

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

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On the eve of yet another session of tri-cameral politics, a glance at the political balance sheet is not out of place. A curious phenomenon immediately strikes one : the more repression has deepened, or as some would have it, the more "stability has been restored", the more "democratic talk" as opposed to democratic process, has increased. The volume of democratic rhetoric that has poured forth from government spokesmen is only matched by the extent of coercive action taken by the security establishment against those who have to participate in bringing about a democratic order. As Heunis repeatedly assures us : never before in the history of this country has there been a government more willing to talk and negotiate than the present one. This may or may not be so. What is indisputable is that never before in the history of this country have more people been detained or jailed, by the same government, and without whom no successful talks or negotiation can take place.

Within this general climate of repressive stability an extraordinary illusion of normality is being cultivated. Business goes on as usual, (some say thanks to the State of Emergency); the newspapers are delivered more or less on time, (but with less news); the war in Angola has become "our war" in a quietly natural and far-away sense, but not too far away to be a fertile source of honoris cruxes and pro-patria extravaganzas.

In politics a mood of cynical resignation seems to prevail : "Things may not be good, but they are better than they would be if things were different". And, of course, the tri-cameral Parliament begins another session, infusing its annual ritualistic urgency into public affairs : Parliamentary debates, votes, columns and reviews reassure us that the democratic tradition is being honored in some form, even in the absence of any substance. If only the State could succeed in getting a few "heavyweight", "credible", "good" blacks to come and sit on the National Statutory Council, the picture would be complete and "real negotiation" could begin.

Nothing is further from the truth. As far as the politics of negotiation is concerned, we live in highly abnormal circumstances and we are not even in the proper pre-negotiation phase of politics. What does the pre-negotiation phase entail ? It involves both a mood and the practical conditions necessary for negotiation and both are closely related to one another. The mood must reflect a disposition or attitude from all parties which reflects a willingness to negotiate and to accept the legitimacy of the others as partners in the process. The practical conditions must allow for parties to organize freely, seek mandates and elect leaders to represent those mandates.

The strategy of the state seems to be to keep the lid on the pot as far as political opposition is concerned; concentrate on socio-economic reform in a number of carefully selected black

communities; hope for a demonstration effect to popularize the benefits of reform above the disadvantages of revolt and then induce "moderate", "responsible" black leadership into unilaterally created co-optive constitutional structures and use a multi-racial government of national unity as a vehicle towards a more legitimate and democratic form of government. For the state, negotiation is not about a new political system, but how to accommodate blacks into the present one without losing control.

Against this strategy there is a growing strategy of revolt and alienation. Increasingly the line between participation and collaboration is being blurred, and security action being politicized. The ideology of non-racialism is associated with a certain dogmatic exclusivism and strategic inflexibility. More and more we find ourselves in a standoff polarized situation in which it is as stupid to confuse the State's lack of moral legitimacy with its inability to control, as it is to confuse the State's ability to control with the consent of those who are coerced.

It is a situation ripe for racial outbidding. The surprising thing is that there have not been more black Eugene Terreblanche's coming to the fore. The longer the deadlock continues the more likely their time will come. Meanwhile all this "democratic rhetoric" in an increasingly undemocratic environment is giving the politics of negotiation a bad name. Those of us who take it seriously must re-double our efforts to

encourage a mood conducive to negotiations and to bring about pressure to establish the practical conditions which can make negotiations possible. One way of doing so is to expose the fallacy at every opportunity that this government is ready and willing to negotiate under the present circumstances.