

A degree of hope

HAD I written this article a month ago, my mood would have been different and so too would my opinion of our political leadership.

Along with many South Africans, I have been feeling frustration, despair and anger at the way in which the political future of the whole nation has been held to ransom by a few. I confess to now be feeling a degree of hope because agreements have been reached in the past month that will enable the transition of this country to democratic rule. Thus I am feeling more kindly disposed toward some of our political leaders.

My hope has been restored because it now seems possible that a general election will take place on 27 April next year. It is my belief that an election must take place on that date for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is crucial that the political support of the various parties be tested as soon as logistically possible in order for legitimacy and authority to be accorded to those who make decisions on our behalf.

Secondly, the election must take place in order that all of the people of South Africa are at last given an opportunity to share in the governance of their own lives. By April 1994 South Africans will have waited four long years for the promised chance to vote for the party that they wish to represent their interests in government. Any further delay will dash raised expectations and could well lead to increased instability and violence.

I am therefore feeling grateful for the leadership shown by those negotiators at the multi-party talks who went through many drafts in order to ensure that (overwhelming) consensus was reached on four crucial bills in time for those bills to be considered in the September sitting of Parliament.

Still to be achieved are all of the logistical preparations necessary for elections. Given that we are only seven months away from 27 April, this is a huge though not impossible undertaking.

It is noteworthy that, as the multi-party negotiators came closer to agreement on those bills, so too did the sound of rattling sabres grow louder. Conservative Party leader Ferdi Hartzenberg warned that if the TEC was installed later this year, the CP would regard it as a declaration of war.

Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Walter Felgate

Recent agreements achieved by negotiators have restored a measure of hope for the future of South Africa. But the reckless war talk of some leaders and the lack of accountability displayed by others endanger the accomplishment of a democratic order, says Black Sash president JENNY DE TOLLY.



of the Inkatha Freedom Party have both warned of the danger of civil war if the government and the ANC persist in making decisions not approved by the IFP, and go ahead with the April elections. Felgate threatened mass action, a familiar strategy during the past few years. The Afrikaner Volksfront has warned that it would resort to violence and military action in order to achieve its demand for an "Afrikaner volkstaat".

Are these threats a serious danger? Or are they the pressure tactics of those who wish to gain concessions now, before a general election, because they fear that their support base will be exposed as small when put to the test?

'It is time for everyone to play an active role in the transition to democracy'

Are these leaders really expressing the mood and intent of their supporters to engage in war should their demands not be met? Is this talk of war being seen by those on the ground as condoning acts of violence?

A pattern has begun to emerge of an escalation of violence as soon as some breakthrough in negotiations is achieved. Given the volatile situation on the ground, and the horrifying incidence of violence in the country, war talk by leaders is totally irresponsible. It has been said that "while our leaders war with words, we war with our sticks and guns".

Given the fact that the system in South Africa has been a highly authoritarian one, with attendant deference toward leadership, these leaders must accept responsibility for their inciting, intolerant and reckless utterings.

An encouraging sign over the past few weeks has been the commitment of the main political players to keep negotiations on the

go through bilateral talks and often tough compromise. The National Party has held talks with the IFP, the ANC with the Afrikaner Volksfront, and Nelson Mandela with the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging in Beaufort West.

Those involved have demonstrated leadership and a clear understanding that South Africa stands very close to the edge; that we have only a very short time left in

which to negotiate a deal, and that this is involving substantial compromise on everyone's part. The immediate future is dependent on the maturity, wisdom and skill of the major players in the continuing talks.

However, there is a very real problem with this process of negotiations and dependence on a few leaders. The problem is that while a small group of politicians and technical experts are determining our future at the World Trade Centre, and having behind-the-scenes talks, the general public has been left on the sidelines, feeling excluded from active participation in the process of transition.

There has been a lack of accountability to the groups that these leaders purport to represent, and a lack of transparency in some aspects of the negotiations. This pattern is echoed at the level of local government negotiations. As a result those on the outside feel alienated. We also are left feeling that because the situation in the country is so desperate, we must be grateful for the agreements that are being reached, despite their inadequacies.

We have grown weary of the daily carnage, the acts and utterings of political intolerance, and the posturing and grandstanding. On 2 September 1993 ordinary citizens made it quite clear what they want. On that day millions of South Africans across the country physically demonstrated their longing for a resolution to this country's current crisis and their common desire for a peaceful future.

It is time for everyone to play an active role in the transition to democracy. We must also become a part of the process and demand that mechanisms are set up which ensure that the politicians and leaders account to us in an open and inclusive way. To demand any less will mean that we risk perpetuating the secrecy, abuse of power and violation of human rights that have characterised our recent history.