that public relations have made in a developing country like South Africa within the democratic and developmental context. During the 20th century there was a growing concern articulated by governments that effective governance necessitates two-way communication between government and the people; that government needs to listen to the people to obtain information regarding their needs; and that the government needs to be people-centred and put the people first.

It also examines the South African presidential political discourses for nation-building. It is divided into two sections. The first section compares presidential discourses/speeches of the former and current South African presidents on their articulation of nation-building. Secondly it looks at the characteristics of the presidential political discourse on the nation-building agenda.

This research was based on an exploratory discourse analysis of state of the nation addresses, inaugural addresses and both regarded as presidential speeches. In addition news stories and or debates, looking at the implications for development communication for nation-building.

## 2. Theoretical departure

Building a nation or promoting national unity, which is one of the historic objectives of post-apartheid South Africa, was set out to give shape to the new historical community that is evolving. During the first ten years (1994–2004) of democracy, political narratives about the rainbow nation displayed optimism that was largely shared with the public. The ‘discourse of hope’ was evident in the popular media that introduced diverse public relations programs and campaigns such as ‘Proudly

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