

SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS: THE STATE OF PLAY

There was a time, particularly during the Verwoerd and Vorster eras, when the SA political situation could best have been described as relatively stagnant and government policy actions more or less certain and predictable. To a considerable extent this is no longer so: there are forces at play, within South Africa as a whole and also within the Government and its political behaviour which defy self-evident predictions of certainty. Ask any thinking South African the following questions: What is going to happen regarding our economic development over the next five years (our balance of payments, the repayment of our international debts, the importation of capital, the economic effects of sanctions and disinvestment, the gold price, the "brain drain", immigration, labour relations etc.) and he is most likely to say: "I do not know" or "I have no idea". And if he is prepared to discuss it any further, probably 90% or more would indicate grave concern and pessimism, even gloom, about the future. And the same applies to the political scene per se. Is the CP really going to "take over" the government? What has happened to Mr P. W. Botha's "reform" movement? Will the NP retain its unity? Who will succeed Mr Botha as State President, and what will be the implications internally and externally? Is there any possibility of a negotiated settlement in South Africa, or is increasing violence inevitable? It is indeed a brave man — or a fool — who can honestly profess that he has the answers.

The most, or best, a responsible observer can hope to do is to try to discover whether there are certain dominant trends which will probably play a major or important role in the shaping of things to come. This is what I will attempt to do in this article, in respect of a limited number of fields.

THE RIGHT-WING THREAT

I think it is highly probable that, party-politically, the right-wing will become stronger; but under the present circumstances, and in the present climate, I doubt whether they will gain more than 45-50 seats in the White House of Assembly, if as many. The real danger does not lie in the possibility of their gaining control of the White House, but in their avowed intention and ability to mobilise political support on the basis of naked racism — outdated as it may be — thereby creating and exacerbating the conditions for racial friction and conflict at the grassroots level. I get the impression sometimes that the CP leadership and supporters are totally unaware of the fact that the days that people of colour were prepared to eat humble pie and to simply accept what the White overlord or baas has decided to do with/to them are irrevocably gone, and will never return. I also believe that the vast majority of Whites recoil instinctively from the re-imposition of the crudest forms of apartheid (as we have experienced lately in the case of a number of CP controlled municipal areas), and will be prepared, far more than in the past, to be actively involved in opposing such measures. It is not impossible that this in turn could lead, for the first time in South African history, to

a joining of forces, not necessarily in a party-political context, of Whites and people of colour in a massive movement against such re-imposition. All that is required to bring this about is strong leadership.

I shall not put it beyond the realms of possibility that the actual implementation of CP racial policy — as in these municipal areas — may prove to be counter-productive for the CP. Although it would be foolish to deny the existence of racial prejudice in South Africa and the exploitative potential of colour/racial differences for political purposes, I do believe that the vast majority of Whites have become far more sensitive about the feelings and aspirations of people of colour and are far less inclined to countenance or support policies which they know are an open insult to people of colour and can only lead to increased friction.

THE NATIONAL PARTY AND NP GOVERNMENT

Let me summarise in a number of points what I believe to be some of the salient elements in this connection:

1. Despite its stated intention to move away from colour/race discrimination, the very basis of NP policy, as enshrined in the tri-cameral parliamentary system, is based on colour/race. That system depends for its existence and implementation on the racial classification of people in terms of the Population Registration Act and on the differentiation made between so-called "general affairs" and "own affairs" — the latter being nothing else out apartheid in another form.
2. Ideologically its policy is thus based upon two non-negotiable principles: that the constitutional system has to be structured on the existence and recognition of the various colour/racial groups and must provide for (a) powersharing between these groups as regards "general affairs" and (b) the maximum degree of self-determination for each of these groups as regards "own affairs" and as regards its "own" "community life".
3. However, as far as (a) is concerned NP policy has proved to be a dismal failure on two points: (i) it has failed to provide for Black involvement and participation in the central government (legislature and executive); and (ii) even within the confines of the tri-cameral parliament it has failed to obtain the co-operation of its other two partners (the House of Representatives and the House of Delegates) in important "general affairs" legislation and in the executive arm of government. The reason for this is to be found in a number of factors, viz. inter alia in the Government's own unwillingness to seek "consensus" (which was to have been the dominant feature of the tri-cameral arrangement), the existence and involvement of the President's Council (with its in-built NP majority) to overcome the resistance of the other two Houses, and its adherence to the concept of "self-determination" for each of the "communities" (leading, amongst other things to its commitment to the maintenance of separate "group areas" etc.).

4. As far as (b) is concerned, the policy has met with a degree of success inasmuch as (i) a number of people of colour have been "co-opted" into the system; (ii) it has placed people of colour in a position to tend to the needs of their respective communities (e.g. in the field of housing) and consequently being less dependent upon the favours and goodwill of White politicians and officials; and has given power to the people concerned (particularly the "own affairs" ministers and administrations). What the system has done is to create a whole range of vested interests in the maintenance of the system itself. In this sense the distribution and disposal of power has in itself become a powerful instrument in the hands of the government in securing co-optation and co-operation.

5. Inasmuch as the "reform policy" of the State President raised expectations that the NP Government would be prepared to move away from the non-negotiable principles mentioned above, those expectations have not materialised (and thence the disappointment, even disillusionment, with the reform process); neither do I think that there is a likelihood of the Government being prepared to do so in the foreseeable future (unless something dramatic happens within the NP itself). My contention is that the "reform initiatives" of Mr P. W. Botha were misunderstood and misinterpreted in the first place: not only because he himself did not indicate clearly the outer boundaries of that process (in other words, how far he is prepared to go), but also because people were inclined to expect the process to achieve what they wanted it to achieve (in other words, interpreting it in terms of their own wishes and expectations). This does not detract from the fact that under the Botha regime major legislative changes have taken place, removing some of the most discriminatory aspects of the apartheid policy; and that the "unintended consequences" of these changes may be as important as the changes themselves.

6. This situation has been and is being aggravated by the political threat posed to the NP by the rightwing-movement, and the Government's reaction to that threat. The CP has taken over from the NP the NP's own former success recipe (an ideological appeal to Afrikaner nationalism and to race prejudice) in the hope or expectation that it will lead to the same kind of success that brought the NP to power in 1948. It is undoubtedly true that the NP has moved away from the crude use of these two forces (although still applying them in the more sophisticated form of the "own affairs" concept), but in the process they have created an ideological vacuum to their own detriment (a vacuum which the CP is exploiting). Unfortunately the NP has been unable to present to the White voter a viable or attractive ideological alternative — mainly for four reasons: (a) the Parties to the "left" of the Government have already claimed patronage of the one logical alternative to apartheid and racial separation; (b) the NP is afraid that if it were to move in a "liberal" direction (which would mean departing from its non-negotiable principles) it would drive more Whites into the arms of the CP; (c) because there are dominant personalities within the NP itself who themselves believe strongly in these non-negotiable principles; and (d) because any fundamental departure from these principles could, and most probably would increase the tensions and divisions within the NP immeasurably and even threaten the unity of the Party.

Under these circumstances it would appear that the NP is constantly "looking over its shoulder", and that it is afraid

that any injudicious move to bring about change will only weaken its position electorally and threaten its internal cohesion. Ideologically the NP is trying to sit on two stools simultaneously: on the one hand, stating its intention to "move away" from racial discrimination and to create a constitutional system which would also provide for effective Black participation; and, on the other, emphasising its belief in and adherence to the concept of "own affairs" and "community self-determination" as essential elements in any constitutional structure.

7. The various bills passed by the House of Assembly during the sessions in September — the trilogy of Group Areas Bills and the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Amendment Bill — clearly indicate the Government's continued commitment to the principle of enforced racial residential separation and its unwillingness to accept Black urbanisation as the irreversible process that it undoubtedly is; as a matter of fact, the last mentioned Bill is in total conflict with the Government's own White Paper on Urbanisation issued two years ago, and which was so widely welcomed by people, including myself.

8. The events in the CP controlled municipal area of Boksburg have also clearly illustrated the ideologically impossible position in which the NP finds itself. The Government's unwillingness to scrap the Separate Amenities Act has provided the CP not only with the legislative power to enforce petty apartheid in the areas which it controls, but has also highlighted the conflicts — and hypocrisy — within the Government's policy itself: it is impossible to reconcile attacks on CP actions, when in so many areas under the control of the Government or the NP the same apartheid measures are consistently applied and enforced.

The Parties on the "left"? It is generally conceded that the fragmented nature of the (Parliamentary) groupings "left" of the Government is self-defeating and that the interests of South Africa demand that they should form a united front. Only by doing so could they effectively oppose the Government and its policies and provide a rallying point for those large numbers of South Africans who share a fundamentally "liberal" value system or who find that they can no longer support NP policies, but are unwilling to come out in enthusiastic support for opposition parties which are not prepared to sink their relatively minor or unimportant differences in the broader interests of our country and its future. Whether the present discussions to form a single Party will be successful will become apparent within the next few weeks. There is no sense in denying the severity of the obstacles: past antagonisms, differences in perception, images, philosophy, and the question of leadership.

A NEW NEGOTIATED CONSTITUTION

It would appear that the possibility of achieving a peaceful settlement in South Africa by the creation of a negotiated new constitutional structure providing for participation by all the people, is as far removed from becoming a reality as it ever was. The Government seems unwilling to consider entering into discussions with the ANC and other Black and extra-parliamentary groupings, thereby making it impossible also for other Black leaders and organisations who or which do not subscribe to the "armed struggle" to be seen to be prepared to talk to the Government. The Emergency, and the detention of many leading person-

alities opposed to the Government, have aggravated the situation. Lately, however, there seems to be somewhat of a change in the Government's attitude; if one considers its release of some people who have been in detention for a long time (despite the fact that most, if not all, of them have been subjected to restrictions orders after their release) and its attitude towards the imprisonment of Mr Nelson Mandela. I think it is too early to say whether this is part of a longer-term strategy and what that strategy could entail or lead to.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Government (despite its frequent pronouncements over the last number of years about the need for a new constitution and the political involvement of Blacks), has failed to deliver the goods. One gets the impression that the Government believes that by improving the socio-economic conditions for Blacks, by involving them in the second and third tiers of government and by the process of selective co-optation, Black political demands may be satisfied at least for the foreseeable future. I think this is a fallacy; and that the longer the Government delays the process of true negotiation (in which Mr Mandela — if released unconditionally — may play a major role) the more difficult it may become.

The reasons given by the Government for its unwillingness to involve the ANC in discussions are apparently threefold: it believes the ANC is communist-controlled, that it is dedicated to violence (committed to the "armed struggle"), that it espouses (and will be prepared to support) only a system which, economically, is based on Marxist principles and, politically, upon the majoritarian principle in a unitary state without adequate protection for the rights of minority groups.

Obviously I cannot adequately deal with these various arguments in this article.

However, even if one were to accept that the majority of the members of the ANC executive are dedicated marxists/communists, this is, to the best of my knowledge, not true of the vast majority of ANC supporters in South Africa (or of Blacks generally). The Government itself, in the interests of South Africa and of stability and peace in South Africa, has been negotiating with the marxist regimes in Mosambique and Angola (despite all the talk about the "total onslaught"). A possible step could perhaps be to unban the ANC internally even while countering ANC (or PAC) inspired and controlled violence from outside, as has been done in the case of Swapo in Namibia.

THE WAR IN ANGOLA

It would seem as if at long last South Africa's military involvement in Angola may be coming to an end. I have no reason at this stage to doubt the genuine desire on the part of the SA Government to end the military conflict in Angola, and its willingness to respect and implement any agreement arrived at in the talks that have been taking place over the last number of months. Obviously, this will depend upon satisfactory arrangements regarding the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola; but I am very hopeful that agreement will be reached.

NAMIBIAN INDEPENDENCE AND RESOLUTION 435

The SA Government has clearly indicated that it has now accepted the independence of Namibia within the confines of Resolution 435. All indications are that the beginning of this process may well take place within the next few months, although one must recognise the possibility of something happening that could retard, or even reverse, the process. It is a wise man indeed who could predict the exact course of events during this process or what may result once independence has been achieved.

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

Most South Africans are deeply aware of the mounting international pressure on South Africa and the possibility of increased sanctions and disinvestment. I am inclined to think that the latest developments regarding South Africa's relationship with Mosambique, the talks about ending the Angolan war and the independence of Namibia may have given South Africa some breathing space. It also seems to be clear that until such time as there is a new constitutional dispensation which will include Blacks in the political decision-taking process, it is very likely that the pressure will increase. Apart from the justified accusations of double standards and hypocrisy that could be levelled against some of South Africa's most vocal critics, I personally believe that sanctions and disinvestment are counter-productive (unless one subscribes to the desirability of creating conditions for increased violent confrontation); the best chances for non-violent changes flow from the economic muscle of the Blacks and the economic interdependence of all South Africa's peoples. It is interesting to note that probably the most effective instrument to halt the re-imposition of petty apartheid in Boksburg and in other CP-controlled municipalities will be by the use of economic measures: the buying power of the Blacks is playing an increasingly important role in this connection. In the absence of such economic muscle, there are not many other non-violent avenues open to Blacks to convey their displeasure and opposition.

To the extent that sanctions and disinvestment will lead to greater impoverishment of Blacks and increased Black unemployment (about which there is no doubt in my own mind), to that extent they may become counter-productive and even promote an escalation in the course of violent confrontation.

I am desperately afraid that the campaigners for sanctions and disinvestment (well-meaning as some of them may be), in their capacity for over-simplification and wishful thinking, and their (very often) abysmal ignorance of the harsh South African realities — and particularly of the make-up of the Afrikaner — will actually exacerbate the chances for peaceful accommodation, and even match the Afrikaners' own past stupidity and foolhardiness in their inability to grasp the elemental forces operating in and shaping the destiny of this country. □