

Journalist – Philany Nombembe

Public sentiment on extreme ends of the debate is reflected in the views of two prominent figures pushing radically different identity agendas.



National Coloured Congress MP Fadiel Adams says the party wants to destigmatise the term "Coloured".



Should the term “Coloured” be criminalised as an offensive race classification in South Africa?

Capetonians are divided over the term, with public sentiment on extreme ends of the debate reflected in the views of two prominent figures pushing radically different identity agendas.

One wants it banned. The other has built a political party around the racial classification rooted in apartheid.

Activist Glen Snyman, founder and leader of People Against Race Classification, wants the label criminalised by parliament and the department of justice, calling it as offensive as the K-word. He argues it erases the identity of indigenous groups such as the Khoikhoi and San.

MP Fadiel Adams, on the other hand, has embraced the term, naming his party the National Coloured Congress (NCC), which he said gave a voice to a long marginalised community.

Snyman, who has campaigned vigorously against race classification, proposed using “Bruinmens” or “Brown people” in the interim, until a more appropriate term could be agreed on for the term “Coloured”.

“The name 'Coloured' was forcefully given to us. It disguises the true identity of the first inhabitants of South Africa. The government still refuses to recognise the Khoikhoi and San people on official forms after 30 years of democracy,” he said.

He questioned why the K-word was criminalised but not Coloured.

“In 1994, the K-word was made a criminal offence for 52-million black people, but not the word Coloured for three-million brown people.”

In 2020, Snyman, a teacher, self-identified as African when applying for the post of principal and was later summoned to a disciplinary hearing — on a fraud allegation — because official records said he was Coloured.

“I became the first person in democratic South Africa to be charged for misidentifying my race,” he said. The charges were later withdrawn.

Snyman believes his activism is bearing fruit and is helping a pushback against forced racial identification. He said the National Council of Provinces had ordered the National Assembly to hold a debate on identity; the Western Cape Blood Service had added “other” and “prefer not to say” options to its donor form; and the SA Library for the Blind had removed race from its registration forms.

“Most political parties reject our campaign because politicians need racism to win elections. The community, however, supports us when they see our vision for a future South Africa without race labels.”

Snyman criticised Adams for using the term “Coloured” in his party’s name, saying he warned him in 2021 about its harmful history: “There’s no excuse.”

Adams, however, defended it: “We are decolonising the term and reclaiming our power.

“Mr Snyman doesn’t speak for me, as I do not purport to speak for him. If he wants to undo history, we wish him well. It’s a pity educated folk like him have no voice on the issue of Coloured marginalisation or premature gang-related death, but are loud on trivial matters like a label that — in South African terms — seems to be acceptable,” he said.

Will the Khoi and San ever gain First Nation status? What about the Khoi and the San? What has happened in terms of their recognition as the First Nation people in Southern Africa?

The NCC, which emerged from the Gatvol Capetonian Movement in 2020, said the democratic government continued the apartheid classification system. Its 2024 manifesto states: “Under apartheid, we were not white enough. Under democracy, we are not black enough.”

Adams, however, is facing scrutiny of his own. Parliament's ethics committee recently found he used explicit, sexist and racist language in a Facebook video directed at a woman, the DA and Cape Town mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis.

In it, he called DA members "f***ing agents" and used crude language such as "ma se p**s".

According to the parliamentary committee's report, Adams said: "I don't know what is wrong with some Coloured people."

The committee recommended a 15-day suspension, a corresponding salary cut and a consultation with the Speaker on ethical conduct.

Adams apologised, but sought to explain his rant, saying he lived in a "ghetto" where children were killed and his family was exposed to trauma. He accused a DA member of putting his children at risk by publicly stating they had attended a gang leader's funeral.

Stellenbosch University political analyst professor Amanda Gouws said the government used racial categories — "white", "black", "Indian" and "Coloured" — to measure the progress of its BEE programme. She did not believe criminalising the word would solve the country's deep-seated issues.

"To see if things improve, you must keep these categories. During the fight for apartheid, that categorisation was rejected. People started to talk about 'brown', while some felt we should use the collective term black. In those days, my students called themselves brown. Now they call themselves Coloured. It's a general acceptance," said Gouws.

"We cannot regulate identity. People need to be able to self-identify, and there needs to be a conversation and getting the governing party involved in that conversation."

Social justice activist and filmmaker Angelo Louw said the label was complex.

"There are people who consciously subscribe to the 'Coloured' identity, and that is their right. But there must be more than one option for this diverse community," he said.

Louw said Snyman's proposal to include indigenous African identities in official classification systems was an important step in decolonisation.

"Parties must stop race-baiting and voters must stop falling for it. The race card cannot be their offering."