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What is President P W Botha going to say when he opens Parliament? By the time this article appears he would have said it. I don't think one should expect too much statesman-like level-headedness; not after the manner in which this government has traumatized the country over the last year. Furthermore, the speech has to tell us why he is calling a white election. That the reasons are not obvious, is the most obvious thing about the election.

The circumstances under which it will take place are about as clear a contradiction of what an election is all about, as one could hope to find. There is an extended state of emergency, (in fact, the Chief of the Army says "we are in a state of war"); there is a massive clampdown on information; there is no freedom of organization, association or meeting; major political opponents of the government are either in prison, exile or on the run and their organizations banned or impaired and virtually nothing is allowed to be reported which presents them in a favourable light. In the wisdom of the President, this is an appropriate moment to allow whites to peacefully canvass support from voters to change the government or strengthen it. This they are supposed to do by criticizing or praising government policy; presenting clear alternatives and disseminating information as widely as possible in order to achieve an informed electoral response.

At election time the leader of the government targets one or two issues which become the rallying cry for his workers and supporters. The moment they are identified the machine cranks into motion : supporting editors and newspapers suspend rationality; the only scope given to opponents is to distort their intentions and question their motives; nothing else matters but "the issues". Workers and candidates walk around repeating them as if they have a magic that guarantees success. In 1981, P W Botha identified "Voorspoed & Veiligheid" as the major reasons for supporting the NP. No matter that there is precious little left of either today, he just has to find the right mix for the moment.

So what is it likely to be?

I think he will juxtapose chaos and stability and present himself as the pillar of the one and everyone opposing him, wittingly or unwittingly, epitomizing the other. Nothing original in that, but if you have made such a mess of things yourself, it is best to suggest that everyone else will make an even bigger mess if they were in your position. So to the conservative voters, he will say : "You think I am too radical - wait until the ANC and their fellow travellers take over." To the "moderate enlightened" voter, he will say : "You think I am too reactionary, wait until those right-wing fanatics take charge." To the broad mass of "responsible reasonable white voters" he will say : "I am not perfect, but I love my country, (always useful to imply that those who oppose you don't), and I am moderate, reform-minded, security conscious and determined that the trains will run on time." So the buzz words in this election to re-inforce the juxtaposition of stability and chaos will be : moderate-radical, reform-revolution, security-terror, orderliness-disruption, peace-violence.

But he will also need positive and negative entities to symbolize these opposites. The major negative ones : (a) Externally - the whole of the outside world (except Taiwan, South Korea and some South American countries), but especially the USA that is doing Moscow's work by intensifying the total onslaught and working with our enemies. "South Africa" must use this election to show the "outside world" that nobody imposes solutions on us through the use of revolution, terror, violence, disruption or any radical means.

(b) Internally - the ANC and its support groups who are the agents of Moscow's imperialist total onslaught against South Africa and are determined to use revolution, terror, violence and disruption to impose radical solutions on us. "South Africans" must use this election to show they will have nothing to do with them."

The major positive entities ? Obviously the government, epitomizing moderation, reform, security, peace and orderliness. But also, and this is going to be the interesting one : "Good, responsible blacks."

This election is necessary to give the President a mandate to do a deal with blacks on the future of the country. Now that all the 'radical, revolutionary, disruptive and violent blacks' have been jailed, detained or banned, the government seeks a mandate from "responsible whites" to do a deal with "responsible blacks" and to tell "the outside world" to mind its own business.

Any party, organization or individual that is ambiguous, or questioning on the positive and negative entities identified in the President's speech on Friday, will find themselves defined into the camp of chaos in this election. In the meantime, the underlying paradox of this whole farce endures : The government assured us through the Minister of Defence only last week, that whatever the outcome of the election, the State of Emergency is to continue for quite some time.

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