

'WHILE THEY DIDN'T LIKE THE CRUDITY OF THE NATS, THEY DON'T LIKE UNTIDY LOOK OF BLACK MASSES EITHER'

the brutal crackdown, there was a palpable shrinking from the swelling tide of the black revolt.

I wrote an article lamenting this tendency in June 1987. Noting the vital role liberals had played in keeping the spirit of dissent alive through the decades of apartheid, preventing conformity from engulfing all White South Africa the way it did in Algeria, Kenya and Rhodesia, I expressed concern that this now seemed to be faltering.

"They (the liberals) still believe in criticising the government for its oppressive policies," I wrote, "but they have become afraid to identify with the black struggle to replace apartheid with a new society. They are distancing themselves from it with the liberal's historic fear of radicalism, getting lost in a no-man's land somewhere between sympathy and antagonism."

Three years later, with the ANC unbanned and active inside the country again, the tendency became more pronounced. A proposal that the Democratic Party should form a pact with the ANC produced an emotional reaction at its congress last September, culminating in Harry Schwarz's shrill declaration that "a pact with the ANC will be a Warsaw Pact".

What was particularly noticeable was that, while many new Afrikaner "progressives" like Momberg were all for a pact, it was the old Progs, the "true blue liberals", who were most passionately opposed.

Now we have this visible coolness towards the ANC's first full-blown national conference inside the country for 33 years — surely an historical moment for everyone who waged that long struggle for a nonracial democracy.

I find the reaction astonishing. All their lives these liberals have abhorred apartheid and believed in the inalienable justice of democratic majority rule. But now as that prospect draws close they find themselves unable to go out to welcome and applaud it.

It is particularly disappointing in the light of the ANC's continued commitment to the principle of nonracialism. Considering the offensiveness, the insult,

the sheer brutality of apartheid — the 18-million pass-law arrests and 3,5-million forced removals, the shattering of families and the torture in detention — I find it amazing that the country's major black nationalist movement should not have set about mobilising its people on the basis of an out-and-out counter-racism — Africa for the Africans and whitey go home.

But no. The ANC has clung unwaveringly to the principle of nonracialism and the dictum of its Freedom Charter — "South Africa belongs to all its people, black and white" — often in the face of criticism from Africanists elsewhere on the continent.

Surely white liberals should make some kind of responding gesture to that remarkable generosity of spirit?

Surely, too, there should be a recognition of the ANC's commitment to multi-party democracy, instead of the surly scepticism one finds? Again and again at the Durban conference Mandela and other speakers stressed the need for political tolerance and the rights of other parties to express themselves freely.

"We have no desire whatsoever to impose our views on everybody else," Mandela said. "We have never claimed that we have a monopoly on wisdom and that only our views and policies are legitimate. As a democratic movement we shall continue to defend the spirit of all our people to freedom of thought, association and organisation. It is precisely because of this that we have firmly committed ourselves to the perspective of a multi-party democracy."

In a continent still edging its way tentatively towards such thinking, that must stand as the most unequivocal commitment to multi-partyism by any African leader.

Yet the coolness persists. Why? One suspects the reason is that, while the liberals didn't like the crudity of the Nats, they don't like the untidy look of the black masses either. It turns out that the majority whose cause they have been championing are not classical European liberals like themselves but a proletarian mob of African socialists from whom they shrink in alarm. ●

ALGERIA

Colin Legum

ALGERIA, which has been ruled as a single-party state ever since it won its independence from France 30 years ago, is currently engaged in establishing itself as a multi-party democratic society. The first elections for a new parliament were called off when a boycott of the polls by a Muslim fundamentalist party, the Front for Islamic Salvation, ended in serious violence. The FIS has been accused of seeking to turn Algeria into 'a second Iran'. The country is now in a 'state of siege', that is, it is under emergency laws. But the false start has not deterred President Chuali Benjedid's ruling party, the Front for National Liberation (FNL), from pressing ahead with its promise to usher in a new era of democratic politics. It has only postponed the elections for six months.

This bold experiment to create a pluralist democratic society in Algeria is important not only for the 30 million Algerians, almost all of whom are Muslim, but because it is a key country whose influence extends beyond North Africa, deep into sub-Saharan Africa, across into the Middle East and into France, where some two million Algerians and other North Africans live, mainly as migrants.

However, what happens in Algeria will have its most immediate repercussions on its closest neighbours — Morocco, Libya and especially Tunisia, which is also engaged in re-establishing itself as a multi-party democratic state. Tunisia faced a violent coup attempt by Muslim fundamentalists only a month before the debacle in Algeria, and it has not yet eliminated the threat from that quarter despite the government's retreat from the secularism favoured by modern Tunisia's founder, Habib Bourguiba, as well as from its formerly Western-orientated foreign policy.

Fears of turning Algeria into 'a second Iran' are expressed not just by Westerners but also by the country's democratic politicians like Hooina Ait Ahmed, leader of the important Socialist Forces Front (FFS). In the Algerian context, 'a second Iran' is a code-word for an Islamic fundamentalist state, not necessarily one modelled on Khomeini's ideas. Algerian Muslims are mainly

IN AGONY OVER REFORM

reflects on problems of creating a plural society

Sunnis and not, like most Iranians, Shi'ites.

The upsurge of Islamic fundamentalism in Algeria has been brought about by a variety of factors. These include disillusionment with a modernising technological regime which has failed to produce employment for a growing number of young people — 60% of the population is under the age of 19; widespread economic discontent; repression of Muslim political groups; increasing anti-Western feelings due, in part, to the Gulf War but much more because of the treatment of Algerians in France and the evidence of growing anti-migrant racism in Europe. Some of these factors are common to other largely Muslim countries in the 'Arab world', and particularly Tunisia.

The Islamic movement in Algeria is not monolithic. At least half a dozen rival Muslim parties — one of which is led by the former president, Ben Balla — are opposed to the FIS. These divisions can be a positive factor in developing a pluralist political system.

Important lessons about the difficulties of creating multi-party parliamentary systems in the Third World can be learnt from the latest developments in Algeria.

First and foremost, there is the lesson that democracy cannot take root in a situation where challengers for power are themselves anti-democratic and ready to use violence to impose their ideas on the majority, as is the case with Islamic fundamentalists everywhere. Their aim is to replace undemocratic single-party rule with their own no-party theocratic regimes, as in Iran and Sudan. These movements see the opening up of the democratic process as a means to achieve power through undemocratic methods.

A second important lesson is that an electoral system which encourages a multitude of small parties cannot produce political stability. No fewer than 42

parties have been licensed to contest the promised elections in Algeria. The fragmentation of political parties does not only give wide scope for minority interests to be canvassed; it generally produces extremist factions — of which one good current example is Israel.

The role of religion in politics has become one major phenomenon in many Third World countries — ranging from India, with the rise of the Hindu chauvinistic party, the Bharatiya Janata, to Israel, Sudan and Pakistan. A second major phenomenon has been the proliferation of small parties in every case where the political system has been opened up. There are 62 parties in Zaire, 27 in Senegal, 14 in Mali, etc.

These two phenomena need to be seriously addressed if multi-party democratic systems are to stand any chance of evolving out of the present unsatisfactory single-party systems. An attempt to do so has already been made in a few countries.

In Tanzania, no candidate is allowed to introduce religion in his/her election campaign. It is even forbidden for a candidate silently to hold up a Bible or the Koran on a public platform. As a result, after four general elections, religion has not become a factor in Tanzanian politics despite its religious diversity of Christians and Muslims. The outlook after the present elections in India would have been different if the founding fathers' example of secularist politics had been entrenched in the constitution.

In countries, like Algeria, where the preponderance of people follow the same religion, the banning of religious sectarian parties could be relatively simple, even if one considers the risk that those favouring theocratic rule would be forced (as in Egypt) to operate clandestinely. Of the two risks, the latter is the lesser one.

The way of dealing with multiplicity of parties — most of them based on regional, ethnic or sectarian interests — is shown in Nigeria's new constitution, although it still falls short of reasonable democratic ideals in that it provides for only two parties to contest for power in the elections due next year. Its positive feature is that to establish its *bona fides* as a national party, each party is required to have a percentage of registered members in each of the 21 states of the federation, and will need to secure a percentage of the votes in each of the states in the national elections. This is intended to ensure that no party can win by appealing on religious, sectarian, regional or ethnic grounds. The weakness in the new Nigerian constitution is the undemocratic manner in which the military regime decreed that only two parties can be registered to contest elections. This ignores, for example, the country's experience since independence which is that three broadly national movements exist.

Under a system requiring that parties should be able to demonstrate their national support, there is no need to limit their numbers as only a few are likely to meet the criteria of having, say, 10-12% of registered voters in every state or region of the country.

One obvious objection to such a system is that it could prevent minority interests from gaining representation in parliament. However, it does not preclude minority parties from the right to organise and campaign to achieve the requisite percentage of votes to qualify as national parties and, so, eventually to qualify for the right to engage in rational elections.

To sum up: There is little prospect of true democratic systems growing up in developing countries unless the problems caused by religious, ethnic and regional politics are addressed.

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