

Peoples Power Can it happen in S.A.?

By people's power I mean a strategy of repetitive demonstration involving thousands of individuals willing to assemble peacefully day by day in some large symbolic public arena close to the seat of state power – in other words, what might have happened in March 1960 had Philip Kgosana and his 20 000 supporters not been persuaded to abandon their march on the House of Assembly in Cape Town.

The term people's power first gained currency during the events surrounding the fall of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, although it also bears some resemblance to the passive resistance campaigns of Gandhi in the Indian sub-continent in the 1930s and 1940s, insofar as both strategies attempt to inhibit the state from deploying force against a peaceful,

unarmed mass. Clearly, sustained people's power requires skilful organisational capacity and immense self-control in the face of provocation.

There are variations of this strategy: in Peking, the students, in effect, camped in Tiananmen Square until forced to flee by the harsh response of the People's Army; in Leipzig and Prague, the demonstrations were not continuous, but re-assembled every day. What is critical for success or failure is the nature and power of the regime. South Africa, in the past, has always been considered *sui generi* with respect to its vulnerability to social upheaval. The question at issue is whether the demonstration effect of events in Eastern Europe has altered this conventional wisdom.

In an interview with *The Independent* (January 24, 1990), Pik Botha, South Africa's Foreign Minister, dismissed the relevance of any comparison between events in Eastern Europe and what might happen in South Africa. Was he being too optimistic?

Botha cited the existence of outspoken newspapers and opposition parties in South Africa; that blacks form almost half of the police force; the growth of a prospering black bourgeoisie; and the existence of local self-government in the black townships. Since President F.W. de Klerk's February 2 address to parliament, Botha can add the unbanning of all organisations, the release of many political prisoners and detainees and the return of ANC exiles (to be followed by a general amnesty), and the repeal of the Separate Amenities Act and other apartheid legislation as well.

Most important, Botha stressed, was the now obvious fact that the 'obsolete and worn-out (Marxist) theories and systems' supported by the ANC and its allies were worthless as a basis for creating and sustaining a new and just political order – the establishment of which was his government's firm commitment.

What Botha is saying here is that Eastern Europe swept away communism with (peaceful) people's power because the system was unreformable, but by contrast the polity in South Africa is reformable and this will avert revolution. This is a familiar Afrikaner claim: that fundamentally they are an adaptable people, capable of innovating dynamic change when a prevailing system begins to crumble.

How justified, though, is Botha's optimism? The 'positive' factors he cites as evidence of the change in South Africa can just as easily be construed as offering blacks a basis for a heightened rather than a reduced struggle against

apartheid, because they raise expectations not only of more reforms, but of a greatly accelerated pace of reform. Once there is a hint of loss of resolve by the ruling group, as happened in Eastern Europe, the balance of forces can change quite dramatically. I shall return to this point later.

As for Botha's assumption that blacks will abandon their beliefs in communism/socialism, because the erstwhile supporters of this system in Eastern Europe did so – this is open to challenge. There is no evidence that the comrades in the townships are willing converts to a belief in the benefits of a free market economy. On the contrary, blacks' experience of capitalism in their own country is more direct than that of East Germans viewing with envy the material cornucopia in the neighbouring Federal Republic.

Thus for a young black, capitalism may well seem (rightly or wrongly) to be the source of his woes as the hand-maiden of an apartheid state. There is, therefore, no necessary inference that the example set by Eastern Europe will persuade blacks to change their conviction that the state must control the commanding heights of the economy.

In Eastern Europe, rebuilding the economy along free market lines could become a unifying enterprise (even if long-cossetted citizens would not want the state to remove its protective arm completely); in South Africa rebuilding the economy to ensure 'redistribution of wealth' almost certainly would be highly divisive, fuelling rather than weakening people's power.

Even if we accept that the collapse of the *ancien regimes* of pre-1989 Eastern Europe may pay ideological dividends for Pretoria in the short-term, as both the government and its black opponents struggle for the political

high ground in the current, delicately balanced, pre-negotiation phase, the longer-term implications of a people's power strategy are worth considering, especially if the negotiation process results in prolonged bouts of stalemate. In these circumstances the black opposition might well attempt a local variant of people's power to hasten the transfer of power. This seems to be the more likely objective in the short to medium-term, rather than an attempt to oust the government from power on the East European analogy.

SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

In the South African context, the incentives and constraints for and against the success of people's power are finely balanced.

Firstly, there is no external actor equivalent to a Gorbachev waiting in the wings and refusing – unlike his predecessors in 1956 and 1968 – to prop up discredited satellite governments via military intervention. Nor could the regimes in Eastern Europe count on the undivided loyalty of their armies to disperse massive popular demonstrations by force.

The reverse is true of South Africa: the South African Defence Force and the South African Police remain loyal to white rule to an extent that exceeds even their support of the Nationalist government, and the black opposition has long memories of their use by the state to crush dissent. Yet it is one thing to employ force to deal with stone-throwing mobs in the townships or disperse crowds defying beach apartheid; it is quite another to fire cold-bloodedly a *la* Tiananmen Square into a large gathering (say 30 000 or so) peacefully occupying a public square. Would the loyalty of black policemen and white army conscripts hold in these circumstances? (Front File Vol 4, no. 3, How Loyal are the SA Police?)

Secondly, a black strategy of this kind would be a high risk one. There is the difficulty of mobilising sufficient numbers willing to exercise the self-restraint of the demonstrators in Wenceslas Square in Prague to which Czech dissidents had relatively easy access night after night. In the South African context, the segregation of blacks into townships provides the security forces with the option of fencing their opponents within tight parameters once the first mass demonstration has been forcibly dispersed.

On the other hand, a Tiananmen Square outcome and the state's continuing need to prevent further black mobilisation would strain the economy, stretch the resources of the security forces, appal the outside world and maximise pressure on the Republic from friend and foe alike. Thus, the risks to both parties in a conflict of this kind would be great; the difficulty is that the black opposition would have to take the first step.

Thirdly, the ease with which governments collapsed in Eastern Europe suggests that their legitimacy – even in the eyes of many Communist Party rank and file members denied the material and often corrupt privileges of their superiors – was virtually non-existent. This profound lack of confidence in what Pik Botha has described as a 'small, privileged clique who closed up and ruled the country, irrespective of the wishes of the vast majority of people' (no irony presumably intended!), is not reflected among the *white* population of South Africa.

At best, the majority of whites identify with the government's aspiration to share power, but would presumably close ranks behind the state against black demands – made manifest by people's power type demonstrations – to abdicate forthwith in favour of straightforward majority rule. This would be even truer of the sizeable (white) Conservative Party minority.

MORE AT STAKE

In Eastern Europe, the aim was to force the ruling Communist Party out of exclusive control of the state; in the Republic, much more would be at stake – the transfer of political authority and economic privilege from a large white minority to a black majority. The white power structure would not necessarily collapse overnight. The critical factor in Eastern Europe was the public perception that the prevailing regime was a spent force. This factor is not present in South Africa.

Finally, if we are looking for parallels, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev may be more illuminating: a Communist Party trying to manage change without losing control of either the process or the end product. And if the Russian C.P. surrenders its exclusive power in favour of multi-party competition, might not this, too, be the fate ultimately in store for the National Party in a post-apartheid dispensation?

Both Gorbachev and de Klerk might, after all, have to settle for this outcome rather than continue the use of force to deal with ethnic demands as in Baku in 1990 or Soweto in 1985/6. Constitutional Development Minister, Dr Gerrit Viljoen, has already indicated that the path the NP is treading will lead to coalition government.

Afrikanerdom – divided as it is – may be more favourably placed to hang on, first, to exclusive power and then to limited power, for it still has considerable resources and military and bureaucratic capability. It might, indeed, be willing to use them if a real threat emerged by way of people's power or any variation thereof.

And, even if we assume the eventual withering away of white power as a consequence of some new constitutional dispensation, the extent to which pressures of the kind facing Gorbachev emerge in a post-apartheid society will depend on how a successor government deals with the distribution of power and resources and the degree to which national unity – after decades of forced diversity in the name of separate development – becomes a reality.

UNLIKELY

People's Power as demonstrated in Eastern Europe is unlikely to be repeated in South Africa, because (a) the discipline required for mass peaceful protest is not available, and (b) the government is still too strong to be toppled overnight. Eastern Europe was able to mobilise people's power on a massive scale because a common purpose existed: to bring down the government as quickly and painlessly as possible from what people sensed was an irresistible position. No such common purpose or base exists in South Africa. A major fault line is emerging in the black community dividing pro- from anti-negotiations. This fundamental strategic difference renders discipline impossible. Rivalries between black organisations will become more, not less, intense.

A compromise strategy of organising protests in parallel with negotiations – e.g. the ANC/UDF defiance campaign

– in the long run will prove untenable, because it will encourage anti-negotiators to mount their own, not necessarily peaceful, protests, damaging to the negotiating process. Although ‘free’ political activity is returning to South Africa, there is a threshold beyond which the de Klerk government will regard protests as destabilising the negotiation process.

TELEVISION

THE ROLE OF TELEVISION in provoking and producing a demonstration or knock-on effect in Eastern Europe was crucial. Historically, TV had raised economic expectations as East Germans, for example, watched West German images of material well-being. Similarly, in Romania, political aspirations reached fever-pitch as the riveting spectacle of chanting Czechs and East Germans, employing the technique of mass demonstration, was transmitted by neighbouring television stations in the Soviet Union, Hungary and Yugoslavia.

By contrast, in China the government quickly asserted its control over state television, and the events in Peking were interpreted to the millions beyond the capital in terms which successfully discredited the student attempt at revolution.

A common feature of the East European revolt was the importance attached to gaining access to TV stations as a way of circulating news of what was happening elsewhere in the country. This encouraged the spread of unrest and foiled government attempts to isolate the original source of public dissension.

As Garron Baines argues, ‘the security of regimes around the world may in future depend on keeping other people’s video images off television sets at home. In fermenting revolution in the age of broadcasting, control of television appears almost as important as access to the weapons needed to take on the state by force’ (The Guardian, January 8, 1990).

In South Africa, neither access to arms or television by black protesters has been or will be easy, and without arms and/or sympathisers in the armed forces (as in Romania), gaining control of the broadcasting media (heavily fortified by the state at the first hint of trouble) will be a major obstacle for a people attempting a version of the strategy so successful in Eastern Europe.

Censorship of the media and selective reporting of events is a familiar practice in the Republic. When de Klerk announced the lifting of some emergency measures on February 2, he specifically retained the restrictions on the media. There is the added difficulty that the SA state’s physical boundaries are not as porous as those in Eastern Europe, allowing relative freedom of movement for journalists and indeed large numbers of dissidents, as the opening of the Hungarian border to Czechoslovakia for East German refugees clearly illustrated.

The significance of porous borders in contributing to a ripple, indeed a torrent, of revolt across Eastern Europe, should not be underestimated. South Africa, by contrast, is isolated from potentially troublesome

neighbours in a way which was not true of the closely packed societies of Eastern Europe, all of which – in varying degree – had a history of war, conflict and foreign occupation. It was the technology of mass communications which provided their peoples with a window on each other’s world, enabling them to ‘see for themselves’. And, more important, TV provided a telling means of distinguishing between a Soviet Union in the throes of glasnost and perestroika and the stultifying, bureaucratised regimes under which the satellites still languished.

POLICE

It is at that point that the police will be sent in to deal with the protests, and, being anti-negotiators themselves (or mostly so), they will perform their task with relish. Negotiations will then be caught in a pincer movement between black anti-negotiators and white anti-negotiators. The more (black) negotiators invoke public demonstrations, therefore, as an adjunct to negotiation, the more they will undermine the negotiation process.

A further complicating factor will be the dependability of black policemen (almost half the South African Police) in the changing situation. The responsibility for dealing with unrest situations then will rest increasingly with white policemen, who will be tempted to take advantage of the government’s increased dependence on them. The government in turn will apply increased pressure on the ANC to make up its mind whether it is for or against negotiations.

The ANC’s dilemma is obvious. Already, it accuses its rivals, like the Pan-Africanist Congress and some elements of the Black Consciousness Movement, of deliberately inflaming emotions in the black townships as a way of undermining both negotiations and the ANC’s popularity and authority. Yet for the ANC to dispense with the protest weapon is difficult – it would risk surrendering the townships to the PAC and to those young comrades who see negotiations as a futile exercise.

The whole point of the Mandela initiative is to exchange strife for negotiations, so that a future black government does not inherit a wasteland. Only if the ANC abandons this initiative can it take its place again at the head of the *toy-toying* young comrades.

The fact that the ANC’s rivals in the townships are a motley collection with scarcely a coherent programme between them is neither here nor there. All they need to do to destabilise negotiations is to provoke the police to open fire. Then immediately the ANC’s position at the negotiating table becomes precarious.

Unless the ANC can summon up unexpected resources of command, therefore, the signs in South Africa point not to an Eastern European type people’s power, but to continuing violence-related unrest emanating from the black townships. The dilemma facing the ANC in this context is illustrated by Nelson Mandela’s support for the government’s decision to send the army into Natal to try to separate the warring Inkatha and ANC/UDF blocks factions.

RESOLVE

Possibly the most striking parallel between Eastern Europe this loss of resolve was total; in South Africa it is populaces of loss of resolve by the rulers. In Eastern Europe this loss of resolve was total; in South Africa it is still only partial: it is limited to acceptance that power can no longer be maintained as a monopoly of the white group; at the same time there is a closing of ranks against any demand for a 'democratic' transfer of power to the black majority.

The future test of the South African government's resolve will be its willingness to unleash repression, because along that route lies the re-banning of organisations and the re-jailing of black leaders. Full-scale repression probably will contain unrest, at least temporarily, but it will play havoc with ruling group unity, and it will, of course, invite fearful international retribution via sanctions.

Most blacks know there has been a weakening of white rule, but they are divided over whether to seize the opportunity to negotiate a peaceful changeover, with minimum damage to the economy, political institutions and the social fabric, or to go for the government's throat – and hang the cost.

By comparison with Eastern Europe's peaceful revolution, the South African situation is much more complex and fraught with violence – both real and potential. In his first public address after his release from prison, Mandela called for a 'disciplined' struggle against apartheid. Discipline and black unity are the key to the ANC's negotiations strategy. Without either, the strategy will be self-defeating. □

FUTURES

Two possibilities might be mentioned: one is that the burgeoning black trade union movement will be able to mount something approaching 'people's power' – massive, disciplined, peaceful and decisive demonstrations. This possibility seems unlikely. The other is that the white right-wing will mobilise white 'people's power' to force De Klerk to call an election on the government-ANC negotiation package – and defeat it. Extremist vigilante groups would contribute the street theatre, but basically the demonstration of white power would have to be constitutional – peaceful and yet overwhelming. Given the propensity for violence by the far right, this outcome seems improbable.
