Honouring the Legacy of Mandela: Becoming Active Agents of Change in 2014
Imam Dr A Rashied Omar
It is my considered view that the year 2014 could turn out to be a decisive year in the history of our beloved country. I am not venturing to make such a bold statement because I have any special divine insights but rather because I believe that a number of factors have coalesced at this critical juncture in the history of our country to produce what I interpret to be ripe conditions for social transformation. In particular, I believe our times are pregnant with possibilities for advancing the struggle for the dignity of all the people of our country, more especially the poor and marginalised majority.

My purpose in this khutbah is to call on all South Africans to let 2014 be the year in which we commit ourselves to become active agents of social change.

**An Islamic Theory of Social Change**

Let me begin by briefly reflecting on an Islamic theory of social change. I shall use the well-known Qur'anic verse 11 from *Surah al-Ra'ad*, chapter 13, as the basis of my analysis:
God will not change the condition of a people as long as they do not change themselves (Q13:11)

It is crystal clear from the above verse that the Qur’anic theory of change is not deterministic. Consonant with this Qur’anic teaching, transformation and social change according to the Islamic worldview is not merely the outcome of objective conditions, technically known in Islamic terminology as *ibtila‘*, but is also the result of the moral choices and ethical responsibilities that human beings assume. In other words, human beings have critical agency in realizing transformation and social change. This Islamic theory of social change thus asserts that even though the objective conditions may be ripe for social transformation, this does not occur automatically. It requires a subjective factor, the critical role of individuals who join together in collective action to seize the opportunities of the moment for social transformation.

**Conditions for Social Transformation**

In 2014 there are a number of factors that have come together to produce conditions that we as conscientious Muslims and responsible South African citizens should exploit in order to advance the ongoing struggle for greater social justice and economic transformation. 2014 could be the year in which we make significant progress in closing the huge gap between rich and poor and restoring the dignity of the poor and marginalised in our country. I would like to identify some of these salient factors that have coalesced at this moment in our country’s history.

First, on 14 January 2014, we will mark 40 days since the passing of one of our country’s greatest sons, Nelson Rohilahla Mandela. This is a good time for us to transform our mourning and celebration of Mandela’s rich life into even deeper introspection and an even greater emulation of the noble values of social justice that he embodied. One of the key dimensions of Mandela’s legacy that beckons at this time is usefully encapsulated in the following quotation from him:
"Overcoming poverty is not a task of charity, it is an act of justice. Like Slavery and Apartheid, poverty is not natural. It is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings. Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom."

The question facing us at this time is how can we take forward this critical dimension of Mandela’s rich legacy?

Second, Mandela’s passing has come at a time when disappointment in our country’s leadership and disenchanted with the social conditions in our country is deep and widespread. There is a growing national consensus that corruption is threatening and undermining our hard-earned democratic rights and freedoms. Serious crime and violence, especially against women and children, remains a blot on our society’s collective conscience. All of these problems have been exacerbated by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and lack of basic services such as sanitation and health care. The cumulative effect of all of this negativity has induced despair and alienation across many sectors of our society. The humiliating spectre of the booing of President Jacob Zuma at Mandela’s official memorial service was illustrative of this disenchantment. Furthermore, recently we have seen growing calls by individual citizens and trade unions for President Jacob Zuma to be impeached.

The third factor that makes 2014 a critical time for change is that we are entering an election year. We are four months away from celebrating twenty years of our new democracy and participating in our young nation’s fifth democratic elections. This election year will no doubt allow South Africans to reflect seriously about the performance of our political parties and politicians and to exercise their vote discerningly.

Fourth, the decision in December 2013 by one of the largest trade union movements in COSATU, the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) to not support the ANC in the 2014 National elections, has led to what political commentators have described as a realignment of not only political power dynamics in South Africa but more significantly ideological debates. NUMSA’s decision stems from workers’ disillusionment with State economic policies that
they believe do not substantively redress the huge economic inequalities that continue to exist in our country. The focus of future national debates will fittingly highlight not only the legacy of apartheid inequalities, but also the rampant economic inequalities that have grown in the past two decades since democratic rule.

Fifth, the vibrant South African social activism that characterised the struggle against Apartheid, is beginning to rediscover its dynamism. A rich array of civil society groups have emerged and grown significantly during the past few years. These groups and organisations have begun to form coalitions to hold government to account and to give voice to the needs and aspirations of ordinary citizens. This is an encouraging development that needs to be celebrated and supported.

It is my considered view that the coming together of the above five factors have produced ideal conditions through which we as South African citizens could work towards achieving greater socio-economic justice and dignity for all the people of our country.

Five Strategies for Becoming Agents of Social Change in 2014

I would like to propose five (5) concrete strategies that we should adopt in our endeavours to become active agents of social change in 2014.

First and foremost, we need to eschew apathy and cynicism. Too many of us are armchair critics and indulge in whining about the many things that are going wrong in our young democracy. Our apathy and cynicism renders us accomplices in the malaise of our society and we become part of the narrative of hopelessness. At this critical juncture in the history of our young democracy we need to keep the spirit of hope alive in our communities. We need to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit against all odds, epitomised in the life of Nelson Mandela. We can achieve this by channeling our frustrations with the decadent trends in our society in constructive ways that will bring about the positive changes that we all desire. 2014 could be the year in which we transform widespread apathy and cynicism into hope and social change.
Second, we need to become informed and responsible citizens so that those in power can be held accountable for their political and moral mandates. From an Islamic perspective, democracy does not merely mean casting one’s vote for this or that party every five years. The Islamic concept of shura or mutual consultation as presented in the Glorious Qur’an (Q42: 38) and exemplified in the practice of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is closer to the modern notion of participatory democracy. Participatory democracy holds that the critical motor of social change does not lie in the support for this or that political party, but rather in holding politicians and parties accountable for their actions. Shura thus demands that we become active citizens who contribute to the building of consultative and transparent social institutions. By embracing participatory democracy we strengthen our capacity to root out corruption, to stem the tide of violence and crime and to better address the needs of the poor.

This brings me to the third strategy that we should adopt to become active agents of social change in 2014. That is, we need to join and strengthen our civil society organizations. This is the only real guarantee for a healthy democracy. Joining organisations whose primary aim is the promotion of human rights and socio-economic justice is a great sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) exemplified in his joining of the Hilf al-Fudul (the Pact of the Virtuous) when he was only 20 years old. According to contemporary Muslim scholar, Tariq Ramadan, Hilf al-Fudul represents the high importance Islamic Ethics accords the promotion of socio-economic justice and the legitimacy of forming alliances with non-Muslims in the promotion of socio-economic justice. (Following Muhammad, Oxford University Press, 2007).

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, we need to work hard to expose and mitigate against the devastating consequences of the neo-liberal and capitalist economic policies being pursued by our post-Apartheid government. The capitalist environment in which post-Apartheid South Africa subsists has bred attitudes of entitlement and greed in all strata of our society, rich and poor alike. Unless the moral values and behavioural patterns that define our society are transformed from a culture of greed to that of a culture of altruism and caring, our country’s progressive Constitution and Bill of Rights will remain an unrealized dream. We can all play a critical role in assisting with this challenging task of systemic transformation and moral regeneration by supporting progressive forces that have
called for a reassessment of our country’s economic policies, including the newly proposed National Development Plan.

Last but not least, each one of us together with our families need to take active steps to consciously build bridges across racial and class divides. The spacial legacy of the apartheid group areas means that we continue to live in segregated areas. It requires of us each new day to resolve to take active steps to bridge the racial and class divides that separate us as citizens from each other. We should see this as part of the spiritual struggle (jihad al-nafs) to cleanse and purify our souls from the vestiges of racism and class prejudices. So too we should be vigilant of sectarianists within the Muslim community that seek to promote bigotry and prejudices against people of other faiths.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, let us commit ourselves to becoming active agents of social change in 2014. Let us seize this moment and ensure that 2014 becomes a year in which we advance the struggle for social and economic justice in our country in significant ways.

We give thanks to the congregants of the Claremont Main Road Masjid for their commitment to a socially responsive vision of Islam and for their love, compassion, and affection for each other. We pray that the wonderful spirit of solidarity that has been nurtured through this past year will continue to gather momentum during 2014.

I end with the reading of a special apt and relevant prayer for 2014 produced by a dear friend and colleague Omid Safi:

> May 2014 be a year that sees the discomforted comforted, the orphans cared for, the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the homeless provided with shelter. May there be a widening of the circle of compassion, may there be a real peace rooted in justice, and above all else, may all of us be participants in making it so.
Claremont Main Road Masjid Tribute

To

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

(18 July 1918 – 5 December 2013)

The Claremont Main Road Masjid (CMRM) joins our fellow compatriots in South Africa and people all over the world in mourning the death of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. We extend our sincere condolences to his family and close friends and our mourning world.

In paying tribute to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela it would be easy to confer a messianic status on the personality we lovingly called Tata Madiba. Madiba is the embodiment of the South African heroes and heroines who sacrificed their personal lives so that we may be free. In this tribute, we pay homage and give thanks for a life that epitomized the concept of ‘Ubuntu’, of living your life through others. Here was a man embodied with some extraordinary human qualities and some frailties, which he used to the benefit of the people of South Africa and inspired countless millions in the rest of the world.

We are thankful that Nelson Mandela had the love and compassion to emerge from 27 years of incarceration without an iota of bitterness to lead South Africa onto the democratic pathway. We are thankful that his Humanity averted a catastrophic end to the apartheid state. We are thankful that Mandela often chose the middle way of compromise over political brinkmanship. We are thankful that Mandela always advocated policies which were driven by the ‘greater good’ rather than selfish interests. We are thankful that Mandela chose to be inclusive rather than parochial. We are thankful that he was around to oversee the transition and emergence of the democratic South Africa.

In August 2010 the South African Muslim National Network awarded Nelson Mandela a lifetime achievement award in recognition of his service to humanity on behalf of all South African Muslims. The inscription aptly proclaimed:
“Mr. Mandela’s living embodiment of forgiveness, compassion and humility are traits we can all admire and emulate”.

There are many other great qualities and words of wisdom that will abide with us but one quotation that adorns the conclusion of his autobiography Long Walk to Freedom and that should live with us forever is the following:

“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.”

The greatest honour we can bestow on the memory of Madiba is to embrace this call of responsibility that comes with our freedom. This is a responsibility that should not only fall on our current leadership, but on all of us as conscientious citizens, to continue the struggle for social justice and dignity for all who live in our beautiful land.

Nelson Mandela was born into a time where his humanity and humanness, discipline and diligence, love and compassion and spirit of sacrifice, enabled him to endure tremendous personal pain and suffering and ultimately leave a lasting legacy and an indelible mark on the pages of history.

CMRM expresses its gratitude for the remarkable contribution of Nelson Mandela to the struggles of the oppressed and exploited masses of South Africa for a life of dignity and equality.

May his spirit of sacrifice and witness to justice continue to inspire.

...From God We Come and to God is our Return.

Hamba Kahle Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela!
In this khutbah Imam Dr A Rashied Omar proposes five (5) strategies that could enable us to honour the rich legacy of Mandela by becoming active agents of social change in 2014.

He identifies the conditions at this critical juncture in our country's history that could assist us in making significant progress in closing the huge gap between rich and poor and restoring the dignity of the marginalised in our country.