

## Understanding Afrikaners Is Key to Further Reforms

It is curious that many people in the U.S., who quite rightly denounce the racial stereotypes that white South Africans hold about blacks, often cherish equally flawed stereotypes about white South Africans. These are stereotypes, unfortunately, that continue to influence U.S. policy.

Not many Americans understand the almost tribal differences between the English-speaking South Africans and the Afrikaners, or understand that it is the latter, some 60% of the white population, who

### Africa

by John H. Chettle

have dominated politics and the civil service since 1948. As National Party policies have gradually moderated, the government has received more English-speaking support. But to this day there are more people of color in the South African cabinet than there are English-speaking South Africans. As a rule, English-speaking South Africans have tended to go into business and the professions, and have carried with them their political opposition to government. In fact, the London Daily Telegraph recently described the business sector as the most effective opposition to the present government.

But if the English suffer from unwarranted stereotypes, their concerns are negligible compared with the Afrikaners. For all its deficiencies, South Africa is one of the very few countries in Africa to have vigorous opposition elements, an outspoken press, an independent judiciary and organized human-rights groups. Yet this is hardly allowed to disturb the picture of its Afrikaner rulers as blustering, narrow-minded, cruel and oppressive. Joseph Lelyveld, a former South Africa correspondent for the New York Times, has just

written a book described by Alan Paton, author of "Cry, the Beloved Country" and hardly an admirer of the white government, as almost 100% anti-Afrikaner.

Scant attention has been paid to the changes that have taken place within Afrikanerdom, though the Afrikaners control the country and it would seem important to know where they are going.

One major change is that they have become an urban people. In 1900 only 10% of Afrikaners lived in the cities. By 1970 the proportion was almost exactly reversed. The consequences of this shift have been profound. They include a decline in the control and conformity characteristic of a rural society, and greater contact with a more cosmopolitan population with different values.

The influence of education was just as important. As late as 1953, there were fewer than 10,000 Afrikaans-speaking university students in all of South Africa. By 1978, that number had increased seven or eightfold. One result of this was to dilute the leadership of that narrow academic and professional elite that had led Afrikanerdom. It was no coincidence that the 1960s produced a new group of Afrikaans writers more challenging and skeptical than any who had gone before. Many found distasteful the puritanical social conservatism of the elite, and two of the best of them, Etienne Leroux and Andre Brink, produced books that were actually banned.

Afrikaners historically have not been a wealthy people—they were the subject of the first Carnegie Foundation investigation of rural poverty in the 1930s. Recently, they have moved increasingly into business. A growing number of Afrikaners are not only better educated but richer, more widely traveled, more experienced and more self-confident. Even among those who were not, few are confronted with the same economic threat that the blacks had presented at an earlier stage, and which led to minimum-wage and job-reservation

laws. As that threat abated, so did the fear underlying much petty apartheid.

At the same time, the quality of education and the standard of living of the blacks have risen, and sharp economic and social differences between the races are starting to diminish. Between 1970 and 1980, before the recent recession, the proportion of the Gross National Product produced by blacks increased 1% a year, while that contributed by whites fell by the same percentage.

This occurred just as trenchant criticism began to call into question the morality of apartheid. It became more difficult for Afrikaners to reconcile the bleak consequences of that policy with their profession of Christian faith.

It became apparent that the Afrikaners were in many respects ahead of the government they supported. A 1976 survey indicated the majority of Afrikaners were prepared to do away with job reservation, to open the universities to all races, to open sport to participation by all races and to abolish the pass laws. By 1983, 69% of them were in favor of granting Indians and Coloreds the parliamentary representation they had abolished a few years before. By 1984, 67% expressed themselves in favor of power-sharing with all groups provided there were safeguards against a possible tyranny of the majority.

By now, the government itself realizes that the intellectual foundations of apartheid have collapsed. The abolition of the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act have destroyed the notion of a white society. The failure of the homelands policy means—as State President P.W. Botha himself conceded—that the sharing of power with all races is inevitable, both morally and in practice.

Nonetheless, it is evident that the Afrikaners are still deeply apprehensive of the consequences of changes in the power structure. That fear springs in part from their own holocaust during the Anglo-Boer

War, which resulted in the deaths of perhaps 20% of the Afrikaner population in the area of conflict, most of them women and children. It gave rise to a determination that Afrikaners would never again be subject to the domination of anyone and a tendency, under pressure, to circle the wagons.

It is these experiences that make so unconvincing the views of those who believe that all that is necessary to produce a more reasonable frame of mind is for international sanctions to be applied. Reform itself is imperiled by the failure to recognize that reform is taking place and even more so when reform is rewarded only by punitive action. A series of by-elections on Oct. 30 indicated that up to a fourth of present National Party seats could be lost to parties that want to roll back the reforms already initiated.

The by-election results confirm that the reform program is now widely perceived as a failure. It has failed to conciliate black opinion, it has not moved fast enough to provide the results that moderate whites were looking for, it did not improve a dire economic situation, and it seems to have led merely to sanctions on the part of erstwhile friends. It is no wonder that there has been a backlash, or that doubts grow about the willingness of Mr. Botha to continue with further reforms.

The predicament of the Afrikaners is a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense. It arises in part from a flaw within themselves. Until fairly recently, they allowed the injuries they had suffered to blind them to those they were inflicting on others.

A more imaginative approach to that dilemma might assist U.S. policy makers to contrive an approach that might achieve greater results, not only for the whole subcontinent, but for the U.S. as well.

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