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Centre for Human Rights
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PRESS STATEMENT

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FREEDOM TO INSIST ON ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IS A MEANS TO GREATER ECONOMIC FREEDOM

It's Freedom Day, a day that reminds us that on 27 April 1994, South Africa had its first democratic elections. All South Africans were for the first time free to vote. Since then, millions of South Africans have expressed their political freedom in numerous elections at various levels of government.

On this historical day, we should recall some of the moments that brought us here. It was also on this day that the Interim Constitution, the predecessor of our current Constitution, came into force in 1994. Although the parties to the Multi-Party Negotiating Process adopted the Interim Constitution in 1993, its operation was postponed until the day of the first democratic elections. The elected representatives then had to agree on the text of a final Constitution, to replace the Interim Constitution. They did so, on 8 May 1996. On this day, then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki greeted the Constitution with his "I am an African" speech.

In the coming weeks, South Africa will commemorate this landmark: 20 years since the adoption of the final text of our current Constitution!

To many South Africans, there will be little cause for celebration. Their lived reality reminds us that voting is not the only freedom South

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Africans fought for. Former United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union address famously proposed four fundamental freedoms that people "everywhere in the world" ought to enjoy, namely freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. We, in South Africa, have much progress in realising our freedom of speech, for example to speak out and protest. We worship more freely than most people on this planet.

To many South Africans who do not experience "freedom from want", these freedoms may look irrelevant. They find themselves in a context of growing inequality. Around them, they see the persistence of historical patterns of privilege, and the emergence of new political elites apparently more interested in pursuing their own interests than the public good. A 2015 StatsSA report shows that about 27 million South Africans live in "extreme poverty", meaning that they live on R779 per month or less. The same report also shows that 37% of our people do not have the money to purchase adequate food items.

In these challenging times, we must keep in mind that there is a close link between political freedoms (such as being free to vote, to speak out and to protest) and economic freedoms. Economist Amartya Sen in his work *Development as Freedom* emphasised the relationship between freedom and development. He made the telling observation that large-scale famines have never happened in a democracy; and that they are likely to happen only in authoritarian systems lacking a free flow of information and transparency.

The Constitutional Court, the highest court in the land, recently found that President Jacob Zuma had failed to "uphold, defend and respect the Constitution as the supreme law of the land". The President was ordered to reimburse some of the money used to make improvements to his private Nkandla homestead. As we see opposition parties, civil society and even card-carrying members of the African National Congress calling for the removal of the President, we are reminded that even if economic freedom is not a reality, and corruption is wide-spread, it is our informed exercise of the freedoms to speak, question, and insist on

transparency and accountability that can curb corruption and reign in other executive excesses.

Our Constitution guarantees both sets of rights – civil and political, as well as the socio-economic rights. We should use the freedoms we have, including the right to vote and to question, to work toward a South Africa in which everyone is also economically free. Political freedom without economic freedom is hollow. But economic freedom without political freedom is both unlikely and potentially dangerous. It is our persistent insistence on accountability and good governance that will create the conditions for economic freedom.

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