You can't ignore the elephant in the room

To spend any amount of time with people who consider themselves liberal, and are fully sentient of the unique circumstances of South Africa, often means being witness to some incredible mental gymnastics. A question that my liberal compatriots often seem to stumble over is the one of redress. We have a progressive constitution that tasks the government with not only advancing second- and third-generation rights (alongside well-established first-generation rights, of course), but also with redressing the sins of the past. As we know, in the past, the full enjoyment of rights was superimposed onto race. The rights that blacks were excluded from included access to land, education and the full recognition of black cultural norms. In today's society, we seek to right those wrongs. This means uncoupling disadvantage from race (and gender). That's really the point of affirmative action, black economic empowerment or however else you choose to term these tools of redress. To do so often means awarding certain opportunities to blacks more often than whites. My poor liberal friends find this very distasteful. We shouldn't be recognising race at all, they scold. I believe that trying to impose non-racialism in our society is not only misguided, but dangerous. Imagine if we'd done that in 1994 – all we would have achieved would have been to preserve privilege along colour lines. To get around this issue, I've often observed, with amusement, liberals describing race-based redress in a way that doesn't actually mention the word 'race'. The University of Cape Town applies a very straightforward admissions policy – it believes race is still the best way to suss out disadvantage, and thus award special admissions to black students. It has come under a lot of criticism for this and has established a commission to review this process. The Democratic Alliance Students' Organisation made a submission in which it argued that a basket of socioeconomic indicators should be used, instead of race. But in a country where one's socio-economic circumstances are mostly determined by race, this is just a way of saying: apply race-based criteria, but just don't call it that. Oh, poor us.
Sipho Hlongwane is a Daily Maverick writer and columnist, and a UCT dropout.