

WORLDLINK MAGAZINE

September 1991

F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

1. South Africa has one of the largest graveyards of political predictions in the world. She has been condemned, cursed and dismissed more often than understood. The complexity of her problems has undermined the confidence of many a competent analyst. Very few, if any, would have predicted that she would be busy with what she is doing now : negotiating away racial domination and democracy in its place.
2. The dynamics of this transition has unleashed a torrent of new political energy on all levels of societal life; some of it destructive, most of it creative. Most key political actors on national, regional and local level display a willingness to engage rather than confront; to create rather than destroy. South Africa is not on the point of

collapse or disintegration, nor is she on the point of imminent breakthrough to a troublefree democracy. For the time being (minimum 3-5 years) she will move through an unresolved but relatively stable transition.

3. One of the hopeful signs is a growing awareness on the part of key actors and organisations of the gravity of the problems that have to be solved. These can be summed up as the following -

(a) The search for transitional legitimacy: How can transitional mechanisms be negotiated in terms of which major parties can share responsibility for managing transition? Signs that this problem is being taken seriously are : agreement on a peace accord; the search for consensus on the problems that have to be addressed by a Multi-Party Conference. Also a growing acceptance that stability, i.e. law and order, has to be maintained in a non-partisan, impartial manner.

(b) Sound Management of the Economy: Much of the ideological posturing and moral one-upmanship which characterised debates on the economy at the onset of transition has disappeared. There is growing acceptance of the need for market-driven growth. Debates now centre on sectoral preferences for growth and prioritizing social expenditure, as well as whether and how political action can or should be constrained

so as not to undermine economic performance. This latter dilemma is epitomized in the strategic ambiguity of the ANC's approach to transition where it attempts to combine the politics of mass mobilization with negotiation. "The Mining Summit" is a clear example where highly articulated interest groups, e.g. Mining Houses, Labour Unions and the Government have entered into sustained negotiation to find common ground and strategy in terms of which the crises in the mining industry can be jointly managed. Similar developments are taking place on the newly formed Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber where opposing parties have signed a common constitution pledging to jointly negotiate a non-racial and democratic structure of metropolitan and local government, as well as to improve the quality of life of the people in the region by exploring the establishment of a common tax base and equalizing services. This kind of regional/local development is beginning to take place in other centres as well, e.g. Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Pietermaritzburg. In the Transvaal the Provincial Administration is involved in +- 60 local level negotiations.

4. These hopeful signs should not mislead one about the severity of the structural problems that have to be overcome: low growth, growing unemployment, severe urban dislocation, economic inequality compounded by racial

deprivation. The point is that these structural obstacles have not forced the key actors to abandon negotiated transition, but strengthened their resolve to pursue it. This is what deserves support and encouragement. There are many prophets of doom who have regularly seized on these structural constraints to predict the collapse and disintegration of the South African polity into a Beirut or civil-war situation. If anything, the opposite has happened.

5. South Africa has the potential for militancy and radical outbidding. Most of the radical outbidding and militancy thus far has come from right-wing elements who view the whole process of negotiated transition as capitulation of white interests. Plausible arguments are presented for explaining so-called "Black-on-Black" violence as being instigated by such elements within the security forces. This is not to deny that there is sufficient evidence of factional, ethnic and/or ideological hostility to precipitate such violence in any case. Equally plausible arguments can be presented for militant/radical elements within Inkatha, ANC, PAC or AZAPO who do not favour the process of transition. A curious dynamic is however beginning to take shape, e.g. the week before the signing of the Peace Accord between the major parties such as the Government, ANC and INKATHA (the right-wing did not sign), there was a significant upsurge of brutal arbitrary violence in townships across the country. Contrary to expectations

this did not delay the signing of the Accord but actually stiffened the resolve of the parties to go ahead. There was clear evidence of a growing consensus to marginalize the arbitrary or rogue violence. How does one make sense of this dynamic?

One way is to see the process as one of the formation of a coalescing centre that outperforms the demands or threats of the flanking parties by "delivering the goods", i.e. improving the quality of life, containing violence and negotiating an alternative to the status quo. This in turn will depend on whether the centre can achieve transitional legitimacy and manage economic performance satisfactorily. On balance, the evidence in this regard is increasingly positive rather than negative and it is not inconceivable that South Africa may have a government of Transitional Unity within the next 18 months. This very likelihood will increase militancy on the flanks and that is why it is reasonable to expect that South Africa will move through unresolved transition with relative stability over the next 3 - 5 years. Unresolved in the sense that it is unlikely that a fully democratic constitution and government will be in place but that the government that will manage transition will be more broadly based and acceptable than the one at present : a government of transitional unity.

6. A major imponderable at this stage is a highly unresolved security situation. Technically speaking, South Africa has

five defence forces, e.g. SADF, Ciskei Defence Force, Transkei Defence Force, Bophuthatswana Defence Force and the Venda Defence Force and even more police forces. One of the legacies of the 80's was a highly partisan security system that arbitrarily decided on who the "enemies of the state" were. This polarised the normal maintenance of law and order and politicized police and military work. South Africa is now beginning to emerge from this and the peace summit and accord is the first hopeful and fragile sign of progress in this regard. The more the security system comes under broader based civilian control, the less it will be an imponderable in determining the outcome of transition. The new Minister of Defence is apparently working with other parties to develop a code of conduct for the SADF of the future.

7. From the preceding points it should be clear that South Africa's transition is a process not an event. There is no fixed moment or date which could be seized upon to decide whether South Africa is now in a fully "post-Apartheid era" (such as for example an Independence flag-down-flag-up ceremony). Countries, governments and organisations may respond differently in their evaluation of the relative degree of progress South Africa has made in her transition. Already new diplomatic missions, trade agreements, sporting links etc. are being brought about, whilst others still withhold judgement in this regard. South Africa in transition is not the uncomplicated source of policy

formulation as old-style Apartheid South Africa. In a sense, South Africa is a concept in search of a definition. She is sending out at least four different kinds of signals in terms of which the "outside world" is judging progress:

- (a) Dismantling formal Apartheid structures, e.g. laws, statutes, bodies;
- (b) getting rid of the socio-economic inequalities brought about by Apartheid, e.g. social reconstruction and affirmative action programmes;
- (c) democratizing political life by negotiating new structures for political representation; and
- (d) managing the economy for market-driven growth.

Different interests will weigh these different signals differently as they respond to South Africa's transition. One thing is very evident. There is a growing dynamic interchange between South Africa and the outside world - isolation is a thing of the past.

8. South Africa is changing in a dramatically changing world, and the dynamics of her transition correspond to trends and changes in the international community. The end of the

bipolar Cold War world has seen the resurgence of at least four trends that shape international relations -

- (i) a concern with human rights;
- (ii) a growing emphasis on environmental issues;
- (iii) good governance in the pursuit of democracy;
- (iv) sound management of a market driven economy.

Whether it be the G7, World Bank, IMF, EC etc these are the criteria being applied in judging the acceptability of countries in the international community. South Africa precipitated its own transition precisely at the moment the bi-polar world began its disintegration. This has brought about a remarkable development - the Government that for decades has been responsible for the repressive system of Apartheid domination, is increasingly being accepted as an agent for good governance and sound management of the economy as it engages willing opponents to negotiate a democratic transition. Opponents who were the most prominent recipients and victims of such domination. An inconceivable situation only 20 months ago. The explanation is surely to be found in the fact that South Africa's own internal transition corresponds to the dynamics of transition in a global context. Most countries in the world are caught up in a process of transition away from one form

of domination or the other, towards an uncertain democratic outcome.

9. In conclusion, South Africa's quest for democracy is not as easy as some pretend, nor as futile as others predict. There is more reason for hope than despair for those who care to look seriously at the dynamics of its transition.