

Zuma Spends Day With Afrikaners

Written by Rudi Prinsloo
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ANC president Jacob Zuma spent the day on Thursday wooing the Afrikaans community, a move he insisted was not mere electioneering.

"Our being here today is not because we are campaigning. We are here because we are engaging with the Afrikaner community which we believe is important in terms of this country," he told the group, comprised of agricultural, women's and cultural organisations.

At the meeting at the Hilton Hotel in Sandton, Johannesburg, Zuma said: "Of all the white groups that are in South Africa, it is only the Afrikaners that are truly South Africans in the true sense of the word."

With the audience leaning forward in their seats, he said: "Up to this day, they [the Afrikaners] don't carry two passports, they carry one. They are here to stay."

Zuma was heartened by what he saw at the private Afrikaner ranch Orania in the Northern Cape and delicately broached the apartheid era with a touch of humour.

He said the Afrikaners were "innovative" in their approach to complaints about apartheid, giving it new names, like "separate development", whenever there was a grievance.

Zuma sought to explain his remark that the ANC would rule until Jesus returned, saying this was a "political expression".

"Talking about Jesus is not abusing his name, its actually saying historically this is what the ANC is all about," he said, summing up the day's talks with the community.

No harm was intended, he said. "It's just a political expression that we [the ANC] are strong and will be strong for a long time."

"I want to apologise if this reality sits uncomfortably with others."

Zuma added that he was baptised and he knew Jesus.

"I fear God... it's [the comments] not because I'm despising God, not at all," he said.

The ruling party's presidential pick recapped the many issues raised by the Afrikaner community, including language, land reform, crime, the use of his signature tune Awulethu' Mshini Wami, rural development and affirmative action.

Zuma appeared relaxed as he took to the podium after ANC treasurer general Mathews Phosa, engaging with the audience who welcomed his summation of the talks with outbursts of applause.

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Zuma's comments on crime were particularly well received by his captive audience.

"We are absolutely serious about dealing with crime," he said, adding that the coming government may "lose friends" in its approach to crime.

"Because some people love this soft approach to criminals and I have a problem with that."

"I don't think we should tolerate criminals who kill people... and apply the law in the same way as we are applying it to citizens who are adhering to the law."

He called for a change of the police's "psychology".

Zuma said punishment of police members found committing crimes should be "doubled".

"I don't know if we will succeed... the democrats and lawyers... may argue but you cannot put the trust of the country to a person who is actually a criminal."

Zuma emphasised that the "momentum of the engagement" with the Afrikaners had to be maintained.

"I would suggest the organisers... we could then say at some point let us come back again."

Louis Meintjies, deputy president of the Transvaal Agricultural Union (TAU), said Thursday's meeting was an opportunity for the community to present its case.

"... hopefully after this we'll get something out. We are part of South Africa, we are here to stay, we won't leave so we need to take this forward," he told Sapa.

Food security was a key issue which Zuma raised during his summation of the session.

"If we are able to solve food security, we almost solve half the problems," he said.

Meintjies' presentation to the ANC leadership included the lack of policy for the commercial agricultural sector and the need to protect farmers, he said.

"We should first look at food security... there is a place for land reform... they [government] must first secure food. We must protect those three areas, the commercial farmers, the land and the water," he said.

Zuma would have a one-on-one meeting with TAU in the near future, he said.

On the pending corruption charges against Zuma, Meintjies said: "The law must take its course... that's his issue, not ours."

Dr Jackie Grobler, who presented on behalf of youth organisation, Die Voortrekkers, said many Afrikaners felt they were being marginalised.

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"... we want to combat that feeling of despair that they might develop after school when they find it difficult to get a job... we really hope that Zuma will use the opportunity to really unite us again as I feel we were in about 1995."

"Since then the ties have loosened."

He blamed the loosening of the ties on the Mbeki era.

"Mr Mbeki let an opportunity slip to reach out to the Afrikaners because he was preoccupied to such an extent with the African Renaissance.

"For some reason he regarded us as enemies whereas we had already taken farewell of Apartheid... we were given a cold shoulder and now things I hope will change, I am sure it will," he said.

After a lengthy summary of the meeting, Zuma closed with an English translation of an Afrikaans poem.

"Baie dankie," he concluded.

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