
SOUTH AFRICA'S TRANSITION TO A NON-RACIAL DEMOCRACY

JOHN MATISONN

On the 17th of March 1992, an overwhelming majority of South African whites (68.6 percent) voted yes in President De Klerk's white-only referendum, thus ensuring that they will never again be the only ones determining the political future of South Africa. The referendum gave De Klerk a clear mandate to continue the government's reform process, which is aimed at "a new constitution through negotiation." This power of determination will be recorded in history as one of De Klerk's achievement's. In a very understated way, keeping the various factions off-balance, De Klerk and African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela have provided South Africa with a glimmer of hope, allowing a relatively smooth transition to a non-racial democracy. Despite both the difficult tasks that lie ahead—the creation of an interim government and the writing of a new constitution—and the on-going low-level violence, the two leaders have set a process on track. The Fletcher Forum asked former National Public Radio correspondent John Matisonn to comment on the dramatic political changes that have occurred within the apartheid nation's tight ideological and bureaucratic system.

The collapse of communism and apartheid occurred at about the same time. It is natural that many people, including professional analysts and policymakers, continue to see parallels between the two systems and between presidents who presided over radical reform in both. In the former Soviet Union, news followers experienced a wave of hope followed by pessimistic fears that the brave attempt to create a new society would end with the fracturing of the society into ethnic splinters. Likewise, as Gorbymania swung over to a nostalgic acceptance that he could not stay at the top of the Soviet power structure, the confident assumption followed that F. W. De Klerk would lose control of the process in South Africa. Then came the white referendum in which whites gave De Klerk a landslide victory for his policy of negotiations with his former enemies.

Many experts predicted that there would be a safe margin of victory for the yes vote. Most of the media who were saying that De Klerk could lose, and that there would be civil war, were saying what the "spin doctors" in Pretoria wanted them to say. Those in Pretoria have a long history of playing with public

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perception. In this election, the advertising agency of Saatchi and Saatchi managed De Klerk's campaign. Apocalyptic fears of the consequences of a no vote were part of Saatchi and Saatchi's strategy to prod apathetic yes voters to the polls. It worked.

Part of what assured De Klerk's victory was that opinion polls were available in the months before the vote was announced. Then the polls gave De Klerk at least 57 percent of the vote. In the end, he received 10 percent more than that. Perhaps the real basis for such confidence lies in the analysis of De Klerk himself and the process in which he was engaged.

In terms of the De Klerk/Gorbachev analogy, the two men do have some things in common. Both come from deep within the establishment of their countries. Both retained a strong emotional attachment to their parties in which they spent their lives. In Gorbachev, this loyalty was the fatal political flaw. He wanted to reform the communist party, but it was a task he could undertake only after the failed coup left him no choice.

The difference between the two leaders' attachment to their parties is a fact that goes unnoticed. While De Klerk has fundamentally reversed the policy of the National Party, he has not suffered a single defection from his cabinet, from the members of parliament of his party, or even among senior generals in the army or the police. This is a highly significant sign for the political future and begs the question of how this was done.

De Klerk was able to draw on several advantages. First he understands South Africa's patronage system and has made it known that he does not plan to interfere with the generous pensions of the members of parliament (MP). That system, which has been improved several times in recent years, provides that anyone who serves in parliament for seven years or more will receive approximately half of their salary as pension thereafter. This pension rises on a sliding scale to a full salary after fifteen years. Every MP has done the calculation—very few will have less than seven years service when the white parliament finally ends. There are other ways of adding to the size of the pensions. There are rules that allow members to purchase increases in their pensions with lump sum payments and rules recognizing other forms of service such as time in the provincial legislatures. It pays them all to remain in until the end. Beyond that, it is very clear from De Klerk's mode of negotiating that he will bring as many colleagues as possible into the new system. De Klerk's policy suggests that rewards will come in the new system, and they will still come through his party.

This policy serves the interests of at least some civil servants, and even a fragment of what would be regarded in other countries as the private sector. Contrary to the view De Klerk expresses in public, South Africa's free-market, has, under his power, been restricted by extensive government intervention in the economy. More than a third of the white population work either for the government or a parastatal organization. De Klerk is looking for a combination of job and pension guarantees and golden handshakes to keep support for his leadership strong. He has already privatized certain parastatal industries in a way that secures existing jobs. De Klerk has one other "secret weapon:" he is not his predecessor. Former president P.W. Botha was not only despised by his

opponents at home and abroad, he was feared by his own colleagues. A college drop-out, Botha was seen as many as arrogant, insecure, and subject to fits of temper. Even those in Botha's cabinet believed that a misstep could be fatal to their careers.

In his relations with his colleagues, De Klerk could not represent a happier contrast. De Klerk has the resume of a man who was born to rule in the South African system. The son of a senator and cabinet member, nephew of a former prime minister, and brother to a former editor of the nation's leading pro-government newspaper, the private De Klerk exudes a sense of confidence. He started as a modest small town attorney, but then became a highly regarded law professor before entering politics. He held senior positions in every youth and adult organization in which National Party politicians cut their teeth, ending as National Party leader in the Transvaal province, traditionally the most powerful party job. By the time he became President, he was secure in himself, understood his role, and felt no need to prove himself with unnecessary gestures or shows of power among his colleagues. The relief among party and cabinet officials was audible.

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These reasons account for much of his success in keeping the party together thus far. Yet it leaves to question the efficacy of the referendum. What was particularly clever about the referendum was its timing. As his opposition on the far right argued, De Klerk did not have a mandate to make the radical changes he is making. When he led his party in the last general white election, in 1989, he did not convey to voters that he would do what he has done; release Nelson Mandela from prison, unban the African National Congress, and begin a process of serious negotiation for a new constitution that will provide every South African with the vote.

This was a radical departure. De Klerk knew it, and so he promised from the beginning that he would go to the voters one more time before a new constitution was implemented. This was a necessary promise. It was clear to informed observers that this would not be a conventional white election, because the far right Conservative Party has been growing in the parts of the country that benefit from South Africa's gerrymandered district lines. In South Africa, De Klerk's National Party always scored well among farmers, so the government divided the seats by political districts to give farmers an advantage at the polls. Beyond that, decades ago they had a law passed that allows rural seats to have

fewer voters than urban ones. As a result of these changes, a political party with rural support can easily win control of the parliament and hence the presidency with a minority of white votes. However, in a referendum, districting lines are not relevant. It is simply a yes or no vote across the country. For that reason, it was obvious that the last white votes would be cast in a referendum, not a general election.

The question was, when? De Klerk's promise suggested that once a constitution was drafted, he would go to the voters. However, he seemed to be hemorrhaging support at the grass-roots level, though not in parliament. Each by-election called when a member of parliament passed away or vacated a seat showed a rise in far right support. Once a constitution negotiated with Nelson Mandela was on the table, things would look even worse for De Klerk. It would be clear just how much the whites would have to swallow.

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For that reason, De Klerk took the initiative. Seeing a by-election in Potchefstroom, southwest of Johannesburg, he acted. He announced that he would treat the results of that by-election as a test of voter sentiment about his policies. Since De Klerk was a professor of law in Potchefstroom and knows the community intimately, it is safe to assume he knew what any analyst knew—he would lose. When he did, he announced that he had to respect the voters' wishes, and call a referendum.

This gave him back the initiative. Because there was not a written constitution on the table, he could set the terms of the campaign. He framed it as a choice between his responsible leadership that was already bringing South Africa back from world isolation and the wild-eyed neo-Nazi extremists who would consign the country to chaos. In winning, he obviously had the support of the third party, the moderately liberal Democratic Party. He did what many thought unthinkable: persuaded whites to vote to end white rule.

This vote was important because there still is a white parliament under the present constitution. Every day De Klerk had to face criticism that he was acting without a popular mandate. Now that mandate is his. The far right proved its limitations, and fissures within the far right movement are growing. De Klerk kept his support base together and he remains stronger in relation to both the right and left.

He showed what that meant for his dealings with Nelson Mandela's African National Congress almost immediately. His negotiators hardened their posi-

tions in the talks about setting up an interim government and drafting a new constitution. That infuriated the ANC negotiators, but the process will remain on track. More break-downs in the talks can be expected, but these problems will be overcome.

Challenges to this Optimistic Scenario

The process of writing the new constitution could take two years. During this time, and even after an interim government which includes ANC members is in charge, violence between various factions around the country will continue.

To predict the future level of violence, it is necessary to understand its origins, which are not primarily tribal. The area where the conflict started, Natal province, around Durban and Pietermaritzburg, has only one African ethnic group or tribe—Zulus. All the perpetrators in Natal were Zulu, as were all the corpses, with occasional exceptions involving migrant workers. Most of the deaths so far have taken place in this region.

The conflict has been between supporters of the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party. Inkatha has always used ANC colors and other symbols, and the speeches of Inkatha's president, KwaZulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, stress his ANC credentials. So the fight was over power and ideology—over who represented the real ANC, over whether it was legitimate to stay within the government-created ethnic structures, and over whether violence should be used to fight apartheid.

Shortly after Mandela was released from prison, the violence spread to the black townships around Johannesburg, where many different ethnic groups are represented. Here it soon took on ethnic overtones, involving Zulus and Xhosas. The police press releases almost always describe it in "tribal" terms, even where the evidence for this is absent. Buthelezi is the only significant black political leader who mobilizes around an ethnic identity. It is now true that in some townships around Johannesburg, the fight has ethnic characteristics, but this is not linked to notions of secession as is the case in Eastern Europe, even where Buthelezi's supporters are involved. Because apartheid was associated with enforced ethnic "nationalisms" that were promoted even to the point of creating separate countries (though the outside world did not recognize them), almost all black leaders regard unity within a single South Africa as the positive alternative to apartheid. This of course contrasts with Eastern Europe, where enforced unity fuelled the anti-authority demand for separate states.

Only two so-called black homelands are partial exceptions to this position. The first is KwaZulu in Natal where, although Buthelezi has always demanded a place as a national leader, there are growing signs that his fall-back position is to retain some regional autonomy, albeit within a single, South African state. The second is Bophuthatswana, whose platinum deposits and successful gambling industry have encouraged its President Lucas Mangope to hold out against incorporation. It would be premature to address this problem now, but, since he was kept in power by the South African military during an attempted

coup, it is likely that De Klerk will have the necessary leverage when the time comes to unify the country.

Another form of violence that poses a danger to a peaceful South Africa comes from the far right. White paramilitary organizations, using Nazi-style insignia, tend to attract media coverage. This attention is not wholly unwarranted, but it does tend to distort perceptions. Support for these groups is small, and while they have been responsible for a few bloody incidents, they have not been able to sustain their rallied support. Again, De Klerk seems to have managed this problem to date.

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The more significant danger from right wing violence comes from within the government's uniformed services. This was certainly the case pre-1990. Much of that activity has been exposed in the media, but little effective official response came about. There are some witnesses within the military and the police who allege responsibility for the random killings of black people that started only last year. So far De Klerk has done little about this. His strategy is to keep the Defense Force and police on his side during the reform phase by avoiding challenges to them except when absolutely compelled to act.

The final challenge to the optimistic proposals rests with the economy. Here too the apparent dangers can be separated from those that are real. It is true that South Africa now has the only thriving Communist Party in the world. The reason for this should be obvious—the communists were the only party of whites to actively organize and promote blacks to high party positions as long as sixty years ago. They followed this with thirty years of supplying money and guns from Moscow, after the ANC was banned and forced underground by the white government. The Communist Party is in alliance with the ANC, and it is unlikely that the alliance will be broken before national, universal franchise elections. Whether the reforms taking place in Europe will change this is unclear. Nonetheless the alliance does not intend to enforce the traditional communist policies such as nationalization or to challenge democratic principles.

The South African Communist Party does not have economists planning the transformation, as was once thought certain to be the case. Some leaders still talk of nationalizing sectors such as the insurance industry to provide some state funding for those who have been discriminated against. On the other hand, forms of state planning applied in Japan and its neighbors are being actively examined.

It seems that the bigger problems in South Africa arise from a lack of qualified people to manage new policies, which will mean that the old civil service may largely remain in place, as well as the effect that the socialist rhetoric will have on foreign investors, especially in the United States.

The years of economic stagnation, sanctions, and disinvestment have had considerable effect in converting the opinions of many government leaders to a belief in a multiracial future. It is indeed remarkable that after generations of apartheid, the major political groupings, representing both blacks and whites, are committed to this principle. While the ANC has espoused non-racial leadership for decades, De Klerk's National Party only opened its membership to all races in 1990. Since then, only a trickle of blacks have joined, but it is already clear that after elections, the main opposition to a multiracial ANC (which polls show has a majority of votes), will be the National Party in alliance with several black political parties and religious groups.

De Klerk and Mandela still argue in public over whether foreigners should invest or lend money to South Africa. In this atmosphere, the economic signals are mixed. A German bank has recently made the first substantial loan to South Africa since the debt standstill in the mid-1980s. On the other hand, all three attempts to start mutual funds for international investors to invest in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange have had to be abandoned because of lack of support.

South Africa has major advantages over Eastern Europe as an economy, because it has many flourishing free market institutions and a substantial infrastructure functioning in such areas as transportation, communication, and banking. On the negative side, the prospects for gold, the foundation of the South African economy, are not so healthy. While the gold price has been stagnant, South Africa's share of the world market has been falling. Newly opened mines are small, while the large mines are getting old. The country's future depends on using its infrastructure to establish itself as the center of the large regional market.

The Transition on Track

Both De Klerk and Mandela have a common perception about the timetable they must follow to complete the transition to a non-racial democracy by 1994, by which time the present constitution mandates another white election. Mandela and De Klerk have a common interest in ensuring that this election never takes place. To avoid it, they must agree on a new constitution by 1994, and get approval from the white parliament (and the Asian and so-called colored, or mixed-race parliamentary chambers). Before that time, the ANC will be brought into a transitional or interim government. The transitional government will call elections under the new constitution, and the winners in that election will form the first post-apartheid government.

In writing the constitution, the main proposals that will dominate discussions are those of the ANC and the current government. The ANC wants a one

person, one vote constitution with a bill of rights guaranteed by the courts. The government offers a more complicated formula, providing for a one person, one vote election to the lower house of parliament; in the upper house or senate, the party that comes second in each region would get equal power with the winning party. Since the government assumes the National Party will come second, it is trying to reserve for itself veto power over significant change under an expected ANC government.

Some of these government proposals should be seen as opening bargaining positions which will later be abandoned. However, the ANC is certain to accept some form of compromise, including a time period within which the National Party will be allowed influence disproportionate to its support from the popular (multiracial) vote. ANC negotiators are making it clear they want a formula that will discourage white skills, capital, and technology from leaving the country.

All the signs suggest that the restructuring process will continue to a successful conclusion. De Klerk will keep his party together, and lead it into a vote in which the party will lose control of the presidency and the government. An ANC leader, presumably Nelson Mandela, will become president. De Klerk's National Party will be the second most powerful party. Its make-up will have changed to some degree, a process which has already begun among whites. Whereas traditionally his support consisted of Afrikaners like himself, for several years now support has shifted: he has lost about half the Afrikaners to far-right parties, but has gained significantly among the other major white group, English-speaking white South Africans.

The National Party will remain a force, though it will no longer hold the monopoly on power it has maintained since 1948. Whatever the constitutional formula, the National Party leader, President De Klerk, will be a powerful figure. He may even have the title of vice-president, but regardless of the title, his party's influence will remain. The ANC has come to see value in that scenario, because the constituency De Klerk represents will continue to be so important. The political process is now sufficiently entrenched that it will survive both De Klerk and Mandela. Within both the government and the ANC, there is substantial unity at the highest level about keeping the reform process on track. Now these parties must build public confidence in their ability to satisfy the needs of foreign investors and the needs of those at home who have been dispossessed for so many decades.

