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A New Order Stays in the Wings in South Africa

By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN

FREDERIK W. DE KLERK, who succeeded P. W. Botha as the new leader of South Africa's governing National Party, rose in Parliament last week to assume the mantle of an ailing leader and call for new thinking. He envisioned "a South Africa free of domination or oppression in whatever form," declared his party "against domination of any one group by others," and added: "White domination, insofar as it exists, must go."

But though the words had a new ring to them, it was hard to tell how much change they will bring. For one thing, Mr. de Klerk has become the leader only of the governing party, not the Government, which he lacks the mandate to lead.

In that, he is like others of the next generation of South African leaders, a generation whose true intentions and possibilities are not yet clear because their transition to power is not yet complete. In the interim, they appear to differ from Mr. Botha, South Africa's 73-year-old leader, more in style than in substance.

They present themselves as technocrats more comfortable with negotiation than are Mr. Botha and the patriarchs who once spoke for Afrikanerdom. But while they seem ready to confront the thinkable by putting a more human face on apartheid, they are not ready for the unthinkable: reforming themselves out of power by giving blacks an unqualified vote. And after 40 years in power, the National Party has not produced a visible pool of diverse talent. Still, it appears likely to retain the support of most white voters.

Mr. de Klerk took over as party leader after President Botha suffered a stroke last month. The President's stepping aside presages the end of an era, and there is speculation that he could retire from the Presidency this year. But he still casts a long shadow across the National Party, which is postponing decisions, including the date of a national election this year, until Mr. Botha is well enough to be consulted.

One of Mr. de Klerk's first acts was to reiterate the unacceptability of "domination by a majority." It was his way to address the fear among whites of one-man-one-vote democracy in a nation where blacks

make up three-quarters of the population. He also defended his party's doctrine of segregated group rights. Even so, he seemed to go farther in his expressed willingness to be flexible toward other races than Mr. Botha did in his decade as party leader.

A Distinct Edge

As the new party leader, Mr. de Klerk, 52, has a distinct edge in a contest for succession to the presidency. He probably won at the party caucus on Feb. 2 because he was considered unlikely to embark on anything too daring. He has said he likes to have strong people around him, but he is also politically vulnerable. As leader of the National Party in the Transvaal, he has battled a rising opposition from right-wing whites, not least in his own constituency of Vereeniging, and he may not want to sound too liberal to his blue-collar constituents.

Mr. de Klerk's one serious rival in the party is Finance Minister Barend du Plessis, 48, who narrowly lost to Mr. de Klerk. He appears more liberal than Mr. de Klerk and expresses contempt for the racial views of the Conservative opposition. His belt-tightening measures have not endeared him to the public. But his creative style helped him succeed, as Finance Minister, in outwitting Western economic sanctions.

J. Christiaan Heunis, 61, Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning, is enjoying transitory prominence as acting President while Mr. Botha recovers. But his elimination in the second round of caucus voting was an embarrassment.

Foreign Minister Roelof F. "Pik" Botha, 56, has a blunt manner that makes him popular with ordinary white South Africans. He is considered relatively liberal by party standards. But he was eliminated early in the party voting, and it has been suggested that this was a price he paid for having signed the accord in December that promises Namibia independence.

A significant development has been the disappearance from the list of potential successors of Defense Minister Magnus Malan, 59. He was never even nominated in the party caucus, suggesting that the military may enjoy less influence within the National Party than is widely assumed.

All this translates into little immediate prospect that apartheid will disappear. The new leadership retains the political caution instilled by the autocratic style of President Botha, and it is the politician's instinct for survival, rather than ideological fervor, that seems to account for their unwillingness to scrap increasingly unworkable laws like the Group Areas Act, which legitimizes residential segregation.

A more dramatic change in National Party thinking may have to await a generation of politicians too young to be encumbered by the emotional baggage of apartheid. For example, Roelof P. Meyer, the Deputy Minister of Constitutional Development and Planning, and Leon Wessels, the Deputy Minister of Law and Order, are only 42 years old. "We've grown up in a new situation," Mr. Meyer explained. "We didn't invent apartheid." Even so, Mr. Meyer added quickly, his statement implied no disloyalty to the party that did invent it four decades ago.