

# PRISONERS AS PRESIDENTS

*South Africa's leaders display little vision of where their new willingness to negotiate will lead. As in Eastern Europe, the opposition may take the initiative away.*

BY HERIBERT ADAM

**D**RAMATICALLY AND UNEXPECTEDLY BY all accounts, "people's power" swept entrenched communist regimes aside in a matter of weeks in Eastern Europe. How have those events influenced the antagonists in South Africa? Why should racial minority rule be able to withstand even more widespread outrage and illegitimacy among its disenfranchised majority population? If a Vaclav Havel can move from a prison cell into a presidential palace, why can't Nelson Mandela?

Such a course of events would abolish overnight South Africa's pariah status, reverse the capital outflow and restore the country's prosperity as the most developed part of a declining African continent. Unlike Eastern Europe, South Africa would not even need special development assistance, given the abundance of human talent, natural resources and a sophisticated infrastructure. Presumably, most social forces, domestically and internationally, would welcome such a rational outcome of a seemingly intractable conflict. The South African stock market would boom as the Frankfurt bourse did in anticipation of democratic pluralism in place of authoritarian centralism. East and West, North and South would join South Africans to celebrate the abolition of the last vestige of formal colonial rule by White settlers. But since they would be urged to stay and play their part as indigenous Africans, only the minority racists among them would not be able to reconcile themselves to majority rule – neither would extremists on the left, mourning the sellout of the socialist revolution.

THE ANALOGY WITH EASTERN EUROPE MAY BE appropriate in its potential for an equally peaceful and negotiable solution, but it is far off in the timing. F.W. de Klerk's reformist agenda cannot be equated with the break in style and policies that Gorbachev symbolized for the Eastern bloc. The National Party may resemble its communist counterparts in power and influence over the life of the population, and the secret *Broederbond* may be compared with a wider politburo in shaping policies. But neither of these Afrikaner associations has experienced the erosion of morale that

Gorbachev's policies brought to the USSR's European client states.

In South Africa, ethnic rule has managed to modernize itself partially from within by jettisoning its uncompromising ideologues. Unlike in Eastern Europe, where Stalinist hardliners attempted to defend the indefensible, in South Africa the ultra-right exists in the political wilderness and reformers now try to adapt to new exigencies – de Klerk may indeed be as willing as Krenz was to open walls. The communist reformers had to contend with an enfranchised population and a disillusioned party membership, and therefore lost power to their non-communist opposition.

The South African government, on the other hand, still commands legitimacy among its ethnic constituency, and the army remains loyal to the ethnic state. Despite being half Black in composition, the Afrikaner police force itches to pounce on insurgent activists. A skeptical Black population is still deeply divided along ideological, class, ethnic and regional lines, despite a common political exclusion. The recent reformist posture of Pretoria has not deprived the rulers of other options.

THE OPPOSITION DECEIVES ITSELF WITH WISHFUL thinking that Pretoria is tacitly admitting defeat, that de Klerk is "desperate" and "panicking" in a deep crisis, due to the onslaught of a brave resistance. On the contrary, the more sophisticated strategy of negotiations instead of repression exudes confidence rather than weakness. Pretoria has learned the lessons of futile attempts at coercive pacification and now wants to reap the benefits of a political solution. Unlike the European Stalinists, the powerholders in Pretoria realize that politics cannot be made against major social forces. Instead, they try to steer them. By adopting a conciliatory stance, post-*apartheid* nationalists are praised as peacemakers by Western friends and African foes alike.

Whether de Klerk is "sincere" or not is therefore the wrong question. Psychologizing about changing policies overlooks the underlying interests. If staying in power and controlling opponents inside and outside the *volk* can be pursued more effectively through new al-

liances and changing styles, the current rulers have shown remarkable skills of adaptation.

The more interesting question remains whether official powerholders can determine the outcome of their new approach. They themselves display little vision of where their ad hoc management should lead. Just as Gorbachev's *perestroika* developed its own dynamic of releasing ethno-nationalism in a disintegrating Soviet empire, so Pretoria's new soft co-optation may simultaneously strengthen as well as weaken the opposition. In the new interplay between previously implacably hostile sides, both antagonists change, and emerge with new strategies.

A concrete example illustrates this dialectic. Few organizations deserve more praise than F. van Zyl Slabbert's and Alex Boraine's Institute for Democratic Alternatives (IDASA).<sup>\*</sup> At the height of Botha's emergency when most dialogue had ceased and both antagonists criminalized each other, IDASA managed to pull off dozens of encounters outside and inside South Africa between opinion makers who would normally not speak to each other. The exiled African National Congress (ANC) seriously engaged for the first time with Whites who were not communists, and prominent figures of the Afrikaner establishment (though not from the government) discovered common ground with "terrorists." The mutual learning process clearly altered perceptions and subsequent policy statements.

IS THE CURRENT TREND TOWARDS NEGOTIATION rather than confrontation irreversible? Unlike the Eastern European regimes, whose fate was sealed when the Soviet Union abandoned the Brezhnev doctrine, Pretoria can fall back on coercion without needing the backup of outside allies. Although South Africa has lived with verbal condemnation from its Western friends for decades, it has nevertheless received various forms of economic, political

<sup>\*</sup> The IDASA's main activities are educational and information efforts to facilitate dialogue between the antagonists. Its leadership is made up of prominent academics and community leaders, and it receives most of its funding from West European governments, US philanthropic foundations and Canada's Department of External Affairs.