

A QUESTION OF POWER

Brian Pottinger

This summer, a rash of T-shirts appeared on South Africa's beaches bearing the legend: "1993 - The Nightmare Continues." The national mood, it may reliably be assumed, is cynical.

While most South Africans desperately want a peaceful political settlement, they are confused about its form, ambivalent about ways to achieve it, and skeptical about those who would direct it. Old orders must clearly make way for new. But what does the "new" entail: even the once laudatory phrase "The New South Africa" has become a dismissive slogan to describe fumbling and faltering. In Antonio Gramsci's words: "The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms." And, it appears, a great diversity of T-shirts.

The problem is the tendency to think of a "settlement" in comprehensive terms: as one single and illuminating moment in which all is explained, all relationships defined, all ambiguity resolved. It does not happen that way. Political settlements, at least those that are not revolutionary, are trench-by-bloody-trench affairs: they involve trade-offs, deals, accommodations.

Conceding that futurology is the most imperfect of sciences, what could a "settlement" in South Africa look like in years to come? Let's skip the tedious business of "levelling playing fields" and "interim transitional mechanisms" which are currently under debate, and go to the heart of it. What will the constitution look like?

Experience in Zimbabwe, Namibia and even the KwaZulu-Natal Indaba of the mid-1980s shows that constitution-making could be the easiest part of the process. To use the famous dictum: if you have them by the balls, their hearts, minds and constitutions will follow. South Africa's major political parties - the African National Congress, National Party and Inkatha Freedom Party - are in that uncomfortable position. They want to settle.

A fading economy and increasing impatience on the part of supporters have put great pressure on them to reach a constitutional deal so as to get on with the more serious business of buying off or placating their restless constituencies. Added pressure comes from the advanced democracies which have become qui-

etly missionary - dare one say imperialistic - about what *sort* of constitution they want. This, roughly, is one which is western in style: multi-party, with a respect for human rights.

In these conditions, then, it is not surprising that the common ground between the main players has grown like Topsy. There is little doubt that a new constitution would have these elements:

- ☐ multi-party elections on the basis of an equal and non-racial franchise;
- ☐ proportional representation in the electoral system;
- ☐ a justiciable bill of rights enshrining an impeccable list of human rights (although the crucial question of protection of property rights is still being negotiated);
- ☐ a division of power between the executive, legislature and judiciary;
- ☐ a constitutional court; and





(Left) Anything in sight? Like the other major political parties, the ANC urgently needs a constitutional settlement so that it can begin to placate its restless constituency.

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□ a bicameral legislature with some powers of review in the second legislature.

The new constitution will also no doubt contain some elements of federalism, although the mix of that particularly important cocktail is still undecided. At most it will entrench a genuine devolution of power, as opposed to mere function, to new regional states which will transcend current provincial and homeland boundaries. At the least it will attempt to give sufficient original powers to the states to allay secessionist tendencies in places such as KwaZulu/Natal.

So South Africans, it seems likely, have it within their power to draft a constitution which will pass muster as a democratic constitution. But settlement on a constitution is no guarantee of a settlement on power. Post-colonial Africa is full of agreements on the former and violent disagreements about the latter.

When those elections commence there will be three major groups in contest:

The recidivists, harking back to the advantages brought by the *ancien régime*, the reformists, battling to stake a claim in a future government; and the revolutionaries, whose only desire will be to overthrow any system bartered by the majority parties and designed to exclude them. Blacks and whites, it should be noted, will serve in all three groups.

The recidivists consist of the amalgam of forces in current uneasy alliance under the banner of the Concerned South Africans Group (Cosag) – the white Conservative Party and the elites of the quasi-independent homelands of Bophuthatswana and Ciskei. The Inkatha Freedom Party hovers uneasily between the recidivists and reformists. It is enticed by the vision of a Zulu state in Natal, but lured by the prospects of a share of power in the central

government; it is torn between the attractions of a Zulu ethno-nationalism, yet seduced by calls to a broader South African pan-nationalism. Its role in negotiations so far has been that of judicious spoiler: showing that, although it does not have the power to unilaterally create constitutions, it has the capacity to wreck them.

The reformists comprise what can be loosely called the ANC alliance – the ANC itself, the South African Communist Party (whatever its longer term agenda, it is committed to the success of negotiations), and the trade union movement. In this group are found the NP, Democratic Party and various assorted smaller groups, including opportunistic remnants of the old order such as the Labour Party and some of the Indian parties.

The NP and the ANC represent the two most powerful members of the political spectrum. They are bound by a compelling uniformity of interests: they have most to gain from a political settlement. Unlike the recidivists, both know that the future must be better than the past and for them there is no going back – the ANC into exile, or the NP into isolation. And so, locked together by fear of the awful consequences of failure, they stagger to an opaque future certain of only one thing: the past is a distant and unreachable place.

The third group comprises the revolutionaries. Unlike the recidivists, the past holds no fond memories for them and, unlike the reformists, the future only promises impotence once the big players have staked out their turf. These, then, are

the uneducated and unemployed who, under the leadership of the dissident intellectuals of, say, the Pan-Africanist Congress, could turn to revolt. Joining them, from quite another quarter, would come the white revolutionary right who also see little attraction in a future neatly divvied up by the ANC and the NP.

The relative strengths of the parties is hard to gauge, although all surveys concur that the ANC would certainly win the most votes although not inevitably an outright majority. The recent Human Sciences Research Council survey estimates that in the event of an election 45 per cent of the electorate would vote for the ANC, 25 per cent for the NP, and 10 per cent for Inkatha. That leaves 20 per cent of the vote up for grabs, assuming people will not be too terrified of the country's endemic violence to go to the polls.

On such assessments are built the hopes of some people in the NP who hold that a "moderate alliance" of the NP, Inkatha, Christian and conservative blacks, Indian South Africans and coloureds may after all pip the ANC at the final post.

The compelling reality, however, is that in order to guide the country through the undoubtedly tumultuous years ahead, there will almost certainly be an alliance of the most powerful groups at the centre.

It is because of this that the ANC in its Strategic Perspectives document has accepted the principle of a government of national unity after the elections and the NP, although publicly denying it, is already negotiating towards joint future control of power and profits in what is euphemistically called "bilaterals" with the ANC.

Underpinning such a government of national unity lies the fact that a political settlement will not be bought by rhetoric or constitutions but by an *equilibrium of power* which, reduced to its simplest, means a trade-off between white managerial and entrepreneurial skills and black numerical superiority.

That this simple equation is understood in the ANC and within the NP and the business community is evinced every day in widely diffused horse-trading. The ANC, for example, accepts the need to protect white civil servants' vested interest – and the government responds by reducing bureaucratic overload. The government, even as the ANC abjures nationalisation as a policy plank, freezes its privatisation programme so as not to offend the ANC and unionists. Business, meanwhile, strives for a binding social

contract which recognises market forces as the motive influence in our economy but genuflects towards the need for social spending in welfare and job creation programmes – the accord reached at the time of the tax protests last year and the recently formed series of economic forums are merely manifestations of it. The unions, meanwhile, reluctantly concede to productivity-linked wage settlements.

The bones of the future settlement are thus laid: white entrepreneurial and capitalist interests join hands with a black political elite and a protected and unionised labour aristocracy to become the new ruling class. Last year, for the first time, the Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality within a system) between blacks became almost as great as between whites and blacks. Last year, also for the first time, black household incomes accounted for more than half of total household incomes in the country. Thus, even as income disparities between whites and blacks narrow, the division between wealthy blacks and poorer ones grows. A new insider-outsider division emerges, no longer based on race but on class.

But the ascendancy of this new class of rulers is critically dependent on one thing: economic growth. Without that growth the new regime cannot provide for its own supporters, let alone ever hope to buy off the teeming millions of poor, uneducated and unemployed. The ANC's most recent, and welcome, acceptance of the importance of economic stability and growth is born not from a fear of what it will do to the impoverished masses in South Africa, but what it will do to the new elites.

But even assuming there is a settlement on constitutional matters, on the balance of power and the divvying up of spoils – what will be the durability of the settlement, buffeted as it most certainly will be between the extraordinary expectations of black people and the increasing exasperation of whites?

Here lies the rub. The World Bank delicately refers to it as human capacity: the ability of the people in a country to develop and sustain a modernising industrial society. On the face of it, the prospects are not good. A recent comparative study of 14 Newly Industrial Countries put South Africa at the bottom of the scale in terms of human productivity and competence.

"It is true that I am the great chief of the Xhosas," said Chief Hintsa to Sir Benjamin D'Urban in 1835, "but it is a mere title. I

can't compel all the Xhosas to do as I wish. I can't restrain them."

This ageless plaint of South African political leadership is as true today as then. The severely disruptive effects of apartheid and then the heedless attack by the resistance groups against all forms of authority, all values of civic discipline and responsibility, the growth of the sense of entitlement among the majority of the people's population – these factors all put serious question marks against the capacity of any political elite, white or black, or a combination of them, to reimpose a civil discipline on the country sufficient to ensure growth and prosperity. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that coalition or alliance governments invariably prefer to go for the softest options rather than risk dissolution.

Under these conditions of uncertainty it is not impossible that the new elites will resort to less than democratic methods to ensure control. The government may thus tolerate opposition to the level of irritation but not usurpation – the essential difference between mature and immature democracies.

It is here, of course, that the skill and strength of political leadership will play a crucial role. It will be easy to have a constitutional settlement, less easy to reach a settlement of power, and extraordinarily difficult to create the conditions for genuine settlement and prosperity. Gramsci's symptoms of morbidity may be with us a little longer than expected.

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