

'South Africa joins the OAU'

The end of apartheid heralds a new relationship with Africa which will be fraught with complications. But, from within the OAU, South Africa could play an important part in redirecting the continent's course into the next century.

By Peter Vale

IT IS easy to predict the banner headlines the day that South Africa finally joins the Organisation for African Unity. It is also easy to foresee that, all things being equal, the day is not far off. Just before Easter, for instance, Thabo Mbeki was reported as saying that South Africa will be represented at the OAU meeting due to be held in Uganda in May.

For most South Africans, however, the final reconciliation with the continent is likely to be a powerful but painful experience. Every economic and social indicator suggests that Africa is in very serious crisis: economic performance is poor, mortality rates are soaring and infrastructure is stretched to the point of collapse. The image of decay was vividly underscored by David Ewing Duncan in *The Atlantic* recently: "In an age of computers and fax machines", he writes, "it is difficult to raise a dial tone in some Africa cities".

Faced with these impressions, it is easy to see why Afro-pessimism – that abiding negative outlook on the continent's future prospects – is so prevalent: our continent is facing an uncertain future.

'The final reconciliation with the continent is likely to be a powerful but a painful experience'

Periodically, it seems as if the infliction of Afro-pessimism has sapped the rationality of analysts. For example, at the conference on trade in Southern Africa in March, Christopher Coker of the London School of Economics made the eccentric suggestion that "for Southern Africa, the 20th century came to an end in November 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down"!

Still there is no gainsaying the fact that South Africa will have to grapple with its own future alongside Africa's uncertain one.

This process, in turn, will be complicated by expectations which Africa has of this country. The most serious one, perhaps, is that South Africa is in a position to offer some form of immediate relief at a time when the continent



Nelson Mandela meets African heads of state in Lusaka in February 1990.

faces a shrinkage in international aid. To stretch the point for the sake of emphasis: for many Africans, South Africa is a source of wealth and expertise, a new metropole in a world in which resources are increasingly tight.

But as South Africa's own budget has painfully illustrated, its assets are limited. The profligacy of 40 years of ideologically-driven policies (ironically, a condition increasingly familiar elsewhere on the continent) have all but wasted South Africa's own margins.

In these circumstances, it seems likely that the initial years of engagement between South Africa and the continent will be fraught with complications. Of these, perhaps the most serious will be the migration southwards of Africa's people in search of enhanced life prospects. Patterns of labour migration are deeply etched on the collective memory of the sub-continent, in particular. When the walls of apartheid finally crumble, the lure of the rich south will be almost irresistible.

This gloomy assessment of developments in the light of the emergence of a new South Africa is, of course, predicated on the understanding that things will remain stable in Africa. Primarily, this means that the long litany of political disasters are doomed to

repeat themselves in a never-ending cycle of violence, fire and anarchy.

In recent years, however, a threshold does seem to have been passed on the continent: there seems to be a clear-minded indigenous compulsion to break the downward spiral.

Whether or not this will be possible is unclear: can socialist dictatorships give way to functioning multi-party systems with a mixed economy? The sheer uncertainty of this particular condition at this moment in Africa's history was captured by the recent coup in Mali: a 20-year-old dictatorship was overthrown by soldiers calling for the establishment of a multi-party democracy!

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Notwithstanding misgivings of this kind, the overall disposition on the continent is clearly different today than it was in the dark days of the '70s and even '80s.

Morality 'must be restored' in transition process

Most political parties turned up at Idasa's seminar on the multi-party conference but their speakers left many questions unanswered – and were challenged to represent the interests of ordinary people in negotiations.

By Sue Valentine

AN IDASA seminar on "Perspectives on the all/multi-party conference" brought together an impressively broad range of politicians in Johannesburg early in April and an equally diverse audience of more than 350 people.

The interest in the subject seemed to bear out Bishop Peter Storey's sentiments when he said the issues to be raised at a multi-party conference were "far too important to be left to the politicians".

The aim of the seminar was to hear perspectives as to who should attend a multi-party conference (MPC), what should be on the agenda and what would happen to those who did not attend.

In general the views offered by the eight speakers did not provide much insight into the possible composition and agenda of an MPC, leaving many in the audience frustrated at the apparent lack of substance in the various presentations.

It was Bishop Storey of the Methodist Church, who drew applause for his appeal for the restoration of morality in the transition process and for the interests of ordinary people to be represented at the negotiating table.

"A range of organisations led the struggle in spite of claims to the contrary by others later on the scene. The writing on the wall was made by many ordinary people, the difference about Mr De Klerk is that he was the first state president who could read," he said.

It was not enough to thank those people for their involvement and then relegate them to a lesser role.

Storey said a monitoring group which had no interest in gaining power for itself was needed to monitor developments. Those making the constitution faced a paradox: to achieve as much as possible in terms of political power or to balance as many different interest groups as possible.

On the dilemma of violence, Storey said both the government and its opponents had trained people to use violence to achieve their ends.

There could be no impetus for a peaceful resolution while any party held open the possibility of using violence as a last resort.

Concluding with a word to all political organisations, Storey said: "As long as you rely on violence, you must not expect us to take you

too seriously when you speak of peace."

Idasa director of policy and planning, Van Zyl Slabbert, said many people assumed wrongly that there would be a "magic moment" in the transition process when the government would be overthrown, the old flag struck and a new one raised in its place.

He argued that because of the nature of the transition in South Africa, the government of the day (National Party) would be involved in the change.

Three mechanisms to assist in the transition process had emerged, he said. A multi-party conference, an interim government and a constituent assembly. No matter what one called these various forums, the issue remained that responsibility for the transition had to be shared by the different political groupings. An MPC would decide on the agenda of the transition. From that conference would flow the decision on the status of the negotiating parties.



Bishop Storey: a range of organisations led the struggle.

"The only other way to manage the change is through revolution, partition or external intervention. The process that is dominant at the moment is negotiation," he said.

A member of the ANC's legal and constitutional committee, Penuel Maduna, said there was broad agreement on the need for an all-party conference. However, he suggested a limited agenda for such a conference, arguing that a constituent assembly was the most democratic mechanism by which to transform racial rule.

South Africa's emergence as a new force in African politics should reinforce this new mood, and the OAU will be a good place to start.

Like many other international organisations, the OAU was forged on a fundamental compromise. In the difficult days of May 1963 when the ideal of unity proved illusory, African heads of government gathered in Addis Abbeba heard an emotional appeal from Ahmed Ben Bella, then the president of Algeria. He called on sectional interests to, as he put it, "die a little so that African unity can become a reality". The understanding was that different models for unity would be put aside so that the continent's attention might be directed towards opposing colonialism and helping to liberate the "white south".

The end of apartheid, therefore, terminates one of the lives of the OAU: its new challenge, in which South Africa can play an important role, will be to redirect the continent's course into the next century.

It will be foolish to suggest that this will be easy. In addition to the manifold economic problems, the continent is riven with political strife. Of these, the hoary and complex question of tribalism looms large.

Actually this issue when gradually linked to the sanctity of African national boundaries was, with Ben Bella's compromise, the only glue which has kept the OAU together for these past 28 years.

'SA's most powerful long-term contribution to Africa will be to discover a bridge over its own ethnic divides'

Vexed and intricate formulae will be needed for dealing with the persistence of ethnicity on the continent. In many ways, South Africa's unhappy experience with ethnic manipulation throughout the apartheid years will be instructive. But its most powerful long-term contribution will be to discover a bridge across its own ethnic divides and offer this as an example to the continent.

Together with Nigeria, South Africa will dominate African forums. Its new fully-representative, non-racial diplomatic corps will be active in African capitals and, almost certainly, South Africa will itself offer aid and assistance to fellow African states. This, incidentally, might be the only way in which to help stem the tide of humanity which, as we have seen, will be drawn to South Africa.

A compelling and exciting African future beckons South Africa. It is true that many will continue to wallow in Afro-pessimism: perhaps, however, like the poor or decrepit, latent racism of this kind will always be with us.

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