

In 1961 South Africa left the Commonwealth after its apartheid policies had been roundly rejected. That same year the ANC and PAC were banned. Now almost thirty years later, they are unbanned, Nelson Mandela is free, and the negotiations, which the black opposition has sought for so long and at such a high cost, seem to be close at hand. While the political climate has been radically transformed since February 2, it is important to remember, however, that legally very little has changed and apartheid is still the law of South Africa.

But there can be no dispute that a new chapter has been opened, and its principal authors are Nelson Mandela and President de Klerk. We fervently hope that this is also the final chapter of the history of apartheid in South Africa.

It was clear to any observer of the May 2 to 4 talks between teams representing the ANC and the South African Government that there is rapport and respect between the opposing sides.

Importantly, each side also accepts the legitimacy of other parties who have not yet taken a seat at the table. Each side has provided a clear commitment that the mechanism of change should be peaceful negotiations. Ensuring peace will not be easy in turbulent South Africa. But some of the obstacles to peace, some of the root causes of violence, may be cleared away if the Government carries out its commitment to work towards the lifting of the State of Emergency and the review of existing security legislation. The ANC has also undertaken to exert itself toward the resolution of the existing climate of violence.

Of course, no one should underestimate the difficulties that lie ahead. Not all of the pitfalls are centred around the negotiating table. The tragic near-civil war in Natal has not accounted for most of the political violence in the country, and has also become a serious impediment to successful negotiations. The violence in Natal calls for imagination and resolution by all parties and the government, and help from the international community wherever appropriate.

On negotiations, sharp differences remain, and are deeply rooted in different understandings of the very concepts of democracy, equality, majority rule, constitutions, and possibly even of justice. But there appears to be a determination on all sides that the common commitment to seeking a peaceful settlement will eventually win the day, and see all South Africans as victors.

We can all take heart from the recent experience of Namibia. Its long awaited transition to independence is a convincing demonstration to South Africans that fundamental change can be achieved through a peaceful, democratic and negotiated process. Its unanimously-adopted constitution is exemplary in providing for entrenched human rights and effective democracy. The repatriation of Namibian exiles and refugees - once the necessary amnesty and legislative changes were in place - was a model of smooth cooperation between the international community and the Namibian groups involved, which I hope can soon be repeated for South Africans.