

# SOUTH AFRICA LURCHING TOWARD DEMOCRACY

*The government and the ANC eye each other like prospective partners in an arranged marriage, not liking what they see, yet knowing that wedlock has much to offer.*

BY RICHARD STEYN

LESS THAN TWO YEARS AFTER SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT F.W. de Klerk's speech to Parliament which changed the face of politics in this country, once bitter foes are on the verge of an "interim arrangement" that will bring about power-sharing between Afrikaner and African Nationalists. For those who fought against apartheid during the barren years of Afrikaner leaders Verwoerd, Vorster and Botha, and those who fought to preserve it, the prospect is dizzying to contemplate.

In his seminal study on the prospects for democracy in a post-apartheid society, American political scientist Donald Horowitz identifies a dynamic that helps to explain much of what is happening in South Africa today.<sup>1</sup> Now that the National Party (NP) of F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) have begun a dialogue based around certain common interests, extremists on the black left and white right are being forced into ever greater rhetorical (and sometimes physical) excesses. With each act of moderation, the two extremes are provoked against the middle. And each aggressive act – the violence in black townships or the far right's sporadic acts of armed resistance – drives the middle partners closer together. The NP and ANC are eyeing each other like prospective partners in an arranged marriage, not much liking what they see, yet knowing that wedlock has much to offer both. But some caveats are necessary.

As another perceptive American observer, Pauline Baker of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes, "South Africa has to do it all: de-racialise its society, democratize its polity and restructure its economy, under some of the world's most adverse conditions of cultural diversity, ideological polarization and economic stratification." There is no shared sense of national identity, illiteracy is widespread and disparities in wealth are great. It will require nothing less than a political miracle for negotiations leading to a democratic outcome to succeed.

IF ONE FACT STANDS OUT ABOVE ALL THE OTHERS, IT IS THAT NEITHER OF the two main parties can govern successfully without the assistance of the other. Far-reaching political or constitutional change is not possible without the consent of de Klerk and the white electorate. Equally, there can be no resolution of the current socioeconomic turmoil without the cooperation of the ANC and its allies.

There are other important players who are able to put a brake on the unfolding process – Chief Buthelezi's *Inkatha*, the socialist Pan-Africanist Congress and Andries Treurnicht's white Conservatives. They are, in political commentator Lawrie Schlemmer's words "gate-keepers" to one another. "Without each other's cooperation and consent, each is condemned to operate under the very conditions which made negotiation necessary in the first place." And because pennies are beginning to drop in the unlikeliest places, the focus of debate in South Africa is gradually shifting towards the centre.

As the pre-negotiation phase of "talks about talks" comes to an end with the conclusion of a widely-endorsed National Peace Accord to curb violence, the two main actors have put their constitutional pro-

posals on the table. As might be expected, there are significant differences between them.

In essence, the ANC is demanding the election of a constituent assembly on a one person, one vote basis to draft a constitution for the post-apartheid South Africa. An interim government would oversee the introduction of the constitution and the transfer of power to a democratically elected government, which the numerically stronger ANC confidently expects to be itself. The National Party, however, has set its face against abdicating power to a constituent assembly, preferring to negotiate a new constitution in which there will be significant safeguards for minorities (for which read "whites"). It would then go to the country in a one person, one vote election which some NP strategists believe F.W. de Klerk has a fair prospect of winning via the judicious use of alliance politics.

AS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL BLUEPRINTS, THE NATIONAL PARTY PROPOSES A democratic, non-racial South Africa with power devolved from the central government to regional and local authorities, and special representation for minorities. The country would remain a unitary state, with a strong federal component. The ANC also favours a unitary state, but one with a strong central government and much less power given to the regions. Minority rights would be protected by a justiciable bill of rights and a constitutional court would interpret the constitution and apply the law of the land.

While there are features such as a universal franchise, bicameral legislature and proportional representation that are common to both plans, the essential difference is that the ANC would concentrate power in the centre, while the NP would disperse it, politically and geographically, as far as possible. The ANC proposes a majoritarian government whose powers would be curbed only by the constitution and the courts. The NP favours a consociational system, in which the power of the majority would be checked by the need to find consensus with other parties.<sup>2</sup> One of the shortcomings of the ANC's proposals is the little weight given to ethnicity – a thoroughly discredited concept in the eyes of many blacks, thanks to the efforts of successive apartheid governments, but a potent element in the politics of Africa nonetheless.

WHILE THE CONSTITUTIONAL BOFFINS MULL OVER THE MERITS OF THE TWO drafts, the political argument is turning towards the transitional arrangements that will be required while the constitutional negotiations are taking place. Despite appearances to the contrary, the two parties are drifting closer towards each other. De Klerk continues to reject the notion of an interim government, but is thought to be willing to concede an "interim authority" which will go half-way towards meeting ANC demands. The creation of an interim authority is high on the list of items for discussion when the All-Party Conference convenes, possibly towards the end of the year.

The body that de Klerk is reported to have in mind will enjoy joint decision-making powers with the current tricameral parliament<sup>3</sup> thereby bringing the major players together in a quasi-governor period of joint administration could conceivably extend