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# POLITICAL CHANGE IN SOUTH AFRICA

— PATRICK O'MEARA AND N. BRIAN WINCHESTER —

When the ruling National Party (NP) campaigned in the 1989 general election for the all-white House of Assembly in the South African Parliament, there were few signs that it soon would embark on far-reaching reforms and the abolition of apartheid. Yet soon after, some hailed newly elected President F.W. de Klerk as the Gorbachev of South Africa. On February 2, 1990, de Klerk announced in an historic speech to the parliament that he was unbanning the African National Congress (ANC) and other anti-apartheid organizations, legalizing the South African Communist Party (SACP), releasing Nelson Mandela from prison, and opening the way to eventual negotiations for power-sharing. Many continued to question de Klerk's sincerity, as he remained circumspect about the extent and pace of future changes. Was South Africa on an irreversible path toward a new political order, or was this simply another ploy to deflect world attention and to buy time in order to sustain minority domination?

Since the all-white National Party came into power in 1948, South African politics have been characterized by prolonged periods of enforced calm punctuated by outbreaks of political violence, labor unrest, school boycotts, and other forms of resistance. Upheaval and repression in the late 1970s set the stage for further confrontation and change in the 1980s. In May 1983 then Prime Minister P.W. Botha introduced a constitutional amendment that provided for three racially separate chambers in a proposed new parliamentary structure and replaced the position of prime minister with a state president. The new tricameral parliament gave the appearance of power sharing among whites, Asians, and peoples of mixed race, so-called Coloreds. But white control of the presidency and the powerful President's Council, as well as the predetermined numerical superiority of the white House of Assembly, ensured that real power remained in white hands. Most importantly, Africans, who constituted 73 percent of the total population, continued to be excluded. Separate referenda for whites, Coloreds, and Asians were held in 1984 to legitimize the proposed constitutional changes. While most whites supported the new constitution, 77 percent of the eligible Colored voters and 80 percent of the eligible Indian voters boycotted the elections. The government's illusion of power sharing had the exact opposite effect of its intent, precipitating a crisis of unprecedented magnitude and duration. Violent confrontations be-

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tween protesters and security forces spread, the death toll rose, and the government declared a state of emergency in May 1985. This gave police and army wide powers of detention without trial, search and seizure without warrant, and full indemnity from legal claims. Greater violence ensued as South Africa slipped deeper into crisis.

In response the South African government introduced modest reforms, repealing the prohibition of interracial marriage and expanding the rights of Africans to conduct business and acquire ownership in designated urban areas. The government intended to repeal a number of apartheid laws such as restrictions on black residence, citizenship, and freedom of movement without endangering continued white control. Nonetheless, over 2,000 blacks were killed and as many as 24,000 were arrested and detained between 1984 and 1986. This pattern of modest reforms in the midst of repression might have continued if not for a series of dramatic events following the September 1989 general election. The election was unusual for South Africa because, while the ruling National Party won power, it was left with a greatly reduced majority. Nevertheless, President F.W. de Klerk announced that a substantial majority of the white electorate had given a mandate for significant political changes. He believed there was no alternative. The growing violence and conflict in the townships as well as the demands of black trade unions and workers indicated that without negotiation the spiral of violence would continue indefinitely. Despite stringent controls imposed by the recurring states of emergency, the government could not halt the national strikes and boycotts, protests by church leaders, acts of sabotage, and bombings. The government was forced to rely on nationwide states of emergency to maintain order because it was unwilling to share power with legitimate black leaders and groups. Up until recently the government demonstrated its enormous repressive capacity and its unwillingness to negotiate meaningful constitutional change. A heightened sense of black political consciousness as well as growing international impatience—which manifested itself through sanctions, divestment, and disinvestment—confronted the government's intransigence. South Africa, as a result, became more isolated from the world community and encountered difficulties in obtaining loans and new investments.

### From Limited Reforms to Preliminary Negotiations

More fundamental changes have occurred in South African politics over the past twelve months than in the previous forty years of NP rule. Within the space of a few months, Nelson Mandela was released from prison, anti-apartheid organizations such as the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were unbanned, and the South African government announced its readiness to begin talks on a new constitutional order. Despite the fundamental changes, many important questions remain unanswered. While it was assumed the ruling NP would negotiate with black leaders, it was clear that the party and its leader, F.W. de Klerk, did not intend to surrender all political power. In addition, while the ANC and the NP have cooperated and indeed appear

to be entering an incipient governing coalition, other groups and actors still vociferously claim a stake in the process. For example, the SACP, which was legalized in early 1990 after forty years in exile, seeks to define its future role in South African politics as a functioning political party. While membership of the ANC's national executive and the SACP's Central Committee overlap somewhat, Nelson Mandela pointed out that the ANC is separate and independent. It remains to be seen what influence the SACP will exert within the ANC and within the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU), where it maintains a strong presence. Chief Mangosuthu Gatsha Buthelezi and his *Inkatha* movement also must be taken into account. *Inkatha* has been concerned about its role in constitutional talks and, ultimately, in the sharing of power. Conflict between *Inkatha* and the forces of the ANC and the United Democratic Front (UDF) is the direct result of a growing concern over the ANC's prominence. The predominantly Zulu *Inkatha* movement perceives itself as being politically outmaneuvered. Much of the Natal Province conflict, which has spread to other parts of the country, revolves around *Inkatha's* sense of insecurity about its political future. The ANC accepted the need to widen participation in constitutional talks in May 1989 when it agreed that other organizations should be represented at future negotiations. Its foreign affairs secretary, Thabo Mbeki, maintained, "The African National Congress recognizes that there are many other forces that are involved in the struggle against apartheid, and the ANC therefore believes that those forces ought to be involved in any process which is going to result in the remaking of our country."<sup>1</sup> At the same time, President de Klerk stressed that a constitutional assembly would not function as an interim government during the drafting of a new constitution as in neighboring Namibia. Instead he proposed that a wide range of black and white leaders should come to the negotiating table. Furthermore, he emphasized that the government would continue to insist on constitutional guarantees that blacks would not dominate white political interests.

The ANC will enter the constitutional negotiation phase with important bargaining resources. It is perhaps the only organization that can successfully call for the lifting of international sanctions. Furthermore, it still maintains a somewhat ambiguous position with regard to the economic restructuring of South Africa, and will use this ambiguity for leverage. In the interests of continuing a dialogue, it already has made compromises in demilitarizing its military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation). In 1989, after holding meetings in different parts of the country, the ANC drafted *Constitutional Guidelines for a Democratic South Africa*, a position paper on the constitutional future of the country. The ANC emphasized that guidelines which addressed such topics as a bill of rights, affirmative action, and land redistribution were presented for discussion rather than as a final plan for a constitutional future. The framers of this document reaffirmed the centrality of the 1955 Freedom

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1. Christopher S. Wren, "Mandela Ally Speaks of Broader Talks," *The New York Times*, 4 May 1990, A3.

Charter with its emphasis on protection of the fundamental human rights of all citizens, irrespective of race, color, sex, or creed. The document calls for an independent, unitary, democratic, and non-racial state with universal franchise based on one person, one vote. Furthermore, the ANC opposes proportional representation.

For its part, the NP undoubtedly will seek to ensure a defined and protected power base for whites. In this respect it is interesting that Nelson Mandela endorsed the idea of a coalition government of all major parties for the period of transition to power. One of the major issues concerns whether South Africa should remain a unitary state with power invested in a central government, or be organized along federal lines where both the central government and the federating units exercise sovereignty in separate areas of jurisdiction. In either case an independent judiciary with the power of judicial review would ensure protection of cultural, linguistic, and religious rights. Other whites favor consociational democracy, which, like federalism, divides sovereignty among diverse communities of interest but also provides for a minority veto

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guaranteeing that no unit could be outvoted at the central political level when its vital interests were at stake. Consociations also recognize the principle of proportionality in political representation, civil service appointments, and the allocation of public funds. Black South Africans can be expected to oppose a white minority veto within a democratic and non-racial South Africa. They believe that a strong central government will be needed to foster national unity and enforce affirmative action.

Will de Klerk successfully navigate toward a new constitutional order given these differences and given that right-wing ideologues are attempting to undermine the reform process? Both Nelson Mandela and President de Klerk have implied that a "hidden hand" is behind the escalating violence in South Africa, aimed directly at derailing the constitutional process. It is alleged that right-wing groups, including elements within the security forces, support and encourage *Inkatha's* continuing violent opposition to the ANC. On the extreme right, parties such as the *Boerestaat* Party, which calls for the establishment of a separate white state, have been closely connected with terrorist activities, while the *Blanke Veilieheid* (White Security Group) organizes vigilante patrols to impose its brand of law and order. The largest of the paramilitary organizations, the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* (AWB or Afrikaner Resistance Movement), engages in military training and blatantly threatens insurrection. Under the leadership of Eugene Terre'Blanche, the AWB holds frequent mass

rallies at which its khaki-clad members bear symbols and display behavior reminiscent of the Nazis in Germany. Fearing white self-determination would be compromised, most of these extremist organizations have said they would refuse to enter into any negotiations. President de Klerk's announcement in August 1990 that the NP would become multiracial was a pragmatic move to ensure the party a wider base of support and increase its chances of electoral success in the face of diminishing popularity in the last several national elections. Broadening the franchise and drawing liberal whites and newly enfranchised Colored, Asian, and African voters into the party lessens the impact of an estimated 100,000 resignations from the NP in the Transvaal alone in 1990. De Klerk must hold either a new election or a referendum on a new constitution by September 1994, when the term of the current all-white House of Assembly ends. In an all-white referendum on constitutional changes, right-wing groups might convince a majority of whites to reject proposals put before them for power sharing. Some speculate that the opposition Conservative Party, which broke away from the NP in 1982 and is led by Dr. Andries Treurnicht, could win power if an all-white election were held today.

### **Economic and Demographic Limitations on Political Transformation**

In addressing South Africa's economic future, much of the debate on constitutional change centers on whether there is to be a free enterprise system or some form of socialism. Economic change and political reform are thus interrelated. While the ANC's National Executive Committee maintains that the inordinate concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority of whites needs to be broken up, it recognizes that most economic systems in the world today are mixed and that some forms of private entrepreneurship can make positive contributions. The ANC continues to leave its options open on nationalization and talks about the importance of economic growth as the means to deliver a more equitable share of the country's resources to the black majority. ANC statements on the question of land lack precision, but an independent black government clearly will be under great pressure to reallocate land for peasant farmers and to improve living conditions for the increasing numbers of black urban squatters. Already there are demands for a minimum wage and for the removal of the inequalities in spending in such areas as pensions and education. Two hundred white schools have been closed since 1980 and thousands of additional classrooms remain empty for lack of students, while African students endure extreme overcrowding and lack facilities. In the area of health it is not simply a question of desegregation of hospitals, but also of providing resources to eliminate malnutrition and to create better health care delivery systems. In addition to changes in social programs, the government will have to generate new job opportunities for blacks, who currently suffer from an overall unemployment rate as high as 30 percent—even higher in rural areas—and for whom few social services exist. Revenues to bring about these changes are uncertain because the tax base is extremely

narrow and external investment is unpredictable. Attracting new foreign investment to South Africa will not be easy and might be negatively affected by the rhetoric and policy agenda of the ANC regarding nationalization.

South Africa's economic and demographic patterns are central to any interpretation of recent political changes, providing a basis for speculation on the country's future. One of the most significant demographic factors is that the white population continues to shrink, going from 19 percent of the total population in 1960 to 14 percent in 1990. By the year 2000 some project that whites will make up only 12.6 percent of the total population while Africans will comprise 76.2 percent, Coloreds 8.4 percent, and Asians 2.8

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percent. Furthermore, the annual population growth rate for whites is less than 1 percent, just under 2 percent for Asians, and approximately 2.5 percent for Coloreds and Africans. South Africa is predominantly an urban society. In 1985 89.6 percent of the white population lived in urban areas, and 77.8 percent of the Coloreds and 93.4 percent of the Asians were urban dwellers. The percentage of Africans living in cities was estimated to be 40 percent in 1985, but the African urban population is expected to grow dramatically in the next decade. This will place enormous demands on urban housing and infrastructure, already under heavy pressure in many areas. "Soweto, for example, built officially to house 600,000 contained 1.6 million in 1980. There were a staggering 12,500 people per square kilometer, compared with only 1,400 in neighboring white Johannesburg."<sup>2</sup> Such demographic realities have forced whites to recognize their diminishing ability to maintain control. Whites' share of retail sales is expected to fall from a 1985 level of 55 percent to 42 percent by the year 2000, while Africans' share will grow from 31 percent to an estimated 40 percent in that period.<sup>3</sup> Such statistics explain the effectiveness of black boycotts against white businesses. The impact of demographic and economic changes will increasingly be felt in the 1990s. As blacks move into more skilled and managerial positions and their buying power increases, the pressure for social and economic change can be expected to increase dramatically.

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2. John D. Brewer, *After Soweto* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 68.

3. Ronald William Bethlehem, *Economics in a Revolutionary Society* (Capetown: Donker Publishing, 1988), 46.

The employment structure is also an area in which white control inevitably will diminish. Although whites comprise less than 20 percent of the total labor force, they hold most of the skilled jobs. In the past when the economy expanded rapidly, the country produced less than half the number of skilled workers and technicians it needed, a direct effect of apartheid labor and education policies.<sup>4</sup> Attempts to recruit white skilled immigrants from abroad were largely unsuccessful. From an economic perspective, inequities in the educational system and a shortage of skilled workers pose serious threats to future growth.

Domestic political changes undoubtedly will have an effect beyond South Africa's boundaries. The smooth transition to independence for Namibia and prospects both for a resolution of the Angolan conflict and for a more stable Mozambique, coupled with a more benign regional role by South Africa, imply the beginning of a new regional economic and political configuration. The 1990s present different options, possibilities, and strategies. Increases in trade and investment and an end to regional violence could point the way to a Southern African Economic Common Market—if foreign corporations and investors can be convinced that South Africa has the necessary infrastructure for expanding regional exports and trade. The less-developed countries of the region could offer new markets and new opportunities, thus providing South Africa with a means to redress some of its own social and economic problems. Increased demand for goods and services from the region might even ameliorate South Africa's bleak unemployment situation. An increase in revenues could help underwrite such needs as new housing for the increasing African population, a minimum wage, better health care, educational needs, and other social programs.

### Conclusion

What is taking place in South Africa is not merely a change of leadership or a shift in policy but rather an attempt at reordering historically defined power relationships. If successful, for the first time in hundreds of years, race and class might not be the sole determinants of power and status. Creating a new political order will not be easy. Even when a framework is established and implemented, unrealistic expectations will be a continuing source of political instability and a threat to economic growth. The legacy of apartheid will demand affirmative action programs to compensate for social and economic disparities. However, these will redirect scarce resources, thus posing the need to choose between redistribution and new economic growth. Inevitably, there will be failures as well as successes. The effort to implement reforms and eliminate the vestiges of apartheid will require experimentation. Inter-ethnic and inter-racial mistrust and friction will continue. If the problems between the ANC and *Inkatha* are unresolved and violence on the part of right-wing

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4. Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid, South Africa, 1910-84* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 238.

whites increases, South Africa's economic renaissance and political transformation will be delayed.

A political culture with a tolerance for opposition, a commitment to the rule of law, and an entrenched bill of rights has been absent in South Africa. If constitutional engineering entrenches these necessary prerequisites for democracy, and economic redistribution provides previously excluded groups with a stake in the system, a stable and democratic political culture might emerge. This may not be as unlikely as it appears. Positions considered nonnegotiable by the ANC and the NP in 1989 were accepted only a short time later in order to move the reform process ahead. The very fact that fundamental democratic concepts are being given serious consideration in the constitutional debate is cause for cautious optimism for a post-apartheid South Africa.

