

# THE RIGHT TO KNOW AND THE S.A. STATE OF EMERGENCY 1986-1989

On 2 February 1990, in his opening address to Parliament, President F.W. de Klerk initiated an era of **glasnost**, or dialogue, in South Africa. Firstly, he lifted bans on organizations, individuals and documents imposed under security legislation, and released a few political prisoners. Secondly, while the State of Emergency remained in place, it was severely amended. The media emergency regulations were abolished except in relation to visual material, long-term detention was subject to greater control, all affected organizations were de-restricted, and the power to restrict individuals was severely curtailed. In many senses, the government's powers reverted to the level which had pertained prior to 12 June 1986, while their implementation became more relaxed than at any time in the preceding thirty years. This is thus an opportune moment to consider the nature and impact of Emergency censorship in South Africa during the late 1980s.

For political activists of the mid 1980s a major memory of the declaration of the national State of Emergency in June 1986 is of isolation and lack of information. For several weeks people disappeared into detention or hiding, meetings were paralysed by uncertainty about what could or could not be said (even in the form of prayers), political organizations were forced underground, and the publication of anti-apartheid opinion and news was stifled. Unattributed pamphlets by clandestine groupings were suspected, often wrongly, of being police plants. The prevailing climate of uncertainty, and even fear, bears a remarkable resemblance to Vaclav Havel's description of the 'atomized' society of Czechoslovakia, in which opposition groups operated in isolation<sup>1</sup>.

It was a period of bizarre and unreal experience throughout South Africa in which normal discourse, written and spoken, came to a virtual standstill. The **Weekly Mail** and **Sowetan** were seized from news vendors and all anti-apartheid newspapers were in disarray. The office of **SASPU National** was raided, and burnt down a few days later, and the periodical was produced on the run. Virtually the only commentator on South African affairs was the Bureau of Information whose spokesperson, David Steward, appeared frequently on television. Steward threatened journalists with retribution should they employ that unquestionably accurate phrase 'white minority regime', as control was exercised over language as well as the contents or reports. Bureau of Information briefings were not privileged and could be used later against reporters. By the end of 1986 five foreign journalists had been deported. Newspapers appeared with heavy black lines through censored portions, and the **Sowetan** ran a blank box instead of a leader, until such indications of censorship were themselves banned. This was in tune with the authorities' assertion that "We do not have censorship. What we have is a limitation on what the newspapers can report"<sup>2</sup>. The limitations were illustrated by the fact that a report was released by Amnesty International in London on the detention of an entire

church congregation at Elsie's River on 15 June 1986, days before the news was available in South Africa. In the Northern Transvaal a Reverend Abram Maja was detained for 380 days for possessing and circulating subversive material. In court in 1987 the Security Police used part of psalm 5 as evidence of the illegal nature of Maja's documents, and, when cross-examined, put forward the view that parts of the Bible could be construed as subversive under the Emergency. Orwell's 1984, it appeared, had surfaced in South Africa just a couple of years late.

Those who designed the censorship aspects of the Emergency believed that the demands of the liberation movement for democracy in a unitary, non-racial state justified a response akin to a low key civil war in which control of news and ideas was fundamental. The Emergency regulations thus sought to inhibit communication at a number of levels. The most obvious were the transmission overseas of images of the popular uprising which began in September 1984 in Sebokeng and details of officially sanctioned brutality; the communication by the Mass Democratic Movement of the ideas and aspirations of the oppressed, and alternative organizations, to other sectors of South African society; and the essential linkage between organizations which keeps the liberation movement functional. There are two viewpoints from which to consider the impact of Emergency censorship: the pessimistic and the optimistic, and they will be addressed in turn.

## PESSIMISTIC

The pessimistic viewpoint saw the censorship implications of the Emergency as a microcosm of the different types of censorship inflicted on South Africa for decades, enforced with the zealotry of an unchallengeable security apparatus. There is much evidence to support this contention. Like apartheid and its educational system the State of Emergency sought to seal off the realities of apartheid from those who enjoy its benefits. The specific role of Bantu education is to separate the mass of the people from the cerebral and mechanical means to articulate their grievances and hopes for the future. Like the plethora of security related laws which has been placed on the statute book since 1950, the Emergency had the ability to censor dissident individuals (537 banned and listed persons in August 1989) and organizations. Like the censorship provisions of statutes affecting key areas of South African life (for example, the police, defence force, strategic trade, and fuel and energy supplies) the Emergency regulations covered up the truth about the methods used to sustain apartheid. Finally, like the Internal Security and Publications Acts, the Emergency targeted specific publications and seized, censored and suspended them.

In epitomizing the massive edifice of South African censorship, the Emergency focused attention on the extent to which the suppression of ideas was central to the government's counter-insurgency Winning Hearts

and Minds (WHAM) strategy. The installation of a pliant group of 'moderate' black political leaders at the community level was predicated on two tactics: the injection of massive material aid in order to improve low standards of living; and the neutralization of popular leaders and activists from the democratic movement. The history of Alexandra township from 1986 to 1989 illustrates this well. The suppression of popular organizations and those who propagate their ideals was one strand of censorship implicit in the Emergency; the others being the cutting off of the flow of information at source; control at the point of publication; and the encouragement of a climate of informal repression.

There can be no doubt that these four strands of censorship have had a far-reaching and malign influence on the nature of contemporary South African society. Cutting off information at source involved the exclusion of reporters and photographers from scenes of unrest or operational areas, which may simply have been, for example, the site of a strike. In this way the daily experience of thousands of South Africans went unpublished – Ameen Akhalwaya of **Indicator** contends that reporters were even afraid to record events in their notebooks for fear of seizure and harassment. The consequences have been large gaps in the recorded history of South Africa; and the attainment of an official objective of breaking the mental strands linking the struggles of the past with those of the present. Out of publication comes shared experience, solidarity and commitment, which prompted Suttner and Cronin to write: "The struggle is a struggle of memory against forgetting"<sup>3</sup>; and identify censorship as the enemy of the democratic movement. As the late Percy Qoboza of the **Sowetan** commented, these regulations reduced the general credibility of the Press – people who experienced traumatic events were led to distrust newspapers which could not report them fully.

## NEWSPAPERS

The Emergency regulations empowered the Minister to place censors in newspaper editors' offices. This he chose not to do, probably because of the poor international publicity which would have ensued, and because he had other effective weapons at his disposal. It was forbidden, for instance, to publish subversive statements, speeches of restricted persons and officials of restricted organizations, photographs and details of unrest and security force action, details of restricted gatherings and certain strikes and boycotts deemed subversive, as well as material about the arrest, conditions, release and court proceedings involving detainees.

Titles which tried to circumvent these controls were threatened with suspension and in some cases taken off the streets for periods ranging from four to thirteen weeks. Eleven titles, of which nine are still in existence, were so threatened and five actually suspended. This tactic was employed as late as November 1989 although there were signs that securocrats had penchant for more decisive action. Thus there was an upsurge in the number of raids and seizures, the latter sometimes involving spectacular quantities of material, coinciding with a transfer of responsibility for seizure from the Department of Home Affairs to Law and Order. The process started in July 1988 with the seizure of 14 300 copies of the Learn

and Teach publication **The historic speech of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela at the Rivonia Trial**, which is part of open court proceedings and the historical record. In late August 5 000 copies of the Muslim community paper **Al Qalam** were seized, followed by 30 000 copies of **Crisis News**. In the same month copies of one issue of **Weekly Mail** were confiscated; while in November 1988 a Lebowa youth was arrested at a bus stop for reading **New Nation**, questioned at a police station and then taken home, where copies of **Learning Nation** supplement and a T-shirt were confiscated.

During 1989 raids affected not only the favourite targets, the alternative Press and the trade unions (10 000 copies of **COSATU News** taken in April 1989), but also publishers like David Philip (four raids in six weeks), Ad Donker and Ravan, and booksellers. The authorities removed 1340 copies of the Learn and Teach publication **Comrade Moss** and were also interested in **Culture in another South Africa**, Meli's **The land belongs to us**, van Diepen's **The national question**, and Mzala's **Gatsha Buthelezi**, which quotes Ronald Segal, at that stage a banned exile. From The Other Press Service (TOPS) police confiscated in July 1989 two photographs of David Webster's funeral, a poster and a notebook, minutes and a Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC) resource package.

At the same time the State started to prosecute rather than take administrative action. A Gardens Youth Congress member was fined R1 500 in June 1989 for publishing a subversive statement in a pamphlet. On 21 July 1989 reporters from the **Weekly Mail** were charged under the Emergency for articles printed in 1987 on detainees, based on information raised under privilege by Andrew Savage in Parliament. **Vrye Weekblad**, a favourite target, was prosecuted for its coverage of the conscientious objection issue; and other publications faced charges for publishing material on school boycotts, security force action, hunger strikes, labour strikes and demonstrations. Newspapers were also charged under the Internal Security and Prisons Acts by way of reminder that the censorship provisions of other legislation were formidable. At least four newspapers were charged with quoting Comrade Harry Gwala, who was released from prison in November 1988, yet remained a listed person until 2 February 1990.

## DETENTIONS

During the five weeks following declaration of the national Emergency on 12 June 1986 one person was detained on average every five minutes. From July 1985 to December 1989 45 000 people were detained, some for periods up to 30 months and almost all under the Emergency. The vast majority were members of organizations adhering to the Charterist and Congress traditions. Although many types of person were included, two stand out. The first were high profile leaders, including journalists and academics, the most articulate exponents of the democratic philosophy. In the case of Zwelakhe Sisulu, editor of **New Nation**, it was eventually made clear that detention was a result of his work as a journalist. Security police admitted in court that the detention of two other media persons was designed to prevent the publication of a new radical paper in the Eastern Cape. Under the 1985 Emergency almost the entire staff of **Saamstaan** was



detained. The second type involved thousands of low-profile activists and rank-and-file members of anti-apartheid organizations. Many underwent no interrogation and the purpose of their detention seems to have been that of disruption of community organizations, especially the severing of communications.

On release many ex-detainees became restrictees, numbering 658 in all. Restriction orders varied from person to person, but many proscribed work intended for publication, Press interviews and a presence on premises involved with journalism and educational matters. Such restrictions severely disrupted the careers of two leading journalists, Zwelakhe Sisulu and Brian Sokutu. Sisulu's detention occupied 735 of 1056 days of his newspaper's existence and his restriction order ran to three pages. He had to report to Orlando police station daily. Restrictions were also placed on 31 anti-apartheid organizations which, while they continued to exist in a purely legal sense, were prohibited from disseminating their own or anyone else's views. Thus important data and viewpoints on township affairs conscientious objection, alternative education, trade union issues and human rights abuses became inaccessible. As early as 21 June 1986 the utterances of 118 organizations in six magisterial districts in the Western Cape had been banned.

The Emergency encouraged a climate of increasingly unrestrained militarism which nurtured informal repression. This has ranged from the harassment of community activists by police, municipal police and vigilantes, through arson and explosions, to assassination. The massive, professionally executed explosions at COSATU House and Khotso House, the firebombing of Khanya House and the Port Elizabeth Advice Office, and the burglaries of news agencies have all resulted in the loss of important documents and communications hardware. The killing of David Webster on 1 May 1989 is widely believed to have been connected to his role in documentation of detentions and political assassination by death squads. The prosecution of low intensity conflict, whether by the State or its freelance allies, had (and continues to have) the general objective of silencing opposition viewpoints emanating from community groups, educational, cultural and religious organizations, trade unions, the media, and professional and sports bodies. Evidence now emerging from the Harms Commission suggests that both the South African Police and the South African Defence Force ran squads capable of assassination and destruction.

### BLEAK

By the end of 1989, the picture was thus bleak. In late 1986 a number of successful challenges were mounted to Emergency regulations in the Natal Supreme Court, which declared them void for vagueness or outside the original intentions of the Public Safety Act (Act no. 3 of 1953); or, in other words, meaningless or illegal. Some rulings were overturned in the Appellate Division; other regulations were made more watertight and re-issued, for example as the Media Emergency regulations of December 1986 and August 1987, a draconian set of curbs which remained largely unaltered and licensed the Minister to exercise his prejudices in an arbitrary way. A wall of silence descended around significant portions of South African life, particularly in the black townships, already deprived by the policy of apartheid of the

educational and material wherewithal to communicate news, ideas, frustrations and hopes. Anthony Sampson in the **Observer** of 22 June 1986 described Soweto as cut off from Johannesburg in the same way as East from West Berlin. Physical obstructions such as roadblocks and cut telephones could not be maintained indefinitely, but some commentators attributed deaths to the control of information which inhibited propagation of the Mass Democratic Movement's non-violent philosophy.



The Emergency's censorship has been very much more radical and effective than that which operated before 1986. It was not overly ambitious, sought to control information only from within South Africa, depended almost entirely on State employees to enforce it, and encouraged self censorship. 'Traditional' censorship by contrast was over-ambitious in its attempts to control the World's literature and the import of media through the co-option of many potentially unco-operative agents such as librarians and booksellers. Perhaps most important of all there was no general opposition from the white community about media restrictions. Christopher Hope found that "... people are told very little. They wish to know even less"<sup>4</sup>, accepting the small warnings on the front pages of newspapers and voting in large numbers (80% or over) in both May 1987 and September 1989 for parties practising or advocating the methods of a police state. "Pictures of rugby and beauty queens have replaced township unrest on many front pages", wrote Tony Heard. "Now the darkness is almost complete"<sup>5</sup>. Truth had become subversion.

### OPTIMISTIC

Considerable damage has been done to South African society, and to the liberation movement, by Emergency censorship. However, there were contradictions within the system, and combative challenges to it, which make a more optimistic viewpoint not unreasonable. When the **Weekly Mail** was suspended for four weeks in November 1988, its co-editor, Anton Harber, in a pugnacious response, called upon journalists to stop worrying about the law and adopt the tactics of the streetfighter. Only in this way, he reasoned, could remnants of the right to know be preserved in the face of the imperatives of the

totalitarian state. This strand of defiance was visible throughout the Emergency and it has important implications for the future. Significantly it surfaced in resolutions closing an Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa (IDASA) conference in January 1990, at which it was agreed that laws restricting democratic debate should be broken.

A limited amount of textual and photographic material about township experience has filtered through in spite of the exclusion of journalists and camera crews. In the early days of the Emergency this was because the police followed up cases retrospectively. With the launch of the Defiance Campaign in August 1989 a new policy of arrest and confiscation on the spot became apparent as well as a continuance of raids on the offices of foreign news networks. The aim of the police seemed to be to remove Press persons at the scenes of non-violent protest, before taking violent action themselves. In the first few weeks of the campaign 74 arrests were noted and the determination of journalists was epitomized by repeated arrests. Overseas news coverage, written and pictorial, was far more comprehensive than had been the case three years earlier and the South African Police expressed anxiety about material smuggled out of the country.

Comments in works such as **Now everyone is afraid**<sup>6</sup> offer an insight into loopholes in the Emergency. The acquisition of information about police activity in less accessible areas was made virtually impossible until court proceedings were instituted. The lodging of affidavits and the bringing of interdicts against kitskonstabels was not seen as a direct tactic but one which would generate publicity. In this way information about human rights abuses at KTC, Bhongolethu (Outshoorn), Aberdeen and Hofmeyr was brought to light, although the State tried to embargo affidavits relating to community grievances. Similar tactics exposed the activities of the Ama-Afrika vigilante group in the Eastern Cape, and some headway was made in countering government propaganda about so-called 'black on black violence' and 'faction fights'. In KwaNdebele three journalists from the **Star** found a three day spell in custody at Kwaggafontein police station a fertile source of information. In the case of a Black Sash project looking into municipal police in the Eastern Cape<sup>7</sup>, research was only possible because they did not fall within the definition of security forces. In the published findings some references to the South African Police and South African Defence Force had to be excised. On the other hand, de Villiers and Roux<sup>8</sup> reported that Press curbs restricted information on municipal police activities.

Political trials, required from time to time to display South Africa's legal system, also proved to be a useful source of data, possibly explaining why the government appeared to grow less keen on them. Occasionally there were suggestions that reporting on political trials would be restricted until judgement was given. The various Alexandra Treason Trials, for example, revealed information about people's courts, alternative township structures, and police and vigilante action. Inquests also provided a channel for the release of information, for example about the existence of Askaris, or renegade ANC cadres, now in the service of the State. Little is still publicly known about

the deaths of 11 people at Trust Feed on 3 December 1988 because of Emergency restrictions, but the inquest magistrate in October 1989 found circumstantial evidence of the involvement of three policemen from New Hanover.

## INNOVATION

Prohibitions at the point of publication were circumvented in a number of innovative ways. Initially there was an air of despair involved in the printing of black lines across vulnerable text, and the choice of the potato by the editor of **Sowetan** as the subject of his weekly column, in the absence of a clear right to report political matters. The **Weekly Mail** argued that once the Bureau of Information had released its version of events, details from other sources could be published. This adroit approach was declared illegal in court. Initially it was believed to be illegal to publish the names of detainees. In the confusion of 12 June 1986 a few inaccurate lists appeared, but after 25 July a concerted effort was made to list all those persons whose next-of-kin had been informed, an assumption of public knowledge. The ready availability of names stands in contrast to the Argentinian experience during the 'dirty war' of 1976 to 1983 where only two Buenos Aires newspapers, one English language, dared to provide this protective role. The **Weekly Mail** became skilled at drawing attention to censorship without infringing the regulations and simultaneously raising the spirits of its supporters: blank spaces were, for instance, filled with the names and phone numbers of government ministers, to whom readers were referred for further information. The alternative Press became accustomed to releasing information in thinly veiled terms easily interpreted by its readership. Thus "familiar yellow vehicles", "persons who may not be named" "a substance inducing tears" became longhand for police vans, the police themselves, and tear gas.

The suspension procedures launched against **New Nation** were challenged in court, but this succeeded only in postponing the inevitable. Both the court proceedings and the process of appeal to the Minister under the Emergency did, however, allow the public to see how muddled and arbitrary were the reasons for suspension. **Weekly Mail** published the front page of the first suspended edition of **New Nation**, an action subsequently made illegal under the Emergency. **South** managed to sell 20% of its 9 May 1988 edition in two hours before its suspension was gazetted, and the next month was spent in in-house training, helping **Grassroots**, a Western Cape community newspaper, and launching a Press agency. **Grassroots** and **New Era** had suspensions lifted as recently as May 1989. However, the outburst by Stoffel Botha in May 1988, when he described the alternative Press as 'media terrorists' purveying 'publicity for revolution'; **Work in Progress** editor Glen Moss' description of warnings as "incoherent and ungrammatical" and his point that scattered references could not be considered "systematic publication of subversive propaganda" as required by the regulations<sup>9</sup>; and, most significantly, international support for the Save the Press campaign, devalued the suspension process even in the eyes of the State. Conversely the lack of a rational and predictable basis to the Minister's comments and actions encouraged the self censorship which is borne of uncertainty.



## SLOW PROCESSES

There was evidence of dissension, inefficiency and embarrassingly slow processes within the system. The latter could have been exacerbated by the need to reiterate the warning process with the declaration of each new emergency. None of these fitted the image of the Emergency as a time of quick, firm action. Nor did the authorities persuade anyone that this arbitrary but drawn out procedure was in any sense objective or scientific despite the existence of a panel of experts to advise the Minister. Suspended titles, to outward appearances and like many detainees, emerged strengthened by the experience. **Grassroots**, for example, increased its print run from 30 000 to 50 000 when it re-appeared in May 1989; while **New Nation** printed 65 000 copies after a suspension warning in November 1989 and sales rose 82% during the year as a whole. Similarly, plans to establish a register of news agencies in June/July 1988 had to be abandoned when the practicalities were investigated – under this proposed regulation even the local gardening correspondent regularly writing for a rural newspaper would have been liable for registration. There was also considerable international opposition to the measure. The Save the Press campaign, which was at its height at this time, demanded the right to acquire and disseminate information, move freely around the country, air all views and act on behalf of any cause, and associate with any movement. Most opposition newspapers, whether of the mainline or alternative traditions, carried front page warnings about Emergency censorship, although not necessarily every day. Some were comprehensive in their explanation of the state of affairs, but the most creative was **South's**: "You have the right to know".

Restrictions on individuals and organizations proved increasingly thin: in August 1989 a number of persons and corporate bodies declared themselves unrestricted, although the UDF itself was not to do this until 17 January 1990. At the height of the Defiance Campaign in November 1989 Transkei lifted its State of Emergency and bans on Charterist, Africanist and Black Consciousness organizations. Even before the campaign however, restricted views were becoming more readily accessible. The London based **Southscan** on 7 June 1989, for instance, published an interview with Ephraim Nkoe (education officer) and Simon Ntombela (publicity secretary) technically in their individual capacities, but in reality speaking on behalf of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO). The Defiance Campaign included a national 'speak out' by restricted persons which was reported verbatim by the alternative Press. The same Ephraim Nkoe was a speaker at the launch of the Durban Youth Congress in August 1989 and was quoted in the Press. In September 1989 a Northern Transvaal SAYCO member was charged with furthering the aims of his restricted organization, in what was believed to be the first such legal action. At the same time SAYCO issued a statement condemning the charge, which was published in the Press. In the same month another restricted organization, the End Conscription Campaign, released a national register of 771 men refusing to serve in an apartheid army. Although full details of related Press conferences could not be published, information about the objectors and their experiences in Namibia and Angola were a powerful challenge to the regulations which made it an

offence to undermine conscription. The State was able to outlaw organizations and disrupt communications but not remove accumulated experience nor control thought<sup>10</sup>.

Both the government and the Mass Democratic Movement were well aware of the effect of draconian censorship on democratic discourse. Mohammed Valli Moosa of the UDF National Executive speaking in June 1989<sup>11</sup> admitted that the Emergency had disrupted communication and created isolation, while much energy had been expended on a purely holding operation. David Webster wrote about the chaotic days of June 1986, pointing out that at that time only the trade unions had the communications structure to maintain a flow of information. The human rights observer of June 1986 would have needed to be capable of a considerable level of optimism to believe that three years hence, still under a State of Emergency, fulfillment of the right to know would still be on the agenda, and fiercely contested.

This combative response developed particularly strongly in the wake of the February 1988 restrictions, led in particular by the Church. New umbrella groups such as the Committee for the Defence of Democracy in South Africa (CDDSA) and the Azanian Co-ordinating Committee (AZACCO) replaced restricted organizations, but they too were quickly silenced. More significant was the restriction of the Detainees Parents Support Committee (DPSC). Its documentation and publicity role were quickly taken over by the Human Rights Commission with a structure and brief far wider than the DPSC. The monitoring roles of many local detainee support groups were taken on by unaffected organizations and new projects were started by relatively well protected university departments and research groups. The idea that academic freedom demands the academic responsibility of documenting State repression became more widely accepted in universities than hitherto. Similarly the number of human rights activists and progressive journalists increased.

## TRUTH

The nature of South African society and its international links have been such that the truth cannot be suppressed in its entirety, although the government evinced a clear desire to do so since the report of the Steyn Commission in 1982. Even the barriers created by apartheid have been too porous to permit this. Similarly there have been too many people committed to the right to know to control all the information crucial to preservation of the status quo. The esoteric details of the South African struggle are often difficult even for sympathetic foreign observers, but the South African government's assault on freedom of expression and information touched on an international issue which is only too readily understood overseas. In this context the alternative media became well entrenched given the circumstances, and even attracted material aid. In 1988, for instance, the Canadian government announced a million dollar plan to establish a legal advisory fund for the alternative Press, support individuals suffering from censorship and blunt government propaganda. International pressure was important, and possibly crucial, in limiting suspension and defeating the registration of news agencies. Two, perhaps unfashionable, further points are worth making. Firstly, the existence of Parliament and opposition MPs to ask questions

ensured that the authorities were forced to reveal some information. Secondly, the failure of the international community to enforce sanctions rigorously gave the South African government reason to behave in a relatively restrained fashion; and refrain from the tactics remembered from Argentina and Chile in the 1970s which would have disrupted communication totally.

In the opinion of the editors of *Work in Progress* "... any government which has as much to hide as South Africa's rulers must fear all but the most tame sections of the media" and "... is justified in fearing what a competent media might publish"<sup>12</sup>. It is the task of South African democrats to uncover and disseminate as much information about the way the country is run as possible. A deeper understanding of power structures and relationships is fundamental to the debate about the planning of a future in which people have greater control over their destinies. Experience of life under a State of Emergency has shown that within a deeply entrenched culture of resistance in South Africa is an important group which has as a priority the maintenance of channels of communication. So draconian were the implications of the State of Emergency that the numbers of people committed to the right to know grew considerably and their skills and tactics expanded commensurately. It is thus possible that out of the challenge of severe repression might emerge stronger foundations for a policy of freedom of information in a post-apartheid South Africa. □

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by Yusuf Bhamjee

# ACCESSIBLE POLITICS

Chris Heymans and Gerhard Totemeyer (eds): **Government by the People: The Politics of Local Government in South Africa**. Juta, 1988.

Given the municipal elections and the implementation of the new local government structures that are under way, this is a most welcome book. It is timely, useful and also, the first of its kind.

A wide range of people, representing a cross-section of the ideological spectrum have contributed to this book. The usefulness of the text lies in the fact that the politics of local government in South Africa has been made accessible to a wider reading public. It is written in a fairly simple style – a book which is not only of interest for the specialist alone but can be read by the average practitioner of local government as well as people involved in community organisations.

The articles are broadly divided into three themes:-

- (a) The relevance of local government;
- (b) Local government and the politics of "reform" and "restructuring" in South Africa; and
- (c) Future trends

The general feeling amongst people who write about local government and certainly amongst those whose work appears in this publication, is that Central Government is seeking to make reforms at local government level – there is a belief that this process will be a building block towards more fundamental changes at the national level.

Local government reforms can be perceived to take place at least partly in response to struggles waged by civic and community organisations. Local government is a site of struggle, and changes at this level may affect policies at a national level. Changes brought about by struggles from below rather than concessions granted from above make it possible for local government to function as a forum for change – that will lead towards more fundamental national changes.

This review will discuss the book under consideration chapter by chapter.