

Press Release



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Media Contact: John Kane-Berman
Tel: 011 482 7221
E-mail: ceo@sairr.org.za

Institute backs COSATU on civil society initiative

The CEO of the South African Institute of Race Relations, John Kane-Berman, has spoken out in defence of efforts by the Congress of South African Trade Unions to promote the role of civil society organizations in the country. COSATU came in for considerable criticism from both the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) after inviting a group of civil society organizations to a meeting in Boksburg in October. Kane-Berman has described the criticism directed at COSATU as “Stalinism straight and simple”.

Writing in the Institute’s monthly bulletin *Fast Facts* Kane-Berman further said:

‘Mr Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of Cosatu seems taken aback at the vehement reaction by the ANC and the SACP to his initiative of summoning a range of institutions in civil society to a meeting in Boksburg at the end of October.

‘The meeting was evidently attended by about 300 trade unionists and members of various civil society organisations. Mr Vavi said his conference focused on the implementation of government programmes in education, health care, and job creation and that the ANC should in fact be “excited” about this. “We are now getting a role for civil society to play in line with the ANC's own slogan, ‘the people shall govern’, he said.

‘The ANC's national working committee denounced the initiative as an attempt at “regime change”. The ANC’s secretary general, Mr Gwede Mantashe, said Cosatu was being “oppositionist, dangerous, and populist”.

‘The ANC's hostile reaction, Mr Vavi said, was “paranoid”. Some of the civil society groups present said they would not be intimidated by the ANC's “big brother” antics.

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‘Ironically, the launch of a new organisation outside ANC control comes at the same time as the ANC is attempting to extend its controls over other parts of civil society. Apart from the much-publicised attempts to control the Media, these include proposals to bring the legal profession under the control of the Department of Justice via a "South African Legal Practice Council" whose members will in the end be chosen by the minister of justice. Already, members of the ANC have the majority say on the Judicial Service Commission, which appoints judges.

‘Since the ANC came to power, numerous other institutions have been brought under government control.

‘The ANC has also recently exhumed the idea — abandoned some years ago following opposition mobilised by the South African Institute of Race Relations — to give the Government control of the funding of independent institutions in civil society.

‘None of this should surprise anybody. The ANC is not a normal political party but a liberation movement which regards itself as the sole authentic representative of the people of South Africa. Its cadre deployment policy is designed to extend control over as much of society as possible in accordance with its strategy of implementing its “national democratic revolution”.

‘Mr Vavi’s initiative undermines this drive. It will require considerable courage to withstand ANC attempts to stop the new initiative from going anywhere.’