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South African Still President,

but His Future Is Cloudy

By CHRISTOPHER S. WREN

Spcnnl 1a The New York Times

CAPE TOWN, Feb. 2 - President

P. W. Botha, recuperating from a stroke, resigned abruptly today from an important political post, that of leader of the National Party, which has governed South Africa for the last 40 years.

But Mr. Botha, who is 73 years old, said he would stay on as President. Mr. Botha, who suffered the stroke on Jan. 18, retains all the powers of head of state.

At a party caucus today, Frederik W. de Klerk was elected to succeed Mr. . Botha as party leader. Mr. de Klerk, 52, is National Party leader of Transvaal Province and chairman of the Ministers Councils in the white legislature. His election makes Mr. de Klerk, who is little known outside South Africa, ' potentially the country's most powerful active politician. The party that he now heads, which has become synonymous with apartheid, is considered likely to extend its four decades in power beyond the next white elections.

By quitting his party post, Mr. Botha said in his letter of resignation, he hopes to elevate the presidency above partisan politics and make it "a unifying force in South Africa."

His decision, coming on the eve of the 1989 session of Parliament, took everyone, including his own National Party caucus, by surprise and injected a note of uncertainty about South Africa's political future.

In particular, it encouraged speculation that Mr. Botha, because of his ill health, might retire as President this year, perhaps by not running as a Member of Parliament when the next national elections are held for the country's five million white voters.

Elections in September

The elections fall due in early September, but the National Party has talked of seeking a postponement of six months. Now that Mr. de Klerk will lead the party, interest in early elections seems bound to revive.

South African blacks, who make up three-quarters of the population, were not directly affected by today's development because they are denied the right to vote, except in local elections for segregated municipal councils in the black townships.

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During his recovery, Mr. Botha appointed J. Chris Heunis, the Minister of Constitutional Development and Plan-

ning, to serve as Acting President. He progressed enough from his stroke, which doctors characterized as mild, to visit his office briefly last Saturday. But a statement issued today by the President's office said Mr. Botha had been advised to rest for another month. In winning the party's top post, Mr. de Klerk defeated three other prominent politicians, Foreign Minister Rieffers, Mr. Botha, Mr. Heunis and Finance Minister Barend J. du Plessis, a protégé of President Botha. All of the candidates were Afrikaners. His wife, Marike, is also known for her staunchly conservative political views.

' A Likely Front-Runner

Mr. de Klerk's election as party leader positions him as the likely front-runner when Mr. Botha leaves the office. Mr. Botha's Cabinet and did not expect any problems in "a very special relationship" with the President. It took three rounds of balloting by the National Party's Members of Parliament to elect Mr. de Klerk. The first to be eliminated was Foreign Minister Botha, who by one account received only 16 votes out of 130 cast. Mr. Botha was previously defeated for the party leadership in 1978, and this setback seems likely to curtail his political aspirations.

The second round of balloting eliminated Mr. Heunis. As the Acting President, he is scheduled to give the opening address to Parliament on Friday, and his defeat could undercut the authority of his words.

Mr. de Klerk defeated Mr. du Plessis in the third round of balloting by a vote of 69 to 61.

There was a report afterward that Mr. de Klerk had persuaded the party leadership to decrease the likelihood of a succession struggle.

H. Coetsee, the Justice Minister, to line up his province's National Party members for South Africa's apartheid policy are still unclear. The National Party introduced the legal concept of apartheid to South Africa, and Mr. de Klerk described himself today as "basically a team man."

As Minister of National Education, he tried to suppress protests against apartheid on university campuses by threatening to withhold the Government's financial assistance.

Consequently, Mr. de Klerk appears in its cautious agenda for gradual change that would not jeopardize the interests of the country's white minority.

Mr. de Klerk did not depart from his members of Parliament, by promising to consider Mr. Coetsee for Prime Minister if he became President.

P. W. Botha became Prime Minister in 1978 when he was National Party

leader, but a constitutional amendment
abolished the parliamentary leadership post to leave only the State Presidency, which Mr. Botha assumed in 1984. Mr. Botha has talked of restoring the prime ministership to alleviate the workload of the presidency.

Mr. de Klerk implicitly denied today unlikely to move ahead of the National that his election involved any political maneuvering at the party caucus. "It took place in the best of spirits, and it was democracy at its best," he said. party's policy in a statement that he _ issued to reporters today.

"The ultimate aim is a free South Africa in which justice towards every South African as an individual, as well as in group context, will be done," he said in discussing his party's future. He has been an advocate of "group security," which means the protection of white minority rights in any power-sharing arrangement with the country's black majority.

At a news conference this afternoon, Mr. de Klerk refused to be drawn into a discussion of President Botha's motives for stepping down as party leader. He said he could not give Mr. Botha's reasons because he had not had the chance to "pay a courtesy call" on the President.

Mr. de Klerk also turned aside questions about his own enhanced political prospects, other than to say he would be running the party but not the country.

"It must be clearly understood that the election of a new leader in chief of the National Party is a party political affair with no direct or formal constitutional implications," Mr. de Klerk said in his statement.

3 Rounds of Balloting

Mr. de Klerk was asked what would happen if he as party leader disagreed with President Botha over policy. He admitted that the arrangement was unique but said he was already a member.
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