

17 March 2023

Media Statement

From the desk of the General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana

SACC STATEMENT: PROPOSED 20 MARCH PUBLIC PROTEST

Many member churches of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) have expressed concern, apprehension, and some consternation about what to expect on Monday 20 March, the eve of Human Rights Day, in view of what has been circulating in various communication platforms in the public domain. There have been intimations of blockages of transport routes, violence against those who do not join the protest, and threats of action against commercial services like shops that stay open. Given the experience of July 2021, many businesses and commercial centres may close and apply the “no work, no pay” principle that denies incomes for workers who would have wanted to be in their work posts. Again, with the 21 July memory still with us, the notion of a “shutdown” raises the horror spectre of wanton destruction and looting that leaves communities in desperation.

The SACC recognises that the South African constitution provides for all South Africans and all organised formations to express themselves about any matter that affects them and their lives. Section 17 of Chapter Two, the Bill of Rights, prescribes for this and says, “Everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions”, thus providing constitutional protection for these rights. In this regard, the Economic Freedom Fighters, (EFF) and any other formation has the right to express themselves on national matters through protests. This right is fundamental to our constitutional order and must be guaranteed to all. Its exercise must be within the law and the limitations that the constitution puts to its exercise.

That right to protest does not cancel the rights of other citizens to live their lives free of intimidation, cohesion, violence and freedom to choose to participate or not in a protest that is within the bounds of the law. The constitution provides limitations to these freedoms in respect of how the exercise thereof may impact the freedoms of other citizens. Therefore, such a right must be exercised peacefully and with due regard to the rights of others.

The country is facing serious challenges like the persistent energy crisis that has a long history of neglect and corruption, the rising cost of living, the high levels of crime and the deepening levels of poverty and inequality.

As the SACC we believe these matters demand of all of us to work together in finding solutions that will benefit our people, especially those who are poor and vulnerable. It is our prayer that all South Africans including our political leaders can put aside our narrow interests and work together to solve the problems we face as a country.

The rhetoric and social media posts that have raised alarms preceding the 20 March public protests, paint a picture, not of a peaceful and voluntary protest, but that of organised intimidation and coercion to confront other citizens who choose to get on with their regular activities; thus impinging on their freedoms. That is a recipe for mayhem and public disorder that will most likely turn violent. The constitution specifically says that, “Everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person”, which includes “the right not to be deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause”; and the right “to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources”. With this understanding, let those who choose to exercise their right to protest, do so peacefully, without attempting to draw in those who do not want to protest, as it is also their right not to.

Apart from the manner of conducting the protest, the SACC is concerned about the shocks to the economy that such action will cause, not to mention the inevitable public inconvenience of vandalised infrastructure, and the costs in money and the time that it takes to rebuild - something we are still living with in KwaZulu Natal, following both the 21 July destruction and the fateful floods of 2022.

The SACC applauds the organised taxi industry for its decision to function as normal in serving commuters on Monday, and calls on security services to ensure that commuters and properties in major centres are protected, and major thoroughfares and supply systems remain open for the benefit of citizens.

We also acknowledge the call by the leader of the EFF in a press conference on Wednesday 15 March, to those who will participate in the march on Monday to do so peacefully and anyone who does not do so, to be dealt with by the law of the country and his further commitment to discipline within the party all those who cause mayhem. His emphasis that this is to be a peaceful protest is highly welcomed by the SACC.

We also urge security forces to restrain themselves from using lethal weapons; and that standard crowd control measures be applied. We should not have the unchecked impunity for mayhem such as we saw in July 2021, with hardly any effort at preventing the daylight robbery that was displayed on our TV screens.

The proposed Monday protests are a further manifestation of the social and political disintegration of our hugely divided society. We do not enjoy a common sense of identity with values that we all embrace. South Africans need to rally towards a common nationhood bound together by love, mutuality of respect, honour, integrity and basic old fashioned decency. We appeal to faith communities of all traditions to use this weekend to pray for South Africa. The time has come for faith communities to propagate standards of public engagement that advance the common good, and invigorate hope. Hope is the last thing to die especially for the people of faith.

There is a Chinese proverb that says, "You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair." We call on all citizens not to allow "birds" of negative actions to build on the "hair" of our young democracy and our beautiful land. Flying over the land are dangerous and destructive forces of corruption, bad leadership, patronage, neglect of the poor, violence and preying on the frustrations of the people. These cannot and must not be allowed to build their nests here. All people of faith and all citizens are called upon to focus our energies on things that can lead to positive change.

Let us dedicate prayer time this weekend in our congregations, to pray for our country.

—ENDS—

Media enquiries:

Khuthalani Khumalo
SACC Communications Consultant
South African Council of Churches
Tel: 084 074 1285 | Email: khuthalani@khuthalani.net



About SACC

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) is an ecumenical association of affiliated Christian Churches, and blocks of churches such as The Evangelical Alliance and the Council of African Independent Churches, and the International Federation of Christian Churches, with a mandate to lead common Christian action that works for moral witness in South Africa. SACC does not exist for the propagation and the advancement of its doctrinal position, but is the place where our diverse interpretations of our faith come together in action for **social justice**. It therefore seeks to achieve a visible, just socio-economic and ecological impact, enabled through engaged churches-in-community for a reconciled South Africa and our sub-continent.

