

No 8

ARGUS GROUP - 20/6/86

DR F VAN ZYL SLABBERT

Sometimes it helps to step back in order to get a better view or perspective on a situation. I have just returned after 6 weeks absence from South Africa, having visited New York, Paris, London, Rome and Dakar. During that time I spoke to businessmen, academics and journalists about the South African situation. Also during that time the South African Government raided the three countries Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana. The EPG decided that its mission was no longer worth pursuing and the Government announced a State of Emergency. These events all enjoyed front page coverage and columns of analyses in the newspapers of all the cities that I had gone to. It felt strange to sit at a Boulevard cafe and read about these developments in South Africa and not be there. But it also helped one to form perhaps a more dispassionate perspective of what was going on in one's own country.

Some general observations. The good times are never going to come back to the old South Africa, they are gone for ever. In other words, we are not going to stabilize or normalize the situation and simply carry on as before. Also, it is quite clear that the Government has lost the political initiative. Obviously, it is in control from a security and military point of view, but this precisely underlines the failure of its political initiatives. Sanctions of some kind or the other is absolutely inevitable. I was struck by the fact that the Government really has no awareness of the depth of its rejection in the international community, and how isolated it really is.. It also became clear to me that the level of mass mobilization in South Africa has never been higher in its history than now. In other words, never before has South Africa's Black population been mobilized to the same extent in pursuit of a common objective as they are at present.

That objective can be put quite simply, FREEDOM. One may scoff at this, make cynical comments about the futility of pursuing freedom, but if one listens carefully to Black spokesmen, the message is quite simple. As one Black spokesman put it to me in New York, Whites are concerned with survival and therefore they are not prepared to die. Blacks want their freedom, and they are willing to die for it.

2/...

The Government's response to the Black demand for freedom has been to emphasise stability; the need to normalize the situation in order to bring about reform. And thus we have the curious paradox in this South African situation. A divergence between the values of freedom and stability. In any normal society, these two would be intimately linked with one another, where the individual's freedom would be the source of stability for society. But in our situation, the Government's emphasis on stability is seen as a threat to the freedom for Blacks generally, and the Blacks insistence on freedom is seen by Government as a threat to stability. Consequently, the only way in which Government can resolve this paradox, is to extend coercive control, and this is how we have to understand the State of Emergency.

The State of Emergency also makes it quite clear that the Government has decided for the "siege option". They have said so quite blatantly. They are prepared to go it alone; they are not going to crawl before anybody; they are prepared to fight for their survival at all costs. Politically, this means that the Government has no intention whatsoever to negotiate a new constitution in which its own position of dominance and control will disappear. The only political strategy apart from brutal White repression which is going to become increasingly difficult logistically, due to the numerical imbalance between Black and White, is co-optive domination. In other words, more and more the Government is going to seek ways and means of co-opting Blacks, Coloureds and Asians into a new system of Government in which they can maintain control. It would therefore not be surprising if the Government increasingly by-passes the normal institutions of Government such as Parliament and tried to create new institutions which would give the appearance of a Government of national unity.

The Government might even suspend the Constitution, if not formally, then in a de facto sense, and set up an emergency Government in which it will invite Blacks, Coloureds and Asians to join it in trying to maintain stability; actively open up the Defence Force to all races, as well as the Police Force, and promote them to the highest level of command and suspend most of the offensive Apartheid laws, right down to the Group

Group / ...

Areas Act and Population Registration Act. This form of co-optive domination may even stabilize the situation for five to ten years, but eventually the outcome is inevitable.

We got to Heathrow Airport early in the morning having taken a connecting flight from Dakar. We tried to book in but found that the SAA check-in counter was closed and would only open at 2pm that afternoon. It was sharing it with British Airways. I remember the days when we had seven or eight counters of our own at Heathrow.

That night, we flew back in our half empty plane to South Africa and I kept thinking to myself about that old cliché - it is always darkest before dawn. Our darkness had begun, and it was not quite sure when the dawn would come and who would be there to see it.

---o0o---