

Popular History

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Pastoral Letter of the
Southern African
Catholic Bishops' Conference

**The Municipal Elections
of October 26, 1988**

1. The reason for this letter from the Bishops' Conference

The great concern of Jesus and therefore of his church is that all aspects of our life should come under the reign of God. This means that his truth, his purity, his justice, his love should grow in us- in a word, that we should become holier. This applies not only to our personal life but also to our domestic and social life. In social life there are special problems because of its political and economic aspects. In social life it is not easy to foster the love and justice that should be the mark of followers of Jesus.

In regard to this we are about to get involved in another situation that will make special demands on us, namely, the municipal elections to be held on 26 October this year.

At first sight municipal elections do not appear to be a church concern. However, on 29 June 1988 a group of church leaders issued a call to boycott these elections maintaining that to take part in them would amount to co-operating in an unjust system of government. In issuing this call the church leaders were actually breaking the law and risking severe penalties. However, they felt they had to put conscience before fear of punishment. Consequently this call has to be considered by us in conscience.

To do this it is necessary to understand the context in which the call was made.

2. Total strategy

The October elections have to be seen in the context of what is known as the total strategy, or the overall plan of the government, for dealing with what it sees as revolution. The 1983 constitution provided the framework for the government's total strategy. The October elections are an integral part of the implementation of the constitution. In actual fact total strategy is designed to keep the present government in power and to entrench apartheid in a form the government imagines will be more acceptable to people.

3. The two prongs of the strategy

This total strategy is two-pronged. By those in power the prongs are called security and reform. By those oppressed they are called coercion and co-option.

Security includes the state of emergency, detentions, banning and the growing power and influence of the armed forces. Reform includes propaganda, the upgrading of some townships and co-opting some leaders in order to win the minds and hearts of the people. It is hoped that through the elections there will be black (that is African, 'Coloured' and Indian) leaders on local and regional councils. This will make the new system look democratic, racially representative and therefore legitimate.

Meanwhile most organisations and leaders that can really mobilize and represent black people are banned or imprisoned. All criticism of the elections is forbidden. Both reform and security are part of the total strategy of preventing democratic change.

4. The two-pronged system

The role of municipal councils has to be seen in relation to the whole system of security and reform.

Security is ensured by the National Security Management System which operates at three levels. At national level there is the National Security Council. At regional level there are Joint Management Centres and, at local level, sub or mini Joint Management Centres. This system controls law and order and keeps the government in power. There is a strong representation of police and armed forces in the system and all members are appointed. None are elected.

Reform will be represented by another system, that of welfare and services, with responsibility for such things as housing; provision of water, sewerage and electricity; rubbish and night soil removal; the planting, trimming and removal of trees; distributing

of poor relief, control of street trading and advertising. It will have the power to raise taxes to meet expenses.

The welfare and service system will consist of elected local authorities, that is, municipal or township councils and, at a higher level, regional service councils with black and white elected representatives of local councils. One day, the government hopes that there will also be a national council. Once these arrangements are in place the picture will be complete with two systems of government operating side by side:

1. A regular state system, from president and parliament down to regional or service councils and local authorities.
2. A national security system, from the National Security Council down to sub or mini Joint Management Centres.

Though representatives of all population groups will meet in Regional Service Councils, local councils will be segregated according to race. Furthermore since the voting power of local authorities in the Regional Service Councils will be in proportion to expenditure, White control will persist. Obviously it will also persist at the higher levels of government and throughout the security management system. Apartheid with a slightly altered face, or perhaps we should say two faces, will be unshakably entrenched.

5. The elections and the 1983 constitution: To vote or not to vote
The municipal elections to be held in October (and the elections to the regional services councils that will follow) are the working out of the new constitution introduced in 1983. At that time we warned of the serious dangers involved in the new constitution saying:

We cannot accept the constitution that prevents people from crossing racial barriers and working together for unity and peace in parties and associations of their own choosing.
(Pastoral Letter of the SACBC on the Proposed New Constitution)

for South Africa, par. 6).

Later, in 1987, on the occasion of parliamentary elections, we said:

'An election cannot be just if the system it serves is unjust. We have said it before and we say it again, there can be no reconciliation and peace in our country until substantial, responsible and courageous steps are taken to dismantle apartheid.' (Statement of Administrative Board of SAC, March 1987).

As in 1987, people are again asking if the only possible conclusion is that they should not campaign or vote in the forthcoming municipal elections.

In replying to this question we make two observations:

To many people voting appears unacceptable because the Councils that they are urged to elect will be powerless and moreover, voting will be co-operating with the system of oppression under which they suffer.

To others, the councils for which they are asked to vote may still exercise some power and furthermore, there may be candidates standing for election who will work for justice.

Consequently we see it as a situation in which people must decide in conscience whether to vote or not.

We are publishing this letter in our capacity as pastors who have the right and duty to help people form their conscience on matters of social justice.

We look forward to the day when all citizens of South Africa will be able to vote in meaningful, free and fair elections.

In the meantime, the present elections represent one of the weaknesses of the policy called total strategy i.e. it requires our collaboration. This in fact can be withheld. It is possible to boycott the municipal elections as a matter of conscience.

Those who choose this option must exercise it in a peaceful, non-

violent way. In our role as leaders of a christian community we plead that the elections should not be an occasion of violence either on the part of the state or on the part of those who oppose the present state.

Returning to the ideas with which we opened this letter we reaffirm that our deep concern in writing it is with the christian values of justice and love, sharing and unity, which are of such immense importance for the Kingdom of God. We write because we feel compelled by the love of Christ, the love that persuades us to follow the dictates of christian conscience in treating one another with justice, respect and affection and in striving for social structures that will reflect these attitudes.

Assuring you of our blessing and prayer, We remain
Devotedly yours in the service of Christ and his people

**The President and Members of the Southern African
Catholic Bishops' Conference**