analysing south africa's survival

(a decade on...)

In this straight-talking interview, ***R.W. Johnson****, best known in South Africa for his book* ***How Long Will South Africa Survive?****, offers his assessment of current South African politics. Born and educated in Durban before leaving South Africa in the 1960s, Johnson is now a fellow of Magdalene College, Oxford, and the author of books on a diverse range of topics.* ***Heather Hughes****, a lecturer in the Department of African Studies at the University of Natal, interviewed him during a recent stay in South Africa as a guest of the Student Visiting Lecturers Trust Fund.*

Fiona MacDonald

R.W Johnson *Heather Hughes*

HH: Perhaps the first thing to ask you would be what you consider to be the most important milestones along the way to significant change in South Africa since the publication of *How Long will South Africa Survive?* - if you think there have been any.

RWJ: I think the legalisation of trade unions has certainly made a big difference in creating a whole new constellation of forces which didn't exist before. You could go through listing many of the achievements of the Botha reform programme - the abolition of the Immorality Act and so on. While I share what I take to be the Sash point of view that the reform programme is still very incomplete and slight, I think you have to say that the Botha presidency has seen a whole series of things happen which none of us predicted. We wouldn't have got it right if we'd been forced to predict in 1978 what he was going to do in the ten years to come. I think people on the left would have been too pessimistic. But the rising of 1984 to 1986 has to be really at the centre of it all, because despite the fact that quite a lot of so-called reform had taken place, it was a tremendous demonstration that it was nothing like enough. Moreover, all the diffuse effects of 1984 to 1986 - the collapse of the currency, sanctions and so on - mean that the uprising sticks out as the biggest single landmark. It is still exerting pressure now - that is what is getting South Africa out of Angola and Namibia.

HH: Would you say that that upsurge of resistance has been the major pressure for change, or would you say that there have been quite important changes going on in the National Party, such that it is no longer the same party really as came to power in 1948?

RWJ: It has changed a great deal, and the rise of the Conservative Party is the testimony to that, really - now there is the space for something like that. But I find two things funny about the National Party. One is that they've never had their de-Stalinisation period: I mean they've now turned round on Verwoerdism and started to reverse it, but they never denounce it because they have no vision of the alternative society they want to move towards. And now you've got people - often the very same people who were there under Verwoerd - preaching something close to the opposite of Verwoerdism but they'll never admit that they were completely wrong before. Or that lots of people like you or me will have said to them that they were wrong. They won't accept the implications of that, what that means.

Because if they were as wrong then as all that, surely they can be just as wrong now. Secondly, there's still this peculiar exclusiveness of

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Afrikanerdom. I know that its unity is gone, but that Botha can still make a plea for Afrikaner unity is quite peculiar, (a) because no-one ever appealed among whites for English-speaking unity, and (b) what's the point of Afrikaner unity? What was it used for politically? It was simply to oppose white English speakers. White unity was against blacks, so Afrikaner unity was against the rooineks. When you get into discussions even with liberal Afrikaners and radical Afrikaners, there's still a tendency to talk as if the pace of change has got to be regulated by what is acceptable to the Afrikaans-speaking community. And when you try to say that's not a reasonable clock to work by, they really don't know what you mean. I find those two things are still there.

HH: Do you think the tricameral parliament has changed the terrain of South African politics?

RWJ: I think what we've seen over this last couple of months, with Hendrickse blocking Group Areas legislation, has shown that it has, that you can't even carry out that sort of reform without creating new niches from which people can work. I think that the case for participation, even by blacks, is one that is not sufficiently examined by the UDF. Yet there is an argument - I am not saying it's right - for getting in there, and using your elbows for all you're worth and trying to block the structure, and force things out of it that way. It's what the Irish nationalists did in Britain in the late nineteenth century: getting into parliament and then completely disabling it, and just making things impossible for the government. That is something which people are too quick to dismiss; they say don't touch anything, boycott everything, have nothing to do with: there may be things there which can be used.

HH: The Labour Party did try to use the old Coloured Representative Council in that way, years ago, but what would you think of the opposite position, that in fact the debacle over the Group Areas Act has merely shown up the impotence of the coloured house in the new tricameral parliament?

RWJ: Not yet. It may be that the President's Council goes ahead. When that happens, okay, you can say something like that. But at the moment, it looks as if Heunis's bill is going to be weakened, it still hasn't been legislated through, here we are only days from the municipal elections and it has still not gone through. If we get through until 26 October with nothing happening [nothing did - ed.], it may not happen at all. I think we'll have to wait and see. There's no point in denying that Hendrickse - I know he has been vilified for participating by many people - has achieved something. And he has got a constituency. I would suspect that after these past couple of months, his constituency's in pretty good heart.

HH: Just to push that position further though: can it not be argued that refusal to participate on the part say for example of UDF affiliates, is precisely what is causing more and more spaces to be opened up, politically speaking, whereas participation would actually halt that process of opening up more political spaces?

RWJ: Yes, I think that that is probably right. Perhaps there still aren't sufficient spaces - the National Council still is not a very interesting idea. Who are they going to put on it? If the UDF says yes, then Buthelezi will say yes, and then you'll end up with Buthelezi on the National Council. Now I'm not saying that's a bad thing, and I'm not saying I'm against Buthelezi; but I'm simply saying that that's not what the UDF intends. There isn't an African house - if there was, then that would be different again and you'd have to make a reassessment. I don't think participation on present terms would be wise. I think, however, that boycotting, refusing, the politics of defiance and rejection, have become almost a principle, so that instead of being a tactic, people want to say no always, all the time, to everything, and this is actually very stupid. You may miss out on important things, and there are gaps then which you miss altogether, and that's very poor politics. So, I think there's a great danger in this, that people stop thinking about it.

HH: The big question is knowing when to make that strategic switch.

RWJ: Yes, I know. You see for example these municipal elections. I would have thought that it would be pretty silly in Durban for liberal-minded or radical whites to refuse to vote, and allow people to be re-elected who would like to re-segregate the beaches. I can't see that you're doing a good thing by doing that. Now I know it makes you feel better to say no, no, no, but I think people are very silly to preach that, just because it makes everyone feel better in a rhetorical way. We don't have the calibre of leadership which is able to make these distinctions and get itself heard. We've simply got the sort of leadership which can get across a no, it's always a no - and that's nice and simple. Everyone's worried about being outflanked. The thing people must realise is that the

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politics of opposition and protest generate habits of mind and leaders who are only good for that. And the problem is going to be that when finally majority rule comes, you're going to need completely different mental habits, completely different people.

HH: Any ideas where that leadership's going to come from?

RWJ: Well, I think that there are a few among the ANC exiles who are men of ability, probably women of ability too. But I don't think that many of those people are all that promising. I think that Thabo Mbeki, from everything I've heard, Pallo Jordan, and a number of others, are clearly very able people in whom one could have confidence. But I think that within the country it's tough. Many of the most able people one meets have withdrawn, are sitting on the sidelines feeling that there's no-one they really want to support. They've drawn their horns in, and those people are often the very people that you would like to have, because they're the most sensible and just generally the most competent and able. The nature of the political struggle here has driven them away. That's a real problem.

HH: No easy walk to freedom?

RWJ: Well, who knows what Mandela would be like, being so old now? I would have to include him on my list of people who I would have confidence in. I think that he is a very able man, and he's a man with a sense of humanity and tolerance. There are a whole set of dangers on that side as well. I have actually met people who seem to believe that in the new South Africa after apartheid you will still have torture, but that you will just torture the other guy.

HH: That's a difficult one.

RWJ: No, it's not difficult. I find that an easy one. I don't want torture.

HH: No - I would agree with you. I would agree that one would hope that those forms of repression would go, but the record elsewhere in Africa hasn't been bright on that score; there's no guarantee.

RWJ: Of course there's no guarantee. One shouldn't let that pass by without saying that the record in Africa is appalling, and there's no excuse for it. I couldn't have confidence in civil rights if I were living anywhere in Africa. I think that the human rights concert in Harare was amazing, given what has happened in Zimbabwe! I wasn't there, but they really ought to have led off with a condemnation of what happened in Matabeleland, and of detention without trial and torture in Zimbabwe. One can make excuses but I think too much has happened in Africa: there is a quite casual abuse of civil rights, and dreadful things happening and no free press, and all the things we know. It's very patronising and almost racist to say, oh well, they're only Africans, that's what they do, what can you expect.

HH: What about the argument that those notions of human rights are a mere bourgeois importation from the West?

RWJ: Absolute rubbish. I would like to see anybody on the left make an argument in principle that either torture or detention without trial are not bad things. They are bad things, but surely they would still be bad things after liberation. We all know where it ends up. It ends up with particular individuals getting extreme power, and feathering their own nests with Swiss bank accounts, and all the rest. Finally you end up with a situation where the radicals then condemn them for that, and the radicals get sat on - and tortured again. They seem to be too confident that they're going to be in charge - they're the most likely victims.

HH: Coming back then to the summary of events over the last ten years: it seems as if you feel then that we've taken some quite important steps to a real transformation of the status quo in this country.

RWJ: I don't want to praise too much what has been done because it's so inadequate.

HH: But in terms of the resistance movement looking creatively at alternatives and so on?

RWJ: I'm not as impressed by that as I would like to be. There's a party-mindedness about many people and a refusal, until recently at least, to evaluate things in a more pragmatic way. But I do think that the frontiers have been pushed back, there's a sense of common citizenship which you can begin to see, on campus, in advertisements, even on television, in multiracial advertising and so forth - it all counts. There is a sense far more than there used to be of a common South African citizenship. And that is growing, and that's a diffuse result of all sorts of things, including what the government has done. And that's very positive. One would like to see that go much further.

HH: Apart from the tremendous political tur-

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bulence and state of flux that I think we've seen in this country, what other factors are important pressures in leading to real change?

RWJ: Well above all, external economic pressures of course - those are huge. What people didn't realise was that once you start getting those pressures, businessmen within the country start panicking, and then it's not just disinvestment from abroad, but people at home not investing either, and shipping money out all the time. That is really going to destabilise the whole situation here very dramatically - we haven't seen the results yet. The erosion of the whole white power structure is a process underway now.

HH: Would you say that's a direct result of sanctions?

RWJ: It's a result of the 1984 to 1986 uprising, which caused a collapse of the currency, which spurred on the sanctions movement abroad, which then led to the panic by the banks. It's amazing to think that anyone thought the people in the streets could beat the government in a military sense, and bring about a revolution that way, but they of course had an enormous effect on the money markets, and that's where their power lies. I'd go further than that and say that the structure cannot easily survive another 1984 to 1986. I used to come from England and get R1,65 for my pound: this time I got R4,26. What do I get next time - R10? Another round of things like that would do just that. In that sense the government is now treading on a very, very thin edge.

HH: Do you think that there are real signs of worry about that situation, in government?

RWJ: Well, yes to the extent that the whole national security management system is throwing a bit of money at trouble, and obviously doing everything to try to stop the lid being blown off again. But if they're as worried as I would be in their place, they would be doing a lot more than they are.

HH: I think you said in a lecture here, sanctions, or at the very least calls for sanctions, and popular support for sanctions in Britain is more or less a fact of life, so that debates about whether they're good or bad, or should or shouldn't happen are really a bit on the side. Does that mean you discount serious debate about the efficacy of sanctions, and whether they're desirable in their effects or not, and following on from that, whether you think that that kind of debate could have any impact on popular consciousness abroad?

RWJ: No, I don't think it could have any impact. I think the momentum for sanctions is there and one can only see it ratcheting on. The biggest single thing is that the Americans have done what they've done, because they will now exercise real pressure on Japan, on Taiwan, etc., not to move into the gaps they leave. We will be seeing the effects coming through for a long time. South Africa has lost trade which they haven't replaced in any other way.

HH: And that's trade that is probably lost for good, isn't it? It's unlikely that those companies disinvesting will want to come back?

RWJ: I agree, and this is a problem, isn't it? Objectively, the left has to cheer on things happening which will be very tough for them when they finally inherit, if they do. As for the sanctions debate: inside South Africa, it's a very peculiar debate, because the left seem to want to say that sanctions (a) are a good thing and (b) don't cause black unemployment. Well, of course that's nonsense, because the one thing they certainly do do is cause large-scale black unemployment. It's difficult to say what I think they ought to say, which is that from their point of view they're a good thing **and** cause black unemployment. But the debate abroad is more whether it makes whites want to change or whether it simply encourages the right-wing. Again, I don't think those are either/ors: I think it does encourage the right-wing **and** it forces the government more towards reform. I think that the sort of scenario one has got to think about - though this is too neat - is a Conservative Party victory or something close to it, causing the government to say they were going to carry out a whole further wave of forced removals, producing large-scale resistance, bloodshed, a further collapse in the currency, a grave ratcheting upwards of sanctions, producing higher unemployment, and so more riots, etc. It wouldn't take very long for that to spin way out of control. It's not all that far away. I think it's going to be quiet for a while. Of course, the opposition has taken a pounding and they're in no mood to start anything again for quite a while. But not many years down the line we shall probably face something a bit like that. □

** The second part of this interview will be published in the March issue of SASH.*