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AFRIKAANS AS AN OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: THE NEW LANGUAGE OF RECONCILIATION?

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The adoption of the *Use of Official Languages Act* last year provides us with an opportunity to consider the role of language in our society - and our language rights in terms of the Constitution. The reality is that language can divide communities or bring them closer together, especially in a diverse and multilingual country such as South Africa.

The installation of the Government of National Unity in May 1994 concluded a long period in which language had often been a cause of division. This includes the struggle of Afrikaans to attain status as an official language together with English and Dutch in the early decades of the 20th century, as well as the Soweto uprisings in 1976 about Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in schools.

Before the advent of our new constitutional dispensation Afrikaans was able to establish itself as a language well capable to articulate all the complexities of science, culture and commerce. In fact, it is one of only four world languages to achieve standardization and use in all walks of public and private life during the 20th century.

Before 1994, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages of the Republic of South Africa. The country's other nine indigenous languages enjoyed official status only in the black states that had been established in terms of the National Party's policy of 'separate development'. Although some steps were taken to develop them at the universities that were established in the black states - they were marginalized and neglected in the rest of the country. Section 6(1) of the final Constitution - flowing from the negotiations at CODESA and in the Constituent Assembly - recognises South Africa's multilingual character and provides for 11 official languages. It recognises "the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people" and calls on the state "to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages".

The language provisions of the Constitution entrench the multilingual character of South Africa and because due recognition is given to all language groups in the country by the Constitution; it *ought* to serve as a factor which brings our communities closer together. There are, however, indications that despite these constitutional guarantees, language might once again become a cause for division rather than unity.

The way in which especially Afrikaans encounters hostility forms part of this question.

Afrikaans is a non-racial, inclusive language. Large numbers of South Africans speak Afrikaans as a first or second language - regardless of their race. According to the 2011 Census, brown South Africans accounted for the largest group who spoke Afrikaans in the country at more than 3.44 million people. This number is followed by white South Africans at 2.71 million, black South Africans at 602 166 and Indian South Africans at 58 700 respectively. Afrikaans also extends beyond South Africa's borders. In Namibia, Afrikaans



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enjoys constitutional recognition as language of instruction in schools and is also spoken in parts of Botswana, Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

Yet, despite its status as official language, Afrikaans is under pressure almost everywhere in South Africa. This includes the electronic media, business, the courts and government administration. Traditional Afrikaans universities and schools are under pressure to switch to English - often under the guise of transformation.

Two examples include correctional services employee Mr GWS Heyns and the Fochville High School in North-West Province. Heyns was informed by a departmental moderating committee that they would not evaluate his departmental performance appraisal because he had completed it in Afrikaans.

Fochville - an Afrikaans-medium high school - is being forced to accept 37 English-speaking pupils, most of whom happen to be black. The department alleges that the school is preserving "racial privilege" despite the school's SGB stating that it would have been happy to accept the pupils had they chosen Afrikaans as the medium of instruction. However, experience has shown that as soon as English is accepted as a parallel medium language it often drives out Afrikaans - and thus deprives Afrikaans-speakers of all races of their constitutional right to education in the language of their choice.

The fact that Afrikaans as an official language is under political pressure, is not only unconstitutional and negative for Afrikaans, but also has serious implications for the other official indigenous languages. If Afrikaans - with all of its historic advantages - cannot survive as a de facto official language - what chance do the other official indigenous languages have of developing to their full potential, as section 6(2) directs? This infringes on the language rights of more than 90% of South Africans whose home language is not English. It seriously undermines the multilingual nature of South Africa and makes nonsense of the requirement in section 6(4) that "all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably".

Section 9(3) of the Constitution states that "the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including language". If the state increasingly neglects the language rights of minorities in South Africa, already fragile communal relations could suffer further damage. Unless active steps are taken to develop and advance South Africa's indigenous languages - especially at official level - they may soon be in a weaker position than before 1994.

This would put South Africa in the same situation as other post-colonial African states where colonial languages (such as English, French and Portuguese) were associated with power, modernity, school, government and officialdom, whereas African languages were relegated to the domestic domain, informal use and primordial solidarities.

Government must decide whether it wants language to be a dividing or uniting factor in our national life. If it wishes to preserve our rich linguistic heritage and promote unity in



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diversity it should carry out its responsibility of honouring its constitutional obligations regarding official language use. It ought to promote the use of not only *some* official languages, but *all* the official languages as protected in our Constitution - and should also create an atmosphere conducive to the fostering of a mutual respect for the official languages in all spheres of society.

If this is done in line with our Constitution, Afrikaans - together with the other official languages - can create a unique post-colonial society where all the official indigenous languages take their rightful place next to English. This will help to preserve our rich linguistic heritage and will also have a positive effect on the inter-communal relations between different linguistic communities. Much will depend on the manner in which the Government decides to implement the *2012 Use of Official Languages Act*.