



COOL POLITICS CAFÉ DIALOGUE AT THE HUMAN RIGHTS FESTIVAL: CONCEPT NOTE

DATE: SATURDAY, 28 MARCH 2026

Venue: Constitutional Hill, 1 Kotze Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg

POLARISATION AS A SOCIETAL FRACTURE: ANALYSIS OF 32 YEARS INTO SOUTH AFRICA'S DEMOCRACY

In Partnership with the Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and Pan-African Parliament CSO Forum.

Contextual Background:

Polarisation is increasingly recognised as a societal fracture, a force that deepens divisions and obstructs the resolution of social conflicts. When societies split into antagonistic camps, compromise becomes impossible, trust in institutions erodes, and democracy itself is endangered.

South Africa's current political moment illustrates this vividly. After the ANC lost its majority in the 2024 elections, President Cyril Ramaphosa launched a National Dialogue to forge a new social compact. Yet the inaugural convention to launch the dialogue process was boycotted by foundations representing the legacies of Thabo Mbeki, Steve Biko, FW de Klerk, Robert Sobukwe, and Desmond and Leah Tutu. Their absence highlights the fragility of consensus building in a polarised society and raises urgent questions about how dialogue can be made inclusive and effective.

At the Human Rights Festival, this conversation will explore polarisation's impact on South Africa's 32 year democracy as a case study and ask how civil society, youth, state and African Multilateral Organisations can help bridge divides. The festival itself is dedicated to showcasing and amplifying the work of hundreds of NGOs, inspiring young activists, and igniting dialogue around human rights issues. Through exhibitions, debates, round tables, and creative expression, it encourages participants to interrogate their own values and imagine fairer collective futures.

Hosted by Democracy Works, Pan-African Parliament (PAP), and PAP CSO Forum, this dialogue will connect global insights on polarisation with South Africa's and African Continent lived experiences, offering practical strategies to restore trust, strengthen democratic resilience, and build a culture of human rights that thrives on inclusivity and active participation.

The dialogue will also be informed by DWF's [Polarisation Project](#) that seeks to understand and track the extent of polarisation in South Africa including select countries of Southern Africa, notably Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.



Objectives:

The dialogue aims to:

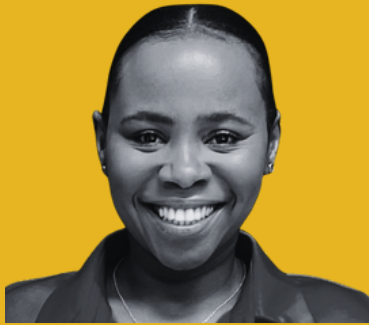
- Unpack the concept of polarisation as a societal fracture and its implications for democracy
- Examine the South African National Dialogue as a case study of polarisation's impact on consensus building.
- Explore consequences such as political violence, institutional distrust, and democratic erosion.
- Highlight the upcoming 2026 Local Government Elections as a critical test of South Africa's democratic resilience, with particular attention to the risks posed by declining youth participation.

Expected Outcomes:

- Deeper understanding of polarisation as a societal fracture that complicates consensus building and threatens South Africa's democratic resilience.
- Critical insights into South Africa's National Dialogue, highlighting both its potential and its limitations in addressing divisions within society.
- Heightened awareness of the 2026 Local Government Elections as a pivotal moment for South Africa's democracy, with recognition of the risks posed by declining voter turnout among youth.
- Clear articulation of the dangers of youth disengagement, emphasising how non-participation undermines democratic legitimacy and leaves space for entrenched divisions to harden.

Speakers:

YOLOKAZI MFUTO



Yolokazi Mfuto is Project Officer, Democracy and Civic Engagement Unit, Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria). She holds an Honours degree in Political Science and a BA in Politics, History and Communication from the University of Fort Hare. She has experience in student governance and leadership development through her work in Student Affairs at the University of Fort Hare. She also served with the United Nations Population Fund South Africa as a Youth Advisory Panel member and intern focusing on adolescent and youth issues in East and Southern Africa. Yolokazi is a co-founder of RE4M Envoy and currently serves as Civil Society Liaison Officer at the Pan-African Parliament.

DR REKGOTSOFETSE CHIKANE



Dr Rekgotsfetse Chikane is a lecture at the Wits School of Governance and is also a political commentator, activist and the author of *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation: The Politics behind the #MustFall Movements*. He is a research associate at the Wits Institute for Socio-Economic Research, the Education and Learning Manager for the Tayarisha Working Group on Digital Governance and Deputy Chairperson of the civil society movement, *Defend our Democracy*. His broad areas of research focus on Decolonial Thought, Development, Youth Politics, Complexity Economics and South African Public Policy.

MOEKETSI KOAHELA



Moeketsi Koahela is The Civil Society Liaison Officer of the Pan-African Parliament. He served in 2025 as Co-Chair of Youth20, the official youth engagement group of the Group of Twenty. He is also an expert panel member for the Democracy Works Foundation Polarisation Project. He previously served as Education and Training Officer in the Youth Activism Programme at the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (2023–2026) and as Chairperson of the National Youth Coalition, contributing to key sub-committees of the National Dialogue. Moeketsi holds a Master's degree in Sociology from University of the Witwatersrand, as well as an Honours and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and Psychology.



Dialogue Format:

The Cool Politics Café will feature an intergenerational panel including a youth representative, civil society, and a political actor exploring “Polarisation as a Societal Fracture: 32 Years into South Africa’s Democracy.” This 1 hour, 30 minutes guided dialogue will include Q&A sessions and use Mentimeter to enable dynamic interaction between the audience and panelists, ensuring an engaging and participatory discussion.

Partners:

Democracy Works Foundation:

Democracy Works Foundation (DWF) opened its doors in 2014 in South Africa in response to the weakening of public institutions, corruption and declining citizen participation. It is an organisation committed to promoting and building democracy in Southern Africa and supporting inclusive development and regional cooperation. DWF believes in developing homegrown and innovative solutions that support public officials and states to be more open, transparent, responsive and accountable. We also work to build the capacity of citizens and provide tools enabling them to better impact their democracies, meet their obligations and claim their rights. DWF works on the supply and demand side of democracy.

About Democracy Works Foundation Polarisation Project

Pan-African Parliament (PAP) and PAP CSO Forum

The Pan-African Parliament was established in March 2004, by Article 17 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, as one of the nine Organs provided for in the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community signed in Abuja, Nigeria, in 1991. The Protocol establishing the PAP was ratified by 49 Member States.

The PAP CSO Forum emanates from the partnership between the Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria and PAP through a Memorandum of Understanding signed in October 2017. Key among the objectives of this partnership is facilitating capacity building on human rights and democratisation in Africa, increasing the visibility of PAP and fostering a strong interaction between PAP and CSOs on the continent.