

1984: A period of political flux

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AT the end of 1983, South Africa is entering a period of political flux which could have a profound effect on white, coloured and Indian politics in 1984.

And this, in turn, could have an equally significant effect on black politics, which remains confined to the homelands despite a new "reformist" constitution.

That new constitution dominated political developments this year — and will do so again if it is implemented as planned during the next 12 months.

From the January decision by the coloured Labour Party to participate in the new deal, to the massive white endorsement at last month's referendum, 1983 was the year of the constitution.

Though still regarded by many as defective and possibly even unworkable, the constitution has opened the way for a new Parliament and a new political debate in South Africa.

Squatter raids

It has shown the strong desire in the white community for reform, while exposing the limits to which the government is prepared to go to fulfil that desire. Squatter raids, forced removals and beach apartheid have not been affected by the supposed era of reform.

The constitutional debate, by-elections and the referendum showed both the strengths and limitations of the white right-wing. This has proved less fearsome and less numerous than many feared, confined to a few predictable rural areas.

The constitution showed signs of precipitating new alignments in the white, coloured and Indian communities. And it was the constitution which rescued the National Party from a disastrous 1983 in and out of Parliament.

The government started the year badly, with cabinet ministers floundering during the opening no-confidence debate in Parliament, and unable to answer a



Dr Van Zyl Slabbert



Mr Amichand Rajbansi



The Rev Allan Hendrickse



Mr P W Botha



Mr Harry Pitman



Dr Alan Boesak

series of opposition attacks on its handling of the nation's affairs.

This all changed in the constitutional de-

bate and the subsequent referendum campaign. The National Party successfully hijacked the rhetoric of reform, presenting itself as the party of dynamic change and its new constitution as a major step forward.

Surprised

The Prime Minister, Mr P W Botha, was rewarded by a referendum result which surprised the most optimistic Nationalist analysts. Mr Botha is widely expected to become the first executive president when the new system is implemented.

The "yes" referendum vote included large

numbers of businessmen and traditional opposition voters who saw the constitution as inadequate but a step in the right direction. This has presented problems for the Progressive Federal Party, which believes in more fundamental reform than the government is offering.

The PFP rejected the white-dominated constitution as apartheid in disguise and drew attention to top-level government statements ruling out developments such as one multi-racial parliamentary chamber or the inclusion of black representatives. It found its stance rejected by many who opted for what was perceived as a gradualistic approach to change.

The PFP leader, Dr Van Zyl Slabbert, said

there would be many red faces in a year's time when the reformist shortcomings of the new constitution were exposed. Dr Slabbert can nevertheless expect to come in for harsh criticism next year from a buoyant National Party and a rejuvenated New Republic Party.

The NRP, under Mr Vause Raw, was widely

regarded as a dying force in white politics before it aligned itself with the successful "yes" referendum campaign.

If the constitution was directly or indirectly responsible for the major political developments of 1983, it was also the issue which gave existing politicians more prominence and brought new ones to the

fore.

Mr Botha and his seemingly tireless Minister of Constitutional Development, Mr Chris Heunis, received extensive new coverage throughout the year. The Rev Allan Hendrickse and Mr Amichand Rajbansi, the coloured and Indian leaders prepared to participate in the new constitution, have been turned by television into familiar national figures.

Opposition to their stance led to the rise of a new grouping, the United Democratic Front, and possibly the rise of a new leader, Dr Alan Boesak. It provoked increasing militant statements from the Kwazulu and Inkatha leader, Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, who said the constitution's exclusion of blacks was a rejection of black moderation.

Lost seat

The government plan to bring coloured and Indian representatives into Parliament also cost the National Party the first parliamentary seat they have lost to the right.

Dr Andries Treurnicht held his Waterberg constituency for the Conservative Party after an election challenge issued by the former Minister of Manpower, Mr Fanie Botha.

Mr Botha narrowly held his own Soutpansberg seat, only to resign from Parliament and the cabinet last month because of a possible legal dispute over his actions when Minister of Mines.

The constitution will continue to be the dominant political issue next year, which will be a year of elections.

The coloured and Indian communities will go to the polls to elect representatives to the new Parliament in what promise to be bitter and divisive campaigns over the constitutional proposals.

Sad death

Similar bitterness is likely in the two important white by-elections to be held early in the year. Mr Fanie Botha's

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former Soutpansberg seat will see another clash between the National Party and the right, itself still divided between the CP and Mr Jaap Marais's Herstigte Nasionale Party.

And in Pinetown, the sad death of the PFP MP, Mr Harry Pitman, will lead to a fight between the PFP and the NRP over reform and the new constitution.

Campaign-weary politicians fear that, if pro-constitution parties win both seats, the government could be tempted into the general election it has so far insisted would not be held before 1986.