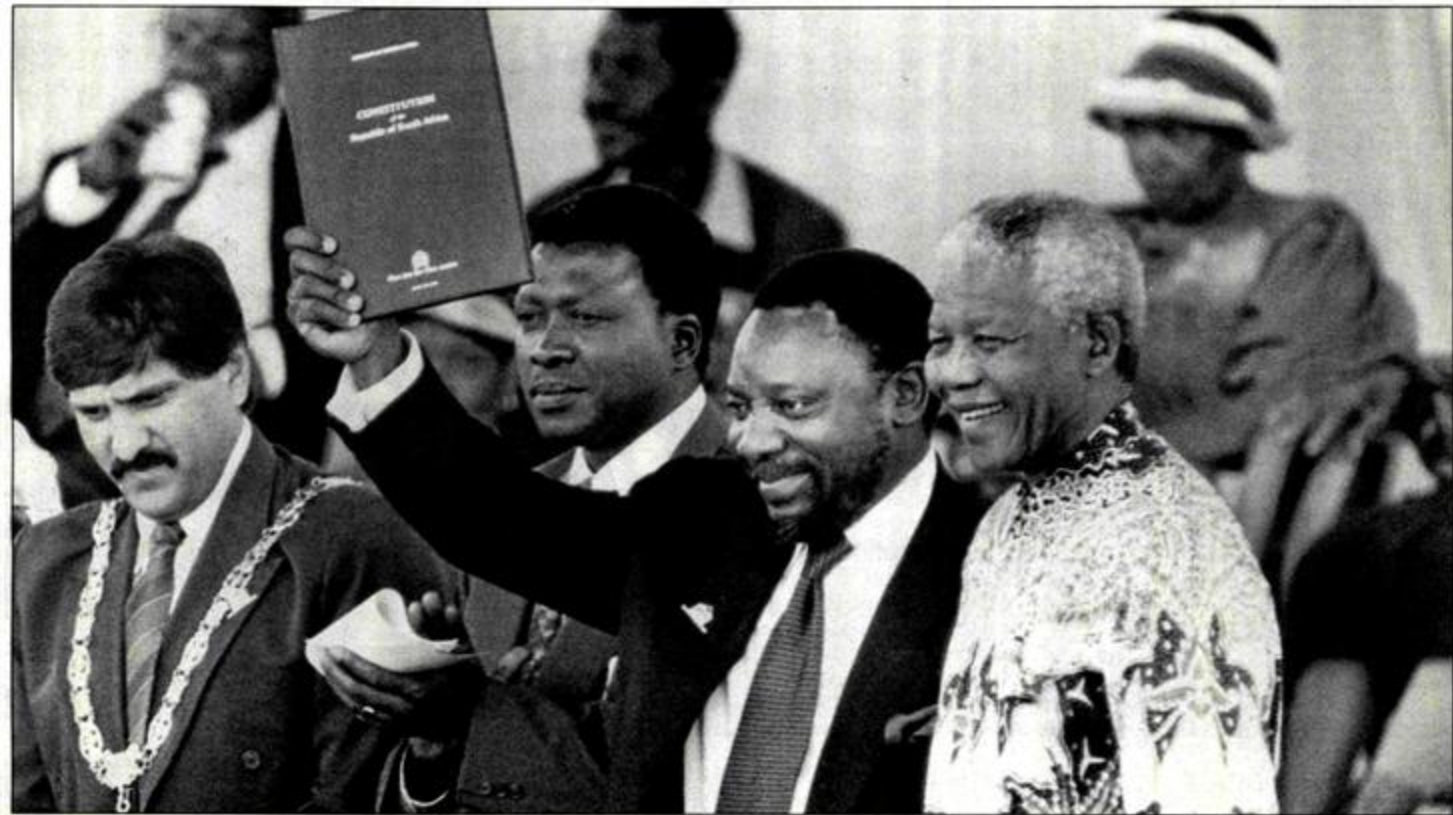


Rock of South Africa

When the social and political environment looks bleak, South Africans know that their constitution will shield them, writes **Cyril Ramaphosa**



NEW DAWN: President Nelson Mandela at the signing of the new South African Constitution in 1996 in Sharpeville. ANC secretary-general Cyril Ramaphosa holds up a copy
Picture: ROBBIE BOTHA

THIS year marks 15 years since we stood in the sun in Sharpeville as the first democratic Constitution of South Africa was signed into law by the father of our nation, Nelson Mandela.

Sharpeville was chosen as the place because that is where one of the worst violations of our people's human rights was perpetrated when 69 people were killed by the apartheid police.

It was an incredible moment, made more poignant by the long struggle that was fought to give birth to this precious document.

The smiles which accompanied the adoption of the new Constitution masked a bitter and protracted struggle for political ascendancy which went back generations. The process of negotiating SA's first democratic constitution began many years before — long before the ANC was unbanned in the 1990s, long before the secret meetings between ANC and government representatives in the late 1980s. It began when black South Africans first gathered to examine their lot under colonialism and began to articulate their vision of a different South Africa.

Seventeen years ago, in April 1994, 490 members of the newly elected Constitutional Assembly were given a mandate to draft a new constitution for our country.

From the start we knew we had embarked on a project that was both historic and filled with immense possibilities for the future of our country. I was convinced of victory and of ending the process on a positive basis. There was not a moment's doubt. Why was this so?

We were just agents, there to ensure that the goals of a nonracial, nonsexist democratic SA were reached. We were working with the giants of our movement — Joe Slovo, Walter Sisulu, OR Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Part of the adrenaline rush came from the fact that we were standing on their shoulders. How could we fail these people who had done so much? The other fear was failing our people. How would we explain that we were charged with the responsibility to deliver this final blow to apartheid and tell them that we had failed?

This politically diverse body of former enemies had come together and written a constitution that represented the will of the overwhelming majority of the people of this country — one law for one nation.

The document committed the government and every single one of us to a set of values that had been flagrantly disregarded in the past.

In the spirit of the Constitution

itself, the process had reached out to every corner of our country. It was democratic, open and transparent.

The writing of our Constitution has become an international reference point in law-making and an example to the world of what participatory democracy should be. It is a document that has universal and fundamental legitimacy and credibility.

Even when the environment seems more complex, as it is now, the one thing that we can always say is great about our nation is that we have a universally respected, phenomenal constitution and that document is our shield.

The Constitution is as relevant today as it was 15 years ago and it will be as relevant tomorrow. It is the repository of everything, everything that I ever dreamed of, that I ever wanted in my life. It gives me strength, it gives me hope, it protects me. If anyone were ever to violate my rights, our Constitution is my shield.

Never again will courts rubber stamp or stand helplessly by while unjust laws are made to take away peoples' rights, to detain and torture and deny them their dignity. Now judges are champions of the people, testing the actions of the

There is nothing that gives me more confidence

legislatures and the executive against the fine standards we have set ourselves in this Constitution.

The real legacy of the hard work leading up to the adoption of the Constitution lies in the awareness of what the Constitution means among the citizens of South Africa. We must nurture this and continue to claim the Constitution as our own.

The extent to which the Constitution has become part of people's lives is difficult to measure in any quantifiable way, but to my mind, it has had a profound effect on South African society. Ordinary people feel that they have the capacity to influence the laws and workings of the government. Our people are articulating their concerns about a range of issues, from quality of life to corruption. They are seeing that the Constitution provides ways and independent state institutions set up to tackle their rights through engagement rather than by violence.

As for me, this Constitution is my Rock of Gibraltar. It is the rock of my constitutional soul. There is nothing that gives me more confidence, more hope and more security and a sense of stability than our Constitution.

● *Ramaphosa is the chairman of the Constitution Hill Trust. He served as the chairman of the Constitutional Assembly, which was responsible for drafting the Constitution*